

Early Modern Philosophy

Instructor: Andrew Werner

Time: Tues/Th 2:30-3:50pm

Location: SMUD 204

Office: 307 Cooper House

Office Hours: Wednesday 10am-12pm

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Course Description

Descartes inaugurated a new tradition in philosophy that was dominant in the West from the mid-1600s until the late 1700s. The key effort of this tradition consisted in a willingness to examine anew, from the ground up, the nature of our capacity to know the world. How do I know that water freezes below a certain temperature? Do I know that because I have seen various samples of water freeze at a certain temperature on a number of occasions? (That is, do I know it by perception?) But what would justify me in inferring from the times I have seen water freeze at that temperature that it is always or even usually the case that water freezes at that temperature? Surely I need something more than simple perception. Perhaps I can know this rationally, by deducing it from more general principles or by achieving some other kind of rational insight into the nature of the world? (This is, do I know that water freezes by reason?) And before we even ask how we can know that water freezes, maybe we should ask a prior question: what does my claim that water freezes even mean, and how do I get the ideas of water and freezing? And how do I know that my ideas of these things actually correspond to anything in the world?

In this course, we will pursue these and related questions by reading several of the most important figures in the tradition inaugurated by Descartes. As a result of taking this course, you will have a much better appreciation of the fundamental sources of and limitations on our capacity to know the world. You will gain familiarity with a tradition of thought that is absolutely indispensable for understanding later developments in European thought. And you will have the opportunity to develop your interpretive skills by reading and writing about difficult philosophical texts.

Requirements

Academic Honesty

Please read the Statement of Intellectual Responsibility, as well as the other information contained in 'Academic Honesty and Plagiarism' on the Dean of Students website <www.amherst.edu/campuslife/deanstudents/acadhonesty>. If you have any questions about what constitutes academic honesty or dishonesty, come speak to me about them. ("But I didn't know that was plagiarism" will not serve as an excuse.)

You are not expected to consult any sources other than those assigned. If you do so for an assignment, you must credit that source (a footnote stating what the source is and what you have gained from it will suffice).

Deadlines

Some students will encounter personal crises, family emergencies, and other struggles throughout the semester. I am committed to doing what I can to see to it that those students' performance is

not adversely affected by these external factors. If you find that you are unable to complete an assignment by the deadline because of some crisis or emergency, do contact me and let me know what is going on. This is crucial, for I can only help you if I know what is going on. And it is just as crucial that you contact me *on or before* the deadline, for, once the deadline has passed, there is much less I can do to help. Do not assume, without contacting me, that you may turn an assignment in late.

Short Writing Assignments

Before each class, you will be expected to post a comment on the Moodle about the reading. The comments should be between 250-500 words. Your comment can take one of two forms: it can initiate a new topic, or it can respond to a comment posted by another student.

For initiating a topic, you may do any of the following: attempt an interpretation of a passage from the reading in your own words; ask a question of clarification about something in the reading; draw a connection between two issues in the text that you find illuminating; pose an objection to something in the reading; etc.. The only requirement is that it be a thoughtful engagement with the reading; to that end, each initiated topic must refer to some passage in the reading.

A response to another comment should be thought of as engaging in a respectful conversation, with the aim being to deepen our collective understanding of the topic. This might mean asking a question of clarification about the original thread; it might mean offering an alternative interpretation, or raising a question about the interpretation offered; it might mean posing an objection, or noting a different connection.

Your posts are due by midnight before the following class (e.g., for the Tuesday class at 11:30, your response is due eleven and a half hours prior). You are expected to read through the posts from the other students before class.

At the end of every two weeks, I will give you individual feedback and a grade on your posts during those two weeks.

Note on Reading: we will develop strategies for reading philosophical texts together over the course of the semester. To start with, though, I will provide you with reading questions to facilitate your engagement with the text. I **strongly encourage** you to write out the answers to these questions as you read, to look back over them after you have finished reading, and then to bring them to class. (In fact, if you would like, you may turn in your answers; I will happily read them and give you feedback on them.) You should expect the reading to progress slowly, and should plan how much time it will require accordingly.

Essays

In addition to the short written assignments, you will be expected to write two 1250 word essays. For each paper, you will turn in a first draft (which should be at least 1000 words in length); you will receive full credit for this draft if you turn it in on time and demonstrate that you put in good faith

effort on it. I will give you extensive feedback on the draft, and you will then be responsible for revising it and resubmitting it.

Before your first paper draft is due, we will discuss the expectations for the papers and also discuss together an example paper.

Class Participation and Group Presentation

A major component of your grade will be your class participation. This will in part consist in a group presentation (15%), and it will in part consist in your contributions to the class (15%). The details of the group presentation can be found below the schedule for the readings.

Electronic devices

Use of electronic devices is not permitted during class time. Again, this is the result of our shared moral obligation to treat the classroom as an environment where we hold each other accountable for learning. You need only bring your printed text and a notepad.

Office hours

I will hold weekly office hours and I encourage you to stop by. Office hours are an invaluable opportunity for you to work through some question, concern, thought with me in a way that is maximally tailored not only to that question, concern or thought but also to your individual understanding. They are also an invaluable opportunity for me to get to know more about how class is going, and to alter my teaching accordingly. If you cannot make my normal office hours, or would like to meet more often than they permit, email me – I'm happy, even eager, to arrange meetings outside of my regularly appointed times.

