

## Interactive Meditations: Discussion Assignments in An Introductory Philosophy Class

EMRYS WESTACOTT  
*Alfred University*

Descartes's *Meditations* is undoubtedly one of the canonical primary texts most widely used in introductory philosophy courses. There are good reasons for this. It is relatively short; it is fairly readable; it is historically important. Most of all, perhaps, the *Meditations* raises and addresses a range of fundamental but accessible philosophical questions concerning such matters as skepticism, knowledge, certainty, consciousness, the self, truth, error, the existence of God, and the mind-body connection. The work thus lends itself to being used as the occasion for a direct discussion of these philosophical problems—the kind of discussion in which students are more likely to become engaged and which serves to demonstrate what it means to engage in philosophical enquiry.

Like many teachers, I have found that one of the most successful ways of promoting discussion in the classroom is to divide the class into small discussion groups with four or five students in each group. This strategy makes it easier for shy students to participate, and it unfailingly leads to a more lively discussion when the class reconvenes as a whole. I have also found that some of the liveliest and most fruitful discussions occur when the students are set a fairly well defined task as opposed to being asked to discuss a philosophical question stated in general terms. Over several years of using the *Meditations* in introductory philosophy classes I have built up a small repertoire of these group activities which I believe may be of interest to other philosophy teachers. No doubt many readers already employ some discussion assignments similar to those described here; but I would hope that even

these readers will discover something useful or interesting in the description of these activities which follows. The activities I describe below have all been tried more than once and have proved successful. (Naturally, there have been plenty of experimental failures, but they have all been selected out!)

### *The Question of Epistemic Authority*

This is actually an assignment that relates most directly to the *Discourse on Method* (which I usually have students read prior to the *Meditations*, using the excellent Hackett edition which offers both works in a single, inexpensive volume).<sup>1</sup> As I see it, the *Discourse* is first and foremost a manifesto in defense of the idea that reason (understood broadly) should be our supreme epistemic authority: it is what we should appeal to when trying to decide whether statements are true or false. Nowadays, this is such a commonplace assumption for most of us that it has become invisible. To try to bring it into the light I set students the following assignment.

Consider this question: Is there life after death? Here are several ways of deciding how to answer it.

- 1 Toss a coin. Heads says there is, tails says there isn't.
- 2 Consult scripture
- 3 Accept the view of a representative of your church
- 4 Accept the majority opinion among your peers
- 5 Believe whatever people in your culture have traditionally believed
- 6 Follow your parents' beliefs
- 7 Ask a philosophy professor
- 8 Ask a scientist
- 9 Work out for yourself what to believe on the basis of whatever evidence and arguments you consider relevant.

Which way is best? What is wrong with the other ways?

Other possible questions to use in this exercise might be: Are there witches? Are there ghosts? Is incest wrong? Is homosexuality wrong? Almost everyone, of course, will say that the last procedure (9) is preferable to the others. The interesting part of the discussion is usually where students try to specify exactly

what is wrong with the other methods. Normally, the idea that it is important to think for yourself emerges. Sometimes, students also arrive at the more subtle idea that it is not enough simply to have true beliefs; ideally, one should also thoroughly understand the reasons for holding that a belief is true. Both these ideas—intellectual autonomy and epistemic transparency—are, of course, central to Descartes's philosophical mission.

*How Do We in Fact Decide What To Believe?*

An optional but interesting supplement to the first assignment is to raise the question of how we in fact decide what to believe. This can be done through the following exercise.

Why do you believe that the following statements are true?

1. You were born on the day your parents say you were.
2. Descartes was French.
3.  $37 + 24 = 61$
4. There are no unicorns.
5.  $E = mc^2$
6. Yesterday the weather in <hometown> was <sunny/cloudy>.
7. You are now in a philosophy class.
8. There is no life on the sun.

(Note: one way of approaching this question is to consider what you would say to people who denied the truth of any of these statements. How would you set about trying to convince them they were wrong?)

Reflecting on our reasons for accepting these statements normally brings out the fact that, notwithstanding the value we place on thinking for ourselves, we often do grant authority to some person, text, or institution and decide to accept what we are told. Of course, there need be no inconsistency here. Trusting encyclopedias, parents, or the media may be a perfectly reasonable thing to do; part of thinking for oneself could be making rational decisions about who or what to trust.

