

POSC 100:
COSMOS OR CHAOS?

VIEWS OF THE WORLD, VIEWS OF THE GOOD LIFE

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Office Hours: MW 3-4, F 10-12,
and by appt.

“There is almost no human action, however particular one supposes it, that does not arise from a very general idea that men have conceived of God, of his relations with the human race, of the nature of their souls, and of their duties toward those like them. One cannot keep these ideas from being the common source from which all the rest flow.”

—Alexis de Tocqueville

“‘Above all,’ I said, ‘it mustn’t be said that gods make war on gods, and plot against them and have battles with them—for it isn’t even true—provided that those who are going to guard the city for us must consider it most shameful to be easily angry with one another.’”

—Socrates, in Plato’s *Republic*

I. Purpose and Scope

There is no question more important to us than the question of how we should live, or the question of the good life. Everything we do, however grand or petty, ultimately stems from our answer to the question of the good life. Yet if the question of the good life is the most basic of *practical* questions, it still rests on prior conceptions, or answers to prior questions—and one question perhaps more than any other: what is the fundamental character of the world? As Tocqueville and Plato indicate in the passages quoted above, how we understand what it means to live well is shaped by our view of the fundamental character of the world, including—especially—the highest beings or principles of the world. Those who suppose the world to be an arena of chaos and strife will be led to conceive of the good life in a different way from those who suppose the world to be structured according to a moral order. Those who suppose the world to have been created by a God who makes demands of His creatures will conceive of the good life differently from those who suppose that there is no God who cares about what we do. Among the latter (i.e., among the nonbelievers), those who suppose that human beings are powerless against chance or fate will conceive of the good life differently from those who suppose that human beings can assert their own will and impose a beneficent order on the world.

Our seminar will address just this matter, that is, the question of the fundamental character of the world and the implications of that character for human beings. Is the world a Cosmos or Chaos?

Is it characterized by order and harmony? Are order and harmony even possible in it, and desirable? Or is the world essentially and inevitably an arena of contest or strife? And where does that leave human beings?

Fortunately our theme has been addressed with great power and insight in numerous philosophic, religious, and literary texts. We will study just a few of these texts in this seminar, in the hope that we might advance our own thinking—and our openness—in the process.

The course will be divided into six parts, representing, loosely speaking, six different interpretations of the fundamental character of being and its consequences for human beings. These interpretations constitute major chapters in the history of the West.

The first part of the course will take up the tragic worldview as exemplified by Homer's epic poem, the *Iliad*. Homer presents human beings as somehow unserious, because they are mortal and the playthings of the gods, and yet at the same time intensely serious, because they *know* they are mortal and the playthings of the gods, that is, because they must make a name for themselves in the face of oblivion.

The second part of the course will be devoted to readings from the Hebrew Bible: the whole of Genesis and the first twenty chapters of Exodus. In these books we receive an account of Creation (and thus the character of the world), a depiction of what we might call human nature, and the outlines of a new, divinely sanctioned way of life. From the standpoint of our seminar's theme, the Hebrew Bible is striking for asserting divine will and divine order—thereby giving meaning, structure, and goodness to life—while making no evident promise of individual salvation or immortality.

In the third part of the course we'll take up the treatment of our theme by classical, or Socratic, philosophy. Readings will be drawn from Plato and Aristotle. Both philosophers seem to teach that human beings participate in an orderly and harmonious cosmos which permits them, at least in principle, to live orderly and harmonious lives. Yet as we'll see, Plato and Aristotle also suggest, on closer reading, that the facts are more complicated, one might almost say more tragic, than they at first appear. Yes, it might be possible to rise above tragedy—through the practice of philosophy. But most people may not be up to that.

Where Plato and Aristotle are ambiguous, Christianity is not. According to Christian doctrine the world is structured according to divine will and everyone has the capacity to see this and to receive salvation. This teaching will be the focus of the fourth part of the course. Readings here will include drawn mainly from the New Testament, with additional short excerpts from St. Augustine's *The City of God*.

Christianity was the predominant cultural force in the West for the better part of two millennia. Its reign came to be challenged with the advent of the modern epoch in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At that time there arose a new worldview, propounded by political philosophers, who argued that human beings can and should order and remake the world in accordance with their own needs or desires. According to this worldview, human will need not bend to divine will—if indeed there even is such a thing as divine will. The fifth part of the

course will examine the articulation and development of this principle by two of its earliest and most powerful proponents, Niccolo Machiavelli and Francis Bacon. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli criticizes the classical and Biblical worldviews and advances a new understanding of human possibility and the human good. In the *New Atlantis*, Bacon exploits the opening created by Machiavelli to argue for something very like modern technological civilization, while at the same time subtly indicating the costs and ills that could flow from such a project.

