

Rene Descartes

The Most Important Issues



Two Major Things to Begin

- Descartes represents an even greater break from tradition than did the philosophers of the Renaissance who rejected the authority of the church, but not the authority of the classical philosophers—he rejected both authorities
 - Set out to think through things for himself
- Descartes was a **rationalist**—the rational is real and the real is rational; innate ideas play a big part of his thinking—divine light allows us to know through intuition (similar to Augustine)



Other Things to “See” & Remember

- Descartes project in the *Meditations* was to find a stable starting point for knowledge
- Knowledge = indubitable; cannot be doubted
- Used radical doubt to arrive at sure foundations
- This will eliminate experience from being a part of the foundation

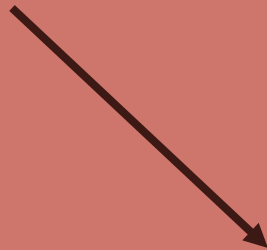


Things to “See” & Remember

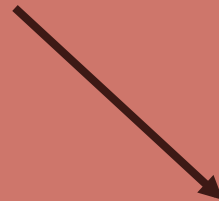
- So his thinking (his doubting) had a sort of “downward” trajectory where he entertained and then discarded presumed foundations for a knowledge—that is an indubitable knowledge
- This could be visualized in the following way:



Doubts experience
and senses (they could
be deceivers)



Doubts mathematics
(Evil Genius problem)



