

# 17th and 18th century philosophy

Philosophy 312, Spring 2026 MW 1:10-2:30 Massry 231

The period in philosophy from Descartes to Kant— from the mid 17th to the late 18th century— was dominated by the system of ideas, the assumption that the only objects of direct perception are ideas occurring in our own minds. This course charts the rise and fall of the system of ideas through the philosophies of René Descartes, George Berkeley, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and others.

**Professor:** P.D. Magnus <[pmagnus -at- albany.edu](mailto:pmagnus@albany.edu)>

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Office hours W 11:00–noon, F 11:00–noon, and by appointment

**Teaching assistant:** Jack Jia <[jjia2 -at- albany.edu](mailto:jjia2@albany.edu)>

Office: HU-255

Office hours Tu and Th 3:30–4:30

**Texts:** The readings which are originally in English will be available via Brightspace. For Descartes and Kant, the translations which are in the public domain are rough-going. I've opted for the easier-to-read translations, but that means having to buy books.

- Descartes, René *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies* John Cottingham (translator) ISBN 9781107665736
- Kant, Immanuel *Critique of Pure Reason* Abridged, Werner S. Pluhar (translator) ISBN 9780872204485

**Requirements:** You will take two mid-term exams and a final exam. You will have to record a short video presentation on a topic related to the course. You will have to watch videos recorded by some of your classmates and write replies. For grading:

24% Exam #1

24% Exam #2

24% Exam #3

24% video presentation

4% response to video presentations

**Academic honesty:** Presentations should be your own words, although you are encouraged to discuss ideas with anyone who will listen. Exam answers are your own work. Cheating will not be tolerated.

**Absences:** Students who will need to class or assignments for foreseeable reasons should discuss them with the professor at the beginning of the term. If an emergency results in absence, the student should contact the professor as soon as reasonably possible.

**Schedule of topics** The assignment of topics to class days is an approximation. If a topic takes more or less time than is scheduled for it, we will make adjustments as we go.

**Week 1** Jan 21

Introduction

**Week 2** Jan 26, 28

René Descartes (read Meditations 1–3)

**Week 3** Feb 2, 4

Descartes continued (read Meditations 4–5)

**Week 4** Feb 9, 11

Descartes continued (read Meditation 6)

Descartes' critics (read Elizabeth)

**Week 5** Feb 16, 18

Review

FIRST EXAM Wednesday, Feb 18

**Week 6** Feb 23, 25

General ideas (read Locke)

George Berkeley (read Preface and Introduction)

**Week 7** Mar 2, 4

Berkeley's idealism (read Part I ¶1–66)

**Week 8** Mar 9, 11

Advantages of idealism (read ¶85–90, 133–149)

David Hume (read Hume §§II–III)

**SPRING BREAK!** no class

**Week 9** Mar 23, 25

Hume: Sceptical worries (read Hume §IV, §V pt 1)

Hume: Causal power (read Hume §VII)

**Week 10** Mar 30, Apr 1

Hume: Freedom (read Hume §VIII)

Hume: Types of scepticism (read Hume §XII)

**Week 11** Apr 6, 8

Review

SECOND EXAM Wednesday, Apr 8

**Week 12** Apr 13, 15

Immanuel Kant (read Kant pages 1–24)

Kant's transcendental aesthetic (read Kant pages 25–38)

**Week 13** Apr 20, 22

VIDEO PRESENTATION due April 20

Kant's deduction of the categories (read Kant pages 39–65)

**Week 14** Apr 27, 29

Kant continued? Thomas Reid? To be determined.

**Week 15** May 4

Conclusion

FINAL EXAM M May 11, 10:30–12:30