Philosophy 500

Advanced Studies in Early Modern Philosophy: The Metaphysics of Rationalism

Spring 2016 — Section A02 (CRN: 22465)

General Course Information, Recommended Supplementary Reading, Schedule

1. General Course Information

Location & Time: CLE B315, Mon. & Thurs. 8:30 a.m. — 9:50 a.m.
Instructor: David Scott
Office: CLE B320
Office Hours: Mon. & Thurs. 1:00—2:00 p.m. (by appointment only)
Telephone & Email: 250-721-7517; djfscott@uvic.ca

ABOUT THIS COURSE:
This course focuses on the metaphysics and epistemology of two key philosophers in the rationalist tradition: Nicolas Malebranche and Benedict Spinoza. Students will be expected to have a good working knowledge of the main principles of Aristotle’s philosophy and (more particularly) of Descartes’ philosophy, since it is the latter’s philosophy especially that sets the stage for early modern rationalism. The course focuses largely on metaphysical issues (e.g., causation, the doctrine of substance) and epistemological issues (e.g., innate ideas, perception) in these philosophies, though time permitting we may pay attention to their philosophical theologies. Outside of Descartes’ Meditations (cf. the optional text below), the key texts will be Malebranche’s Search After Truth and Dialogues on Metaphysics (excerpts of which appear in the required text below) and Spinoza’s Ethics (cf. required text below).

TEXTS/COURSE MATERIAL:


MARKING SCHEME & CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION:
(a) Two essays, each worth 50%. Letter grades correspond to the following marks: A+ = 90 - 100, A = 85 - 89, A- = 80 - 84, B+ = 77 - 79, B = 73 - 76, B- = 70 - 72, C+ = 65 - 69, C = 60 - 64, D = 50 - 59, F = 0 - 49.

(b) In this course you can assume that all essay or exam topics are intended to test you on the material covered in class. You are of course permitted and encouraged to supplement class discussion of the subject with outside material, but the minimum expectation is that you deal with the material covered in class, and that you address the points raised there about that material. This does not mean that for tests and essays you are expected merely to repeat the in-class proceedings. Rather, it means that you are expected to take account of or do justice to in-class discussion; and it means that absence from class may well place you at a considerable disadvantage in your tests and essays. I emphasize that the tests and essays for this course constitute part of a continuous whole with the lectures and in-class discussions. They do not float free of the work done in the classroom, though of course the tests and especially the essays also provide you with room to explore topics outside of the classroom confines. Roughly speaking, “B+” and “A-” papers take account of and rise to the level of the class discussion; “A” and “A+” papers take that discussion to a higher/deeper level.
c) Criteria for evaluation: The criteria I use to evaluate essays are, I believe, criteria which common sense would suggest in the assessment of a philosophy essay. Primarily my concern is with content or substance. Of course, this does not mean that form or style count for nothing (and indeed it may not ultimately be possible to divorce form from content). In indicating these evaluation criteria I emphasize that philosophy is an arts or humanities subject, which means that assessing the merits of a philosophy paper ultimately requires qualitative evaluation or judgment on my part. Therefore, I do not assign precise numerical values to the following assessment criteria; nor is there a mathematical formula I can employ to judge the quality of philosophical writing. However, as a rough guide I employ a list of relative priorities, presented here in ascending order of importance:

- spelling/grammar
- organization & clarity of expression
- accuracy of exposition
- use of examples reflecting understanding of the subject
- breadth of analysis, i.e. number of points covered
- depth of analysis, i.e. how far into the issue analysis is pushed
- resourcefulness, originality and imagination
- tightness, rigor or logical coherence of analysis
- overall degree of philosophical insight

I stress that the order of these criteria is not absolute. Thus, sometimes less important criteria will be given more weight than more important ones. For instance, a student’s use and analysis of examples might be so good that I am led to conclude that that student has an excellent understanding of the subject. In such a case the value I attach to the use of examples might increase significantly, and I might overlook the fact that, for instance, the student has failed to cover as many points as other students.

d) Academic Honesty: Cheating of any kind, including collusion (working with others too closely) and plagiarism from (i) books and/or articles, (ii) other students’ papers, and (iii) papers or other material on the internet, is a serious academic offence. University regulations also prohibit students from submitting the same work for two different courses; in other words, plagiarizing or “recycling” one’s own work is not permitted. If detected, cheating can result in dismissal from this course (with an “F”), and dismissal from the university.

