

Descartes – Meditations

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Descartes (1596-1650)

Bio:

Born Tourraine, France 1596

Worked in: physics, astronomy, music, human physiology, psychology

Inventor of analytic geometry

1649: moved to Sweden to teach philosophy to Queen Christina.

Descartes liked to stay in bed until noon, Christina made him teach lessons at 5:00AM

Descartes didn't survive his first winter

Died 1650 after six months in Sweden

Foundationalism and the Regress Argument

I know/ am justified in believing that Fido is a mammal b/c I I know/ am justified in believing that Fido is a dog and all dogs are mammals

I know/ am justified in believing that Fido is a dog because I I know/ am justified in believing that fido is furry, has four legs and a tail, barks, plays fetch, and things like that are dogs

I know/ am justified in believing that Fido is furry because...

Call these *chains of reasons*

How are these chains structured? What's their shape?

Three options:

Coherentism: they loop back on themselves

problem Circular justification?

Infinetism: chains go on forever

problem plausibly, the function of inference is to take justification that's already in the premise and *transmit* it to the conclusion, as a pipe might transmit the water from one bucket to another. Suppose there's an infinite, linear chain of buckets connected with pipes. Is there water flowing? Maybe, but maybe not: seems that that water must come from somewhere in order to

flow, and it's the mere existence of the pipes doesn't guarantee the existence of water. Similarly, just because you have an infinite number of beliefs (analogue of the buckets) connected inferentially (analogue of the pipes), it doesn't follow that any of those beliefs are actually justified.¹

Foundationalism: at some point the chains just end. There are two types of knowledge/ justified belief:

Inferential knowledge: propositions known/ believed with justification by inference from some other proposition

Basic/foundational knowledge: propositions known/ believed with justification, but not by inference from some other proposition

2 central questions about foundationalism:

1. Which knowledge is basic?
2. What's the relationship between foundational and inferential knowledge? What kind of inferences are permissible?

Meditation 1

The project:

Descartes recognizes that he has some false beliefs, wants to get rid of them, rebuild with only true beliefs

He's worried specifically about the foundations of his beliefs. Do all his foundational beliefs amount to knowledge?

Analysis of Knowledge:

I distinguish [knowledge from mere opinion] as follows: there is conviction when there remains some reason which might lead us to doubt, but knowledge is conviction based on a reason so strong that it can never be shaken by any stronger reason. (1640 letter to Regius, AT 3:65)

Simpler: Knowledge = true belief + perfect justification (i.e. no doubt)

Method of doubt:

Knowing that P is inconsistent with having any doubt at all about P

So, you can check all foundational beliefs by looking for some reason to doubt them:

¹ This concern picks up on a broader question: is the function of inference merely to *transmit* justification, or can the existence of inferential connections actually *generate* justification? Consider a crossword puzzle, where the answer to a vertical line intersects with the answer on the horizontal line. If the answers match up in the right way then I might end up with a higher confidence in each answer than I had in those answers considered on their own. But where did that justification come from? Presumably it was *generated* by the mutual support provided by the answers.

If no reason can be found, keep on believing

If any reason at all can be found for doubt, throw out that belief: it isn't knowledge²

Descartes's three skeptical arguments

What's most certain?

Hypothesis: what's learned from the senses

NB: knowledge derived from the senses is a posteriori knowledge

So, hypothesis is: a posteriori knowledge is most certain

This was a common view among his contemporaries who were influenced by Aristotle

Far and Distant Objects argument:

Our senses sometimes lead us astray and "it is a mark of prudence never to place our complete trust those who have deceived us even once"

So, there's reason to doubt what our senses tell us

So, for each belief based on the senses, I have some reason to doubt it

So, I don't have any knowledge based on the senses (by method of doubt)

Structure of Argument:

Descartes's skeptical arguments are each aimed at a broad category of knowledge.

Far and Distant Objects argument is aimed at the broad category of perceptual knowledge.

Since knowledge requires certainty, all he needs is one reason to doubt perceptual beliefs and he has shown that none amount to knowledge: one skeptical hypothesis

But, that reason (skeptical hypothesis) must be common to all beliefs of that type in order to undermine all beliefs of that type.

What's the reason? The mere possibility that things are not as they (perceptually) appear: if I can't rule that out then I can't be sure that things really are not as they appear.

The argument:

² Note: he isn't trying to prove that his beliefs are false, only that they can be doubted.

1. You can't rule out the possibility that things are not as they appear
2. If you can't rule out that things are not as they appear, then you don't know that P (p = any perceptually justified belief)
3. So, you don't know that p

Why believe 1? Because we've experienced misleading appearances in the past and been unable to tell

So, we have no knowledge based on perceptual experiences

Descartes's partial rebuttal to the F+DO argument:

We've all had misleading appearances in the case of far and distant objects, so perhaps I can't have knowledge based on those.

What about experience of nearby objects? No reason to doubt those, so (so far) no barrier to perceptual experience of nearby objects providing knowledge

Big picture: the F+DO argument purported to cast doubt on all perceptual knowledge, but in the end it just cast doubt on some perceptual knowledge.

This pattern will repeat.

Dream Argument

Same pattern: identify a skeptical hypothesis that applies to a class of beliefs, reject all of those beliefs as uncertain.

Here the class of beliefs is again perceptual beliefs

Skeptical hypothesis I can't rule out: the possibility that I'm dreaming right now

Argument (Same as above):

1. You can't rule out the possibility that things are not as they appear
2. If you can't rule out that things are not as they appear, then you don't know that P (p = any perceptually justified belief)
3. So, you don't know that p

The possibility of dreaming supports P1, just as did past experience of misperception.

Dreaming also casts doubt on perceptions of near things

Painter Passage³

³ read p. 105-6

Painting fantastical, non-true scenes involves rearranging real things: shapes and colors, eyes, hands, bodies, etc.