The sixth part of the course will take up two critiques of the modern project written from perspectives informed by some of the very worldviews we'll have examined earlier in the course. Friedrich Nietzsche offers a scathing critique of modern life from a perspective he believed to be consistent with Homer's. The twentieth century American novelist and philosopher Walker Percy offers a comic critique influenced by Judeo-Christian and classical thought.

II. Course Requirements

The most important course requirement is that you read all assigned texts **closely** and **before class**. The readings will be of varying length and difficulty, but they will always demand—and success in the course will demand—careful attention and review. You should come to class prepared to discuss what you've understood and prepared to ask about what you haven't understood.

Course grades will be determined by four papers and class participation. The first three papers will each be worth one sixth of your course grade. The final paper will be worth one third of your grade. You will hand in a draft of the final paper, along with an abstract and a brief outline, in time to receive and make use of comments from me. (My comments will be general.) The remaining sixth of your grade will be determined by class participation. As part of your class participation you will be required to make an oral presentation and lead discussion in one class session. You will also be expected to contribute regularly to class discussion throughout the term.

III. Academic Honesty

Strict standards of academic integrity will be upheld in this class. Your submission of written work means that your work is your own, that it is in accord with Carleton's regulations on academic integrity, and that you have neither given nor received unauthorized aid. Be sure you are familiar with Carleton's principles and policies on Academic Honesty: if you haven't done so already, review the website found at <https://apps.carleton.edu/campus/doc/honesty/>. I take academic honesty very seriously: students who are found to have violated these standards should expect severe sanctions.

IV. Assigned Texts

The following books are available for purchase at the bookstore:

Robert Alter, trans., *The Five Books of Moses*
Machiavelli, *The Prince*
Bacon, *New Atlantis and the Great Instauration*

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*
Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*

Other required readings will be on eReserve at the Library (password: POSC) or available at specified websites.

V. Class Schedule

This is an *approximate* schedule. We may depart from it if class discussions, etc. so require.

September 12: Introduction

Part 1: Tragedy

September 14: Homer, *Iliad*, book 1 (on eReserve)

September 16: Homer, *Iliad*, books 9 and 10

Part 2: Creation and Redemption: the Hebrew Bible

September 19: Genesis, chapters 1-3 (in *The Five Books of Moses*)

September 21: Genesis, chapter 4-11

September 23: No reading—visit by Bryan Garsten, convocation speaker

September 26: Genesis, chapters 12-22

September 28: Genesis, chapters 23-35

September 30: Genesis, chapters 36-50

October 3: Exodus, chapters 1-20

Part 3: Classical Rationalism

October 5: Plato, *Republic*, book 1 (on eReserve)

October 7: Plato, *Republic*, book 2

October 10: Plato, *Republic*, book 3

October 12: Aristotle, *Politics*, book 1, chapters 1-2 (on eReserve)

October 14: Aristotle, *Politics*, remainder of book 1

October 17: Mid-term break

October 18: ***“Adapting to College” evening exercise for all first-year students: details TBA**

Part 4: Christianity: Sin and Salvation

October 19: Biblical readings—available at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/r/rsv/browse.html>

- (1) The Gospel According to Matthew
- (2) John 18: 28-40
- (3) Romans 12-13
- (4) 1 Corinthians 13
- (5) 1 Peter 2: 13-14

October 21: Excerpts from St. Augustine, *The City of God*—available at

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/aug-city2.asp>

- (1) Book 14, chapter 28, “Of the Nature of the Two Cities”
- (2) Book 15, chapter 4, “Of the Conflict and Peace of the Earthly City”
- (3) Book 19, chapter 17, “Of the Conflict and Peace of the Earthly City”

October 24: Review prior readings (from Oct. 19 and 21)

Part 5: Modernity: the Empowerment of Humanity

October 26: Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapters 1-15

October 28: Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapters 16-26

October 31: Review Machiavelli

November 2: Bacon, *New Atlantis*

November 4: Bacon, *New Atlantis*

Part 6: Modernity: the Diminishment of Humanity?

November 7: Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Preface for the Second Edition and §343-58

November 9: Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 359-72

November 11: Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 373-83

November 14: Hans Jonas, “Technology and Responsibility” (on eReserve); recommended:
Jonas, “The Seventeenth Century: The Meaning of the Scientific and Technological Revolution”
(also on eReserve)

November 16: and Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*, pp. 1-126

VI. Due dates

First paper due Tuesday, September 27

Second paper due Tuesday, October 11

Third paper due Tuesday, October 25

Abstract, outline, and draft of final paper due Friday, November 11

Final paper due Monday, November 21

Papers should be submitted electronically.