

Rene Descartes *Meditations* Reading Guide

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Descartes' Life and Works¹

- 1596 Descartes is born at La Haye, France on March 31.
- 1606-14 Attends the Jesuit College of La Flèche
- 1616 Graduates (in law) from University of Pointiers
- 1618 Goes to Holland; Joins arms of Prince Maurice of Nassau; writes *Compendium Musicae*
- 1619 November 10, has vision of a new scientific system
- 1619-28 Travels throughout Europe, settles in France
- 1628 Writes *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*; Moves to Holland
- 1629 Starts writing *The World*
- 1633 Galileo is condemned in Italy. Descartes abandons work on *The World*
- 1635 Descartes' daughter Francine is baptized on August 7th (she dies in 1640)
- 1637 Publishes *Discourse on the Method, Optics, Meteorology, and Geometry*
- 1641 Published *Meditations on First Philosophy*, with *Objections and Replies*
- 1642 second edition of *Meditations* published, with an additional (7th) set of objections and replies and a *Letter to Dinet*
- 1643 Cartesian philosophy condemned at the University of Utrecht
Correspondence with Princess Elizabeth begins.
- 1644 *Principles of Philosophy* published.
- 1647 Awarded a pension by the King of France
Begins writing *Description of the Human Body*
- 1649 Moves to Sweden at invitation of Queen Christina
Passions of the Soul published.
- 1650 Dies in Stockholm on February 11.

¹ Much of this chronology is taken from *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (ed. Cottingham, Stutthoff, and Murdoch).

Meditation One

Before doing the reading:

1. Descartes's book is called *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Let's start with the fact that it's a set of *Meditations*. In his Preface to the Reader, he says, "I do not advise anyone to read these things except those who have both the ability and the desire to meditate seriously with me" (38b). What do you think it would take to "meditate seriously with" Descartes? Look at the rest of D's sentence on 38b. Are you willing to meditate with him for the next few weeks? How will you ensure that you do this?
2. Now let's turn to the topic of the book, "First Philosophy." What sort of philosophy do *you* think ought to be done "first"? Where should philosophizing begin? Why?

While reading:

1. What sort of skepticism is implied by the claim that "it will suffice for the rejection of all of these opinions if I find in each of them some reason for doubt"? Could someone be *more* skeptical Descartes? Is it reasonable to be *as* skeptical as he is, at least "once in my life"?
2. What "reasons for doubt" does Descartes give in the first Meditation? As you read the first Meditation, try to identify and list out as many distinct skeptical arguments as you can. By the end of the first Meditation, is there anything left that has not been doubttable? Which argument do you think is the best? Which is the weakest?

While rereading:

1. Pay close attention to each distinct skeptical argument in the first Meditation. For each one, ask the following questions:
 - a) What range of beliefs does this argument call into question?
 - b) How/Why? That is, what reasons does Descartes give for challenging this range of beliefs?
 - c) What range of beliefs does this argument *not* call into question?
 - d) How good does Descartes think that this particular skeptical argument is? How seriously does he take the threat? (Note that there is at least one argument that he raises, but doesn't take particularly seriously. Which one?)
 - e) How good is this skeptical argument *in fact*? That is, how seriously *should* Descartes take it?

(As you reread, you may find new skeptical arguments. That's part of what rereading is for!)

2. At the end of the first Meditation, Descartes says, "Accordingly, I will suppose...an evil genius...who has directed his entire effort at deceiving me." What does the "Accordingly" refer to? What does this imply about the role of the evil genius in Descartes's *Meditations*?

After rereading:

1. At the end of this Meditation, what level of skepticism is (provisionally) justified by Descartes's arguments? Has Descartes given arguments that, at least for now, cover everything anyone might think they can know? If not, what's left up for grabs?
2. What is the most convincing skeptical argument in this meditation?
3. Are *you* skeptical of everything at this point? That is, do you think that it's impossible to have real knowledge of anything?
4. Is *Descartes* skeptical of everything at the end of the Meditation?
5. Recall Descartes's claim at the end of his Preface that "no one of sound mind has ever seriously doubted" that there really is a world, etc. How does that change your assessment of this Meditation?
6. Look back at the synopsis of Med. 1 on p. 39a. Do you agree with Descartes that the first Meditation accomplishes the goals he describes here? How much hope do you have for future *Meditations*? How much knowledge do you think will eventually be able to withstand these skeptical challenges?
7. Look briefly at only the first two paragraphs of Meditation II. At this point in the Meditations, how confident is Descartes that he will escape his skeptical worries? What will he do if he can't prove anything? Is that a good response to skepticism? Why or why not?

