

Uncommon Read: Descartes' *Meditations*

IDH2930 #26178 (Spring 2025)
Thursdays, Period 6 (12:50–1:40pm)
Little Hall 0117

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Office Hours: Thursdays 1:40-3:40pm, or By Appointment

Course Description

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) is one of the greatest thinkers in Western history. He is often credited as the “founder of modernity” due to his enormous influence on modern science and philosophy. Students will be familiar with his “Cartesian Coordinate System” from their study of geometry, and everyone knows his famous declaration “I think therefore I am.” Indeed, most people know the Latin, even if it’s the only piece of Latin they know: *cogito ergo sum*. But what does this iconic phrase really mean, and why does it matter?

In weekly 50-minute sessions, we will read and discuss the two most influential works of Descartes, collected in the volume *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy (Fourth Edition)*, translated by Donald A. Cress. We will consider such issues as: the motivations for Descartes’ quest for an absolutely certain foundation for human knowledge; his method of “radical doubt,” which questions the true reality of the external world and the things in it; his discovery of the *Cogito* as the sought-after foundation for knowledge; his arguments for the existence of God, and their relation to the *Cogito*; his views on the differences between humans, animals, and machines; his influence on modern science; and his legacy in the later history of philosophy, especially vis-à-vis the “transcendental turn” of Immanuel Kant, the “phenomenological turn” of Edmund Husserl, and the “existential turn” of Martin Heidegger.

We will contextualize Descartes backwards, as well as forwards, in history—for example, by considering how his doubting of the reality of the external world is not only an inspiration for contemporary “simulation theory” and movies like *The Matrix*, but also an evolution of Plato’s Cave Allegory. Throughout the course, we will strive to apply what we read to our own lives and times.

By the end of this course, you may become convinced that you exist and that the world around you is real, or you may come to doubt this more radically—but either way, you’ll have read one of the most famous books in the history of philosophy, and you will have learned how to think about these issues more precisely and in dialog with the great thinkers of the Western tradition.

Schedule of Assigned Readings

| | | | |
|---------|------------|------|--|
| Week 1 | Class 1 | 1/16 | <i>Discourse</i> Part 1 (5.5pp) + Course Syllabus pp.1-6 |
| Week 2 | Class 2 | 1/23 | <i>Discourse</i> Part 2 (6.5) |
| Week 3 | Class 3 | 1/30 | <i>Discourse</i> Part 3 (5pp) |
| Week 4 | Class 4 | 2/6 | <i>Discourse</i> Part 4 (5pp) |
| Week 5 | [no class] | 2/13 | <i>Discourse</i> Part 5 (11pp) |
| Week 6 | Class 5 | 2/20 | <i>Discourse</i> Part 6 (10.5pp) |
| Week 7 | Class 6 | 2/27 | <i>Meditations</i> “Letter,” “Preface,” and “Synopsis” (8pp) |
| Week 8 | Class 7 | 3/6 | <i>Meditation One</i> (4pp) |
| Week 9 | Class 8 | 3/13 | <i>Meditation Two</i> (6.5pp) |
| Week 10 | [no class] | 3/20 | SPRING BREAK |
| Week 11 | Class 9 | 3/27 | <i>Meditation Three</i> (11pp) |
| Week 12 | Class 10 | 4/3 | <i>Meditation Four</i> (6.5pp) |
| Week 13 | Class 11 | 4/10 | <i>Meditation Five</i> (5pp) |
| Week 14 | Class 12 | 4/17 | <i>Meditation Six</i> (11pp) |

Course Objectives and Student Learning Outcomes

In this course, students will read two of the most influential works by Rene Descartes in full. They will learn how to read, write, think, and speak critically about a historical and philosophical text like this, with a focus on explication, contextualization, evaluation, and application. They will practice these skills, as well as civil and intellectual discourse, through oral discussions in class and written discussions on Canvas each week.

Students will have the option of an oral exam or final paper (or both, if desired).

