

PHILOSOPHY FOR BEGINNERS



Week 9. Descartes
14th November 2018

Class aims

- Introduce Descartes and his philosophical context
- Discuss the problem of scepticism and Descartes' response
- Consider and debate Descartes' scepticism about the senses, dreams, and whether there is an evil deceiver
- Understand what Descartes means by *cogito ergo sum*

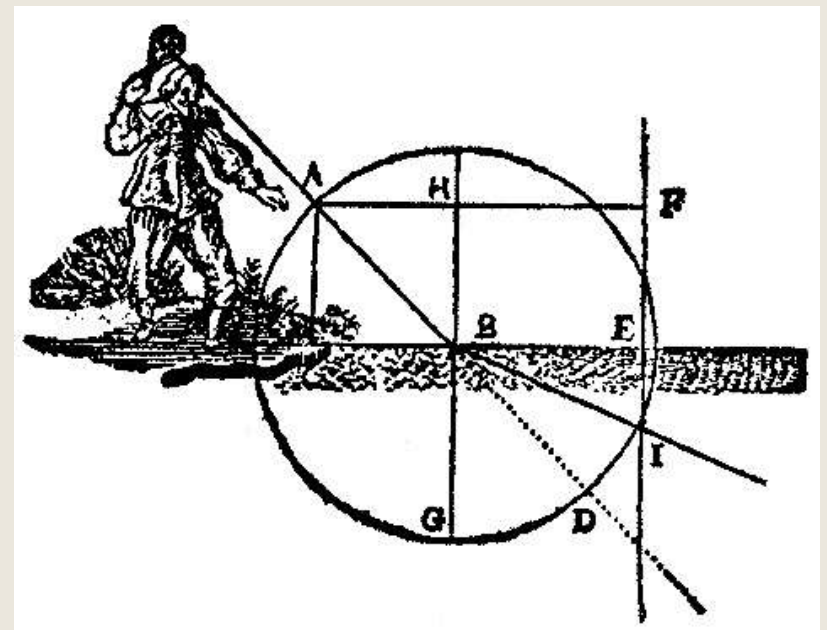
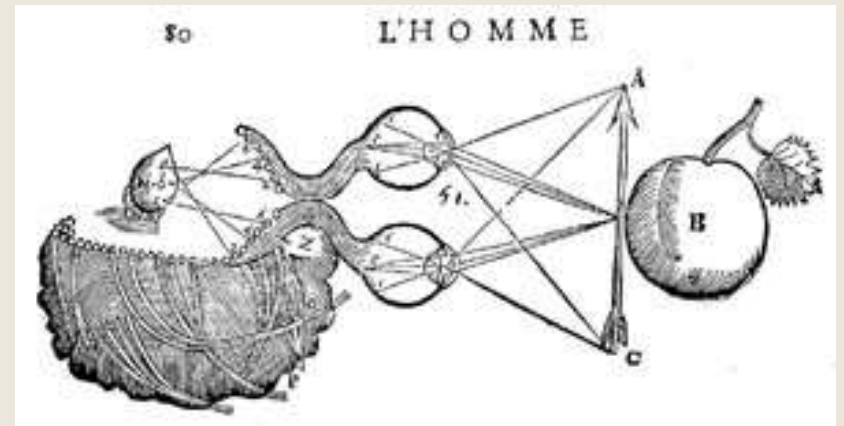
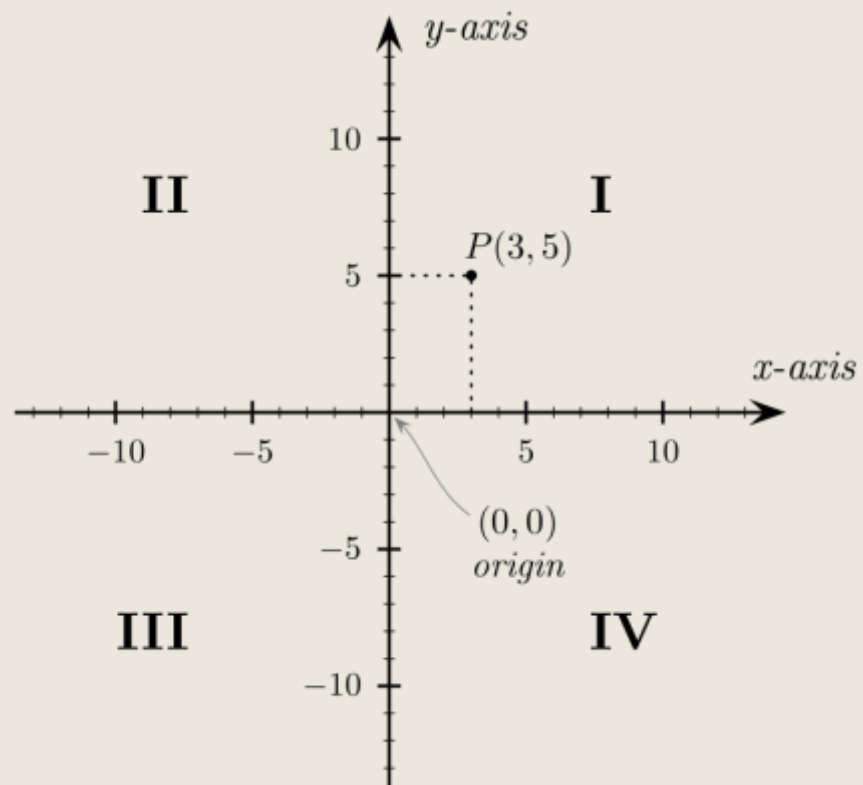


‘SEVERAL years have now elapsed since I first became aware that I had accepted, even from my youth, many false opinions for true, and that consequently what I afterward based on such principles was highly doubtful; and from that time I was convinced of the necessity of undertaking once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted, and of commencing anew the work of building from the foundation, if I desired to establish a firm and abiding superstructure in the sciences.’

