

Introduction to Early Modern European Philosophy
PHIL-UA21. Summer 2023. Credits: 4.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 3.30 – 5.05 pm.
Room 202, Philosophy Department, 5 Washington Place.

Instructor

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Email policy: I am happy to answer logistical questions over email. For questions about course material, please come to my office hours instead.

Office hours

Time: Wednesdays and Thursdays, 1.00 – 2.00 pm. If you cannot make these times, you can always email me to set up a meeting.

Location: Room 414, Fourth Floor, Philosophy Department, 5 Washington Place.

Office hours are your chance to come and talk to me about course material or philosophy in general. You do not need to have a well-formed question to come to office hours; just show up, and we can have a chat.

Course Description:

This course is an introduction to European philosophy during the early modern period: roughly, 1600 to 1800. During these 200 years, Europe experienced a series of immense social, religious, and scientific upheavals, including the development of modern natural science, the challenging of the traditional authorities of church and crown, and the birth of colonialism and the world market. These upheavals also extended to the realm of thought, leading philosophers to revise or outright reject traditional ways of understanding both ourselves and the world around us. Indeed, the early modern period is often seen as the beginning of a distinctly *modern* worldview, radically different from what came before it.

We will closely read some of the canonical texts from this period, including works by figures like René Descartes, Margaret Cavendish, John Locke, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and David Hume. Key themes will include skepticism and the foundation of knowledge, the relationship between our mind and the external world, the nature of reality and the existence of God, self and self-knowledge, and the value of philosophy.

Course Aims:

This course has three aims. The first is to introduce you to some of the central texts and ideas of early modern philosophy. These texts provide a crucial foundation not just for further study

in philosophy, but also more generally for understanding the development of modern European culture and thought. We are still, in many ways, living in the intellectual world that figures like Descartes and Hume built. The second aim is to develop your ability to read and interpret difficult texts. We will spend a lot of time, both in class and in the assignments, close-reading passages and considering how best to make sense of the texts. Finally, the third aim is to help develop your abilities to critically engage with, analyze, and evaluate philosophical arguments and theories. We will not just engage with the texts as historical artifacts, but as philosophical interlocutors with whom we might agree or disagree.

Required Texts:

The following texts are available from the NYU Bookstore:

- Margaret Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, edited by Anne M. Thell. Broadview Press, 2020.
- René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Donald A. Cress, 3rd Edition. Hackett: 1993.
- G. W. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Essays*, translated by Daniel Garber and Roger Ariew. 9th Edition. Hackett: 1991
- David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Eric Steinberg, 2nd Edition. Hackett: 1993.

Note that many of the texts we are reading are in translation. *It is critical that you use the translation and edition listed above.* We want to be able to discuss the texts together, but that requires that we are all reading the same thing.

Except for the readings from Leibniz, all texts required for the course will also be available on the Brightspace page. Please bring either physical copies or print-outs of the assigned text to each session, as we will reference them during discussion.

Assignments:

Your grade will be based on the following:

Participation: 10%

Short weekly writing assignments: 20%

Each week you will hand in a short (1 page) piece of writing on the text we have read that week. These assignments will be due before class on Monday of the next week. Prompts will be posted on Brightspace a week in advance. I am not expecting you to

hand in polished mini-essays; these assignments are mostly meant to get you thinking independently about the texts.

There will be no writing assignments the weeks you have papers due or the final week of class, which means that there will be 4 short writing assignments in total. Each will count for 5% of your grade.

Papers: 40%

Paper 1 (due July 26th): 1200–1600 words (4–6 pages) – 15%

Paper 2 (due August 6th): 1400–1800 words (5–7 pages) – 25%

Exam: 30%

There will be an in-class exam on the final day of class. This exam will cover all the material for the course and will consist of text identification questions, short-answer questions, and essay questions.

Course Policies:

Accessibility: Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities or other accessibility needs. Your go-to resource for accommodations is the Moses Center. You can submit an accommodation request at <https://www.nyu.edu/students/communities-and-groups/student-accessibility/academic.html>. You can also contact them directly at 212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu. It is a good idea to get in touch with the Moses Center as early as possible, as they sometimes take a while to respond.

I am committed to making my classroom accessible to all students. If you have any concerns about accessibility, please contact me.

Extensions and late penalties: I happy to grant extensions on papers or assignments if for some reason you are unable to meet the original deadline, for example because you are sick or because the deadline falls on a religious holiday that you observe. If you are going to request an extension, please contact me as far in advance of the deadline as you can and let me know why you need an extension. Also, keep in mind that the summer semester is compressed, and so it is easy to fall behind if you do not submit your coursework on time.

If you do not have an extension, the grade penalty for late assignments is 1/3rd of a letter grade per day that the assignment is late. For example, a B paper that is one day late becomes a B- paper, and an A paper that is three days late becomes a B paper.

Academic integrity: I take academic integrity seriously. The work you submit must be original, and it must be your own. Likewise, any sources you use must be properly quoted and cited.

Failure to follow these rules can result in an F on the assignment or you failing the course. For more guidelines on academic integrity, see <https://cas.nyu.edu/academic-integrity.html>.

A particular note on AI: it is plagiarism to use text generated by an AI like ChatGPT program in your essays or assignments. It is also fairly easy to spot; ChatGPT and other programs like it are not very good at doing either philosophy or the history of philosophy.