To construct a unicorn, which is fantastical, stick together a horse and a horn

Though the unicorn is fantastical, the basic parts are real

Objection to Dream Argument

Dreams are like Paintings: they indicate false things about the world by rearranging basic parts

Partial list of basic parts of perceptual experience:

... corporeal nature in general, together with its extension; the shape of extended things; their quantity, that is, their size and number, as well as the place where they exist; the time through which they endure, and the like (106)

So, Dream Argument provides reason to doubt beliefs based on perception of complex objects, but not simple objects

Painter Passage as a Response to the Dream Argument:

Structurally the same as the response to the Far and Distant Objects argument:

- Dream argument purports to cast doubt on all perceptual beliefs by pointing out that I can't rule out the skeptical hypothesis for any perceptual belief, and if it's true then my belief might be false
- But some aspects of perceptual experience are the same whether I'm dreaming or awake. Example: squares always have four sides
- So even if I am dreaming, that perceptual belief is still sure to be true
- So the mere possibility of dreaming is no threat to those beliefs, even if it is a threat to other beliefs

Lesson for the sciences:

Sciences dealing with 'composite things' are doubtful: physics, astronomy, medicine

Since we have reason to doubt these disciplines, we must not throw out all of our beliefs about them as not-knowledge

Sciences dealing with 'the simples and most general' things are not doubtful: arithmetic, geometry

Knowledge of these disciplines survives the Dream Argument

For whether I am awake or asleep, 2 plus 3 make 5, and a square does not have more than 4 sides. It does not seem possible that such obvious truths should be subject to the suspicion of being false. (106)

Evil Deceiver Argument:

New worry: Descartes believes that he was created by an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God.

Since God is omnipotent, God could deceive him in all of his beliefs⁴

But since God is omnibenevolent, he wouldn't deceive us about everything like that

Problem: but even if we are not systematically deceived about everything, we are undeniably deceived about some things. Why would an omnipotent, omnibenevolent god create us so that we are even occasionally deceived?

It's at least possible that he was created by an omnipotent but malicious demon, who designed him to have imperfect faculties of reasoning

In that case, even when I reason about simple things, the demon could disrupt my reasoning process

So I have reason to doubt whether $2+2=4$

So I don't know that $2+2=4$

NB: the deceiver isn't actually necessary: same problem exists for atheists

If he's not created then he's the product "of fate, or by chance, or by a connected chain of events" (106)

But if we have imperfect cognitive faculties then we also have reason to doubt whether $2+2=4$

So, we don't know that $2+2=4$

ED Argument:

1. You can't rule out the possibility that things are not I judge them to be
2. If you can't rule out that things are not as I judge them to be, then I don't know that P (p = any perceptually justified belief)
3. So, I don't know that p

ED argument provides a reason to believe (1), but this time it's not just perception that's questioned, it's judgment en masse.

⁴ E.g. make it appear as if there is a material world even though there isn't one, make it seem as if $2+3=7$, etc.

Second Meditation

Cogito

After Evil Deceiver argument, Descartes is convinced he knows nothing of the world or things in it: ‘

...everything I see is false. I believe that none of what my deceitful memory represents ever existed. I have no senses whatever. Body, shape, extension, movement, and place are all chimeras. What then will be true? Perhaps just the single fact that nothing is certain.

But how do I know there is not something else, over and above all those things that I have just reviewed, concerning which there is not even the slightest occasion for doubt? Is there not some God, or by whatever name I might call him, who instills these very thoughts in me? But why would I think that, since I myself could perhaps be the author of these thoughts? Am I not then at least something? But I have already denied that I have any senses and any body. Still I hesitate; for what follows from this? Am I so tied to a body and to the senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have persuaded myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world: no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Is it then the case that I too do not exist? But doubtless I did exist, if I persuaded myself of something. But there is some deceiver or other who is supremely powerful and supremely sly and who is always deliberately deceiving me. Then too there is no doubt that I exist, if he is deceiving me. And let him do his best at deception, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I shall think that I am something. Thus, after everything has been most carefully weighed, 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. (25)

Cogito, ergo sum

So there’s one thing he knows, even against the possibility of an Evil Deceiver: he exists

This is the first foundational belief

Limits:

- Must be first personal: I exist, not you exist or he exists
- Must be present tense: don’t trust your memories yet
- Thinking is inessential: any sort of conscious mental activity will do (doubting, wishing...)

Minds and Bodies

At this point he knows nothing of his body, even whether he has a body

Only knowledge that survives doubt is ‘I exist’, which must be true whenever ‘I am thinking’ is also true

So what am I?

But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses... It is this same “I” who senses or who is cognizant of bodily things as if through the senses. For example, I now see a light, I hear a noise, I feel heat. These things are false, since I am asleep. Yet I certainly do seem to see, hear, and feel warmth. This cannot be false. Properly speaking, this is what in me is called “sensing.” But this, precisely so taken, is nothing other than thinking. (28)

Beliefs about external world are dubious, beliefs about our experiences are certain, amount to knowledge. Massively expands set of foundational beliefs

Descartes’s Rationalism: the Wax Example

Rationalism vs Empiricism

Suspend skepticism for a moment, make observations about how we know about a piece of wax. 3 possible ways to know about the wax:

Sensory observation

All sensory properties of the wax are changeable, can’t tell us what’s essential in the wax Imagination (i.e. considering mental images)

But I know that the wax can take on an infinite number of shapes even though I haven’t imagined that many ‘Mental Perception’

...I need to realize that the perception of the wax is neither a seeing, nor a touching, nor an imagining. Nor has it ever been, even though it previously seemed so; rather it is an inspection on the part of the mind alone. This inspection can be imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct, as it is now, depending on how closely I pay attention to the things in which the piece of wax consists. (31)

Second example of mental perception:

I see people from a block away

But my sensory perception is only of hats and clothes, so I don’t really see people at all (with my senses)

What I thought I had seen with my eyes, I actually grasped solely with the faculty of judgment, which is in my mind. (22)

Mental perception is not imagination

Chilliagon example: I can understand what a 1,000 sided figure is, and I can understand that it’s different from a 10,000 sided figure, but

when I try to imagine each it just looks like a circle. So understanding/ judgment/ mental perception is distinct from imagination

NB the division of mental perceptions into the imperfect and confused vs clear and distinct

this is important just as separating perceptions into far and distant vs up close, complex vs simple

M3 Proof of god's existence

At beginning of M2, Descartes knows he exists, knows contents of his own mind

Can he know anything else?

