

Lecture 05: Descartes

s.butterfill@warwick.ac.uk

The usefulness of extensive doubt ‘lies in freeing us from our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses.’

1. Descartes’ Aim in The Meditations

‘these six meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle.’

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2. Aristotlians vs Descartes on the Essential Nature of Bodies

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‘in the whole history of physics up to now people have only tried to imagine some causes to explain the phenomena of nature, with virtually no success. Compare my assumptions with the assumptions of others. Compare all their real qualities, their substantial forms, their elements and countless other such things with my single assumption that all bodies are composed of parts’ (Descartes 1984b, p. 107 AT 2:199-200 quoted (with incorrect page number) by Sorell 2018).

‘The only principles which I accept or require in physics are those of geometry and pure mathematics; these principles explain all natural phenomena, and enable us to provide quite certain demonstrations regarding them’ (Descartes 1984a, p. 247 AT 2:64)

‘The whole of of Philosophy is like a tree, of which the roots are Metaphysics, the trunk is Physics, and the branches which come out of this trunk are all the other sciences ...’ (Descartes 1984a, p. 186)

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3. Wax

‘even bodies are not strictly perceived by the sense or the faculty of the imagination but by the intellect alone’ (Meditation 2)

‘I can grasp that the wax is capable of countless changes, yet I am unable to run through this immeasurable number of changes in my imagination... The nature of this piece of wax is in no way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone’ (Meditation 2).

‘Something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind’ (Meditation 2).

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References

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- Sorell, T. (2018). Experimental philosophy and the history of philosophy. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 26(5), 829–849.