

Early Modern Philosophy: On the Borders of Canonicity



Course Description

Much of the philosophy in the early modern period (c. 1500–1800) is an adjustment of the new Galilean science to theological and other pre-scientific commitments. There were particles and laws of nature, but only in ways allowed by proper conceptions of matter and causation; there was free will and agency, but only in ways allowed by a proper conception of God. The adjustment, of course, went both ways, and in particular, insights in science suggested and then guided revisions of belief in theology.

In teaching early modern philosophy, there has long prevailed a narrative of a triumphant succession of Great Men. As a result, a typical way to structure a course has been through the so-called “Big Seven” (typically René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, G. W. Leibniz, John Locke, George Berkeley, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant, though Thomas Hobbes and Nicholas Malebranche are also sometimes included). At the same time, however, many women and other marginalized philosophers were respected and influential in their own time, only to be later left out of the historical canon. This course introduces students to early modern philosophy by retaining a similar format but applying marginalized philosophers on the borders of the canon, thereby demonstrating that philosophy in the early modern era was not exclusively the domain of old white men.

Through the writings of figures such as **Teresa of Ávila, Marie de Gournay, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, Margaret Cavendish, Anne Conway, Émilie du Chatelet, Anton Wilhelm Amo, Phillis Wheatly, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Shepherd**, we examine the central questions of skepticism, feminism, race, causation, the nature and existence of the world and God, the arguments surrounding the debate between science and religion, the place of minds in a physical universe, the limits of human cognition, and free will and human responsibility in the context of deterministic science.

Learning Objectives

My teaching mission is to create a safe and supportive environment for the students to increase their knowledge and become better both as academics and as human beings. The course is planned to increase the students' knowledge on the major discussions and arguments in early modern philosophy, give them tools to approach different types of philosophical texts and genres, teach them to read texts written in early modern English, and allow them practice in dissecting philosophical arguments and the writer's hidden assumptions.

Upon completing the course, the student is familiar with the central philosophical questions and approaches through their most important historical formulations. The main objective is epistemic: after completing the course, the student has an overview of the major classical questions and methods of philosophy. They understand the history of philosophy through questions concerning being, knowledge, and truth, as well as goodness, justice, and beauty. A student who has completed the course is familiar with different philosophical approaches and textual genres and is able to evaluate them. They understand the significance of original texts in philosophy and the specific challenges related to their use. The student also understands that studying the history of philosophy is itself a way of practicing philosophy, not merely an exercise in historical research

In a course like this, there are always planning constraints. What texts to include, what to leave out, what figures and topics to discuss, and so on. As this course aims to concentrate on the borders of the typical canon, none of the typical early modern "classic" texts are included in the mandatory readings (but they can be found in the optional extra readings). This approach has likewise affected the philosophical topics discussed. Despite this, efforts have been made to create a chronologically coherent narrative from 1500's to early 1800's. At the end of the course, there will be a discussion on what was left out and why.

Particular individuals who deserve a special mention in influencing my teaching style and approach to the course include **Jani Hakkarainen, David Cuning, John Carriero, Leonard Finkelman, Bennet McNulty, Dwight K. Lewis**, the students in my History of Skepticism and Early Modern Philosophy: Freedom of the Will classes at Tampere University, and the students in my Seventeenth-Century philosophy class at the University of Iowa in Spring 2024.

Materials

Classic texts and research papers.

Schedule

Week 1. Introduction I

- a) Lecture: Introduction to the Course
- b) Lecture: Introduction to Early Modern Philosophy I

No reading!

Week 2. Introduction II

- a) Lecture: Introduction to Early Modern Philosophy II
- b) Seminar: Initial Discussion

No reading!

Week 3. Medieval and Renaissance Background

- a) Lecture: The Woman Question
- b) Seminar: Christina de Pizan

Reading: *Book of the City of the Ladies* (1405)

Optional: Henricus Cornelius Agrippa: *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex* (1529)

Lucrezia Marinella: *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men* (1600)

Week 4. Second Scholasticism

Jan Forsman, PhD

- a) Lecture: Baroque Scholasticism and Spanish Mysticism
- b) Seminar: Teresa of Ávila

Reading: *Interior Castle* (1588)

Optional: John of the Cross: *Dark Night of the Soul* (1570's)

Optional: Ignatius de Loyola: *Spiritual Exercices* (1520's)

Week 5. Skepticism

- a) Lecture: Skepticism and the beginnings of New Science
- b) Seminar: Marie de Gournay

Reading: *Equality of Men and Women* (1622)

