

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2005
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I. Introduction to Meditation II

In the first meditation, Descartes provides three arguments for doubt which call pretty much all of his beliefs into question.

1. Illusion
2. Dream
3. Deceiver

Note the difference between the deceiver doubt and the *Matrix*, or the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis.

According to those two examples, our thoughts really happen in brains.

But the brains are being fed misleading information.

There is a physical reality, but it is unlike the one we perceive.

On the other hand, the deceiver hypothesis is consistent with the non-existence of the physical world.

We could be disembodied minds, whose thoughts are directly controlled by an independent source.

In terms of the metaphor of the house of knowledge, Descartes has razed (brought down) the house, and now needs to rebuild from new foundations.

In order to rebuild his beliefs, Descartes seeks a single starting point.

Like Archimedes and the lever, pp 23-24.

II. The Cogito

“I am, I exist” must be true whenever I am thinking.

We must be careful with the Cogito, pp 24-5.

It can not be:

1) Whatever thinks, exists.

2) I think.

So, I exist.

This representation, as a logical deduction, would require previous knowledge of the two premises.

Also, it would require previous knowledge that the conclusion follows from the premises.

But we eliminated logical knowledge on the basis of the deceiver doubt.

Thus, the Cogito must be more of a pure intuition.

It establishes the existence of a thinker, as long as the thinker thinks, pp 25-6.

I am a thinking thing, a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines, and senses.

III. After the Cogito

Descartes concludes that he is a thinking thing.

What can he learn from these thoughts?

These thoughts may not tell him anything true about the world outside of him.

But even if the thoughts are false, they still appear to Descartes.

Even if there is no table, we still seem to sense the table, in a privileged and infeasible way.

Note the distinction between sensing and seeming to sense.

Ideas can not be false, considered only as images in our minds.

We can get certainty about our beliefs, but only inside our minds, and not of the outside world.

Descartes has started to rebuild his knowledge, but he is stuck with just the Cogito.

He decides to take another approach.

He starts by considering the physical objects he does not yet know exist.

How did we think we knew about physical objects?

Obviously, through our senses.

But Descartes realizes that this is an error.