

**Department of Philosophy**  
**PHIL 480**  
**Topics in the History of Philosophy**

**Topic for 2024: Causation in early modern philosophy**  
TTh 8:35-9:55, Leacock 109

Prof. Emily Carson  
emily.carson@mcgill.ca  
Office hours: T 11-12:30pm, Leacock 936

In this course we will survey what Hume called “one of the most sublime questions in philosophy, viz. *that concerning the power and efficacy of causes*” [*Treatise* 1.3.14] through the work of some of the most important philosophers of the early modern period. The general theme of the course will be the relation between the idea of causal power and laws of nature. We will begin with Descartes, who sought to eliminate the primary causal mechanism of Aristotelian science, substantial forms, which he saw as incompatible with a mechanistic view of the physical world. Substantial forms were replaced in Descartes’ natural philosophy by an appeal to God as the primary cause of motion. We’ll read Elizabeth’s critique of Descartes’ view, followed by Malebranche’s development of occasionalism, which denies interaction between finite substances. We will look briefly at Masham’s critique of such a view. Leibniz also denied that there could be such interaction, but he nonetheless held that substances are endowed with sufficient intrinsic active powers or forces to determine *their own* states. In order to explain the apparent causal interaction of substances—bodies and minds—Leibniz invoked his system of pre-established harmony. During the same period, we find Locke attempting to reconcile the Aristotelian commitment to causal powers of bodies with the new mechanistic natural philosophy. Berkeley’s rejection of this appeal to causal powers leads him to reconceive the aim of natural philosophy: science should not aim at uncovering the ‘natural causes’ of things, but at subsuming natural phenomena under regularities: laws of nature. This leads us naturally into Hume’s own discussion of this “most sublime” question.

**Text:** *Readings in Modern Philosophy, vol. I*, available at The Word bookstore on Milton Street.

**Requirements:**

- discussion board posts: you’ll be required to post one question per month (September, October, November) about the reading under discussion and post at least one reply per month, for a total of three of each; 15%
- one short 1000-word maximum paper on a selected passage from our readings; 20%
- a mandatory peer review exercise where you will submit a draft of your final paper to a peer review platform; each student will review two peers’ drafts; 10%
- final paper of 2500 words maximum. 55%

**Assessment criteria:**

Discussion board posts and replies will be assessed according to their engagement with the course material.

Peer reviews will be given full marks for completing the task, assuming a satisfactory level of feedback.

Papers will be graded according to the rubric found below.

\*Late work will be penalised half a letter grade per day; late discussion board posts will not count towards the required number.

\*Accommodation must be requested well before the due date.

\*Artificial Intelligence tools (such as ChatGPT or others that are or may become available) are not permitted in this class.

**Paper grading rubric**

		<b>(1) Outstanding</b>	<b>(2) Good</b>	<b>(3) Adequate</b>	<b>(4) Inadequa</b>
S T R E N G T H  O F  A R G U M E N T	ARG	Thesis is supported excellently—the arguments in the essay work well together to support the thesis; the claims in these arguments are themselves supported well	Thesis is mostly defended well, but one small part isn't supported, or one or two of the arguments for it need a bit more support or explanation	1-2 important parts of thesis need further support (textual or other evidence), or several claims in the arguments for the thesis given too quickly, w/little support	The points given in the paper do not support the thesis, or there are major gaps where aspects of the thesis or arguments for it are left undefended, or it's difficult to tell what you are arguing for & how
	EVID	Adequate textual evidence provided for your claims about the text	Adequate textual evidence provided for your claims about the text(s) in most places, but need more in 1-2 places	More textual evidence is needed in several places	Very little to no textual evidence is provided
	ACC	No inaccuracies in discussion of texts, and/or non-standard interpretations defended well	Mostly accurate discussion of claims and arguments from texts, but 1-2 minor inaccuracies; or, controversial or non-standard interpretations of texts need a bit more defense	A few inaccuracies in the discussion of the texts, or controversial or non-standard interpretations of texts not defended as well as they should be	Many points in discussion of texts are inaccurate, or controversial interpretations hardly or not defended at all
	EXPL	Explanations of arguments in texts or your own arguments clarify the views well	Could use a bit more explanation of arguments in the texts or your own arguments	Need significantly more explanation of the texts or your own arguments to clarify the views	Little to no explanation of the texts or your own arguments to clarify them

