

BACKGROUND TO THE MEDITATIONS

1. Mechanism vs. Teleology

Scholastic (Thomist, i.e., Christianized Aristotle) science and metaphysics were incompatible with the new mechanistic principles of explanation associated with the new mathematical physics of Galileo and Newton. The main reason for this incompatibility is that Aristotle and scholastic philosophers thought that natural phenomena arise due to a *combination of causes*: material, efficient, formal and final. The problem is that final causes, i.e., purposes or ends, and formal causes (the effect on a finite being of its *nature*, i.e., its essential properties, this effect being the determination of *what kind of thing it is* according to Aristotle), were rejected by 17th century mechanistic scientists like Galileo and Newton. These thinkers were convinced that all natural phenomena, and the finite beings that make up the world, could be explained entirely in terms of only *two* kinds of cause, what Aristotle had called *material and efficient causes*. A material cause = the stuff (matter) of which things in the world are made. An efficient cause = the action by which one bit of matter changes the properties or actions of another bit of matter (the ball strikes the window, the cue ball strikes the eight ball). Everything that exists in the world was to be explained as the result of spatio-temporal relationships among bits of matter. That is, the world was to be explained entirely as the result of the way matter is arranged in space, and of the relative motions of matter. The difference between a canteloupe and a giraffe was to be accounted for by a certain spatial configuration (shapes and spatial arrangement of numerous parts) of two distinct amalgamations of matter, and the relative motions of their parts. This approach leaves out anything like the final or formal causes with which Aristotle explained canteloupes and giraffes, and thus required a new metaphysics to accommodate the new mechanistic sciences.

2. The Geometry of Matter vs. the Rich Phenomenal Life World

Another feature of mechanistic science is that it rejects many properties of our phenomenal experience as *real properties of the world*. Color, taste, odor, sound, hardness and softness, hotness and coldness are to be *explained* by the motions and spatial configurations of colorless, tasteless, odorless, soundless matter that lacks hardness *or* softness and has no property like felt heat or cold itself. This rejection has continued, for all intents and purposes, in our contemporary physical sciences. In Descartes' work, the view that only geometry is required to describe the essential properties of matter is dominant.

These features of modern physical science pose serious metaphysical and epistemological problems for philosophers working during and since the 17th century, especially when one adds *determinism* to the mix (the view that all phenomena are entirely determined in their properties and relations by a universal set of fixed laws governing the efficient causal relationships that ever have or can arise between bits of matter). As Margaret Wilson puts it: "How might human consciousness, purposiveness, and sense of freedom be brought into harmony with the materialistic, mechanistic, and deterministic outlook of science? And, granted the tenuous connection that science suggests between those sensible appearances of things ordinarily present to consciousness and the real natures of the things [in themselves], how are we to evaluate our perceptual beliefs [based on those sensible appearances]? In what sense, indeed, can we regard

ourselves as *conscious of objects* at all, if our subjective awareness must be so radically distinguished from the objectively real?"[p. xiii, *The Essential Descartes*, Margaret D. Wilson, Mentor]

Descartes is the first great thinker to address these questions arising from modern, mechanistic physical explanations and sciences. Curiously, Descartes is often attacked as if he had *created* these difficulties. As I will try to show in the course of our discussions of the *Meditations*, in fact Descartes was not responsible for the rift between mind and body that so many think he originated. Rather, he simply is trying to make sense of a world in which so much that comprises the rich life world of our perceptual experience is entirely irrelevant for purposes of explaining it by means of modern scientific modes of explanation. One way to solve these epistemological and metaphysical puzzles involves the claim that the world must be made of two radically different kinds of substances, one mental, one physical, interacting through the medium of a composite creature (a creature with both a mind and a both): the human being.

3. Descartes' Dream of a Universal Science (the Mathesis Universalis) with the Simplicity, Clarity, and Certainty of Mathematical Proofs and Explanations

Descartes was appalled by two aspects of scholastic philosophy: that it placed high value on obscure and esoteric learning (difficult and obscure thought = true thought), and that it relied on formal principles, particularly the rules of syllogism (Aristotelean logic). The former arises from human vanity, but yields sophistry. The latter has two major disadvantages: first, it encourages absentmindedness, resulting in error and sophism. Second, it is not conducive to the production of new truths, since whatever is true in the conclusion must already be contained in the premises.

Descartes, stimulated by his own mathematical discoveries (analytical geometry) and the power of mathematics to describe mechanistic phenomena, envisioned a new, universal science of nature based upon the careful application of what he called the 'natural light of reason' to generate *new principles of nature* by means of a 'chain of intuitions' (where "intuition" = "something clear and evident to the natural light of reason"). As we will shortly see, the application of the natural light to certain kinds of ideas (clear and distinct ones) will yield the founding principles of the new science, principles that Descartes claimed to have generated and proved true in the *Meditations*. The vision of this new science came to Descartes on a specific day, November 10, 1619, as a result of a day of meditation at a Bavarian farmhouse. He felt that the accuracy of this vision was partly supported by a series of vivid dreams he had that night (nicely described in Owen Flanagan's *Dreaming Souls*). He took these as evidence that he was about to make a series of great discoveries concerning this science.

4. Three Frameworks Clash in the Meditations

There is a "transcendental" significance in three 'fundamental frameworks' in modern philosophy. The engine driving these philosophical positions are certain world views, or ways of organizing the way the world is. I see three of these operating since the 1600s:

(e.g.) How do you explain the table? Give the sufficient reason for the table.

1) common sense approach: ignore origins or 'basic nature,' just focus on immediate properties and uses, rely on perception chiefly (the manifest image).

2) scientific approach: look beyond the manifest image to some underlying nature

or structure which accounts for the surface properties of the thing.
3) religious/theological approach. Explain by appeal to divine causes/ends.

JP: these three ways of looking at the world are all natural to us moderns (and perhaps to us humans). Yet each tends to 'crowd out' the other (JP concedes, by implication, that each of these satisfies different needs of ours). A sceptic thinks the 3 approaches' claims against each other cannot be settled.

d) it is necessary to understand the early modern period of philosophy if one is to understand the origins of the modern world, including our ideas about the self, about the community, about the nature of reality, about the foundations of moral judgment (if there are any), and even such common currency in our time as the very idea of 'individual interests' and 'the private life'.

The Frameworks clash in the Meditations.

(1) Intro to the Meditations

a) Meditations as an UR text (grounding/fund'l/originating text) in phil; privileges the scientific framework, twists the religious framework, attacks the common sense framework. [Is RD a special kind of believer, a believer, or an atheist? JP thinks he is a special kind of believer, but he has very frequently been viewed as an atheist, without much basis in his writings]

b) watch both content & the literary structure of the Meditations:

1) first-person perspective, confessional format (confessions are, traditionally, religious in orientation and involve a "I lost my faith, but then found it again" theme); RD's 'epiphany' (Nov. 10, 1619)...spent 3 days in a hut ("stove"). Had a dream in which one of the Greek muses told him he would make a great discovery. Couple of days later he had vision of the "mathesis universalis". Way to synthesize all the known sciences to provide a ground for absolute knowledge. This was philosophy. His new faith is one about the sciences, but also about a grounding discipline for knowledge. RD has 6 Meditations as trade on religious framework in Genesis: create absolute insight into all reality in 6 days, rest on the seventh.