Required Texts

Students must complete the readings before each class and be prepared to discuss them in depth. There is only one required text, the correct edition of which all students must purchase a hard copy of (and bring to every class):

Descartes, Rene (1998). *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy (Fourth Edition)*. Transl. Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. ISBN: 978-0-87220-420-1.

All other required and supplementary readings will be provided by the instructor through Canvas.

On Reading Philosophy

Most men pursue pleasure with such breathless haste that they hurry past it. They fare as did that dwarf who kept guard over a captured princess in his castle. One day he took a midday nap. When he woke up an hour later, the princess was gone. Quickly he pulled on his seven-league boots; with one stride he was far beyond her.

- Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

A book like this, a problem like this, is in no hurry; we both, I just as much as my book, are friends of lento. It is not for nothing that I have been a philologist, perhaps I am a philologist still, that is to say, a teacher of slow reading:—in the end I also write slowly. Nowadays it is not only my habit, it is also to my taste—a malicious taste perhaps?—no longer to write anything which does not reduce to despair every sort of man who is ‘in a hurry’. For philology is that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow—it is a goldsmith’s art and connoisseurship of the word which has nothing but delicate, cautious work to do and achieves nothing if it does not achieve it lento. But for precisely this reason it is more necessary than ever today, by precisely this means does it entice and enchant us the most, in the midst of an age of ‘work’, that is to say, of hurry, of indecent and perspiring haste, which wants to ‘get everything done’ at once, including every old or new book:—this art does not so easily get anything done, it teaches to read well, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers... My patient friends, this book desires for itself only perfect readers and philologists: learn to read me well!

- Friedrich Nietzsche, 1886 letter, in *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*

Philosophy texts are not like popular novels or “page-turners.” They require reading that is both “slow” and “active,” and indeed slow *because* active: they require you to actively think about what you’re reading, as opposed to “going along with the flow” of the text and absorbing its contents passively. I encourage you to set aside more time than you think you will need for the reading assignments, to think deeply about what you read, and to take notes while you read.

Hence, though readings for this course average to a mere 7 pages per week, you should consider this a course with a “heavy reading load.”

Assignments and Assessment

This course has four categories of assessment:

- (1) Class Attendance:..... 20% of total grade
- (2) Class Discussion:..... 25% of total grade
- (3) Weekly Discussion Posts:..... 30% of total grade
- (4) Oral Exam or Final Essay:..... 25% of total grade

Class Attendance

For this discussion-focused seminar, it is very important that you attend as many classes as possible.

- All excused absences must include documentation (e.g., a doctor’s note if you are absent due to illness), which you should email to the instructor.
- Each unexcused absence will result in a deduction of 10 points from your class attendance grade (out of 100).

Tardiness

Since we only have 50 minutes together each class, punctuality is important.

- If you are late, I will record precisely how late and penalize your attendance grade proportionally. For example, if you miss the first 5 minutes of class 9 times, that’s a total of 45 minutes, equivalent to 90% of one class—so you would lose 9 points from your overall attendance grade.

Class Participation

It is crucial that all students complete the readings before class and come to class prepared to discuss them.

- This grade is meant to reflect neither your *knowledge* or *mastery* of the material nor the *mere fact* of your speaking. It reflects my assessment of your sincere *participation* in the intellectual co-journeying we will be doing through class discussion. That means, through speech, *trying* to think about and to understand the “things themselves” in which we are interested, such as the course text and the ideas of Descartes. Hence the grade also reflects things like my assessment of your *attention*.
- This is thus a fairly “subjective” grade. It is possible for one student to not speak the entire class, but to receive an A in participation, and for another to speak up one or more times and yet receive a lower grade—e.g., if I notice the former student is paying intense and focused attention the entire class and seemingly “thinking very hard,” while I notice the latter student is not paying attention most of the class and only chimes in at the end of class with a question or comment that could have been made without doing the reading, presumably merely out of concern for their grade rather than out of any “care” for the “things themselves.”
- That said, I *typically* only assign grades lower than A- in this category if a student very rarely speaks in class—since you have a moral contribution to your peers to be more than a sponge, to contribute something to the discourse yourself—or if a student speaks but clearly has not done the readings.

