

# KNOWLEDGE: Descartes' Reply

## Lecture 10

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## Questions

- Are you dreaming right now?
- Do you exist?
- How do you know?

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## Quick Review

- Epistemology
  - “Knowledge” denotes a privileged epistemic state, associated with certainty or indubitability.
  - Traditional account of knowledge: JTB
- Skeptic’s Challenge
  - Faulty senses – Appearance vs. Reality
  - Problem of the criterion – infinite regress
  - Anti-dogmatism – can never be absolutely certain (Unger)
- Descartes’ Reply to the Skeptical Challenge

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## Rene Descartes

- Born in France (1596-1650): “Father of Modern Philosophy”
  - Rationalism/Foundationalism
  - Mind/Body dualism, mechanical world
- Scientists-Mathematician
  - Cartesian coordinates
  - Analytic geometry
- “The book of nature is written in the language of mathematics” (Galileo Galilei)
  - Knowledge should be modeled on mathematics
  - Certain & axiomatic (built from simple axioms to complex propositions)

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## Method of Doubt

Descartes adopts a method that meets skeptical standards: he will reject any item or source of knowledge if it is even possible to doubt it (aka: hyperbolic doubt).

- Senses
  - Senses have deceived before
- Dreaming Conjecture
  - Might be dreaming, but mathematics is reliable
- Malicious Demon Conjecture
  - Any thought I have can be doubted because malicious demon

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## *Cogito ergo sum*

- According to Descartes, there is one thing that cannot be doubted: his own existence.
- **Cogito Argument:**
  - Can’t be deceived about thinking I exist, because whenever I doubt or am deceived I exist
  - “I am, I exist is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.”
- Cannot doubt that I am thinking, even though I can doubt the content of my thinking.
  - Compare thinking “I am skiing” with “I exist”

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## Problems with the Cogito Argument

### What is the "I" that exists?

Descartes: I exist so long as I think, and I can doubt that I am a body; so I am essentially a thing that thinks: a thinking thing (substance).

- I exist only so long as I think?
  - No persistent "I": problem for knowledge?
- A "thinking thing"?
  - Can only show there is thinking going on now, not that there is a thing that is thinking.

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## Foundationalism & Rationalism

- **Foundationalism** (Method of Doubt):
  - Knowledge must start with something certain, rest on a secure foundation.
- **Rationalism** (Wax Example):
  - Don't know wax through sensible qualities, only through intelligible (rational) qualities: extension, malleability, etc.
  - "Clear and distinct ideas", not sensory experience, gives certainty.

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## Two Cartesian Problems

- **Solipsism**
  - Problems with knowing that anyone/thing else exists.
- **External World**
  - Problems with knowing anything about the world.

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## Descartes' Answer

- Resolve the Demon conjecture, the dreaming conjecture, and sensory illusions problems. How?
- God
  - I have this idea of a perfect being
  - The effect is at least as powerful as the cause
  - I'm imperfect...
  - God must exist, as a perfect being
- God and "clear and distinct ideas"
  - Deception is an imperfection... God is not deceiving me about my senses...
  - So long as I attend to "clear and distinct ideas"... I'm secure in trusting senses.

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## Where does this leave us?

- What kind of knowledge does Descartes leave us with?
- What about inductive-type of knowledge?

**Next time:** The Problem of Induction (Hume)

Think about this: how can you trust knowledge derived from empirical generalizations? From science?

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## Summary

- Skeptical Challenge
- Descartes' Reply
- Method of Doubt
- Cogito Argument
- Foundationalism and Rationalism
- Two Cartesian Problems

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