Hello and welcome to what will be the first of two lectures on the limits of reason and the philosophy of common sense. After these two lectures we will just have two more lectures within this topic and then we’ll be ready for our second exam. I know it’s hard to believe. Things are moving quickly.

What I want to talk about in these next two lectures is about the fallout, the consequences of the failure of Descartes’ project. I think that there is almost sort of unanimous agreement that in the most important senses Descartes’ project fails. Where there is enormous disagreement is where that failure should lead us. And so the topic — the subject that we’re getting into now for today and for next time is going to look at one option, one way of dealing with the failure of the Cartesian project.

And so let’s just sort of get ourselves situated. Let’s map out what some of the main responses to Descartes’ predicament have been, what some of the historically important responses have been, and then I will focus on the line of response that I’m going to be interested in and that I’m going to talk about in this course.

At the end of last time, it really looked like Descartes had run into a wall. In trying to vindicate a strong notion of individual intellectual autonomy and competence, in trying to uncover rational grounds for all of our beliefs, we discovered last that no such grounds are forthcoming, right? So Descartes has this very strong sense — and, indeed, most of the mainline Enlightenment thinkers have this very strong notion of human intellectual autonomy, that the individual pursues knowledge on his or her own, and human intellectual competence, that the individual is able to pursue and acquire knowledge on his or her own. Descartes says there’s a very strong sense of this and in
order to vindicate this, wants to show that all human beliefs can be rationally justified. That is, that a human being is essentially a rational thinking entity who is capable of going out and acquiring knowledge about the world, and that this is reflected in the process of justification in defining rational reasons for belief.

The problem was that when Descartes tries to chase down those rational reasons, we find ourselves coming up empty. Indeed, we concluded by the end of last time that there really is no rational ground for believing that any thing, process, or objective truth exists independently of our own minds. And this is a sort of a shocking conclusion to come to in light of the kind of optimism, the hope, the aspiration that Descartes and the rest of the mainline Enlightenment thinkers — I'm thinking particularly of John Locke whose views we also explored and which are in some important ways very similar to Descartes — this is sort of a shocking conclusion to come to.

You know, you think about historically where we're standing. The Enlightenment comes after centuries of medieval civilization in which human beings lived both practically, politically and intellectually, spiritually, under external authorities. The whole idea of the Enlightenment was the idea of the individual standing on his or her own two feet and being able to rationally pursue their own ideas, their own beliefs, and now we find out that at the end of the day none of our beliefs have any rational grounds or justification. This is a shocking conclusion to come to and a great disappointment if indeed that's where we are left.

Now, it's important to understand that Descartes himself did not think that he had
failed. Given how similar John Locke’s views are to Descartes — remember, John Locke comes right after Descartes — and certainly John Locke’s theory of perception, the basic notion of ideas, the basic theory of ideas, the primary secondary to quality distinction, this basic picture of the human being’s relationship to the world and the manner in which knowledge is acquired is roughly the same, although there are some significant differences as we discussed. Neither Locke nor Descartes believed that their own work has failed. But as the Enlightenment continues on and as the thinkers — as the progression of thinkers continues after Descartes, there is increasingly a realization that the central elements of this project — and let’s call it the Enlightenment project just for lack of a better name for it — that this Enlightenment project had serious problems, if not that it had run completely aground.

What we’re gonna talk about in the next two lectures — so that’s the rest of this one and the next one — are two things. There are two things I want to address. The first is I want to meditate upon the chief reasons for the failure of Descartes' project. In other words, it’ll be useful to us after we’ve gone through our sketch of the project to step back and look at it again and ask, “Okay. Where did it run aground?”

The second thing I want to discuss — and, indeed, the second thing will take up more of our time — is where one goes from there. So in light of the failure of Descartes’ project, where do we go next? That general question I’m going to break down into two smaller questions. First, what should our attitude be with regard to the external world of objective truth? In light of Descartes’ failure to show that our belief in the existence of things, processes, and truths outside our own minds, given that
Descartes has failed to justify the belief in the existence of things, processes, and truths outside our own minds, what should our attitude be about things, processes, and truths outside our own minds?

