

Philosophy 390 A01 (CRN: 22709)

The Cartesian Tradition: Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche

Spring Semester 2027

General Course Information, Recommended Supplementary Reading, Schedule

1. General Course Information

<u>Location & Time:</u>	11:30 a.m. – 12:50 p.m.
<u>Instructor:</u>	Dr. David Scott
<u>Instructor's Office:</u>	CLE B320
<u>Office Hours:</u>	Tues. & Wed. 9:30 – 10:30 a.m. (Zoom, by appointment)
<u>Email:</u>	djfscoth@uvic.ca

ABOUT THIS COURSE:

Cliché has it that René Descartes—from whom the movement known as “Cartesianism” derives its name—is the “father of modern philosophy”. There are many reasons—largely metaphysical and epistemological—which explain this assessment of Descartes’ historical significance; and it is the goal of this course to explore those reasons as they feature in Descartes’ philosophical writings and in the writings of his two principal successors-in-title, Benedictus Spinoza and Nicolas Malebranche. Together these three figures are central to the so-called “rationalist” tradition within philosophy, a tradition whose most famous original forebears are Plato and Aristotle. Rationalism is the name given to a broadly defined set of positions and doctrines, all of which tend to involve the ideas that (i) in some sense reason or rationality is something real in itself, (ii) the universe exhibits reason or is rational, and (iii) the rational universe can be known by us as rational beings. These key ideas frame this course’s approach to the Cartesians we shall be studying in this course.

PRIMARY TEXTS:

E-copies of the following primary readings will be supplied on the Brightspace site for this course:

Background texts:

- Plato, *Phaedo* (95a-100a): excerpt dealing with dualism of necessary vs. sufficient condition reason; *Meno* (excerpt dealing with dualism of general vs. individual);
- Aristotle, *Categories*: excerpts dealing with substance;
- Aristotle, *Physics*: excerpts dealing with form and matter;

Main texts:

- Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy, Principles of Philosophy* (Part One);
- Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion* (Dialogues III, VII).
- Benedictus Spinoza, *Ethics* (Part One).

MARKING SCHEME:

In-class exam:	25%
Take-home test:	25%
Final Exam:	50%

Letter grades correspond to the following marks: A+ = 90 - 100, A = 85 - 89, A- = 80 - 84, B+ = 77 - 79, B = 73 - 76, B- = 70 - 72, C+ = 65 - 69, C = 60 - 64, D = 50 - 59, F = 0 - 49.

MAIN EVALUATION CRITERIA:

This course is quite text-focused, which means that both in instruction and in evaluation (testing) emphasis is put on your ability to understand the assigned readings and class discussions of them. In this course we will not be relying on secondary literature or commentary, though of course you are always welcome to supplement your reading and class lectures/discussions with secondary material.

The criteria I use to evaluate your work are, I believe, criteria which common sense would suggest in the assessment of philosophical writing. Primarily my concern is with content or substance, i.e., the course material; and in this respect the guiding question is the extent to which a student has understood the material. Of course, this does not mean that form or style count for nothing (and indeed it may not ultimately be possible to divorce form from content).

In indicating the evaluation criteria for this course, I emphasize that philosophy is an *arts* or *humanities* subject, which means that assessing the merits of philosophical writing ultimately requires qualitative evaluation or judgment on my part. Therefore, I do not assign precise numerical values to the following assessment criteria; nor is there a mathematical formula I can employ to judge the quality of your work. However, as a rough guide I employ a list of relative priorities, presented here in ascending order of importance:

- spelling/grammar
- organization & clarity of expression
- accuracy of exposition
- use of examples reflecting understanding of the subject
- breadth of analysis, i.e., number of points covered
- depth of analysis, i.e., how far into the issue analysis is pushed
- resourcefulness, originality and imagination
- tightness, rigor or logical coherence of analysis
- overall quality of philosophical insight and expression

I emphasize that, with the exception of the last criterion—that of overall quality of philosophical insight and expression—in practice the ranking of these criteria is not absolute. Thus, sometimes less important criteria will be given more weight than more important ones. For instance, a student's use and analysis of examples might be so good that I am led to conclude that that student has an excellent understanding of the subject. In such a case the value I attach to the use of examples might increase significantly, and I might lay less emphasis on the fact that the student has failed (for instance) to cover as many points as other students.

