

Philosophy
PHILOS 2X03
Early Modern Philosophy
Winter 2026



HUMANITIES

Instructor Information

Dr. Allauren Samantha Forbes

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Office: University Hall 307A

Office Hours:

Tuesdays 1430-1530, Thursdays 1330-1500, or by appointment.

Course Dates: 01/05/2026 - 04/07/2026

Units: 3.00

Course Delivery Mode: In Person

Course Description: A survey of the metaphysical, epistemological, and moral questions asked and answered by philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries, such as Descartes, Cavendish, Astell, Locke, Hume, Du Châtelet, and Amo. Two lectures, one tutorial; one term
Prerequisite(s): Registration in Level II or above

Instructor-Specific Course Information

Early modern philosophy was an exceptionally intellectually rich and dynamic period, and no single course could hope to cover all of the exciting debates and questions with which figures active in this period reckoned. In this course, we will ask some of these questions – what exists? How do we know? How can we know? – and examine the debate concerning the mind-body problem. So too will we consider the practical implications of how we answer these questions and debates as are borne out in important socio-epistemic and socio-political topics, such as the status of non-humans, prejudice, freedom, and friendship. In many ways, these questions are timeless: even today, we still ask, How do we not know certain kinds of things? Who counts as a knower? And, with

these questions in mind, how then should we live? Turning to how our philosophical predecessors asked and answered these questions will prove illuminating. This course features figures and texts from a wide range of philosophical traditions and lived experiences; we will explore these theories together as an epistemic community of engaged inquiry.

Meeting Details

Lectures will be twice a week and in person (no recordings). Tutorials will be once a week, starting week 2, and will have 11 meetings.

Important Links

- [Mosaic](#)
- [Avenue to Learn](#)
- [Student Accessibility Services - Accommodations](#)
- [McMaster University Library](#)
- [eReserves](#)

Course Learning Outcomes

- Reading: read philosophical texts for understanding and context
- Interpreting: develop your own interpretation of philosophical texts
- Communicating: communicate your understanding, interpretation, and critical evaluation of philosophical views and texts clearly
- Discussing: discuss philosophical views and texts with your peers and TA in class and in your tutorial in charitable and respectful ways, even when challenging one another

- Engaging: engage in meaningful self-reflection on your own knowledge, understanding, and experiences and how they have(n't) changed over the semester
- Constructing: construct clear and persuasive original philosophical arguments
- Reimagining: reimagine what history is, can be, and can do for us now; revise your understanding of philosophical histories and canons.

Required Materials and Texts

Please sign in with your MacID [here](#) to view your booklist

Early Modern Philosophy: An Anthology

ISBN: 9781554812790

Authors: Lisa Shapiro and Marcy Lascano

Publisher: Broadview Press

Publication Date: 2021

Other texts will be provided via pdf and URL in keeping with McMaster's Copyright Policy.

Class Format

In Person

Lectures will not be recorded. Students are not to record lectures.

Course Evaluation

In this course, you will be evaluated on the following measures:

1. 10%: Pop quizzes
2. 25%: Tutorials
 1. 15% - Participation
 2. 10% - Self-assessment

3. 30%: Exegesis assignments
 1. 10% Exegesis #1
 2. 20% Exegesis #2 (in-class).
4. 5%: Cumulative reflection
5. 30%: Final exam

Course Evaluation Details

Your grade in this course will be determined by the following:

Pop Quizzes (10%)

There will be five in-class pop quizzes, each worth 2.5% of your final grade. Your lowest score will be dropped automatically.

Tutorials (25% = 15% discussion + 10% self-assessment) DUE: Ongoing, with the self-assessment due on 2 April 2026 at 11:59pm on Avenue

Since philosophy is a fundamentally social activity, you will be expected to engage in charitable, respectful discussion with your peers and your TA. Each tutorial will begin with (a) a 5-minute writing activity, and (b) a discussion. Each of (a) and (b) are worth 1 point. Your total score out of 20 over the course of the semester will be weighted for 15% of your final grade. This assignment will be based on effort, that is, on a pass/fail basis.

At the end of the semester, you will be asked to write a brief self-assessment of your participation in discussions. I will provide some prompts asking questions like, were you a present and engaged participant? What does that mean for you? Were you a collaborative and charitable co-inquirer? You will assess yourself, providing a careful explanation of your reasoning, and give yourself a score out of 10. The TA will similarly score you; should the two scores match, that is your grade. If the TA assesses your grade as higher than you graded yourself, then you will get the TA-assigned score out of ten. If your TA assesses your grade as lower than what you assigned yourself, the instructor will examine your and your TA's carefully reasoned explanations and determine the appropriate grade given the provided evidence.