*Degrees of Certainty*

One of Descartes's most obvious concerns in the *Meditations* is to provide human knowledge with a secure metaphysical foundation. To this end, he seeks to discover truths that are absolutely certain. The following exercise helps students to discover for themselves some of the difficulties and complexities involved in this undertaking.

Arrange the following sentences according to how certain you are that they are true.

- 1 All men are mortal
- 2 My mother was female
- 3 Water contains oxygen
- 4 I exist
- 5 I am now thinking
- 6 The sun will rise tomorrow
- 7  $9 + 6 = 15$
- 8 The floor is hard
- 9 The floor feels hard
- 10 I am not now dreaming
- 11 Paris is the capital of France
- 12 I am over 15 years old

This assignment usually provokes some fierce debates. In the course of these, several important distinctions either emerge or can be easily introduced, such as those between:

- practical certainty (subjective confidence) and metaphysical certainty (absolute indubitability)
- existential necessity and objective necessity (“I exist” is necessarily true at the moment I assert it; but “ $7 + 6 = 15$ ” can claim to be objectively necessary since it is always true.)
- analytic and synthetic statements
- subjective and objective judgements

*Distinguishing Between Dreams and  
Waking Experience*

In Meditation One Descartes reflects on the possibility that he may be dreaming and concludes that “there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep.”<sup>2</sup> This suggests an obvious discussion topic.

1. Identify at least five differences between dreaming experience and waking experience.
2. Can any of these differences be used to prove that you are not now dreaming?

Predictably, discussions sometimes get sidetracked into an exchange of weird and wonderful dream memories. But students invariably do succeed in producing an impressive list of interesting and revealing differences, such as those relating to the vividness of sensations, the intensity of feelings, the nature of cause-effect relations, the regularity, predictability, connectedness and logical coherence of experience, the experience of time, and the possibility of reflexivity. When discussing the second of the two questions given, an amusing and thought-provoking idea to throw into the discussion is the idea of the “limerick test.” Can I prove to myself that I am not now dreaming by quickly making up a limerick?—a cognitive task that some believe would be beyond the capabilities of the dreaming mind.

*The Limits of Illusion*

After discussing Descartes’s hyperbolic doubt and the evil demon hypothesis, but before discussing his resolution of this doubt through the *cogito* argument, I read aloud to the class a short story by Fritz Leiber entitled “Mariana.”<sup>3</sup> Reading the story aloud takes about ten minutes. It is a third person narrative about a woman, Mariana, who gradually learns that she is living in a sort of virtual reality. Her immediate surroundings—trees, house, and even her husband—turn out to be illusory. So do the sun and the stars. Mariana discovers this when she presses labeled switches on a control panel inside what she originally thought was her house. At the end of the story, she appears ready to press the final switch on the panel—a switch labeled “Mariana.”

The story always goes over very well. The discussion question I usually pose is a fairly obvious one: What will happen when Mariana presses the switch with her name on it? Answering this

question naturally requires one to interpret the events described in the story, and this task in itself often generates some lively discussions. But the chief reason I use the story and ask this particular question is to help students come to grips with the Cartesian idea that a conscious subject can be certain about the reality of what occurs within the domain of his or her subjectivity. The initial response of many to the question posed is that when Mariana presses the switch marked “Mariana” she will go the same way as the trees, house, husband, and stars. But just a little further thought reveals this response to be problematic; for though these things may have been part of some sort of induced or manufactured hallucination, it is paradoxical to suppose that the subject of experience herself could turn out to be unreal in exactly the same way.

### *The Great Chewing Gum Experiment*

Descartes’s famous experiment with the piece of wax in Meditation Two provides a marvelous focus for discussion at just about any level. A variation on Descartes’s version can be performed in class using chewing gum. I give every student a stick of chewing gum and ask them to complete the following assignment.

- 1 Carefully examine the piece of unchewed chewing gum you have been given and write down a list of its properties (e.g. shape, smell, texture, etc.).
- 2 Insert gum into mouth and chew for two minutes, meditating throughout this time on the question: What is the essence of gum?
- 3 Remove gum from mouth, examine it again, and opposite the first list write down a list of the chewed gum’s properties.
- 4 Discussion question: Why, in spite of all the changes, do we say that the gum has remained the same piece of gum?

