

History of Modern Philosophy & World Philosophies: Modern Europe 2024-2025

Programme and Readings

5 September 2024 Lecture 1: Introduction

This is one of a series of courses in which we study the history of philosophy. But why do we do so? If you study physics, you will not receive a series of courses about the history of physics. What then is the special relation that philosophy has with its own history, and what should we expect to get out of a history of philosophy course? And what, specifically, is *modern* philosophy, this era that is supposed to begin in the early 17th century with the writings of René Descartes? I will suggest that the most radically new thing about modern philosophy is its idea that philosophy requires a radical new beginning.

Obligatory readings: none.

Recommended readings: Kenny chapter 1, or another short introductory text about sixteenth-century philosophy.¹

It is helpful if you familiarise² yourself with the following terms and names: humanism; reformation; counter-reformation; Nicolaus Copernicus; Giordano Bruno; Galileo Galilei; Francis Bacon (the philosopher, not the painter).

12 September 2024 Lecture 2: The *Meditations* of Descartes

In this week and the next, we will do an in-depth reading of the first four of Descartes' six *Meditations on First Philosophy*. This is a seminal text of modern European philosophy, and will allow us to delve into many of the themes that will continue to occupy us – the method of philosophy, the nature of knowledge, the existence of God, the gap between mind and world, human finitude. The first meditation contains Descartes' famous sceptical thought experiment, as well as his ideas on philosophical method. The second meditation delves into the nature of ideas and our knowledge of our mind and the external world.

Obligatory readings: René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), preface, synopsis, meditation 1, meditation 2.

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- 1 It's also fine if you simply work through a history of philosophy from roughly 1600 to 1830 during the course. No need to worry that the order doesn't match up with my recommendations.
 - 2 I don't mean 'investigate in depth'. If you know that Copernicus was a 16th century author who came up with the idea that the Earth moves around the Sun, you're good. I want you to start building up a mental framework of time periods, people, ideas, and inventions.

19 September 2024 Lecture 3: The *Meditations* of Descartes

We continue our in-depth reading of the *Meditations* with the third meditation, which gives us a proof of the existence of God that allows us to solve the problem of skepticism; and the fourth meditation, which asks about the sources of human error in a world directed by a supremely good and powerful God.

Obligatory readings: René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), meditation 3, meditation 4.

26 September 2024 Lecture 4: Philosophy and the New Science

Modern philosophy arises out of modern science, and modern science arises out of modern philosophy. We must understand this interplay. But in order to understand the new science, we must also know about the old science it partly replaced. We will therefore discuss neo-Aristotelian science and Renaissance neo-Platonism, before delving into the mechanical world view that was developed during the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century.

Obligatory readings: none.

Recommended readings: Kenny chapter 2 and chapter 5, or another short introductory text about 17th century philosophy and physics.

It is helpful if you familiarise yourself with the following terms and names: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Blaise Pascal, Nicolas Malebranche, Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, George Berkeley; the physics of Descartes; the atomism of Gassendi; Newton's laws of motion and gravity.

10 October 2024 Lecture 5: Modern Epistemology – Rationalism and Empiricism

In many ways, *epistemology* is the central field of modern philosophy. There were two main epistemological trends. One is called rationalism, and the main philosophers belonging to it are Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. The other is called empiricism, and its main proponents are Locke, Berkeley and Hume. Where the rationalists claim that we can understand the world through rational thinking alone, the empiricists claim that only sensory perception can give us knowledge. At the end of the 18th century, Kant attempted to overcome the difference between rationalism and empiricism and bring the two together. While this story is too simplistic, it is nevertheless a useful framework, and this week we will delve into it.

Obligatory readings: none.

Recommended readings: Kenny chapter 4, or another short introductory text about 17th century epistemology.

17 October 2023

Lecture 6: Leibniz's *Monadology*

We familiarise ourselves with one text from the rationalist tradition: the *Monadology* of Leibniz. (Sorry, Spinoza fans, but the *Ethics* is just too long and dense!) This text is very wild and very fun, and allows us to see in detail how radical the modern philosophers dared to be. Leibniz argues that everything in the universe is a monad, a perfectly simple, unextended being that has no influence on the world around it and is not influenced by anything else; but each of which reflects the entire universe.

Obligatory readings: Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz, *Monadology* (1714).

24 October 2023

Lecture 7: The Way of Ideas – Locke, Berkeley, and Hume

We now delve into the empiricist side of things, focussing on Locke and Berkeley, but with short appearances by Hobbes and Hume (who will be the centre of attention in two future lectures). We investigate Locke's theory of ideas: that there are no innate ideas, but all are received from the senses; that simple ideas can be combined into complex ideas; the processes of combination and abstraction; and the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. We also delve into Berkeley's criticism of Locke and his idealism.

Obligatory readings: none.

Recommended readings: Kenny chapter 3, or another short introductory text about 18th century philosophy.

