

Meditation 1 Notes for Philosophy 1**Spring, 2007**

From the Discourse on Method, we have identified Descartes's goals as

1. attaining certain knowledge, thus defeating skepticism,
2. establishing "something firm and lasting in the sciences." The idea is to secure a foundation for science on the model of mathematics,
3. challenging and replacing the Aristotelian-Scholastic philosophy that is dominant in the schools,
4. showing that reason, the natural light, as opposed to the evidence of the senses, is the proper route to knowledge.

Why certainty? Why is the goal of the knowledge enterprise certain knowledge, rather than plain knowledge? If I have strong evidence for a belief, but not conclusive evidence, and the belief is correct, maybe if the evidence is good enough, I should be credited with knowledge. What does certainty add? Descartes could say that whenever my reasons for believing are not conclusive, for all I know, my belief could be false. In contrast, according to Descartes, the knowledge I gain in mathematics is secure. Taking the knowledge achieved in subjects such as geometry as the model, Descartes hopes to construct a philosophy that is an absolutely secure foundation for knowledge. He is inspired in part by recent (17th century) scientific advances that suggest the possibility of a mathematical physics. Although Descartes does not quantify probability, suppose the evidence I have for some belief renders it .8 probable that the belief is true. This means that there is a .2 probability the belief is untrue, so any further knowledge claims I arrive at on the basis of this first claim might all be false. If instead one starts with beliefs that are self-evidently true or certainly true, and extends these beliefs via rules of inference that are truth-preserving, one ends up with a structure of knowledge that is as rock-solid as the system of Euclidean geometry. As Descartes had said in the *Discourse*, Part 2: "These long chains composed of very simple and easy reasoning, which geometers customarily use to arrive at their most difficult demonstrations, had given me occasion to suppose that all the things which can fall under human knowledge are interconnected in the same way."

Indubitability can be a psychological state, the state in which I cannot doubt. Being in this psychological state might be consistent with there being good reasons to doubt. Maybe I have taken a pill that blocks me from doubting anything, so whatever thought comes into my mind, that thought will be indubitable. Or maybe I have a mind-set such that I am absolutely incapable of doubting the virtue of my father and mother, but there might be good reasons to doubt their virtue just the same. Indubitability might also be thought of as a normative state: the state in which there are no good reasons whatsoever to doubt. A proposition I am inclined to believe might be normatively indubitable (there are no good reasons at all to doubt it) but psychologically dubitable (I neurotically and for no good reason obsessively keep doubting it). Most commentators hold that Descartes wants to arrive at a state that combines psychological and normative indubitability, with respect to the propositions that he will count as certain knowledge. Some commentators worry that Descartes himself does not keep track in the course of his arguments what notion of indubitability is at stake and what exactly his arguments regarding indubitability are supposed to establish.

I mention that in at least one passage in his writings Descartes suggests that what he is after is certainty, including normative indubitability, rather than truth. Of the absolute certainty he seeks, Descartes in the “Objections and Replies” published with the *Meditations* says it provides “everything that we could reasonably want.” He continues, “What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or to 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” (Second Objections reply). Here Descartes seems to envisage that the very best state of certainty and justified epistemic confidence we or any other human could ever attain with respect to some proposition might not guarantee its “absolute truth.” From a God’s-eye point of view, which we can never attain, the proposition might reveal some defect. That possibility or alleged possibility should not faze us. Our problem is to attain the very best position from which a being like us could ever judge the truth or falsity of some claim. What things appear to us from that ideal state to be is truth or as good as truth. Other passages in the *Meditations* do not seem to allow this gap between what seems true from the ideal human position for assessing truth claims and what is absolutely true.

Descartes dedicates his *Meditations* to the dean and doctors of the faculty of sacred theology of Paris. The aim is to convert them to his way of thinking. He is serious in believing his arguments support religious orthodoxy, and he further holds that his work reconciles religion and the new doctrines of so-called “mechanical philosophy,” which might be thought subversive of religion. In a letter to Mersenne, Descartes writes that “I may tell you, between ourselves, that these six *Meditations* contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth.” So he thinks there is as it were a stealth bomber quality to his writing. The reader, if an adherent of the old Aristotelian beliefs, will read Descartes without realizing his beliefs are under attack, and then find himself agreeing with Descartes’s arguments and replacing his worldview with Descartes’s conclusions.

The mechanical philosophy is corpuscularianism—the doctrine that nature consists of little particles, whose movements are governed by simple laws of mechanics. These dynamics are at work everywhere in nature. The movements of middle-sized and large objects are to be explained by showing that the movements of little particles aggregate to produce the phenomena we observe. Seemingly disparate phenomena are to be incorporated in a unified science. Descartes envisages the laws of mechanics as mathematical axioms, certified as true by the intuition of pure reason. These laws of mechanics yield a mathematical physics, on all fours with geometry and algebra. We shall arrive at this system of natural philosophy by strict reliance on reason and by eschewing any reliance on the evidence of our senses, which is held to be unreliable.

