

Introduction to Epistemology and Descartes' Arguments for Skepticism

Meditations on First Philosophy, I & II



A Few Assumptions About Knowledge

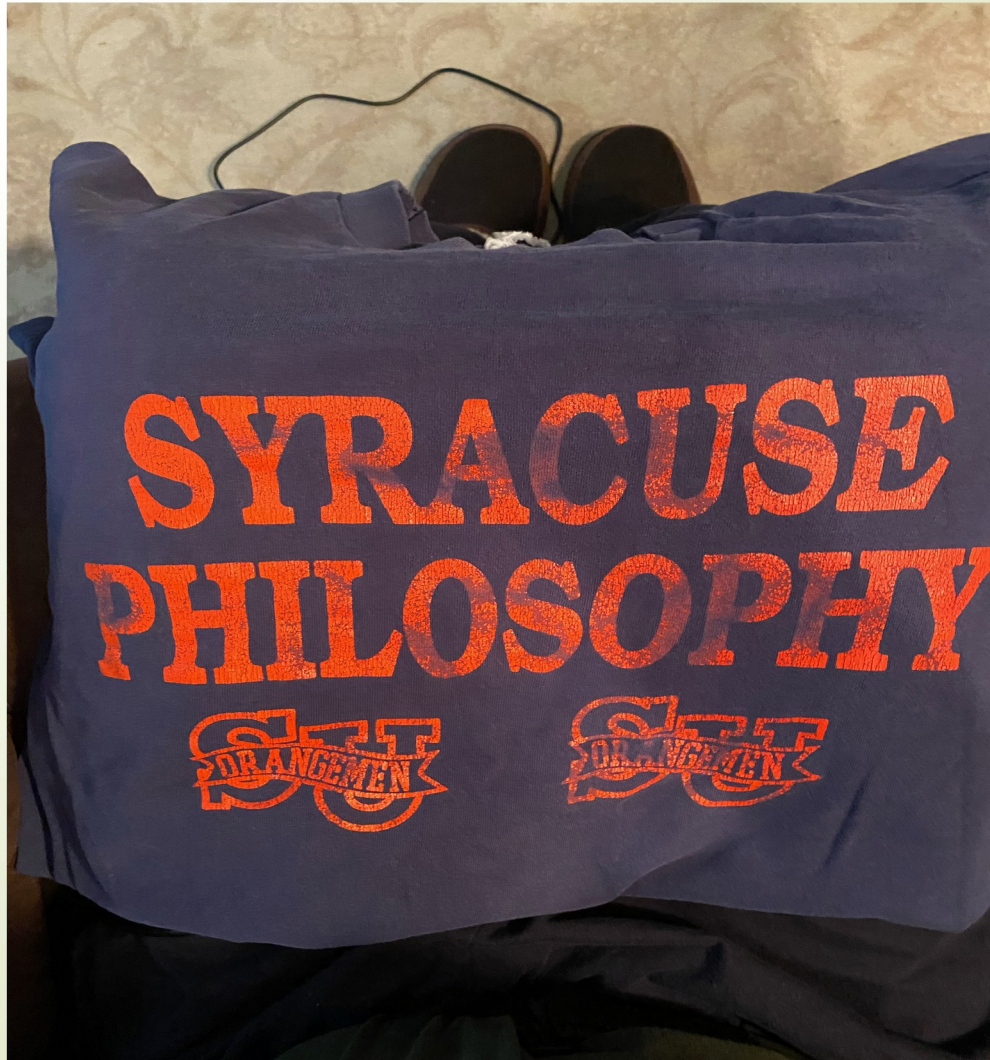
- We are mostly concerned with *propositional knowledge*.
 - “S knows that p.”
 - E.g., “Abby knows that her yard needs mowing,” or “Ahmad knows that Pluto is no longer considered to be a planet.”
 - Distinguished from *procedural knowledge* and *knowledge by acquaintance*.
- Knowledge entails truth.
 - We’ll be assuming a realist account of truth: P is true iff P describes the world as it is.
- Knowledge entails belief.
 - To believe something is just to think it is true.
 - Three doxastic attitude: believing, disbelieving, and withholding.
 - Credences: 0-1 (0 = maximal disbelief; 1 = maximal belief)
 - Believing is generally understood functionally.

