PHIL 346-01 The Scottish Enlightenment

Aaron Szymkowiak
szymkowiak@xavier.edu

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In the 17th and 18th centuries, a relatively small and still-somewhat-backward nation produced some of the most important philosophical minds and debates of the modern era. Owing perhaps to its status as the subordinate member in the union of Great Britain, or perhaps also to its own internal cultural and economic rifts, Scotland became fertile ground for philosophical theorizing, particularly on matters pertaining to morals, politics, and economics.

As we shall discover this semester, the Scotland of Kames, Hutcheson, Hume, Smith, Reid, and Stewart was rife with problems similar to those of the present day: economic division, the question of cultural identity, the struggle between fundamental and “moderate” strains in religion, the question of the proper relationship of church and state, and the myriad of difficulties brought about by rapid change, particularly of a commercial sort. The thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment offer unique insights into all of these problems, taking various conceptions of human nature as their starting points. Though they (especially Hume) are often grouped under the “empiricist” tradition, this label captures very little of the great range of topics treated, and positions taken, by the Scots. These thinkers are behind the “inductive” account of modern science, the field of modern economics, and to a great degree many of our political institutions.

Indeed, one might argue that much of modern social theory has a “Scottish” origin, and that we have come to understand our world through a “Scottish” lens: our concept of “civilization”, for instance, had its origin with the Scottish Legal Theorist Lord Kames and Scottish historian William Robertson, and was further developed as a moral concept by Hume and Smith. The particular philosophical move involved in the concept of “civilization”, whereby human
sentiment is tied to commerce, morality, history, and a theoretically modest notion of “progress”, is perhaps the most enduring legacy of the Scots.

This semester, we will explore the development of this particular connection: of modernity as a set of material conditions with modernity as a social and moral outlook. As we shall see, the “worldly philosophy” of the Scottish Enlightenment holds continuing relevance for our contemporary social and economic situation.

This course is an ER/S, or Ethics Religion, and Society course. As such, we will be emphasizing the centrality of ethical analysis in the Scottish Enlightenment, especially questions relating ethical deliberation to commercial activity and cultural independence.

**Attendance, Participation, Assessment, and Readings**

There will be two exams for the semester: an in-class mid-term, and a final. Each of these will consist of a few short essay questions. Each will count for 25% of the total grade. There will be two essays written outside of class. The first, shorter paper will be 5-7 pages in length, and will concentrate on textual analysis. It will count for 15% of the grade. The final paper will involve reading the texts and themes of the course in light of some contemporary political, moral, or social problem. The final paper will be 6-8 pages in length and count for 25% of the student’s grade. The remaining 10% will be determined by class attendance and participation. Each student will be permitted a maximum of two unexcused absences without penalty. Any student missing 10 or more class sessions automatically fails the course. A student must complete all major assignments in order to pass the course. Any plagiarism will be punished by a failing grade on the assignment in question, and possibly, for the course as a whole.

The following standards have been adopted for grading in the department of philosophy:

- **A** = work that not merely fully and accurately reproduces class discussion, the main thread in an argument or the main philosophical significance of a text under discussion, but which goes beyond these and indicates a contribution of the student, giving evidence of a deeper understanding of the material in question.

- **B** = work that shows a more or less complete and exact understanding of the issues, texts, and/or arguments as explained in class, clearly and logically formulated without going beyond such explanations.

- **C** = work that shows basic understanding of the material but with errors, omissions and confusions of either a formal or material nature.

- **D** = work that shows a minimal acquaintance with the material or serious logical and conceptual flaws in formulating responses to the question raised, the argument at issue, or to the philosophical text under discussion.

- **F** = work that shows inadequate acquaintance with texts, issues, or ideas with little or no valid logical argumentation; or, the work is a plagiarism. In cases of plagiarism, which involve the use of published or other’s written work without giving credit, an F will be awarded for the semester and the student’s name reported to the Dean of the College.

