

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**



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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 hyperbolic 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=vnE9GJI7AVw>

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*')