

MODERN PHILOSOPHY
SPRING SEMESTER 2016
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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or by appointment

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COURSE
DESCRIPTION

“Modern” philosophy covers the period from roughly 1600 to 1800. To the extent that we are still living in modern times (as opposed, for example, to “postmodern” times) this period has had a lasting effect on how we instinctively approach the world and our place in it. Our modern western world view, which can now seem almost a matter of instinct, emerged during this period, often as a result of philosophical inquiry. This world view includes a respect for the methods and results of science, for the rights of individuals, and for the power and autonomy of human reason.

Here we’ll look at the range of positions and arguments that make up the modern philosophical era. There are several reasons for doing this. First, we’ll focus on the reasons for positions which we otherwise might accept without thinking. Second, because this was a period of intellectual controversy, we’ll look at the tensions and inconsistencies inherent in the modern era and, as a result, try to make our own world view more consistent. Third, because modern philosophy involves some of the first attempts to systematize and resolve what are now familiar questions (e.g., how can we be free if our bodies are like machines? what room does science leave for god?) we should have some fun looking at answers that are refreshingly weird yet also deeply thought-provoking.

The philosophers we’ll read tended not to specialize. Instead, for the most part, they were systematic thinkers and so tried to provide a coherent account of a range of topics including science, ethics, politics, and theology. While our focus must be somewhat tighter, we’ll still cover a range of topics. These include the nature and existence of god, the basis of ethical decision making, the ultimate composition of the universe, and the foundations of knowledge and justification.

Plus—and this sets our class apart from some others—we’ll be spending an obsessive amount of time looking at the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. We all have our favorites but Kant should be on everyone’s list of the top three most important philosophers of all time. It’s impossible to imagine the last two hundred years without him: his ideas are all around us and continue to be influential. That’s not to say that he’s right all the time or even half the time—but it’s true that a lot of philosophical thinking after Kant really is just a footnote. Taking Kant seriously, reading him closely, marveling over the intricacies and details of his system, considering his relevance in the 21st century: these are all important and valuable things to do. I’m pretty confident that, for better or worse, reading a lot of Kant will likely rewire your brain and change how you look at the world around you.

Finally, since our interests aren’t merely and purely historical, we’ll be looking at a couple more recent assessments of the modern period and of Kant’s moral philosophy.

TEXTS

Here are the books we'll be reading. They should all be available at the campus Barnes & Noble.

René Descartes: *Meditations, Objections, and Replies**

G.W. Leibniz: *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Essays**

George Berkeley: *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge**

David Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding**

Immanuel Kant: *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics**

Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Practical Reason, Revised Edition* (Cambridge, 2015)

Stephen Toulmin: *Cosmopolis* (Chicago, 1990)

Onora O'Neill: *Acting on Principle, Second Edition* (Cambridge, 2013)

In addition, I'll ask you to access Spinoza's *Ethics* from the Early Modern Philosophy website (earlymoderntexts.com).

*Any edition of these books will be fine, but I prefer the ones published by Hackett. If you buy the Hackett Edition then we'll literally all be on the same page.

INFORMATION
AND
REQUIREMENTS

1. Philosophy is a group activity that depends on conversation and discussion. Discussion is the only way to make sure we're covering all our bases and considering all the options. There is no way to do this entirely on your own. In order for this class to function well I need to be confident that everyone's done the reading; no free-riders. I *don't* expect everyone to have understood the reading; that's what class and our discussions are for. But I do expect everyone to make a good faith effort to do the reading, get at least some idea of what it's about, and have a couple questions or interesting thoughts to raise. I expect regular attendance. I will do everything I can so that everyone can participate in our discussions. Attendance and participation are worth 20% of the final grade.
2. I may also periodically assign short take-home or in-class writing assignments; these will be factored into the attendance and participation grade.
3. This class will be run as a seminar which means, among other things, that I'll try to keep the lecturing to a minimum. This is so we can work out our own thoughts and exercise some degree of self-control over the topics we discuss. Every once in a while I'll probably lecture because a) I can't help myself or b) there's some crucial background information that I want everyone to have or c) you demand that I do it. But I want to limit my lecturing so we can all participate and not just spectate. If you'd be more comfortable with a more lecture-oriented course I'll be happy to recommend some.

4. There will be a take-home **midterm examination** covering the topics discussed during the first six weeks of class. The midterm will consist of a small number of short essays in response to passages from the readings. The midterm will be worth 15% of the final grade.
5. There will be four short (2-3 page) **writing assignments** scattered throughout the semester. In these I'll ask you to reflect critically on particular themes of the readings and course. These together will count toward 50% of the final grade.
6. I'm asking everyone to **facilitate** one class discussion. Here's what I have in mind:

A facilitation should give a brief overview of the day's reading (<5 minutes), provide any helpful background information that may add to our understanding of the reading, and help coordinate discussion. The emphasis is on helping frame and lead the discussion. You want to be pretty familiar with the day's reading and be able to ask good, insightful questions about it; it is not expected, however, that you have all the answers.

