A History of Philosophy
31 Descartes
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This week, our attention is going to be focused on René Descartes, and you, immediately, I hope, realize what's happening in relation to this intersection of traditions in modern times. We've looked at Bacon and Hobbes from the British empiricist tradition that's developing, taking us up to about 1700. And we're now looking at Descartes, who will be followed by Spinoza and Leibniz, which will take us up to about 1700 in the continental rationalist tradition.

So we're swinging over to continental philosophy. And the contrast, all the way down the line, works out something like this. Hobbes, as we have seen, is very plainly a nominalist, very much influenced by William of Ockham.

No real universals, the only explanatory principles needed in explaining any process at all in the physical world, or in human beings, or in the body politic. Simply efficient cause, material cause. No formal or final causes.

And consequently, his nominalism gives rise to a purely empiricist kind of epistemology, in which he tries to see, in good Baconian fashion, what the uniform patterns of apparent cause-effect relationship. And in contrast to that, we'll find that Descartes is not a nominalist, but a conceptualist. And of course, it's that which makes his rationalism possible.

Namely, the kind of rationalism which maintains we have some intuitive, in a sense other than Plato's, innate knowledge of general principles, universal concepts, you see. So that he's able to get his logically universal premises as something other than empirical generalizations, because he's a conceptualist. We do have intuitive knowledge of certain universal principles.

So Descartes, then, the rationalist, in that theory of knowledge, both Hobbes and Descartes have a representational view. That is to say, the consciousness is, and I say consciousness rather than mind in talking about Hobbes for obvious reasons, okay, the consciousness is immediately aware of its ideas, which represent to it external realities. So the point is that there is a cognitive petition between our mental states and external realities, such that we don't have any direct awareness of external realities.

We only know them by virtue of these representations in the consciousness, namely, our ideas. Sense ideas, empirical ideas for Hobbes, but it would include, of course, intuitive ideas for Descartes. But in both cases, they have a representational theory of knowledge, okay, that'll become very, very important.

We saw it in Hobbes in terms of his distinction between primary and secondary qualities, because while the primary qualities are indeed qualities of external things, they're represented in our minds in association with secondary qualities, you see. And those secondary qualities are purely subjective representations with no objective counterpart. So the epistemology then comes out that way.

In talking of methodology, I mentioned that Hobbes' method is one that he drew from Galileo, a reconstitutive method, an attempt to restructure our understanding in the form of a deductive system with empirical premises. So that's simply, if you like, a pedagogical or rhetorical way of structuring it for easy understanding and seeing of implications. There is a marked comparison between that and Descartes, because both Hobbes and Descartes want their philosophy to take the form of a deductive system.

However, the pattern that Descartes is following is not that of empirical premises leading to a deductive system, but rather self-evident truths or intuitive premises, as in mathematics. So, the model for Descartes is that of a geometrical system, where you have axioms followed by deductive proofs, leading to hard and certain conclusions. And part of the reason Descartes does that is in his reaction against the skepticism that was looming on the day.

What he wanted was complete certainty, either intuitive certainty or logical certainty. And so, intuitively certain premises and logically certain conclusions. By virtue of the mathematical method.

And we'll open that up later on as we get into it. In the development of their philosophical beliefs, Hobbes comes out as a clear-cut materialist. Matter and motion seem to explain everything.

Descartes, on the other hand, is a dualist. He wants to distinguish mind from matter and maintains that minds or souls are immaterial entities, so that a human being is a composite of two different kinds of things. A physically extended entity, matter, and a thinking entity, mind or soul, are dualistic.

Okay? Hobbes was a determinist. Yes, everything, including our thoughts and decisions, is causally determined. What we think is a free decision is simply our ambivalence between two conflicting drives, motives, you see.

And the choice is simply coming down on one side of that oscillation. On the other hand, Descartes, with a mind-soul that has a separate status from that of the body, is able to say that the mind is independent of those causal mechanisms. And so Descartes asserts the freedom of the will, freedom of our choices.