Why Care About Epistemology?

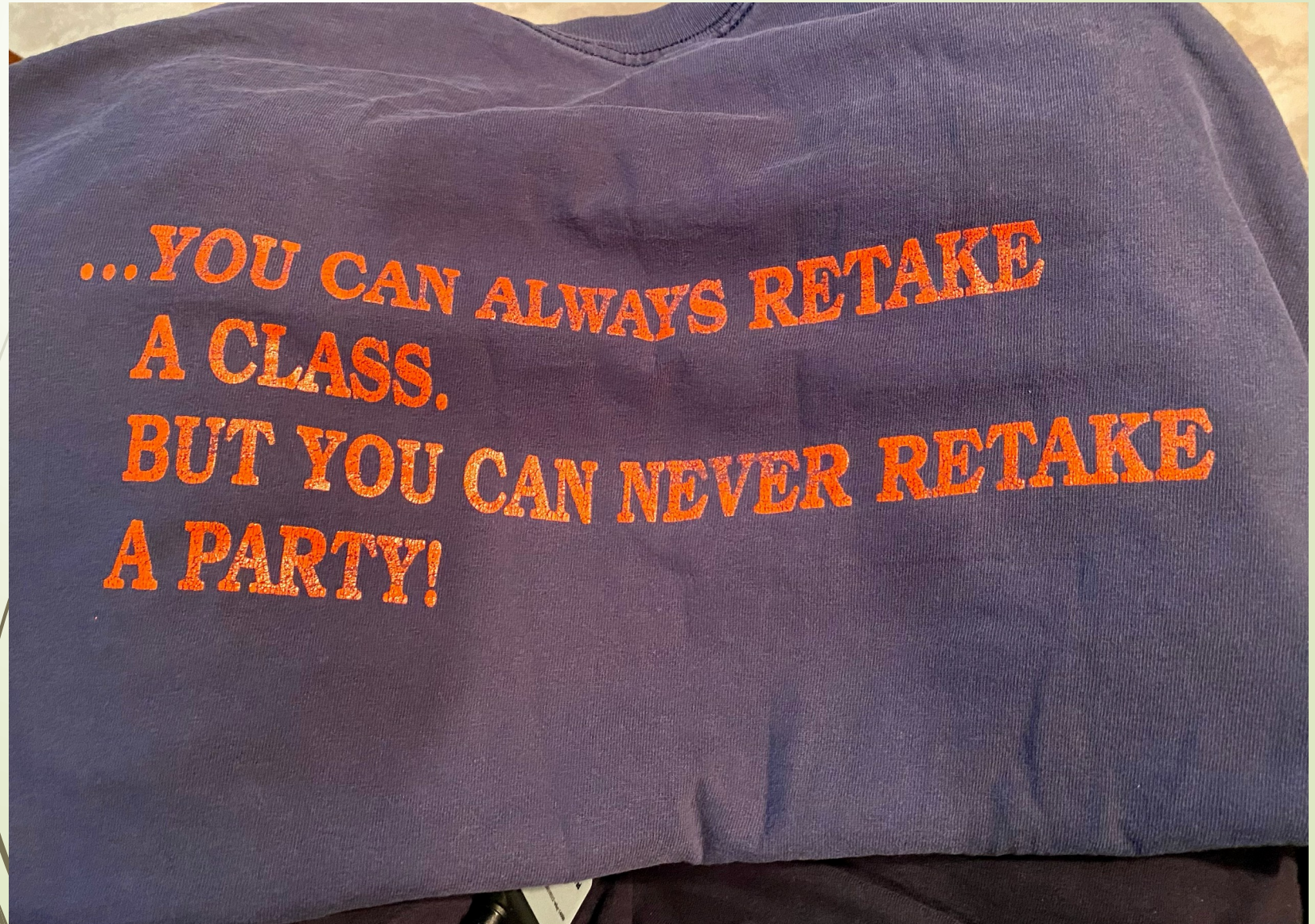


- Appearance v. Reality
 - Things (i.e., reality) aren't always as they seem (appear).
 - Fundamental epistemological question: how do we know when our appearances reflect reality?
- T-shirt example...

Syracuse Philosophy Department T-shirt!