Penalties for repeatedly violating the Electronics Policy (see below) will be applied to your participation grade.

Weekly Discussion Posting

Students will engage in weekly discussion online about the readings. The precise method/platform for this is currently TBD but will be updated before the first assignment.

- Students must make one post about the readings each week.
- Students must also make at least 2 replies to posts by other students each week.

Unless instructed otherwise, posts should be about the readings assigned for the previous class (e.g., the post due Monday, January 20th, should concern the readings for Class #2, on Thursday, January 16th).

- Posts must be at least 200 words.
 - Replies have no word limit but must engage the substance of the post. (“Great post!” or more protracted “empty compliments” won’t cut it.)
- Posts are due by 11:59pm on Monday of each week.
 - Replies are due by 11:59pm on Wednesday of each week.
- Posts and replies should include citations of page numbers for all quotes and paraphrases (and of the last name of the author and year of publication, if the citation is of a source other than the primary course text).
- Students will receive a single grade for each week’s post and replies. I will typically assign this grade initially after reading and grading the posts, and then modify it, if necessary, in light of the replies. These are graded primarily for content, but points may be deducted for missing citations, repeated typos or solecisms, etc.

Some weeks a specific prompt will be provided for these discussions, but otherwise students are free to write on a topic of their choosing, so long as it relates to the assigned readings.

- Canvas posts about a passage, concept, claim, or argument from the text may be devoted to one or more of the following: explaining it, evaluating it (e.g., defending or criticizing), or applying it (e.g., to a contemporary phenomenon or other text). Or, finally, *questioning* it or about it—for I do not expect you to understand everything perfectly the first time you read it or we discuss it in class. Indeed, these posts are a good opportunity to explain a(ny) confusion you might have and to ask for help, from both your peers and your instructor, in your quest to remove that confusion.

Final Examination

Students will choose between the options of an oral exam or a written essay for their final assignment. (They may also opt to do both, in which case the grades will be averaged.)

- Oral exams consist of a 20-30 minute conversation about topics from the course text and class discussion. A good way to practice for the oral exam, besides actively participating in class discussion, is to email me for an office hours appointment to discuss the week’s readings.
 - I will compose and share an “Oral Exam Study Guide” toward the end of the semester, listing terms, topics, and passages for you to focus your preparations on.
- The final essay will be 2000-4000 words. A list of potential topics will be provided, but students are encouraged to come up with their own. Topics must be emailed for approval 3 weeks before the final class.
 - A “Writing Guide” and set of precise formatting instructions will be provided later in the semester.
 - Students may submit an outline or draft of their final paper for feedback up to 1 week before the deadline. If a student requests feedback *less* than a week before the deadline, I will try to provide it, but it is not guaranteed.

Late Submission Penalties

Late submission of any assignment will be penalized 2/3 letter grade per 24 hours late. Hence, if you make a Canvas post between 12:00am and 11:59pm the day after the deadline for that post, the *highest* grade you could receive would be a B+.

- If you have an excused absence, you have a 48 hour grace period on Canvas posts.

File Format

Any writing assignments besides Canvas posts/replies should be submitted as Microsoft Word (.docx) files. If you cannot do that, you must submit them as PDFs. Other file formats (e.g., .pages) will not be accepted.

UF Canvas Grading Scheme

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| A | A- | B+ | B | B- | C+ | C | C- | D+ | D | D- | E |
| 94-100 | 90-93 | 87-89 | 84-86 | 80-83 | 77-79 | 74-76 | 70-73 | 67-69 | 64-66 | 61-63 | 0-60 |

Free Speech and Civil Discourse

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution reads as follows:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

As a public land-grant institution, the University of Florida is a governmental entity for First Amendment purposes. Students, staff and faculty at UF thus possess First Amendment rights that may protect their right to engage in speech. To learn more about freedom of speech and expression at UF, students may consult freespeech.ufl.edu.

