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Meditations on First Philosophy

Descartes

Study Guide on René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy: I – II*

Why are the meditations addressed to the Faculty of Sacred Theology at Paris (61¹ ff.)?

- Does Descartes think that theology is unable to address the unbeliever—that is, that it cannot really give an account of itself to the outside world?
- On what grounds does Descartes claim that he “would not think that there is any way open to the human mind by which better . . . [arguments] could ever be found” (65)?

“I am supposing, then that all the things that I see are false . . . Perhaps just this one thing [will be true]: that there is nothing certain” (99). How does Descartes reach this point in his “meditations”?

- How does Descartes go about “demolishing” (87) his opinions (First Meditation)?
- Does he consider classes or particular beliefs?

Consider exactly how Descartes concludes that “we can doubt all things” (79):

- Why does he doubt knowledge based on sensation (89)?
 - Is Descartes' claim persuasive, that it is “a matter of prudence never to confide completely in those who have deceived us even once” (89)? At what level, or with respect to what decisions (if any), is this true?
 - Recount the main turns of Descartes' argument from dreams (89–91). What certainty does he “lose” as a result of this consideration?
 - Is the argument from dreams persuasive? Is Descartes right that there are no certain criteria for distinguishing being awake from sleep (as he claims at 91)?
- Why does he doubt mathematical knowledge?

¹ René Descartes. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated and edited by George Heffernan. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



- Recount the main argument about the omnipotent evil genius (93–97). Consider the elements which go into the formation of this notion and hypothesis.
- Is it right for Descartes to presuppose that such an evil deceiver is possible, and reject his certainty based on this possibility?
- Is it possible to doubt intellectual knowledge, such as that of mathematical truths, even when the demonstrations are known?

Why does Descartes believe that mind and body are not only different, but “in a certain manner contrary” (81)? Consider his definition of “body” at page 103.

Why does Descartes object to conceiving of man as “rational animal” (101–103)?

Does Descartes succeed in finding a “firm and immovable” point, like Archimedes (99)?

- Recount the major steps in his argument (101–107) for being a *res cogitans* (a “thinking thing”). Is his reasoning sound, or does it have any problematic steps?
- If we can be mistaken about mathematical truths, as Descartes claims, why is it impossible that we be mistaken about being aware of our thoughts and our existence? Why is it impossible to doubt one’s own existence? Cannot the evil genius confound even this principle?
- Does the “immovable principle” depend on memory? That is, does the power of Descartes’ claim require “remembering” the chain of reasoning which preceded the perception of one’s existence?
- Is it true that “nothing can be perceived . . . more easily or more evidently than [one’s] mind” (107)?

What prompts the wax example, and what does Descartes show by it (109–113)? What remains as perceived, after analysis (111)? What grasps that particular wax?



Study Guide on Descartes' *Meditations* on *First Philosophy: III – IV*

What, in Descartes' mind, is the "foremost and most frequent error" (125)? Why does this induce him to consider the existence of God?

How does Descartes move from knowing that he is a thinking thing to knowing that God exists? That is, what is Descartes' first proof for God's existence?

- What is the distinction between objective and formal reality (129–131)?
- What principles does Descartes believe are "manifest by the natural light" (129–133)? Consider:
 - "There must be at a minimum just as much [reality] in the efficient and total cause as there is in the effect of the same cause" (129).
 - What defense does he give of this principle?
 - Is it consistent with his rejection of all previous knowledge, or is he relying on too much?
 - "From thence it follows both that something cannot come to be from nothing, and also that that which is more perfect . . . cannot come to be from that which is less perfect" (129). Again, from what starting place does Descartes argue here?
 - Descartes claims that these principles are manifest, but that mathematical truths are not (as in Meditation I). Are these claims consistent, or incompatible?
- How do these principles come to bear on the ideas that Descartes has?
 - How does Descartes defend his application of the principle of perfection to ideas and causes of ideas? (129–131.)
 - Is this a correct application of the principle?
 - How does Descartes know that ideas require causes in this way?
 - What kind of idea does Descartes claim to have about God?
 - Is this a reasonable claim?
 - What experience leads you towards or away from agreement with this claim?
- How does the above allow Descartes to prove that God exists (135–137)? Does his conclusion follow?



Why does Descartes want to investigate the existence of God? What will the answer allow him to conclude?

What is the precise nature of each objection that Descartes considers, and how does he reply to each? Are his replies satisfying? Are the assumptions he uses in his replies consistent with what he has admitted as knowable up to this point?

- That the infinite is perceived only by negation of the finite (137–139).
- That the idea of God is materially false (139).
- That Descartes himself is “something greater than . . . [he] might understand, and all those perfections which I attribute to God are in some mode in me potentially . . .” (141).
- What other objections, if any, might be made to Descartes’ conclusion? How might he reply, in line with his principles?

Consider Descartes’ distinction between what is “taught by nature” (125) and what is evident by the “natural light” (127). He claims that the former comes about by “a certain spontaneous impetus” (127). Why should these things be rejected, according to Descartes? Is his case convincing? How natural is this distinction into two categories?

Around page 141 Descartes seems to take up a new line of argument for God’s existence. Why does he do this? What is the argument, and how does it differ from the first? Is it conclusive?

