Early Modern Philosophy  
PHIL 206  
Kalamazoo College  
Winter 2017

Instructor: Dr. Patrick Ahern  
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Office Location: Humphrey House, 201  
Office Hours: Thursday 2:10pm-3:10pm, and by appointment  
Class Times: Tuesday/ Thursday, 12:10pm-2:00pm  
Class Location: Upjohn Library, Room 306

The period referred to as “Early Modern,” roughly the period between the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, was an age of considerable transformation of human thinking and activity. The impact of thinkers such as Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza led to radical shifts in metaphysical, epistemological, religious and political thought. These shifts in philosophical understanding find a reflection in the scientific work of Galileo, Kepler, Newton, and Copernicus, as well as in religious controversies and political upheavals. The reorientation of the place and power of human knowledge became expressed through the insights of a mechanistic worldview, the development of modern subjectivity, and through the promises of the human capacity to construct a social-political order. Whether or not one is consciously aware of the influence of this period upon our thinking and social organization, the impact of the Early Modern period of philosophical writing still reverberates upon our thinking and social-political activity. In this class, we will look to some of the most influential thinkers of this period to examine the ways that the influence of these thinkers persist to this day.

Required Texts:

- Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, Cambridge University Press, (0-521-56797-1)  
- Spinoza, The Spinoza Reader, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (0-691-0067-0)  
- Rene Descartes, Meditations, with Selections from the Objections and Replie, Cambridge University Press (9780521558181)

Grading Breakdown:

- Short Writing Assignments (4 X 5%/ 20%)  
- Two Papers (2 X 30%/ 60%)  
- Class Discussion Leading (10%)  
- Participation (10%)
Reading and Short Writing Assignments: It is crucial that you complete the readings on the assigned day and that you have given the text careful consideration before coming to class. Since it will take more than one reading of the texts to familiarize yourself with the ideas presented, you should have the initial reading of the material for the following week done by Monday of the assigned week. You will have four short writing assignments (at least two pages, double-spaced) covering the material to be covered in class. The specific task for each writing assignment will be given the class prior to its due date. Late short writing assignments will not be accepted.

Essays: You will be required to write two papers of at least five typed pages each. The topics will be distributed in class. I will be available to meet with anyone who seeks individual assistance with your paper, and I strongly encourage you to take advantage of this extra assistance in writing your papers. Essays that are late (i.e. not handed in at the time that they are due in class) are subject to a full grade reduction for each day that the essay is late. Exceptions will be made only for extreme circumstances (death, serious illness, etc.) and must be granted in advance.

Class Discussion Leading: You will be expected to lead class discussion once during the course of the term in a group of three students. You will be expected to evaluate what issues or problems compelled the writer to write the reading(s) we are covering in class that day, and present a thesis of how they responded to that problem. You will offer an evaluation of the claims, arguments, etc. made in the day’s reading. Also, you will come to class with several questions inspired by the readings for class discussion. The presentations will be accompanied by a two-page write up from each member of the group focusing on the main themes of the days reading. This write-up and preparation for discussion leading should be ready one class prior to the day that you will be leading the discussion. We will briefly meet at that time to help you prepare.

Attendance and Participation: Active participation in class discussion is key to drawing as much as possible from the readings and the course in general. The class will involve a mixture of lecture and discussion, and you are expected to come to class with questions and comments about the reading. You are entitled to two unexcused absences before your grade is reduced by one step (A to A-, B+ to B, etc.).

Late Policy: Assignments not submitted in-class on the due date are subjected to a full grade reduction. Exceptions will be granted only under extreme circumstances (death, documented illness, etc.) and when requested in advance.

Disabilities: If you have a disability requiring special accommodations, please let me know as soon as possible so that the necessary arrangements can be made.
Final Note:
I encourage feedback from you regarding anything in the class that you find most or least helpful to your understanding or interest in the material. While I am aware that many of the ideas in the class will be challenging, it is my hope that the classroom atmosphere will be conducive to lively discussion and encourage you to take risks in your own thinking. You may even surprise yourself!

(Tentative) Reading Schedule:

**Week One (January 5th):** Introduction

**Week Two (January 10th and 12th):** Read Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

**Week Three (January 17th and 19th):** Rene Descartes, *Meditations* I, II, III; *Meditations* IV, V, VI

**Week Four (January 24th and 26th):** Finish Descartes; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (The First Part, Of Man); Paper #1 assigned

**Week Five (January 31st and February 2nd):** Hobbes, *Leviathan* (The Second Part, Of Commonwealth; Sections 17-21, 26, 29-31); 2/3 Paper #1 due.

**Week Six (February 7th and 9th):** Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 1 and Part 2

**Week Seven (February 14th and 16th):** Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 2 (Continued) and Part 3

**Week Eight (February 21st and 23rd):** Spinoza Part 4 and Part 5

**Week Nine (February 28th and March 2nd):** TBD (we will discuss several options as a class such as Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, sections 1-8, 11, and 12, or Locke's essays on government)

**Week Ten (March 7th and 9th):** TBD