LOGIC AND ARGUMENT
LECTURE ONE
PHILOSOPHY IN A WEEKEND

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In this lecture I am going to introduce you to the methodology of philosophy – logic and argument
We’ll do this by analysing and evaluating a very famous argument

Descartes’ *Cogito Ergo Sum*
René Descartes 1596 - 1650

Portrait after Frans Hal 1648
Descartes’ Cogito is found in Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*

This was first published in 1641 together with six sets of objections and Descartes’ replies.

A second edition was published in 1642 together with a seventh objection and Descartes’ reply.
The argument we are concerned with appears in Meditation Two
In Meditation One Descartes has introduced and applied his famous ‘method of doubt’
So he has treated as if false any belief about which he can entertain even the slightest doubt.
Three levels of doubt:

1. The argument from illusion
2. The argument from dreaming
3. The evil demon argument
The argument from illusion

I know my senses have deceived me in the past

I should not trust anything that has deceived me

Therefore I should not trust my senses
Should Descartes reject as if false any belief grounded on sensory perception?
We only know our senses have deceived us in the past by relying on our senses

We must trust our senses

The argument from illusion calls into doubt only those sensory beliefs formed under sub-optimal conditions
The argument from dreaming

I have previously believed things were thus and so and then discovered I was asleep

Unless I can distinguish between being awake and being asleep I should reject as if false any belief that would be false if I were asleep

I cannot distinguish between being awake and being asleep

Therefore I should reject as if false any belief that would be false if I were asleep
Should Descartes reject as if false any belief that would be false if he were asleep?
We only know that we have lucid dreams because we wake from them.

This means we cannot always be dreaming.

This gives us *conditional knowledge* even of those beliefs that would be false were we asleep.
The evil demon argument

All my beliefs about the external world are based on the belief that my experiences have an external cause and that these experiences are a good guide to this external cause.

Unless I can be certain that there is an external cause all my beliefs about the external world might be false.

I cannot be certain that there is an external cause (or that that cause is as I take it to be).

Therefore I should reject as if false all my beliefs about the external world.
Should Descartes reject as if false all his beliefs about the external world?
The evil demon takes Descartes into hyperbolical doubt – he must reject *as if false* all his beliefs about the external world.
So Descartes is left only with the contents of his own mind

His ploy is now to reflect on these to see if he can find any belief of which he is certain

His ‘cogito’ gives him the certainty from which he can rebuild his knowledge (even of the external world)
Descartes’ Cogito

Premise one: I think

Premise two: If a thing thinks it exists

Conclusion: I exist
In 1962 the philosopher Hintikka argued that the cogito isn’t an inference at all but a performance.

Hintikka, J: ‘Cogito, ergo sum: Inference or Performance?’ in the Philosophical Review LXXI (1962) 3-32

I am ignoring this suggestion, believing it to be incorrect.

Feldman, F: ‘On the Performatory Interpretation of the Cogito’ Philosophical Review LXXXII (1973) 345-63
Two questions (as always):

1. Are the premises true?

2. Does the conclusion follow?
If the premises are both true, then the conclusion *must* be true

Premise one: I think

Premise two: If a thing thinks it exists

Conclusion: I exist

The conclusion follows deductively
But are the premises true?
Premise one: ‘I think’
It is just when he is asking himself whether there is *nothing* of which he can be certain...

...that Descartes becomes conscious of his own consciousness
Descartes’ reason for believing the ‘I think’ lies in…

… his recognition of the fact that he cannot doubt a belief…

… unless he has that belief…

… to have beliefs, after all, is to think
To doubt ‘it is raining’ one must:

- believe that ‘it is raining’ is *true*

and

- entertain the possibility that ‘it is raining’ is *false.*
The very act of *doubting* one’s own beliefs makes it clear that one *has* beliefs.

This is so even if one *cannot* know that these beliefs are true.
So Descartes is making a distinction between knowing:

- that one *has* a belief with a given content

- that the belief with that content is *true*
On recognising this Descartes can be certain of:

- the general claim: ‘I think’
- many specific claims ‘I believe it is raining’, ‘I believe I have a body’, ‘I believe…’
Vital: Descartes is certain only of the truth of ‘It is with me as if it is raining’...

... i.e. of his belief that it is raining...

... he is NOT certain of the truth of ‘it is raining’
Reflect on the fact that you have a whole slew of beliefs of this kind…

… ‘it is with me as if I am watching a lecture by Talbot’…

… ‘it is with me as if I am…’
You can be certain of the truth of these *as if* beliefs…

… even if you are tucked up in bed asleep…

…and only dreaming you are watching Talbot lecture
If you reflect on the contents of your consciousness...

... you will see that you too can be certain that you are thinking...

... and certain also that you believe whatever it is you believe
So Descartes’ first premise – *I think* - is grounded on the fact that …

… as beliefs are immediately accessible to consciousness…

…a believer cannot *but* know he has beliefs
Even an evil demon cannot cause Descartes to doubt the *contents* of his own beliefs…

…or that he has them…

… even if he can cause him to doubt their *truth*
Descartes first premise is conclusively established on the basis of its being *incorrigible* (if S believes P then P is true)
Premise two: It is necessarily the case that if a thing thinks it exists
We might understand this premise:

1) as an inductive generalisation

2) as a logical truth
If the premise were an inductive generalisation..

… Descartes would be generalising from his own case (I think therefore I exist)…

… to the general case
Generalisations from single instances are always questionable

Descartes is not entitled to any such generalisation
If we were to understand Descartes’ second premise as an inductive generalisation…

… we could reasonably reject it (and with it Descartes’ argument)
Descartes, however, explicitly denies that his cogito is based on an inductive generalisation…

…he himself points out that he wouldn’t be entitled to any such claim
He claims instead that the second premise is ‘self-evident’…

… seen by a ‘simple inspection of the mind’ (II Rep.: V11 140, HR2 38)
This suggests we should understand premise two as expressing a *logical* truth...

... one that presents itself to us as true as soon as we think about it
There are lots of such truths.

For example ‘It cannot be the case that he’s a bachelor and he’s not a bachelor’, ‘a person cannot be in two places at once’
Vital: We must distinguish logical truths from empirical truths.
Empirical truths are established by observation, logical truths by reflection.

We know by reflection, for example, that circles cannot be squares.

It is only by observation that we know someone with the HD gene will get Huntington’s Disease.
So we can see that it is reasonable to believe:

- Descartes’ first premise because when we reflect on the contents of our consciousness it is not possible to doubt we are thinking

- Descartes’ second premise because a moment’s reflection reveals that it must be true; it is a *logical* truth
As Descartes’ conclusion follows deductively from his premises...

... we can be certain that Descartes’ conclusion is also true...

... Descartes can indeed be certain of his own existence
Each of us, by dint of engaging in Descartes’ thought experiment, can be certain of our own existence even if we doubt the existence of everything else
If Descartes had to stop at the Cogito he would be a solipsist of the present moment…

… certain only of his own existence at the moment he is thinking about it…

… each of us, of course, has the same problem
Famously though, Descartes doesn’t stop there...

...but what happened next is another story!
Further Reading, websites and podcasts:

Entry on Descartes’ epistemology in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-epistemology/

Philosophy Bites: short video of A.C. Grayling on Descartes Cogito:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnE9GJl7AVw

Bryan McGee talking to Bernard Williams about Descartes:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44h9QuWcJYk

Williams, B: Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry, chapter 3 (‘Cogito and Sum’)