

The Case for Conscience: Pierre Bayle's Theory of Toleration

An Honors (Un)common Read Course

IDH2930

Section 2403

Spring 2024, Class #29298

W 1:55-2:45 (7th Period)

Little 117

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Course Description

Toleration, freedom of conscience, and liberty are foundational values in contemporary society. However, only a few centuries ago these concepts were controversial and widely rejected. Why was there once such a fear of these revolutionary ideals? What arguments were given to defend them? When answering these questions, scholars often turn to the Enlightenment philosopher John Locke as the forefather of toleration. However, three years before Locke's famous *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), a French Protestant by the name of Pierre Bayle had already published most of the same arguments in his *Commentaire Philosophique* (1686), translated into English as the *Philosophical Commentary* (1708). Unlike Locke, whose concept of toleration excluded Catholics and atheists, Bayle applied his theory of toleration universally to include any citizen, regardless of their beliefs. In his day, Bayle was a leading figure of the Enlightenment, renowned for his encyclopedic knowledge and penetrating skills in critical reasoning. Unfortunately, today, almost no one has heard of Bayle and his defense of liberty, freedom, and tolerance. In this class, students will engage in an 'uncommon read' of a great and influential figure, through a critical examination of the English translation of Bayle's *Philosophical Commentary* in its historical and intellectual context.

Texts

Pierre Bayle. *A Philosophical Commentary on These Words of the Gospel, Luke XIV. 23. Compel Them to Come In, That My House May Be Full*. London: J. Morphew, 1708.

For the Liberty Fund edition: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/bayle-a-philosophical-commentary-on-these-words-of-the-gospel>

Course Requirements

Class Participation: 40%

Written Analysis: 60%

Learning Outcomes

Critical Thinking:

Students will learn to

- analyze the biases, intellectual background, and historical context of a primary source.
- critically examine the core conceptions of toleration, freedom of conscience, and liberty as they developed in early modernity.

Communication:

Students will be able to

- effectively communicate the history, core ideas, and challenges, posed by ideals of freedom, liberty, and toleration.
- articulate a strong historical, political, and philosophical defense of freedom of conscience.

Course Expectations

Students are expected to read Parts 1 and 2 of Bayle's *Philosophical Commentary*, paying close attention to its original historical context. Students will be required to complete 3 short written assignments referred to as a 'gobbet,' which is an analysis of a text, its context, and its significance. Each 50-minute class will consist of a lecture and group discussion. The lecture will teach students contextual details needed to interpret the text. Classroom discussions will take place based on the weekly readings.

Description of Graded Work

1. Gobbets: 60%

A gobbet is a form of analysis developed in the United Kingdom, utilized at the University of Oxford. Students are given a short excerpt from a text. They are then asked to write a short piece of writing which (1) engages in a close reading of the passage, (2) connects the passage to the broader work of the author, (3) connects the passage to a broader historical context, (4) explains the significance of the text.

In this class, a gobbet will consist of approximately 500 words. The first gobbet will not be graded by the instructor and will provide detailed feedback for the students. The latter two gobbets will be worth 30 % each.

2. Class Participation: 40%

Each week, class will engage in a discussion set by the instructor. 20% of your total course grade is based on verbal, in-class discussion participation: an exemplar participant shows evidence of having done the assigned reading before each class, consistently offers thoughtful points and questions for discussion, and listens considerately to other discussants. If you have trouble speaking up in class, feel free to prepare beforehand a question or two to pose during class, and that counts as contributing to productive class discussion.

20% of your total course grade is based on attendance. On-time class attendance is required for this component of the course grade. You may have two unexcused absences without any penalty. Starting with the third, each unexcused absence reduces your attendance grade by 2/3: an A becomes a B+, and so on. Excessive tardy attendance (3 or more) will also reduce your attendance grade: for each 3 tardies, your attendance grade will be reduced by 1/3. Except for absence because of religious holiday observance, documentation is required for excused absences, per UF attendance policy. Excessive unexcused absences (6 or more) will result in failure of the course.

Rubrics and Grading

Gobbet Rubric

	Excellent	Good	Average	Insufficient
Close reading: Eloquently assesses key words, sentence structure, and important content				
Literary Context: Using effective prose, connects the passage to the work				
Historical context: Effectively connects the passage to the historical context				
Significance: Persuasively communicates the significance of the key concept of the text				

Participation Rubric

	Excellent	Good	Average	Insufficient
Knowledgeable: Shows evidence of having done the assigned work.				
Thoughtful: Evaluates carefully issues raised in assigned work.				
Considerate: Takes the perspective of others into account and listens attentively.				

Grading

For information on how UF assigns grade points, visit: <https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academic-regulations/grades-grading-policies/>

A	94 – 100%		C	74 – 76%
A-	90 – 93%		C-	70 – 73%
B+	87 – 89%		D+	67 – 69%
B	84 – 86%		D	64 – 66%
B-	80 – 83%		D-	60 – 63%
C+	77 – 79%		E	<60

Weekly Schedule

Date	Reading assigned before class
January 10	Optional: ‘A Preliminary Discourse’ (28 pages)
January 17	Part 1: Chapters 1 and 2 (15 pages)
January 24	Part 1: Chapters 3, 4, and 5 (22 pages)
January 31	Part 1: Chapter 6 (17 pages)
February 7	Part 1: Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 (18 pages)

February 14 Part 2: Chapters 1 and 2 (24 pages)
February 21 Part 2: Chapter 3 (13 pages)
February 28 Part 2: Chapter 4 (11 pages)
March 6 Part 2: Chapter 5 (14 pages)
March 13 Reading Day (*Spring Break*)
March 20 Part 2: Chapters 6 and 7 (20 pages)
March 27 Part 2: Chapter 8 (14 pages)
April 3 Part 2: Chapter 9 (17 pages)
April 10 Part 2: Chapter 10, to reason IV (9 pages)
April 17 Part 2: Chapter 10, remainder of chapter (19 pages)
April 24 Part 2: Chapter 11 (5 pages)