Meditation Two

Before doing the reading:

1. Look back at the synopsis of Med. 1 on p. 39a. Do you agree with Descartes that the first Meditation accomplishes the goals he describes here? How much hope do you have for future *Meditations*? How much knowledge do you think will eventually be able to withstand these skeptical challenges?
2. Look briefly at only the first two paragraphs of Meditation II. At this point in the Meditations, how confident is Descartes that he will escape his skeptical worries? What will he do if he can't prove anything? Is that a good response to skepticism? Why or why not?
3. How would *you* respond to Meditation One? Why?

While reading:

1. How does Descartes prove that he exists? (Don't just say that he says "I think therefore I am.") Does his argument work? Against what sort(s) of skepticism? Does it adequately respond to *each* of the skeptical concerns in the first *Meditation*? Is there any skeptical objection that works even against the claim that "I think"? Is there a new objection to that claim? What?
2. As you read through this Meditation, write down at least three distinct key claims that Descartes claims to have established over the course of the Meditation. How does he (or might he) justify these in the light of his skeptical objections?
3. Don't skip the discussion of the wax at the end of this Meditation. Why does Descartes include this? What is his point?

While rereading:

1. Notice the *title* of this Meditation. What does this title imply about the main point of the Meditation?
2. By the end of the third paragraph, Descartes has proven that “‘I am, I exist’ is necessarily true...” and he moves on to the question of “what I am.” What is his answer to this question? Work through at least two key passages:
 - a) “But for how long? For as long as I am thinking . . . I am therefore precisely nothing but a thinking thing . . .” (44b)
 - b) What else am I? . . . But is it perhaps the case that these very things which I take to be nothing . . . nevertheless are no different from that me that I know? This I do not know, and I will not quarrel about it now” (44b)
 - c) For thinking through these passages, it might help to go back to Descartes’s synopsis of Med. 2 (p. 39).
3. Descartes claims that this Meditation proves “the nature of the human mind” and “that it is better known than the body.” How does he prove the latter claim?

After rereading:

1. Recall Descartes’s reason for using the method of doubt (from p. 40b). At this point in the *Meditations*, are you convinced “that [facts that men have bodies and there really is a world] are neither so firm nor so evident as the arguments leading to the knowledge of our mind” (40b)? Does it seem likely (or even possible) that Descartes will be able to convince you that these facts are also not as firm and evident as “knowledge...of God” (40b)?
2. Is Descartes’s argument that I am “a thing that thinks” sound? How many of you are on board with him at this point? Why or why not?

Meditation Three

Before doing the reading:

1. By the end of the last *Meditation*, Descartes was convinced “that [facts that men have bodies and there really is a world] are neither so firm nor so evident as the arguments leading to the knowledge of our mind” (40b). But he eventually hopes to show that these facts are also not as firm or evident as “the knowledge of God.” What differences are there between the mind and God that might make knowledge of God more uncertain than knowledge of the self? What, if anything, might make knowledge of God less certain even than knowledge of physical things?

2. Before reading Meditation Three, spend a moment to dwell on your own possible theophobia. Descartes insists that his readers “withdraw their minds from...all prejudices,” but most of us, whether personally religious or not, have a lot of prejudices about God. As you read through this chapter, try to avoid projecting your own prejudices about “God” onto Descartes; instead, actually pay attention to what *Descartes* means by God, and then remain open-minded about whether he actually *succeeds* in his proof. You can hold him to high standards; he holds himself to high standards. But don’t dismiss his arguments out of sheer theophobia.

While reading:

1. Look closely at the first four paragraphs of Med. 3. What is the central claim of the first two paragraphs? Is that claim at least provisionally justified (that is, does the last Meditation give Descartes good reason to at least think that it “seems” to be true)?

Why does he start talking about God in the fourth paragraph? Does it make sense for him to bring up God (again) here? Why?

What is the key issue of this Meditation, as stated at the end of ¶4? Why is this such an important issue? Is Descartes correct that it’s important?

