THE BIRTH OF THE WORLD: COSMOLOGICAL TRADITIONS
NYU Gallatin School for Individualized Studies, IDSEM-UG 1374
Fall 2011
Mondays and Wednesdays, 9:30-10:45am, Room 512, Silver Center
Instructor: Katharina Natalia PIECHOCKI
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

“How did the world begin?” and “Why is there anything rather than nothing?” and “Who made the starts?” These are primary questions: the kind not only children like to ask, but also philosophers, scientists, and artists. These are questions that interested people four thousand years ago and that preoccupy us now as we’re moving into the 21st century. This course will explore manifold accounts of Creation across the globe, from Antiquity to the Renaissance. We will anchor the course in Mesopotamian creation myths and look at the Hebrew and the Islamic traditions (Genesis and The Qur’an). We will investigate both the ancient Greek (both mythic and philosophical: Hesiod, the Presocratics, and Plato) and the Roman traditions (Lucretius), and will ask how medieval mystics—Christian, Jewish, and Islamic—engaged with the question of origins and what is unique about their thinking. We will make a trajectory from Ptolemy and the geocentric conception of the world in Antiquity to Copernicus and the heliocentric revolution in the Renaissance. Some of our guiding questions that we will critically engage with during the semester are: Is there such a thing as the “Western” way of conceiving of cosmological traditions? How does the question of the birth of the world relate to the questions we ask ourselves on a daily basis? Can we think of natural catastrophes, the environment, and ecocriticism through the lens of historical cosmological traditions? How can a critical engagement with cosmological texts from the distant past help us gain new insights and address conceptual challenges for the present, and help us shed a new light not only on our own research and academic interests, but also on the way we think about things in our daily life, from the question of when life begins in the uterus to the question of life on another planet.

AIMS OF THE SEMINAR

The aims of this seminar are manifold: Your reading and writing assignments will be geared toward discussing and analyzing a wide range of texts and genres across centuries and continents. You will improve your ability to generate clear, focused arguments based on close reading and critical analysis of the assigned textual material. You will explore the topic of the birth of the world and the
cosmological traditions in your own unique, creative, and analytical way, and discover how it branches out to and engages with your own research interests. You will write two papers during the semester, a shorter midterm essay (7 pages) and a longer final essay (15 pages). The first essay will ask you to use a theoretical lens (Deleuze or Heidegger) to pose and explore a question about a text discussed in class. The second essay will ask you to build outward from our course readings and develop your own research project, which ideally will blend our course material and material from your individual concentration to form a unique, creative, and critical textual analysis related to our semester topic.

**WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

**WEEK 1**  
**WED, SEPTEMBER 7:**  
**Introduction**  
Reflecting about origins; Why are we interested in the question of “origins”? “Origins” in different contexts; Thinking about “origins” through close reading of text passages and artifacts

**WEEK 2**  
**MON, SEPTEMBER 12:**  
**Mesopotamian Creation Myths—Questioning “Western” Myths of Origin**  
_Theogony of Dunnu_ (ca. 1900 BC); _Atrahasis_ (ca. 1700 BC), Tablets I-III (pp. 9-35); _Enuma Elish_ (ca. 1700 BC), Tablets I-II (pp. 233-244)

**WED, SEPTEMBER 14:**  
**Mesopotamian Creation Myths—The Origins of Writing**  
_Gilgamesh_ (ca. 1300 BC), Tablets I-IX (pp. 50-99)

**WEEK 3**  
**MON, SEPTEMBER 19:**  
**The Flood Story: Cataclysms and Natural Disasters**  
_Gilgamesh_ (ca. 1300 BC), Tablets X-XII (pp. 99-125)

**WED, SEPTEMBER 21:**  
**Biblical Creations: Genesis (The double origin; The Tower of Babel)**  
_Genesis_ (especially chapters 1-2 and 9-11; page numbers depend on edition)

**WEEK 4**  
**MON, SEPTEMBER 26:**  
**The Birth of the Gods**  
_Hesiod_ (ca. 750-650 BC), _Theogony_ (pp. 3-85, bilingual edition; on Blackboard)

**WED, SEPTEMBER 28:**  
**Of Roots and Rhizomes: Empedocles and the Presocratics**  
_Empedocles_ (490-430 BC), _Fragments On Nature_ (pp. 211-275, bilingual edition; on Blackboard)

