

Thursday, 5 March 2026 // filosofia 14 at Rozz-Tox // *Memento* (2000 Nolan, dir.) & *Meditations on First Philosophy*, excerpts (1641 Descartes)¹

Agenda:

- pre-screening discussion (about 6:30pm, informal)
- film starts 7:00pm // 10 minute break // post-screening discussion of Descartes reading selection and film from 9:00pm to 10:00pm

Pre-screening discussion (6:30pm)

- general remarks about our filosofia series:
 - we screen a film and we pair it with a famous philosophical text that examines themes related to that film; this year the schedule is quarterly:
 - 5 March 2026: *Memento* & *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Descartes)
 - 4 June 2026: *Waking Life* & “Allegory of the Cave” (Plato)
 - 10 September 2026: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* & *Discourses* (Epictetus)
 - 10 December 2026: *Silent Running* & “Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental, Ethic?” (Routley)
 - more filosofia plans on instagram (@rozztox_qc & @casuallyineffacious), on the Rozz-Tox website: www.rozztox.com, and my website: dekecainasgould.com
- More details on the four main branches of philosophy:
 - metaphysics: the theory of reality
 - notable sub-fields: ontology (the study of what exists), philosophy of mind (theory of the nature of consciousness), free will, God, personal identity
 - epistemology: the theory of knowledge
 - notable sub-fields: analysis of ‘knowledge’ (challenges to the “Justified True Belief” model), debates over the a priori vs. a posteriori justification (whether there is justification independent of experience)
 - axiology: the theory of value
 - notable sub-fields: normative ethics (theory of right/wrong), aesthetics (theory of good/bad art), social and political philosophy
 - logic: the theory of right reasoning
 - notable sub-fields: classical logic (modern formal theory of entailment), non-classical logics (formal theories that reject assumptions in classical logic, such as the principle of explosion (*ex falso quodlibet*) in paraconsistent logics)

¹ Descartes. (1641) “First Meditation, Second Meditation, & Fourth Meditation.” *Meditations, Objections and Replies*. Ariew & Cress, trans. Hackett.

- tonight's topic: epistemology
 - What is knowledge, and from whence do we derive justification for our beliefs?
 - empiricism vs. rationalism: does knowledge come from the senses, or does knowledge come from thinking?

Post-Screening Discussion (9:00pm)

- key concepts:
 - traditional analysis of 'knowledge' (**JTB analysis**): person S knows that proposition P if and only if (iff) (a) S *believes* that P, (b) S's belief that P is *true*, and (c) S's belief that P is *justified*.
 - This analysis held sway over philosophy for over two thousand years, since Plato introduced it in the "Meno".
 - It was decisively demolished by Gettier (1963), though it is curious that it took that long, as Plato himself thoroughly shredded it later in "Theaetetus".
 - Still, it's a convenient model to use for discussions like this, for simplicity.
 - Descartes assumes a **foundationalist** view of knowledge: justification for a belief derives from a special privileged set of beliefs—knock down the foundations and all of the other beliefs come down with it.
 - more recently, some rivals have emerged to this view: see Quine & Ullian's *Web of Belief*, and Sosa (1980).
 - Descartes's agenda in the *Meditations* is to defend a **rationalist** theory of knowledge over the prevailing **empiricist** theory of his time.
 - empiricism is the view that knowledge is derived from the senses; rationalism is the view that knowledge is derived from thinking
 - widespread misconception about the *Meditations*: his goal is not skeptical—he's *not* trying to prove that you might be dreaming right now
 - rather, the skeptical scenario is a mere tool for arriving at his rationalist alternative over the empiricist view
- First Meditation:
 - setting up the approach for the remainder of the book:
 - ordinary beliefs have turned out to be false
 - instead of going through each one (which would take far too long), Descartes looks for the source of the error: trusting the senses
 - So, let's suppose that none of the information from the senses can be trusted—is there anything that will still count as knowledge if there were some evil demon (or, say, malicious machine) that is causing me to believe that I am experiencing this room when I am not?

