

MODERN PHILOSOPHY

SPRING SEMESTER 2023-2024

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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Office Hours: MWF 12:00-1:00 @ LBR 1309

Course Description

“Modern” Philosophy covers the period from roughly 1600–1800 so it isn’t really “modern” in the way we normally talk about modern architecture, modern science, or modern design, etc. But it is “modern” in that it laid the foundation for the modern world we live in, with all its triumphs and benefits and frustrations and catastrophes. We wouldn’t have modern architecture if it weren’t for modern philosophy.

A good case can be made that many of us carry the residue of ideas that became common during this era: e.g., that knowledge requires certainty, or that things will always work out for the best, or that our minds are blank slates, or that if God does exist then he hasn’t shown up for work in a long time. If these are your ideas, or if you find them tempting, or if you know people who believe them, then it’s interesting to see where, how, and why they arose.

A good case can also be made that much modern philosophy is just astoundingly and obviously wrong because philosophers couldn’t help themselves. They tried to construct theories of everything without a clear idea of what “everything” was. They latched on to one good idea, pushed it as far as it could go, and then kept pushing. Aware that the world and our understanding of it was changing dramatically, they pressed the accelerator. *Of course* they did: in many cases they were not passive observers of revolutions in science, math, and politics but active participants. The world was changing *because* they were changing it.

So why should we bother reading a bunch of philosophers who were wrong about so much? One reason is that they were sometimes wrong in really interesting ways, ways that pushed the conversation forward. Despite their mistakes they took us to new places, and we can learn a lot and benefit from their mistakes. (Like this: if it weren’t for The Velvet Underground there wouldn’t be R.E.M.)

Another reason is that, just often enough, they got something very important very right. Sometimes what they got right now seems so obvious that we take it for granted: for example, Locke's argument in favor of a social contract over absolute monarchy. It's good to remind ourselves of the reasons for the nice things we take for granted. That way we won't be caught flatfooted the next time they come under attack.

Bottom line: our goal is to better understand both the mistakes *and* the triumphs of modern philosophy. This way we can better understand our own commitments, why and whether we should care about the things we do, and how we might do better.

Finally, because this class isn't merely a nostalgia-trip through the 18th century, we'll periodically come up for air and read contemporary philosophy. I've chosen Seana Shiffrin's recent-ish Tanner Lectures *Democratic Law* because it's grounded in modern ideas but also examines a timely set of questions: namely, why we need to obey laws and foster democratic attitudes. We'll take a close look at her arguments and consider where earlier philosophers would have agreed or disagreed with her answers.

Texts

Our readings are a mix of several historical texts plus one contemporary book. Some of the historical texts were written in English (and may sound antiquated); some were written in other languages (mostly Latin or German). So here's the plan:

1. The contemporary book is Seana Shiffrin's *Democratic Law* (Oxford University Press, 2021). You can buy this wherever books are sold.
2. For the historical texts originally written in English I've ordered inexpensive versions published by Hackett Publishing Company. Please get *these* versions: in some cases the texts are abridged or edited, so you don't want to get stuck reading more than you need. These books are:

Margaret Cavendish: *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy—Abridged, with Related Texts* (ISBN 9781624665141)

David Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (ISBN 9780872202290)

David Hume: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (ISBN 9780872204027)

John Locke: *Second Treatise of Government* (ISBN 9780915144860)

John Troyer, ed.: *The Classical Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill* (ISBN 9780872206496)

3. For the historical texts that were not originally written in English I've made the audacious decision to use the versions found on the Early Modern Texts website (www.earlymoderntexts.com). The audacity is due to these being more than translations: they have also been *intensively* edited for accessibility. (They work fine for class but you shouldn't rely on them for scholarly purposes.) This is where you'll find the readings by Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Kant.

4. Unfortunately, the Early Modern Texts website does not include a version of Kant's *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*. You'll find those readings on myCourses.

