This course will engage the philosophy of René Descartes, the intellectual and scientific context from which his ideas emerged, and his philosophical legacy in the early modern era. The first section of the semester will take up Descartes’s most important treatment of method, the fragmentary and unfinished Rules for the Direction of Mind. Its focus will be on both the ‘philosophical method’ Descartes elaborates and the sense in which this constitutes a decisive intervention into the history of that concept (one as heavily embedded in medicine, science, and rhetoric as in epistemology). A close reading of the Meditations on First Philosophy (together with the Objections and Replies) will be the task of the central portion of the semester. Here, we will seek to understand Descartes’s most fundamental arguments, with attention to what may turn out to be surprising aspects of his project (hint: if you think the core argument of Meditation Two is ‘I think, therefore I am’, then you haven’t actually read it). Members of the seminar will determine the topic for the final part of the semester. Possible foci include:

- The physics of corpuscular matter in Principles of Philosophy: a profoundly original theory bodies in motion and the element of Descartes’s system for which he was best known in his own day.
- The most serious early modern challenge to the dualism of the Meditations, namely, the position developed by Elisabeth of Bohemia in her extensive correspondence with Descartes.
- Cartesian ‘fictionalization’ in The World and Treatise on Man (where philosopher-gods conspire to create a model of the universe and to sculpt a pneumatically-powered grotto populated by self-moving statues).
- Early modern mechanism, i.e., you already know Descartes holds that living bodies are mechanical, but do you actually have any idea what a ‘machine’ was in seventeenth century Europe?
- Mathesis in Descartes’s early notebooks, the Discourse on Method, and the essays it introduces (Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology): what exactly is this ‘general science of order and measure’ that Descartes takes to ground of all rigorous philosophizing?
- The long seventeenth century debate between Cartesians and Epicureans, which emerged in the wake of Descartes’s own work beginning with Pierre Gassendi’s objections to the Meditations.
- members of the seminar may suggest other topics.

Students will be responsible for an analytical protocol, a research paper, and participation in class discussion. Depending on enrollment, seminar presentations may also be required.

The texts required for the course are the three Cambridge University Press volumes of The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (v1-2 eds. Cottingham, Stoothoff & Murdoch; v3 eds. Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch & Kenny). These are expensive, but cheaper used copies are widely available through online booksellers. However, take care to order the correct books, since there are dozens of different Descartes collections with similar titles, including some from Cambridge itself. The correct ISBNs are: 9-780521-288071 (v1); 9-780521-288088 (v2); and 9-780521-423502 (v3, sometimes listed separately as The Correspondence).