Clear and distinct ideas:

Now I will ponder more carefully to see whether perhaps there may be other things belonging to me that up until now I have failed to notice. I am certain that I am a thinking thing. But do I not therefore also know what is required for me to be certain of anything? Surely in this first instance of knowledge, there is nothing but a certain clear and distinct perception of what I affirm. Yet this would hardly be enough to render me certain of the truth of a thing, if it could ever happen that something that I perceived so clearly and distinctly were false. And thus I now seem able to posit as a general rule that everything I very clearly and distinctly perceive is true. (113)

Descartes's goal: establish that when I clearly and distinctly perceive that P, P must be true.

First, what is a clear and distinct perception?

I call a perception "clear" when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind, just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception "distinct" if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear. (Principles I, art. 45)

Descartes's argument:

1. Suppose it's possible to clearly and distinctly perceive the truth of P even though P is actually false
2. In that case, clear and distinct perception cannot result in knowledge⁵

⁵ After all, if clearly and distinctly perceiving results in false beliefs *sometimes* then I have reason to worry that it's resulting in a false belief in the case of P, which gives me some reason to doubt that P, which is inconsistent with my knowing that P.

3. But my clear and distinct perception of my own existence⁶ as a thinking thing did result in knowledge
4. So, it's not possible to clearly and distinctly perceive the truth of P even though P is actually false, i.e. anything I clearly and distinctly perceive is true⁷

⁶ I.e. in the Cogito.

Problem:

- The truths of math and geometry seem clear and distinct
- But there's reason to doubt them: possibility of evil deceiver, or no god at all⁸
- Hence, it's possible to be deceived even about what's clear and distinct

⁷ This argument form is called *reductio ad absurdum*: make a supposition, from that supposition derive something clearly false (or contradictory), and on those grounds infer that the supposition is false.

⁸ Recall the sophisticated version of the Evil Deceiver argument.

...in order to remove even this basis for doubt, I should at the first opportunity inquire whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether or not he can be a deceiver. For if I am ignorant of this, it appears I am never capable of being completely certain about anything else.
(114)

So, Descartes needs to prove two things:

- (i) God exists
- (ii) God isn't a deceiver

Outline of the M₃ proof of God's existence:

1. The idea of god in my mind is caused by something
2. It could only be caused by god
3. So, god exists

This argument is valid, so the task is to establish the truth of the premise.

Most of the remainder of M₃ is dedicated to establishing premise 2.

Descartes's argument proceeds from the idea of god, so it's similar to the Ontological Argument⁹

Descartes's idea of God:

[God is] a certain substance that is infinite, independent, supremely intelligent and supremely powerful, and that created me along with everything else that exists, if anything else exists. (118)

⁹ The Ontological Argument is a proof of the existence of an O₃ God most closely associated with Anselm of Canterbury (11th c.): I have an idea of God as a being with all perfections; existence is a perfection; so, God has existence/ God exists.

Descartes's argument also proceeds from an observed effect to a first cause, which he identifies with God, so it's similar to Cosmological Argument¹⁰

First step: clarify contents of the mind

...the principal and most frequent error to be found in judgments consists in the fact that I judge that the ideas which are in me are similar to or in conformity with certain things outside me. Obviously, if I were to consider these ideas merely as certain modes of my thought, and were not to refer them to anything else, they could hardly give me any subject matter for error. (114)

¹⁰ The Cosmological Argument is very old; Aristotle offered a version of it: what I now observe in the world is effect of some cause(s) that existed in the past; those causes existing in the past are the effects of some causes that existed even further in the past, etc. This chain of cause and effect cannot go on forever, so there must be some starting point: an uncaused cause – God.

Indirect realism

Where do ideas come from? Three possibilities:

Innate: part of me at my creation

Adventitious: ideas I'm caused to have by something outside of my mind

- Why believe Adventitious ideas exist? I notice them against my will: I can't help but feel the heat

Caused by me: fabrications (e.g. unicorns)

Formal and Objective Reality

What's real, and how real are they?

Three basic categories of existent objects for Descartes:

- Ideas (concepts/ representations)
- Finite substances
- Infinite substances¹¹

How real are these things?

Two types of reality:

Formal Reality: the reality that things have in virtue of being the type of things they are

- Ideas have least formal reality
- Finite substances have more formal reality
- Infinite substances have the most formal reality

Objective reality: the reality that ideas have in virtue of the objects that they are about¹²

¹¹ At this point he's only sure that ideas and one finite substance (himself) exist: not sure about anything else. This taxonomy is merely theoretical.

¹² Example: the table is a finite substance, so it has a medium amount of formal reality, so the *idea of the table* has a medium amount of objective reality.

- Ideas about ideas have least objective reality
- Ideas about finite substances have more objective reality
- Ideas about infinite substances have the most objective reality

Recall premise 2 from Descartes's proof of God's existence:

(2) The idea of God in my mind could only be caused by God

Why believe that?

