Descartes’ Meditations

Descartes’ First Meditation

- Four bulldozers of doubt:
  - I can’t trust my senses
  - I could be crazy
  - I could be dreaming
  - A malicious demon could be out to fool me.
- Is there anything you’d stake your life on?

Descartes’ Second Meditation

- Is there anything I can’t doubt?
- I can’t doubt that: I doubt.
- Try it: I doubt that I doubt.
- OK, but then: I doubt that I doubt.
- Self-certifying process:
  Doing it makes it so.
- So, “I doubt” is absolutely certain.

Is anything left standing?

The bulldozer itself.
The bulldozer can’t demolish itself!

Self-affirming statement

John Madden:
“There isn’t a person in this stadium who’s left yet.”
Self-undermining statement:

- Teacher (calling roll): Johnny?
- Johnny: I am absent.

Descartes’ Argument

- I doubt.
- ∴ I think.  Cogito
- ∴ I exist.  Ergo, sum.

Descartes’ Argument

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>I doubt.</th>
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Evaluating Descartes’ Argument:

- If I am dreaming, or the evil genius is deceiving me—then there is a “me” that is being deceived!
- But “I” exist, only as a thinking thing. He hasn’t proven the existence of his body.
- Has he proven that you exist, as a thinking thing?
Evaluating Descartes’ Argument:

• Only proves his own existence:
  • “Solipsism” (solus=alone + ipsi=self).
  • The Problem of “Other Minds”.
  • You have to prove your own existence.
  • Who/What else can prove their own existence?

Evaluating Descartes’ Argument:

• Are you absolutely certain that he exists?
  • What kind of proof is that?
  • Doesn’t a proof have to convince everyone?
  • A proof has to be objective.
  • Descartes’ proof is subjective.

Evaluating Descartes’ Argument:

• “I doubt” and “I think”:
  • Where did the “I” come from?
  • Is it a metaphysical entity or is it just a grammatical convenience?

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg
(1742-1799)

“We should say ‘it thinks’, just as we say ‘it rains.’
To say ‘I think’ already assumes too much.”
Evaluating Descartes’ Argument:

• We know with absolute certainty that there is doubting and thinking.
• But do we know with absolute certainty that there is a unified consciousness that is doing the thinking?

Buddhist conception of the self:
The notion of a unified self is an illusion.

David Hume:
Scottish Philosopher (1711-1776)
The self is: “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions.”

Descartes’ Meditations
Has Descartes found an absolutely solid foundation to build on?
His own existence as a thinking thing.