

Descartes' *Meditations*



KEY QUESTIONS

How do you know that you know something?

Must you be certain?

How might we define what it means to be certain?

Descartes' *Meditations*

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

- Lived 1596-1650
- Often described as the “father of modern philosophy”
Modern philosophy is distinguished by its focus on *reason*, rather than religion or tradition, as the primary mechanism for understanding the world
- Well known as a mathematician
Descartes is credited with the invention of analytic geometry, and is the namesake of the Cartesian coordinate system

Descartes' *Meditations*

Descartes notices that many of his beliefs are unjustified and/or uncertain.

These include beliefs about the external world and the mind

He's interested in determining which, if any of his beliefs, *are* certain. By doing this, he thinks, he can establish a *foundation* for the rest of his beliefs.

This approach to knowledge is called *foundationalism*.

Descartes' *Meditations*

Foundational pieces of knowledge are distinct from other kinds of knowledge.

They require no justification.

You might call them the end of the chain of explanation.

The foundationalist thinks that once foundational pieces of knowledge are discovered, the rest of what we know can be inferred from these foundational pieces of knowledge.

Why would anyone think that there are pieces of knowledge that require no justification?

Descartes' *Meditations*

How might we discover the foundations of our knowledge?

“I will apply myself earnestly and unreservedly to [the] general demolition of my opinions.”

Descartes proposes to withhold belief from (i.e. doubt) *any* claim about which he is not absolutely certain.

What does it mean to be *certain*?

Descartes' *Meditations*

CARTESIAN CERTAINTY

Descartes has a **strong** criterion for certainty.

A belief is not certain merely when it is *unreasonable to doubt*, but when it is *impossible to doubt*

He aims, then, to undermine the certainty of most of his beliefs by asking if it is possible to doubt them

He doesn't have to examine each of his beliefs individually; he goes after the *foundations* of his Beliefs.

Descartes' *Meditations*

FIRST VICTIM: Beliefs acquired by the senses

Are we sure about the things we see when we're far away from them?

Are we sure about the things we see and touch when we're *close* to them? Am I sure, for example, that I'm really seeing my own hands in front of my face?

No! We're often deceived about this *when we sleep*

Descartes' *Meditations*



SECOND VICTIM: Beliefs about mathematical/logical relationships

Dream skepticism isn't enough to undermine these beliefs, because even when we're dreaming, $2+2=4$.

To undermine these beliefs, we'd need a *deeper* kind of skepticism

Descartes' *Meditations*

THE EVIL DEMON/MATRIX SCENARIO

- P1 If I cannot be certain that I'm not being deceived by the matrix, then I can't be certain that $2+2=4$ (or that I have hands!)
- P2 I cannot be certain that I'm not being deceived by the matrix
- C I cannot be certain that $2+2=4$ (or that I have hands!)

DOES *ANYTHING* SURVIVE?

Descartes' *Meditations*

“The Cogito”: *Cogito, ergo sum*

“After everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement “I am, I exist” is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind.” (25)

**The one thing I cannot doubt is my very existence.
After all, *I'm doubting*, right?**

Descartes' *Meditations*

Problem: The Cogito doesn't really help us all that much

How do I get from the knowledge that I exist to any kind of knowledge about *what kind of a thing I am?*

Descartes' answer: God

Since God exists (Descartes claims) and God's perfections require that he not deceive us (Descartes claims), we can conclude that the knowledge we have about the world is generally reliable.

Are you convinced?