

## *Sample Syllabus (200-level)*

### **Early Modern Philosophy: African and European Perspectives**

When/Where: TBD

Instructor: Carmen De Schryver

Office Hours: TBD

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#### **Course Description:**

The Early Modern period, lasting from roughly the late 16<sup>th</sup> to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, is characterized by a flurry of philosophical activity. Early modern philosophical thought originates a novel demand to think responsibly, *i.e.* unburdened by prejudice and presupposition, a demand which transformed the very nature of the philosophical enterprise. This course will consider the global nature of this transformation by setting Early Modern European philosophers into dialogue with their contemporaries from the African continent. Our thematic focus will be on the various methods of radical doubt advanced during the Early Modern period which sought to realize the philosophical ambition of presuppositionlessness. This starting point, however, develops in very different directions: (i) an emphasis on the distinctiveness of the mind and its relationship to God and (ii) a focus on the embodied nature of human being and the way that thinking is ultimately dependent on bodily sensation. This course traces these two strands of thought by looking at the philosophies of Zera Yacob and René Descartes, on the one hand, and Anton Wilhelm Amon and John Locke, on the other. We will conclude with a consideration of the historical juncture in which the common perception of philosophy as a global enterprise was replaced with a novel idea – that then became orthodoxy – which regarded philosophy as uniquely European.

#### **Learning Outcomes:**

- Gain a familiarity with key debates in Early Modern Philosophy regarding the relationship between the body and the mind, and the relationship between the human being, nature, and God
- Develop critical thinking, reading and writing skills, particularly in light of the attention to philosophical method in the Early Modern Period
- Cultivate a sensitivity to different hermeneutic contexts in reading primary sources, as we attempt to both read these philosophers on their own terms and in conversation with other philosophers and in light of historical developments
- Reach a deepened understanding of the historical construction of philosophy as “European”
- Constructively engage with the work of peers by providing written feedback on a presentation

## Course Elements

- Participation (20%)
    - (i) Preparation for class.
      - Readings. Weekly discussions will be based largely on the assigned readings. All the assigned readings for this course are mandatory. You are expected to read closely and attentively (often, this will mean reading twice; it will always mean taking notes).
      - Post on the discussion *before class*. Depending on the week, you will be asked to either pose a question of your own based on the readings, or answer the question posted on the discussion board.
    - (ii) Contribution to the discussion.
      - A positive contribution can take on a variety of forms: asking a clarificatory question, raising a discussion point, weighing in on an interpretation, pointing to a significant passage in the text, etc. At minimum, it requires that you be a respectful and engaged listener not just to what I say but to what your peers say. Speaking up in larger group settings will be more comfortable for some than for others. If you tend to be more talkative, an important component of your contributing to a healthy and respectful discussion will be making space for others to speak. If you tend to be less talkative, I encourage you to meet with me during office hours to determine how we can cultivate a welcoming dialogical environment that works for you.
  - Reading Reports (30%)
    - **Weekly** submission of a reading report which addresses that week's prompt *in advance of the class meeting*. You may be asked to share some of this material during our discussion.
    - Your reading report should accomplish three things: (i) identify the major themes of the reading (ii) present what you take to be the most important argumentation related to that theme and (iii) offer a reflection (an objection, question to or extension of the argument).
  - Two papers (25% each). A guide to writing philosophy papers will be circulated.
    - This can build on one of your reading reports or pick a new topic.
    - Two weeks prior to the deadline, you should prepare a one-page outline of your paper which details your *thesis* and breaks down the various steps in your argument
      - You will then be assigned a peer provide written commentary (one-paragraph) on their outlines
      - Your assessment on the final paper will factor in your engagement with your peers. Guidelines for respectful and constructive peer feedback will be circulated online.
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## Course Materials

