Descartes, Literature, and the Problem of Skepticism
Cartesian Subjectivity and the Doctrine of Dual Substance

- *Res extensa*: “extended thing” – body

- *Res cogitans*: “thinking thing” – mind
• “I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary . . . to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.”

• First Meditation
Contexts

• Revival of ancient skepticism
• Reformation
• Scientific Revolution / Galileo’s Persecution
Sextus Empiricus (160-210 AD), follower of Pyrrho
Dogmatic Philosophy

• Lays down positive teachings about the nature of the world

• Ancient Dogmatism
  – Platonism
  – Aristotelianism
  – Epicureanism
  – Stoicism

• Modern Dogmatism
  – Scholasticism
  – Cartesian rationalism
Skepticism

• Academic Skepticism:
  – We can’t have knowledge. At best, we can make probabilistic judgments about things.

• Pyrrhonian Skepticism:
  – We don’t know whether we can know anything. We simply show on a case by case basis that no argument is certain. It’s thus best to suspend judgment (epoche) on these matters.
Ataraxia (Tranquility)

• [The point of skepticism] Is tranquility [ataraxia] . . . . For the man who believes that anything is in itself good or bad is forever disturbed: when he is without things which he supposes good he believes himself to be tormented by bad things, and rushes to pursue after things which are good. But when he gets these good things, he is only more disturbed, because he is irrationally and extremely elated, and in dreading a change of fortune he uses all his energy to avoid losing the things which he thinks good. On the other hand, the man who makes no judgment about what is good or bad in itself neither shuns nor pursues anything too eagerly; and so he is at peace.

Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 1.12
Montaigne: Philosophy as “Sophisticated Poetry”

• “I always call reason that semblance of intellect that each man fabricates in himself. That reason, of which, by its condition, there can be a hundred contradictory arguments about one and the same subject, is an instrument of lead and wax, stretchable, pliable, and acceptable to all biases and all measures”

• (Montaigne, Apology for Raymond Sebond).
“Do you want a man to be healthy, do you want him disciplined and firmly and securely poised? Wrap him in darkness, idleness, and dullness. We must become like the animals in order to become wise, and be blinded in order to be guided.” (Montaigne, Apology)

“There is nothing that leads weak minds further from the straight path of virtue than that of imagining that the souls of the beasts are of the same nature as ours . . . . But when we know how much the beasts differ from us, we understand much better the arguments which prove that our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body, and consequently that is not bound to die with it” (Descartes, Discourse on Method, 141).
Galileo’s Trial
Three stages of *The Spiritual Exercises*

1) Purgation
2) Illumination
3) Union

Ignatius of Loyola
Doubting the senses

• [T]here are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses—for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter, dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine?
Doubting the Senses

• “So a reasonable conclusion from this might be that physics, astronomy, medicine, and all other disciplines which depend on the study of composite things, are doubtful; while arithmetic, geometry, and other subjects of this kind, which deal only with the simplest and most general things . . . contain something certain and indubitable.”
The three stages of Cartesian doubt

• **Sense illusions**
  – gives us reasons for doubting the senses, and our subjective experience.
  – Science doubted: none

• **Dreams**
  – gives us reasons for doubting the world around us is real
  – Science doubted: composite (physics, medicine, etc.)

• **Demon/Madman**
  – the deepest at all. Not only are our senses and reality doubtful, but our very faculties for evaluating the senses and reality are doubtful.
  – Science doubted: simple (mathematics)
SUM ("I am")

- "I am, I exist—that is certain."

- *Cogito ergo sum*

- "I think therefore I am"
Clear and Distinct Perceptions

• I call a perception ‘clear’ when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception “distinct” if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear.”

• *Principles of Philosophy*, part 1, section 45
• Ontology – the study of being

• Epistemology – the study of knowledge
The General Welfare of Mankind

“I believed that I could not keep [my writings] secret without sinning gravely against the law which obliges us to do all in our power to secure the general welfare of mankind. For they opened my eyes to the possibility of gaining knowledge which would be very useful in life, and of discovering a practical philosophy which would replace the skeptical philosophy taught in schools”  
(Discourse on Method, 142)
“This is desirable not only for the invention of innumerable devices which would facilitate our enjoyment of the fruits of the earth and all the goods we find there, but also, and most importantly, for the maintenance of health, which is undoubtedly the chief good and the foundation of all the other goods in this life. For even the mind depends so much on the temperament and disposition of the bodily organs” (Discourse on Method 143)