

Descartes

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Introduction to Descartes

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Reading Questions

1. Was Descartes a foundationalist?
2. If Descartes was a foundationalist, what was his epistemological objective? Why did he take that epistemological objective?
3. If Descartes was a foundationalist, what was his test for fundamentality? Explain why this test makes sense, given Descartes' epistemological objective.
4. What is rationalism? Was Descartes a rationalist?
5. According to Descartes, which of the following beliefs are *foundationally justified* for you? (There may be more than one.)
 - Your belief that the objects that you see around you exist.
 - Your belief that other people exist.
 - Your belief that you have a body.
 - Your belief that you have a mind.
 - Your belief (if you have it) that God exists.
6. What does "Cogito ergo sum" mean?
7. What is solipsism? Was Descartes a solipsist?
8. Did Descartes think that belief in God is justified? Why or why not?
9. According to Descartes, which of the following beliefs are *inferentially justified* for you? (There may be more than one.)
 - Your belief that the objects that you see around you exist.
 - Your belief that other people exist.
 - Your belief that you have a body.
 - Your belief that you have a mind.
 - Your belief (if you have it) that God exists.
10. Is Descartes' epistemology ultimately successful? Why or why not?

Introduction to Descartes



Rene Descartes (France)
1596-1650

"One cannot conceive anything so strange and so implausible that it has not already been said by one philosopher or another."
(Rene Descartes, *Le Discours de la Méthode*)

[Note: "Descartes" is pronounced "Day-Kart" with the emphasis on "Kart." The "s" on the end is silent, but it's there anyway. Avoid the common mistake of spelling Descartes' name "Descarte." People who make that mistake when writing about Descartes tend not to be taken very seriously.]

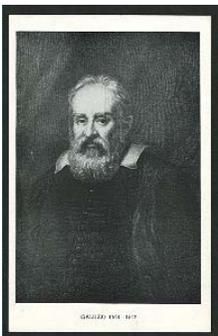
Rene Descartes is commonly known as the Father of Modern Philosophy and he is especially influential in the field of epistemology. As we've seen, it's natural to accept the beliefs that come from our senses as foundational, or as justified without arguments to support them. We do it all the time. You probably believe that you're sitting before a computer (or a piece of paper if you've printed this out) right now simply because you see it. It hardly seems as though you need to give an argument to support the evidence of your senses. Surely you can trust what you see, and hear, and taste, and smell, and touch!



Stop and Think:

Have you ever seriously questioned whether or not you can trust your senses? Why? Did you tell anyone else that you were questioning whether you could trust your senses? How did they respond?

But things aren't quite as simple as "Go ahead and trust your senses" (*nothing* in philosophy is that simple) and Descartes appreciated the complexity of the issue.



Descartes lived from 1596 to 1650, a period in which many beliefs were being challenged. In particular, Galileo lived at roughly the same time, from 1564 to 1642. Galileo, as you may remember, is famous now (and was infamous during his lifetime) for demonstrating the earth revolved around the sun. Why was that such a big deal? There are at least two reasons.

First, the heliocentric (sun-centered) theory contradicts the immediate evidence of our senses! If you stand outside and *look* long enough, it seems like the sun is revolving around the Earth. Thus, Galileo demonstrated that beliefs that seem to be true, and for which we have direct sensory evidence, can actually be false.

Second, the beliefs that were contradicted by Galileo, essentially the geocentric (or Earth-centered) theory of astronomy, were *important* to a lot of people. It wasn't "just" an academic or scientific dispute because the position of the Earth was supposed to have theological implications. If the Earth were at the center of the universe, it would symbolize the central importance of human beings in divine creation. If the Earth is simply one of many planets orbiting the sun then maybe it isn't all that important. And if the Earth isn't all that important then maybe *we* aren't all that important. But *we are* that important, the creature for the sake of whom God created the heavens and the Earth and around which creation should, literally, revolve. So, if Galileo is right then maybe the our religious beliefs are wrong? Maybe God doesn't exist?

So you see, some of our most "obvious" beliefs can be false in ways that matter. We might call this the "Crisis of Error." You've probably experienced it, because it's a real today as it was when Descartes was writing.

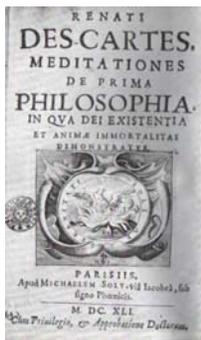


Stop and Think:

Remember a time when you were upset to learn that something you thought to be true was actually false. What belief of yours was proven wrong? Why did you hold this belief in the first place? What evidence did you have? How did you find out that your belief wasn't true? How did you feel when you found that out? What effect, if any, did this have on other beliefs you had? What effect, if any, did this have on how you formulated beliefs after that?

We'll see how Descartes responded to the Crisis of Error by taking a look at selected passages from Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Because Descartes can be difficult to read, I'll comment on the text as we go along. Mine will be the indented writing in green.

Meditations on First Philosophy
by René Descartes (1641)
translated by
John Veitch, LL.D. (1901)

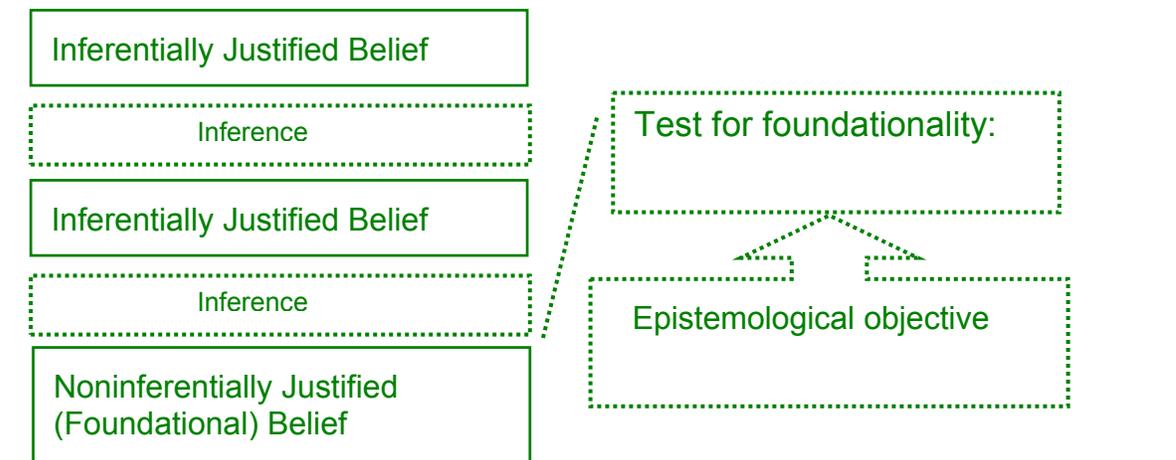


MEDITATION I. OF THE THINGS WHICH WE MAY DOUBT.

1. Several years have now elapsed since I first became aware that I had accepted, even from my youth, many false opinions for true, and that consequently what I afterwards based on such principles was highly doubtful; and from that time I was convinced of the necessity of undertaking once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted, and of commencing anew the work of building from the foundation, if I desired to establish a firm and abiding superstructure in the sciences. But as this enterprise appeared to me to be one of great magnitude, I

waited until I had attained an age so mature as to leave me no hope that at any stage of life more advanced I should be better able to execute my design. On this account, I have delayed so long that I should henceforth consider I was doing wrong were I still to consume in deliberation any of the time that now remains for action. To-day, then, since I have opportunely freed my mind from all cares [and am happily disturbed by no passions], and since I am in the secure possession of leisure in a peaceable retirement, I will at length apply myself earnestly and freely to the general overthrow of all my former opinions.

Here, Descartes notes that he's been wrong about a lot of things and that he's reasoned from these false beliefs to equally false conclusions. Descartes also identifies himself as a foundationalist in this paragraph, so he decides that he should, essentially, throw out everything that he already believes and start over, rebuilding his belief wall from the bottom up, upon good and solid foundations.

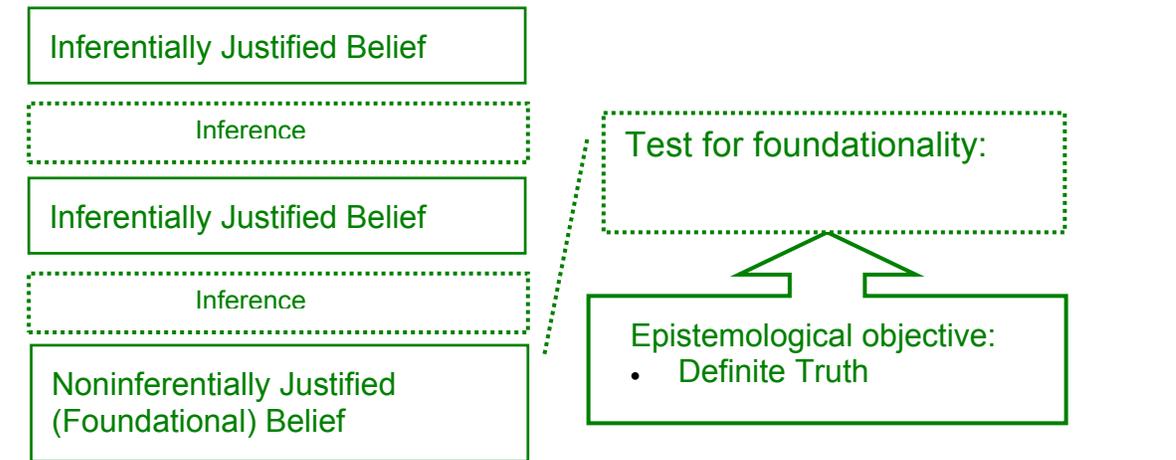


2. But, to this end, it will not be necessary for me to show that the whole of these are false - a point, perhaps, which I shall never reach; but as even now my reason convinces me that I ought not the less carefully to withhold belief from what is not entirely certain and indubitable, than from what is manifestly false, it will be sufficient to justify the rejection of the whole if I shall find in each some ground for doubt. Nor for this purpose will it be necessary even to deal with each belief individually, which would be truly an endless labor; but, as the removal from below of the foundation necessarily involves the downfall of the whole edifice, I will at once approach the criticism of the principles on which all my former beliefs rested.

