

KNOW THYSELF

Professor James S. Cutsinger

The fundamental aim of this seminar is to encourage a thorough re-examination of what it means to be human. “Know thyself,” proclaimed the Delphic oracle. But what is the self? And what does it mean to know it?

In an effort to begin answering these questions, Professor Cutsinger will enlist the aid of several writers whom he calls “epistemological radicals”, authors whose works transcend the common dichotomy between religion and science and who are in the business of challenging contemporary assumptions—academic and otherwise—as to who, what, where, and why we are.

Discussions will focus on three flummoxing, and therefore deeply rewarding, books: *Reality*, a meditation by Peter Kingsley based on the surviving fragments of an ancient poem by the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides; *Worlds Apart*, a “dialogue of the 1960’s” by Owen Barfield, whom C. S. Lewis called “the wisest and best of my unofficial teachers”; and *In Search of the Miraculous*, a detailed account of the knowledge-inducing doctrines and methods of an influential, and highly controversial, spiritual teacher named G. I. Gurdjieff, composed by his foremost disciple, P. D. Ouspensky.

Method:

The seminar will be conducted as a Socratic discussion. Each class begins with a question about the reading for the day, and students are expected to join the instructor and each other in a shared conversational inquiry. A premium is placed on precision, explanation, and defense. Students will be held doubly accountable: for courteously listening to the contributions of others and for patiently justifying their own observations.

While it is sometimes thought that Socratic conversation is less rigorous than a more didactic and professorial style, its rigor is simply of another kind. In the serious cross-examination of a text, the course of conversation is often unpredictable; it is certainly less linear than in the “traditional” classroom. But the intellectual commitment required—the daily vigilance—demands a preparation and yields a mental fitness not promoted by other forms of learning. These advantages will be pressed to the full in this course.

Requirements:

1. *Reading*. In keeping with Socrates’ observation that “it is better to deal thoroughly with a little than unsatisfactorily with a lot” (*Theaetetus*, 187e), reading assignments are relatively short. Students are expected to study the assigned texts very closely and carefully; underlining important words and passages and maintaining a dialogue with the authors through copious marginal comments are essential preparations for class discussion.

2. *Attendance*, both prompt and regular. Two unexcused absences are permitted; a penalty of one letter grade is imposed for each additional unexcused absence. And attendance means punctuality; tardy arrivals and seminars are a disastrous mix.

3. *Constructive participation.* For obvious reasons, this course is not for students who prefer an education they can simply ingest as the passive takers of notes. It is for those who enjoy the acts of thinking and reflection and argument. Frequent contributions to class discussion are not merely desirable; they are essential. One-third of the final course grade will be based on class participation.

4. *Essays.* Students will write either one essay of 15-18 pages, or several short essays totaling the same number of pages (e.g., five or six 3-page papers; three 5-6 page papers; one 2-page paper and one 13-16 page paper). Professor Cutsinger’s *Breviary of English Usage*, which can be found on his website under “Teaching”, will be used in his grading and commentary. Grades received on the 10-12 best pages, or the single grade if only one essay is written, will count toward two-thirds of the final course grade.

Schedule:

Jan. 13	“Requiring Religion” (*)	Jan. 15	Ouspensky, 3-28
Jan. 20	Ouspensky, 29-52	Jan. 22	Kingsley, 15-48
Jan. 27	Barfield, 9-35	Jan. 29	Barfield, 35-62
Feb. 3	Kingsley, 55-82	Feb. 5	Kingsley, 83-110
Feb. 10	Ouspensky, 99-115	Feb. 12	Ouspensky, 116-140
Feb. 17	Barfield, 63-87	Feb. 19	Barfield, 87-111
Feb. 24	Barfield, 112-37	Feb. 26	Barfield, 137-61
Mar. 3	Kingsley, 117-40	Mar. 5	Open Discussion
Mar. 10	Spring Break	Mar. 12	Spring Break
Mar. 17	Kingsley, 141-70	Mar. 19	Kingsley, 171-99
Mar. 24	Ouspensky, 141-66	Mar. 26	Ouspensky, 217-37
Mar. 31	Kingsley, 205-32	Apr. 2	Kingsley, 233-58
Apr. 7	Barfield, 162-87	Apr. 9	Barfield, 187-211
Apr. 14	Ouspensky, 299-315	Apr. 16	Ouspensky, 346-68
Apr. 21	Kingsley, 265-306	Apr. 23	Open Discussion

(*) Available on Professor Cutsinger’s website: <http://cutsinger.net/scholarship/articles.shtml>.