The Back of the T-shirt



Plato's Epistemology

- Knowledge is grounded and stable in a way that mere opinion/belief are not.
- But the material world is in a constant state of flux (it's in a state of "becoming")
- If knowledge is stable and the material world is not stable, then the material world cannot be an object of knowledge.
 - That is, there is no knowledge but only opinion about the material world.
- In addition to the world of becoming there is the world of being; this is the realm of the "forms."
 - Fully real (as opposed to "realish")
 - Unchanging/stable (as opposed to transitory/influx).
 - Perfect (as opposed to imperfect).
 - Immaterial (as opposed to material).
- For every property/concept we have there is a perfected prototype form.

Plato's Cave and Theory of Recollection

- The allegory of the cave:
 - People who have lived in a cave and seen only the shadows reflected on the wall, but never the real objects that cast the shadows.
 - The job of the philosopher is find their way out of the cave and then lead others out.
- We can have knowledge of the forms, but how?
 - We are “trapped” inside our material bodies; our material bodies can only experience the material world.
 - We know that we have some knowledge of the forms because we can do mathematics and geometry.
 - The slave boy in the *Meno*.
 - Our knowledge of the forms is recollection.
 - But that means we've existed prior to our material existence
 - Our prior existence must be immaterial and in a situation where we can learn about the forms: so, it was in “Plato's heaven.”

Skepticism

- In ancient Greece and, independently, in India, there *were* philosophers as early as 700 BCE who espoused skepticism.
- What is skepticism? There are many types:
 - 1. Global skepticism: there is no knowledge.
 - 2. Local skepticism: there is no knowledge of a particular type.
 - Religious skepticism
 - Moral skepticism
 - Mathematical skepticism
 - Historical skepticism
 - 3. Justification or rationality skepticism: there are no justified/rational beliefs.
 - Religious and moral varieties (not uncommon).
 - In matters of general disagreement (increasingly common among philosophers)
 - Regarding standard physical world beliefs (very rare).

Introduction to Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*

- Descartes (1596-1650) was a brilliant scientist, mathematician, and philosopher. He discovered analytic geometry; the Cartesian coordinate system is named after him.
- Natural science was beginning to take off during his day; he wanted to construct a useful epistemology that the sciences could use in determining what was true.
- In the first *Meditation*, Descartes gives an argument for near-global skepticism for which he is famous; however, by the end of the book, Descartes argues that skepticism can be defeated and adopts a commonsense realist-type of theory.

Cartesian Foundationalism

Descartes' Goal:


- 1. Find a set of beliefs/convictions that could be known for certain.
 - These will be the foundational beliefs.
- 2. Believe only foundational beliefs and beliefs supported by foundational beliefs.
- 3. A belief is "supported" by foundational beliefs iff it is logically entailed by them.
 - Logical entailment: If A entails B, then B is true anytime A is true.
 - Entailment is just logical validity:
 - An argument is valid iff the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion.
- So, truth is guaranteed in Cartesian foundationalism.

Descartes' "Commonsense Skepticism"

- I call the type of skepticism Descartes gives us arguments for "common sense global skepticism."
- What? Skepticism is crazy!
- Descartes leads us into skepticism incrementally.
- To anticipate:
 - He doesn't think that the senses are generally deceitful.
 - He doesn't think that life might be just a dream.
 - He doesn't think there's a real chance that all of our experience is produced by an evil demon/genius.
- What he thinks is that if you know that p , you are able to rule out situations in which p is false.
 - E.g., If I know that the bird at my feeder is a gold finch, then I'm able to rule out the possibilities that the bird is a robin or a canary.

Descartes' Motivation & Procedure

- “It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must once for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences.”
- The idea is to set aside all his beliefs and to produce a criterion to tell which beliefs he can fully count on—that is, an epistemic criterion that will guarantee truth.
- So, he will suspend judgment in whatever he can find even the slightest reason to doubt.
- In the end, he wants a belief system that consists of a foundation of beliefs he can know for certain and then he'll build on that foundation by making inferences on indubitable truths.



