

# Rene Descartes

The Father of Modern  
Philosophy

1596-1650



## RENE DESCARTES

THE END OF DYNAMISM  
THE BEGINNING OF THE  
MECHANISTIC WORLD

## Before Descartes--Dynamism

The medieval view is that God is the driving, animating force within all matter. The flight of birds, illnesses, earthquakes, volcanoes--nearly all natural phenomena--were signs of God's pleasure or displeasure. Priests and ministers were the best source for understanding the physical world.

## Dynamism --Exhibit 1

- ◆ Magnets were protection against witches.
- ◆ A magnet under a pillow would drive an adultress from her bed.
- ◆ A compass is "the finger of God."
- ◆ William Gilbert (1544-1603) explained the earth's rotation by saying the earth's soul could feel the sun's magnetic field and knew it would burn on one side and freeze on the other if it did not act; therefore, it chose to revolve upon its axis.

## Dynamism --Exhibit 2

- ◆ Folk traditions of sympathetic magic derive from the age of Dynamism.
  - Voodoo dolls made in the appearance of someone give power over the person (homeopathic).
- ◆ Putting salve on a knife blade could heal the wounds it made.
  - Sending a handkerchief carried power from the sender (touching the hem of Jesus' garment) (contagion).

## After Descartes--Mechanism Cartesian Dualism

- ◆ The spiritual part of man is his mind, his soul. It is not confined in any spatio-temporal way. Matter, including a human body, although it was created by God and put into its proper place and motion, now acts according to mechanical laws and forces.
- ◆ Therefore, nature, including human bodies, can be studied with science and mathematics without theological underpinnings.

## Cartesian Dualism The Body as Mechanism

- ◆ "[O]ne may very well liken the nerves of the animal machine I have described to the pipes of the machine of those [garden] fountains; its muscles and its tendons to the other different engines and springs that serve to move them; and its animal spirits, of which the heart is the source and the ventricles of the brain the reservoirs, to the water that moves these engines. Moreover, respiration and other similar functions which are usual and natural in the animal machine and which depend on the flow of the spirits are like the movements of a clock or of a mill, which the ordinary flow of water can make continuous." (Descartes)

## Cartesian Dualism

In Cartesian physiology, movements of bodies are purely mechanical: "All the movements of the muscles and likewise all sensations, depend on the nerves, which are like little threads or tubes coming from the brain, and containing, like the brain itself, a certain very fine air or wind, which is called the 'animal spirits.'" (Descartes, Passions of the Soul)

## Descartes--Beginnings

- ◆ Good sense is equally distributed among most people, but . . .
- ◆ Many cultures believe sincerely contradictory ideas, because . . .
- ◆ We apparently believe much because of traditions and authority; therefore . . .
- ◆ We must doubt, question, and reject all we hold as true, even our own existence.

## Descartes--Four Rules of Logic

- ◆ Never to accept anything as true which I did not clearly and distinctly know to be such (a method of doubt)
- ◆ To divide each of the difficulties into as many parts as possible
- ◆ To conduct my thoughts from the simplest and easiest to the more complex
- ◆ To make enumerations [in writing] so complete that nothing was omitted (the last three outline a method of inquiry)

## Descartes--First Principle of his Philosophy

- ◆ Perhaps we are simply minds in a vat controlled by some wizard who sends to our minds sensations which seem real to us; therefore, I may not even exist.

↓  
solution

## ◆ COGITO, ERGO SUM

– I THINK, THEREFORE I EXIST. I am that which doubts. I am the thing that thinks.





Non-cogito, ergo non-sum??

## Proofs for the Existence of God

- ◆ All things which we clearly and distinctly conceive are true.
- ◆ I had learned to think of something more perfect than myself.
- ◆ I must hold this notion from some nature which was more perfect than I.
- ◆ The notion of "God" must come from God.

## Another Cartesian Proof for the Existence of God

- ◆ Logically, God would contain all the characteristics of perfection: omniscient, omnipotent, all-loving, etc.
- ◆ **Existence** would be one of the qualities of perfection.
- ◆ Therefore, God must have that quality; He must exist.

## Implications of the Proofs for God

- ◆ Once we have established that God exists, we can throw out the evil wizard hypothesis. We can trust that what we clearly and distinctly perceive in nature must be so; God would not trick us or deceive us.

## Descartes & Rationalism

While Galileo was a practitioner of modern science (**empiricism**) and Bacon was a philosopher who promoted inductive, empirical science, Descartes put more emphasis on the ability of an ordinary human to reason (**rationalism**) carefully towards truths. Some note the difference by saying Bacon would be a good biologist, while Descartes would be better as a mathematician.

## Descartes & Tradition

- ◆ Descartes, Bacon, and Galileo are alike, however, in their **rejection of reliance on authority and tradition** for their beliefs and views about man, the world and the universe.
- ◆ They were alike in having a new confidence in **individual** reason and **secular** learning.

### Innate Ideas in the Mind (Spirit)

When we look at beeswax in solid form or in a liquid form, we still recognize it as beeswax.

Therefore, the **idea** of beeswax must come from a spiritual idea about the substance, not from its material qualities that come through our senses.

That God exists as an infinite, eternal, all-powerful being is also an innate idea.



### Descartes

#### The Unanswered Epistemological Questions

If the mind does not exist in space and time, how does it control or coordinate with the body, which is a mechanical structure that exist in time and space?

Descartes claimed that body and mind meet and interact in the pineal gland. But if the mind can influence the body in that way, or the body can influence the mind, that seems to weaken his "mechanical" world.