A basic note on classroom conduct: there will be NO use permitted during class time of cell phones, computers, iPods, or any electronic texting devices. Please turn these items OFF before entering class.
As you will see below, this course will involve a lot of reading. Much of it will require rereading, especially Hume’s *Treatise* and the more elaborate psychological passages in Hutcheson’s *Essay*. You will find, however, that careful and diligent study of the difficult passages will enrich immeasurably your understanding of the more “conversational” pieces (Hume’s essays, for instance). It will be crucial for you to read the assignments before the class in which each text is to be discussed. Your success in this course depends in large part upon a willingness to come to class with questions and discuss them.

It is the student’s responsibility to keep up with readings and class assignments (what follows is a rough outline of the topics to be covered on certain days – this may change slightly with class discussion and other factors). In the event of a missed class, be sure to contact the instructor, or at the very least, another student, to keep informed. All exams taken late will involve grade penalties, unless a very serious circumstance is involved.

Students will be expected to follow the lectures by reading the required texts. No study of secondary literature will be necessary, but the portions of the primary texts listed below will be required reading.

**Course Schedule and Outline**

1/13: Introduction: 18th century Scotland – Lowlands and Highlands, Presbyterians and Jacobites, Merchants and Scholars, Union with England; Introduction to Hutcheson.


1/27-29: Introduction to Hume; Treatise 1.1.1-1.1.7 (7-22); 1.3.1-1.3.2 (50-55); 1.3.8-1.3.9 (69-81); 1.4.7 (171-78) (Hume’s epistemology)

2/3-5: Hume *Treatise* 3.2.1-3.2.6 (307-342); 3.2.12 (364-366) (Hume’s moral system)


2/24-26: Lord Kames *Sketches of the History of Man, Book I*: (13-51) (the origin of men and languages); (74-90) (commerce); (259-305) (the female sex); (313-333) (luxury)

3/10-12: Kames *Sketches of the History of Man, Book I*: (259-305) (the female sex); (313-333) (luxury)

3/17: MID TERM EXAM

3/19-31: Millar: The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks (pages TBA)

4/2: *Easter Break*

4/7: Introduction to Smith: *TMS* Part I, sections 1-2 (9-40): propriety as the source of morals; Part II, section 2 (78-92); resentment and justice: imagination and harm

Core Curriculum Goals

Listed here are goals that have been agreed upon for courses taught in the university core. This course will aim to fulfill these goals in the following ways:

GOAL 1: Students will be effective communicators in writing and orally

In this course we will emphasize both class participation and written essays. Without discussion, success in philosophy is very difficult. In our essay assignments, we will stress the formulation of clear and arguable theses, the drawing of solid inferences from evidence, and the maintenance of cohesive style.

GOAL 2: Students will be critical thinkers

The comprehension of difficult philosophical texts, such as those included in this course, requires careful reading and the use of one’s critical intelligence. By thinking clearly about these texts and their competing claims, we will develop a sense for what makes stronger and weaker arguments. In doing this, we will examine central questions concerning the grounds of morality, the nature of beauty, the place of statistical reasoning and inferences of design, the foundations of economics, and the role of religion in ethics.

GOAL 3: Students will be creators of new knowledge and expression

An important question among the Scottish philosophers was the role of habit or traditions as foundations for knowledge, as opposed to the supposition that “novelty” in learning was possible. Possible answers to this question notwithstanding, there is still an important sense in which each student must use his creative capacities to synthesize the various strands of argument being examined in the course. The best philosophical thinking demands as much.

GOAL 4: Students will be able to understand and appreciate the arts, humanities and science disciplines, and reflect on connections among these studies

As a period in the history Western thought, the Scottish Enlightenment is a considerable influence on the development of the modern fields of history, law, economics, biology, ethics, and aesthetics. In this course we will touch upon all of these topics, especially their common roots.

GOAL 5: Students will be integrated individuals who articulate a coherent, ethical perspective on the world and their place in it

As part of a coherent liberal arts education, PHIL 346 will aim at making students more thoughtful and serious human beings. We will trace the concerns of the Scottish thinkers in relation to issues of cultural and economic dependence, particularly as these things are tied to questions of commerce and accommodation of the larger world. In noting the parallels with many contemporary issues, we will seek to understand our own political and social situations more fully.