

# Philosophy 223: Cartesian Man

Fall Term 2011

## Essentials

Professor Alison Simmons

Office: 315 Emerson Hall

Email: [asimmons@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:asimmons@fas.harvard.edu)

Office Hours: T 3-4, W 4-5 (tentative)

Mondays 2-4

310 Emerson Hall

Course Website: <http://isites.harvard.edu.k82566>

## Course Description

Descartes is famous for his mind-body dualism, but what happens to human beings in his dualist metaphysics? Are they just composites of mind and body? Some sort of metaphysical mixture of mind and body? Or is there simply no room for human beings in Descartes' cosmos, as some have charged? Descartes is equally famous for championing the intellect over the senses and passions. He repeatedly urges us to set aside the senses and passions, whose deliverances he describes as "obscure and confused", in order to achieve a more God-like (or at least angelic) view of things. All of this seems rather de-humanizing. Is Descartes just down on human beings? In this seminar we'll have a close look at what Descartes actually has to say about human beings and human nature, focusing in on some of the phenomena central to human life: sensory perception, bodily sensations, passions, and the will. In the end, we'll find that Descartes has a rather rich conception of the human being, and that we've been getting a one-sided view of his metaphysics and epistemology for some time.

## Texts

The following primary texts are available at the Coop and easily obtained online:

René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. and ed., J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch [and A. Kenny], three volumes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985-91).

René Descartes. *The World and Other Writings*, trans. and ed., S. Gaukroger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Elizabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, *The Correspondence between Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, trans. and ed., L. Shapiro (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

The secondary literature on the syllabus is largely posted on the website, and most of it is available online through Hollis' e-resources. As you will see, the secondary literature will be *essential* to the course.

## Reading Assignments

Because this course is organized by topic, and Descartes didn't write a treatise on each topic separately, the readings range over a variety of texts, and sometimes point you to bits and pieces of texts. That can be confusing. In order to focus your reading of the primary texts, we will rely on secondary literature more than usual to guide us. For weeks when there is

more than one selected piece of secondary literature, I will assign some of you to one and some to the other(s) so that reading load will be manageable.

*Here, then, is the way to approach the reading each week:* (a) read as much of the primary text material as you can (use your own nose to follow what you think is most important and most interesting) and (b) read carefully the assigned secondary literature.

**Note:** *In addition to the prompt questions and secondary literature listed below for each topic, you can find an expanded version on the website which can service as reference guide and reading aid.*

### **Writing Assignments**

**1. Weekly 2-3 page Reading Sheets.** Each week you will prepare a reading sheet on the secondary literature. My intention here is threefold. First, it will help teach you to boil an article down to its bare bones (a skill worth developing). Second, it will provide you with some handy notes down the road (including the part of the road when you are writing your seminar paper and, who knows, maybe the part of the road when you are teaching Descartes!). Third, it will equip you with ideas to contribute to the discussion each week. *Bring your Reading Sheet to class in duplicate. You will give me a copy at the start of class and keep a copy for yourself to use during class.* The reading sheet need not be all prose. It can include outlines, lists, drawings, diagrams, doodles, etc.--whatever helps you organize your thoughts. They should include (in some form or other):

- bibliographic information for the article or chapter (good practice)
- capsule summary of the main thesis of the paper
- summary of the argument
- key texts you think we should look at in discussing the topic (either ones the author quotes/cites or ones you found that you think are important to the topic)
- any objections you have to the line of argument
- questions or ideas you think we should discuss

**2. Seminar Paper.** By the end of the semester you will write a (roughly) 25-page seminar paper. It's hard to sit down in Week 10 and write a paper from scratch, so here is the plan. Start looking for a topic immediately. Then we'll set aside some time most weeks to do some work-shopping. You'll tell the rest of what you are thinking about for a topic, what puzzles you are running into, what texts are giving you trouble, etc. The rest of us will give you feedback in the form of questions, things you might think about, texts and articles we have run across that might prove helpful to you, etc. The result: you will be working on the seminar paper throughout the semester, and you'll be getting feedback on it along the way. (A potential added bonus: as each of you narrows in on a topic, it will give you a unique slant on the materials we read.)

