

Sample Paper Topics on Descartes' "Meditations"

1. Descartes famously argues "I think, therefore I am" (though he doesn't say this in Meditation II). What is Descartes' basis for the conclusion that he exists? Is his argument compelling? What does he take himself to be? Consider Hobbes' objection 2, here:

<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfbits/desco34.pdf> (p.42). What is the objection? Is there a plausible way for Descartes to respond? Alternatively: consider one of your own objections to Descartes' proof that he exists. How would Descartes respond, and would that response be adequate?

2. Descartes seems at points to argue 'in a circle.' For instance, on p98 he says, "if I find that there is a God, I must also inquire whether He may be a deceiver; for without a knowledge of these two truths *I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything.*" But in order to prove that God exists and is not a deceiver, Descartes has to be certain that he exists and that he has an idea of God. (See also the final paragraph of Meditation IV.) This is also the subject of Arnauld's objection 4, here: <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfbits/desco34.pdf> (p.75). State the circularity objection clearly. How does Descartes respond to the charge of circularity? Is his response successful?

3. In arguing that God exists in Meditation III, Descartes relies on the premise, which he takes to be clear and distinct, that he has an idea of God: "eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, and Creator of all thing which are outside of Himself." First, state how this premise is used in the proof of God's existence. What is its significance? Second, state what you think are the two strongest objections to Descartes' use of this premise in the proof. Descartes considers three such objections later in Meditation III and another objection by Hobbes in objection 5, here: <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfbits/desco34.pdf> (p.46). How does Descartes respond to the objections you consider? Are his responses adequate? If so, why? If not, why not? [Note: you may take for granted that the reader knows about Descartes' theory of ideas and about the distinction between formal and objective reality.]

4. In arguing that God exists in Meditation III, Descartes relies on the premise, which he takes to be clear and distinct, that the cause of an idea must have at least as much formal reality as the idea itself has objective reality. First, state how this premise is used in the proof of God's existence. What is its significance? Second, consider why Descartes thinks this principle is true (besides the fact that it's clear and distinct). You may want to discuss what the precise nature of objective reality is. Finally, state what you take to be the best objection to this principle. How would Descartes respond to this objection? Would his response be adequate?

5. Consider the Problem of Error: if God exists, and he is not a deceiver, then why is it so often the case that he allows humans to form false beliefs? What is Descartes' reply to the Problem of

Error? Is his reply successful? You may find it worthwhile to critique Descartes' model of how error arises in Meditation IV. Are there cases of error which can't be covered on the model? Does the model succeed in solving the Problem of Error?

6. Descartes' second proof that God exists (Meditation V) is a version of the ontological proof originally due to St. Anselm of Canterbury. How does Descartes formulate the argument? Consider one or more of the following objections to Descartes argument: Pierre Gassendi's first two objections to Meditation V, here: <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfbits/desco5.pdf> (pp.129-134) or the two objections on pp.24-25 of Meditation V. Clearly state the objections you consider. How does Descartes reply? Critically evaluate Descartes' reply (or replies). Is he successful? Has Descartes proven that God exists? Why or why not?

7. Descartes' project is to start from what is clear and distinct and to incrementally build up his knowledge by argument from that foundation. What are the prospects for the Cartesian project? Is there more that is clear and distinct than what Descartes identifies? Is there less? Is it possible, using Descartes' methods, to establish that there is an external world without proving that God exists? Make sure to back up your contentions with arguments.