

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2005
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Lecture Notes, September 12

I. Descartes Background

Descartes wants something “firm and lasting in the sciences”.

We can interpret ‘science’ broadly, as covering all legitimate knowledge.

We can also see some of his concerns about falsehoods he learned in his youth as applying to a narrower, more sophisticated interpretation of ‘science’.

This requires a bit of historical background.

Descartes (1596-1650) is called the ‘father of modern philosophy’ but he is still a medieval in many ways. He was a mathematician and scientist, in addition to being a philosopher.

One of his achievements in philosophy is cleaving thought from sensation, as we will see.

Descartes’ worries about his false beliefs arise in large part from his medieval education.

Consider four dogmas of the medieval world view:

D1) The heavens are constant, and the Earth is at the center of the universe.

D2) Causes are (partially) explained teleologically, by purposes.

E.g. Objects tend to fall to the Earth because of their natural tendency toward the center.

D3) The heavens contain starry perfect spheres (stars and planets) which revolve in perfect circles around the Earth.

D4) There are two kinds of motion.

On earth motion is linear, in the heavens it is circular.

The first two of these dogmas come from Aristotle (384-322 BC).

The third and fourth come from Ptolemy (2nd century AD), who saw the sky as a thing, like a roof on the Earth.

Note that this medieval view does not include the opinion that the earth is flat, though that may have been a common superstition.

Also note how these views cohere with a Biblical Judeo-Christian world view.

The new science undermined all four of these dogmas.

In the 15th century, a new star is discovered, against D1.

Copernicus (1473-1543) hypothesized that earth was not stable, and that it underwent retrograde motion, against D1.

Brahe (1536-1601) discovered that planets move in ellipses, against D1 and D3.

Kepler (1571-1630) urged heliocentrism, against D1.

Galileo (1564-1642) suffered under the Inquisition in 1633 for supporting Kepler’s heliocentrism.

He also argued that there was one type of motion for all bodies, not one on earth and one in sky, against D4.

This motion, due to gravity, is a unifying hypothesis, which explains all motion, against D2.

His discovery of Jupiter’s moons meant that there was more than one center of motion, against D1.

And his discovery of bumps on moon is evidence against D3.

The Earth has lost its place in the center of the world.
This undermines the Church's view.

Adding to Descartes' belief that he had many false opinions were direct attacks on religion, and its role in medieval thought.

A weakening of Church from the Great Schism (1378-1417), corruption, and Henry VIII breaking with Rome in 1530.

Luther (1483-1546) led the Reformation, against corruption.

Calvin (1509-1564) and the Protestant Work Ethic opposed the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church in favor of a more direct relationship between God and man.

There was a general rise of the individual against (Earthly) central authority, in the guise of humanism, and natural reason.

Skepticism, as a philosophy, arose due to the loss of certainty of the Earth's place.

Also, skepticism may have been due to the problem of Scriptural circularity:

Read from Letter of Dedication.

1) Why believe that God exists? - Because it says so in the Bible.

2) Why believe that the Bible is true? - Because God wrote it.

Compare scriptural circularity to: Why believe that the crystal ball tells the truth? - Because the crystal ball tells you to.

The 17th Century is not so different from our own.

There was an increasing skepticism about religion and its explanatory role.

There was a rise of relativism, both metaphysical (i.e. there is no absolute truth, it depends on your perspective) and moral.

There was great optimism about science and technology.

Into this atmosphere comes Descartes.

He published **Discourse on Method**, in French, in 1637.

It is a popular and easy introduction to the Meditations.

You might take it in at your leisure.

The **Meditations** was published in Latin, in 1641, with Objections and Replies.

II. Knowledge vs belief

Descartes' goal is knowledge.

Be careful to distinguish between knowledge and belief.

Consider two people in the Middle Ages

Person A: I know that the sun revolves around the earth.

Person B: I believe that the sun revolves around the earth.

What happens when we find out that the earth revolves around the sun?

Both A and B now deny that the sun revolves around the earth.

Person A recants his previous claim that he knew this. He never knew it, but only thought that he did.

Person B maintains his previous claim. He believed that the sun revolves around the earth, even though it was false.

You can not have false knowledge, but you can have a false belief.