And the second sort of part of this second question is that I’d like to ask: In light of Descartes’ failure, how should we think about human rationality and more generally how should we think about human nature? The Enlightenment project carries with it at its center a very strong picture of human nature, that the human being is defined essentially by rational thought, by its capacity for rational thought. And that this not only defines him but, in a sense, comprises much of his dignity, much of a human being’s dignity. And what I want to ask is, given that the Cartesian picture — the Cartesian project is a failure, given that we have failed to vindicate this very strong notion of the rational individual, the rational human being, what should our attitude about human rationality, about human nature, be? Do we need to rethink our picture of humanity and what should that rethinking consist of?

Now, there is widespread agreement with respect to the first question. That is, there is a good amount of agreement about why Descartes’ project failed and I will only touch upon two of the main reasons for the failure. But there have been an enormous number and variety of views with respect to where we should go from here. So there’s a great diversity of opinion in the literature about what one should do in light of the failure of Descartes’ project, what our answer should be to this second cluster of questions that I just outlined.

And so let me just sort of — just very briefly sketch what some of the main
responses have been and then I will identify which line of response I’m most in
sympathy with and which line of response I will talk about in the course. Then we’ll turn
back to the question of the reasons for Descartes’ failure and then I’ll lead us into what
will be our next lecture next time. So that’s what we’ll do for the rest of this period.

So let’s just sketch out what some of the main historical responses have been to
the failure of Descartes’ project. And there really are two varieties of response,
although within each of those varieties there are many different versions. One variety
of response essentially remains sympathetic to Descartes’ overall motivations. So it
remains sympathetic to the basic idea of the Enlightenment project to show that the
individual human being is defined by reason and that his rationality, in a sense — and
that his rationality makes him capable of acquiring knowledge of the universe on his
own.

And so these philosophers have tended to hold on to the basic ambitions of the
project and just say, “Look, Descartes’ version of this didn’t work. Maybe John Locke’s
version of this will work, but we need to try some other version.” Such a person was
Immanuel Kant. Immanuel Kant remained committed to the idea of Enlightenment.
Indeed, he was one of the key personalities, the key figures in philosophy, to define the
Enlightenment project. Kant said and defined Enlightenment as man’s wrestling himself
free from his self-incurred tutelage. By which Kant meant that Enlightenment occurs
when the individual wrests his mind away from the influence of others, from the
influence of dogmas, and opens himself to the truth and acquires the truth on his own
by his own efforts.
So one very influential response to the failure of the basic Cartesian project is Immanuel Kant. Kant remained committed to the idea of the Enlightenment. He believed that there simply must be a way to demonstrate the rationality of our beliefs, especially in the external world and in objective truth. And so he simply pressed on. He said, “Well, Descartes failed but I’m going to try even harder.” He produced an even more elaborate project than Descartes’ although it is essentially a Cartesian inspired program which culminated in a massive and somewhat impenetrable work, Kant’s most important and well-known work, which is *The Critique of Pure Reason* that was published in 1781. So this is one response. Essentially, hold on to Descartes’ basic motivations, ideas, ambitions, and simply press on even harder in the hope of getting past that sticking point that Descartes never got past.

A very different reaction — but still, I think, one that is in sympathy with the basic Enlightenment project — was the reaction of Bishop George Berkeley. He also held on to the essential idea of individual intellectual rationality and autonomy. So he’s going to also basically buy into — Berkeley is basically gonna buy into the essential Enlightenment picture of human nature and human rationality. But Berkeley — what’s wonderful about Berkeley is how consistent he is. Berkeley says, “Look. Yes, human beings are defined by reason which translates into the idea that human beings should only believe those things which have rational justification.” The only beliefs that we have rational justification for are beliefs in our own existence and in the contents of our own thoughts — that is, in our own ideas. And so Berkeley concludes that all that exists in the world are minds and ideas.
Berkeley gives up on the notion that there exists any external world or objective truths at all. For Berkeley, the entire furniture of the universe consists of minds and thoughts. As I said, this is a very consistent position. If you accept the idea that human beings are rational, if you accept the idea that what this means that human beings should only believe that which is justified, and if, as a result of Descartes’ project, you conclude that the only things that we have justification for believing in are our own existence and our thoughts, then you must conclude that those are the only things that exist. This position is known as — in literature, is commonly known as phenomenalism. It is a form of what’s called anti-realism, meaning it’s anti-realist about the external world and about objective mind independent truth.

