

# Proseminar: Perception from Descartes to Helmholtz

PHIL 610 · AUTUMN 2010

<b>Class Location</b>	LA1 304	<b>Professor</b>	Alexander Klein
<b>Class Time</b>	W 7:00-9:45 PM	<b>Email</b>	<a href="mailto:aklein@csulb.edu">aklein@csulb.edu</a>
<b>Office Location</b>	MHB 912		
<b>Office Hours</b>	M & W 9:45-10:45 AM, or by appointment.		

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

We think of modern science as having its roots in the new physics of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the work of people like Galileo, Boyle, and Descartes. But these figures offered such a revolutionary picture of physical reality that their work immediately demanded new accounts of *perception* to accompany the new physics. After all, these figures had to have a story to tell about how a physical world such as they conceived it could be cognitively accessible to inquirers. This course will investigate key early modern theories of perception, especially in light of then-new advances in the physical sciences. We will focus on two central challenges that emerged for such figures. First, theorists had to offer accounts of how we can perceive *primary properties* directly, or at least reliably indirectly. Of special interest in this vein was the primary property of three-dimensional spatial extension. A good deal of early modern theorizing about perception arises in the context of accounts of spatial perception, so we will pay special attention to this topic. Second, the accounts of perception these figures offered had to fit—in some intelligible way—inside the very same world that physics describes. Thus we will find theories of perception getting drawn not just into epistemological questions, but into metaphysical questions as well. The main figures we will study include some or all of Descartes, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Muller, Hering, Lotze, and Helmholtz.

This class will serve as the Philosophy Department's proseminar this year. As such, the course will be writing intensive, and will pay special attention to secondary literature that models the sort of writing graduate students should strive to produce. Assignments will be specially designed to help students learn how to conduct graduate-level research in philosophy.

## COURSE GOALS

Upon completion of this course, diligent students should find that they

- ◆ can show a basic ability to conduct original philosophical research and to write scholarly, philosophical essays;
- ◆ can show a basic grasp of the most important scholarly debates concerning perception in early and late modern philosophy;

- ◆ can demonstrate a basic ability to comprehend and critically analyze philosophical texts.

## TEXTS

Books: *PLEASE ORDER ONLINE*—you should be able to find more affordable copies that way. They will not be available at the bookstore.

- Rene Descartes. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. 1-2. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (eds.). New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985. [ISBN: 052128807X, 0521288088]
- George Berkeley. *Berkeley: Philosophical Writings*. Desmond Clarke (ed.), New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. [ISBN: 0521707625]

Articles: *All other articles and readings will be available for download on Beachboard.*

## GRADING

- Plagiarism Quiz (0%) \*
- Paper Introduction (10%)
- Short Paper (15%)
- Long Paper (20%)
- Presentation (15%)
- Group Grade: Bibliography (10%)
- Writing Exercises—an average of your five out of six best scores (20% total)
- Participation (10%)

\* You must score 100% on the plagiarism quiz before you will be permitted to hand in any written work in this class. You may take the quiz as many times as you need to. The plagiarism quiz does not count towards your final grade—unless you fail to take it and achieve a perfect score, in which case your final grade for this class will be an F.

## MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ASSIGNMENTS

### Paper Introduction, Short Paper, Long Paper

These three assignments are designed to guide you, step by step, through the process of writing a philosophy term paper. Your first substantial assignment connected with the term paper will be to complete that paper's (tentative) introduction. Your second such assignment will be to produce a short version of the term paper—including an edited version of the introduction. The short paper is not a sketchy version of the final, but rather a draft of several (but not all) of the paper's

projected subsections. And the long paper will be the final draft of the whole thing, due by our final exam time.

### Presentation

Most weeks we will have at least one presentation on the day's assigned reading. Presentations are to take between 9 and 10 minutes, exactly. I will be positively savage in keeping you within these limits!

Although each presentation will be delivered by one person, the presentations are to be jointly prepared by small research groups. We will form these research groups during the first class meeting (we will probably form five groups of three). Presentations will rotate between groups.

Each week, the group that is slated to present next must meet on its own, outside of class, to help prepare the presentation. These meetings should take an hour or two. The groups should discuss at least these four questions about the assigned reading:

1. What is the most *important* claim the author advances in this reading?
2. How does the author support said claim?
3. What is the most *interesting* point in this reading?
4. To what kinds of objections are the important and/or interesting claims most vulnerable?

