

Freedom

Readings (see copies for full bibliographic details)

[1] Descartes, from the *Fourth Meditation*, ¶¶8–10.

[2] Leibniz, from the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §13.

[3] Leibniz, from *New Essays on Human Understanding*, pp. 175–8.

[4] ★ Leibniz, *Letter to Coste*.

1. [1] The mediator finds that his will is ‘not restricted in any way’ (¶8). Why is this?
2. [1] What is the source of the meditator’s mistakes (¶9)?
3. [2] What is the difference between ‘absolute’ and ‘hypothetical’ necessity? Why is this relevant?
- 4.★ [2] Was Caesar free to cross the Rubicon?
5. [2] [3] Explain the phrase ‘reasons incline without necessitating’.
6. [3] Why is it important to ‘distinguish what is necessary from what is contingent though determined’ (cf. §13)?
- 7.★ [4] [1] In *Med. IV* (cf. Reading [1]), Descartes claims that the freedom of indifference is the ‘lowest grade of freedom’ (¶8). Leibniz agrees. But why?

Background Information. (a) In Reading [1], Descartes uses the distinction between two kinds of freedom. The freedom of *indifference* is the ability to choose one way or another, or to select among equally possible alternative actions. When we act freely in this sense, we could have done otherwise. In Reading [4], Leibniz attacks this kind of freedom as ‘chimerical’ or fictitious. The freedom of *spontaneity* is the ability to act in line with, or from, one’s will. Free acts in this sense are self-determined or determined internally. (b) What is *contingent* is possible, but not necessary; what is *necessary* could not be any different. For instance, it is a necessary truth that I could not be taller than myself (cf. [2]). (c) *Fatalism* (Reading [2]) is the view that whatever happens could not happen differently: what happens at any given time is bound or ‘destined’ to happen just as it does, *whatever the past*, since the present is not (causally) related to the past: it is all just fate. This is not *determinism*, which says that *given* the past, the present could not be different, or what happens now happens *because* of what happened earlier. (d) Reading [3] is a dialogue between Philaletes (Phil.), which means ‘lover of truth’, and Theophilus (Theo.), which means ‘lover of God’. They are spokespersons for Locke and Leibniz, respectively. (e) *Buridan’s ass* (Reading [4]) starves to death because it cannot decide between two equally attractive stacks of hay; since it is impelled equally towards both, the ass cannot and does not act: it is in a ‘perfect equilibrium’. (f) In the same Reading, Leibniz mentions ‘small impressions’. These are the *petit perceptions*, and they are ‘small’ because they are unconscious.