

Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

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Descartes, R. (1641) *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In the version by Jonathan Bennett presented at www.earlymoderntexts.com.

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Rene Descartes sets out to prove – through logical argumentation – the certainty of knowledge and the existence of the world. Across six chapters, Descartes takes his readers on a journey inside his mind, in the course of which he subjects all reality and knowledge to an extreme level of doubt until he arrives at a secure foundation from which to re-establish certainty of knowledge. In the *First Meditation*, Descartes, noting that sensual perception can be incorrect at times, starts to call into doubt any information obtained by the senses and with it all his previous knowledge. This radical method is aimed at supporting his search for reliable knowledge and truth by acting as a counterweight to Descartes' previous trust in information obtained through the senses. In the *Second Meditation*, Descartes – considering the possibility of his being deceived by a powerful malicious being – argues that he no longer can be certain not only about the existence of the sensible world, but also about previously held unshakable mathematical beliefs. This takes him to the conclusion that owing to the presence of thought processes inside of his mind the one thing he can say with certainty is that he exists as a thinking thing. Starting from this foundation, Descartes turns to the question of God in the next chapter. Descartes presents two proofs of God's existence: First, he argues that since the idea of God he has cannot have originated inside his mind since the level of perfection inherent in God cannot be found inside of him. This is based on the argument that ideas cannot be caused by nothing and that causes must have at least as much reality as their effects. Second, he argues that without God his existence would not be possible since, as an imperfect being, he could not have caused himself to exist. He concludes by noting that owing to his nature as a perfect being, God cannot deceive him since such action would constitute a defect. In the *Fourth Meditation*, Descartes sets out to prove the existence of the sensible world on the foundation of the existence of God. In this context, he attempts to reconcile his proneness to error with the idea of God not being a deceiver. He establishes that owing to his limited judgment and his unlimited free will, he is prone to err when judging on issues of which he has no certain knowledge. In the next chapter, Descartes argues that whatever the mind perceives clearly is true, but that certainty can only be achieved by belief in God. Following from this he argues that the fact that there is a clear idea of God in his mind proves that God exists. In the *Sixth Meditation*, Descartes focuses on the question of whether material things exist. He introduces the distinction between imagination – ideas received through the senses – and understanding – operations of the mind concerning the mind's ideas. Descartes argues the ideas of objects must be produced by some other substance than him and that therefore it is certain that other bodies exist. He goes on to explain that what is perceived by virtue of nature must have some truth since nature was created by God. Starting from the notion that what is clearly perceived is true, he then goes on to argue that mind and body are distinct since he perceives them as being such. The *Meditations* are written in a clear style and are an approachable and enlightening read for those interested in issues of epistemology. The work arguably owes its status as a classic to the application of a rational approach to the inquiry into certainty of existence and knowledge, although its central and most famous premise "I think, I am," was not entirely new at the time, having been previously entertained by St. Augustine. The *Meditations* furthermore stand out for placing the individual at the centre of an epistemological enquiry and turning philosophy into an individual's quest for truth and certainty, although, as noted by Descartes in the Replies to Meditations, it was probably not intended for the average audience. The author deserves particular praise for carefully illustrating

because he has a clear & distinct idea of himself being separate from the world

though, as back as ancient times philosophy was well concerned with heart & soul

Renowned

the above version is appropriate for PG no. 5

even the most complex ideas by means of examples, which makes the arguments presented easier to follow. The repetition of key themes throughout the text, furthermore, allows readers to keep track of the main argument. The *Meditations*, however, are from being a perfect work and invite criticism. While the sceptical arguments presented in the first chapter concerning certainty of knowledge and sensory perception and the argument for the existence of the mind presented in the second chapter are interesting and arguably plausible even to a modern audience, the arguments presented in the following chapters are not particularly sound from today's perspective. This applies in particular to the proof of the existence of God, which is central to Descartes' argument: Descartes appears to adopt circular reasoning when he asserts that what is perceived clearly is true because of the existence of God and that God exists because there is a clear idea of God in the mind. Furthermore, the notion that God necessarily exists because, as a perfect being, existence must be part of its nature may make sense in and of itself, but is not necessarily convincing to a modern audience. Descartes' other arguments, for instance the dualism of mind and body, also relies on the existence of God to be true, which holds true for any argument brought forward by Descartes from the moment he proves the existence of his mind. It appears strange that Descartes would place an attempt to refute scepticism on such a shaky foundation. To conclude, it should be noted that, despite obvious flaws, the *Meditations* rightly claim their status as a classic of modern philosophy and are highly recommended to readers who would like to acquaint themselves with the questions concerning the certainty of knowledge and the dualism of mind and body, issues which continue to be of relevance in the philosophical community and beyond to this day.