I N S I G H T	INS	Creative, original thesis, argument, and interpretations of texts that spark new ideas and questions in the reader beyond what is in the texts and lectures; takes risks and reflects deep thought and effort	Thesis, arguments, and/or interpretations of texts reflect some original thought	There is not much evidence of original thought or interpretations, or the arguments in the essay were given in class or in the texts, or the interpretations are pretty clear to most readers on a first read	The essay attempts to repeat arguments or ideas from texts or lectures/discussions, or attempts to give an original argument, but shows a serious lack of understanding of the material in either case
---------------------------------	-----	---	--	---	--

		<b>(1) Outstanding</b>	<b>(2) Good</b>	<b>(3) Adequate</b>	<b>(4) Inadequate</b>
O R G A N I Z A T I O N	THESIS	Thesis is clear and accurately reflects the main argument in the essay	Thesis statement is vague, or the essay argues something slightly different	Thesis is hard to find and/or difficult to understand	There seems to be no thesis statement at all
	ORDER	Points are linked in an order that reveals well how they work together to support the thesis	One or two paragraphs should be moved to a different part of the essay to improve the argument flow, or one paragraph goes a bit off topic	It's somewhat difficult to follow the thread of the argument in the essay, to see why the paragraphs should be in this order (though with effort the thread can be found), or the essay makes some points disconnected from thesis	Points seem to be listed somewhat randomly rather than having clear transitions and a logical order
	PARA	Paragraphs are coherent, with good topic sentences	One or two paragraphs could be better organized internally, or missing topic sentences for 1-2 of them	It's hard to follow the internal organizational structure of several paragraphs, or several paragraphs missing topic sentences	The essay is not broken up into coherent paragraphs for different points
	TRANS	Excellent transitions between paragraphs	Missing one or two transitions between paragraphs	Missing transitions between many paragraphs	Missing transitions throughout
	I&C	There is an engaging introduction and a conclusion that rounds out the essay well	One or two problems with intro or conclusion	Significant problems with intro or conclusion (e.g., both include arguments that should be in the body of the essay; they don't read like intro or conclusion at all)	There is no intro or no conclusion; (e.g., the essay may stop in the middle of an argument)

S T Y L E & M E C H	GRAM	Very few to no typos, spelling, grammatical or punctuation mistakes	A few typos, spelling, grammatical, or punctuation mistakes	Frequent typos, spelling, grammatical, or punctuation mistakes	Enough typos, spelling, grammatical or punctuation mistakes to make the essay difficult to read and understand
	STYLE	Style is clear and easy to read; author's voice comes through well; sentences flow well; little to no awkward wording	A minor problem with style, such as a few awkward sentences/ words, a few repeated words/phrases author's voice doesn't come through as well as it could	Significant problems with the style, such as frequent awkward sentences/words, frequent repeated words/phrases, or other problems with style that make for some difficulty reading	Serious problems with the style that make the essay difficult to understand
	CIT	Citations given where needed & formatted correctly, includes works cited list		1-2 citations not given where needed and/or formatted incorrectly	Several places where citations not given where needed and/or formatted incorrectly; or no works cited list
	TOPIC	All parts of the topic addressed		One part of the topic not addressed well	The topic is hardly addressed at all

Adapted from <https://blogs.ubc.ca/chendricks/2017/09/06/grading-rubrics-in-philosophy/>

These are common things I look for when marking; this is not exhaustive, but has common issues students run into. There may be more that goes into your overall essay mark than this: no rubric can capture all aspects of every possible essay.

McGill University (Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal) is situated on the traditional territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka, a place which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst many First Nations including the Kanien'kehà:ka of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Huron/Wendat, Abenaki, and Anishinaabeg.

The University Senate has passed a resolution requiring that the following note be attached to the course syllabus:

*McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures; see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information.*

*In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the control of McGill University, assessment tasks in a course are subject to change, provided students are sent adequate and timely communications regarding the change.*

*Students are permitted to use either English or French in completing any assessment task.*