A third reaction altogether more pessimistic and indeed less credulous — there’s something slightly credulous about Berkeley’s view, this notion that everything that exists is merely an idea in the mind. Another more pessimistic but also perhaps less credulous view — and yet again one that I still think is in sympathy with the larger ideas of the Enlightenment — holds the following. It accepts the picture of human rationality basically identified by Descartes. It accepts the idea that this picture requires that human beings only believe in those things which have rational grounds.

But it concludes, from the failure of Descartes’ project, that no beliefs are justified. In other words, the conclusion it draws from Descartes’ failure that, well, if Descartes failed to vindicate the rationality of our beliefs in the external world and the belief in objective truth — that is, mind independent truth — well, then, that shows that none of our beliefs are justified. If we’re to be consistent with our Enlightenment
outlook, that means we shouldn't believe anything. We should suspend all belief.

This position — in other words, these people are skeptics. They come to a skeptical conclusion. This position is known as Pyrrhonism and the name comes from a radical skeptical sect that belongs to the Hellenistic period of ancient Greece. So there was a radical sect of skeptics in the Hellenistic period in the ancient world which held a view very much like this. They were called the Pyrrhonists. Their view was called Pyrrhonism. Those modern 18th century thinkers — skeptical thinkers were often referred to also as Pyrrhonists.

Finally — and this is only finally with respect to my list. This by no means represents the last of all possible and even actual historical responses to Descartes. But finally for our little list here, another group of philosophers based in Scotland took an entirely different approach. Every response that I've just mentioned accepts the basic Enlightenment outlook, accepts the basic idea of the Enlightenment project. There's simply a disagreement as to what that basic picture entails given the failure of the Cartesian version of it.

The next response that I'm gonna discuss — and it's the one that I'm the most sympathetic to — does not accept the basic Enlightenment picture. In other words, its response is not to say, "Okay, this picture is correct. Descartes simply messed it up. So what do we do now?" What this line of response says, this distinctively Scottish line of response says, is we don't accept the basic initial set of assumptions. We don't accept the basic Enlightenment picture. Indeed, it's the Enlightenment picture itself that's the blame for the failure of the project. Any version of it is going to yield some
kind of skeptical outcome, some kind of Pyrrhonist or Phenomenonalist outcome. Because if you think about it, Phenomenalism is simply the sunny side Pyrrhonism. I mean, the Pyrrhonist is simply the gloomy side of Phenomenalism, if you want to put it that way. The Phenomenalist says, “Well, the external road doesn’t exist but the universe does exist. It simply consists of minds and thoughts.” To the Pyrrhonist, that means nothing exists. That means that there’s no reason to believe in anything.

This other group, this Scottish response that I’m gonna talk about here — and I will give it a name in a minute so I don’t have to keep calling it the other group or the Scottish response — it questions the Enlightenment picture altogether. And it says, “Look. Every version that you’re gonna try of this basic Enlightenment picture, of this Enlightenment project, any version of it is going to come to the same call it sticky end. The same skeptical conclusions, the same failures.

They not only question the uncompromising conception of rationality offered by Descartes. In other words, they’re gonna reject this notion that in order to be rational every one of your beliefs has to be rationally justified. They’re gonna say that’s an entirely all too strong conception of rationality. And they also even went farther and questioned whether indeed rationality should be considered the defining characteristic of a human being. Furthermore, they argue that the very possibility of knowing anything requires that some things be taken as given without proof.

And so this group of thinkers is going to say, “Look. If your ambition is to show how knowledge is possible, knowledge is only possible if some things are taken for granted. Knowledge is impossible if the demand for justification is going to go all the
way down to the bottom.” They’re gonna say that justification itself, the very practice of reasoning, presumes that you assume things without reason. In other words, reasoning can’t get going unless you believe some things first and obviously those things can’t be reasoned to because they provide the grounds in which reasoning begins. We will go into this in much more detail. I just want to give you a sense of how this very radical type of response attempts to solve the problems by getting outside the entire framework. Saying, “Look. It’s not Descartes’ fault. It’s the framework’s fault. And all you guys — all you other guys who want to keep working in the framework are simply gonna keep coming to the same dead end.”

