

PHL 310: The Rationalists

University of Toronto, Fall 2020, lightly revised

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Lecture hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays 6:00 to 7:30 PM in LM 158 and online

Office hours: Thursdays 1:00 to 3:00 online

Course description

This course is a detailed examination of the early modern philosophies of Descartes, Leibniz, and Pascal. Descartes and Leibniz are often classified as rationalist philosophers, for they attempted to use their reason to determine the ultimate nature of reality. Pascal, by contrast, criticized such an approach, arguing that it was presumptuous that finite minds could achieve such a task. Our aim will be to master some of the main ideas and arguments as found in the writings of these three philosophers. Topics to be discussed include various metaphysical principles, the nature of substance, the relation between mind and body, the existence and nature of God, and the proper scope of reason in arriving at philosophical truth.

Logistics

Joining the lectures: For students registered in the online section of this course, lectures are livestreamed via BB Collaborate Ultra. To join a lecture, log in to Quercus (q.utoronto.ca), click on the course, click on “BB Collaborate” on the left, and then join the appropriate session.

Evaluation: A midterm at 25% (on Oct 22), two papers at 25% each (due Oct 30 and Dec 4), and a final assessment at 25% (date determined by the registrar’s office for Dec).

Readings: There is no official textbook for this course. Instead, a handout containing a selection of primary texts will be available for each lecture. Many of the texts on these handouts are taken from the following works, which you may read for the sake of context: Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method* (parts I to IV), *Meditations on First Philosophy* (all six of them), *Principles of Philosophy* (part I); Leibniz’s *Primary Truths*, *Correspondence with Arnauld* (the letter from 28 Nov/8 Dec 1686), *A New System of Nature*, *On the Ultimate Origination of Things*, *Monadology*, *Correspondence with Clarke* (letters 1-4); Pascal’s *Pensées* (pages 1-64, 163-174, 198-228 in the Ariew edition). You can access the works of Descartes and Leibniz (as well as Spinoza) by clicking [here](#) (it might ask you for your UTORid), then clicking on the “IntelLex Past Masters – CRKN” link, and then clicking through the menu that appears on the left. An inexpensive electronic version of the preferred edition of Pascal’s *Pensées* (the 2005 Hackett edition, edited by Roger Ariew) is available from vendors listed [here](#). Note that none of these works have been ordered via the U of T bookstore.

Midterm: The midterm will be based on material discussed in the lectures, and will consist of both multiple choice and short answer questions. It will be conducted online via Quercus, though students who are already registered for in-person lectures may bring their laptops to class and write the midterm there. The instructor will be available to answer any questions online.

Papers: For each paper you will have a choice from three topics. Papers are to be 4 to 8 pages double-spaced. Topics and instructions will be posted to Quercus well before the due dates, and papers must be submitted via Quercus.

Final assessment: The final assessment will be based on material discussed in the lectures since the midterm. The plan is for a similar format as the midterm, though this will be confirmed closer to the date.

Late submissions, extensions, and missed midterms: Late papers will be penalized at 5% for each calendar day, and papers more than one week late will not be accepted. In more normal circumstances, requests for extensions would require submitting a Verification of Student Illness or Injury Form, or another document deemed acceptable by the University. This term, however, the University has decided the following: “Students who are absent from class for any reason (e.g., COVID, other illness or injury, family situation) and who require consideration for missed academic work should report their absence through the online absence declaration. The declaration is available on ACORN under the Profile and Settings menu. Students should also advise their instructor of their absence.” I would highly recommend that, as soon as you have filled out this form, you contact me immediately concerning your situation. Late requests will not be viewed favourably.

Email: Only use email for short logistical questions that are not already answered on the syllabus. Philosophical and textual questions are best saved for office hours.

Turnitin.com: Normally, students will be required to submit their papers to Turnitin.com (now incorporated into Quercus) for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their papers to be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University’s use of the Turnitin.com service are described on the Turnitin.com website.

Departmental Quercus support: If you have trouble accessing Quercus or trouble with any feature of Quercus, don’t hesitate to reach out to the Department of Philosophy’s Quercus helpline. From Sep 10 to Sep 23 you can reach someone at qssupport.phil@utoronto.ca (between 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM). For alternative support (and support beyond the period mentioned above)

please get in touch with the [Information Commons Help Desk](#) on the ground floor of Robarts library. You can contact them at 978-HELP (4357), or at help.desk@utoronto.ca.

Information security: If you are a citizen of another country, and/or accessing your courses at the University of Toronto from a jurisdiction outside of Canada, please note that you may be subject to the laws of the country in which you are residing, or any country of which you have citizenship. The University of Toronto has a long-established commitment to freedom of expression, with this right enabled by an environment valuing respect, diversity, and inclusion. In your classes, you may be assigned readings, or discuss topics that are against the law in other jurisdictions. I encourage you to become familiar with any local laws that may apply to you and any potential impact on you if course content and information could be considered illegal, controversial, or politically sensitive. If you have any concerns about these issues, please contact your instructor directly to discuss with them.

Recording and copyright policy

Recording policy: Lectures will be recorded and made available via a medium that only those associated with U of T may access. Note that these recordings will include any comments or questions posed during the course of these recordings. If you wish to remain anonymous while the lecture is being recorded, please contact your instructor.

Copyright: Please note that the instructors reserve their copyright on all material that they have created for this course, including lectures. You have the right to access course materials and use them privately as part of your learning experience. However, you do not have the right to share course materials, whether by email, file-sharing software, reposting them on another website, or any other method not mentioned here.

Academic integrity

All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following procedures outlined in the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters. If you have questions or concerns about what constitutes appropriate academic behaviour or appropriate research and citation methods, please reach out to me. Note that you are expected to seek out additional information on academic integrity from me or from other [institutional resources](#).

Lecture schedule

Sep 10	Descartes	Introduction and Descartes' methodology
Sep 15	Descartes	Skepticism and the cogito
Sep 17	Descartes	The trademark argument
Sep 22	Descartes	The ontological argument

Sep 24	Descartes	Divine voluntarism
Sep 29	Descartes	Substance dualism
Oct 1	Descartes	The mechanization of nature
Oct 6	Spinoza	The no shared attribute thesis
Oct 8	Spinoza	Monism
Oct 13	Leibniz	The principle of sufficient reason
Oct 15	Leibniz	The cosmological argument
Oct 20	Leibniz	The argument from eternal truths
Oct 22	Midterm	
Oct 27	Leibniz	God's choice of the best
Oct 29	Leibniz	God's non-intervention
Oct 30	Paper 1 due	
Nov 3	Leibniz	Arguments against matter
Nov 5	Leibniz	Monads (1)
Nov 10	Reading week	
Nov 12	Reading week	
Nov 17	Leibniz	Monads (2)
Nov 19	Pascal	Embodiment
Nov 24	Pascal	Anti-rationalism
Nov 26	Pascal	Pride
Dec 1	Pascal	Divine hiddenness
Dec 3	Pascal	The wager
Dec 4	Paper 2 due	
Dec 8	Course wrap-up	
Dec TBA	Final assessment	