

Reading Guide #2: Descartes and the Scientific Revolution

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 required to hand in written answers. You are expected to have responses ready for class discussion. Page numbers refer to Peter A. Morton, *A Historical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*, Broadview Press, 1997. **Note that the suggested order of readings, below, differs from the order in Morton.** Specifically, I suggest first reading the selections from the second and third meditations; second, going back to the three short selections which Morton has included in Chapter 3, and lastly proceeding with the sixth meditation and the selections in Chapter 5.

Rene Descartes, from *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Second and Third Meditations, pp 75-80.

1. Why is Descartes' engaged in systematic doubt? What is his goal?
 2. What is the first thing that Descartes claims he can not doubt? Why can't he doubt it?
 3. How does Descartes proceed to determine what is essential to himself?
 4. What were Descartes' previous thoughts about bodies and souls? Which did he think he knew better?
 5. Does Descartes' argument that he exists prove the existence of his body? Explain.
 6. Why can't the soul be a wind, or fire, which permeates our bodies?
 7. What is imagining? Why is it irrelevant to our knowledge of ourselves?
 8. According to Descartes, what is the self? Describe the self and its faculties, especially sensing.
 9. What is the difference between seeming to sense and sensing?
 10. Why can't we learn about the wax on the basis of its sensory features? How do we learn about it?
 11. What properties does the wax really have?
 12. "It is of course the same wax which I see, which I touch, and which I picture in my imagination... And yet... the perception I have of it is not a case of vision or touch of imagination (p 78)." Explain.
 13. How does ordinary language mislead us about our knowledge of physical objects?
 14. How does any knowledge of physical objects reinforce our knowledge of ourselves?
 15. What general rule does Descartes accept as a criterion of certainty? How does he arrive at this rule?
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Galileo Galilei, from *The Assayer*, pp 57-9.

1. What are the properties of material, or corporeal, substances?
 2. Are tastes, odors, and colors real qualities? What are they?
 3. Is the tickle in the feather, or in the body that is tickled? Explain.
 4. How do we get tactile sensations? How are tastes, smells, and sounds similar to touches?
 5. What properties must external bodies have to create smells, tastes, and sounds?
 6. How does Galileo explain heat? Is heat a real quality, or just a sensation in us?
 7. In what language is the book of nature written?
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Rene Descartes, from *The World or Treatise on Light*, pp 60-1.

1. "Everyone is commonly convinced that the ideas we have in our mind are wholly similar to the objects from which they proceed... (p 60)." Who, in particular, held this doctrine?
2. Explain Descartes' analogy between words, and their references, and light.
3. What is sound? What would we hear, if we heard the actual cause of a sound?
4. Does our sense of touch give us veridical representations of the world? Explain.

Rene Descartes, from *Principles of Philosophy*, pp 61-2.

1. What properties do objects really have?
 2. How are sensations transmitted to the brain?
 3. What changes in bodies can other bodies produce? Why is the production of “substantial forms and real qualities” in other bodies unintelligible?
 4. What, precisely, are the sensible qualities, like color?
 5. What best characterizes the real properties of objects?
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Rene Descartes, from *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Sixth Meditation, pp 80-8.

1. How does Descartes know that physical objects can exist?
2. What is imagination? What is the difference between the imagination and pure understanding? (Consider the difference between the triangle and the chiliagon.)
3. Why is imagination not essential to our selves? How might the imagination work? (Consider the metaphors of turning toward the self and the body.)
4. “I do not yet see how the distinct idea of corporeal nature which I find in my imagination can provide any basis for a necessary inference that some body exists (p 81).” Explain.
5. What reasons did Descartes have for believing there were physical objects? Why does he say they did not seem to come from himself?
6. “Since the sole source of my knowledge of these things was the ideas themselves, the supposition that the things resembled the ideas was bound to occur to me (81-2).” Explain.
7. Why might one think that everything in the intellect must first come through the senses?
8. What made Descartes’s body seem closer to him than other physical objects?
9. “For there is absolutely no connection...between the tugging sensation and the decision to take food... (p 82)” Explain.
10. What three considerations undermined Descartes’ confidence in the beliefs based on his senses?
11. “The fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct... (p 83).” Explain. What does this mean about the relationship between the mind and the body?
12. How does Descartes distinguish our ability to exist without our bodies from our ability to exist without our imagination?
13. From where must our ideas of sensible things (bodies) come? How does Descartes argue that God does not send us ideas of bodies directly?
14. Which properties does Descartes see clearly and distinctly belonging to physical objects? Which properties remain doubtful? Provide examples.
15. Why is the relationship between our selves and our bodies not like that between a sailor and his ship?
16. How is the sensation of pain a confused mode of thinking?
17. What can we tell about bodies from our different sensations? What can we not conclude about them?
18. How do we learn to avoid things which produce painful sensations, and pursue those which produce pleasurable ones?
19. How does the example of the star support Descartes’s argument that true knowledge of external things belongs to the mind alone, and not to the composite of mind and body? What does this argument say about the information we get from our senses?
20. What is the proper role of the senses? Why is their fallibility a problem for Descartes?
21. How does the divisibility of the body show it to be distinct from the mind?
22. How does Descartes account for the body’s ability to provide misleading sensations to the mind?
23. How does Descartes argue that misleading sensations show no defect in God?
24. How does Descartes argue that we can distinguish dreams from waking experience?

