

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
Undergraduate Course Outline 2010-2011

Philosophy 2006: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Witchcraft
Previously Philosophy 145

Fall Term 2010
Tuesdays and Thursdays 1:30-2:30
UC224

Instructor: Benjamin Hill
StH4147

661-2111 x80143
bhill28@uwo.ca

DESCRIPTION

In Western Europe between approximately 1400 and 1700 over 100,000 people were persecuted, viciously tortured, and executed for the crime of witchcraft – why? What philosophical beliefs underlay the beliefs in the possibility of black magic and compacting with Satan? And what philosophical beliefs warranted the witchhunts, the relentless persecution, and the gruesome torture of accused witches (most of whom were women)? Why did it suddenly appear at the end of the fourteenth century and just as suddenly disappear at the beginning of the eighteenth? Could it (or something similar) happen again? How many of these underlying philosophical beliefs do we still retain?

The belief in witchcraft and the medieval witchcraze touched upon all areas of philosophy – from metaphysics through the philosophy of law and illuminate those areas in interestingly unique ways. This course will introduce students to the following topics: the metaphysics, science, and philosophy of language of natural magic; demonology and the biology of demonic sex; the philosophy of mind of demonic possession; the philosophies of the will and legal responsibility; the Natural Law tradition of legal theorizing; the ethics of torture and execution; the epistemology of testimony; gender and the status of women in the medieval and early modern periods; and the rise of philosophical naturalism.

TEXTS

Brian Levack, ed. *The Witchcraft Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2004);
René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald Cress
(Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993);

Coursepack
TBA

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the course are as follows:

- (1) To inform the students of the events constituting the Witchcraze of the late medieval and early modern period;
- (2) To introduce the students to the current scholarly understanding of the events constituting the Witchcraze;
- (3) To introduce the students to the philosophical positions and debates underlying the belief in witches and witchcraft on the following topics:
 - a) the metaphysics of natural magic and demonology,
 - b) the sciences and physics of natural magic,
 - c) the philosophy of language of magical incantations,
 - d) the biology of demons and demonic sex,
 - e) medieval philosophy of mind and the problem of demonic possession,
 - f) humoral medicine and the problem of demonic possession;
- (4) To introduce the students to the philosophical positions and debates underlying the persecution of witches and conduct of the witchcraft trials on the following topics:
 - a) the natural law theory of legal philosophy,
 - b) the possibility and nature of “victimless” crime,
 - c) the moral justification of torture,
 - d) moral responsibility and the culpability of witches,
 - e) the medieval philosophy of the will and grace;
- (5) To introduce the students to the philosophical puzzles and problems raised by the persecution of witches and conduct of the witch trials on the following topics:
 - a) the epistemology of testimony,
 - b) the reliability of confessions elicited through torture,
 - c) the identification of witches;
- (6) To introduce the students to the late medieval and early modern conceptions of women and gender, and examine why approximately 85% of the victims of the Witchcraze were women;
- (7) To introduce the students to philosophical natural, inform them of its ascendance in the seventeenth-century, and its role in ending the Witchcraze;
- (8) To instill in the students an appreciation of the philosophical beliefs underlying the Witchcraze and their similarity to many of their own and their society’s deeper, philosophical beliefs;
- (9) To encourage critical self-reflection regarding their and their society’s deeper philosophical beliefs and the possibility that another Witchcraze or something similar might someday be perpetuated.

REQUIREMENTS

Four exams will be required:

- (1) An one hour quarter-year exam during the fall term worth 20% of the student’s grade;
- (2) A cumulative two hour mid-year exam to be held during the December exam period at the time and date assigned by the University Registrar worth 30% of the student’s grade;
- (3) An one hour quarter year exam during the winter term worth 20% of the student’s grade;
- (4) A two hour final exam encompassing all the material of the winter term to be held during the April exam period at the time and date assigned by the University Registrar worth 30% of the student’s grade.

All examinations will be closed-book, multiple choice, scantron examinations.

WARNING

This class will include frank and graphic depictions of sex, violence, torture and religious belief. Some people may find such depictions shocking or offensive. All students who register for this course are expected to participate in discussions of this material. Student discretion is advised.

AUDIT

Students wishing to audit the course should consult with the instructor prior to or during the first week of classes.

The **Department of Philosophy Policies** which govern the conduct, standards, and expectations for student participation in Philosophy courses is available in the Undergraduate section of the Department of Philosophy website at <http://uwo.ca/philosophy/undergraduate/proceduresappeals.html>. It is your responsibility to understand the policies set out by the Senate and the Department of Philosophy, and thus ignorance of these policies cannot be used as grounds of appeal.