

Lecture One: What is Epistemology?; Introducing Descartes

1. Epistemology

Start with the word: episteme (knowledge, understanding) + logos (rule, theory, word). So we are studying the *theory of knowledge*. What does it take to know something?

This is of central importance because of the prevalence of conflicting **knowledge claims**: the educated biologist claims to know that variation between organisms is a result of natural selection. The creationist claims to know otherwise. We can also think of more mundane examples. If we are to settle these sorts of questions we need to know what knowledge is and what it takes to have it.

2. Philosophical Background to Descartes Work

The dominant philosophical view of Descartes's youth was **scholastic Aristotelianism**. This wedded the theology of the church with the metaphysical views of Aristotle. Often accompanied by a commitment to **direct realism** about perception.

Hylomorphism: objects are composed of a combination of **matter** and **substantial forms** (akin to an organising principle). This makes space for **natural teleology**: things in the world have purposes (final causes) which they are trying to fulfil.

In epistemology we have **forms** directly perceived by the mind – no intermediary sensation or idea. The world is enriched with real qualities like temperature, colour, taste, etc.

Modern philosophers (e.g. Descartes, Hobbes, Locke and Hume) think that this philosophical foundation is insufficient to cope with new scientific discoveries. We can start to reductively explain the behaviour of the natural world without using **natural teleology**. **Corpuscularianism** displaces **hylomorphism**.

In epistemology: the triumph of the 'idea' idea: we perceive the world via mental images that represent the world. This **representationalism** hugely influential on the history of philosophy.

Among modern philosophers **Rationalists** are loosely united by the idea that it is possible, by the use of reason, to gain superior kind of knowledge to that derived from the senses. We have a faculty of reason, intuition, 'natural light', 'light of reason' that can perceive things 'truly, as they are in themselves'.

They were inspired by the development of science – in particular scientists' use of **mathematical and geometrical** tools.

Empiricists, in contrast are more inspired by the experimental, observational style of the modern science (they downplay its *a priori* elements). For them, the only way to gain substantive knowledge about the world is through sense experience – observation and experiment especially.

3. Descartes Aims

What does Descartes set out to achieve in this work? Note the subtitle: ***In which are demonstrated the existence of God and the distinction between the human soul and the body***

“The great benefit of these arguments is not, in my view, that they prove what they establish – namely that there really is a world and that human beings have bodies, and so on – since no sane person has seriously doubted these things. The point is that in considering these arguments we come to realise that they are not as solid or transparent as the arguments which lead us to knowledge of our own minds, and of God, so that the latter are the most certain and evident of all possible objects of knowledge for the human intellect. Indeed this is the one thing that I set myself to prove in these Meditations.” (Synopsis).

Descartes thought that certain core beliefs, opposed to his metaphysics were the natural result of human development. We unreflectively hold that bodies are composed of properties manifest to the senses – including colours, sounds, tastes, odours (the Aristotelian “real qualities”). By pushing our senses beyond their real bounds we come to Aristotelian conclusions. If we want to see things properly, then we are going to have to look again at our foundational beliefs.

A letter to Mersenne (28 January 1641): “these six meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle.”

6 Meditations together with Objections and Replies: From Caterus; Mersenne (2 sets); Hobbes; Arnauld; Gassendi; Bourdin.

1. Meditator engages in a process of doubt.
2. Meditator finds that the existence of his own mind is better known than material things.
3. Meditator considers two proofs of the existence of God.
4. Meditator learns to guide judgement in order to find truth and avoid error.
5. Meditator considers the essence of material things and considers another proof for the existence of God.
6. Meditator discovers a real distinction between mind and body and proves the existence of material things.

4. The Method of Doubt

Descartes calls his philosophical method ‘The Method of Doubt’. He introduces it in the first two paragraphs of the *Meditations* (page 12).

Scepticism: There is no knowledge; we do not know anything; we can never reach the truth.

Correspondence theory of truth: A claim or a belief is **true** when it **represents** the world as being in a certain way *and* the world really is in that way.

Epistemic markers (signs, indications) of truth:

Certainty: A belief is certain for me when I am in a position of information which is sufficient to rule out **in my mind** the hypothesis that the belief is false.

Justification: A belief is justified for me when I am in a possession of information which *entitles* me to take it that the belief is true.

In the beginning of the first *Meditation*, Descartes says that (page 12):

1. I will review all my beliefs and suspend them.
2. I will proceed by examining first my most fundamental beliefs. I will then reject these and all the other beliefs based on them.
3. I will re-admit them only if they are 'completely certain and indubitable'.

According to Descartes, this method out all knowledge based on sensory experience. Ordinarily, we accept the following **principle of charity**: If things appear thus and so, then they indeed are thus and so. We can trust our senses. However, he then offers an argument from illusion against this.

5. The Argument from Illusion

Premise 1: Sometimes we experience illusions (or hallucinations).

Premise 2: If we sometimes experience illusions, we cannot always trust our senses.

Conclusion: Therefore, we cannot always trust our senses.

First Response: Reformulate the Principle of Charity. According to the new version:

If things appear thus and so and conditions are **standard**, then things are thus and so. By standard, we mean no hallucinations or illusions.

This would make the hallucinations and illusions seem irrelevant. The person who defends knowledge based on sensory experience didn't mean that sensory experiences are always reliable.

Descartes' Anticipation: How can I tell that I am perceiving truly and that the conditions are standard? I could be a madman. If I don't know that I am in the standard conditions, then I cannot use the new principle of charity as justification for my beliefs based on my senses.

Second Response: Reformulate the Principle of Charity again. Now:

If things appear thus and so under **standard conditions** to a **normal observer**, they are indeed thus and so.

This principle begins to look vague and arbitrary. Its sole motivation is to rule out counter-examples. All it seems to say is that 'When conditions and the observer are such that they observe truly that things are thus and so, things are thus and so.'

Conclusion: no informative, non-trivial principle of sensory reliability can be formulated to save the senses from universal doubt.

Descartes seems to be aware that the scope of this argument is limited – for instance it won't touch beliefs we don't get from our senses. We will see next time how he tries to push these sceptical doubts further.