

Descartes' Answer to Skepticism

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Some Definitions

Belief is
a proposition
that we hold true

Skepticism is
the attitude of
doubting some
or all our beliefs

A piece of
knowledge is
a belief that is true
and adequately
justified by
evidence and
reason

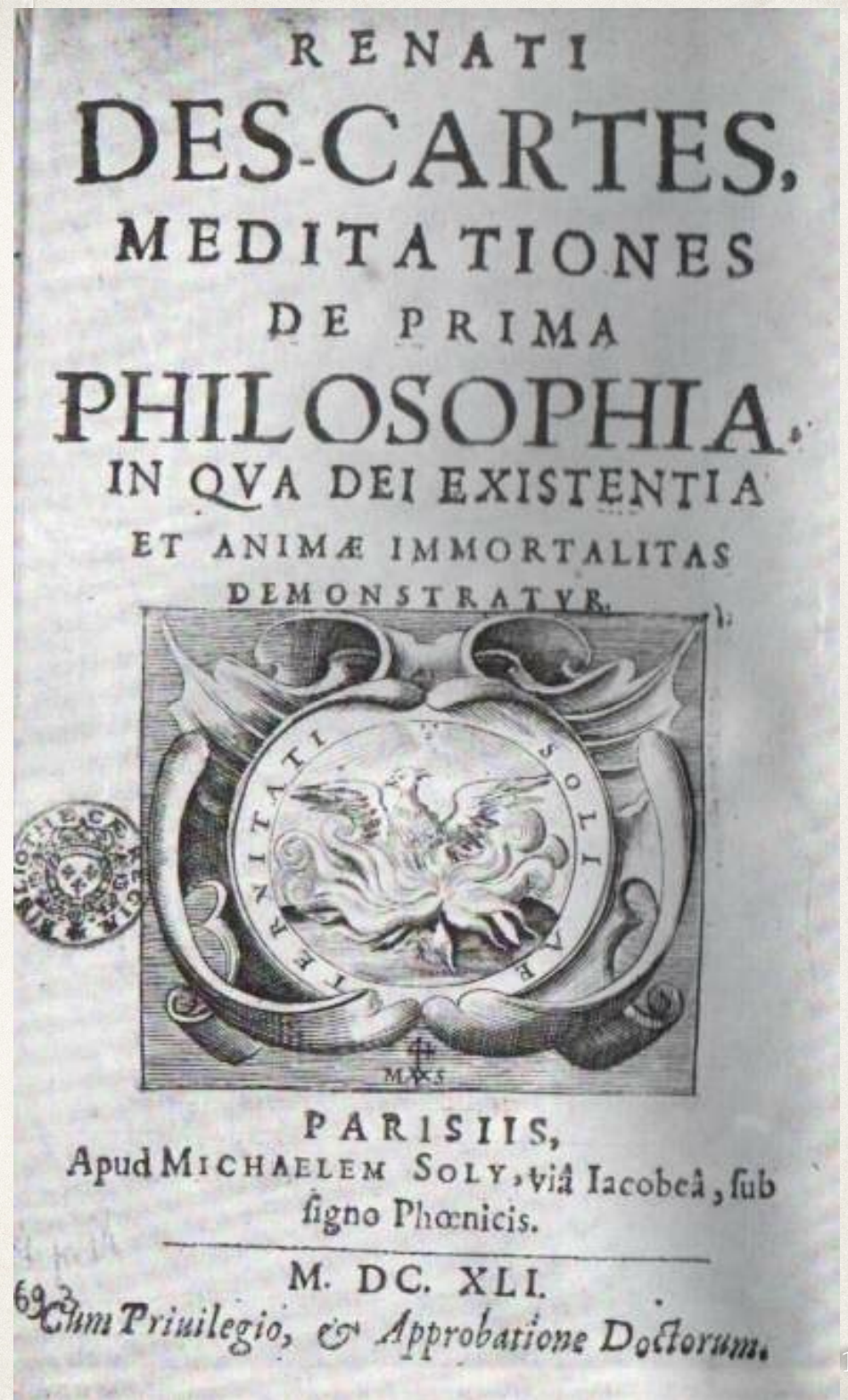
Examples:

- Lehman is in the Bronx
- Obama is American
- We are alive
- God exists
(or God does not exist)
- Etc.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650)



Meditations on First Philosophy (1641)



Six Meditations in Six Days

- There are six meditations in total.
- We will only read two.
- Ideally, each meditation should occupy an entire day of thinking and reflecting.

