

THEORIES OF FIRST PRINCIPLES IN EARLY MODERN METAPHYSICS

Workshop Programme

Oriel College, University of Oxford • 2–3 October 2026

FRIDAY | 2 October 2026

09:30–10:00	Welcome and opening remarks
10:00–11:15	Clara Carus (<i>Heidelberg University</i>) The Principle of Contradiction as a First Principle in Early Modern Philosophy
11:15–11:30	Coffee break
11:30–12:45	Ursula Renz (<i>University of Graz</i>) Spinoza on Constitutive Goodness and the Principle of Plenitude
12:45–14:15	Lunch
14:15–15:30	Peter Anstey (<i>Australian Catholic University</i>) Locke, Maxims, and the Theory of Principles
15:30–15:45	Coffee break
15:45–17:00	Samuel Levey (<i>Dartmouth College</i>) A Clash Between Principles: Totality and Infinity in Leibniz (and Cantor)
17:00–17:15	Coffee break
17:15–18:30	Xi Luo (<i>Minzu University of China</i>) Kant’s Critique of the First Principle of <i>Metaphysica Specialis</i>
19:00	Speakers’ dinner Oriel College

SATURDAY | 3 October 2026

09:30–10:45	Julia Peters (<i>Heidelberg University</i>) First Principles and Hard Choices: Kant on the Non-Foundational Structure of Moral Character
10:45–11:00	Coffee break
11:00–12:15	Jeffrey McDonough (<i>Harvard University</i>) Mary Shepherd’s Two Principles of Induction
12:15	Closing remarks and end of workshop

ABOUT THE WORKSHOP

The aim of the workshop is to discuss the conception, demonstration, formulation, and logical implications of first principles in early modern metaphysics leading up to and including Kant.

Scholars of the early modern period often struggle to describe philosophical developments in early modern metaphysics without resorting to anachronistic descriptions like “rationalism” or “speculativism”. Nevertheless, since most early modern philosophers drew extensively on their immediate predecessors and contemporaries, classifications that go beyond one author and enable a focus on philosophical developments in the period are clearly fruitful. We suggest that the theories of first principles provide a promising and non-anachronistic perspective on early modern metaphysics. This is because theories of first principles were a core aspect of early modern philosophical systems, from Suarez to Kant. Core questions that resonated with early modern authors were thus:

- What are the “first” principles of knowledge?
- Can first principles themselves be demonstrated, and if so, how?
- If first principles cannot be demonstrated, why should they be accepted?
- Some authors postulate more than one “first principle”. If this is so, how do the different principles relate to each other?
- How can first principles be defended against Lockean criticism?
- Are first principles relevant to moral action and practical philosophy, and if so, how?

Although early modern authors grappled with these shared questions, their conceptions of what the first principles are, if and how they are to be demonstrated, and how the different first principles relate to each other are interestingly different. Our workshop seeks to discuss the different theories of first principles that were developed in early modern metaphysics.

On a meta-level, the workshop seeks to address the role of the theories of first principles in the history of metaphysics and to thereby gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of “metaphysics” in the early modern period. Did Aristotle and the Scholastics also understand metaphysics as a science of first principles? Do contemporary philosophers understand metaphysics as a science of first principles? Or is this conception of metaphysics unique to the early modern period?

The event is free and everyone is welcome to attend. Please register at clara.carus@uni-heidelberg.de by 30th of September.