

PHIL 354

Descartes and Rationalism

<http://www.sfu.ca/~lshapiro/PHIL354/index.html>

T: 12:30-2:20 AQ4130; R: 12:30-1:20 AQ4120

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Course Overview

We will engage in a close, systematic reading of Descartes' Meditations as a whole. Our discussion will be framed by consideration of the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation and Descartes' answers to those arguments in what follows. In those answers are contained his conception of mind, of the natural world, and of the place of mind in the natural world. We will examine the adequacy of Descartes' view of that last philosophical issue by looking at what Malebranche and Spinoza have to say in response to Descartes' views about the union and interaction of mind and body.

Course Requirements

4 papers (5-6 pp) 25% each

Texts

Required:

Descartes, Selected Philosophical Writings, Cambridge UP; Malebranche, Philosophical Selections, ed. S. Nadler, Hackett.
Spinoza, Ethics and Other Writings, ed. E. Curley, Princeton UP

Recommended:

Descartes's Meditations: Critical Essays, ed. Vere Chappell, Rowman & Littlefield

Also Recommended (not ordered for the course, but on reserve in the Library):

Williams, Bernard. 1978: Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry. Penguin

Wilson, Margaret. 1978: Descartes. Routledge.

At the end of this syllabus you will find a bibliography of select secondary sources – contemporary commentators on Descartes' Meditations.

Schedule of Readings (subject to change)

Sept 3-5 Introduction, *Meditations* as meditations: Preface to the Reader, Synopsis, Postulates of Geometrical Exposition in Second Replies

What are the *Meditations* about? What is 'First Philosophy' and the 'Principles of First Philosophy'? What is a meditation? What is one supposed to gain from meditation? Why might the format of meditations be suited to a study of first philosophy? Who or what is this 'I'? Does the synopsis summary map onto the *Meditations*?

Sept 10-12 First Meditation

What are the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation? What does each serve to call into doubt? How do they build on one another? How are they different from one another? Is there anything the meditator does not call into doubt? What is the 'method of doubt'? How does the method work? What is the relation between doubt and knowledge? Doubt and certainty?

Sept 17-19 Second Meditation

What, precisely, does the meditator determine he cannot doubt? How does he make that determination? What do we learn about the nature of thought from the meditator's discovery? What is the '*cogito*'? How does the list a thinking thing does get generated? What is special about sensing and imagining? How can the meditator claim he senses and imagines if he is still doubting that he is embodied? What is the lesson of the consideration of the piece of wax? How does that discussion suggest we represent the world in thought? In what sense is the mind better known than body?

Sept 24-26 Third Meditation **FIRST PAPER DUE SEPT 24**

What do you make of the meditator's take on what he has learned from the preceding meditations? What is the task of the Third Meditation? How does it relate to the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation? Does it succeed in this task? What is a clear and distinct perception? Is it purely psychological? Is it an objective criteria? What are the different kinds of thoughts we can have? What is an idea, according to Descartes? What are the two arguments Descartes offers for the existence of God? What is this causal principle, and how does it figure in these arguments? How are the two arguments related to one another? Do the arguments succeed? Are they flawed?

October 1-3 Fourth Meditation

What is a judgement, according to the view Descartes puts forward in this meditation? What is notion of will, and of the freedom of the will, in play in this account? How does this notion of judgement lead to a method of avoiding error? What else does this method depend upon? How does it address the concerns of the First Meditation? At the end of the Fourth Meditation, what sort of knowledge claims can our meditator make, if any? What is left to be determined?

Oct 8-10 Fifth Meditation

How does Descartes try to prove the existence of God again? What is the standard problem with ontological arguments? Does this argument avoid this problem? If so, how? Why does he need to prove the existence of God again? What are these true and immutable natures? How do they relate to the nature of material things?

Oct 15-17 Sixth Meditation **SECOND PAPER DUE OCT 15**

How does Descartes distinguish mind from body? What is a real distinction? How is it different from other sorts of distinctions? How does Descartes establish the existence of the material world? Does this proof fully answer the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation? What according to this proof do our sensation tell us about the material world? What is the nature of a human being, according to Descartes? In what way are mind and body united? Do they form a third substance? In what way does the union inform the content of our sensations? What is the content of our sensations, if any? What is the nature of the causal interaction between mind and body?

Oct 22-24 Correspondence with Elisabeth

What are Elisabeth's concerns about the interaction of mind and body? How does Descartes' replies address her concerns? Is this reply satisfactory? Are Descartes' remarks in the later (1645) letters surprising? How so?

Oct 29-31 Principles, Passions of the Soul

Does Descartes' view about the mind-body union develop in these later works? How so? Do these developments require him to rethink his substance dualism?

November 5-7 Malebranche (all pg numbers in Hackett edition) **THIRD PAPER DUE NOV 5**
Background: *Search After Truth*, pp.3-22, *Dialogues on Metaphysics*: pp.147-158., 168-182.
Foreground: *Search*, pp. 24-26, 32-50, *Dialogues*, pp. 183-210.

Background: Consider what points of similarity and what points of difference there are between Malebranche's and Descartes' theories of ideas. Pay attention to what the different points of emphasis are.

Foreground: What do our sensations represent, according to Malebranche? How do sensations come to have the content they do? Do sensations give us knowledge of the nature of objects? If so how? Do objects of sensation cause our sensations?

Nov 12-14 Malebranche, *Search*, 92-127; *Dialogues*, 222-238.

