

Lecture 04: Descartes

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1. What Went Wrong?

‘The main reason why we can find nothing in ordinary philosophy which is so evident and certain as to be beyond dispute is that students of the subject first of all are not content to acknowledge what is clear and certain, but on the basis of merely probably conjectures venture also to make assertions on obscure matters about which nothing is known; they then gradually come to have complete faith in these assertions, ... The result is that the only conclusions they can draw are ones which apparently rest on some such obscure proposition, and which are accordingly uncertain’ (Descartes 1984a, p. 14, AT X:367–8).

2. Descartes Cares about Science, not Shopping

‘in practical life it is sometimes necessary to act upon opinions which one knows to be quite uncertain just as if they were indubitable’ (Descartes 1984a, p. 126 AT 6:31)

3. The First Principle

In devoting ‘myself solely to the search for truth ... I resolved to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more

true that the illusions of my dreams’ (Descartes 1984a, p. 127 AT 6:32)

‘I noticed that while I was trying thus to think everything false it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something.’ (Descartes 1984a, p. 126 AT 6:31)

‘this truth “I am thinking, therefore I exist” [is] so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics [are] incapable of shaking it’

I took it as ‘the first principle’. (Descartes 1984a, p. 126 AT 6:31)

4. Persistence through Time

‘We clearly understand that it is possible for me to exist at this moment, while I am thinking of one thing, and yet not to exist at the very next moment’ (Descartes 1984c, p. 355 AT V:192)

5. Contrast Breathing

‘When someone says ‘I am breathing, therefore I exist’, if he wants to prove he exists from the fact that there cannot be breathing without existence, he proves nothing, because he would have to prove first that it is true that he is breathing, which is impossible unless he has also proved that he exists’ (Descartes 1984c, p. 98 AT II:37)

6. How does Descartes Arrive at the Conclusion That He Exists?

‘When someone says “I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist,” he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but by a simple intuition of the mind. This is clear from the fact that if he were deducing it by a syllogism, he would previously have had to know the major premise “Everything that thinks is, or exists” yet in fact he learns this from experiencing in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing.’ (Descartes 1984b, AT 7:140)

‘... the truth of the proposition ‘I am thinking, therefore I exist.’ Now this knowledge is not the work of your reasoning [...] it is something that your mind sees, feels and handles; [...] although your imagination insistently mixes itself up with your thoughts and lessens the clarity of this knowledge by trying to clothe it with shapes (Descartes 1984c, p. 331 AT V:138)

References

Descartes, R. (1984a). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volume I. Cambridge University Press.

Descartes, R. (1984b). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volume II. Cambridge University Press.

Descartes, R. (1984c). *The philosophical writings of Descartes: Volume 3, The correspondence*, volume 3. Cambridge University Press.