

## The project of the *Meditations*

To build a system of knowledge deductively on absolutely certain foundations

(Following the first rule of the method)

## The project of *Meditations I*

To identify absolutely certain foundations

(Why do we need *absolute* certainty? Why not just rest content with a good likelihood?)

Because the method goes from the top down, from general rules and principles to particulars

Not from the bottom up, from experience of facts to general rules and principles

When you go from the bottom up, and get things wrong, subsequent experience will generally reveal your error at some point

But when you go from the top down, you don't rely on sense experience, and expect that it might constantly deceive you. This is why you start at the top instead, by "looking within" with the "eyes of the mind" in the "light of nature"

And in fact all the mechanical philosophers thought that sense experience is deeply mistaken about the nature of reality.)

What makes something  
“absolutely certain”

It survives even the most extravagant doubt.

## “Principles” of knowledge

Sense experience

Reasoning

Reasons traditionally offered by sceptics for rejecting what is learned through sensory experience:

- The same thing appears differently to different sense organs or to the same sense organ at different times
- The same thing appears differently to different people (e.g., the normal and the insane, the healthy and the sick)

And we have no way of choosing between these different claims that does not beg the question, argue in a circle, or get caught in an infinite regress.

## Weakness of the traditional sceptical arguments

Instances of conflict between the senses are rare and confined to special cases.

It is wrong to extend the predicament we find ourselves in there to all cases.

Insane and ill people are clearly disordered (as proven by the fact that they don't feel well and can't function effectively), so their opinions can't count against those of healthy people.

## Another reason for rejecting sensory knowledge

There is no criterion for distinguishing between waking and dreaming.

And what is experienced in dreams usually does not exist.

So anything I discover by means of my senses could be dreamed up and might not in fact exist.

## Limitations of the dreaming argument

Just as the blind cannot dream in colour,

so none of us could dream of things we have not encountered somewhere, either as parts of ourselves or as parts of something else.

The most we can manage to do when we dream is take real things that we have experienced apart and recombine those pieces in fantastic ways.

But then at least the pieces we work with must be real.



## The most the dreaming argument can do

Make me doubt whether I have hands, arms, eyes, etc.

Make me doubt whether anything I see or touch corresponds to anything that actually exists.

but not make me doubt the existence of things that could give me the ideas that figure in my dreams:

solid things, variously coloured things, variously shaped things, etc.

## A further limitation

The dreaming argument can lead me to doubt whether these “simple and universal things” are actually combined in the ways they seem to be combined in my sensory/dream experience.

But there are truths about quantitative and qualitative relations between these things that do not depend on experience and so are immune to doubt.

e.g. mathematical truths about shapes and numbers as revealed in geometry and arithmetic

[also truths about degrees of resemblance between colours & other qualities]

But sometimes in dreams I dream I perform a calculation and in my dream I am convinced the result is right, though when I wake up and remember it, I realize it is clearly wrong.

**Descartes's Answer:** You don't need to be asleep and dreaming to do this. We make these sorts of mistakes in daily life.

So this objection does not point to anything special about dreaming that makes our rational knowledge open to question.

It simply points to the fact that we can make mistakes in calculation.

Such mistakes are an inadequate ground for distrust because they can be corrected by care and frequent review, as mandated by the 4<sup>th</sup> step of the method.

## Another reason for rejecting rational knowledge

It is widely supposed that there is a supremely powerful being who created us and the world.

A being with such powers could surely have created just us, without creating a world, and proceeded to create ideas of a world in us.

In that case we would get ideas of simple and universal things even though nothing exists that possesses those qualities.

Only our ideas of them would exist, not anything at all like these ideas.

... Moreover, the being could make it so that we *always* make mistakes in reasoning about qualitative and quantitative relations of these things.

But what if there is no such being?

Then whatever caused us to come into existence was something less than a supremely powerful being.

That means that it is even more likely that we were so created as to always make mistakes in reasoning.

Besides, it suffices that the existence of such a being is possible.

The possibility of such a being suffices to establish some doubt of the reliability of reasoning,

and we are looking for things that are beyond any doubt, even the most extravagant.

But wouldn't such a being have to be supremely good and so unwilling to make us defective or allow us to be deceived?

It is at least possible that there might be a powerful *evil* being.

## Limitations of the “deceiver” argument

It cannot lead us to doubt the existence and reality of our ideas as they are in us.

Even a supremely powerful deceiver cannot deceive us into thinking we have an idea without making us think that idea.

That idea has to exist somewhere.

If not outside us, then in us

The ideas may not be combined with one another in anything like the way we think

And the laws governing the relations between the ideas may not be what we imagine

But the ideas themselves must at least be something, and so must have some nature and some cause.

so there is some fact of the matter about what they are like and how they got to be there, whether we ever get it right or not