

Syllabus
PHIL 331W-0 (3 Cr.)
Modern Philosophy
Winter 2025

Instructor: Dr. Kristopher G. Phillips
Office: Pray Harrold 702-B
Student Hours: MW: 10:00a – 11:00a; 1:00p-2:30p & also by appointment

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Class Meets:
MW: 11:00a -12:15p Pray-Harrold 402

COURSE DESCRIPTION: The traditional narrative surrounding the development of philosophy in the 17th and 18th centuries revolves around a dispute between so-called “rationalists” (Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz), “empiricists” (Locke, Berkeley, and Hume), culminating in a great unifier (Kant). There are a number of reasons to be unhappy with this narrative. It oversimplifies the complex interactions and influences important thinkers had on one another; ignores the contributions from anyone other than wealthy white men; forces us to study systematic thinkers in an incomplete way; and offers at best a shallow understanding of tremendously rich philosophical and scientific issues. In this class, we will focus on only three figures from the “modern” era: Rene Descartes, Margaret Cavendish, and Anton Wilhelm Amo. We will devote substantial time to developing and understanding their philosophical systems and the interconnections between these thinkers. The idea is to develop the skills required to approach the works from this era (for example: how to read texts closely, how to extract extended arguments from longer manuscripts, how to reconstruct arguments in a way that is charitable to the author, how to be sensitive to and avoid anachronism, and how to approach a philosopher’s work *systematically*). The reason that we will focus on these skills is that they will allow you continue to read modern philosophy carefully and attentively well beyond our short time together. To that end, I have included on the last page a list of works from the 17th and 18th centuries that we will not read this semester, but that deserve careful attention, and will prepare you for future studies better than almost any of your peers.

This course fulfills Section II of the required knowledge areas as well as the *writing intensive* designation for the philosophy major.

Course Learning Outcomes:

- *Charitable Thinking:* The successful student will begin to approach the positions and arguments of historical figures charitably (i.e. to take seriously and try to understand how a smart, thoughtful, and careful person might hold a view like that). A successful student will begin to understand why, even if it looks at first as if a view must be wrong, there are good reasons for why others might think it is true.
- *Close Reading:* The successful student will demonstrate the ability to identify what a passage actually says (without imposing assumptions onto the text), what a passage logically implies, and how to connect a passage to its broader context.
- *Writing in the History of Philosophy:* The successful student will be able to express some abstract and complex philosophical ideas in clear, precise, concise, and logical prose. The successful student’s writing will be grounded in source texts without becoming a mere book report.

Learning outcomes will be evaluated through weekly reading responses, in-class group textual analyses, and a term paper.

TEXTS: Rene Descartes: *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings* Trans. Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch; Cambridge University press, 1998. ISBN: 978-0-521-35812-5 **(CSM)**

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Margaret Cavendish: *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy* Ed. O'Neill; Cambridge University Press, 2001. ISBN: 978-0-521-77675-2 **(OEP)**

Anton Wilhelm Amo: *Philosophical Dissertations on Mind and Body* Ed. Menn & Smith; Oxford University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-19-766801-6 **(DMB)**

These can be found at the College Bookstore, and are *required*.

As of Jan 3, *OEP* and *DMB* are available in a digital format through [Halle Library Course Reserves](#).

SCHEDULE OF READINGS:

This list of readings is tentative. Specific reading assignments will be given on a day-to-day basis.

Week 1 **Introduction**

Introductory remarks, logic, and getting to know the class.

Weeks 2-6 **Descartes**

Dedicatory Letter to the Sorbonne & Preface to the Reader (Canvas)

Synopsis & First Meditation (CSM 73-79) & Selections from *Objections and Replies* (CSM 123-126)

Second Meditation (CSM 80-86) & Selections from *Objections and Replies* (CSM 126-131)

Third Meditation (CSM 86-98) & Selections from *Objections and Replies* (CSM 131-133)

Fourth Meditation (CSM 98-105) & Selections from *Objections and Replies* (CSM 133-135)

Fifth Meditation (CSM 105-110) & Selections from *Objections and Replies* (CSM 135-143)

Sixth Meditation (CSM 110-122) & Selections from *Objections and Replies* (CSM 143-150)

["Spring" Break Feb. 24-28]

Weeks 7-11 **Cavendish**

Recommended: Cuning: *Introduction* (Canvas)

Part I

Sections 1-3, 9 (OEP 46-53)

Section 16-17 (OEP 74-75) & Descartes *Principles* II (CSM 189-199) & Letter XXX (Canvas)