He's a libertarian rather than a determinist. Psychological egoism characterizes Hobbes. That is to say, our drive for survival, self-preservation, is the consuming passion, and that self-interest then is what drives us in everything we do.

The result is that when it comes to ethics, his appeal to right reason, which was the very thing that Occam had appealed to, the appeal to right reason is in terms of prudence and consequences. And what he speaks of as natural law is certainly not natural law grounded metaphysically in the nature of reality. It's simply the natural kind of law that humans are going to go for out of the desire for self-preservation.

Namely, make peace if you want to survive. Make peace. The first rule of prudence.

And that's what he calls natural law. The general ethical approach of Hobbes is a strong kind of hedonism that runs through it. It's really an Epicurean kind of ethic, if you can hark back to the Hellenistic period.

Whereas we'll see that Descartes is closer to a Stoic ethic. He doesn't write systematically in ethics, but he does have a book on the passions, emotions, and feelings. And his view is that our passions, our emotions, and desires are themselves good, but they can get us into a mess.

In other words, he has a more positive view of human nature than Hobbes does. What the passions need is simply a little rational guidance. So it's a matter of the rule of reason over the passions, and the good naturally follows.

So it's much more of a Stoic ethic. The thing that Hobbes has been working towards is this Erastian view of the relationship between church and state. That is to say that in matters where there are religious differences and controversies, where sectarianism and conflict break out, as in the English Civil War, what we must do is to submit to the decision of the state in that regard.

And accordingly, the state has authority over what is going to be a church doctrine. Now, the basics of the Christian faith are one thing. There, there is agreement.

Existence of God, the divine trinity, and the forgiveness through Christ. But beyond the basics of that sort, in order to avoid the religious conflicts that were so pervasive on the continent as well as in Britain, the church was subservient to the state. That Erastian view was quite common in Britain in those days.

And, on the other hand, uh, Descartes seems to have been a fairly traditional Roman Catholic in his thinking about the church. And what that leaves us with, number nine, is what Hobbes thinks is philosophically significant about God. Uh, what seems to arise, though he's, he never formulates the proof, he thinks that it's certainly

persuasive at least, that God must be the first efficient cause in the whole chain of cause and effect which has produced things as we know them today.

That's about all he's willing to say, philosophically, because of his methodology, cause-effect mechanisms being unfolded. That's all he's willing to say about God, though as a practicing, broad church, uh, Anglican, he obviously seemed to believe more than that, but that on the authority of the church and the state. And he talks at length about biblical revelation.

On the other hand, uh, Descartes wants to say more. Descartes, remember, is a conceptualist, not a realist about universals. So, in terms of what the objective realities involved are, he can only speak of God as an efficient cause, not as a formal cause, only as an efficient cause.

But he does want to have, uh, the picture of God that he gained from the medievals. He was educated in a Jesuit school at La Flèche; therefore, he was well acquainted with medieval thought. Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and so forth.

And so, God is not only the efficient cause, but also good. And you don't see Hobbes talking philosophically about the goodness of God. You do see Descartes talking about the goodness of God.

And, uh, the reason I'll mention just in a moment, but let me pause there and see if this rundown on Hobbes refreshes your mind. Is it clear? Do you want clarification, rerun on anything there? Yes, Kristen. Okay.

As the scientist gathers observational data, a mass of information, not necessarily coordinated, interpreted in terms of theory and implication, a mass of information becomes available. Now, how is that going to be organized, you see? In effect, what is happening is that the scientist's observations, experiments, and analysis are taking apart the, uh, the world of our ordinary experience. Such as, uh, the tree with an apple falling, which is going to hit Isaac Newton on the head.

Uh, you see, analyzing all of that. Now, what you want, however, is a systematic theoretical understanding. So, having, as it were, taken it apart into all the particular observations, now you try to reconstitute the understanding.

