

The Renaissance Studies Program
“Truth, Falsehood, and Fraud in the Renaissance” Series
Presents the second lecture by

ELLEN MCCLURE

*The Logic of Idolatry: Mind-Body Dualism and Human
Creation in Descartes’s Meditations*



5:30 p.m., Thursday, September 18, 2014
Walnut Room
Indiana Memorial Union

In the fifth of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes asserts that “Certainty, and the truth of all science, depend solely upon knowledge of the true God.” And indeed, Descartes prides himself on having proved God’s existence not through revelation, but through reason. In my talk, I argue that Descartes’s effort to establish a link between the existence of God and the ability of the human mind to think without using images needs to be understood in the context of the endless polemics swirling around the concept of idolatry in seventeenth-century France. Descartes saw himself as solving, once and for all, a question that had reached a particularly nasty impasse—what is the proper role of images, and even the created world, in attaining knowledge of God? Yet by releasing the mind from the imagination and by defining the will through its godlike independence, Descartes raises the possibility, paradoxically often identified as idolatrous, that humans are capable of creation. The philosopher’s repeated, and often derisive, rejection of this possibility, both in the *Meditations* and in his responses to his contemporaries’ objections, demonstrates that the specter of idolatry, broadly defined as a reversal of the relationship between Creator and creation, is not so easily dismissed in a century still transitioning to what we now call modernity.

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