- Ideas are caused to exist by things other than ideas, i.e. substances
- So far, the only substance that I know to exist is myself (i.e. my mind)
Could I be the cause of all of my ideas, including my idea of God?
- General observation about causation: effects cannot exceed causes.
 - Adding hot water to a bowl of cold water can't produce more total heat: it just transfers heat from one bowl to the other
 - If I poke the chalkboard with the chalk, there can't be more force exerted on the chalkboard than I exert on the chalk

This gives us:

Causal Principle: the objective reality of an idea cannot exceed the formal reality of its cause

Recall that the idea of God is, in part, the idea of an infinite substance:

...**a certain substance that is infinite**, independent, supremely intelligent and supremely powerful, and that created me along with everything else that exists, if anything else exists. (118, emphasis added)

Argument:

1. I have the idea of an infinite substance (God)¹³
2. The idea of God has infinite objective reality
3. Causal Principle: the objective reality of an idea cannot exceed the formal reality of its cause
4. So, the idea of God must be caused by an existing substance with infinite formal reality (God)¹⁴
5. So, there exists a substance with infinite formal reality, i.e. God

¹³ This is just P₁ from the argument outline above

¹⁴ This is essentially just P₂ from the argument outline above.

Meditation 4

At this point he's sure that God exists (grant the point)

Descartes's God is perfect: O₃

So,

...it is impossible for God ever to deceive me, for trickery or deception are always indicative of some imperfection. And although the ability to deceive seems to be an indication of cleverness or power, the will to deceive undoubtedly attests to maliciousness or weakness. Accordingly, deception is incompatible with God. (122-3)

My faculties of judgment come from God, and

...since he does not wish to deceive me, he assuredly has not given me the sort of faculty with which I could ever make a mistake, when I use it properly. (123)

Problem: but I do make mistakes. Why?

First Response:

There's a perfection spectrum: God is maximally perfect, 'nothingness' is as far away from that as possible. Humans are somewhere in the middle.

Error follows from our lack of perfection:

...error as such is not something real that depends upon God, but rather is merely a defect. And thus there is no need to account for my errors by positing a faculty given to me by God for the purpose. Rather, it just so happens that I make mistakes because the faculty of judging the truth, which I got from God, is not, in my case, infinite. (123)

But that's unsatisfactory:

For if it is true that the more expert the craftsman, the more perfect the works he produces, what can that supreme creator of all things make that is not perfect in all respects? No doubt God could have created me such that I never erred. No doubt, again, God always wills what is best. Is it then better that I should be in error rather than not? (123)

Digression: this sets up an analogue of the argument from evil

Original argument from evil:

1. God can do anything (is omnipotent)

2. God is perfectly good (is omnibenevolent)
3. Good beings always eliminate evil as far as they can
4. So, if God exists then all evil is eliminated
5. Not all evil is eliminated/ evil exists
6. So, God does not exist

Argument from cognitive imperfection:

1. God can do anything (is omnipotent)
2. God is perfectly good (is omnibenevolent)
3. Good beings always eliminate evil imperfect cognitive faculties/ error as far as they can
4. So, if God exists then all evil imperfect cognitive faculties/ error is eliminated
5. Not all evil imperfection/ error is eliminated/ evil imperfect cognitive faculties/ error exists
6. So, God does not exist

NB: the problem of evil argument and its analogues pose a much broader challenge to the existence of God than one might have thought. If an O₃ God were to exist, then we would expect the world to be perfect. The existence of evil poses a problem for the existence of an O₃ God because a perfect world contains no evil. But one might also have thought that a perfect world would not contain mosquitos, pollution, or disco music either, so one could just as easily have formulated an argument from disco music and on that basis conclude that exactly zero O₃ Gods exist.

[End digression]

D's first response:

Mysterianism: God is mysterious, we shouldn't expect to understand

Compare: Pascal

D's second response

...errors depend on the simultaneous concurrence of two causes: the faculty of knowing that is in me and the faculty of choosing, that is, the free choice of the will, ...simultaneously on the intellect and will. (124)

Forming a belief involves two faculties:

1. intellect, through which we merely perceive ideas
2. will (choice), where we make judgments based on those ideas

Errors of intellect are impossible: it's just the presentation of ideas

So, no reason to think that intellect is imperfect in the sense of flawed

Compare:

- (i) I believe truly that X
- (ii) I believe falsely that X
- (iii) I don't believe that X

(ii) is much worse than (iii): my mental state is positively defective, rather than merely limited

So, the problem with our belief forming faculties is that (ii) happens, not that (iii) happens

Similarly, the intellect is limited: I don't perceive all ideas. But that doesn't make it defective:

Compare again:

- (iv) I'm presented with idea X
- (v) I'm presented falsely with idea X
- (vi) I'm not presented with idea X

D thinks (v) is impossible, so intellect can't be defective in the way that our belief forming mechanism is defective

But, belief forming mechanism is just intellect + will

So problem must be with the will

Did God give me an imperfect will? Not in the sense of being limited:

[I cannot] complain that the will or free choice I have received from God is insufficiently ample or perfect, since I experience that it is limited by no boundaries whatever. (124)

So what is the will?

...willing is merely a matter of being able to do or not do the same thing, that is, of being able to affirm or deny, to pursue or to shun; or better still, the will consists solely in the fact that when something is proposed to us by our intellect either to affirm or deny, to pursue or to shun, we are moved in such a way that we sense that we are determined to it by no external force. (125)

This shows that God gave us a perfect faculty of free will.

Solution to the Problem of Cognitive Imperfection:

What then is the source of my errors? They are owing simply to the fact that, since the will extends further than the intellect, I do not contain the will within the same boundaries; rather, I also extend it to things I do not understand. Because the will is indifferent in regard to such matters, it easily turns away from the true and the good; and in this way I am deceived and I sin. (125)

But if I hold off from making a judgment when I do not perceive what is true with sufficient clarity and distinctness, it is clear that I am acting properly and am not committing an error. But if instead I were to make an assertion or a denial, then I am not using my freedom properly. (126)

So, whenever I err it's the product of exercising my own free will.

How does this help?

