

From Brains in Vats

- To God;
 - To a “Evil Genius;”
- And even to Myself;
 - What can know?
 - What can we doubt?

The search for certainty

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. [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.

Descartes seeks an

- **Epistemic Foundation**
 - Knowledge claims that are absolutely certain
 - like the postulates of geometry.
 - From such (certain) claims, all others truths can be derived.
 - His “Method of Doubt” is his search for such a foundation, i.e., some belief that simply *cannot* be doubted.

Method of Doubt

- A proposed method for discovering truths that are absolutely certain:
 - Withhold belief (for or against) from ...
 - everything that is even *possibly* false,
 - that is, from everything that is doubttable.
 - (Because, if it can be doubted, it is not certain.)

Descartes

- Applies this “Method of Doubt” to
 - *sources* of beliefs (like the senses) rather than to individual beliefs about specific things.
- So, he will try to show that
We should not trust our senses.

Descartes' Goal

- His goal here is not, in the end, to argue that our senses never provide *knowledge*.
 - He will spend the rest of the *Meditations* trying to argue that they *do*,
- His goal here is to show us that the senses do not provide *certainty*
 - And so that belief in them needs to be *argued for*.

Challenges to the Senses

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.

Dreams

Dream Argument

- In dreams, my senses deceive me.
 - We “see” stuff that isn’t there.
- There are no certain marks to distinguish dreaming from wakefulness.
 - We can’t tell for sure, at any moment, that we are awake and not dreaming.
- So, since I can never be certain I am not dreaming right now, *I should not trust my senses.*

Dream “*visions ... [are] like paintings....*”

- In this “argument,” Descartes is questioning our belief that we can know (with certainty) whether we are dreaming or awake.
- He is *not* (at least, not *yet*) questioning the veracity of waking experience.
 - For *that*, he needs another argument.

Limitations of the Dream Argument

- *“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,
 - which he has not yet challenged.

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.
- The following arguments try to undermine even these more general beliefs based upon the senses.

What created me (and my senses)?

The God Argument

- 1) Either I was, or was not, created by an all powerful being (God).
- 2) If I was, she could have made me so that I (mistakenly) *think* I see material objects, even though no material objects exist.
- 3) If I wasn't, she might have created me incorrectly, so that I think I see material objects, even though none exist.
- 4) In either case, ***I should not trust my senses.***

Could God “Deceive” Me?

- Descartes continues with this discussion about 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 the same results without supposing that it is (an all good) *God* who does the “deceiving.”

An Evil Genius?

Evil Genius Argument

- It is possible there is a “evil genius” (or some other malicious being) who causes me to have “sensations” of material objects, even though no material objects exist.
 - (It is possible that I am a brain in vat, or that I’m in “the matrix,” and my “sensations” are being caused by a computer.)
- *So I should not trust my senses.*

Second Meditation

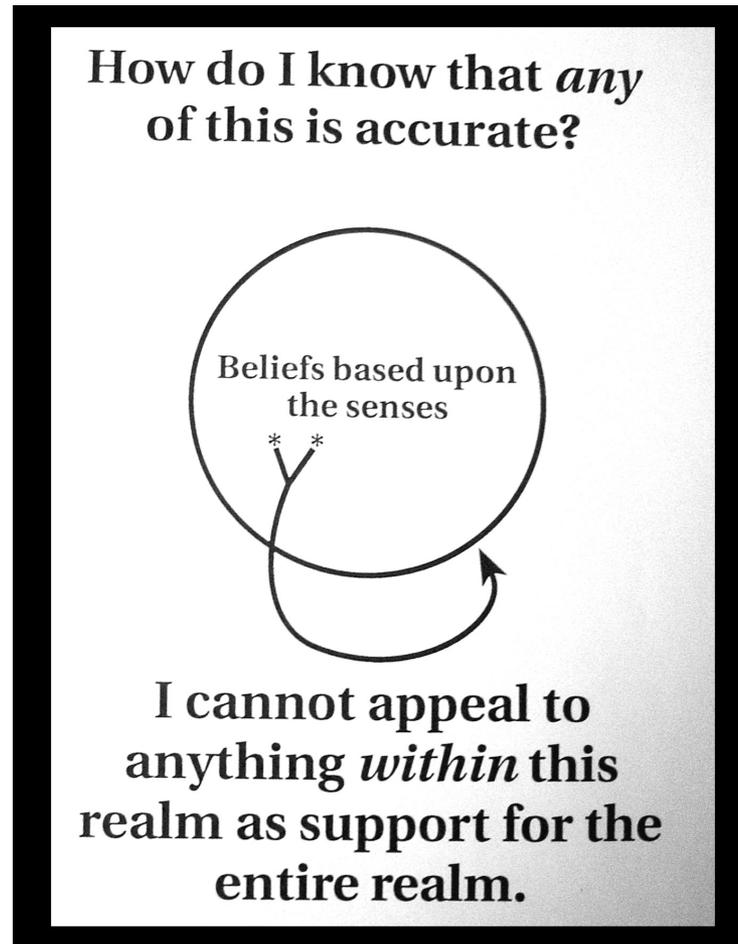
- *I will suppose, then, that everything I see is fictitious. So what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain! Still, how do I know that there isn't something ... a God [or some other being] who gives me the thoughts I am now having? But why do I think this, since I might myself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

Am I the cause of my “sensations?”

