

## 1 Skepticism

Montaigne excerpt from *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (p.7):

“The sects that oppose man’s knowledge do so chiefly through the uncertainty and weakness of our senses: for, since our knowledge comes to us through and by means of them, if they fail in the report they give us, if they corrupt and alter what they bring us from outside, if the light that flows into the soul is obscured in its passage, we have nothing else to hold on to.”

Descartes’ skeptical aims: Provide foundations using only pure reason to establish with certainty the existence of God, the nature of the soul, what truth and error consist in, etc.

- This is sometimes called **methodological skepticism**.
- From the Letter of Dedication (p.36): “... I know that there are many irreligious people who refuse to believe that God exists and that the human mind is distinct from the body – for no other reason than their claim that up until now no one has been able to demonstrate these two things. By no means am I in agreement with these people; on the contrary, I believe that nearly all the arguments which have been brought to bear on these questions by great men have the force of a demonstration, when they are adequately understood, and I am convinced that hardly any arguments can be given that have not already been discovered by others. Nevertheless, I judge that there is no greater task to perform in philosophy than assiduously seek out, once and for all, the best of all these arguments and to lay them out so precisely and plainly that henceforth all will take them to be true demonstrations.”

## 2 Brains in Vats

The BIV scenario: Imagine that our experiences proceed only *as if* the world really were as it appears...

Challenge: How do we know that we are not BIVs?

The problem: BIV scenarios undermine our purported knowledge

- Knowledge requires true belief (and more).
- If it’s not true that there’s a blackboard behind me, then I can’t know that there’s a blackboard behind me.

## 3 *Meditations* I and II

Meditation I: Starts by noticing that many things he once thought true he now denies; decides to find out once and for all what he can know for certain

“The senses have deceived us” argument:

1. Many of our beliefs are justified by the evidence provided by our senses.
2. The senses have sometimes deceived us in the past.
3. So no belief justified by evidence of the senses is certain.

The dream argument:

1. Many of our beliefs are justified by the evidence provided by our senses.

2. The senses, even the clearest ones, have sometimes deceived us in dreams.
3. So no belief justified by evidence of the senses is certain.

The Evil Demon argument?

Meditation II: Descartes' aims are to (1) find something about which he can be certain, (2) turn the reader's attention away from the senses.

The "cogito":

- "And let him [the Evil Demon] 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." (p.43)
- This proposition is absolutely beyond doubt: "I am, I exist."
- In fact, we can extend the domain of certainty to all contents of consciousness.
  - For example, if I think "Paris is in France," I might be utterly mistaken. But as the thought runs through my mind, I can be certain that I am thinking it
  - If I perceive a room full of students, it may all be an illusion. But I can be certain that there are images that appear to be students in my visual consciousness
- Two meanings of 'perceive'
  - The *veridical* sense: If someone perceives an aardvark, in this sense, there must be actually an aardvark there.
  - The *phenomenological* sense: If someone perceives an aardvark, in this sense, there must be an aardvark-like percept in her visual consciousness, but there may or may not be a real aardvark there (or anywhere).

The wax:

- Remove everything that can change about the wax; what remains is that it's extended, flexible, and mutable.
- These qualities are not known through the imagination, but through the intellect alone.

Hobbes, "Third set of objections," *Against Meditation II* (p.76):

"I am a thing that thinks"; quite true. For from the fact that I think or have a phantasm, whether I am asleep or awake, it can be inferred that I am thinking, for "I think" means the same thing as "I am thinking." From the fact that I am thinking it follows that I am, since that which thinks is not nothing. But when he appends "that is, a mind, or soul or understanding, or reason," a doubt arises. For it does not seem a valid argument to say, "I am thinking; therefore I am a thought" or "I am understanding; therefore I am an understanding." For in the same way I could just as well say, "I am walking; therefore I am an act of walking." Thus M. Descartes equates the thing that understands with an act of understanding, which is an act of the thing that understands. Or he at least is equating a thing that understands with the faculty of understanding, which is a power of a thing that understands. Nevertheless, all philosophers draw a distinction between a subject and its faculties and acts, that is, between a subject and its properties and essences; for a being itself is one thing and its essence is another. Therefore, it is possible for a thing that thinks to be the subject in which the mind, reason, or understanding inhere, and therefore this subject may be something corporeal. The opposite is assumed and not proved. Nevertheless, this inference is the basis for the conclusion that M. Descartes seems to want to establish."