The 'father' of modern philosophy...?

- Modern philosophical concerns: the search for certain knowledge; the means by which knowledge is acquired; the mind-body problem
- A 'modern' physics based on mechanical principles
- Rejection of scholasticism—and all ancient philosophical tradition—and a conscious depiction of doing something new
- Accessible style: subjective, autobiographical, non-technical

- Pioneer in mathematics and the natural sciences
- Inventor of the Cartesian coordinate system, which enables points on a plane to be specified by numerical coordinates
- Pioneer of analytical geometry, which connected algebra to geometry and became the basis for later discoveries of the calculus, a profound influence on Newton and Leibniz
- In natural philosophy, he pioneers a new understanding of rainbows and on the optics of reflection and refraction
- Other key research occurs in mechanical momentum and the formation of the earth and the planets
- In philosophy, his key contributions are his method of sceptical doubt, his ontological argument for the existence of God, and for his view that minds and bodies are distinct substances that interact



Key biographical details

- Third son of a country gentleman and councillor in the *parlement* of Brittany
- Classical Jesuit education at La Flèche, where he acquires a dislike for classic Scholasticism
- Education placed a particular emphasis on ‘method’, carrying out everything according to rules maximising efficiency
- Studies law, then becomes a military engineer
- Early interest in the ‘new science’ and mathematics

Descartes: chronology

1596 Born at La Haye, near Tours on 31 March

1606-14 Attends Jesuit college of La Flèche, in Anjou

1616 Studies law at the University of Poitiers

1618 Goes to Holland where he joins the army of Maurice of Nassau; writes a short treatise on music, the *Compendium musicae*

1619 Travels to Germany, where he has vision of new philosophical and scientific system

1622 Returns to France; spends some time in Paris, but also travels in Europe

1628 Writes *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (published posthumously); leaves for Holland, which becomes his home until 1649

1629 Begins working on *De mundo (The World)*

1633 Abandons plans to publish *The World* after the condemnation of Galileo

1635 Birth of his daughter Francine (died 1640)

1637 Publishes *Discourse on Method*, with *Optics*, *Meteorology* and *Geometry*

1641 First edition of *Meditations on First Philosophy*, with the first set of six *Objections and Replies*

1642 Second edition of *Meditations*, with full set of seven *Objections and Replies*, and the *Letter to Dinet*

1643 Cartesian philosophy condemned at the University of Utrecht; begins long correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia (1618-1680)[eldest daughter of Frederick V, Elector of the Palatinate]

1644 Publishes *Principles of Philosophy*

1647 Publishes *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*; begins work on *Description of the Human Body*

1649 Accepts invitation to from Queen Christina to go to Sweden; publishes *The Passions of the Soul*

1650 Dies at Stockholm on 11 February



Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), Spanish priest and theologian who in 1539 together with two others founded a religious order called the Society of Jesus [i.e. the Jesuits]

[illegible]



From my childhood I have been nourished upon letters, and because I was persuaded that by their means one could acquire a clear and certain knowledge of all that is useful in life, I was extremely eager to learn them. But as soon as I had completed the course of study at the end of which one is normally admitted to the ranks of the learned, I completely changed my opinion. For I found myself beset by so many doubts and errors that I came to think I had gained nothing from my attempts to become educated but increasing recognition of my ignorance. And yet I was at one of the most famous schools in Europe... (*Discourse on Method*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, I, pp. 112-13.)

But I thought I had already given enough time to languages and likewise to reading the works of the ancients, both their histories and their fables. For conversing with those of past centuries is much the same as travelling. It is good to know something of the customs of various peoples, so that we may judge our own more soundly and not think that everything contrary to our own ways is ridiculous and irrational, as those who have seen nothing of the world ordinarily do. But one who spends too much time travelling eventually becomes a stranger in his own country; and one who is too curious about the practices of past ages usually remains quite ignorant about those of the present. (*Discourse*, pp. 113-14.)

as soon as I was old enough to emerge from the control of my teachers, I entirely abandoned the study of letters. Resolving to seek no knowledge other than that which could be found in myself or else in the great book of the world, I spent the rest of my youth travelling, visiting courts and armies, mixing with people of diverse temperaments and ranks, gathering various experiences, testing myself in the situations which fortune offered me, and at all times reflecting upon whatever came my way so as to derive some profit from it. For it seemed to me that much more truth could be found in the reasonings which a man makes concerning matters that concern him than in those which some scholar makes in his study about speculative matters. (*Discourse*, p. 115.)



Maurice of Nassau (1567-1625), Prince of Orange

the onset of winter detained me in quarters where, finding no conversation to divert me and fortunately having no cares or passions to trouble me, I stayed all day shut up alone in a stove-heated room, where I was completely free to converse with myself about my own thoughts. (*Discourse*, p. 116.)

I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last. (*Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, II, p. 12.)



Descartes' world (1596-1650)

- An era defined by conflict, uncertainty, religious war and the collapse of old certainties
- Luther initiated the 'Reformation' in 1517, which would divide Europe between (broadly) Northern Protestantism and Southern Catholicism
- Developments in the natural sciences and discoveries of the New World overturned many classic and religious beliefs
- The 'Wars of Religion' in France (1562-98), and Thirty Years War (1618-48) across Europe devastated the continent with 8 million deaths
- A mini Ice Age at the time and Millenarian beliefs added to the turbulence of the era