Freedom of speech is one of the hallmarks of modern liberal democracies like the United States, but free speech is not absolute in the United States. For example, while the First Amendment protects offensive speech, it does not protect “true threats”, i.e., “statements where the speaker means to communicate a serious expression of an intent to commit an act of unlawful violence to a particular individual or group of individuals” (*Virginia v. Black*, 538 U.S. 344).

Moreover, free speech can only truly flourish in a context of civil discourse, in which participants who hold a variety of viewpoints converse together in good faith and with respect for certain norms designed to ensure civility. This is especially important for a discussion-centered class like this one. In this class, all students will be expected not only to respect their fellows' First Amendment rights, but also basic norms of civil discourse. For example, insulting fellow students may be constitutionally protected speech, but it is inappropriate in the context of an academic discussion in the classroom and may even constitute “disruption” of the class’s academic activity.

In this class, all students should feel not just free but also comfortable in expressing their viewpoints, exploring historical and conventional (and unconventional!) viewpoints, and interrogating the viewpoints of others—regardless of whether they are controversial, offensive, etc. There is no expectation that students will agree with each other’s views or those of the instructor, with one exception, namely, regarding the norm of civil discourse. In other words, we must all agree to respect each other in the classroom and in our academic interactions with each other. I cannot say it better than Prof. Robert P. George:

My philosophy of teaching is straightforward and rather simple: My job is not to tell students what to think or induce or encourage them to think as I do; it is, rather, to help students to think more deeply, more critically, and for themselves. What I ask of students is open-mindedness, tolerance of those whose opinions differ from yours, a willingness not only to challenge others but to be challenged in turn, and a genuine and deep desire to learn--and to learn by seriously engaging authors and fellow students whose ideas differ, even radically differ, from your own.

For further information on the sort of behaviors considered unacceptable in a UF classroom environment, students should consult the Regulations of the University of Florida (https://regulations.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/4-040_2021-12-06.pdf)—in particular, section (3)(d) (“Interference with an Academic Activity”) and section (4)(c) (“Disruptive Conduct”).

Electronics Policy

The usage of electronic devices including laptops, smartphones, and tablets is prohibited in the classroom unless explicitly permitted by the instructor on a case-by-case basis. If a student feels they need to use an electronic device for some reason, they should consult with the instructor in advance of class to ask for permission. That includes students with relevant disabilities (see the Disability Statement below) and students who wish to record class (see the statement on In-Class Recording below). This policy is in place for a number of reasons, including the instructor’s awareness of the extensive empirical evidence for the educational benefits of such a policy (e.g., the benefits for attention and retention of taking notes by hand rather than by typing or recording, of reading a hard-copy rather than digital text, etc.).

If you find this policy uncomfortable, I encourage you to reflect (or “meditate”) on why.

If you want to be able to look up unfamiliar terms that I use, for example, I would encourage you *always* to interrupt class by raising your hand and asking me what that term means. If you don’t know, there’s probably at least one other student who doesn’t—and even if you’re the only one who doesn’t, there’s nothing to be “embarrassed” about in that regard; we are all here to learn together with each other as human beings with unique talents and backgrounds—the purpose is not to line you all up like robots on a track so that you can race as efficiently as possible, but also without any individuality, to some preordained finish-line. Moreover, we’re here to *share* our thoughts and think *together*, as much as possible, rather than in parallel—for we don’t need to be present together for that.

