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## RENÉ DESCARTES (1596 - 1650)

MAIN POINT: Descartes demonstrates that THINKING is itself the source of knowledge.

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### I. SOME PRELIMINARIES

- A. Office & Office Hours
  - KH 144 (KH = Murray Krieger Hall)
  - Monday 1:30 – 3:00
  - Thursday 11:00 – 12:30

B. Please always bring your books to lecture.

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### II. TRANSITION: ARISTOTLE TO DESCARTES

384-322 BC OR BCE      1596-1650 AD OR CE

- A. Descartes' view of the difference:
  - [T]hese 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" (Qtd from *Stan. Ency. of Phil.*).

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### II. TRANSITION: ARISTOTLE TO DESCARTES

- B. Aristotle's hylomorphism (matter-formism) from Prof. Schwab's lectures:
  - 1. The soul is the form of the body. The body is matter of the soul. A living being is ensouled. The soul is the life-conferring element in the compound "living being." The soul is the actuality of the body.
  - 2. The body and soul are part of one thing. Hylomorphism does not suggest any opposition between soul the body.

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### II. TRANSITION: ARISTOTLE TO DESCARTES

- C. Descartes rejects Aristotle's hylomorphism
  - 1. He rejects the matter-form framework and he doesn't analyze the soul into parts or faculties (nutritive, sensitive, & rational).
  - 2. Bodies are to be explained quantitatively--by size, shape and motion of the "nano"-elements that make them up
  - 3. He insists on a strict body-mind dualism; the mind is a thinking thing and the body is an extended thing.

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### II. TRANSITION: ARISTOTLE TO DESCARTES

- D. Aristotle and Descartes were alike in seeking to systematize knowledge.
  - Descartes wrote: 'all philosophy is like a tree, whose roots are metaphysics, whose trunk is physics, and whose branches, which grow from this trunk, are all of the other sciences, which reduce to three principle sciences, namely medicine, mechanics, and morals.'
- E. But they were very different in the way that they grounded their systems of knowledge.
  - Metaphysics: "The branch of philosophy which studies fundamental principles intended to describe or explain all that is, and which are not themselves explained by anything more fundamental; the study of first principles; the study of being insofar as it is being."

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### III. PREPARING TO THINK WITH DESCARTES

- A. Are your senses reliable?

- B. Trusting the senses requires continual correction.

8  C. TRUSTING THE SENSES. . . NOT

9  IV. OVERVIEW OF DESCARTES' *MEDITATIONS*

A. Meditation #1: Everything can be doubted.

B. Meditation #2: I think. I exist. I am a thing that thinks.

C. Meditation #3: God exists.

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D. Meditation #6: The Meditator opens his eyes. The world exists. The mind is separate from the body.

10  V. DESCARTES' HEURISTIC METHOD

A. Descartes' Meditator re-enacts the path of discovery.

--This re-enactment is both a philosophical and a rhetorical choice.

B. Descartes' project: To withdraw from all past beliefs in order to **think new**.

C. Having to walk the path of discovery requires us at first to dwell in confusion and uncertainty.

11  VI. THESIS: DESCARTES DEMONSTRATES THAT **THINKING IS ITSELF THE SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE**.

- A. Meditation #1: Descartes calls everything into doubt.

- 1. Just say 'NO' to every belief (e.g., 59, 63)

- 2. It is necessary to destroy foundations (instead of every belief, one by one).

- 3. Doubting globally: the "dream hypothesis" and the "evil genius" (See p. 62.)

- 4. **Doubt is a device to achieve certainty.**

- **Systematic doubt, radical doubt, hyperbolic doubt.**

12  VI. THESIS: DESCARTES DEMONSTRATES THAT **THINKING IS ITSELF THE SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE**.

- B. Meditation #2: The mind is better known than the body.

1. Doubting leads to Extreme Makeover (63-4).

2. Crucial question: Is it then the case that I too do not exist?

3. DISCOVERY: I EXIST!!!!!!

"There is no doubt that I exist, if he is deceiving me" (64).

13  VI. THESIS: DESCARTES DEMONSTRATES THAT **THINKING IS ITSELF THE SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE (CONT.)**.

3. Question: "What am I—I, who now necessarily exist?" (64)?

Answer: A thing that thinks = a thing that "doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses" (66).

- 14  B. Meditation #2: The mind is better known than the body (cont).  
■ 4. Even sensing is “nothing other than thinking” (66) The example of the wax (68)
- 15  B. Meditation #2: The mind is better known than the body (cont).  
■ 5. Empiricists have all along been wrong.  
a) The knowledge we all thought came from the senses actually depends on the mind's thinking process.  
b) We believe that we gain knowledge from the senses, but in reality, that knowledge is vetted by the mind.
- 16  VII. SOME QUESTIONS FOR DESCARTES  
■ A. Is hyperbolic doubt—or a general demolition of all past opinions—possible?  
■ B. Why do you call your philosophical work a meditation? “[T]his undertaking is arduous” (63).
- 17  VII. SOME QUESTIONS FOR DESCARTES (CONT.)  
■ C. Why are you called a modern thinker?  
■ 1. Rejection of authority  
■ 2. Complete confidence in working from thought in order to achieve certainty.  
■ 3. The individual thinking being is completely validated. Descartes’ “I” is beyond examination.  
■ 4. Finding the right method will lead to discovery.
- 18  VIII. MODERN THINKERS