

# **DAS 300: The Great Conversation: Primary Texts Core Course**

## **Introduction:**

This team-taught course will provide students enrolled in the Primary Texts Certificate, as well as others interested in the content, with the intellectual equipment needed to access primary texts throughout the curriculum in Arts and Sciences. This will include instruction on the techniques of careful reading of works that are often complex and multidimensional. We will read significant texts that have informed important themes in intellectual history, allowing students to enhance their reading skills through guided study and discussion. We will also use these texts to show students how primary texts form the basis of an ongoing historical "conversation." Students will learn how great ideas in fields ranging from philosophy to literature to science can be traced through history, and how thinkers from other eras respond to and argue with thinkers from the past, using their arguments as the foundation and/or proving ground for their own ideas. Students should come away with a better ability to read and appreciate the significance of the primary texts that they will encounter in their other classes and throughout their lives.

In addition to the above goals, we will trace the theme of civic virtue throughout this course. All regimes promote a particular virtue. They endeavor to help citizens to be better people, to be fully human. For the Homeric Greeks, the ideal man might be Achilles, the warrior whose personal achievements brought glory to the city but were gained for the good of the hero himself, a man for whom the idea of humility was unknown and unappreciated, and for whom duty to self came before duty to the city. By contrast, the medieval hero was the chivalrous knight, who pursued glory in battle, but for whom humility and duty were virtues stressed by European Christianity. The Renaissance and Reformation led to increased individualism and rebellion against authorities unquestioned in the past. This questioning flowered in the Enlightenment period, which extolled the "rights of man" and the curative powers of enlightened self-interest and education, but may have neglected the idea of duties, and in the long run questioned deeply what had motivated the ancient and medieval thinkers—the quest for glory and honor as the ideal human activity. The scientific revolution also changed the way human beings saw themselves in relation to God and the universe, changing their focus to the scientific solution of this-worldly problems and a new confidence that spilled over into the social and political worlds. American political thought embraced the modern "scientific" version of civic virtue, downplaying honor and duty in exchange for individual liberty, and more solid and attainable such as prudence, enlightened self-interest and thrift. What was previously most highly valued—honor and duty—now seemed like a source of contention and strife to be eliminated in favor of more peaceful "bourgeois" virtues. Finally, post-modern thought arises when, partly due to the questioning of authority and universal definitions of virtue that have characterized Western intellectual history, agreement on what constitutes the virtuous man or citizen, indeed what constitutes the good life, is deemed impossible, and individual perspective becomes the only source of truth.

## **Participating Instructors:**

Dr. Laurie Johnson, Lead Instructor, Political Science  
Dr. Michael Donnelly, English  
Dr. Jim Franke, Political Science  
Dr. Marsha Frey, History  
Dr. Benjamin McCloskey, Modern Languages  
Dr. Charles Reagan, Philosophy  
Dr. Chris Sorensen, Physics

**Academic Honor Policy:** All instructors in this course adhere to the University's Academic Honor code. Evidence of plagiarism or any other form of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Academic Honor System office and will result in an "XF" being applied to the final course grade. For more information on K-State's Honor System, please go to: <http://www.k-state.edu/honor/>. For more information defining plagiarism and a discussion of how to avoid it: <http://www-personal.k-state.edu/~lauriej/courses/polsc821/plagiarism.html>

**Disabled students** are encouraged to speak to Dr. Johnson about any accommodations they may need as soon as possible in the course.

## **Grading:**

**Interpretive paper: 20%**  
**Midterm: 20%**  
**Final (cumulative): 30%**  
**Interpretive Paper Presentation 10%**  
**Participation 20%\***

\*Participation includes quality and quantity of in-class discussion. It also includes good citizenship in and regarding the class, including attendance, and refraining from rude, disruptive or harassing behavior in and regarding the class and all of its participants.

**Interpretive Paper:** The interpretive paper should start with selections from a primary text or texts from an author featured in the course. Students should try to ascertain the author's meaning and intention in the selected text, relating what he or she has read to prior class discussion. The paper should contain a bibliography including the primary text and at least 5 appropriate journal articles or scholarly books, which should also be used meaningfully in the paper. The primary text you choose to write about must go beyond the excerpt used in class. Parenthetical citations should be used. The paper should be 7-10 pages double spaced and should be submitted to the file drop box or submitted in class by the deadline, which will be during class, December 4, and brief presentations begin the next week (see below).

