

PHIL 306 (A01): The Rationalists

CRN# 22535

MTh 14:30-15:50, ELL 061

Instructor: Dr. Thomas Land

Office: CLE B 331

Office Hours: Wed 1:30-3:00 and by appointment

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Course Description

This course traces themes in the epistemology and metaphysics of a group of 17th and 18th-century philosophers often classified as Rationalists. Rationalists tend to think that the world is not simply a collection of independent facts, but that these facts are systematically connected and therefore intelligible. Rationalists also often think that reason alone, independently of experience, can discover significant metaphysical truths. We will study central texts of the Rationalist tradition by closely analyzing the arguments proposed for these and other claims. Topics to be discussed include the following: What are the fundamental building blocks of the universe? Does matter exist? What is a mind? How is the mind related to the body? Is there a God? Do we have free will? What is space? And how should we go about answering these questions, through reflection alone or by relying on observation and experiment?

Learning Outcomes

This course has three main objectives. By successfully completing this course you will

- (i) acquire knowledge of central metaphysical and epistemological doctrines held by three very influential early modern thinkers as well as a number of less well-known philosophers;
- (ii) come to understand some of the philosophical motivations underlying these doctrines as well as some of the problems they face; and
- (iii) hone important analytical skills. These include reading and analyzing difficult philosophical texts; constructing and assessing arguments; articulating and communicating complex ideas; and composing philosophical essays.

Course Website

This course has an associated website on UVic's *Brightspace* tool. This will be used for assignments, communication, and to make available additional materials. To access your customized *Brightspace* page, sign in to UVic and click on *Online Tools*. You should see *Brightspace* as an option. If you are unable to access *Brightspace*, please contact me.

Texts

There are two required books. Both are available at the UVic Bookstore:

Readings in Modern Philosophy, vol. I: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Associated Texts, edited by Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000 [=AW]

Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period, edited, with an introduction, by Margaret Atherton, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994 [=A]

Additional readings will be made available on *Brightspace*.

All of the readings in this course were written over two hundred years ago, in a style and, in many cases, language very different from contemporary English. This sometimes makes for slow-going reading, even

on a purely linguistic level. In class, we will work with the original versions (mostly in translation). But for your own reading you are encouraged to consult in addition the simplified and more approachable versions of these texts available at <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/texts>. Please note that these do not replace the required textbooks.

Course Format

A mix of lecture and discussion, with some group work components. You are expected to come to class prepared to discuss the assigned material in detail. So you need to read the material carefully and take good notes. Some of this material is hard, and the readings often dense (especially Spinoza). You need to read slowly and note points that are unclear, seem implausible etc. To help with this, I will post weekly reading questions. These are meant to focus and guide your reading.

Evaluation

a. Requirements

There are five requirements for this course, which are as follows:

<i>Assignment</i>	<i>Due Date</i>	<i>Weight</i>
Attendance	N/A	5%
Participation	N/A	5%
5 Quote and Comment	Wednesdays at 11:00pm	6% each
Midterm Paper	Released: Feb 5, Due: Feb 19	25%
Final Paper	Released: Apr 8, Due: Apr 22	35%

Attendance

You are required to attend class, and attendance will be taken. You are permitted **two** unexcused absences over the course of the semester. Any additional unexcused absence will count toward your attendance mark. For more information on acceptable excuses, see ‘Academic Concessions’ below.

A passing attendance grade is a minimum condition on achieving a passing grade in the course. In other words, if you miss more than 13 classes you will fail the course regardless of your overall grade.

Participation

Participation comes in two main forms: contributing to in-person class discussion and posting to the discussion forum on *Brightspace*. Ideally, you participate regularly in both of these ways. Asking a question is a valid (indeed, important) form of participation. Both quantity and quality of contributions are considered in assessing participation.

The discussion forum is intended to supplement, not replace, in-class discussion. While in-class participation is a required component of this course, I recognize that there are different learning styles. If you find it difficult to participate in discussion, please talk to me, so we can work out a viable strategy for facilitating your participation.

