

**Department of Philosophy**  
**Eighteenth-Century Philosophy/107-361B 2018**  
**Professor Alison Laywine**  
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**Office hours: Tuesdays 17:40-19:00**

**No use of laptops in class**

The purpose of this course is to introduce students to philosophy of the eighteenth century in Europe. The focus of our readings and discussion will be a claim associated with the English philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626): philosophy (broadly construed) can make progress, but not if it proceeds by conjecture or hypothesis; progress is possible only by proceeding ‘experimentally’, i.e., by observation, by conducting experiments or even collecting reports of received wisdom (‘old wives’ tales’). The virtue of proceeding this way is supposed to be that we do not prejudice what our conclusions should be; we allow ourselves to be guided to the truth by the facts and not by our expectations. One reason for taking Bacon’s claim very seriously is that it seems to pass the most important test: it yields fruit – perhaps even the most and the best. Or so its ablest proponents argued. We will critically examine the claim by tasting the fruit of the experimental philosophy and comparing it to the fruit of hypothesis – in two different areas of enquiry: the investigation of material nature – ‘natural philosophy’, as it was known at the time – and the investigation of human nature. We will proceed by case-study (there is no other way). Our case study for the investigation of material nature will be two different attempts to explain the nature of colour: that of Descartes, which rests on a certain hypothesis (namely that light is a pressure of the etherial medium that fills space) and that of Newton, which purports to proceed experimentally. Our case study for the investigation of human nature will be more broad-ranging. We will consider whether Hume’s experimental approach can shed light on the causes of belief among human beings (if time permits, we will see how Hume applies his results to try to account for religious belief). We will consider Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s attempt to explain – by conjecture of some kind – the origin of political and social inequality among human beings. We will also consider Johann Gottfried Herder’s criticisms of Rousseau on the origin of human language and his alternative (speculative account). Our concern over the course of the term is to see what experimental philosophy can deliver and how it delivers the goods when it succeeds. Are assumptions involved? Do they count as hypothetical? How are we supposed to proceed in scouting out answers to questions that do not seem tractable experimentally? Can speculation be both fruitful and intellectually responsible?

This course will have four units of roughly three weeks each. I cannot predict more precisely than that, because how long we take on a given reading or unit will depend on the pace of class room discussion, which is largely up to you.

I have ordered two books for this class, which are available for purchase at the Word Bookstore. They are *Rousseau: The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing) and *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, trans. Michael Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). The other readings I will post on Mycourses as PDF scans.

**Unit One:** Descartes and Newton on colours and light. Our readings will be from Descartes will include the Eighth Discourse of the *Meteorology*, Parts One and Two of the *Discourse on the Method* and his letter to Picot (the introduction to the French translation of his *Principles of Philosophy*). Our readings from Newton will include selections from his *Optics*, his letter of 1672 to the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society and replies to it.

**Unit Two:** selections from Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature* and his *Natural History of Religion*

**Unit Three:** Jean Jacque Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among Men* and selections from the *Origin of Language*

**Unit Four:** Herder’s *On the Origin of Language*

Students are expected to have **done the readings ahead of time** and to **bring the readings to class**. Since the use of laptop computers is not allowed, this will mean printing up the readings – ahead of time. **Bring the readings to class**. The method of evaluation will be 10% for constructive classroom participation. Getting credit for participation presupposes you come to class regularly. Coming to class regularly is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for getting credit for participation. 90% of the grade will be for written assignments. There will be a final paper and (probably) a shorter paper early in the term.

Ceux et celles qui aiment mieux rédiger et soumettre leurs travaux en français ont le droit de le faire à l’Université McGill (<http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/search/local/french>).

Plagiarism is not tolerated at McGill. If you have any questions about what it consists in or what the consequences are at McGill, go to <http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/academicrights/integrity/cheating>. In the interest of promoting academic integrity, I require that students sign a pledge on all pieces of written work they turn in to me. That pledge is a simple, signed statement to the effect that the paper you are turning in represents your own work and that you have acknowledged all your intellectual debts. If you do not sign the pledge, I will not read or grade your paper. If I do not grade your paper, you will flunk the course, because it is a necessary condition for getting credit for the course that you turn in all your assignments.

