

Jason Potter

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Web Site: <http://philophizer.com/index.html> (Please note: all handouts, along with lecture notes, readings and lecture plan, and this syllabus, are available at this web site or on the Canvas site.)

Office Hours: 2:00-3:15 P.M. T-Th, in HLMS W137 (or via Zoom by appointment).

Course Description

A survey of seminal European philosophical works of the 17th and 18th centuries, including writings by Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, Berkeley, and Kant. This will take us from Rationalism, through Empiricism to Idealism, and then on to Kant's Transcendental Idealist cure for the shortcomings he found in each of these traditions. Overall, we will concentrate on three central issues: the nature of reality; the nature of mind; and the nature of knowledge. This will lead us into various more specific topics, such as: appearance vs. reality; substance and attribute; the metaphysics of God; causality; self-consciousness, consciousness, and personal identity; the nature of mental representation (ideas); the mind-body problem; experience vs. reason; idealism vs. realism; and skepticism vs. certainty.

Course Objectives

There are many reasons to study early modern philosophy. At the very least, the philosophical works you will read in this course form key links in the chain of thought which led to the modern, western, scientific account of the world and its fundamentally secular approach to human life. While there are many high ambitions lurking, I do have a set of "least" ambitions for our time and efforts here:

1. That you learn to identify arguments, the chief tool of philosophical work.
2. That you learn to express your thoughts clearly.
3. That you make progress in the fine art of comprehending and then assessing, analyzing and criticizing philosophical texts.
4. That you leave here knowing: a) what, generally speaking, the thinkers from Descartes to Kant were trying to accomplish; b) some of the tools they invented for the task; and c) why otherwise normal people like myself would boldly claim we cannot *fully* understand the modern, specifically western political, cultural, intellectual worlds if we do not understand what Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, Berkeley and Kant thought about the questions and problems we will study together in this course.

Required Texts

1. Rene Descartes, *Meditations, Objections and Replies* (available in Canvas and Course Website).
2. Gottlieb Leibniz, *Monadology*, translated by Simon Sparks (available in Canvas and Course Website).
3. John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Abridged/Edited with Introduction by Kenneth Winkler.
4. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Second Edition.
5. George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, edited by Robert M. Adams.
6. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Marcus Weigelt, Penguin Classics.

Reading assignments are available online through the *Readings and Lectures* page schedule on the website (and in Canvas), along with daily lecture topics and assignment dates.

Supplementary Packet (available on the website and in Canvas), containing: (i) helpful hints for writing philosophy papers; (ii) a list of abbreviations used in grading papers; (iii) a Checklist to be filled out before submission of any essay assignment; (iv) a model history-of-philosophy paper, and (v) a very brief but amazingly informative survey of informal logic.

Course Requirements & Percentage of Final Grade

(1) Attendance (10%) & Class Participation ¹ + Short In-class Reading Quizzes ² (10%)	20%
(2) 1 In-Class Group Reading Report ³	5%
(3) Midterm Exam (in-person)	25%
(4) Paper	25%
(5) Final Exam (in-person)	25%

Extremely Generous Rewrite Option:

You may rewrite your first paper, using criticisms and suggestions on the graded paper as a guide, and then turn it in at the final exam date for the course; the grade you receive on the revised paper will replace the grade you originally received. Never *assume* that just

¹Not everyone is amenable to public speaking and discussion. Since you have all taken at least two philosophy courses before, you know that philosophy is a discussion sport. If you can bring yourself to speak in class, you will find it easier to understand the issues and arguments, largely because we often do not know what we think until we try to say it or write it. It is also much more likely that I will detect and retain an awareness of your development as a student of philosophy, and as a thinking being, if you express yourself in person. However, I will not consciously use class participation to decide a grade. Class attendance and performance on "in-class reading quizzes" do count, and reap an easy reward. Those who attend all but 2 classes or less get an automatic 100 for this 10% of the course. If you miss *any* classes beyond 2, this part of your overall grade begins to drop from 100 by 5 points for every class missed until you reach an F grade for that 10%.

² To be explained in class on the first day.

³ To be explained in class on the first day.

because you make changes to the original paper, I will necessarily raise your grade. I may notice deficiencies I missed in the first reading. Therefore, if you choose to revise the paper, make a serious stab at those recommended revisions!

Notes on Course Requirements:

(1) There will be a series of very short, in-person Reading Quizzes that are designed to encourage students to complete the reading(s) on which the class session will be focused. These all consist of three questions and are Pass/Fail. Full credit is only received for answering at least two of them correctly and goes toward your Participation Grade (10% of the final course grade).