Descartes says that he should refuse to accept beliefs that he can't be *certain* are true. Why? Well, because if we can't be *certain* that a belief is true then it *might* be false, and Descartes wanted to avoid all possibility of error. This gives us Descartes' epistemological objective: Definite Truth.

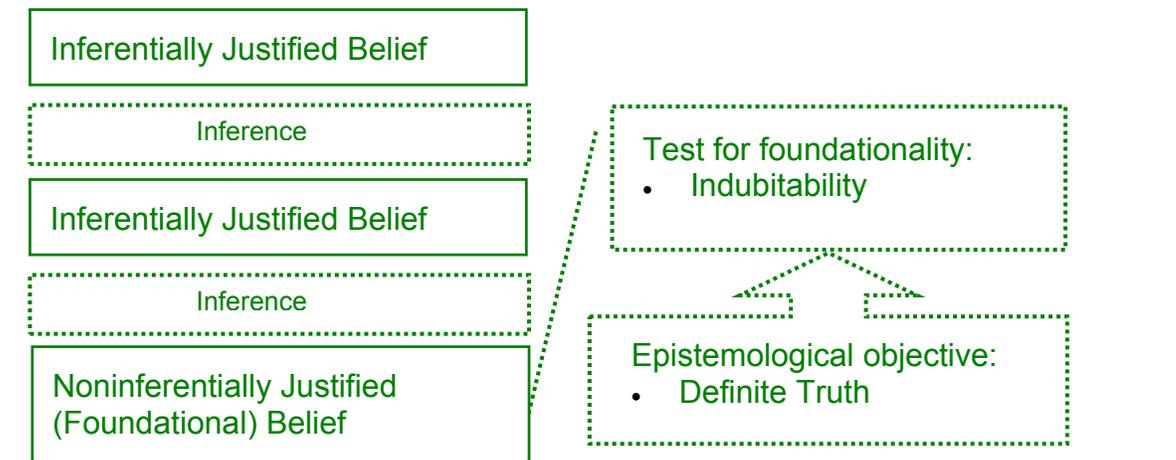
And we should pause to note that definite truth is a worthy goal. It's reasonable to want our beliefs to be true, and why should settle for beliefs that are only

possibly true, or even *probably* true, if we can have beliefs that are *definitely* true? Descartes is setting his sights very high, but that's sometimes a good thing.



Of course, Descartes realizes that it would be a tiresome and endless business to consider *all* of his beliefs *one at a time* in order to decide whether or not they are definitely true. Instead, he'll focus on his foundational beliefs and ensure that they are absolutely certain.

And how does Descartes evaluate his foundational beliefs? He uses what has become known as his famous Method of Doubt: he rejects any belief that he is able to doubt, and not just those beliefs that he has reason to think are false. This gives us Descartes' Test for Foundationality: Indubitability (or the inability to be doubted).



This is a particularly important point, so we should think about it for a bit. Can you see how the desire for definite truth leads Descartes to reject beliefs that it's possible for him to doubt? The idea is that if it's possible for us to doubt a belief

then the belief might not be true. And if a belief might not be true, then we don't know for *certain* that it is true. It's not definite truth.

For example, I happen to think that my bed is where I left it this morning. But can I doubt that it is? Can I tell myself a story that, for all I know, might be true and that, if it were true, would entail that my bed has gone missing? Sure. Maybe, after I left home, someone came into my house and stole my bed. Now of course I don't really *believe* that somebody stole my bed, but I'm willing to concede that it *might* have happened, and because I don't know for certain that it *didn't* happen, I don't know for *certain* that my bed is where I left it. Got it? I don't really think that bed has moved. I pretty sure that my bed is where I last saw it. I just *don't know for certain* that it is.

If it's *possible* for you to doubt that one of your beliefs is true – if you can tell a story that, for all you know, might be true and that, if it were true, would entail that your belief is false – then you can't be *absolutely certain* that your belief is true. If you're hunting for beliefs that are definitely true, such a belief won't do. Descartes' motto is "If you can doubt, throw it out!"

3. All that I have, up to this moment, accepted as possessed of the highest truth and certainty, I received either from or through the senses. I observed, however, that these sometimes misled us; and it is the part of prudence not to place absolute confidence in that by which we have even once been deceived.

Descartes notes that most of his beliefs have been grounded the evidence of his senses. Most of his foundational beliefs have concerned what he was seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling, and he took for granted that these basic sensory beliefs were trustworthy. But are they? Are these beliefs immune from doubt, as Descartes wants his foundational beliefs to be? Essentially, can he trust his senses?

Descartes attempts to decide whether or not he can trust his senses by having a little conversation with himself. It's important to understand this because if you don't, it can sound like Descartes is contradicting himself. He isn't. It's exactly the way that you probably think when you're trying to figure something out: "Should I take the job? Well, there's a lot of money in it, which is good. But then again, money isn't everything. I'm afraid that I'd be less happy in that job than I am in my current position. But then again, the new job might be more enjoyable and less stressful than I think it will be, so maybe I should give it a chance."

Descartes will be thinking like this. In order to make it easier to follow, I'll label these two competing voices in Descartes "the Skeptic" and "the Realist." (Just so you know who to bet on, the Skeptic is going to win.)

So, the question is "Can I trust my senses?"

The Skeptic: "Probably not. My senses have been wrong in the past. I've seen things incorrectly, or heard them incorrectly, and once you've been fooled by something, you shouldn't trust it again."

4. But it may be said, perhaps, that, although the senses occasionally mislead us respecting minute objects, and such as are so far removed from us as to be beyond the reach of close observation, there are yet many other of their informations (presentations), of the truth of which it is manifestly impossible to doubt; as for example, that I am in this place, seated by the fire, clothed in a winter dressing gown, that I hold in my hands this piece of paper, with other intimations of the same nature. But how could I deny that I possess these hands and this body, and withal escape being classed with persons in a state of insanity, whose brains are so disordered and clouded by dark bilious vapors as to cause them pertinaciously to assert that they are monarchs when they are in the greatest poverty; or clothed [in gold] and purple when destitute of any covering; or that their head is made of clay, their body of glass, or that they are gourds? I should certainly be not less insane than they, were I to regulate my procedure according to examples so extravagant.

The Realist: "Oh, be serious. Your senses deceive you only in special cases, when looking at very small or very distant things, for instance. Most of the time, and in all normal cases, your senses get it right. Right now, for instance, your senses tell you that you're wearing particular clothes, that you're sitting in a certain place, and other things like that. If you think that your senses can be wrong about *those things* you must be insane!"

5. Though this be true, I must nevertheless here consider that I am a man, and that, consequently, I am in the habit of sleeping, and representing to myself in dreams those same things, or even sometimes others less probable, which the insane think are presented to them in their waking moments. How often have I dreamt that I was in these familiar circumstances, that I was dressed, and occupied this place by the fire, when I was lying undressed in bed? At the present moment, however, I certainly look upon this paper with eyes wide awake; the head which I now move is not asleep; I extend this hand consciously and with express purpose, and I perceive it; the occurrences in sleep are not so distinct as all this. But I cannot forget that, at other times I have been deceived in sleep by similar illusions; and, attentively considering those cases, I perceive so clearly that there exist no certain marks by which the state of waking can ever be distinguished from sleep, that I feel greatly astonished; and in amazement I almost persuade myself that I am now dreaming

The Skeptic: "Good point, but I sleep, don't I? And I dream. And when I dream, things can seem pretty real to me, as real as what I'm experiencing now, even though none of it is actually happening. How do I know that I'm not asleep now? Maybe I'm dreaming and none of this is real."

The Realist: "For Pete's sake! Just look around! Move your body! See? You're not asleep!"

The Skeptic: "But how can I tell that I'm not just *dreaming* that I'm looking around? That I'm not just *dreaming* that I'm moving my body? What common characteristic is shared by all dreams, or by all waking experiences, so that I can tell them apart from one another?"

6. Let us suppose, then, that we are dreaming, and that all these particulars - namely, the opening of the eyes, the motion of the head, the forth-putting of the hands - are merely illusions; and even that we really possess neither an entire body nor hands such as we see. Nevertheless it must be admitted at least that the objects which appear to us in sleep are, as it were, painted representations which could not have been formed unless in the likeness of realities; and, therefore, that those general objects, at all events, namely, eyes, a head, hands, and an entire body, are not simply imaginary, but really existent. For, in truth, painters themselves, even when they study to represent sirens and satyrs by forms the most fantastic and extraordinary, cannot bestow upon them natures absolutely new, but can only make a certain medley of the members of different animals; or if they chance to imagine something so novel that nothing at all similar has ever been seen before, and such as is, therefore, purely fictitious and absolutely false, it is at least certain that the colors of which this is composed are real. And on the same principle, although these general objects, viz. [a body], eyes, a head, hands, and the like, be imaginary, we are nevertheless absolutely necessitated to admit the reality at least of some other objects still more simple and universal than these, of which, just as of certain real colors, all those images of things, whether true and real, or false and fantastic, that are found in our consciousness, are formed.

The Realist: "Okay. Maybe I *am* dreaming right now. But even if I'm dreaming, I can know something because the elements of dreams are taken from the elements of waking life. Even if I'm just dreaming that I'm moving my hand, for instance, I must have experienced some real hand in order to dream about it. This means that I can know that hands exist, even if my experience of my hand, right now, is just a dream. Similarly, I know that heads exist, and trees, and all other sorts of things, because if they didn't exist I couldn't dream about them."

7. To this class of objects seem to belong corporeal nature in general and its extension; the figure of extended things, their quantity or magnitude, and their number, as also the place in, and the time during, which they exist, and other things of the same sort.

The Realist: "In general, then, I can know that *stuff exists*, even if I'm just dreaming about that stuff right now."