**Midterm and Final:** The midterm and final exams will consist of term identification and short answers. The midterm will be a take-home exam, and the final will be in-class during regularly assigned final exam time. These exams will measure whether or not the student is making an effort to come to class and keep up with the readings, and that he/she knows the facts presented in class.

**Interpretive paper Presentation:** During the week of December 9 and 11, students will give brief presentations on their papers. These can be informal, and students can use the technology in the class for their presentation if they want to (Powerpoint, etc.), but it is not required. (If you want to make a presentation using Powerpoint, I would appreciate it if you'd email me the presentation ahead of time so that I can pull it up for you using K-State Online: lauriej@ksu.edu). Other students are encouraged to ask questions and engage in dialogue at the end of these presentations, as time permits.

**Primary Texts:**

(Most readings will be printed in a binder for the class, but some may be provided online. This list is not exhaustive, and titles may change depending on the professors' preference in any given year.)

Bacon, "Simulation and Dissimulation"

Burke, *Letters on the Regicide Peace*, excerpts

De Charny, *The Book of Chivalry*, excerpts

Chaucer, "The Knight's Tale," from *The Tales of Canterbury*

Copernicus, *de Revolutionibus*, excerpts

Darwin, *Descent of Man*, excerpt

Martin Diamond, "Ethics and Politics: The American Way"

*Federalist* 10, 51

Franklin's Virtues

Galileo, *Dialogues* and *The Siderial Messenger*, excerpts

Hawking, *The Illustrated On the Shoulders of Giants*, excerpts

Homer, selections from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

Hoyle, selection from "Man in the Universe"

Hubble, selections

Kant, *What is Enlightenment?*

Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Newton, *Principia*, excerpt

Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, excerpts

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

John Maynard Smith, "The Importance of the Nervous System..."

Weinberg, "What About God?"

## **Course Outline:**

### **Week 1 Introductions (Dr. Johnson, August 26 & 28):**

Dr. Johnson will introduce the course, its mechanics and themes, and Mr. Jim Hohenbary will visit us to discuss the many scholarship opportunities for accomplished students.

### **Week 2: The Ancient Greek Hero (Dr. McCloskey, Sept. 2 & 4)**

This week we will read excerpts of Homer's Iliad and focus on the traditional Greek figure of the hero. We will use Homer's characters of Achilles and Agamemnon to explore the Greek hero's motivations, his methods, and his role in epic society. We will consider this hero, whose authority and position often seem derived solely from his ability to harm others, as problematic not only from a modern perspective but, potentially, from a contemporary one as well.

### **Week 3: An Ancient Greek Hero on the Ancient Greek Hero (Dr. McCloskey, Sept. 9 & 11)**

We will continue our discussion of the ancient hero by reading excerpts of Homer's Odyssey. A significant portion of the Odyssey is Odysseus' autobiographical—and potentially deceitful—account of his own heroism. We will contrast how Homer, as narrator, depicts Odysseus and how Odysseus depicts himself. If, as we will argue, the bulk of Odysseus' fame as a hero is derived from his lies about his own deeds, what difference is there for Homer between a great hero and a great liar? We will end by considering whether the Greek concept of the hero, problematic as it is, may in fact be the most effective method of immortality invented by humans so far.

### **Week 4: The Medieval and early Renaissance Hero (Dr. Donnelly, Sept. 16 & 18)**

Excerpts from "The Knight's Tale" from *The Tales of Canterbury* will be used to understand the sometimes morally problematic ways in which the heroic figure was presented during the Middle Ages. We will discuss the appearance and development of these ideas in feudal society. We will contemplate the ideal of the chivalric hero as the man who is willing and even eager to risk his life for others, for whom death is not the greatest evil, and the relative diminishment of this ideal in the modern world.

