**Syllabus – Philosophy 376 -- Early Modern European Philosophy -- Spring Semester 2025** – 4 Credits

Professor Tom Atchison

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Office hours: Tuesday 11-2 (in my office, but I’ll also have a Zoom meeting open) and by appointment

**Course Objectives**

1. To learn something about the philosophical views, ideas, and arguments put forward by a variety of European philosophers of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries.
2. To consider various interpretations and criticisms of their works and of their contemporary relevance.
3. To improve students’ ability to develop and defend interpretations of their own.
4. To improve students’ ability to criticize and assess the views of these philosophers.

**Course Description (**See below for the official course catalog description)**)**

The philosophers of the early modern period represent a fairly major shift in the outlook of European culture. After many centuries in which the authority of the Catholic Church and the philosophy of Aristotle largely shaped people’s thinking, a revolutionary new science was developing, the Church was fragmenting, old skeptical ideas were being revived and new worlds were being discovered (geographically and astronomically). The philosophers of the period made heroic efforts to defeat skepticism, to provide new foundations for human knowledge, to reconcile the new scientific spirit with religious belief, to develop rigorous methods for the pursuit of science, and (eventually) to apply these new methods to the problems of ethics and politics. In the process they framed questions and developed concepts that still dominate philosophical inquiry and discussion in the global North– questions about the sources and limits of human knowledge, about the possibility of proving (or at least providing evidence for) the existence of God, about the relations of our minds to our bodies, about the grounds of moral judgment and of political authority. At the same time, some of these philosophers played a less admirable role in the development of ideologies justifying European colonialism and slavery.

Our first job will be simply to understand the discussions of these issues provided in their works and in the writings of some contemporary critics. But I also want students to work on developing their own views about these issues and on articulating reasoned defenses of their opinions.

**Course Materials**

I have not ordered any texts through the bookstore. If it weren't so expensive, I would have ordered The Great Conversation, Volume II (8th edition) by Norman Melchert. As it is, I will make some chapters from the book available in PDF form. This book provides an overview of the ideas and of some of the social context of the thinkers we will be studying. It also contains the entire text of Descartes’ Meditations on First Philosophy and many excerpts from other important works. But we will need to read more than what Melchert provides. Since virtually all the texts of the philosophers of this period are available online, it seemed to me better not to order a large number of those texts in book form (or a fat anthology). But those of you who don’t like to read things online (and don’t want to have to print out many pages of text) might want to get hold of hard copies of those works. They are all available in inexpensive editions, and often can be found for pennies at the used bookstores near the University of Minnesota (or from online booksellers). There are excellent versions available at www.earlymoderntexts.com a website developed by Professor Jonathan Bennett. Prof. Bennett has devoted his retirement to rewriting these texts in modernized and somewhat simplified prose, so that they are easier for contemporary readers to understand. More conventional versions are available on other websites. I would be happy to provide advice about what editions and translations to try to find if you are interested.

I will also provide copies of some more contemporary writings that interpret and criticize these works: *The Racial Contract*, by Charles Mills and *Decolonizing Freedom* by Allison Weir

Please bring the assigned reading to class with you each week. (We will often spend a good deal of our class time looking at the texts.)

Please make sure your Metro State email account is working and check regularly for class related emails.

Class website: I maintain a simple website where I post course handouts and information. The URL is <http://www.woldww.net/classes/> . This is where you will find links to online versions of the specific texts assigned each week and to other resources.

**Conduct of the Course**

Class time will be devoted largely to discussion, some in small groups, some all together. I will occasionally lecture, more often I will answer questions as they come up in discussion, and even more often I will try to help you figure out how to answer your questions yourself.

Much of our discussion will focus on understanding and evaluating the texts. This will work well only if you have done the assigned reading carefully -- often twice or three times -- and given it some thought. In philosophy we are interested not in the information that can be extracted from a text, nor simply in the conclusions or opinions that an author expresses; we are primarily interested in understanding and assessing the reasoning that an author uses to try to establish or support those conclusions. This requires a very careful sort of reading.

The point of reading these texts is not only to understand what some great minds have produced. A guided tour through the Museum of Great Ideas is a very good thing, but not the best thing that philosophy has to offer. Better is the opportunity to learn to think for yourself. The readings provide models of careful and/or creative thinking, challenges to our prejudices and assumptions, and starting points for our own reflections. But the only way to learn to philosophize is to enter the conversation yourself. In this way a course in philosophy is more like a course in drawing or sculpture -- a studio art course -- than like a course in art history or art appreciation. You can’t learn to draw by just watching other people draw, and you can’t learn to do philosophy by just listening and reading. You have to express your views and expose them to other people’s critical reactions.