Descartes, R. (1642) *Objections to the Meditations and Descartes' Replies*. In the version by Jonathan Bennett presented at www.earlymoderntexts.com.

The *Objections to the Meditations and Descartes' Replies* are an exchange of letters between Descartes and contemporary theologians and philosophers on the topics raised by Descartes in the *Meditations*. The most famous contributor is arguably English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. The work is divided into six chapters (objections) in which Descartes replies to objections to his arguments. The objections raised fall into three main categories: Descartes' approach to proving the existence of God, Descartes' solution to epistemological certainty and the dualism of mind and body suggested by Descartes. Objections against Descartes' proof of God's existence for instance take aim at the notion that God can be the cause of its own existence. Such an objection is raised by French theologian Antoine Arnauld in chapter 4. There, Arnauld argues that in order for something to cause its own existence it must not have existed prior to its own creation, which is contrary to God's nature as an infinite being. Descartes replies that he did not mean to say that God brings himself into existence, but that it is simply the essence of God's nature to exist, i.e. that God does not need a cause to exist. Another objection presented in chapter one is the idea that the human mind cannot grasp infinity, being itself limited and imperfect. Descartes replies that it is possible to see an excerpt of God's infinity from close-up and gain an understanding of infinity on that basis. He compares this to the way human beings can learn about the ocean by seeing only parts of it. Another objection to the proof of God's existence is made by Hobbes in chapter three. Hobbes argues that the idea of God need not necessarily have come from God, but could have been constructed by the mind from real-world observations. To his, Descartes replies that the idea of God could not have originated from the outside because God's infinity is not represented in anything in the external world. In chapter four, Arnauld accuses Descartes of circular reasoning when claiming that human beings can only be sure that everything they perceive clearly is true because God exists and then going on to argue that they know God exists because they perceive God clearly. According to Descartes, belief in God, in this case, enables certainty of knowledge obtained by a chain of reasoning not present in the mind at that very moment. Objections against Descartes' epistemology, for instance, are directed against the notion that what is perceived clearly and vividly exists. An example of this is an objection against Descartes' notion that God is always truthful and therefore cannot be a deceiver. To this, Descartes replies that even though one may find instances of God not saying the truth in the bible, lying in his eyes involves malicious intent to deceive, which cannot be ascribed to God because of its perfect nature. He argues that since human beings have a faculty to

All very loose though

And - is existence properly?

Although he foundation for knowledge itself is the Cogito

discover truth, which has been given to them by God, God must be good and therefore cannot be a deceiver. In this context, Descartes is criticised for giving rise to scepticism since, by virtue of the notion that what is perceived clearly is true, everyone would be entitled to their own truth. Descartes' response is that there is no proof that someone actually perceives something clearly when they claim to do so. Furthermore, in chapter two, one critic argues that Descartes is guilty of circular reasoning when on the one hand arguing that having clear knowledge of something requires God's existence, while on the other asserting that he existed before proving God's existence. Here Descartes replies that by knowledge he only refers to conclusions drawn and that the idea of existing as a thinking thing is not a conclusion, but a self-evident truth shown by intuition. In chapter five, French philosopher Gassendi attacks the notion of innate ideas. He claims that what is referred to as innate ideas could have had their origin in the outside world and could have been constructed by the mind. To this, Descartes replies that this would mean that the mind would not be able to be the cause of any idea and that even the idea of a chimera would have to originate in the outside world. The third category of criticism is Descartes' dualism of mind and body. In this context, Hobbes argues that the subject of any action, for instance thinking, must be a body or substance. To this, Descartes responds that there are not only physical but also metaphysical substances and that the mind is a metaphysical substance. In chapter five, Gassendi argues that a problem facing the mind/body dualism is the difficulty of interaction between the mind as an unextended being and the body as an extended being and the mind's possibility of feeling pain. To this Descartes replies that the mind perceives images and not things in themselves and that the intermingling of mind and body cannot be compared to the intermingling of bodies with one another and is of an entirely different nature. Gassendi also points out that the mind grows weaker and stronger with the body and that Descartes would have to prove that a body is not capable of producing thoughts. To this, Descartes replies that the mind uses the body like an instrument and that the proof is that he can clearly conceive of himself as a thinking thing.

- The *Objections* are an interesting, though at times difficult read. Although not as approachable and clearly structured as the *Meditations*, the *Objections* may help the reader to better understand Descartes' reasoning and mindset. For instance, his argument that God is the cause of its own existence since it is in his nature to exist becomes much clearer after reading the relevant section in the *Objections*. Readers also gain a clearer understanding of the flaws in Descartes' reasoning, which becomes particularly clear in his defence against Gassendi's attack against innate ideas, which at least from a modern perspective lacks merit. While Descartes should be applauded for publishing these criticisms along with the *Meditations*, it should also be noted that at times when pressed hard on his ideas he refuses to produce arguments, but instead resorts to a dismissive and almost insulting tone, as can be seen in his replies to Thomas Hobbes and Gassendi.

