

Empiricism and Early Modern Philosophy



Fall 2024

Tuesdays 1:00–3:50 PM, D 121

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PHIL 251B: Empiricism and Early Modern Philosophy

Course Description

This course will examine the major epistemological and metaphysical themes of empiricism, with a particular emphasis on the philosophies of John Locke and David Hume, their critique of Descartes and Cartesian-inspired rationalism, and their influence on Immanuel Kant. The early modern school of thought develops in tandem with the Scientific Revolution whose discoveries demanded not only a complete overhauling of the medieval worldview but also an investigation into the nature and limits of human understanding. To this end, empiricism radicalized the notion of experience, specifically that of sensory experience, by arguing that it alone is the ultimate source and criterion of knowledge. This reorientation of epistemology led to some of the most lively and controversial debates of the era surrounding innatism, scientific realism, and the metaphysics of objects and personal identity, amongst others. We will also question the canon of early modern philosophy by looking at two women thinkers, Mary Astell and Lady Mary Shephard, and a thinker of African descent, Anton Wilhelm Amo, who are frequently left out of the history books. Their work is not only intrinsically valuable but also sheds unique light on our understanding of the empiricist tradition.

A Breakdown

This course delves into the movement of what historians have retrospectively baptized as “empiricism” and its place in early modern philosophy. In the 16th century, a continuous onslaught of breakthrough discoveries was slowly dismantling the medieval worldview that had governed European life and science ever since the 5th century by putting into doubt its key beliefs about the universe and how knowledge works. While this series of events, collectively referred to as “the Scientific Revolution,” helped set the stage for the early modern period of European history more broadly construed, it also demanded a philosophical framework capable of grounding the new science. Empiricism came to be in this shifting intellectual, sociopolitical, and religious context.

Empiricism has its beginning in two antithetical efforts. The first is the work of Francis Bacon (1561-1626). Extremely critical of the still dominant Aristotelian demonstrative model of science and metaphysical speculation as well, Bacon sketches the groundwork for a new inductive approach that, by basing knowledge on data discovered by experience, would prove pivotal in the development of the modern scientific method. The second is the work of René Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes, too, was searching

for an approach that would be apt for the new science but was led in the opposite direction to propose a rationalism that, on the grounds of axioms verified independently of experience by reason, would lead to absolute certainty in knowledge.

John Locke (1632-1704) agrees with Bacon on experience being the origin of knowledge but also with Descartes on the need for an unassailable epistemic foundation. These motivations come together in his magisterial *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. By rejecting the rationalist view of innatism and positing that the mind at birth is a *tabula rasa*, Locke argues that all knowledge consists in the interplay between first-order sense data and second-order reflection on such data. In so doing, he proposes an indirect realism according to which the external world is always mediated by our sensory experience but can still be known via abstraction, a consequence of which is that we must always remain cautious about the extent to which science and philosophy reveal the true nature of things corporeal and mental. Taking Locke's theory of sensory experience as his point of departure, David Hume (1711-1776) goes on to maintain that empiricism entails a radical skepticism. Whereas Locke accepted the reliability of sensory experience as a medium of truth within certain prescribed limits, Hume claims that not only is our belief in causation is irrational but so are also our beliefs in the existence of mind-independent objects and in that of a permanent, unified self that persists over time.

At the end of the course, we will explore how empiricism was received by a variety of early modern thinkers. Hume famously awakened Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) from his dogmatic slumber, thereby setting in motion the Copernican revolution in philosophy that would forever change the philosophical landscape. Kant's new transcendental idealism would not only give the final death blow to rationalism but would also attack the very presuppositions of empiricism by arguing that (1) the mind is not a *tabula rasa* but comes pre-equipped with the *a priori* forms of sensibility and categories of the understanding and (2) these *a priori* forms and categories make experience itself possible in the first place.