This position is known as Scottish Naturalism. Alternatively, it’s sometimes referred to as the Philosophy of Common Sense. And its chief architects were two Scottish philosophers of the 18th century, David Hume and Thomas Reid. It is indeed this last position with which I’m in the greatest sympathy. I will not say that it is the majority position today but it is a position that has enjoyed a significant resurgence of esteem and popularity. Its star is on the rise again after a relatively long hiatus in which it was virtually ignored. Throughout much of the first half of the 20th century this line of response to the basic problem of the Enlightenment was pretty much ignored. It was very popular when it came out in the late 18th century. It was very popular in the 19th century for at least a while. Then it kind of disappeared off the radar screen and now there’s been a resurgence of interest in Scottish Naturalism.

It is the position with which I’m in the greatest sympathy. I’ve published a number of articles arguing that the Scottish Naturalist position can be employed to solve
a whole number of contemporary epistemological problems as well as these classic
ones. It will be the lens through which I address the two questions I posed at the
beginning of this lecture regarding the reasons for the failure of Descartes’ project and
where we should go from here. So I am going to take on the Scottish Naturalist mantle
in trying to diagnose what went wrong with Descartes’ project and trying to make
suggestions of where to go from here. You should be aware, however, that this is only
one potential line of response and it is not even necessarily the majority or most popular
line of response. I would suspect that probably the most popular lines of response has
been the Kantian one.

Let me just say a few things about these two architects of Scottish Naturalism,
first David Hume and then Thomas Reid. Hume is generally regarded as the greatest
English speaking philosopher of the Enlightenment — that is, of all the philosophers of
the Enlightenment who wrote in English. Because, of course, the Enlightenment
occurred across Europe. You had an Enlightenment in France, you had an
Enlightenment in Germany, and you had an Enlightenment in England and Scotland.
Hume is considered to be the greatest philosopher of the English speaking world in the
Enlightenment. He also is the most influential Enlightenment philosopher in the English
speaking world today. That is, if you were to take a look at the work — at the
philosophical work that’s been done over the last century in the English speaking world
— so America, the British Isles, Australia and Canada — by far the most significant
important Enlightenment philosopher is David Hume.

Hume did not attain the kind of status in his lifetime that he should have, given
his brilliance and given the impact of what he was writing, and the reason largely was because Hume was a publicly avowed atheist. It was very difficult to be an atheist in the 18th century and get anywhere in life. Most of the philosophers you think of as politicians who were inclined to be atheists would at least publicly profess some form of Deism if not a full-blown theistic religious outlook, simply because to be an atheist would be to kill your career.

And so Hume was rejected for a number of very prestigious academic posts because of his atheism. Nonetheless, Hume wrote a very popular at the time and still popular history of Britain, a multi-volume history of Britain. He’s most famous in his philosophical work for three works: his Treatise on Human Nature, his Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals and his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. I will tell you that Hume has been one of the greatest influences on my own work and I hope you will find him as interesting and as insightful as I do.

The second of the architects of the Scottish Naturalist school of thought is Thomas Reid. Reid held prestigious professorships at both the University of Aberdeen and the University of Glasgow, both in Scotland, of course. In Glasgow he actually took over the chair that had been vacated by Adam Smith — Adam Smith, of course, being the inventor of modern capitalist economic theory as well as a very important moral philosopher in his own right. Reid took over his chair at Glasgow when Smith resigned it.

Reid is the one who was credited for actually founding the Scottish Naturalist or
common sense philosophy school of thought. Hume really laid the essential foundations for the philosophy of common sense, but it's Reid who actually coined the term. And Hume himself never was self-avowed as a common sense philosopher.

There has been an evolution in Hume scholarship. The view on what Hume really is has changed substantially since the publication in the 1950s of Norman Kemp-Smith's enormously influential and important book on Hume. The view used to be, the pre-Kemp-Smith view, was that Hume was essentially a skeptic not entirely unlike Barclay. That Hume came to somewhat — sort of phenomenolistic conclusions that he was a skeptic but that he was a kind of a cheerful one as opposed to a gloomy one like the Pyrrhonists. Hume is very clear that he opposes the Pyrrhonist response to Descartes.

