

History of Philosophy B: Lecture One

1. René Descartes (1596-1650)

Born in La Haye en Touraine (now called Descartes). Not exactly the most active man, although he did serve in the army. Indeed, his demand for sleep has been cited as a contributing cause to his death. In 1649 he was invited to Sweden to give lessons to Christina of Sweden. He died in 1650 from pneumonia.

Famous for his advances in science and philosophy. He invented the *Cartesian coordinate system*. Perhaps most famous for writing *The Meditations on First Philosophy*.

2. Fact One

Descartes thought that human beings could achieve genuine and lasting knowledge of themselves and the world around them.

The philosophical establishment at the time was firmly entrenched in Aristotelian tradition. As we shall see, Descartes offers a response to that tradition. However, there were other responses. One of those was a revival of *scepticism*: that we can't have genuine and lasting knowledge of the world.

3. Fact Two

Descartes thought we can only have such knowledge through science.

Indeed, this is a good juncture to talk about what Descartes had been up to *before* he wrote the *Meditations*. Descartes was a scientist, and previous to the *Meditations* he had written a book (*Le Monde*) describing the how the universe worked. However, it endorsed a *Copernican* view of the world. Having seen what happened to Galileo, Descartes did not want to publish it. So having written his opus, Descartes was left in a quandary. The world, it seemed, just wasn't ready for his ideas.

The *Meditations* was intended to be part of a scheme to achieve that, and make the world ready to accept the ideas and proposals Descartes wanted to promulgate.

4. Fact Three

Descartes didn't just believe these things. Descartes wanted to prove these things.

But *only* if we give up on common sense; on the Aristotelian traditions; on listening to the authority of the Church. He wanted everyone who read his book to agree with him.

5. Descartes' Level of Doubt

Sensory Doubt

Example: The tower.

Example: Optical illusions.

But, says Descartes, it seems we should only doubt our senses *in certain circumstances*. You still know *most* of what you see is accurate.

Dream Doubt

In a dream you appear to be seeing numerous things that aren't true. So is this all just a really vivid dream? We would then be a sceptic about a broad area of our beliefs – our sensory beliefs. But you still know *some* things. In a dream all of the elements of your

dream must come from somewhere. You also still know things like Euclidean geometry and mathematics.

Evil Demon Doubt

Imagine there was an evil demon, with omnipotent powers (like God, but with a bad attitude). Perhaps he deceives me about *everything*. Descartes argues that you can be deceived even about matters like maths. Is that realistic? Can we be deceived about $5+6=11$?

Example: Derren Brown.

So, maybe the world is this way. In which case, everything we think we know is false.

Brains in a Vat

These scenarios are a lot like a more contemporary version: that you are a brain in a vat.

Question: Is this like the evil demon? Or dream doubt?

Cartesian Scepticism

Whereas global scepticism says you can't know *anything*, Cartesian scepticism just says you know a lot less than you thought you knew. You still know some things – such as what words mean, and what's going on in your own head.