Quote and Comment

This is a short assignment (up to one page), in which you are given a short passage from an assigned reading and asked to do two things: (i) explain what the passage says; (ii) explain how the passage contributes to the overall argument of the text from which it is taken.

A Quote and Comment assignment will be available each week during Weeks 2-5 and 7-11 (i.e., *not* during the first and last week of the semester and not when the midterm is due), and you must complete a

total of **five**. The choice of weeks is up to you. If you complete more than five, your five highest marks will count.

Quote and Comment assignments are due on Wednesdays at 11:00pm (in Weeks 2-5 and 7-11).

Midterm Paper

A short paper on an assigned topic, with a focus on exposition and argument analysis, i.e. stating and explaining the position advocated in a selected reading.

Final Paper

A slightly longer paper, on an assigned topic, in which exposition will be combined with assessment and discussion.

b. Late Penalties

Midterm and Final paper: 10 percentage points per day (weekends count as one day).

There are no exceptions to these deadlines unless there are good reasons for an extension.

c. N Grades

If you have a passing grade for the attendance and Quote and Comment assignments *and* complete the midterm paper and final paper, you will be considered to have completed the course. Failure to complete any one of these requirements will result in a grade of “N” regardless of the cumulative grade for all course requirements. N is a failing grade and factors into GPA as a value of 0.

Academic Concessions

UVic recognizes its responsibility to offer academic concessions to students whose ability to complete course requirements is interrupted by 1) unexpected and unavoidable circumstances or 2) conflicting responsibilities. In general, academic concessions take two forms:

1. during the term when all course requirements can be completed by the student before the instructor must submit the final grades (these are often informally called “extensions”); and
2. after the term has ended or when course requirements cannot be completed before final grades are submitted (including deferrals, extended deferrals, aegrotats, withdrawals under extenuating circumstances and backdated drops).

For additional details, please see the [regulations](#) and [guidelines](#) on academic concessions.

If you foresee or experience circumstances that prevent you from completing course requirements, please be proactive and contact me right away. The sooner you do, the easier it typically is to address the situation.

Course Schedule (may be adjusted as we go along)

Week	Date	Reading
1	Jan 8, 11	della Rocca, “PSR” Scipion Duplex, <i>Corpus of Philosophy</i> (excerpt)
2	Jan 15, 18	Descartes, <i>Meditations</i> , Prefaces, Meditations I-II (AW 22-34) Third Set of Objections and Replies (Hobbes) (AW 63-66)
3	Jan 23, 25	Meditation III-V (AW 34-48) <i>Principles of Philosophy</i> , part I, sections 29-65 (AW 86-94); part II, sections 1-25 (AW 97-103) Fourth Set of Objections and Replies (Arnauld) (AW 70-80) Second Replies (AW 57-62)

4	Jan 29, Feb 1	Meditation VI (AW 48-55) Descartes, Correspondence with Elisabeth (A 11-21) Margaret Cavendish, <i>Philosophical Letters</i> , Letter XXXV (A 33-35) Anne Conway, <i>The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy</i> (A 49-76)
5	Feb 5, 8	Spinoza, From the letters to Oldenburg and Meyer (AW 151-157) Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> , part I (AW 158-178)
6	Feb 12, 15	Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> , part I continued
Reading Break – no class on Feb 19 or 22		
7	Feb 26, 29	Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> , part II (AW 178-201)
8	Mar 4, 7	Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> , part II continued Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> , part V, excerpt (AW 201-209)
9	Mar 11, 14	Leibniz, From the Letters to Foucher, Elisabeth and Molanus (AW 116-122) Leibniz, <i>Discourse on Metaphysics</i> (AW 234-257)
10	Mar 18, 21	Leibniz, <i>New System of Nature</i> (AW 279-284) Leibniz, <i>Primary Truths</i> (AW 275-278) Leibniz, From the Letters to Arnauld (AW 258-274)
11	Mar 25, 28	Leibniz, <i>Monadology</i> (AW 285-293) Cudworth (Lady Masham), Correspondence with Leibniz (A 80-95)
12	Apr 4, 8	Newton, <i>Natural Philosophy</i> (AW 294-303) Leibniz, From the Letters to Clarke (AW 304-313) Du Chatelet, <i>Foundations of Physics</i> (excerpt)
	Exam period	Final paper due April 22

Attendance and Notes

You are expected to attend class and come prepared to discuss the assigned readings. Handouts I use for lecturing will be made available on the course website. However, I elaborate on these in class, so downloading the handouts is no substitute for attending class.

