

**PHIL 251A:
Rationalism and Early Modern Philosophy**

Winter 2022: January 10 – April 15
CRN 12473, Section AB1
Fridays 13:00 –15:50, A402

Professor: Dr. Joseph Carew
Contact: joseph.carew@ufv.ca

Office Hours:
By appointment on Zoom due to Covid restrictions

The University of the Fraser Valley is located on the unceded territory of the Stó:lō peoples. We gratefully acknowledge our ability to live and work on the traditional territory.

Short Course Description

This course will be devoted to the major epistemological and metaphysical themes of rationalism, focusing on how the tradition arose as a response to problems posed by the Scientific Revolution in the early modern period. While the tradition is characterized by the conviction that we can only gain reliable knowledge by deduction and apodictic intuition, each representative's own line of reasoning leads them to advance a unique theory of the universe and our place in it. We encounter the doctrines that mind and body are ontologically distinct, that matter itself is alive, that nature and its causal system exhausts reality, or that we live in the best of all possible worlds created by an infinitely wise God, to name just a few. In studying rationalist epistemology and metaphysics, we will also rethink the canonical story of the tradition, which one-sidedly focuses on the contributions of three figures: René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. To this end, we will display its rich diversity of voices by examining four women thinkers—Elizabeth of Bohemia, Margaret Cavendish, Anne Conway, and Mary Astell—and the thinker of African descent Anton Amo. These thinkers are all too often left out of the history books despite the influence that they exerted on the tradition and their originality.

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-blossoming mechanical sciences, the worldview that had dominated the Middle Ages was crumbling due to the onslaught of truths that challenged its basic assumptions about the universe, our place in it, and how we acquire knowledge of it. This, in turn, helped pave the way for the early modern period of European history and led to the need for a new philosophy that could provide an unassailable foundation for these new sciences, given how inapt Aristotelianism and scholasticism were proving to be for the task during the Scientific Revolution. It is in this historical context that the tradition that we call "rationalism" came to be.

Our narrative begins with René Descartes. In his search for such an unassailable foundation, Descartes places the rational subject in a state of hyperbolic doubt in the attempt to discover an axiom upon which he could then construct a sturdy philosophical system. In so doing, Descartes comes to argue for two core theses: (1) reason alone is the source of reliable knowledge; and (2) the world is composed of two ontologically distinct substances—mind and

matter, one being the subject matter of human first-person experience and agency and the other of the new deterministic physics, the former irreducible to the latter. This had the effect of putting a divide between us and the world that philosophers have wrestled with ever since. But he also thereby broaches epistemological and metaphysical themes that would become central to the whole tradition: (1) the privileging of deduction and apodictic intuition over the senses because the latter are prone to illusion and, by their very nature, perspectively limited; (2) the goal of philosophy is certain rather than probable knowledge; (3) the idea that the structure of reality is inherently rational and thus knowable by reason alone; and (4) the attempt to articulate a unified conception of reality via a metaphysics of substance

The thinkers who follow in Descartes' footsteps are committed to these four doctrines but dissatisfied with the conclusions of his philosophical system. In particular, they are unhappy with its metaphysical dualism, which makes the human being fall from unity with the world. We see this, in a first moment, in Elizabeth of Bohemia's (and later in Anton Amo's) staunch critiques of Descartes' model of the disembodied mind. As an answer to this loss of unity, the rationalists would develop a number of competing metaphysical models. Margaret Cavendish contends that matter *qua* substance must itself be self-moving, espousing a vitalist materialism that denies a radical distinction between the animate and the inanimate and hence also mind and matter. Baruch Spinoza maintains the monistic position that nature is the one and only substance. This makes nature itself into an impersonal God-like figure, all the while naturalizing the human being by turning everything into a product of nature and its causal system, thus dismantling traditional understandings of God and human freedom. In contrast, Anne Conway articulates a form of monism that places emphasis on the spirit of living beings as the one and only substance and their striving towards perfection, all of which she argues is compatible with these traditional understandings. At his turn, Leibniz maintains that the world was created by an infinitely wise and personal God, the most perfect substance, who designed it in such a way that it is the best of all possible worlds—that is, one in which everything has a place that is rationally justified in the grand scheme of things.

At the end of the course, we will take up several motifs crucial to evaluating the tradition as a whole. We will first explore its ambivalent legacy. Rationalist epistemology was a major source of inspiration for equalitarian social and political change, including the French Revolution. But many rationalists also marshaled their systems to justify the exclusion and marginalization of minorities. We will conclude by discussing two potentially devastating critiques of rationalism from the late Enlightenment of the 18th century: its metaphysical tendency to normalize evil as a necessary feature of the universe and Jacobi's accusation that the only consistent form of rationalist metaphysics is Spinozism, which leads, by denying human freedom, to *nihilism*—a term he popularized long before Nietzsche.