The actual presenter for the week should then craft his or her presentation using insights that come up in the group discussion. The presenter is not required to represent everybody or even anybody else's ideas from the group—the presentation, finally, is the *presenter's* responsibility, and the presenter alone will receive a presentation grade for that week.

If you are concerned that another group member is skipping meetings or being disruptive, please contact me immediately so I can resolve the situation. I will lower the presentation grade of any student who continually disrupts or skips group meetings.

### Group Grade: Bibliography

Research groups will be jointly responsible (*i.e.*, everybody in the group gets the same grade) for one project during the semester. The project has two parts. The first part will be to compile and annotate a bibliography of the most widely cited articles or books on Berkeley's *New Theory of Vision*. The second part of the project will be for the group to give a five minute presentation in class about its findings.

## Writing Exercises

There will be six short writing exercises assigned throughout the semester. I only count the top five of your grades on these—this is to give you some leeway in case you have to miss one of the assignments for any reason.

## OTHER POLICIES

### Plagiarism

**My penalty for any and all plagiarism is an F for the final course grade.** I give no second chances. I will not permit you to rewrite the paper or assignment. I will simply fail you.

Why do I care so much about plagiarism? The grades you have when you graduate, the honors or distinctions that may go along with those grades, and the letters you get from your professors on the basis of your performance in their courses, are all you will have to show prospective employers or PhD programs that you are qualified to be employed or admitted. Plagiarism is a way of cheating in this process, pure and simple.

The founding ideal of the American university system is precisely that opportunity should be correlated with performance. In fact, the idea that social opportunities like jobs and education should be commensurate with actual performance, not with one's family or fraternity connections, money, or whatever, is also among the founding ideals of our entire American democracy. Since plagiarism is an affront to this idea of a meritocracy, and thus to founding ideals of our nation, I simply will not tolerate it.

Unfortunately the rise of the internet has ushered in a new era of plagiarism. Perhaps plagiarism seems less serious these days because it is so easy to cut, paste, and paraphrase. Whatever its source, the new wave of plagiarism has forced many professors to institute no-tolerance policies, and I am certainly part of that trend. So please—do not get mixed up in a plagiarism case. You will fail the course with no second chance.

To be sure that everybody knows what constitutes plagiarism, you are required to complete a plagiarism quiz before the first written paper is due. The quiz actually instructs you about any mistaken ideas you might have about what constitutes plagiarism. See above for details.

Finally, please be aware that **I use turnitin.com to collect and check all written work in this class.** Turnitin.com is a tool embedded in Beachboard. It compares your

paper with every written word available online, and with every written word ever submitted to turnitin.com. I then receive your paper along with the results of turnitin.com's search. I will never use the turnitin.com report to automatically trigger a charge of plagiarism. Instead, I refer to the turnitin.com report to help me find source material that might have been copied in the event of a suspected case of plagiarism.

### This Syllabus

It is your responsibility to read and understand the rules and regulations set out in this syllabus. If there is anything you do not understand, it is your responsibility to ask me for a clarification early in the semester.

### Beachboard

This class requires the use of Beachboard. I will distribute the syllabus and some readings and assignments simply by posting them online. I will also post your grades to Beachboard, and send the occasional group email to all enrolled students.

### Withdrawal

I follow the University's withdrawal policy, which can be found here:

[http://www.csulb.edu/divisions/aa/catalog/2008-2009/academic\\_information/withdrawal\\_policy.html](http://www.csulb.edu/divisions/aa/catalog/2008-2009/academic_information/withdrawal_policy.html)

### How to Submit Assignments in Case of an Excused Absence

Most writing assignments will be submitted on Beachboard. So if you have an excused absence you should not have trouble submitting your work outside of class—just use Beachboard as you normally would.

In the event of a serious, documented emergency that causes you to miss more than two weeks of class, please contact me so we can try to make alternate arrangements for you to finish the work required in this class.

### Disability

I am happy to accommodate any special requirements you may have in connection with a University-documented disability. Please notify me in advance if you need any such accommodation. I would appreciate hearing from you as soon as possible.

*This syllabus subject to change*