And you reconstitute it in terms of premises, followed by, uh, logical deductions, leading you to further conclusions. Essentially, arranging all of one's observations as premises or further inferences to show the logical interrelatedness. Okay, and then drawing further deductions.

Uh, the reconstitutive method. When we get into the 19th century, there will be a subtle change in that, though it'll still persist. Because in the hypothetico-deductive

method, that is to say, the premises for the deductive reconstitution, the premises are hypotheses.

Whereas for Hobbes, the premises are empirical generalizations. Do you see that difference? So, in a way, you have three ways of formulating a body of theoretical understanding in the sciences. Either empirical premises, then deductive inference, or intuitive premises, like mathematical axioms, then deductive inference, or, beginning in the 19th century, a hypothesis.

And what you deduce from the hypotheses are the things you found empirically. You show that they all stem from some, what is called, covering general law. A broad empirical generalization, of which your empirical findings are just particular instances.

Okay, so we'll get into that when we get to John Stuart Mill next semester. David? Yes, yes, Bacon doesn't seem to be cued into the deductive method. You find in almost any commentary, or any historical work that talks about Bacon, his tendency, his need to get into mathematical methods, that's one of his lacks.

The use of hypothesis is one of the differences between Bacon's methods and later inductive methods, you see. Now, the use of hypothesis comes into focus, as I was telling Kristen in the 19th century. But mathematical methods, no, in one way, that's already operative in, uh, Descartes.

Yeah. Okay. anything else, then, about Hobbes? Then let me add a further comment about number nine, concerning God.

We've talked about the breakdown of medieval science, rooted as it was in Greek science, Pythagorean, Platonic, or Aristotelian, as the case may be. And the breakdown of that science, due to, in significant measure, the rise of nominalism, the development of purely empirical methods, since there are no forms that you have to get at by other than empirical means. Now, it's been argued that there were other reasons for the movement to empirical methods than simply the rise of nominalism.

Other reasons. so that, a British philosopher by the name of Michael Foster, M. P. Foster, in a series of articles in the 1930s, long time ago now, in the journal Mind, a very famous series of articles, uh, developed this, uh, this thesis, uh, that the rise of empirical science is due to the fact that by the late Middle Ages, it was recognized, uh, that if we take seriously the doctrine of creation, it follows that the nature of the physical creation is completely contingent. It doesn't have to be.

It doesn't have to be the way it is. That is to say that if there is no necessary creation, if there are no fixed forms necessitating things, then what you have is the contingency of created things, as indeed, William of Ockham had said. Uh, but if you

want to understand the way things are in nature, what you have to do is simply look and see empirical methods.

However, what is going to assure us that the processes of nature will be accessible, intelligible, and that our empirical methods are going to be reliable? And there, again, you have some sort of theological justification that's been suggested. Alfred North Whitehead, whom we'll be reading towards the, well, in the last third of the second semester. Uh, Alfred North Whitehead, 20th-century mathematician, physicist, philosopher.

He argues in one place that it was confidence in the rationality of God that gave confidence in the intelligibility of God's creation. You see, quite apart from the theory of forms, which had been the way in which God presumably gave intelligible order to the creation, but quite apart from that, granted a rational God intelligibility of the creation. But the question still arises not as to objective conditions, therefore, which make nature intelligible, but as to the subjective conditions, which make human rationality reliable, and which make the human senses believable.

You see? Now, the one who tried to argue for the, uh, reliability of human reason and senses is Descartes. Now, if your introduction to Descartes in your introductory course was in terms of his skepticism, yes, it's still the same Descartes. He starts methodologically where the skeptic is.

Skeptical about reason, skeptical about the senses. But you will find that by the time he gets to meditation four, he is arguing that reason is trustworthy because a good God would not deceive us by giving us faulty intellectual faculties. So it rests on the goodness of God.