First Meditation — First Day

“Whatever I have accepted until now as most true has come to me through my senses. But occasionally I have found that they have deceived me, and it is unwise to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.”

—Descartes, Meditation I

Sometimes
the Senses
Deceive Us...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvvcRdwNhGM>



But the Senses Aren't Always Wrong!

“Yet although the senses sometimes deceive us about objects that are very small or distant, that doesn't apply to my belief that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. It seems to be quite impossible to doubt beliefs like these, which come from the senses.”

—Descartes, *Meditation I*



What if I Am Dreaming?

“What a brilliant piece of reasoning! As if I were not a man who sleeps at night and often has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake—indeed sometimes even more improbable ones.

Often in my dreams I am convinced of just such familiar events— that I am sitting by the fire in my dressing-gown—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!”

—Descartes, Meditation I

But the Truths
of Arithmetic
and Geometry
Are Special,
Because They
Remain the
Same Even in
One's Dreams

“arithmetic, geometry and other studies of the simplest and most general things—whether they really exist in nature or not—contain something certain and indubitable. For whether I am awake or asleep, two plus three makes five, and a square has only four sides. It seems impossible to suspect that such obvious truths might be false.”

—Descartes, Meditation I

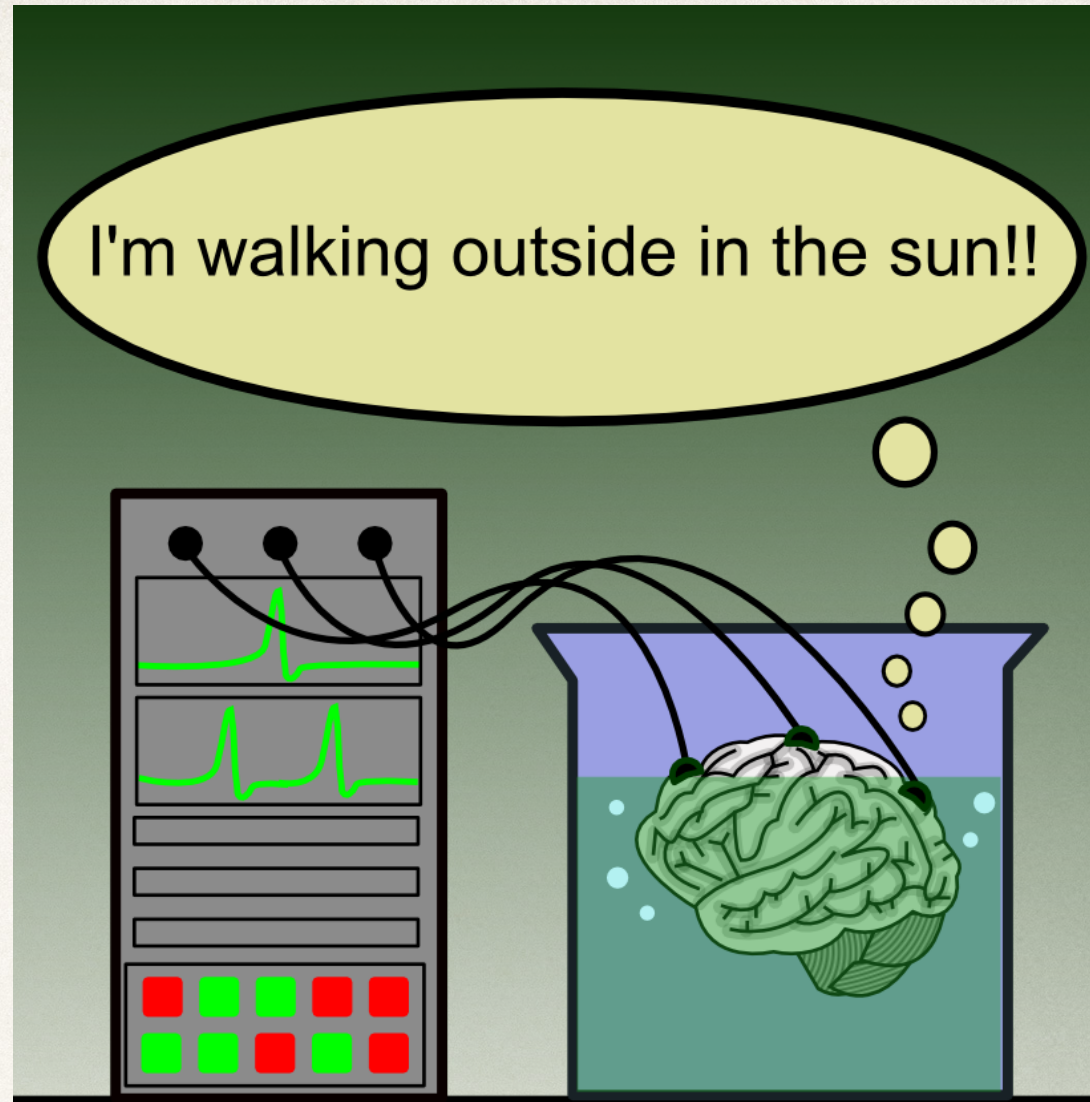
Malignant Genius Hypothesis

“so how do I know that I myself don’t go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square? Well, you might say, God would not let me be deceived like that, because he is said to be supremely good. But, I reply, if God’s goodness would stop him from letting me be deceived all the time, you would expect it to stop him from allowing me to be deceived even occasionally; yet clearly I sometimes *am* deceived.

[...] So I shall suppose that some malicious, powerful, cunning **demon** has done all he can to deceive me [...]