□ “Now for this object it is not necessary that I should show that all of these are false—I shall perhaps never arrive at this end. But inasmuch as reason already persuades me that I ought no less carefully to withhold my assent from matters which are not entirely certain and indubitable than from those which appear to me manifestly to be false, if I am able to find in each one some reason to doubt, this will suffice to justify my rejecting the whole.

□ “And for that end it will not be requisite that I should examine each in particular, which would be an endless undertaking; for owing to the fact that the destruction of the foundations of necessity brings with it the downfall of the rest of the edifice, I shall only in the first place attack those principles upon which all my former opinions rested.”

Assumptions and Principles

- The Knowledge Assumption:
 - if S knows that P, then S has no reason to doubt that P.
- Methodological Principles:
 - 1: Any belief for which there is some reason to doubt will be discarded.
 - 2: If certain basic presuppositions can be doubted, then there is reason to doubt all the beliefs that depend on those presuppositions.

The Deceiving Senses!

- “All that up to the present time I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses; but it is sometimes proved to me that these senses are deceptive, and it is wiser not to trust entirely to anything by which we have once been deceived.”
- If legit, this reason for doubt would undermine all of his empirical knowledge:
 - Time out for defining a posteriori v. a priori propositions and knowledge.

First Reason for Doubt: The Argument

- P1. The senses sometimes deceive.
- P2. I'm never able to tell if the senses are being deceptive.
- C1. So, every sensory experience I have possibly deceptive.
- P3. If every sensory experience is possibly deceptive, then I have a reason to doubt all my empirical beliefs.
- P4, If I have reason to doubt all my empirical beliefs, then none of them count as knowledge.
- C2. Therefore, none of my empirical beliefs count as knowledge.

Descartes' Reply to the Deceiving Senses Argument

- “But it may be that although the senses sometimes deceive us concerning things which are hardly perceptible, or very far away, there are yet many others to be met with as to which we cannot reasonably have any doubt, although we recognize them by their means. For example, there is the fact that I am here, seated by the fire, attired in a dressing gown, having this paper in my hands and other similar matters.”
- Reply to first doubt: the senses don't *generally* deceive us, but only when we perceive very small or very distant objects (or when the conditions of observation aren't very good).
- Effect of the Deceiving Senses Reason for Doubt: gives us reason to discard only a relatively small number of our beliefs (and these are beliefs we won't have taken for knowledge anyway).

Second Reason for Doubt: The Dream Argument

- “At the same time, I must remember that I am a man, and that consequently I am in the habit of sleeping, and in my dreams representing to myself the same things or sometimes even less probable things, than do those who are insane in their waking moments. How often has it happened to me that in the night I dreamt that I found myself in this particular place, that I was dressed and seated near the fire, whilst in reality I was lying undressed in bed...”

Second Reason for Doubt: The Dream Argument

- “At this moment it does indeed seem to me that it is with eyes awake that I am looking at this paper; that this head which I move is not asleep, that it is deliberately and of set purpose that I extend my hand and perceive it; what happens in sleep does not appear so clear nor so distinct as does all this. But in thinking over this I remind myself that on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions, and in dwelling carefully on this reflection I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep that I am lost in astonishment. And my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I now dream.”

Descartes' Second Reason for Doubt: The Dream Argument

- P1. There is no way to determine conclusively that I'm not dreaming.
- P2. If there is no way to determine conclusively that I'm not dreaming, then I might be dreaming anytime I have apparent sensory experience.
- P3. If I might be dreaming anytime I have apparent sensory experience, I have a reason to doubt all my empirical beliefs.
- C1. Therefore, I have a reason to doubt all my empirical beliefs.
- C2. Therefore, I don't have any empirical knowledge.

Stroud on the Dream Argument

- Barry Stroud interprets Descartes as claiming that the following is a necessary condition of knowing any empirical claim:
 - S has empirical knowledge that P at t only if S knows that S is not dreaming at t.
- Note that this is much stronger than this claim:
 - S has empirical knowledge that P at t only if S is not dreaming at t.
- The general idea: you know something only if you are in a position to rule out competing claims.

Descartes' Second Doubt Continued...

- The key point is this: there is no sure way to distinguish wakeful consciousness from sleep consciousness.
- If that's right, then you have a reason to doubt any belief that is grounded in sense experience (since any experience might be or have been a dream experience).
- This means that virtually *everything* we believe about the world external to our minds (i.e., the external world) does not count as knowledge.
- Important clarification: Descartes isn't saying that "everything is a dream."

