

Department of Philosophy
PHIL 480
Topics in the History of Philosophy

Topic for 2015: Causation in early modern philosophy

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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 will then consider Malebranche’s development of Descartes’ occasionalism. Like the occasionalists, Leibniz also denied that there could be interaction between finite substances. 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.

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

Requirements: The requirements for this course are two 2500-word papers worth 20% and 30% respectively, a final paper proposal worth 10%, and a 4000-word final paper worth 40%. Late papers will be penalised half a letter grade per day. final paper proposal

The University Senate has passed a resolution requiring that the following notes 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/students/srr/honest/ for more information). (approved by Senate on 29 January 2003)

L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/).

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.” (approved by Senate on 21 January 2009 - see also the section in this document on Assignments and evaluation.)

Conformément à la Charte des droits de l'étudiant de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l'un des objets est la maîtrise d'une langue).