And when, finally, in meditation six, at the end of his meditations, he gets around to talking of sense experience. There again, he pulls out the same kind of argument, that in the final analysis, our senses are reliable if we use them aright, because a good God would not deceive us by giving us unreliable senses. So, the point is that, uh, Descartes is able to go beyond simply saying God is an efficient cause.

He's able to go beyond because of the goodness of God and talk about the reliability of human reason and the senses, and accordingly, he's much more optimistic about the development of science and philosophy than the skeptics could ever have been, and certainly more confident about rational possibilities than Thomas Hobbes was. Comment? Question? There's been quite a lot of debate and discussion about the influence of medieval thought in laying the basis for the rise of modern science. That sort of thing is discussed in the history of science at some length.

There's one of our graduates who teaches the history of science up at the University of Wisconsin, in Madison, David Lindbergh. And, Lindbergh is, is wary of these, uh,

these easy justifications. he makes the point that, in the actual texts out of the medievals, he doesn't find that sort of confidence expressed.

Now, but the ethos is there, is part of the response. And the other thing is that it's the ethos of confidence in a divinely created world that underlies both the theory of forms, okay, and the continued confidence that people like Ockham and Bacon had in the empirical accessibility of nature to human understanding. So, as long as you say it guardedly, it seems to me there's a good basis there.

David? It came about from confidence? Descartes thesis is not a historical thesis. He's not saying confidence in science arose because of. No, that's the thesis of people like Whitehead and, uh, Michael Foster.

Descartes thesis is that logically, it's a logical thesis, not a historical one. Logically, since God is good, okay, premise, since God is good, and he offers in the previous meditation a proof for that, you see. But if God is good, then what God does is good.

And so the abilities, the faculties God has given us, are reliable, or God would be deceiving us, and that wouldn't be good, you see. A good God does not deceive, does not give us deceptive faculties. So this is a logical justification, rather than a historical argument.

Okay. All right, I'm ready then to move on to Descartes himself. How about it? Okay.

What we have in the anthology is the Meditations, probably his most influential work. In fact, if you read the editor's introductory comments, Kaufman's introductory comments, before you get into the meditations, he makes the observation that it's this work which was the starting point for the philosophy later on of Benedict Spinoza, of the French philosopher Malebranche, and of Leibniz. Tremendously influential point of reference.

Moreover, to this day, Descartes is probably the most regarded French philosopher before the 20th century, and in the 20th century, still the most highly regarded French philosopher. It seems to be characteristic that when people lecture at the Sorbonne for the first time, they all pay their homage to René Descartes, you see. He's such a towering figure.

But you might, as you read the meditations, realize almost at once that for all of the contrast between Hobbes and, for that matter, Bacon and Descartes, there is a strong point of similarity initially between Bacon and Descartes. You see, Bacon really begins in his discussion of how we know by casting down all the idols. Remember? The idols of the cave, the idols of the market, the idols of, so on and so forth.

That is to say, faulty assumptions and faulty methods. He does not trust either the philosophical or scientific methods of the past, or the philosophical beliefs of the past. They're all subject to doubt.

Now, that's Bacon, but Descartes, in that regard, is virtually the same, because the first meditation in Descartes' meditations is precisely on his part simply an attempt to expound on the thesis, I doubt, and to give reasons for doubt. Now, what they're doing should, in the historical context by now, be pretty obvious. Remember what we said about the epistemological vacuum created by the breakdown of scholastic methodology? Remember about the rise of skepticism again, you see? And what both Bacon and Hobbes are doing, therefore, is paying serious attention to the skeptic subjections to existing methods of knowing and existing beliefs.

Paying serious attention. And, as it were, identifying with the skeptical position. And by devising a new method, breaking out of skepticism into a new era of philosophical inquiry.

So, there's a sense in which both of them are conceding the skeptic's point about science and philosophy to date, you see? But, to say that science and philosophy to date are questionable does not imply that science and philosophy in the future are always going to be questionable, if we can find the right kind of method. And that's precisely what they're trying to do. Bacon was coming up with a much more careful kind of empirical method than had been used previously.

