

PHIL 2330

Early Modern Philosophy

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course, we will trace the development of European philosophy through the *early modern period*, focusing on key texts written in the 17th and 18th centuries. Four thinkers will receive pride of place in this narrative: Margaret Cavendish, Anne Conway, Mary Astell, and Damaris Masham. We will also consider the work of René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, John Locke, David Hume, and others along the way. A chief aim of this course is to draw connections between discussions in metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, and politics. We will examine issues of substance, causation, and the limits of knowledge alongside those of love, happiness, and freedom. In so doing, we will be true to the project of early modern philosophy – to provide a unified account of all things natural, moral, and political.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The primary objectives of the course are to

- Give you familiarity with one of the most important periods in philosophical history.
- Introduce you to important and largely understudied figures in the early modern period.
- Refine your ability to carefully read and analyze texts.
- Develop your skills as a writer – learning to produce clear, coherent prose and craft well-structured arguments.
- Develop your skills as a communicator – learning to receive feedback on your ideas and writing from your peers and to give helpful feedback to others.
- Spark your natural curiosity for philosophical ideas and questions.

TEXTS

Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (Hackett)

ASSIGNMENTS

1. 3 essays – 60% of your final grade.

- Each of these essays will cover a particular sub-unit in the class. The first essay will concern the **“three great systems”**; the second, **love & morals**; the third, **education**
- These essays will be **argumentative**: you will receive a question related to the particular subtopic. Using what you’ve learned from the readings on this topic, our discussions, and your reflection assignments, you will develop and defend an argument.
 - If we are discussing Anne Conway, you might argue that her system cannot sustain a meaningful, substantive distinction between God and human beings. Conway must therefore allow that human beings can *become like Gods* with great effort.
- An example of how such an essay may be structured is as follows: introduction – where you make clear the topic of the essay, **your position, the reasons that you think justify your position, an objection that someone might make to your position, how you plan to respond, and the significance of your argument** (i.e., what follows if you’re right). The following paragraphs of the essay would then spell out each of these five elements of the essay – from your position to its significance).
- We will discuss essay writing in more detail when the time comes to do so.
- Each of these essays will be **1200 words**.

2. 3 – 30% of your final grade.

- Like the essays, each reflection will cover a particular sub-unit of the class.
- These reflections will be **interpretive**: you will receive a question related to a certain part of one reading (e.g. why does Cavendish see a problem with positing non-material substance to which all thinking beings have access?). Your aim is to get the reader to understand **why** Cavendish holds the position she does in this instance. The question of whether Cavendish is justified holding this position is a different question altogether and belongs in your essays.
- The aim of these reflections is to serve as **scaffolding** for your essays. Before we can construct well-informed arguments, it’s important to be acquainted with what others have said about the topic. By writing these reflections, you will develop the necessary skills to write essays that represent your considered thoughts on a topic.
- The structure of your reflections will differ based on the question that you receive. Due to the length of these reflections, most will have a 2-3 paragraph structure, though we will discuss the writing of reflections in more detail when the time comes to do so.
- Each of these reflections will be **500 words**.

3. Participation & Attendance – 10% of your final grade

- **5%** of your grade will be based purely on attendance.

- You are free to miss one week of class without harm to your grade. If you miss a fourth time, you will lose 1% of your final grade; if you miss a fifth time, you will lose 2% of your grade; if you miss a sixth time, you will lose 3% of your grade, etc. The maximum you can lose on the basis of your attendance is 5%. That said, if you were to miss 8 days of class it would also have an impact on your participation grade.
- **5%** of your grade will be based purely on participation.
- How does one participate? There's the normal way of course – asking questions in class, engage with others productively when in groups, bring to class any requested materials (e.g. if we have a workshop day, you will be expected to bring a complete rough draft of your essay or reflection to class). Philosophy, unlike other disciplines like chemistry or biology, flourish with your participation. The aim is not for me to deliver content to you (though I will certainly assist you in helping to understand the readings) but to engage with you in conversation about the topics of the readings.
- Many of you may not feel comfortable participating. There will be other options for people to gain their participation grade. The chief one of which is sending me questions about the reading. If you feel like were unable to participate well a particular week, you can send me **2 questions & 2 comments** about the reading for that week. I will respond to every question, so you may also wish to use this medium to seek clarification on an issue or delve further into issues that we didn't get to cover in class.

4. Grade Scale

A	93-100
A-	90-92
B+	88-89
B	83-87
B-	80-82
C+	78-79
C	73-77
C-	70-72
D+	68-69
D	63-67
D-	60-62
F	0-59

EXPECTATIONS

What you can expect from me:

- I will upload any course readings **at least a week** prior to when they will be covered in class – you can expect the same when it comes to the reflection and essay topics.
- I will grade any and all assignments **within 7 days** of them being turned in.
- I will respond to any and all emails **within 24 hours**.

