

DESCARTES'S MEDITATIONS

Ted Sider
Intro Philosophy

Next topic: *epistemology* (theory of knowledge)

1. Foundations and the method of doubt

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last...

But to accomplish this, it will not be necessary for me to show that all my opinions are false, which is something I could perhaps never manage... it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. (Descartes, p. 242)

Basic belief: a belief that is not supported by any other beliefs

Foundationalism In a good belief system, every belief is either basic or else supported by basic beliefs

The method of doubt: go through all your beliefs, and throw away all those that can be doubted. The remaining beliefs are certain; they are the basic beliefs that support all others

2. Doubting sensory beliefs

Sensory beliefs (beliefs about the external world based on sensory perception) can be doubted:

- Illusions
- The dream argument

How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events—that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!... As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. (Descartes, p. 243)

3. Doubting a priori beliefs

For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides. (Descartes, p. 243)

a posteriori: beliefs justified by sensory experience

a priori: beliefs justified by pure reason, not by sensory experience

Even a priori beliefs can be doubted (the evil demon).

4. The cogito

What remains after we apply the method of doubt?

So serious are the doubts into which I have been thrown as a result of yesterday's meditation that I can neither put them out of my mind nor see any way of resolving them. It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top. Nevertheless I will make an effort and once more attempt the same path which I started on yesterday. Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least recognize for certain that there is not certainty. Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth, so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable.

I will suppose then, that everything I see is spurious. I will believe that my memory tells me lies, and that none of the things that it reports ever happened. I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, movement and place are chimeras. So what remains true?...

...I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case too I undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something.

So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (Descartes, pp. 244–5)

5. But what is this ‘I’?

6. Mental contents are basic

What else is certain? The contents of my mind, including what I’m doubting, thinking, imagining, and also my sensory perceptions:

...I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called “having a sensory perception” is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking. (Descartes, p. 247)

7. Building from the foundations

Later in the *Meditations* Descartes tries to build up the rest of our beliefs from these foundations. First, he argues that God exists; second, he argues that since God is good, he wouldn’t deceive us; and third, he concludes that we can trust the contents of our minds.