...it is surely no imperfection in God that he has given me the freedom to give or withhold my assent in those instances where he has not placed a clear and distinct perception in my intellect. But surely it is an imperfection in me that I do not use my freedom well and that I make judgments about things I do not properly understand. (126)

Could have stopped there, but goes on:

Nevertheless, I see that God could easily have brought it about that, while still being free and having finite knowledge, I should nonetheless never make a mistake. This result could have been achieved either by his endowing my intellect with a clear and distinct perception of everything about which I would ever deliberate, or by simply impressing the following rule so firmly upon my memory that I could never forget it: I should never judge anything that I do not clearly and distinctly understand. I readily understand that, considered as a totality, I would have been more perfect than I am now, had God made me that way. But I cannot therefore deny that it may somehow be a greater perfection in the universe as a whole that some of its parts are not immune to error, while others are, than if all of them were exactly alike. And I have no right to complain that the part God has wished me to play is not the principal and most perfect one of all. (126-7)

Surprising! D identifies two ways to prevent mistakes:

1. by endowing my intellect with a clear and distinct perception of everything about which I would ever deliberate
2. by simply impressing the following rule so firmly upon my memory that I could never forget it: I should never judge anything that I do not clearly and distinctly understand

What's a third way?

Compatibilism: I could have free will re: judgment, I am able to make judgments even in the absence of a clear and distinct perception, but judge correctly in every instance

God could give me freedom to choose, then intervene whenever I choose incorrectly.

Recall what Descartes tells us about free will:

...the will consists solely in the fact that when something is proposed to us by our intellect either to affirm or deny, to pursue or to shun, we are moved in such a way that we sense that we are determined to it by no external force. (125)

Compatibilists are free to say that we never sense the external forces that determine our actions (deterministic causal processes, mad scientist with a remote control)

Meditation 5

At this point, Descartes knows how to inquire without error: stick to clear and distinct perceptions.

First goal of M5: examine the nature of/ essential properties of material objects

Method: consider my ideas of material objects, see which ones are clear and distinct

Can clearly and distinctly perceive the general idea of material objects

- that have extension (size shape)
- that are in motion
- that have their own immutable natures

Importantly,

...when I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists outside my thought anywhere in the world and never has, the triangle still has a certain determinate nature, essence, or form which is unchangeable and eternal, which I did not fabricate, and which does not depend on my mind. [That I did not fabricate these essences] is evident from the fact that various properties can be demonstrated regarding this triangle: namely, that its three angles are equal to two right angles, that its longest side is opposite its largest angle, and so on. These are properties that I now clearly acknowledge, whether I want to or not, even if I previously had given them no thought whatever when I imagined the triangle. For this reason, then, they were not fabricated by me. (43)

Remember: Descartes thinks that all ideas are either:

- Innate
- Caused by something outside of me (adventitious)
- Fabricated by me

In above passage, Descartes provides a test for whether an idea is fabricated by me:

If I clearly and distinctly perceive the essential properties of an idea, and I do so independent of whether I want to or not, then that idea is not fabricated by me

The idea seems to be that I can fabricate ideas at will, so if the idea of a triangle were fabricated then I should be able to drop certain

properties (e.g. interior angles summing to 180) just by willing it. With triangles I can't do that, so the idea of a triangle isn't fabricated.

Moreover: Since I perceive clearly and distinctly many of the *essential* properties of the triangle, and:

All these properties are patently true because I know them clearly, and thus they are something and not merely nothing. For it is obvious that whatever is true is something and I have already demonstrated at some length that all that I know clearly is true. (43)

This sets up an argument:

1. I have within me the idea of a triangle
2. I perceive clearly and distinctly that part of the essence of a triangle it to have three sides
3. Everything that I perceive clearly and distinctly is true
4. So, all triangles have three sides

This is all working up to a second proof of the existence of God:

Descartes's a version of the Ontological Argument:

1. I have within me the idea of God
2. I perceive clearly and distinctly that part of the essence of God is to exist necessarily
3. Everything that I perceive clearly and distinctly is true
4. So, God exists necessarily

NB: it does not generally follow from the idea of a thing that it exists:

- One can think of a winged horse without there existing a winged horse
- What we can know: if a winged horse exists then it has wings

But the existence of God is a special case, since necessary existence is an *essential property* of God

Guanilo's objection:

I have the idea of a unicorn, but that's no reason to believe that unicorns exist

But what about existicorns?

1. I have within me the idea of God an existicorn
2. I perceive clearly and distinctly that part of the essence of God an existicorn is to exist necessarily
3. Everything that I perceive clearly and distinctly is true
4. So, God existicorns exist necessarily

What's the disanalogy? How to patch things up?

NB:

- Descartes made a big deal of the non-fabricated nature of the idea of god
- Obviously, the idea of an existicorn is fabricated
- How can that make a difference?

Beginning of an answer:

...I am not free to think of God without existence, that is, a supremely perfect being without a supreme perfection without a perfection, as I am to imagine a horse with or without wings. (44)

Here Descartes is thinking of God's essence as 'the supremely perfect being', and he's thinking of existence as a perfection

So, God without existence = the supremely perfect being without a perfection

But then God isn't supremely perfect, so at that point you're not really thinking about God at all

But how does this help?

Existicorn =_{df} a unicorn that exists necessarily

As above, thinking about an existicorn that doesn't exist isn't really thinking about an existicorn

One more reason this is so important:

Grant for the moment that I can know and be certain of everything that I perceive clearly and distinctly right now at this very moment. What about a moment later when my attention shifts and I stop perceiving those things? Do I still know them?

