

# PHI 311 The Rationalists Spring 2012

version: February 29, 2012

MW 2:15-3:35  
Bowne Hall 125

Instructor: Aaron Wolf

aawolf@syr.edu

Office: 528 Hall of Languages

Office hours: Monday 1-2 pm

Course website: [aawolf.mysite.syr.edu/phi311.html](http://aawolf.mysite.syr.edu/phi311.html)

## Course Overview

Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz began with the assumption that the universe is governed by *a priori* logical principles. For this reason they are known as the rationalists. From this rather innocuous assumption, each believed he could derive surprising and controversial truths about knowledge, the existence and nature of God, and the nature of the mind and the body. Our aim in this course is three-fold—we'll aim to understand how they get from the assumption that the real is rational to their various conclusions, to state clearly how their views differ from one another, and to see how well their arguments withstand scrutiny.

This course offers students the chance to think through some of life's most vexing questions with three of the best minds the world has known. But be warned: their work is long and tremendously difficult to read, even with the modern translations we'll be using. If the idea of spending long hours studying 17<sup>th</sup> Century metaphysics every week doesn't arouse any curiosity or excitement in your heart of hearts, this course probably isn't for you. But if it does, and you dedicate yourself to the task, you'll find the effort worthwhile, as all three figures are importantly relevant to contemporary philosophy. To that end, you should aim to do the following throughout the course:

- Provide a charitable reconstruction of each argument in the readings
- Formulate intelligent and non-trivial questions about those arguments
- Argue for informed views about how to answer such questions

## Materials

- All you need for this course is reliable internet access and a deck of 3x5 index cards. The assigned readings are hosted on the web at [earlymoderntexts.com](http://earlymoderntexts.com) and linked from the course website.

## Assessment

- **Written exams - 60% of course grade**  
Three in-class written exams. True/false, matching, short answer, and essay questions may be given. Students will be responsible for all assigned readings as well as material from class discussions.
- **Oral exam - 20% of course grade**  
The course will conclude with an individual oral exam that covers the entire course. Possible topics will be made available in advance as a study guide. Scheduling will be announced at a later date.
- **Discussion participation - 20% of course grade**  
Active and quality participation in class discussions is essential for success in the course. Those who don't regularly voice their questions and observations will fall behind quickly, and will be unprepared to speak confidently in their oral exams. And since class time will consist almost entirely of group discussion, those who are reticent will likely be bored. Students will self-assess their participation four times during the semester. See the course website for more detailed information.

## Policies

- **Attendance & participation**

Students are expected to attend every class, though attendance *per se* does not figure in your final grade. Attendance is graded indirectly by way of your participation grade. Nearly every class will include material not found in the readings, for which you will be responsible on exams. If you must miss class, do not ask me to review this material with you unless you have made an appointment with me prior to 10 AM the day of the missed class. Appointments will be granted at my discretion.

- **Study cards**

For each day's reading, you may (but need not) submit a single 3x5 index card with study notes from that day's assignment only at the beginning of class. These cards are not graded, but they will be returned to you during written exams for extra assistance. No other materials may be used during exams, and *late cards will not be accepted. No exceptions.*

- **No texting, facebooking, emailing, etc.**

Doing these things is a huge distraction, for me, for your classmates, and for you. Please don't do it. *Violators of this policy will lose 2% off the final course grade for each violation.*

- **Make-up work**

Make-up written exams and participation self-assessment forms will be permitted on a case-by-case basis at my discretion. If you need to miss an exam or a form deadline, *it's imperative that you discuss it with me beforehand.* Your chances of being granted a make-up are slim if you do not. Study cards and the oral exam cannot be made up.

- **No extra credit**

No extra credit will be given in this course, so plan accordingly. If you have a documented illness or emergency, talk to me *before* it interferes with your work, not after.

- **Grade changes**

Students have the right to an explanation of their grades. If you wish to ask for an explanation of your grade, you must (a) write a document explaining your question, and (if you believe there has been a mistake) giving evidence for your claim from the text or your notes, and (b) submit this document as a hard copy in person, along with the graded work in question where applicable. I will review it at my leisure and return it to you with notes and a new grade, if warranted. If you do this, I will consider your request carefully and I will not lower your original grade. If you don't, I will not discuss your grade with you.

- **Academic integrity**

The Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy holds students accountable for the integrity of the work they submit. Students should be familiar with the Policy and know that it is their responsibility to learn about instructor and general academic expectations with regard to proper citation of sources in written work. The policy also governs the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments as well as the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verifications of participation in class activities. Serious sanctions can result from academic dishonesty of any sort.

For more information and the complete policy, see the Academic Integrity Policy and Procedures on the University's website at <http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>.

- **Disability accommodation**

Students who are in need of disability-related academic accommodations must register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS), 804 University Avenue, Room 309, (315) 443-4498. Students with authorized disability-related accommodations should provide a current Accommodation Authorization Letter from ODS to the instructor and review these accommodations with the instructor. Accommodations, such as exam administration, are not provided retroactively; therefore, planning for accommodation as early as possible is necessary.

For more information, see the Office of Disability Services, <http://disabilityservices.syr.edu>.

## Schedule of Readings and Class Events

### Descartes

Week of	Monday	Wednesday
1/23	Discourse on the Method	Meditations 1-3
1/30	Meditations 4-6	<b>Exam 1</b>
2/6	Objections and Replies, 3 <sup>rd</sup> set	Objections and Replies, 4 <sup>th</sup> set <b>Self-assessment form 1 due</b>
2/13	No class	No class
2/20	Correspondence, 1643-4	Principles of Philosophy, part 1
2/27	Principles of Philosophy, part 2	Passions of the Soul, part 1
3/5	Wrap-up & Review	<b>Exam 2</b> <b>Self-assessment form 2 due</b>
3/12	Spring Break	Spring Break

### Spinoza

Week of	Monday	Wednesday
3/19	The Ethics, part 1, through prop. 15	The Ethics, part 1, prop. 16 to end
3/26	The Ethics, part 2, through prop. 25	The Ethics, part 2, prop. 26 to end

### Leibniz

Week of	Monday	Wednesday
4/2	Discourse on Metaphysics, sections 1-20	Discourse on Metaphysics, sections 21-36 <b>Self-assessment form 3 due</b>
4/9	A New System	<b>Exam 3</b>
4/16	New Essays, Book 1 preface	New Essays, Book 1, ch. i-iii
4/23	Principles of Nature and Grace	Monadology
4/30	TBA <b>Self-assessment form 4 due</b>	