What is the difference between occasional causation and 'regular' causation? Does Malebranche think that bodies have the power to cause something to happen? What does he take to be inadequate with existing accounts of causation? What alternative does he propose? In what way is God the only cause? What does the doctrine of occasional causation tell us about how our sensations represent?

Nov 19-21 Spinoza, *Ethics* Part I, Definitions, Axioms, P1-16; Part II Definitions, Axioms, P1-P6.

What is a substance for Spinoza? What is Spinoza's argument for there being only one substance? What, then, are mind and body, in Spinoza's view? How is Spinoza's ontology similar to and different from Descartes'

Nov 26-28 Spinoza, *Ethics* Part II, P7-P31, Preface to EIII, (EIIIP1-P11), Preface to EV

What is the justification for Spinoza's doctrine of parallelism (EIIIP7)? What problems in Descartes account of the human being does this doctrine aim to solve? What sort of account of the content of our ideas does it afford? Does this account give us a sensible notion of the mental?

December 3 **FOURTH PAPER DUE**

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

These readings are most well-suited to advanced philosophy students, as they are written for a scholarly audience. In all cases, you should attempt to work through the texts on your own before consulting secondary literature. Where practical, these readings are on reserve. CITE SOURCES PROPERLY. PLAGIARISM IS A SERIOUS OFFENSE.

MEDITATIONS AS MEDITATIONS

Hatfield, Gary. 1986: "The Senses and the Fleshless Eye: The Meditations as Cognitive Exercises" in A. Rorty (ed.) Essays on Descartes' Meditations, U California Press.

Kosman, Aryeh. 1986: "The Naïve Narrator: Meditation in Descartes' *Meditations*" in in A. Rorty (ed.) Essays on Descartes' Meditations, U California Press.

Rorty, Amelie. 1986: "The Structure of Descartes' Meditations" in A. Rorty (ed.) Essays on Descartes' Meditations, U California Press.

FIRST MEDITATION

Broughton, Janet. 2002: Descartes' Method of Doubt. Princeton UP. Especially Part I.

Carriero, John. "The First Meditation" in Descartes' Meditations: Critical Essays, ed. V Chappell.

Williams, Michael. 1986: "Descartes and the Metaphysics of Doubt" in A. Rorty (ed.) Essays on Descartes' Meditations, U California Press.

SECOND MEDITATION

Markie, Peter. "The Cogito and its Importance" in Descartes' Meditations: Critical Essays, ed. V Chappell.

Schiffer, Stephen. "Descartes on his Essence" in Descartes' Meditations: Critical Essays, ed. V Chappell.
Schmitter, Amy. 2000: "The Wax and I: Perceptibility and Modality in the Second Meditation," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 82, 2, 178-201.

THIRD MEDITATION

Gewirth, Alan. 1943: "Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes," Philosophy, 13, 17-36.
Loeb, Louis. 1992: "The Cartesian Circle" in The Cambridge Companion to Descartes, ed. John Cottingham. Cambridge UP.
O'Toole, Frederick. "Descartes' Problematic Causal Principle" in Descartes' Meditations: Critical Essays, ed. V Chappell.
Newman, Lex and Alan Nelson. 1999: "Circumventing Cartesian Circles", Nous, 33, 3, 370-404
Van Cleve, James. 1979: "Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle," Philosophical Review, 88, 55-91.

FOURTH MEDITATION

Kenny, Anthony. "Descartes on the Will" in Descartes' Meditations: Critical Essays, ed. V Chappell.
Newman, Lex.. 1999: "The Fourth Meditation", Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 59(3): 559-591
Rosenthal, David. "Will and the Theory of Judgement" in Descartes' Meditations: Critical Essays, ed. V Chappell

FIFTH MEDITATION

Kenny, Anthony. "Descartes' Ontological Argument" in Descartes' Meditations: Critical Essays, ed. V Chappell

SIXTH MEDITATION

Cottingham, John. "Descartes' Sixth Meditation: The External World, 'Nature' and Human Nature" Descartes' Meditations: Critical Essays, ed. V Chappell
Hoffman, Paul. 1986: "The Unity of Descartes's Man," The Philosophical Review, 95, 339-370.
Newman, Lex. 1994: "Descartes on Unknown Faculties and Our Knowledge of the External World" The Philosophical Review, 103(3): 489-531
Rodis-Lewis, Genevieve. 1998: "Descartes and the Unity of the Human Being", transl. J. Cottingham, in Descartes, ed. J. Cottingham, Oxford UP, 197-210.
Simmons, Alison. 1999: "Are Sensations Representational for Descartes?" Nous, 33,3, 347-369.
Wilson, Margaret. "Descartes: The Epistemological Argument for Mind-Body Distinctness" Descartes' Meditations: Critical Essays, ed. V Chappell.

THE PASSIONS OF THE SOUL and the Elisabeth correspondence

Hoffman, Paul. 1991: "Three Dualist Theories of the Passions," Philosophical Topics, 19,1, 153-200.
Shapiro, Lisa. 1999: "Princess Elizabeth and Descartes: The Union of Soul and Body and the Practice of Philosophy," British Journal for the History of Philosophy, 7(3): 503-520.

MALEBRANCHE

Nadler, Steven. 1992: Malebranche and Ideas. Oxford UP
Schmaltz, Tad. 1996: Malebranche's Theory of the Soul

SPINOZA

Curley, Edwin. 1988: Behind the Geometrical Method. Princeton UP.
Garrett, Don, ed. 1996: Cambridge Companion to Spinoza. Cambridge UP. See especially the chapters by Bennett, Wilson and Della Rocca.
Wolfson, Harry. 1934: The Philosophy of Spinoza. Meridian Books.