Optional: Michel de Montaigne: *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (1580 ed. by Gournay)

Optional: René Descartes: *Discourse on the Method* (1637) and *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meds. I & II (1641–1642)

Optional: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: *First Dream* (1693)

Week 6. Scientific Revolution I

- a) Lecture: New Science – Minds and Bodies
- b) Seminar: René Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia

Reading: *Correspondence between René Descartes and Princess Elisabeth* (1640's)

Optional: René Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Med. VI (1641–1642)

Optional: Francois Poullain de la Barre: *On the Equality of the Two Sexes* (1673)

Optional: Anton Wilhelm Amo: *Impassivity of the Human Mind* (1734)

Week 7. Scientific Revolution II

- a) Lecture: New Science – Natural Philosophy
- b) Seminar: Margaret Cavendish

Reading: *Poems & Fancies* (1653) and *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668) [or a research article]

Optional: Thomas Hobbes: *De Corpore* (1655)

Optional: Galileo Galilei: *The Assayer* (1623) and *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* (1632)

Week 8. Scientific Revolution III

- a) Lecture: New Science – Experimental Philosophy
- b) Seminar: Margaret Cavendish

Reading: Margaret Cavendish: *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) and *The Blazing World* (1666)

Optional: Robert Hooke: *Micrographia* (1665)

Optional: Francis Bacon: *Novum Organum* (1620)

Week 9. Theology

- a) Lecture: God and Nature
- b) Seminar: Anne Conway

Reading: *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (1690)

Optional: Baruch Spinoza: *Ethics* (1677)

Optional: David Hume: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779)

Week 10. Freedom

- a) Lecture: Determinism and Freedom of the Will
- b) Seminar: Émilie Du Châtelet

Reading: *On Freedom* (c. 1737) [or a research article]

Optional: Gottfried Leibniz: *Theodicy* (1710)

Optional: René Descartes: *Principles of Philosophy* (1644)

Optional: Christian Wolff: *German Metaphysics* (1719)

Optional: Joachim Lange: *A Modest and Detailed Disclosure* (1724)

Week 11. Space and Time

- a) Lecture: Space and Time in Early Modern Physics
- b) Seminar: Émilie Du Châtelet

Reading: *Foundations of Physics* (1741) [or a research article]

Optional: *Correspondence between Gottfried Leibniz and Samuel Clarke* (1710's)

Optional: Isaac Newton: *Principia* (1687)

Week 12. Race

a) Lecture: Race and Slavery in the Early Modern Period

b) Seminar: Anton Wilhelm Amo and Phillis Wheatley

Reading: *Impassivity of the Human Mind* (1734) and *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773)

Optional: Immanuel Kant: *Of the Different Races of Man* (1775)

Optional: Jean-Jacque Rousseau: *The Social Contract* (1762)

Week 13. Feminism

a) Lecture: Women's Rights and Education

b) Seminar: Mary Wollstonecraft

Reading: *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

Optional: Mary Astell: *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694)

Optional: Anna Maria van Schurman: *The Learned Maid* (1641)

Optional: Margaret Cavendish: *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668)

Week 14. Causation

a) Causation and Necessity

b) Seminar: Mary Shepherd

Reading: *Essays on the Relation of Cause and Effect* (1824)

Optional: David Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1741)

Optional: Thomas Brown: *Inquiry into the Relation of Cause and Effect* (1818)

Week 15. Conclusion

a) Lecture: Conclusion to the Course: What was included, what was left out?

b) Seminar: Final discussion

No Reading!

Assignment

Final course grades will be assessed based on your performance in the following activities:

Class participation and attendance (10%): Regular and prompt attendance is not mandatory but is highly recommended. Since a substantial percentage of your grade will be based on class attendance and participation in discussion it is in your interest to attend every class and to arrive with significant contributions to the discussions. Participation in this class includes being prepared to join the discussion and give oral responses to questions on textual and visual materials.

Class presentation (30%): Each student will present part of the original reading material during the class (either on their own or as a group), while the ones who are not presenting offer criticism and feedback. For extra credit, a student can present on more than one topic.

A traditional essay (40%): Each student will prepare a short (about 4-5 pages) essay based on (at least) one of the discussed philosophical works that the student did NOT present on. You will receive written feedback from the instructor on the essay.

An experiment in an unconventional philosophical genre (20%): During the course, we will read several texts in a variation of genres and writing styles (treatises, meditational exercises, essays, correspondence, dialogues, poems, plays...). Here is your chance to try out one of these philosophical text genres. No page limit but you are expected to choose one genre, stick to it, and put effort into the execution. Go wild!