### **Tentative Schedule**

We may decide to linger over some topics, skip topics, etc., depending on time and interest, so this schedule needs to thought of as tentative.

**August 31: Introduction, Re-humanizing Descartes**

## I. Cartesian Dualism: Angels and Machines

*It is often (rightly) said that Descartes redrew the boundary between mind and body. How so? What is a Cartesian mind? What is a Cartesian body? What would actually separated minds and bodies (ones that aren't in the situation our human minds and bodies are in) be?*

### September 12 & 19: Cartesian Minds

*Cartesian minds are thinking things, but what is Cartesian thought? We'll look at the relationship among thought, intellection and consciousness.*

Primary Texts:

***Meditations***: Preface to the Reader (all), Synopsis (all), Meditation 2 (all), Meditation 3 on ideas (AT VII 37-43), Meditation 4 on error (AT 56-end), Meditation 6 (all; we'll read this over and over and over), Second O&R, topic 1 (AT VII 122-3, 129-33, 170) and definitions (AT 160), Third O&R (AT VII 172-76), Fourth O&R, topic 1 (AT VI 353-7), Fifth O&R, topic 4 (AT VII 356-7), Sixth O&R (AT VII 440-46); ***Principles***: I.8-12, 31-38, 43-48, 51-75.

Secondary Literature: for **September 12** on *Dualism and the Nature of the Mind*:

Marleen **Rozemond**, "The Nature of the Mind" in *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes*, edited by Stephen Gaukroger (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 48-66. Great overview of Descartes' redrawing the boundary between mind and body that also discusses some of the interpretive complications in Descartes' treatment of mind.

Secondary Literature for **September 19** on *Consciousness and Transparency*:

Daisie **Radner**, "Thought and Consciousness in Descartes" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26 (1988): 439-452. Classic article that raises and tackles the question what the relationship is between thought and consciousness in Descartes. Also tackles the question how "transparent" the mind is supposed to be to itself as a result of the prominent role that consciousness plays. Sets the stage for most other discussions of the topic.

### September 26: Cartesian Bodies (animals in particular)

*Cartesian bodies are extended things. Depriving animals of minds, Descartes notoriously insisted that they are (just) automata ("beast-machines"). Apart from the ethical concerns this position gives rise to (was Descartes a brute to the brutes?), it raises potential internal problems for Descartes insofar as his conception of animals (and machines) seems to smuggle in illicit teleology (in, e.g., his conception of functional organs).*

Primary Texts:

***Treatise on Man*** (as much as you can); ***Discourse on Method*** V; ***Description of the human body*** (as much as you can). What you want to do with these texts is not focus on the details (unless you decide to write your seminar paper on a topic that demands attention some of the details, e.g., sensory perception), but focus on the explanatory strategy Descartes is using to account for the body and its functions.

Secondary Literature:

Dennis **Des Chene**, *Spiritis & Clocks: Machine & Organism in Descartes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), Introduction, Chapter 4, "Tools of Knowledge" and Chapter 6, "Unity of the Body." In depth discussion of the idea and use of the "machine" in Descartes and in the early modern period, along with discussion of the problems it poses for Descartes (illicit teleology and insufficient unity).

## II. Mind-Body Union: Putting Humpty Dumpty back together again

### October 3: The Metaphysics of Mind-Body Union

*Dualism is all well and good, but where does that leave human beings? Although you might think they are just composites of mind and body (take one mind, one body, shake them together a bit and you get a human being), Descartes insists to the contrary that human beings are unions of mind and body. What does that mean? Is this a concession on Cartesian dualism, or can it be understood within the bounds of Cartesian dualism?*

Primary Texts:

Works:

***Meditations***: Meditation 6 (again); Fourth Replies (AT VII 219, 228); Sixth Replies (AT VII 440-47); ***Discourse*** V (AT 55-60); ***Principles*** IV.189; ***Comments on a Certain Broadsheet, Passions of the Soul*** I.30-34.