Expectations

Discussion-Oriented

1. Philosophy is a group activity that depends on conversation and discussion. We can't tell if we're covering all our bases if we're not checking in with each other. For this reason my classes are normally discussion-intensive. In order for this class to function well I need to be confident that everyone's doing the reading: no free-riding, please. I don't expect everyone (or, in some cases, anyone, myself included) to fully understand the reading: that's what class and our discussions are for. But I do expect everyone to make a good faith effort to do the reading, get at least some idea of what it's about, and come up with a couple questions or interesting points to share. I expect regular attendance (though please don't come to class if you're feeling unwell!) and I will do everything possible so that everyone feels comfortable participating in our conversations.

For the most part I plan to talk/lecture for 10-15 minutes at the start of each class. After that I will open the class up for questions and comments and, I hope, conversation and discussion.

2. I may also periodically assign short in-class writing assignments: these will be factored into the attendance and participation grade. I normally only resort to these when I lose confidence that we're doing the reading, or when overall attendance is suffering. So please do the reading and come to class. That's the path of least resistance.

Attendance and participation are worth 15% of your final grade.

In-class Exams

3. There will be 3 in-class exams, each covering roughly 5 weeks of class. These exams will consist of short essays where you respond to and assess central passages from our readings.

The third exam is scheduled for May 1 which is during the Final Exam period. For this exam you may substitute a final paper. I will provide more information about this option as we get closer to the end of the semester.

The three in-class exams will be worth 45% of your final grade.

Pointed Questions

4. To help us be in semi-regular contact I'm asking everyone to hand in **seven** typed questions, each one directed at a particular day's reading. You can distribute these across the semester however you wish, though one every two weeks or so is probably a good idea. These questions can take lots of different forms: it might be a request for clarification or it might reflect profound misgivings with a reading or it might be something in between. It should be specific and pointed, and not vague, and referring to a specific passage always helps. It should reflect some real thought about the day's reading. Even though these are primarily questions, you should feel free to offer an answer, if you wish. A few sentences, maybe half a typed page, is probably enough.

You can hand these in to me right after class—and you should feel free to raise your question *in* class.

These questions will be worth 20% of your final grade.

Class Summary

5. I think it's important that after every class we have a sense of what we discussed and what conclusions, if any, we reached. (Class is often like a meeting: we want to know what was decided and what we need to do next.) For this reason I'm asking everyone to summarize one class meeting in a 1-2 page document that can be shared with everyone before the next class meeting. I'll do a few of these at the beginning of the semester so you can see what I have in mind but here are some guidelines:

a. Avoid bullet points. Bullet points tend to be unrelated and don't reveal the *connections* between different ideas or the *reasons* for holding them. It's more effective to write in paragraphs so you can tell the story of how we ended up where we are and why we might be one place rather than another. There should be an arc or a trajectory to your summary.

b. Show discretion. You should *not* repeat everything that was said. Just like good meeting notes, you want to identify the main points, the decisions, and the action-items.

c. Don't worry if things are still amorphous and uncertain at the end of class. If they are then point this out: these are things we need to keep our eyes on moving forward. This is philosophy, not a romantic comedy, and so we shouldn't necessarily expect tidy resolutions.

d. In the end, these summaries will be a record of the semester: a day-by-day overview of what we discussed, the insights we gained, the issues we took up. What are the main points you think will still be relevant next week, next month, or next year? What sort of record do you want to have of this semester?

Please e-mail these to me within 24 hours. That way I can review them before distributing to the class.

The summary is worth 20% of the final grade.

General Policies and Additional Information

6. I think philosophy in general is really wonderful and important so I'm always eager to talk about our class. Feel free to drop by office hours or speak to me after class. I've found it's usually a lot more efficient to talk in person than over e-mail.

And I'll be honest: I have some very mixed feelings about the philosophers in this course. Some are guilty pleasures, some are wrong about nearly everything, some are probably right but I refuse to admit it, and some are so toxic I need to wear lead gloves and a welding helmet while reading them. If you're having these reactions then let's talk.

7. In the interest of good communication please ask if you ever have a question about where you stand grade-wise. While I expect you can keep track of this, too, I'm happy to give you an up-to-date calculation. myCourses sometimes calculates grades in strange and alarming ways, so I can give you a more accurate picture if you need it.