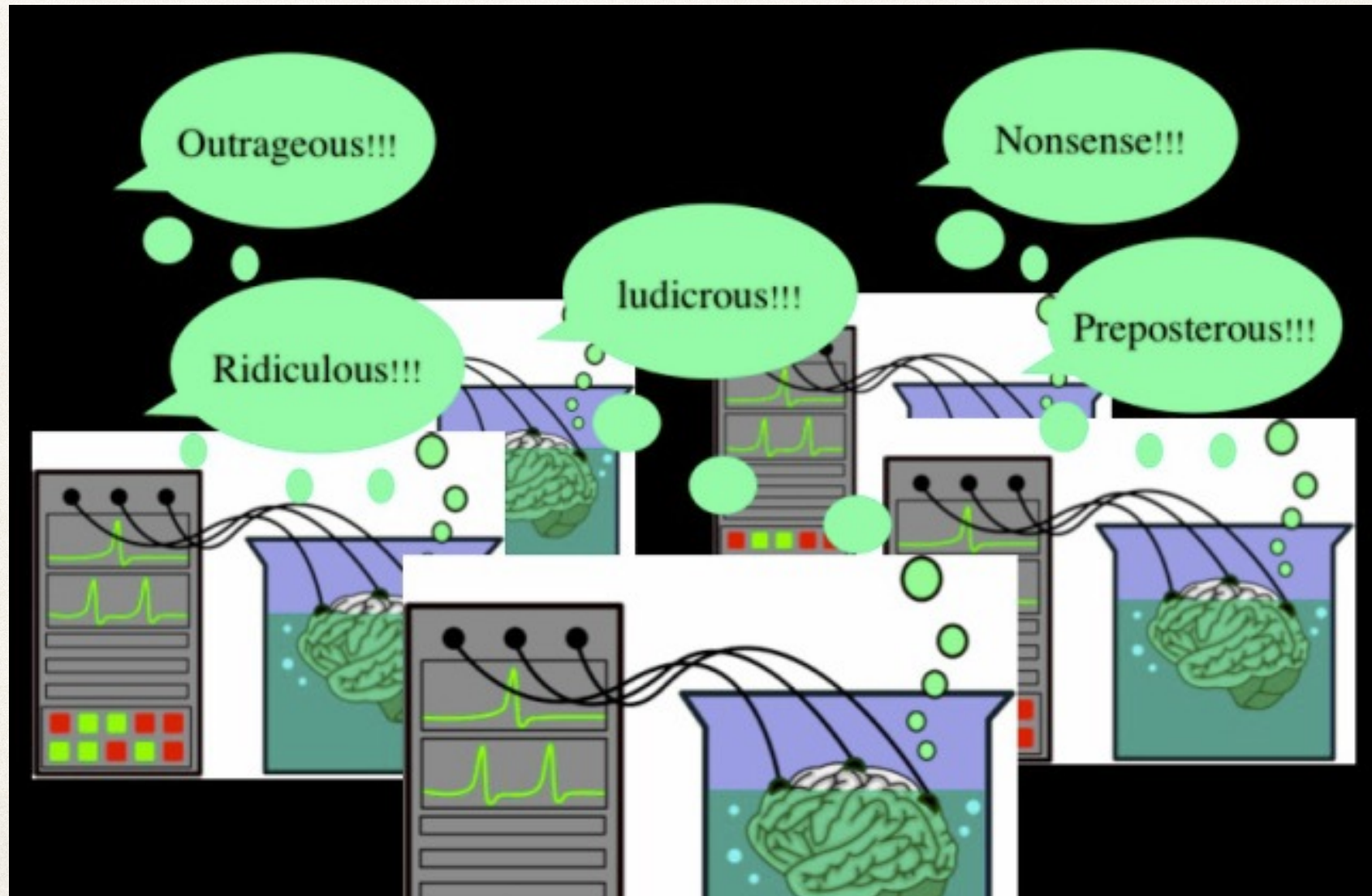
—Descartes, *Meditation I*

The Malignant Genius Hypothesis (or the Brain in a Vat Hypothesis)



Instead of being manipulated and deceived by a malignant genius, we might be deceived and manipulated by an evil supercomputer.

How Do You Know We Are Not Just
Like The Idiots Below Thinking
That We Are Not Brains in a Vat?



Three Stages of Doubt

1. Doubting what the senses tell us

At this **first** stage, we doubt what the senses tell us, but we do not doubt that we have a body or that we are here in this place at this moment.

2. Imagining that we are dreaming

At this **second** stage, we doubt that we have a body and that we are here, but we do not doubt the truths of arithmetic and geometry.

3. Malignant Genius Hypothesis (or Brain in a Vat Hypothesis)

At this **third** stage, everything is put into question.

Nothing is immune from doubt...

What To Do Now?

- How can we answer the tremendous challenge posed by the "malignant genius" hypothesis?
- Descartes thinks he has a conclusive answer to the challenge