8. We will not, therefore, perhaps reason illegitimately if we conclude from this that Physics, Astronomy, Medicine, and all the other sciences that have for their end the consideration of composite objects, are indeed of a doubtful character; but that Arithmetic, Geometry, and the other sciences of the same class, which regard merely the simplest and most general objects, and scarcely inquire whether or not these are really existent, contain somewhat that is certain and indubitable: for whether I am awake

or dreaming, it remains true that two and three make five, and that a square has but four sides; nor does it seem possible that truths so apparent can ever fall under a suspicion of falsity [or incertitude].

The Realist: "And I can know certain facts, as well. Numbers are numbers, whether I'm awake or asleep, so I can know that two plus three is five whether I'm asleep or awake. So not only can I know that stuff exists, even if I'm dreaming now, I can know the basic truths of mathematics, too."

9. Nevertheless, the belief that there is a God who is all powerful, and who created me, such as I am, has, for a long time, obtained steady possession of my mind. How, then, do I know that he has not arranged that there should be neither earth, nor sky, nor any extended thing, nor figure, nor magnitude, nor place, providing at the same time, however, for [the rise in me of the perceptions of all these objects, and] the persuasion that these do not exist otherwise than as I perceive them? And further, as I sometimes think that others are in error respecting matters of which they believe themselves to possess a perfect knowledge, how do I know that I am not also deceived each time I add together two and three, or number the sides of a square, or form some judgment still more simple, if more simple indeed can be imagined? But perhaps Deity has not been willing that I should be thus deceived, for he is said to be supremely good. If, however, it were repugnant to the goodness of Deity to have created me subject to constant deception, it would seem likewise to be contrary to his goodness to allow me to be occasionally deceived; and yet it is clear that this is permitted.

The Skeptic: "I'm not convinced. Couldn't God put the images of hands, heads, trees and other things directly into our minds, even if none of these things ever existed? Couldn't God fool us into thinking that stuff exists even though it doesn't? And as for knowing the truths of mathematics, there are a lot of people who seem absolutely *certain* of things that I know to be false. Couldn't I be like one of those people? Couldn't I be wrong every time I add two and three to get five?"

The Realist: "Nonsense. You're talking about God here. God is all good and so He wouldn't allow you to be mistaken like that. He wouldn't fool you into thinking that stuff exists even though it doesn't, and He wouldn't allow you to be wrong about things like basic addition."

The Skeptic: "Why wouldn't He? If we think that a good God can allow us to be wrong sometimes - and we must allow this because clearly we *can* be wrong sometimes - why not think that a good God can allow us to be wrong most of the time, or even all the time?"

10. Some, indeed, might perhaps be found who would be disposed rather to deny the existence of a Being so powerful than to believe that there is nothing certain. But let us for the present refrain from opposing this opinion, and grant that all which is here said of a Deity is fabulous: nevertheless, in whatever way it be supposed that I reach the state

in which I exist, whether by fate, or chance, or by an endless series of antecedents and consequents, or by any other means, it is clear (since to be deceived and to err is a certain defect) that the probability of my being so imperfect as to be the constant victim of deception, will be increased exactly in proportion as the power possessed by the cause, to which they assign my origin, is lessened. To these reasonings I have assuredly nothing to reply, but am constrained at last to avow that there is nothing of all that I formerly believed to be true of which it is impossible to doubt, and that not through thoughtlessness or levity, but from cogent and maturely considered reasons; so that henceforward, if I desire to discover anything certain, I ought not the less carefully to refrain from assenting to those same opinions than to what might be shown to be manifestly false.

The Realist: "Okay, if God exists then He could fool us all the time and we could always be wrong. But that just means that *if* I believe in God then I can't be certain of anything. What if I choose *not* to believe in God? If I don't believe in God then I won't need to worry about him fooling me all the time."

The Skeptic: "Sorry, but that won't help. Either you're created by God or you're not. If you're created by God then God exists and he can fool you all the time. If you're created by something *other* than God, then your origins are imperfect (only creation by God would be perfect) and if your origins are imperfect then you're even *more* likely to be mistaken. See? So either way all of your beliefs could be wrong. I think that I've made my point. Specifically, it's *possible* that everything that I thought to be true is actually false. In order to learn or know anything, then, I should refrain from believing anything that it's even *possible* to doubt because anything that it's possible to doubt *could* be false, and I don't want to believe things that are false."

11. But it is not sufficient to have made these observations; care must be taken likewise to keep them in remembrance. For those old and customary opinions perpetually recur--long and familiar usage giving them the right of occupying my mind, even almost against my will, and subduing my belief; nor will I lose the habit of deferring to them and confiding in them so long as I shall consider them to be what in truth they are, viz, opinions to some extent doubtful, as I have already shown, but still highly probable, and such as it is much more reasonable to believe than deny. It is for this reason I am persuaded that I shall not be doing wrong, if, taking an opposite judgment of deliberate design, I become my own deceiver, by supposing, for a time, that all those opinions are entirely false and imaginary, until at length, having thus balanced my old by my new prejudices, my judgment shall no longer be turned aside by perverted usage from the path that may conduct to the perception of truth. For I am assured that, meanwhile, there will arise neither peril nor error from this course, and that I cannot for the present yield too much to distrust, since the end I now seek is not action but knowledge.

Descartes acknowledges that it's *very hard* to avoid believing some things that we can doubt. First, we're just in the *habit* of believing them. Second, we correctly recognize that most of the beliefs that we can doubt are, nonetheless,

actually true. (Remember how I can doubt that my bed is where I left it, even though it's probably true that my bed is where I left it.) So, Descartes proposes to counteract this natural tendency to believe things by *pretending* that something is actually false until it's proven, beyond all doubt, to be true.

This is an important passage to remember when you read the rest of Descartes. Descartes will *pretend* that certain beliefs are false as part of a larger project of self re-education. *He does not actually think that these beliefs are false and he is not crazy.* (But what if he *had* been crazy? What effect, if any, would that have on the *philosophical validity* of what he said?)

12. I will suppose, then, not that Deity, who is sovereignly good and the fountain of truth, but that some malignant demon, who is at once exceedingly potent and deceitful, has employed all his artifice to deceive me; I will suppose that the sky, the air, the earth, colors, figures, sounds, and all external things, are nothing better than the illusions of dreams, by means of which this being has laid snares for my credulity; I will consider myself as without hands, eyes, flesh, blood, or any of the senses, and as falsely believing that I am possessed of these; I will continue resolutely fixed in this belief, and if indeed by this means it be not in my power to arrive at the knowledge of truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, viz, [suspend my judgment], and guard with settled purpose against giving my assent to what is false, and being imposed upon by this deceiver, whatever be his power and artifice. But this undertaking is arduous, and a certain indolence insensibly leads me back to my ordinary course of life; and just as the captive, who, perchance, was enjoying in his dreams an imaginary liberty, when he begins to suspect that it is but a vision, dreads awakening, and conspires with the agreeable illusions that the deception may be prolonged; so I, of my own accord, fall back into the train of my former beliefs, and fear to arouse myself from my slumber, lest the time of laborious wakefulness that would succeed this quiet rest, in place of bringing any light of day, should prove inadequate to dispel the darkness that will arise from the difficulties that have now been raised.

Descartes proposes to imagine that there is no god, but that there is, instead, an Evil Demon who is constantly playing with Descartes' mind. The things and the people that Descartes thinks he sees don't really exist; they're just images produced in his mind by the Evil Demon. Descartes' *body* doesn't even exist; that's just an impression produced in his mind by the Evil Demon, too.

This is a classic thought experiment and we're all supposed to run it for ourselves. Maybe there's an Evil Demon deceiving *you* and so *you* can't be certain that anything, or anyone else, or even your body, exists.

Of course, under the Evil Demon assumption, the Evil Demon exists, so at least you can know *that*, right?

Well, not really. Let me tell you a True But Disturbing Story. When I was a little girl – about six or seven – I was sitting on the living room floor watching T.V.

when all of a sudden, for no particular reason, I thought to myself, “What if I’m not a little girl. What if I don’t have a mom and a dad and a canopy bed and a pink bedroom and a doll house and a poodle and pony tails with ribbons?” (I was one of *those* of little girls.) “What if I’m *actually* a Disembodied Space Alien? What if I’m a the *only thing in the universe*? And what if I just got really, really lonely and had some sort of breakdown and started to hallucinate everything? And what if one day I’ll realize this, and stop hallucinating, and be all alone again, just me, forever and ever and ever and ever?”

Naturally, this prospect scared me, so I went into the kitchen where my mother was. I had more sense than to ask her if I was a disembodied space alien, so I just chatted a bit and before long I felt better. I knew, however, that I *shouldn’t* have felt better because I knew that talking with my mother proved nothing. I knew that my mother could have been just an illusion. I knew that I could still wake up at any moment, and everything would be gone.

Does this show that I’m weird? Maybe. But certain people just naturally come up with this kind thing on their own, and I’ll bet that at least 5% of you have had similar thoughts. Who knows why.

The important point is that you *allow yourself to be gripped by this now, whether or not you’ve thought of it before*. How do you know that an Evil Demon isn’t deceiving you all the time, about everything? How do you know that you’re not a Disembodied Space Alien?

In *fact* maybe you *are* a Disembodied Space Alien hallucinating everything, and maybe some small part of your mind is trying to get well, trying to come to terms with your actual situation, trying to break out of its own hallucination.

But how could it do this? How could the small, unconscious, part of your mind that understands the truth share that truth with the large, conscious, part of your mind that believes the world is real?

Well, maybe by hallucinating *this very experience*. Maybe by coming up with the idea of Descartes, who never actually existed, and by having you hallucinate *this very lesson on Descartes*, in order to prod you into asking the necessary question “Could I be hallucinating everything?” and coming up with the obvious answer....

It’s possible.... isn’t it?