The *Meditations* is written in the first-person singular. Who is speaking? The *Discourse on Method* is an intellectual autobiography. Descartes purports to be telling us how he arrived at his present opinions. In The *Meditations*, the situation is less clear. The

narrator, who embarks on the meditations, seems to be a generic person of common sense, not a unique personality. On the other hand, the first sentence of Meditation 1 announces that several years have passed since “I first realized how numerous were the false opinions that in my youth I had taken to be true.” This is Descartes speaking, not a generic everyman. However, the train of thought that the narrator introduces to the reader is one the reader is encouraged to follow for herself, and the voice of the narrator is kept bland and free of personal idiosyncrasy to facilitate the reader’s identification of her own point of view with the viewpoint of the narrator.

The “Preface to the Reader” tells us that the *Discourse on Method* has evoked objections, which the *Meditations* are to resolve. Part 4 of the *Discourse* presents a sketchy short summary of arguments, which are amplified and developed in the *Meditations*.

In Meditation 1 the narrator resolves to start his quest for knowledge afresh and withhold assent from all beliefs except those that are “completely certain and indubitable.” We are to follow the method of pressing skeptical doubt to its limits. The aim is to discover an absolutely secure foundation for subsequent knowledge claims.

At the very start of the inquiry, someone might raise an objection to the procedure. The objection is that I can only have good reason to give up one of my beliefs on the basis of other beliefs. The idea of giving up all my beliefs at once does not make sense. So goes the objection. For example, I now believe my car is in good working order and will start when I crank the motor by turning the ignition switch. I could be induced to give up this belief if I get evidence against it. If I see that my gas tank is empty, I will no longer believe my car will start normally. But this procedure always involves relying on some beliefs to dislodge others. In this way I am never going to give up all of my beliefs; this would never be reasonable. So what is Descartes doing?

Descartes is clearly relying on background beliefs about how beliefs should be formed. This may not be a problem for his inquiry. The skeptical arguments in Meditation 1 take the form of providing an alternate explanation of how I might have formed a particular belief (or class of beliefs) other than the explanation that (for example) perceiving that there is a cat on the floor in the room I am occupying caused me to form the belief that there is a cat on the floor. The skeptical argument provides an explanation of how I could have formed this belief even though what I believe is false. An alternate causal account is offered, which I cannot rule out. Consider the lunacy argument. A possible explanation of how I came to believe the cat is on the floor is that I am a lunatic given to hallucinations, and I am hallucinating a cat on the floor when none is there. For all I know, my belief might have been caused in either of two ways—1, normal perception or 2, lunatic hallucination. I cannot decide in favor of 1 against 2 on the ground that I know I am normal and not a lunatic. For if I were a lunatic, I could well have the belief that I am perfectly normal. In fact I have seen lunatics with just this belief structure.

Another objection: Descartes claims to be following common sense, but actually he is injecting at the start controversial Cartesian metaphysical assumptions, and only in this way does he get to his wide skeptical conclusions, which are counter to common sense.

At the start Descartes supposes that in sense experience, what we are directly aware of is just our own thoughts. To get from sense experience to knowledge of things external to the mind, we must draw inferences from the nature of our thoughts to the nature of things around us. The present objection holds that this is not part of common sense, which assumes that we have direct awareness of things external to our minds. Descartes does not then start with uncontroversial premises of common sense and then argue inexorably for skepticism and then later inexorably for a certain foundation for knowledge. Rather Descartes appeals to uncontroversial assumptions of common sense plus highly controversial theoretical assumptions about knowledge that he tacitly introduces and on that basis his argument proceeds. We can then resist his argument by rejecting the controversial theoretical assumptions. So goes the objection.

Reply to objection: It is not clear that Descartes has to argue in the way just described. In the lunacy argument, rehearsed above, Descartes assumes we come to know about many things by observing and touching and smelling them. I learn the whereabouts of my cat by observing it. This is not a heavily theoretical assumption that common sense is free to reject. The lunacy argument then proceeds from there, noting that for all I know, I am in a lunatic state and am not really observing any cat even though it seems to me as though I am having this experience.

In Meditation 1 Descartes gives four arguments that drive to radical skeptical conclusions. One is the lunacy argument, described above. Another is the dreaming argument. These arguments are supposed to yield reasons to withhold assent from any empirical claims—claims about the world that rely on the evidence of the senses. So far, this leaves immune from doubt some propositions. Descartes notes that “arithmetic, geometry, and other subjects of this kind, which deal only with the simplest and most general things, regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not, contain something certain and indubitable.” These are supposed to be untouched by the dreaming and lunacy arguments. [Question: is it so that the dreaming and lunacy arguments do not cast doubt on these beliefs along with the simplest and most general things?] Two further arguments cast the net even wider. One argument, for those who antecedently believe in God, involves the hypothesis that God might be a deceiver, or an evil demon that systematically deceives us even about supposed truths known independently of experience on the basis of pure reason, self-evident intuitions. An alternate argument for atheists and agnostics appeals to fate or chance or whatever natural process one thinks has brought about one’s present state. Why couldn’t this process have made one defective as a knower, so that one could be in error, for all one knows, even about the simplest and apparently most certain truths such as that $2 + 3 = 5$.

