PHIL 401 Proseminar on Descartes

Professor Baron Reed                                   Fall Term, 2008
office: 3-225 Kresge Hall                      Kresge Hall 2-345
b-reed@northwestern.edu                    Monday 3:30-6:30 PM
office hours: MW 12:30-1:30
and by appointment

Course Description:
Descartes is a pivotal figure in the history of western philosophy. He is often considered the first
Modern philosopher—the most important leader of the “new philosophy” that replaced the
Scholastic aristotelianism of the Medieval era. Perhaps more than anyone else, Descartes has
presented the questions that continue to shape the way we now engage in philosophy (e.g., is
knowledge possible? what is the nature of the mind? how can it interact with material objects? what
is the proper method for philosophy?). Although most contemporary philosophers reject Descartes’
views, his influence on them is still profound. In this course, we will examine Descartes’
philosophical system in depth, both to understand its place in historical context and to evaluate its
current relevance.

Required Texts:
Cottingham, John; Stoothoff, Robert; and Murdoch, Dugald (trs.). 1985. The Philosophical Writings of
Cottingham, John; Stoothoff, Robert; and Murdoch, Dugald (trs.). 1984. The Philosophical Writings of
Descartes, Vol. II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [CSM II]
Cottingham, John; Stoothoff, Robert; Murdoch, Dugald; and Kenny, Anthony (trs.). 1991. The
Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. III. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [CSM III]

Highly Recommended Texts:

Required Work:
Two short papers, 5 pages in length, and one presentation, 20-30 minutes in length. The
presentation will serve as the basis for the long paper you write in the Winter Term. The short
papers are on topics of your choice (no more than one per week); each counts for 25% of the final
grade. The presentation counts for 50% of the final grade. Your final grade may also be affected by
excellent participation in class discussion.

Blackboard:
Much of the business of this course, including access to readings on reserve, will be conducted
through Blackboard. You are encouraged to check it frequently, as I may post announcements there
from time to time. To access Blackboard, you will need to use your NetID.
Schedule of Readings:
(* recommended)

Sept. 22 Introduction
Descartes’ life; the intellectual climate of the late 15th and early 16th centuries: Scholasticism,
the “new philosophy,” the rise of quantitative science, and the rediscovery of skepticism
*JC, 1-21, 161-4
*Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, “Descartes’ life and the development of his philosophy” (CCD, 21-57)
*Roger Ariew, “Descartes and scholasticism: the intellectual background to Descartes’ thought” (CCD, 58-90)

and

Meditations on First Philosophy (part 1)
Translator’s preface, Dedication to the Sorbonne, Preface to the reader, Synopsis,
Meditations One, Two, Three (CSM II: 1-36)
*Gary Hatfield, “The Senses and the Fleshless Eye: The Meditations as Cognitive Exercises” (EDM 45-79)
*Amélie Rorty, “The Structure of Descartes’ Meditations” (EDM 1-20)

Sept. 29 No class

Oct. 6 No class

Oct. 13 Meditations on First Philosophy (part 2)
Meditations Four, Five, Six (CSM II: 37-62)
Discourse on the Method (CSM I: 109-151)
*Daniel Garber, “Semel in vita: The Scientific Background to Descartes’ Meditations?” (EDM 81-116)
*Louis Loeb, “Is There Radical Dissimulation in Descartes’ Meditations?” (EDM 243-270)

Oct. 20 The method of doubt, skepticism, and the Cogito
Principles of Philosophy, Part One 1-7, 10 (CSM I: 193-6)
2nd OR (CSM II: 87-8, 93-6), 3rd OR (CSM II: 121, 137), 5th OR (CSM II: 179-180, 241-2), 6th
OR (CSM II: 278, 285), 7th OR (CSM II: 302-313)
Michael Williams, “Descartes and the Metaphysics of Doubt” (ORP 28-49)
Peter Markie, “The Cogito and its importance” (ORP 50-78)
*Janet Broughton, Descartes’ Method of Doubt (pp. 97-119)
*JC 29-42
*Jaako Hintikka, “Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?” (MSP 108-139)

Oct. 27 Clear and distinct perceptions and the Cartesian Circle
Principles of Philosophy, Part One 13, 30, 45-50 (CSM I: 197, 203, 207-9)
2nd OR (CSM II: 89-91, 100-6), 4th OR (CSM II: 150, 171), 5th OR (CSM II: 193-5, 227-8, 249-250, 263-4), 6th OR (CSM II: 279, 289), 7th OR (CSM II: 309-310)
James Van Cleve, “Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle” (ORP 101-131)
Ernest Sosa, “How to Resolve the Pyrrhonian Problematic: A Lesson from Descartes” 
(*Philosophical Studies 85: 229-249*)
*JC 66-73

*Alan Gewirth, “Clarity and Distinctness in Descartes” (*ORP 79-100*)
*Harry Frankfurt, “Descartes’ Validation of Reason” (*MSP 209-226*)
*Louis Loeb, “The Cartesian circle” (*CCD 200-235*)
*Michael Della Rocca, “Descartes, the Cartesian Circle, and Epistemology Without God,” (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 70: 1-34*)

Nov. 3 **God**

*Principles of Philosophy, Part One 14-23 (CSM I: 197-201)

1st OR (CSM II: 66-85), 2nd OR (CSM II: 126-133), 3rd OR (CSM II: 88-91), 4th OR (CSM II: 154-162), 5th OR (CSM II: 199-214), 6th OR (CSM II: 126-133), 7th OR (CSM II: 154-162), 8th OR (CSM II: 199-214)

Jean-Marie Beyssade, “The idea of God and the proofs of his existence” (*CCD 174-199*)

*JC 47-64

Nov. 10 **Dualism of mind and body**

*Principles of Philosophy, Part One 8-9, 11-12, 51-65 (CSM I: 195-7, 210-6)


Margaret Wilson, “The Epistemological Argument for Mind-Body Distinctness” (*ORP 186-196*)

*Marleen Rozemond, “The Real Distinction Argument” (*DD 1-37*)

*JC 107-122

Nov. 17 **Interaction between mind and body: a “substantial union”**


*Principles of Philosophy, Part Two 2 (CSM I: 224), Part Four 189-198 (CSM I: 279-285)

*Treatise on Man (CSM I: 99-108)

*Description of the Human Body, Part One (CSM I: 313-6)

*Description, Parts Two, Three, and Four (CSM I: 316-324)

*Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics, Seventh Dialogue (PS 222-238)*

*Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, “Descartes and the Unity of the Human Being” (*ORP 197-210*)

*Daniel Garber, “Understanding Interaction” (*DE 168-188*)

*JC 122-132, 152-6

*Stephen Wagner, “Mind-Body Interaction in Descartes” (*EPS 115-127*)

Nov. 24 **The material world and causation**

*Principles of Philosophy, Part Two 3-64 (CSM I: 224-247)

*The World (CSM I: 81-98)*

*Optics, Discourse One (CSM I: 152-6)*

*Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics, Seventh Dialogue (PS 222-238)*

*Gary Hatfield, “Force (God) in Descartes’ Physics” (*ORP 281-310*)

*Daniel Garber, “Descartes’ physics” (*CCD 286-334*)

*JC 79-88*
Dec. 1 Presentations

**Recommended Further Reading:**


