



Department of Philosophy,
University of Notre Dame

Descartes and Pascal: Philosophy in Early Modern France

Spring 2024

Instructor: John William Waldrop

Time: Tues. & Thurs., 2:00pm-3:15pm

E-mail: jwaldrop@nd.edu

Room: DeBartolo Hall 246

Course description: The aim of this course is to introduce students to some of the key thinkers and historical controversies in early modern French Philosophy from around the time of the Reformation to the end of the 17th century. In particular, we will focus on two pivotal figures from the period—René Descartes and Blaise Pascal—in their immediate religious, scientific, and political contexts. Three topics that will show up repeatedly are:

1. the threat of philosophical skepticism;
2. the question of the reasonability of religious belief;
3. the possibility of practical reasons for belief or commitment in the face of uncertainty.

Along the way, students will get a glimpse of how the scientific, religious, and political forces influencing this period of French philosophy influence early modern philosophy as a whole and, by extension, the contemporary world as well.

Student Responsibilities: To be successful in this philosophy course, students should attend all lectures prepared to actively participate in discussions; meticulously complete readings before class to enable productive dialogue; thoroughly review material in preparation for exams; and submit assignments on time while following provided format guidelines:

- Carry out the one practice exercise and bring the resulting work to class on the listed due date.

-
- Email short papers to me by 11:59pm on the listed due date.
 - Schedule a 20-minute slot in the week of March 3rd (i.e., week 8). exam week for an oral exam. Sign ups will take place during the week before.
 - Schedule a 20-minute slot in exam week for an individual oral exam. Sign ups will take place during the last week of classes.

Adhering to these expectations and procedures will lead to an enriching semester.

Course Materials: Most of the readings for the course will be from three required textbooks:

1. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. 4th edition, Translator: Donald A. Cress (Hackett)
2. Blaise Pascal, *Penseés and Other Writings*. Editor: Anthony Levi (Oxford World Classics)
3. Richard Popkin (eds.), *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (The Free Press)

The remaining readings for the course will be available under “files” in the page for this course on Canvas.

For reasons that will become clearer in what follows, it is critical that you purchase the Levi translation (Oxford World Classics edition) of Pascal’s *Penseés*. That’s the edition listed here, and it’s the edition available for this course through the bookstore. Though there are many editions of this work, and some may be more affordable than the one assigned for this course, *be sure to purchase this one*.

Course Requirements:

1. Participation and Attendance (10%)
2. One practice exercise for completion (5%)
3. One mid-term exam (15%)
4. Three short papers (15% each)
5. One final exam (25%)

Important Deadlines: See the course schedule below.

Late submission policy: Paper assignments should be submitted by or prior to the listed due date. I will not typically punish reasonable delays, and please feel free to email me with good-faith requests for extensions. If this lenient policy is abused or if I conclude that it is leading to poor learning outcomes, a more inflexible policy will be instituted.

Attendance and Participation: Students should arrive on time to all lectures and should participate in discussions. Please feel free to email me informing me of reasonable reasons for your absence. For now, no particular penalties will attach to repeated absences, though if this lenient policy is abused or if I conclude that it is leading to poor learning outcomes, a more inflexible policy will be instituted.

Technology Policy: To facilitate engaged dialogue, laptops, phones and other devices must be closed during class. Students should possess hard copies of all textbooks. Those requiring technology access due to learning needs or disabilities should provide appropriate notice through the Sara Bea Accessibility Services in the Center for Student Support and Care.

Outside of class, assignments should be completed without the assistance of LLM chatbots like ChatGPT or Claude.

Other Notes on Classroom Etiquette: Be respectful, kind, encouraging, and patient with others.

Interesting links:

1. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://iep.utm.edu>
2. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/index.html>

Course Schedule:

Week	Monday	Wednesday
Week 1: 1/15-19	1/15: No class	1/17: First day of class
Week 2: 1/22-26	1/22	1/24
Week 3: 1/29-2/2	1/29	1/31
Week 4: 2/5-9	2/5: Practice exercise due	2/7
Week 5: 2/12-16	2/12: First short paper	2/14
Week 6: 2/19-23	2/19	2/21
Week 7: 2/26-3/1	2/26	2/28: Second short paper
Week 8: 3/4-8	3/4	3/6: Midterm
Week 9: 3/11-15	3/11: No class (break)	3/13: No class (break)
Week 10: 3/18-22	3/18	3/20: No class (conference)
Week 11: 3/25-29	3/25	3/27
Week 12: 4/1-5	4/1: No class (Easter Monday)	4/3
Week 13: 4/8-12	4/8:	4/10
Week 14: 4/15-19	4/15	4/17: Third short paper
Week 15: 4/22-26/1	4/22	4/24
Week 16: 4/29-5/3	4/29	5/1: Last day of class
Week 17: 5/6-10	5/6: No class (finals)	5/10: No class (finals)

Reading Schedule:

