**Philosophy 206: History of Early Modern Philosophy**

Class meets Monday, Wednesday and Friday 2:40-3:55 PM in DS 229

**Your host:** Prof. Michael P. Wolf  
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**Office Hours:** Mondays and Wednesdays 9:00-11:00 and by appointment

**Required Texts**


Some additional materials will be provided as links online. Please check the page regularly.

**What Is This Course About?**

The Modern period in Western philosophy is an era sandwiched between the Renaissance in Europe and the last half of the nineteenth century. Its scope and shape were profoundly affected by the cultural and intellectual currents that preceded it and in one way or another, the disparate strands of contemporary philosophy are all either descendants of it or reactions against it. For the first time since ancient Greece, the philosophers of this period were not employed by or directly under the control of religious authorities. This led to an openness to new sorts of arguments and philosophical projects on the one hand and a new sense of rigor to secure the requisite sort of knowledge on the other. Most scholars think of Descartes's *Meditations* as the first great work in this epoch, and feel that it closes with the linguistic turn in analytical philosophy, such as the writings of Gottlob Frege in the 1880s.

Some of the most interesting work in this period is in metaphysics - the theory of what the world is like in its most basic forms and what exists at all - and in epistemology - the theory of knowledge. These topics will be the focus of our course. There is also a great deal of interesting literature on ethics, moral philosophy, political philosophy and aesthetics, but our time is too short to address all of these topics adequately. Most of the philosophers we will look at thought of their views on those topics as outgrowths of the epistemological and metaphysical accounts they offered, so this course can be thought of as a grounding in the details that underlie those other views. We also will stop short of the last phase of the modern period because it would require a reading of the German philosopher Hegel, whose works are notoriously dense thickets of Teutonic jargon. We will focus on getting a picture of the earlier authors instead.

As all of this might suggest, the focus of this course will be on historical detail and not on original critique and analysis. In some classes, I might give you an argument and ask you why it is false. In this class, I will usually offer you one author's argument and ask you to figure out why or how another author objected to it or might have objected to it. Although your insights are always welcome and I would be very excited to hear that you had worked through an argument in a way that had not been presented to you, the first order of business in this class is attention to historical detail. The historical epoch of greatest importance to us will begin with Descartes's work in the early 17th century and carry on through Hume's critique of empiricism in the mid 18th century. Hume's work is often seen as the spark that gives rise to Kant's "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy in the late 18th century, so our goal is to establish the ideas that precede that and give rise to contemporary philosophy. This is a substantial task, since the philosophers of this period aimed to produce comprehensive accounts of the world, touching on theories of knowledge, the mind, metaphysics and emerging scientific practices. These authors share a suspicion of appeal to authority or revelation in their
works, and the search for absolute certainty in the absence of such sources is perhaps the feature that best defines modern philosophy. We will touch on each of these areas in turn, although we will roughly split the semester between theories of knowledge and theories of metaphysics.

**Assessment**

Class participation is an important issue to me, especially in a small class like this. I expect you to come to class with the readings done and ready to discuss them. With this in mind, **10% of your grade will be your participation in class.** In this, I will include how regularly you attended class, how much you contributed to discussion, how regularly and how well you attend to study questions and anything else you might bring to the fore. Study questions are available online, along with guidelines on how to complete them.

In order to get you involved in these ways and as an exercise in immersing yourself in the debates that motivated different philosophers to adopt the views they did, each student in this class will take part in a scheduled presentation. The presentation will involve offering a position relevant to some topic in the class, and defending it or challenging some opposing views. You will be expected to provide notes on what you expect to present a week in advance so that others who are presenting may see what is on the table. The level of preparation expected here is roughly the same as a five-page paper. Details of the format and topics will be made available as we progress. This will count for **20% of your final grade.** Since the number of students in this class may make it prohibitive to have everyone make such a presentation, I will make provisions for some members of the class to prepare a five-page paper on a topic of interest in recent medical news in lieu of such a presentation.

Over the course of the quarter, you will also have to write **two papers** of about 3000-3500 words, which works out to about 8-10 pages in Times 12-point double spaced with one-inch margins. The two assignments will correspond roughly with the two halves of the course. I will offer you a set of paper topics well in advance of the due date and you may choose from there. You may also suggest your own paper topic and write on it **SO LONG AS YOU CLEAR THE TOPIC WITH ME FIRST.** Each one of these papers will be worth **35% of your final grade.** More information on the assignments and how to approach these papers will be available in class.