Please bring a one page handout. The handout should tell a story about the day's reading: the main points, its arc, how the reading takes us from Point A to Point B. It should also list some issues for discussion. I'll provide examples of handouts early in the semester when, by default, I'll be facilitating discussion. I'll also pass around a sign-up sheet early in the semester.

A good facilitation doesn't just summarize the day's reading. Instead, it extracts the essential issues, the points that are especially interesting or problematic, and the themes that are worth discussing. It doesn't attempt to be absolutely comprehensive and it doesn't miss the forest for the trees.

A good handout is usually a narrative or story of some kind. It isn't, usually, a list of loosely connected bullet points. In your handout you want to describe a certain kind of trajectory and that means showing connections and showing how the author builds an argument.

I've also noticed that good facilitators usually don't read their handout but rather talk through the main ideas. The handout is not a script.

The facilitation is worth 15% of the final grade.

7. I think philosophy is really wonderful and important, so I'm always happy to talk about the course. Feel free to drop by my office hours or speak to me after class. I've found it's usually a lot more efficient to talk in person than over e-mail.
8. Feel free to ask if you have a question about where you stand grade-wise. While I expect you can keep track of this, too, I'm happy to give you an up-to-date calculation.

SCHEDULE OF
ASSIGNMENTS

Please note: a particular day's reading should be done *before* class.

- 1.25 Introductory Remarks
1.27 Introductory Remarks
1.29 Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy* Meditation One
Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy* Meditation Two
- 2.1 Toulmin: *Cosmopolis*, pp. 1-30
2.3 Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy* Meditation Three
2.5 Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy* Meditations Four & Five
- 2.8 Toulmin: *Cosmopolis*, pp. 30-62
2.8 Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy* Meditation Six
2.10 Descartes: *Objections*, pp. 115-116, 122-128, 70-75
2.12 Descartes: *Replies*, pp. 138-148, 82-86 (i.e., §3-4)
- 2.15 Spinoza: *Ethics* Part I: Definitions, Axioms, Propositions 1-15
2.17 Spinoza: *Ethics* Part I: Propositions 16-36, Appendix
2.19 Leibniz: *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Propositions 1-9
Writing Assignment #1 Due
- 2.22 Toulmin: *Cosmopolis*, pp. 62-87
2.24 Leibniz: *Monadology* (pp. 68-81)
2.26 Berkeley: *Treatise*, Sections 1-33 (pp. 22-35)
- 2.29 Toulmin: *Cosmopolis*, pp. 89-117
3.2 Berkeley: *Treatise*, Sections 50-53, 85-96 (pp. 42-43, 56-61)
3.4 Berkeley: *Treatise*, Sections 135-156 (pp. 78-87)
- 3.7 Toulmin: *Cosmopolis*, pp. 117-137
Midterm Due
- 3.9 Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Sections 1-3
3.11 Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Sections 4-5
- 3.14 Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Sections 11, 12
(part 3 only)
3.16 Kant: *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* Preface, §1-5
3.18 Kant: *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* §6-12, §14-27
- 3.21-3.25 **Spring Break**
- 3.28 Kant: *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* §28-38, §45-54
3.30 Kant: *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* §55-60 & "Solution of the
General Question" (pp. 99-104)
4.1 Kant: *Critique of Practical Reason* pp. 17-37
- 4.4 O'Neill: *Acting On Principle* Chapter 1 (pp. 42-59)
Writing Assignment #2 Due
- 4.6 Kant: *Critique of Practical Reason* pp. 37-60
4.8 Kant: *Critique of Practical Reason* pp. 60-86

- 4.11 O'Neill: *Acting On Principle* Chapter 2 (pp. 60-93)
- 4.13 Kant: *Critique of Practical Reason* pp. 87-106
- 4.15 Kant: *Critique of Practical Reason* pp. 106-118
- 4.18 O'Neill: *Acting On Principle* Chapter 3 (pp. 94-110)
- 4.20 O'Neill: *Acting On Principle* Chapter 4 (pp. 111-124)
- 4.22 No Class
- 4.25 O'Neill: *Acting On Principle* Chapter 4 (pp. 125-135)
- Writing Assignment #3 Due**
- 4.27 O'Neill: *Acting On Principle* Chapter 5 (pp. 136-173)
- 4.29 O'Neill: *Acting On Principle* Chapter 5 (pp. 173-193)
- 5.2 O'Neill: *Acting On Principle* Chapter 6 (pp. 194-223)
- 5.4 O'Neill: *Acting On Principle* Chapter 6 (pp. 223-245)
- 5.6 O'Neill: *Acting On Principle* Chapter 7 (pp. 246-277)
- 5.9 Toulmin: *Cosmopolis*, Chapter 4 (pp. 139-174)
- 5.11 Toulmin: *Cosmopolis*, Chapter 5 and Epilogue (pp. 175-209)
- 5.13 Final Remarks
- Writing Assignment #4 Due**