(2) The first major assignment consists in an In-Person Midterm Exam⁴ (samples of which will be provided through Canvas to familiarize students with its format). The former will cover the Descartes and Leibniz Units *plus* Locke's attack on the doctrine of innate ideas. To help students prepare for the Midterm and Final Exams, there will be a series of **Advisory Study Guide/Worksheet quizzes**. These are *not required*, but completion will give each student access to the *answer sheets* for each, and those answer sheets constitute excellent preparation for the kinds of questions that will be asked on both Midterm and Final Exams. Each Advisory Study Guide/Worksheet is best completed by class time on the date it is due, but will remain available for exactly *one week* after the due date and then the quiz will be closed permanently. Any submissions received before the closing date will be graded and the answer sheet will be provided to the student responsible for the submission. NOTE: These study guide/worksheets *do not count for or against your final grade in this class* (the purpose in grading them is to give the student some idea where they were on the right track, and where they were not!).

(3) The Semester Paper will be one of a list of assigned possible topics drawn from our readings in Descartes, Locke and Leibniz and Hume. Paper topics to choose from will be made available through the associated Canvas assignment folder and on the course website by February 24, 2026. The paper must be typed and **stored in MS Word word processing format** before being uploaded in Canvas. **If you use Pages, export the original to MS Word before uploading the result of the export process. If you work in Google Docs, the procedure is this: download the Google document in MS Word format to your hard drive, and then upload that file.** Do not send me essays in PDF format, as these are unnecessarily difficult to comment on and my handwriting is too terrible to grade hard copies based on PDFs! The paper is due on March 27, 2026 by 11:59 p.m. on that date. Late papers, other things being equal, are a Really Bad Thing as it makes it harder for me to get papers graded, commented upon, and returned (which will be needed if you choose to rewrite the semester paper for a better grade as I give considerable advice about where and how the essay can be improved).

(4) Since a philosophical essay is *not* like other kinds of essays you may have written in college (or elsewhere), it is strongly recommended that before preparing your papers, you read very carefully the helpful hints for doing philosophy papers, a checklist you should go through before submission of any paper for this course, a list of abbreviations I use in grading papers, and a model history-of-philosophy paper (all to be found in the supplementary packet on the course website).

(3) The final exam will be a comprehensive exam covering the entire course and will be taken in-person on the date determined by the Registrar (which won't be settled for a few weeks, but be known by the third or fourth week of the semester). It will consist of 10 yes/no questions, 10 short-answer questions, and one long essay question (taken from four possible essay questions given to the class in advance of the final exam meeting). A sample of such a final (but for PHIL3000) will be provided in Canvas.

Clarifications, Rules of the Road, Regrettable Necessities & Errata

(1) What your grade means:

A: Superior work; **B:** Good work; **C:** Work with some strengths, balanced against clear weaknesses; **D:** Work with few strengths, many weaknesses; **F:** Work with no strengths not offset by clear and compelling weaknesses.

(2) Late papers are a Really Bad Thing. The usual excusing conditions must exist if I am to make exceptions in your case.

(3) Breaches of academic honesty will receive the harshest allowable university penalty. However, I do think it is worth noting that to cheat in philosophy is to cheat yourself, since you undermine the potential development of your own mind (which *is the point of any education worth having*).

(4) Handwritten notetaking improves retention and depth of understanding, and for that reason, laptops are not permitted except for those with a disability accommodation. I suggest you get a notebook in which you keep your class notes, but tablets with touchscreen-based handwriting are permitted. Cell phones are to be kept in silent mode & put away during our class meetings.

(5) Reading assignments in philosophy tend to be both challenging and time consuming. You might want to take this into account when planning your spring semester. This course is as difficult as any technical course you take (calculus, for example). Do not assume it is a cakewalk ... you will regret that assumption later.

(6) Readings should be done prior to the class for which they are assigned. If this involves a range of days, you should have everything read by the first day in the range.

(7) Total points possible for the course: 100.

(8) What to expect from me: prompt and honest feedback, clear lectures, sufficient contact outside class (e.g., office hours, e-mail, Canvas, and/or the course website).

(9) (9) Late-arriving assignments get, without a doctor's note or one of the usual excusable conditions, a half-letter-grade deduction (5 pts on a 100-pt scale). Any assignment makeup must be completed and turned in within three weeks of the original assignment due date.

(10) I am happy to discuss assignment grades with you after they are returned, but let's talk during office hours or on the phone.

(11) If you need to request an extension on an essay, the chance to take a quiz you missed, hope to be excused for one or more

⁴ Students with extended-time accommodations need to contact me so we can arrange for the Midterm and Final Exams to be taken at the Testing Center in the Case Building.

absences, or to make me aware of a situation in your personal life that you think I should be aware of, if you prefer to email me rather than speak to me in person, use the Canvas email system, **not my CU Boulder email address**. I get too many emails each day from non-university sources, whereas, Canvas emails come through and are always from students (rather than from spammers, companies I do business with, friends of mine, etc.). This makes it very unlikely that I will miss an important message from you sent through Canvas email. In cases where you need to reach me **very soon/immediately, just text me at 720-252-0643**. That will more consistently get my attention short of actually coming to talk to me in person.