**Assignments and Grading**

Reading assignments

I expect you to find time (many hours) to do the reading for each class and to come prepared to discuss it. Come to class ready to say what you found interesting, what you found confusing, questionable, or just plain wrong, what seemed to you to be the most important claims made, and what arguments or justifications were offered for those claims. Expect that you will need to read the assignments more than once to understand them adequately, and plan your time accordingly.

Analytical response papers

30 % of your grade will be earned by submitting brief (2-3 pages, typed, double-spaced) responses to the readings for each class. These must be submitted to the appropriate assignment folder in D2L before the start of class each week in order to be considered 'on time.' Late response papers will earn (at best) half credit. If you must miss a class, try to submit your response paper before the start of that class.

Each week’s response paper should contain a concise summary of the main points made by the author and a critical discussion of one argument that you found in the text. For the purposes of this exercise, an argument is simply a claim supported with some reasons why we should think that that claim is true. Your critical discussion should include a concise statement of the argument (as you understand it) and an assessment of its success. (Does the author prove his or her point? Can you identify weaknesses in the argument?) Your grade for this assignment will be based on your 10 best response papers. (The astute student will notice that this means you can safely skip several of these weekly assignments.)

Class discussion

20% of your grade will also be determined by my evaluation of the quality of your participation in class discussions. Just showing up and paying attention earns a C for this component; occasionally making helpful contributions earns a B; regularly making helpful contributions earns an A. Helpful contributions include: asking pertinent questions, answering questions asked by the instructor or by other students, expressing your views about the texts or topics we are discussing, responding (relevantly and respectfully) to the views expressed by others. Taking more than your fair share of ‘air time’ and/or taking the discussion ‘off topic’ are general not helpful.

Position Papers

You will be asked to write 2 fairly short (5-8 page) papers explaining and supporting your position on an interpretive or substantive question arising from one or more of the texts we study. I will provide topics for you to choose from. Each paper will count for 25% of your grade. One will be due at the halfway point and one at the end of the semester. Please keep copies of all the work you hand in.

Note: I try hard to base my evaluation of your work on your understanding of the reading, the quality of your reasoning and questioning, and the clarity and effectiveness of your expression of your thoughts, not on whether I agree with your philosophical theories, ideas, or opinions.

Time commitment outside of class

In accordance with Metropolitan State University guidelines, I've designed this course with the expectation that students will do 2-3 hours of course-related work outside of class for every hour spent in class. In other words, you should expect to spend 7-10 hours a week outside of class working on this course.

Needed reading and writing skills

Although there are no prerequisites for this course, it is an upper-division course. This means I assume you have the following reading and writing skills, and assignments are made with this expectation in mind:

* Ability to read and summarize the main points of analytical, abstract material such as Supreme Court decisions and academic journal articles;
* Ability to include appropriate citations of quoted and paraphrased sources in academic writing;
* Ability to construct short, analytical essays including stating and supporting a thesis, presenting and addressing objections to your thesis, and drawing conclusion
* Ability to edit written work well enough to eliminate most errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling.

**Course Policies**

Attendance

I do not require attendance per se, but part of your grade is determined by your participation in class discussion. I strongly advise regular attendance because the material in this course is relatively difficult and confusing, and few students are able to do well on the papers without the explanations and practice provided in class.

Late work

Because their primary purpose is to prepare students for class discussion, response papers must be turned in at (or before) the beginning of class to receive full credit. Late response papers will receive half credit. In fairness to students who turn their position papers in on time, I will subtract one grade (e.g., B+ to B) for each day that a position paper is late. Of course, students with medical or other emergencies may avoid these penalties. Requests for extensions on assignment due dates should be submitted prior to the due date. All requests will be reviewed on an individual, case-by-case basis and may include consultation with the Center for Accessibility Resources.

Incompletes

Incompletes are generally considered when students experience unexpected and/or significant barriers late in the semester. Requests for an incomplete grade will be determined on an individual, case-by-case basis and may include consultation with the Center for Accessibility Resources

Groundrules for class discussion

In my view, high quality class discussion is *informed* by careful reading of assigned texts, *respectful* of the other participants, *relevant* to the issues we are trying to discuss and *thoughtful* in that points are made or questions are raised that help us move toward greater understanding. I believe the following guidelines help foster this kind of discussion:

* Coming to class with the reading done and some ideas in mind;
* Being willing to say what you really think even if it might be unpopular or not what you think the teacher wants to hear
* Never demeaning or "putting down" others for their perceptions or opinions, but honestly expressing disagreement with or confusion about what they say;
* Speaking from one's own experience-- not presuming to speak for others;
* Being sensitive to what we don't know about each other-- not assuming that we all share certain experiences or perceptions;
* Allowing each other to "try on" unfamiliar ideas and ways of looking at the world;
* Speaking up for yourself in a timely manner if you feel these guidelines are not being respected.