Sections 18, 20-21 (OEP 79-90)

Section 31 (OEP 125-131)

Sections 35-37 (OEP 137-194)

Part II

Sections 1-3 (OEP 195-200)

Section 6 (OEP 204-208)

Sections 9-10 (OEP 214-216)

Sections 13-15 (OEP 218-224)

Section 20 (OEP 227-240)

Section 26 (OEP 247-248)

Part III

All (OEP 249-275)

Weeks 12-15 **AMO**

Inaugural Dissertation on the Impassivity of the Mind (DMB 153-197)

Philosophical Disputation Containing a Distinct Idea of Those Things that Pertain Either to the Mind or to our Living and Organic Body (DMB 199-225)

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ASSIGNMENTS, EVALUATION, POLICY:

“Extrinsic motivation, which includes a desire to get better grades, is not only different from, but often undermines, intrinsic motivation, a desire to learn for its own sake” – Alfie Kohn (1999), *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A’s, praise, and other bribes*. Rev. ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Let’s Talk Motivation: In recent years I have become increasingly unhappy with grades as a measure of anything at all. I often tell my students that it’s probably easy to get an A in my class – you can relatively easily “hack” my grading system and figure out the “formula” for writing a paper for me. Once you figure it out, getting an A on papers in my classes is easy. But I don’t want you to get an A by “hacking the system.” I want you to push yourself to learn new things because you found something you’re excited about and wanted to try to go beyond what’s comfortable and familiar. I’ve long thought that an A- or a B+ that was the result of taking risks was worth more than a safe, but well-written A paper.

In short, grading is not a good measure of learning, and the focus on grades distracts from the real goal of education. If you’re aiming for a specific grade, you’re not aiming to get the most out of your educational opportunities.

Evaluation: Here’s what we will do. I will ask you to fill out a brief survey to help us both better understand where your strengths are and where you can improve with regard to various intellectual virtues. I will then ask you to write a self-evaluation considering the following questions:

- (a) What are your reasons for taking this class?
- (b) What do you hope to get out of this class?
- (c) Where and how do you think you can improve on your academic work?
- (d) What do the learning outcomes listed above mean and how can you improve on them in your work?
- (e) Which of the listed virtues do you consider to be the most important? Why?
- (f) On which of them do you want to focus this semester?

You and I will meet one-on-one at the start of the semester to establish concrete goals for the class.

I will ask you to do a mid-semester check-in reflection paper just after mid-terms.

We will meet up again at the end of the semester to discuss what progress have you made with regard to our goals and to establish both criteria for, and how to evaluate your learning this semester.

The idea is that we will **collaboratively** come to a determination about what sort of progress you’ve made, where you think you can continue to improve (and how to best do so). As such, I will not provide you with numerical or letter grades on individual assignments. I will provide my standard level of *qualitative* feedback on your work (discursive comments regarding clarity, precision, critical engagement, etc.), but the gradebook will only note whether you turned the assignment in.

You are responsible for working with me to determine your final grade in this class. We will come to an agreement based on formal self-assessments, the collected feedback you received from me over the course of the semester, and a final discussion. In our final meeting, we will collectively identify the criteria for success in the class and then apply those criteria to your body of work and the feedback you’ve received.

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Assignments:

- **Introductory Self-Reflection Paper** (Due **Sunday, Jan 12.**)
- **Introductory Goal-Setting Meeting.** Sign up for a 15 minute meeting (zoom or office) where we will discuss your goals, motivations, etc.
- **Weekly Reading Responses** (Due Sunday each week).
- **Descartes Close Reading Papers** (Due **Wednesday Jan 22**; Due **Wednesday Feb 19**)
- **Mid-point Reflection Paper** (Due **Sunday Mar 9**)
- **Cavendish Close Reading Papers** (Due dates TBD)
- **Amo Close Reading Papers** (Due dates TBD)
- **Term Paper** (Due **Sunday Apr 13**)
- **Final Reflection Paper and Portfolio** (Due **Sunday Apr 20**)
- **Final Meeting** (During finals week). We will meet to discuss your progress toward your goals over the semester, and determine your final grade. I will post the Calendly link as we get closer.
- **Participation** Philosophy is best done in open, careful dialogue with one another. I know not everyone is comfortable speaking in front of their peers, but I want to encourage you to genuinely engage one another regarding the ideas in the class. There are a number of ways one can be an active participant in the course. Whether that is asking questions in class, organizing discussion boards, setting up study groups, visiting during student hours, or something else you come up with, I'd like to see you really engage with both the material and one another. That said, it's virtually impossible to engage meaningfully with the course material if you do not **attend class regularly**.

