

# From Brains in Vats ....

- To God;
- To a “Malicious Demon;” (or “Evil Demon”)
  - And even to Myself,
- But, with “I am, I exist” (or *Cogito ergo sum*, i.e., “I think therefore I am”), we have found the ultimate foundation.
  - The place where “assumptions” stop.

# Knowledge and Sense Experience

- Empiricism:

- *All* knowledge ultimately rests upon sense experience.
- Our justification for claiming we *know* something must always end up with something we perceive with our senses.
  - “*Seeing is believing.*”

- Rationalism:

- *Not* all knowledge ultimately rests upon sense experience.
- At least some (maybe all!) knowledge can be justified without appealing to sense perception.
  - E.g.,  $2+2=4$ .

# Knowledge and Sense Experience

- **Empiricists:**

- **Locke and Berkeley** (plus others we're not reading)
- Believe that all “substantive” knowledge (i.e., truths about how things are in the world—excluding logical/mathematical truths) can only be known *a posteriori*.

- **Rationalists:**

- **Descartes** (plus others)
- Believe that at least some (maybe all!) “substantive” knowledge about the nature of reality can be known *a priori*.

# René Descartes

- *Meditations on First Philosophy*
  - *In which are demonstrated the existence of God and the distinction between the human soul and body*
- Aside from God, Descartes' goal is to prove that mind is distinct from body (from *matter*), and that we *can* trust our senses about a world outside our minds.
  - i.e., that we are **NOT** brains in vats.

# Metaphysics and Epistemology

- **Metaphysics** is the study of what is real.
- **Epistemology** is the study of what we can know (of what we are *justified* in believing).
- But any belief about what there is (i.e., any claim in metaphysics) pre-supposes that we are *justified* in this belief.
- So, don't beliefs about what is real pre-suppose beliefs about what we can know?

# Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy*

- *Epistemology* is “First Philosophy”
  - Before we can answer questions about “what is,” we must answer questions about “what we can know.”
    - And this may lead to different beliefs about what there really is.
- This is part of what is “new” with Descartes.
  - We must start by looking at our “method” for justifying beliefs.
  - This is Descartes’ contribution to “scientific method.”

# The First Meditation

- *Some years ago I was struck by how many false things I had believed, and by how doubtful was the structure of beliefs that I had based on them. I realized that if I wanted to establish anything in the sciences that was stable and likely to last, I needed—just once in my life—to demolish everything completely and start again from the foundations. .... [T]oday .... I will devote myself, sincerely and without holding back, to demolishing my opinions.*

# The Goal

- Descartes realizes that his *method* for distinguishing true from false beliefs has been faulty.
  - And so now he doesn't know which beliefs are true.
- His strategy is twofold:
  - **Destroy** his old belief structure. Tear it down to its foundation. Then,
  - **Rebuild** this “structure” from the ground up, employing a method that won't lead to false beliefs.



# Is there an “Epistemic Foundation?”

- Descartes is looking for something of which he can be completely certain.
- Like the “postulates” of geometry, these would form a “foundation” from which all other beliefs could be justified.
- His “Method of Doubt” is his search for such a foundation, i.e., some belief that simply *cannot* be doubted.

# How to find a foundation

- Descartes is looking for *certainty*, an epistemic “foundation” on which all other beliefs can rest.
- His “tool” for looking for this foundation is “The Method of Doubt.”
  - Withhold belief from anything doubtable. If we find any such belief, this will be the “foundation” upon which we can build.

# The Method of Doubt

- Since Descartes is looking for *certainty*, he will reject any belief that is even *possibly* false.
  - Not because he believes all such beliefs *are* false, but because he recognizes they are not *certain*.
- Descartes applies this method not to *individual* beliefs, but rather to “sources” of belief.

# Deceived by the Senses

- *“Whatever I have accepted until now as most true has come to me through my senses. But occasionally I have found that they have deceived me, and it is unwise to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.”*
- What follows are various arguments for questioning sense experience.

# The “Dream Argument”

- In dreams, my senses deceive me.
- There are no “certain marks” by which to distinguish dreams from wakefulness.
  - I can’t tell for sure, right now, that I am not dreaming.
- So, since I can never be sure, right now, that I am awake, I should never trust my current sense experience.

# Limitations

- *“Still, it has to be admitted that the visions that come in sleep are like paintings: they must have been made as copies of real things; so at least ... general kinds of things ... must be real and not imaginary. For even when painters try to depict sirens and satyrs, they simply jumble up the limbs of different kinds of real animals .... If they do succeed in thinking up something completely fictitious and unreal, ... at least the colours used in the picture must be real.”*

# Dreams

- The “stuff” of dreams comes from waking experience.
- The “Dream Argument” undermines my belief that I am awake right now.
- But even if I am now dreaming, these dreams must be based on previous waking experiences.
- So, the Dream argument doesn’t imply that I might *always* have been dreaming.

# Limitations

- The “Dream Argument” undermines my belief in the existence and/or properties of *particular things*.
  - If I’m dreaming now, you might not be here. Maybe I’m dreaming that there are such things as students!
- But since dreams are based on waking experience, the “Dream Argument” does not *itself* undermine beliefs in “general truths” such as the existence of things with shape and color.
- But, there is more to come! ....



