

Reading Guide #1

These reading guides are provided to assist you in your reading. I encourage you to read the material through, first, then go back to answer the questions. You are not expected to hand in written answers. You are expected to have responses ready for class discussion. Only the boldfaced questions will appear on exams. Page numbers refer to the pages in the Hackett, Fourth Edition.

Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, pages 59-103.

Meditation 1

- 1. Why does Descartes want to demolish his opinions? How does he plan to do that?**
- 2. "...[I]t is a mark of prudence never to place our complete trust in those who have deceived us even once." (60) How is Descartes being deceived? What, specifically, does this deception *not* call into doubt?**
- 3. How does Descartes come to doubt all of what his senses tell him?**
- 4. Of what does Descartes think might be certain even if he is dreaming? Why does he doubt even those things?**
- 5. What makes Descartes doubt the truth of mathematics?**
- 6. "But eventually I am forced to admit that there is nothing among the things I once believed to be true which it is not permissible to doubt - and not out of frivolity or lack of forethought, but for valid and considered reasons." (62) Explain what these three reasons are.**

Meditation 2

- 7. Exactly, what is the one thing that Descartes claims he can not doubt? Why can't he doubt it?**
- 8. "Thus I realize that none of what I can grasp by means of the imagination pertains to this knowledge that I have of myself." (66) Why not? What does this mean for Descartes' knowledge of himself?**
- 9. How does Descartes argue that he grasps what the wax is "through the mind alone"? Be specific.**
- 10. "Surely it is the same piece of wax that I see, touch, and imagine... But I need to realize that the perception of the wax is neither a seeing, nor a touching, nor an imagining." (68) Explain.**
- 11. According to Descartes at the end of the second meditation, how do we learn about physical objects? How does this support his view that knowledge of ourselves is most certain?**

Meditation 3

Note: Please read the first twelve paragraphs of this meditation, and the last three paragraphs. The remainder of Meditation 3 contains a difficult argument for God's existence. You are welcome and encouraged to read through it, but we will not spend a lot of time on it. The questions below refer only to the required sections.

- 12. What general rule does Descartes accept as a criterion of certainty?**
- 13. Why does Descartes turn to the question of whether God exists?**
- 14. What are the classes of thoughts?**
- 15. Why can't ideas, properly speaking, be false?**
- 16. What are the three types of ideas? Characterize each, providing examples.**
- 17. "Nothing is more obvious than the judgment that this thing is sending its likeness rather than something else into me." (72) Explain.**
- 18. Distinguish the "light of nature" from being "taught by nature".**

19. Why does the example of the sun seem to refute the assertion in question 17? Does it?

...

20. From where does Descartes' idea of God come?

21. Why can't God be a deceiver?

Meditation IV

22. What potential problem does Descartes find in supposing God not to be a deceiver?

23. How does Descartes define error? How does this help him avoid the problem in the previous question?

24. "For this reason alone, the entire class of causes which people customarily derive from a thing's 'end' I judge to be utterly useless in physics..." (83) Explain. Who might do this?

25. What are the two concurrent causes of Descartes' errors? Describe them, specifically, and their functions.

26. How does the difference between the will and the intellect cause error?

27. How does Descartes decide that he can avoid making errors? How do you think this might be difficult?

Meditation V

28. "What I believe must be considered above all here is the fact that I find within me countless ideas of certain things that, even if perhaps they do not exist anywhere outside me, still cannot be said to be nothing." (88-9) To what ideas, specifically, is Descartes referring?

29. In what 2 different ways does Descartes think his knowledge about geometry (e.g. triangles) can not come? (Recall Question 16.) Why? What does Descartes think about his knowledge of mathematics because of this?

30. "Thus it is no less contradictory to think of God... lacking existence... than it is to think of a mountain without a valley." (90) Why not? Be specific.

31. On what does Descartes' certainty of everything else depend?

Meditation VI

32. How does Descartes know that physical objects *can* exist? What can not exist?

33. What's the difference between the imagination and pure intellect? Which is primary, for Descartes?

34. If there were bodies, how might the imagination work, according to Descartes?

35. What reasons did Descartes have for believing there were physical objects? Why does he say they didn't seem to come from himself?

36. What made Descartes' body seem closer to him than other physical objects?

37. Can your mind be separated from your body? Why does Descartes say, "I rightly conclude that my essence consists entirely in my being a thinking thing" (97)?

38. What is Descartes' argument that physical objects exist? Be specific.

39. What properties does Descartes see clearly and distinctly belonging to physical objects?

40. Describe the connection between self and body, for Descartes.

41. Descartes argues that true knowledge of external things belongs to the mind alone, and not to the composite of mind and body. How does the example of the star support this argument?

42. How does the divisibility of the body prove it to be distinct from the mind?

43. How does Descartes argue that the body will provide misleading sensations? Why does he argue this?

44. What, finally, distinguishes dreams from waking experience?

45. Why are we likely to err, even if we know how to test experiences?