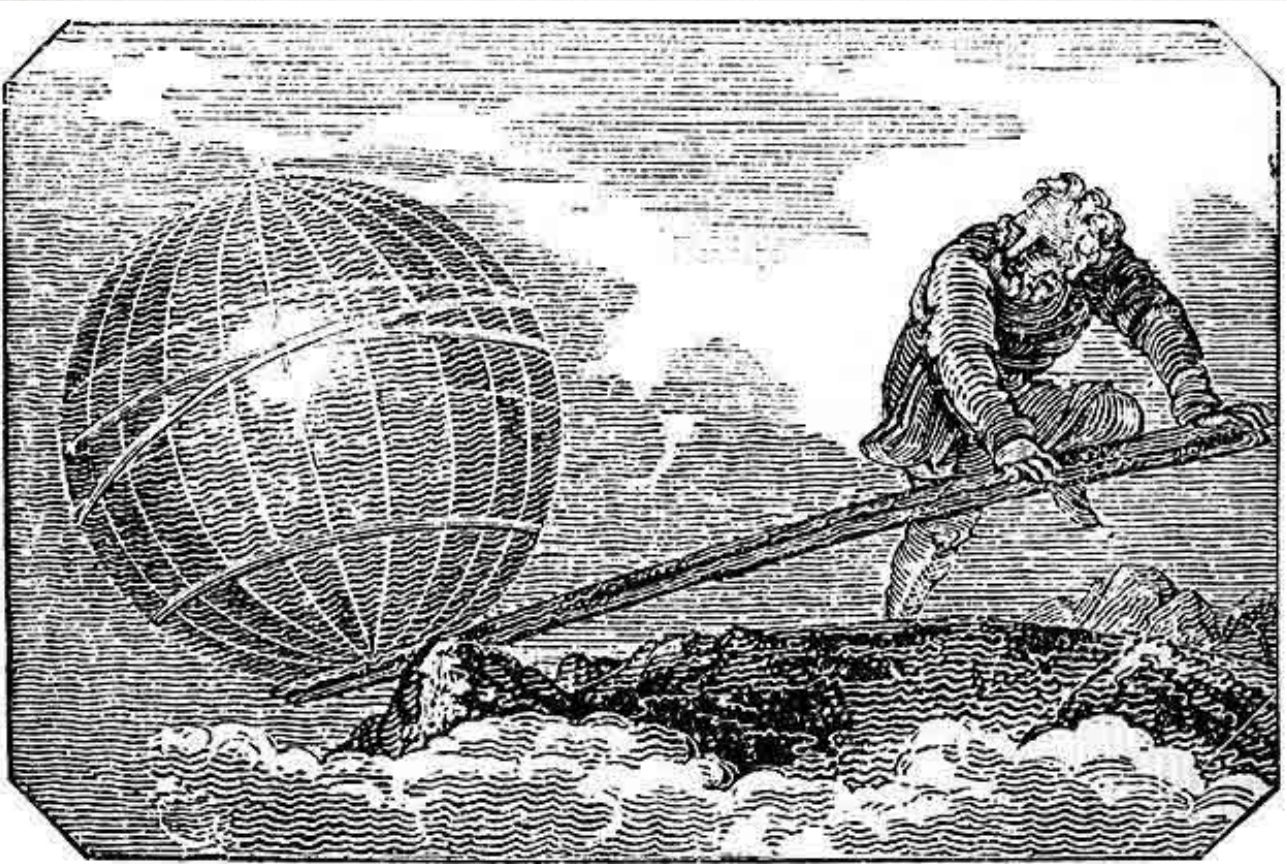
Second Meditation — Second Day

Descartes is Drowning in Doubt

“Yesterday’s meditation raised doubts
—ones that are too serious to be
ignored—which I can see no way of
resolving. I feel like someone who is
suddenly dropped into a deep
whirlpool that tumbles him around so
that he can neither stand on the
bottom nor swim to the top.
However, I shall force my way up.”

