I. The “Catastrophe”

II. Descartes’ Response

III. The Empiricist Response

IV. Consequences

V. Effects on the *Vita Activa*
I. The “Catastrophe”:
Epistemological Crises of the 17th Century

A. Voyages of Discovery
B. Reformation
C. The Copernican Revolution

Traditional claims to knowledge about both the natural order and the moral order of the universe were shown to be deeply problematic.

Results:

- Social upheaval
- Wars
- Persecution
- Revolts and Revolutions
II. Descartes and Rationalism

Rationalism and Empiricism — Epistemology

= Theory of knowledge:

• What counts as knowledge?
• how we come to know anything?

Continental Rationalists:

Descartes    Spinoza    Leibniz
(1596-1650)    (1632-1677)    (1646-1716)

British Empiricists:

Locke     Berkeley    Hume
(1632-1704)    (1685-1753)    (1711-1776)

Descartes: How can I be certain that any of my beliefs are true?

How do I know that …
  … I actually see what I seem to see?
  … I have a body?
  … 2+3=5?
  … by letting go of an object I will cause it to fall?
Descartes and his Times

1596  Born in La Haye

1604-12 College at La Flèche
  (FOUNDED 1603 BY HENRI IV, DIRECTED BY JESUITS)

1610  ASSASSINATION OF HENRI IV

1611  Henriade

1618-48 THIRTY YEARS WAR

1618-19 With armies of Prince Maurice of Nassau and of Maximilian of Bavaria

1619  Dreams; the “stove-heated room”

1628  in Paris — debate with Candoux

1628  Rules for the Direction of the Mind (Latin)
     (published posthumously)

1628-49 In Holland

1633  CONDEMNATION OF GALILEO

1634  Le Monde (French) — suppressed it himself

1637  Discourse on Method (French)

1641  Meditations on First Philosophy (Latin)

1644  Principles of Philosophy (Latin)

1649  Summoned by Queen Christina of Sweden

1650  Dies of pneumonia in Stockholm
Meditation One: Cartesian Doubt

**Project:** Raze all beliefs to their foundations, and then begin again.

**Method:**
(1) “withhold my assent … from opinions that are not completely certain and indubitable…”
(2) “attack … those principles which supported everything I once believed”

**Indubitable:** Incapable of being doubted.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Reason to Doubt</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs from the senses are to be trusted.</td>
<td>The senses sometimes deceive us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs from the senses, when things are vivid and perceived close at hand, are to be trusted.</td>
<td>It is possible that I am dreaming (“there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep”).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Beliefs about simple and universal things (e.g., extension, shape, size, number, place, time) are to be trusted. | (1) It is possible that God is deceiving me.  
(2) It is possible that I am by nature so imperfect so as to be deceived.  
(3) It is possible that an evil genius is deceiving me. |

(Physics, astronomy, medicine)  

(Arithmetic, geometry)
Meditation Two: The Ground of Certainty

The Cogito
(“cogito, ergo sum” = “I think, therefore I am”)

“… it must finally be established that this
pronouncement ‘I am, I exist’ is necessarily
true every time I utter it or conceive it in my
mind.”

The Archimedean Point: “I”

What am I?

1. It is possible that I exist and my body does not exist.
2. It is possible that I exist and sensing, nourishing, movement (etc.) are fictions.
3. It is not possible that I exist and thinking does not exist.
4. Therefore, thinking alone is inseparable from me.
5. Therefore, I am nothing but a thinking thing.
III. The Empiricist Response.

Central tenets of Empiricism:

- Human beings are born as “blank slates” — we have no innate ideas or innate knowledge.
- All knowledge is ultimately derived from sensory experience.

Problem: Gap Between “Seems” and “Is”

- MacBeth’s Dagger: “Is this a dagger I see…”
- The Stick in Water
- Descartes’ Example of the Sun
IV. Consequences of the Crisis

• Earth Alienation

“… at the beginning [of the modern age] the old dichotomy between earth and sky was abolished and a unification of the universe effected, so that from then on nothing occurring in earthly nature was viewed as a mere earthly happening. All events were considered to be subject to a universally valid law in the fullest sense of the word … valid beyond the reach of human sense experience…” (262-3)

• World Alienation

“… modern men were thrown back not on the world but on themselves” (254)
• Retreat of Common Sense

“... common sense, which once had been the one by which all other senses, with their intimately private sensations, were fitted into the common world, now became an inner faculty without any world relationship. This sense was called common merely because it was common to all. What men now have in common is nor the world but the structure of their minds, and this they cannot have in common, strictly speaking...” (283).
V. Effects on the Vita Activa

Earlier (ch’s 3-5), Arendt wrote how action was replaced by work, and work by labor.

Here, she gives an explanation as to why.

1. 1st Reversal: Victory of Homo Faber

Science made progress due to making:
- Experiments
- Scientific instruments (e.g., telescope)

1. 2nd Reversal: Rise of Animal Laborans

- Emphasis on processes
  “from the ‘what’ to the ‘how’” (307)

- Earth alienation
  “transformation of physics into astrophysics” (313)

- World alienation
  “No other capacity … stood to lose as much through modern world alienation and the elevation of introspection into an omnipotent device to conquer nature as those faculties which are primarily directed toward the building of the world and the production of worldly things.” (307)