While reading, continued:

2. Much of this Meditation is taken up with Descartes's proof that God exists. During your first reading of the Meditation, try to reconstruct Descartes's proof as a *valid* argument,² making clear each premise and how those premises lead to the conclusion "God exists." As you outline this argument, keep a few things in mind:
 - a. Descartes's argument is *not* the following:
 - i. I have an idea of God.
 - ii. Anything I have an idea of must exist.
 - iii. Thus God must exist.

This argument, but not Descartes's, works for fairies and unicorns as well as for God. If you end up thinking that this is the argument that Descartes gives, think harder.
 - b. In the course of his argument, Descartes distinguishes between "objective" and "formal" reality. The terminology here is very misleading, so pay close attention to how Descartes defines these terms. Come to class prepared to explain what the difference between the two is. (Consult p. 72 for some help with this.)
 - c. In the course of his argument, Descartes talks about something being "more real" than something else. Try to figure out how you might understand this phrase in a way that would make sense of his argument. Note in particular his examples of "more reality" on 49b: a substance is "more real" than its accidents or modes. *Roughly speaking, a "substance" is a thing (such as a tomato), accident is a fundamental property of that thing (say, containing carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen; or taking up space), and a mode is the particular way that the accident shows up in a particular case (the particular chemical composition of the tomato; or its particular size and shape).*

Lay out your argument reconstruction below (you may need more or fewer than 9 steps):

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

9. Therefore, God exists (based on steps ____, ____, ____ and ____ above)

² Recall that a "valid" argument is one where the conclusion logically follows from the premises. A "sound" argument is one that is valid *and* has true premises. (Hence the conclusion of every sound argument is true.) It is helpful in reconstructing arguments to find a way of presenting the argument so that it turns out to be valid, even if this involves adding premises or slightly modifying the presentation of the argument from the text. This way, you can focus on evaluating the premises to determine whether the argument is sound (and the conclusion thereby true).

While *rereading*:

1. Before rereading, look over your reconstruction of Descartes's argument. At this point (but not sooner), you can use Descartes's own reconstruction of the argument (on p 75a) to refine your own. Now, make sure that you have a valid argument. Then, look at the premises. Which ones seem false or poorly-defended? What are the best objections to Descartes's premises? (See too appendix A.)
2. As you read through the Meditation again, keep one eye on your reconstruction of Descartes's argument. Correct that reconstruction as you go along. Also look for Cartesian responses to your objections to his proof.
3. Option: You might want to go back to the argument from "chance" creation in the first Meditation. If a Darwinian were to revisit that argument here, would it be as appropriate as Descartes's revisiting of the God argument? What would become the central question for this Meditation if we approached it with that Darwinian concern? How might the Meditation unfold in that case?
4. Option: As you reread, keep your eyes out for three important issues in this Meditation that we are going to pass over (for the sake of time):
 - a) Judgments vs. Ideas
 - b) Material Falsity (This was a big issue in D's time – see Objections in book – and is a major topic of debate among philosophers who study Descartes today)
 - c) Impulse to believe vs. light of nature (latter "cannot be doubtful").

Some Objections and Replies:

1. Start by clearly formulating your own best objection to Descartes's argument(s) to the existence of God.
2. In his objections to Descartes's Meditations, Arnauld famously raises an objection that has become known as the "Cartesian Circle."
 - a. Look at the objection on p. 86b, the passage starting "My only remaining concern..." What is the objection? How might Descartes respond to it?
 - b. Now look at Descartes's response on p. 92, the passage starting "Finally, as to the fact..." Is this an adequate response? Why or why not?
3. On pp. 79-81, Hobbes raises several objections to Descartes's argument for the existence of God. Look especially at his objections that "there is no idea in us of God" (79b) and "Does reality admit of degrees?" (81a), along with Descartes's replies. What are Hobbes's objections? What are Descartes's replies? Are Descartes's replies adequate?

Meditation Four

Before doing the reading:

1. Meditation Four will be motivated by the “experience that I am subject to countless errors” (54-55). Why would that be a particular problem at this stage in the Meditations?
2. Assuming that you are on board with everything Descartes has done in Meditations one through three, how would you explain human error?
3. Whatever your views (if, e.g., you favor an evolutionary over a Cartesian approach to the origin of your mental faculties), how could you provide for the possibility of genuine human knowledge while still adequately explaining the experience of human error?
4. Is there any adequate way to distinguish knowledge from mere belief?

