

## Philosophy Paper 101: History of Philosophy from Descartes to Kant

### *1. Descartes' Project and the Cogito*

What is Descartes trying to achieve with his *Meditations*? What are his principal objectives and conclusions? What function do the sceptical arguments play, and how does Descartes attempt to answer them? What is the intended role of the *Cogito*, and what is it about the *Cogito* that makes it suitable for this role? Is Descartes' procedure viable, at least in principle?

### **READING**

\*\* René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy (with Selections from the Objections and Replies)*, translated and edited by John Cottingham, Cambridge University Press, 1986 (revised edition 1996)

*The most important aim of this first week is carefully to read right through the Meditations (and at least much of it more than once) to get a clear understanding of Descartes' overall project, the place of scepticism within it, and way of attempting to answer that scepticism. You will find that some sections are more important than others; for example most of the Third Meditation is taken up with a proof of God's existence, and most of the detail of that proof is irrelevant to the overall flow of Descartes' broader argument (though of course the fact that he takes himself to have such a proof is very pertinent indeed). The recommended edition includes some selections from Objections that were published with the Meditations – these were produced by a number of notable philosophers including Hobbes, and Descartes published Replies to them. You might find it helpful to look at some of these.*

*A notorious problem for Descartes' procedure is the so-called "Cartesian Circle". Don't lose time at this stage delving deeply into the literature on the Circle, since we shall be addressing it in detail soon.*

\*\* Gary Hatfield, *Descartes and the Meditations* (Routledge, 2003): chapters 1-2 provide useful background; chapter 3 covers the method of doubt, and pp. 99-117, 141-6 discuss the nature and role of the *Cogito*

\* John Cottingham, *Descartes* (Blackwell, 1986), chapters 2 and 3 (chapter 1 gives an outline of Descartes' life which may be of interest)

\* E. M. Curley, *Descartes Against the Skeptics* (Blackwell, 1978), chapters 3 and 4

Margaret Dauler Wilson, *Descartes* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), chapter 1 and pp. 50-71

Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Penguin, 1978), chapters 2 and 3, and appendix 3

Each of Hatfield's chapters ends with suggestions for further reading, and since his book is so recent these suggestions are very up-to-date. Of course you are encouraged to explore them if you are interested and have time to do so.