

**Philosophy 203**  
***History of Modern Western Philosophy***

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**Class 2 - Meditation One**

# Business

- My name is Russell
- Panel presentation sign-ups
  - Send three choices
  - Check dates of presentation and practice session
- Today:
  - A little more background
  - Some talk of Descartes's method and goal
    - knowledge
  - The doubts of Meditation One

# Five Dogmas undermined by the new science

D1. The heavens are constant.

D2. The Earth is at the center of the universe.

D3. Causes are (partially) explained teleologically, by purposes.

D4. The heavens contain starry perfect spheres (stars and planets) which revolve in perfect circles around the Earth.

D5. There are two kinds of motion: linear and circular.



# Against Church Authority

- The Papal Schism (1378-1417) undermined the Church's claim to infallibility.
- Henry VIII severed England's ties with Rome in 1530.
- Charges of corruption by Martin Luther (1483-1546) spurred the Protestant Reformation.
- Calvin (1509-1564) and the Protestant work ethic opposed the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church.
- The Protestants sought a direct relationship between God and man.

# Descartes is a Punk Rocker

- The Mood of the 17th Century
  - Skepticism
  - Humanism
  - Natural reason
  - The scientific method
- The 17<sup>th</sup> Century is not so different from our own.
  - Increasing skepticism about religion and its explanatory role.
  - There was a rise of relativism, both metaphysical (i.e. the claim that there is no absolute truth) and moral.
  - There was optimism about science and technology.
- Descartes works with a DIY ethos: the individual has a direct relation to the truth.
  - Foundation of the enlightenment

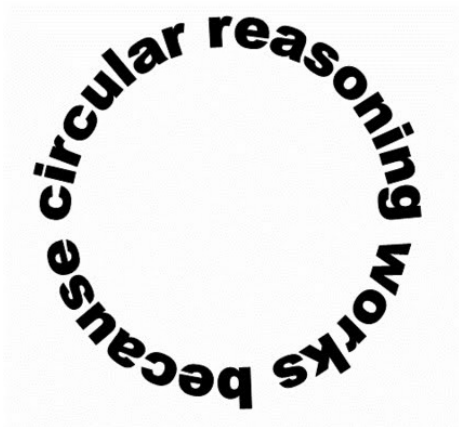


# Letter of Dedication

- A difficult piece to interpret
- *Le Monde*, and Galileo's condemnation (1615)
- The letter of dedication is clearly an attempt to appease the Church.
- Some take Descartes's claims in the letter to be insincere.
- Indeed, there are interpretations of Descartes's *Meditations* which impute insincerity to much of its content.
- I will not pursue such interpretations, evaluating the arguments as they are written.

# Scriptural Circularity

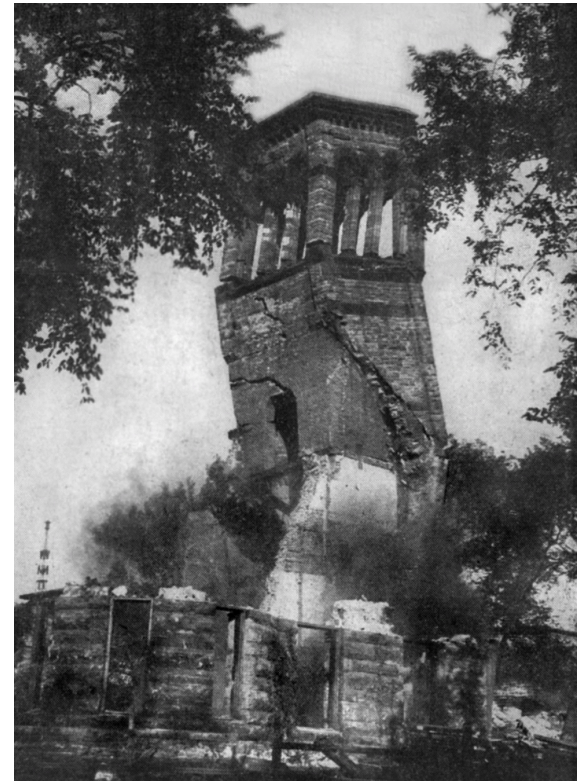
I have always thought that two issues - namely, God and the soul, are chief among those that ought to be demonstrated with the aid of philosophy rather than theology. For although it suffices for us believes to believe by faith that the human soul does not die with the body, and that God exists, certainly no unbelievers seem capable of being persuaded of any religion or even of almost any moral virtue, until these two are first proven to them by natural reason... Granted, it is altogether true that we must believe in God's existence because it is taught in the Holy Scriptures, and, conversely, that we must believe the Holy Scriptures because they have come from God. This is because, of course, since faith is a gift from God, the very same one who gives the grace that is necessary for believing the rest can also give the grace to believe that he exists. Nonetheless, this reasoning cannot be proposed to unbelievers because they would judge it to be circular (AW 35).