While reading:

1. In the course of this Meditation, Descartes runs through many of the classic explanations of human error (and human evil). In the first half of the Meditation, try to pick out as many possibly distinct ways of explaining human error/evil as you can.
2. Then, in the second half of the Meditation, look for traces of these distinct arguments in the complex overall account Descartes actually puts forward as his own.
3. As you read, compare Descartes’s account of human error with your own. Does Descartes successfully show how human beings can err while at the same time preserving the possibility for real knowledge? Does he successfully identify a criterion for distinguishing the cases? (Here it will help to recall his discussion of the “spontaneous impulse” and the “light of nature” on 49a.)

While rereading:

In your rereading, focus on Descartes’s account of human freedom. Before starting this rereading, ask yourself what your own view of human freedom. What would it take for human beings to be “free” in a sense that matters? Do you think we *are* free in that sense?

1. How can Descartes reconcile his claim that “the faculty of willing is incomparably greater in God than it is in me” with his claim that “God’s faculty of willing does not appear to be any greater [than mine]” (56a). (Note that these claims are in the *same sentence!*)
2. What does Descartes mean when he says that “Were I always to see clearly...I would never deliberate...In that event, although I would be entirely free, I could never be indifferent”? What is the difference between “freedom” and “indifference”? Which is more like your (antecedent) conception of freedom? Which is more important?
3. What, in sum, is Descartes’s conception of human freedom? What, if anything, is he missing?

After rereading:

1. Based on the account of error in Meditation Four, what are the prospects for coming to have knowledge of the world? How should such knowledge be pursued?

Meditation Five

Before doing the reading:

1. At the start of Meditation One, Descartes said he would “raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations.” How much has Descartes managed to rebuild? At this point in the Meditations, what do you (if you have followed Descartes all the way) actually *know*?
2. Go back to your initial list of skeptical arguments. Which arguments have been answered? Which have not?
3. Note again the title, and focus on the first half. What do you think it means to talk about “the essence” of material things? How might this be different than showing (about God) “that He exists”?

While reading:

For your first reading of this Meditation, try to bracket the discussion of God and focus on what Descartes is saying about our knowledge of material things.

1. At the end of Meditation Five, what do we know about material things?
2. Do I know that anything other than I and God exist?
3. What new knowledge did I gain from this Meditation?

While rereading:

For your rereading, pay attention to Descartes’s (new) argument for the existence of God.

1. Descartes says, “From the fact that that I am unable to think of a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that a mountain or a valley exists anywhere, but only that, whether they exist or not, a mountain and valley are inseparable from one another. But from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and that for this reason he really exists” (59).
 - a. What contrast is Descartes drawing between these two cases?
 - b. What justifies (or might justify) this contrast?
2. Why does Descartes include this argument, given that he has already proven the existence of God? How does this argument fit into Meditation Five?

After rereading:

1. Now that we’ve finished this Meditation, how much knowledge has Descartes managed to rebuild? At this point in the Meditations, what do you (if you have followed Descartes all the way) actually *know*?
2. Has this Meditation answered any new skeptical arguments? What more (if anything) needs to be done?

Meditation Six

Before doing the reading:

1. What is left for Descartes to prove in this Meditation? Given what he has said so far, how many of the beliefs with which he (and you) started do you think will be salvaged by the end of the Meditation? Which belief (that you think he'll salvage) will be the hardest to prove? Why? How would you prove it?
2. What do you believe about the relationship between the mind and the body (in particular, the brain)? Is the mind just the same thing as the brain, or is it something distinct? Is one dependent upon the other? In what ways? If they are distinct, how do they affect each other? If they are the same thing, why does it seem possible to make certain claims about mental states (e.g. "my belief was false") that don't seem to make sense about the brain (what could it mean to say "my brain-state was false")?
3. Do you believe that there is an external world? Why? Does your reason stand up to the skeptical concerns of Descartes's first Meditation?

