

# Philosophy 168

Descartes  
Fall, 2011  
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**Introductory Remarks**

# René Descartes



- Born 1596, La Haye, France
- Died 1650, Stockholm, Sweden
- Single
- One daughter, died at age six
- Primary education at La Flèche

# A Street in Paris



# Important Events, I

- 1606. Enters La Flèche
- 1616. Obtains degree in civil and canon law from the University of Poitiers
- 1618. Joins army of Prince Maurice in the Netherlands. Meets Isaac Beeckman
- 1619. Begins mathematical studies. Joins army of Maximilian of Bavaria
- 1620. Begins work on *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, then abandons it
- 1625. Moves to Paris. Begins fellowship with Marin Mersenne. Studies optics.

# Important Events, II

- 1628. Resumes work on *Rules*, only to abandon it for good
- 1630. Moves to the Netherlands. Completes drafts of *Optics* and *Meteorology*
- 1633. Writes *The World* but does not publish it upon hearing of Galileo's fate
- 1637. Publishes *Optics* and *Meteorology*, along with *Geometry* and *Discourse on Method*
- 1641. Publishes *Meditations on First Philosophy*



# Important Events, III

- 1644. Publishes *Principles of Philosophy*. Begins correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia
- 1647. Supervises French translations of *Meditations and Principles*
- 1648. Publicly attacks his former disciple Regius. Is interviewed by Dutch student Frans Burman
- 1649. Moves to Sweden as tutor of Queen Christina. Publishes *Passions of the Soul*
- 1650. Dies of pneumonia

# Early Life

- Father Joachim was Councillor of the Parliament of Brittany
- Mother died when he was one year old
- Abandoned by his father upon his remarriage
- Brought up by his maternal grandmother
- Sent to boarding school at age ten
- Lived in seclusion in Paris after graduation
- Studied law at ages 19 and 20
- Became a gentleman soldier at age 22

# La Flèche

- La Flèche was a Jesuit *college* located in Anjou
- It provided both secondary and university education
- The goal was to produce Catholic educators and scholars to spread the faith
- The first five years focused on grammar and rhetoric
- The second three years covered the “mathematical arts” along with metaphysics, natural philosophy, and ethics



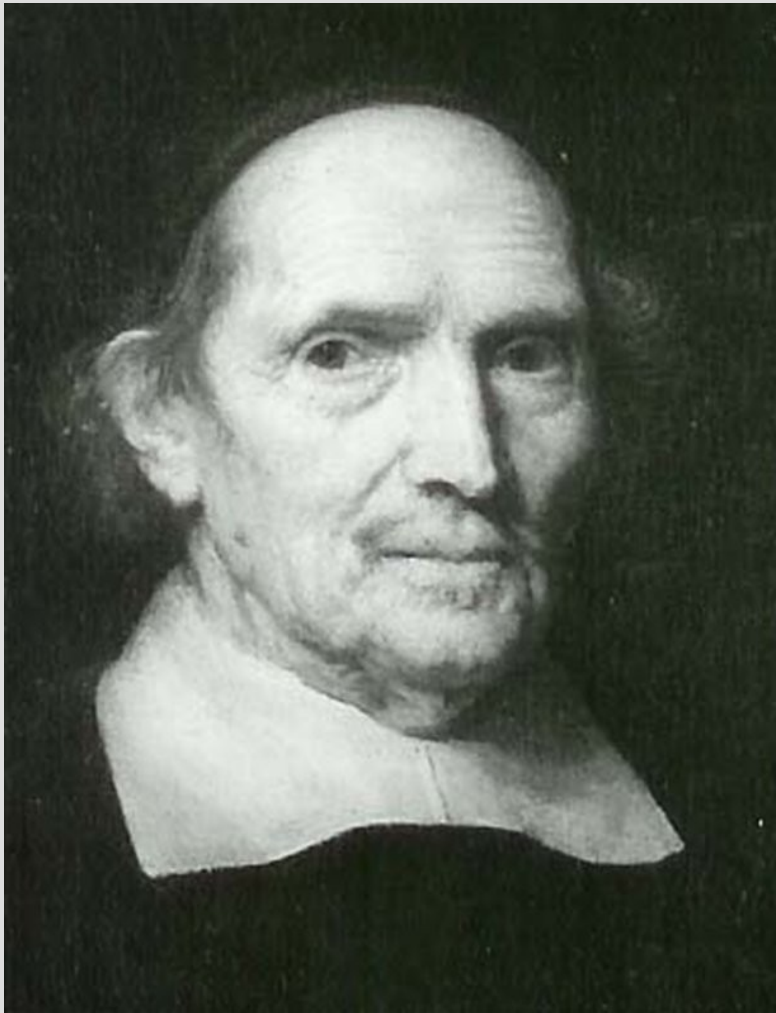
# Collaboration with Isaac Beeckman

- Eight years older than Descartes
- Met Descartes by chance in Breda, the Netherlands, in 1618
- First intellectual collaborator with Descartes
- Attempted to explain phenomena in terms of the mechanical behaviour of their unobserved parts
- Presented Descartes with various problems calling for a mathematical solution
- In 1630, Descartes broke off relations with him, only to be reconciled with him in 1632