Weekly Reading Responses

I expect you to keep up on the reading. I will typically not assign very much, but I want you to engage with it *carefully*. To facilitate discussion and keep you on track, you are expected to complete weekly responses. I will post more details on Canvas but in short, the responses must engage with the text in three different ways total (though you're allowed to engage in more ways than this, if you want to). Your three reflections must be from at least two different categories (comprehension, queries, connection, criticism, epiphany, or other). Use separate paragraphs for each reflection task. There is no word minimum or maximum, but you should write at least three sentences for each of your three engagements. Be sure to label each reflection, include the page numbers from which you're getting the information, and state how long it took you to do the reading as well as how long it took to do the reflection. These reflections will encourage students to keep up with the reading and to read the material carefully and charitably.

Note: I recognize that the texts are challenging and that you can probably find a summary of most of them online. Please do *not* do this. These reading responses are a low-stakes opportunity to practice getting better at reading and interpreting challenging texts. There are a number of times in your life where people will rely on your inability or unwillingness to read difficult material and will thus hide things in obscure writing. This is an opportunity to practice working through and interpreting challenging writing so that you can better interpret challenging writing.

Close Reading Papers

Close reading is one of the most important skills to develop in studying the history of philosophy. It's very easy to fail to recognize how many assumptions we bring to philosophical texts when we read them and in studying the history of philosophy that becomes apparent very quickly. The purpose of these short papers is to practice reading and interpreting passages in context. For each figure, we will work on a close-reading paper, focusing on one passage. For the second paper on each figure, we will introduce two pieces of secondary literature, each of which offers a different interpretation of one passage. These papers will afford students practice with close reading, charitable thinking, and writing in the history of philosophy.

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Standard Term Paper

You will be expected to complete a term paper on any topic relevant to the modern philosophy. You are not limited to topics that we discuss explicitly in class, and you are welcome (and encouraged) to do research (whether secondary or primary) beyond the books we read. Your paper should be between 2000-3000 words. For standard approaches to writing papers in the history of philosophy, please see the “Some Basic Structures for Historical Papers” file on the Canvas homepage.

Revisions: You are more than welcome to revise your written work at any time and as frequently as you would like in order to take full advantage of our feedback. This is not a requirement for the course, but those students who do take the time to thoughtfully respond to my feedback and revise their work will get the most out of the class and will develop the most as writers and thinkers.

Late Work: I get that life happens and things sometimes take longer than we anticipate. As a result, I will accept late work for up to 24 hours after the deadline with no questions asked. I ask that you do your best to meet the deadlines – please consider that I too am a busy person with a life outside of school, and that I have to budget and schedule time carefully. If too many people turn in papers late, it throws off my plans and creates more work for me. Please try to be mindful of the work you create for others. If you are going to need more than 24 hours, you must contact me we can discuss how to move forward.

Classroom Conduct: The classroom constitutes a community of which we are each an important part. The very foundation of philosophy as a discipline is the ability to charitably listen, understand and represent the views of ourselves and others. Philosophy as a discipline requires careful dialogue. As such, respect for your fellow student, your instructor, and the course is of critical importance. We can, should, and will disagree with one another often, but this *MUST* be conducted with respect. As such threatening behavior, offensive language (including “hate speech”) will not be tolerated.

A Note on AI, Large-Language Models, and Their Use Using AI tools appropriately is a big part of our cultural development at this point in our history. This class is focused on building your philosophical skills, especially interpreting, designing, and critiquing arguments and theories. AIs can sort of do some of these things (but not well), but there are myriad reasons *not* to employ them in place of doing the work yourself. One such reason is that allowing an AI to do any part of the coursework for you is not just cheating yourself out of the opportunity to get better at philosophy, it is failing to do what the assignment is asking you to do – display and develop *your* philosophical abilities. If there is good reason to believe an AI did the work for you, any of the following may well occur: you will be asked to meet to discuss the work and you will be asked to redo the work. In class we will discuss further reasons to refrain from having AI do the work *for* you, as well as ways that it *can* appropriately be employed.

