

Gentrain Unit 9 Philosophy of Descartes, 26 September, 2013. Dr. Cindy Ausec

Rene Descartes 1596 – 1650

- French philosopher and writer who spent much of his adult life in the Dutch Republic
- Dubbed the “Father of Modern Philosophy” – *Meditations on First Philosophy* is still a standard philosophy text
- Also influential in mathematics
 - Cartesian coordinate system – allows algebraic equations to be expressed as geometric shapes, in a 2D coordinate system
 - Credited as the father of analytical geometry
- One of the key figures in the Scientific Revolution

Used a tree as a metaphor for his holistic view of philosophy

- Roots are metaphysics; the trunk is physics – provides the basis for the rest of the sciences; and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences (the three principle sciences are medicine mechanics and morals)

Against Scholasticism

- Broke with Aristotelian tenets in two ways
 - Rejected “substantial forms” as explanatory principles in physics
 - Rejected any appeal to ends – divine or natural – in explaining natural phenomena
- Rejected the thesis that all knowledge must come from sensation

Method

- Rejected the Aristotelian “syllogism” argument forms
- Sought to avoid these difficulties through the clarity and absolute certainty of geometrical-style demonstration

Meditations on First Philosophy

- Consists of six “meditations”
- Aim was to show that there is at least one intuitive truth that is beyond all doubt and from which the rest of human knowledge can be deduced
- Conducted from a first person perspective

First Meditation: Concerning Those Things That Can Be Called into Doubt

- Lays out several arguments for doubting all of his previously held beliefs
 - Observes that the senses sometimes deceive and you might be dreaming
 - Proposes an evil demon with supreme power and cunning that put all of his efforts into deceiving him, so that he is always mistaken about everything
- “Methodological” or “hyperbolic” doubt
 - Doubts and supposed falsehood of all his beliefs are for the sake of his method
 - Purpose is to clear the mind of preconceived opinions that might obscure the truth

- Goal is to find something that cannot be doubted even though an evil demon is deceiving him and even though he is dreaming

Second Meditation: Concerning the Nature of the Human Mind

- Tries to establish absolute certainty in his famous reasoning: *Cogito, ergo sum* “I think therefore I am”
 - The fact that I am thinking, implies that there must be something engaged in that activity, namely “I”
 - “I exist” is an indubitable and therefore absolutely certain belief that serves as an axiom from which other absolutely certain truths can be deduced
- Nature of the Mind and its ideas
 - Concludes that he is a thinking thing – a mind “a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sense perceptions”
 - The mind is by its nature not a body, but an immaterial thing
 - The mind is a substance and the modes of thinking substance are its ideas

Third Meditation: Concerning God, That He Exists

- Three kinds of ideas
 - Fabricated – mere inventions of the mind
 - Adventitious – are sensations produced by some material thing existing externally to the mind
 - Innate – are placed in the mind by God at creation – Geometrical ideas are paradigm examples of innate ideas – idea of a triangle – three sided figure
- Sets out to prove existence of God - Something that is actually an infinite substance, namely God, must be the cause of the idea of infinite substance. Therefore, God exists as the only possible cause of this idea

Fourth Meditation: Concerning the True and the False

- Proves that God is not a deceiver – The will to deceive is “undoubtedly evidence of malice or weakness = an imperfection. Since God has all perfections and no imperfections – God cannot be a deceiver

Fifth Meditation: Concerning the Essence of Material Things, and Again Concerning God, That He Exists

- God is deducible from the idea of his nature just as the fact that the sum of the interior angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles is deducible from the idea of the nature of a triangle
- Idea of God is that of a supremely perfect being, with all perfections to the highest degree

Sixth Meditation: Concerning the Existence of Material Things, and the Real Distinction between Mind and Body

- Dualism of Body and Mind