

Lecture 29  
Descartes on the Principles of Philosophy

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# René Descartes



**1596:** Born in La Haye en Touraine (now renamed “Descartes”), France.

**1644:** *Principles of Philosophy* published in Latin.

**1647:** French translation published.

**1648 or 1649:** This portrait painted by Frans Hals.

**1650:** Died in Stockholm, Sweden.

# Conception of knowledge

*For . . . knowledge to be . . . perfected, it must necessarily be deduced from first causes; so that, to study for its acquisition (which [study] is properly called “philosophizing”), one must begin by searching for these first causes, that is, for Principles. And these Principles must meet two conditions: first, they must be so clear and so evident that the human mind cannot doubt of their truth when it attentively considers them; and second, the knowledge of other things must depend upon these Principles in such a way that they may be known without the other things, but not vice versa. (xvii)*

- This is more like Aristotle than Bacon.
- Difference from Aristotle: Aristotle established principles by induction or dialectic. That's not good enough for Descartes because things established in those ways can be doubted when attentively considered.

# Descartes's principles

Descartes claims to have found principles that satisfy his conditions. These principles are the following.

## 1. Existence of his own mind

- Descartes found he could doubt that things in front of him are really there, and even that his body exists, since he could be dreaming or hallucinating.
- However, he couldn't doubt that he has a mind (when he considered it attentively) because he was doubting other things and doubting can only be done by a mind.
- *It is not possible for us to doubt that, while we are doubting, we exist; and . . . this is the first thing which we know by philosophizing in the correct order.* (4)
- So Descartes's first principle is that his own mind exists.

## 2. Existence of a perfect being (God)

*One of Descartes's arguments:*

- Existence is a perfection.
- So, the idea of a perfect being includes the idea of existence.
- So, a perfect being exists.

## 3. God created everything

*Descartes's argument:*

- God is as perfect as possible.
- It is more perfect to have created everything than not to have done so.
- So, God created everything.

#### 4. Whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive is true

- Descartes is here talking about perception by the mind, not the senses. He knows, and stresses, that the senses are sometimes deceptive due to illusions, dreams, and hallucinations.
- *His argument for this principle:*
  - Since God created everything, he created our minds.
  - So, if what we clearly and distinctly perceive to be true were false, God would be a deceiver.
  - Since God is perfect, he isn't a deceiver.
  - So, whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive is true.

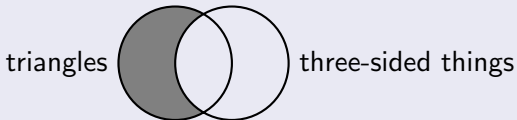
## Quotation (xxi–xxii)

*Thus, considering that he who wishes to doubt everything nevertheless cannot doubt that he exists while he is doubting, and that what reasons thus (being unable to doubt itself and yet doubting all the rest), is not what we call our body but what we call our soul or our mind; I took the being or the existence of that mind as the first Principle. From this I very clearly deduced the following: that there is a God who is the author of everything which is in the world; and who, being the source of all truth, did not make our understanding of such a nature that it could be mistaken in the judgment it makes of the things of which it has a very clear and very distinct perception.*

## Criticism of Descartes's argument for God

*Analogy to Descartes's argument:*

- The idea of a triangle includes having three sides.
- So, triangles have three sides.  
I.e., there are no triangles that don't have three sides.



*Descartes's argument:*

- Existence is a perfection.
- So, the idea of a perfect being includes existence.
- So, a perfect being exists.  
Should be: Perfect beings exist.  
I.e., there are no perfect beings that don't exist.

It doesn't follow that a perfect being exists.



# Questions

- 1 (a) What did Descartes say is needed for knowledge to be perfected? (b) What is the first condition he said principles must satisfy? (c) How does what Descartes says here differ from Aristotle?
- 2 What is the first principle of Descartes's philosophy? What is his argument for it?
- 3 What is an argument that Descartes gives for the existence of a perfect being? Is the argument valid? Explain.
- 4 Having established (a) the existence of a perfect being, Descartes argues that it follows that (b) we cannot be mistaken about the things of which our mind has a very clear and distinct perception. Explain fully Descartes's argument that (b) follows from (a).



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 parentheses are page numbers.