PHIL 206: Early Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Kant

Syllabus

| Instructor:    | Prof. Ashley McDowell               |
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Texts:
- Garrett Thomson, *Bacon to Kant: An Introduction to Modern Philosophy*
- Robert Cummins and David Owen (eds), *Central Readings in the History of Modern Philosophy: 2nd edition*
- Articles made available electronically

Note on Moodle: this course website will include useful information – go to [https://moodle.kzoo.edu/](https://moodle.kzoo.edu/) and find our course, and get yourself logged on.

Note on email: I will be sending mail to the class alias, which only knows your K email address. Make sure your K email is forwarded to whatever email account you use regularly, if it’s something else.

Description:

This is an intermediate course on the history of Western philosophy in what’s called the “early modern” period – roughly, the 17th and 18th centuries. This is history of philosophy, not history, so we won’t be studying events, societies, or backgrounds; rather, we’ll be studying the views of these figures, especially in context of each other and their predecessors. The important thing here is to understand what these philosophers were probably trying to say about these issues, what they were interested in, and what arguments they used in coming to their conclusions.

In particular, we’ll be focusing on four philosophers: Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume; and we’ll be further focusing on their views in the areas of epistemology (the study of belief and knowledge) and metaphysics (the study of the nature of reality). This includes issues of

- what and how we know things (and what it is to know things);
- whether reality is as we perceive it or not, and how we might know that;
- how we deal with the strong argument that we don’t really know what we think we do;
- what the nature of causation is;
- whether or not we have free will;
- what we can know about God and the implications of his existence and nature;
- what the relationship is between mind and body.

In general, this period is of great interest because, first, a remarkable flourishing of philosophy occurred, with several of the most brilliant philosophers of all time making their discoveries. Also, though, it is an interesting period because it marked a major transition in the West. When scientific thinking replaced its predecessors, it was a mystery how thinking would take place after that.

I would like you to think about whether the questions they were facing might be ones we are faced with as well. They include things like:

- how will we see ourselves in the future?
- what will change about our views of fundamental things in the Universe, like matter, causation and freedom, minds, and God?
- what knowledge, if any, will we be left with? How will we gain, examine, and fortify knowledge, if at all?
- what will we discard as false, misguided, superstitious, simplistic, or otherwise out of date?

Course Goals:

Since this is a history of philosophy course, the focus is on mastering the views and arguments of the specific
philosophers we'll study. I'd like you to understand them better in and of themselves, and also as they relate to each other. I'd also like you to understand the issues they're debating – their significance, difficulty, and place in contemporary thinking as well as in your own thinking.

Class Format:
Although the difficult material we'll be reading will mean I'll have to do a good bit of outright lecturing, I also intend to engage in as much discussion as possible, and all students will be expected to contribute. I may sometimes have you break up into pairs or groups to work on an in-class assignment or discussion. Since philosophical learning is best done in an environment of discussion, attendance and participation are expected. In-class discussions will be conducted with respect and a mutual interest in solving these problems, so that all views will be open to thoughtful criticism. We will be approaching other views – and our own – with an open-minded but critical eye. The focus will be on providing and assessing arguments for positions, to try to come to the most thoughtful position possible on these questions. Students will be evaluated on how well you have learned the views and arguments of the authors studied.

You will be responsible for completing the readings before each class, and being prepared to discuss those readings. You should be aware that some of the readings in this course most likely will be quite challenging for you. Give yourself plenty of time to do these readings carefully. Those who want to truly excel in this class will want to read each assignment at least twice, and take notes on the readings (before and after class works well for many people). I will sometimes provide study questions to guide your reading. You must bring with you to class whatever text(s) we are working on for that day and the one before, any homework or assignment due that day, and any study or reading questions I might have provided.

