

Reading Guide #1

Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy, Discourse on Method*, “Arguments... Arranged in Geometrical Fashion”

These questions are provided to assist you in your reading. I encourage you first to read the material through, 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. Page numbers refer to the Ariew and Watkins collection.

I have not listed questions for the “Arguments... Arranged in Geometrical Fashion,” pages 72-75. It will be useful to consult that reading, especially the definitions, for more complete answers to some of these questions, especially concerning the Third-Meditation argument for the existence of God.

Meditations on First Philosophy, pages 35-68

Meditation I

1. What does Descartes want to raze to the ground? What is his goal?
2. How does Descartes proceed to reject his opinions?
3. “[I]t is a mark of prudence never to place our complete trust in those who have deceived us even once” (AW 41a). How is Descartes being deceived?
4. How does Descartes come to doubt all of what his senses tell him?
5. How are general things less doubtful than particulars?
6. Of what does Descartes think might be certain even if he is dreaming?
7. What makes Descartes doubt the truth of mathematics?
8. “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” (AW 42b). Explain what these three reasons are.
9. Distinguish doubt from denial. Is Descartes doubting or denying?

Meditation II

10. What is the first thing that Descartes claims he can not doubt? Why can't he doubt it?
11. What is a body? Does the cogito prove the existence of our bodies?
12. What is imagining? Why is it irrelevant to our knowledge of ourselves?
13. Describe the self, and its faculties, especially sensing.
14. How does Descartes argue that he perceives what the wax is through the mind alone?
15. What properties does the wax really have?
16. “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” (AW 46a). Explain.
17. How does ordinary language mislead us about our knowledge of physical objects?
18. How does any knowledge of physical objects reinforce our knowledge of ourselves?

Meditation III

19. What general rule does Descartes accept as a criterion for knowledge? How does he arrive at this rule?
20. Why does Descartes turn to the question of whether God exists?
21. Why can't ideas, properly speaking, be false? What can be false?
22. What are the three sources of ideas? Characterize each, providing examples.

23. “Nothing is more obvious than the judgment that this thing is sending its likeness rather than something else into me” (AW 49a). Explain.
24. Distinguish the “light of nature” from being “taught by nature”.
25. Must ideas which do not depend on my will come from outside of me?
26. How does the example of the sun contravene the claim in Question 23?
27. Distinguish substances from modes or accidents. How do ideas of substances have more objective reality than those of modes?
28. On the basis of what evidence does Descartes claim that there is more reality in a cause than in its effect? What does this general principle allow Descartes to conclude?
29. What role does the claim that something can not come from nothing play in Descartes’s Third-Meditation argument for the existence of God?
30. Why, according to Descartes, must we posit a cause of any idea with formal, as opposed to merely objective, reality?
31. Do we need to posit God to explain our ideas of finite substances? Distinguish Descartes’s claim for minds and for bodies.
32. How does Descartes block the objection that my idea of God could be produced by augmenting my finite (imperfect) ideas, as opposed to by an existing God?
33. Is the claim that we do not fully comprehend infinite ideas an objection to Descartes’s Third-Meditation argument for the existence of God?
34. How does Descartes reply to the supposition that he, and not an external God, is the source of his idea of God?
35. Distinguish creation from preservation. How does the distinction support Descartes’s argument for the existence of God?
36. Why can the source of Descartes’s idea of God not come from an intermediate being with more perfection than a person but less than God?
37. Can the source of my idea of God arise from merely combining ideas?
38. How does the idea of God arise in us?
39. How does Descartes argue that God can not deceive?

Meditation IV

40. What kinds of things are there? Which do we know most about? Which do we know least about?
41. How will Descartes gain knowledge of “the treasures of science”?
42. What potential problem does Descartes find in supposing God not to be a deceiver? How does he arrive at this problem?
43. How does Descartes define error? How does this help him avoid the problem in the previous question? What problem remains to be explained?
44. “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” (AW 55b). Explain. Who explains causes in terms of ends?
45. How does consideration of the whole universe help account for our ability to err?
46. How does the difference between the will and the intellect cause error? Describe each faculty and its function.
47. Why is the will, in Meditation IV, indifferent to whether the mind is identical to, or distinct from, the body?
48. Why does our ability to err not indicate an imperfection in God?
49. Could God have made us finite, yet not prone to error?
50. How does Descartes claim that he can avoid making errors?

Meditation V

51. What properties of “continuous quantity” does Descartes imagine (seem to perceive)?
52. “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” (AW 58b). Explain.
53. How does Descartes argue that the essence of a triangle is independent of his thoughts?
54. How does Descartes argue that we do not acquire our geometric ideas from our senses?
55. How does Descartes’s argument for the truth of mathematics lead to an argument for the existence of God?
56. “Thus it is no less contradictory to think of God... lacking existence... than it is to think of a mountain without a valley” (AW 59b) Why? Be specific.
57. How does Descartes respond to the criticism that we can attach existence to God without God existing?
58. On what does Descartes’s certainty of everything besides the Cogito depend?
59. How is it possible to doubt a clear and distinct idea?
60. How does Descartes respond to the criticism that he could be making the same old mistake of thinking he has attained certainty when he has not?

Meditation VI

61. How does Descartes know that physical objects can exist?
62. What is the difference between the imagination and pure intellect? (Consider the difference between the triangle and the chiliagon.)
63. If there were bodies, how might the imagination work? (Consider the metaphors of turning toward the self and the body.)
64. What reasons did Descartes have for believing there were physical objects? Why does he say they did not seem to come from himself?
65. What made Descartes’s body seem closer to him than other physical objects?
66. “For there is no affinity whatsoever...between this twitching in the stomach and the will to have something to eat...” (AW 63a). Explain.
67. What can we doubt about our own sensations of pain?
68. “[M]y ability clearly and distinctly to understand one thing without another suffices to make me certain that the one thing is different from the other...” (AW 64a). Explain. What does this mean about the relationship between the mind and the body?
69. From where might we get our ideas of sensible things (bodies)?
70. How does Descartes argue that God does not send us ideas of bodies directly?
71. What is Descartes’s argument that physical objects exist?
72. Which properties does Descartes see clearly and distinctly belonging to physical objects? Which properties remain doubtful? Provide examples.
73. Describe the relationship between our selves and our bodies. (See also *Discourse* AW 34.)
74. How is the sensation of pain a confused mode of thinking?
75. “[F]rom the fact that I sense a wide variety of colors, sounds, odors, tastes, levels of heat, and grades of roughness, and the like, I rightly conclude that in the bodies from which these different perceptions of the sense proceed there are differences corresponding to the different perceptions...” (65a). Distinguish this claim from the resemblance hypothesis.
76. Why do we avoid things which produce painful sensations, and pursue those which produce pleasurable ones?
77. 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?

78. Do the senses infallibly tell us what to pursue and what to avoid? Explain. How is this a problem for Descartes?
 79. How does the divisibility of the body show it to be distinct from the mind?
 80. How does the body provide misleading sensations to the mind?
 81. How does Descartes argue that misleading sensations show no defect in God?
 82. How does Descartes argue that we can distinguish dreams from waking experience? Why is this argument acceptable to Descartes in Meditation VI, when it would not have been acceptable in Meditation I?
 83. Why are we likely to err, even if we know how to test experiences?
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Discourse on Method, pages 25-34.

84. What is reasoning, or good sense?
85. How do sciences borrow their principles from philosophy?
86. Describe Descartes's first rule. What contentious epistemic theory is implicit in it?
87. Describe the remaining three rules.
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88. What two characteristics distinguish persons from animals?
89. How does Descartes argue for the immortality of the soul?