PHIL 206: Early Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Kant  
Winter 2010

Syllabus

Winter 2010: MWF 2:40-3:55, Upjohn Library 307  
Instructor: Prof. Ashley McDowell  
Office: 202 Humphrey House  
Availability: Usually I can meet for a bit after class,  
I have regular office hours from 1-4 on Tuesdays, in my HH office,  
and we can meet by appointment.  
Another possibility is K’s “Take a professor to lunch” program – those  
who eat at the Caf can take me to lunch, and K will foot the bill for me. I  
could do this Tuesdays especially, but also MWF at 11-ish or 1:15-ish.

Texts:  
Robert Cummins and David Owen (eds), Central Readings in the History of  
Modern Philosophy: 2nd edition  
Some articles and handouts made available electronically

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 the context of each other. The important thing here is to  
understand what these philosophers were probably trying to say about 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), metaphysics (the study of the nature of reality), and philosophy of mind (a branch of  
metaphysics focusing on issues concerning minds). This includes issues of  

- what things we know and how we know them (and what it is to know things);  
- whether reality is as we perceive it, 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  
ocurred, 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 encourage 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?
• how has our style of argumentation and coming to philosophical conclusions changed, and how might it continue to change?
• 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. You should come to understand them better in themselves, and also as they relate to each other. You should also gain understanding of the issues they’re debating — their significance, difficulty, and place in historical philosophical context, contemporary thinking, and 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 gaining knowledge and understanding, so all views will be open to thoughtful critique and disagreement. We will be approaching other views — and our own — with open minds, collaborative spirits, and genuine intentions to work to improve the quality of our grasp of the arguments. The focus will be on comprehending and assessing arguments for positions; students will be evaluated on how well you have learned and absorbed the views and arguments of the authors studied.

You are 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 your texts to class, and any study or reading questions I might have provided.

Course Requirements and Grading Scheme

Oral exams on each philosopher: 60% (15% each)
I will conduct individual oral exams with each of you in order to assess the depth of your comprehension and engagement with the work of each philosopher. The idea behind this exam is not to check and see what you’ve memorized, or how well you can recall details “on the fly.” The concept is a simple one: if you have carefully read the material, paid attention in class, participated in discussion, and thought about what we’ve been studying, you ought to be able to talk about what you’ve studied and what you think about it in an intelligent and informed way. These exams will presuppose an adequate grasp of key concepts, principles, views, terms, and arguments. Without an informed background on things like these, your conversation on the philosophers’ work would fail to impress.
An oral exam will take the form of a conversation on the material in which I ask you questions designed to let you show me how much you have understood and considered. For instance, I might ask you which argument or issue you were most engaged with, and why; or to explain to me in general terms the significance of a view. I might ask you to tell me what you think is the most troubling aspect of an issue, or whether you think it has been resolved since the philosopher’s time. I might have you talk to me about examples and their use, and have you compare one of the philosopher’s examples to another. One model to think of in connection with the oral exam is a chat with someone from whom you want a job or a graduate school offer, in which she is familiar with the philosopher’s work, and wants to get a feel for how well you’ve thought about it.

Each oral exam will take about 25 minutes, and will be held in my office (Humphrey House 202).

Take-home written exams on your choice of three of the four philosophers: 30% (10% each)

These exams are focused on your ability to convey key components of the philosophers’ views and arguments. 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.

Participation and demonstrated preparedness: 10%

You should be participating regularly in class and on the Moodle forums – this is hard to quantify, especially since the grade will ultimately be a qualitative one, but you need to be giving me enough data on which to base a grade. As a guess, I’d say regular participation would involve at least a couple of significant in-class questions or comments each class (depending on the nature of that class); some substantive Moodle forum posts each week would be helpful, too (starting a thread or responding to others’ posts). Short comments or posts, perhaps simply saying what you like about someone else’s contribution, or asking for clarification from someone, would be in addition to “substantive” or “significant” comments, questions, or posts – but would count toward overall quality of participation, especially since they show that you’re engaged in class and looking at the forums regularly.

Moodle forums:

The general expectation for your Moodle contributions is that they engage with the material in a sophisticated way that shows genuine effort and comprehension, but in an informal format. Of course, sometimes your posts might just be basic questions or comments, which is okay. I might pose questions to focus your thinking, but there will be a good amount of flexibility in what you choose to post or say. I do not expect polished essays on Moodle, with things like thesis statements and conclusions – just provocative, insightful, helpful, or reflective comments and questions.

One purpose of the Moodle contributions is for you to be thinking about the material we’ve been discussing or reading in a personal way, either grappling with your own view on a topic or applying the ideas to things in your own life.

Class participation:

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:**

Demonstrated preparedness is mainly focused on evidence of your having read the assignments carefully; but it would also involve your having thought about and tried to answer any study questions or tasks I’ve given, and prepared questions or comments in advance of class. I might sometimes give a brief reading check to see if you were prepared. I won’t grade these—they’re just for my information—but they will play a role in your overall preparedness grade. I’ll gauge this on the basis of things like your ability to discuss the readings in class or on Moodle forums; and to answer questions I’ll pose on the readings.

### Schedule of Readings

#### WEEK ONE

**Introduction**

W  Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” and “Divided Line”

**Descartes**

F  Descartes: Synopsis and First Meditation

#### WEEK TWO

M  Descartes: Second Meditation

W  Descartes: Third Meditations

F  Descartes: Fourth and Fifth Meditations

#### WEEK THREE

W  Descartes: Sixth Meditation

F  Elisabeth of Bohemia, “Selections from Her Correspondence with Descartes”

#### WEEK FOUR

M  Descartes review

**Locke**

W  Locke: *Essay* Book I, Ch.1 (notation: I.I);
    Book I, Ch. II, Sections 1-11,15-18,21,26,28 (notation: I.II. 1-11,15-18,21,26,28)

F  Locke: II.I.1-5,9,10,20,22-25
    II.II.1-2
    II.III.1
    II.IV.6
    II.VI.1-2
    II.VIII.7-17, 21-26
    II.IX.8,15

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WEEK FIVE
M  Locke: II.XII.1-8
    II.XIII.18-20
    II.XXI.1-5, 26, 73
W  Locke: II.XXIII.1-6, 9-21, 28-32, 37
F  Locke: II.XXVII (all)

WEEK SIX
M  Locke: III.I.1-2
    III.I.1-5, 8
    III.I.1, 6-9, 20
    III.IV.11-13
    III.VI.36-37, 51
W  Locke: IV.I (all)
    IV.II (all)
    IV.III.1-6, 13-14, 18, 21-22, 26-29, 31
F  Locke: IV.IV.1-3
    IV.IX (all)
    IV.XI.1, 3-10, 13-14
    IV.XII.1-7, 9-11, 14
    IV.XXI (all)

Berkeley

WEEK SEVEN
M  Berkeley: Principles of Human Knowledge, Introduction

WEEK EIGHT
M  Berkeley: Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, The Third Dialogue
W  Berkeley: Principles of Human Knowledge, Principles 1-33

Hume

F  Hume: Enquiry I-III

WEEK NINE
M  Hume: Enquiry IV
W  Hume: Enquiry V-VII
F  Hume: Enquiry VIII

WEEK TEN
M  Hume: Enquiry X
W  Hume: Enquiry XI
F  Review