

Philosophy 102
History of Western Philosophy: Modern
Spring, 2015
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:30 – 11:45 (Rockefeller Hall 304)

J.S. Seidman
Rockefeller Hall 401 (fire escape door)
jeseidman@vassar.edu
Ext. 5537

Office Hours: Fridays, 4:30 to 6:00, and by appointment. For brief discussion, I will usually be available immediately after class sessions.

Course Objectives: This course offers an introduction to ‘modern’ Western philosophy, from Descartes through Kant. The course will attempt to trace the development of a single philosophical problematic which shaped the development of modern philosophy, and which is still very much alive today. Descartes establishes this problematic by asking how it is possible for us to *know* anything about the world in which we live, and by offering a series of skeptical arguments, more powerful than any given before, to suggest that we *cannot* know anything about that world. All that we can directly perceive, Descartes argues, is how things *appear* to us – and such appearances are not features of the world, but of our own, subjective experience. Descartes’ skeptical arguments invite us to conceive of subjective experience as a world of its own – an inner realm whose contents we can perceive directly, through introspection. The skeptical problem then becomes: how is it possible for our knowledge to reach beyond the “inner world” of subjectivity and into the “external world” of material objects? Descartes sought to solve this problem and thus to establish a firm foundation for our knowledge about the material world. But philosophers who have followed him have been more impressed with his problem than with the solution Descartes offered.

So, the problematic the course will trace is: how should we conceive of the relation between the mind and the world? How can the apparent *gap* between them be bridged if, as Descartes made it appear, we are trapped behind “the veil of perception?” We will consider the answer offered by the greatest of the British empiricists, David Hume, before jumping back over the English channel to consider the “Copernican Revolution” in philosophy with which Kant sought to address this question in his greatest work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

Along the way, we will consider in passing a series of other questions that fall out of the problematic which we inherit from Descartes: What is it to have a thought? What is it to understand something that someone else says? What is the relation of the mind to the body? How do we so much as arrive at the *idea* of a world that exists independently of our own experiences? What is the nature of “the self?” What makes me the same person now as the person who got out of bed this morning, or as the child who went to school twenty-some years ago? Does everything that happens have a cause? What grounds could we have for believing this?

Text: *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, 2nd edition, ed. Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- **Regular and faithful attendance.** I take this very seriously. Attendance will be taken, and more than one unexcused absences *will* lower your final grade. I will close the door at the start of class.

If you come after the door is closed, you may enter, but *you will be marked absent for that day*. If you need to miss class, be sure to notify me *in advance* in order to avoid penalty.

- **Participation in class discussions.** Philosophy can't be learned passively, by reading or listening to lectures. You learn philosophy by articulating views, probing those views, raising objections to them, refining them in the light of those objections, etc. *Talking* about philosophy with others is one of the only ways to do this. (Writing is the other.) Participation in class discussions is therefore *required*, and will contribute to your final grade. I recognize, however, that students sometimes find it very difficult to speak in the classroom. If you think this is you, please come talk to me about it outside of class. I have a host of strategies to suggest that will make speaking easier. If you find that you simply cannot bring yourself to speak, even with the help of these strategies, *you can make up for this by doing more work on the Moodle discussions* (see below). Class participation plus Moodle discussion will, *considered together*, contribute 25% to your final grade.
- **A note on note-taking:** Please turn off your laptops, iPads, smartphones, etc. when you enter the class. There will always be some who are tempted by the lure of Facebook, IM, e-mail, etc., and their activity distracts others... and me. For what it's worth, several recent studies have shown that students who take notes *by hand* process and recall the information at *far* higher levels than students who take the same notes on a keyboard. Apparently, writing by hand stimulates parts of the brain tied to recall that are not similarly involved by typing. I recognize that there are special reasons for some to use laptops; if you have such a reason, speak to me, and I will make an exception to the policy accordingly.
- **Moodle discussions.** This class will have its own Moodle site. I will create a discussion thread for most (not all) assignments, usually posing one or more questions on the reading. **Before** each class, go to the relevant discussion thread and write at least one paragraph (up to a page) in answer to the question or questions posed. You will all be able to view one another's posts, and are encouraged to respond to one another, in addition to answering the questions posed yourself. Contributions must be posted by **9:00 AM** on the day of the class to which they are relevant, so that I will have time to read them before class. (You are, of course, welcome to add *more* to a thread later on, to continue a previous discussion.)

