

Autumn 2013

English and Cultural Studies 3Q03E
Cultural Studies and Critical Theory 3Q03E



Jacques-Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii* (1786)

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Debrief on the 3Q03E Midterm Examination

Andrew and I very much looked forward to having the opportunity to consider your midterm answers, in large part because the exam provides us with a snap-shot of where each of you finds yourself in the course, and, in a more general way, where the class as a whole is at this particular juncture. The exam is an important part of the learning experience of the course, and thus an occasion for you to consider how closely you are wrestling with the course materials (the lectures, the assigned texts, and the Study Questions and Course Blog, the discussion thread on Avenue to Learn, etc.). Beyond the specific question that you were asked to discuss, the exam forms an occasion to ask broader questions about where you are in the course and how you are taking up the materials: Are you thinking about the larger questions and themes knitting the course together? Are you taking detailed lecture notes? Are you attending all classes? Are you reading the assigned materials, searching for specific examples of the large themes activating this course, namely justice, mimesis, and education? Are you bringing the assigned texts to class? Are you taking advantage of the regular office hours offered by Andrew and myself to help you with particular questions related to the course?

As it turns out, many students did quite well on the exam, while some students ran into difficulty. No difficulty struck us as insurmountable, certainly not without some focus and hard work,

including, in some cases, work on your study habits, i.e., how you go about taking this particular course. Andrew has put together a memorandum helping you consider some of the most common problems characterizing the midterm exam answers. I urge everyone in the course to take a good look at that memorandum. Andrew's remarks are reproduced below.

Andrew will be holding regular office hours if you would like to discuss your midterm. Before meeting with him, though, please ensure that you do the following things:

1. Carefully consider the marking commentary that Andrew has provided on your exams. Contemplate and then work with the problems to which he points, the questions he raises, and the suggestions that he makes.
2. Review the examination question and your answer. Looking back, did you understand and answer the question? Did you shape your answer, consistently rooting it in particular details drawn from Aristotle and Plato? Did you remember to compare and contrast the two thinkers? Did you take up the advice given in the exam question on how to write a persuasive and detailed answer? Where do your strengths in the exam answer lie? What are the areas where you can improve? For example, do you have a good handle on the course materials but found it hard to organize a strong answer to the exam question? Did you find that you weren't able to budget your time well, perhaps spending too much time discussing Plato rather than Aristotle or too much time thinking about how to answer the question rather than actually answering the question? Perhaps you found yourself unprepared for the examination; for example, attending lectures but not taking detailed enough notes, or attending lectures but not reading the assigned material as closely as the lectures and Study Questions are inviting you to do. Perhaps you did not in fact read the course materials, relying instead on what you heard in class. Asking and answering these sorts of questions in the frankest way possible is the first step towards doing the sort of work that Andrew and I are confident that you can do in this course. Identifying those areas in the course where you need to devote more focussed work is the first step towards doing better in the course going forward.
3. Return to Plato and Aristotle, making sure to re-familiarize yourself with their claims, arguments, illustrations, examples, and worries. Connect those details to the exam question, your answer, and Andrew's marking commentary.
4. Return to the Midterm Study Tips posted on the 3Q03E Coursepage, asking yourself whether you employed the specific suggestions made there in writing your exam answer. Carefully consider your exam answer. Does it take up the quite particular pointers made in the Midterm Study Tips document?
5. Read Andrew's welcoming memorandum with care (see below), connecting your exam answer to the questions and problems that he helpfully raises there.

I look forward to seeing you in class, where we can continue to think together!

Dr. David L. Clark

3Q03E Midterm Examination: Problems and Solutions

Dear Class:

Plato and Aristotle each demonstrate a tremendous anxiety about the capacity of mimeses (representations, imitations, mimeries) to induce powerful effects within human beings. How is it possible, they wonder, for aesthetic objects and performances, which are ostensibly derivative of empirical reality, to provoke emotional and intellectual responses? How can writing, which seems to be little more than an imitation or transcription of speech, communicate or teach as effectively as a verbal exchange? Why is it that rhetoric, which uses language to manipulate the affective reactions of audiences, is at times able to convince people of something more effectively than reasoned argumentation? How can philosophy—the rigorous, amorous, unflinching pursuit of truth and wisdom at all costs—differentiate itself vis-à-vis mimetic practices that may appear to resemble it uncannily?

This exam was an invitation to address these questions and take up Plato and Aristotle's challenge: to reckon with the relationship between philosophy and its shadow double, mimesis. As Dr Clark mentioned, many students did well on the exam, while others struggled. Overall, I was greatly pleased by the effort students displayed. The vast majority of you clearly dedicated yourselves to the difficult task of thinking with Plato and Aristotle, two thinkers separated from the contemporary moment by thousands of years, who nevertheless remain provocative, urgent voices. Although I have written individualized comments on all of your exams, there were a number of issues that I felt apply more generally. My intention here is to give you an understanding of what I look for when I grade. The most successful exams could be described by the following:

1. **Organized.** A clear sign that a student understands the material thoroughly is if they are able to take a broad constellation of observations and insights about the texts and make them cohere into a single, consistent line of argumentation. A strong, organized essay states its overarching thesis early in the essay. It divides its argument into paragraphs with clear topic sentences and conclusions. It transitions smoothly between thoughts, illustrating how different strands of argumentation interrelate. Exams that lacked an explicit thesis, that were not arranged into logical paragraphs, and that demonstrated no linear progression or transition between thoughts, tended to do more poorly. By organizing your thoughts into a clear, coherent structure, you not only make your exam easier to read, you also indicate that the texts we study are not chaotic or random, but rather well ordered. Scribble out a quick outline before you begin writing. Break your thoughts into their component parts. Write concluding sentences that anticipate the paragraphs that are to follow and introductory sentences that look back towards that paragraphs that preceded.
2. **Explanatory.** An explanatory essay is one that does not assume that its arguments are self-evident. It clarifies opaque or complicated claims. It takes nothing for granted, offering working definitions for technical or philosophical terms. It may use sentences that begin with "In other words..." It both "shows and tells," unpacking the significance of complicated arguments or episodes in the texts. It writes "more about less," analyzing a relatively small number of examples in great detail. Exams that did not explain their examples, that did not define key terms, that did not justify their assumptions, and that mentioned more examples than could be examined in depth, tended to do more poorly. When in doubt, provide a more detailed explanation of your arguments and terms than

you think is necessary. Show your reader that you know what you are writing about. Provide definitions even for technical terms contained within the exam question. Make it clear that you have learned from the course.

