

History of Philosophy

31 Descartes

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Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes compares the **modern philosophical traditions** of British empiricism and Continental rationalism, specifically contrasting **Thomas Hobbes** with **René Descartes**. While Hobbes championed a **materialist and nominalist** view where knowledge derives from sensory experience, Descartes established a **dualist and conceptualist** framework centered on the power of human reason. The text highlights their shared **representational theory of knowledge**, which suggests that the mind interacts with ideas rather than direct external reality. Descartes sought to overcome systemic skepticism by using a **mathematical methodology** to identify indubitable, self-evident truths. By establishing the **goodness of God** as a logical guarantee for the reliability of human faculties, Descartes argued for a **foundationalist epistemology** built on absolute certainty. Ultimately, the source illustrates how Descartes' focus on **a priori** intuition and deductive logic created a distinct path for Western philosophy.

Briefing Document:

The Philosophy of René Descartes: Rationalism and the Search for Certainty

Executive Summary

This document synthesizes the philosophical contributions of René Descartes as presented in the historical analysis by Dr. Arthur Holmes. Emerging from an "epistemological vacuum" created by the breakdown of Scholasticism, Descartes established the continental rationalist tradition. His work is defined by a departure from the nominalism and empiricism of contemporaries like Thomas Hobbes,

favoring instead a conceptualist framework that asserts the existence of innate, a priori knowledge.

The core of Cartesian philosophy is a mathematical, deductive method designed to overcome skepticism and achieve indubitable certainty. Unlike the empiricist reliance on probability and sensory generalizations, Descartes utilized methodological skepticism to identify "clear and distinct" foundational truths. Central to his system is a theological justification: the goodness of God serves as the ultimate guarantee for the reliability of human reason and sensory perception. This framework leads to a metaphysical dualism that distinguishes the immaterial thinking mind from extended matter, asserting human freedom against the deterministic materialism of his era.

Comparative Philosophical Landscape: Hobbes vs. Descartes

To understand Descartes, he must be contrasted with the British empiricist tradition, specifically the work of Thomas Hobbes. While both operated within a representational theory of knowledge—maintaining that consciousness is aware of ideas representing reality rather than reality itself—their foundational principles differed sharply.

Feature	Thomas Hobbes (Empiricism)	René Descartes (Rationalism)
Metaphysical Stance	Materialism (Matter and motion)	Dualism (Mind and matter)
Ontology	Nominalism (No real universals)	Conceptualism (Universal concepts exist)
Epistemology	Empiricism (Sense-based)	Rationalism (Innate/intuitive knowledge)
Human Nature	Determinism (Causally determined)	Libertarianism (Freedom of the will)
Ethic	Hedonism/Egoism (Survival/Prudence)	Stoicism (Reason over passions)

Method	Reconstitutive (Empirical premises)	Geometrical (Self-evident axioms)
Church/State	Erastianism (State authority over Church)	Traditional Roman Catholicism

Descartes' Methodology: The Search for Certainty

Descartes' primary objective was to resolve the crisis of skepticism by establishing a foundation for knowledge that was beyond all doubt.

The Geometrical Model

Descartes rejected the "reconstitutive method" of Hobbes, which used empirical generalizations as premises. Instead, he adopted a mathematical model:

- **Intuitive Premises:** Starting with self-evident truths or axioms equivalent to those in geometry.
- **Deductive Inference:** Proceeding through logical proofs to arrive at hard, certain conclusions.
- **Indubitability:** Seeking knowledge that is not merely probable but impossible to doubt.

Methodological Skepticism (Meditation I)

Before constructing his system, Descartes employed "methodological skepticism." This was a strategic "ploy" to identify what, if anything, could withstand the most rigorous doubt. He identified several grounds for skepticism:

- **The Relativity of Senses:** Sensory perception is often unreliable and dependent on conditions, observers, and time.
- **The Deceptive God Hypothesis:** The hypothetical possibility that God, or a "malign demon," is deceiving our minds about the most basic realities.
- **The Purpose of Doubt:** By laying to rest even the most hypothetical possibilities of deception, Descartes sought to uncover premises that were "indubitable."

Epistemological Foundations

Descartes' system rests on the "intuitive criterion," a standard used to judge the validity of any proposition.

The "Clear and Distinct" Rule

Descartes proposed four rules for his method in the *Discourse on Method*:

1. **Acceptance:** Only accept ideas that are so "clear and distinct" as to allow no confusion or fuzziness.
2. **Analysis:** Break down every belief or problem into its constituent parts.
3. **Synthesis:** Reorganize these parts into a logical demonstration.
4. **Verification:** Check and re-check every step of the proof.

Nature of Knowledge

- **Intuition:** For Descartes, intuition refers to a direct awareness of one's own ideas as they truly are.
- **A Priori Knowledge:** Unlike empiricists, Descartes argued for knowledge that is independent of experience. These ideas are universal (shared by all) and necessary (their opposite involves contradiction).
- **Innate Ideas:** Descartes viewed certain ideas as "native" to the mind—spontaneous developments of natural origin rather than fictions or empirical observations.
- **Representationalism:** Descartes maintained that we have no direct awareness of external realities; we only know the "objective reality" of the ideas in our minds, which are caused by the "formal reality" of external things.