Two other important critics of empiricism, Mary Astell (1666-1731) and Lady Mary Shephard (1777-1847), reveal aspects of the empiricist tradition required for its evaluation as a whole. Defending the rationalist view of innatism and unlocking its emancipatory potential for women's rights, Astell contends that, if adopted, empiricism would inevitably perpetuate the false belief in women's intellectual inferiority to men, hindering any hope for educational and social reform in their favour. At her turn, Shephard questions the ability of empiricism to do justice to the impulse of scientific inquiry and its unwavering realist conviction in reason's ability to know the external world as it truly is. Last but not least, Amo presents us with a fringe case that challenges the canonical narrative of empiricism. Simultaneously a

stauch rationalist and fully committed to the empiricist thesis, his work shows how the retroactive application of dichotomous isms that were never employed at the time can marginalize and exclude voices from the philosophical histories that we tell—voices that, when integrated, make the traditions we study richer and more complex.

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Describe central concepts in empiricist epistemology (e.g., associationism, the copy principle, and the problem of induction).
- Describe central concepts in empiricist metaphysics (e.g., the primary/secondary quality distinction, the psychological continuity thesis, and bundle theory).
- Assess highly influential empiricist theories (e.g., the Baconian method, Lockean epistemology, and Humean skepticism).
- Provide close readings of important philosophical arguments.
- Apply key philosophical concepts, theories, and arguments in conversation and writing.
- Apply the rudiments of the historical-critical method in philosophy.

Texts

All required readings will be made available free of charge on Blackboard.

Background Reading

If you are seeking supplementary texts to help you navigate the world of philosophy, there are many excellent resources available. Both the [*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*](#) and the [*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*](#) are free and reputable. Another valuable resource is the [*Very Short Introductions*](#) book series published by Oxford University Press. All three are written by experts for a general audience, making them ideal for students. They are a great place to get your bearings in the discipline.

Requirements and Grading	Holistic Assessment	10%	
	Midterm Exam	25%	October 17
	Essay	30%	November 17
	Final Exam	35%	To be set by the university

Holistic Assessment

Holistic assessment will be determined not only by regular attendance and contributions to discussions, exercises, and activities but also by preparation, improvement in academic performance throughout the semester, and eagerness to acquire course-specific knowledge and skills.

Exams

The midterm and final exams will consist of short-answer questions on the philosophical concepts, theories, and arguments studied throughout the term. The final exam is non-cumulative.

Essay

The essay will be of a historical and expository nature. You will contextualize and summarize the formal argument from one of our readings. The essay should be approximately 1500 words.

Course Schedule

Unit	Date	Topic
1	Sep. 3	The Motto "Experience First"
2	Sep. 10	Bacon and the New Science <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bacon, <i>The New Organon</i>, Book I, Aphs. I-LXV
3	Sep. 17	The Rationalist Foil <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i>, Meditations 1-4 and 6
4	Sep. 24	The Mind as a <i>Tabula Rasa</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Locke, <i>Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i>, The Epistle to the Reader, Book I, chs. i-iii, and Book II, ch. i
5	Oct. 1	Writing Workshop (Asynchronous Online Class) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jim Pryor, "Guidelines on Writing Philosophy"
6	Oct. 8	Locke's Sense-Data Foundationalism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Locke, <i>Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i>, Book II, chs. ii-xii
	Oct. 15	Midterm Exam
7	Oct. 22	Locke's Agnosticism about Substance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Locke, <i>Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i>, Book II, chs. xxiii and xxvii
8	Oct. 29	Hume's Pragmatist Naturalism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hume, <i>A Treatise of Human Nature</i>, Introduction Hume, <i>Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i>, Sections II-V and VII
9	Nov. 5	Hume's Skepticism Unleashed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hume, <i>A Treatise of Human Nature</i>, Book I, Part IV, secs. ii and vi
	Nov. 12	Reading Week
10	Nov. 19	The Destroyer of All Awakens from a Dogmatic Slumber

