

Early Modern Philosophy (Prospective Syllabus)

Course Description

The rejuvenation of the natural sciences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was accompanied by the flourishing of philosophical inquiry by thinkers such as Descartes, Hume, and Kant. Much of this philosophical inquiry concerned epistemological questions concerning the extent and limits of our knowledge, particularly in relation to science and religion. Debates about these matters would give rise to significant philosophical trends that were later called “rationalism”, “empiricism”, and “idealism”, and we shall try to understand these trends within their historical context. But we shall do so not just by considering the standard canon of writers and texts but also by engaging with women philosophers of the early-modern period.

Course Goal

By the end of the semester, you will be able to engage in philosophical dialogue with others. By this I mean that you will do the following:

- * sympathetically reconstruct arguments of other philosophers
- * raise objections to those arguments; and,
- * evaluate whether the original argument(s) can be defended from those objections.

Texts

[WP] Atherton, Margaret. *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994.

[MP] *Modern Philosophy: A Workbook with Source Material*. Edited by Walter Ott. 2013.
[available [here](#)]

[KP] Kant, Immanuel. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Edited by Gary Hatfield. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004. [ISBN: 978-05218282460]

Assignments and Grading

30%	Study Questions and Exercises that Accompany Readings
15%	3-Page Paper on Descartes
20%	3-Page Paper on Cavendish, Conway, Leibniz, or Locke
25%	4-Page Paper on Berkeley or Hume
10%	2-Page Paper on Kant

Schedule of Readings [each “*” corresponds to 1-2 class sessions]

Unit 1: Background

The Aristotelian Background

* Selections from Aristotle, *Categories*, *Physics*, and *Posterior Analytics* (MP pp. 1-9)

The Thomist Background

* Selections from Thomas Aquinas, “On the Eternity of the World”, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, *Summa Theologiae* (MP pp. 10-17)

Unit 2: Descartes

* Selections from *Discourse on Method* and *The Principles of Philosophy* (MP 1-6); “Synopsis of the Six Following Meditations” (MP 1-8)

- * Meditations I & II (MP 8-16)
- * Meditations III & IV (MP 16-29)
- * Meditations V & VI (MP 29-38); Selection from *Objections and Replies* (MP 39-40)
- * Correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia (WP 9-21)

Paper Prompts for Unit 2

- * In Meditation I, Descartes advances arguments to raise doubts about the existence of the external world as well as “arithmetic, geometry and other subjects of this kind”. His strongest argument is the so-called Evil-Demon Argument. Your tasks in this paper are to explain how this argument supports Descartes’ aims in the Meditations and to evaluate this argument.
- * In the Meditation IV, Descartes notes that a puzzle arises about the conclusion of his argument in the Third Meditation that God exists and is not a deceiver. Explain and evaluate Descartes’ answer to this problem.

Unit 3: Cavendish and Conway

Margaret Lucas Cavendish

- * Selections from *Philosophical Letters* (WP 22-45)

Anne Viscountess Conway

- * Selections from *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (WP 46-76)

Paper Prompts for Unit 3

- * Explain and evaluate Cavendish’s view that the notion of “thinking matter” is intelligible. Consider whether her view is persuasive against Cartesian dualism.

Unit 4: Leibniz

- * “Letter from Molanus” and *Monadology* (MP 1-11)
- * Selections from Lady Damaris Masham’s Correspondence with Leibniz (WP 77-95)

Paper Prompts for Unit 4

- * Explain and evaluate Leibniz’s argument for the existence of monads.
- * Explain Leibniz’s doctrine of pre-established harmony and his reasons for holding it. Evaluate whether this is a viable conception of the relationship between mind and body.

Unit 5: Locke

- * Selections from *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*: “A. The Project” and “B. Against Innate Knowledge”, “C. Ideas and their Origin”, “D. Simple Ideas”, “E. Primary and Secondary Qualities”, “F. Complex Ideas” (MP 1-9)
- * Selections from *An Essay*: “G. Substance/substratum”, “H. Natural kinds”, “I. Body”, “J. Mind”, “K. Personal Identity”, “L. The Limits of Knowledge”, “M. God” (9-23)

Paper Prompts for Unit 5

- * Explain and evaluate Locke’s arguments against innate ideas. How would Leibniz respond to such arguments? Who has the better view?
- * Explain why Locke thinks that Descartes is wrong about what accounts for personal identity over time. Explain the view that Locke offers in its place and his grounds for that view. Evaluate whether Locke’s conception of personal identity is viable.

Unit 6: Berkeley

- * Selections from *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (MP 1-11)
- * Selections from *A Treatise* (MP 12-23)
- * Selections from Lady Mary Shepherd's *Essays on the Perception of an External Universe* (WP 147-159)

Paper Prompts for Unit 6

- * Berkeley raises several arguments against the notion of material substance. Select one of these arguments and explain it. Evaluate whether this argument is sound.
- * Explicate and critically evaluate Shepherd's criticisms of Berkeley.

Unit 7: Hume

- * *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Sections II-IV (MP 1-9)
- * *Enquiry*, Sections V-VII, IX (MP 10-22)
- * *Enquiry*, Sections X-XII (MP 31-51)

Paper Prompts for Unit 8

- * In Section VIII of the *Enquiry*, Hume argues that "free choice" is compatible with the view that everything (including human behavior) occurs according to uniform, predictable, and "lawlike" patterns. Explain Hume's grounds for this view and evaluate whether it is a defensible position.
- * Explain and evaluate Hume's account of miracles in Section X of the *Enquiry*.
- * How would an empiricist respond to Descartes' claim that the idea of God could only be produced by God? Which account of the origin of our idea of God is more convincing, and why?

Unit 8: Kant

- * Transcendental Philosophy: *Critique of Pure Reason*, B-edition Introduction; *Prolegomena*, Preface
- * Space & Time: *Critique*, "Transcendental Aesthetic"; *Prolegomena*, §13
- * The Conceptual Basis for Experience & Response to Hume: *Prolegomena*, §§14-23, 27-30
- * Metaphysics: *Prolegomena*, §§40-44; *Critique of Pure Reason*, "The Antinomy of Pure Reason"

Paper Prompts for Unit 8

- * What is Kant's example of incongruous counterparts supposed to show? How does it show this? Is it a convincing argument? What could Leibniz say in response?