Modern Rationalism
LART602
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See also notes in the study guide (#8).

Descartes

- In his *Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence*, Descartes wrote that
  > I came to see that the exclusive concern of mathematics is with questions of order or measure and that it is irrelevant whether the measure in question involves numbers, shapes, stars, sounds or any other object whatever. This made me realize that there must be a general science which explains all the points that can be raised concerning order and measure irrespective of the subject-matter, and that this science should be termed *mathesis universalis*…[1]

  Galileo, too, at about the same time, wrote that the "great book of the universe cannot be understood unless one can read the language in which it is written – the language of mathematics."[2] It is difficult to over-state the extent to which the proposition of a quantified understanding of reality impressed early Modern thinkers. And it is equally difficult to over-state the influence of this proposition on the world since. Science, as we now know it, essentially begins here.[3]
- With the rise of quantified science arises efforts to demonstrate an equally exacting standard of knowledge. This standard is identified by Descartes in terms of doubt or, rather, the lack of it: whatever cannot be doubted is known with certainty; only certain knowledge it would seem, ensures a correct understanding of the world around us.
- Certainty, however, is a difficult standard to achieve, as the arguments of Meditation I show: little if any of our knowledge is impervious to doubt, for, it seems, we cannot rule out the possibility that we are dreaming, when considering any given present state of affairs, and cannot rule out the possibility that even our most careful reasoning is not the product of some error, perhaps prompted by some evil demon. Am I awake typing notes in my office, or dreaming that I am while asleep under my desk? Are two and two really four, or does it just seem so to me?
- A proposition that does appear resistant to doubt, at least while we consider it, is the proposition, "I exist." This, it would seem, cannot be doubted as long as we contemplate it, since in order to contemplate it, there must exist some subject – an

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[1] Descartes: *Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence*, Rule 4 (AT 378)
[2] Galileo: *Il Saggiatore*; quoted in John Cottingham, *The Rationalists*, Oxford University Press, p. 5.
[3] The term 'science' derives from the Latin, *scientia*, meaning exact knowledge; the term comes into general use during this time.

"I" – to do the contemplating.[4] From this meager beginning, Descartes hopes to build a foundation for certainty across human knowledge.

- Descartes is a rationalist philosopher (in our second sense; see Terminology Handout), and so believes that it is reason, rather than sensation, that is our primary route to knowledge. It is reason, not sense, that assures him of his first certainty, the *Cogito*. He seeks to confirm that it is reason, primarily, that informs us of important truths in the subsequent discussion of the ball of wax, in Med. II. Note, here, that it is reason, not sensation or the imagination, that tells him that the piece of wax is *malleable* and the *persisting subject of change* (AT 31/20-21).[5]
- Beyond the knowledge of his own existence, Descartes is able to determine that is *essence* is "a thinking thing" (AT 27/18), that his body is not essential to his existence, and that his thought includes such "modes" as doubt, understanding, affirmation, denial, will, etc. (AT 28/19).
- In order to extend his field of knowledge beyond this solipsism, Descartes determines that he must establish a "rule of reason," namely, that "whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true" (Med. III, AT 35/24). This rule, in turn, is guaranteed by the existence of a good God (Med. IV, AT 53-54/37-38). In other words, if God exists (and is good), then as long as Descartes uses his faculty of reason carefully, he can be certain that he acquires truth. (See Med. VI for application of this idea.)
- To this end, Descartes must demonstrate the existence of God, which he attempts in Meds. III and V. The argument in Med. III is a version of the Cosmological Argument: from the mere fact of having the idea of God, we can be certain that such a being exists. The argument in Med. V is a version of the Ontological Argument: from the content of the idea of God, we can be certain that such a being exists.
- Many commentators, however, have objected that Descartes has reasoned in a "circle": Descartes can trust the rule of reason if he knows that God exists, and he knows that God exists only if his arguments are sound, but how does he know that his arguments are sound? If he appeals to reason, here, then he is appealing to the very principle that God's existence is intended to ensure. Descartes insisted that his position was not vulnerable to this criticism, though most commentators find his reasoning unconvincing. Spinoza's comments on reasoning may provide some comfort to his position.

Spinoza

- Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* epitomizes the Modern conviction that clear, precise thought can relieve humanity of its suffering. Aside from their fascination with the physical world, that is, the Moderns maintained a keen sense of moral responsibility: the power of reason might be turned to human good.

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[4] This line of thought, encapsulated in the Latin, "*Cogito, ergo, sum,*" (I think, therefore, I am) is sometimes called "the *Cogito*."

[5] As previously, page-references are first to the AT (Adam and Tannery) Latin text from which standard translations are made and second to the Cambridge edition (Cottingham, ed.) available in the WU bookstore. AT page numbers appear in the margins of the Cambridge edition.

- Note, then, Spinoza's goals of "true" and "supreme goods" (¶¶12-13), the promise of "continuous and supreme joy to all eternity" (¶1). That humans are capable of a better life seems obvious to the rationalist thinker of this period, and that we are obliged to assist in its pursuit seems equally obvious.
- Spinoza is perhaps understandably vague about the content of the supreme human good, but his account includes these tantalizing details: that it is a communal state consisting in "knowledge of the union which the mind has with the whole of Nature" (¶13). What this means, exactly, is difficult to say. It alludes to the difficulty of the human mind penetrating to the ultimate nature of reality, but the exact relationship implied isn't clear. A purely noetic relationship might not obviously entail our greatest good; and it is in any case *knowledge of* this relationship that Spinoza speaks here of. What, then, would knowledge of our unity with everything around us do for us?
- Note, again, the standard of knowledge, for Spinoza, of which, as I suggest in the study guide, Descartes's *Cogito* is one instance. In the proper state of knowledge, we see clearly a reality, and see it in such a way that we can clearly see that it is precisely reality that we are seeing. It is a direct and witting acquaintance with some feature of the world, one that places us intimately in that world, not as a distant, frustrated observer, but as a participant and author. Perhaps recognition of this status would, indeed, hold a key to improving our lives.
- In order to achieve this union, Spinoza asserts that we must "emend" the intellect (18). Thus the details of his study and its generally optimistic tone.

Bach – see the study guide for notes adequate to this subject.