

PHIL 251: Modern Philosophy

Spring 2007

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Office: Humanities 205

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Course Description

This course presents a survey of modern Western philosophy, with a focus on the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. Philosophers of this period had to contend with a variety of massive shifts in science, religion, and society. In response, philosophical theories underwent their own radical changes. So too did the enterprise of philosophy itself, as philosophers (sometimes unwittingly) reconceived their field of inquiry. In this course we will focus on some of the ways in which philosophers of the period sought to accommodate changes wrought by the Scientific Revolution. How did the rise of modern science call for a new understanding of the place of the human mind in the natural world? In this course we will examine topics such as the following: the mechanical conception of nature; the relation between the mind (soul) and the body; skepticism and the sources of human knowledge; the relation between reason and the emotions; freedom of the will and human agency; God's relation to nature; knowledge of the divine; the nature of self-knowledge and the problems associated with it.

Required Texts

Descartes, *Meditations* (Hackett)

Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Essays* (Hackett)

Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Hackett)

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, abridged (Hackett)

Schopenhauer, *Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will* (Cambridge)

- The above books are available at the campus bookstore. You must purchase the editions selected for this course. Further readings will be on E-Reserve.

Course Requirements

- Eleven "pop" quizzes (100 points total)
- Three take-home essay exams (100 points each)
- Attendance: If you miss six classes, your final grade will drop by one letter grade. For each absence after that, it will drop another letter grade. (Exceptions will be made only in cases of catastrophic illness.)
- Participation and overall progress will also factor into your final grade, particularly in borderline cases.

Course Expectations

- Many of the readings for this course will be quite demanding. You should expect to devote at least two hours to each reading assignment. (Some background in philosophy will be helpful, but it isn't required or assumed.)
- You *must* bring the assigned reading to class each day.
- Though there will be a mix of lecture and discussion, the emphasis will be on the latter. Therefore, I expect you to participate.
- Even when not participating, you should be *engaged* during class. I expect you to eliminate all distractions, such as laptops, cell phones, iPods, crackberries, and other electronic devices I'm too old to know about. If you must bring these into the classroom, turn them off.
- Daily reading questions, announcements, assignments, etc. will be posted on the Learnlink conference for this course. So it is your job to check the conference on a daily basis.
- In addition to the essay exams, there will be opportunities in and out of class to practice writing and to increase your grasp of the material through writing about it. These no-pressure exercises will not be graded, but I expect you to complete them to the best of your ability.

Course Goals

- Our central aim will be to improve your skills in the following three areas:
 - *Interpretation*: Are you able to understand the meaning of complex texts? Can you situate particular claims in context and master an author's terminology? Can you decipher metaphor, irony, and other figurative uses of language?
 - *Logic*: Are you able to recognize and analyze important arguments? Can you identify the main conclusion of an argument? Are you able to grasp how an author's conclusion depends upon his or her premises? Can you grasp the connections among a complex series of thoughts? Are you able to supply missing premises in order to fill in the gaps of an argument?
 - *Communication*: Are you able to express yourself with clarity, precision, and style? Can you organize an essay coherently around a central point? Can you help guide an intelligent conversation by asking salient questions, offering clear suggestions, and listening closely to others?
- At this point your answer to most of these questions may be "no" or "sort of, but..." Don't worry. The goal is to work hard and improve in these areas as we go along. No one is assuming that you have *already* mastered these skills.
- We have one further goal. Our aim will be to learn how to use historical texts as intellectual resources—to understand how to engage with them in order to find answers to pressing questions, and challenges to our assumptions about how to ask the right questions in the first place.

The Details

- There will be a total of eleven "pop" quizzes. These will be based on the reading, and will test your understanding of the basics. Only *ten* of the quizzes will count towards your final grade, so you may miss or drop *one* of them. No make-ups (except in cases of documented emergency).
- There will be three take-home essay exams. These will give you the chance to work through your own understanding of the material and put it into written form.
- Exams will be assigned letter grades. Please see the grading system below for details.

- My policy regarding *late papers* is simple: they drop one letter grade per day.
 - If a burdensome schedule requires negotiating the due-date, please see me in advance. I'm open to reasonable requests. I'm not open to negotiation after the deadline, however.
- You are free to contest grades you feel are unjust. But you must do so in accordance with the following policy. All complaints must be registered in writing. Complaints must be typewritten and may not exceed 250 words. They must take the form of an argument designed to persuade the teacher that his evaluation of your work is mistaken. Please attach a photocopy of the graded assignment to your complaint. I will respond to either in writing or by discussing the grade directly with you. Under no circumstances will I discuss grades before the above procedure has been followed.
- **You are obligated to abide by the Student Honor Code of Oxford College.** I encourage you to work together and discuss your ideas, but *plagiarism will not be tolerated*. Whenever you use another person's words or ideas, you must give him or her credit. This applies to conversations with friends and class discussion, as well as anything you read (whether in print or on the Internet). Unfortunately, it is sometimes easy to fall into plagiarism without realizing it. When in doubt, cite the work that is influencing you. But if you have questions about a particular case, please ask me before it is too late—that is, *before* you hand in your essays. This policy goes for *all* writing assignments and quizzes. No exceptions.

THE GRADING SYSTEM:

- Reading quizzes will be scored on a numerical basis. Each quiz question will be worth 1 or 2 points, depending on the length of the quiz. (Quizzes will be combined to yield a total score out of a possible 100 points. This total will be worth the same as one take-home exam.)
- Each take-home exam will consist of three short essay questions.
 - Individual essay questions will be graded on a block scale. This means no pluses or minuses. The letters correspond to numerical values in the following fashion: A = 95, B = 85, C = 75, D = 65, F = 55. (Exams not turned in will receive a 0.)
 - The numerical values will be averaged together to yield a final grade for the exam, which *may* include a plus or minus—depending, of course, on how the numbers turn out. The numerical values correspond to letter grades as follows: 95 = A, 92 = A-; 88 = B+, 85 = B, 82 = B-; etc. etc.
 - For example: let's say you get two A's and one B on the first exam. This averages out to 91.66, which rounds up to 92. This would give you an A-.
- The three exam grades will then be averaged together with the total quiz grade to yield your final grade for the course.
- FINAL NOTE: I'm giving you the details in the interest of eliminating the mystery. I want you to understand exactly how grades get calculated for this course, but I do not want you to fixate on them. Please just do your work and try to learn as much as you can. The grades will take care of themselves.