

Descartes, Meditation One (1641)

1. The Method of Doubt: Descartes is on a quest to find Truth. How do we do that?

Imagine that your closet is a mess, badly in need of some Spring cleaning. Sometimes the best thing to do is just remove EVERYTHING from the closet, and organize it from scratch. ...That's what Descartes is going to do with his mind.

Descartes realizes that there are probably lots of false beliefs rattling around in his mind, infecting his body of knowledge. He wants to eliminate them. He figures the best way to do this is to start over, from scratch, clearing away ALL of his previously held beliefs, and build from the ground up, accepting at first ONLY those beliefs that his is absolutely certain about. He writes,

"I realized that it was necessary ... 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."

The hope is that, once he identifies those of his beliefs that are CERTAIN, from there, he'll be able to build up the rest of his knowledge on this firmest possible foundation. So, to begin, he decides that, if a belief is subject to ANY doubt whatsoever, he's going to set it aside for now. This is known as '**The Method of Doubt**'.

"Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false."

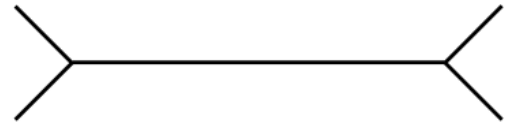
2. Can I Trust My Senses? Most of our beliefs are formed based on what we perceive with our senses. Can these be trusted? Surely not all of the time!

Have you ever seen a mirage?
In the left photo, it looks as if there is water on the ground in the distance, when there is not.

Or consider that, when you immerse a pencil or a stick in water (right), it looks bent or disconnected, even though it is perfectly straight.

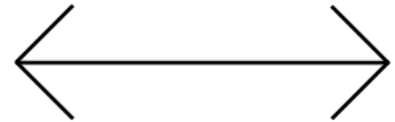


Or consider the two lines to the right. The top line appears to be longer, but they are both the same length. Don't believe me? Go get a ruler!

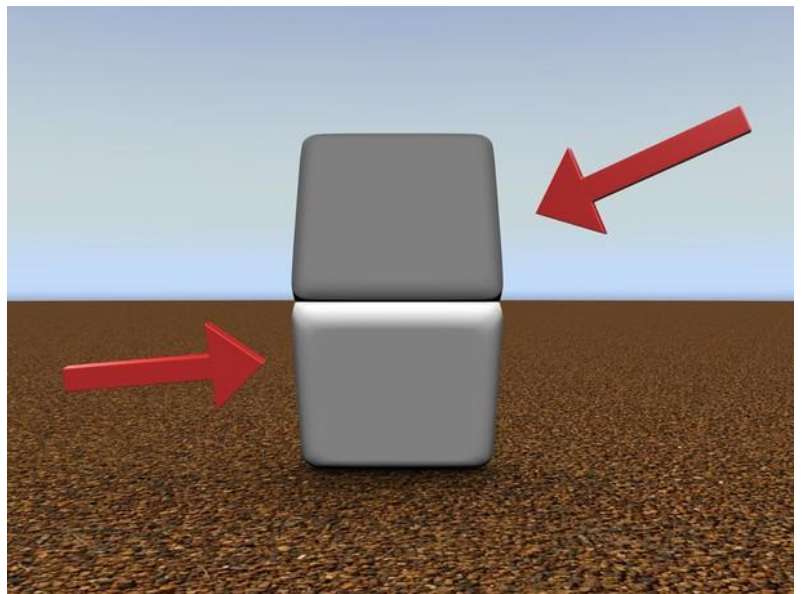


Now check out the album cover, and 2 gray squares (below).

Does the pattern on the left appear to be breathing? It isn't. It's perfectly motionless.



Do the two squares appear to be different colors? They're not. They're the same.



In short, as Descartes notes,

"from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once."

Keep in mind that Descartes plans to withhold assent from any belief that is "not completely certain and indubitable". This means that "anything which admits of the **slightest** doubt" will not be trusted (for now). By admitting that the senses **SOMETIMES** deceive us, we are admitting that they at the very least admit of the "slightest doubt". Therefore, for the sake of this exercise, the senses in general cannot be trusted.

3. I Could Be Dreaming: But, Descartes gives us even more reason to doubt the senses. Consider: In the past, I have dreamt that I am sitting, typing up notes, with a body, and hands, etc. There is no way to be certain that you are not dreaming NOW. Therefore, NOTHING that our senses tell us is certain. For all I know, I am NOT surrounded by desks and students—I might just be dreaming... So, ALL of my senses are ALWAYS doubtable! For all I know, I don't even have hands! (I might be a dreaming tentacle monster!) At least, I cannot rule out this possibility. Descartes writes,

"Suppose then that I am dreaming ... Perhaps indeed, I do not even have such hands or such a body at all."

Or, alternatively, it is possible that an evil demon is deceiving me. Such an evil genius could deceive me into believing that I am living a real life, and that I am a teacher who studies philosophy—but in reality my life is nothing like that at all, such that ALL that I presently believe to be true is actually false.

[The Problem of Other Minds: There is another problem in this vicinity. Consider different pictures of the same thing taken with different cameras. Often, there are slight variations of color, shadow, resolution, etc. between the pictures. Odds are, there is enough variation between your eyes and my eyes, that things look at least a LITTLE different to me than they do to you. But, consider: When we both look at a ripe tomato, do we even have a SIMILAR experience of color? How can you be sure that, when I look at a ripe tomato, its color doesn't look to me the way a ripe banana looks to you? (Is my red the same as your red? Watch [this video](#) from start to 2:15) Is there any way to know with certainty? For that matter, how can you even know for sure that I am CONSCIOUS? Sure, I ACT as if I am conscious. I talk and walk, and say "ouch" when you pinch me, and so on. But, that's just BEHAVIOR. You can never truly get inside of my mind to know for sure what my inner mental life is like—or indeed, whether there is any mental life at all!]