The purpose of this requirement is three-fold:

- i) It is intended to help you to think about the assignment before class, so that it will be easier for you to ask questions and contribute to discussions in class.
- ii) It is intended to help me to see, before class, what questions a reading has raised for you, how you're interpreting it, what difficulties you're having with it, etc.
- iii) **MOST IMPORTANT:** it is intended to help foster discussions among you, which you can continue off-line, out of class. There is *no better way* to learn philosophy than in discussion with your peers.

I will read, but not grade, individual discussion-threads; at the end of the semester, however, I will look back over all of your discussion-thread answers, and give you a grade based upon them, which will contribute to your final course grade as explained below, under "assessment." **NOTE:** Whereas the grade for your two regular *essays* will be based upon the grasp they display of the material you discuss, their philosophical acuity, precision of expression, and so on, *the grades for your discussion posts will be based entirely on effort*. I do not expect you to have a good grasp of the material before class, when you write these; nor do I expect these to be carefully written, philosophically acute masterpieces. I just want to see you doing your best to come to grips with the material. Students may skip contributing to the discussion thread on up to **three** occasions over the course of the semester without penalty to their grade.

- **Exam:** There will be a mid-term exam. It is tentatively scheduled for **Tuesday, April 7th**, but that date is subject to change. (There will be no final exam.)
- **Essays:** There will be two essays due (apart from the Moodle posts).
 - i) The first essay is due **Friday, Feb. 20th at 10:00AM** (in RH209), and should be approximately 4-6 pages long.
 - ii) The second essay is due ***in class* on Tuesday, May. 12th**, and should be approximately 6-8 pages.

Page-lengths for the essays are *only approximate* (based roughly on double spacing, 12-pt. font and 1" margins).

I will give you a list of topics from which to choose for each of your essays. You are free, though, to pick an essay topic of your own, *provided that I approve it in advance*.

Please see the following, excellent guide to writing a philosophical essay:

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

It's worth reading right away, even before you think about writing essays, as it can help you to figure out how to engage with the texts we'll be reading.

I *strongly* suggest that you avail yourself of one or both of the following resources when writing your papers:

1) *The Writing Center*, located in the Library's *Learning and Teaching Center*, has writing tutors (students) and a writing specialist (faculty) who will meet with you and help you with your essay at any stage of the writing process – from drawing up the outline to editing the final draft. They have walk-in hours, but get busy at crunch times during the term, so it may be best to make an appointment. More info on them is available here:

<http://ltrc.vassar.edu/writingcenter/>

2) *Philosophy Department Interns* are senior philosophy majors, chosen by the department because they are (a) exceptionally good students of philosophy and (b) nice, easy people to talk to. Like the writing center tutors, they will help you think about and write your philosophy papers. The philosophy interns this semester are: Tom Wolfe (thwolfe@vassar.edu) and Michael Sandberg (misandberg@vassar.edu). They will hold regular office hours, which are posted on the door of their office, RH401A.

Your papers will be much better if you get help from these sources, and I'll be able to give you more philosophical comments and fewer comments about how to write.

IMPORTANT: I take essay deadlines very seriously. Unless you have specific permission from me, *in advance*, to hand in an essay late, late essays will be subject to a penalty of one grade increment per day late. I.e., one day late takes you from an A to an A-, two days to a B+, three days to a B, four days to a B-.... On the other hand, if asked sufficiently in advance, I will grant reasonable requests for extensions.

I do not accept essays by e-mail, except in special circumstances.

PREPARING FOR CLASS: In terms of numbers of pages, most assignments will be relatively short. This is to allow you time to read each assignment slowly and carefully, *twice*. Take notes as you go. Write down points at which you disagree with the author's argument. When you hit a passage that you just can't understand, no matter how carefully you re-read it (this will happen plenty), don't worry.