The assignment is intended to make the philosophical questions Descartes is posing as immediate and concrete as possible. It does this in a fairly lighthearted way, but the discussion that ensues can go to the heart of key issues in metaphysics and epistemology, such as the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, the nature of material substance, the distinction between appearance and reality, and our criteria for ascribing numerical identity to something over time.

*What, or Who, Is God?*

Almost all students bring to their study of the *Meditations* a prior conception of God. This is usually the idea of God that is common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Before tackling questions about whether God can be known or proved to exist, a useful exercise is to have students brainstorm regarding this concept of God, to see how many of the attributes traditionally ascribed to God they can identify. The following list is not exhaustive, but it gives a good idea of what one can expect to end up with (in some cases after a little prompting):

omnipotent	eternal
omniscient	independent
loving	creative
just	intelligent
merciful	personal
unique	exists necessarily
incorporeal	infinite
indivisible	perfect
immutable	

Students enjoy constructing this list; doing so reveals to them that they are already familiar with a certain amount of metaphysical doctrine. Another thing that emerges from the exercise is just how rich and complex the traditional idea of God is. Most of the attributes listed are mentioned or implied by scripture (as are a number of other qualities that many believers have become less comfortable with, such as masculinity or a disposition to be jealous, wrathful, and vengeful). But the biblical portrait of God does not, of course, coincide with the rationalist philosopher's conception of God. Indeed, this is one of the most important points to come out of the session. When Descartes writes about God, he has in mind a streamlined and more precise concept of God than that which occupies the minds of most orthodox Jews, Christians, or Muslims when they pray or worship. The fundamental attributes of the God of the *Meditations* appear to be perfection and infinity (or perhaps just perfection), from which the other attributes can be deduced. (A worthwhile further exercise is to ask students to explain exactly how perfection and infinity might be thought to imply the other attributes.)

*The Difficulty of Proving God's Existence*

Before introducing students to Descartes's proofs of God's existence in Meditations Three and Five, I set the following assignment.

<p>Some proofs of God's existence</p> <p>What, if anything, is wrong with the following arguments for the existence of God?</p> <p>I The bible says that God exists. The bible is the word of God. Since God is perfect, God would not lie. Therefore, what the bible says is true. Therefore, God exists.</p> <p>II The vast majority of people who have ever lived have believed that the world was created by some sort of God. The vast majority of people cannot be completely wrong. Therefore, God exists.</p> <p>III It is a fact that belief in God is very widespread. The best explanation of this fact is that there really is a God. Therefore, God exists.</p> <p>IV Some people have had mystical experiences which they say revealed God to them. Such mystical experiences can only be explained on the assumption that God exists. Therefore, God exists.</p> <p>V The universe began with the big bang. Something must have caused the big bang. The only thing that could have caused the big bang is God. Therefore, God exists.</p> <p>VI An idea of God exists in my mind. Ideas are caused by the things they represent. The idea of God in my mind was caused by God. If God caused something, then God exists. Therefore, God exists.</p> <p>VII Believing in God helps me cope with life. Being able to cope with life enables me to be happy. If believing something helps me achieve happiness, then it is reasonable for me to believe it. Therefore, it is reasonable for me to believe that God exists. Therefore, God exists.</p>
--



This exercise serves several purposes: it offers a fairly basic, but nonetheless worthwhile, exercise in critical reasoning; it shows that most of the “coffee bar” proofs of God’s existence are really very poor and cannot survive critical scrutiny; and at the same time, it indirectly makes one realize how very hard it is to construct a convincing proof of God’s existence. It thus helps one to appreciate the magnitude of the task Descartes sets for himself, and to understand his need for some of the sophisticated metaphysical concepts and principles that he introduces in Meditation III.