Cannot doubt his own
existence—he “saw”
that he was a thinking being

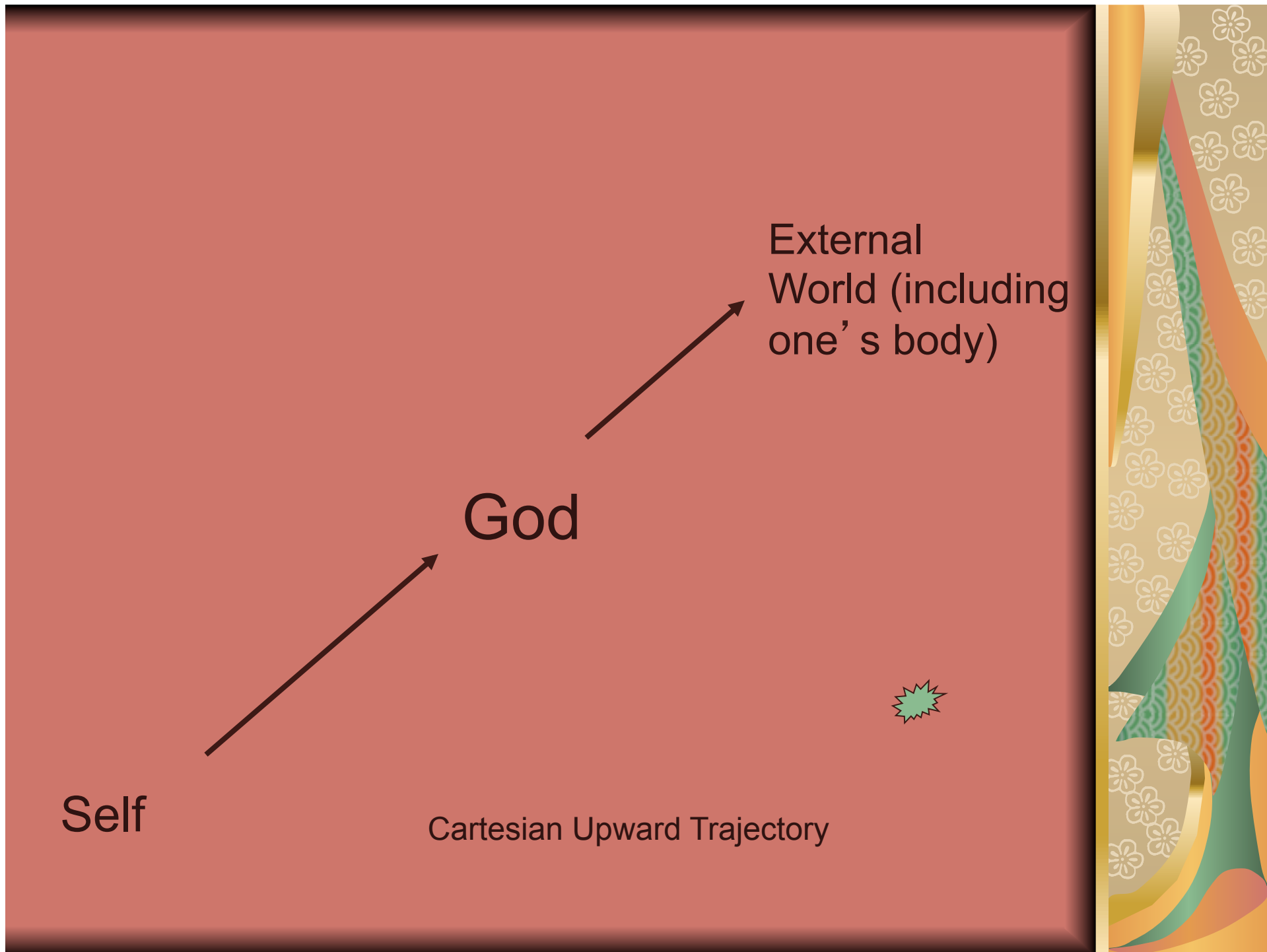
Cartesian “downward” trajectory



Things to “See” & Remember

- So he now had a starting point he could be sure of and he could build on that
deductively
- The importance of what I call the Cartesian upward trajectory
 - Start from his own existence
 - Get God into his epistemology
 - This establishes basis for the reliability of his senses
 - This could be visualized in the following way:





Things to “See” & Remember

■ Note that Descartes was rationalistic in that:

- He held to real existence of innate ideas self, identity, substance, and God ✚
 - These innate ideas were discerned with the help of “divine light”
 - This notion of “divine light” is a sort of basis for taking out the element of elitism that had been around since Plato and Aristotle—everybody could have this divine light, not just the educated
 - He believed in the reality of universals and took the law of non-contradiction as the final test of truth (A cannot be non-A at the same time and in the same sense)
 - He derogated experience to reason



Side bar on the laws of thought

■ Law of identity

■ $A = A$

■ Law of non-contradiction

■ A cannot be non-A at the same time and in the same sense

■ Law of excluded middle

■ Either A or non-A



Things to “See” & Remember

- Descartes rejected the Hobbesian nominalism and the nominalism of some of the medieval philosophers and theological voluntarists
 - Nominalists think there are only particulars
 - Names are arbitrarily placed on things—no real forms exist transcendentally or in the object



Things to “See” & Remember

- But Descartes did think we **assign** perceivable qualities (“red,” “blue,” “sweet,” “warm,” “melodious”) **to the mind** and left only mathematically measurable quantities in the external world
 - A cold, colorless, odorless, soundless, tasteless word of matter in motion
 - This strategy of assigning certain things to the mind would be picked up by Locke, Hume and Kant and expanded upon



Things to “See” & Remember

- Descartes conception of substance
 - What are self, matter, and God?
 - Everything that exists is either a substance or an attribute of a substance (a property)
 - Since Self, matter, and God are clearly not attributes, they are substances
 - Substances seemed quite obvious to Descartes





Things to “See” & Remember

- He held substance is so obvious we must “conclude” that a substance is “necessarily present” when we encounter a property, even though the substance in question is “not observed by us”
 - “The attribute of the mind is thought, while that of body is extension”
 - Criticism: he didn’t put this to his doubting methodology as he did things that are “observed by us”
 - Hobbes held that substance and body signified the same thing: no sense to incorporeal body—sort of an empirical criteria of meaning
 - Heavy (but I think poorly aimed) criticism to come!