1. 1/17, *First day of class*: No readings
2. 1/22, *Introduction to the Reformation*: Martin Luther, "Address to the German Nobility" in Popkin, *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th Centuries*.
 - In-class readings: C.S. Lewis, "Preface" in Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*; & Martin Luther, "The Diet of Worms" (1521) in Bettenson et al., *Documents of the Christian Church*.
3. 1/24, *Calvinism and the Reformation in France*: Calvin, pp. 21-47 in *The Institutes of Christian Religion*.
 - In-class readings: Guido de Bres, Articles 2-3, 5, & 7 in *The Belgic Confession*.
4. 1/29, *Calvinism and the De Auxiliis Controversy*: Guido De Bres, Article 12 in *The Belgic Confession*; & Heinrich Bulinger, Chapters VI and IX in *The Second Helvetic Confession*.
 - In-class readings: Ursinus (et al.), Q1 of *The Heidelberg Catechism*.
 - Optional readings: Calvin, pp. 69-82 in *The Institutes of Christian Religion*
5. 1/31, *Women During the Reformation in France*: Marguerite of Navarre, lines 1-260 from "The Mirror of the Sinful Soul" and Novella 69 from *The Heptameron* in *Selected Writings*.
 - In-class readings: Jeanne d'Albret, "Letter to King Charles IX" and "Letter to Catherine de' Medici" in Llewellyn et al., eds., *Letters from the Queen of Navarre with an Ample Declaration*.

For the practice exercise: Galileo, "Letter to the Grand Dutchess Christina" in Popkin *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th Centuries*.
6. 2/5, *The Scientific Revolution*: Copernicus, "Dedication: To Pope Paul III" in Popkin *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th Centuries*; Galileo, selections from "Letters on Sunspots" (1613) in Popkin *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th Centuries*. **Practice Exercise Due**
7. 2/7, *Skepticism in France I*: Montaigne, selections from *The Apology for Raymond Sebond* in Popkin *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th Centuries*.
8. 2/12, *Skepticism in France II*: Gassendi, selections from Book II of *Dissertations in the Form of Paradoxes Against the Aristotelians* in Popkin *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th Centuries*. **First Short Paper Due (end of the week)**

-
9. 2/14, *Descartes's Meditations I*: Descartes, "First Meditation" in *Meditations on First Philosophy*.
 10. 2/19, *Descartes's Meditations II*: Descartes, "Second Meditation" in *Meditations on First Philosophy*.
 11. 2/21, *Descartes's Meditations III*: Descartes, "Third Meditation" in *Meditations on First Philosophy*.
 12. 2/26, *Descartes's Meditations IV*: Descartes, "Fourth Meditation" and "Fifth Meditation" in *Meditations on First Philosophy*.
 13. 2/28, *Descartes's Meditations V*: Descartes, "Sixth Meditation" in *Meditations on First Philosophy* **Second Short Paper Due (end of the week)**
 14. 3/4, *Descartes and Princess Elisabeth*: Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, "Selections from her Correspondence with Descartes" in Atherton, *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*.
 15. 3/6, No class. **Oral midterms in progress**
*** Spring Break ***
 16. 3/18, *Pascal's Penseés*: The Art of Persuasion and an Introduction to the *Penseés*: "The Art of Persuasion" (pp. 193-204); *Penseés*, Table of *Liasse* Titles (pp. 1-10).
 17. 3/20, No class. **Traveling**
 18. 3/25, *Pascal's Penseés*: Reason and Skepticism: *Penseés*, III, VII: 141-142, VIII: 164, (pp. 12-22; 35-36; 40-43).
 19. 3/27, *Pascal's Penseés*: Reason and Religion: *Penseés*, XIV-XV, XIX, SERIES XXXI: 423 & 427, XXXVII: 644 & the beginning of 645 (pp. 60-64, 78-82, 95-96, 99, 139-141).
*** Easter Break ***
 20. 4/3, *Warmup for Pascal's Wager*—The Art of Thinking: Arnauld and Nicole, *Logic or The Art of Thinking*, Chapters 12-13 and 15-16 in *The Port Royal Logic*.
 21. 4/8, *Pascal's Penseés*: The Wager: *Penseés*, XVV (pp. 152-158).
 22. 4/10, *Pascal's Penseés*: Wagering and the Marks of Truth: *Penseés* review XVV, read XVII: 240, 252-253, XXII: 314, XXIV, XVV (pp. 74-75, 76-77, 84, 85-87). **Guest talk and Q&A with Liz Jackson**
 23. 4/15, *Pascal's Penseés*: Wagering and Indifference: *Penseés* XLVI-XLVII (pp. 158-173)

24. 4/17, *Special Topics—Grace and Natural Disasters*: Sampson, “Disaster Prevention and the Possibility of Hell: A Dilemma for Longtermist Effective Altruists”. **Third Short Paper Due (end of the week)**

- Optional readings: Rota, “Grace and Free Will” and “Predestination and the Wager”, pp. 70-76 in *Taking Pascal’s Wager*.

25. 4/22, *Port Royal and Jansenism I*: Pascal, “Letter V: The Motive of the Jesuits in Establishing a New Morality” from *The Provincial Letters*, reprinted in Houston (eds.) *The Mind on Fire*.

26. 4/24, *Port Royal and Jansenism II*: Pascal, “Letter II: On the Subject of Sufficient Grace” from *The Provincial Letters*, reprinted in Houston (eds.), *The Mind on Fire*.

- Optional readings: Angélique Arnauld, “On the Danger of Hesitation and Doubt Once we Know Our Duty” from *Writings of Resistance*.

27. 4/29, *Malebranche*: Malebranche, “Sixth Dialogue” and “Seventh Dialogue” from *Dialogues on Metaphysics* in Popkin *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th Centuries*.

28. 5/1, *Bayle and Enlightenment Skepticism*: Pierre Bayle, selections from *Historical and Critical Dictionary* in Popkin *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th Centuries*.