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PHIL 252H.01: History of Modern Philosophy

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Philosophy 252/History of Modern Philosophy
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Philosophy 252 covers philosophical figures and movements from roughly the 16th century through the 18th century. We give special attention to debates in metaphysics and epistemology and somewhat less attention to politics, ethics, and religion. I have three primary goals in this course. First, I want to provide you with an historical context for the philosophical debates that characterize the modern period. Second, I want you to appreciate how the modern period significantly shaped the contemporary Euro-American worldview. And, third, you will learn to closely read and to thoughtfully critique philosophical arguments.

Please be advised of the following: (1) I don’t accept late papers, unless attached to a doctor’s excuse. (2) I consider group efforts plagiarism, unless I’ve specified the project a group one, e.g., the presentation debate. Please see me if you have any questions about plagiarism. (3) Class starts at 3:40 and ends at 5:00. Please come on time and don’t leave early, unless you’ve notified me of some special need. Thanks. Let’s be considerate of each other.

Text:
Modern Philosophy, ed. Roger Ariew & Eric Watkins
(x)—Xerox. Hard copies and ERes in library

Assignments:
1/27 Hello, business, introductory remarks
1/29 Socio-historical context of the modern period: Modern Philosophy (MP), General Introduction, Vespucci (x), Luther (x), Erasmus (x)
2/3 Montaigne (x)
2/5-2/19 Descartes, Meditations
2/24 Descartes debate
2/26 Spinoza, Theologica—Political Treatise (x)
3/3-3/5 Spinoza, Ethics, Part 1
3/10 Spinoza Debate
3/12 Mid-term exam
3/17-3/31 Essay, Locke
4/2 Locke debate
4/7-4/9 Principles of Human Knowledge, Berkeley
4/14-4/21 Inquiry, Hume
4/23 Hume debate
4/28 2nd exam
4/30-5/7 Prolegomena, Kant
5/12 Final Exam, 3:20-5:20

Requirements:
Exam I: 25%
Exam II: 25%
Final: 25%
Debate: 10%
Summaries: 15%
Debate Presentation

Each student must participate in a debate presentation once. Groups of 6-7 students will be responsible for debating a figure in front of the class. One group of 3 or so will defend the figure, while another group of 3 or so will ask 3 questions of the figure. One of those questions must be posed from the perspective of a figure we have already read. E.g., you might have Hume ask Kant a question or Locke question Descartes. A second question should be stated as the group’s objection to some specific, but central, point the philosopher makes. I’ll leave the nature of the third question to the group’s discretion. Each question should be written up in a minimum of 3 good sized paragraphs. That is, you should develop each question into a mini-paper, referring to specifics in the texts and giving us some solid sense of why you are asking the question. The challengers must distribute xeroxed copies of their questions to all students on the class before the scheduled debate. This way everyone will have prior opportunity to research and respond to these questions. I’ll provide you with sample questions soon.

Nondebaters will prepare their own three questions and bring those to class on the day of the debate. You don’t need copies for everyone, but you will turn your questions in to me on the day of the debate.

The formal debate will take place during the first 50 minutes of class. During the last 30 minutes nondebaters will ask their own questions of the group representing the figure on the hot seat.

Please be advised: those who don’t follow these instructions will be docked 1/2 a letter grade. So, see me if you have any questions about this procedure.

And feel free to run questions by me prior to these debates.
Sample Debate Questions

Montaigne's "The Apology for Raimond Sebond"

1. [Response from a prior philosopher] Galileo was no skeptic. He asserts that God provided us with senses, reason, and intellect so that we can decipher the meaning of the universe, God's divine creation. He acknowledges that divine wisdom far surpasses human knowledge, but, he says, "I do not feel obliged to believe that that same God who has endowed us with senses, reason, intellect has intended to forgo their use and by some other means to give us knowledge which we can attain by them" (p. 63). Indeed, he argues, "Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language... It is written in the language of mathematics..." (p. 65).

In addition to mathematical truths, which are apparently accessible to us, we can have knowledge of other first principles. For example, we can safely say that the whole is greater than its parts. Why would God give us the various powers of reason if not to discover such truths and deduce further truths from these? Montaigne suggests that the creator endowed us with reason so that we could argue ourselves into a stupor, become empty vessels, "blank slates," at which time God, in His grace, would fill us up with truth. Why would God give us such a round-about means of finding truth? Such a God would seem malevolent and frivolous, not the Christian God.

Besides, to challenge our rationality, the way Montaigne challenges and trivializes it, is to destroy our humanity, to turn us into beasts. Surely, we, human beings, are closer to the truth, and to God, than the ox or Montaigne's cat. Scripture clearly says this is the case. Montaigne's attempts to equate humanity with the lower animals (p. 71) defies commonsense and may even be blasphemous.

2. [Objection] Montaigne argues that because all is in doubt, we ought to accept Christianity on faith alone. For example, he says that "Our faith is not of our own acquiring. It is a pure present of another's liberality. It is not by reasoning or by our understanding that we have received religion; it is by external authority and command" (p. 72). And he cites Corinthians to buttress his case. Once it sinks in that religion is a matter of faith and not understanding, that we couldn't possibly understand something as awesome as the divine, we humbly open ourselves to divine grace, to His gift of knowledge.

Montaigne's argument is a non sequitur. Just because all is doubt, doesn't mean that we must (a) accept Christianity on faith, or (b) accept Christianity at all. With regard to (a), all may well be in doubt, but we may still seek and offer compelling...
reasons on behalf of Christianity. We can do so as good Pyrrhonic skeptics, in fact, as Christians who acknowledge doubt, the uncertainty, of the reasons we offer.

And, regarding (b), if all is doubt, then so is Christianity. Why not accept Judaism, or some variety of paganism, or better yet, become an agnostic? Montaigne is addressing the Reformists, among others here. But why not embrace Calvinism? Why throw your lot in with the Catholic papacy, if there are no criteria for deciding veracity of any sort, theological, scientific, or political? (See Montaigne’s discussion of criteria on p. 80-81.)

3.) [Open Question] Montaigne says that Pyrrhonian skeptics cannot adequately express their brand of skepticism in any language available to them. This is because all languages rely solely on affirmative propositions: "I have two heads," or "I do not have two heads," or, even, "I don’t know if I have one or two heads." Each of these statements asserts something is true, is certain. The Pyrrhonian skeptic, unlike more dogmatic skeptics, want to avoid assertions of any sort of truth. They don’t even want to assert the truth of Pyrrhonian skepticism, as that would contradict their view that nothing, not even their own view, is certain.

Is this a tenable position? If one can’t articulate it, how can any of us fully understand it, much less practice it? Montaigne uses two analogies in order to better articulate the Pyrrhonistic position. First, he takes an analogy from medicine (p. 73), involving rhubarb. What, exactly, does this analogy mean and how is it directly relevant to his position?

Second, he uses a pair of scales as an analogy. Above the scales, he says, are inscribed the Pyrrhonist’s motto, a question, not an assertion, "What do I know?" (pg. 73) What does this analogy mean, and how is it relevant to Pyrrhonism?