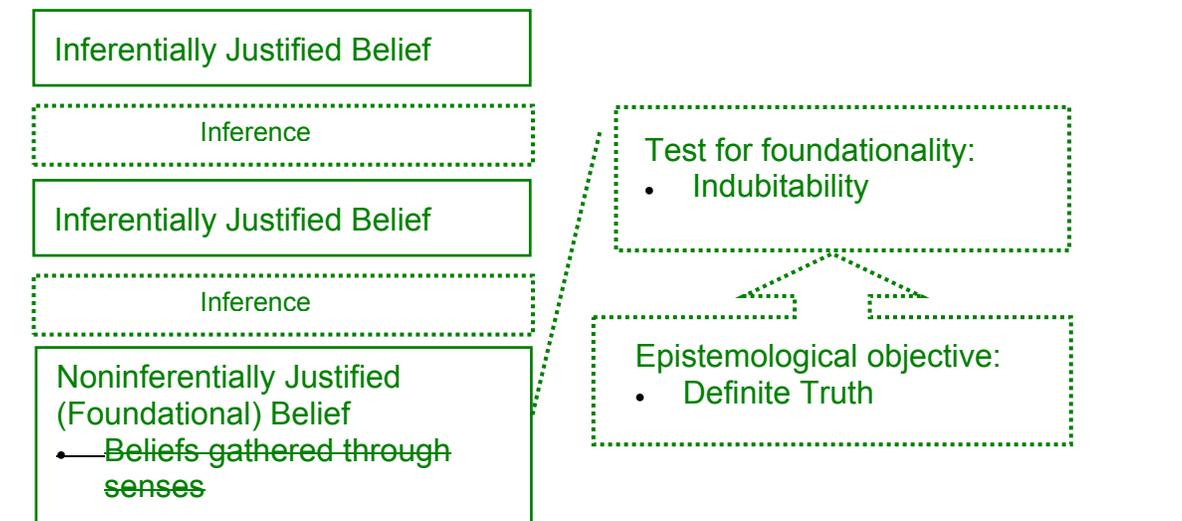
A little freaked out? Good. That means you get it.

Really freaked out? Relax. You are *not* a Disembodied Space Alien or anything of the kind. This is just a device used to make a certain philosophical point (although the part about me worrying about this as a kid is entirely true and Descartes certainly existed). Your friends are real. Your family is real. Your body is real. The point is that it’s *possible* to doubt all this, like it’s possible for me to

doubt that my bed is where I left it, and so none of it counts as “Definite Truth” in Descartes’ sense.

You can’t be certain that *anything* outside of your mind exists, not the White House, not your desk, not other people, not even your own body, because you could be dreaming, because you could be deceived by an Evil Demon, or because you could be a Disembodied Space Alien. Philosophers call the world outside your mind the “external world,” and so we can sum this up by saying that if Descartes is right, you can doubt that the external world exists.

At this point, Descartes has rejected sense experience as a source of foundational beliefs because it’s possible to doubt the truth of any belief gathered through your senses by employing through the dreaming, evil demon, or disembodied space alien hypotheses.



This rejection of sense experience as a source of foundational belief makes Descartes a rationalist. Rationalism is a school of epistemology characterized by its relative distrust of sense of experience and by its preference for pure reason. Rationalism is often contrasted with *empiricism*, which we’ll be talking about later.



Stop and Think:

Take a moment to use your senses to get a belief about your immediate environment. You might acquire the belief that a soda can is sitting on the table, for example. According to Descartes, you can’t know for certain that this belief is true because you might be hallucinating everything. In my example, I can’t know for certain that a soda can is on the table because I might be hallucinating everything, including the soda can. Can you think of a way to prove that you’re *not* hallucinating everything?

Consider the following attempts to prove that you're not hallucinating everything. Do they succeed?

- If I were hallucinating everything then I could control everything. But I can't control everything. Therefore, I'm not hallucinating everything.
- If I were hallucinating everything then nothing bad would ever happen. But bad things do happen. Therefore, I'm not hallucinating everything.
- If I were hallucinating everything then I could know what's going to happen. But I don't know what's going to happen. Therefore, I'm not hallucinating everything.
- If I were hallucinating everything then other people wouldn't experience the same things that I do. But other people *do* see the same things I do. Therefore, I'm not hallucinating everything.
- I can't have a mind without having a brain, so I have a brain. But I can't have a brain without a body, so I have a body. But my body can't exist without food and oxygen and so on, so the world really does exist and I'm not hallucinating absolutely everything.

So, we've seen that if Descartes is right, we can't take any belief gathered through our senses as foundational. But then what *can* we take as a foundational belief? To learn how Descartes answers this question, we'll continue with Meditation II.

MEDITATION II. OF THE NATURE OF THE HUMAN MIND; AND THAT IT IS MORE EASILY KNOWN THAN THE BODY.

1. The Meditation of yesterday has filled my mind with so many doubts, that it is no longer in my power to forget them. Nor do I see, meanwhile, any principle on which they can be resolved; and, just as if I had fallen all of a sudden into very deep water, I am so greatly disconcerted as to be unable either to plant my feet firmly on the bottom or sustain myself by swimming on the surface. I will, nevertheless, make an effort, and try anew the same path on which I had entered yesterday, that is, proceed by casting aside all that admits of the slightest doubt, not less than if I had discovered it to be absolutely false; and I will continue always in this track until I shall find something that is certain, or at least, if I can do nothing more, until I shall know with certainty that there is nothing certain. Archimedes, that he might transport the entire globe from the place it occupied to another, demanded only a point that was firm and immovable; so, also, I shall be entitled to entertain the highest expectations, if I am fortunate enough to discover only one thing that is certain and indubitable.

Descartes resolves to see if there's anything that he *can* know for certain, if there's anything that *can't* be doubted.



Stop and Think:

Can you think of anything that you can't doubt?

2. I suppose, accordingly, that all the things which I see are false (fictitious); I believe that none of those objects which my fallacious memory represents ever existed; I suppose that I possess no senses; I believe that body, figure, extension, motion, and place are merely fictions of my mind. What is there, then, that can be esteemed true? Perhaps this only, that there is absolutely nothing certain.

Descartes recalls that everything he sees around him could be a product of his own mind and so might not be real. He wonders if there's anything that's real for sure, anything that *can't* be a product of his own mind.



Stop and Think:

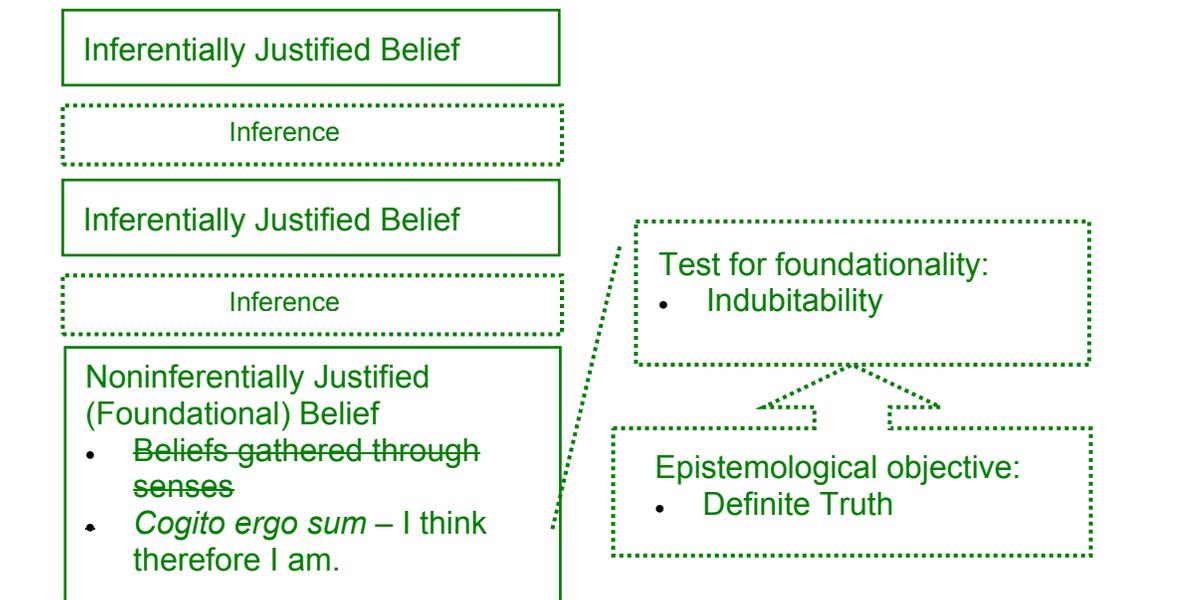
Can you think of anything that can't be a product of your own mind?

3. But how do I know that there is not something different altogether from the objects I have now enumerated, of which it is impossible to entertain the slightest doubt? Is there not a God, or some being, by whatever name I may designate him, who causes these thoughts to arise in my mind? But why suppose such a being, for it may be I myself am capable of producing them? Am I, then, at least not something? But I before denied that I possessed senses or a body; I hesitate, however, for what follows from that? Am I so dependent on the body and the senses that without these I cannot exist? But I had the persuasion that there was absolutely nothing in the world, that there was no sky and no earth, neither minds nor bodies; was I not, therefore, at the same time, persuaded that I did not exist? Far from it; I assuredly existed, since I was persuaded. But there is I know not what being, who is possessed at once of the highest power and the deepest cunning, who is constantly employing all his ingenuity in deceiving me. Doubtless, then, I exist, since I am deceived; and, let him deceive me as he may, he can never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I shall be conscious that I am something. So that it must, in fine, be maintained, all things being maturely and carefully considered, that this proposition (pronunciatum) *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true each time it is expressed by me, or conceived in my mind.

Descartes notes that *he can't successfully doubt that he exists* because he needs to exist in order to doubt his existence! An Evil Demon can't fool him into thinking that he exists, because he needs to exist in order to be fooled by the Evil Demon! Even if Descartes were a Disembodied Space Alien hallucinating everything, he'd need to exist because otherwise he couldn't hallucinate!