I place a premium on *understanding* the course readings over *criticism* of them. In this connection I cite a line from Bob Dylan's song, *The Times They are A-Changing*: "Don't criticize what you don't understand." While at some level understanding and criticism intertwine, nonetheless the distinction between them is viable and important. My insistence in this course is on the methodological priority of understanding.

The premium placed here on understanding over criticism presupposes that there is a *right* to criticism that must be *earned* (through understanding), and that criticism that is unearned—i.e., criticism predicated on shortcomings in one's understanding of the text—is less valuable philosophically than thoroughgoing or "simple" description. In part, the justification for this view lies in the idea, prevalent in philosophy though not decisive, that the deepest part of philosophy—metaphysics—is a largely descriptive rather than prescriptive enterprise (notwithstanding the obvious fact that descriptions, too, must be *argued* for). In the end, the guiding principle here can be at least partially expressed as a quasi-mathematical sentence: Understanding for understanding's sake is greater than (>) criticism for criticism's sake.

In practice, this means that in this course "A's" (a various levels) are entirely within reach for essays that engage predominantly in exegesis or description.

CLASS ATTENDANCE, IN-CLASS DISCUSSION AND PARTICIPATION:

Under the heading of "Attendance", UVic's Undergraduate Calendar states the following: "Students are expected to attend *all* classes in which they are enrolled." The full policy statement in the calendar is here:

https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/undergrad/index.php#/policy/ryNResf_E?bc=true&bcCurrent=03%20%20Attendance&bcGroup=Undergraduate%20Academic%20Regulations&bcItemType=policies.

In this course I will be enforcing a minimum class attendance requirement: class attendance is required for a *minimum* of 14 out of the 21 attendable classes scheduled for the semester. (This excludes the two scheduled class day which we will be using for in-class tests.) Starting on the first day of classes (January 7, 2027), attendance will be taken in every class. For any given class, any student who arrives after half the time has elapsed will be marked absent. Any student who fails to meet the minimum overall attendance

requirement of 15 classes for the semester will lose 25% of the overall semester mark (incl. final exam mark).

The main rationale for requiring that at least 14 classes be attended is that this number represents 2/3 of the total number (21) of attendable classes. That at least 2/3 of all classes be attended is a reasonable requirement if penalty is to be avoided, particularly given UVic's requirement that "students...attend *all* classes in which they are enrolled", but also given the nature of the subject matter and the method I employ to teach it.

To elaborate on this point, the underlying rationale is that all students who—for *whatever* reason(s)—fail to attend at least 2/3 of the course's classes miss simply too many of those non-quantifiable but essential elements demanded when it comes to learning this course's material. Active listening, responding to questions, etc.—e.g., the live performance of human reasoning and discourse, with its attendant experience of success and failure in the shared effort to consider philosophical positions—are essential elements of learning and doing philosophy, and they demand a student's presence. In the end, students who have missed more than 1/3 of classes have been, in effect, significantly less involved in the course than those who have attended more regularly; and their diminished involvement should be reflected in their final grades (whatever the grades otherwise achieved in the course's assignments/tests).

Regular class attendance is also required for students wishing to discuss class content during office hours. While students are welcome and encouraged to come to office hours to discuss class content, to do so students must first have attended class or at least have listened to the recordings of the relevant missed class(es) that are posted on Brightspace. The reason for this requirement is that student use of office hours is intended to function primarily as *supplement* to classroom lecture and discussion. Office hours are not intended as replacement or substitute for class attendance.

Finally, as noted above, class attendance is extremely important in this course when it comes to essays and tests. The reason is that, when it comes to these forms of evaluation, the minimum expectation is that you deal with *the material covered in class as it has been covered in class*. In all assignments you need to take explicit account of and do justice to the material covered in class as it has been covered there. Obviously, the best way to do this is to attend class. Material not covered in class but used by students on tests will not be recognized unless, additionally, the material covered in class has been addressed.