Descartes' Second Doubt Continued...

- Even in the worse case scenario (suppose you are always dreaming), we still have some knowledge:
- “That is possibly why our reasoning is not unjust when we conclude from this that Physics, Astronomy, Medicine and all other sciences which have as their end the consideration of composite things, are very dubious and uncertain; but that Arithmetic, Geometry and other sciences of that kind which only treat of things that are very simple and very general, without taking great trouble to ascertain whether they are actually existent or not, contain some measure of certainty and an element of the indubitable. For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three together always form five, and the square can never have more than four sides, and it does not seem possible that truths so clear and apparent can be suspected of any falsity [or uncertainty].”
- The effect of the Dream Argument: we have no empirical knowledge, but we still have knowledge of basic truths of mathematics and logic, simple definitional truths, and our current conscious states of mind.

Descartes' Third Reason to Doubt: The Evil Demon Argument

□ “Nevertheless I have long had fixed in my mind the belief that an all-powerful God existed by whom I have been created such as I am. But how do I know that He has not brought it to pass that there is no earth, no heaven, no extended body, no magnitude, no place, and that nevertheless [I possess the perceptions of all these things and that] they seem to me to exist just exactly as I now see them? And, besides, as I sometimes imagine that others deceive themselves in the things which they think they know best, how do I know that I am not deceived every time that I add two and three, or count the sides of a square, or judge of things yet simpler, if anything simpler can be imagined? But possibly God has not desired that I should be thus deceived, for He is said to be supremely good. If, however, it is contrary to His goodness to have made me such that I constantly deceive myself, it would also appear to be contrary to His goodness to permit me to be sometimes deceived, and nevertheless I cannot doubt that He does permit this.”

Descartes' Third Reason Continued...

□ “I shall then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity; I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things...”

The Evil Genius Argument

P1. There is no way to determine conclusively that I'm not being deceived by an evil genius.

P2. If there is no way to determine conclusively that I'm not deceived by an EG, then I might now be deceived by an EG.

P3. If I might now be deceived by an EG, then I have reason to doubt both my a posteriori (empirical) beliefs and my a priori beliefs.


C1. Therefore, I have reason to doubt both my a posteriori beliefs and my a priori beliefs.

C2. Therefore, I don't have any a priori or a posteriori knowledge.

Descartes' Third Reason Continued...

- Matrix and “Brain in a Vat” examples.
- Key point:
 - Descartes isn't saying you should think that there's a demon deceiving you or even that there is any serious likelihood of it.
 - The key point is that *you can't rule it out* and if you can't rule it out then you can't be absolutely sure there isn't one and that gives you a reason for doubting pretty much everything.
- Now the issue is: given the possibility of the demon, is there *anything* that survives this doubt?

Descartes Hits Rock Bottom!



□ “I suppose, then, that all the things that I see are false; I persuade myself that nothing has ever existed of all that my fallacious memory represents to me. I consider that I possess no senses; I imagine that body, figure, extension, movement and place are but the fictions of my mind. What, then, can be esteemed as true? Perhaps nothing at all, unless that there is nothing in the world that is certain.”

“I think, therefore I am”

- Here's the main passage where Descartes finally hits upon something he thinks is certain:
- “But I have already denied that I had senses and body. Yet I hesitate, for what follows from that? Am I so dependent on body and senses that I cannot exist without these? But I was persuaded that there was nothing in all the world, that there was no heaven, no earth, that there were no minds, nor any bodies: was I not then likewise persuaded that I did not exist? Not at all; of a surety I myself did exist since I persuaded myself of something [or merely because I thought of something]. But there is some deceiver or other, very powerful and very cunning, whoever employs his ingenuity in deceiving me. Then without doubt I exist also if he deceives me, and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I think that I am something. So that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it.”

“I think, therefore I am” Continued...