– *Descartes, Meditation II*

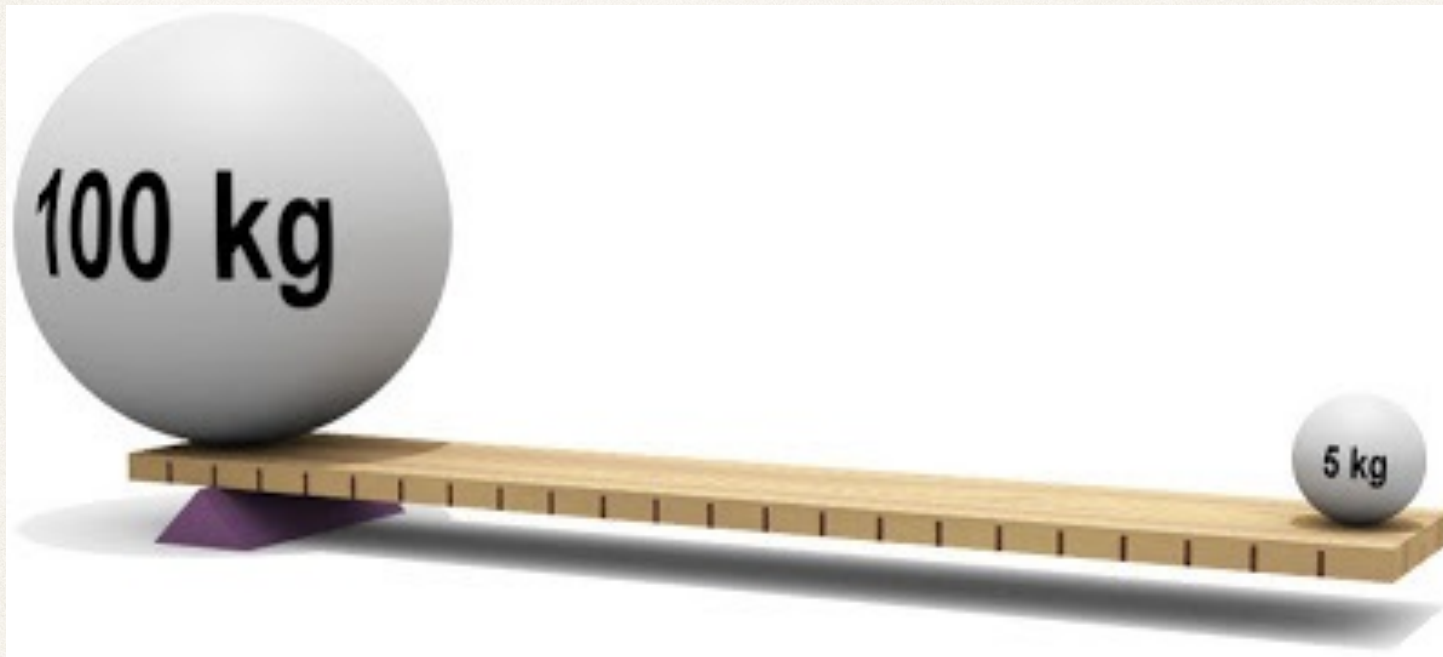
“ I will set aside anything that admits of the slightest doubt, treating it as though I had found it to be outright false; and I will carry on like that until I find something certain”



“Archimedes said that if he had one firm and immovable point he could lift the world with a long enough lever; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one little thing that is certain.”

– *Descartes, Meditation II*

Archimedes' Lever Principle



So, What Can Remain Certain After One Doubts Everything?

“ I will suppose, then, that everything I see is fictitious. I will believe that my memory tells me nothing but lies. I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, movement and place are illusions. So what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact —that nothing is certain!”

– *Descartes, Meditation II*

Can I Doubt That I Exist?

“...I have just said that I have no senses and no body, and I am so bound up with a body and with senses that one would think that I can’t exist without them. Now that I have convinced myself that there is nothing in the world—no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies—does it follow that I don’t exist either?

No it does not follow; for if I convinced myself of something, then I certainly existed.”

– Descartes, Meditation II

I Think, I Exist...

“ But there is a supremely powerful and cunning deceiver who deliberately deceives me all the time!

Even then, if he is deceiving me I undoubtedly exist: let him deceive me all he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing while I think I am something. So after thoroughly thinking the matter through I conclude that this proposition, **I am, I exist, must be true whenever I assert it or think it.**”

—Descartes, Meditation II

Descartes' Arguments

- Either I am not deceived or I am deceived
 - If I am not deceived, then I exist.
 - If I am deceived, then I exist. (*why?*)
 - If I'm deceived, there is something being deceived, namely myself.
 - If there is something being deceived, namely myself, I must exist.
 - So, If I am deceived, then I exist.
- Either way I exist.

St. Augustine Came Up With a Similar Argument

“If I am mistaken, I am.”

(St. Augustine, *De civitate dei*, Book XI, 26)

“By not positively affirming that they are alive, the skeptics ward off the appearance of error in themselves, yet they do make errors simply by showing themselves alive; one cannot err who is not alive. **That we live is therefore not only true, but it is altogether certain as well.**”

(St. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, Chapter 7 section 20).