Metaphysics and Theology

Descartes moved beyond the medieval view of God as merely a "formal cause," focusing instead on God as the "efficient cause" and the guarantor of truth.

The Goodness of God as a Logical Necessity

While Hobbes viewed God primarily as the first efficient cause in a chain of motion, Descartes emphasized God's goodness. This theological attribute is critical to his epistemology:

- **Reliability of Faculties:** Because God is good, He would not deceive us by providing faulty intellectual faculties or unreliable senses.
- **Justification of Science:** This "logical thesis" provides the subjective conditions necessary for science. If God is rational and good, then human reason and the senses are trustworthy if used correctly.

Dualism and Human Freedom

Descartes established a sharp distinction between two types of entities:

1. **Thinking Entities (Mind/Soul):** Immaterial and independent of physical causal mechanisms.
2. **Extended Entities (Matter):** Physically extended and subject to mechanical laws.

This dualism allowed Descartes to assert **Libertarianism**. Because the mind is separate from the body's causal mechanisms, humans possess free will, whereas Hobbes' materialism necessitated a purely deterministic view of human choice.

Historical Context and Critical Reception

The Shift from Medieval Science

The rise of Cartesianism coincided with the decline of medieval science, which was rooted in Pythagorean and Aristotelian forms. Figures like Alfred North Whitehead and M.P. Foster have argued that the doctrine of creation in the late Middle Ages actually laid the groundwork for this shift. They suggest that the contingency of a divinely created world necessitated empirical methods, while confidence in God's rationality provided the "ethos" for believing nature was intelligible.

Criticisms of the Cartesian Method

- **The Practical Contradiction:** Critics point out a disconnect between Descartes' theoretical doubt and his practical actions (the "stove-heated room" anecdote). While he theoretically doubted the existence of his body, he continued to tend to its physical needs (such as adding wood to a stove), suggesting that his doubt was a methodological exercise rather than a lived reality.
- **Realist Critique:** Philosophers who argue for a direct awareness of reality reject Descartes' representationalism entirely. From a realist perspective, the immediate experience of the world (e.g., being cold or seasick) is proof enough of external reality, rendering Descartes' deductive proofs unnecessary.
- **Foundationalism vs. Evidentialism:** Descartes is regarded as a "hard foundationalist," seeking indubitable first principles. This stands in contrast to the "evidentialism" of later thinkers like John Locke, who argued that belief should be proportioned to available evidence and probability.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: René Descartes and the Continental Rationalist Tradition

This study guide examines the philosophical systems of René Descartes and Thomas Hobbes as presented in the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. It focuses on the transition from British empiricism to continental rationalism, highlighting differences in epistemology, methodology, and ethics.

Section I: Short-Answer Quiz

1. How does Descartes' conceptualism distinguish his rationalism from Thomas Hobbes' nominalism? Hobbes' nominalism asserts that there are no real universals and only material or efficient causes, leading to an empirical epistemology based on sensory generalizations. In contrast, Descartes' conceptualism allows for intuitive, innate knowledge of universal concepts and

general principles. This enables Descartes to establish logically universal premises that are not dependent on empirical observations.

2. What is the "representational theory of knowledge" shared by both Hobbes and Descartes? This theory posits that the human consciousness is not directly aware of external realities but is instead immediately aware of "ideas" that represent those realities. Consequently, there is a cognitive partition between mental states and the external world, meaning knowledge of the physical world is mediated through these mental representations.

3. Why did Descartes adopt a geometrical model for his philosophical methodology? Descartes sought to combat the pervasive skepticism of his era by achieving complete intuitive or logical certainty. By following a mathematical model, he utilized self-evident axioms (intuitive premises) to reach indubitable conclusions through deductive proof.

4. How do the metaphysical views of Hobbes and Descartes differ regarding the composition of a human being? Hobbes is a materialist who believes matter and motion explain all phenomena, viewing human thoughts and decisions as causally determined. Descartes is a dualist who distinguishes the mind or soul as an immaterial entity separate from the physically extended body, allowing for the existence of a thinking entity independent of causal mechanisms.

5. In what way does Descartes defend the "freedom of the will" against Hobbesian determinism? Hobbes argues that human choices are simply the result of conflicting drives and causal determination, a view known as determinism. Descartes asserts a libertarian position, maintaining that because the mind or soul has a separate status from the body, it remains independent of physical causal chains, thereby granting humans the freedom to choose.

6. Contrast the ethical frameworks of Hobbes and Descartes as described in the text. Hobbes' ethics are characterized by psychological egoism and hedonism, where human action is driven by self-preservation and prudence regarding consequences. Descartes leans toward a Stoic ethic, suggesting that while passions and emotions are naturally good, they require rational guidance to achieve the "rule of reason" over desire.

7. How does Descartes use the "goodness of God" to resolve methodological skepticism? Descartes argues that since God is inherently good, He would not deceive human beings by providing them with faulty or deceptive intellectual faculties. Therefore, if reason and the senses are used correctly, they must be reliable because a good God is the ultimate guarantor of their trustworthiness.

