

PHIL 251A
Rationalism and Early Modern Philosophy

Winter 2022

CRN 12473, Section AB1

Fridays 13:00–15:50, A402

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Office Hours:

Wednesdays 15:00–17:00, ABK155

Or by appointment on Zoom

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, for instance, the views that mind and body are ontologically distinct, that matter itself is alive, that nature and its causal system exhaust reality, and that we live in the best of all possible worlds created by an infinitely wise God, to name just a few competing doctrines. 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 science of mechanics, the worldview that had dominated the Middle Ages was crumbling due to the onslaught of recently discovered or verified 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 prompted the need for a new philosophy that could provide an unassailable foundation for then-emerging natural 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 an 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 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 the subject matter of the new natural sciences, 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 different 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 claims that, since God is an immaterial, living spirit and everything derives from God, all things, too, must be a form of immaterial, living spirit and strive towards perfection. At his turn, Leibniz upholds 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 to say, 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 entails, by denying human freedom, *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, 221.

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 the texts we will study. 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%

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

Week 8 (March 11): Conway's Monism of Spirit

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

Week 9 (March 18): Leibniz on God, Truth, and Logically Possible Worlds

- Leibniz, 1686, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Sections 1-8.
- Leibniz, 1714, *The Monadology*, paragraphs 31-57.

Week 10 (March 25): Leibniz's Panorganicism and Idealism

- Leibniz, 1686, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Sections 9-15, 20-22, 30-37.
- Leibniz, 1714, *The Monadology*, paragraphs 1-30, 58-90.

Week 11 (April 1): An Ambivalent Legacy: The Education of Women and the Gender of Race

- Astell, 1694/1697, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, excerpts.
- Lloyd, 1984, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, excerpts.

Week 12 (April 8): A Philosophical Dilemma: Between 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*, excerpts

Course Procedures and Policies

- 1 *Email*: I will respond within 2 business days. If something is urgent, please indicate so in the subject line so that I can prioritize getting back to you.
- 2 *Missed Exams*: Please contact me within 24 hours, if possible. If you are excused (for medical reasons, bereavement, etc., as determined on a case-by-case basis), you must reschedule.
- 3 *Late Essays*: Any essay handed in late will be penalized by 5% per day for a maximum of 7 days. Late essays after this point will not be accepted, except under extenuating circumstances.