Things to “See” & Remember

The Cartesian Compromise

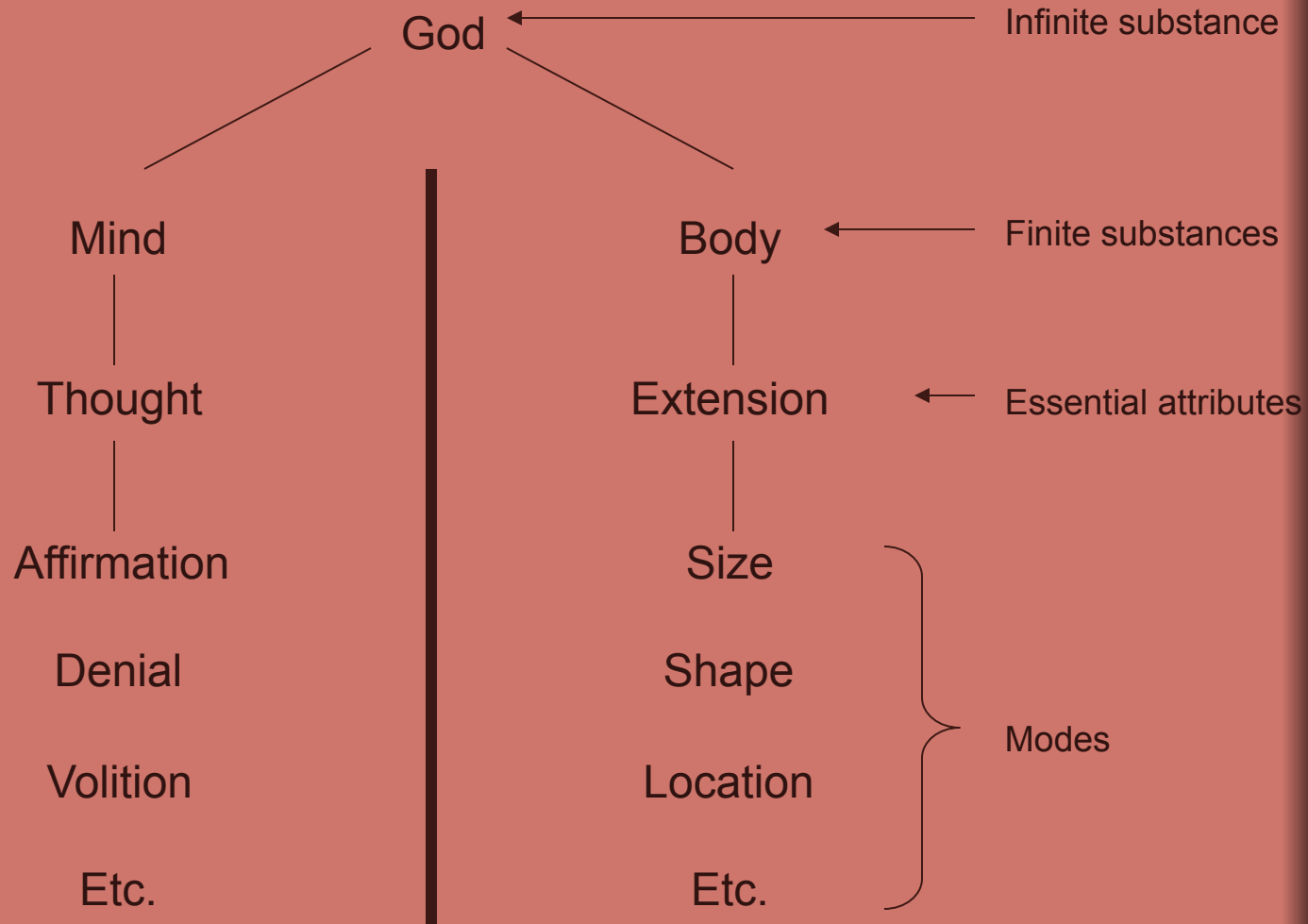
-  It might be said that Hobbes' successors were trying to find a *via media* that would allow them to adopt principles of the new physics without ending as Hobbes had done, in a completely secular and amoral view of the universe
-  Descartes was enthusiastic about the new science as was Hobbes, but tried to show the Church's misgivings were ill founded and thus to free physicists from the prohibitions that were interfering with their work



Things to “See” & Remember

- Descartes basic ideas followed immediately from his belief that in proving the existence of self and matter he had proved each to be an independently existing substance
- If mind and body are completely different kinds of things, and if the truths about each follow from the distinct nature of each, it is impossible for the science of minds and the science of bodies to contradict each other






The Cartesian Dualism: Mind/Body

Note: substance is defined as “that which can exist by itself, without the aid of any other substance



Things to “See” & Remember

- This dualism had a lot of implications
 - Descartes identified material substance with extension and of extension with space and that was to make physics an absolutely certain science
 - This move avoids the Hobbesian chasm between “science” and “knowledge of fact” 
 - But Descartes thought that though the physical universe is God’s creation, it behaves as if it were not—it doesn’t seek “the Divine likeness” it is merely mechanism; so no use looking for final causes in nature
 - So physicists can drop the study of final causes, because after creation God withdrew!



Things to “See” & Remember

- The problem of interaction between mind and body
 - They are completely distinct kinds of substances
 - Yet sense perception can be explained only by presupposing their interaction
 - Descartes thought at the pineal gland
 - How did it happen?
 - The only big problem is that it doesn't fit with a completely mechanistic material world
 - Then the physicists are incorrect in assuming physics is a universal and necessary science of bodies
 - Is there a synthesis that can do justice both to our sense of human freedom and to the claims of universal mechanism?
 - Digression on mind/body problem--solutions

