Inventing Reality: The Final Meeting
by Douglas Leonard, 2002.04.15

In past years, the final “thing” in Inventing Reality has consisted of a large paper due at the course’s end. I have decided to alter the final assignment for this year, and instead have the final “event” be structured individual meetings, to take place on May 7, 8, and 9. The meetings will last for half an hour each, and will be framed around your responses to two questions:

1. The first question will be your choice from among three rather broad questions. The first of the three possible questions is:

   We started this course by considering three different perspectives on the Universe, namely those of Hesiod, Plato, and Lucretius. Begin by explaining the essential characteristics of these three philosophies. Then, answer the following: Which of the three early philosophies do you think comes closest to the modern scientific understanding of the physical world, and our relation to it?

The remaining 2 possible questions will be written by your fellow students (perhaps even you); specifically, the “thought question” for the second to last week of class will be to think of a question that you think best encapsulates the broadest range of ideas covered by this class, and provide a brief response. I will then select two of these to serve as possible final questions for the first part of the meetings; you will get the full list of the three possible questions at the last class meeting.

2. We have covered a lot of material in this course. Of all of the ideas, people, time periods, etc. that we have discussed, what has been your single favorite thing?

The Structure of the Meetings

The meetings will work like this. After telling me which question you have chosen to answer for part (1), I will ask you the question, and then listen to your response. For at least five minutes I will not interrupt you, and will not ask any questions. This means that you must come prepared to speak for at least 5 minutes, without interruption, on the question. Note that you may accomplish this in any way you like: You may read from a prepared response (note that you can have anything with you that you like; notes, the Reader, or a complete, prepared response), or speak without notes — whatever you feel most comfortable with. What I am hoping to get from you is a clear, coherent, well thought-out answer to the question. After this, I will ask some questions based on what you have just said, and we will engage in some dialogue.

The second part of our meeting will work in exactly the same way as the first; that is, you’ll first describe your favorite specific thing about the course, and we’ll then discuss it. So, be sure to chose something that you are comfortable talking about, since I will be asking you follow-up questions about it.

That is it. I have given this final ending lots of thought, and my sincere hope in ending things off in this way is fourfold. (1) You will spend a significant amount of time thinking and reflecting on what we have covered in this class. I have seen a lot of your writing this term, and I’m sure most of you will have large papers and projects due in other courses. The point here is to give you the time (that usually would be spent working of the final paper) to thoroughly review, discuss, and ponder the broad scope of ideas that we have explored together. (2) That this will further develop your prowess at vocalizing ideas. In the “real” world, being able to communicate ideas verbally is at least as important a skill as being a clear writer, yet this is not usually stressed in academics as much as the written word. (3) This allows us to interact. So often in the past I have gotten final papers that raise a host of interesting questions that I would love to pursue, but I am never able to find out what a student actually think about them. (4) That you enjoy it! After this whole semester of grappling with complex ideas, writing volumes of thoughts and reflections, this is your chance to show what you have absorbed. And since you are in control of the basic set of topics that we will discuss, you can steer the discussion towards those areas that interest you most.

So that is it! As always, if you have any questions about this, don’t hesitate to ask!