Recall the problem with the evil deceiver argument: without a response to the ED argument

I [could] convince myself that I have been so constituted by nature that I might occasionally be mistaken about those things I believe

I perceive most evidently, especially when I recall that I have often taken many things to be true and certain, which other arguments have subsequently led me to judge to be false. (AT 70)

Recall that the possibility of existing as a result of natural processes is problematic for the same reason

But, once I know that there's a God I can know that everything I perceive clearly and distinctly is true:

But once I perceived that there is a God, and also understand at the same time that everything else depends on him, and that he is not a deceiver, I then concluded that everything that I clearly and distinctly perceive is necessarily true. Hence even if I no longer attend to the reasons leading me to judge this to be true, so long as I merely recall that I did clearly and distinctly observe it, no counter-argument can be brought forward that might force me to doubt it. On the contrary, I have true and certain knowledge of it. And not just this one fact, but of everything else that I recall once having demonstrated... (AT 70)

And thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of every science depends exclusively upon the knowledge of the true God, to the extent that, prior to my becoming aware of him, I was incapable of achieving perfect knowledge about anything else. (AT 71)

Surprising! So all scientific knowledge depends on knowledge of God!

Sucks for atheists, and if it turns out there is no God, and hence that knowledge of God's existence is impossible, then scientific knowledge is impossible!

But back up: does this even work if there is a God?

- Anything I perceive clearly and distinctly I know, even if I'm not now considering the proofs that led me to perceive them clearly and distinctly
- But isn't my memory of what I clearly and distinctly perceived in the past fallible?
- So even if yesterday I C+D perceived that p, couldn't I today doubt that p on the grounds that I might be misremembering that I C+D perceived it yesterday?
- Given the discussion in M₄, shouldn't I withhold judgment about whether I recall C+D perceiving p until I C+D recall C+D perceiving that p?

Final coda: NB that this doesn't help with the Dream Argument at all:

What remains to be said? That perhaps I am dreaming, as I recently objected against myself, in other words, that everything I am now thinking is no truer than what occurs to someone how is asleep? Be that as it may, this changes nothing; for certainly, even if I were dreaming, if anything is evident to my intellect, then it is entirely true. (AT 71)

Aaaaaand, that's essentially just where the painter passage left us.

As a result:

...even if I not longer attend to the reasons leading me to judge this to be true, so long as I merely recall that I did clearly and distinctly observe it, no counter-argument can be brought forward might force me to doubt it. On the contrary, I have a true and certain knowledge of it. (46-7)

Big-picture lesson:

And thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of every science depends exclusively upon the knowledge of the true God, to the extent that, prior to my becoming aware of him, I was incapable of achieving perfect knowledge about anything else. But now it is possible for me to achieve full and certain knowledge about countless things, both about God and other intellectual matters, as well as about the entirety of that corporeal nature which is the object of pure mathematics. (47)

Cartesian circle

Aarnauld:

I have one further scruple, about how the author avoids a circle when he says that we are sure that what he clearly and distinctly perceives is true only because God exists. But we can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Consequently, before we might be sure that God exists, we ought to be sure that whatever we clearly and evidently perceive is true (AT 214)

Zoom way out on Descartes's project.

Started out with the skeptical arguments in M1, concluded that we know nothing

By the Cogito, came to know that he exists

Noticed that his perception of his own existence is 'clear and distinct'; concluded that anything he perceives clearly and distinctly is true

1. He knows that he exists solely on the basis of a C+D perception
2. Knowledge is only possible on the basis of an infallible, indubitable process
3. So, believing what you C+D perceive is an infallible, indubitable process

Problem: Evil Deceiver argument provides reason to doubt some clear and distinct perceptions (e.g. all squares have four sides)

So, we're not yet in a position to say that everything clearly and distinctly perceived is true

Solution in M3: first, prove that God exists.

How does Descartes know that God exists?

Partly on the basis of the Causal Principle

How does Descartes know that the Causal Principle is true? Because he clearly and distinctly perceives it to be true

Now it is indeed evident by the light of nature that there must be at least as much [reality] in the efficient and total cause as there is in the effect of that same cause. (116) (seen clearly and distinctly = seen by the light of nature)

Broader conclusion of this argument:

I recognize that it would be impossible for me to exist with the kind of nature I have – that is, having within me the idea of God – were it not the case that God really existed. By ‘God’ I mean the very being the idea of whom is within me, that is, the possessor of all the perfections which I cannot grasp, but can somehow reach in my thought, who is subject to no defects whatsoever. It is clear enough from this that he cannot be a deceiver, since it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend on some defect.

Lesson: God exists and is not a deceiver, so I can trust my judgments.

But: in M₄ Descartes worries that the existence of an O₃ god is inconsistent with any error at all. But we do in fact err, so something has gone wrong.

Free will theodicy: God never misleads when you use your capacity for judgment correctly

This requires that you only judge when things are clear and distinct

So, I can trust my judgments as long as they are based on C+D perceptions

This simplifies to the following:

Arc 1: Everything I C+D perceive is true, so the Causal Principle is true, so God exists

Arc 2: God exists, so everything I C+D perceive is true

Possible responses to Cartesian Circle:

Certainty, Not Truth response

NB: C+D perceptions have two important features

Certainty: a psychological state

Factivity: a relation between representation and reality

Proposal: Maybe he’s not really serious about the factivity part.

From objections and replies:

First of all, as soon as we think that we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously persuaded that it is true. Now if this persuasion is so firm that it is impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are persuaded of, then there are no further questions for us to ask: we have everything we could reasonably want. What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception of whose truth we are so firmly persuaded may appear false to God or an angel, so

that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged absolute falsity bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it? For the supposition that we are making here is of a persuasion so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such persuasion is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty. (AT vii, 144-5)

How this is supposed to avoid the circle: retreat from aim of establishing truth, instead try to merely remove all doubt

Lots of ways to have a psychological effect other than making sound arguments. If making a circular argument establishes certainty, the goal is achieved

Problem: but once I recognize that C+D perceptions don't establish truth, isn't that itself a reason to doubt them? So do I even have certainty?