# The Three Dreams

- In November, 1619, Descartes was stationed at Ulm
- He befriended the Rosicrucian mathematician Johannes Faulhaber
- He wrote that he had three dreams on November 10
- The first two dreams seem to symbolize some guilt
- The third heralds an intellectual discovery
- There may have been a nervous breakdown

# Dispute with Voetius



- When living in the Netherlands, Descartes clashed with Gisbertus Voetius (Gjibert Voet)
- Voetius accused Descartes of atheism
- Descartes rebutted him harshly

# Catholic Aristotelianism

- Thomas Aquinas reconciled Aristotle's doctrines with Christianity
- Form and matter are the fundamental explanatory principles
- Form is considered a principle of activity
- Mathematical explanation is largely excluded
- God is pure form and pure activity
- Human beings are a "hylomorphic" combination of matter and form
- The rational soul is the form of the body

# Mechanism

- A potential threat to Catholic Aristotelian philosophy was naturalism
- Naturalism explains events in the world as the effects of natural powers
- Such explanations diminish or exclude a role for the supernatural (God)
- A form of naturalism is mechanism
- One form of mechanism denies activity in matter
- This does away with the efficacy of forms

# Skepticism

- Pyrrhonian skepticism was revived during the Renaissance
- It raises the general issue of how the human mind can know reality
- The Pyrrhonian claims that there is no way to know what lies beyond the appearances, a view which undercuts mechanism.
- Montaigne (1533-92) used doubts about the truth to defend the authority of the Church.
- The Church, in turn, was hostile to mechanism



# The Program

- Descartes adopted mechanism and worked out principles of natural philosophy on that basis
- He tried to establish that the principles of his philosophy are known with certainty
  - The principles are said to be truths describing the way things really are
  - The basis of their certainty is their mathematical character, which requires that nature be quantifiable
  - Nonetheless, they include God essentially

# Laws of Nature

- Descartes's mechanism removes causality from the natural world
- The cause of the motion of bodies is to be found in God
- God establishes laws which govern how the motions of bodies occur
- The certainty of this account requires certainty in the existence of God
- So proving that God exists is a central part of the project

# The Human Being

- Aristotle held that the mind is the form of the human substance
- Descartes banished substantial forms
- He held that a human is a union of mind and body
- The mind is separable from the body, and hence can survive death
- The body is an automaton subject to the laws of nature
- The passions are explained in bodily terms

# Certainty

- The criterion of truth is clear and distinct perception
- Simple mathematical truths are the model
- One has direct certainty only insofar as one is attending to the perception
- God is needed to guarantee indirectly the certainty of what *has been* but *is not* being attentively perceived clearly and distinctly

# The External World

- The existence of specific external things is not known with certainty
- Even the existence of external things in general cannot be established by the senses
- Certainty about the existence of external things in general will have to depend on our knowledge of God
- More specifically, we can be certain of the existence of external things only if we know that God is no deceiver

# The “I Think”

- The initial certainty Descartes finds is that of his own existence, when he is thinking about it
- He describes the “I think” (*cogito*) as the starting-point for all other knowledge
- His task is to show how this limited, subjective fact can be the starting-point for all other knowledge
- His argument is that the characteristic feature of knowledge of “I think” is the clarity and distinctness of the perception of it



# Philosophical Problems

- The Mind-Body Problem
  - How can the mind, which is not extended, be united to the body, which is extended?
- The Cartesian Circle
  - If all certainty depends on knowledge of God, how can he be certain that God exists without begging the question?
- The External World
  - Can the existence of an external world be proved on the basis of his own perceptions?

# Theological Problems

- Descartes was criticized by various individual priests and clerical groups
- His books were placed on the Roman Catholic Index of Forbidden Books
- His rejection of substantial forms appeared to create theological difficulties, especially with transubstantiation
- His mechanism seemed to exclude God from the world

