**PH145: PLATO AND DESCARTES**

**Seminar Schedule**

**Module Tutors: Dr. David Woods (Plato) and Prof. Stephen Butterfill (Descartes)**

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**How to do well in this module:** There is a direct correlation between the marks students tend to get for modules like this one and the amount of reading they do independently outside the classroom in preparation for lectures and seminars. The first thing you should do in preparation for each seminar is to read the indicated sections from Plato’s *Republic* or Descartes' *Meditations*. But it is recommended to read at least one or two of the items from the list of secondary readings indicated for each week (items marked ‘\*\*’ are essential; items marked ‘\*’ are strongly recommended). The recommended readings will help you to test and develop your own understanding of the main text.

**Seminar Topics**

**Week 2: Socrates and Thrasymachus on Justice**

**Reading:**

\*\**Republic* Book I.

\*\*Rachel Barney, “Socrates’ Refutation of Thrasymachus”.

1. What is Thrasymachus’ view about justice? Is it plausible?
2. What is Socrates’ “nature of craft” argument? Is it convincing? What can be said in response to Thrasymachus’ use of the comparison of ruling with shepherding?
3. What is Socrates’ “gang of thieves” argument? Does it show that being just is more profitable than being unjust?

**Week 3: The Case against Justice**

**Reading:**

\*\**Republic* Book II.

\*\*Christopher Shields, “Plato’s Challenge: the Case against Justice in Republic II”.

1. How should we understand Glaucon’s distinction amongst three kinds of good? Try to give examples of each kind of good, and explain why they fit into their allotted kind.
2. Which kind of good is justice according to (a) Glaucon’s arguments and (b) Socrates’ arguments.
3. What is Glaucon’s account of the origin of justice? Is it plausible? And How does it support his classification of justice?
4. How, if at all, does Glaucon’s account of Gyges support his classification of justice? Is his argument here convincing?

**Week 4: Was Plato a Feminist?**

**Reading:**

\*\**Republic* Book V.

\*\*Julia Annas, “Plato’s Republic and Feminism”.

\*\*Harry Lesser, “Plato’s Feminism”. Republic V.

1. Why does Annas think that Plato’s argument is ineffective against an antifeminist? Is she right?
2. Why does Annas think that Plato’s argument fails to take into account women’s desires? Is she right?
3. Why does Annas think that Plato’s argument fails to capture the injustice of sexual inequality? Is she right?
4. What is Annas’ view of Plato’s proposal that the nuclear family should be abolished? Is she right?
5. To what extent do Annas’ objections count against the claim that Plato defends a feminist position?

**Week 5: Plato on Poetry**

**Reading:**

\*\**Republic* Books III and X.

\*\*Alexander Nehemas, “Plato and the Mass Media”.

1. What does Nehemas mean by saying, “for Plato representation is transparent”?
2. How does this idea of transparency figure in Nehemas’s interpretation of Plato’s attitude towards poetry?
3. How is the idea of transparency supposed to support Nehemas’s comparison of Plato’s attitude towards poetry with some contemporary attitudes towards television? Does it?
4. Does Nehemas’s comparison of Athenian poetry and television support, or undermine, Plato’s attitude towards poetry?

***Week 6: Reading Week; no lectures of seminars***

**Week 7: The Method of Doubt**

**Reading:**

\*\**First Meditation*

*Objections and Replies on Meditation One* [pp. 63-67 in Cottingham]

\*\**Preface and Synopsis* (the latter, in particular, is extremely helpful)

\*\*G. Hatfield, Gary 2003. *Descartes and the Meditations*, chs. 1 & 3

\*Williams, Bernard 1978. *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry*, ch. 2 (and Appendix 3)

1. How does Descartes describe his own project? Does this project make sense?
2. Is it true that "there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep", as Descartes maintains?
3. Descartes seems to think that the 'malicious demon argument' is stronger than the 'dreaming argument'. How, if at all, are they different from each other?
4. Descartes says that he is "compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised" already before introducing the idea of a malicious demon deceiving him. So what's the point of introducing the latter idea?
5. At the end of the First Meditation, do we have reason to doubt all of our beliefs?

**Week 8: The Cogito**

**Reading:**

\*\**Second Meditation*

\*\**Objections and Replies on Meditation Two* [pp. 68-77]

\*\*Hatfield, Gary. 2003. *Descartes and the Meditations*, ch. 4

\*Williams, Bernard. 1978. *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry*, ch. 3.

1. What is the point of the analogy with Archimedes that Descartes draws in the first Paragraph of the Second Meditation? Does Descartes have good reasons for thinking that the analogy is a good one?
2. What is the nature of the 'I' that Descartes can be certain exists? How does it differ from what he used to think he was?
3. In the Second Replies, Descartes says that "When someone says ‘I am thinking, therefore I am’, he does not deduce the existence from thought by means of a syllogism...’. Why is it important for Descartes to reject the idea that the conclusion is a consequence of a syllogism? What is the alternative?
4. In the Fifth Replies, why does Descartes say that "I am walking, therefore I am" doesn’t work? Is he right?
5. If you can be certain that you exist, is this a promising foundation to build a new, reliable, system of knowledge?

**Week 9: The Existence and role of God**

**Reading:**

\*\**Third, Fourth and Fifth Meditation*

(See also *Objections and Replies on Meditation Three, Four and Five)*

\*\*Hatfield, Gary. 2003 *Descartes and the Meditations*, chs. 5-8

\*van Cleve, James. “Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle”

*Philosophical Review* 88, 1979; also in Cottingham (ed.) Descartes (Oxford Readings).

1. Towards the beginning of the Third Meditation, Descartes claims that "I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true." What does he mean by that, and is he entitled to claim this?
2. Why, given the overall project of the Meditations, does Descartes follow up the Cogito with a proof of the existence of God?
3. In the Third Meditation, Descartes distinguishes between 'innate' and 'adventitious' ideas. How, if at all, do they differ from each other?
4. "Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause." Do you agree?
5. "I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God." (Fifth Meditation). Does this also apply to mathematical knowledge, or knowledge of the principles in play in Descartes' own arguments for the existence of God?

**Week 10: Mind and Matter**

**Reading:**

\*\**Second and Sixth Meditation*

(See also *Objections and Replies on Meditation Two, Five and Six*)

\*Hatfield, Gary. 2002. *Descartes and the Meditations*, chs. 8 & 9

\*Williams, Bernard. 1978. *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, chs. 4 & 10

\*\*Wilson, Margaret. 1978. *Descartes*, chs. 2 and 6

1. What is the point of the 'wax example' in the Second Meditation? (This is a hotly debated question, but give it a go.)
2. What is matter (e.g., your body), for Descartes? Is he right?
3. How, according to Descartes, is your mind different from your body?
4. What is Descartes' argument for the "real distinction between the mind and body" (Sixth Meditation)?
5. "I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship" (Sixth Meditation). What does Descartes mean by this?