

Arendt on the Modern Age

Work and the Human Condition: Winter 2009

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
(1596-1650)

Spinoza
(1632-1677)

Leibniz
(1646-1716)

British Empiricists:

Locke
(1632-1704)

Berkeley
(1685-1753)

Hume
(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.

Principle

Reason to Doubt

Beliefs from the senses are to be trusted.

The senses sometimes deceive us.

Beliefs from the senses, when things are vivid and perceived close at hand, are to be trusted.

It is possible that I am dreaming (“there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep”).

(Physics, astronomy, medicine)

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.

(Arithmetic, geometry)

(3) It is possible that an evil genius is deceiving me.

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 not 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)