

**BIRKBECK COLLEGE**  
**University of London**  
**Modern Philosophy**  
**Autumn Term 2001**  
**DESCARTES**  
**Sarah Patterson**

**October 5 Introduction**

**Early Modern Philosophy and Scholasticism**

Reading: Meditations on First Philosophy

Daniel Garber, 'Semel in vita: The Scientific Background to Descartes' Meditations' in A. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Descartes' Meditations* (University of California, 1986)

**October 12 Descartes's Project**

Reading: Meditation I with selections from Objections and Replies

John Carriero, 'The First Meditation' in V. Chappell (ed.), *Descartes's Meditations Critical Essays* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1997). Originally in *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 68 (1987): 222-248.

**October 19 Mind and Body**

Reading: Meditations II and VI with Selections from the Objections and Replies

Margaret Wilson, 'Descartes: The Epistemological Argument for Mind-Body Distinctness', in V. Chappell (ed.), *Descartes's Meditations: Critical Essays* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1997) and in J. Cottingham (ed.), *Descartes* (Oxford University Press, 1998). Originally in *Nous* 10 (1976): 3-15.

**October 26 God and Ideas**

Reading: Meditations III and V with Selections from the Objections and Replies

Bernard Williams, 'God', Ch. 5 of his *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Penguin, 1978).

**November 2 Intellect and Sensation**

Reading: Meditations V and VI with Selections on the Cartesian Circle

Anthony Kenny, 'Reason and Intuition', Ch. 8 of his *Descartes: A Study of his Philosophy* (1968; reprinted by Thoemmes, 1997).

**November 9 Reading Week**—No Lecture or Backup Class

**November 16 Cumberland Lodge**—No Lecture or Backup Class

**Texts**

The primary text for the lectures on Descartes is his *Meditations on First Philosophy with the accompanying Objections and Replies* (1641), though his *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) is also useful. The Cottingham translation of the *Meditations* is recommended, and is available in three forms:

René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. J. Cottingham. Cambridge University Press, 1996. The text of the *Meditations* with useful Selections from the *Objections and Replies*, arranged by topic.

Descartes: *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch. Cambridge University Press, 1988. The text of the *Meditations* with the same selections from the *Objections and Replies*, together with other works including the *Principles of Philosophy*, *Discourse on the Method*, and *Passions of the Soul*. [continued overleaf

The *Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume II*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch. Cambridge University Press, 1984. The full text of the *Meditations* and of the *Objections and Replies*.

*See the separate Descartes Reading List for secondary literature and further primary sources.*

## Course Organization

As the accompanying Course Outline shows, lectures on Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz, Berkeley and Hume occupy Terms 1, 2 and 3 of this academic year. Each lecturer will suggest readings to accompany the lectures, but the main texts are:

René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), tr. J. Cottingham (CUP)

Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677), tr. E. Curley (Penguin or Princeton)

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689)

Gottfried Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, tr. and ed. R. Ariew and D. Garber (Hackett)

George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713)

David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739)

The BA Philosophy finals paper Modern Philosophy from Bacon and Descartes to Kant is divided into three sections (Rationalists, Empiricists and Kant) and students must answer questions from at least two sections, no more than two questions on any one philosopher. BA Philosophy students study Kant by attending the Philosophy of Kant lectures in Term 1 of next year.

PPH or BA Humanities students taking the course-unit Modern Philosophy from Descartes to Hume take a three-hour exam in Term 3. The paper is not divided, but you may answer no more than two questions on any one philosopher. There are standardly at least three questions on each philosopher.

## Sample Essay Questions on Descartes

1. Why does Descartes begin the Meditations with sceptical doubts?
2. What exactly does the cogito establish? Does Descartes try to extract more from the argument than he is entitled to?
3. What is Descartes's discussion of the piece of wax in the Second Meditation intended to establish? Does it succeed?
4. Discuss critically Descartes's proof that he is essentially a thinking thing.
5. Does Descartes succeed in proving that God exists?
6. What, if any, are the weaknesses of Descartes's proof of the existence of God in the Third Meditation?
7. 'I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists' (Fourth Objections). Does Descartes have a satisfactory response to this worry?
8. Descartes insists that he does not argue that mind is distinct from body until the Sixth Meditation. What, then, does the Second Meditation contribute to his argument for the claim that mind and body are distinct?
9. What is Descartes's argument for the 'real distinction' between mind and body? Is it a good one?
10. The Sixth Meditation claims both that mind and body are distinct substances and that they are combined to form a unit. Can Descartes reconcile these claims?