Descartes to Kant
SYLLABUS

Class time and room: Monday 10am – 1pm  David Meyer East E:223
Instructor: Professor Rob Wilson
Office: Social Sciences 325
Office hours: Monday 2-3, Wednesday 11.15-12.15, and by appointment
Ph / e-mail / web: 94791145 / r.wilson2@latrobe.edu.au / robwilsonphilosophy.com

Please read the whole of this syllabus ASAP.
It should be read in conjunction with the Subject Learning Guide for PHI3DTK.
Thanks to Professors Ruth Boeker and Peter Anstey for their help in developing this subject.

I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBJECT

Descartes to Kant provides an advanced introduction to the history of modern philosophy—roughly the period from 1600 to 1800—by focusing on the texts of some of the most influential thinkers of the period, the problems and issues that these philosophers were grappling with, and the dialectics they were enmeshed in. It will also draw on now-contemporary philosophers in order to reflect on the historiography, boundaries, and demography of traditions of thinking in Western philosophy from this productive period in the history of philosophy. This subject is organized into four three-week units covering the following themes, each with a corresponding focus on particular authors from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries:

A. The Material World and Its Qualities  (Author Focus: Locke)
B. Persons, Minds, and Personal Identity  (Author Focus: Descartes, Locke, Leibniz)
C. The Social Contract  (Author Focus: Hobbes)
D. Race and Gender in Modern Philosophy  (Author Focus: Kant)

All subject materials will be available through LMS; you do not need to buy any textbooks for the subject.

II. WORKLOAD AND SUBJECT REQUIREMENTS

(i) Reading and writing loads

The reading load for the subject is moderate in quantity and moderate-to-difficult in overall level. On average, the required reading each week comes to about 35-40 pages. The writing load for the subject is moderate. We will focus on developing your philosophical thinking skills through your writing in this subject, as well deepening the dialectical skills that you will have begun to develop in lower-level university subjects.

(ii) Grades and Assessment

Assessment will be determined by the following components:

- first essay (1500 words), based on Weeks 1-5 due by Friday 7th September, 2018 (25%)
- second essay (2500 words), based on Weeks 6-11, due by Monday 29th October, 2018 (50%)
- ten weekly active learning paragraphs, due by 10pm Sunday night in advance of the corresponding class meeting, each responding to one set guiding question for that week (25%). Exception: Week 1, where you may submit your response up until Friday noon of Week 1.
Topics for each of the papers will be distributed at least three weeks before the paper is due. Each weekly active learning paragraph should respond in 100-200 words to one of the numbered questions for that week, and you need to submit passing responses in ten of these weeks and be prepared to respond to questions about it in or shortly after class to receive a grade of A for participation. Your participation grade will be reduced in proportion to any shortfalls here, e.g., 5% for nine passing responses, 10% for eight, and so on.

(iii) Due Date Policy and Plagiarism

Submission of essays by their due date is strongly encouraged; many students lose crucial grades simply because they miss deadlines. If it helps you, think of it like this: if you submit your essay on time, in effect you are increasing your grade from (say) a B+ to an A-, compared to if you submit it a day late. I will grant extensions on due dates for personal medical and family emergency reasons that may require documentation, but not for other reasons, such as: my internet wasn't working, my phone got dropped in the toilet, and there were a lot of parties on last weekend. The subject will otherwise follow the general university policy on the submission of late assignments, as specified under the “Policies, Procedures and Guidelines” and subsequent sections of the Subject Learning Guide for the subject.

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense that is grounds for disciplinary action at a number of levels within the university system. This is treated at length in the SLG for PHI3DTK and you are expected to be familiar with what plagiarism is and why it must be avoided. We will also devote lecture time to this as well in advance of the first paper. I would encourage you not to risk the consequences of plagiarizing in this subject, which could include not only outright failure in the subject but have more severe repercussions for your future at the University. More generally, please take academic integrity seriously since the University does and will discipline you when it is violated.

III. THEMES AND WEEKLY SCHEDULE

With a few exceptions, the weekly readings will be 30-40 pages, with each week’s readings within a unit building on those that precede it. The proposed weekly schedule of readings within each of these units, modifiable in light of the progress and interests of the class, including the two weekly guiding questions, one of which you need to answer and submit prior to class for that week as part of your participation assessment, is as follows:

A. The Material World and Its Qualities

Week 1
Short extracts from Locke’s “Epistle to the Reader” from his An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, and Lisa Shapiro’s “Elisabeth’s Philosophical Style”, pp.518-520 of her “Princess Elisabeth and Descartes: The Union of Soul and Body and the Practice of Philosophy”, British Journal for the History of Philosophy 7(3), pp.503-520.


