

Introduction to Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Kant

Michael Deigan
michael.deigan@yale.edu
<https://mikedeigan.com/teaching/>

Description

What am I? What is the physical world like? Is there a God, and if so, what is God like? How should I live? What can I know and how can I know it? There must be answers to these questions, and they must all fit together into a coherent whole. An ambition of philosophers has long been to formulate a cohesive, correct, and comprehensive view of the world, answering all of these questions (among others), or else showing that their answers cannot be known by us. The period stretching from the beginning of the 17th Century to the end of the 18th Century was a time of remarkable creativity in this respect. As many long-held assumptions began to be challenged by scientific advance and political tumult, many philosophers attempted to forge new worldviews in response. The results of their efforts have loomed large in philosophical, scientific, and political thought to this day.

In this course, we will explore the philosophical systems of three important figures of the period: René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and David Hume. We will also get a taste of the thought of many other philosophers of the time through considering some of their criticisms of our chosen three. Besides an understanding of a variety of fascinating philosophical problems and thinkers, we will develop your skills of (i) close, charitable, and critical reading, (ii) analysis and evaluation of arguments, and (iii) systematic philosophizing.

Assignments

1. *Class participation*: Class and section meetings won't be primarily lecture-based. Instead, you'll spend much of class time talking, reading, or writing. Active participation, not just attendance, is required.
2. *Group projects*: see below for details.
3. *Short papers*: for each of Descartes, Spinoza, and Hume, you will write an 800-1,200 word paper presenting an objection to some aspect of their system, responding to the objection on the target philosopher's behalf, and evaluating that response.
4. *Final exam*: a low pressure exam prompting you to develop some philosophy of your own, in reaction to the problems for the systems we will have examined.

Grading

Participation:	25%
Group projects:	20%
Paper 1:	10%
Paper 2:	15%
Paper 3:	15%
Final exam:	15%

Participation grades will be the average of 3 participation grades given over the course of the semester (one for each 4-5 weeks).

You will be working together for the group project, but you will also have a specified role, and will be graded based on the part of the project for which you are responsible.

Group Projects: Objectors

At the beginning of the semester, you will be assigned to a group. For each of Descartes, Spinoza, and Hume, your group will be assigned two other philosophers from the period who had some objection to the target philosopher. You will be assigned some readings from your objectors, and your task will be to understand a bit about where they are coming from, analyze their objections, and evaluate the effectiveness of those objections. You will post your results to a page on the course website to be shared with your classmates. We will then discuss in class some of these objections and how the target philosopher could best respond to them.

The objecting philosophers I will be assigning will include the following.

For Descartes: Arnauld, Berkeley, Cavendish, Princess Elisabeth, Gassendi, Hobbes, Locke, Malebranche, Newton, and Pascal.

For Spinoza: Bayle, Boyle, Clarke, Conway, Jacobi, Leibniz, More, Tschirnhaus, and Voltaire.

For Hume: Home, Macaulay, Price, Priestley, Reid, and Shepherd.

Schedule

The assigned readings are subject to change. I will notify you of any such changes at least one week in advance.

Introduction			
Week 1	M	Aristotelian Background	No reading
	W	Argument and Charitable Interpretation	<i>Guide to Argument Analysis</i> Galileo: selection from <i>The Assayer</i>
Descartes			
Week 2	M	Doubt	<i>Synopsis of the Meditations</i> <i>Meditation 1</i> <i>Principles I. 1–6</i>
	W	Foundations: Mind, God, and CDPs	<i>Meditation 2 & 3</i> <i>Principles 7–13, 18–25</i>
Week 3	M	Freedom and Error	<i>Meditation 4</i> <i>Principles I. 29–44</i>
	W	Mind and Body	<i>Meditation 6</i> <i>Principles I. 63–69, 75</i>
Week 4	M	Objection Day	Reading assigned based on group
	W	Response Day	Your classmates' objection posts
Spinoza			
Week 5	M	Knowledge and Prejudice	<i>Emendation of the Intellect</i> §§1–35 <i>Ethics, Part I, Appendix</i>
	W	Substance and Attributes	<i>Ethics, ID1 – IP5</i>
	F	<i>Paper 1 due</i>	
Week 6	M	Monism	<i>Ethics, IP6 – 14</i>
	W	God, Modes, Necessity	<i>Ethics, IP15 – 36</i>
Week 7	M	Mind and Body	<i>Ethics, Part II, up to IIP13S</i>
	W	Affects	<i>Ethics, Part III</i>
Week 8	M	Ethics	<i>Ethics, Part IV, Preface and Appendix, VP20, 25 – 27, 36, 41, 42</i>
	W	Objection Day	Reading assigned based on group
Week 9	M	Response Day	Your classmates' objection posts

Hume

	W	Psychology	<i>EHU</i> §§1 – 3, <i>Treatise</i> 1.4.6
	F	<i>Paper 2 due</i>	
Week 10	M	Skepticism	<i>EHU</i> §§4 – 5, 12, <i>Treatise</i> 1.4.7
	W	Necessity and Freedom	<i>EHU</i> §§6 – 7
Week 11	M	Sentiments and Morality	<i>Treatise</i> 3.1.1 – 3.1.2, <i>EPM</i> §9
	W	Benevolence and Justice	<i>EPM</i> §§2 – 3, Appendices 2 – 3,
Week 12	M	God and Evil	<i>Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion</i> , Parts 10 – 11
	W	Objection Day	Reading assigned based on group
Week 13	M	Response Day	Your classmates' objection posts

Kant

	W	Transcendental Idealism	<i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> , A Preface, A Introduction, B Introduction
	F	<i>Paper 3 due</i>	
Week 14	M	Freedom	A421/B449 – A425/B453, A444/B472 – A451/B479, A532/B560 – A558/B586 <i>Groundwork</i> 4:412 – 4:426

Free Philosophizing

W			Kant: "What is Enlightenment?" Hume: <i>Treatise</i> , title page Spinoza: <i>TPT</i> , Chapter XX Descartes: Letters to Mersenne, Elisabeth
---	--	--	---