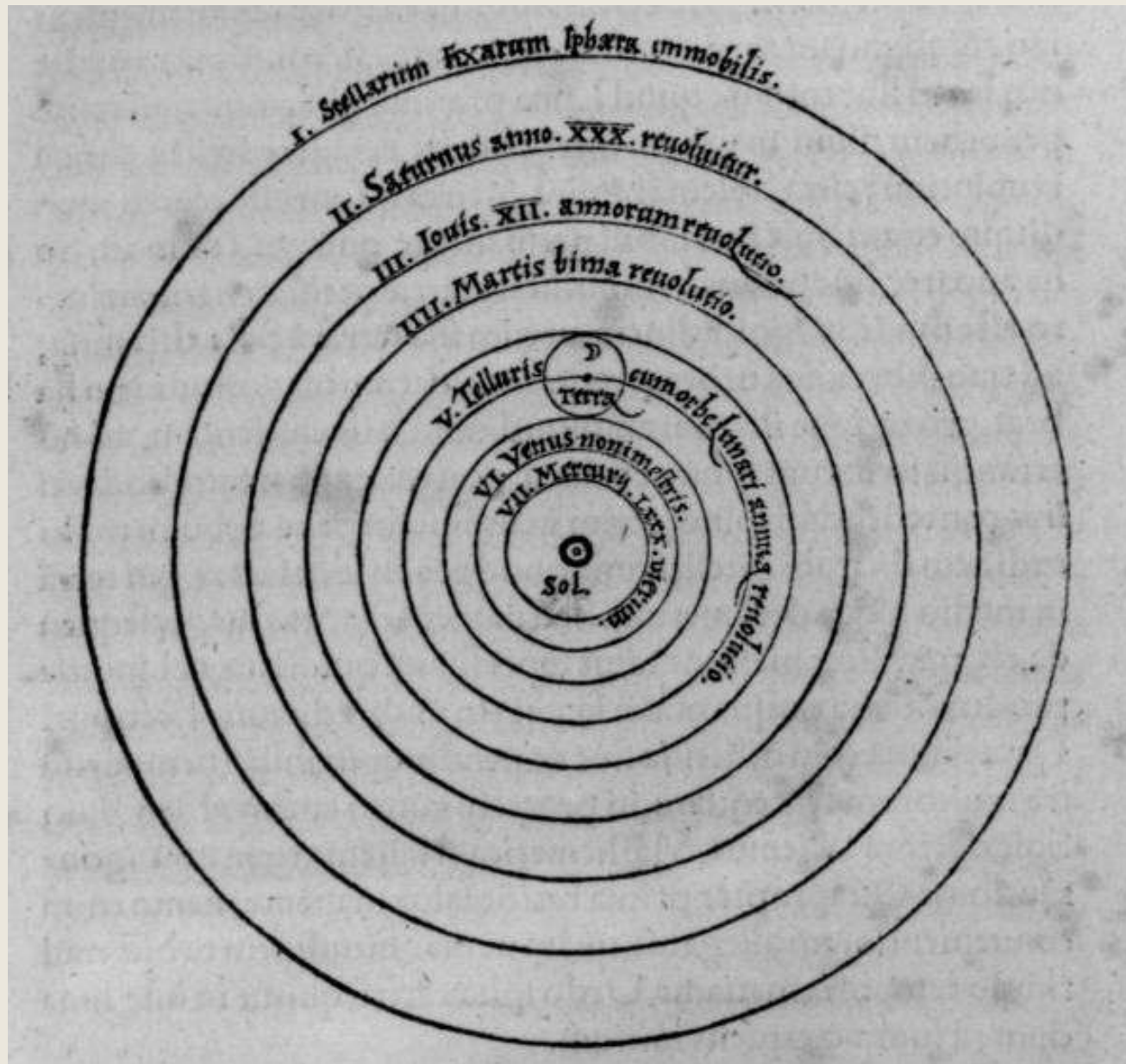


And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
The element of fire is quite put out,
The sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to look for it.
And freely men confess that his world's spent,
When in the planets and the firmament
They seek so many new; they see that this
Is crumbled out again to his atomies.
'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone...

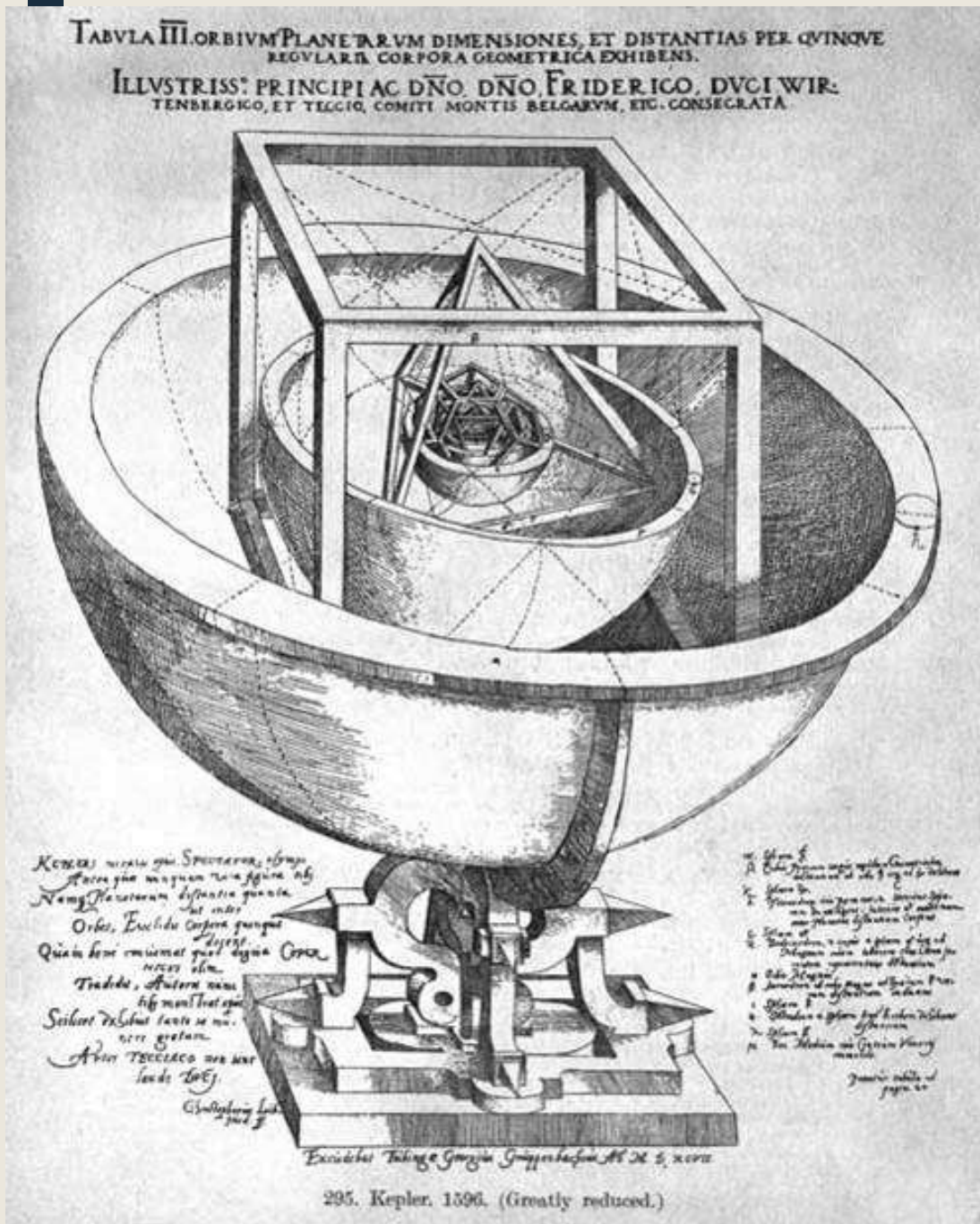
from 'An Anatomy of the World' (1611)