Vlastos G. (1954) 'The Third Man Argument in the Parmenides', *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 63, Issue 3, pp.319-49. Accessible online at JSTOR.

Excellent choice. An important paper

In his paper, Gregory Vlastos conducts an in-depth analysis of the Third-Man Argument in Plato's *Parmenides*. His objective is not only to examine the argument but also to look into its implications for the Theory of Forms. In the first part, Vlastos analyses the argument by translating it into logical propositions in order to test its validity. The Third Man Argument is structured as follows: There is a form by virtue of which it is possible to understand that a number of different objects share the same property. From this it follows that there must be a second form by virtue of which it is possible to understand that the objects in question and the first form share the same property. This chain of reasoning could be continued ad infinitum, thereby creating an infinite regress and posing a severe challenge to Plato's theory. In his analysis, Vlastos notes an inconsistency between premise 1 and premise 2 of the argument: In the first premise a number of objects is seen as having a certain property owing to the first form; in the second premise, however, the same objects (and the first form) are all of a sudden seen as having the same property in virtue of another second form. Vlastos then goes on to introduce two tacit assumptions required to make premise 2 a logical conclusion of premise 1: the self-predication assumption and the non-identity assumption. The self-predication assumption means that any form has the property it stands for, for instance largeness being large. The non-identity

assumption means that an object/form which has a certain property cannot be identical with the form exemplifying said property, i.e. a large object cannot be identical with the form of largeness. Combining these two assumptions, one arrives at the contradictory conclusion that a form cannot be identical with itself, which according to Vlastos shows an inherent flaw in one of the preceding premises. Vlastos, however, notes that a way around this would be to assume a weaker non-identity assumption which only applies to objects and not to forms. Then the second premise of the Third Man Argument would no longer be a valid conclusion since under these conditions a form could be understood as having its property in virtue of itself. This would undermine the Third Man Argument and its notion of infinite regress since then a second form would not be required to understand the first form as having a certain property. Vlastos, however, notes that Plato appears to have been unable to refute the Third Man Argument because he was unaware of its inherent premises and because refutation would have jeopardised the integral parts of his Theory of Forms, namely the Degrees of Reality Theory and the Separation Theory. These two theories and their relation to the Third Man Argument are further analysed in part two of the paper. Vlastos first takes a look at the degrees of reality theory according to which the sensible world is less real than the world of forms. From this it follows that a form has a more real version of a certain property than an object does. The non-identity assumption discussed in part one of the paper follows from Plato's separation theory according to which the forms exist in a realm separate from the sensible world. The consequence of this separation coupled with the degrees of reality theory is that for each characteristic there must be one kind of property for forms and one kind of property for sensible objects (largeness having the property large¹, while a large chair having the property large). This means that there is not only a separation between objects and forms but also a separation within the world of forms. This premise results in an infinite regress, such as the one illustrated by the Third Man Argument, since to understand largeness as having the property large¹ another form (largeness²) is required.

Vlastos' paper is a quite difficult, though particularly rewarding read since it not only provides an analysis of the Third Man Argument but at the same time provides for a deeper understanding of the Theory of Forms by highlighting the assumptions implied in two its core premises, the degrees of reality and the separation theory. Vlastos manages to translate the complex and at times opaque arguments of the Parmenides into clearly understandable logical propositions, thereby making it easier for readers to follow and understand a complex argument. The paper's train of argumentation, however, remains complex at times and could have been rendered easier had the author provided the link between the tacit assumptions of the Third Man Argument and the Separation Theory and the Degrees of Reality Theory of the Theory of Forms previous to the second part of the paper. This also would have made clearer the link between the Separation Assumption and the non-identity premise. Despite its difficulty, *The Third Man Argument in the Parmenides* is a highly recommendable read for those wishing to gain a deeper understanding of the Theory of Forms and its inherent flaws.

Popper, K. (2012) 'Back to the Presocratics' in Popper K. *The World of Parmenides: Essay on the Presocratic Enlightenment* (New York: Routledge).

