

Undergraduate Seminar: Rethinking Descartes' Meditations

Christia Mercer -- Office Hours Tr 1:30-3:30

PHIL3912C004

9/14/16

W 2:10pm-4:00pm

402 Hamilton Hall

This seminar has two main goals: to reconsider the centrality of rationalism in the seventeenth century and in particular to see Descartes' *Meditations* in its proper philosophical and historical context. We will explore the philosophical goals and methodology of Descartes' most famous work after discussing the spiritual and philosophical practice developed in medieval Europe of reorienting the truth-seeking subject's goals in life. Along the way, we will discuss contributions that late medieval and early modern women made to the development of early modern philosophy.

Requirements

Besides coming to class prepared, each student is asked to turn at least 16-18 pages, which might be divided into chunks of different sizes. These pages can be submitted in a series of short papers (4 papers of 4 pages, e.g.,) or one long paper. But I must see a detailed plan and/or outline of planned paper and at least 4 pages of fairly polished material by the middle of the term.

Also, we will share our thoughts and ideas about the main questions of the seminar every week as they relate to the assigned readings.

Grades

50% combination in-class participation and discussion board comments

50% paper(s).

Books to Have at Hand

Revelations of Divine Love (Short Text and Long Text) Paperback, by Julian of Norwich (Author), Elizabeth Spearing (Translator)

Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila (Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila), Vol.2 First Edition Edition, by Teresa of Avila (Author), Otilio Rodriguez and Kieran Kavanaugh, translators.

The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 2 reprint Edition

by René Descartes (Author), John Cottingham (Translator), Robert Stoothoff (Translator), Dugald Murdoch (Translator)

NOTE: Another edition of the *Meditations* is okay, but make sure it has the AT numbers in margin.

Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich* (Yale U. Press).

Recommended: Stephen Menn's *Descartes and Augustine*, CUP, 1998;

Gary Hatfield, *Descartes and the Meditations*, Routledge;

David Cunniff, *Cambridge Companion to Descartes' Meditations* (2014).

First Questions (to tweak and discuss).

- What is Wisdom [ultimate knowledge]? What is its relation to ultimate truths?
- Ultimate truths are truths that are most basic: what are they and how are we supposed to arrive at them?

- What role does reason play in the acquisition of knowledge of such ultimate truths?
- What is the subject of knowing such that it can acquire knowledge of those truths (or not)?
- What role does experience play? Does such experience “conflict” with reason?
- How does experience lead to insights?
- What methodology does the wisdom-seeker use to get us to move away from the common-sense world to contemplate ultimate truths.
- What role, if any, does affect play in this?
- To what degree is self-knowledge (or the exploration of oneself) acquired along the path toward wisdom?

Second Questions (to tweak and discuss):

The goal of meditative exercises is always ultimate truth (is the result wisdom?). What precisely is the goal? Is there more than one?

What is the meditative subject that seeks those goals (mind v. body; what are the capacities? faculties; will?)

What are the steps that the subject must take along the path to those goal?

Is there conversion or reorientation of the subject?

What is the nature of the cognitive insights that occur along the way? Are they all the same?

What are the temptations or problems that prevent success?

What is the role of self-knowledge along the path?

Our Schedule by Topics and Texts

Topic One: Augustine’s *Confessions*, esp. Books 1-8.

Part I: Discuss

Part II: Discuss Augustine’s views about suffering, the will, evil, ascent to truth, love.

Peter King, “(Early) medieval Evil: Augustine” in Courseworks, under Files and Resources.

Christia Mercer, “The methodology of the *Meditations*: tradition and innovation,” in Cunning, *Cambridge Companion to Descartes’ Meditations* (some parts will be more relevant later).

For fun, read the short story by John Updike, *Augustine’s Concubine*. Insightful!

Part III: Augustinianism:

Simo Knuuttila, “The Emergence of Logic of the Will...”

Topic Two: Julian of Norwich, the Long Text (feel free to read the Short Text as well). Read intro in the Penguin

Part I: Discuss

Part II: Discuss with the help of Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich* (Yale U. Press). Good to buy. There are used copies available.

Christina Van Dyke’s papers on medieval mysticism.

Topic Three: Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castles*

Secondary Literature to follow

Topic Four: Augustinianism, Medieval Meditations, and Descartes

Gareth B. Matthews, “Augustine and Descartes on Minds and Bodies.”

Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge, 1998).

Christia Mercer, “Descartes’ Debt to Teresa of Ávila, Or Why We Should Work on Women in the History of Philosophy,” *Phil Studies* (2016).

Topic Five: Descartes’ *Search for Truth* and *Meditations*.

Decent overview of system on Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

Gary Hatfield, *Descartes and the Meditations*, Routledge;

David Cunniff, *Cambridge Companion to Descartes’ Meditations* (2014).