- Second Meditation:
 - he finds his first piece of knowledge that will serve as the “Archimedean Fulcrum” around which he can begin to build his new rationalist foundations: “I am, I exist” must necessarily be true, so long as I am thinking about this.
 1. If I am deceived by an evil genius, I couldn’t trust my senses.
 2. Suppose that the evil genius is trying to convince me that I don’t exist.
 3. In order for him to convince me that I don’t exist, I have to exist.
 4. So, I exist but I don’t exist (assumption 2), but this is absurd.
 5. So, assumption 2 is false and I exist.
 - note that this bears some resemblance to the famous “*cogito*”, or “I think, therefore I am” which Descartes gives in the *Discourse on Method*
 - Descartes prefers the above formulation to the *cogito*, though, since it shows how this piece of knowledge is revealed by the “light of nature” as a self-evident proposition, not something that relies on a premise.
 - The wax analogy: the senses tell us about the properties of the object: at first, it is hard, emits a floral scent, tastes like honey, is white, etc.; after it is near the fire for some time, it lacks all of the properties.
 - the senses inform us that it exists, and yet over time the senses cannot sustain the belief that it is the same object
 - we believe that it is the same object, but the only other candidate for supporting that belief is source of thinking, not the senses

- Fourth Meditation:
 - The overall lesson of the whole *Meditations*: don’t make judgements about that which you don’t fully understand (“clearly and distinctly”).
 - God endowed you with a perfect and free will, unbounded and infinite
 - this is the respect in which you are “made in God’s image”
 - You have a finite intellect, and the capacity to will (or judge) over-extends beyond the boundaries of the intellect.
 - God has both a perfect/infinite intellect and an infinite will, and hence never makes any mistakes.
 - An “intellectual problem of evil” arises here: why would God make us in such a way that our intellect isn’t coextensive with our will?
 - Descartes’s answer: don’t look at it that way; instead, be grateful for the perfect will and learn to use what God has given you.
 - God has given you the capacity to recognize that you can make judgements about things that you don’t understand clearly and distinctly, and it’s up to you to use that power wisely. In other words, don’t make judgements about things you don’t fully understand.

- An interesting aside: contrary to popular opinion, the freest expression of your will is not slow deliberation and calculation, but rather immediate (unhindered), straight and direct movement toward the good, without hesitation (p34).
 - Deliberation is a sign of an imperfect mind.
 - God would never have to deliberate.
 - This is compatible with the following, surprising claim: God is determined to move in a singular direction: He is free and supremely knowledgeable, but because He always knows the good, he will always move in a straight line towards it, so to speak.
- Back to *Memento*:
 - Descartes places a lot of emphasis on thinking (by contrast with perception), but I wonder if the role of memory is more central than either the rationalist or the empiricist lets on.
 - An argument inspired by the situation in the film:
 1. All derived justification comes from the foundation of either the senses, from thinking, or from memory.
 2. The senses are misleading, and can be systematically doubted via skeptical scenarios.
 3. If 2, then the senses cannot adequately serve as the foundation for derived justification.
 4. Thinking can provide some limited knowledge of one's present existence, but (as the film demonstrates) it cannot provide support for one's continued existence without the aid of memory.
 5. The function of memory is a distinct faculty apart from (though often highly important for) the function of reason (that is, thinking).
 6. Thus, derived justification requires both the proper function of memory in addition to thinking. (cf. Burge 1993, Frise 2023)

Recommended Further Reading/References:

1. Burge. (1993) "Content Preservation." *The Philosophical Review*. 102.4: 457-488.
2. Descartes. (1637) *Discourse on the Method, Third Edition*. Cress, trans. Hackett.
3. Descartes. (1641) *Meditations, Objections and Replies*. Ariew & Cress, trans. Hackett.
4. Frise. (2023) "Epistemological Problems of Memory." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Zalta & Nodelman, eds. URL: plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/memory-episprob
5. Gettier. (1963) "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis*. 23.6: 121-123.
6. Plato. (385 BCE/1997) "Meno." *Plato: Complete Works*. Cooper, ed. Hackett. 870-897.
7. Plato. (369 BCE/1997) "Theaetetus." *Plato: Complete Works*. Cooper, ed. Hackett. 157-234.
8. Quine and Ullian. (1978) *The Web of Belief, Second Edition*. McGraw-Hill.
9. Sosa. (1980) "The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*. 5.1: 3-26.