4AANB005 Modern Philosophy I

Syllabus – Academic year 2016/17

Basic information

Credits: 15
Module Tutor: Jasper Reid, jasper.reid@kcl.ac.uk
Office: 903
Consultation time: TBA
Semester: First
Lecture time and venue*: TBA
*Please note that tutorial times and venues will be organised independently with your teaching tutor

Module description (plus teaching arrangements, aims and objectives)

This module will introduce students to Early Modern Philosophy, by focussing on the two figures who book-end that period chronologically, and who perhaps best represent the sheer breadth of the range of opinions developed in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: René Descartes (1596–1650) and David Hume (1711–1776). (Subsequent modules at levels 5 and 6 will fill the gap, by covering the other major figures of the period, who—philosophically as well as chronologically—fell in between these two). Our focus will chiefly be on Descartes’ Meditations on First Philosophy (1641) and Hume’s Enquiry concerning Human Understanding (1748), although we will also have occasion to look at passages from other works (especially Hume’s Treatise and Dialogues). We will be chiefly concerned with their metaphysical and epistemological views, although we might also touch on issues belonging to other fields. There will be ten weekly lectures, four on Descartes and six on Hume; and students will meet for a second hour each week to discuss of the material in smaller groups led by teaching tutors. By the end of the course, students should not only have gained an understanding of the views of Descartes and Hume, but should also have developed a more general ability to engage carefully with some often quite complex texts, written in a different era, showing a due regard for their historical context. Where applicable, students should also be able to relate these historical ideas to still-ongoing debates.

Assessment methods and deadlines

Formative assessment: One 1,500-word essay, to be submitted to your teaching tutor via email, by 16:00 Monday 7 November 2016.
Summative assessment: One 2-hour exam in May/June.
Outline of lecture topics (plus readings)

Week One
Topics: An introduction to Descartes; Cartesian scepticism; the ‘Cogito’; the essence of the mind.
Readings: Descartes’ First Meditation, and the first half of the Second. You might as well read the prefatory material too.

Week Two
Topics: The essence of body; the ‘trademark’ argument for the existence of God.
Readings: The remainder of the Second Meditation, followed by the Third.

Week Three
Topics: The Ontological Argument; Cartesian method.
Readings: Meditations Four and Five.

Week Four
Topics: The Cartesian Circle; the existence of bodies; Cartesian dualism; mind-body union.
Reading: Meditation Six.

Week Five
Topics: An introduction to Hume and his philosophy; impressions and ideas; association of ideas.
Readings: Hume’s Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, sections 2, 3, 9 and 12. Note: although these lectures will not actually follow the order of presentation in the Enquiry, you should nevertheless read the book in full, sequentially from start to finish.

READING WEEK

Week Six
Topics: Hume on mind and bodies.
Readings: Hume’s Treatise of Human Nature, book 1, part 4, sections 2 and 6; and ideally also section 5.

Week Seven
Topics: The problem of induction, and Hume’s sceptical solution.
Readings: Enquiry, sections 4, 5.

Week Eight
Topic: Causation.
Readings: Enquiry, section 7.

Week Nine
Topics: Liberty and necessity; miracles.
Readings: Enquiry, sections 8, 10.

Week Ten
Topics: Hume on natural religion.
Readings: Enquiry, section 11. Ideally, you would also read Hume’s Dialogues concerning Natural Religion in their entirety: but that is optional.
Note on editions

The standard edition in English of Descartes’ works is *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, edited by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, plus Anthony Kenny in vol. 3 (three volumes, Cambridge University Press, 1984-1991). The *Meditations*, together with the Objections and Replies, are to be found in vol. 2. There is also an abridged, single-volume version of the same edition, *The Selected Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge, 1988), which includes the full text of the *Meditations*, although only a few extracts from the Objections and Replies, alongside extracts from the first volume. In the original French and Latin, the standard edition is the one edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery. If you see, perhaps in the secondary literature, page references bearing the initials ‘CSM’ (or ‘CSMK’) and ‘AT’, it is to these editions that they are referring.