Just write down your questions about it, and then force yourself to push on. *For every assignment, write down at least one question about the reading that you would like to discuss in class.*

ASSESSMENT: There will be no final exam. Your essays and participation + moodle posts will be weighed as follows:

Participation + Moodle posts:	25%
First essay:	20%
Mid-term exam:	25%
Second essay:	30%

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

The following schedule is *tentative* and *subject to change*. The syllabus is fairly ambitious, so it's not unlikely that we'll take longer than the syllabus allows on some topics, and so push other topics back – some of them off the syllabus altogether. (The last couple of Kant readings are optional, and so leave room for other topics to expand.)

Note that the readings are distributed so that there is a reasonable amount of reading *each week*. However, the distribution of the topics makes it unavoidable that there will often be a relatively long reading assignment for the *Thursday* class. It will be prudent, therefore, to do at least part of the reading for the Thursday class during the preceding weekend, in addition to the reading for the Tuesday class.

Week of Jan 25th

1. (Thurs.) **Introduction to course**

DESCARTES, *MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY*

Week of Feb 1st

2. (Tues.) **(Note: both I and II, below, comprise the assignment for Tuesday.)**

I. Descartes' rationalist mathematical physics

- Descartes, *The World* (also called *Treatise on Light*). The text is *not* in A & W. Here is a link to an electronic version of it: <http://www.princeton.edu/~hos/mike/texts/descartes/world/worldfr.htm> The same link can be found in the "Readings" section of Moodle.
- Read chaps. 1-2 carefully
- Read first three paragraphs of chap. 3 carefully, then read rest of chap 3 more quickly
- Read first three paragraphs of chap. 4 carefully, then read rest of chap 4 more quickly
- Read chap. 5
- Read chap. 6 carefully
- Read chap. 7 *up through* the paragraph that begins "Now it is the case that those two rules manifestly follow..." then skim the rest of the chapter
- Skim chap. 8
- Read just the first couple of paragraphs of each of chaps 9-15.

II. Descartes' project: firm foundations for his physics. His method: radical doubt.

- From the *Meditations*: Dedicatory Letter, Meditation I and *first part* of Meditation II, ending immediately before the paragraph that begins "From these considerations I am beginning to know a little better...", pp. 35-37 and pp. 40-45 in A & W. (**NOTE: You can skip the "Preface to the Reader" and the "Synopsis."**)

3. (Thurs.) **The *Cogito* argument, and the argument that the mind is better known to us than the body**

- Meditation II (read *all* of it again)
- Watch the movie, *The Matrix* (on reserve in library, and available for \$2.99 on Amazon Instant Video)

Optional further reading

- Objections and Replies, pp. 76-79 in A & W.

Week of Feb. 8th

4. (Tues.) **Clear and distinct perception as the criterion of truth, and the existence of God**

- Meditation III

Optional further reading

- Objections and Replies, pp. 79-92 in A & W.

5. (Thurs.) **The existence of God (again), and His nature**
- Meditation III (again), Med. IV

Week of Feb 15th

6. (Tues.) **Material Things and “The Cartesian Circle”**
- Meditation V
7. (Thurs.) **The Existence of the Material World, and the “Real Distinction” between mind and body**
- Meditation VI

****Friday, Feb 20th: First essay due at 10:00AM in RH209. (4-6 pages) ****

Week of Feb 22nd

INTERLUDE: A POST-CARTESIAN METAPHYSICAL DISPUTE

8. (Tues.) **The Newton-Leibniz debate on Space and Time**
- Isaac Newton, *Principia Mathematica*, “Scholium to Definitions,” pp. 284-288 in A & W.
 - G. W. Leibniz, excerpts from the Letters to Clark (starting with “Leibniz’s Third Paper,” pp. 297-303 in A & W.

HUME, A TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE and AN INQUIRY CONCERNING THE HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

9. (Thurs.) **Hume’s empiricism: the theory of ideas**
- *Treatise*, Introduction (available on-line via Moodle)
 - *Inquiry*, Sections II, III: pp. 538-542 in A & W.

