Descartes’ “Meditations”

Rene Descartes (1596-1650)
French Philosopher & Mathematician

Descartes

Circle
Cartesian coordinate system
$x^2 + y^2 = 9$
“Reduce” geometry to algebra.

Meditations on First Philosophy 1641

• Impressed by method of science & math.
• Disgusted by philosophy.
• Seek a solid foundation for beliefs:
  • Philosophy needs a method.
  • What can I know with absolute certainty?

Meditations

• Personal endeavor: search for certainty
• Like personal search for God

St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556)
“Spiritual Exercises” (1551)

Meditations

• Envisioned the whole process while sitting by a fire in November, 1619.

Meditations

• “The general demolition of my opinions.”
• Radical doubt: withhold assent from any of his beliefs that can be doubted.
• Architectural metaphor.
Four Methods of Doubt

• My senses can mislead me.

• I might be crazy.

• I might be dreaming.

Shakespeare, *Macbeth* V, v:

“Life…is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”
Four Methods of Doubt

- My senses can mislead me.
- I might be crazy.
- I might be dreaming.
- An evil genius might be fooling me.

Demolishing my Beliefs

“Is anything left standing?”

“The Matrix”
Reading for next class:
• Descartes’ Second Meditation