Question: Why do we need the fancy rigmarole of argument? Why not just have the narrator doubt and suspend assent to all of his beliefs? Answer: Descartes does not suppose one can just believe or disbelieve whatever one likes by an act of will. (After all, indubitable beliefs are beliefs that cannot be doubted. One cannot will oneself to withhold assent from such a belief.) One needs grounds for doubt, which the four arguments of Meditation 1 supply.

The dreaming argument. Descartes proposes a wholesale reason to doubt even the most firm and seemingly incontrovertible beliefs that come to us through the evidence of the senses. Sometimes perception may leave us in doubt, as when we try to make out whether a distant figure is a person, an animal, a cloud of dust, whatever. But closer inspection settles these doubts. But take the most unproblematic beliefs based on the evidence of the senses, such as that I have two hands [said when I am holding my hands in front of my face with my eyes wide open in clear light]. Descartes says, this very belief might be produced in an abnormal way, by a dream. When dreaming, it can seem to me that I am sitting awake holding my hands in front of my face, but really I am asleep in bed. Any belief I form on the evidence of my senses might be produced in a dream state, so any belief I form in this way might for all I know be false. Even if I have a strong inclination to keep believing what the direct evidence of observation suggests, I should grant that no such belief is entirely certain and indubitable. So, I should withhold assent. Moreover, for all I know, I might be dreaming or in some similar state that distorts the process of belief formation, so that none of my beliefs based on the evidence of my senses is certain, and all should be set aside. Following the method of doubt, I should withhold assent from all observational beliefs.

Objection: Descartes perhaps has some very vivid dreams, which resemble waking states closely. For most of us, maybe for everybody, dream states are distinguishable from waking states. Dream experience is sketchy and blurry, waking experience is different in feel.

Reply: Descartes need not deny perceptible differences between waking and dreaming states. Nor does he need to rely on the reader having very vivid dreams. Even if my dreams are not vivid, I have to acknowledge that for all I know, a dream I have might be such that while dreaming I suppose I am awake, and am mistaken in supposing so. And if this can happen once, it is possible it happens all the time. If I seem to experience myself waking from a dream, maybe I am not actually becoming awake, but dreaming a dream within a dream, and emerging from the dream-within-a-dream into straight dream.

The superdoubt raised in Meditation 1 extends to a class of propositions, the propositions that are known independently of the evidence of the senses by the judgment of reason (such as mathematical judgments), that the dreaming and lunacy arguments are not claimed by Descartes to reach. The superdoubt arises from noting that I might have been created by an evil genius or demon, a God who is all-powerful and wills to deceive me, so that he throws dust in my eyes and leads me into error even when I am forming simple self-evident beliefs such as the belief that $2 + 2 = 4$. There is a version of this superdoubt that applies to atheists, for they must allow that some natural process brought about the state of affairs in which I now entertain various beliefs and claim some to be certainly true. The natural process, whatever its character, might have left me damaged in my belief forming capacity, so that I go astray and form false beliefs even with respect to simple matters where I rely only on the evidence of reason not the evidence of my senses. I don't have any strong inclination to believe this is so, but that is not the question. (And anyway an atheist should not be dogmatic, and should allow she has no conclusive reason to reject the evil demon hypothesis.) If I have some reason to doubt

that any one of my beliefs is justified, I should withhold assent from all of them. At the end of Meditation 1, Descartes notes that when the meditation process is suspended, the narrator tends to fall back into his customary belief states, and dreads facing “the inextricable shadows of the difficulties now brought forward.” Or as the beginning of Meditation 2 puts it, rehearsing the result of the argument in Meditation 1, it is as though one has fallen into a deep whirlpool and can neither touch bottom with one’s feet nor swim to the surface. One thrashes in the deep.

One might well wonder if the method of doubt followed in Meditation 1 is going to be a tidal wave sweeping away all belief without possibility of regaining any. It will turn out that Descartes thinks the method of doubt does not merely destroy what had been thought to be knowledge, but also rebuilds on a certain foundation. Belief that cannot be shaken by the strongest doubt becomes certain belief, the foundation of knowledge. Descartes will argue that in certain cases, doubting a proposition implies that another proposition is true, and the second proposition implies that what is doubted is certainly true. Schematically put: If I doubt that A, then B, and if B, then A. (The cogito argument will have this form: If I doubt that I exist, then I am thinking, and if I am thinking, I exist.)