Problem: this is not supported in the text, where Descartes claims to be seeking truth

Limit the Doubt response: Recall the summary of the circle:

Arc 1: Everything I C+D perceive is true, so the Causal Principle is true, so God exists

Arc 2: God exists, so everything I C+D perceive is true

Observations: In Arc 1, Descartes doesn't need everything he C+D perceives to be true, just the Causal Principle. But the M₃ reflection on the Cogito doesn't imply that conclusion:

1. I know that I exist solely on the basis of a clear and distinct perception
2. If C+D perception were fallible, then it couldn't lead to knowledge
3. So, everything I C+D perceive is true (i.e. C+D perception is infallible)

Generality problem: why is the basis of my knowledge of my existence: C+D perception? Why not: C+D perception of an existential claim? Or: C+D perception on a Tuesday? Or just: coming to believe something?

There are lots of ways to describe the method employed in establishing the Cogito. On what non-arbitrary grounds do we choose: C+D perception?

What Descartes needs for his argument to go through: a basis of belief that

1. provides knowledge of his own existence (the cogito)
2. provides knowledge of the Causal principle

Possible basis satisfying those needs: I come to believe on the basis of C+D perception of my own existence OR general philosophical principle.

Resulting principle: everything I C+D perceive is true, provided that what I perceive is either my own existence or a general philosophical principle

Grant for the moment that's right. How does it help?

Proposal: skeptical arguments in M1 raise doubts about the universal truth of C+D perceptions, but not about individual C+D perceptions.

How that helps: he has no reason to doubt his C+D perception that the causal principle is true, so no barrier to knowing that it's true. So circle becomes:

Arc 1: everything I C+D perceive is true, provided it's my own existence or a general philosophical principle; so the Causal Principle is true; so God exists

Arc 2: God exists, so everything I C+D perceive is true

Here we have:

- no circle: NB that the beginning of Arc 1 is distinct from the end of Arc 2
- the end product of Arc 2 is a full strength, unqualified C+D perception principle

Objection 1: this response to the Generality Problem is completely arbitrary *Objection 2:* can I not in fact doubt the causal principle, e.g. on the basis of evil deceiver doubt? And isn't that a counterexample to the claim that I can know that the causal principle is true via C+D perception¹⁵

¹⁵ Given that doubt is inconsistent with knowledge.

Basic Knowledge Response:

Perhaps it's enough that the C+D perceptions do in fact always indicate truth, and I don't have to *know* that C+D perceptions always indicate truth

Forget Descartes for a moment. When a small child has a visual experience as of the cup on the table, they typically come to *know* that the cup is on the table.

But, small children have not beliefs or knowledge about the reliability of visual experience.

This suggests the following combination of theses:

1. My visual experience as of the cup being on the table (typically) provides knowledge that the cup is on the table
2. This doesn't require that I have any beliefs or knowledge about the reliability of visual experience at all: the mere fact of the experience produces justified belief/ knowledge

NB: if you deny this is possible for some source of knowledge or other, you run into the **Problem of the Criterion**

Back to Descartes

How this solves the problem:

Arc 1 is essentially an argument:

1. everything I C+D perceive is true
2. I C+D perceive that the Causal Principle is true
3. so, the Causal principle is true
4. (insert M3 proof of God's existence here)
5. so, God exists

The point of this response is to deny that (1) and (2) are premises in the argument at all:

- the function of (1) and (2) in the argument are to establish that (3) is true
- but on the current proposal, my knowledge that the Causal Principle is true isn't the result of any argument at all: it's the product of my C+D perception of the Causal Principle's truth.¹⁶
- So, Arc 1 really just consists of (3) - (5)
- But we still get knowledge of (1) as the conclusion of Arc 2

¹⁶ Compare: the child's knowledge that the cup is on the table isn't the conclusion of an argument, it's the product of her visual perception of the cup being on the table.

Problem:

- Suppose that's right, and C+D perception produces knowledge, even when I don't antecedently know that C+D perception produces knowledge

- In order for *reasoning* from premises to produce knowledge in the conclusion, I must *know* the premises.
 - So, in order to know the conclusion of Arc 1 on the basis of that argument, I must first know (3)
 - For Descartes, that implies that I must have absolutely no doubt that (3) is true
 - But we have good reason to doubt (3): the evil deceiver argument
 - On way to diffuse those doubts: prove (3) with an argument from indubitable premises¹⁷
 - * But we can't use premises (1) and (2) in an argument unless we know them to be true
 - * So, we can't make an argument for (3) to remove all doubts¹⁸
 - So, we don't know that (3), and hence are in no position to use it as a premise

¹⁷ Presumably that's what Descartes was trying to do in M2 and the first part of M3.

¹⁸ At least, we can't provide *Descartes's* argument for (3)

Big picture:

- On the old conception, C+D perceptions guarantee two things: certainty and truth
- On this proposal, they guaranty truth but not certainty
- Knowledge requires both truth and certainty
- So, on this proposal, C+D perceptions don't guaranty knowledge

Possible (non-Cartesian) response: Bootstrapping

Meditation 6

Meditations 1-5 were primarily devoted to questions of *epistemology*: questions about how to obtain knowledge, and about the limits of our knowledge.

Meditation 6 is almost entirely devoted to questions of *metaphysics*: what sorts of things exist? what are the most important features of those things.

Big upshots of M6:

1. matter (physical stuff) exists, is essentially *extended* stuff
2. minds exist, are essentially *thinking* stuff
3. **Substance dualism**: there are two fundamentally different types of substances: mind and matter

At this point Descartes knows that he exists, but only insofar as he's a thinking thing - he's not yet sure that his body exists.

Question: does the material world exist?

Question: what is matter anyway?