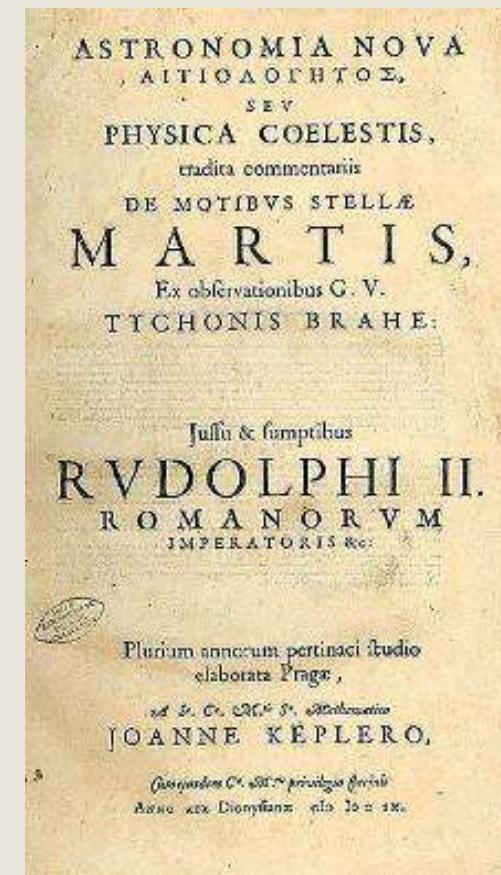
John Donne



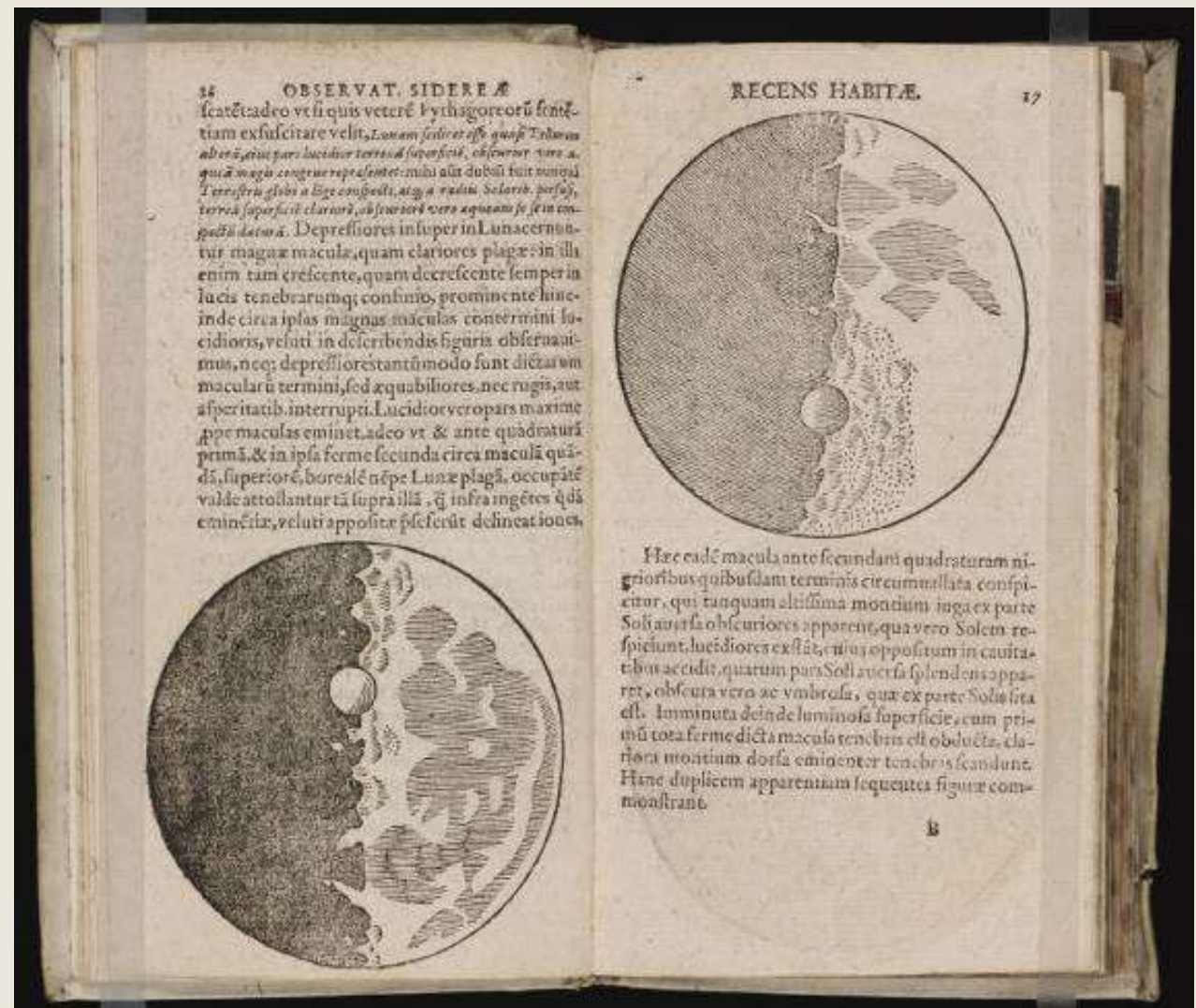
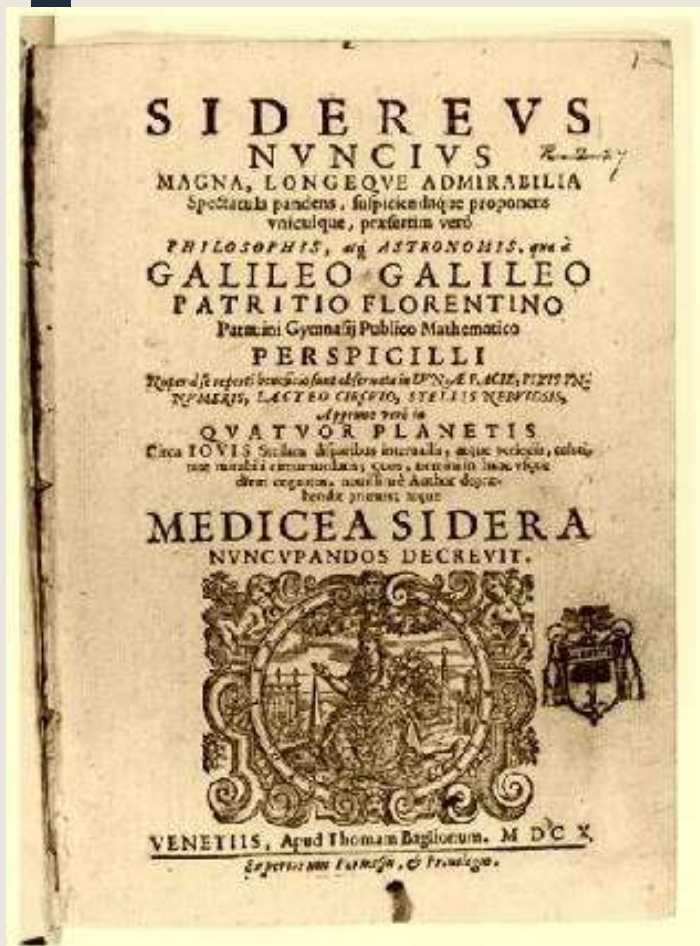
The heliocentric theory, from Nicolaus Copernicus, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (On the revolutions of the celestial spheres) (1543)



Engraving of Johannes Kepler's astrolabe, c.1596. With the help of instruments such as the astrolabe, Kepler worked out that planetary orbits are elliptical.



Title-page of Kepler's *Astronomia nova* (New Astronomy) (1609)