8. What are the four rules Descartes establishes in his *Discourse on Method*? First, one must only accept ideas that are so "clear and distinct" as to be beyond all doubt. Second, complex beliefs must be analyzed and broken down into their constituent parts. Third, these parts should be reorganized into a logical demonstration. Finally, every step of the proof must be checked and re-checked for accuracy.

9. Define the distinction Descartes makes between "objective reality" and "formal reality." Objective reality refers to the immediate object of awareness within the mind, which is the idea itself in a representational system. Formal reality refers to the external, objective entity that exists independently of the mind and serves as the cause of the idea.

10. What does "innate" mean within the Cartesian framework, and how does it differ from the Platonic view? For Plato, innate ideas are inborn and remembered from a previous existence. For Descartes, innate ideas are "native" to the mind or of "natural origin," meaning they are spontaneous, a priori concepts that well up within the consciousness independently of sensory experience.

Section II: Answer Key

1. **Conceptualism vs. Nominalism:** Hobbes rejects universals and relies on empirical patterns; Descartes uses conceptualism to justify intuitive knowledge of universal principles.
2. **Representational Theory:** Consciousness is aware of ideas representing things, not the things themselves; a cognitive partition exists.
3. **Geometrical Model:** To achieve indubitable certainty via axioms and deductive proofs as a reaction against skepticism.

4. **Metaphysical Composition:** Hobbes is a materialist (matter/motion); Descartes is a dualist (immaterial mind/extended matter).
5. **Freedom of the Will:** Hobbes sees choices as determined by drives; Descartes argues the immaterial mind is free from physical causal mechanisms.
6. **Ethics:** Hobbes is a hedonist/egoist focused on survival; Descartes is a Stoic focused on the rational guidance of passions.
7. **Goodness of God:** A non-deceiving God ensures the reliability of human reason and sensory faculties.
8. **Discourse on Method Rules:** 1. Only accept clear/distinct ideas; 2. Analyze into parts; 3. Reconstitute into logical order; 4. Check/re-check.
9. **Objective vs. Formal Reality:** Objective reality is the idea in the mind; formal reality is the actual external thing representing that idea.
10. **Innate Ideas:** Spontaneous, a priori, and native to the mind rather than remembered from a pre-existence (Plato).

Section III: Essay Questions

1. **The Role of Mathematics in 17th-Century Philosophy:** Discuss how the "geometrical system" influenced Descartes' attempt to create a foundationalist epistemology. Contrast this with Hobbes' "reconstitutive method" derived from Galileo.
2. **Skepticism as a Methodological Tool:** Analyze the "methodological skepticism" of Descartes' *First Meditation*. How does his use of doubt differ from the skepticism of Sextus Empiricus, and what is its ultimate purpose in his system?
3. **The Theological Foundation of Science:** Evaluate the arguments of Alfred North Whitehead and Michael Foster regarding the doctrine of creation and the rationality of God. How does Descartes' logical justification for the reliability of the senses align with or diverge from these historical theses?

4. **Rationalism vs. Empiricism:** Compare the "starting points" of the two traditions. How does the choice between empirical generalizations (Hobbes/Bacon) and a priori, self-evident axioms (Descartes) dictate the resulting certainty or probability of a philosophical system?
5. **The Cartesian Passions and Stoic Influence:** Examine Descartes' view of human nature as presented in his book on the passions. How does his optimistic view of "rational guidance" contrast with the Hobbesian view of "psychological egoism"?

Section IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
A Priori	Knowledge that is prior to and independent of all experience; characterized by universality and necessity.
Clear and Distinct Ideas	The Cartesian criterion for truth; ideas so lucid they allow no confusion (clear) and are not mixed with other notions (distinct).
Conceptualism	The view that we have intuitive knowledge of universal principles or concepts, making rationalism possible.
Determinism	The belief that all events, including human choices, are causally determined by preceding events or laws of nature.
Dualism	The metaphysical view that reality consists of two distinct substances: immaterial mind (thinking entity) and matter (physically extended entity).
Erastianism	The view that the state has authority over the church in matters of doctrine and religious controversy to maintain social order.
Evidentialism	An epistemological approach where belief is proportioned to the available evidence, often leading to probability rather than certainty.

Foundationalism	The epistemological theory that knowledge rests on "hard" indubitable first principles from which certain conclusions are deduced.
Innate Ideas	Ideas of natural origin that arise spontaneously within the mind; they are "native" to human reason rather than learned through senses.
Libertarianism	In the context of the will, the view that the mind is free and independent of causal mechanisms, allowing for genuine choice.
Natural Light of Reason	A metaphor for the inherent human capacity for rational intuition; a secularized version of the Augustinian divine illumination.
Nominalism	The denial of the existence of real universals; the belief that only particulars exist and only efficient/material causes are necessary for explanation.
Psychological Egoism	The theory that all human actions are motivated by self-interest and the drive for self-preservation.
Representational Theory	The epistemological view that the mind is immediately aware only of its own ideas, which represent external realities.