Course Description:

This course provides an historical introduction to Western philosophy through the examination of a work by one of the most important philosophers of all times, René Descartes. In addition to analyzing the reasoning in Descartes’ Meditations on First Philosophy, and discussing the ways he is ushering in “modern philosophy,” we will also evaluate the arguments of two of Descartes’ important critics: Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and David Hume. The topics that we will treat include scepticism; the existence and nature of human minds, bodies, and God; the relation of cause and effect; mind-body problems; knowledge that is independent of sense experience; and the problem of induction. At the beginning of the course, we will work on “reconstructing” arguments in a text. That is, we will work on interpreting a text in order to extract the structure of the reasoning in the form of premises and conclusions. We will also focus on evaluating arguments in terms of the validity of formal structure and the truth of premises. There will be ample opportunity to demonstrate mastery of textual interpretation and argument analysis in the one-page, weekly reflection assignments; the final take-home essay; and the two essay exams. Given the importance and breadth of the texts and topics covered, the stress on critical evaluation of arguments, and the focus on written and verbal expression, this course meets the objectives of the General Education (Arts and Literature) curriculum.

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