

**South Carolina Honors College 398E**

**GREAT BOOKS: KNOWLEDGE AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF**

**Spring 2005: Tuesday and Thursday, 2:00 – 3:15 P.M.**

**Professor James S. Cutsinger**

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This seminar will consist in a close and careful reading of four philosophical dialogues that are concerned in various ways with the relationship between knowledge and religious belief: Plato's *Theaetetus* (4th century B.C.), Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (6th century), David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (18th century), and Owen Barfield's *Worlds Apart* (20th century). With the help of these authors, we shall be inquiring into the meaning, foundations, scope, and limits (if any) of human cognition, asking ourselves what the bearing of this knowledge may be on the question of God.

The *Theaetetus*, *Consolation of Philosophy*, and *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are available for purchase at the South Carolina Bookstore (801 Main Street); *Worlds Apart* is presently out of print, but is available in a photocopied form at Universal Copies (1120 College Street).

### **Method:**

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 conventional 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. There will be a penalty of one letter grade per absence for unexcused absences in excess of two. 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.) The first essay is due at class-time on February 17; the second at class-time on March 24; and the third by 12 Noon on April 25. (Early submissions will be most gratefully received.) 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:**

Jan. 11	Introduction	Jan. 13	Plato, 15-40
Jan. 18	Plato, 41-65	Jan. 20	Plato, 66-91
Jan. 25	Plato, 92-115	Jan. 27	Plato, 116-131
Feb. 1	Boethius, 3-20	Feb. 3	Boethius, 21-41
Feb. 8	Boethius, 42-74	Feb. 10	Boethius, 75-100
Feb. 15	Boethius, 101-119	Feb. 17	Open Discussion
Feb. 22	Hume, 37-50	Feb. 24	Hume, 51-68
Mar. 1	Hume, 69-91	Mar. 3	Hume, 92-112
Mar. 8	Spring Break (No class)	Mar. 10	Spring Break (No class)
Mar. 15	Hume, 113-39	Mar. 17	Open Discussion
Mar. 22	Barfield, 9-35	Mar. 24	Barfield, 35-62
Mar. 29	Barfield, 63-87	Mar. 31	Barfield, 87-111
Apr. 5	Barfield, 112-37	Apr. 7	Barfield, 137-61
Apr. 12	Barfield, 162-87	Apr. 14	Barfield, 187-211
Apr. 19	Open Discussion	Apr. 21	Conclusion

*All numbers in this schedule correspond to page numbers in the assigned editions.*

**Office Hours:** Tuesday and Thursday, 9:30 – 10:30 A.M. or by appointment.