Descartes sums this up with one of the most famous quotations of all time: "*Cogito ergo sum*," or "I think, therefore I am." It's shame that this was translated into English in this selection.

Descartes finally has discovered some indubitable beliefs – some belief that pass his test for fundamentality! He knows that he exists.



4. But I do not yet know with sufficient clearness what I am, though assured that I am;....For this reason, I will now consider anew what I formerly believed myself to be, before I entered on the present train of thought; and of my previous opinion I will retrench all that can in the least be invalidated by the grounds of doubt I have adduced, in order that there may at length remain nothing but what is certain and indubitable.

Now that Descartes sees that he can't doubt his own existence, he wants to be sure he doesn't get sloppy and start to think that he's something he's not. Descartes will only believe that he is what he can not possibly doubt that he is.

5. What then did I formerly think I was? ... In the first place, then, I thought that I possessed a countenance, hands, arms, and all the fabric of members that appears in a corpse, and which I called by the name of body....

Before he embarked on his Meditations, before he buckled down and got seriously philosophical, Descartes used to take for granted that he had a body.

6. But [as to myself, what can I now say that I am], since I suppose there exists an extremely powerful, and, if I may so speak, malignant being, whose whole endeavors are directed toward deceiving me? Can I affirm that I possess any one of all those attributes of which I have lately spoken as belonging to the nature of body? After attentively considering them in my own mind, I find none of them that can properly be said to belong to myself....Thinking is another attribute of the soul; and here I discover what properly belongs to myself. This alone is inseparable from me. I am--I exist: this is certain; but how often? As often as I think; for perhaps it would even happen, if I should wholly cease to think, that I should at the same time altogether cease to be. I now admit nothing that is not necessarily true. I am therefore, precisely speaking, only a thinking thing, that is, a mind (*mens sive animus*), understanding, or reason, terms whose

signification was before unknown to me. I am, however, a real thing, and really existent; but what thing? The answer was, a thinking thing.

At this point, of course, Descartes realizes that he easily doubt the existence of his body. Maybe an Evil Demon is deceiving him into thinking that he has one. Maybe he's hallucinating it. Descartes can know something for certain, though: he can know that he's thinking. Descartes can know for sure that he exists as a mind.

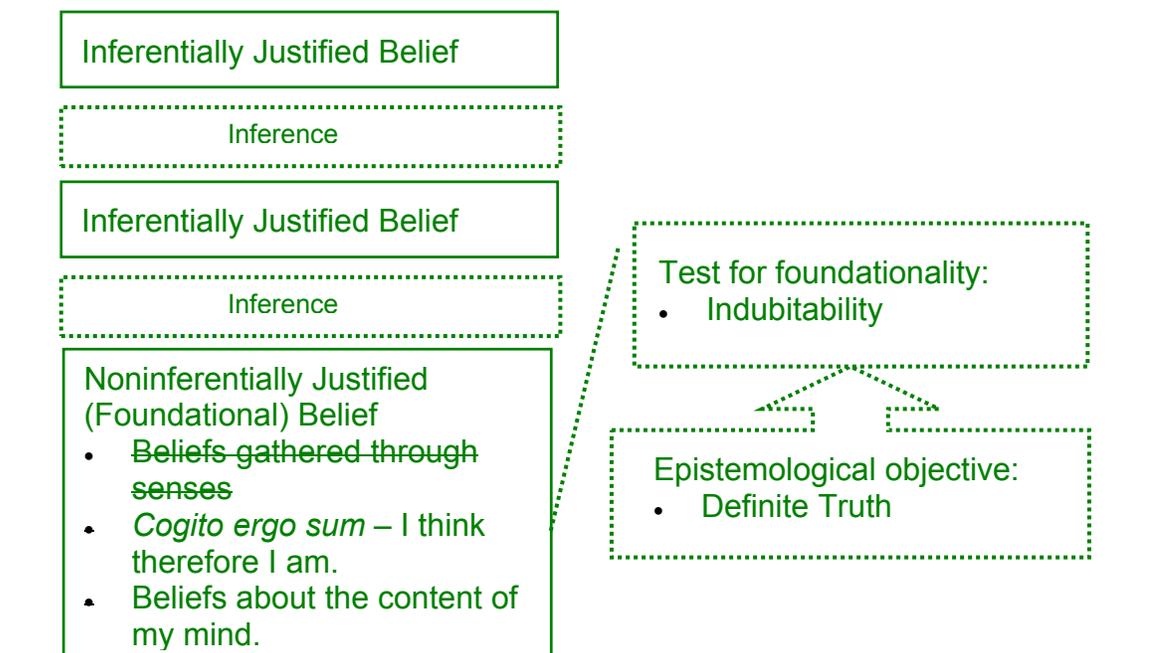
Similarly, you can know for certain that you have a mind. Of course, you might be badly mistaken about what your mind *is*. You probably think that you control your thoughts to some extent, for example, and maybe you're wrong about that. Maybe some member of an alien race from the 10th dimension is now and has always been controlling everything you think. Alternatively, maybe your mind is nothing more than a fragment of some much bigger mind that is, in some sense, dreaming you. Who knows? This is all perfectly compatible with what Descartes is saying. His only point is that he knows he has a mind, that he can't possibly be mistaken about that basic fact.

To see what else Descartes knows for certain, let's jump directly to paragraph 8.

8. But what, then, am I? A thinking thing, it has been said. But what is a thinking thing? It is a thing that doubts, understands, [conceives], affirms, denies, wills, refuses; that imagines also, and perceives.

9. Assuredly it is not little, if all these properties belong to my nature. But why should they not belong to it? Am I not that very being who now doubts of almost everything; who, for all that, understands and conceives certain things; who affirms one alone as true, and denies the others; who desires to know more of them, and does not wish to be deceived; who imagines many things, sometimes even despite his will; and is likewise percipient of many, as if through the medium of the senses. Is there nothing of all this as true as that I am, even although I should be always dreaming, and although he who gave me being employed all his ingenuity to deceive me? Is there also any one of these attributes that can be properly distinguished from my thought, or that can be said to be separate from myself? For it is of itself so evident that it is I who doubt, I who understand, and I who desire, that it is here unnecessary to add anything by way of rendering it more clear. And I am as certainly the same being who imagines; for although it may be (as I before supposed) that nothing I imagine is true, still the power of imagination does not cease really to exist in me and to form part of my thought. In fine, I am the same being who perceives, that is, who apprehends certain objects as by the organs of sense, since, in truth, I see light, hear a noise, and feel heat. But it will be said that these presentations are false, and that I am dreaming. Let it be so. At all events it is certain that I seem to see light, hear a noise, and feel heat; this cannot be false, and this is what in me is properly called perceiving (*sentire*), which is nothing else than thinking.

Just as philosophers call the world outside your mind the “external world,” they call the world *inside* your mind the “internal world.” Descartes is asserting – and I think correctly – that we can’t doubt the existence of the internal world. In addition to knowing for certain that he thinks and exists as a mind, he knows for certain things about the content of his mind. For example, even though he can doubt that he’s seeing a tree (because he might be hallucinating) he can’t doubt that he’s having experiences that he formerly would have called “seeing a tree.” He can be certain about that much. This allows him to take beliefs about the content of his mind as foundational beliefs as well.



If Descartes stopped here, all he would claim to know is that he exists as a mind and that he has particular thoughts and experiences. He wouldn’t claim to know that he has a body or that anything other than his mind exists. This would have made Descartes a solipsist. Solipsism says that the only thing you can know for sure is that you exist as a mind. One of the major questions of modern epistemology has been “How can we escape or avoid solipsism?” In fact, Descartes was not a solipsist because he reasoned from his foundational belief “I think therefore I am,” to beliefs about the external world. Let’s see how he attempts this by skipping directly to Meditation V, paragraph 5.

MEDITATION V. OF THE ESSENCE OF MATERIAL THINGS; AND, AGAIN, OF GOD; THAT HE EXISTS.

5. And what I here find of most importance is, that I discover in my mind innumerable ideas of certain objects, which cannot be esteemed pure negations, although perhaps they possess no reality beyond my thought, and which are not framed by me though it may be in my power to think, or not to think them, but possess true and immutable natures of their own. As, for example, when I imagine a triangle, although there is not

perhaps and never was in any place in the universe apart from my thought one such figure, it remains true nevertheless that this figure possesses a certain determinate nature, form, or essence, which is immutable and eternal, and not framed by me, nor in any degree dependent on my thought; as appears from the circumstance, that diverse properties of the triangle may be demonstrated, viz, that its three angles are equal to two right, that its greatest side is subtended by its greatest angle, and the like, which, whether I will or not, I now clearly discern to belong to it, although before I did not at all think of them, when, for the first time, I imagined a triangle, and which accordingly cannot be said to have been invented by me.

6. Nor is it a valid objection to allege, that perhaps this idea of a triangle came into my mind by the medium of the senses, through my having seen bodies of a triangular figure; for I am able to form in thought an innumerable variety of figures with regard to which it cannot be supposed that they were ever objects of sense, and I can nevertheless demonstrate diverse properties of their nature no less than of the triangle, all of which are assuredly true since I clearly conceive them: and they are therefore something, and not mere negations; for it is highly evident that all that is true is something, [truth being identical with existence]; and I have already fully shown the truth of the principle, that whatever is clearly and distinctly known is true. And although this had not been demonstrated, yet the nature of my mind is such as to compel me to assert to what I clearly conceive while I so conceive it; and I recollect that even when I still strongly adhered to the objects of sense, I reckoned among the number of the most certain truths those I clearly conceived relating to figures, numbers, and other matters that pertain to arithmetic and geometry, and in general to the pure mathematics.