While reading:

1. In this Meditation, Descartes aims to prove both the existence of the external world and the distinction between mind and body. As with the argument in Meditation Three for the existence of God, these are complicated proofs. Reconstruct both proofs as valid arguments and identify the premises of each proof. (Do this on a separate sheet of paper.)
2. The proof that ends on the first paragraph on p. 64a ends with the conclusion, "It is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it." (For part one, you should have reconstructed Descartes's argument for this claim.) But on p. 65a, Descartes claims to be "commingled with [the body]," so that "I and the body constitute one single thing". How is this compatible with the proof on 64a?
3. Note that the last 9 or 10 paragraphs of this Meditation (starting with "I have already examined..." on p. 66a) echo the argument of Meditation Four. There Descartes was interested in how his reason could lead him astray. Here he is interested in how, given the goodness of God, his senses can lead him astray. How is his solution to the unreliability of the senses different from his solution to the unreliability of reason? What implications does this have for gaining knowledge from the senses?

While *rereading*:

1. While rereading this Meditation, focus on the implications of this Meditation (and the previous one) for Cartesian knowledge of the sensible world. What will it actually be possible to *know* in the strict sense about material things? What will (still) not be possible to know?

After rereading:

Having finished the entire Meditations, it's time to take a step back.

1. First, go back to your list of skeptical arguments from Meditation One.
 - a. Which does Descartes think he has addressed? Where does he think he addressed these? Fill in your list of arguments with specific references to the Meditation (and page number) where Descartes "answered" that skeptical argument.
 - b. Did Descartes address them successfully?
2. If you were to really take the Meditations to heart, how would it change the way you think about the world?
3. If you were to really take the Meditations to heart, how would it change the way you live?

Appendix One: Descartes's Ethics

Before doing the reading:

1. Go back to your responses to the last question above. How would taking the *Meditations* seriously affect the way you might live your life?
2. Try to guess what is coming. Given what you know of Descartes thus far, what do you expect his ethics to look like? Think of clues in the *Meditations* that might indicate where he will look for his ethical theory.

While reading the *Discourse*:

1. As you read through Part Three of the *Discourse*, highlight those aspects of Descartes's view here that fit particularly well, on a first impression, with the *Meditations*. Jot at least two of those down here.
2. At the same time, highlight those that seem particularly at odds with the *Meditations*. Jot at least two of those down here.
3. Now, before rereading, *think* about how you might reconcile the *Discourse* with the *Meditations*.

While rereading the *Discourse*:

1. Pay close attention to the passages you thought about. Does Descartes say anything that might help you reconcile the *Discourse* with the *Meditations*?
2. Be sure you spend some time with each of the "three or four maxims." (First, are there three, or four? Figure this out.) Jot each one down, in your own words.

3. Do you find these plausible? Which is the most plausible? Which is the least? Why? For the one that is the least plausible, why do you think Descartes would have affirmed it?

After reading the *Discourse*:

1. Spend some time over the next day or two with Descartes's ethics in mind. How would living according to the maxims of the *Discourse* actually affect your life? As you face practical decisions, ask yourself, WWDD (What Would Descartes Do?).
2. What features of the ethics of the *Discourse* would you like to incorporate into your own ethical life? What would you definitely *not* want to incorporate? How would you modify his ethics to improve it?

Descartes's Ethics, continued: after the *Discourse*

Before doing the reading:

1. Go back to your responses to the last question above, and now think about Descartes's ethics from the perspective of Princess Elizabeth. What issues do you think *she* might have with his ethics?

The next set of readings...

The rest of the readings from Descartes's ethics cover a *lot* of territory. I've given three additional readings. I'll focus on a few key questions for each.

The Dedicatory Letter to the Principles of Philosophy. The *Principles of Philosophy* was the book that Descartes considered his magnum opus, the sum of all his philosophy. We are reading just the letter in which he dedicates this work to Princess Elizabeth. In that letter, what does he say about the overall project of his philosophy as a whole? What are the main reasons to engage in philosophy? How does philosophy in general relate to moral philosophy in particular? (And, just to prepare you for a soft-ball quiz question... What metaphor does Descartes use on p. 186 to describe the relationship between metaphysics and moral philosophy?)

Correspondence with Elizabeth. Earlier, we read Elizabeth's critiques of Descartes's metaphysics, particularly her questions about how the soul and body relate to one another. Now we are looking at correspondence focused on moral philosophy. What traces of Elizabeth's earlier concerns resurface here in her questions about moral theory? What are two important questions/concerns/objections that Elizabeth raises for Descartes's moral theory? How does he respond?

