

Introduction to Early Modern European Philosophy
PHIL-UA21. Summer 2026. Credits: 4.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 9.30 –11.05 am.
Room 202, Philosophy Department, 5 Washington Place.

Instructor

Carl Christian Abrahamsen

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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, 11.15 am – 12.15 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 to buy or rent from the NYU Bookstore:

- George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, edited by R.M. Adams. 8th edition. Hackett: 1979.
- Margaret Cavendish, *Essential Writings*, edited by David Cunniff. Oxford University Press: 2019.
- René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Donald A. Cress, 3rd edition. Hackett: 1993.
- G. W. F. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Essays*, translated by Daniel Garber and Roger Ariew. 9th Edition. Hackett: 1991
- John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited and abridged by Kenneth P. Winkler, Hackett: 1996.
- 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.

All texts required for the course will also be available on the Brightspace page, *with the exception of the Descartes and the Leibniz*. 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: 15%

In-class writing assignments: 30%

There will be two in-class writing assignments, on July 9th and July 16th, each worth 15%. Both assignments will involve you reading and answering questions about a piece of text related to that week's content. You will be given the rough topic of the assignments in advance.

Papers: 25%

You will write a substantial and original research paper of 1200-1800 words or 4-6 pages, either on a topic provided by me or a topic of your own choice. The paper will be worth 20% and will be due July 31st at 11:59 pm.

I will additionally schedule short 15-minute interviews on your paper, worth 5%, during the week of August 3rd. As long as you have a good grasp on the argument of your paper, the interview will not be difficult. I also encourage you to discuss your paper topic with me in office hours prior to the deadline.

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 an 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>.

Please note that it is plagiarism both to use text generated by a large language model like ChatGPT in your essays or assignments *and* to use LLMs to generate the ideas in your essays or assignments. I **strongly** recommend that you refrain from using LLMs in any part of your work for this course in order to avoid any risk of plagiarizing.

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. Particularly useful entries include:
- <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 1st – Introduction: what is early modern philosophy?

Reading: Excerpts from Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (optional)

July 2nd – Skepticism and the quest for certainty

Readings: Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation 1

Week 1: Descartes and the origin of modern philosophy

July 6th – Self-knowledge and the existence of God (drop/add deadline)

Readings: *Meditations*, Meditations 2–3

NB: Deadline to drop/add courses

July 7th – The existence of God continued; truth and error

Readings: *Meditations*, Meditations 4–5

July 8th – Imagination and intellect; mind-body dualism; the external world

Readings: *Meditations*, Meditation 6

July 9th – First in-class writing assignment

Week 2: Elizabeth of Bohemia and Margaret Cavendish on materialism

July 13th – 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* (optional)

July 14th – Animals minds, plant minds, material minds

Readings: *Philosophical Letters*: Preface, Section I, Letters 1, 10–11, and 35–36; Section II, Letters 1, 7–8, 10, 13, 18, 25, 29, 33; Section IV, Letter 30. (Optional) *Poems and Fancies*: “A Morall Discourse betwixt Man, and Beast”

July 14th – Matter and self-movement

Readings: Margaret Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*: First part, Chapters I–VIII. *Philosophical Letters*: Section I, Letters 2, 4, 29–30; Section II, Letters 4–6, 15, 21, and 31; Section IV, 1–2, 6.

July 16th – Second in-class writing assignment

Week 3: John Locke and George Berkeley on empiricism

July 20th – Empiricism and the theory of ideas

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

July 21st – Ideas continued; Primary and secondary qualities; substance as substratum

Readings: *Essay*, Book II, Ch. 2–12; Excerpts from Galileo’s *The Assayer*

July 22nd – Matter; mind-dependence; immediate and mediate perception

Readings: George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues*, Dialogue 1

July 23rd – Idealism and common sense

Readings: *Three Dialogues*, Dialogues 2 and 3

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

July 27th – Truth; complete concepts; freedom and necessity

Readings: G. W. F. Leibniz, *Discourse* Sect. 1 – 15 and “Primary Truths” (optional)

July 28th – Knowledge, teleology, and pre-established harmony

Readings: Leibniz, *Discourse* Section 16–35 (feel free to skim-read 17).

July 29th – Monads and idealism

Readings: *Monadology*, §1 – 35

July 30th – The principle of sufficient reason; God; perfection

Readings: *Monadology*, §36 – 90

Essay due @ 11:59 pm July 31st

Week 5: David Hume on naturalism and skepticism

August 3rd – Hume’s science of the mind; the problem of induction

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

NB: Deadline for withdrawal and pass/fail requests

August 4th – Hume’s skeptical solution to the problem of induction; the idea of causation

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

August 5th – Skepticism about the self

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

August 6th – Naturalism and the role of skepticism in our life

Readings: *Enquiry*, Sect. XII

Interview the week of August 3rd

Week 6: Reason and the role of philosophy in life

August 10th – The “Enlightenment” and the call to think for yourself

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

August 11th – In-class exam