Texts

The following text is required and is the basis of coursework. It is available through UFV's bookstore:

- Lisa Shapiro and Marcy P. Lascano, eds. *Early Modern Philosophy: An Anthology*. Peterborough: Broadview Press.

This book is, hands down, the best anthology of texts in early modern philosophy. It includes key texts in early modern epistemology and metaphysics, but also texts on theology, moral philosophy, and political philosophy, including topics such as virtue and vice, equality and difference, feminism, and more. It has texts from traditionally taught figures such as Descartes,

Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, and Kant alongside others such as Cavendish, Conway, Suchon, Du Châtelet, Amos, and Lord Shaftesbury who equally deserve our attention. It encompasses both rationalist and empiricist traditions and then some, permitting the reader a broad survey of early modern philosophy, its debates, and its history in all its richness. It is a great resource for students and scholars alike.

Other required readings are available online via Blackboard.

Background Reading

If you are looking for extra or supplementary readings, there are many great resources that may help you navigate philosophical texts. These include the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and the *Very Short Introduction* series published by Oxford University Press. All of these are written by experts for a general audience.

Student Evaluation

- | | |
|---------------------|-----|
| • Participation | 10% |
| • Essay 1 | 20% |
| • Take-Home Midterm | 20% |
| • Essay 2 | 30% |
| • Take-Home Final | 20% |

Essay 1:

The first essay will be of a historical and exegetical nature. You will contextualize and summarize key concepts of an important and influential textual passage and reconstruct the formal argument for them in said passage. The essay will be 1500 words.

Midterm:

Short-answer questions on course readings and class discussions up to the midterm.

Essay 2:

The second essay will be a reflective essay that deals with a theme of your choice and argues for your own position with regards to this theme. I will circulate a list of topics, although you are encouraged to choose a topic of your own in consultation with the professor if there is a specific topic you would like to explore further. This essay can be a place for you to investigate your philosophical interests and existential concerns through the course material. The essay will be 2000 words.

Final:

Short-answer questions on course readings and class discussions after the midterm.

Class Schedule

Week 1 (January 14): Introduction to Rationalism

Week 2 (January 21): The Rise of the Early Modern World

- Descartes, 1637, *Discourse on Method*.

Week 3 (January 28): Methodological Skepticism and the Birth of Rationalism

- Descartes, 1641, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditations 1-3.

Week 4 (February 4): Descartes' Dualist Metaphysics

- Descartes, 1641, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditations 4-6.

Week 5 (February 11): Voices Contra the Cartesian Disembodied Mind

- Bohemia, 1643, *Correspondence with Descartes*, excerpts.
- Amo, 1743, *Inaugural Dissertation on the Impassivity of the Human Mind*.

Week 6 (February 18): Cavendish's Vitalist Materialism

- Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies*, *Philosophical Letters*, and *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, excerpts.

Reading Week: February 20-27

Week 7 (March 4): Spinoza's Naturalistic Pantheism

- Spinoza, 1677, *Ethics*, Part I.

Week 8 (March 11): Spinoza's *Sub Specie Aeternitatis*

- Spinoza, 1677, *Ethics*, Part II.

Week 9 (March 18): Conway's Spiritual Panentheism

- Conway, 1690, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*.

Week 10 (March 25): Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason and Principle of the Best

- Leibniz, *Discourse on Method*.

Week 11 (April 1): Leibniz's Panorganicism and Idealism

- Leibniz, *Monadology*.

Week 12 (April 8): An Ambivalent Legacy: The Education of Women, the Race and Gender of Reason, and Revolution

- Astell, 1694/1697, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, excerpts.
- Sharp, "Eve's Perfection: Spinoza on Sexual (In)Equality."
- Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture*, excerpts.

Week 13 (April 15): A Philosophical Dilemma: The Scylla of Evil and the Charybdis of Nihilism

- Voltaire, 1759, *Candide*, excerpts.
- Lessing, 1779, *Nathan the Wise*, excerpts.
- Jacobi, 1785, *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn*.

Course Guidelines and Rules

- 1 *Email Format*: emails to the professor must indicate your name, student number, and the course number with section number. Please provide a course-specific subject line. I will respond within 2 business days.

