

Third Discussion Paper (Due Monday, November 30):

Write a five-page essay on one of the following topics.

1. In Meditation Three and Meditation Five, Descartes gives us rational arguments purporting to prove God's existence. Sketch one or the other of these arguments. Do you think that these arguments are persuasive? On your view, what role ought such rational arguments play in matters of faith? Should faith be grounded, instead, in a personal experience of the divine? Should it be grounded in tradition?
2. Descartes thinks that the essence of mind is thought, in all of its many forms. He thinks that extension is the essence of body. For Descartes, therefore, the human person is essentially a thinking being. Take away the mind, and the body is just an automaton, a kind of zombie. Do you think that this is an adequate view of human personhood?
3. Many people are drawn to Descartes' rationalism because they take comfort from a philosophy that promises a foundation in certainty, not just for logic and mathematics, but for the sciences, as well. Many people are made uneasy by Hume's empiricism because they feel insecure in a world where there can be no certainty about "matters of fact." These reactions are matters of the heart as well as the mind. In your opinion, when we turn to philosophy as a guide to life, do we need to find the kind of foundation that Descartes sought, or can we flourish in a world not built on certain foundations?
4. Hume argues that, if one cannot trace an idea back to antecedent impressions, then the idea is fundamentally confused and meaningless and should, therefore, play no role in philosophy or science. First, explain why he thinks that this is true. Do you think that this is an overly restrictive "criterion of meaningfulness," or do you find it a reasonable way to seek clarity?
5. According to Hume, the claim that a specific miracle occurred falls in the category that he terms "matters of fact" and therefore should be evaluated exclusively on the basis of the same kinds of evidentiary considerations that we apply in evaluating any other factual claim. Is this the right way to adjudicate claims about miracles, and is Hume's skepticism about miracles justified?
6. Hume thinks that the age-old argument over free will versus determinism is merely a verbal dispute, that if we define the terms "necessity" and "free will" clearly, we will see that belief in both entails no contradiction. How does that argument work, and do you think that Hume is right?
7. If, as Hume argues, there is no certainty in science, can we, then, trust science?