Course Requirements and Grading Scheme

Exams on each philosopher: 60% (15% each)
After we finish studying each philosopher, there will be an in-class exam on that philosopher’s work. The exam on Hume will take place on your final exam day (Wed 3/19), but will take the same amount of time as the other three exams. These exams may include essay questions, short answer, true/false, or other formats. They are designed to test not your memorization skills, but your genuine grasp of the material, its significance, and its role within an overall view. You will need to become familiar with the key concepts, terms, definitions, positions, and arguments from each philosopher. Learning things like definitions in this context is not busywork but a fundamental component of understanding the views.

I will give you more information about the tests as we go along, as well as study guides and help.

Reflections essays: 20% (5% each)
Toward the end of our studying each philosopher, you’ll turn in reflections essays on the material we’ve been covering. I’ll provide a series of questions to focus you and launch your reflection. You should attempt to address the issues I raise, but your essay may or may not directly answer every question. The essay should not be a series of my questions and your answers, but should be a synthesized response.

Your personal experiences are a crucial part of your reflections, but these experiences must be subject to your analysis and should make comparisons and connections to our readings. Be ready to devote meaningful time to writing these essays. I do not expect polished papers, with things like thesis statements and conclusions. Rather, I’m looking for good quality, thorough reflections that include consideration of deeper implications as well as appropriate and effective references to the readings. I’m also looking for genuine engagement and effort to make connections – think about whether your writing reveals the risks that lead to striking insights.[1]

Final compare & contrast essay: 10%
You will turn in an approximately 6-page paper during exam week. This paper will be an essay comparing and contrasting the views of three of the philosophers (your choice) on one key issue (also your choice). See the issues in the course description above for some possibilities – you’ll choose your issue in consultation with me, and should work on this as an ongoing project as we move through the quarter, keeping track of a few possible issues and the philosophers’ approaches to them. You might keep a journal, compile notes, use a color-coding system, construct a chart, or whatever works for you. I may have you check in with me or your classmates on the status of this project on specific, announced days.

Participation and demonstrated preparedness: 10%
Participation is expected. In a philosophy class of this kind, discussion is absolutely essential, and may be the way you learn most about the material. I know that participation is difficult for some people, but you can consider this a safe place to practice contributing to a group discussion, which you will surely need to do throughout your life.

I will keep general track of your contributions in class. Keep in mind that contributions can take various forms,
including asking for clarification, participation in group work, and giving helpful examples. Keep in mind also that more does not necessarily mean better: those who excessively dominate discussions, speak disrespectfully, or otherwise use their voices in a negative way may be penalized for doing so. If you are in doubt, or if you are interested in advice about how to participate more effectively or more easily, ask me.

Demonstrated preparedness includes evidence of your having read the assignments carefully, thought about and tried to answer any study questions or tasks I’ve given, prepared questions or comments in advance of class, and kept up with ongoing work on your final paper project.

Again, if you want to know how you’re doing on this, or want to talk about how to do this well, get in touch with me.

**Assignment responsibilities:**

All assignments must be turned in as hard (paper) copies – no emailed assignments will be accepted except by special permission. It is your responsibility to retain copies of all assignments you turn in, in a reliable format.

Late assignments and missed quizzes for which you do not have a strong, documented excuse will be assessed a penalty of at least 10% reduction in grade, or more if significantly late. Let me know right away if you’re turning something in late or missing class, and we’ll work out the details.

*A note on changing grades:* if you feel you have been assigned a grade unfairly or inaccurately, you should by all means talk to me about it. My only requirement is that you prepare an argument (a set of reasons and facts) before you do so.

**Academic integrity and the Honor System**

“It is always important to think of the intellectual world as a community of mutual dependence, mutual helpfulness, mutual protectiveness, and common delight. We take ideas from others and we give them to others. We are indebted to others, and others are indebted to us. In sharing and acknowledging the community, we define ourselves more certainly as individuals. The ability to describe our sources is also an ability to define our own originality and our own selves. All communities depend on generosity, trust, definition, and the proper use of sources is part of the mortar that holds the community of the mind together.”

