

Class #6 - Descartes and His Critics
Excerpts from *Themes from the Objections and Replies*

I. Historical Background

The first edition of Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* was published in Paris in 1641. Descartes was concerned that his work be shown defensible in the face of thorough criticism, and that he deflect attacks. "I would have liked to have the approbation of a number of people so as to prevent the cavils of ignorant contradiction-mongers" (Letter to Mersenne, 30 September 1640, AT III.184.) To this end, he included not just the six brief Meditations and introductory notes, but also a much longer collection of six sets of objections from theologians, scholars, and friends, as well as Descartes's replies to these objections. The objectors were:

1. Johan de Kater (Caterus), a Catholic Dutch theologian;
2. Various theologians and philosophers in a circle centered around the friar and mathematician Marin Mersenne. The second set of objections was collected and presented by Mersenne, who handled the remaining circulation of the manuscript.
3. Thomas Hobbes, in his 50s, exiled and living in France, still ten years before the publication of *Leviathan*, and a year before *De Cive*;
4. Antoine Arnauld, philosopher and Jansenist theologian, a co-author of *The Port-Royal Grammar*, whose comments Descartes said he preferred ("I consider them the best of all" (Descartes, letter to Mersenne, 4 March 1641, AT III.331));
5. Pierre Gassendi, French atomist philosopher; and
6. Various theologians and philosophers whose comments were again collected by Mersenne.

The second edition of the *Meditations*, published a year later in Amsterdam, included an additional, harsh seventh set of objections from Pierre Bourdin, a Jesuit priest, along with Descartes's replies.

Descartes had good reason for concern about the acceptability of his work. Galileo's condemnation by the Inquisition in June 1633 created a dangerous climate for Descartes, who was just entering his most productive philosophical period. Descartes immediately scrapped his plans to publish *Le Monde*, which presented a heliocentric system, as well as the foundations of physics and human physiology. In 1637, when Descartes resolved to publish essays on optics, geometry, and meteorology (though omitting the most controversial topics), he did so anonymously. The introductory essay, now known as the *Discourse on Method*, nonetheless provoked severe criticism. Descartes prepared for publication his consequent correspondence with Jean-Baptiste Morin, a professor at the Collège de France who later contributed indispensably to the second set of objections. Morin and Descartes, though, abandoned their plan when it became clear that their differences on many details could not be resolved.

The *Objections and Replies* to Descartes's *Meditations* are no mere auxiliary commentary to a more important, central work. Indeed, they are essential to the *Meditations* themselves. "[I]t would be illegitimate to read the *Meditations* in abstraction from the *Objections and Replies* with which they intentionally form an organic whole..." (Marion 1995: 20).

Descartes's oeuvre is not the product of a solitary meditator, working alone. His exchanges with colleagues are edifying. The *Objections and Replies* were passed among the objectors sequentially, so themes can be traced through these exchanges. Caterus, Arnauld, Gassendi, and Mersenne all criticize the arguments for the existence of God. Mersenne, Hobbes, and Gassendi work on the criteria of clear and distinct ideas and the problem of Cartesian circularity. All of the objectors comment on the mind/body distinction. Descartes and his objectors repeatedly pursue and elaborate arguments first raised earlier in the *Objections and Replies*. For example, after Gassendi uses the example of a straight stick appearing bent in water to raise a worry about Descartes's account of error (AT VII.333), Mersenne returns to the example to argue that the senses, rather than reason, correct the error (AT VII.418).

II. The Lesson

1. Group Assignments

2. Each group is assigned a topic.

There are fifteen topics:

- I. The Illusion and Dream Arguments
- II. The Cogito
- III. The Idea of God
- IV. The Causal Argument for God's Existence
- V. The Ontological Argument
- VI. The Nature of Knowledge and the Criteria for Certainty
- VII. The Nature of Reason and the Classification Our Ideas
- VIII. Innate Ideas and Necessary Truths
- IX. The Account of Error and Free Will
- X. The Nature of the External World
- XI. Arguments for the Mind-Body Distinction
- XII. The Nature of the Self, and the Faculties of the Mind
- XIII. The Immortality of the Soul
- XIV. Differences between Humans and Animals
- XV. Method

3. There are three or four roles in each:

1. Objector;
2. Descartes; and
3. Facilitator/Scribe (which can be separated).

The Objector reads the objection aloud to the group.

Descartes reads Descartes's reply.

All the students in the group discuss the merits of the objection and reply.

During adjudication, the Objector and Descartes lobby the Facilitator and defend their positions.

All members of the group should seek agreement on a result.

Not all adjudications result in a clear victor.

To help adjudicate, you must both play your roles, and step out of them.

The Facilitator/scribe adjudicates and takes notes, writing down questions for further research.

All members of each group should be prepared to present at least one of their three adjudications to the whole class at the end of the group work.

Once the first objection is adjudicated, switch roles for the second and third adjudications.

Continue until all the conversations are adjudicated.

After each group has adjudicated each objection and reply, groups dissolve and the class comes together for discussion.

Individual students may present one of their results, including summaries of an objection and reply and the group's adjudication.