

Early Modern Philosophy: Objects and their Properties

A sample syllabus by Tiina C Rosenqvist

[This syllabus outlines a proposed (upper) intermediate course in Early Modern philosophy.]

1. Course Description

This course explores the philosophical treatment of objects and their properties in early modern thought, focusing on the distinction between primary and secondary qualities—a key debate in the history of Western philosophy. We will examine the views of influential philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, Boyle, Berkeley, and Hume and explore questions like: What qualities do objects really possess, and how do our perceptions shape our understanding of them? Is there a meaningful difference between properties like shape and size versus qualities like color and smell? If so, what is the difference?

Through readings from primary sources, we will critically explore the ways early modern thinkers sought to understand the nature of the physical world and our interaction with it. Topics covered include the new science of mechanism, the role of sensation in forming ideas about the material world, and the tensions between empirical science and metaphysical theory. We will also engage with contemporary scholarship on early modern philosophy, and reflect on how early modern debates continue to shape current discussions in philosophy of perception and metaphysics.

2. Course Objectives

Through active participation in this course, you will gain a deep understanding of the debates surrounding the distinction between primary and secondary qualities in Early Modern philosophy, enhance your critical thinking abilities, and refine your skills in constructing and evaluating philosophical arguments, both orally and in writing.

3. Course Structure

In-person sessions:

The in-person sessions will primarily consist of lectures and discussions. You are expected to complete the assigned readings prior to each class and actively engage in discussions and other in-class activities. Additionally, you will be required to present one of the secondary readings to the class.

You are permitted to miss up to two class sessions without prior notice, unless you are scheduled to present on that day.

Out-of-class activities:

You must complete all required readings before the relevant class sessions.

You will also need to submit reading reflections on the Canvas Discussion Board. You may miss up to two reflections without penalty. Late submissions will be accepted for half credit.

The course requires one short paper and one longer paper. You will also engage in peer review.

4. Assignments & Assessment

- Attendance & Participation —10%
- Reading Reflections — 15%
- Presentation —10 %
- Paper 1 (1,500-2,500 words) —20%
- Paper 2 peer Reviews — 5%
- Paper 2 (2,500-3,500 words) —40%

5. Course Policies

[Omitted from this sample]

6. Resources

[Omitted from this sample]

7. Class & Readings Schedule

Note on terminology:

- **“Required”** readings are the ones you are expected to read and engage with *before* the relevant in-class session, and the *only* ones you will be quizzed on. Normally you’re required to read one paper or book chapter or a collection of shorter excerpts per session.
- **“Recommended”** readings/podcasts/videos will give you a fuller understanding of the topic under discussion. They will likely be useful to you when writing papers. Some ideas in the recommended readings might also be discussed during in-class sessions.
- **“Optional”** readings are extra materials for when you are particularly interested in a topic.

(1) Introduction

- **Required:** Nolan (2011), “Introduction” in *Primary & Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*
- **Recommended:** Bolton (2022), “Primary and Secondary Qualities in Early Modern Philosophy” *SEP*, pp. 1-4

(2) Precursors

- **Required:** Lee (2011), “The Distinction between Primary and Secondary Qualities in Ancient Greek Philosophy” in *Primary & Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*

- **Required:** Pasnau (2011), "Scholastic qualities, primary and secondary" in *Primary & Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*

(3) The New Science of Mechanism

- **Required:** Galileo, *The Assayer*, in *The Controversy on the Comets of 1618*, pp. 308-314
- **Required:** Baigrie (2002), 'The new science: Kepler, Galileo, Mersenne' in *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, pp. 49-52.
- **Recommended:** Bolton (2022), "Primary and Secondary Qualities in Early Modern Philosophy" *SEP*, Section 2: Galileo Galilei
- **Optional:** Gaukroger (2002), "Francis Bacon" in *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*

(4) Descartes: Excerpts

- **Required:** Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, I §§26-27, 66-71; II §§1-20, 33-34; IV §§197-203.
- **Optional:** Wilson (1999), "Skepticism without indubitability" in *Ideas and Mechanism*

(5) Descartes on the properties of objects

- **Required:** Wilson (1999), "Descartes on the perception of primary qualities" in *Ideas and Mechanism*
- **Required:** Nolan (2011), "Descartes on "what we call color" in *Primary & Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*, pp. 81-92
- **Optional:** Bolton (2022), "Primary and Secondary Qualities in Early Modern Philosophy" *SEP*, Section 3: René Descartes

(6) Mechanistic vs. Atomistic Philosophy: Descartes and Gassendi

- **Required:** LaLorde (2011), "Gassendi and the seventeenth-century atomists on primary and secondary qualities" in *Primary & Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*
- **Required:** Garber (1992), "Descartes against the atomists" in *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics*, pp. 117-136.