The use of handouts is for your own learning only. You are not permitted to distribute them to others or make them available on the internet (e.g. by posting them on social media). Doing so constitutes a violation of copyright.

It is crucial to your success in this course that you take good lecture notes. Research shows that taking good notes helps your learning. By taking your own notes (and this does *not* mean copying the lecture word for word) you process the material more thoroughly than you otherwise would and you make later reviewing easier for yourself. One good way of taking notes is to annotate handouts.

If you miss class, please ask another student to share their notes with you and/or ask them what happened in class. Since we are in the middle of a pandemic and there is a good chance that some of you will need to self-isolate at some point during the semester, I want to encourage everyone to be generous about sharing notes. Think of this as a contribution you can make to keeping everyone safe.

Office Hours

I hold regular office hours. I encourage you to make use of these. No sign-up needed; just drop in. I especially encourage you to come to office hours if there is something you don't understand or if you are struggling in the course. The sooner you do, the better I will likely be able to help you. The default mode for office hours is in-person, but I would be happy to meet on Zoom. If you prefer Zoom, please email me, so I can set up a meeting.

Announcements and Email

I will regularly communicate course-related information to you using the 'Announcements' function in *Brightspace*. Please ensure that you read these announcements. You can configure your *Brightspace* page so that you get notified (by email or text) when a new announcement is posted. Occasionally, I will also email you. Emails will be sent to the address listed in UVic's system as your contact information. It is your responsibility to make sure that this information is current and to check this email address at least once a day. If you contact me via email, I will make every effort to respond in a timely manner, which generally will be within 48 hours (longer on weekends). To make sure your email does not end up in my spam folder, I encourage you to put the course number in the subject line (i.e. PHIL 309) and use your UVic email address. If you have a question about assignments, due dates, or other course policies, the syllabus should be your first resource. *I will not respond to any emails that ask questions which are answered in the syllabus.* Your second resource should be the discussion board, which is accessible through the course website. You are encouraged to use this feature to discuss questions about course mechanics as well as course content.

Student Conduct

The University of Victoria is committed to providing a respectful and productive learning environment. All members of our community, including students, have both the right to experience and the responsibility to help create such an environment. For details on the rights and responsibilities this involves please read through the [Trifaculty Standards of Professional Behaviour for Students](#). This document also contains links to applicable university policies. It is part of your responsibility as a student in this course to know your responsibilities as outlined in the code of professional behaviour (which covers, among other things, attendance and classroom behavior, online conduct in university learning systems, and academic integrity).

Intellectual property of materials on D2L Brightspace

Please note that all assignments for this course and all materials posted to the course's *Brightspace* site or distributed in class are the intellectual property of myself and the University of Victoria. Do not circulate this material or post it to note-sharing sites without my permission. Posting course materials to note-sharing sites or otherwise circulating course materials without the permission of your instructor violates the [Policy on Academic Integrity](#). Any evidence you are circulating materials without permission will be referred to the Chair of the Philosophy Department for investigation.

Academic Integrity (Plagiarism etc.)

Violations of academic integrity, such as plagiarism, cheating on exams etc., constitute breaches of university policy and carry serious penalties (e.g. failing the class, being put on disciplinary probation). Note that it is *your responsibility* to be aware of what constitutes plagiarism and other violations of academic integrity, and that *ignorance of this is not an acceptable excuse*. For information, please consult [UVic's Policy on Academic Integrity](#) or contact me. If you are interested in learning more about academic integrity, you can also self-enrol in the [Integrity Matters](#) course in Brightspace. Search for this course under the [Discover](#) tab on your Brightspace homepage.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Generative AI tools (such as ChatGPT or Dall-E) constitute sources just like books and articles. This means that, if you use such tools for completing assignments, you must acknowledge this just as you would other sources. For example, text generated using ChatGPT-3 should include a citation such as: "Chat-GPT-3.