Galileo's *Sidereus Nuncius* (*The Starry Messenger*) (1610)

“The language of the universe is written in mathematics”



William Harvey (1578-1657)

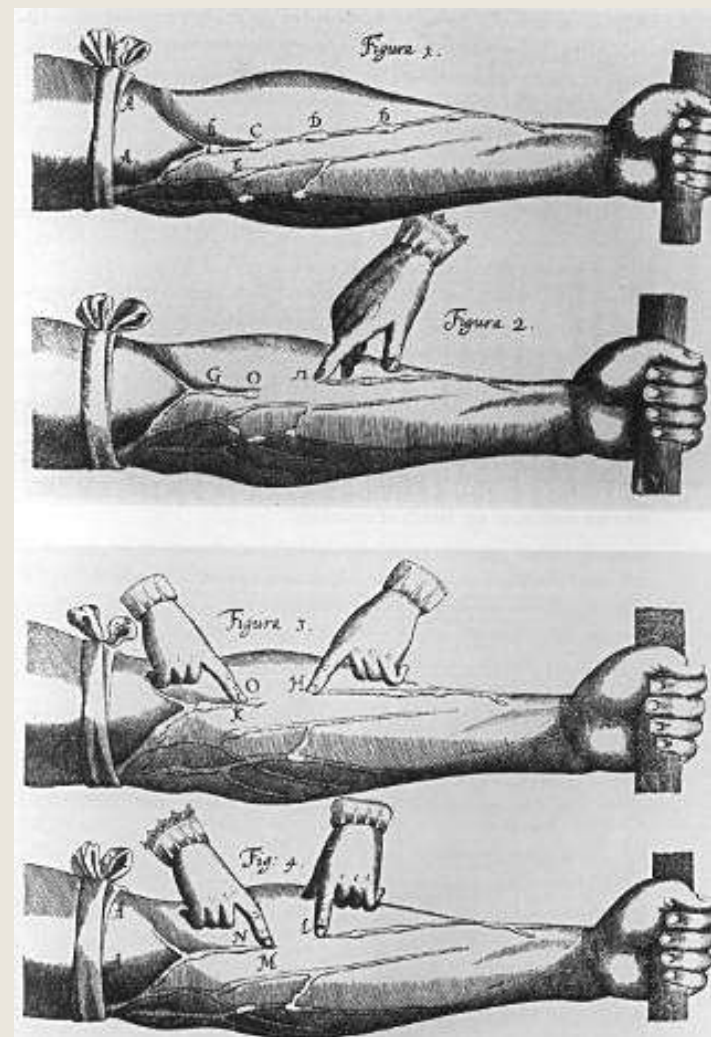


Illustration from Harvey's *Exercitatio anatomica de motu cordis et sanguinis in animalibus* (An anatomical exercise on the motion of the heart and blood in living beings) (1628), showing an experiment, with the use of a ligature, demonstrating that venal blood flows only towards the heart; Harvey was presenting his findings in lectures from 1616