It is helpful if you familiarise yourself with the following terms and names: Adam Smith, Thomas Reid, the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Christian Wolff, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, F. W. J. Schelling, G. W. F. Hegel.

30 October 13:00-14:00 (World Philosophies: Modern Europe)

31 October 9:00-10:00 (History of Modern Philosophy)

Midterm exam

7 November 2023 Lecture 8: Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Hume's *Enquiry* is an extremely influential text and a great way for us to engage with the empiricist tradition. We will be reading about the origin and association of ideas; Hume's criticisms of the idea of causation; his sceptical solution to the problems; and finally his rejection of necessary relations in the world.

Obligatory readings: Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1751), sections II, III, IV, V, and VII.

14 November 2023 Lecture 9: Problems of Causation

One of the most fascinating discussion in modern philosophy is that surrounding the notion of causation. We will spend some time thinking about the problem of causal determinism, that is, the place of human freedom in a mechanical world; and about the problem of mind-body interaction, which had become especially acute in the philosophy of Descartes. But we will focus especially on the notion of causation itself. With the rejection of Aristotelian notion of powers, a serious philosophical problem emerged, and seemingly wild theories were developed to solve it: e.g., Malebranche's idea that God causes my movements, the idea of Leibniz that I have no causal relations at all, and Hume's famous theory that there is no reason to believe in any causal regularity. We end by diving into Kant's philosophy for the first time, trying to understand his 'second analogy of experience' and how he thinks we can know a priori that every event must have a cause.

Obligatory readings: none.

Recommended readings: Kenny chapters 6 and 7, or another short introductory text about metaphysics and the mind-body problem in the modern period.

It is helpful if you familiarise yourself with the following terms and names: Francisco Suarez, monism and dualism in the philosophy of mind, determinism & freedom, compatibilism & incompatibilism, Locke's theory of personal identity.

21 November 2023 Lecture 10: Mary Shepherd; Canonicity and History

We will read selections from the works of Mary Shepherd, an early 19th century philosophy who develops her own metaphysical system through a criticism of, especially, Hume. She defends an original theory of causation that fits actual daily and scientific practice much better than Hume's, and develops arguments to prove the existence of the external world. Delving into Shepherd's philosophy also allows us to think about the nature of the canon: why are, say, Berkeley and Hume canonical philosophers, while Shepherd was in danger of being forgotten until her recent rediscovery? How is the canon constructed, and what is the best way for us to interact with it? We will also revisit the idea of 'modern philosophy' as a coherent time period that ended with Kant.

Obligatory readings: selections from Mary Shepherd's *An Essay Upon the Relation of Cause and Effect* (1824) and *Essays on the Perception of an External Universe* (1827). To be announced.

Recommended readings: If the topic of canonicity interests you, I recommend the article "Revisiting the Early Modern Philosophical Canon" by Lisa Shapiro.

28 November 2023 Lecture 11: The Kantian System

We will delve into the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, with special attention to his so-called Copernican Revolution and the 'transcendental idealism' that follows. Since this is one the most widely misunderstood ideas in the history of philosophy, we will take special care in introducing it and associated terms such as 'thing-in-itself' and 'appearance'. One of our guiding threads will be the fact that Kant believes his philosophy is an answer to Cartesian scepticism. Another is that Kant radically reconceives the nature of human finitude. We end by giving an impression of the

most difficult and most central part of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: the transcendental deduction, in which Kant argues that subject and object depend on each other.

Obligatory readings: text by the teacher which will be shared on Brightspace.

5 December 2023 Lecture 12: Ethics – Spinoza, Hume, Kant

We have so far focused on the topics that fall under 'theoretical philosophy': epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science, philosophy of mind. This week we take a quick look at 'practical philosophy', in particular the field of ethics. We meet Spinoza's moral anti-realism and his idea that we can achieve happiness only by mastering the passions, which means being rational. We also discuss Hume's empiricist and anti-rationalist theory of ethics, according to which reason is merely instrumental and can never be a guide to good and evil. Instead, ethics is based on sentiment and sympathy. Finally, we take a very brief look at the connections between Kant's ethics and his transcendental idealism.

Obligatory readings: none.

Recommended readings: Kenny chapter 8, or another introductory text about 18th century ethics.

It is helpful if you familiarise yourself with the following terms and names: casuistry, stoicism, sentimentalism.

12 December 2023 Lecture 13: God and His Existence

Again and again we have seen that God plays an important role in modern philosophy. On the other hand, it is also the period in which God starts to disappear. God plays a crucial role in Descartes' *Meditations*, but in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, all that is left is an attack on arguments in favour of His existence. We will consider the topic of proofs of the existence of God by considering Locke's positive argument and Kant's attack on the ontological argument.

We will also have time for questions about other topics from the course.

Obligatory readings: Locke, *Essay*, Book 4, Chapter X (anthology pages 435-441); Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A592/B620 to A602/B630 (anthology pages 877-881).

Recommended readings: Kenny chapter 10, or another introductory text about the role of God in modern philosophy.