

Descartes: Natural Philosophy and the *Meditations*

Spring 2008

Descartes' *Meditations* concerned "First Philosophy", a subject-matter traditionally co-extensive with Metaphysics or Theology. Virtually all of Descartes' other works, however, concerned "Second" or "Natural Philosophy", a subject-matter that encompassed any and all investigations into the structure and nature of the changing, material world. The aim of this seminar is two-fold. First, it is to understand the *Meditations* as an isolated, free-standing text. Second, it is to understand the connection between the *Meditations* and the remainder of Descartes' mature philosophical output. In other words, it is to understand the meaning and relations of "First Philosophy" and "Second Philosophy" in the Cartesian context.



Texts:

Required:

Descartes, René (1985). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Vols I + II. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Descartes, René (1998). *The World and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Stephen Gaukroger. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Garber, Daniel (1992). *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Recommended:

Rorty, Amélie Oksenberg (ed.) (1986). *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*. University of California Press.

Des Chene, Dennis (1996). *Physiologia: Natural Philosophy in Late Aristotelian and Cartesian Thought*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Zinsser, William (2006). *On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. Collins. There are many cheap editions of this book, any will do.

Grading:

Grades will be based on participation (15%), two presentations (40%), a proposal for a final paper (5%), a short draft of the final paper (10%) and the final paper itself (30%). One of the presentations must be on the *Meditations*. The proposal for the final paper must be no more than a single paragraph. The short draft of the final paper must be 2 and 5 pages. The final paper must be between 15 and 25 pages. Students are highly encouraged to consult with me before their presentation.

Website:

<http://www.wmich.edu/philosophy/courses/descartes.html>

Schedule:

Week 1 (Jan 8, 10): Background & Historiography.

Wallace, William (1978). "The Philosophical Setting of Medieval Science". In *Science in the Middle Ages*, ed. D. C. Lindberg. University of Chicago Press.

Edwards, Michael (2007). 'Aristotelianism, Descartes, and Hobbes', *The Historical Journal* 50: 449–464.

Week 2 (Jan 15, 17): The Cartesian System.

Garber, *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics*.
Chapter 1: "Descartes' Vocation"
Chapter 2: "Descartes' Project."

Week 3 (Jan 22, 24): *Meditation VI*.

Week 4 (Jan 29, 31) : *Meditation V*.

Week 5 (Feb 5, 7): *Meditation IV*.

Week 6 (Feb 12, 14): *Meditation III*.

Week 7 (Feb 19, 21): *Meditation II*.

Week 8 (Feb 26, 28): *Meditation I*.

Paper proposal due on Feb 26th.

Week 9 (Mar 11, 13): *Le Monde*, Guakroger Translation, p. 3 - 47.

Week 10 (Mar 18, 20): *Le Monde*, Guakroger Translation, p. 47 - 75.

Paper draft due on March 18th.

Week 11 (Mar 25, 27; Reschedule!): Body

Garber, *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics*. Chapter 4: "Descartes Against His Teachers: The Refutation of Hylomorphism"

Week 12 (Apr 1, 3; Reschedule?): Body

Garber, *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics*. Chapter 5: "Descartes Against the Atomists: Indivisibility, Space, and Void"

Week 13 (Apr 8, 10): The Cartesian System

Ariew, Roger (1992). 'Descartes and the Tree of Knowledge', *Synthese* 92: 101–116.

Hatfield, Gary (1985). 'First Philosophy and Natural Philosophy in Descartes', in A. J. Holland (ed.), *Philosophy, Its History and Historiography*. Dordrecht, Boston: D. Reidel. 149–164.

Week 14 (Apr 15, 17): Buffer

Final Paper Due April 22.