Rationalism and Early Modern Philosophy

Winter 2022

Fridays 1:00 PM–3:50 PM, A 402

Dr. Joseph Carew
Contact: joseph.carew@ufv.ca
Website: www.josephcarew.com

The University of the Fraser Valley is located on the unceded territory of the Stó:lō peoples. We gratefully acknowledge our ability to live and work on the traditional territory.

PHIL 251A: Rationalism and Early Modern Philosophy

Course Description

This course will explore the major metaphysical and epistemological themes of rationalism, focusing on how the early modern school of thought originated in the work of René Descartes, itself a response to problems that the Scientific Revolution posed to the medieval worldview. While the main doctrine of rationalism is that we can gain absolute certainty in knowledge by using reason independently of experience, each representative's own employment of pure reason leads them, via a critical engagement with Descartes' philosophy, to advance a unique theory of reality. We encounter, amongst others, the following views: mind and body are ontologically distinct; all matter is alive; the universe is God; the spark of the divine spirit is within everything; and we live in the best of all logically possible worlds. In studying rationalism, we will also rethink the canonical narrative of the tradition, which one-sidedly focuses on the contributions of three male thinkers: the aforementioned Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. To achieve this, we will display its rich diversity of voices by examining four women thinkers—Elisabeth of Bohemia, Margaret Cavendish, Anne Conway, and Mary Astell—who are, even though they are pivotal to its history, all too often overshadowed if not outright ignored.

A Breakdown

In the aftermath of the rapid advances of the then-emerging science of what we would now refer to as "classical mechanics," the medieval worldview that had dominated Europe from the 5th to 15th century, the so-called Middle Ages, was crumbling. The Scientific Revolution was overthrowing long-held truths about the universe and our place in it. The way was thus paved for the early modern period of European history and the need arose for a new philosophy that could provide a framework for the new physics, specifically for its observational method and mathematization of nature, given how inapt Aristotelianism and scholasticism were proving for the task.

It is in this tumultuous intellectual, sociopolitical, and religious context that rationalism came to be. It begins with the work of René Descartes (1596–1650). In his search for an unassailable epistemic foundation for the new physics, Descartes places the rational subject in a state of hyperbolic doubt in the hope of discovering a set of axioms upon which he might be able to construct a sturdy, irrefutable philosophical system. In so doing, Descartes comes to argue for two core theses, the first epistemological and the second metaphysical. (1) Reason, when used independently of experience, is the ultimate source

and criterion of knowledge. (2) Reality is composed of two ontologically distinct substances: mind, whose thought processes are spontaneous and immaterial, and matter, inert bodies governed by iron-clad physical laws that are ultimately mathematical in nature. While the irreducibility of the mind to matter saves the human being from becoming a part of a deterministic universe, the Cartesian system had the effect of putting a divide between us and the external world—the so-called "mind-body problem"—that philosophers and scientists alike have been wrestling with ever since. But Descartes also thereby introduced epistemological and metaphysical doctrines that would, retroactively, become the founding gesture of rationalism as a school of thought: (1) the privileging of intuition and deduction over the senses; (2) the attainability of absolute certainty in philosophical matters; (3) the inherently logical structure of reality; and (4) the need for a theory of everything via a new metaphysics of substance.

While the rationalists following in Descartes' footsteps all share these four concerns, the majority are unconvinced by his metaphysics. In particular, most take issue with the unbridgeable gap between the human being and the world that his substance dualism generates—an issue already highlighted by Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618–1680) in her correspondence with Descartes. As an answer to this loss of unity with the world, the rationalists would develop different and competing metaphysical visions. This course will concentrate on a selection of these philosophical systems. Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673) contends that matter *qua* substance must itself be self-moving rather than inert, thereby espousing a vitalist materialism that denies a radical distinction between the animate and the inanimate as well as between mind and matter. Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) maintains the monistic position that nature is the one and only substance, going so far as to advocate a naturalistic pantheism that makes the universe itself into an impersonal God and turns everything into a product of its deterministic, mechanical nexus. In contrast, Anne Conway (1631–1679) articulates an alternative form of monism, a type of panentheism according to which the one and only substance is an immaterial vital force: the non-mechanical divine spirit of God himself, a spark of whose life resides in all his creations, whether they be stones, animals, or people, and places within them a striving towards perfection to be freely realized over infinite eons. At his turn, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) submits that the world was created by an infinitely wise and personal God who designed it in such a way that it is the best of all logically possible worlds—that is to say, one in which every entity and event has a place justified in the grand scheme of things and there is a pre-established harmony of mind and body.