First argument for the existence of the material world:

1. I have a faculty of understanding, and I have a distinct faculty of imagination^{19,20}
2. While having a faculty of understanding is essential to me, having a faculty of imagining is not²¹
3. So, the power of imagining depends on something distinct from me (where 'me' = my mind)
4. Hypothesis: "[imagination] may differ from pure intellection only in the sense that the mind, when it understands, in a sense turns toward itself and looks at one of the ideas that are in it; whereas when it imagines, it turns toward the body, and intuits in the body something that conforms to an idea either understood by the mind or perceived by sense." (48)
 - shorter: imagination is the mind directed at a body (not an idea)
5. That requires the existence of a body, and since I can't come up with a better explanation for imagination, it seems likely that my material body exists

¹⁹ Imagination = an ability to inspect mental images; requires effort on my part to do so that is unlike what happens in understanding

²⁰ Chiliagon vs myriagon (10,000 sides) example shows intellection is distinct from imagination.

²¹ No real argument: '...this power of imagining that is in me, insofar as it differs from the power of understanding, is not required for my own existence. For were I to be lacking this power, I would nevertheless undoubtedly remain the same entity I am now.' (73)

NB: this argument is an inference to the best explanation

Problem: even if this is correct as far as it goes, it's a merely probable conclusion, which can't amount to knowledge for Descartes

Argument that Descartes = his mind

Descartes: before Meditation 1, I believed in material substances due to involuntary perceptual experiences as of material substances, the best explanation of which is the existence of those material substances

But Meditation 1 showed that this is inadequate, that he knows nothing

Meditations 2-5 showed that he does in fact know some things, but not yet the existence of material objects.

Real Distinction between Mind and Body:

First, I know that all the things that I clearly and distinctly understand can be made by God such as I understand them. For this reason, my ability clearly and distinctly to understand one thing without another suffices to make me certain that the one thing is different from the other, since they can be separated from each other, at least by God... For this reason, from the fact that I know that I exist, and that at the same time I judge that obviously nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists entirely in my being a thinking thing. And although perhaps (or rather, as I shall soon say, assuredly) I have a body that is very closely joined to me, nevertheless, because on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, insofar as I am merely a thinking thing and not an extended thing, and because on the other hand I have a distinct idea of a body, insofar as it is merely an extended thing and not a thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.

Here Descartes is drawing conclusions about what's *actually* true on the basis of considerations about what's *possibly* true.

Compare: it's possible that I will win the lottery, so it's actual that I will win the lottery (i.e., I really *will* win the lottery). Clearly that's a bad inference.

Is it ever possible to draw conclusions about what's *actual* on the basis of considerations about what's *possible*?

Yes: there are some properties such that: actually having that property entails necessarily having that property²²

Example: consider the property *is evenly divisible by 7*.

²² Where 'necessarily p' is equivalent to 'not possibly not p', e.g. if p is necessarily true, then it's impossible for p to be false.

- 21 actually has that property: in the real world, 21 is evenly divisible by 7
- Given that 21 actually has that property, it's impossible that things could have turned out such that 21 does not have that property. In other worlds, it's necessarily the case that 21 is evenly divisible by 7
- Plausibly, all mathematical properties are like that
- Other examples:

deductive validity if an argument is valid in the actual world, it's valid in all possible worlds

identity Superman is identical to Clark Kent; Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus²³

Properties of this sort are called *essential properties*: F is *actually* an essential property of a iff it's *impossible* for a to exist without property F

It follows from this definition that: if it's *not impossible* for a to exist without property F, then F is not *actually* one of a's essential properties

NB how this ties together the actual and the possible; that's what Descartes needs for his argument:

Reconstructing Descartes's argument:

1. If I can *actually* C+D understand p, then it's *possible* that p
2. I can *actually* C+D understand myself existing without any properties other than being a thinking thing
3. So, it's *possible* that I can exist without any properties other than being a thinking thing
4. If it's *possible* that I can exist without property F, then F is not *actually* one of my essential properties
5. So, none of my properties *other than being a thinking thing* are *actually* essential to me
6. In particular, my having a material body, if in fact I do have one, is not *actually* one of my essential properties

Note the conclusion:

²³ Importantly: the phenomenon I'm calling your attention to is not *linguistic*, it's *metaphysical*. It's of course possible that Superman's parents might have named their child 'Mitch', in which case the words 'Superman' and 'Clark Kent' would have different meanings. The point is not about the names, it's about the things named. Given the actual meanings of 'Superman' and 'Clark Kent', both names pick out the same person, and that person is self-identical (as is everything that exists). That's a metaphysical point, not a linguistic point.

- Descartes already knows that *being a thinking thing* is one of his essential properties
 - Important: that does not follow from his argument, which is purely negative²⁴
 - he knows that thinking is one of his essential properties because he C+D perceives that it is²⁵
- this argument shows that he doesn't have any *other* essential properties
- so, his entire essence is to be a thinking thing.

²⁴ it only establishes that certain properties are *not* essential to him, doesn't show that any properties actually *are* essential to him.

²⁵ NB that he could also have skipped the argument and claimed instead to have C+D perceived that *being a thinking thing* is his only essential property.

At this point Descartes isn't sure that matter – stuff distinct from mind, which has the single essential property of being thinking stuff – exists.

But, he's in a position to say, in part, what matter would be like if it *does* exist:

- we know that minds are essentially *thinking things* because we C+D perceive that they are
- similarly, we know that material objects are *extended things*²⁶ because we C+D perceive that they are

²⁶ Extended =df takes up space

In order to prove that being extended is the *entire* essence of being a material object, Descartes offers a parallel argument:

Reconstructing Descartes's parallel argument:

1. If I can *actually* C+D understand p, then it's *possible* that p
2. I can *actually* C+D understand **matter** existing without any properties other than **being extended**
3. So, it's *possible* that **matter** can exist without any properties other than **being extended**
4. If it's *possible* that **matter** can exist without property F, then F is not *actually* one of **matter's** essential properties
5. So, none of **matter's** properties *other than being extended* are actually essential to it