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<http://goclenius.net/ph349-2011s/>
 Office hours: TBA (110 Wilson)

History of philosophy: Descartes to Kant

Description

Modern philosophy begins in the early 1600s with the generation that includes Hobbes, Gassendi, and Descartes, and ends with the pivotal work of Kant, who is also regarded as the first “nineteen-century” philosopher even though he died in 1804. Historical periods are to some degree matters of convenience; what matters is to understand how and why changes occur, especially in those epochs of rapid change that come to be thought of as “revolutions”.

One revolution occurred in the first half of the seventeenth century, when the natural philosophy of Aristotle receded in the face of the “new science” of Galileo and Descartes, and when theistically-grounded ethical systems began to give way to “secularized” systems. Another occurred with Kant’s critiques and the welter of responses to them in the last twenty years of the 18th century. Less radical but significant was the change in conceptions of knowledge initiated by Locke’s *Essay on human understanding* (1690), whose influence we will see in Hume’s *Treatise*.

The aim of this course is to read some of the more important and characteristic texts of the period, in order to understand, at least in general terms, how modern philosophy came about and how it developed from 1600 to 1800; and also to work through arguments on basic philosophical questions.

Requirements

Doing philosophy is mostly a matter of talking and writing (which includes *active* reading). This

is a lecture course, but there should be ample opportunity for questions and discussion.

As for writing, the requirement is to write **four** papers on topics chosen from lists I will hand out. The first paper will be 4 pages (1000 words), the next three 5 pages (1200–1300 words), and the last, 7 pages (1500 words) in length. I won’t be picky about the word count unless it is markedly low or high. A style guide and tips on writing philosophy papers will be handed out with the first topics.



Francis Bacon (from Spedding & Ellis, ed. *Works* v.1, frontispiece)

Readings

NB. The Descartes readings are in the Cottingham volumes of the *Philosophical writings*; the Spinoza readings are in *The essential Spinoza*.

4 Sep	Introduction
6 Sep	Bacon; Descartes, <i>Med. 1</i>
11 Sep	Descartes, <i>Med. 2</i>
13 Sep	Descartes, <i>Med. 3</i>
18 Sep	Descartes, <i>Med. 3</i> , selections from the <i>Objections and replies</i>
20 Sep	Descartes, <i>Med. 4</i> , <i>Principles</i> bk1
25 Sep	TBA
27 Sep	TBA
2 Oct	Descartes, <i>Med. 6</i> , <i>Principles</i> bk2§1–37; first paper due
4 Oct	Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> 1; Descartes, <i>Med. 5</i>
9 Oct	Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> 2; Descartes, <i>Passions</i> 1 (selections)
11 Oct	TBA
16 Oct	Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> 3; Descartes, <i>Passions</i> bk2
18 Oct	Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> 3; Descartes, <i>Passions</i> Book 3
23 Oct	Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> 4
25 Oct	Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i> 4, 5
30 Oct	Leibniz, <i>Discourse</i> 1–7
1 Nov	Leibniz, <i>Discourse</i> 9–22, Corr. Arnauld various
6 Nov	Leibniz, <i>Discourse</i> 23–37, Corr. Arnauld various, <i>Monadology</i>
8 Nov	Hume, <i>Treatise</i> 1 [selections]
13 Nov	Hume, <i>Treatise</i> 2pt1c1–8; 2pt2c1–3, 6, 8, 11, 12
15 Nov	Hume, <i>Treatise</i> 2pt3, 3pt1
20 Nov	Hume, <i>Treatise</i> 3pt1, 3pt2c1–5, 11–12
27 Nov	Kant, <i>Groundwork</i> §1
29 Nov	Kant, <i>Groundwork</i> §2
4 Dec	Kant, <i>Groundwork</i> §2

6 Dec Kant, *Groundwork* §3

What is “modern” in philosophy?

“Modern” as a historical term is not at all modern.

In philosophy, the modern coincides with the transformation of Western intellectual culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (including the “Scientific Revolution” of Copernicus & Galileo). Dates: ca. 1580 (Montaigne) to ca. 1715 (death of Leibniz and Malebranche).

What makes a philosopher modern? It’s not sufficient merely to have lived in the period.

Descartes is modern, his contemporary Ceterus (a theologian and the author of the first Objections to Descartes’ *Meditations*) is not. ‘Modern’ doesn’t just denote a period: it has “ideological” content.

The works of those philosophers who have been thought to define the modern (as we understand it) form a “canon”, a set of works thought to be essential to modern philosophy.

What do these works share?

1. Themes:

the problem of (ultimate) justification;
the nature of the will;
the basic constituents of the natural world;
moral principles (what they are; how to justify them; a secular ethics).

2. Points of reference:

(i) especially in the 17th century, the “philosophy of the schools”: this was the Aristotelian philosophy that until 1650 (and even long after in some universities) formed the basis of the baccalaureate curriculum (logic, natural philosophy, metaphysics, ethics);

(ii) the “new science” of Copernicus, Galileo, et al., regarded then as a triumph of the human understanding, and a decisive step away from the philosophy of the schools.

(iii) a theistic setting (in the midst of sectarian contention).

3. A Latinate *literary culture*: every boy, and some girls, in the noble and the wealthier merchant classes studied Latin (and Greek) grammar and literature in their grammar school years.

The language of instruction in universities was Latin; this lasted in some parts of Europe well into the nineteenth century. But philosophical works were being published in vernacular languages even in Descartes' time (his *Discours de la méthode* was one example), and by the time of Kant's *Critique of pure reason* (1781) the majority of philosophical work was published in English, French, or German (even by authors whose native tongue was something other than these), though theses continued to be published in Latin.

Links

Bacon readings (from the *Novum Organum*—the source is here):

NB. These are fairly large files (11M). The first is a 2-up version for printing. The second is better for viewing on screen.

<http://goclenius.net/courses/ph349-2012f/pdf/bacon-works-8-print.pdf>

<http://goclenius.net/courses/ph349-2012f/pdf/bacon-works-8-screen.pdf>