Seminar in Modern Philosophy (PHIL 491/PHIL 516)
Thursday 11:00 to 2:00 Buchanan D304 Fall Term 2026
Professor Margaret Schabas Buchanan E358, margaret.schabas@ubc.ca
Office Hours: Tuesdays/Thursdays 2:00 to 3:00PM or by appointment

Course Description

This course offers an in-depth study of the major works by John Stuart Mill (1806-73), one of the leading contributors to modern philosophy. Mill's thought is subtle and highly qualified, rather than dogmatic or doctrinaire. Yet his vision for the future was radical and, in many respects, reads as if he was a century or more ahead of his time. We will start with his epistemology and program for the social sciences, followed by his economic, moral, and political philosophy, and finish up with his contributions to feminism and the philosophy of religion. We will also situate his work in the broader context of modern philosophy to comprehend its significance.

Requirements

There are three written assignments: two short précis, and one research essay.
The discussion in the seminar is of paramount importance. You are required to attend the seminar (2.5 hours, ending circa 1:30), and to actively participate, drawing explicitly on the assigned readings. There will also be at least one lead-off discussant assigned for each class, starting in the third week. You are allowed to miss one class without justification but for any additional absences, points will be deducted unless you provide a compelling reason. In November, I will set up obligatory fifteen-minute appointments in my office, to discuss your research essay and overall comprehension of Mill.

Grading

Two précis: 20 (due October 9 and November 6, 10PM)
Participation: 20
1:1 Meeting: 10
Essay Outline: 5 (due November 16, 10PM)
Research Essay: 45 (due December 10, 10PM)
100

Assigned Texts

J.S, Mill, *A System of Logic, Principles of Political Economy* and *Essays on Religion* will be placed on reserve with a 2-hour lending policy; the e-versions will be made available with links on Canvas. There are also multiple copies of Mill's works to be found at the UBC libraries.

J.S. Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays,* edited by Mark Philp and Frederick Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press) (The other essays are *On Representative Government* and *The Subjection of Women*).
Please purchase this book at the UBC Book Store, so that we are using the same pagination.

Course Schedule

September 10: Preliminaries: Mill's Life and Overview of his Philosophical Contributions
(we will read portions of his Autobiography in class, so bring a laptop and your CWL)

September 17: No class

September 24: *A System of Logic* (1843): Book 1

October 1: *A System of Logic* (1843): Book III

October 8: *A System of Logic* (1843): Book VI
October 9: First Précis due

October 15: *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), Books I-II (selected chapters, TBA); Book IV (Ch. 6 only)

October 22: *On Liberty* (1859; co-authored with Harriet Taylor)

October 29: *Utilitarianism* (1861)

November 5: *On Representative Government* (1861)
November 6: Second Précis due

November 12: No class
November 16: Research essay outline due

November 19: *Subjection of Women* (1869)

November 26: "Three Essays on Religion" (1874)

December 3: Presentations of your research essay

December 10: Research Essay Due

Précis: 500 words. Take a passage or chapter from the assigned work by Mill and pose questions of interpretation which enable you to delve more deeply into the topic. No research is required or recommended.

Research Essay: 2500 to 3000 words. Find five to eight journal articles or book chapters that debate a specific question that focuses on Mill's philosophical work. Adjudicate the debate and develop an argument that establishes one scholar as more compelling than the others.
More detailed instructions will be posted on Canvas.