

PHL306 (A01):The Rationalists

CRN#22535

MTh 14:30-15:50,ELL 061

Instructor: Dr. Thomas Land

Office: CLE B 331

Office Hours Wed 1:30-3:00 and by appointment

Email tland@uvic.ca

Course Description

This course traces themes in the epistemology and metaphysics of a group of 17th and 18th-century philosophers often classified as Rationalists. Rationalists tend to think that the world is not simply a collection of independent facts, but that these facts are systematically connected and therefore intelligible. Rationalists also often think that reason alone, independently of experience, can discover significant metaphysical truths. We will study central texts of the Rationalist tradition by closely analyzing the arguments proposed for these and other claims. Topics to be discussed include the following: What are the fundamental building blocks of the universe? Does God exist? What is a mind? How is the mind related to the body? Is there a God? Do we have free will? What is space? And how should we go about answering these questions, through reflection alone or by relying on observation and experiment?

on a purely linguistic level. In class, we will work with the original versions (mostly in translation). But for your own reading you are encouraged to consult in addition the simplified and more approachable versions of these texts available <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/texts>. Please note that these do not replace the required textbooks.

Course Format

A mix of lecture and discussion with some group work components. You are expected to come to class prepared to discuss the assigned material in detail. You need to read the material carefully and take good notes. Some of this material is hard, and the readings often dense (especially Spinoza). You need to read slowly and note points that are unclear, seem implausible, etc. To help with this, I will post weekly reading questions. These are meant to focus and guide your reading.

Evaluation

a. Requirements

There are five requirements for this course, which are as follows:

Assignment	Due Date	Weight
Attendance	N/A	5%
Participation	N/A	5%
5 Quote and Comment	Wednesdays at 11:00pm	6% each
Midterm Paper	Released Feb 5 Due: Feb 19	

4	Jan 29, Feb 1	Meditation VI (AW 48-55) Descartes, Correspondence with Elisabeth (A 11-21) Margaret Cavendish, Philosophical Letters, Letter XXXV (A 33-35) Anne Conway, The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy (A 49-76)
5	Feb 5, 8	Spinoza, From the letters to Oldenburg and Meyer (AW 157) Spinoza, Ethics, part I (AW 158-178)
6	Feb 12, 15	Spinoza, Ethics, part I continued
Reading Break—no class on Feb 19 or 22		
7	Feb 26, 29	Spinoza, Ethics, part II (AW 178-201)
8	Mar 4, 7	Spinoza, Ethics, part II continued Spinoza, Ethics, part V, excerpt (AW 201-209)
9	Mar 11, 14	Leibniz, From the Letters to Foucher, Elisabeth and Molanus (AW 226) Leibniz, Discourse on Metaphysics (AW 234-257)
10	Mar 18, 21	Leibniz, New System of Nature (AW 279-284) Leibniz, Primary Truths (AW 275-278) Leibniz, From the Letters to Arnauld (AW 287-4)
11	Mar 25, 28	Leibniz, Monadology (AW 285-293) Cudworth (Lady Masham), Correspondence with Leibniz (A 305)
12	Apr 4, 8	Newton, Natural Philosophy (AW 293-303) Leibniz, From the Letters to Clarke (AW 304-3) Du Chatelet, Foundations of Physics (excerpt)
Exam period		Final paper due April 22

Office Hours

I hold regular office hours. I encourage you to make use of these. No sign-up needed; just drop in.

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struggling in the course. The sooner you do, the better I will likely be able to help you. The default mode
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Using AI without proper acknowledgment constitutes a violation of academic integrity.

Assignments in this course are designed to help you develop your understanding of complex philosophical material. Typical uses of generative AI do not do this (though there are exceptions). For this reason, I discourage you from using it. Exception: Some assignments may ask you to use AI in a particular way.

If you do use AI tools (e.g. to help you get started on an assignment), you need to cite them (see above) and explain how you used them. For example, did you use ChatGPT for outlining or are passages in your paper copied from it (and if so, which ones)?

You are responsible for what you submit. If any AI-generated text turns out to include mistakes, you are responsible for including these in your assignment.

Accessibility PT