Descartes came up with a kind of analysis and logical method that he thinks has been operative in mathematics, about which these skeptics weren't skeptical in his day, apparently. Now, Sextus Empiricus, the Roman skeptic, actually had written a work against the mathematicians. Descartes never questions the nature of mathematical reasoning.

Well, never question it. He does, yes, but it's mathematical reasoning which has been open to the least doubt, to the most consensus, simply because of the nature of a mathematical proof. In other words, if you can break up subject matter into a succession of individual judgments, propositions, and organize them in logical order, beginning with what is intuitively, axiomatically self-evident, and proceeding by deductive inference, you see, that's what mathematics does.

Then what you can have is really hard knowledge. Now, at this level of the new method, the big difference, the big difference between Bacon's new method and Descartes' new method is this, that in the empiricist strain, where the premises are empirical generalizations, okay, where the premises are empirical generalizations, what you have is evidence, perhaps probability, but no certainty. But in Descartes' tradition, if the premises are self-evident and intuitive, what you have is complete certainty, as he says, beyond all doubt.

Certainty, indubitable, which means cannot be doubted, are the first indubitable premises. Now, the result is that if by this method you are trying to justify certain conclusions, you're trying to justify believing that certain conclusions are true, the most you have on the empirical line is going to be probability, you see, and an approach, therefore, to justification of beliefs, which in today's epistemology is known as evidentialism, and we'll be seeing more of that in John Locke in the first week of school in January, okay, John Locke's evidentialism. John Locke, in fact, says that you should proportion your belief to the evidence, you see.

On the other hand, Descartes, with his indubitable certainty, he lays the basis for the approach to justification of beliefs, which today is called foundationalism, where what's called the hard foundationalist, or sometimes the strong foundationalist, is trying to say that, yes, we do have indubitable first principles and, therefore, indubitably certain conclusions, and the weak or soft foundationalist is likely to soften that if the premises are a little bit softer than certain, logically or intuitively certain, okay? So you hear a great deal in talk of epistemology today, and if you're around Jay Wood or any of his classes, you'll hear it constantly, because this is his special interest: talk of justification of belief, foundationalism, and evidentialism, and this is where the difference arises. It arises in the difference of starting points for a deductive system, whether in Baconian induction, as it were, and empirical premises, or in Descartes' mathematical-like axioms. Okay, clear enough? And incidentally, what you say about justification of beliefs generally applies in areas like apologetics, because Christian apologetics is simply an attempt to provide justification for believing certain Christian beliefs, you see, so the same strategies are involved.

In fact, it would be possible to trace the history of Christian apologetics by tracing the history of epistemology, because apologetics is just applied epistemology, at least when it's done reflectively about method. It's simply applied epistemology, okay? All right, so Meditation I, then, develops what we usually call methodological skepticism, and in your reading of it, notice several of the reasons that Descartes gives for that kind of skepticism that he adopts because of his method. Notice the relativity of sense perception.

The relativity of sense perception, nothing new there, I mean, we've talked about that ever since the Presocratics. Plato talked about it. The empiricist recognizes the relativity of sense perception, you see, relative to observation conditions, relative to the observer, relative to time as well as place, and so forth.

Second, he employs the hypothesis that perhaps God deceives us, or if God doesn't deceive, perhaps there is some malign spirit, some malign demon deceiving us, so that what we think to be so, what we think we see is not so at all. Is that possible? At least it's a hypothetical possibility. How realistic a possibility is another question, but

if you want something beyond all doubt, you have to lay to rest even the most hypothetical of possibilities if you're after that kind of certainty.

So watch for that. He's not going to be content with probabilities at all; keep that in mind. So what he does then is to lay down certain rules for what he wants, and not in the meditations, but in one of his other works called his Discourse on Method, the first four rules, which he sets up are these: that we will accept as intuitive only what is so clear and so distinct as to be beyond all doubt.