Accommodation: Some students find public discussion deeply challenging. If you have an SAS-approved accommodation, email me to discuss an alternate assessment method. If you feel you should have an SAS-approved accommodation but have not yet obtained one, you should also email me to discuss an alternative. However, if public discussion is simply uncomfortable, I encourage you to participate to the best of your abilities (keeping in mind that this is one of the things you may wish to discuss in your self-assessment), and, in the meantime, to reach out to your TA and to me in office hours or via email for how we can better facilitate your participation. Philosophy is much more fun when it is social and dynamic!

Exegesis assignments (10% + 15% = 25%)

Exegesis #1: 29 Jan 2026 at 11:59pm on Avenue

Exegesis #2: 5 March 2025 in class.

Because the goals of this course include developing and practicing the skills of reading, understanding, and communicating that understanding of historical texts, views, and figures, this assignment is a formal assessment of those skills. An exegesis is a kind of low-level interpretation – it is not quite a full interpretive argument, but is decidedly more than a summary.

Your assignment should include (a) a passage from the relevant assigned text and (2) a 1000 word interpretation of this passage. We will discuss exegeses in practice in lecture, and you will have some exegesis-writing exercises in your tutorials prior to the deadline.

Structurally, your assignment should seek to answer the following questions: what is going on in this passage? What is the argument? What are the premises of the argument? How does it work? Are there missing or suppressed premises? This assignment is not evaluative – you should not be assessing whether the argument is good or bad, only its structure and method.

Please see Avenue for detailed instructions and the rubric. This assignment will be graded out of 10 points. The first exegesis will be weighted as 10% of your grade and the second exegesis will be weighted as 15% of your grade. Note that the second exegesis is worth more of your grade not because the assignment itself is different, but because you have had an opportunity to practice the relevant skills and obtain thoughtful feedback from the

teaching team. You will select your own argument/passage for the first assignment, but I will provide a passage for the second assignment (as it is in-class).

Please ensure that all your student number (and not name) is on the submitted document. This assignment will be assessed on the basis of achievement, that is, demonstration of the relevant skills we've modeled and practiced in lecture and in tutorial.

Cumulative Reflection Assignment (10%) DUE: 27 March 2026 at 11:59pm on Avenue

For this assignment, you will answer some questions prompts provided on Avenue concerning what you have learned in this course. Your task is to engage in metacognition - thinking about thinking (and learning). Your assignment must be between 700-850 words. This assignment is graded on a good-faith effort pass-fail basis, where a pass = 10% and a fail = 0%.

Final Exam (30%): TO BE SCHEDULED BY REGISTRAR

You will write a final exam for this course at a day/time to be determined by the Registrar's Office. This exam will be cumulative. It will have multiple choice, short answer, and essay portions. We will discuss the composition of the exam and how to prepare for it on the last day of the semester.

Undergraduate Grading Scale

The grades breakdown for McMaster's 12-Point Grading Scale

Grade	Equivalent Grade Point	Equivalent Percentages
A+	12	90-100
A	11	85-89
A-	10	80-84
B+	9	77-79
B	8	73-76
B-	7	70-72
C+	6	67-69
C	5	63-66
C-	4	60-62
D+	3	57-59

Grade	Equivalent Grade Point	Equivalent Percentages
D	2	53-56
D-	1	50-52
F	0	0-49

Course Schedule

Schedule and Readings

* indicates it is NOT in the Broadview volume

Week 1: Jan 6 & 8

- Marie de Gournay, "Ladies Complaint"
- Michel de Montaigne, "Of Cannibals"

Week 2 – Jan. 13 & 15: How do we know? I

- Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, "Let us pretend that I am happy..."
- Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, "Response of the Poet..."

TUTORIALS START THIS WEEK

Week 3 – Jan. 20 & 22: How do we know? II

- Madeleine de Scudéry, "Of the Knowledge of Others, and of Ourselves"
- Denis Diderot, "Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See"

Week 4 – Jan. 27 & 29: How do we know? III

- Francis Bacon, *New Organon*
- Robert Hooke, *Micrographia*
- Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (excerpt)

Week 5 – February 3 & 5: Do we know?

- René Descartes, *First Meditation*
- René Descartes, *Second Meditation*
- René Descartes, *Third Meditation*

Week 6 – February 10 & 12: What can we know?

- René Descartes, *Fourth Meditation*
- René Descartes, *Sixth Meditation*

READING WEEK - TAKE CARE!

Week 7 – February 24 & 26: Minds, Bodies, and The Mind-Body Problem - Resolved?

- Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, *Correspondence* (selections)
- *Anton Wilhelm Amo, *On the Impassivity of the Human Mind* (excerpt)

Week 8 – March 3 & 5: What Matters? I

- IN-CLASS EXEGESIS ASSIGNMENT
- Margaret Cavendish, "A Dialogue between an Oak, and a Man cutting him down"

Week 9 – March 10 & 12: What Matters? II

- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality among Men*
- Aminah Hasan-Birdwell, "That Sottish and Selfish principle': Cugoano on Self-Interest, Imagination, and Moral Wrongdoing"

Week 10 – March 17 & 19: What Matters? III

- Thomas Hobbes, *Of Liberty and Necessity*
- *Phillis Wheatley, "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth"
- Gabrielle Suchon, *On The Celibate Life Freely Chosen*

Week 11 – March 24 & 26: What Matters? IV

- Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*

- Émilie Du Châtelet, Discourse on Happiness

Week 12: March 31 & April 2: Love and Friendship

- *Sergio Gallegos-Ordorica, "Can There be Romantic Love Without Jealousy?"
- *Allauren Samantha Forbes, "Friendship as a Means to Freedom"

LAST TUTORIAL THIS WEEK

Week 13: April 7: Exam Preparation

- No readings!

Late Assignments

Extensions can be granted by the instructor or your TA, and will be granted at their discretion. To request one, email more than 24 hours in advance of the deadline. SAS accommodations operate independently of extensions. **However, you must contact Dr. Forbes in advance of the deadline to implement your SAS accommodations. Failure to do so may result in late penalties, etc.**

If you want to use an MSAF, recall that they must be filed within three days of the deadline. Please note how MSAFs work for specific assignments in this course:

- Exegesis #1, cumulative reflection: Automatic 7 day extension from the original due date.
- Exegesis #2: either a) writing an alternate version of the assignment in my office hours the following week, or b) having the weight added to your final exam. You must **confirm your choice in an email to me when you file the MSAF**. If I do not hear from you, I will assume you want the reweighing.
- Pop quiz/tutorial: reweighing so that other quizzes/tutorials are worth more.

Late penalties:

When uploading assignments to Avenue, make sure to allow a couple of minutes before the deadline in case of internet/Avenue issues. Everyone receives a 24-hour flexible deadline on all assignments without needing to email for an extension. If it looks like

there's going to be a technical issue with Avenue, email it to Dr. Forbes before the deadline to ensure that your submission isn't late.

Otherwise – that is, when no extension has been obtained in writing, and no MSAF has been filed – every 24 hrs after the flexible deadline you will lose 5% off the top of the final grade of the paper. So, if you turn in a paper that scores an 83% two days late, it becomes a 73% paper. There is no upper limit on this penalty.

Absences, Missed Work, Illness

Absences:

If you are sick, do not come to class/tutorial.

If you are ill and have to miss tutorial, email your TA to let them know before tutorial starts. All students have two absences permitted for tutorials without cost to their participation grade.

Missed work:

Any work which does not have an extension or accommodation obtained in writing (via email)/SAS-approved accommodation, and which remains unsubmitted more than 5 calendar days after the deadline, will receive a zero.

Turnitin.com

Some courses may use a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal authenticity and ownership of student submitted work. For courses using such software, students will be expected to submit their work electronically either directly to Turnitin.com or via an online learning platform (e.g. A2L, etc.) using plagiarism detection (a service supported by Turnitin.com) so it can be checked for academic dishonesty.

Students who do not wish their work to be submitted through the plagiarism detection software must inform the Instructor before the assignment is due. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to the plagiarism detection software. All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have

been upheld (e.g., on-line search, other software, etc.). For more details about McMaster's use of Turnitin.com please go to www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity.

Course Modification

Behaviour

It is deeply important that we maintain an attitude of respect for one another and for the subjects we cover in this class, especially because many of them are quite personal/sensitive/important. Philosophy is, at its core, a practice of critical thinking. This often consists in making arguments and responding to one's interlocutors in ways that interrogate their positions and claims; we will consider reasons for and against views in a way that incorporates an underlying commitment to trust, empathy, and cooperative inquiry. Throughout our discussions of some sensitive issues and concerns, we will maintain an attitude of respect even – especially – when we disagree with the views at hand. We will discuss specific practices of class conduct in the first class.

Email

I will communicate with you via email and Avenue Announcement, particularly if something changes in the course. Please ensure that you are receiving these notifications. My general policy is to respond to emails within 48 hours of receiving them, not including weekends; however, I will not discuss grades over email, and would prefer that longer questions about assignments are addressed in office hours. Please check the syllabus and the (forthcoming) detailed instructions on assignments, etc. before emailing me about them.

Grades

I am committed to a fair and unbiased grading process. As such, all assignments must be submitted with no identifying information other than your student number. This allows the teaching team to grade anonymously. If you have concerns about this process, please contact me and we will discuss possible solutions. If you are unsatisfied with your grade and would like to appeal it, the process is as follows. Between 24 and 72 hours after the

grades are posted, explain in writing – in a way that responds to every single comment – how you think the grade/comments are inappropriate for your assignment. I promise to consider these appeals and, if the appeal is accepted, to re-examine your assignment. Please note, however, that a successful request for regrading can result in your mark going up or down.