But starting with Kemp-Smith's work, Hume has increasingly begun to be seen as a precursor to Scottish Naturalism, if not a full-blown Scottish Naturalist himself, and certainly he set many of the foundational ideas in place for the philosophy of common sense. And as far as I'm concerned, my own view is that Hume belongs firmly in the Scottish Naturalist camp and is in no way a skeptic. He certainly employs skepticism. He employs doubt as a method of argument much in the way that Descartes does, but Hume himself does not come to skeptical conclusions, in my view. Again, I don't know that I would say that this is the majority view on Hume. I would say that the accurate depiction of the situation and the scholarship today is that the opinion is pretty evenly split on the older view of Hume and the newer view of Hume.

Let me just talk a little bit about some of the widely agreed upon reasons for the failure of Descartes' project and I'm gonna talk about this to a large extent through the
lens of Scottish naturalism. As I said, I'm going to take on the mantle of Scottish naturalism from now on as we discuss this topic, and that's fine. We have to take on one mantle or another. You should just be aware that it is only one way of thinking about and one way of replying to Descartes' project, not the only way.

One reason for the failure of Descartes' project — and it's a reason that both Hume and Reid point out — is, of course, what I've called the double object theory of perception. Reid calls it the ideal theory of perception and I will alternatively speak of it as the theory of ideas, the double object view of perception, the ideal view of perception. I will alternatively use these expressions inasmuch as they all refer to the same thing.

They refer to this view in which we have in a sense two objects of awareness. That in our cognitive activity we have two objects of awareness: an immediate object of awareness, a direct object of awareness, and a secondary, indirect object of awareness. The immediate object of awareness is an idea, a mental representation, a thought, whatever you want to call it. We've used all these words. The immediate object of awareness is a mental representation, an idea, a thought. The secondary object of awareness is an external object, process, or an objective truth. A mind independent object, process, or objective truth. We only have indirect access to that. In other words, our knowledge of that external object, our knowledge of that second object, is mediated through out knowledge of the first.

That is the double object view of perception. That is the ideal theory, as Reid calls it — the theory of ideas, as I've alternatively called it. It is cited as one of the chief
reasons for the failure of the project. Remember, in this double object view, the following two things are acknowledged. One, it is acknowledged that the second object may not resemble the first. So remember, our ideas have all sorts of characteristics that the external object event process does not have. For one thing, secondary qualities.

So it is first and foremost acknowledged that there may be a lack of resemblance between the first object and the second. But even more problematically, it’s acknowledged that the first object may exist where there is no second object. In other words, my mental podium, my idea of a podium, may be caused by an actual podium which it may not resemble or may be entirely generated by my own mind. That is, there may be no external podium as in the case of a dream or a hallucination. So both of these caveats are acknowledged by the proponents of the ideal theory, by the theory of ideas, by the double object view. We discover this in Meditation One through the process of doubt.

But then we can see how the ideal theory sets itself up for its own collision, right? It sets itself up for its own fall. Because no method or procedure, no proof, let’s say, as Descartes tries to do — no proof of God’s existence and benevolent intentions is going to succeed in bridging this gap between the two objects, between the first object and the second. There’s gonna be no procedure, no method, no proof that’s gonna allow me to know that there is an external object and that I’m right about what the external object is like because any such procedure method or proof will be subject to the very same doubts that we’re trying to overcome.
So to put this bluntly, the very same doubts that lead me to wonder whether there is a podium are also going to lead me to doubt whether my proof for the existence of the podium is a valid proof. The problem is that the doubts that arise in the first meditation are so powerful that no procedure or method can overcome them. So what we wind up with then — we end up with precisely the skepticism that we sought to avoid, that we sought to overcome. The whole idea was to overcome doubt and show how all our beliefs can be based in rational grounds. And instead what we would up with was even bigger doubts than when we started.

