



Abigail Adams Institute

The Great Conversation: HOW SHOULD WE LIVE

Volume I: The Ancients

This semester we explore the “best which has been thought and said” from the dawn of civilization through the fall of Rome. The idea of human liberty has taken millennia to incubate, and next semester we make the beginning of that conversation our own! Starting by asking the fundamental question of about the relation of divine agency to human freedom as explored in the Book of Genesis and in the ancient Near Eastern and Greek mythologies, we then turn to the philosophical critique of these traditions.

Engaging Genesis frames the question of how we should live with regard to origins and how that origin holds sway through providence. If a promise is driving history, is that good news or problematic for human liberty? We then turn to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the earliest extant monument of great literature, with its themes of political virtue, friendship, and facing mortality. The Greeks follow, especially those of Periclean Athens, who initiate a critique of millennia of religious tradition. In pressing rationality, their thought does not forsake mythology and religion. The Gospel and Saint Paul push the question of the relation of individual and communal perfection to its limit. The Roman Empire would not have to grapple head-on the unleashing of this transcendent claim of the Church for several centuries, so another tradition grows up: a Roman extrapolation of Hellenistic syncretism in high pagan virtue, which helps secure the claims of nature against peremptory assertions of the supernatural. We end with the chapter on memory from Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, who finds the flourishing of human personality in a constant dialogue with the divine ground of each moment and all history.

Sessions will meet on Thursday evenings, from 6 – 7:30pm with refreshments served. The texts are available in pdf format on our website or in a bound book, which can be picked up at our office.

Week One (Sept 12)	Book of Genesis
Week Two (Sept 19)	Epic of Gilgamesh
Week Three (Sept 26)	Homer (Iliad)
Week Four (Oct 3)	Heraclitus
Week Five (Oct 10)	Sophocles (Antigone)
Week Six (Oct 17)	Plato (Apology)
Week Seven (Oct 24)	Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics)
Week Eight (Oct 31)	New Testament (Romans)
Week Nine (Nov 7)	Plutarch (selections)
Week Ten (Nov 14)	Tacitus (Annals)
Week Eleven (Nov 21)	Aurelius (Meditations)
Week Twelve (Dec 5)	Augustine (Confessions)