- Sumner, Claude (ed.). 1976. *Ethiopian Philosophy Vol III: The Treatise of Zara Yacob and Walda Haywedt*. Addis Ababa: Commercial Printing Press
- Menn, Stephen and Smith, Justin (eds.). 2020. *Anton Wilhelm Amo's Philosophical Dissertations on Mind and Body*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Ariew, Roger and Watkins, Eric (eds.). 2000. *Readings in Modern Philosophy, Volume I* (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Associated Texts). Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Ariew, Roger and Watkins, Eric (eds.). 2000. *Readings in Modern Philosophy, Volume II* (Locke, Berkeley, Hume and Associated Texts). Indianapolis: Hackett.
- *All other readings will be made available in PDF.*

## Note on the Readings

In order to get the most out of the course, it is necessary that you read the assigned texts closely *in advance* of the class meeting. As you will see, most of the readings are relatively short. Do not be discouraged if you find the readings difficult or even confusing. Our class discussion is designed to (i) collaboratively make sense of the text and (ii) equip you with the skills that you need to fully comprehend and critically interrogate the course material. I will not expect you to understand everything that you read. I do, however, expect you to make a good-faith effort to interpret the text on your own, to note down any questions, and to participate proactively in the class discussion on this basis. I would also like to emphasize that raising clarificatory questions is not just okay but very much encouraged; if you are confused about something, it is very likely your peers will be as well, and your questions will be welcomed!

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## Tentative Course Schedule

*The following is a provisional course schedule for the semester. Any changes to the schedule will be announced in class.*

### **Week 1:** Introduction to Early Modern Philosophy + Discussion of the Syllabus

*No reading*

### Unit 1: Zera Yacob and René Descartes

#### **Week 2:**

Yacob, *The Treatise of Zera Yacob*, Chapter I & II, pp. 3-4

Q: Why is Zera Yacob forced into exile? How do you think this might impact his philosophical position, if at all?

#### **Week 3:**

Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*: First Meditation, Second Meditation, I, pp. 27-34

Q: How and why does Descartes call everything into doubt?

#### **Week 4:**

Yacob, *The Treatise*, Chapter III & IV, pp. 5-6

Q: Why is Yacob concerned with disagreement?

#### **Week 5:**

Descartes, Third Meditation, Fourth Meditation I: pp. 34-45

Q: Why does Descartes want to find an explanation for the errors we make?

#### **Week 6:**

Yacob, *The Treatise*, Chapter V, VI and VIII, pp. 9-14

Q: How does Yacob distinguish between truth and falsity? What are the ethical resonances of this?

#### **Week 7:**

Descartes, Fifth Meditation, Sixth Meditation I, pp. 45-55

Descartes, Correspondence with Elizabeth

Q: How does Descartes prove that the mind and the body are distinct?

## Unit 2: John Locke and Anton Wilhelm Amo

### **Week 8:**

Amo, "Inaugural Dissertation on the Impassivity of the Human Mind", pp. 159-173

Q: How does Amo understand the human mind?

### **Week 9:**

Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, I.1-2; II.1.1-5; II.8.7-26 II, pp.11-8, pp.27-31

Q: What is the difference between primary and secondary qualities?

### **Week 10:**

Amo, "Inaugural Dissertation", pp.173-189

Q: What is meant by the "impassivity of the mind"? What does this mean for the source of thinking?

### **Week 11:**

Locke, *Essay*, II.27, II, pp. 61-70

Q: What, according to Locke, is the source of personal identity?

### **Week 12:**

Amo, "Philosophical Disputation", pp. 213-223

Q: What do we have in common with animals?

### **Week 13:**

May 11 Locke, *Essay*: III.3,6 (II, 70-9)

Q: What is an abstract idea?

## Unit 3: The Enlightenment and the Development of Philosophical Eurocentrism

### **Week 14:**

Smith, "The Enlightenment's Race Problem and Ours"

Mills, "Non-Cartesian Sums"

### **Week 15:**

Bernasconi, "The Paradoxical Parochialism of Philosophy"

Diagne, "Decolonizing the History of Philosophy"