If you like to be as “efficient” as possible with your notetaking, which means doing so digitally, so that all your notes are accessible, shareable, and searchable with maximum “ease” and efficiency, then consider this: In our postmodern technological society, all humans are *driven to be this way all the time*—driven or “challenged-forth” by “the essence of technology”¹ itself to drive ourselves forward in this way in which efficiency is a supreme value. I encourage you to view “challenges” like that of taking notes by hand as opportunities for *liberation* from that drive for efficiency. I encourage you to view them as opportunities to “slow down” and be more thoughtful as you “tarry” with the “things themselves.” Try to see the transcription of your handwritten notes to your personal database or cloud drive not as a burdensome

¹ See Heidegger, Martin (1954). “The Question Concerning Technology.” In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Transl. William Lovitt. New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc. (1977).

“necessity” you wish you could automate away with technology, but as a gift that gives you the opportunity to actively review and think over your notes, and how best to word them, a second time.

If you find writing by hand physically uncomfortable, awkward, or difficult, and so “inefficient” in the sense of not being able to “keep up” with the lecture or discussion you are taking the notes on, then again, I encourage you to view this as an opportunity rather than impediment. Treat it like a videogame or puzzle that you are playing, rather than treating yourself like the digital avatar being controlled by the player: you are not a “passive recording device,” but an active thinking-and-interpreting device. So, you have to decide *how* to transform the words of the teacher or your peers into words that you can write down “in time” to “keep up” with the flow of the discourse or lecture. Perhaps you will develop your own “private shorthand,” for example. But this is what *all* writing is—whether the poet having to choose the best word to express the thing he desires to “bring forth” for the reader, or the journalist deciding how to fit his or her story into the confines of a newspaper column of limited length. What I’m giving you is the opportunity to practice this skill in real time.

If you repeatedly violate the Electronics Policy without permission, your Participation Grade will be penalized. There is no fixed scheme for penalties here; it will depend on the frequency and egregiousness of the violations (e.g., whipping out your smartphone for a minute once *vs* tapping and scrolling on a tablet you think I can’t see all class long).

Course Evaluations

Course evaluations are an extremely important part of the university’s assessment of teachers and classes, and they can have a great impact on instructors’ future ability and opportunities to teach. Students are expected to provide professional and respectful feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing GatorEvals. Students will be notified when the evaluation period opens.

- Students can access the evaluations through the email they receive from GatorEvals, in the Canvas course menu under “GatorEvals,” or via <https://ufl.bluera.com/ufl/>.
- Guidance on how to give respectful feedback is available at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/students/>.
- Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/public-results/>.

Extra Credit

There will be opportunities for extra credit in this course if desired by students. I will update this section with details later in the semester if something especially good occurs to me, but if you are concerned about extra credit, you should be proactive and email or speak to me to let me know that you want an extra credit opportunity.

Syllabus Change Policy

This syllabus is only a guide for the course and is subject to change with advance notice. The version # and date created is listed in size 2 font at the very top of the first page of this syllabus.

Summary of Important Course Deadlines:

- Canvas Posts and Replies: due **Mondays and Wednesdays by 11:59pm**
- Notification of Final Paper topic: due **April 3**
- Final Paper Submission: due **April 26**
- Oral Exams: **April 26-29**

Boilerplate

UF Attendance Policies

Requirements for class attendance in this course are consistent with university policies, available here:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academic-regulations/attendance-policies/>.

Disability Statement

Students with disabilities who experience learning barriers and would like to request academic accommodations should connect with the disability Resource Center. Click this link to get started with the Disability Resource Center:

<https://disability.ufl.edu/get-started/>. It is important for students to share their accommodation letter with their instructor and discuss their access needs as early as possible in the semester.

UF Conduct Code

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states, “We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: “On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.” The Conduct Code specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Click here to read the Conduct Code: <https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/process/student-conduct-code/>. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructor or TAs in this class.

