

Reading Questions - DESCARTES (*Meditations I, II and III*)

Meditation I

1. Why did Descartes undertake the method of doubt? What is it?
2. On what grounds, or on what basis, can he doubt what his senses tell him?
3. What remains true, even if he's now dreaming?
4. On what grounds is even mathematics possibly false?
5. Try to state as clearly as you can what Descartes means in *Meditation I* by "certain and indubitable" beliefs. (To see what this might mean, ask yourself if you have any beliefs that you are convinced are certain and indubitable? What are they? How do you think Descartes would throw doubt on them?)
6. Can you really doubt that you have a body, or that there are other people in the world? What would it be like to doubt such things? Now, look at the text carefully. Does Descartes really doubt these things? If you think he doesn't, then why do you suppose he raises the question of certainty in the way he does?
7. What is Descartes' "dream argument"? State what kinds of beliefs Descartes uses this argument to challenge. Is his challenge here successful? Have you ever had a dream that seemed so realistic it fooled you? Could you be dreaming now? (If you say yes, then who do you suppose is asking you this question?!)
8. What is the difference between the kinds of beliefs that are called into question by the dream argument, and the beliefs that are called into question by the 'evil demon' argument? Do logical inferences make existence-claims? Is that a significant consideration for Descartes?
9. Is it logically possible to doubt all of our beliefs at the same time, or do we need to assume the truth of some of them in order to call the others into question? What empirical (e.g., common sense) beliefs must Descartes assume in order to argue that all his experience might be a dream?

Meditation II

10. In *Meditation II*, according to Descartes, what is necessarily true each time it is expressed by me?
11. What, according to Descartes, am I? What is the nature of the mind?
12. Exactly what does the argument concluding at the end of the third paragraph of *Meditation II*

prove? Does it prove that Descartes exists? Does it prove that I (the reader) exist? Does it prove to me that I exist? (Are these last two questions different?)

13. How does Descartes go about imagining himself without a body? Can you really imagine yourself without a body? Can you conceive of having sensations -- sights, sounds, smells, etc. -- without a body? Could you be without being somewhere and some when?
14. What does Descartes say is the nature of material bodies? (Is he right?)
15. In the example of the wax, if the wax really changes all of its sensory qualities (i.e., the qualities that the senses can perceive), then what makes me think there is *any one thing* here at all? Does any collection of sensory qualities make up the sensations of an object?
16. What important conclusion about the nature or character of the mind does Descartes draw from the example of the piece of wax?
17. When a physicist investigates the nature of some element, does he or she concentrate on sensory qualities, or on the underlying atomic structures? Would Descartes call our knowledge of that underlying atomic structure sensory knowledge or rational knowledge?
18. If Descartes is correct that the essence of the mind is thinking, then how can I ever know whether there are other minds besides my own?

Meditation III:

19. Descartes says that the purpose of *Meditation III* is to prove that there is a God who is not evil-- who is not a deceiver. Why does he say he has to prove this?
20. What is his proof for the existence of God? (follow these steps)
 - a. For his starting point, what is the one thing that Descartes is certain of?
 - b. What are the 3 types or classifications of thoughts we have? (Which types lead to error?)
 - c. What are the 3 classifications of ideas?
 - d. How do some ideas DIFFER from others?
 - e. What does reason tell us about causes ("efficient causes") and effects? What conclusions can we draw from this about how things come to be or come into existence?
 - f. What can we conclude from this about where an idea gets its content [objective reality] from?

g. What is the definition of "God"?

h. What can't I myself be the cause of the idea of God?

i. What can we conclude from this about the cause of the idea of God?

General questions (for review and for understanding):

21. Trace Descartes' journey of doubt, showing the point beyond which he could no longer doubt, and tell how he retraced each step from doubt to clear knowledge.
22. Bertrand Russell once said that Descartes did not have a right to conclude that he, Descartes, existed as a thinking being, but only that his thought existed. Comment on this assertion. Can or could thoughts exist all by themselves, without a thinking person?
23. "The most serious difficulty faced by dualists such as Descartes ... is to explain how mental states can affect or be affected by bodily states." Explain why this is a difficulty and comment.