4. Conclusion: Skepticism?: Meditation One ends on a bleak note. We took everything out of our closet to do some Spring cleaning – and what have we put back in so far? Answer: Nothing at all. For, so far it seems that NOTHING is certain!

"I ... am finally compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised."

Our project of building our system of knowledge upon a foundation of certainty is not off to a very good start! Later, we'll see that **skeptics** conclude that we should respond to what we've said so far by believing nothing at all! Rather, we should *suspend judgement*, forming no beliefs about the world, whatsoever. Descartes is NOT a skeptic, however. Let's see why.

Descartes, Meditation Two (1641)

Recap: The project: Descartes begins anew, reiterating his method of doubt. He states,

"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 no certainty."

1. That 'One Certain Thing': Why is Descartes so obsessed with finding something certain? An analogy might help: Imagine that you are sitting on one side of a teeter-totter, and the biggest kid on the playground sits down on the other side. You are immediately shot up into the air with no way to get back down. How do you lift the biggest kid in school? Well, Archimedes, the ancient Greek philosopher who studied the power of levers and fulcrums noticed that, so long as the fulcrum (the middle of the teeter-totter that rests on the ground) is firmly fixed, all we would need to do is make your side of the teeter-totter LONGER. And this is true, no matter how heavy the object on the other side is. He then claimed that, if he could just find one single immovable point to serve as a fulcrum, he could place a lever upon it and move the entire Earth.

Descartes says that he is metaphorically looking for something similarly fixed. If he could just find that one certain thing, he says, he could hoist ALL of our knowledge upon it.

"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."

But, the outlook so far is pretty bleak, and we find Descartes concluding:

"So what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that **nothing is certain.**"

2. 'I Exist': We aren't certain about ANYTHING!? I can't be certain that sizes or shapes exist, or if numbers exist, or if my hands exist. For all I know, maybe *I* don't even exist!?

...Wait. Is even MY OWN existence doubtable? (*Think about that for a moment*)

A-ha! As soon as he doubts his own existence, Descartes realizes something: If his own existence is doubted, then SOMETHING must be doing the doubting. Thus, doubting one's own existence inadvertently PROVES one's own existence!

Puzzled? Consider it this way:

Question: Is it doubtable that I exist? (a yes or no question)

No: Then I DO exist.

Yes: Then DOUBT OCCURS, and we'll call the thing that is doubting ME.

Either way, "I exist" must be true.

[A historical note: Descartes actually stole this idea from 5th century philosopher and theologian, Augustine of Hippo, who put it this way:

Question: Am I mistaken about my belief in my own existence?

No: Then I DO exist, since I am not mistaken.

Yes: Impossible, since I would have to exist in order to be mistaken!]

In Sum: If I try to doubt my existence, the very act of doubting affirms that something exists; namely, ME, the thing that doubts. To deny my own existence is self-defeating. For SOMETHING must exist in order to do the denying. Therefore, I know for certain that 'I exist' or 'I AM' is true.

"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."

This is famously summed up in his other writings as follows: "**I think, therefore I am.**"

3. All Thinking Is Certain: But, it is not just the existence of his SELF that is certain. It turns out that his entire inner, mental world is certain. Consider: Could I be deceived into thinking that I am having thoughts, when in fact I am not having thoughts at all? Answer: No! That is impossible. Consider:

Take **pain** for instance. Imagine you are in a hospital bed, suffering excruciating pain:

"I am in pain," you say to the doctor.

"No you're not," she says. "You're deceived about that. You're not really in pain at all!"

Does that make ANY sense? NO! There is NO WAY that you can be mistaken about this. If you FEEL that you are in pain, then you ARE in pain—and no one can take this fact away from you. But, now imagine that the conversation continues as follows:

"No. I am in pain. My leg is killing me!"

<Doctor pulls back cover to reveal a bandaged stump.>

"But, that's impossible!" she says. "I amputated your leg an hour ago."

All that has happened here is that you were mistaken about the SOURCE of your pain. You thought it was being caused by your leg. You were mistaken about this. But, you were NOT mistaken about the SENSATION of pain. If you are having an experience of pain, then you are having an experience of pain. This is certain. End of story.

A similar story can be told about ALL of your inner, mental life, including doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, unwilling, imagining, and **sensing**. Perhaps you are not absolutely certain that you have hands, but you CAN be certain that you SEEM to have hands—i.e., regardless of whether you ACTUALLY have hands, **you're certainly having a SENSATION of hands**.

"I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But [suppose] 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 am I? We have established that THINKING is undoubtable. Well, 'I' am just the thinking thing (whatever it is that's doing the thinking, and having the sensations). Furthermore, each and every one of my thoughts affirms MY existence. Every time thought occurs, I am certain that **thinking is**, and therefore **I AM**.

4. Re-Building All Knowledge Upon This Foundation: So, Descartes has found his "one certain thing"—his Archimedean point—upon which he will hoist all knowledge. In fact, he's found quite a LOT that is certain. Namely, his entire inner, mental world.

Historical note: Descartes goes on from here to find reason to trust his senses, and restore his belief in the things in the external world outside of his head. The short version is that he goes on to prove the existence of God. And, from there it follows that we CAN trust our senses for the most part, since a good God would not allow us to be constantly deceived. Voila! Most philosophers (even theists) reject Descartes' proof for the existence of God, however. So, we're left to finish the task of re-instating our beliefs about the external world in some other way. That will be the project of our next lecture.

Begin by asking yourself: Can you still **know** that there are things like tables, and trees, and hands, and other people, even if you are not **certain** of their existence? If so, how? (Also check out some fun videos on this topic [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#).)