I should mention a few things in closing. First, you are of course bound by the honor code here and any form of plagiarism will be severely punished. (Speak to me or consult a student handbook if you are unsure what counts as plagiarism.) The policy of the philosophy department on this matter is to automatically fail a student on any plagiarized assignment and to submit their names for discipline under the College’s Honor Code. This does not mean that you cannot use another source, or discuss and consult with your classmates about your assignments. I permit you to do the former and strongly encourage you to do the latter, so long as all the sources and classmates in question are properly cited in your paper. Finally, be forewarned that I reserve the right to lower the grades of papers given to me whose grammar and spelling do not meet college-level standards.

**A Tentative Syllabus**

**Class 1. January 6:** Introduction

**Class 2. January 8:** The New Science  
Read Bacon, New Organon 1, Aphorisms 1-3, 11-31, and 36-46 and Descartes, *Discourse on Method* 1, 2, and 5.

**Class 3. January 10:** Skepticism and Medieval Philosophy
Read the IEP notes on modern skepticism, as well as notes on Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrho, and Montaigne. Click here for Week 1 Study Questions. (Word or straight text.)

**Class 4. January 13:** Cartesian Rationalism  
Read Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, sections 1-3.

**Class 5. January 15:** Cartesian Rationalism  
Read Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, sections 4-6.

**Class 6. January 17:** Cartesian Rationalism  
Read Descartes, Hobbes, and Arnauld, "Objections and Replies III"  
Click here for Week 2 Study Questions. (Word or straight text.)

**January 20:** Martin Luther King Holiday (No class will be held)

**Class 7. January 22:** Cartesian Rationalism  
Read Leibniz "Primary Truths" and handouts.  
Click here for Week 3 Study Questions. (Word or straight text.)

**Class 8. January 24:** Empiricism  

**Class 9. January 27:** Empiricism  
Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* III.3, 6, and IV.1-4, 11.  
Click here for Week 4 Study Questions. (Word or straight text.)

**Class 10. January 29:** NO CLASS

**Class 11. January 31:** Empiricism  

**Class 12. February 3:** Empiricism Turned on Itself  

**Class 13. February 5:** Empiricism Turned on Itself  
Click here for Week 5 Study Questions. (Word or straight text.)

**Class 14. February 7:** NO CLASS

**Class 15. February 10:** Empiricism Turned on Itself  

**Class 16. February 12:** Empiricism Turned on Itself  
*First Set of Presentations* - Click here for topics

*First paper due February 12* - Click here for topics

**Class 17. February 14:** Mind and Body  
Read Descartes's *Meditations* 2 and 6.  
Click here for Week 6 Study Questions. (Word or straight text.)
Class 18. February 17: Mind and Body
Read Leibniz's *Monadology*.

Class 19. February 19: Simplicity, Substance and the Soul
Read Kant "Paralogisms of Pure Reason", parts 1-3 (Ariew pp. 701ff.)

Class 20. February 21: Simplicity, Substance and the Soul
Read Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature* 1.IV §5-6.
Click here for Week 7 Study Questions. (Word or straight text.)

Class 21. February 24: Substance and Dependence
Read Descartes "Principles of Philosophy" §51-69 (handout)

Class 22. February 26: Substance and Dependence
Read Leibniz, "Critical Remarks Concerning Descartes's Principles" (corresponding sections)

Class 23. February 28: Substance and Dependence
Read Spinoza, Part 1 of *Ethics*, especially Propositions 4-8, 13 and 14
Click here for Week 8 Study Questions. (Word or straight text.)

Class 24. March 3: Substance and Dependence
Read Spinoza, Part 1 of *Ethics*, especially Propositions 4-8, 13 and 14
Second Set of Presentations - Click here for topics

Class 25. March 5: Phenomenalism or Skepticism?

Class 26. March 7: Phenomenalism or Skepticism?
Click here for Week 9 Study Questions. (Word or straight text.)

Class 27. March 10: The Substantiality of Space
Read Leibniz, *New System of Nature and Newton, Principia*, “Scholium to Definitions”.

Class 28. March 12: The Substantiality of Space
Leibniz, from the Letters to Clarke.

Class 29. March 14: The Substantiality of Space
Leibniz, from the Letters to Clarke.
Click here for Week 10 Study Questions. (Word or straight text.)
Third Set of Presentations - Click here for topics

Second Paper Due March 17 - Click here for topics

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