- 2 *If you miss a test or assignment*, you must contact the professor within 48 hours. If you are excused (for medical reasons, bereavement, etc., as determined by the professor on a case-by-case basis), you must reschedule the test or discuss a plan to make up for it with the professor.
- 3 *Late assignments*: any assignment handed in late will be penalized by 5% per day for a maximum of 7 days. Late assignments after this point will not be accepted, except at the professor's discretion.

Institutional Procedures and Policies

Students registered in UFV courses should be aware of the following institutional procedures and policies:

About Covid, and returning to campus: please consult the official [UFV Return to Campus webpage](#).

Daily Assessment: All individuals entering UFV campus spaces are currently required to [conduct a self-assessment health check](#).

If you are sick: The option of requiring a doctor's note to document a short term illness is suspended. Please do the following:

- Do not come to campus.
- Contact your instructor to explain your situation.
- Submit a [student declaration of absence form](#) to your instructor and work together on a plan for you to make up any missed learning activities or assignments. This applies to both online classes or scheduled face-to-face classes.
- Communicate with your instructor if you are unable to complete the course due to illness and request an [Incomplete Grade Contract](#).

Guidelines for suspected or confirmed Covid case on campus: Please familiarize yourself with [this document](#), which provides the necessary guidelines for how to deal with confirmed or probable cases of covid on campus.

Attention: If you communicate to a UFV staff or faculty member by email, Blackboard Course Messages, or phone that you have Covid, being tested for Covid, or exposed to Covid, UFV staff or faculty will complete a [Priority Access to Student Supports \(PASS\) referral](#) and Student Services will follow-up with you to assess your situation.

Priority Access to Student Supports (PASS): UFV faculty and staff may use the PASS program to connect you to supports and resources to help you succeed in your courses. Such assistance may include putting you in touch with an academic advisor, financial aid, a counsellor, or another resource. PASS referrals are also used for reporting positive cases of Covid-19, as well as for those who may have to self-isolate as a result of contact. If your instructor is concerned about your progress, he/she may refer you to PASS. The referral is treated confidentially and is sent because your instructor cares about your progress and success. Your response to PASS is entirely voluntary. Instructors will let you know they are

making a referral. If you do not wish your instructor to make a referral to PASS on your behalf, please let them know by using your UFV email.

Visit ufv.ca/student-services/PASS for more information.

UFV Academic Policies

For a full list of UFV policies please refer to the [University Secretariat website](#). Below is an overview of policies that directly relate to your success:

Grading: All undergraduate students at UFV are evaluated using the same grade scale:

A+	90-100	B	73-76	C-	60-62
A	85-89	B-	70-72	D	50-59
A-	80-84	C+	67-69	F	<50
B+	77-79	C	63-66		

All students who are admitted to, or declare, a program or program option require a [minimum program grade point average \(PGPA\) of 2.00](#) (3.00 for graduate level) on all courses taken at UFV that are used to meet program requirements.

Academic Misconduct: UFV Policy 70 includes, but is not limited to, plagiarism, cheating, impersonation, improper access to examination materials, falsification or unauthorized modification of an academic document/record, resubmission of work, improper research practices, obstruction of the academic activities of another, and aiding and abetting.

Attendance Policy: UFV Policy 62 states that instructors may withdraw students who do not attend the first class and penalize lack of regular attendance. Instructors are expected to advise students of penalties at the start of term.

Audit Policy: UFV Policy 108 explains that a student intending to audit a course must do so before 30% of the course is complete. Please refer to [Important Dates](#).

Final Exams: UFV Policy 46 explains that final exams are scheduled by the institution during the pre-determined final exam period. Students must be available for the entire exam period and should not make travel or other plans which conflict with this schedule. Instructors are entitled to require that students take all examinations at the times scheduled.

Final Grade Appeals: UFV Policy 217 outlines the appeal process for final grades. All appeals must be made within 14 days of the final grade becoming available.

Pre-requisites: UFV Policy 84 states that the minimum grade required for a prerequisite course is C- unless another grade is stated.

Safe Student Learning Community: UFV Policy 204 states “Students are required to conduct themselves in a mature and responsible manner, consistent with the university mission, policies, and regulations, and in compliance with federal, provincial, and municipal laws.

Students will be held accountable for their actions whether acting alone or in a group.” Further information can be found on the [Safe Student Community website](#).

[Withdrawal: UFV Policy 81](#) states students may choose to withdraw from a course without penalty before completing 60% of the course. Students withdrawing before they have completed 30% of the course will not receive a “W” on their transcript; students withdrawing after completing 31% to 60% of the course will receive a “W” on their transcript. A “W” has no academic penalty and is not counted in the student’s GPA. After 60% of the course has been completed, students must apply for [Late Withdrawal](#). Please be aware of [semester withdrawal deadlines](#).