Given that he is caused in every way by a good God, how does Descartes account for error and confusion?

- What is Descartes’ account of his experience of the faculty of judging (153)? How and when is it reliable?
- Does Descartes think that God could have made man such that he would never err (155)? What would such a creation entail?
- How exactly do we err (157–161)?
- What is the method for avoiding error (167)?

According to Descartes, is it partly by the will, or by the will only, that we bear the image and likeness of God (159)?



At the start of Meditation III, Descartes explains that, through this meditation, he will “attempt to render me myself gradually more known and familiar to me” (119). By the end of Meditations III and IV, how has Descartes come to know himself better? For example, in what way does Descartes think that “the perception of God is . . . in some mode prior to the perception of me myself” (139)?



Study Guide on Descartes' *Meditations* on *First Philosophy: V – VI*

At the end of the Fifth Meditation, Descartes writes, “And thus do I plainly see that the certitude and truth of all knowledge depends on the one cognition of the true God . . .” (183). How does the cognition of God make possible all other kinds of knowledge?

- What does the true awareness of God guarantee? What relation does this cognition have to the rest of one's thoughts? How does the knowledge of God enable Descartes to know with certainty about “the entirety of that corporeal nature which is the object of pure mathematics” (183)?
- Has Descartes concluded that clarity and distinct perception (see, for example, 179) are insufficient bases for true knowledge? Explain.
- If “the certitude of the other things so depends on this itself that nothing could ever be known perfectly without it” (183), then is knowing God's existence required for the first clear grasping of truth?
 - Does this mean that Descartes' knowledge of his own existence in Meditation II is destroyed?
 - If so, on what foundation does the project rest? Is Descartes' reasoning circular?

What is the purpose of the new argument for the existence of God in Meditation V (173 ff.)? Does it prove God from a sounder foundation? Does it illustrate certain philosophical principles which Descartes wants to make clear?

As Descartes reviews in Meditation VI, paragraph 7 (193–195), he began the *Meditations* with three reasons for doubt: 1) his senses sometimes deceive, 2) he cannot distinguish reality from dreams, and 3) it is possible there is an evil deceiving genius. By the Sixth Meditation, are these still problems? If not, how have they been solved (195 ff.)?

What exactly does Descartes believe we are “taught by nature” (193)? Does he consider these teachings fairly, and does he rightly conclude they must contain some truth? Consider:

- Is he right about what he claims we are led to believe naturally? For example:



- That I have a body, that I am one thing with it, and that there is truth in sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, *etc.* (201).
- Various other bodies exist around my body, and I can be affected by them (201).
- These things have “variations corresponding to—even if perhaps not similar to—the perceptions” (201).
 - Is Descartes right that nature does *not* teach that “there is something in the fire similar to that heat [which I sense]” (205)?
 - Does he fairly compare such a thought to believing “pain” is in the fire?
- To flee pain and pursue what produces pleasure (203). Does the skin know the fire as *harmful to me* when the skin feels pain?
- Is Descartes right that nature does not teach us that, “from these perceptions of the senses we should conclude anything about the things posited outside us without the previous examination of the intellect . . .” (203)?
- Does Descartes really hold that only “a certain custom of judging inconsiderately” (203) led him formerly to believe these things, or does he later revise this opinion? Explain.
- How does Descartes reach the claim, “there is surely no doubt that all the things that I am taught by nature would have some truth in them” (199), and is his reasoning sound?

Does Descartes consider existence to be a perfection (175–177)? How does this pertain to the argument for God’s existence?

“Even if I were no longer to be paying attention to the reasons because of which I have judged that this is true, if only I would remember that I have clearly and distinctly perceived it, no contrary reason can be offered that might impel me to doubt it” (181). Does Descartes’ proof for God’s existence depend in any way upon his memory? By Descartes’ principles, could the evil genius plant this as a false memory?

How does Descartes account for our knowledge of material things?

- Why does Descartes claim that imagination “is not required for the essence of me myself, that is, for the essence of my mind” (187)? Is this a reasonable claim? Is it true that, without the power of imagining, he would remain the same?
- Is it true that we sense the parts of our body first, before external objects (189)?



- Do we perceive our ideas first and properly, inferring the existence of things, or do we perceive the things first (191)?
- Recount how Descartes argues from the faculty of sensing (197) to the existence of corporeal things (199). Is this a valid argument?

What is sense perception useful for (205, 213–215)? How does Descartes conclude that the deceptive and erroneous signals of the body are not a defect in the body? Is this reasonable?

What is Descartes' final position with respect to the reliability of sense experience? Is his conclusion only tenable because he has gone through these meditations, or has he recognized a kind of trustworthiness in sense experience which was there all along?

At the start of the First Meditation, Descartes speaks of beginning again "from the first foundations" (87). Has he accomplished this by the end of the work? What is the first foundation, finally, for Descartes—what is most known?

In the letter of dedication, Descartes claims that he has shown the existence of God and the distinction of the soul from the body with "very certain and very evident demonstrations" (65). By the end of Meditation VI, do you think he has achieved this end? Has he argued convincingly?

Why does Descartes choose to call this work *Meditations*? What does he meditate on? How does Descartes' form of "meditation" compare with religious or mystical meditation?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