# Descartes's Method

To raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundation

- Principles for doubting will call swaths of beliefs into question.
- The method of doubt will lead to certain knowledge.





# Descartes's Rules

## From *Discourse on Method*

R1. Never to accept anything as true that I did not plainly know to be such;

R2. Divide each difficulty into as many parts as possible;

R3. Conduct my thoughts in an orderly fashion, commencing with the simplest and ascending to the most composite; and

R4. Everywhere to make complete enumerations (AW 31).

Note: no deference to authority



# What is Knowledge?

## Descartes's Goal

- Knowing a person vs knowing a fact
  - put aside the former
- Knowledge-How vs Knowledge-That
  - Riding a bicycle or making an omelet
  - That the square root of 25 is 5, that Albany is the capital of New York
  - Focus on knowledge-that (propositional knowledge)
- Knowledge-that appears to be related to belief.
- Both belief and knowledge are relations between people and propositions.

# Knowledge and Belief



“I *know* that the sun revolves around the earth.”



“I *believe* that the sun revolves around the earth.”

# Knowledge and Belief



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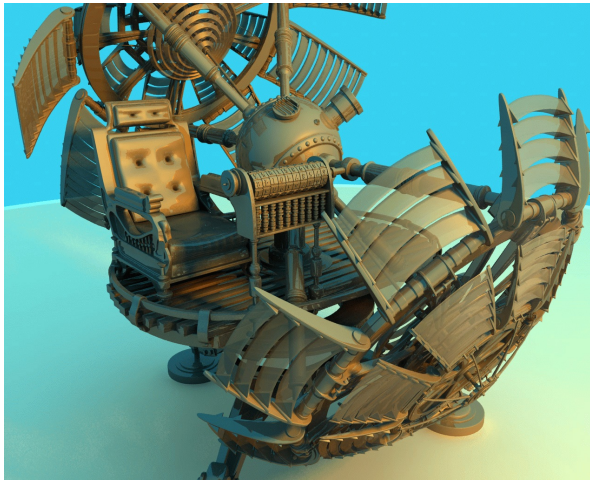


# Knowledge and Belief



“I *know* that the sun revolves around the earth.”

I now see that I did not know.



“I *believe* that the sun revolves around the earth.”

I really did believe it.



# Knowledge is a Success Term

- If you know that p, then p is true.
- We can have false beliefs.
- We can not have false knowledge.
  - We can be wrong, of course.

# Knowledge as True Belief

- Consider the belief that there are exactly 6,592,749,256,111 grains of sand on the beaches of the Earth.
- Let's imagine that there are, in fact, exactly 6,592,749,256,111 grains of sand on the beaches of the Earth.
- Still, no one could be truly said to know this fact.
- We need some account, some justification of how we know.

# Knowledge as Justified True Belief

- Plato's *Theaetetus*
- Gettier counter-examples: rare cases



# The KK thesis

The first [rule] was never to accept anything as true that I did not plainly know to be such; that is to say carefully avoid hasty judgment and prejudice; and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to call it in doubt (AW31).

- Descartes is claiming that if I know p, I can not doubt it.
- KK thesis: In order to know p, you must know that you know p.
- Name the capital of Illinois.
- Note, but put aside for now, worries about the KK thesis.

# Three Doubts

## Illusion, Dream, The Demon Deceiver



- Descartes is seeking firm and lasting knowledge in the sciences by way of doubt.
- Rotten apples
- Distinguish doubt from denial
  - 'I doubt that p' means that I do not know whether p is true or false.
  - 'I deny that p' is an assertion of the falsity of p.
  - At the end of the first Meditation, Descartes asserts that he will deny all of the claims he formerly believed.
  - Why?
- If the three doubts are successful, they will make us doubt, but not deny, everything on the list.