## **Week 5: The Art of Self-Creation: Operators in the (Incompletely) Secular World, Dr. Donnelly, Sept. 23 & 25)**

While the Renaissance image of man presents many continuities with the ideals of chivalry and courtliness that aristocratic society in the Middle Ages espoused, there is an unmistakably heightened awareness of self-fashioning and performance, of playing to an audience and mastering a role, of public image as a real tool of power and self-advancement in a greatly secularized context. To be sure, wealth, display, the brilliance and texture of material objects, the cultivation of a noble manner had been a part of the aristocratic ideal of the Middle Ages; but in Castiglione the aspect of performance and the very fact that the nature and accomplishments of the ideal man, the perfect courtier, have become a subject for discussion and debate. And in Machiavelli and Bacon, the veneer of idealization, the lip-service to conventional Christian morality and virtue, is more or less stripped away, and a pragmatic, calculating self-consciousness and relentless manipulation of self and others emerges as the means to a kind of art of self-creation. When Shakespeare's Iago says of Michael Cassio, "He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly," he acknowledges the appeal of the life and manners of Castiglione's model courtier, who is also well represented in Ophelia's characterization of Hamlet before the Ghost had poured the poison of his message into his ear--"The soldier's, scholar's, courtier's eye, tongue, sword,. . . the glass of fashion and the mould of form, the observed of all observers"--but the court and world in which Hamlet as ideal courtier moves also brings to the fore and embodies all the darker elements of Machiavelli's observations and injunctions, and Bacon's worldly prudence. Shakespeare's most famous play affords a comprehensive touchstone for evaluating the new man of the Renaissance, and his glittering, dangerous world of brilliance and shadows.

## **Week 6: Enlightenment: Natural Rights vs. Duties (Dr. Frey, Sept. 30 & Oct. 2)**

This week we will read Kant's "What is Enlightenment." Our discussion will focus on the shift from moral duties to individual rights encapsulated in the events and writings of Kant's time. Enlightenment figures such as Kant no longer talked of men's duty to the state but rather men's rights in the state. In this pivotal essay, Kant challenges readers to dare to know, to dare to question established authority. Only then can man emerge from his "self-imposed nonage." We will discuss the consequences, good and bad, of this monumental shift in thinking, as well as its origins in ideas we have already encountered from the Renaissance, Reformation, and the emergence of modern science.

### **Week 7: The French Revolution (Dr. Frey, Oct. 7 & 9)**

We will read excerpts from the American Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and compare the differing emphases especially on the rights of the individual and that of the nation in these two revolutionary documents. Other primary documents from the period will show the increasing radicalism of the Revolution and the revolutionaries' betrayal of fundamental tenets of the revolution. Last, selections from Edmund Burke will analyze his defense of tradition and the established order, and his criticism of those who would deal with an atheistic, regicide regime. For Burke, license, not liberty reigned in France. He decries the stress on natural rights and the rejection of "ancient opinions and rules of life."

### **Week 8: The Scientific Revolution (Dr. Sorensen, Oct. 14 & 16)**

Excerpts from Copernicus' *de Revolutionibus*, and Galileo's *Dialogues* and *The Siderial Messenger* will provide the reading material for understanding the way modern science challenged and supplanted the basic view of the universe as understood by the Church. These readings will be accompanied by selections from Stephen Hawking's *The Illustrated On the Shoulders of Giants*. We will discuss the importance of understanding the way scientists reason and develop their theories, as the heritage upon which contemporary scientists build which replace myth and dogma.

### **Week 9: Preparation and MIDTERM**

### **Week 10: The Center of the Universe? (Dr. Sorensen, Oct. 28 & 30)**

This week we will read a selection each from Newton's *Principia* and Darwin's *Descent of Man*. These will be accompanied by more material from Hawking's book and an essay by Steven Weinberg, "What About God?" These will help us discuss the impact of modern scientific theories and findings our conceptions of who we are and how it is we are here.

### **Week 11: Nietzsche: The Overturning of Natural Law and Natural Right (Dr. Charles Reagan, Nov. 4 & 6)**

Selections from Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals* will be the springboard for discussing the post-modern rejection of "eternal" ideas such as heroism, virtue, natural laws, natural rights, and even scientific truth. We will focus here on Nietzsche's project of destroying all claims to truth and how his argument impacts some of the previous arguments we have encountered that claim some kind of natural law and/or right around which we can order human societies.

### **Week 12: Postmodernism: Camus and Sartre (Dr. Charles Reagan, Nov. 11 & 13)**

We will continue our discussion of existentialism and postmodernism, in particular through an examination of Albert Camus' work *The Plague*. Nietzsche's rejection of "eternal truths" was not simply destructive, but also constructive in the sense that human beings could use it to become their own truths, freeing themselves from the shackles of history, tradition, and contemporary social norms, and insight which led to existentialism. This will lead us to a discussion of contemporary arguments about whether and how people can discover moral truths.

