BECOMING A PHILOSOPHER : DESCARTES' METHOD

Institute for the Study of Texts

Edition 2

Session 1

Saturday 6 May 2017

TIMELINE CRASH COURSE

		SESSION 1 : 6 MAY 2017
Presentation timeline	*18:00*	
Introduction participants	*18:03*	
Introduction to Descartes	*18:10*	*Why Descartes*
		Life events, context and chronology
		Science and Philosophy until Descartes
		Responses and reactions
Break	*18:50*	
Part One	*19:00*	*Reading, comments and reactions*
Break	*19:50*	
Part Two	*20:00*	*Reading, comments and reactions*
	20:50	*Presentation of home study for Session 2*
		SESSION 2 : 14 MAY 2017
Introduction	*18:00*	*Initial reactions to the home study*
Part Three	*18:10*	*Reading, comments & home study comments, reactions*
Break	*18:45*	
Part Four	*18:55*	*Reading, comments & home study comments, reactions*
Break	*18:35*	
Part Five	*19:45*	*Selected readings, brief comments and reactions*
Part Six	*20:15*	*Reading, comments & home study comments, reactions*
	20:50	*Final comments and responses*

DESCARTES ?

Why Descartes ?

- Father of Rationalism, i.e. instrumental in provoking the Enlightenment and later, modern and contemporary reactions through philosophy, modern science and society at large
- Father of modern subjective philosophy — birth of the modern subject
- A new kind of subjective writing : metaphysics enters everyday life ; the literary voice
- Philosophy and theology : with God without God
- Discovering a true revolution

Context and life events

1596	Birth in La Haye (France)
1607-1615	Jesuit College of La Flèche (Aristotle & Thomas Aquinas)
1616	Degree of Law
1618	Dutch State Army, interest in military engineering
1619	Dream of the grand vision
1620s	Travels to Italy, stay in Paris and Brittany ; researches in mathematics ; first writings
1628-1643	Netherlands
1633	Galileo condemned by the Roman Inquisition ; Descartes holds the publication of his *The World*
1637	***Discourse on Method for Guiding One's Reason, The Dioptrics, the Meteors and the Geometry***
1640s	Proper recognition
1641	*Meditations on First Philosophy*
1644	*Principles of Philosophy* (textbook)
1649	*The Passions of the Soul*
1649-1650	Stockholm, Queen Christina and death

Philosophy : a brief chronology

8th-5th BCE	Homer, Hesiod, Greek mythology and poetry	*Mythos*, orphic mysteries…
5th BCE	Parmenides, Heraclitus	Pre-Socratic fragments ; the One vs. flux
470-399 BCE 428-348 BCE	Socrates Plato	Socratic dialogues, Theory of Forms (or Ideas), the Good, the Cave, the Divided Line…
384-322 BCE	**Aristotle**	Empirical studies, natural sciences and the importance of perception. The categories of Being (*genus*, *species* and *differentia*) ; universal to be found in the *essence* of particular things ; actual over potential ; four causes (material, formal, efficient, final) ; geocentrism
4th BCE - 1th CE	Stoics, Sceptics, Epicureans, Cynics	*(in passing)*
204-270	Plotinus	Neoplatonism : the One, the Intellect and the (World) Soul, mysticism
354-430	Augustine	Church Father — Christianity meets Neoplatonism : God is met on a mystical and not 'rational' plane, evil is not positive but a privation of good, Church as the City of God
1033-1109	Anselm	Early Scholasticism ; Faith *for* Reason : one does not understand in order to believe, but believes in order to understand. The intelligence of faith. God is "that than which nothing greater can be thought" (ontological argument)
980-1037 1126-1198	Avicenna Averroes	Aristotelianism enters back European thought through a combination with Neoplatonism
1225-1274	**Thomas Aquinas**	Aristotle combined with Christian Theology : triumph of Aristotle over Augustine. 'Natural Theology' : faith and reason *must* be in accord ; reason must be brought to reach the convictions set by faith. Will become the unquestionable dogma of the Christian church.
1533-1592	Montaigne	The essay as a literary genre : anecdotes, autobiography and conceptual philosophy ; a wider audience for philosophical writings

The scientific revolution : a brief chronology

Magnetism	William Gilbert	1544-1603	The Earth itself is magnetic ; magnetism and gravity
Sciences	Francis Bacon	1561-1626	Sceptical methodology as a bedrock for modern science
Astronomy	Galileo Galilei	1564-1642	Heliocentrism…
Astronomy	Johannes Kepler	1571-1630	Astronomy away from cosmology, as a part of universal mathematical physics ; laws of planetary motions
Physiology	William Harvey	1578-1657	Systemic circulation of blood
Mathematics	Pierre Fermat	1601-1665	Infinitesimal calculus
Anatomy	Thomas Willis	1621-1675	Anatomy of the brain, nervous system, muscles
Chemisty	Robert Boyle	1627-1691	Modern, scientific chemistry
Optics	Christian Huygens	1629-1695	Wave theory of light
Physics	Isaac Newton	1643-1727	Classical mechanics : laws of motion and universal gravitation

PART ONE

On reason, his story, his (unsatisfactory) schooling and the quest for truth beyond cultures

PART TWO

On rebuilding his personal foundations, on the inspirations of mathematics and his 4 basic principles for a method

§ 1 Metaphors of the single agents : architect, legislator, God. Stronger and more sustainable.

§ 2 Metaphor continued ; not knocking down and rebuilding upon traditions as such, just his own personal foundations

§ 3 Only an attempt at reforming his own thoughts ; a dangerous example to follow (2 kinds of human minds)

§ 4 A diversity of teachers and the variations of cultural norms across space and time is what led him to realise he had to guide himself

§ 5 A slow, careful progression

§ 6 Inspired by logic, geometry and algebra, but respective flaws : logic is useful for explaining but not for learning ; geometry discusses shapes and thus tires imagination ; algebra sets constraints of rules and symbols that confuse the mind.

Need for another method with as less rules as possible, yet strictly followed, first to apply to his own mental habits :

§ 7 1. No jumping to conclusions. Only truly dispersed doubts, *clear* and *distinct* (*evidentia*)

§ 8 2. Subdividing each of the problems addressed as precisely as necessary.

§ 9 3. A guided progression from simplest to more complex objects of knowledge.

§ 10 4. Making comprehensive enumerations to forget nothing.

§ 11 Inspired by mathematics and the certainty of its inferences. Plan to test that approach by exploring the most elementary question of geometry : proportions between lines.

§ 12 His explorations in geometry and arithmetic indeed showed that following the correct order certainly leads to the only possible “one truth about each thing”.

§ 13 Satisfaction of this method : using reason for each step. Long-term plan of applying this method to philosophy itself, from which the principles of other sciences derive.