Class attendance is important in this course when it comes to evaluation, because you can assume that all forms of testing adopted in this course will focus on the material covered in class. The minimum expectation in all forms of evaluation is that you deal with the material covered in class, and that you address the points raised there about that material. This does not mean that for essays you are expected merely to repeat the in-class proceedings; nor does it mean that you cannot look to external sources for guidance. What it does mean is that in any and all assignments you need to take explicit account of the texts and passages covered in class and to do justice to the in-class discussions of

them. Obviously, the best way to ensure that you meet those requires is to attend class. As for use of external sources (i.e., secondary literature), this will be regarded as beneficial only *after* the class-based material has been addressed.

Overall, then, the various assignments for this course constitute part of a continuous whole with the lectures and in-class discussions. They do not float free of the work done in class; rather, they are deliberately constructed to incorporate what goes on there. Assignments that fail to incorporate important points arising out of class discussion will be penalized accordingly. At the same time, essays can also provide you with room to explore topics more deeply than they have been treated in class, and good essays do precisely that. Overall, then, “B+” and “A-” papers take account of and rise to the level of the class discussion; “A” and “A+” papers take that discussion to a higher/deeper level.

If you happen to miss a class, a written summary of the material scheduled for that day will be posted on Brightspace shortly (usually within 24 hours) thereafter. However, it must be emphasized that these are just general summaries, *not* detailed class-notes. They do little more than list the key themes covered in the lecture on a given day and refer to the passages explicitly covered during the class. An audio-recording of the class will also be posted on Brightspace—again, usually within 24 hours of the class.

CLASSROOM CONDUCT:

(a) The University of Victoria is committed to promoting critical academic discourse while providing a respectful and supportive learning environment. All members of the university community have the right to this experience, and the responsibility to help create, such an environment. The University will not tolerate racism, sexualized violence, or any form of discrimination, bullying or harassment.

Professionalism is expected from all students enrolled in courses in the Faculty of Humanities. As part of professionalism, students, faculty and staff are expected to be familiar with University policies, including the Tri-Faculty’s Standards for Professional Behaviour (<https://www.uvic.ca/advising/get-support/index.php#ipn-associate-dean-academic-advising>).

Please be advised that by logging into UVic’s learning systems and interacting with online resources, and by attending class, you are engaging in a university activity.

All interactions within this environment are subject to the university expectations and policies. Any concerns about student conduct, may be reviewed and responded to in accordance with the appropriate university policy.

To report concerns about online student conduct: onlineconduct@uvic.ca

(b) Coming late to class: The classroom is a work environment, and when students arrive late this can be a distraction. So please try to be on time.

(c) Visits to the classroom by non-registered students: As the instructor for this class I am *duty-bound* to ensure that a work environment is preserved in the class. Both students and I can find it a distraction for strangers to walk into the classroom. It takes some students a good deal of time before they gain confidence to participate in the class proceedings, and the presence of a stranger can be disruptive in that regard. If, as sometimes happens, you wish to invite a friend to attend my class to check it out, please ask permission ahead of time.

(d) Use of computers in the class: For note-taking purposes, you are welcome to use laptops with quiet keyboards in the classroom.

EMAILING ME:

Because of problems with SPAM and viruses transmitted by email, I request that whenever you email me you make sure to put something in the subject line of your email that identifies you as a student in this course. If you don't do this, and I don't recognize your name, I will delete your email without opening it.\

In addition to this, I would greatly appreciate it if you observed the (still) standard courtesy of beginning your emails with a salutation, e.g., "Dear Dr. Scott", "Hello Dr. Scott", etc. (as opposed to, e.g., "Hey Dave" or "Dude", which is too informal). Use of formal salutation is social etiquette rooted in the recognition that people are not simply inanimate objects (like ATM machines), and so they should therefore be addressed before being spoken to. After all, unlike ATM machines, people have the *option* to respond, so it just makes sense to ask them nicely.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