In paragraphs 5 and 6, Descartes makes a very important point about certain kinds of knowledge: specifically, certain facts about certain things follow from the *idea* of that thing alone. For example, solely from the idea of a triangle, you can, after significant thought, see that the sum of its interior angle is 180 degrees. That's something you *figure out* about triangles, not something you *make up* about triangles. It's something you discover, not something you invent. Furthermore, this knowledge is fundamentally *nonsensory* because you don't need to tinker around with actual triangles in order to find out that the sum of the interior angles of any triangle is 180 degrees – a geometrical proof is enough. (In fact, a geometrical proof is the *only* way we can know that the sum of the interior angles in a triangle is 180 degrees. Measuring and adding the angles of specific triangles can only show us that *all of the triangles we've encountered so far* have interior angles which sum to 180. The geometrical proof tells us that *all triangles that ever were or will be* have interior angles which sum to 180.) Not surprisingly, is the sort of knowledge that rationalists really like, because it appeals *only* to ones ideas and ability to reason, and doesn't rely upon nasty, undependable sense perception.

In paragraphs 7 – 11, Descartes will attempt to prove that “existence” follows from the idea of God just like “having interior angles which sum to 180 degrees” follows from the idea of a triangle. Hence, just like a triangle must have interior

angles that sum to 180 degrees, God must exist. As Descartes wrote in another context: "I saw quite clearly that, assuming a triangle, its three angles must be equal to two right angles; but for all that I saw nothing that assured me that there was any triangle in the real world. On the other hand, going back to an examination of my idea of a perfect being. I found that this included the existence of a such a being, in the same way as the idea of a triangle includes the equality of its three angles to two right angles... Consequently it is at least as certain that God, the perfect being in question, is or exists, as any proof in geometry can be," (from *Le Discours de la Méthode*).

Any argument for God's existence that attempts to prove that God exists from the idea of God alone is called an "ontological argument," so Descartes is about to give us an ontological argument for God's existence. It isn't at all easy to follow, but do the best you can. Slog through the next five paragraphs of Descartes' prose and really try to understand it. It builds character. And don't worry; I'll highlight a particularly important passage in paragraph 11 and then summarize the argument.

7. But now if because I can draw from my thought the idea of an object, it follows that all I clearly and distinctly apprehend to pertain to this object, does in truth belong to it, may I not from this derive an argument for the existence of God? It is certain that I no less find the idea of a God in my consciousness, that is the idea of a being supremely perfect, than that of any figure or number whatever: and I know with not less clearness and distinctness that an [actual and] eternal existence pertains to his nature than that all which is demonstrable of any figure or number really belongs to the nature of that figure or number; and, therefore, although all the conclusions of the preceding Meditations were false, the existence of God would pass with me for a truth at least as certain as I ever judged any truth of mathematics to be.

8. Indeed such a doctrine may at first sight appear to contain more sophistry than truth. For, as I have been accustomed in every other matter to distinguish between existence and essence, I easily believe that the existence can be separated from the essence of God, and that thus God may be conceived as not actually existing. But, nevertheless, when I think of it more attentively, it appears that the existence can no more be separated from the essence of God, than the idea of a mountain from that of a valley, or the equality of its three angles to two right angles, from the essence of a [rectilinear] triangle; so that it is not less impossible to conceive a God, that is, a being supremely perfect, to whom existence is wanting, or who is devoid of a certain perfection, than to conceive a mountain without a valley.

9. But though, in truth, I cannot conceive a God unless as existing, any more than I can a mountain without a valley, yet, just as it does not follow that there is any mountain in the world merely because I conceive a mountain with a valley, so likewise, though I conceive God as existing, it does not seem to follow on that account that God exists; for my thought imposes no necessity on things; and as I may imagine a winged horse,

though there be none such, so I could perhaps attribute existence to God, though no God existed.

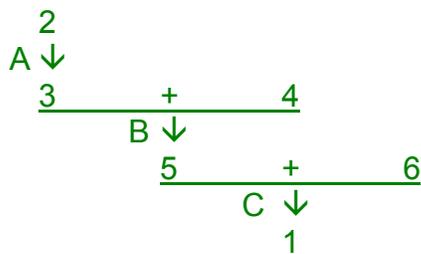
10. But the cases are not analogous, and a fallacy lurks under the semblance of this objection: for because I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that there is any mountain or valley in existence, but simply that the mountain or valley, whether they do or do not exist, are inseparable from each other; whereas, on the other hand, because I cannot conceive God unless as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from him, and therefore that he really exists: not that this is brought about by my thought, or that it imposes any necessity on things, but, on the contrary, the necessity which lies in the thing itself, that is, the necessity of the existence of God, determines me to think in this way: for it is not in my power to conceive a God without existence, that is, a being supremely perfect, and yet devoid of an absolute perfection, as I am free to imagine a horse with or without wings.

11. Nor must it be alleged here as an objection, that it is in truth necessary to admit that God exists, after having supposed him to possess all perfections, since existence is one of them, but that my original supposition was not necessary; just as it is not necessary to think that all quadrilateral figures can be inscribed in the circle, since, if I supposed this, I should be constrained to admit that the rhombus, being a figure of four sides, can be therein inscribed, which, however, is manifestly false. This objection is, I say, incompetent; for although it may not be necessary that I shall at any time entertain the notion of Deity, yet each time I happen to think of a first and sovereign being, and to draw, so to speak, the idea of him from the storehouse of the mind, I am necessitated to attribute to him all kinds of perfections, though I may not then enumerate them all, nor think of each of them in particular. And this necessity is sufficient, as soon as I discover that existence is a perfection, to cause me to infer the existence of this first and sovereign being; just as it is not necessary that I should ever imagine any triangle, but whenever I am desirous of considering a rectilinear figure composed of only three angles, it is absolutely necessary to attribute those properties to it from which it is correctly inferred that its three angles are not greater than two right angles, although perhaps I may not then advert to this relation in particular. But when I consider what figures are capable of being inscribed in the circle, it is by no means necessary to hold that all quadrilateral figures are of this number; on the contrary, I cannot even imagine such to be the case, so long as I shall be unwilling to accept in thought aught that I do not clearly and distinctly conceive; and consequently there is a vast difference between false suppositions, as is the one in question, and the true ideas that were born with me, the first and chief of which is the idea of God. For indeed I discern on many grounds that this idea is not factitious depending simply on my thought, but that it is the representation of a true and immutable nature: in the first place because I can conceive no other being, except God, to whose essence existence [necessarily] pertains; in the second, because it is impossible to conceive two or more gods of this kind; and it being supposed that one such God exists, I clearly see that he must have existed from all eternity, and will exist to all eternity; and finally, because I apprehend many other properties in God, none of which I can either diminish or change.

So there it is! Descartes' ontological argument for God's existence! Let's see it in diagram form. (Here's where diagrams *really help*.)

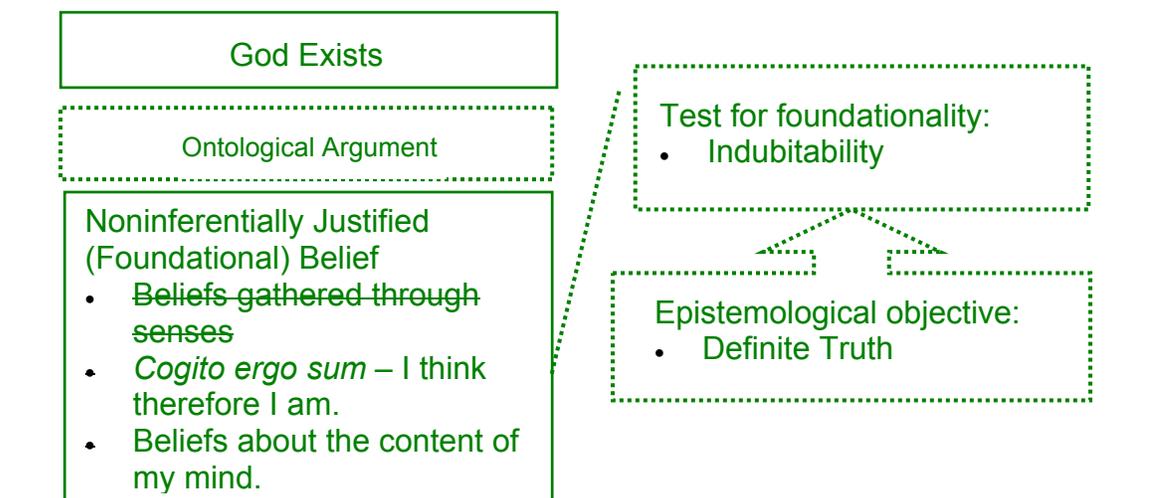
Justifying Belief in God – Descartes' Ontological Argument

1. Our idea of God entails that an all good, all knowing and all powerful God exists.
2. Our minds exist, and all of the ideas in them exist, at least as ideas.
3. We have an idea of God, and this idea is of an all-perfect being.
4. By definition, an all-perfect being has all perfections.
5. Our idea of God entails that He has all perfections.
6. Goodness, knowledge, power and existence are all perfections.



Say what you want about this argument, you've got to admit that it's pretty clever. Descartes thinks that he's proven that God exists from the existence of ideas alone (and what else, at this point, does Descartes have?).

Descartes' knowledge wall now has one inferential belief brick!



But of course we want more than this. We want to know that our bodies exist, that objects exist, in short, that the external world exists. Descartes wants this too, and he's now only one short step away! We can hop directly to that step, in paragraph 10 of Meditation VI.

