



PHILOSOPHY LAB

Imagine that you and a friend are looking at an especially bright light in the night sky. You think the light is an aircraft; your friend believes it is a twinkling star. To you, the light seems to move; to your friend, it seems stationary. When you view it from the ground, it looks elliptical, but from your second-story window, it looks circular. You judge it to be close, perhaps only a couple of miles away. You can make out the craft's nose and tail, the outline of the wings, and tiny dots that must be the windows. You may even hear the drone of its engines. After a half hour, the light has remained in exactly the same position in the sky. On your radio, you hear a newscast about how bright and beautiful the planet Venus is tonight—positioned as it is in the very same portion of the sky that you have been observing. You have been wrong about everything, your mind has shaped your perceptions, your perceptions of the same object have been different from different angles, and your friend's observations and your own have differed dramatically.

If your senses can be this fraught with inconsistencies, discrepancies, and errors (and they often are), how can you ever be sure that the world is as it appears to be? Can you really know anything? How would you answer these skeptical concerns?

Descartes' Certainty

Adrift in doubt, Descartes wonders whether there is anything at all he can know. But just when it seems that he can know nothing, he comes upon a truth that he cannot possibly doubt: He exists:

René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*

The Meditation of yesterday filled my mind with so many doubts that it is no longer in my power to forget them. And yet I do not see in what manner I can resolve them; and, just as if I had all of a sudden fallen into very deep water, I am so disconcerted that I can neither make certain of setting my feet on the bottom, nor can I swim and so support myself on the surface. I shall nevertheless make an effort and follow anew the same path as that on which I yesterday entered, i.e. I shall proceed by setting aside all that in which the least doubt could be supposed to exist, just as if I had discovered