There are, however, lots of other editions out there, including ones (e.g. those of Veitch, or Haldane & Ross) that you should be able to find freely available online, because they’re old enough to be out of copyright. Other things being equal, the more up-to-date the edition the better, so that it can take the results of recent scholarship into account: but even an older one, such as one of these, should be perfectly adequate for present purposes. All in all, it really doesn’t matter which edition you use, with just one possible exception. Jonathan Bennett has a website called www.earlymoderntexts.com, where he presents these and other works of early modern philosophy. But it’s important to be aware that Bennett has deliberately modified the texts, simplifying them for ease of understanding, and has also abridged them in some cases. As useful as that might be as a way in, the consequence is that Bennett will have inevitably imposed his own interpretation on the work, and will also have omitted details that might sometimes be quite important. So you might do better with one of the other editions, rather than Bennett’s.

When it comes to Hume’s *Enquiry*, there are really two standard editions. Dominant for many years, and still commonly cited even now, was the combined edition of the two *Enquiries* by L.A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford University Press, 1975). The same editors also produced an edition of his *Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford University Press, 1978). More recently, however, these have gradually come to be supplanted by the critical editions by Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford University Press, 2000) and by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford University Press, 2007) respectively. You’d be well served by any of these. There is no one standard edition of the *Dialogues on Natural Religion*: but there are plenty out there, and plenty of other editions of those others too. Although some might supplement the text with useful introductions or notes, the text itself—since here we don’t need even to rely on the skill of a translator—ought to be exactly the same, whichever edition you use. Moreover, in the case of Hume, we also have the exceptional benefit of a website, presenting online versions of all of his philosophical works: http://www.davidhume.org/. That too would serve you perfectly well: indeed, it has the benefit of being searchable. All in all, it really doesn’t matter which version of the text you happen to get your hands on, just as long as you do have access to it, one way or another.

Secondary Literature

The London Philosophy Study Guide provides some excellent (and only slightly out of date) bibliographies, relevant to this module (and to others too). You will here find extensive lists of books and articles on our two authors, both general works and examinations of particular
topics. If you’re looking for secondary literature, you’d do well to make this Guide your guide:

http://www.ucl.ac.uk/philosophy/LPSG/contents.htm
http://www.ucl.ac.uk/philosophy/LPSG/Modern.htm#Descartes
http://www.ucl.ac.uk/philosophy/LPSG/Modern.htm#Hume


As for online resources, your first port of call should be the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which is useful both in itself and to give pointers for still further reading:

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes/
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-epistemology/
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-ontological/
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-ideas/
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume/
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-freewill/
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-religion/
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-hume-causality/ (Note: this one’s on Kant more than it is on Hume, but it does include some discussion of Hume)

Suggested essay questions

If your teaching tutor gives you any specific instructions regarding essays, you should heed them. But, failing that, here are some suggestions:

• What reasons does Descartes give his reader to doubt the tenability of everyday beliefs about the world? Are these reasons compelling?
• What precisely is the Cogito designed to show? How successful is it?
• Give a critical analysis of one of Descartes’ arguments for the existence of God.
• What is the ‘Cartesian Circle’? Does Descartes have any way out of it?
• What argumentative use does Descartes make of the fact that God is not a deceiver? Supposing we grant that fact to him, how good are his arguments?
• What is Descartes’ account of the relation between the mind and the body? How would you assess the strengths and weaknesses of his account?
• In what sense (if any) is Hume a sceptic?
• Can either minds, or bodies, or both, be equated with bundles of perceptions?
• Does causation, for Hume, amount to anything more than constant conjunction?
• What is the problem of induction? Is there any way of solving it?
• Is there any room for human liberty in a deterministic system? Is there any room for it in an indeterministic system? Is there any room for it at all?
• Critically compare Hume and Descartes’ views on the existence and nature of God.