SUBMITTING AND RETURNING GRADED WORK:

(a) All essays must be typed (12-font, Times), double-spaced, paginated, and contain the word-count on the front cover. Essays should be stapled, not paper-clipped. I will not accept essays submitted as email attachments; nor will I accept essays that exceed the maximum word limit. In cases where I think the word limit has been exceeded, I will require an electronic copy to check. I’m afraid I will not be available to discuss test or essay questions on the day before or on the day they are due to be submitted, as I need to avoid being swamped by last-minute enquiries.

(b) In general, I will return your graded work during class time, within two weeks of its having been submitted. If you are not there to receive your work when I return it in class, you can pick it up either from me in my office or, if you are willing to sign a waiver form, from the “Returned Work” box outside the departmental office. The Protection of Privacy Act prevents me from placing your work in that box unless you have signed the waiver form.

(c) When graded work is returned to you it will frequently be annotated with comments. If you wish to discuss your work with me, please read those comments first. To give you a chance to do this, as a matter of policy I do not discuss work on the same day as it is returned.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS / MISSED TESTS:

Late assignments will not be accepted without penalty unless justified by a medical or other academically legitimate reason, for which documentation of some kind (e.g., a medical certificate) will generally be required. Late assignments will be accepted with a penalty of 5% per day (or part-day, including weekend days or part-days), for a maximum of 4 days (20%). After four days, no late assignments will be accepted.

OFFICE HOURS:
Because of demand (especially near test days or essay due-dates), if you wish to see me during my office hours you need to make an appointment. Appointments are limited to about fifteen minutes per student, so it’s best to come prepared with specific questions.

**MISCELLANEOUS NOTES AND CLASS POLICIES:**

(a) **Class discussion & participation:** In general, my classes tend to involve lots of discussion. I encourage and greatly value your in-class contributions, and I can assure you that other students do too. It is a frequently unacknowledged fact of the classroom that if you have a question or comment, it’s likely that others have the same one too. So go ahead and ask your question, or make your comment: it helps me, you, and your classmates. And the more you talk, the less I talk, and surely that is a good thing at least sometimes! If, however, you are more shy or reserved but still have comments or questions, please see me during office hours.

(b) **Emailing me:** Because of problems with SPAM and viruses transmitted by email, I have to request that whenever you email me you make sure to put something in the “subject” line of your email to identify you as a student in this course. If you don’t do this, and I don’t recognize your name, I will delete your email without opening it. In addition to this, I would greatly appreciate it if you observed the (still) standard courtesy of beginning your emails with a salutation, e.g. “Dear …”, “Hello Dr. XX”, etc. This piece of social etiquette is rooted in the recognition that people are not simply inanimate objects (like ATM machines), but should be addressed before being spoken to.

(c) **Coming late to class:** The classroom is a work environment. Frequently students and I find it a distraction for people to walk in late. Because of this, some of my colleagues do not allow students to enter the classroom late, though I do not follow this practice. In general, I find that most students who come late do not do so on a consistent basis, and because in general these students are otherwise active participants in the class, I am pleased to cut them a bit of slack. That said, arriving late can be a mild distraction, and I know that students, of whom it is my duty to be mindful, find it distracting to lesser or greater degrees. So please try to be on time.