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kant, <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i>, Preface (B edition) and Introduction (A edition) • Kant, <i>Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics</i>, Preface
11	Nov. 26	<p>Kant on the Sensible and Conceptual Conditions of Experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kant, <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i>, The Transcendental Aesthetic (B version), §§ 1-3 and §§ 6-8, Introduction to the Idea of a Transcendental Logic, and On the Clue to the Discovery of All Pure Concepts of the Understanding
12	Dec. 3	<p>Empiricism and Its Discontents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Astell, <i>A Serious Proposal for the Ladies</i>, excerpts • Amo, <i>Treatise on the Art of Soberly and Accurately Philosophizing</i>, excerpts • Shephard, <i>Essays on the Perception of an External Universe</i>, Preface, Introductory Chapter, and Chapter 1

Course Procedures and Policies

Professionalism

I require that students maintain a professional attitude toward the class and their peers. This entails doing all readings before each session, paying attention during lectures, participating in discussions, completing in-class exercises, arriving on time, not leaving early, and being respectful.

Email Communication

The subject line should include the course number and the nature of the inquiry. I do my best to respond within 2 weekdays. Please refrain from resending the inquiry or asking about its status before the timeframe has passed. If it has passed without a reply, feel free to reach out with a friendly reminder. Should it be an urgent matter, indicate so in the subject line. That way, I can prioritize getting back to you. Kindly note that UFV's Instructional Responsibilities Policy 46 states that "Instructors are not expected to respond to student emails on weekends or statutory holidays."

AI Use

Students are strictly prohibited from using generative AI for any requirements. In alignment with UFV's Student Academic Misconduct Policy 70, it "shall be an offense knowingly to [...] submit academic work for assessment that was purchased or acquired from another source." This includes work created by generative AI tools.

Missed Exams

Please contact me within 24 hours, if possible. If you are excused (for medical reasons, bereavement, etc., as determined on a case-by-case basis), you must reschedule.

Essay Drafts

I appreciate the eagerness to learn students display when asking for feedback on essay drafts. However, I must respectfully inform you that I cannot provide this service. Reviewing academic work for some students and not others creates an uneven playing field that is contrary to the principle of fairness that I uphold myself to. I encourage you to make use of my office hours for any specific questions or concerns you may have regarding your essays. For general help on essay writing, the [Academic Success Centre](#) offers [individual tutoring](#) and [writing support tools](#). If you need assistance with references, please consult the [Citation Style Guides](#) developed by the [Library](#) or [request an appointment](#) with a librarian.

Late Essays

Any essay handed in late will be penalized by 5% per day for a maximum of 5 days. Late essays submitted after this period will not be accepted, except under extenuating circumstances.

Rewrites

While I admire the dedication to academic success students show when they request a rewrite, I do not permit rewrites of exams or essays. It is inequitable to offer some students and not others the opportunity to improve their grades. I encourage you to make use of my office hours throughout the term for any specific questions or concerns you may have regarding course material, learning outcomes, and requirements. Once again, the [Academic Success Centre](#) and the [Library](#) offer personalized support in the form of [tutoring](#) and [consultation](#), [writing support tools](#), and [Citation Style Guides](#) to aid you in your studies. If you take advantage of all the resources available to you, you will be prepared for each requirement by its scheduled time or due date.

Grade Grubbing

Grade grubbing is when a student requests, threatens, or pleads for a grade increase for no legitimate academic reason. Instances include asking or begging for a grade bump, seeking preferential treatment, disputing grades on subjective rather than objective criteria, or seeking to complete requirements long after they were scheduled or due. The course syllabus clearly articulates students' responsibilities in demonstrating learning outcomes through the listed requirements, the grading scheme, and policies regarding missed exams or late essays. There will be no grade changes that are not rightfully earned.



"The human understanding is like an uneven mirror receiving rays from things and merging its own nature with the nature of things, which thus distorts and corrupts it."

— Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, Aph. XLI