### *The Ontological Argument*

The ontological argument is a hard sell to most students. Like countless professional philosophers, they are inclined to dismiss it pretty quickly as a bit of logical jiggery-pokery. To try to get inside the reasoning underlying Descartes’s version of the argument, I usually also discuss Anselm’s version; but this rarely makes anyone less suspicious about the argument’s legitimacy. I have found, however, that a certain contemporary restatement of the ontological argument can intrigue and challenge even the most skeptical—at least for a while. After discussing Anselm’s and Descartes’s versions, I ask students to criticize the following “proof.”<sup>5</sup>

A contemporary version of the ontological argument

1. By definition, if God exists then God necessarily exists. [*Def.*]
2. God’s existence is possible (i.e. conceivable). [*Axiom*]
3. If God’s existence is possible, then it is possible that God necessarily exists. [*from 1*]
4. Therefore, it is possible that God necessarily exists. [*from 2 and 3*]
5. If something does not in fact exist, then it is not possible that it necessarily exists. [*Axiom*]
6. Therefore, if God does not exist, it is not possible that God necessarily exists. [*from 5*]
7. Therefore, God exists. [*from 4 and 6*]

In my experience this is a good assignment to set toward the end of class since it also makes an excellent out-of-class exercise, especially for the more engaged students.

*Cartesian Distinctions*

Descartes's mind-body dualism belongs to, and in part rests on, a complex system of metaphysical concepts and distinctions. Key concepts within this system include those denoted by terms such as substance, accident, attribute, property, quality, and mode. In an introductory course it is not usually possible or appropriate to go too deeply into the metaphysical background to the dualistic account of persons for which Descartes argues in Meditation Six. Nevertheless, it is important that students grasp the kind of problem he was struggling with. One way of stating it is: What sort of distinction is the distinction between my mind and my body? Are they two distinct things? Two parts of a greater whole? The same thing viewed in different ways? Could one be a property of the other?

To help students toward an initial understanding of the import and the difficulty of these questions along with their metaphysical context, I set the following assignment.

Cartesian Distinctions	
Descartes's metaphysics, especially his dualism, requires him to differentiate between various kinds of distinction. The most important of these are the following:	
Distinction	Example
thing—different thing	sun—moon
thing—part	book—page
thing—property	chalk—whiteness
thing—mode	H <sub>2</sub> O—ice, steam, or water
property—property	color—taste
mode—mode	ice—steam
part—part	arm—leg
thing—same thing	Venus—Evening star
thing—nothing	light—darkness

Using the above list as a basis, how would you classify the following distinctions:

your mind—your thoughts

your mind—your leg

your mind—your brain

your mind—your body

your body—your sensations

your self—your mind

your self—your body

your self—God

God—the universe

space—matter

Note that this exercise asks students to clarify their own rather than Descartes's understanding of the distinctions in question. Trying to decide how Descartes would respond makes a good follow up exercise. In my experience, doing things in this order helps to make the philosophical issues more alive and the discussions—including the discussion of Descartes's position—more lively. The assignment provides a good platform for explaining the contrast between a “real” distinction (which obtains between two substances), and a merely “conceptual” distinction (which obtains between a substance and its attributes or between two attributes of the same substance). One of Descartes's greatest challenges in defending his dualism is to demonstrate that the mind-body distinction is real and not conceptual.<sup>6</sup> The final three distinctions in the above list provide an opportunity to broaden the discussion of Descartes's metaphysical views to take in questions such as: How many substances does Descartes think there are? Does he view the material universe as a single extended substance of which space and matter are both modes? What keeps individual minds separated from one another and from God?

The discussion assignments described here are not the only ones I have used, but they are the ones that have proved most successful. My hope in describing them is that other teachers will find at least some of them useful and may, in addition, be prompted to share similar activities of their own devising.

### Notes

I would like to thank Bill Dibrell and Vicky Westacott for their assistance with this article.

1. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980). Quotations from Descartes are from *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge University Press, 1985); references cite the volume and page numbers of the Adam and Tannery edition of Descartes's works (Paris: Vrin, 1965), these being given in the margins in most translations.

2. Descartes, *Meditations*, AT, VII, 19.

3. The story is included in *The Best of Fritz Leiber* (Doubleday, 1974).

4. For both the general idea and some of the details of this exercise I am indebted to Fred Feldman, *A Cartesian Introduction to Philosophy* (McGraw Hill, 1986). This book is an excellent resource for anyone teaching Descartes.

5. This reformulation of the ontological argument is taken from Robert Kane, "Anselm's Modal Argument," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Global Approach*, edited by Stephen H. Phillips (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 155–161.

6. For Descartes's most explicit statement regarding "real," "conceptual," and "modal" distinctions, see *Principles of Philosophy*, Part One, sections 60–64 (AT, VIIIA 28–31).

*Emrys Westacott, Division of Human Studies, Alfred University, Alfred, NY 14802*