Readings and Assignments

01.17.24	Overview and Introductory Remarks
01.19.24	Adam Kirsch: "Are We Really So Modern?" (from <i>The New Yorker</i> 8/29/16; also on myCourses)
01.22.24	Joshua Rothman: "What Are the Odds We Are Living in a Computer Simulation?" (from <i>The New Yorker</i> 6/9/16; also on myCourses) Descartes: <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> , Meditation 1
01.24.24	Descartes: <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> , Meditation 2
01.26.24	Descartes: <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> , Meditations 3 & 4
01.29.24	Descartes: <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> , Meditations 5 & 6
01.31.24	Descartes: <i>Objections and Replies</i> , pp. 25-29 (start with "Two Challenges..."), 34-41 (start with right hand column [RHC]), 75 (RHC) "Letter to Mersenne" January 28, 1641
02.02.24	Seana Shiffrin: <i>Democratic Law</i> , pp. 17-38
02.05.24	Spinoza: <i>Ethics</i> Part I: Definitions, Axioms, Propositions 1-15
02.07.24	Spinoza: <i>Ethics</i> Part I: Propositions 16-36 + Appendix
02.09.24	Spinoza: <i>Treatise on Theology and Politics</i> , Chapter 20 <i>Political Treatise</i> , Chapter 11
02.12.24	Seana Shiffrin: <i>Democratic Law</i> , pp. 38-60
02.14.24	Cavendish: <i>Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy</i> , Chs. 1-3, 21, 31
02.16.24	Cavendish: <i>Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy</i> , Chs. 35-36
02.19.24	Cavendish: <i>Further Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy</i> , Chs. 2, 3, 5, 7, 10, 11, 13-15
02.21.24	Exam #1 (in-class)
02.23.24	Leibniz: <i>Discourse on Metaphysics</i> , Propositions 1-9
02.26.24	Leibniz: <i>Monadology</i>
02.28.24	Locke: <i>Second Treatise of Government</i> Chapters 1-5
03.01.24	Locke: <i>Second Treatise of Government</i> Chapters 7-10
03.04.24	Locke: <i>Second Treatise of Government</i> Chapters 11-12, 18-19
03.06.24	Shiffrin: <i>Democratic Law</i> , pp. 61-89
03.08.24	Hume: <i>An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i> , §§ 1-3
03.11.24- 03.15.25	Spring Break

- 03.18.24 Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, §§ 4-6
- 03.20.24 Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, §§ 8 11-12
- 03.22.24 Seana Shiffrin: *Democratic Law*, pp. 90-130 (skip footnotes)
- 03.25.24 Hume: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Parts 1-4
- 03.27.24 Hume: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Parts 5-9, 9-12
- 03.29.24 Hume: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Parts 10-12
- 04.01.24 Kant: *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic*, Introduction + §§1-5
- 04.03.24 Kant: *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic*, §§ 6-11, 14-23
- 04.05.24 Kant: *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic*, §§ 27-32, 36, 39-40
- 04.08.24 **Exam #2 (in-class)**
- 04.10.24 Kant: *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic* §§ 43, 46-48, 53, 57
- 04.12.24 Kant: *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, pp. 7-30
- 04.15.24 Kant: *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, pp. 113-128, 146-150, 161-163
- 04.17.24 Bentham: *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Chapters 1-2, 4, 8
- 04.19.24 Bentham: *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Chapters 13-15
- 04.22.24 Bentham: *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Chapter 17
 "Bentham on 'The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number' "
 "Bentham on 'Push-pin versus Poetry' "
- 04.24.24 Niko Kolodny: "Democratic Law as Medium and Message"
 Anna Stilz, "Communication Through Law?"
 Both in: Shiffrin: *Democratic Law*, pp. 133-146, 165-179
- 04.26.24 Seana Shiffrin: *Democratic Law*, pp. 180-203
- 04.29.24 Seana Shiffrin: *Democratic Law*, pp. 203-223
- 05.01.24 **Exam #3 or Final Paper Due**