

HISTORY OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY

Course Description

Virtually all 20th century intellectual movements—including liberalism, socialism, existentialism, atheism, feminism as well as the philosophical bases of democratic government—lay deep roots in the philosophy of the so-called “modern period,” a rough historical designation stretching from the beginning of the 17th to the end of the 18th century. This course is aimed at introducing students to the epistemological and ethical questions that consumed Western philosophy at the onset of Western modernity. Our discussion of key-texts by Descartes, Pascal, Spinoza, Hume, and Kant will focus on the workings and outer reaches of human knowledge, the existence of God, the possibility and impossibility of free will, the nature of democracy, and finally, the promise of world peace.

We shall clarify how the modern period is dominated by a fundamental antagonism of approaches regarding the nature of knowledge: Continental European rationalism on the one hand, which we shall explore by examining the core positions put forth by Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant, and British empiricism on the other, which we shall encounter in Hume’s texts. We shall also explore the work of French mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal, who offers a spiritualist alternative to rationalism and empiricism.

After looking at the main cultural changes opened up by the Renaissance, our effort will focus on each philosopher’s body of thought as well as on the impact that philosophical innovations have had on pressing political and religious struggles. Along the way, we shall highlight the crucial role of these thinkers in fashioning the new worldview of the Enlightenment.

Texts¹

R. Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, Hackett

Spinoza, *Ethics*, Hackett

Pascal, *Pensées*, Penguin

Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett

Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hackett

Kant, *Groundings for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Hackett

Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, Hackett

Course Requirements²

Listed below are the reading and viewing assignments for the course. Each one of them should be prepared thoroughly before class. Should you miss a class for a justified reason, I expect you to get notes from a classmate and complete the reading assignment for that day. Philosophy is a demanding discipline and this is a demanding class (☺), which will need your full dedication. There will be 3 short written assignments stemming from the films we are going to view alongside specific philosophical theories, a take-home exam, and a final paper on a subject of your own choice. All your written work has to be double-spaced, and submitted by Blackboard, in a “.doc” format, as well as in hard copy at the Philosophy Department’s office (Rocky 209). On every one of your essays, I expect to find a header with your name, the class in which you are enrolled, the type of assignment (separately from the specific title will choose for it), and page numbers. Failure to include any of this information will result in a grade reduction. Late papers will also result in a grade penalty. Extensions may be asked and obtained only long in advance for medical or family reasons.

¹ All the films we will be using for this class are available on reserve. However, I encourage you to attend the class viewings planned for each of them at the times, places, and days listed in the section “Lectures and Readings” of this syllabus.

² Academic accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Please, schedule an appointment with the Instructor early in the semester to discuss any accommodations that may be needed for the course. All accommodations must be approved through the Office of Disability and Support Services (ext. 7584) as indicated in the accommodation letter.

Lectures and Readings

January	24 Introduction
	29 Descartes, <i>Meditations on a First Philosophy</i> I “Concerning Those Things That Can Be Called Into Doubt” II “Concerning the Nature of the Human Mind”
	31 Descartes, <i>Meditations on a First Philosophy</i> III “Concerning God, That He Exists”
February	5 Descartes, <i>Meditations on a First Philosophy</i> V “Concerning the Essence of Material Things” Assignment on Descartes and <i>The Matrix</i> Available on Blackboard
	7 Descartes continued Butler, “How Can I Deny that this Body and these Hands Are Mine?” (Blackboard) 6:30 PM Viewing of <i>The Matrix</i> , Rockefeller 212
	12 Class Discussion: Descartes and <i>The Matrix</i>
	13 Assignment on Descartes and <i>The Matrix</i> Due at 5 PM, BOTH on Blackboard and in the Philosophy Dept. Office (Rockefeller 209)
	14 Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> Part I, “Concerning God” Propositions 1-8, 11, 14-19, 33
19 Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i>	

	Part II, "On the Nature and Origin of the Mind" Propositions 12-13, 34-35, 40, 42, 47-49
	21 Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> Part III, "Concerning the Origin and Nature of the Emotions," Propositions, 1-10 Don Garrett, "Spinoza's Ethical Theory" (Blackboard), Recommended
	26 Spinoza continued Assignment on Spinoza and <i>Fight Club</i> Available on Blackboard
	27 Viewing of <i>Fight Club</i> , Rocky 212, 6:30 PM
	28 Class Discussion: Spinoza, Determinism, and <i>Fight Club</i>
March	3 Assignment on Spinoza and Fight Club Due at 5 PM BOTH on Blackboard and in the Philosophy Dept. Office (Rockefeller 209)
	4 Pascal, <i>Pensées</i> Section 1, Paragraphs I-X
	6 Pascal, <i>Pensées</i> Section 1, Paragraphs XIII, XVII-XXVII
	8-23 Spring Break
	25 Pascal, <i>Pensées</i> Section 2, Paragraphs II-III, XX-XXII, XXX-XXXI Assignment on Spinoza and <i>The Seventh Seal</i> Available

	on Blackboard
	26 Viewing of <i>The Seventh Seal</i> , Rocky 212, 6:30 PM
	27 Class Discussion: Pascal and <i>The Seventh Seal</i>
	31 Assignment on Pascal and <i>The Seventh Seal</i> Due by 5 PM BOTH on Blackboard and in the Philosophy Dept. Office (Rockefeller 209)
April	1 Hume, <i>An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i> Section II-III, IV, V
	3 Hume, <i>An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i> Section VI, VII, VIII
	8 Hume, <i>An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals</i> Section I, II Take-Home Exam Available on Blackboard
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	15 Hume, <i>An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals</i> Section III, IV
	16 Viewing of <i>Crimes and Misdemeanors</i> , Rocky 212, 6:30
	17 Kant, <i>Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals</i> Second Section Third First Section

22 Class Discussion on Hume, Kant, and Crimes and Misdemeanors

23 **Take Home Due at 5 PM BOTH on Blackboard and in The Philosophy Dept. Office (Rockefeller 209)**

24 Kant, Hume and the Project of Enlightenment: Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*

29 Kant, “Perpetual Peace” in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*

1 *Charter of the United Nations*
Introductory Note, Preamble, Chapters I-IV, Blackboard
Carl J. Friedrich, “The Ideology of the United Nations Charter and the Philosophy of Peace of Immanuel Kant 1795-1945,” Blackboard

6 Kant and the Normative Foundations of International Law
Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Blackboard
Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court
Preamble, Articles 1-8, Blackboard

9 **Final Paper Due at 5 PM BOTH on Blackboard and in the Philosophy Dept. Office (Rockefeller 209)**