Introduction

Philosophy is both very ancient and very much contemporary, almost obsessed with being rational, and a source of rationality's sharpest criticisms, a very "academic" subject studied almost solely in universities, and a pervasive feature of everyday life, often a part of conversations between parents and young children. We'll spend this semester looking mainly at very influential work in the core Western tradition in philosophy—the ancient Greek thinker Plato, the 17th Century Frenchman René Descartes, and the 18th Century Scot, David Hume—but we'll also spend time engaging philosophically with a topic that has not been much discussed by philosophers (when they were on the job, anyway)—motherhood. As we consider the work of both the historic “greats” and working philosophers of our own time, we will be aiming at improving our own philosophical abilities, in part by noting the connections and disconnections between the texts we consider and our own lives, our own efforts to make sense of what it is to be a human being. We will also pay attention to the lives of those who have not been included in the deliberations of philosophers throughout history, and try to figure out what their exclusion says about this enterprise.

Class Procedures

Course Structure. The course will pursue three themes. The first is “Philosophy as a Form of Life,” and our goal here will be to get a sense of the kind of role that reason can play in the shaping of how a person looks at the world, and lives within it. We’ll look at two dialogues composed by one of history’s most influential thinkers, Plato, that (in part) depict how the Greek philosopher Socrates dealt with a crisis in his life—how he would face the end of it. The second and longest theme is “What Am I and What Can I Know?” We’ll consider the work of two of the most influential philosophers of the period of history known as “modernity” or the “Enlightenment”, Descartes and Hume, thinkers whose work continues to have impact on how we understand what it is to be a person, and how we can best respond to all the chances the world throws at us to make serious mistakes in what we believe. Our final theme is called “Philosophy, Identity and Practical Ethics,” and under this heading we will read and discuss several essays by contemporary philosophers addressing an identity that has greatly influenced all our lives—the identity of motherhood.

Class Process. This is a very big class, which presents problems for teaching and learning in general, but especially in a field such as philosophy, where “learning” and “doing” are very closely associated. Lectures will make up a certain part of the course, but to combat the natural tendency to “get lost” in this sort of environment, to sit back and be passive (or actively engaged in interesting but nonphilosophical fantasies) we’ll divide the class into twelve groups of about eight members each. When we break up for small group discussion (as we will often
do) you will (typically) meet and interact with members of your own group. Each group will have
to work up a joint presentation to make to the class as a whole (much more on this to follow).
There will also be role-playing exercises (e.g., debates, short dramatizations) that will involve
your group.

During the first class session, the groups will be formed. By the third class meeting every
group should have chosen a name (clever names are fine; salacious names are not) and have
also chosen a coordinator. The coordinator will get some extra credit—but she or he will earn it.
The coordinator will have to get discussions going and report out to the whole group. She or he
will also have to facilitate group projects and the role-playing exercises.

Assessment. At the end of two of the three themes, you will turn in a paper of 1000 to
1500 words (word processed or typed) on a topic pertinent to that theme. (Possible paper topics
and detailed instructions will be provided.) Each paper will be worth a maximum of 25 points.
On one occasion, your group will make a presentation to the rest of the class (probably in the
form of a “poster session”—more about this later). The presentation will be worth 30 points, and
each member of the group will receive the amount of credit that the presentation as a whole
merits. On roughly 25 occasions during the course, you will be asked to answer a single
question, based on the reading for that day. A correct answer counts one point. While I expect
that these and only these forms of assessment will be used (e.g., there are no plans for a final
examination), weighted in just these ways, if it seems to me that the good of the course requires
any kind of revision, I will feel free to institute the change (letting you all know about it, of
course). You will note that the points mentioned above sum to 105. Taking on the group
coordinator role will be worth 5 points as well. There will be opportunities to earn a few extra
points for attendance at philosophical lectures given out of class hours. I do not grade on a
curve. It will take 94 points or better to score a 4.0, at least 88 to get a 3.5, at least 82 for a 3.0,
at least 76 for a 2.5, and so on.

Texts

Plato, The Trial and Death of Socrates
Descartes, Meditations
Hume, An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding.
Text for theme III: TBA
Further required purchase: a pack of index cards.

Class Ethics and Etiquette
Academic honesty is, of course, essential. Regular participation is a class requirement, as is
timely attendance (8:30 is difficult for some, I appreciate, but, as they say, there it is. Class
extends to 9:50 [or to I say we’ve had it]; please don’t leave before the period is over). If you
must miss class (more than once), please notify me via e-mail. All cell phones must be off for
the duration of the class. I very much hope for many vigorous and challenging discussions,
where disagreement is valued, both in the class as a whole and in small groups, but those
discussions must go on in ways that show our respect for one another. While I don’t expect to
walk around snarling “5 points from Gryffindor” if somebody’s cell goes off, or if someone’s
attendance is poor, I reserve the right to deduct points for etiquette breaches.

As MSU is a research-intensive university, I, like all your professors, have
responsibilities to carry on a serious research program in my discipline. We believe that intense
engagement in research brings value to teaching that would be otherwise be unobtainable; the
flip side is that, on at least one occasion (March 26th) my research responsibilities will preclude
my being in class. Ms. Spry will conduct that session.

Schedule
To be provided.