

Phil 100B: First Paper Assignment

Winter, 2026

Instructions

Due, as an attachment, via the “Assignments” tool on Canvas, by 11:55pm on Friday, January 30.

Please choose *one* of the following arguments from Descartes’s *First* or *Second Meditations* and, in approximately 2–3 pages (double spaced), do the following: (1) briefly explain in your own words what the argument is supposed to prove and how (focus only on the argument you have chosen; you should not summarize the rest of the text); (2) bring up an apparently serious objection to the argument; (3) explain how Descartes would respond to the objection.

Needless to say, this should be your own original work. You probably should not need to use external sources for this assignment, but, if you do, you must cite them. If you have any questions about what plagiarism is or how to avoid it, you can ask me, or consult the resources listed on the Library website.¹ For possible consequences of plagiarism, see the Academic Integrity Policy.²

AI policy: I encourage the use of AI assistance with proper caution (i.e., keeping in mind that current AI is often wrong). You may use AI assistance basically in any way that would not constitute cheating if you used a human for the same thing. Similarly, you should cite the AI in cases where you would cite a human. If in doubt, feel free to ask me for clarification.

Note that this is not a full scale paper — you need not, and should not, write an introduction and conclusion, summarize other parts of the *Meditations*, etc. Just please focus on doing (1)–(3) above.

Also note: to do this well you need to come up with an objection that is serious *and* think of a good way for Descartes to respond to it. The worse

¹<https://guides.library.ucsc.edu/c.php?g=1349850&p=9960819>.

²<https://undergraduate.ucsc.edu/our-units/academic-integrity-office/academic-misconduct/>.

you can make things look for Descartes — as long as you can still get him out of it in the end! — the better your paper.

Objections based on modern technology (or imaginary future technology) are discouraged. If you think of such an objection, see if you can come up with a similar one that involves only things Descartes himself knew about or imagined. (In most cases that should be possible. For example, you could use a powerful evil demon.)

Please write the number of the argument you have chosen at the beginning of your paper (you don't need to quote it).

You can find answers to some commonly asked questions about my assignments and grading in my FAQ (<https://people.ucsc.edu/~abestone/courses/faq.html>).

Text passages

1. “Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.” (AT 17, p. 76)

2. “Reason leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt.” (AT 18, p. 76)

3. “But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself. A brilliant piece of reasoning! As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake — indeed sometimes even more improbable ones.” (AT 19, p. 77)

4. “But perhaps God would not have wished me to be deceived in this way, since he is said to be supremely good. But if it were inconsistent with his goodness to have created me such that I am deceived all the time, it would

seem equally foreign to his goodness to allow me to be deceived even occasionally; yet this last assertion cannot be made [in the French version: “yet I cannot doubt that he does allow this”].” (AT 21, p. 78)

5. “I am, I exist — that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. For it could be that were I totally to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist. At present I am not admitting anything except what is necessarily true. I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks.” (AT 27, p. 82)

6. “But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.” (AT 28, p. 83)

7. “For example, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called ‘having a sensory perception’ is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking.” (AT 29, p. 83)