Gilles Deleuze/Félix Guattari: “Rhizome,” in Introduction to _Thousand Plateaus_ (pp. 3-25)

**WEEK 5**  
**MON, OCTOBER 3:**  
**The Presocratics: Parmenides—Un/Veiling the Universe**  
_Parmenides_ (ca. 520-440 BC?), _On Nature_ (pp. 49-91, bilingual edition; on Blackboard)

Martin Heidegger: _Parmenides_ (Introduction, pp. 1-16)
WED, OCTOBER 5:  NO CLASS!

WEEK 6
MON, OCTOBER 10:  NO CLASS! Columbus Day
WED, OCTOBER 12:  Beginnings and Origins: the “Western” Philosophical Tradition
                   PLATO (ca. 424-347 BC), Timaeus (pp. 3-53)
                   Midterm essays due

WEEK 7
MON, OCTOBER 17:  Beginnings and Origins: Plato
                   PLATO (ca. 424-347 BC), Timaeus (pp. 54-99)
WED, OCTOBER 19:  Love, Seeds, and Atoms: Lucretius
                   LUCRETIUS (ca. 99-55 BC), On the Nature of Things (books 1-2, pp. 25-90)

WEEK 8
MON, OCTOBER 24:  Good Seeds, Bad Seeds: Lucretius and Ecocriticism
                   LUCRETIUS (ca. 99-55 BC), On the Nature of Things (books 3-4, pp. 91-158)
WED, OCTOBER 26:  Cleansing and Hygiene: The Power of Pestilences
                   LUCRETIUS (ca. 99-55 BC), On the Nature of Things (books 5-6, pp. 159-236)

WEEK 9
MON, OCTOBER 31:  The Ptolemaic World: Representing the Oikoumene
                   Claudius PTOLEMY (90-168 AD), Geography (passages)
WED, NOVEMBER 2:  Representing the World and the Cosmos in the Middle Ages
                   Isidore of Seville’s T-O-Map; The Ebsdorf Map (ca. 1235); the Hereford Map (ca. 1300)

WEEK 10
MON, NOVEMBER 7:  Middle Eastern Creation Myths: Islam and The Qur’an
                   Qur’an (ca. 610-630), selected suras
WED, NOVEMBER 9:  Middle Eastern Creation Myths: Islam and The Qur’an (cont.’d)
                   Qur’an (ca. 610-630), selected suras

WEEK 11
MON, NOVEMBER 14:  Medieval Islamic Mysticism
                     AL-GHAZALI (1058-1111 AD), The Niche of Lights, chapters 1-2
WED, NOVEMBER 16:  Medieval Islamic Mysticism: Al-Ghazali
                     AL-GHAZALI (1058-1111 AD), The Niche of Lights, chapter 3

WEEK 12
MON, NOVEMBER 21:  Medieval Christian Mysticism
                     Hildegard VON BINGEN (1098-1179 AD), Scivias (book 1, pp. 67-143)
WED, NOVEMBER 23:  Medieval Christian Mysticism: Hildegard von Bingen
                     Hildegard VON BINGEN (1098-1179 AD), Scivias (book 3, pp. 309-368; 515-536)

WEEK 13
MON, NOVEMBER 28:  Medieval Jewish Mysticism
MAIMONIDES (1135-1204 AD), *Guide for the Perplexed* (passages)

**Medieval Jewish Mysticism: Maimonides**

MAIMONIDES (1135-1204 AD), *Guide for the Perplexed* (passages)

**WEEK 14**

**MON, DECEMBER 5:** The Renaissance Cosmos
Nicolaus COPERNICUS, *Commentariolus*, *On the revolution on Heavenly Spheres* (passages)

**WED, DECEMBER 7:** The Renaissance Cosmos and the Copernican Revolution
Nicolaus COPERNICUS, *Commentariolus*, *On the revolution on Heavenly Spheres* (passages)

**WEEK 15**

**MON, DECEMBER 12:** Humanism and Creation
Giovanni PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA (1463-1493 AD), *The Dignity of Man*

**WED, DECEMBER 14:** The Dignity of Man and Discourses about Creation in the 21st Century
Students bring own short texts for discussion (newspapers, magazines, articles, …)

**READING PRACTICE**

The reading of our texts will be partially guided. Before we start a new text, I will give you a set of questions and guiding lines that will help you identify particularly intriguing, interesting, or challenging moments. My reading assignments will diminish over the course of the semester as your own reading skills will become increasingly strong and subtle. Please note that my reading assignments are not mandatory; they serve to encourage a specific reading practice, close reading, which will allow us to have engaging class discussions and that will help you further your analytical writing skills.

**WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

Your writing assignments include the following:

- **Response papers** to accompany each assigned reading. I will expect you to write a 1-2 page response paper before we discuss a new text in class. Response papers consist in close reading of a specific passage that you found particularly interesting. They serve as a prompt for class discussions and as a possible stimulus for your longer essays.

- **Short (midterm) essay**, 7 pages, due on Wednesday, October 12. Both essays should be 12 pt. font, double-spaced, with one-inch margins on all sides, and typed in Times New Roman or Garamond. I will ask you to email me the first paragraph of your essay one week before the paper is due, so that you can receive feedback and suggestions for further development of your essay. Ideally, I would also like you to come to my office hours in order to discuss your project more in-depth.

- **Long (final) essay**, 15 pages, due on Friday, December 16 (to be submitted electronically to katharina.piechocki@nyu.edu by December 16, midnight). You must send me the first paragraph and come to my office hours in the first week of December to discuss your final project with me. You are furthermore encouraged to send me a draft of your paper in advance. The draft will not be graded, but will afford you an excellent opportunity to review your project and to incorporate your revisions prior to turning in the final copy.
Late work will affect your grade. I will not read late response papers and drafts. Please take advantage of my office hours and of the Gallatin Writing Center to discuss your essays. My office is located at 1 Washington Pl, Room 613 (office hours: Wednesdays after class). The Gallatin Writing Center is located at 1 Washington Place, Room 423. It’s easy to schedule an appointment with them at http://www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/undergraduate/writing/writingcenterappointments.html. I am happy to read and provide feedback on any course-relating writing of yours. Unless otherwise specified, work must be turned in to the instructor in class in a hard copy. Final essays are turned in electronically (see paragraph above).

PLAGIARISM

Please remember that as a Gallatin student you belong to “an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html for a full description of the academic integrity policy.” In case of doubt, please consult with me.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

To be able to fully participate in class and to successfully accomplish your written assignments, you must have completed the reading and writing assignments before class. Always remember to bring your assigned readings to class. Attendance is required, and absence will negatively impact your final grade. An excused absence is an illness with a doctor’s note, a family emergency, or a religious holiday. Please let me know in advance by e-mail if you are going to be absent for any of those reasons. Habitual lateness to class and more than two unexcused absences will seriously compromise your grade in the course. One student will be responsible for briefly summarizing every class, another one to initiate class discussion by posing one or a set of questions stemming from their personal reading experience. Every student will summarize and initiate class discussion at least once during the semester. Since our seminar is entirely based on discussions and textual analyses, laptops and other electronic devices (smart phones, ipads, ipods, etc.) will be distracting in the classroom. I request that you do not plan to write or take notes on laptops in class, but benefit from the seminar as a rare and refreshing screen-free moment in your life.

REQUIRED TEXTS

At the NYU Book Store:


On Blackboard:


Grading

Your final grade will factor in your performance on two essay assignments, your participation, and your response papers.

Response Papers 15%
Participation 25%
Short (Midterm) Essay 20%
Long (Final) Essay 40%

Each essay will receive a grade that reflects the quality of your ideas and the formal structure (including presentation, citation, and proofreading). Participation will be evaluated based on your attendance and punctuality, preparedness for class work, summaries and discussion prompts, the regularity and thoughtfulness of your contributions to class discussion, and small group work.

Important Dates

First class: Wednesday, September 7, 2011; last class: December 14, 2011
Introductory paragraph of midterm essay: due on Monday, October 3rd, 2011
No class on October 5 and on October 10, 2011
Midterm essay: due on Wednesday, October 12, 2011
First week of December: introductory paragraph of final paper due; schedule office hours appointment for that week to discuss your final paper
Final paper: due (electronically) on Friday, December 16, 2011 (midnight)