- Richard Marius, Expository Writing Program, Harvard University

In this class, as in all classes at Kalamazoo College, we will be operating under the Honor System. It is important that you familiarize yourself with that system. You should also familiarize yourself with proper procedures for collaborating, doing research, and citing sources. I expect each of you to visit my the essay on the Moodle site called “Plagiarism and How to Avoid It.” Should you have any questions about citations, plagiarism, or honor system issues, please visit or contact me.

Any assignment you turn in that I find to violate academic integrity, either through dishonesty, plagiarism, lack of appropriate citations, or unauthorized collaboration, will receive a grade of 0. Any further instance of a violation of academic integrity will be punished by a failing grade in the class as a *minimum* sanction.[2]

**Special needs**

If you have any special needs that I can accommodate, please let me know as soon as possible.

**Office hours**

My office hours are posted above. They will be conducted on a first-come, first-served basis, and by appointment, with appointments taking precedence. You should feel absolutely free to come to them and discuss the course, the material, the assignments, or philosophy.

I request that each of you take a few minutes to visit me during my office hours sometime in the first week or two of classes. It will be an opportunity for us to chat one-on-one for the first time, and to get to know each other a bit more.

*A note on reading:* don’t succumb to the misconception that in order to read something you only have to move your eyes over the lines, or “read it out loud in your head,” so to speak. What I expect is that you will read the material in a more sophisticated way, thinking as you go. You should be asking yourself the main points, making sure you understand the structure of the reading, thinking about how this reading relates to others you’ve done, and otherwise working to *comprehend* the material, not just to complete a technical “reading” of it. You might try highlighting, underlining, making margin notes, or outlining – whatever helps you focus and understand.
Schedule of Readings

This schedule is tentative. Any changes will be announced in class and by email. The reading assignments listed for each day must be completed before that class. Readings must be brought physically to class.

**WEEK ONE**

**Introduction**

W Thomson (referred to here as “T”) Intro: pgs. 1-8

F T: introduction to the Rationalists, Descartes biography, and Ch. 1 pt. 1 (pg 9-top of pg 20); Cummins & Owen (referred to here as “C&O”): introduction to Descartes, synopsis, and Meditation I

**WEEK TWO**

M T: Ch. 1 part 2 (pg20-25); C&O: Meditation II

W T: Ch. 2; C&O: Meditations III-V

F Descartes continued; review readings

**WEEK THREE**

W T: Ch.3; C&O: Meditation VI

F Elisabeth of Bohemia, “Selections from Her Correspondence with Descartes,” and Margaret Cavendish, “Selections from *Philosophical Letters*” (available electronically)

**WEEK FOUR**

M **Descartes exam**

W T: introduction to the Empiricists, Locke biography, & Ch. 13; C&O: intro to Locke; selections from *Essay* TBA

F T: Ch. 14; C&O: selections from *Essay* TBA

**WEEK FIVE**

M C&O: selections from *Essay* TBA

W T: Ch. 15; C&O: selections from *Essay* TBA

F C&O: selections from *Essay* TBA

**WEEK SIX**

M **Locke exam**

W C&O: *Principles* introduction

F C&O: The First Dialogue

**WEEK SEVEN**

M C&O: The Second and Third Dialogues

W T: Ch. 16

F T: Ch. 17; C&O: Principles 1-33

**WEEK EIGHT**

M Mary Shepherd “Selections from *Essays on the Perception of an External Universe*” (available electronically)

W **Berkeley exam**

F T: Ch. 18; C&O: *Enquiry* I-VII

**WEEK NINE**

M review Friday’s readings

W T: Ch. 19

F NO CLASS

**WEEK TEN**

M T: Ch. 20

W C&O: *Enquiry* Sections 8, 10, 11

F Hume continued

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[1] This assignment type is indebted to work I have seen by Amelia Katanski, Kim Cummings, and Bruce Mills.

[2] I owe some of the phrasing in this statement to Vaughn Maatman