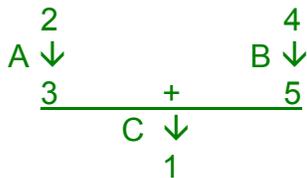
MEDITATION VI. OF THE EXISTENCE OF MATERIAL THINGS, AND OF THE REAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE MIND AND BODY OF MAN

10. Moreover, I find in myself diverse faculties of thinking that have each their special mode: for example, I find I possess the faculties of imagining and perceiving, without which I can indeed clearly and distinctly conceive myself as entire, but I cannot reciprocally conceive them without conceiving myself, that is to say, without an intelligent substance in which they reside, for [in the notion we have of them, or to use the terms of the schools] in their formal concept, they comprise some sort of intellection; whence I perceive that they are distinct from myself as modes are from things. I remark likewise certain other faculties, as the power of changing place, of assuming diverse figures, and the like, that cannot be conceived and cannot therefore exist, any more than the preceding, apart from a substance in which they inhere. It is very evident, however, that these faculties, if they really exist, must belong to some corporeal or extended substance, since in their clear and distinct concept there is contained some sort of extension, but no intellection at all. Further, I cannot doubt but that there is in me a certain passive faculty of perception, that is, of receiving and taking knowledge of the ideas of sensible things; but this would be useless to me, if there did not also exist in me, or in some other thing, another active faculty capable of forming and producing those ideas. But this active faculty cannot be in me [in as far as I am but a thinking thing], seeing that it does not presuppose thought, and also that those ideas are frequently produced in my mind without my contributing to it in any way, and even frequently contrary to my will. This faculty must therefore exist in some substance different from me, in which all the objective reality of the ideas that are produced by this faculty is contained formally or eminently, as I before remarked; and this substance is either a body, that is to say, a corporeal nature in which is contained formally [and in effect] all that is objectively [and by representation] in those ideas; or it is God himself, or some other creature, of a rank superior to body, in which the same is contained eminently. But as God is no deceiver, it is manifest that he does not of himself and immediately communicate those ideas to me, nor even by the intervention of any creature in which their objective reality is not formally, but only eminently, contained. For as he has given me no faculty whereby I can discover this to be the case, but, on the contrary, a very strong inclination to believe that those ideas arise from corporeal objects, I do not see how he could be vindicated from the charge of deceit, if in truth they proceeded from any other source, or were produced by other causes than corporeal things: and accordingly it must be concluded, that corporeal objects exist. Nevertheless, they are not perhaps exactly such as we perceive by the senses, for their comprehension by the senses is, in many instances, very obscure and confused; but it is at least necessary to admit that all which I clearly and distinctly conceive as in them, that is, generally speaking all that is comprehended in the object of speculative geometry, really exists external to me.

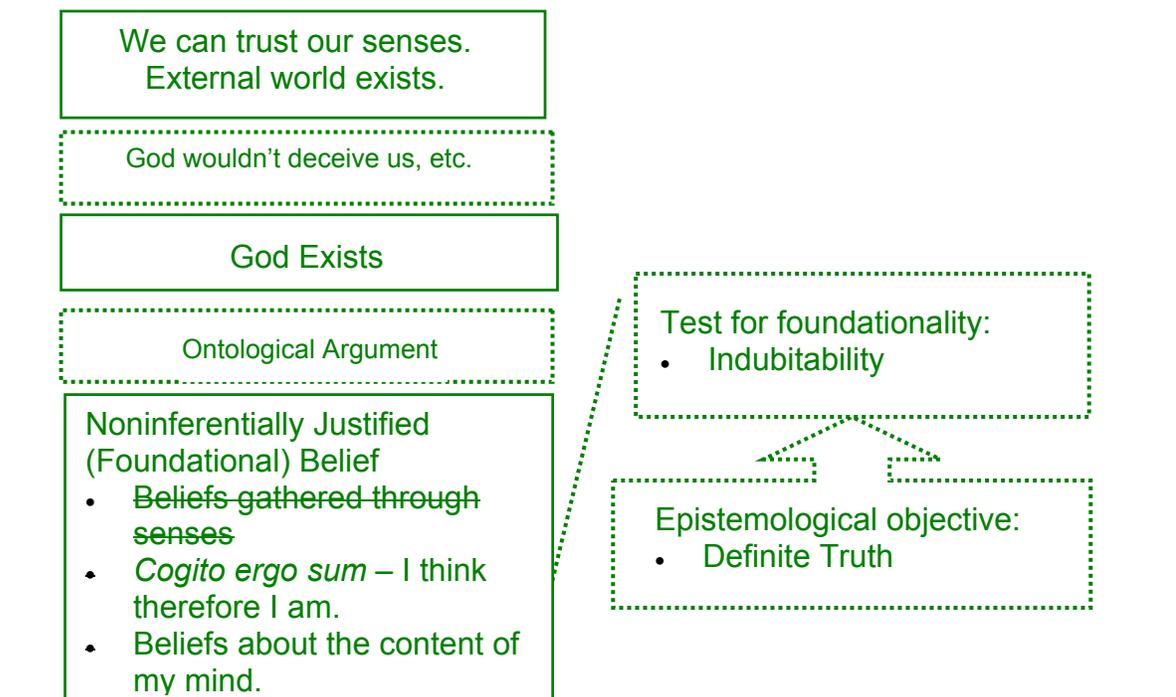
So that's how Descartes tries to prove the existence of the external world. Did you follow it? Here's the argument in diagram form.

Justifying Belief in the External World

1. The external world exists and is roughly the way we perceive it.
2. God exists, is omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent.
3. God would not allow us to be perpetually and fundamentally deceived.
4. We have a natural tendency to assume that our perceptions of external objects stem from and resemble the objects themselves.
5. If the external world did not exist, or if the external world was very different from the way we perceive it, then we would be perpetually and fundamentally deceived.



Clever, isn't it? Unlike most philosophers, who try to prove the existence of God from the facts about of the world, *Descartes tried to prove the existence of the world from facts about God.* (By the way, it's worth noting that Descartes' argument for the external world shows, once again, the high value that Descartes placed upon truth for its own sake. Truth, for Descartes, was so important that it would be incompatible with God's goodness for God to allow us to perpetually entertain false beliefs. Truth, in short, is valued *even by God* and a good God would arrange for us to have true beliefs most of the time.) Descartes' knowledge wall now has pretty much everything we want.



If this worked, it would be *fantastic*. In fact, I think it is fantastic even though it doesn't work. Most philosophers believe that Descartes made a mistake somewhere.

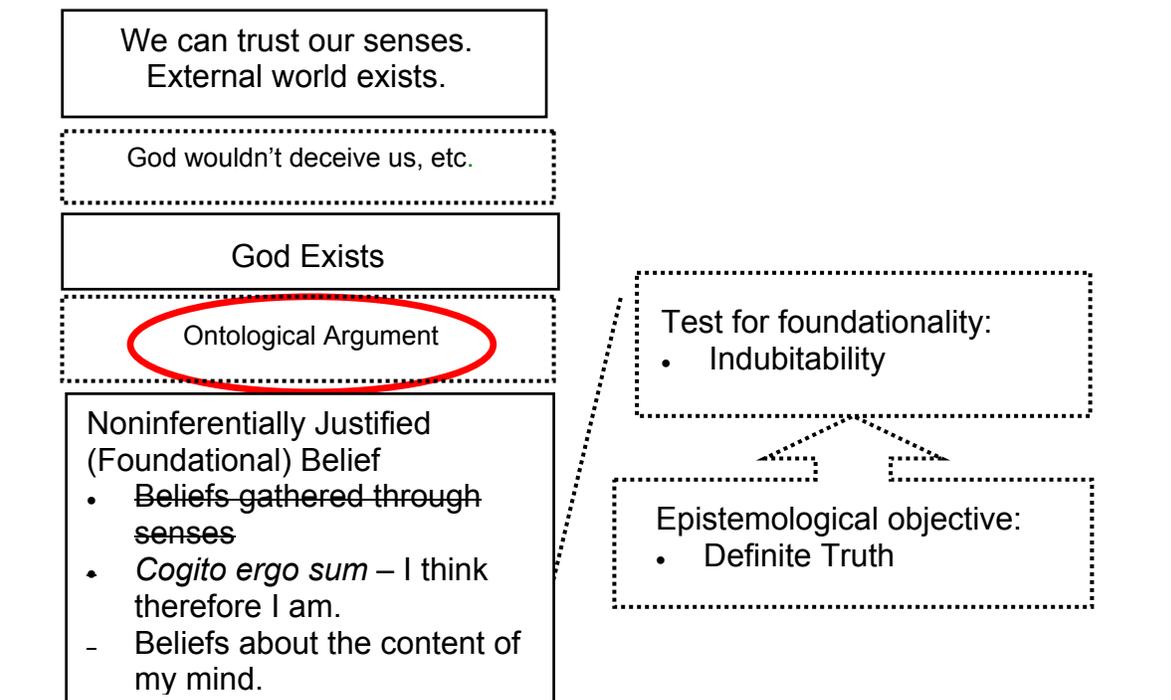


Stop and Think:

Where do you think Descartes goes wrong?

Where Descartes Went Wrong

As we've seen, much of Descartes' epistemological program depends upon the Ontological Argument. If something goes wrong there, then Descartes can't reason from his foundational beliefs to his belief that God exists, and if he can't get to the belief that God exists, then he can't get to the belief that he can trust his senses either.

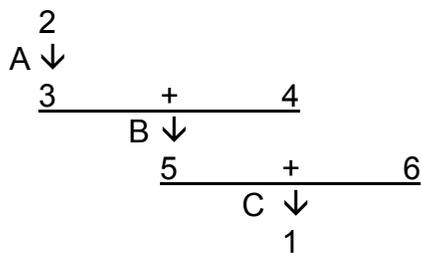


And unfortunately for Descartes, many (and maybe most) philosophers think that the Ontological Argument doesn't work.