Rene Descartes, from *Discourse on Method*, pp 102-3.

1. How are our bodies like machines?
 2. According to Descartes, in what two ways may machines never be like human beings?
 3. How are humans different from animals?
 4. How does Descartes argue that animals do not have their own ways of expressing reason?
 5. How does Descartes argue that the soul is immortal?
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Antoine Arnauld, from "Objections," pp 104-7.

1. Why does Arnauld wonder about the nature of the "I" which Descartes proves exists?
 2. What is the difference between adequate and inadequate knowledge? How does it form the basis of an objection to Descartes' argument for the mind/body distinction.
 3. How does Descartes characterize bodies? Why does Arnauld grant that characterization, but insist that it does not show that the mind is not a body? (Consider the analogy of genus and species.)
 4. According to Arnauld, what is Descartes' argument that his knowledge of the mind, as not a body, is complete? How does the triangle example undermine this argument?
 5. What reply to his objection does Arnauld consider? Why is it inadequate?
 6. How does Descartes' view differ from that of Plato?
 7. Explain how Arnauld's example of every quantity having breadth and length applies to Descartes' argument.
 8. What is Descartes' argument for the immortality of the soul? What problem does Arnauld find with it?
 9. How do Arnauld and Descartes disagree about the souls of animals?
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Rene Descartes, from "Reply to Arnauld," pp 108-13.

1. How does Descartes argue that the body is not part of the essence of the mind?
2. What is adequate knowledge? Why can humans have it, but never know that they have it?
3. What is required for complete knowledge of something?
4. How do we know of substances? Why would stripping a substance of attributes destroy our knowledge of it?
5. Distinguish two senses of 'incomplete substance'. Which sense is acceptable to Descartes?
6. Why is Arnauld's genus/species analogy unsuccessful at showing that some bodies could be minds?
7. How does the distinction between substance and attribute show a disanalogy between Arnauld's triangle example and Descartes' mind/body distinction.
8. "Although we can clearly and distinctly understand that a triangle in a semi-circle is right-angled without being aware that the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the squares on the other two sides, we cannot have a clear understanding of a triangle having the square on its hypotenuse equal to the squares on the other sides without at the same time being aware that it is right-angled (p 110)." Explain.
9. How does the fact that some relationship must hold among the lengths of the side of a triangle serve as a response to Arnauld?
10. What is a substance? Why does a difference in the concepts of mind and body support a distinction between substances?
11. Can one deny that the Pythagorean theorem holds of a right triangle? How does this example show an analogy with Descartes' mind/body distinction?
12. How does Descartes defend against Arnauld's claim that he has returned to Plato's view of the soul?
13. How does Descartes respond to the suggestion that the mind/body distinction is undermined by the fact that thought can be impeded by the body?
14. What kinds of human activity can be done independently of the mind?
15. How does Descartes argue that we have no reason to believe that animals have minds?

Rene Descartes, from *Principles of Philosophy*, pp 113-4.

1. What is the difference between substances and attributes?
 2. What attributes are essential for corporeal substance? Why are they essential?
 3. What attributes are essential for minds?
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John Locke, from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, pp 114-6.

1. According to Locke, what is knowledge?
2. In what three ways can we compare ideas? Are any of these sufficient to account for all of our knowledge?
3. "The extent of our knowledge comes not only short of the reality of Things, but even of the extent of our own Ideas (p 114)." Explain.
4. How does Locke justify his claim that it is possible for matter to think?
5. Why is it hard to account for colors and sounds and pleasures and pains? What does this show about the soul?
6. In what two ways do philosophers err about the relationship between mind and body? What error do both positions share?