Hume offers an absolutely lovely description of what I've just said and obviously he says it much better than I do. In your selections — and I'm going to read an extended quotation that begins on the bottom of page 152 and carries on to 153. Quote, “By what argument can it be proved that the perceptions of the mind must be caused by external objects entirely different from them though resembling them if that be possible, and could not arise either from the energy of the mind itself or from the suggestion of some invisible and unknown spirit, or from some other cause still more unknown to us. It is acknowledged that in fact many of these perceptions arise not from anything external as in dreams, madness and other diseases, and nothing can be more explicable than the manner in which body should so operate upon mind as ever to convey an image of itself to a substance supposed of so different and even contrary nature. It is a question of fact whether the perceptions of senses be produced by external objects resembling them. How shall this question be determined? By experience, surely, as all other questions of a like nature. But here experience is and
must be entirely silent. The mind has never anything present to it but the perceptions and cannot possibly reach an experience of their connection with objects. The supposition of such a connection is therefore without any foundation and reasoning.

To have recourse to the veracity of the Supreme Being in order to prove the veracity of our senses” — here he’s targeting Descartes' appeal to God — “to have recourse to the very veracity of the Supreme Being in order to prove the veracity of our senses is surely making a very unexpected circuit.” It’s wonderful dryness there.

“If his veracity were at all concerned in this matter, our senses would be entirely infallible. Because it is not possible that he can ever deceive. Not to mention that if the external world be called into question, we shall be at a loss to find arguments by which we may prove the existence of that being or any of his attributes.” In other words, he was saying if we can't even prove that the podium exists, how does Descartes hope to prove that God exists?

This is, I think, a lovely summary of the predicament that the theory of ideas gets us into. What we see here is Hume saying that it is the theory of ideas itself that is to blame for the failure of Descartes’ project. And the implication then is that any theory that works within that rubric is going to fail.

Reid has a very similar attitude. Reid also blames the ideal theory for the failures of the Cartesian project, and Reid asks the question — see, Hume never abandons the ideal theory. Hume accepts the double object of perception. Hume is just simply prepared to live with uncertainty. Hume is prepared to live with the idea that human beings just aren’t as rational as Descartes would like them to be. Hume is
famous for rejecting the Enlightenment picture of human beings and of human rationality.

Reid, however, wants to abandon the ideal theory. Like Hume, he blames the failure of Descartes’ project on the ideal theory. Unlike Hume, however, Reid wants to know why should we accept the ideal theory. So on page 23 of your Reid selections, at the bottom of Section 7, Reid says, “Descartes’ system of the human understanding, which I shall beg leave to call the ideal system and which with some improvements made by later raters is now generally received, hath some original defect.” So he’s saying this theory of ideas that everybody seems to agree to has some original defect. Quote, “That this skepticism is inlaid in it and reared along with it. And therefore that we must lay it open to the foundation and examine the materials before we can expect to raise any solid and useful fabric of knowledge on this subject.” So he’s saying the very seeds of cataclysmic, deadly doubt are in the very nature of the ideal theory, of the double object theory, and until we question and bring down that double object theory, that ideal theory of perception, we’re not gonna get anywhere in the theory of knowledge.

A second reason for the failure of Descartes’ project is what I would call an excessively rationalistic view of human beings and excessive optimism about the prospects for human knowledge. To a certain degree, I think that the Enlightenment project sets itself up for failure, sets up human beings for failure, by raising the bar of rationality far too high. So it both has an excessive conception of reason, one that no human being is ever gonna meet, and it is also excessively optimistic about what
human beings ultimately can know. At the peak of sort of the Enlightenment — how shall I say? I don’t want to call it a frenzy because that suggests something sort of irrational. At the peak of the flush of the Enlightenment enthusiasm, let’s call it, there was articulated the view that one day human beings will know everything. Descartes actually says in the Discourse on Method that once we sort of have our epistemology right, once we are placing our beliefs entirely on rational footing, he literally said that there is nothing that human beings will not know.

What I want to see and what both Hume and Reid believe is that this is a serious overreach, and that this kind of overreach, in a sense, sets itself up for failure. It makes human rationality and reasonableness conditional upon perfect justification, and perfect justification is never gonna be forthcoming. It is never going to be the case that every human belief can be shown to have a rational ground. In light of that fact, to define human reasonableness in terms of having such a perfect track record of justification is to set human beings up for failure.

Furthermore, the Cartesian project hangs human nature and human dignity on this excessive expectation. So now if human beings are not revealed to be perfectly rational, it means that they’re not rational and thus are, in a sense, diminished in the eyes of the Enlightenment.

