

Continental Rationalism
PHIL 4030
Syllabus
Fall, 2009

Professor Edward Halper
Office: Peabody Hall #128
Hours: 3:15-3:45 T/ 12:15-12:45 R
Other times by appointment
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Objective and Theme: The theme of this course is the knowledge and control of the self. Modern philosophy began in the seventeenth century with Descartes. What makes it “modern” is not simply the period when it was written but the perspective it espouses and the fact that, by and large, we share that perspective. A large part of this perspective is occupied by modern science. Although there are many interpretations of Descartes’ primary goals, he himself claims to be seeking a foundation for science (or knowledge). His foundation is quite different from the Aristotelian/Medieval approach, and he and other continental rationalists reject the notion that science rests on experience. One subject that we come to know is ourselves. Although there is some reflexivity in the rational grasp of our rationality, we also have emotions. The rationalists think that understanding and controlling the emotions is necessary for our freedom. We will explore the connection between the emotions, reason, and freedom for each philosopher.

Students are expected to understand the philosophical problems posed by the course readings and the particular ways that they address them. We are concerned not only with articulating conclusions, but also with understanding and evaluating arguments for these conclusions. You are invited to enter into ways of thinking that are, despite important similarities, radically different from our own. This can be expanding and liberating.

The focus of our attention will be on understanding and assessing the texts. Though undergraduates are not responsible for secondary literature, you may wish to consult it.

The course syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.

Readings: Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy, Passions of the Soul, Notes Against a Certain Program*, “Correspondence (1641-44),” “To Mesland” (1645), “To Clerselier”
Spinoza, *The Ethics*, “Two Criticisms of Descartes,” “The Worm in the Blood,”
“Objections and Replies”
Leibniz, “Descartes and Malebranche” (except for the dialogue), “Hobbes and Spinoza,” “On Freedom and Possibility,” “On Freedom,” “Dialogue on Human Freedom and the Origins of Evil,” Letter to Coste, “On Contingency,” “Primary Truths,” “New System of Nature,” “On Nature Itself”

Texts: Descartes, *Philosophical Ethics and Correspondence*, ed. R. Ariew, Hackett, 2000
Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, trans. E.M. Curley, Princeton University Press, 1994
Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, trans. R. Ariew and D. Garber, Hackett Press, 1989

Grading:	Critiques	Sept. 17, Oct. 1	20%
	Mid-Term	October 22	15%
	Major Paper (8-10 pages)	November 19	35%
	Final Exam	December 11 (12:00-3:00)	30%

Study: Most of your work for this course should lie in the preparation of the daily assignments. You are expected to come to class prepared to ask and answer questions about the readings. As you know, reading philosophy is not like reading other material. You will undoubtedly need to read the assignment more than once. As a minimum, I suggest three readings. Begin by reading a large portion of text quickly; then, carefully prepare the section that will be discussed in class; third, read the material again after class. Read the text critically. Ask yourself questions as you read; try to anticipate questions that I might ask.

Assignments: As you will soon discover, the arguments of the continental rationalists are often complex and difficult. You will find it helpful to try to formulate them in your own terms as you read. Accordingly, I shall ask you to turn in a two to four page textual explication and critique twice during the semester. While this assignment may seem formidable, it only makes formal what you should do anyway to keep up with the course. Each explication should express in your own words an argument that appears in the text, it should contain at least one criticism of the argument, and it should consider whether the author could defend the argument against the criticism. In stating the argument, present the premises and conclusion in a way that shows how the conclusion follows from what is assumed. Do not tell me about the argument or summarize what is said; that would only show me that you have read the text. Rather, try to show that the conclusion is true. To criticize an argument you should look for stated or unstated assumptions that are false or for conclusions that do not follow from what is assumed. Though it is not required, you may find it useful to consult the secondary literature for arguments and criticisms. (All citations *must* be noted.)

You can use a critique as the starting point for your major paper; but the latter ought to address an issue rather than a single text. This course paper should be a substantial piece of work. Whereas the course paper will allow you to pursue a particular problem deeply, the final exam will give you the opportunity to display your knowledge of all the issues covered in the course.

Academic Honesty: All academic work must meet the standards contained in “A Culture of Honesty.” All students are responsible to inform themselves about those standards before performing any academic work.

Selected Bibliography

General

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- Gennaro, Rocco J., and Charles. Huenemann. *New Essays on the Rationalists*. Edited by Rocco J. Gennaro. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Pereboom, Derk. *The Rationalists: Critical Essays on Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz*. Edited by Derk Pereboom. Critical Essays on the Classics. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999.

Descartes

- Chappell, V. C. *Descartes's Meditations Critical Essays*. Edited by V. C. Chappell. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997.
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Spinoza

- Allison, Henry E. *Benedict de Spinoza: An Introduction*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.
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Leibniz

- Cover, J. A., and John O'Leary-Hawthorne. *Substance and Individuation in Leibniz*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Hooker, Michael. *Leibniz: Critical and Interpretive Essays*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
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