



The History of Modern Philosophy

Short Course Description

The purpose of this course is to provide students with a survey of the major problems of early modern philosophy. We will focus on the development of epistemology and metaphysics in this era by looking at the opposing but leading movements of rationalism and empiricism. Whereas the former believed that we can only gain knowledge of the underlying structure of the world through deductive reasoning based on basic, indubitable principles (e.g., “every event has a cause”), the latter believed that all such knowledge can only arise by constructing scientific theories that draw upon experience. We will examine the works of René Descartes, Elisabeth of Bohemia, Margaret Cavendish, Baruch Spinoza, Anne Conway, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, John Locke, and David Hume as they evolved in dialogue with one another.

Thematic Course Description

In many ways, our contemporary Western worldview began to form in the early 17th century. In the aftermath of the rapid advances of the then-emerging mechanical sciences, the worldview of the Middle Ages was crumbling. This, in turn, led to the need for a new philosophy that could provide a solid foundation for these sciences. The intellectual discussion that arose quickly morphed into a debate between rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism claims that reason and rational intuition alone permit us to have absolutely certain knowledge about the world. Just as we immediately perceive that “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” is necessarily the case, we can, with equal certitude, perceive that a proposition like “every event has a cause” is necessarily the case, from which we can then deduce other metaphysical facts. Such a process, it is argued, confirms and gives additional justification to the laws discovered by science. Empiricism claims, on the contrary, that experience alone is the source of knowledge. Only that which can be observed, generalized, and then tested against the deliverances of the senses can count as genuine cognition. For them, this provides a framework for the new inductive methodology of science.

From the basis of such epistemological considerations, early modern philosophy proposes a series of metaphysical doctrines that are meant to articulate an understanding of the world that is consistent with the findings of science. These doctrines include: dualism, the idea that mind and matter are separate substances; monism, the idea that the natural universe is all that exists; vitalism, the idea that matter is not inert or inanimate but is itself alive; idealism, the idea that everything has something like a mind or soul; and corpuscularianism, the idea that all matter is composed of minute particles and their interactions are governed by physical laws. While rationalism works towards the ideal of a complete system of the world wherein each proposition is derived demonstratively from basic, indubitable principles in such a fashion as to give science a foundation that rivals mathematics, empiricism attempts to give science a more modest foundation true to how it functions in practice. As we shall see, however, at the end of early modern philosophy empiricism eventually set the stage for (1) a radical critique of rationalist metaphysics—as Hume puts it, every book that does not “contain any experimental reasoning” should be “committed to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion”—and (2) a radical critique of empirical science as giving us access to necessary truths about the world.

JOSEPH CAREW
SAMPLE SYLLABUS

Class Schedule

Week 1: Introduction: The Historical and Cultural Background of Early Modern Philosophy

Week 2: René Descartes: Radical Doubt and the Search for Certainty

- *Meditations on First Philosophy*, First and Second Meditations

Week 3: René Descartes: Dualism and the Problem of the External World

- *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Third to Sixth Meditations

Week 4: Responses to Descartes: Elisabeth of Bohemia, Margaret Cavendish

- Anton Wilhelm Amo, *On the Impassivity of the Human Mind*, excerpts
- Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, “Selections from her Correspondence with Descartes,” *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*, 9-21
- Margaret Cavendish, “Selections from Philosophical Letters,” *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*, 22-45

Week 5: Baruch Spinoza: Monism, Nature as God, and the Necessary Order of Things

- *Ethics*, Book 1

Week 6: Baruch Spinoza: Metaphysics as Salvation: Liberating Ourselves from Bondage

- Excerpts from *Ethics*, Books 2, 3 and 5

Week 7: Anne Conway: Vitalism

- Anne Conway, “Selections from *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*,” *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*, 46-76

Week 8: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Leibniz’s Ideal of Science

- “Preface to a Universal Characteristic,” *Philosophical Essays*, 5-10
- “On Contingency,” *Philosophical Essays*, 28-30
- “Primary Truths,” *Philosophical Essays*, 30-34

Week 9: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Metaphysical Idealism

- “Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason,” *Philosophical Essays*, 206-213
- *Monadology*, *Philosophical Essays*, 213-225

Week 10: John Locke: All Knowledge Arises from Experience

- Excerpts from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

Week 11: John Locke: Primary and Secondary Qualities

- Excerpts from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

Week 12: David Hume: Skepticism about Human Scientific and Metaphysical Knowledge

- Excerpts from *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Week 13: Conclusion: Early Modern Philosophy and the Contemporary Worldview

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Assessment

The final grade will consist of four components:

- Participation (10%)
- In-Class Midterm Exam (20%)
- Term Paper of 2500-3000 words (40%)
- Take-Home Final Exam (30%)

Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course, students will be familiar with several major historical figures and currents of thought in early modern philosophy. The two exams, in which students are asked to summarize key concepts and arguments from different texts, are meant to assure that students have sufficiently internalized this knowledge for their future studies. Students will also improve their critical reading and writing skills by analyzing texts and creatively putting them to use in order to explore their own philosophical interests and existential concerns through course material. The term paper, the topic of which can be freely decided by each student in consultation with the instructor, is to promote the development of such skills. Philosophy is not just a body of knowledge, but also a distinctive methodology of critical thinking best learned in practicing it.