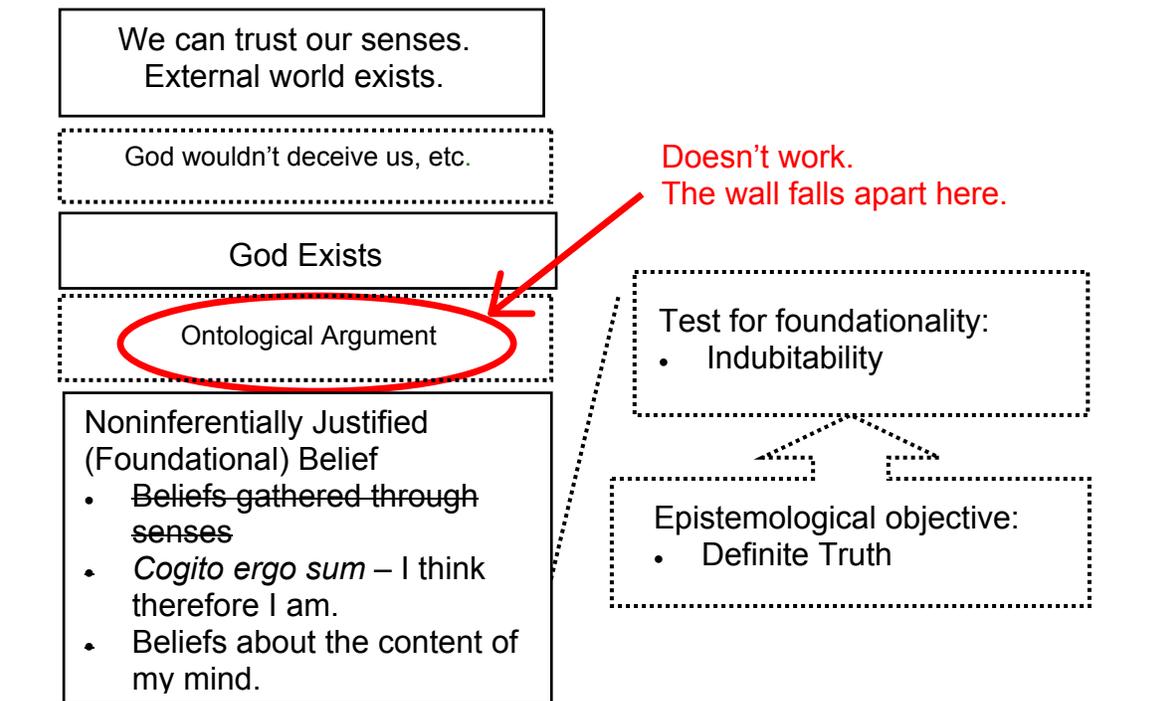
We can see that Descartes' Ontological Argument fails by replacing "God," with "Perfect Island." (This is variation on Guanillo's Perfect Island Objection to Anselm's version of the Ontological Argument.)

Justifying Belief in ~~God~~ Perfect Island

1. Our idea of ~~God~~ the Perfect Island entails that ~~an all-good~~ a sandy-beached, all knowing water-fall-rich and all-powerful magical-wish-granting-beast-possessing ~~God~~ Perfect Island exists.
2. Our minds exist, and all of the ideas in them exist, at least as ideas.
3. We have an idea of ~~God~~ the Perfect Island, and this idea is of an all-perfect being island.
4. By definition, an all-perfect being island has all perfections.
5. Our idea of ~~God~~ the Perfect Island entails that ~~He~~ the island has all perfections.
6. ~~Goodness~~ sandy beaches, ~~knowledge~~ water falls, ~~power~~ magical, wish-granting, ~~beasts~~ and existence are all perfections.

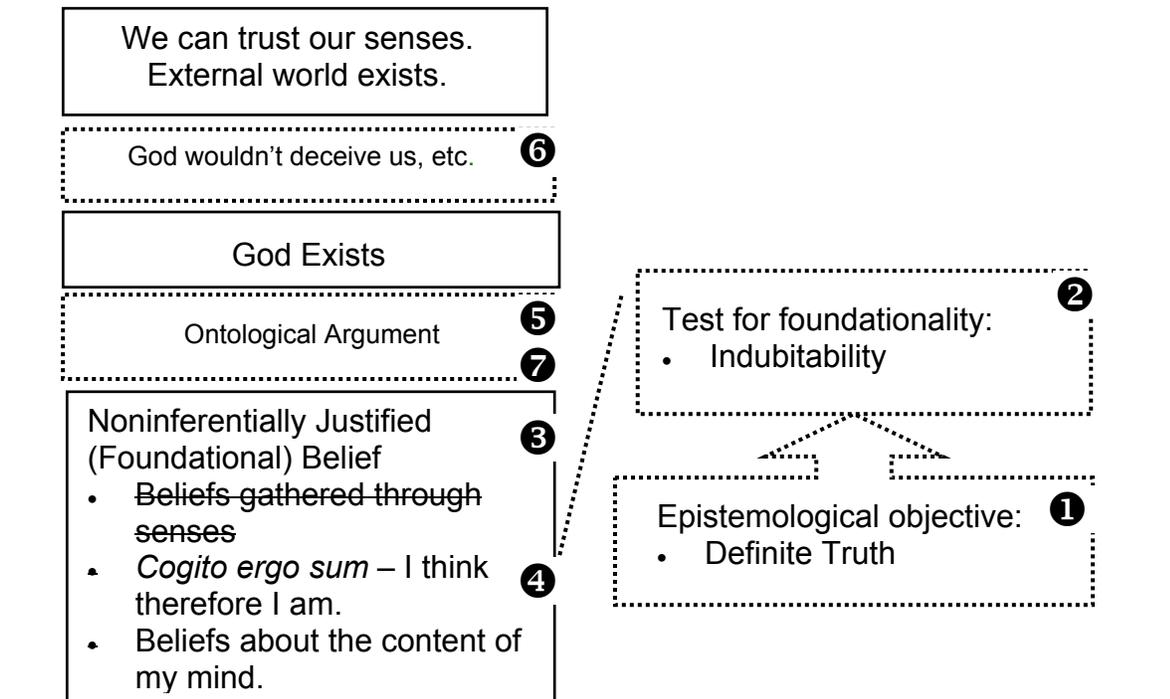


Clearly we can't prove the existence of a Perfect Island this way, so we can't prove the existence of God this way either. And since Descartes failed in his attempt to establish the existence of God, his attempt to prove the existence of the world is unsuccessful too.



Descartes' epistemology, although ultimately unsuccessful, is nonetheless very important because it grapples with serious problems (What can we know for certain? How can we justify trusting our senses?) in a careful and creative fashion. In philosophy (and I think in a lot of other places, too) you don't need to be right if you're wrong in interesting ways. Descartes is *definitely* wrong in interesting ways!

Summary of Descartes

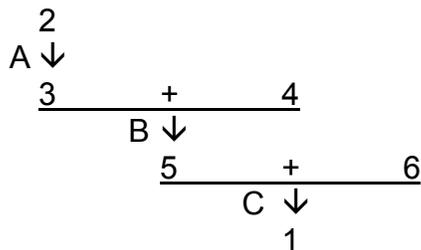


- 1 Descartes had a strong desire to avoid believing falsehoods. To ensure that he avoided the possibility of believing falsehoods, he took “definite truth” as his epistemological objective.
- 2 Because beliefs we can doubt *might* not be true, Descartes’ epistemological objective lead him to adopt a very tough test for fundamentality: “Don’t take anything that it’s possible to doubt as a foundational belief.”
- 3 You can doubt the truth of any belief gathered through your senses (through the dreaming, evil demon, or disembodied space alien hypotheses). Thus, if you’re following Descartes’ lead, you shouldn’t take any belief gathered through your senses as a foundational belief.
In this rejection of sense experience as a source of foundational belief, Descartes shows that he is a rationalist. Rationalism is a school of epistemology characterized by its distrust of sense of experience and preference for reason as the source of justified belief.
- 4 So, if you can doubt all beliefs that stem from your senses, what beliefs *can’t* you doubt? You can’t doubt that you have a mind. Thus, you can take the existence of your mind, and the contents of your internal world, as your foundational belief.
All Descartes can know, at the level of foundational belief, is that he exists as a mind. He can’t know that he has a body or that anything other than his mind

exists. This position is known as solipsism. Solipsism says that the only thing you can know for sure is that you exist as a mind. One of the major questions of modern epistemology has been “How can we escape or avoid solipsism?” In fact, Descartes was not a solipsist because he reasoned from his foundational beliefs to beliefs about the external world.

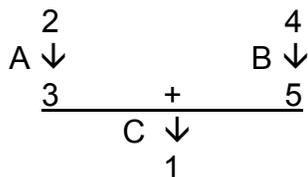
5 Descartes' Ontological Argument

1. Our idea of God entails that an all good, all knowing and all powerful God exists.
2. Our minds exist, and all of the ideas in them exist, at least as ideas.
3. We have an idea of God, and this idea is of an all-perfect being.
4. By definition, an all-perfect being has all perfections.
5. Our idea of God entails that He has all perfections.
6. Goodness, knowledge, power and existence are all perfections.



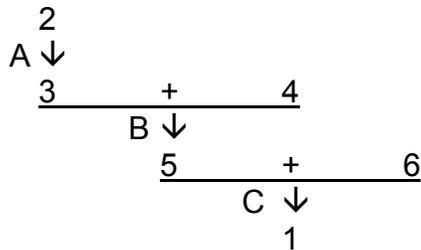
6 Justifying Belief in the External World

1. The external world exists and is roughly the way we perceive it.
2. God exists, is omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent.
3. God would not allow us to be perpetually and fundamentally deceived.
4. We have a natural tendency to assume that our perceptions of external objects stem from and resemble the objects themselves.
5. If the external world did not exist, or if the external world was very different from the way we perceive it, then we would be perpetually and fundamentally deceived.



7 Justifying Belief in ~~God~~ Perfect Island

1. Our idea of ~~God~~ the Perfect Island entails that ~~an all-good~~ a sandy-beached, ~~all-knowing~~ water-fall-rich and ~~all-powerful~~ magical-wish-granting-beast-possessing ~~God~~ Perfect Island exists.
2. Our minds exist, and all of the ideas in them exist, at least as ideas.
3. We have an idea of ~~God~~ the Perfect Island, and this idea is of an all-perfect ~~being~~ island.
4. By definition, an all-perfect ~~being~~ island has all perfections.
5. Our idea of ~~God~~ the Perfect Island entails that ~~He~~ the island has all perfections.
6. ~~Goodness~~ sandy beaches, ~~knowledge~~ water falls, ~~power~~ magical, wish-granting, beasts and existence are all perfections.



Because the ontological argument fails, we'll be able to follow Descartes *into*, but not *out of* solipsism. Solipsism is the black hole from which no epistemologist ever returns. The goal is to avoid getting sucked into it in the first place.