***Correspondence with Elizabeth***:

E to D, 16 May 1643 (AT III 660-62); D to E, 21 May 1643 (AT III 663-68); E to D, 20 June 1643 (AT III 683-85); D to E, 28 June 1643 (AT III 690-95); E to D, 1 July 1643 (AT IV 1-3).

Other ***Correspondence***:

letters to Hyperaspistes, August 1641 (AT III 423-25); to Regius, December 1641 (AT III 454-55; 460-62), January 1642 (AT III 491-509); to Mesland, 9 February 1645 (AT IV 162-70); to Regius, July 1645 (AT IV 248-50); to Mesland, 1645 or 1646 (AT IV 345-48); for [Arnauld], 29 July 1648 (AT V 220-23); to More, August 1649 (AT V 402).

Secondary Literature:

Paul **Hoffman**, “The Unity of Descartes’s Man,” *The Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 339-370. Famously argues that Descartes remains an Aristotelian when it comes to the human being; mind is the form of the body and the human being an old-fashioned Aristotelian corporeal substance. (Not, as Schmalz argues, a third kind of *Cartesian* substance with its own principal attribute and set of modification.)

Marleen **Rozemond**, *Descartes’s Dualism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), chapter 5, “Hylomorphism and the Unity of the Human Being.” Develops the “café au lait” reading of the union according to which a new sort of thing, though not a full-fledged new kind of substance, emerges from the union. The nature of the mind changes as a result of the union.

## III. The Cognitive Life of the Human Being

*Now we’ll have a look at some of the cognitive phenomena that are distinctive of the human being (the mind-body union), and in particular sensory perception (both “internal” bodily sensations and “external” perceptions of the world), the passions, and the will (seat of human freedom).*

### October 17: Sensory Processing

*What’s the causal process by which we come to have sensory experiences? First, how are we to understand the “institution of nature” set up by God between motions in the pineal gland and sensations in the mind? Second, what is attributed to the institution of nature and what to the habitual judgments that the mind makes upon those sensations (another way to put it: how much of the process is a matter of psycho-physiological hard-wiring, and how much of it is a matter of psychology, i.e., of what the mind adds to the*

*mix)? And finally, is sensory processing significantly different for (what Boyle and Locke came to call) “primary and secondary qualities”?*

#### Primary Texts:

**Meditations:** Meditation 6 (esp. AT VII 80-end); Sixth O&R, 9<sup>th</sup> topic (AT 418 & 436-439); **Optics** (essay appended to the *Discourse on Method*) Discourses 1, 4-6; **Treatise on Man**

#### Secondary Literature:

Ann Wilbur **MacKenzie**, “Descartes on Sensory Representation: A Study of the *Dioptrics*,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supp. 16 (1991): 109-47. Fragments Cartesian sensory perception into (a) sensory perception of primary qualities (which are representational and nonphenomenal) and (b) sensations of secondary qualities (which are phenomenal and nonrepresentational). The former aide in the search after the truth; the latter do not. Also offers a reconstruction of Cartesian representation as “range restricted natural indication”. [Note: this piece gets into the issue of sensory representation, and so is listed there as well.]

Alison **Simmons**, “Descartes on the Cognitive Structure of Sensory Experience,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 67, no. 3 (2003): 549-579. Argues against the (then) prevailing view that primary quality perception is somehow more intellectual than secondary quality perception, and that, as a result, sensory experience is curiously “bifurcated” into an intellectual and sensory component. Explores along the way some of the details of Descartes’ account of sensory processing.

#### October 24: Sensory Representation

*Do sensory ideas represent anything? If so, what? And how (in virtue of what)? The standard line used to be that they don’t represent anything at all (they are “mere sensations”), but today the majority interpretive view is that they do represent, though there is considerable controversy over what and how they represent. This topic gets us into some thorny technical apparatus (ideas, objective reality, material falsity, obscurity and confusion). I recommend starting with my “representation” entry for the Descartes lexicon for an orientation to the literature.*

#### Primary Source Readings:

Follow the leads in the secondary literature; you’ll have seen most of them before in another context.