Week of March 1st

10. (Tues.) **Applying Hume’s empiricism: the bundle theories of substance and self**
- *Treatise*, 1.1.6 (i.e. Book I, part I, section VI) – available on-line via Moodle
 - *Treatise*, 1.4.5, *only up through the end of paragraph 6* (the paragraph that ends “we do not so much as understand the meaning of the question”): pp. 517-18 in A & W.
 - *Treatise*, 1.4.6: pp. 525-531 in A & W.
 - Paragraphs 10-21 of the Appendix to the *Treatise*, contained in footnote at pp. 531-2 in A & W.
11. (Thurs.) **Causal reasoning and the problem of induction**
- *Treatise*, Book I, Part 3, sect 3
 - *Inquiry*, sections IV and V

Week of March 8th

12. (Tues.) **More on the problem of induction – and some possible solutions**
- No new assignment
13. (Thurs.) **Hume's regularist theory of causation**
- *Enquiry*, section VII

[SPRING BREAK]**Week of March 29th**

14. (Tues.) **More on Hume's Regularism**
- *Enquiry*, section VII (again)
15. (Thurs.) *****MID-TERM EXAM (in class)*****

Week of April 5th

16. (Tues.) **Skepticism about the existence of bodies**
- *Treatise*, 1.4.2 – only up through paragraph 25 (the paragraph that begins: "In order to justify this system, there are four things requisite. First, to explain the PRINCIPIUM INDIVIDUATIONIS....")
 - *Treatise*, 1.4.7

KANT, *THE CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON*

17. (Thurs.) **Kant's "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy**
- Selections from the two prefaces to the *CPR*: pp. 717-724 in A & W.

Week of April 12th

18. (Tues.) **The *explanandum*: a priori synthetic judgments**
- §1-3 of the B-version of the Introduction to the *CPR*, handout (*not* included in A & W)
 - The rest of the Introduction, pp. 724-729 in A & W.
19. (Thurs.) **The Transcendental Ideality of Space and Time**
- Transcendental Aesthetic, pp. 729-737 in A & W.

Week of April 19th

20. (Tues.)

The Transcendental Analytic and the Pure Categories of the Understanding

- “On Logic as Such” (stopping at section called “Transcendental Analytic”) p. 737 in A & W.
- “On the Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding,” §13 and §14, B116-B129 (pp. 742-746 in A & W).
- First two syntheses from “A-version” of the Transcendental Deduction: A95-A102 (Handout)

21. (Thurs.)

The Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Categories of the Understanding

- The “Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding,” §15 through §20, Starting B129 – B143 (pp. 746-50 in A & W).

Week of April 26st

22. (Tues.)

Kant’s answer to Hume’s critique of substance

- “On the supreme principle of all synthetic judgments”, pp. 760-61 in A & W.
- From the section entitled the “Analogies of Experience,” the first four paragraphs of the “proof” on p. 768 in A & W -- stopping with the paragraph that ends “...intuition from [that of] others.”
- “First Analogy of Experience,” pp. 769-772 in A & W.

23. (Thurs.)

Kant’s solution to Hume’s problems about causation

- start with the second analogy, at B232 (= p. 772 A & W), and read ONLY UP THROUGH B247 – i.e., stop at end of p. 776 in A & W.

Week of May 3rd

24. (Tues.)

Soul; Personal Identity

- The Paralogisms of Pure Reason, B399-B432 (handout)

25. (Thurs.)

A Neo-Kantian account of perception

- P.F. Strawson, “Perception and Its Objects”

Week of May 10th

26. (Tues.)

Kant and Course Wrap-up

- No new assignment
- ***FINAL ESSAY DUE IN CLASS (6 – 8 pages)*****

For students with disabilities: Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities who are registered with the Office for Accessibility and Educational Opportunity. Students in need of disability accommodations should schedule an appointment with me early in the semester to discuss any accommodations for this course that have been approved by the Office for Accessibility and Educational Opportunity, as indicated in your AEO accommodation letter.