Then... Pay close attention to the four "things most useful for us" to know on pp. 111-112. Identify at least four distinct truths useful to know. At least two should be familiar, but pay close attention to how Descartes uses metaphysical truths he's discussed earlier in order to justify ethical conclusions. At least one of these truths should seem quite new. What is this truth? Do you think it makes Descartes's ethics better or worse?

Passions of the Soul. Elizabeth consistently pushed Descartes to write a book explaining the relationship between mind and body and how one could gain control over one's passions. What are the core ethical claims he advances in the *Passions*? What do these add to his ethical theory overall?

After the readings...

1. Identify the two most important changes that Descartes made to his ethical theory, after the *Discourse* on the method. Why did he make these changes? Do they make his theory better or worse?
2. In the end, what are the greatest strengths and weaknesses of Descartes's "mature" moral theory?

Appendix Two: Argument Engagement Guide

Can God be a deceiver?

This appendix gives a set of examples for how to deal with passages in various authors where authors make important claims with little-to-know direct justification. Descartes makes such a claim near the end of Meditation Three (on p. 54a): “It is manifest by the light of nature that all fraud and deception depend upon some defect.”

How should we assess this claim? The first few positions below are very unsophisticated, but later one gives more and more complex ways of responding (many of which can and should be used in conjunction). As you interact with claims of philosophers (and others) in this class (and elsewhere), you should aim for more and more complex forms of engagement.

1. Weak endorsement: “I agree with Descartes. I can’t see how God could be a deceiver.”
2. Weak objection: “Descartes doesn’t give an argument for this claim, so I don’t see why I should accept it.”
3. Strong objection—Arguing for the opposite: “Descartes doesn’t give an argument for this claim, and here is a good reason to reject it: _____.”
4. Strong endorsement—Arguing for the position: “Although Descartes does not flesh out his argument, we can see why it would be impossible for God to deceive in this way: _____.”
5. Strong objection—response to strong endorsement: “Descartes does not flesh out his argument for his position, but we might think that he has in mind something like this: _____. If that is what he has in mind, though, then the argument doesn’t work because _____.” *Note here that the better the argument for the position, the stronger the objection is.*
6. Stronger endorsement—Arguing for position and defending it against critics.
7. “Immanent” endorsement: “Descartes does not flesh out his argument for his position, but if we look elsewhere in the *Meditations*, we can find further support.” *Then you need to go on and build the argument from what he says elsewhere.*
8. “Immanent” critique: “This claim (and/or Descartes’ argument for the claim) might seem plausible, but in fact it conflicts with what Descartes says elsewhere. In particular, _____” (see 55a-b for an example of a text you could use for this).
9. Argument revision. Give a strong endorsement and a strong critique, but end with neither a rejection nor an endorsement of the argument, but a “Thus Descartes’ argument works, but only if he changes such-and-such about his conclusion (or argument, or some other part of his view).”

Appendix Three: Using History to Do Philosophy

Both your first paper (on Descartes) and your Final Paper require that you address a question of philosophical significance and use historical philosophers in order to give your own answer to that question. This balance between exegesis and original argument can be tricky. You should not *merely* lay out what X or Y's view is and then state your opinion about it. Rather, you should use the philosophical work done by X or Y to help you do your own philosophical work of defending your thesis. Here are some examples of ways of using the history to do philosophy, starting with the worst way and moving towards more sophisticated ones.

