

INSTRUCTOR: Colin McLear  
COURSE: PHIL 871  
TIME: M 3:30-6:05 pm  
LOCATION: Oldfather Hall 1007  
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OFFICE HOURS: M/W 1:30-2:30 pm

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# KANT & EARLY MODERN PHILOSOPHY

The essence of a thing consists in its form (*forma dat esse rei*, as it is said by the Scholastics), insofar as it may be known through reason... Upon these forms rests the possibility of all synthetic cognition a priori, whose possession we are indeed unable to deny.

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On a Recently Prominent Tone of Superiority in Philosophy, Ak 8:404  
IMMANUEL KANT

## Course Overview

This course surveys views of some key figures in early modern (17th—18th century) European philosophy, up to and including Kant. Our discussion begins with the enormously influential theories of René Descartes, specifically his theories of mind and nature, and examines subsequent reactions, criticisms, and (partial) defenses of his views in the writings of other prominent philosophers. The course culminates with an analysis of central themes in Immanuel Kant's "critical" philosophical work. In particular, this course focuses on issues surrounding the transformation of notions of scientific explanation in the early modern period. We will start with scholastic Aristotelian conceptions of scientific explanation, see how these are critiqued and transformed by Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz, savagely criticized by Hume, and ultimately given new form by Kant.

## Course Objectives

Upon completion of this course students should have a good grasp of both the broad outline of central philosophical arguments in the early modern period, as well as the historical context in which these doctrines were articulated. This includes being able to (i) articulate some of the central metaphysical, epistemological, and scientific disputes in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth-century; (ii) clearly explain the different positions of the figures discussed in the course, as well as their dialectical context; (iii) articulate Kant's proposed resolutions of these disputes.

## Course Materials

The following books are required for this course:

- Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, volume II
- Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*
- Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

- Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*
- Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*

Other readings will be posted on the [course website](#) under “[Assignments](#).”

## Course Requirements

- **Preparation:** You are expected to attend every class meeting fully prepared to discuss each assigned reading, to submit written work punctually, and to offer thoughtful and constructive responses to the remarks of your instructor and your classmates. Make sure that you bring the relevant readings with you to every lecture class. I further expect you to treat both the texts at hand and your classmates’ ideas with openness and respect.
- **Attendance:** Attendance is required. You are also expected to attend every section meeting. 1/2 a letter grade will be deducted from your final course grade for every absence from section after your fifth.
- **Website:** We will use a course website for all materials. The site address is: [phil871.colinmclear.net](http://phil871.colinmclear.net). Upcoming assignments and readings will be posted there. Please let me know if you have any problems. Technical glitches, computer malfunctions and crashing hard drives are not excuses for failing to complete work in this class.
- **Format for Papers:** Please submit work as a .docx or .rtf file. All work must be typed. I will not accept any handwritten work aside from that we do in class. Your papers should be in 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced with margins set to one inch on all sides. Your name, my name, the date and assignment should appear in the top left hand corner of the first page. Your last name and page number must appear in the top right hand corner on each subsequent page. Please staple or paperclip hard copies of papers and drafts. You are responsible for the presentation of your papers.
- **Late Work:** Late papers and assignments will standardly be marked down by 1/3 of a letter grade for each day the work is late (for example, from A- to B+, from B+ to B, and so on).

## Evaluation

### Two Essays: 60%

- Explain and critically assess a philosophical argument. Topics will be suggested. Approximately 4-6 pages (1200-2000 words). Graduate students taking the course will instead write a research paper (6-8000 words) in two drafts.

### Weekly reading responses: 10%

- (500 words; posted on our public course blog by 8 pm the evening before class meets + 250-word responses to a classmate’s post posted by class time): Your reading responses should detail your observations about a primary text (though one can also relate this to secondary readings). They are not summaries. Move to delimit 1-2 major points or ideas from the reading and discuss them. What do you find interesting or compelling? What do you find logically problematic?

In addition to posting your reading response, you are also required to respond to one of your classmate's posts by the start of class the following day. Your response should engage one or more of the points raised by your classmate. It is not enough to simply say that you agree or disagree with the author of the post. You must explain how your views intersect with the ones presented. Did the post make you think about a reading in a different way? Why? How? What did you find particularly interesting or compelling about the response?

#### **Weekly reading précis: 20%**

- Write a précis addressing a particular secondary text assigned for the week (this does not include my notes). A précis is a rhetorical exercise that asks you to summarize a text, including the claim/argument, supporting evidence, purpose, and audience in 4 sentences. For a helpful example of the form, see: [http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/rhetorical-precis/sample/peirce\\_sample\\_precis\\_click.html](http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/rhetorical-precis/sample/peirce_sample_precis_click.html)

#### **Participation: 10%**

- The participation grade takes into account your attendance in class and section as well as the quantity and quality of your participation.

### Policies

- **Academic Integrity:** All the work you turn in (including papers, drafts, and discussion board posts) must be written by you specifically for this course. It must originate with you in form and content with all contributory sources fully and specifically acknowledged. Make yourself familiar with UNL's Student Code of Conduct and Academic Integrity Code, available online. **In this course, the normal penalty for any violation of the code is an "F" for the semester.** Violations may have additional consequences including expulsion from the university. Don't plagiarize – It just isn't worth it.
- **University Policies:** This instructor respects and upholds University policies and regulations pertaining to the observation of religious holidays; assistance available to physically handicapped, visually and/or hearing impaired students; plagiarism; sexual harassment; and racial or ethnic discrimination. All students are advised to become familiar with the respective University regulations and are encouraged to bring any questions or concerns to the attention of the instructor.
- **ADA:** In compliance with University policy and equal access laws, I am available to discuss appropriate academic accommodations that may be required for students with disabilities. Students are encouraged to register with Student Disability Services to verify their eligibility for appropriate accommodations.
- **Miscellaneous:** Please turn off cell phones, beeping watches, and other gadgets that make noise before entering our classroom. Absolutely no texting is permitted during class. I will subtract up to five points from your participation grade each and every time your phone rings or I see you texting during class.

## Further Resources

- **Jargon:** It's important to be on top of the technical terms used by philosophers. Please ask for clarification of terms in class. You can also consult Jim Pryor's online "Philosophical Terms and Methods."
- **Help with writing:** Papers should adhere to some consistent practice of footnoting and citation (Chicago, MLA, etc.). I don't really mind which one you use as long as you are consistent. On writing a philosophy paper, there is no better on-line guide than Jim Pryor's. Please consult it. Hacker's A Writer's Reference is also extremely helpful. Useful online writing help may be found at the Purdue Online Writing Lab at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Writing Center can provide you with meaningful support as you write for this class as well as for every course in which you enroll. Trained peer consultants are available to talk with you as you plan, draft, and revise your writing. Please check the Writing Center website for locations, hours, and information about scheduling appointments.

- **Reference:** The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <http://plato.stanford.edu> is an excellent online resource.