

Early Modern Philosophy

The Birth of Modernity from Descartes to Kant (1600-1800)

PHIL 2XX- Modern Philosophy
17th and 18th Century Philosophy (Sample Syllabus)

J.W. Symington IV, Ph.D.
Department of Philosophy

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines the birth of modern philosophy as a radical reimagining of knowledge, reality, and the self. Beginning with Descartes's methodic doubt and ending with Kant's critical philosophy, we will trace how seventeenth and eighteenth century thinkers sought to ground truth in reason and experience. Through close readings of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, and Kant, we will explore the historical development of the modern subject, the rise of scientific rationality, and the Enlightenment's promise, and anxiety, of human autonomy. Particular attention will be given to how these thinkers reshaped the relationship between mind and world, faith and reason, and freedom and necessity, setting the stage for both the triumph and the crisis of modern thought.

COURSE READING LIST

1. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1671). Trans. and ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge University Press, 1996).
2. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (Selections: Preface, Book I-II) (1677). In *Spinoza: Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Hackett, 2002).
3. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Monadology* (1714). In *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Roger Ariès and Daniel Garber (Hackett, 1989).
4. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Selections: Book II) (1690). Ed. Peter H. Niddich (Clarendon/Oxford University Press, 1975).
5. George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713). Ed. Desmond M. Clarke (Cambridge University Press, 1999).
6. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748). Ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford University Press, 1999).
7. Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783) trans. And ed. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge University Press, 2004), and *Critique of Pure Reason* (A/B Prefaces; Transcendental Deduction), trans., ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998).
8. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1772), and *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity* (Selections), *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Suggested Secondary Reading

- Galileo Galilei, Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany (1615), *The Essential Galileo*, ed. and trans. Maurice A. Finocchiaro (Hackett Publishing, 2008).
- Voltaire, Letters on England (1733), trans. Leonard Tancock (Penguin Classics, 1980).

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1: Introduction, The Meaning of “Modernity”; Humanism, science and the philosophical break from tradition.

Weeks 2-3: Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*; Methodic doubt, the Cogito, dualism, the search for certainty.

Week 4: Spinoza, *Ethics* (Book I-II); Substance monism, necessity, rational freedom.

Week 5: Leibniz, *Monadology*; Rational Order, perception, pre-established harmony.

Week 6-7: Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Book II); Experience, identity, and empirical knowledge.

Week 8: Berkeley, *Three Dialogues*; Idealism, perception, and the denial of matter.

Weeks 9-10: Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*; Causality, habit, skepticism, limits of reason.

Week 11: Transition from Empiricism to Critique; The Problem of induction and the crisis of certainty.

Weeks 12-14: Kant, *Prolegomena* and the *Critique of Pure Reason*; synthetic a priori, transcendental idealism, Enlightenment autonomy, and synthesis.

Weeks 15-16: Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language* and *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*; Language, culture, and the historicity of reason, the limits of Enlightenment universalism.

ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION

- Reading Responses (15%): Weekly reflections connecting each text to course themes.
- Midterm Essay (30%): Compare rationalist and empiricist approaches to knowledge (5-10 pages).
- Final Essay (30%): Analyze Kant and Herder in relation to the crisis of modernity (8-10 pages).
- Participation (25%): Active engagement through attendance, and discussion.

COURSE POLICIES

- Attendance: Required. More than three absences may affect your final grade.
- Late Work: Accepted with penalty unless arranged in advance.
- Academic Integrity: All writing must be original and properly cited. Plagiarism will result in failure for the assignment.
- Accessibility: Students with accommodations are encouraged to contact the instructor early in the semester.
- AI Use Policy: Generative AI tools may be used to assist brainstorming or structure but **NOT** to generate your analysis.