Cheating of *any* kind, including collusion (working with others too closely), plagiarism from both (i) books and/or articles, etc., in print or online, and (ii) other students' papers, , and (iii) submission of AI-composed material for essays/assignments, is a serious academic offence. University regulations also prohibit students from submitting the same work for two different courses; in other words, plagiarizing or recycling one's own work is not permitted. If detected, cheating can result in dismissal from this course (with an "F"), and dismissal from the university. Here is a link to the University's Academic Integrity policy:

<https://web.uvic.ca/calendar2018-09/undergrad/info/regulations/academic-integrity.html#>

SUBMITTING AND RECEIVING BACK GRADED WORK:

(a) Unless otherwise specified, any take-home essays assigned in this course must be *typed (12-font, Times), double-spaced, paginated, and contain the word-count on the front cover*. I will not accept essays that exceed the maximum word limit. Unless otherwise specified, any essays assigned in this course must be submitted *both* as hard-copies (as per the specific instructions of the essay) *and* through Brightspace.

(b) I will not be available to discuss test or essay questions on the day before or on the day they are due to be written or submitted, as I need to avoid being swamped by last-minute enquiries.

(c) In general tests and essays are returned within two weeks of submission. Tests and essays are returned in class, not through Brightspace. When graded work is returned to you it will frequently be annotated with comments. If you wish to discuss your work with me, please read those comments first. To give you a chance to do this, as a matter of policy I do not discuss work on the same day as it is returned.

(d) In cases when I return graded work in class and students are not there to receive it, it is *up to those absent students* to claim their work: I am not responsible for tracking down absent students to deliver them their work. Once I have returned graded work in class, I continue to bring that work to class (usually for about the next three classes), so that students continue to have the opportunity to claim it. After that, however, any unclaimed work is obtainable only by in-person appointment with me. Finally, I will not be available to discuss any work that has gone unclaimed by the time lectures have finished and the examination period has begun.

f) **Handwriting Quality:** Please be advised that your handwriting needs to be legible for any in-class tests you write in this course to be graded. If you write a test using extremely poor / illegible handwriting, you may be required to read your paper aloud to the test's grader, for the purpose of recording, electronically transcribing, and ultimately grading what you have written. On a different but related note, students whose handwriting is poor for documented or documentable medical reasons may wish to seek accommodation through UVic's Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL).

LATE ASSIGNMENTS / MISSED TESTS:

Late assignments will not be accepted without penalty, unless justified by a medical or other academically legitimate reason. Late assignments will be accepted with a penalty of 5% per day (or part-day, including weekend days or part-days), for a maximum of 4 days (20%). After four days, no late assignments will be accepted.

OFFICE HOURS:

Office hours will be conducted synchronously (by Zoom), and there will be a total of two office hours per week dedicated specifically to this course. Because of demand (especially near test days or essay due dates), if you wish to see me during office hours you need to make an appointment well ahead of time. To set up a meeting with me in my office hours, contact me either in class or by email, and I will send you the Zoom link for the appointment.

To get the most out of your appointment, it's best to come prepared with specific questions about the course material. If for some reason you cannot meet me in my posted

office-hour times, please contact me to arrange an alternative time. While students are welcomed and encouraged to come to office hours to discuss course related matters (incl. class content, tests, essays, etc.), students wishing to make an appointment to discuss class content in particular need first to have attended class, or at least to have listened to the recordings of the relevant missed class(es) that are posted on Brightspace. This requirement is to prevent this course's office hours being used as a way for students to catch up on classes they have missed. Missed classes can be made up by listening to the class recordings posted on Brightspace.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY OF MATERIAL ON LMS WEBSITE:

Intellectual property of materials on the LMS website: Please note that all assignments for this course and all materials posted to the LMS website are the intellectual property of myself and the University of Victoria. Do not circulate this material or post it to note-sharing sites without my permission. Posting course materials to note-sharing sites or otherwise circulating course materials without the permission of your instructor violates the Policy on Academic Integrity

https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/undergrad/index.php#/policy/Sk_0xsM_V?bc=true&bcCurrent=08%20-%20Policy%20on%20Academic%20Integrity&bcGroup=Undergraduate%20Academic%20Regulations&bcItemType=policies

Any evidence you are circulating materials without permission will be referred to the Chair of the Philosophy Department for investigation.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

All course content and materials are made available by instructors for educational purposes and for the exclusive use of students registered in their class. The material is protected under copyright law, even if not marked with a ©. Any further use or distribution of materials to others requires the written permission of the instructor, [except under fair dealing or another exception in the Copyright Act](#). Violations may result in disciplinary action under the [Resolution of Non-Academic Misconduct Allegations policy \(AC1300\)](#).

TERRITORY ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

We acknowledge and respect the Songhees and Esquimalt (Lək̓ʷəŋən), and Saanich (W̱SÁNEĆ) Peoples on whose territory the university stands and whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

2. SOME RECOMMENDED SUPPLEMENTARY READING:

NOTE: Some of the following readings can be made available on demand for you on the Brightspace site for this course.

- Aune, B. (1970) *Rationalism, Empiricism, and Pragmatism*. New York: Random House.
- Collins, J. (1960) *God in Modern Philosophy*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Cottingham, J. G. (1984) *Rationalism*, London: Paladin Books. [B833 C67]
- Cottingham, J. G. (1988) *The Rationalists*, Oxford & New York: Oxford U.P.. [B791 H5 v.4]
- Fodor, Jerry. (2005) "Introduction: Hume's Cartesianism", in *Hume Variations* (Oxford University Press). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199287338.003.0001>
- Hatfield, Gary. (2023) "Descartes", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes/>.
- Jarrett, C. E., King-Farlow, J. & Pelletier, F. J., eds.. (1978) *New Essays on Rationalism and Empiricism*, Guelph, Ontario: *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, sup. vol. 4.
- Jolley, N. (1989) *The Light of the Soul*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. [B 822 J65]
- Kenny, A. ed. (1986) *Rationalism, Empiricism and Idealism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. [B791 R33]
- Lennon, T. M. (1993) *The Battle of Gods and Giants: The Legacies of Descartes and Gassendi, 1655-1715*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. P..
- Loeb, L. E. (1981) *From Descartes to Hume*, Ithica, NY: Cornell U.P..
- Parkinson, G. H. R., ed. (1993) *Routledge History of Philosophy* (vol. 4): *The Renaissance and Seventeenth-Century Rationalism*, London: Routledge. [B 770 R38]
- Phemister, Pauline. (2006) *The Rationalists: Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Robinson, Howard, and Ralph Weir. (2025) "Dualism", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism/>.
- Shein, Noa. (2023) "Spinoza's Theory of Attributes", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza-attributes/>
- Sprigge, T. L. S. (2010) "The Importance of Subjectivity: An Inaugural Lecture", in *The Importance of Subjectivity: Selected Essays in Metaphysics and Ethics*, ed. Leemon B. McHenry (Oxford: Clarendon Press), pp. 39-56.
- Tallis, Raymond. (2004) "The Uncoupled Animal", Ch. 7 of *The Knowing Animal*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 197-216.
- von Leyden, W. M. (1968) *Seventeenth Century Metaphysics*, London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., Ltd.. [B801 L44]
- Woolhouse, R. S. (1993) *Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz: The Concept of Substance in Seventeenth Century Metaphysics*, London & New York: Routledge 1993.

3. CLASS SCHEDULE SPRING SEMESTER 2027 *:

WEEK 1 (Class 1: Jan. 7)

- 1. Thurs. Jan. 7:** Course Introduction. Key themes: Substance and mind-body dualism.

WEEK 2 (Classes 2 & 3: Jan. 11 & 14)

- 2. Mon. Jan. 11:** Background: Plato's *Meno*.