(YYYY, MM, DD of query). “Text of your query.” Generated using OpenAI. <https://chat.openai.com/>”.

Using AI without proper acknowledgment constitutes a violation of academic integrity. Assignments in this course are designed to help you develop your understanding of complex philosophical material. Typical uses of generative AI do not do this (though there are exceptions). For this reason, I discourage you from using it. Exception: Some assignments may ask you to use AI in a particular way. If you do use AI tools (e.g. to help you get started on an assignment), you need to cite them (see above) and explain *how* you used them. For example, did you use ChatGPT just for outlining or are passages in your paper copied from it (and if so, which ones)?

You are responsible for what you submit. If an AI-generated text turns out to include mistakes, you are responsible for including these in your assignment.

Accessibility

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you anticipate or experience any barriers to learning in this course, please feel welcome to discuss your concerns with me. If you require academic accommodations you need to register with the Centre for Accessible Learning (<https://www.uvic.ca/services/cal>). Please do so as early as possible. You can find information about academic accommodations through the Centre for Accessible Learning’s website (<https://www.uvic.ca/services/cal/programs/academic/index.php>).

Significant Dates (<https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/dates/>)

- Sun, Jan 21: last day for 100% reduction of fees
- Wed, Jan 24: last day to for adding second-term courses
- Sun, Feb 11: last day for 50% reduction of tuition fees. 100% of tuition fees will be assessed for courses dropped after this date.
- Thu, Feb 29: last day for withdrawing from second-term courses without penalty of failure.

Grading Scheme

Percentage	Letter Grade	Grade Point	Grade Definition
90-100	A+	9	An A+, A, or A- is earned by work which is technically superior , shows mastery of the subject matter, and in the case of an A+ offers original insight and/or goes beyond course expectations. Normally achieved by a minority of students.
85-89	A	8	
80-84	A-	7	
77-79	B+	6	A B+, B, or B- is earned by work that indicates a good comprehension of the course material, a good command of the skills needed to work with the course material, and the student’s full engagement with the course requirements and activities. A B+ represents a more complex understanding and/or application of the course material. Normally achieved by the largest number of students.
73-76	B	5	
70-72	B-	4	
65-69	C+	3	A C+ or C is earned by work that indicates an adequate comprehension of the course material and the skills needed to work with the course material and that indicates the student has met the basic requirements for completing assigned work and/or participating in class activities
60-64	C	2	
50-59	D	1	A D is earned by work that indicates minimal command of the course materials and/or minimal participation in class activities that is worthy of course credit toward the degree.
0-49	F	0	F is earned by work which, after the completion of course requirements, is inadequate and unworthy of course credit towards the degree.

Interpretation of these grade definitions is at the discretion of the instructor. If you receive a grade that you believe is unfair, please begin by discussing the matter with the instructor (or TA) in a respectful,

open-minded manner. If you still believe the grade you received is unfair you can appeal the matter to the chair of the department.

For additional information regarding grades, please see pp. 51-53 of the most recent edition of the UVic Undergraduate Calendar.

All evaluations of tests and assignments will be calculated according to percentage scores. Letter grades and grade point scores are listed purely for reference.

Counselling Services

Your mental health is as important as your physical health. During the semester, you might feel overwhelmed, lonely, or stressed about your academic performance. You might experience a personal or family tragedy. The University provides free counselling services, and I encourage you to make use of these in this type of situation. (See www.uvic.ca/services/counselling/ for more information).

Course Experience Surveys (CES)

I value your feedback on this course. Towards the end of term, as in all other courses at UVic, you will have the opportunity to complete an anonymous survey regarding your learning experience (CES). The survey is vital to providing feedback to me regarding the course and my teaching, as well as to help the department improve the overall program for students in the future. The survey is accessed via MyPage and can be done on your laptop, tablet, or mobile device. I will remind you and provide you with more detailed information nearer the time but please be thinking about this important activity during the course.