Campus Resources: Health and Wellness

- *U Matter, We Care*: If you or someone you know is in distress, please contact umatter@ufl.edu, 352-392-1575, or visit U Matter, We Care website (<https://umatter.ufl.edu/>) to refer or report a concern and a team member will reach out to the student in distress.
- *Counseling and Wellness Center*: Visit the Counseling and Wellness Center website (<https://counseling.ufl.edu/>) or call 352-392-1575 for information on crisis services as well as non-crisis services.
- *Student Health Care Center*: Call 352-392-1161 for 24/7 information to help you find the care you need, or visit the Student Health Care Center website (<https://shcc.ufl.edu/>).
- *University Police Department*: Visit UF Police Department website (<https://police.ufl.edu/>) or call 352-392-1111 (or 9-1-1 for emergencies).
- *UF Health Shands Emergency Room / Trauma Center*: For immediate medical care call 352-733-0111 or go to the emergency room at 1515 SW Archer Road, Gainesville, FL 32608; Visit the UF Health Emergency Room and Trauma Center website: <https://ufhealth.org/emergency-room-trauma-center>.
- *GatorWell Health Promotion Services*: For prevention services focused on optimal wellbeing, including Wellness Coaching for Academic Success, visit the GatorWell website (<https://gatorwell.ufsa.ufl.edu/>) or call 352-273-4450.

Campus Resources: Academic Resources

- *E-learning technical support*: Contact the UF Computing Help Desk (<http://helpdesk.ufl.edu/>) at 352-392-4357 or via e-mail at helpdesk@ufl.edu.
- *Career Connections Center*: Reitz Union Suite 1300, 352-392-1601. Career assistance and counseling services. <https://career.ufl.edu/>
- *Library Support*: Various ways to receive assistance with respect to using the libraries or finding resources. <https://cms.uflib.ufl.edu/ask>
- *Teaching Center*: Broward Hall, 352-392-2010 or to make an appointment 352- 392-6420. General study skills and tutoring. <https://teachingcenter.ufl.edu/>
- *Writing Studio*: 2215 Turlington Hall, 352-846-1138. Help brainstorming, formatting, and writing papers. <https://writing.ufl.edu/writing-studio/>
- *Student Complaints On-Campus*: Visit the Student Honor Code and Student Conduct Code webpage for more information: <https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/policies/student-honor-%20code-student-conduct-code/>.
- *On-Line Students Complaints*: View the Distance Learning Student Complaint Process: <https://distance.ufl.edu/state-authorization-status/#student-complaint>.

UF Grading Policy

Information on current UF grading policies for assigning grade points can be accessed by clicking this link: <https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academic-regulations/grades-grading-policies/>.

In-Class Recording

Students are allowed to record video or audio of class lectures. However, the purposes for which these recordings may be used are strictly controlled. The only allowable purposes are (1) for personal educational use, (2) in connection with a complaint to the university, or (3) as evidence in, or in preparation for, a criminal or civil proceeding. All other purposes are prohibited. Specifically, students may not publish recorded lectures without the written consent of the instructor.

A “class lecture” is an educational presentation intended to inform or teach enrolled students about a particular subject, including any instructor-led discussions that form part of the presentation, and delivered by any instructor hired or appointed by the University, or by a guest instructor, as part of a University of Florida course. A class lecture does not include lab sessions, student presentations, clinical presentations such as patient history, academic exercises involving solely student participation, assessments (quizzes, tests, exams), field trips, private conversations between students in the class or between a student and the faculty or guest lecturer during a class session.

Publication without permission of the instructor is prohibited. To “publish” means to share, transmit, circulate, distribute, or provide access to a recording, regardless of format or medium, to another person (or persons), including but not limited to another student within the same class section. Additionally, a recording, or transcript of a recording, is considered published if it is posted on or uploaded to, in whole or in part, any media platform, including but not limited to social media, book, magazine, newspaper, leaflet, or third party note/tutoring services. A student who publishes a recording without written consent may be subject to a civil cause of action instituted by a person injured by the publication and/or discipline under UF Regulation 4.040 Student Honor Code and Student Conduct Code.