

Handout #1 - Descartes' Meditations

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25b Thursday Sections -- Handout #1

Historical Background:

- 16th century: wars of religion and independence
- Pre-modern worldview: homology, hierarchy, and political-theological structure
- Strength of the schools and the church -- fear of persecution (Galileo-Complex)
- Advent of the modern self -- Montaigne, Shakespeare, late Renaissance humanism.

Context for Cartesian Philosophy:

- Descartes's philosophical program is motivated by a kind of constitutive antagonism between tradition and progress (philosophical, religious, and political); between public lives and private selves; inner constitution and outer appearance.
- He can be read (especially in the *Discourse*) as advocating for the right of each individual to determine *for themselves* whether the institutions and traditions that organize public and private life are rationally justifiable. At the same time, he appears eager to disclaim any political or otherwise non-philosophical allegiances.
- A similar conflict plays out in Descartes' remarks on religion. It is hard *not* to read him as coyly paying lip service to the Church, but this conflicts with what we know about Descartes' biography.
- Perhaps a better way to interpret the situation is that Descartes was trying to ingratiate his *philosophia nova* with the Scholastic church-fathers (cf. letter to the masters of U. Paris).

Cartesian Metaphysics and Epistemology:

- What is Descartes' aim in the *Meditations*? To lay *secure* (= indubitable) foundations for knowledge. Descartes is the quintessential *foundationalist*, meaning that for him the totality of knowledge (and ontology -- the basic entities and structures of the world) forms a kind of pyramidal hierarchy, with the most basic principles providing the foundations for the derivative principles that they entail.
- There are here traces of the above-mentioned antagonism between tradition and innovation: Descartes' rules for reasoning (read in section) echo the Schoolbooks produced as aids to 'right thinking'.

Structures of Knowledge and Substance:

- **Substance** is perhaps *the* most important concept in Cartesian Philosophy. It provides a kind of bridge between the Aristotelian and Scholastic sources of Descartes' philosophy and a good case-study in the ways Descartes was both beholden to his influences while seeking to free himself from their grasp.
- So what is **Substance**? There are (*almost*) two senses of the term in philosophy, one Aristotelian and one Cartesian. In Aristotelian philosophy, a substance (Greek: *ousia*) is the most basic of all the *categories*: it is that in which all *qualities* or *properties* inhere, but it is itself not a property. Substances for Aristotle and the Scholastics were not always, however, masses of undifferentiated *stuff* (perhaps the more colloquial sense of the word today.) Everyday things -- 'human,' 'horse,' and 'statue' are common examples of substances in Aristotle.
- What about Descartes? The important thing to notice is that Descartes *does* uphold the basic definition of substances as those entities which bear predicates (properties attributed in language) but which cannot be predicated of anything else. What distinguishes the Cartesian up-take of substance is the identification of (finite, created) substances with only one of two basic types of entities: extended things (*res extensae*) and thinking things (*res cogitantes*). The various different ways in which these substances appear in the world is explained in terms of the concept of **modes**.
- For Descartes, all the apparently diversity of phenomena (observable things; literally *appearances*) is prone to mislead if the apparent diversity of effects is attributed to a unobservable plurality of causes. There are only two kinds of causes for Descartes: motion and thought. (This will be important to bear in mind for Locke!). Motion is the causal medium of extended substances; thought the causal medium of thinking substances.