Accessibility and Support Services

I want all of you to succeed and flourish philosophically. There are, of course, many ways to learn; I will strive to adapt to your needs, but this means that you must tell me how you learn best. Please feel free to contact me via email or in office hours to let me know what works for you.

Students with disabilities or relevant diagnoses are strongly encouraged to make use of services here at the University. If you require any accommodations in light of any diagnoses or disabilities, please contact Student Accessibility Services. You do not need to disclose any details of any of these matters with me; once you've been in contact with SAS, we will only discuss how to accommodate your needs given practical details of the class.

Generative AI: Use Prohibited

Students are not permitted to use generative AI in this course. In alignment with [McMaster academic integrity policy](#), it “shall be an offence knowingly to ... submit academic work for assessment that was purchased or acquired from another source”. This includes work created by generative AI tools. Also state in the policy is the following, “Contract Cheating is the act of “outsourcing of student work to third parties” (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016, p. 639) with or without payment.” Using Generative AI tools is a form of contract cheating. Charges of academic dishonesty will be brought forward to the Office of Academic Integrity.

APPROVED ADVISORY STATEMENTS

Academic Integrity

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. **It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty.**

Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behaviour can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: "Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the [Academic Integrity Policy](#).

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

- plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
- improper collaboration in group work.
- copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

Authenticity / Plagiarism

Some courses may use a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal authenticity and ownership of student submitted work. For courses using such software, students will be expected to submit their work electronically either directly to Turnitin.com or via an online learning platform (e.g. Avenue to Learn, etc.) using plagiarism detection (a service supported by Turnitin.com) so it can be checked for academic dishonesty.

Students who do not wish their work to be submitted through the plagiarism detection software must inform the Instructor before the assignment is due. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to the plagiarism detection software. **All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld** (e.g., on-line search, other software, etc.). For more details about McMaster's use of Turnitin.com please go to www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity.

Courses with an On-line Element

Some courses may use on-line elements (e.g. e-mail, Avenue to Learn, LearnLink, web pages, capa, Moodle, ThinkingCap, etc.). Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of a course using these elements, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in a course that uses on-line elements will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

Online Proctoring

Some courses may use online proctoring software for tests and exams. This software may require students to turn on their video camera, present identification, monitor and record their computer activities, and/or lock/restrict their browser or other applications/software during tests or exams. This software may be required to be installed before the test/exam begins.

Conduct Expectations

As a McMaster student, you have the right to experience, and the responsibility to demonstrate, respectful and dignified interactions within all of our living, learning and working communities. These expectations are described in the [Code of Student Rights & Responsibilities](#) (the “Code”). All students share the responsibility of maintaining a positive environment for the academic and personal growth of all McMaster community members, **whether in person or online.**

It is essential that students be mindful of their interactions online, as the Code remains in effect in virtual learning environments. The Code applies to any interactions that adversely affect, disrupt, or interfere with reasonable participation in University activities. Student disruptions or behaviours that interfere with university functions on online platforms (e.g. use of Avenue 2 Learn, WebEx or Zoom for delivery), will be taken very

seriously and will be investigated. Outcomes may include restriction or removal of the involved students' access to these platforms.

Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who require academic accommodation must contact [Student Accessibility Services](#) (SAS) at 905-525-9140 ext. 28652 or sas@mcmaster.ca to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. For further information, consult McMaster University's [Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities](#) policy.

Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work

In the event of an absence for medical or other reasons, students should review and follow the [Policy on Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work](#).

Academic Accommodation for Religious, Indigenous, or Spiritual Observances (RISO)

Students requiring academic accommodation based on religious, Indigenous or spiritual observances should follow the procedures set out in the [RISO](#) policy. Students should submit their request to their Faculty Office ***normally within 10 working days*** of the beginning of term in which they anticipate a need for accommodation or to the Registrar's Office prior to their examinations. Students should also contact their instructors as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for classes, assignments, and tests.

Copyright and Recording

Students are advised that lectures, demonstrations, performances, and any other course material provided by an instructor include copyright protected works. The Copyright Act and copyright law protect every original literary, dramatic, musical and artistic work, **including lectures** by University instructors.

The recording of lectures, tutorials, or other methods of instruction may occur during a course. Recording may be done by either the instructor for the purpose of authorized distribution, or by a student for the purpose of personal study. Students should be aware that their voice and/or image may be recorded by others during the class. Please speak with the instructor if this is a concern for you.

Extreme Circumstances

The University reserves the right to change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances (e.g., severe weather, labour disruptions, etc.). Changes will be communicated through regular McMaster communication channels, such as McMaster Daily News, Avenue to Learn and/or McMaster email.