### **Week 13: The American Experience: A Modern Republic (Dr. Jim Franke, Nov. 18 & 20)**

James Madison proposed the truly revolutionary idea that a stable and enduring republic was possible without relying upon classic civic virtue, though such virtue was considered desirable. This week's readings will come from the *Federalist Papers*, specifically 10 and 51. We will contrast Madison's rejection of classical civic virtue as a requirement for republican order in favor of the "low but solid" foundation of self-interest as a basis for the mixed republic.

### **Fall Break: November 25 & 27**

**Week 15: The American Experience: Modern, “Bourgeois,”  
(Dec. 2 & 4) Papers due December 4 in class.**

Using Martin Diamond’s writings on America as a democratic republic, we will explore the debate over America’s founding—how much of the traditional notions of civic virtue remained in the thought of the founders, and how much focus was there on individual self-interest as the foundation of government? This week’s discussion will help us to place much of what we have studied so far in the American context, and to ask the questions such as: What kind of regime is America? What types of virtue, if any, does this regime encourage? Does individualism reign supreme in America, or can we still see within it an ideal of civic virtue? A reading of Ben Franklin’s short essay on virtues, including Franklin’s advice on how to develop virtues and eliminate vices, will also help us explore the meaning of virtue in the American context as entirely compatible with a positive view of self-interest.

**Week 16: The Great Conversation: Brief Presentations (All  
instructors welcome, Dec. 9 & 11)**

Students will make their presentations this week, sharing the results of their analyses of particular primary texts with an emphasis on tracing great ideas from their origin to their impact on contemporary thought and events.

This course carries the designation of University General Education (UGE). Students’ UGE experiences should inspire them to appreciate differing viewpoints, consider openly new and divergent thinking, weigh ideas with careful skepticism, challenge conventional wisdom, and explore accurate and more useful knowledge. UGE courses are to incorporate an active learning environment, an experiential context for whatever is studied, and an opportunity for students to connect ideas. The intent of the UGE program is to expand the students’ breadth of education at KSU.

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1. [Regarding Academic Honesty](#)



Kansas State University has an Honor System based on personal integrity, which is presumed to be sufficient assurance that, in academic matters, one's work is performed honestly and without unauthorized assistance. Undergraduate and graduate students, by registration, acknowledge the jurisdiction of the Honor System. The policies and procedures of the Honor System apply to all full and part-time students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate courses on-campus, off-campus, and via distance learning. The honor system website can be reached via the following URL: [www.k-state.edu/honor](http://www.k-state.edu/honor). A component vital to the Honor System is the inclusion of the Honor Pledge which applies to all assignments, examinations, or other course work undertaken by students. The Honor Pledge is implied, whether or not it is stated: "On my honor, as a student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this academic work." A grade of XF can result from a breach of academic honesty. The F indicates failure in the course; the X indicates the reason is an Honor Pledge violation.

## 2. [Regarding Students with Disabilities](#)

Students with disabilities who need classroom accommodations, access to technology, or information about emergency building/campus evacuation processes should contact the Student Access Center and/or their instructor. Services are available to students with a wide range of disabilities including, but not limited to, physical disabilities, medical conditions, learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder, depression, and anxiety. If you are a student enrolled in campus/online courses through the Manhattan or Olathe campuses, contact the [Student Access Center](#) at [accesscenter@k-state.edu](mailto:accesscenter@k-state.edu), 785-532-6441; for Salina campus, contact the [Academic and Career Advising Center](#) at [acac@k-state.edu](mailto:acac@k-state.edu), 785-826-2649.

## 3. **Expectations for Classroom Conduct**

All student activities in the University, including this course, are governed by the [Student Judicial Conduct Code](#) as outlined in the Student Governing Association [By Laws](#), Article V, Section 3, number 2. Students who engage in behavior that disrupts the learning environment may be asked to leave the class.

### **Academic Freedom Statement**

Kansas State University is a community of students, faculty, and staff who work together to discover new knowledge, create new ideas, and share the results of their scholarly inquiry with the wider public. Although new ideas or research results may be controversial or challenge established views, the health and growth of any society requires frank intellectual exchange. Academic freedom protects this type of free exchange and is thus essential to any university's mission.

Moreover, academic freedom supports collaborative work in the pursuit of truth and the dissemination of knowledge in an environment of inquiry, respectful debate, and

professionalism. Academic freedom is not limited to the classroom or to scientific and scholarly research, but extends to the life of the university as well as to larger social and political questions. It is the right and responsibility of the university community to engage with such issues.