**READING GUIDE WEEK ONE**

**September 12**

**CARTESIAN SKEPTICISM**

“Discussions in the philosophy of mind usually start off by assuming that everybody has always known how to divide the world into the mental and the physical –that this distinction is commonsensical and intuitive.”

Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*

# Before you begin your reading, reflect on how you understand the distinction between the mental and the physical, and/or between the mind and the body.

# Descartes’ *Meditations*

### Rene Descartes [1596-1650] is often considered to be the founder of the modern discipline of western philosophy. His understanding of the philosophical method and his dualism of mind and body have left a deep imprint on the philosophical tradition and continue to influence contemporary thought. Hence this will be our starting point.

### Descartes practiced a brand of skepticism that is often associated with philosophical inquiry. In the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, published in 1641 when he was 45 years old, Descartes claims to have demonstrated two things: “the existence of God and the distinction of the soul from the body.” We will be reading *Meditations* I this week, with a particular focus on the skepticism of Descartes. In *Meditations I*, Descartes engages in a program of radical doubt. He practices an extreme kind of skepticism, in which he questions everything that he had formerly believed.

READ

Descartes *Meditations: First Meditation*

(link provided on moodle)

### **QUESTIONS**

1. **What is Descartes’ main purpose in *Meditations* I? (What is the question that motivates his inquiry)**
2. **Why does Descartes feel that at least once in his life he would need to “rid [himself] of all opinions that [he] had formerly accepted”? Do you think this is a worthwhile project?**
3. **What criterion does Descartes use to determine whether or not he should reject any particular belief?**
4. **Why doesn’t Descartes need to assess each one of his beliefs individually?**
5. **Look at the different types of doubt raised by Descartes. Why is his doubt systematic?**
6. **Why does Descartes reject knowledge achieved through the senses? Do you agree with his argument here?**
7. **Do you think you can know whether you are dreaming or awake?**
8. **Why does Descartes invoke the strategy of the evil demon? What do you think of this strategy?**

Use your journal to respond to the above questions and come to class prepared to share your thoughts. You need not limit your reflections to the above questions. Fee free to formulate your own ideas/questions in response to the text.