From Brains in Vats ....

- To God;
- To a “Malicious 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.
Review
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.
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. .... Today .... 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 “axioms” 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.
Skeptical Arguments
Reviewed last time

• In dreams, my senses deceive me.
• Whether or not I am created by an all-powerful God, by senses might be mistaken.
• An evil demon might be deceiving me.
  – (This is Descartes’ version of the brain in a vat story.)

• But do I really need one of these hypotheses to doubt 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.

How do I know that *any* of this is accurate?

Beliefs based upon the senses

I cannot appeal to anything *within* this realm as support for the entire realm.
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 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 (in *Meditations* 3 thru 6) 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.
What (i.e., what things) do we actually know via sense experience?
If Sense Experience is Doubtable

• Can we really trust that there are physical/material objects in the world?

• Do we really “see” (or directly perceive) material objects?
  – Descartes thinks the answer is “no.”

• But don’t we directly perceive something?
  – Descartes thinks the answer is “yes.”

• So, what do we directly perceive in sense experience?
Descartes’ Third Meditation

- His aim is to offer an argument for the existence of God, based simply on what (after the first two Meditations) he knows with certainty.
- He begins by reviewing:
  - His doubts, and
  - What he now knows, and
  - What he need not doubt.
“I will now shut my eyes, block my ears, cut off all my senses. I will regard all my mental images of bodily things as empty, false and worthless .... I will ... examine myself more deeply, and try ... to know myself more intimately. I am a thing that thinks, i.e that doubts, affirms, denies, ... [etc]. This thing also ... has sensory perceptions; ... even if the objects of my sensory experience ... don’t exist outside me, still sensory perception ..., considered simply as mental events, certainly do occur in me.”
What this means

• I can no longer (for now) trust my senses.
• But I know that I am “a thing that thinks.”
  – This means a thing that has conscious mental states. Descartes uses the word “thinks” very broadly, to cover all kinds of consciousness.
• I know I also have “sensory perceptions,” even if the “objects” of these experiences do not exist “outside me.”
I previously accepted as perfectly certain and evident many things ...—the earth, sky, stars, and everything else that I took in through the senses—but in those cases what I perceived clearly were merely the ideas or thoughts of those things that came into my mind .... But I used also to believe that my ideas came from things outside that resembled them in all respects. .... [This] was false; or anyway if it was true it was not thanks to the strength of my perceptions.
“When ideas are considered solely in themselves and not taken to be connected to anything else, they can’t be false; for whether it is a goat that I am imagining or a chimera, either way it is true that I do imagine it. .... All that is left—the only kind of thought where I must watch out for mistakes—are judgments. And the mistake they most commonly involve is to judge that my ideas resemble things outside me.’
What I *really* knew vs. what I *thought* I knew

• I know that my ideas (or “sensations”) exist
  – Whether of “the earth,” “goats.” or mere “chimera” (i.e., non-existential beings).
  – I know these ideas (“mental contents”) exist because I directly (Immediately) perceive them.

• But I simply *assume* that my ideas “come from” things outside me, and that they “resemble” those things “in all respects.”
  – This is what makes “mistakes” possible.
What do I see?
What do I *immediately* perceive?

“Normal” Sense Experience

“The Physiology of Perception

“Brain in a Vat” Experience

Experience

Vat

Brain

Computer
Descartes’ (Locke’s too) Theory of Perception: The mind perceives ideas which are caused by and represent real objects.
Descartes, Locke, Berkeley

• All three accept (without much argument) that what we directly or immediately know are only “ideas” or other “mental contents.”

• Descartes argues (in Med. 3-6) that there is a world outside our mind.

• Locke accepts (without argument) that there is such a world, but claims that our sensations do not always resemble it.

• Berkeley argues that there is no world outside mind (yours, mine, and God’s).