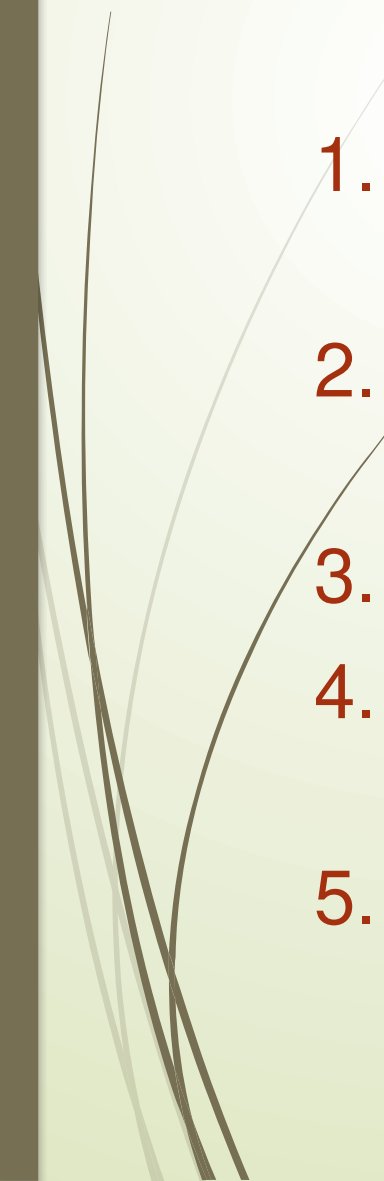
- The idea, again, is to find beliefs that he simply can't be wrong about.
- Because he can't (yet) rule out an evil demon (or evil genius), he believes he has a reason to doubt not only all his beliefs about the external world but also all his fundamental beliefs of math, logic, and definition.
- But even in the worst-case scenario, he thinks, there is something he knows. Even if he assumes there really is a demon who is deceiving him about all this stuff, the scenario still entails that he exists. He must exist in order to be deceived.
- The argument:
 - P1. I think
 - C. Therefore, I am.
- Descartes' point is that this is a valid argument (if the premise is true the conclusion must be true) and you can know indubitably that the premise is true and that the argument is valid.

Descartes is a Thinking Thing

- “What of thinking? I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often? Just when I think; for it might possibly be the case if I ceased entirely to think, that I should likewise cease altogether to exist. I do not now admit anything which is not necessarily true: to speak accurately I am not more than a thing which thinks, that is to say a mind or a soul, or an understanding, or a reason, which are terms whose significance was formerly unknown to me. I am, however, a real thing and really exist; but what thing? I have answered: a thing which thinks.”



What Descartes Thinks He Knows at the end of Meditation II

1. He has no knowledge of the external world.
 2. He has no knowledge of the basic truths of math, logic, and definition.
 3. He knows that he exists.
 4. He knows that what is essential to him is thinking.
 5. He knows the current conscious contents of his mind.
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Knowledge v. Justified Belief Skepticism

- ▢ Descartes is concerned with skepticism regarding knowledge, not skepticism regarding justified belief.
- ▢ Descartes' reasoning can be extended to justified belief, however.
 - ▢ Contrast Real World and SciFi Hypotheses:
 - ▢ Your experience in both cases is exactly the same.
 - ▢ The evidence you have comes from your experience.
 - ▢ The evidence that you are in the Real World = the evidence that you are in the SciFi World.
 - ▢ If your evidence is neutral, then you aren't justified in thinking that you are in the Real World as opposed to the SciFi World.
 - ▢ So, you should suspend judgment.

Two Objections

1. Could there be thought without a thinker? All he really can't doubt is that "there is thought."
2. He begs the question. Recall the "Cogito, Ergo Sum":
 - P1. I think.
 - C. Therefore, I am.

Descartes thinks he knows the conclusion because he can see that it is a valid inference from the premise.

But he's already argued that the evil genius could deceive him about the fundamental truths of logic. So he has no basis for accepting the inference of 2 from 1.

How Descartes Proceeds

- Having taken himself to have an indubitable foundation of knowledge, Descartes then tries to build from the foundation.
- He reasons that if he can show there is no evil genius, then he'll have no significant reason for doubt.
- He reasons that if he can prove that God exists and is no deceiver, then we can know that there is no evil genius since God would let us be so totally deceived.
- So he offers two proofs for God's existence (each of which he thinks works) and so concludes that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true.
- Of course, the problem that we found for the *Cogito* infects the rest of his project too.