3. **Inquiring.** An inquiring essay refuses to take the course texts at face value. It identifies and probes moments of tension, instances where the thinkers we study betray or contradict themselves. Speculate about the significance of these apparent contradictions, query why a philosopher may attempt to stave off certain ideas rather than others. Ponder the significance of irony, paradox, and *aporia* (impasse, impossibility, inconsistency). Much of what has been discussed in this course's lectures (not to mention the course blog!) has been moments when Plato and Aristotle seem to go against their own intentions, when they display symptoms of "auto-immunity"—i.e. a condition whereby a body destroys its own defences, when an argument turns against itself, undermining the conditions for its own existence. Do not inadvertently make the thinkers out to be more consistent than they actually are. Plato and Aristotle often make arguments that are incoherent or incongruous. Dwell with this! Work with the contradictions! These are often the most interesting, provocative moments in the text. Exams that glossed over problematic or paradoxical elements of the texts did not do as well as those that engaged these elements.
4. **Specific.** A specific essay derives its argument from particular details in the course texts. It does not speak in generalizations or gloss over complex concepts. It contextualizes textual details, explaining the circumstances in which particular remarks are made in the text. Exams that were overly general, imprecise, or decontextualized tended to do poorly. Remember to always point to particular passages. Refer to characters by name.
5. **Clear.** A clear essay is grammatical and terse. It is written with the reader in mind. It uses language that is concrete and precise, as opposed to abstract and vague. Exams that were poorly written tended to do very poorly. If your writing is not where it needs to be, please take advantage of the many resources accorded to McMaster students: attend a writing seminar, contact a writing tutor, read a style guide.
6. **Dialectical.** A dialectical essay employs the analytical strategy espoused by Socrates in *The Republic*. It examines how thoughts conflict with one another. It engages opposing viewpoints, in order to clarify matters that are not clear cut. It, for example, compares and contrasts Plato and Aristotle's views on mimesis point by point, showing how one thinker raises problems that the other takes on. A dialectical essay acknowledges that there is always more than one way to respond to a problem, it privileges development over closure, process over completion, dialogue over declaration.

To my delight, I noted that the vast majority of students paid attention to Dr Clark's admonition to cite specific evidence from the texts—i.e. to use sentences that begin with "For example..." In spite of this, many students had difficulty *integrating* evidence into their argument.

In response, I developed the following acronym as mnemonic to help students remember how to put evidence to work:

Satement
Evidence
Explanation

After you make a claim, immediately support it with an edifying example from the text. After providing an example, analyze it. Unpack its significance. State how it supports your claim, why it is important. Examine any difficult or problematic aspects. Spell out its implications for your broader argumentation. In general, this is the form that the body paragraphs of any essay that you write should take. An essay's body is, to a great extent, composed of sequences of Statement-Evidence-Explanations. The "Explanation" section of your body paragraphs is the most important component, which is also likely to be the longest. Here is an example of how the SEE format works, to give a clearer idea about what I mean:

[Statement] Although the majority of *The Republic* is dedicated to describing the complex laws and customs of the "feverish," pleasure-hungry city championed by Glaucon, Socrates suggests that the ideal form of social organization is one in which small communities pursue simple, austere livelihoods. **[Evidence]** When Glaucon and Adeimantus ask that Socrates describe justice in a city, he initially suggests that the best community is one wherein citizens eat uncomplicated, natural foods, wear unadorned clothing, and live without soldiers or luxuries. While Glaucon dismisses this temperate, almost ascetic society as a "city of pigs"—i.e. a city fit only for base animals, not people—Socrates calls it the "true city." **[Explanation]** It is a polity without war, want, or social stratification. In such a place, the aristocratic, Athenian conception of justice—to do good to one's friends and harm to one's enemies—is inapplicable, if not outright incoherent. In spite of this incommensurability, the "true city" nevertheless seems to be ruled by some kind of justice, one characterized by non-violence, egalitarianism, and pacified (although not eliminated) desire, rather than aggression and exclusion. Socrates' insistence that this city is "true," and that the city of luxuries demanded by Glaucon, and developed throughout *The Republic*, is "feverish," suggests that, whatever justice may be, it is *not* the unchecked pursuit of pleasure. Socrates' decision to converse about the place of justice in the "feverish" city Glaucon craves, as opposed to the simple one that he prefers, indicates something important about the Platonic approach to philosophy and education. It is better, Plato implies, to work with the ideas advanced by others than to dictate one's own thoughts. Philosophical education occurs when students refine their own ideas, not when a teacher supplies them with all the answers.

Essay-style exams are a uniquely challenging method of evaluation. They put you in something of a crucible, forcing you to put your knowledge to work and to produce a detailed document in a short amount of time. I know that many students find these exams stressful, but I'm confident that, by drawing upon our commentary and suggestion, the amount of stress associated with future exams can be minimized.

Please feel free to come and speak with me in office hours if you have any questions.

Yours sincerely,

-Andrew