# Illusion



- Among the most difficult beliefs to abandon are those which we grasp with our senses.
- Everything he has taken as most true has come either from the senses or through the senses.
- Some knowledge comes directly from experience, like knowing that it is hot outside.
- Other knowledge requires reasoning in addition to sense experience.
  - knowledge of mathematics
  - 'Bachelors are unmarried'
  - *a priori*
- Does all knowledge come from experience?
- Illusions undermine our sensory beliefs.
  - knowledge of close objects, like our own bodies, resists doubts about illusions.
  - we approach the mirage

# Dreams

We can dream of things that do not exist,  
or that things have different properties than they do.

The dream argument elicits three distinct questions:

- A. Is there any way of distinguishing waking from dreaming experience?
- B. What beliefs does the possibility of our dreaming eliminate?
- C. Is there anything of which we can be sure, even if we are dreaming?

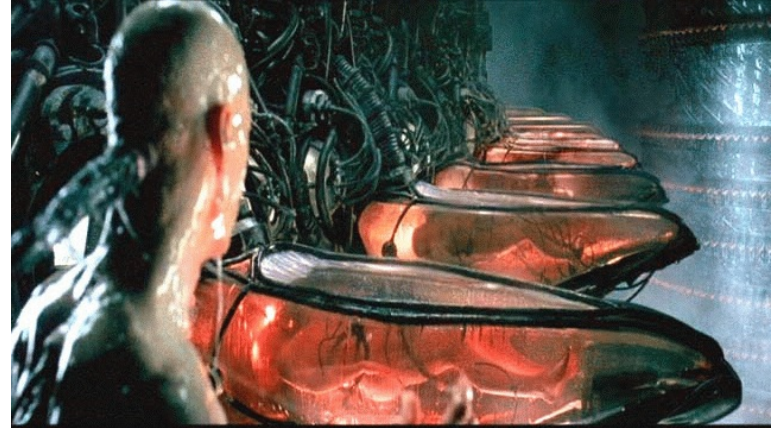
# Waking and Dreaming Experience

- There is no obvious mark.
- Anything we can do when we are awake, we can dream we are doing.
- We might be able to know that some state was a dream.
- We can not be sure that our current state, if it has no obvious dream-like qualities, is a waking state.
- If we can not be sure that we are not dreaming, then we can not be sure of anything our senses tell us.
- The list of beliefs the possibility of our dreaming eliminates will be long and detailed.

# What Survives the Dream Doubt?

- Mathematical claims
  - $7+5=12$
  - the tangent to a circle intersects the radius of that circle at right angles'
- Logic
- Semantic facts
  - 'Bachelors are unmarried.'
- Universals/properties
  - color, shape, quantity, place, time
  - the "building blocks"
  - The properties remain, even if only in our minds.
  - "It is from these components, as if from true colors, that all those images of things that are in our thought are fashioned, be they true or false" (AW42).

# The Deceiver



- What if there were a powerful deceiver who can place thoughts directly into our minds?
- The *Matrix* (and similar)
  - According to such examples, our thoughts really happen in brains.
  - There is a physical reality, but it is unlike the one we perceive.
  - In contrast, the deceiver hypothesis is consistent with the non-existence of the physical world.
- We could be disembodied minds, whose thoughts are directly controlled by an independent source.
- When we apply the deceiver hypothesis to our beliefs, we notice that just about all of them can be called into question.
- Nothing, it seems, is certain.

# Seeking Firm Foundations

- Three arguments for doubt
  1. Illusion
  2. Dream
  3. Deceiver.
- Each of the three doubts corresponds to a set of beliefs eliminable on the basis of that doubt.
  - Class I: Beliefs about the sensory nature of specific physical objects, or the existence of distant or ill-perceived objects.
  - Class II: Beliefs about the existence and nature of specific physical objects, and the physical world generally.
  - Class III: Beliefs about universals, like color, and shape, the building blocks of physical objects; and about space and time
    - Beliefs about arithmetic and geometry
    - Beliefs about logical and semantic truths
- In order to rebuild his beliefs, Descartes seeks a single starting point.
  - Archimedes and the lever