# Is there a God?

- 1) Either I was, or was not, created by an all powerful being (God).
- 2) If I was, she could have made me with defective senses—in which case I shouldn't trust them.
- 3) If I wasn't, then it could be that I am simply defective—and so shouldn't trust them.
- 4) In either case, I should not trust my senses.

# Could God “Deceive” Me?

- Descartes continues by questioning whether or not God might “deceive” him by giving him senses that were always wrong.
- This is a very interesting question, but he seems to just drop it. He thinks he can get the same results without supposing that it is (an all good) *God* who does the “deceiving.”

# The “Malicious Demon”

- There could be a “malicious demon” (or “Evil Genius”) who directly causes my sense experiences, even though there is no external world.
  - A being powerful enough to directly cause my mental states, but not, like God, all good.
  - This “Malicious Demon” thought experiment functions much like the “Brain in a Vat” story.
- So, I should not trust *any* of my sense experiences.

# If there is a “Malicious Demon”

- Then I cannot trust *anything* I know through the senses. As far as I know, there is nothing in the world but me and the malicious demon.
- But, must there be a “malicious demon?” Is the possibility of such a being my *only* reason for not trusting my senses?

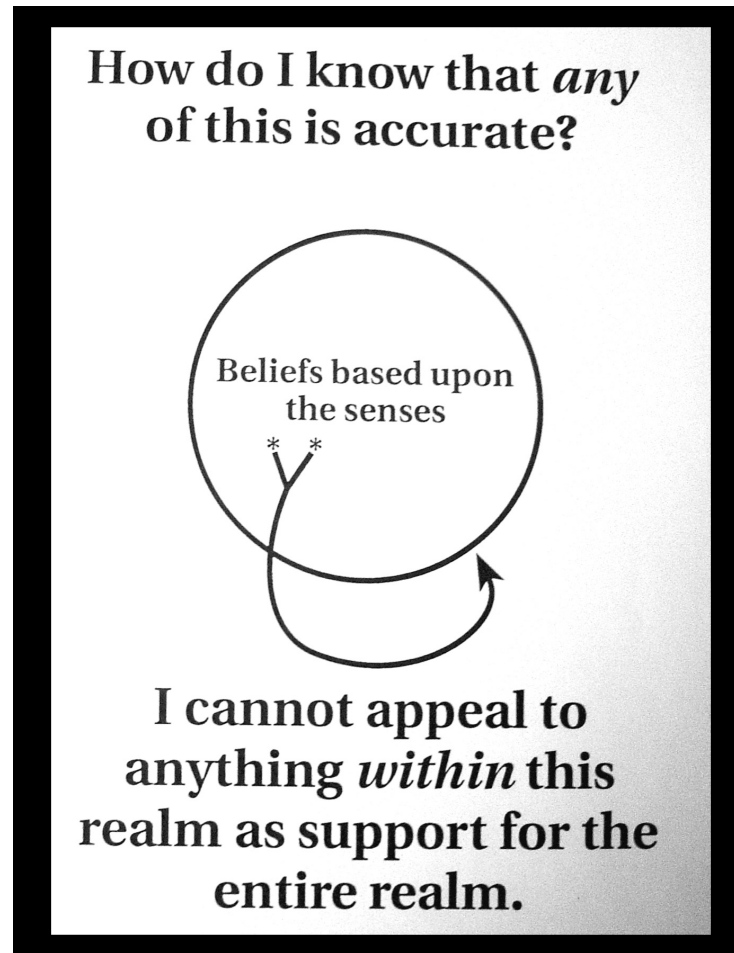
# Second Meditation

- *I will suppose, then, that everything I see is fictitious. .... So what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain! Still, how do I know that there isn't something ... a God [or some other being, like the "Malicious Demon"] who gives me the thoughts I am now having? But why do I think this, since I might myself be the author of these thoughts?*
  - *But then doesn't it follow that I am, at least, **something**?*

# The Self-Deception Argument:

- 1) It is possible that *I myself* am the cause of my own experiences, and so that I (seem to) “see” objects, even though no objects exist.
- 2) So, I should not trust my sense experiences.

# The Problem: I cannot *use* sense experience to *justify* sense experience.



# Descartes' *Epistemic Foundation*:

- I cannot doubt that I exist.
  - If I doubt my existence, I prove it, as I must exist in order to doubt.
- “*I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it or mentally conceive it.*”



# ***“I am, I exist.”***

- This is the phrase Descartes uses in the *Meditations*. But he wrote another parallel book piece called “Discourse on Method.”
  - In that piece, he made the same point this way:
- ***I think therefore I am.***
  - Or, as it is stated in the original Latin;
  - ***Cogito ergo sum.***

# What comes next?

- Having demonstrated *that* he is, Descartes goes on to question *what* he is—i.e., what *kind* of thing a “thinking thing” is.
  - We will come back to this issue next chapter.
- He then provides a long argument that there is a world outside his mind. But many find that argument unconvincing.

# Is anyone out there?

- If one accepts the “destructive” part of Descartes—his undermining of sense experience, but
- Rejects the “constructive” part—where he argues for an “external” world—one is left with
- ***Solipsism***: The view that as far as I know, *I* (or my consciousness) *am the only thing that exists*.
  - To be clear, Descartes *rejects* this view. But some people argue this is where his position leads.