

Study Guide: Modern Rationalism

LART602

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Class #8: Modern Rationalism

Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy*¹

Dedicatory Letter to the Sorbonne (recommended)

Preface to the Reader (recommended)

Synopsis of the following six Meditations (recommended)

Meditation I, entire

Meditation II, entire

Meditation III, ¶¶1-4 (the rest is recommended)

Meditation IV, ¶¶1-3 (the rest is recommended)

Meditation V, entire

Meditation VI, entire

Spinoza: *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* §§1-30 [e]

Bach: Brandenburg Concerto No. 6, 1st Movement²

Descartes (1596-1650)

- The modern³ period begins in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and remains broadly dominant, today. It is characterized by the belief in rationalism and a rational cosmos, generally, and specifically in the possibility of quantified analysis of reality – i.e., “science”, as we understand it today. Major, initial developments include Copernicus’ heliocentric theory of the solar system; Galileo’s observations of the moon’s surface, Jupiter’s planets, and the rings of Saturn, as well as his study of gravitation by means of the inclined plane; Descartes’s development of analytic geometry and the coordinate system bearing his name; and Newton’s formulation of the laws of motion.
- Descartes is the father of modern philosophy and modern thought generally. While there are many important figures in the beginnings of modernity, Descartes’s philosophical work seeking to establish the principles on which the modern, scientific view is based is the clearest and most influential such account. Descartes is also an important exponent of rationalism in the second sense of our term. (See terminology handout.) I.e., Descartes holds that the primary faculty of human knowledge is the faculty of reason (as against the senses).
- We read Descartes, then, as the leading inspiration of an intellectual movement that remains powerful if not ubiquitous today. Central to Descartes’s view is his belief in the power of reason to reveal truth. As it was for Plato, mathematical truth represents

¹ Descartes’s *Meditations in First Philosophy* may be found here:

<http://www.classicallibrary.org/descartes/meditations/>. See here for a simplified text:

<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/de.html>.

² An interesting and useful visual and audio version may be found here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mR8LrZBg02k>; see also the score linked to our webpage.

³ This is a specialized use of the term ‘modern’ which, obviously, is also used in a broader sense.

a paradigm of human knowledge. Where Plato postulates the existence of a non-physical realm of ideas, however, Descartes identifies the physical realm as a proper form of reality (along with the mental). Descartes's efforts to demonstrate how it is possible for us to know reality embody one of Western Civilization's preeminent fascinations. How is it possible, in fact, for the rational mind to grasp truth about the empirical world?

- Pay some attention to the preliminary materials (Dedicatory Letter, etc.) and especially to the first three paragraphs of Meditation I. Think about Descartes's overall goal, "to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last" (17/12).⁴ What does this project tell us about Descartes's view of cosmological order?
- Think, too, about the means by which Descartes proposes to establish this lasting stability. What tools or processes does he deploy towards his stated end? (Descartes's method has come to be called the "method of doubt.") Note in this connection the means that Descartes employs in Med. I to challenge his previous beliefs, and also the discussion in Med. II of the piece of wax: by what means is Descartes able to perceive the true nature of the wax? Note that this discussion is intended to confirm his finding in the *Cogito*.⁵ Further, more specific statement of Descartes's method is found at the beginnings of Meds. III and IV.
- In Med. V, Descartes advances an argument for the existence of God. (There is also an argument advanced in Med. III.) Keep track of the overall purpose for this demonstration. I.e., what role in Descartes's overall project does knowledge of the existence of God play?
- The role of knowledge of the existence of God is developed and applied in Med. VI. Here, Descartes advances his final arguments intended to establish the foundation of science. What, exactly, is the line of argument, here? How, exactly, do we obtain empirical knowledge, according to Descartes? How, in particular, does Descartes argue for the existence of mind-external bodies? How does he know that he is not dreaming?

Spinoza (1632-1677)

- Spinoza was the second great rationalist⁶ philosopher of the modern period. His method was in some respects more strict than Descartes's, ultimately entailing demonstration of philosophical claim by geometry-style proof. His views were also more radical than those of Descartes, including the belief that God comprises all reality and that what we think of as the mental and physical are but two of God's infinitely many attributes. These views are the focus of his *magnum opus*, his *Ethics*.
- Our reading is from an earlier work intended to demonstrate the means by which humans might approach the ideal life proper to them. An important theme in modern rationalism is the goal of improving the human condition. Europe of the 17th Century suffered from the usual human plights, and the ravages of the 30-Years War (1618-1648) would have been a sharp memory for Spinoza. The primary sources of human

⁴ 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.

⁵ The "*Cogito*" is the famous line of reasoning rendered in Latin thus: *Cogito, ergo sum*. "I think, therefore, I am."

⁶ Again we encounter the ambiguity of our term 'rationalism' as outlined in the Terminology handout. Spinoza is a rationalist in both senses of the term, as was Descartes.

suffering, for the moderns, were ignorance and error. All three of the great rationalists, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz composed instructions for how to think intended to relieve this problem.

- Read, then, the selection from *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* with the above in mind. Consider the extent to which Spinoza presupposes a rational, cosmic order insofar as his *Treatise* seeks to advance humankind by instruction in rational thought.
- Note, among other things, the need for speaking to the level of “the multitude” (§17).
- Note as well the highest level of human knowledge (item #4 in §19), which amounts to knowledge of the self-evident. That is, the paradigm of human knowledge is a state in which the justification or validity of the proposition known is implicit in or a part of that very state. Spinoza gives several examples at §22; perhaps a clearer example would be Descartes’s *Cogito*: the mere consideration of my being (i.e., thinking of it) assures me of its truth. This stands as a model for rational knowledge alongside simple arithmetical and geometrical propositions. (Compare, on this point, Plato.)

Bach (1685-1750)

- Have a listen to some Bach, preferably something polyphonic or contrapuntal. I recommend this video of the first movement of the 6th Brandenburg Concerto, which provides a useful visual interpretation of the music:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mR8LrZBg02k>
- See also these videos, among others, from the same wonderful source:
 - o <http://www.youtube.com/user/smalin#p/u/17/pVadl4ocX0M>
 - o <http://www.youtube.com/user/smalin#p/search/11/PEwf8e5jHTg>
- Bach’s music epitomizes the modern rationalist movement. It is rooted in a profound understanding of the rational, semi-mathematical form of tonal music. Working with various, short melodic motifs, Bach wove complex compositions from their rational manipulation and combination – repetition, transcription, inversion, augmentation, and other mechanical transformations were the basic means by which Bach created music of extraordinary beauty.
- Note the perhaps surprising relationship between abstract, rational structures on the one hand and the emotive, passionate nature of music, on the other. While Descartes doesn’t comment directly on this point, both he and Spinoza assert the glory of God’s creation. Compare our other great rationalist, Plato, who emphasized the beauty of the rational forms and who identified *eros* as fundamental to human being, including our rational activity: rational human activity creates beauty.