Michel de Montaigne (1533-92)



- French nobleman, and pioneer of the 'Essay'
- Wrote a large collection of essays in French, in a personable, intimate style on topics including friendship, battle, marriage, cannibals and religion
- Motto: 'que scay-je?' What do I know?
- Reintroduces scepticism

I think Man will confess... that all he has gained from so long a chase [after truth] is knowledge of his own weakness. By long study we have confirmed and verified that ignorance does lie naturally within us. The truly wise are like ears of corn: they shoot up and up holding their heads proudly erect—so long as they are empty; but when, in their maturity, they are full of swelling grain, their foreheads droop down and they show humility. So, too, with men who have assayed everything, sounded everything; within those piles of knowledge and the profusion of so many diverse things, they have found nothing solid, nothing firm, only vanity. They then renounce arrogance and recognize their natural condition.

- Montaigne, from “The Apology for Raymond Sebond”

A P P E N D I X,
Continens
O B I E C T I O N E S
Q V I N T A S & S E P T I M A S
In
R E N A T I D E S - C A R T E S
M E D I T A T I O N E S
De Primâ Philosophiâ,

Cum ejusdem ad illas Responsionibus & duabus Epistolis,

Vna ad Patrem D I N E T Societatis Iesu Præpositum
Provincialem per Franciam,

Altera ad celeberrimum Virum

D. G I S B E R T V M V O E T I V M.



AMSTELÆDAMI,
Apud Ludovicum Elzevirium,
MDCLXIV.

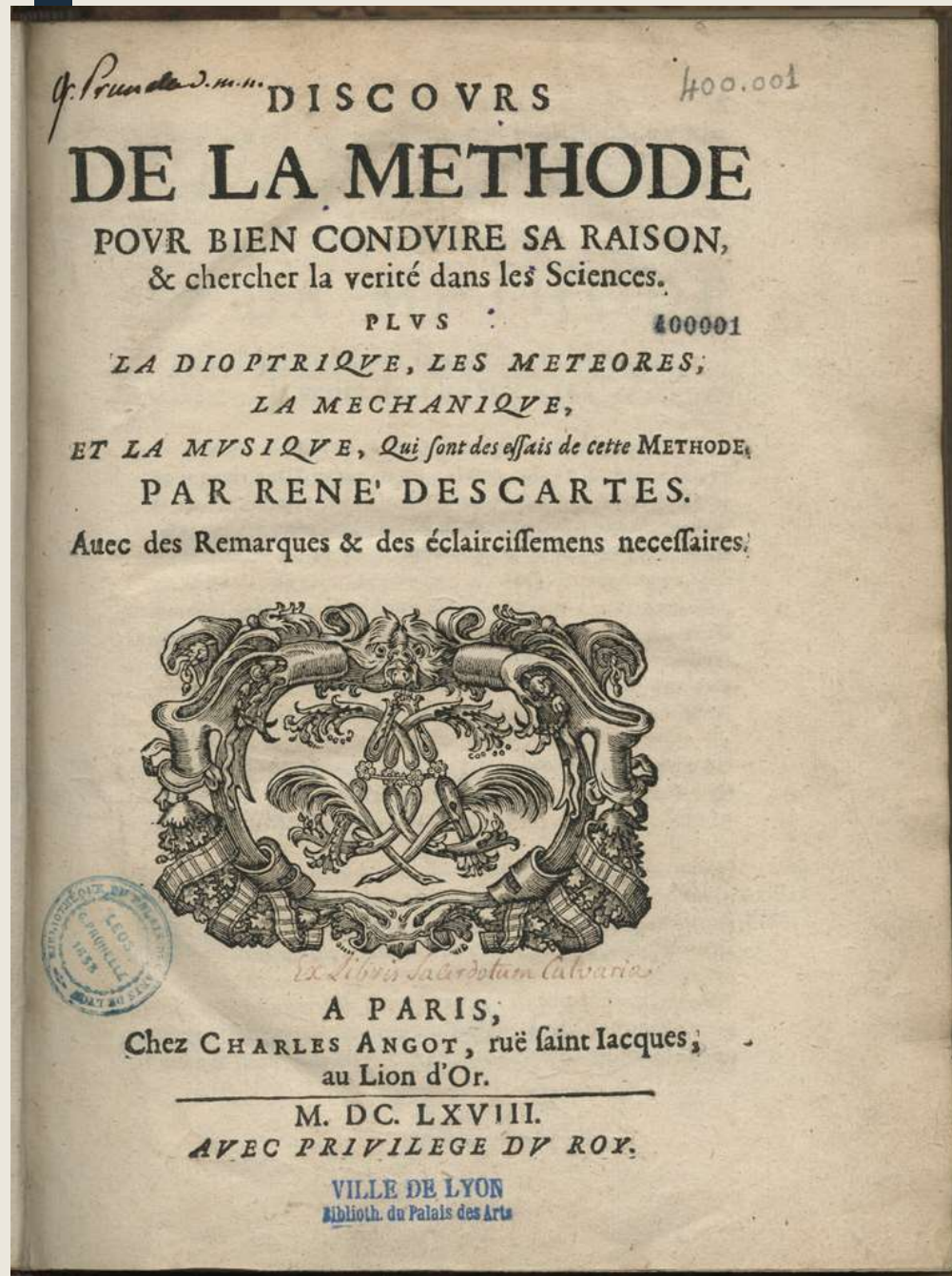
Descartes' key works

- *The Universe* – unpublished
- *Discourse on the Method* (1637)
- *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641)
- *Principles of Philosophy* (1644)
- *Passions of the Soul* (1649)

Emergence of Descartes' project

- In November 1619, while stationed in Germany, Descartes has his first revelation about the lack of a certain basis in his knowledge
- How could the remainder of his knowledge have the same certainty as mathematics?
- How could he make clear how new knowledge was to be achieved, and what existing knowledge could be confirmed as certain, and unified with other knowledge?
- He has a series of dreams which he interprets as giving divine approval to his project. He leaves military service shortly after and begins work on his new philosophical project, founded on clear and distinct ideas.