(d) **Visits to the classroom by non-registered students:** As the instructor for this class I am duty-bound to ensure that a work environment is preserved in the class. Both students and I can find it a distraction for strangers to walk into the classroom. It takes some students a good deal of time before they gain confidence to participate in the class proceedings, and the presence of a stranger can be disruptive in that regard. The fact is, a class is a co-operative enterprise whose participants have worked to establish a trust relationship, built on familiarity with each other. This needs to be respected, and unannounced strangers simply walking in is counterproductive in this regard. Though not every student feels this to be a distraction, the fact that there are students for whom this is a distraction should nonetheless be respected. Beyond this, there is the safety issue. Unfortunately, the unannounced appearance in the classroom of a person unknown to me constitutes, on any reasonable view, a potential risk, of varying degrees of severity, to the participants in this class. I deal with this by asking the person concerned to leave the class room. My failure to do this could amount to negligence on my part. If something unpleasant happened as a result of my failure to ask such a person to leave, I would be partly responsible for any ensuing harm. To express this safety concern in its most dire terms, campuses across North America have recently been the scene of horrendous tragedies visited upon students and faculty: witness L’Ecole Polytechnique de Montréal and Dawson College in Canada, and Virginia Tech in the United States. While mercifully these events are rare, less tragic events are more common. For instance, a student’s ex-boyfriend follows her into class and sits quietly, in feigned interest and attentiveness, all the while knowing that his mere presence there is causing someone great discomfort. This once happened in one of my classes, and because I didn’t ask the stranger to leave, more harm was caused than might otherwise have come about. I cannot subject strangers who walk into my classes to moral retinal scans. But I can—and I do—ask them to leave. If, as sometimes happens, a person wants to attend my class to check it out, that person needs to come to me before hand and ask my permission.

(e) **Use of computers & hand-held media/communication devices, etc., in the class:** For the purpose of taking notes, you are welcome to use laptops with quiet keyboards in the classroom. Attending to computers or hand held-devices for obviously or apparently non-academic purposes, e.g., watching films, surfing the web, texting, etc., is prohibited.
2. Recommended Supplementary Reading

A. General Accounts of Rationalism & the Early Modern Period:


Koyré, Alexandre. From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe


B. Books on Descartes:


Broadie, F. *An Approach to Descartes’ “Meditations”*. [B1854 B7]


C. Books on Malebranche:


Pyle, Andrew. *Malebranche*. [B1897 P95]

**D. Books on Spinoza:**

Caird, John, *Spinoza*, 1910. [B3998 C3]
Roth, L. *Spinoza*. [B3998 R58]
Scruton, Roger. *Spinoza*. [B3997 S34]
3. Class Schedule*

WEEK 1: (Jan. 4, 7)
Mon. Jan. 4 - Course Introduction: History of Philosophy; Importance of Aristotle.
Thurs. Jan. 7 - Descartes’ Philosophy.

WEEK 2 (Jan. 11, 14)
Mon. Jan. 11 - Descartes’ Philosophy.

WEEK 3 (Jan. 18, 21)
Mon. Jan. 18 - Malebranche’s philosophy.

WEEK 4 (Jan. 25, 28)
Thurs. Jan. 28 - Distribution of mid-term exam study questions.

WEEK 5 (Feb. 1, 4)
Mon. Feb. 1 - Malebranche’s Philosophy.
Thurs. Feb. 4 - Mid-term Exam.

WEEK 6 (Feb. 8, 11)
Mon. Feb. 8 - No Classes: Mid-Term Break.
Thurs. Feb. 11 - No Classes: Mid-Term Break.

WEEK 7 (Feb. 15, 18)
Mon. Feb. 15 - Malebranche.
Thurs. Feb. 18 - Malebranche.

WEEK 8 (Feb. 22, 25)
Mon. Feb. 22 - Spinoza.
Thurs. Feb. 25 - Spinoza.

WEEK 9 (Feb. 29, March 3)
Mon. Feb. 29 - Spinoza.
Thurs. March 3 - Spinoza.

WEEK 10 (March 7, 10)
Mon. March 7 - Spinoza.
Thurs. March 10 - Spinoza.

WEEK 11 (March 14, 17)
Mon. March 14 - Spinoza.
Thurs. March 17 - Spinoza.

WEEK 12 (March 21, 24)
Mon. March 21 - Spinoza.
Thurs. March 24 - Spinoza.

WEEK 13 (March 28, 31)
Mon. March 28 - Easter Monday: No class.
Thurs. March 31 - Spinoza.

WEEK 14 (April 4)
Mon. April 4  - Last class of term. Review.

* This schedule is subject to revision, as sometimes discussion and the flow of ideas in class require us to spend more time on certain subjects, less time on others, than originally planned.

FINAL EXAM PERIOD FOR THIS SEMESTER: April 7 – 22.