(7) Cavendish vs. Descartes and Galileo

- **Required:** Chamberlain (2019), "Color in a Material World: Margaret Cavendish against the Early Modern Mechanists," *The Philosophical Review*
- **Recommended:** West (2022), "Margaret Cavendish on conceivability, possibility, and the case of colours," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*
- **Optional:** Liu (2021), "Qualities and the Galilean View," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*

(8) Boyle and Locke: Excerpts

- **Required:** Boyle, *The Origin of Forms and Qualities according to the Corpuscular Philosophy*, pp. 50-53.
- **Required:** Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, chapter VIII; Book III, chapter VI, §6; Book IV, chapter IV, §§1-5, 11- 12.
- **Recommended:** Downing (2002), "Robert Boyle" in *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*

(9) Boyle and Locke

- **Required:** Alexander (1974), "Boyle and Locke on primary and secondary qualities," *Ratio*
- **Optional:** Bolton (2022), "Primary and Secondary Qualities in Early Modern Philosophy" *SEP*, Section 4: Robert Boyle

(10) Locke's Distinction

- **Required:** Rickless (1997), "Locke on primary and secondary qualities," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*
- **Optional:** Bolton (2022), "Primary and Secondary Qualities in Early Modern Philosophy" *SEP*, Section 5: John Locke

(11) Locke's Distinction Cont.

- **Required:** Ayers (2011), "Primary and Secondary Qualities in Locke's Essay" in *Primary & Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*
- **Recommended:** McCann (2011), "Locke's Distinction between Primary Primary Qualities and Secondary Primary Qualities" in *Primary & Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*

(12) Review & Discussion

- **Required:** Come prepared with questions!

Paper 1 Due

(13) Leibniz

- **Required:** Bolton (2011), "Primary and Secondary Qualities in the Phenomenalist Theory of Leibniz". in *Primary & Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*

(14) Berkeley: Excerpts

- **Required:** Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, §§1-33.
- **Required:** Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, First Dialogue

(15) Berkeley's Argument

- **Required:** Wilson (1999), "Berkeley on colors" in *Ideas and Mechanism*
- **Recommended:** Harris (1997), "Berkeley's argument from perceptual relativity," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*

(16) Berkeley and Locke

- **Required:** Stroud (2011), "Berkeley v. Locke on primary qualities" in *Philosophers Past and Present*
- **Required:** Wilson (1999), "Did Berkeley completely misunderstand the basis of the primary-secondary distinction in Locke?" in *Ideas and Mechanism*

(17) Berkeley's Natural Philosophy & Newtonianism

- **Required:** Wilson (1999), "Berkeley and the essences of the corpuscularians" in *Ideas and Mechanism*
- **Required:** Downing (2005), "Berkeley's natural philosophy and philosophy of science" in *Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*

(18) Newton

- **Required:** Stein (2002), "Newton's metaphysics" in *Cambridge Companion to Newton*, pp. 256-264, 272-285, 288-291.

(19) Hume and Newton

- **Required:** Hume, *Treatise concerning Human Nature*, Introduction.
- **Recommended:** Schliesser (2009), "Hume's Newtonianism and anti-Newtonianism", *SEP*, pp. 1-16.

(20) Hume: Excerpts

- **Required:** Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.2.44-47, 1.4.4.
- **Required:** Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 12, §§5-16.

(21) Hume and Berkeley

- **Required:** Nelson & Landy (2011), "Hume and his Debt to Berkeley" in *Primary & Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*

(22) Hume's "Ideas"

- **Required:** Winkler (2011), "Hume and sensible qualities" in *Primary & Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*

(23) Reid: Excerpts

- **Required:** Reid, *Inquiry*, §§I.1-8, §§II.1-2, 8-9, §VI.20
- **Required:** Reid, *Essays*, §II.16 (on smell and sensation), *Essays*, §II.1-2, 5 (on perception)

(24) Reid against "Ideas"

- **Required:** Van Cleve (2011), "Rein on the Real Foundation of the Primary and Secondary Quality Distinction" in *Primary & Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*
- **Recommended:** Maddy, "Naturalism and common sense," pp. 19-27.
- **Optional:** Bolton (2022), "Primary and Secondary Qualities in Early Modern Philosophy" *SEP*, Section 6: Thomas Reid

(25) Review and Discussion

- **Required:** Come prepared with questions!

Paper 2 Draft 1 Due

(26) Final Paper Writing Workshop in Class

- **Required:** Bring a physical copy of your Paper 2 Draft 1

Paper 2 Peer Reviews Due

(27) Final Paper Peer Reviews in Class

- **Required:** Bring physical copies of your peer reviews

(28) Film Day: *Galileo: Fighting in the Dawn of Modern Science* (2013, Dir. Panos Anestis)

Paper 2 Final Draft Due