

Philosophy 2220: Modern Philosophy
Spring 2025
Course Syllabus

This course is a survey of Western philosophy in the 17th and 18th centuries. This period is marked by the development of a wide range of positions on the major issues in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and political philosophy. The philosophy of this period has shaped contemporary philosophy and continues to exert a profound influence on many aspects of culture. Readings are taken from works by influential philosophers of the period. We will focus on five issues: the metaphysics of the physical world, the nature of mind, freedom of the will, moral psychology, and the rationality of morality.

Instructor: Prof. Cole Mitchell

Phone: (607) 255-3687

E-mail: scm244@cornell.edu

Office: Goldwin Smith G67

Office hours: Wednesday 3PM – 4PM and by appointment

Teaching Assistants:

Urna Chakrabarty, uc45@cornell.edu

Henry Kwok, yk732@cornell.edu

Anni Sun, as3293@cornell.edu

Class time: Tuesdays/Thursdays 11:40AM – 12:55PM

Classroom: Baker Laboratory 335

Course website: Canvas and <https://colemitchell.github.io/PHIL2220/>

Required work: A total of 100 points is possible:

- (1) One short paper (4–6 pages/15 points)
Friday, March 28 (due via Canvas)
- (2) Two exams, a small midterm (10 points) and a final (20 points):
Midterm: Friday, March 6, in class
Final: date / time / location TBA
- (3) Discussion participation and reading questions: each week in Thursday's lecture, write down questions and submit them to your TA (10 points)
- (4) Attendance and in-class work (40 points)
- (5) Logic module on Canvas (5 points)

Texts: *Early Modern Philosophy: An Anthology* (eds. Shapiro & Lascano, Broadview 2022). The readings will also be available online on the course website.

Reference text: The most important of these is the on-line *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (plato.stanford.edu). It features many helpful articles on 17th and 18th century philosophy, as well as links to other resources.

Email policy: I will check email at least twice a week. If I haven't yet responded to your email, you are strongly encouraged to send follow-up emails—I will not be offended! Keep track of your own attendance; please do not email the TAs or the instructor asking for your attendance count.

Topics and Main Readings:

A. Metaphysics and Epistemology

René Descartes (1596–1650):

Jan. 21: Introduction.

Jan. 23 – Feb. 4: *Meditations*, along with excerpts from Objections and Replies
also *Principles*, correspondence with Elisabeth of Bohemia

Feb. 6.: English materialists - Thomas Hobbes and Margaret Cavendish

Feb. 11: English Platonists - Henry More, Ralph Cudworth, and Anne Conway

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1667):

Feb. 13–20: *Ethics*, Parts I and II

Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715):

Feb. 25: excerpts from *Search After Truth*

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716):

Feb. 27–Mar. 04: *New System* and *Monadology*.

March 06: Midterm Exam

John Locke (1632–1704):

Mar. 11 – March 13: excerpts from *Essay concerning Human Understanding*

George Berkeley (1685–1753):

Mar. 18–20: excerpts from *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*.

David Hume (1711–1776):

Mar. 25–27: excerpts from 1st *Enquiry*

March 31 – April 4: Spring Break

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804):

Apr. 08–10: excerpts from *Critique of Pure Reason*

B. Morality: Foundations and Psychology

Divine Command Theory and Egoism:

- Apr. 15: Descartes' doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths
Hobbes: excerpts from *Leviathan*, exchange with Bramhall
Mandeville: excerpts from *Fable of the Bees*

The Rationalist Response:

- Apr. 17: Cudworth, excerpt from *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*
Leibniz, excerpt from "Discourse on Metaphysics"
Bishop Joseph Butler, excerpt from *Fifteen Sermons*

The Sentimentalist Response:

- Apr. 22: Lord Shaftesbury, excerpts from *Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit*
Francis Hutcheson, excerpts from *Illustrations upon the Moral Sense*
Apr. 24: Hume, excerpts from *Treatise of Human Nature*

Moral Psychology and the Self:

- Apr. 29: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, excerpts from 2nd *Discourse*
Adam Smith, excerpts from *Theory of Moral Sentiments*

Kantian Ethics:

- May 1: excerpts from *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797):

- May 6: excerpts from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

NOTE: The information contained in the course syllabus, other than the grade and absence policies, may be subject to change with reasonable advance notice, as deemed appropriate by the instructor.