OTHER IMPORTANT POLICIES & RESOURCES

University Policies In addition to the articulated course specific policies and expectation, students are responsible for understanding all applicable university guidelines, policies, and procedures. The [EMU Student Handbook](#) is the primary resource provided to students to ensure that they have access to all university policies, support resources, and student's rights and responsibilities. Changes may be made to the EMU Student Handbook whenever necessary, and shall be effective immediately, and/or as of the date on which a policy is formally adopted, and/or the date specified in the amendment. Electing not to access the link provided below does not absolve a student of responsibility. For questions about any university policy, procedure, practice, or resources, please contact the Office of the Ombuds: 248 Student Center, 734.487.0074, emu_ombuds@emich.edu, or visit the website at www.emich.edu/ombuds. [CLICK HERE to access the University Course Policies](#)

Academic Dishonesty Academic dishonesty of any kind is expressly prohibited. Engaging in academic dishonesty of any kind will result in failure of the course, a referral to the [Office of Wellness and Community Responsibility](#) for

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disciplinary action, and a deeply uncomfortable final conversation at the end of the term. You're already paying an awful lot of money to take this class, and I am committed to helping you develop the philosophical, intellectual, and personal skills to the best of your ability. Engaging in any form of cheating really cuts against the whole purpose of the whole education thing.

Recording Class I will not record class meetings and I ask that you also please refrain from recording the class meetings without prior permission both from me and from your classmates.

University Writing Center The [University Writing Center](#) (UWC) offers writing support to all undergraduate and graduate students. In doing so, we value the diversity of our campus and honor all students and the languages they bring with them to the university.

Holman Success Center Provides [Academic Support](#) through a variety of virtual and in-person services.

Disability Resource Center I warmly welcome any of you who have disabilities. Students with medical, psychological, learning or other disabilities desiring academic adjustments, accommodations, or auxiliary aids must contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC). The [DRC](#) works collaboratively with students, faculty, and staff to create an accessible, sustainable, and inclusive educational environment.

University Library Research support is available to all students, 24/7. This includes getting started with research, identifying sources to search, developing search strategies, evaluating resources, and more. See <https://www.emich.edu/library/help/ask.php> for all of the ways in which you can get help with research. Some University Library services have changed, and may continue to change, in response to the pandemic. Please check for current information at <https://www.emich.edu/library/news/covid.php>

Title IX Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex under any education program or activity receiving federal financial aid. Sexual assault and sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination prohibited by Title IX. [What you need to know about Title IX](#)

Student and Exchange Visitor Statement The Student Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) requires F and J students to report numerous items to the [Office of International Students & Scholars](#) (OISS)

Other Important Works from the Modern Period (a non-exhaustive list)

Machiavelli: *The Prince*

Montaigne: *Essays* (esp. *Apology for Raymond Sebond*)

Bacon: *The New Organon*

Galileo: *The Starry Messenger*

Galileo: *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*

Hobbes: *Leviathan*

Hobbes: *De Cive*

Descartes: *Principles of Philosophy*

Descartes: *Le Monde* (The World)

Descartes: *L'Homme* (Treatise on Man)

Descartes: *Passions of Philosophy*

Elisabeth of Bohemia: *Correspondence with Descartes*

Cavendish: *The Blazing World*

Spinoza: *Theological-Political Treatise*

Spinoza: *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*

Spinoza: *Ethics*

Conway: *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*

Leibniz: *Discourse on Metaphysics*

Leibniz: *Monadology*

Leibniz: *Correspondence with Clarke*

D. Cudworth: *Correspondence with Leibniz*

Newton: *De Gravitatione*

Newton: *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*

Locke: *Two Treatises of Government* (esp. the second)

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Locke: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*
Cockburn: *A Defense of Mr. Locke's Essay of Human Understanding*
Malebranche: *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*
Malebranche: *The Search After Truth*
Berkeley: *Three Dialogues*
Berkeley: *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*
Berkeley: *Correspondence with Johnson*
Pascal: *Pensées*
Butler: *Fifteen Sermons*
Mandeville: *The Fable of the Bees*
Hutcheson: *An Inquiry Concerning Moral Good and Evil*
Smith: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*
Hume: *A Treatise of Human Nature*
Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*
Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*
Hume: *Dialogues on Natural Religion*
Reid: *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*
Reid: *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*
Rousseau: *The Social Contract*
Rousseau: *The First and Second Discourses*
Du Chatelet: *Commentary on Newton's Principia*
Du Chatelet: *Discourse on Happiness*
Du Chatelet: *Foundations of Physics*
Wollstonecraft: *A Vindication of the Right of Woman*
Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*
Kant: *Critique of Practical Reason*
Kant: *Critique of Judgment*
Kant: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*
Shepherd: *An Essay Upon the Relation of Cause and Effect...*
Shepherd: *Essays on the Perception of the External Universe*