- a) **Arguments from authority.** ☹ “Descartes shows that the mind and body are really a single thing: ‘I and the body constitute one single thing’ (65a).”
- b) **Endorsing a philosopher’s arguments.** “Descartes rightly points to the sensations of pain, hunger, and thirst as evidence that ‘the mind and the body constitute one single thing’ (65a). Whatever view one ends up formulating about the mind and body, it must make sense of the phenomenon of pain, whereby what appear to be changes in the body – burning from a fire, for example – are immediately perceived by the mind as being painful to it.”
- c) **Rejecting a philosopher’s positions.** “Descartes points to the sensations of pain, hunger, and thirst as evidence that ‘the mind and the body constitute one single thing’ (65a). But Descartes doesn’t provide sufficient evidence that these sensations are actually due to any changes in a real body independent of him.”
- d) **Rejecting a philosopher’s arguments.** “Descartes points to the sensations of pain, hunger, and thirst as evidence that ‘the mind and the body constitute one single thing’ (65a). But Descartes doesn’t provide sufficient evidence that these sensations are actually due to any changes in a real body independent of him. Granted, he does argue that given his ‘great inclination’ to believe in corporeal things, God would be a deceiver if there weren’t real corporeal things (64b). However, since we know that many of the specifics that we believe about the corporeal world are false, it could be that the corporeal world as a whole is actually totally different than what we think it is. In that case, we can’t really know that ‘pain’ or ‘hunger’ is caused by something bodily.”
- e) **“Immanent critique” of a philosopher’s position** (using one part of that philosopher’s philosophy to undermine another part). “Descartes points to . . . [insert from above] real corporeal things (64b). But Descartes himself distinguished between ‘spontaneous impulses’ to believe things and the ‘light of nature.’ God’s perfection, even if it does justify believing in clear and distinct perceptions made by the light of nature, does not justify believing in something just because we have a strong inclination to believe it.”
- f) **Responding to a philosopher’s objection.** “Descartes might object to my defense of thoroughgoing materialism by appealing to the fact that there are thinking things. Since I can know that I think without knowing that anything material exists, it seems as though there must be a thinking thing that is non-material. But in fact, Descartes’s argument fails to establish the real existence of a non-material substance. All that it shows is that we can *think* of certain things as being non-material. But this doesn’t show that there actually *are* non-material things.”

- g) **Rejecting a philosopher's alternative.** “So far, I have argued that one cannot make sense of causal interactions without assuming real causal interaction at a distance. You might think, with philosophers such as Leibniz and Malebranche, that we can do without *real* causal interaction at all, that all apparent interactions are really mediated by God. Unfortunately, the role of God makes these alternatives merely apparent. God, too, would have to employ a kind of real causal interaction at a distance, so they aren't real alternatives. But adding God introduces problems that my account does not . . .”
- h) **Using one philosopher against another.** “Descartes argues that there are at least two substances, on the grounds that he knows that he exists and he knows that God exists and he knows that he's not God. [Then follow detailed unpackings of these arguments.] But Spinoza effectively shows that neither Descartes himself, nor any other thing can be a substance. As Spinoza argues, [summarize argument from P11 to P14]. Thus while there may be lots of *things* – at least two, as Descartes shows – there can't be lots of *substances*.”
- i) **Extending a philosopher's position.** “[Continuing from the previous point...] But we can take Spinoza's argument even further. Spinoza shows, in P 28, that any *finite* thing must be caused by another finite thing. And this raises the question of why *any* substance is actually necessary. [Then argue that we can actually do without S's substance altogether.]”
- j) **Critically developing a philosopher's position (“determinate negation”).** “Descartes argues that humans' freedom is, on the one hand, as infinite as God, but, on the other hand, less than God's because human beings have less ‘knowledge and power.’ But a freedom that is wholly guided by knowledge isn't really *freedom*; it's really *just* a combination of knowledge and power. Freedom only comes from the ability to do otherwise, an ability that depends upon some level of ignorance. Thus we might say that what really makes human beings free is our *limitation*, the fact that we don't always already know what to do.”
- k) **Using a philosopher's examples.** “Spinoza's example of the stone falling from the roof shows the danger of Leibniz's view that the actions of the monad with ‘more distinct’ perceptions are the indirect reasons for the actions of those with less distinct perceptions (Leibniz 49-50). As Spinoza explains, ‘if a stone falls from the roof on someone's head and kills him, by this method of arguing they will prove that the stone fell in order to kill the man.’”
- l) **Using a philosopher as an example of a point.** “Descartes nicely illustrates the way that even the most conscientious philosophers can still be surreptitiously influenced by the power of words. Descartes's famous ‘I think therefore I am’ makes an inference from the existence of an activity (thinking) to the existence of a *thing* doing that thinking (the I), an inference that is due merely to a prejudice ingrained through the grammar of English (and Latin, and French) sentences, for which every verb requires a noun as subject.”
- m) **Drawing on a philosopher's distinction.** “In the course of proving the existence of God, Descartes draws an important distinction between objective and formal reality... [you can then use this distinction to defend a claim that has nothing to do with God].”
- n) **Drawing on philosophers to make a distinction.** “We can think of substance in at least two importantly different ways, as shown by the contrasting ways in which Descartes and Spinoza think of substances. While both see a substance as something that is independent, Spinoza's conception of independent is absolute while Descartes is relative. Thus...”
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