(12) This syllabus is subject to revision.

Assignment Schedule

Quizzes/Group Reports: See Schedule of Lecture Topics, Readings and Dates for Papers, Quizzes, Group Reports and Exams.
Midterm Exam: In-person on March 24 (on Descartes, Leibniz, & Locke Units).
Paper: Topics available Feb. 24 in Canvas, paper due at 11:59 p.m. March 26 in Canvas.
Final Exam: In-person taken in HLMS E1B01 (2.5 hours on date TBD)
Revised Paper: Optional Revised Paper due April 26 by 11:59 p.m. in the appropriate Canvas Assignments folder.

One Last Thing

Since I find it very helpful to speak with each of you at least once, there will be required, short (10-minute) meetings during office hours the first three weeks of the semester to discuss your progress. I will bring a sign-up sheet with me to class during the first week so you can arrange a time and date that suits you. Don't put this off too long, please.

Basic Needs: I believe that in order to learn, students need to have their basic needs met: food to eat and a safe place to live. If you're having trouble with either, the campus has some resources for you. If you're facing food insecurity, reach out to food@colorado.edu, and they will work with you to find food resources. If you're having trouble paying rent or facing housing insecurity, you can get in touch with these advocates: [Boulder County Housing & Human Services](http://BoulderCountyHousing.com) at 303-441-1000 or [Off-campus Housing](http://Off-campusHousing.com) at och@colorado.edu & 303-492-7053. For assistance with landlord-tenant matters, contact [Mediation Services](http://MediationServices.com) at 303-441-4364 & mediation@bouldercolorado.edu. A [Student Emergency Fund](http://StudentEmergencyFund.com) has been created to support students experiencing a temporary financial hardship as a result of COVID-19. Other campus resources are available here (including mental health resources and [free therapy](http://free.therapy.com)). [Case manager resources](http://CaseManagerResources.com) are also available to help you find appropriate campus and local resources. A 24/7 [Suicide Prevention hotline](http://SuicidePreventionHotline.com) is available for you: just call 303-492-2277. Please don't hesitate to also approach me if you have trouble negotiating these resources.

Campus-Wide Policies

ACCOMMODATION FOR DISABILITIES

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit your accommodation letter from Disability Services to your faculty member in a timely manner so that your needs can be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities in the academic environment. Information on requesting accommodations is located on the [Disability Services website](http://DisabilityServices.com). Contact Disability Services at 303-492-8671 or dsinfo@colorado.edu for further assistance. If you have a temporary medical condition or injury, see [Temporary Medical Conditions](http://TemporaryMedicalConditions.com) under the Students tab on the Disability Services website.

CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR

Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Those who fail to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with race, color, national origin, sex, pregnancy, age, disability, creed, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, veteran status, political affiliation or political philosophy. Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student's legal name. I will gladly honor your request to address you by an alternate name or gender pronoun. Please advise me of this preference early in the semester so that I may make appropriate changes to my records. For more information, see the policies on [classroom behavior](http://classroombehavior.com) and the [Student Code of Conduct](http://StudentCodeofConduct.com).

HONOR CODE

All students enrolled in a University of Colorado Boulder course are responsible for knowing and adhering to the Honor Code. Violations of the policy may include: plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, lying, bribery, threat, unauthorized access to academic materials, clicker fraud, submitting the same or similar work in more than one course without permission from all course instructors involved, and aiding academic dishonesty. All incidents of academic misconduct will be reported to the Honor Code (honor@colorado.edu; 303-492-5550). Students who are found responsible for violating the academic integrity policy will be subject to nonacademic sanctions from the Honor Code as well as academic sanctions from the faculty member. Additional information regarding the Honor Code academic integrity policy can be found at the [Honor Code Office website](http://HonorCodeOffice.com).

SEXUAL MISCONDUCT, DISCRIMINATION, HARASSMENT AND/OR RELATED RETALIATION

The University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder) is committed to fostering a positive and welcoming learning, working, and living environment. CU Boulder will not tolerate acts of sexual misconduct intimate partner abuse (including dating or domestic violence), stalking, protected-class discrimination or harassment by members of our community. Individuals who believe they have been subject to misconduct or retaliatory actions for reporting a concern should contact the Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC) at 303-492-2127 or cureport@colorado.edu. Information about the OIEC, university policies, [anonymous reporting](#), and the campus resources can be found on the [OIEC website](#).

Please know that faculty and instructors have a responsibility to inform OIEC when made aware of incidents of sexual misconduct, discrimination, harassment and/or related retaliation, to ensure that individuals impacted receive information about options for reporting and support resources.

RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to deal reasonably and fairly with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance. In this class, missed assignments, class sessions or scheduled exams that result from religious observances will be accommodate *so long as I am warned of the time conflict at least two weeks in advance of the assignment, class session or scheduled exam*.

See the [campus policy regarding religious observances](#) for full details.