#### Secondary Source Readings:

Alison **Simmons**, “Representation” in *Descartes Lexicon*, Lawrence Nolan, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). In manuscript on the website. Provides an overview of the interpretive controversies concerning the nature of representation in Descartes’ work, including sensory representation.

Andrew **Pessin**, “Mental Transparency, Direct Sensation, and the unity of the Cartesian Mind” in *Topics in Early Modern Philosophy of Mind*, edited by Jon Miller (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 1-37. Nice treatment of other position, and then argues that sensations do represent, and do so intrinsically (not based on, e.g., their causal or functional relations to the environment); they represent in virtue of their objective reality, but don’t reveal to us from the inside what they represent because of their obscurity and confusion.

Margaret **Wilson**, “Descartes on the Representationality of Sensation,” in *Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by J. Cover and M. Kulstad (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990), 1-22. Landmark article trying to sort out what mental (and especially sensory) representation might amount to in Descartes; distinguishes two kinds of representationality, which she calls “presentational” and “referential.” The article also dives in into the labyrinth of Descartes’ treatment of material falsity in the *Fourth Replies*.

### October 31: Function of the Senses

*The typical line on the senses in Descartes is that they are nothing but epistemic troublemakers that misrepresent the world through they obscure and confused perceptions, and that they are to be put aside in favor of the intellect’s superior clear and distinct perceptions. In fact, Descartes re-conceives the role that the senses are supposed to place in the cognitive economy of the human mind: they are life savers, and relative to that role they turn out to be epistemically superior to the intellect.*

Primary Texts:

Same old texts.

Secondary Literature:

Alison **Simmons**, “Guarding the Body: A Cartesian Phenomenology of Perception,” *Contemporary Perspectives on Early Modern Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Vere Chappell*, edited by Paul Hoffman and Gideon Yaffe (Broadview Press, 2008), 81-113.

Alison **Simmons**, “Spatial Perception from a Cartesian Point of View” *Philosophical Topics* 31 (2003): 395-423.

### November 7: The Passions

*What are the passions of the soul, and what is the process by which they arise? How are they related to the rest of the contents of the human mind?*

Primary Texts:

***Passions of the Soul*** (as much as you can); ***Correspondence with Elizabeth*** (as much as you can)

Secondary Literature:

Paul **Hoffman**, “Three Dualist Theories of the Passions” *Philosophical Topics* 19 (1991): 153-200. An excerpt of just the Descartes part of this paper is in his collection of essays, *Essays on Descartes* (New York: OUP, 2009).

### November 14: Passionate Representation

*What is the function of the passions in human life? Are the representational states? If so, what do they represent and how do they do so? If not, what function do they serve? How (if at all) does thinking of them in the context of the mind-body union help us to understand them (or help us understand the union itself)?*

Primary Texts:

The same.

Secondary Literature:

Sean **Greenberg**, “Descartes on the Passions: Function, Representation, and Motivation,” *Noûs* 41:4 (2007): 714-734. Challenges the (relatively new) assumption that Cartesian passions are representational states, arguing that Descartes conceives of them as motivational states, arguing that while the passions do respond to representations, they function to focus the attention of the mind on thing represented by the senses and to motivate choice and action.

### **November 21: The Will: Human Freedom and Virtue**

*To be free we are supposed to exercise our wills properly. But what does that mean? Descartes has a story to tell about the proper use of the will in our cognitive lives (yielding knowledge) in Meditation 4. He has a story to tell about the proper use of the will in our passionate lives (yielding virtue) in the Passions of the Soul and correspondence with Elizabeth.*

Primary Texts:

***Meditations*** review Meditations 1 & 4; ***Passions of the Soul***, focusing on 17-18, 34-50 and Part III.

Secondary Literature:

Paul **Hoffman**, “The Passions and Freedom of the Will” in *Passion and Virtue in Descartes*, edited by A. Gombay and B. Williston (New York: Humanity Books, 2003), 261-99.

### **November 28: Catch Up or Work-shopping Session**