Guiding questions: (1) What does Locke’s comment about being an “underlabourer” suggest about his conception of the role of philosophers? (2) How does Boyle conceptualize the material world?

Week 2


Guiding questions: (3) What does MD Wilson think is of value in the debate over sensible qualities? (4) How does Locke think about what is usually called, following Boyle, secondary qualities?

Week 3


Guiding questions: (5) Why do you think that Locke treats solidity in its own chapter? (6) Why is RA Wilson dissatisfied with existing views of Locke’s primary qualities?

B. Persons, Minds, and Personal Identity

Week 4

Elisabeth and Descartes René, selections from The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes. Edited and translated by Lisa Shapiro (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 61–73.

Guiding questions: (7) What work does Descartes’ appeal to “real distinction” do in his argument for dualism? (8) What do you think is Elisabeth’s chief puzzlement about Descartes’ view of mind and body?

Week 5

Guiding questions: (9) How do Locke’s claims in II.i.1-19 pose an objection to Descartes’ view of the mind? (10) What is special about the identity of persons, according to Locke?
**Week 6**


**Guiding questions:** (11) What does Leibniz seem wary or critical of in Locke’s view of personal identity? (12) Why does Baier think that the second person is important for thinking about Cartesian minds and persons?

**C. The Social Contract**

**Week 7**


**Guiding questions:** (13) How does Hobbes conceive of the natural state or condition of humankind in *Leviathan*? (14) What do you make of Hobbes’ appeal to laws of nature?

**Week 8**


**Guiding questions:** (15) What seems to you clearer or different in Hobbes’ *De Cive* from that in *Leviathan*? (16) What view of human nature do we see Hobbes proposing in the opening of *De Cive*?

**Week 9**


**Guiding questions:** (17) Why do people disagree about whether the state of nature is a hypothetical (vs historical) condition? (18) What does Lott think the role of patriarchal power is in Hobbes’ theory?

**D. Race and Gender in Modern Philosophy**

**Week 10**


Guiding questions: (19) Why do you think that Kant appeals to different human races? (20) How does Bernasconi argue for Kant’s importance in the history of thinking about races?

Week 11


Guiding questions: (21) What would you say is Eze’s best reason for thinking that “reason” is colored for Kant? (22) What textual support does Bernasconi provide for his claim that Kant is a source of racism?

Week 12


Guiding questions: (23) What strikes you as the best argument that Mills gives in defending the idea that Kant’s theories presuppose beings with moral status between those of persons and things? (24) Why does Herman think that the answer to the question posed in her article’s title may be “yes”?

IV. MORE THAN YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE LECTURER

I am the professor of philosophy at La Trobe, having recently returned to Australia after more than 20 years of teaching in Canada and the United States. I was born in the thriving bush metropolis of Broken Hill in New South Wales, a mining town 1150km west of Sydney; the town was settled in the 1880s, remains home to one of the largest base-metal mines in the world, and has served as the shooting location for several landmark Oz films, from the post-apocalyptic Mad Max II to key sequences in comedies such as Priscilla: Queen of the Desert. I grew up there and in Perth. I did my BA in philosophy at the University of Western Australia, and my MA and PhD at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York; apart from studying philosophy at the graduate level, I also took a graduate minor in cognitive studies, mainly doing developmental psychology.

My philosophical interests are broad, but my chief research expertise falls in the philosophy of mind, cognitive science, and the philosophy of science, especially the philosophy of biology. In general, I am most interested in connections between philosophy and the various sciences, and I often get my feet muddy in the process of pursuing those connections. I have authored or edited seven books, the most recent of which is The Eugenic Mind Project (MIT Press, 2018). Recent articles include “Eugenics Never Went Away” (Aeon: A World of Ideas), “Well-Being, Disability, and Choosing Children” (Mind, in press, coauthored with Matt Barker), and “Incest, Incest Avoidance, and Attachment: Revisiting the Westermarck Effect” (Philosophy of Science, revise-and-resubmit). My website robwilsonphilosophy.com contains a lot more information about my teaching, publications, community engagement, and approach to philosophy. I was elected as a Fellow to the Royal Society of Canada in 2009 for my contributions to philosophy, but more importantly I am a long-standing member of the Luxuriant Flowing Hair Club for Scientists (https://www.improbable.com/hair) for my contributions to flowing hair culture.