



# René Descartes (1596-1650)

Born in La Haye, France

# Descartes

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Had own work on astronomy which he did not publish. Instead, he wrote widely in many fields including especially mathematics.

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We will focus on his role as the founder of *Modern Philosophy*- a period that begins with Descartes and continues until the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century (or to present, depending on whom you ask.)

# Important Works

 **1637**

Discourse on the Method

Meditations on First Philosophy  
-first published in Latin (later in French)  
-published with 5 (later 6) sets of  
Objections and Replies

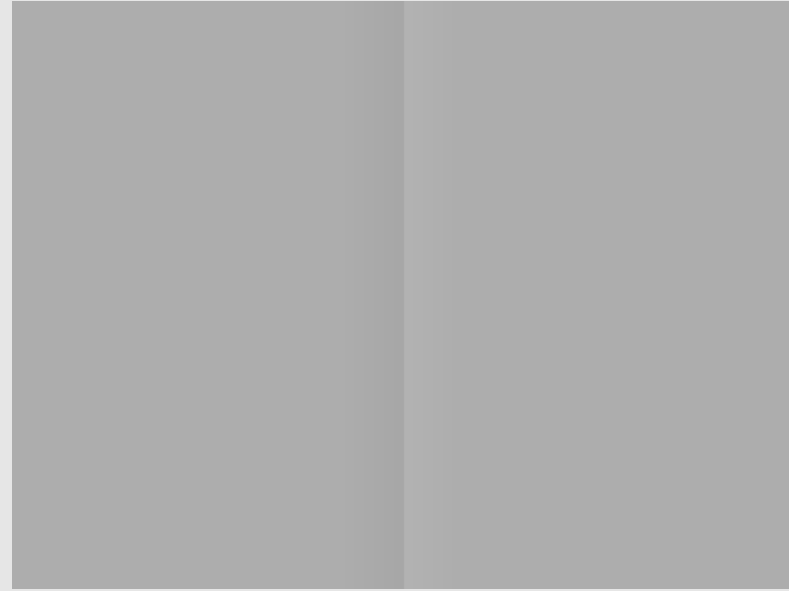
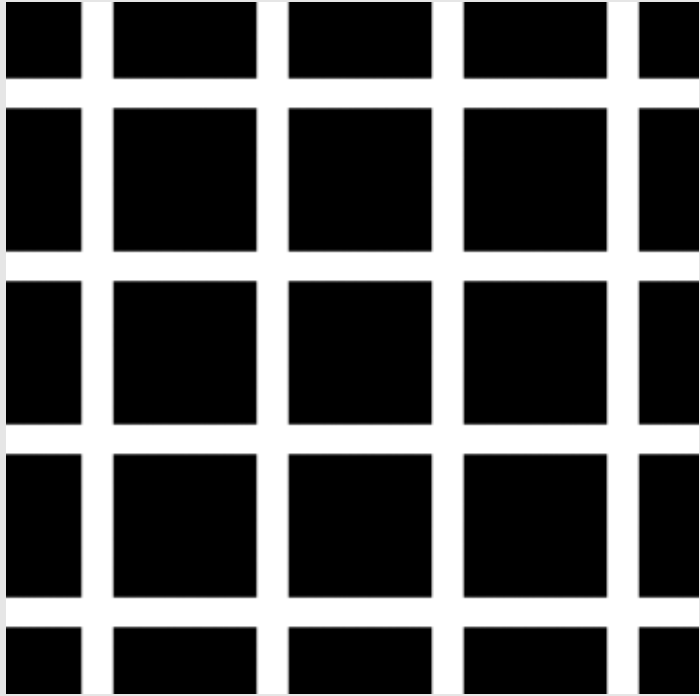
 **1641**

# Descartes' Project

Instead of going through each opinion he has and examining whether it is true or not, Descartes looks for a secure foundation for knowledge and specifically for the sciences

# Sense Data

Descartes realizes that most of the things he believes come from the senses. However, the senses are unreliable.



Optical Illusions

# Sure, Descartes, but ...

Surely the senses are *generally* reliable.





# The Dream Argument



# Methodological Doubt

Descartes doesn't actually think that he is dreaming.

It is important to keep in mind his *project*: to establish a *certain foundation* for the new sciences, so that never again will everyone be so completely wrong (such as in the case of geocentrism).

## Methodological Doubt, cont.

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So, Descartes, for the purposes of looking for a foundation proposes the following method:

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If  $x$  is **doubtable**, treat  $x$  as if it were false.

# The *a priori*

What are the *a priori* sciences?

Math, logic, and analysis

What makes these different than sciences like:

Chemistry, physics, sociology, etc.?

## The *a priori*, cont.

The *a priori* sciences don't require sense data.  
Mathematicians don't need observing  
equipment!

The *a posteriori* sciences do require sense data.


Discussion  
Question

Are the results of the  
*a priori* sciences  
doubtable, or are  
they completely  
certain?

Descartes says the *a priori* is doubtable.



He argues that there might be a “cunning deceiver,” more powerful than him, that causes him to make mistakes in *a priori* reasoning.



This suggestion might seem a bit silly, but there are two things to keep in mind:

1. Descartes' project is to find something that is *absolutely, completely certain*

2. Descartes already believes in a god, so this idea (a “great deceiver”) isn't too far of a stretch for him.

# Meditation I, cont.



## The end of Meditation I

At the end of Meditation I,  
Descartes has nothing  
that he can be certain of.