Discourse on Method



Written in accessible French, aimed at the cultured public of high society

Descartes aimed to become a 'new Aristotle', supplying a new grounds for scientific and philosophical knowledge, free of doubt

The six resulting essays of the *Discourse* are a heterogeneous mix, combining sceptical method with ethics and experimental science

It provokes a number of questions, which the *Meditations* returns to and gives more secure arguments for in 1641

Meditations

RENATI
DES-CARTES.
MEDITATIONES
DE PRIMA
PHILOSOPHIA
IN QVA DEI EXISTENTIA
ET ANIMÆ IMMORTALITAS
DEMONSTRATUR.



PARISIIS,
Apud MICHAËLEM SOLY, viâ Iacobæâ, sub
signo Phœnicis.

M. DC. XLI.

Cum Privilegio, & Approbatione Doctorum.

A P P E N D I X,
Continens
O B I E C T I O N E S
Q V I N T A S & S E P T I M A S
In
RENATI DES-CARTES
M E D I T A T I O N E S

De Primâ Philosophiâ,

Cum ejusdem ad illas Responsionibus & duabus Epistolis.

Vna ad Patrem D. N. E. Societatis Iesu Præpositum
Provincialem per Franciam,

Altera ad celeberrimum Virum

D. GISEBERTVM VOETIVM.



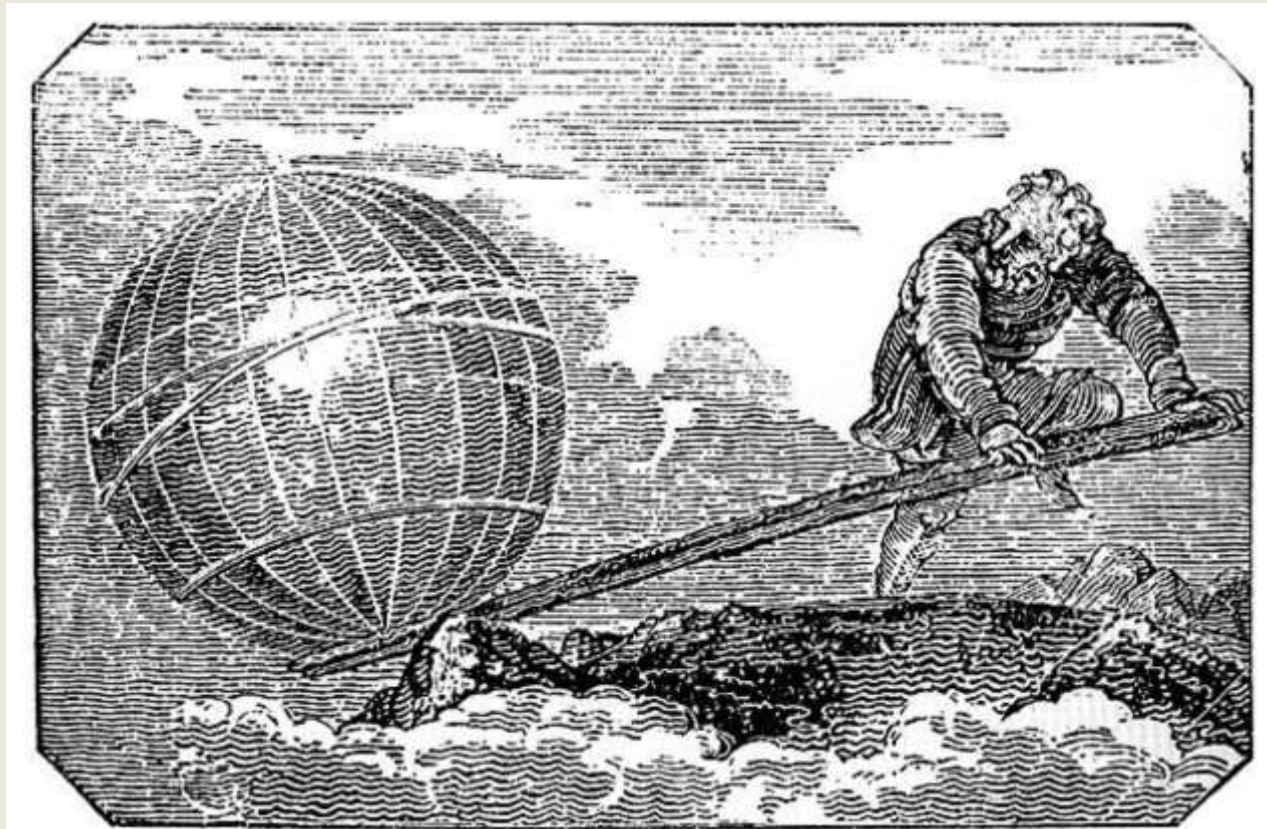
AMSTELÆDAMI,
Apud Ludovicum Elzevirium,
c15 156 LIV.

Sceptical method

- Parts 1 and 2 of the *Discourse* and *Meditation* 1 both present a new sceptical method
- His goal: to withhold his assent from any beliefs that lack a clear and indubitable foundation, so as to establish a new firm foundation for the sciences
- This means doubting anything that ***could*** be doubted.
- 'I had to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations' (*Med.* 1)
- Instead he wants a single, totally indubitable, absolutely certain truth upon which to build his philosophy.
- Descartes will seek out clear and distinct ideas on which to base his new theory of knowledge

Archimedes, in order that he might draw the terrestrial globe out of its place, and transport it elsewhere, demanded only that one point should be fixed and immoveable; in the same way, I shall have the right to have high hopes, if I am happy enough to discover one thing only which is certain and indubitable.

