

Philosophy 2220: Modern Philosophy
Spring 2026
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.

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Teaching Assistants:

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

Classroom: Baker Laboratory 119

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 26 (due via Canvas)

(2) Three exams: a *Meditations* exam (10 points), a small midterm (10 points) and a final (20 points):

Meditations: TBA

Midterm: Friday, March 6, in class

Final: date / time / location TBA

(3) Discussion participation and reading questions (10 points)

(4) Attendance and in-class work (30 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 online *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. 20: Introduction.

Jan. 22 – Feb. 3: *Meditations*, along with excerpts from Objections and Replies
also *Principles*, correspondence with Elisabeth of Bohemia

Feb 5: English materialists - Thomas Hobbes, Margaret Cavendish

Feb. 10: English Platonists - Henry More, Anne Conway

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1667):

Feb. 12–19: *Ethics*, Parts I and II

Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715):

Feb. 24: excerpts from *Search After Truth*

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716):

Feb. 26–Mar. 03: *New System* and *Monadology*.

March 05: Midterm Exam

John Locke (1632–1704):

Mar. 10 – March 12: excerpts from *Essay concerning Human Understanding*

George Berkeley (1685–1753):

Mar. 17–19: excerpts from *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*
and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*.

David Hume (1711–1776):

Mar. 24–26: excerpts from 1st *Enquiry*

March 30 – April 3: Spring Break

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804):

Apr. 7–9: excerpts from *Critique of Pure Reason*

B. Morality: Foundations and Psychology

Divine Command Theory and Egoism:

- Apr. 14: 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. 16: 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. 21: Lord Shaftesbury, excerpts from *Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit*
 - Francis Hutcheson, excerpts from *Illustrations upon the Moral Sense*
- Apr. 23: Hume, excerpts from *Treatise of Human Nature*

Moral Psychology and the Self seen through Others:

- Apr. 28: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, excerpts from 2nd *Discourse*
- Adam Smith, excerpts from *Theory of Moral Sentiments*

Kantian Ethics:

- Apr 30: excerpts from *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797):

- May 5: 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.