The Self-Deception Argument

- It is possible that *I myself* am the cause of my own “sensations,” and so it *seems* to me that I see material objects, even though no material objects exist.
- ***So I should not trust my senses.***

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



Second Meditation

- “.... *Still, how do I know that there isn't something ... a God [or some other being] 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?**”*

Certainty at last!

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.

*What do we directly know by the
senses?*

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.

Med 3: Paragraph 1

“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.”

Med. 3, Paragraph 3

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.

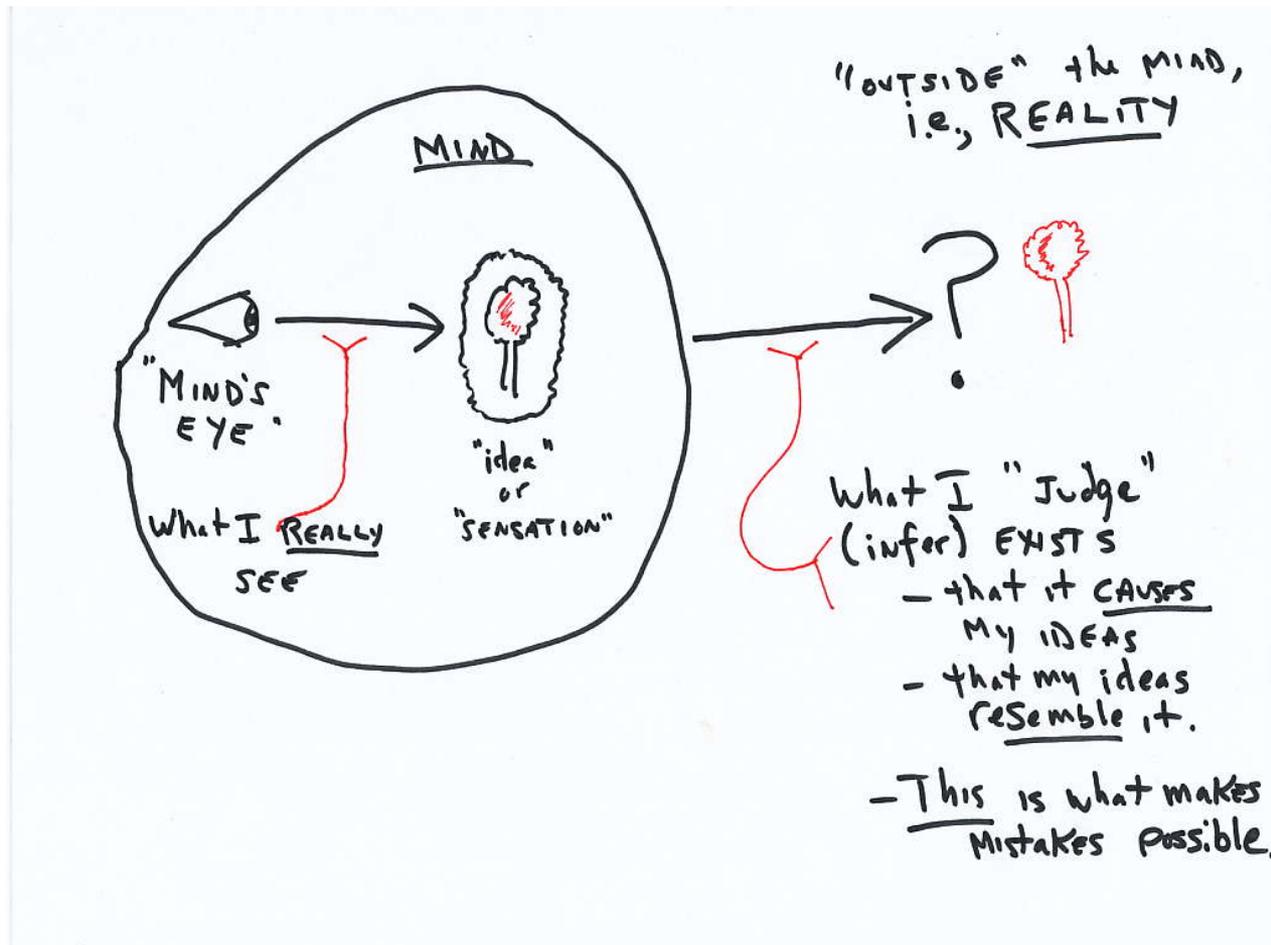
Med. 3, Paragraph 6

“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-existent 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.

