

# Lecture 15

## Descartes's Methodology

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# Parts of *Principles of Philosophy*

## **Part I: Principles of knowledge**

Own mind exists, there is perfect being who created everything, etc.

## **Part II: Principles of material objects**

There is no vacuum; matter fills all space. Laws of motion.

## **Part III: Heavens**

Since there is no vacuum, the heavens are full of matter. The heavens rotate in a vortex around the Sun, carrying the planets with them. There are smaller vortices around Earth and Jupiter that make their moons orbit them.

## **Part IV: Earth**

Many things on Earth explained by theories about imperceptible parts. Examples: weight of bodies is due to action of minute particles of heavenly matter; transparency of glass is due to little channels in it; magnetic attraction is due to little hooked particles.

## Why believe theories about imperceptible parts?

They are hypotheses that could be wrong [IV,204]

*Although perhaps in this way it may be understood how all natural things could have been created, it should not therefore be concluded that they were in fact so created. For just as the same artisan can make two clocks which indicate the hours equally well and are exactly similar externally, but are internally composed of an entirely dissimilar combination of small wheels: so there is no doubt that the greatest Artificer of things could have made all those things which we see in many diverse ways. And indeed I most willingly concede this to be true.*

## They are morally certain [IV,205]

*However, lest some injury to truth may occur here, it must be considered that there are things which are held to be morally certain, that is, [certain] to a degree which suffices for the needs of everyday life; although if compared to the absolute power of God, they are uncertain. Thus, for example, if someone wishes to read a message written in Latin letters, to which however their true meaning has not been given and if, upon conjecturing that . . . for each letter, the following one must be substituted; he finds that by this means certain Latin words are formed by these letters: he will not doubt that the true meaning of that message is contained in these words . . . even though it may perhaps be the case that the person who wrote the message did not put the immediately following letters but some others in place of the true ones, and thus concealed a different meaning in the message. It would however be so difficult for this to happen, especially if the message contains many words, that it does not seem credible.*

## They are morally certain (continued)

*Those who notice how many things concerning the magnet, fire, and the fabric of the entire World have been deduced here from so few principles (even though they may suppose that I adopted these principles only by chance and without reason), will perhaps still know that it could scarcely have occurred that so many things should be consistent with one another, if they were false.*

They are absolutely certain [IV,206]

*Besides, there are, even among natural things, some which we judge to be absolutely and more than morally certain; basing our judgment on the metaphysical foundation that God is supremely good and by no means deceitful, and that, accordingly, the faculty which He gave us to distinguish the true from the false cannot err when we use it correctly and perceive something clearly with its help. Such are mathematical demonstrations; such is the knowledge that material things exist; and such are all evident demonstrations which are made concerning material things. These reasonings of ours will perhaps be included among the number of these absolutely certain things by those who consider how they have been deduced in a continuous series from the first and simplest principles of human knowledge.*

**“I affirm nothing” [IV,207]**

*Nevertheless, mindful of my insignificance, I affirm nothing: but submit all these things both to the authority of the Catholic Church and to the judgment of men wiser than I; nor would I wish anyone to believe anything except where he is convinced by clear and irrefutable reason.*

There is good reason to retract.

- Descartes argued that he deduced his theories from first principles and God would be a deceiver if conclusions obtained that way were false. In fact, he didn't deduce his theories from first principles.
- He used the method of hypothesis. We know this method is fallible, so God would not be deceiving us if conclusions obtained by it were sometimes false.

## Why believe theory of vortices?

Descartes responds to this question with the same sequence of positions as for theories of invisible parts.

It is a hypothesis that could be false [III,19]

Before stating his vortex theory, Descartes said:

*I shall set forth the hypothesis which seems to me the simplest and most useful of all; both for understanding the phenomena and for enquiring into their natural causes. And yet I give warning that I do not intend it to be accepted as entirely in conformity with the truth, but only as an hypothesis or supposition which may be false.*



It is morally certain [III,42]

*In order to know the true nature of this visible world, it is not sufficient to find some causes by which one can explain what appears in the heaven very far from us; it is necessary also to be able to deduce from them the things we see very close to us . . . And we shall know that we have correctly determined these causes when we observe that we can explain, by their means, not only those phenomena which we have considered up to now [concerning the heavens], but also everything else about which we have not previously thought.*

Descartes doesn't here use the term "morally certain" but that is what he means.

It is absolutely certain [III,43]

*And certainly, if the principles which I use are very obvious, if I deduce nothing from them except by means of a Mathematical sequence, and if what I thus deduce is in exact agreement with all natural phenomena; it seems to me that it would be an injustice to God to believe that the causes of the effects which are in nature and which we have thus discovered are false. For we would then be accusing Him of having made us so imperfect as to be liable to make mistakes, even when correctly using our reason which He has given us.*

**“I affirm nothing” [III,44]**

*However, because the matters I am treating here are of no little importance, and because I should perhaps be thought too presumptuous if I stated that I had discovered truths which others have failed to discover, I prefer to make no decision about it; and, in order that each reader may be free to form his opinion, I wish what I shall write later to be taken only as an hypothesis which is perhaps very far from the truth.*

# Why Descartes is inconsistent

- He initially said all knowledge should be deduced from principles that can't be doubted when attentively considered.
- The methodology he actually used for explaining observed phenomena: if we find an explanation that fits many facts then it's probably true because it would be hard for a false hypothesis to fit many facts. This is the method of hypothesis, not deduction from indubitable principles.
- Descartes would like to close the gap with his "God is not a deceiver" argument. But that is a bad argument here.
- So he's in a jam and that is why he has no consistent position.

# Questions

- 1 Descartes said that his theory of vortices, and his theories about the invisible parts of bodies, could be false. Would he say that if he had got them by following the methodology that, at the beginning of *Principles of Philosophy*, he said should be followed? Explain.
- 2 What is an argument that Descartes gave for saying that his theories about the invisible parts of bodies could be false?
- 3 Descartes claimed that his theories about the invisible parts of bodies were “morally certain.” What does this mean? How did Descartes argue for this claim?
- 4 Descartes gave an argument that his theory of vortices, and his theories about the invisible parts of bodies, are absolutely certain; but in each case he soon backed away from the argument. What is the argument? Is the argument a good one? Explain.



René Descartes.

*Principles of Philosophy.*

D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983.

Translated by Valentine Rodger Miller and Reese P. Miller.

This is the only English translation of the whole book.

Numbers in brackets are part and section numbers.