And finally, it fails to recognize the essentially hesitant, probabilistic character of most knowledge. If you actually look at major knowledge acquiring endeavors that we engage in — and, of course, the largest is natural science, but we also have social and applied science. We have mathematics. Take any major knowledge acquiring
endeavor and I think that you will find that it is characterized by great hesitation, by fitful starts and stops, by moving forward and one step moving backwards, sometimes two. Overall, by kind of a probabilism, a sense in which whatever it is we claim to know now is revisable later. I would say that this is a great strength of the knowledge endeavor, if you want to call it that. But in the Enlightenment version, this is, in a sense, unacceptable. In the Enlightenment version knowledge has to be complete, has to be perfect, and the idea of hesitation or probabilism is sort of not — is not to be entertained.

I think that this points to a certain irony. There's a certain irony in the fact in general that the Enlightenment which saw itself — and those people who are sort of on board with the Enlightenment project — saw itself as kind of liberating human beings from the oppressions of church, of monarchy, of feudal landlord — in a sense, by liberating the human being by rationalizing him and ennobling the human being by elevating him in his rational state.

And the irony is that with the failure of the project, human beings wind up being demoted, rendered less noble, and less independent in their knowledge. But if you think about both the Pyrrhonist and the phenomenalist response to Descartes, and if we meditate on Descartes' failure, there's sort of a terrible irony in the fact that this great effort at liberation and at lifting up winds up bringing us further back than we were before and lower than we were before.

If you want to talk about a specific irony, the ideal theory, the theory of perception, the double object view which we've said is a culprit in all of this, was
conceived by philosophers and presented as an advancement over what they called the vulgar view. Now, the vulgar view, of course, or the common view — the common view, of course, is that when you perceive something, that this is a book. Not an idea of a book, not a mental picture of a book where the book is some second object beyond my senses that I can only infer or deduce, but that when I look at this I’m looking at an actual object. That was deemed the vulgar view, the common view, and philosophers presented the ideal theory as a much more rational view, a more enlightened view of perception, one that takes into account all of these problems that are raised by dreaming and by hallucinations and such. Isn’t it ironic, then, that while the vulgar view leaves us with an external world and with knowledge, the more sophisticated advance view leads us nowhere but to skepticism and doubt.

Hume observes this irony on pages 151 to 152 of your reading. He says — at the bottom of 151 he says — he’s talking about the ordinary man. He says, “Always suppose the very images presented by the senses to be the external objects.” In other words, the ordinary person presumes this to be an object — a book, not an idea. All right. So the ordinary person always supposes the very images presented by the senses to be the external objects and never entertain any suspicion that the one are nothing but representations of the other. “This very table which we see white and which we feel hard is believed to exist independent of our perception and to be something external to our mind which perceives it.” In other words, this is the common vulgar view. He goes on, “But this universal and primary opinion of all man is soon destroyed by the slightest philosophy which teaches us that nothing can ever be present
to the mind but an image of perception, and that the senses are only the inlets through which these images are conveyed.”

All right. So this vulgar view, this ordinary view, the view that everybody holds, basically, about our relationship to the external world is rejected by the Enlightenment in favor of the more rational double object view. And the terrible irony is that that more rational view actually lands us in a worse position than we were on the vulgar view. It takes the external world away from us and it takes knowledge away from us. It leaves us with nothing but doubt.

Next time we’re going to begin talking about the actual details of the Scottish naturalist position. I’ve done a lot of set-up, a lot of build-up. I’ve sort of tried to situate us, show us all of these different reactions to the failure of Descartes’ project. There’s a larger question of what our attitude should be towards the larger Enlightenment project in light of the failure of this project, of the Cartesian version of the project. I’ve talked a little bit about Scottish naturalism. I’ve explained my preference for it and said that we’re going to, in a sense, continue from now through that avenue. Next time we’re going to pursue that avenue in its full detail, or as full detail as can be done in a one-hour lecture.

So next time we’ll get into the details of the Scottish natural response to the failure of the Cartesian project. In terms of things to think about, stick with the ones I’ve already given you in the last lecture. They will serve you very well as you continue to read the selections from David Hume and from Thomas Reid. Thank you very much.