In this essay, Karl Popper presents an overview of Presocratic thought in order to bolster his argument highlighting the important role played by the Presocratic thinkers. He praises their critical attitude and the boldness with which they asked grand questions in search of knowledge. He argues that knowledge is not based on induction, but rather on deduction and criticises the increasing specialisation of philosophy. He argues that any theory of knowledge should be concerned with bold theories instead of relying on observation of everyday phenomena. He illustrates this by trying to explain how Anaximander, starting from Thales' observation that the world was supported by water, through critical speculation developed his own theory according to which the earth, as a drum-shaped body, is suspended freely in space. Popper notes that critical thinking gave Anaximander the right idea (earth suspended freely in space), while observation probably led him to a wrong assumption (earth as a drum-shaped body). He notes that while Anaximander's approach may be dismissed as being unscientific, most scientific theories rely on speculation. He concludes that although being false Anaximander's theory paved the way for later discoveries and that progress, too, relies on false

should we agree?

But you are doing a good job at explaining it

theories. Highlighting the important role that critical discussion played among the Presocratics, Popper illustrates how a rationalist approach consisting of guesses and conjectures rather than of certain knowledge has contributed to the extension of knowledge. As an example, Popper shows how the Presocratics approached the problem of change, highlighting how the observation made by Heraclitus that everything was in constant flux led to a problem of knowledge and to the theory put forward by Parmenides that the world was one and change was an illusion. This idea was then led the atomists, who thought that the idea of a motionless world defied experience, to develop the theory of the world consisting of indivisible atoms separated by void, a theory that would be influential until modern times. The article is written in an approachable style and avoiding overly technical language provides an easy-to-understand introduction to key areas of Presocratic thought. There is, however, a suspicion that Popper, noting that he is not an expert in the field of Presocratic philosophy, may be selecting facts to suit his theory of the pre-eminence of rationalism over empiricism, a position that he at least does not hide. For instance, Popper claims that Anaximander arrived at this theory of the earth being suspended through critical speculation without offering evidence for that. Furthermore, there is even a slight contradiction in his chain of reasoning: he claims that the extension of knowledge is based on a rationalist approach. However, he then notes that the atomists arrived at their successful theory through observation. Overall, Popper's essay is an entertaining and enlightening read, if the reader is aware of the author's biases towards rationalism. The text provides a welcome outside perspective on the Presocratic period and is a good starting point for readers new to the subject.

Plato (2017) 'Book VI - VII', in Plato's The Republic. Translated by B. Jowett. Available at:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm> (Accessed: 22 November 2020).

the traces for this, as you have above

Books VI and VII of Plato's Republic – while discussing how future rulers of the ideal city described in the Republic should be educated and trained to make them fit for their task and what kind of features they should display, mainly focuses on the elaboration of the previously introduced theory of forms which is based on the distinction between universals and particulars. Plato illustrates his theory of knowledge with the help of three allegories: the simile of the sun, the metaphor of the divided line and the allegory of the cave. In the simile of the sun, Plato tries to explain the nature of the form of the good, which in his epistemological system serves as the highest of the forms, by comparing it to the sun. He explains that just like sunlight makes objects visible to the eye, the form of the good makes objects of knowledge visible to the mind's eye and is the cause of all knowledge. He then introduces the metaphor of the divided line. The metaphor lays out the division of the intelligible and the sensible world into four areas: the world of images, the world of objects (both belonging to the sensible world) and numbers and the world of being (both belonging to the intelligible realm). The line illustrates a hierarchy of reality, with the forms at the top being the most real and the images at the bottom having the least reality in them. The individual sections of the line also pertain to different faculties in the human mind (perception, belief, understanding and reason). Plato combines and further illustrates the simile of the sun and the metaphor of the divided line in the allegory of the cave. In this allegory, prisoners in a cave can only see the wall in front of them. They only see the shadows of objects and people moving behind them, which are illuminated by a fire. Prisoners who manage to escape will first see the fire and the objects causing the shadows. They will at first be blinded by the light of the fire. On the way to the outside world, they will be dazzled by the light of the sun and only slowly begin to identify objects. Once they descend into the cave again, they will be blinded by the darkness and be laughed at by the prisoners in the cave who will not believe them if they tell them what they have seen. This allegory illustrates the ascension from the world of images, to the world of objects and then further to the world of forms and true knowledge.

Books VI and VIII are a must-read for anyone interested in epistemology since there Plato beautifully and clearly lays out his system of knowledge. Furthermore, while the theory of forms is a quite complex concept, the three metaphors combine to provide a quite clear and simple explanation of the matter. The cave metaphor so to speak puts flesh to the bones of the simile of the sun and the divided line. Plato's method of introducing a theoretical system (the form of the good and the hierarchy of reality) and then illustrating it by means of an easy-to-apprehend example (the cave

metaphor) is particularly effective. This example of poetic craftsmanship and the beautiful poetic style speak to Plato's outstanding ability not only as a philosopher, but also as a storyteller.

