

## VIRTUE AND THE MORAL LIFE

Professor James S. Cutsinger

This seminar will consist in a close and careful reading of five classic works concerning the nature of virtue and the moral life: Plato's *Meno*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, Kant's *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols/The Antichrist*, and C. S. Lewis's *Abolition of Man*.

### Method:

The course is not a survey. The goal instead is to plunge deeply into a few seminal masterpieces in order to come to grips with their continuing importance for human life today. In a sense, the books are the real teachers in this class. The primary aim of the instructor is to assist students in the fine art of attentive reading and to promote a disciplined exploration of a few of the world's most enduring ideas.

The seminar will be conducted as a Socratic discussion. Each class begins with a question about the reading for the day, and it is expected that students will join with the instructor and each other in a shared conversational inquiry. A premium will be 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 great work, 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, however; 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 being 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. *Opening questions.* The instructor and students will take turns posing the opening question, each student being asked to accept this responsibility once during the semester.

5. *Essays.* Students will write three essays of 5-6 pages each. Neither book-reports nor research-papers, these essays should be viewed instead as continuing conversations in which their authors wrestle in writing with the ideas opened up by at least three of the books. (Basing a paper or papers on more than one book is perfectly acceptable.) 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 two best essays will be used in calculating the final course grade (one-third each).

**Schedule:**

		Aug. 24	Introduction
Aug. 29	Plato, pp. 3-20	Aug. 31	Plato, pp. 20-32
Sep. 5	Boethius, Book I	Sep. 7	Boethius, Book II
Sep. 12	Boethius, Book III	Sep. 14	Boethius, Book IV
Sep. 19	Boethius, Book V	Sep. 21	Open Discussion
Sep. 26	Kant, Preface	Sep. 28	Kant, pp. 11-23
Oct. 3	Kant, pp. 24-38	Oct. 5	Kant, pp. 38-50
Oct. 10	Kant, pp. 50-62	Oct. 12	Kant, pp. 63-80
Oct. 17	Open Discussion	Oct. 19	Fall Break (No Class)
Oct. 24	Nietzsche, pp. 39-57	Oct. 26	Nietzsche, pp. 58-70, 116-121
Oct. 31	Nietzsche, pp. 125-145	Nov. 2	Nietzsche, pp. 146-162
Nov. 7	Election Day (No Class)	Nov. 9	Nietzsche, pp. 163-182
Nov. 14	Nietzsche, pp. 182-199	Nov. 16	Open Discussion
Nov. 21	AAR (No Class)	Nov. 23	Thanksgiving (No Class)
Nov. 28	Lewis, pp. 1-26	Nov. 28	Lewis, pp. 27-51
Dec. 5	Lewis, pp. 53-81	Dec. 7	Conclusion