3. Thurs. Jan. 14: Background: Plato's *Phaedo*.

WEEK 3 (Classes 4 & 5: Jan. 18 & 21)

4. Mon. Jan. 18: Background: Aristotle's *Categories* (substance).

5. Thurs. Jan. 21: Background: Aristotle's *Physics* (form and matter).

WEEK 4 (Classes 6 & 7: Jan. 25 & Jan. 28)

6. Mon. Jan. 25: Descartes on substance: mind vs. body.

7. Thurs. Jan. 28: Descartes on substance: mind vs. body. Distribution of preparatory question for test #1.

WEEK 5 (Classes 8 & 9: Feb. 1 & 4)

8. Mon. Feb. 1: Descartes on substance: mind vs. body.

9. Thurs. Feb. 4: IN-CLASS TEST #1.

WEEK 6 (Classes 10 & 11: Feb. 8 & 11)

10. Mon. Feb. 8: Descartes on unity of the world.

11. Thurs. Feb. 11: Spinoza *Ethics*.

WEEK 7 (No Classes: Feb. 15 & 18)

Mon. Feb. 15: No Class (Family Day: First Day of Reading Break)

Thurs. Feb. 18: No Class (Reading Break)

WEEK 8 (Classes 12 & 13: Feb. 22 & 25)

12. Mon. Feb. 22: Spinoza *Ethics*.

13. Thurs. Feb. 25: Spinoza *Ethics*.

Sun. Feb. 28: Last day for withdrawing from this course without penalty of failure.

WEEK 9 (Classes 14 & 15: March 1 & 4)

14. Mon. Mar 1: Spinoza *Ethics*. Distribution of first-draft questions for test #2.

15. Thurs. Mar 4: Spinoza *Ethics*. Distribution of final-draft questions for test #2.

WEEK 10 (Classes 16 & 17: March 8 & 11)

16. Mon. Mar 8: IN-CLASS TEST #2.

17. Thurs. Mar 11: Malebranche's *Dialogues on Metaphysics*...

WEEK 11 (Classes 18 & 19: March 15 & 18)

18. Mon. Mar 15: Malebranche's *Dialogues on Metaphysics*...

19. Thurs. Mar 18: Malebranche's *Dialogues on Metaphysics*...

WEEK 12 (Classes 20 & 21: March 22 & 25)

20. Mon. Mar 22: Malebranche's *Dialogues on Metaphysics*...

21. Thurs. Mar 25: Malebranche's *Dialogues on Metaphysics*...

WEEK 13 (Class 22: April 1)

Mon. Mar. 29: No Class (Easter Monday)

22. Thurs. April 1: Malebranche's *Dialogues on Metaphysics*...

WEEK 14 (Class 23: April 5)

23. Mon. April 5: Last class of this course. Descartes, Spinoza, and Malebranche on human freedom.

Tuesday, April 6: Distribution of questions for final exam.

April 10 – 26: Final exam period for Spring Term.

* This class schedule may be subject to revision, as sometimes discussion and the flow of ideas in class require us to spend more time on certain subjects, less time on others, than originally planned.

4. OTHER RESOURCES

Student Resources:

a. UVic Learn Anywhere. UVic Learn Anywhere is the primary learning resource for students. It offers many learning workshops and resources to help students with academics and learning strategies.

- b. Library resources. Information for students wishing to use the UVic library.
- c. Indigenous student services
- d. Centre for Academic Communication
- e. Learning Strategist Program
- f. Academic Concession Regulations
- g. Academic Concessions and Accommodations
- h. Academic accommodation & access for students with disabilities – Policy AC1205
- i. Student wellness resources.
- j. Ombudsperson. A resource to help resolve disputes or complaints.
- k. Other student groups and resources.

University Statements and Policies

- a. University Calendar – “Information for all students”
- b. Creating a respectful, inclusive and productive learning environment
- c. Accommodation of Religious Observance
- d. Student Conduct and Non-Academic Student Misconduct
- e. Accessibility
- f. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
- g. Equity and Human Rights
- h. Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response
- i. Discrimination and Harassment Policy