We will accept as intuitively evident, as intuitively true, only what is so clear and distinct as to be beyond all doubt. The phrase clear and distinct ideas, is the hallmark of all Descartes writings. So clear as to allow of no confusion or fuzziness.

So distinct that you know you're not mixing up two related notions, okay? Clarity and distinctness. Now, in order to get clarity and distinctness, he thinks we have to analyze any belief into its constituent parts. So break down a body of knowledge into its constitutive ingredients.

That's the second rule. Third, reorganize them, get this reconstitutive kind of approach coming through again. Reorganize them in the form of a logical demonstration.

Reorganize them in the form of a logical demonstration. And then number four, the same as your high school geometry teacher told you, check and re-check every proof, and every step in every proof. Now that's the rules he proposes.

And as I say, the crux of it is the first, clarity and distinctness. Now, one of the confusing things is that he tends to use a variety of synonyms for this business of intuitive knowledge. He speaks of clarity and distinctness.

That's part of it. He uses the term intuition and intuitive. And by intuitive, what is meant is direct awareness.

A direct awareness of something as it really is. Now, be careful, he doesn't say we have intuitive knowledge of material objects. He doesn't say we have intuitive knowledge of the existence of God.

Now those are things that have to be proved. What we do have intuitive knowledge of is our ideas. We're directly aware of our own ideas, you see.

And he wants a direct awareness with clarity and distinctness. So, intuitive. Now, when there is that intuitive knowledge, it's appropriate to say we are taught those ideas by nature.

We are taught by nature. By the natural light of reason. By the natural light of reason.

Interesting phrase. Obviously, it's a platonic metaphor. The light, once you get out of the cave, or the light that there is outside the cave, is the natural light of reason, but it's Augustinian in its rootage.

Except that, what in Augustine was the light of the divine logos illuminating the object of our knowledge, and illuminating the mind to see it, in Descartes has become simply the light of reason itself. There's no logos doctrine in Descartes, because he's not a scholastic. He doesn't have the theory of forms to give him a logos doctrine, the way it had been developed by the scholastics, you see.

So what was the light of the logos is now just the light of human reason. Okay? The light of reason. He makes a distinction between objective and formal reality.

That is to say, when we have a clear and distinct idea that is intuitively evident in the natural light of reason, okay, what we have before the mind is an idea with objective reality. You see, the object, the immediate object of awareness, is the idea. The idea, not the external reality.

In a representational theory of knowledge, what you're immediately aware of is your ideas, you see. So he talks about the objective reality of the idea as distinct from the formal reality of the external thing which it represents. The formal reality is the cause of the objectively real idea.

Okay? And these phrases and this last distinction become pretty important as you go on reading through his line of thought, and you find them cropping up. This one here, the last one in particular, becomes very influential in his argument for the existence of God in meditation 3. So watch for it there, if you would. Let's see.

Oh yes, one other phrase he uses shouldn't surprise you. Self-evident. Certain beliefs contain their own evidence.

And innate. But be careful of that one. Plato talked of innate knowledge, innate ideas, but in a very different sense of innate, right? For Plato, an innate idea is one that is in your mind from a previous existence.

It's literally inborn. When you're born, you have it. You just have to recollect it.

But for Descartes, innate means nothing of the sort. Innate simply means that it is native to us. It is a natural, of natural origin.

It is of natural origin. It's not some fiction we have made up, but it is a spontaneous, natural kind of idea that just wells up within the mind. Now, I've been talking of ideas, but none of the ideas that he has in mind in this kind of account are empirical ideas.

None of them. What he's saying is that the mind somehow or other has a rising within it, emerging in the consciousness, the mind itself spontaneously starting to think these ideas. They are, in that sense, a priori.

Yeah, a priori meaning prior to, independent of, all experience. And this a priori idea is usually regarded as both universal— everybody has it—and it is necessary. There's some logical necessity involved.