Missed exams: Since the final exam is during class time, it will not be possible to take a make-up exam except in cases of exceptional need.

Other Resources:

Online resources: The following are useful online resources:

- <https://plato.stanford.edu/>
 - The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy contains high quality articles on several subjects and authors we will discuss in this course.
- <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/>
 - This website contains easy-to-read versions of many of the texts we will read in this course. *Note that these are not the original texts*; they are basically translations of the texts into simple, modern-day English. You should always try to read the original texts first, but if you are finding it difficult, you can use these texts as a helpful companion. Always cite the standard course translations in your essays.
- <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>
 - This is a great guideline for how to write a philosophy paper, especially if you have never written one before.

Student wellness: The NYU [Wellness Exchange](#) is the constellation of NYU's programs and services designed to address the overall health and mental health needs of its students. Students can access this service 24 hours a day, seven days a week – wellness.exchange@nyu.edu; (212) 443-9999. Students can call the Wellness Exchange hotline (212-443-9999) or the NYU Counseling Service (212-998-4780) to make an appointment for Single Session, Short-term, or Group counseling sessions.

Writing center: The NYU Writing Center is open during the summer. You can make an appointment at <https://nyu.mywconline.com/>.

Class Schedule:

Week 0: Background

July 6th – Introduction; scholasticism and the new science

Readings: Excerpts from Galileo Galilei, *The Assayer*

First short writing assignment due by Monday, July 12th

Week 1: Descartes and the origin of modern philosophy

July 10th – Skepticism, the quest for certainty, and self-knowledge

Readings: Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditations 1–2

July 11th – The theory of ideas and the argument(s) for God's existence

Readings: *Meditations*, Meditation 3

July 12th – The source of our errors, the “truth rule,” and the ontological argument

Readings: *Meditations*, Meditations 4–5

July 13th – Imagination and intellect; mind-body dualism; the external world regained

Readings: *Meditations*, Meditation 6

Second short writing assignment due by Monday, July 17th

Week 2: Margaret Cavendish on materialism

July 17th – Objections to mind-body dualism

Readings: Excerpts from the Correspondence between Descartes and Elizabeth of Bohemia; excerpts from Anton Wilhelm Amo, *An Inaugural Dissertation on the Impassivity of the Human Mind*

July 18th – Materialism

Readings: Margaret Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*: First part, Chapters I–V and Appendix Ch I–III. *Philosophical Letters*: Preface, Section I, Letters 1–2, 35; Section II, Letters 1–3, 15, 18, 21, 25, and 28–31.

July 19th – Vitalism and panpsychism

Readings: *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, First Part, Ch. VI-X, Second Part, Ch. I-IV. *Philosophical Letters*: Section I, Letters 10-11 and 36; Section II, Letters 7-8, 10, and 13; Section IV, Letters 30 and 33.

July 20th – The doctrine of self-movement; sympathy as the driving force of the universe

Readings: *Philosophical Letters*: Section I, Letters 4, 23-24, and 29-30; Section II, Letters 4-6 and 16; Section IV, Letters 1-2, 4, and 6. *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, First Part, Ch. XVII; Fifth Part, Ch. IXX-XXI; Sixth Part, Ch. V, VII-VIII. (Note: read the excerpts from *Philosophical Letters* first!)

First essay due by Wednesday, July 26th

Week 3: John Locke on empiricism

July 24th – Empiricism and the theory of ideas; the primary/secondary quality distinction

Readings: John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book I and Book II, Ch. 1-8

July 25th – Locke's theory of mind; action and freedom; substance as substratum

Readings: *Essay*, Book II, Ch. 9-12, Ch. 20-21, Ch. 23

July 26th – Consciousness and personal identity

Readings: *Essay*, Book II, Ch. 27

July 27th – The limits of human knowledge and Locke's critique of Descartes

Readings: *Essay*, Book IV, Ch. 1-4, 9-11

Third short writing assignment due by Monday, July 31st

Week 4: G.W.F. Leibniz on idealism and rationalism

July 31st – Rationalism and the principle of sufficient reason; the best of all possible worlds

Readings: G. W. Leibniz, "On The Ultimate Origination of Things"

August 1st – Truth and substance; the problem of free will

Readings: Leibniz, *Discourse* Sect. 1 – 15 and “Primary Truths”

August 2nd – Knowledge, teleology, and pre-established harmony

Readings: Leibniz, *Discourse* Section 17–35 (feel free to skim-read 17)

August 3rd – Monads and idealism

Readings: *Monadology*

Second essay due by Monday, August 7th

Week 5: David Hume on naturalism and skepticism

August 7th – Hume’s science of the mind; the problem of induction

Readings: David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sect. I–IV

August 8th – Hume’s skeptical solution to the problem of induction; the idea of causation; liberty and necessity

Readings: *Enquiry*, Sect. V and VII–IX

August 9th – Skepticism about the self

Readings: Excerpt from David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*

August 10th – Naturalism and the role of skepticism in our life

Readings: *Enquiry*, Sect. XII

Fourth short writing assignment due by Monday, August 14th

Week 6: What is the point of philosophy?

August 14th – Happiness, prejudice, and illusion

Readings: Émilie Du Châtelet, *The Discourse on Happiness*

August 15th – The “Enlightenment” and the call to think for yourself

Readings: Immanuel Kant, “Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?”

August 16th – In-class exam