# Scientific Problems

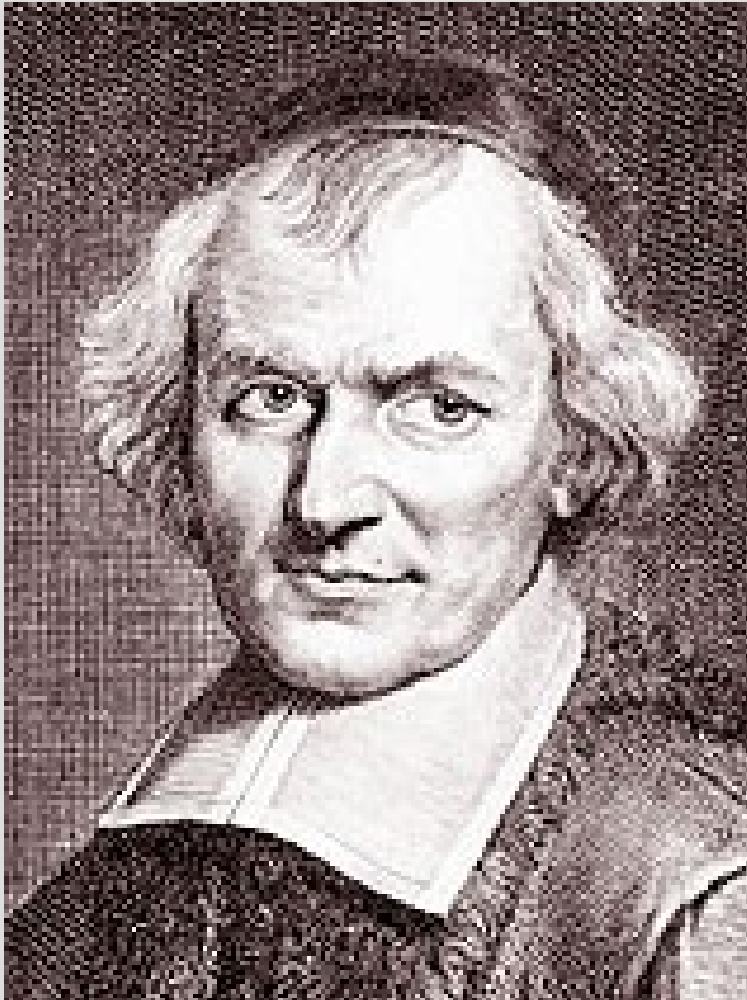
- Descartes's account of the motion of celestial bodies was discredited by Newton
- Descartes's optics was discredited by Berkeley
- Descartes's exclusion of force from bodies was criticized by Leibniz
- Descartes's account of conservation of the quantity of motion did not take into account the direction of motion
- Natural scientists came to accept a void between particles of matter

# Marin Mersenne



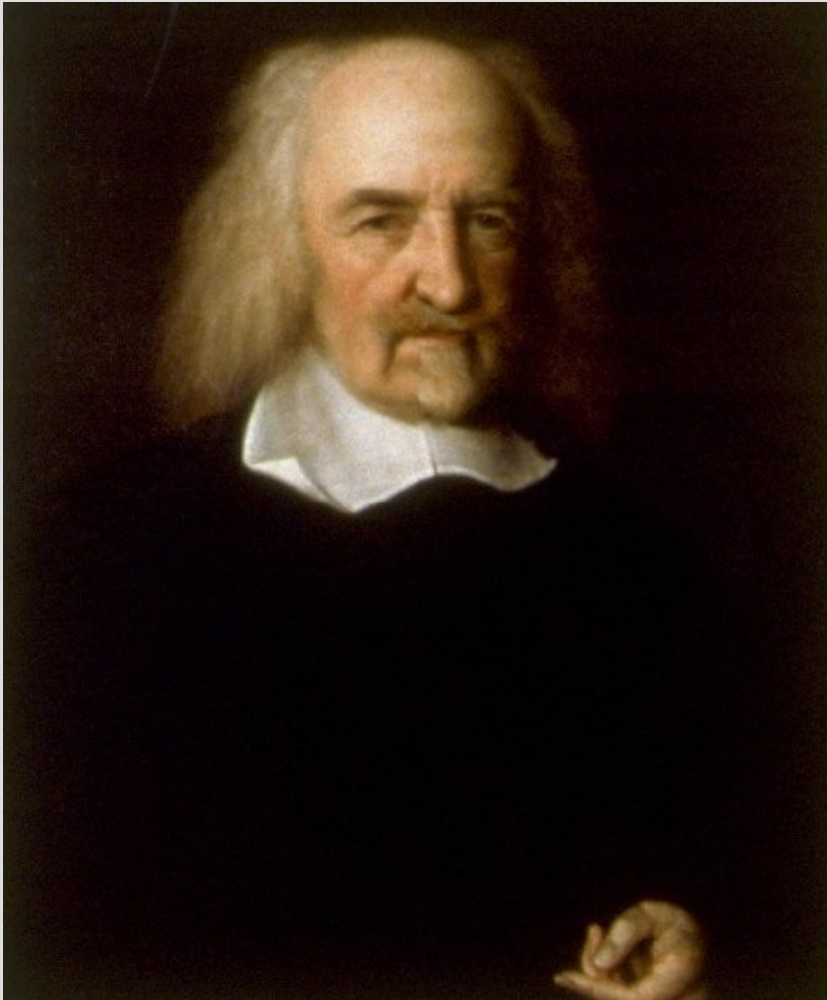
- 1588-1648
- Center of large circle of natural philosophers
- Mechanist
- Solicited and formulated objections to *Meditations*

# Antoine Arnauld



- 1612-1694
- Jansenist priest
- Wrote *Fourth Objections to Meditations*
- Co-wrote “Port-Royal Logic,” replacing Aristotelianism with Cartesianism

# Thomas Hobbes



- 1588-1679
- Wrote *Third Objections to Meditations*
- Mechanist natural philosopher
- Claimed that mind is computation in the brain



# Pierre Gassendi



- 1592-1655
- Wrote *Fifth Objections to Meditations*
- Claimed Epicurus, not Aristotle, best pagan natural philosopher
- Promoted atomism

# Nicholas Malebranche



- 1638-1715
- Descartes's philosophy was best known through him
- Broke with Descartes over causality and perception
- More Augustinian than Descartes