The opposite of it would involve, immediately or indirectly, some kind of contradiction. And this notion of the a priori, which begins in Descartes—oh yes, it has roots in a way earlier, in Plato and so forth—but in this form, it begins in Descartes and runs on throughout this continental rationalist tradition. This is what distinguishes, really, rationalism from empiricism.

The empiricist says we have no a priori knowledge. The rationalist says we do. A priori knowledge.

Well, in that sense, then, when Jefferson declared, we hold these truths to be self-evident, yeah, that's a form of a priori knowledge. Oh, Jefferson seems to have been more influenced by the Stoics than any other philosophical tradition, and so what he may have had in mind, at least for people in Roman jurisprudence and so forth, Lark and so on, people of that tradition. So that when Jefferson said it, he was probably using it in the sense that when such ideas are presented to us, they immediately become irresistible, naturally, spontaneously, so when we come to understand them.

You remember the Stoic view of irresistible truths. We hold these truths to be self-evidencing, self-evident. That's still a kind of a priori knowledge, though Descartes wants to go further than that, and he seems to think not of the mind of the mind, not just as recognizing something when it's said, but coming up spontaneously with ideas.

They spontaneously develop within the mind, such as, well, the crucial case for him is going to be the idea of God, isn't it? The idea of God, yeah. Okay, now this, what's sometimes called this intuitive criterion, an intuitive criterion of truth, is applied not only to premises, but to further inferences you draw from those premises, so that one way in which an idea comes to mind is when it steers out of your premises as you're drawing a conclusion. It jumps out at you.

Three plus five equals, jumps out at you, you see. Oh man, a mortal Socrates is a man, therefore, and the conclusion to a logical syllogism jumps at you, becomes intuitively evident, you see. So he wants the conclusions in the light of the premises to be as clear and distinct as they can possibly be.

So his method involves intuition and deduction. Intuition and deduction. Okay, well, it's in the light of that kind of demand that he initially is a skeptic, because when he tries out these rules, lo and behold, it doesn't give him much grist at all.

Well, this starting point of Descartes has been much criticized, much criticized. When we get to American pragmatism, we'll see one of the originators of the pragmatist tradition, Charles Sanders Peirce, talk of doubt as being completely unreal. Descartes doesn't doubt these things at all.

No, it's a methodological ploy, you see. But what's the point, then, of a methodological ploy? Why not just believe what you believe anyway, if it stands scrutiny? Well, the difference between this and starting all over, which they're doing in an age of skepticism and other approaches. One of the ways in which it's been criticized is that Descartes tells the story of shutting himself in a stove-heated room one winter.

He was traveling, apparently, through the Netherlands, or at least the Low Countries, and decided he'd have to literally sit the weather out a while. So in a stove-heated room, he decided to engage himself in seeing if he could formulate the whole range of things which he believed in this kind of intuitive deductive system. Now, can you imagine it? Here is Descartes in his stove-heated room.

Cold out there. Let's get some more wood on the stove. Now, where were we? Do I really have a body? Oh, we need some more wood on the stove.

You get the implicit contradiction? In other words, what he is doing in theory is contradicted by what he is doing in practice, you see. Now, that didn't bother him, because the kind of criterion he was working with was not a pragmatic criterion, you see. He had a different kind of demand.

A practical experience might be explained in some other way, you see, as was the case, of course, later on with George Berkeley, the subjective idealist. But typically, the realist who wants to argue that we have a direct awareness of reality is going to reject Descartes' method altogether. You see, if you say we have a direct awareness of external realities rather than it being entirely representational, then you don't need these proofs, you see.

The fact that you're cold proves you have a body. Ever been seasick? You know, I can't imagine anybody who's seasick and has still a week at sea to go even imagining they didn't have a body. You know, it's one of the awful things.

You feel as if half your body has already gone overseas. Well, that's the kind of criticism he sometimes gets.