

**MODERN PHILOSOPHY  
(PHIL 251)  
SPRING 2007**

Instructor: Eric Wilson

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Office Hours: M/W (1:00-2:00 PM) & by appointment

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**Course Description:**

This course offers a survey of modern European philosophy—roughly from 1650 to 1850. Our central theme will be the relation between the *active* and *passive* dimensions of human nature. Each of us necessarily interacts with his or her surroundings, both natural and social. The things we believe and the ways in which we behave are a product of that interaction. A central question in modern philosophy concerns the share each of us has in shaping our beliefs and behavior. No one thinks that we are entirely passive—that our thoughts and actions result entirely from being acted upon by our surroundings. Nor does anyone think that we are entirely active—that our thoughts and actions are completely up to us. But how do we determine the correct balance? To what extent is knowledge, for example, shaped by a mind actively imposing itself on the world? To what extent might it be shaped by the passive reception of sensory information? Similar questions can be raised about our behavior. To what extent, for example, are moral decisions based on passive episodes such as emotions or habits acquired through training and education? To what extent might they be based on freely and actively drawn conclusions about the nature of right and wrong?

Our survey is divided into two halves. First we shall focus on the metaphysics and epistemologies found in Rene Descartes, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. Then we shall turn to the moral theories of Joseph Butler, Hume, Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. Topics include the following: skepticism, empiricism vs. rationalism, transcendental arguments, knowledge of God, freedom of the will, moral psychology, philosophical anthropology, the relation between religion and morality, and the nature of enlightenment.

**Required Texts\*:**

Descartes, *Mediations on First Philosophy* (Hackett)

Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Hackett)

Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford)

Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Cambridge)

Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Cambridge)

Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality* (Hackett)

Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator" (E-Reserve)

All other readings on E-Reserve.

\* Successful class discussion will require that we stay, literally, on the same page. So you must purchase the editions selected for this course. These can be found in the campus bookstore.

**Course Requirements:**

- Three take-home essay exams (25% each)
- Eleven reading quizzes (25%)
- Attendance, participation, and overall progress will also factor into the final grade, particularly in borderline cases.
  - If you miss six or more classes, you cannot pass this course.

## **The Fine Print:**

### **Inside the Classroom**

- This is not a lecture-based course. In the words of the recently departed Godfather of Soul, I recommend that you “get on up, get into it and get involved.”
- Come to class prepared. Bring questions and/or comments from the reading. Be ready to discuss and/or write about the material.
- Expect to spend a significant amount of time doing in-class exercises. For the most part, you will not get “credit” for this work. But it will help you hone the skills that will be tested on the exams.
- You must bring your copy of the assigned reading to class.
- Please arrive on time. Tardiness signifies a lack of respect for the teacher and your fellow students.

### **Outside the Classroom**

- My office hours are **M/W, 1-2:00 PM**.
- My office is located at **711 Emory Street**. Of course, it’s never a bad idea to let me know ahead of time that you’ll be stopping by. But please feel free to drop in unannounced. You don’t need an appointment. I’ll be happy to answer questions, discuss assignments, or just have a conversation about anything related to the course.
- You may also contact me via e-mail (Learnlink address above). I check my e-mail once a day. Normally, I’ll be able to reply to any message within 24 hours. But don’t expect a prompt reply in the wee hours of the morning. And if you send me something over the weekend, I may not see it until the following Monday. So bear all that in mind.

### **The Reading**

- In order to do well in this course, you must do all the reading.
- The reading for this course is unusually demanding. Skimming is not sufficient. We are not reading textbooks—with sidebars, visual aids, glossaries, etc. We will be examining original works of philosophy written long ago by people who lived in times and places quite different from our own. Reading of this sort is difficult; it requires patience, diligence and ingenuity.
- You must learn to become an active reader. Plan to read everything more than once. Take notes as you read. Underline important passages. Identify the main point(s). Jot down comments and questions. Read with a dictionary by your side, and look up words you don’t understand.
- I will post reading questions on the LL conference that will help guide you through the assignments. Try to answer these questions as you read.

### **Exams**

- There will be three take-home essay exams.
- These exams test three sets of skills:
  - *Interpretation*: Are you able to understand the meaning of complex texts? Can you situate particular claims in context, master an author’s terminology, as well as decipher metaphors 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?
- We will work on these skills in class. So it is in your interest to attend regularly and participate.
- These exams are not research papers. Supplementary materials will be made available at the library’s reserve desk (and electronically). Beyond this, however, outside research is *strongly* discouraged.

### **Grades**

- All take-home assignments will receive a letter grade. Points are assigned to the letters in the following fashion: A+ = 98, A = 95, A- = 92; B+ = 88, B = 85, B- = 82; etc. etc. (Note that, although it is possible to receive an “A+” on a written assignment, this grade is not recognized by the College as an official grade. So it is not possible to receive an “A+” for the course.)
- Grammar and style will factor into the grades on all written assignments. Clarity of expression and clarity of thought go hand in hand. So you are strongly encouraged to work hard on your writing

throughout the semester. To this end, it would be smart to buy a good writing guide. I strongly recommend either (or both) of these brief, accessible and inexpensive books:

- Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*
- Christopher Lasch, *Plain Style: A Guide To Written English*
- Producing good written work has its own rewards. But if you need further incentive, consider what happened in 2004 to Philadelphia lawyer Brian Puricelli. In a civil rights suit against the city (*Devore v. City of Philadelphia*), Puricelli won a \$340,000 verdict for his client. The judge in the case, Jacob P. Hart, awarded Puricelli \$300 an hour for his courtroom performance, which he praised. But Judge Hart was less pleased with Puricelli's written work. "Mr. Puricelli's complete lack of care in his written product shows disrespect for the court," Hart complained. "His errors, not just typographical, caused the court a considerable amount of work." As punishment, Judge Hart slashed Puricelli's fees in half for the time he spent on his written work, awarding him 210 hours at \$150 an hour. In total, the lawyer's sloppy writing cost him \$31,450 in attorney's fees.
- **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 them 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.

#### Late papers

- Late assignments will be penalized. Your grade drops by one letter for each day it is late. Since the highest possible grade is "A+," that means that highest possible grade for a paper that is one day late is a "B+." The highest possible grade for a paper that is two days late is a "C+." Turn it in three days late and you start with a "D+." Essays more than three days late will not be accepted.
- Exceptions to this rule will be made only in cases of documented medical or family emergency.

#### Quizzes

- There will be eleven multiple-choice/true-false quizzes. Your lowest quiz grade will be dropped at the end of the semester; so only ten will count towards your grade. Each quiz is worth ten points.
- The quizzes will be based on the reading. If you keep up with the reading and attend class regularly, you should do fine.
- Quizzes will be announced one class in advance. It is your job to stay on top of this. If you miss class, find out from a trusted colleague whether or not a quiz was announced.

#### Grade changes

- You are free to contest grades you feel are unjust. However, 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. I will respond to the complaint 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.

#### SEMESTER SCHEDULE

The pace of the course will be determined by our progress in class. Course assignments will be posted on the LL conference—typically one or two weeks in advance. Once we have established a comfortable rhythm, I will post the assignments further in advance. We will cover the following texts in roughly the following order:

Descartes, *Meditations*; Hume, *First Enquiry*; Kant, *Prolegomena*; Hume, *Dialogue*; Butler, *Five Sermons*; Hume, *Second Enquiry*; Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*; Schopenhauer, *Basis of Morality*; Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator"

**FIRST ASSIGNMENT:** Read Ernest Lepore, "A Brief Introduction to Key Terms" (E-Reserve). Do all exercises.