- I will hold office hours **as scheduled**. If you are unable to attend office hours, you are more than welcome (even encouraged) to set up another time for us to meet.
- I will shift the class schedule as deemed necessary for *your learning*. If we need extra time on a topic or you're collectively interested in pursuing a topic further, I will make any necessary changes to the schedule. **These changes will be communicated via email.**
- I will begin each class by writing down 2-3 questions on the board to help frame our discussions. **These questions will be circulated in advance** (at the end of the prior class) so that you can keep them in mind when you're completing the reading.
- I will engage with you – in writing and in person – in a **thoughtful manner**. As I see it, this thoughtfulness has two components. I will be **respectful** of your ideas, and also dedicated to **your improvement** as a thinker and writer. At times, this dedication will require me to be critical in my feedback, which is I sign that I take you seriously.
- I will be **understanding and empathetic** regarding any challenges that you face, either in this class or in your personal lives (to the extent that they bear on your ability to turn work in on time, keep focus, maintain motivation, etc.).

What I can expect from you:

- You will **attend** each class, or notify me of your absence prior to class
- You will attend class having **read** and being prepared to **discuss** the material for that day. My advice is that you a) complete the reading twice and b) make a note of 2-3 questions and 2-3 comments you have. This exercise will cement your understanding of the material and give you a sense of which points you found interesting and/or confusing. Points of interest and/or confusion are the perfect material for discussion.
- You will **complete your work** on time or notify me of your inability to do so.
- You will engage with me and your classmates in a **thoughtful** manner. Show the same dedication to others (and to yourself) that I do to you. For this semester, for three hours a week, you and your classmates are on a bit of a journey. The journey will not always be easy, and we will all meet obstacles along the way. Lift each other up.
- You will **not give up on yourself**. At times, the readings and the assignments will be difficult. If you feel like you are slipping or things have stopped making sense, *reach out*. There is nothing honorable about suffering in silence. I am here to help with anything you may require along your journey, but you must always keep pushing.
- You will **stay curious** and **work to improve**. We have a lot to learn from each other and from the material that we will be discussing throughout the class. If you work to maintain your sense of curiosity and desire to improve throughout the course, you will come out of this experience as a better writer and a clearer thinker.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Part I: Three Great Systems: Descartes, Cavendish, Conway

Week 1	Introduction to Early Modern Philosophy, pt. 1: The Ancients and Moderns	Galileo, <i>The Assayer</i> (selections)
	Introduction, pt. 2: The Experimentalists	Robert Boyle, <i>The Usefulness of Experimental Philosophy</i> (selections) Robert Boyle, <i>The Excellence and Grounds of the Mechanical Philosophy</i> (selections) Robert Hooke, <i>Micrographia</i>
Week 2	The Cartesian System	Descartes, <i>Principles of Philosophy</i>
	(cont.)	<i>Principles of Philosophy</i> (cont.)
Week 3	(cont.)	<i>Principles of Philosophy</i> (cont.)
	(cont.)	Descartes, <i>Correspondence with Princess Elizabeth</i>
Week 4	Margaret Cavendish	Cavendish, <i>Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy</i>
	(cont.)	<i>Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy</i> (cont.)
Week 5	(cont.)	<i>Further Observations upon Experimental Philosophy</i>
	(cont.)	<i>Further Observations upon Experimental Philosophy</i> (cont.)

Week 6	Anne Conway	<i>Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy</i>
	(cont.)	<i>Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy (cont.)</i>
Week 7	(cont.)	<i>Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy (cont.)</i>
	(cont.)	<i>Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy (cont.)</i>

Part II: Love & Morals: Masham and Astell

Week 8	The Bridge between Metaphysics and Morals	Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i>
	(cont.)	Spinoza, <i>Ethics (cont.)</i>
Week 9	(cont.)	Spinoza, <i>Ethics (selections)</i>
	Love	John Norris/Mary Astell, <i>Letters Concerning the Love of God (selections)</i>
Week 10	(cont.)	Damaris Masham, <i>Discourse Concerning the Love of God (selections)</i>
	(cont.)	Damaris Masham, <i>Discourse Concerning the Love of God (selections)</i>
Week 11	Morals	Mary Astell, <i>The Christian Religion (selections)</i>
	(cont.)	Damaris Masham, <i>Occasional Thoughts (selections)</i>

Part III: Education, Freedom, and Happiness

Week 12	Education	Locke, <i>Some Thoughts Concerning Education</i>
	Women and Education	Jean-Jacques Rousseau, <i>Emile (selections)</i>

Week 13	(cont.)	Mary Astell, <i>A Serious Proposal to the Ladies</i>
	(cont.)	Mary Astell, <i>A Serious Proposal to the Ladies</i> (cont.)
Week 14	Philosophy as Education	David Hume, “Of the Delicacy of Passion and Taste”
	(cont.)	Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste”
Week 15	Self-Knowledge and Happiness	Madame de Scudéry, “Knowledge of Others and of Oneself”
	(cont.)	Emile du Châtelet, <i>Treatise on Happiness</i>