To facilitate your engagement with office hours and with the course more generally, everyone will be **required** to sign up for one 30 minute office hour sometime during the first or second week (the sign-up sheet will be handed around in the first class, and posted on Moodle). The point of this meeting is twofold: first, to give me a chance to get to know you; second, to prompt you to articulate, for yourself and for me, what you want to achieve by taking this course. This will not only help you direct your participation more effectively throughout the semester; it will also help me design the class to more effectively help you achieve your goals.

Disability Statement

This course is open to all students who meet the academic requirements for participation. Any student who has a need for accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact Charri Boykin-East, Senior Associate Dean of Students, at cjboykineast@amherst.edu or in Converse Hall 105. Only those students with a documented disability can arrange for

accommodations, and it is the student's responsibility to inform the professor of those accommodations once Dean Boykin-East has documented a disability. For more info, see: www.amherst.edu/campuslife/deanstudents/disability.

Grading

Participation: 30%

Short Writing Assignments: 15%

Essay Drafts (2, 2.5% each): 5%

Revised Essays (2, 25% each): 50%

Reading Schedule

You are required to purchase Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* ISBN-13: 978-0-87720-192-7. This edition (from Hackett Publishing) is the only acceptable edition; it should be available at Amherst Books.

All other texts will be made available *via* Moodle. Also, this reading schedule is provisional: we may speed up, slow down, skip readings, or add readings, depending on where our discussion leads and the interests of members of the class.

1/29: Introduction

1/31: Descartes, *Meditations* 1 and 2

2/5: Descartes, *Meditations* 3 and 4

2/7: Descartes, *Meditations* 5 and 6

2/12: Elisabeth and Descartes, Letters

2/14: Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, through Proposition 14

2/19: Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, through the end

2/21: Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, through Proposition 13

2/26: Conway, *Principles*, Bks VI-VIII

2/28: Locke, *Essay*, Epistle to the Reader, Book I i-ii, and Book II i-vii

3/5: Locke, *Essay*, Book II xii, xvii, xxii-xxiii

3/7: Leibniz, *New Essays*, Preface 44-53; Book I 74-81; Book II 148-50

SPRING BREAK

3/26: Leibniz, "Primary Truths"

3/28: Leibniz, *Monadology*

4/2: du Chatelet, *Foundations*, Chapter 1 §§1-12

4/4: Hume, *Enquiry*, §§I-III

4/9: A Visit to the Mead Art Museum

4/11: Hume, *Enquiry*, §§IV-V

4/16: Hume, *Enquiry*, §§VI-VII

4/18: Hume, *Enquiry*, §§VI-VII continued

4/23: Kant, *Critique*, A Preface Avii-Axiv, B Preface, Bvii-Bxxxvii

4/25: Kant, *Critique*, Introduction B1-B24

4/30: Kant, *Critique*, Transcendental Aesthetic B33-B45, B59-B66

5/2: Kant, *Critique*, Transcendental Aesthetic, B33-B45, B59-B66 continued

Group Presentation Guidelines

Each person is required to join a group of four to five students. As a group, you will be responsible for presenting in class on a reading.

What you need to do **before** the class presentation

- At least one week prior to your presentation, you are expected to have a meeting as a group with me to discuss your plans for the presentation. I expect you to have read the material that you will be presenting on prior to meeting with me. It would be useful, but is not required, that you have formulated a provisional plan for the presentation with one another.
- By the end of the day of the class prior to the one in which you will be presenting, you are expected to submit a set of readings questions (between 3-6 questions) to me, and I will post them on Moodle. These reading questions should focus our attention on the topics you will be discussing in your presentation.
- Two days prior to your presentation, you are expected to send me a handout that you will be using for your presentation. I will provide you with feedback on the handout, and you are expected to change the handout in light of my feedback.

Guidelines for what the presentation itself should look like:

- As a group, you are **not expected to summarize** the reading or to discuss even the majority of the topics covered in the reading. As a group, you **are expected to focus on one or two topics** within the reading that you find interesting and philosophically significant.
- As a group, you are expected to focus on particular passages from the text, to present one or more interpretations of those passages, and to assess or evaluate the view you are attributing to the text. You may note unanswered questions about the meaning of the passage(s), formulate objections to the passage(s), relate the view expressed in the passage(s) to everyday examples, relate the view expressed in the passage(s) to the views of other authors, etc. (Think of the sorts of things people generally do in Moodle posts.)
- Each person in the group should present for around 2 minutes to the whole class, and field at least one question in the large class setting.
- The group should raise some topic/question for discussion in smaller groups. The group will then divide themselves into the different small groups, and take the lead in facilitating discussion in that small group. "Taking the lead" means encouraging everyone in the small group to speak up, making sure the group stays on topic, and highlighting/writing down any progress the group makes in discussing the topic/question. It does **not** mean speaking a lot.

What you need to do **after** the presentation

- Each member of the group will be expected to write up individually what happened in their small groups, in a way which is aimed at clarifying the progress that has been made in the small group. You will each then post your write ups on Moodle.