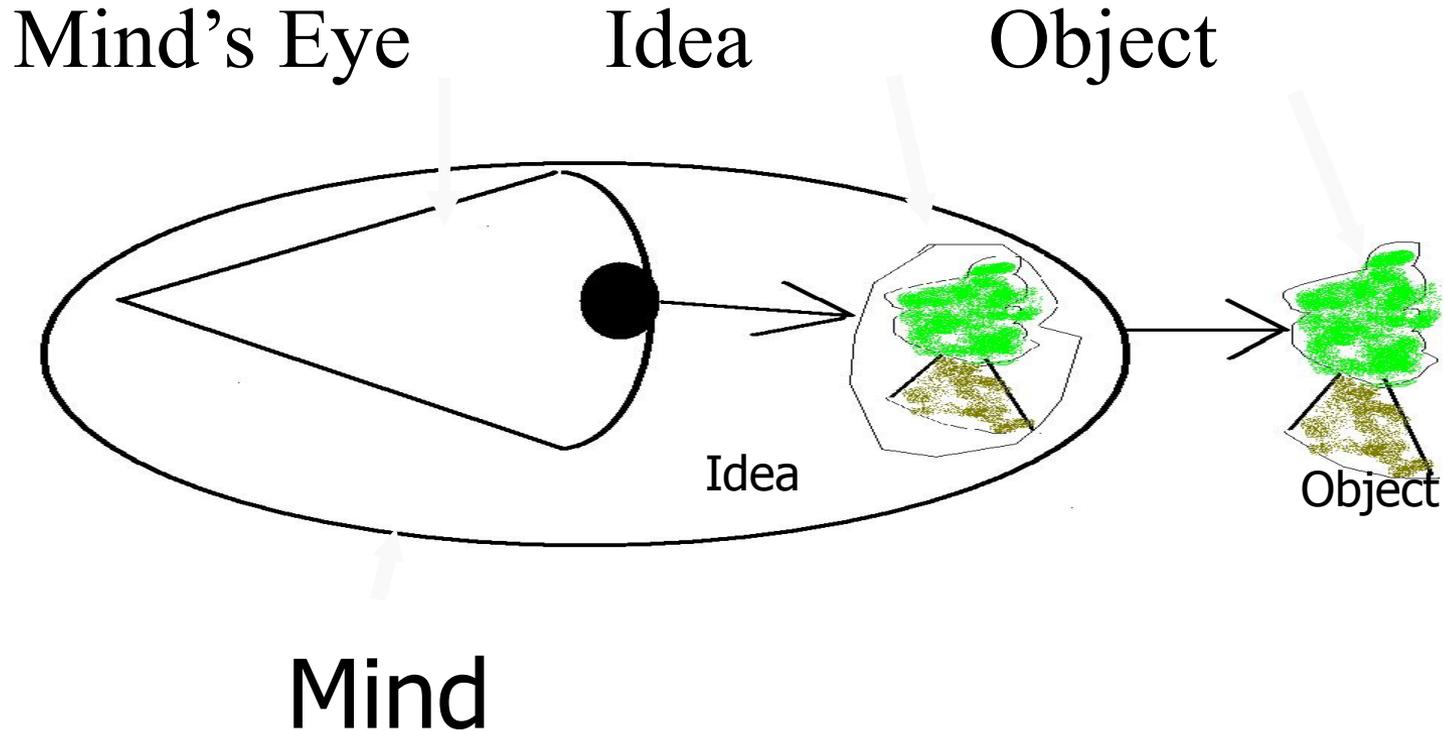
Descartes' Analysis of Sense Experience



Hey, Descartes, Whadayaknow?

- I know that I exist.
 - I know that I am a “thinking thing,” a “mind.”
 - i.e., the subject of conscious experiences.
 - Med. 2 and 6 argue that this “mind” is non-material.
- I know I have *ideas* or *sensations* “in” my mind.
 - These “mental contents” are what I “directly” or “immediately” perceive.
- I “judge” (i.e., *infer*) that these mental contents are caused by things that exist outside my mind, and that my ideas “resemble them.”
 - This is what Med. 4-6 attempt to prove.

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).

Terminology

- **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., $2+2=4$.

Who's What?

- **Descartes is a rationalist.**
 - He believes that there are some things we can know—some beliefs that we can justify—without appealing to sense experience.
- **Locke and Berkeley are empiricists.**
 - They think all knowledge arises from sense experience.
 - But they accept Descartes' claim that what we directly know, via the senses, are merely “ideas” or “sensations” that exist in the mind.