Plagiarism

All work submitted for this course must be your own. Plagiarism is the academic ‘sin’ of presenting someone else’s work as your own. It is plagiarism if you copy something verbatim (word for word) from a published source, from the Internet, from Chat GPT, or from another student. It is still plagiarism if you rearrange, paraphrase, condense, or summarize someone else’s work without making clear to your reader what is your contribution and what is taken from your source. If the exact wording comes from your source, then use quotation marks. If the idea comes from someone else (or an AI or ChatBot), give him or her credit for it. The way to do this is to cite your sources. There is a clear and detailed explanation of various forms of plagiarism and of proper citation practices at <https://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/avoiding-plagiarism/> . I will give a grade of ‘F’ to any student who submits plagiarized work for this course.

A Note on AI

Since the primary purpose of the study of philosophy is to learn *how* to think (as opposed to *what* to think), and since learning to think requires us to actively wrestle with unfamiliar ideas (as opposed to simply remembering or repeating them), use of AI tools like Chat GPT is not appropriate in a course like this. I want you to learn to read the texts, pick out the key ideas in the texts, summarize and explain those ideas and (finally) engage critically with those ideas *for yourself*. To rely on ChatGPT (or other such tools) to do any of this work is like going to the gym to get stronger and then having a robot lift the weights for you instead of lifting them yourself. Or, to use another metaphor, it would be like signing up for a course in map-reading and wilderness orienteering, but then using the GPS navigator on your phone to find your way. Or, again, it would be like taking a course in how to fly an airplane, and never turning off the autopilot.

Students with disabilities

It is the policy and practice of the university to create inclusive learning environments. If there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion or to accurate assessment of achievement—such as time-limited exams, inaccessible web content, or the use of non-captioned videos—please notify the instructor as soon as possible. Students are also welcome to contact the Center for Accessibility Resources.

The Center for Accessibility Resources is located in New Main, room L223. Phone number is 651-793-1549 and email is Accessibility.Resources@metrostate.edu

**Catalogue information required by the University to be included in this syllabus:**

Course Description: This course concentrates on the period of time in which what people call "the modern world view" was formed. With the dawn of modern science, the centuries old grip of Aristotle and the Church was broken and replaced by a fundamentally new philosophy that was responsive to the new science and assisted in its defense. We will study selected thinkers of the period from the 16th to the 19th centuries: Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant, and others. The course also pays attention to the role of race, gender and colonialism in the thought of these philosophers.

Course Learning Outcomes:

1. Analyze and critique philosophical works drawn from that period of time in which what people often call ¿the modern world view¿ was formed, focusing on Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant and others.
2. Assess particularly, the role of race, gender and colonialism in the philosophical thought that emerged at this historical moment.
3. Locate these works in the political, social and economic contexts in which they were created, and explore how, in turn, these works were constitutive of ensuing philosophical traditions, understanding, at an advanced collegiate level, the complex relation between these contexts and intellectual work.

GELS Learning Outcomes: Goal 06 - Humanities/Fine Arts

1. Articulate an informed personal reaction to works in the arts and humanities.
2. Understand those works as expressions of individual and human values within an historical and social context.
3. Demonstrate awareness of the scope and variety of works in the arts and humanities.
4. Respond critically to works in the arts and humanities.

University Non-Attendance and Reporting Policy and Procedure

The purpose of the Non-Attendance and Reporting Policy is to ensure Federal Title IV regulations are adhered to with respect to a student’s enrollment level for the purpose of calculating and paying financial aid. While Metropolitan State University is not required to take attendance, Federal Title IV financial aid regulations require a procedure to establish that students have attended, at a minimum, one day of class for each course in which the student’s enrollment status was used to determine eligibility for the Pell Grant Program. In addition, the university needs to determine a last date of attendance for those students who receive all failing grades or unofficially withdraw.

Attendance is defined based on course delivery mode. A student is “in attendance” if he or she meets the following conditions before the end of the second week of the course:

• Classroom Courses – the student is present in the classroom.

• Web-Enhanced (Reduced Seat Time Courses) – the student is present in the classroom or submits at least one academically relevant assignment.

• Online Courses –the student submits at least one academically relevant assignment

• Independent Studies – the student contacts the instructor or submits at least one academically relevant assignment.