At the end of the course, we will take up several threads inchoately present throughout rationalism as a school of thought and required to evaluate the tradition as a whole. We will first explore its ambivalent

legacy. Rationalism was a major source of inspiration for equalitarian social reform, as evidenced most powerfully by Mary Astell's (1666–1731) Cartesian-inspired feminism. That being said, many rationalists also marshalled their philosophical systems to legitimize the exclusion and marginalization of minorities. We will conclude by discussing two potentially devastating critiques of rationalism from the end of early modern philosophy: Voltaire's (1694–1778) satirization of how it normalizes evil as a necessary feature of the world and Friedrich Jacobi's (1743–1819) accusation that the only rationally consistent philosophical system is Spinozism, which entails, by denying human freedom, nihilism—a term he popularized long before Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). In this way, we shall see how a story can be told from Descartes leading to Nietzsche and, by consequence, contemporary continental philosophy.

Learning Outcomes

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

- Describe central concepts in rationalist metaphysics (e.g., the primary/secondary quality distinction, necessity vs. contingency, and theodicy).
- Describe central concepts in rationalist epistemology (e.g., innate ideas, the clarity and distinctness rule, and the principle of sufficient reason).
- Assess highly influential rationalist theories (e.g., Cartesianism, Spinozism, and Leibnizianism).
- 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

The textbook listed below is required and is the basis for coursework. It is available through the bookstore. Other readings will be made available on Blackboard.

- Lisa Shapiro and Marcy P. Lascano, eds. *Early Modern Philosophy: An Anthology*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2022.

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%	
	Exegetical Essay	20%	March 4
	Take-home Midterm	20%	March 18
	Argumentative Essay	30%	April 8
	Final Exam	20%	April 30

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.

Exegetical 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 1250 words.

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.

Argumentative Essay

The second essay will be a reflective essay that deals with a topic of your choice and argues for your own position on this topic. I will circulate a list of topics, although you are encouraged to choose a topic of your own in consultation with me if there is a specific one you would like to explore further. This essay can be a place for you to investigate your philosophical interests and existential concerns through the course material. The essay will be 1500 words.

Course Schedule

Unit	Date	Topic
1	Jan. 14	A Philosophy to Rival Mathematics
2	Jan. 21	The Scientific Revolution • Copernicus, *The Commentariolus*, excerpts • Copernicus, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, excerpts • Descartes, *Discourse on Method*
3	Jan. 28	Descartes' Dreams of Doubt and Certainty • Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditations 1-4
4	Feb. 4	Descartes' Substance Dualism and Its Critics • Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditations 5-6 • Princess Elizabeth, *Correspondence with Descartes*, excerpts
5	Feb. 11	Cavendish's Vitalist Materialism • Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, excerpts. • Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, excerpts
6	Feb. 18	Spinoza's Naturalistic Pantheism • Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I
	Feb. 24	Reading Week
7	Mar. 4	Spinoza's God's-Eye View of Reality • Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II
8	Mar. 11	Conway's Panentheism of the Divine Spirit • Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*
9	Mar. 18	Leibniz' Modal Metaphysics • Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Sections 1-8 • Leibniz, *The Monadology*, §§31-57

10	Mar. 25	Leibniz's Concurrentism of Virtual Realities • Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Sections 9-15, 20-22, and 30-37 • Leibniz, *The Monadology*, §§1-30 and 58-90
11	Apr. 1	A Tradition Torn Between Oppression and Liberation • Spinoza, *Ethics* and *Political Treatise*, excerpts • Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, excerpts • Recommended: Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, chapter 3 • Recommended: Sharp, "Eve's Perfection: Spinoza on Sexual (In)Equality"
12	Apr. 8	The Scylla of Evil and the Charybdis of Nihilism • Voltaire, *Candide*, Chapters 1-6 • Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*, excerpts • Jacobi, *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn*, excerpts

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.

"Logical proofs are the eyes of the mind,
whereby it sees and observes things."

— Spinoza, *Ethics*, Book V, Prop. 23 Schol.