- Meditations, 1



Sceptical method in action

- What can be doubted? Descartes engages in philosophical, not actual doubt
- Take a look at the handout and consider the three things which Descartes doubts...
- In groups, discuss...
- *Why does Descartes apply scepticism?*
- *How convincing do you find his arguments?*
- *What kind of philosophy is beginning to emerge?*

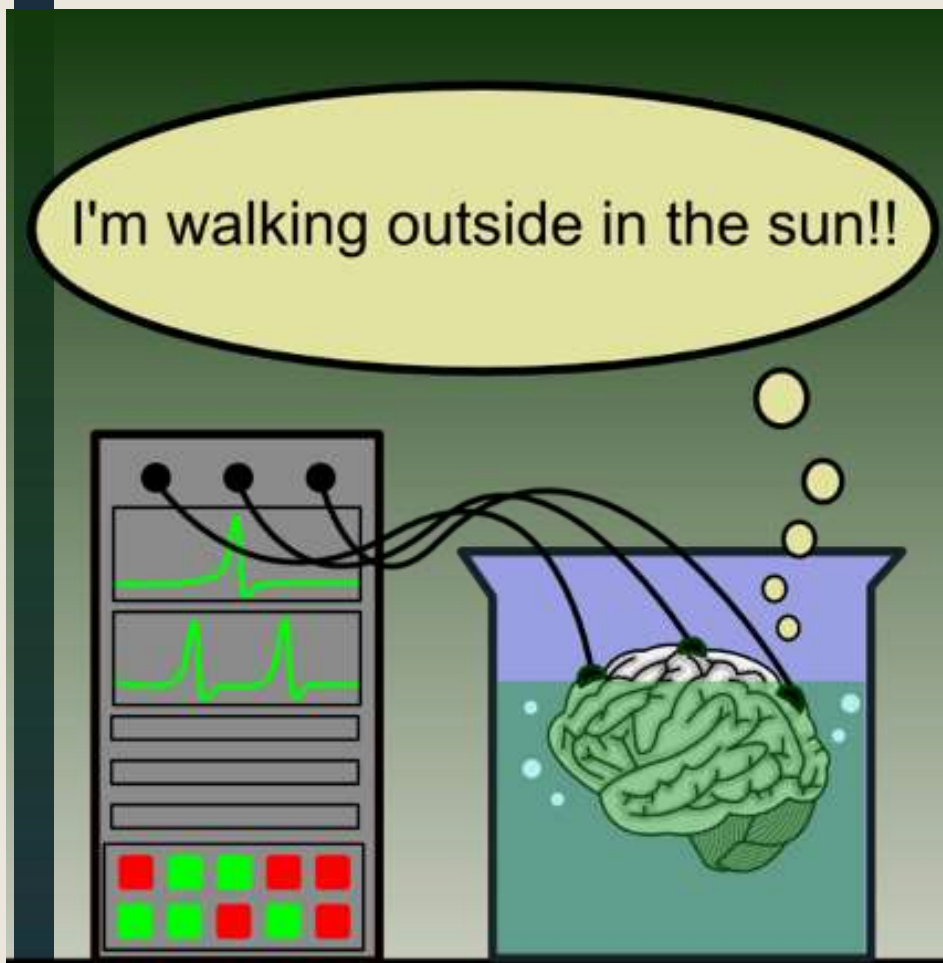
Scepticism about the senses

- He begins by doubting his physical senses, the source of all his immediate knowledge, for being 'sometimes deceptive'.
- – One can be mistaken about **distance**, of 'very small and distant things'.
- – Similarly **the insane** consider themselves to be made of 'glass', or 'kings' or 'gourds', so how can he be so sure of himself?
- – What of **dreams** that seem as vivid as real life? Here he experiences in his dreams the very same things 'as these insane people do when they are awake'. He describes the same scenario of being 'clothed in my dressing gown, seated next to the fireplace', gazing at a sheet of paper. There are dreams which he has mistaken for waking life. What of now, what if this too is a dream?

- *“How often has it happened to me that in the night I dreamt that I [was] in this particular place, that I was dressed and seated near the fire, whilst, in reality, I was lying undressed in bed . . . ! [I]n dwelling carefully on this reflection I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep”*



Suppose there is no God 'who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning [who] has employed all his energies in order to deceive me.' (*Meditations*, p. 15.)



I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things. (*Meditations*, p. 15.)

I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation; and, even if it is not in my power to know any truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree. (*Meditations*, p. 15.)

Evil demon argument

- After doubting his senses, Descartes begins to question his basis for assuming the world of external things actually exists
- What if the world he perceives is actually an illusion?
- What if an 'evil deceiver' has created an entirely illusory world in which Descartes is deceived about absolutely everything?
- Then not only would he not know anything, he would have no grounds even for proving his own existence...

Am I not so bound up with a body and with senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist?

No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something.

So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.

(*Meditations*, pp. 16-17.)

Cogito ergo sum

- In *Meditation 2* and *Discourse Part 4*, Descartes offers his first proof against his sceptical method
- *I think therefore I am* (*Discourse*), and his claim that he is a ‘thinking thing’ (*Meditations*) share the same premise:
- In order to doubt or be deceived, there must be a thing that doubts or is deceived
- This proves at least that he necessarily exists
- It also proves that he exists as a thinking, doubting thing

Class recap

- Introduce Descartes and his philosophical context
- Discuss the problem of scepticism and Descartes' response
- Consider and debate Descartes' scepticism about the senses, dreams, and whether there is an evil deceiver
- Understand what Descartes means by *cogito ergo sum*

