

UNIT 5

DESCARTES'S RATIONALISM

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1. Introduction

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. It tackles such questions as: What is the nature of knowledge? What is the nature of truth? What is scientific knowledge?

There are two traditional positions in epistemology: rationalism and empiricism.

Rationalism is the view that knowledge derives from reason. (You should not expect yourself to know what this means now, but you will know what it means toward the end of this unit.) Many rationalists thought that knowledge is innate and rediscovered by the mind. Rationalists include Parmenides, Plato, René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Leibniz.

Empiricism is the view that knowledge derives from experience. Empiricists thought that there is no innate knowledge – all knowledge is acquired through the senses. Aristotle is often considered to be the precursor of empiricism, but the position thrived primarily on the British Islands and was developed by: Roger Bacon, Francis Bacon, John Locke, Bishop George Berkeley, David Hume.

Much of epistemology may be seen as arising out of the so-called skeptical challenge. Skepticism is the view that we do not have any knowledge at all. Contrary to appearances, skepticism is not a silly position – we will be concerned here both with appreciating just why skepticism is not just plain foolish and with understanding a very elaborate response given to the skeptics by Descartes.

2. Skepticism

The skeptic claims:

(s) I do not know anything.

Skepticism will, no doubt (no pun intended), seem a little silly. It turns out, however, that (s) is not at all a silly claim to make. We can appreciate it in three steps. First, we need to distinguish plain skepticism from self-defeating skepticism. Second, we need to better understand what knowledge is. Third, we need to look at some of the reasons skeptics have given for their position.

2.1. Self-defeating Skepticism

First, we need to distinguish (s) from another formulation of the skeptical claim:

(S) I know that I do not know anything.

(S) is a silly claim to make – it is self-defeating. In making claim (S) one is admitting that there is at least one piece of knowledge one possesses, which contradicts what one claims to be knowing, viz. that one knows nothing. But in making claim (s), the skeptic is not claiming to *know* anything. So, (s) is at least not self-defeating.

2.2. The Concept of Knowledge

The skeptical claim (s) might seem silly for yet another reason. We might want to exclaim “But surely you know a lot of things! You know that the Sun sets every day. You know that cows give milk. And so on. And so forth.”

The second and very important step involves understanding the concept of knowledge. Philosophers have traditionally offered a tripartite analysis of knowledge as *justified true belief*. Consider the three components of the concept in turn:

(1) When John knows that the bunny rabbit is different from the hare, John also believes that the bunny rabbit is different from the hare. When Natasha knows that Sergei has an eye for her, she also believes that he does. **One cannot know something without believing it.**

(2) The concept of knowledge is intrinsically bound with the concept of truth: **one cannot know something that is false.** If (it is true that) Jenny *knows* that her table is made of mahogany then her table is made of mahogany. (If her table were not made of mahogany, we could not say that she *knows* that her table is made of mahogany, but only that she *believes* that her table is made of mahogany.)

To convince yourself that knowledge and truth are related, take the following test:

Bubba thinks that our planetary system has seven planets. Would we say that

(a) he *knows* that there are seven planets in our system, or that

(b) he *believes* that there are seven planets in our system?

Your answer should be (b). If you happened to answer (a), it is probably because you did not distinguish carefully between the claim that (c) Bubba *believes (thinks) that he knows* that there are seven planets in our system, from (a) – the claim that he actually *does know* that there are seven planets in our system. [While (c) may, though need not be, true of Bubba, it does not undermine the thesis that one cannot know something that is false. (c) is irrelevant to our thesis. It would be relevant to a different thesis: that one cannot believe that one knows something that is false. And indeed this different thesis is false: one can believe that one knows something even though it is false.]

(3) Already Plato recognized that the concept of true belief is not identical to the concept of knowledge. Something is still missing. Plato argued that one may acquire a belief that happens to be true, quite by chance, in quite the wrong way, in which case it would not qualify as knowledge.

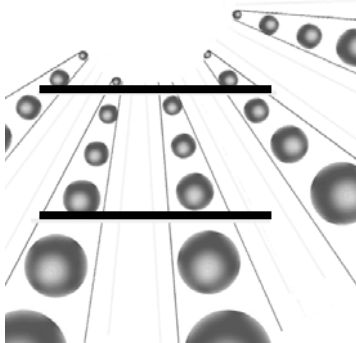
Suppose that Bubba upon being told that the Solar System does not have seven planets decides to find out how many planets it has. He writes numbers from 1 to 99 – excluding 7 – on small pieces of paper and throws them all into an urn. Then he mixes it thoroughly and claims that the number he pulls out will have to be the number of the planets that the Solar System has. He does so and pulls out the piece of paper with the number 9. He thus comes to hold a true belief, but we would not say that Bubba now knows that the Solar System has nine planets. He believes so, his belief is true, but something is missing. He came to hold the belief in the wrong way – his belief is not justified. The method of mixing pieces of paper to find out how many planets there are in the Solar System is worthless as a method. It was a big fluke that he drew the correct number.

Indeed in the case of what we consider as a paradigm of knowledge today, viz. in the case of scientific knowledge, a lot of effort is put in making sure that the claims one is making are justified properly. This is why scientists are careful to follow methodological precepts.

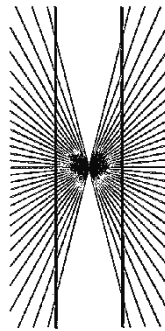
But how does this all help in understanding skepticism? Well, in making the claim that we do not know anything, the skeptics are not claiming that we do not believe anything. This would be an outrageous claim indeed, for, of course, we believe a lot of things. The skeptics are challenging the other two conditions of knowledge. Indeed a lot of skeptical arguments are designed to show that we are *not justified* in believing what we do.

2.3. The Argument for Skepticism

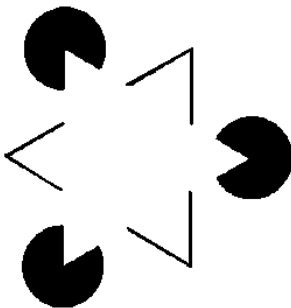
Already the Ancient skeptics (like Pyrrho) noted that our senses frequently deceive us. We suffer from visual and other illusions, hallucinations, etc. Here are some examples:



Which of the horizontal lines is longer?



Are the vertical lines straight?



Do you see the triangle that is not there?



Is this an old or a young woman? [You can actually see both, though not at the same time.]

But if, in these (and other) situations, senses deceive us, why then should we trust them?

If a shop owner cheated you, giving inexact change, you would most likely not visit his store again, or at least you would not trust him next time. If a boy cheated on his girlfriend, she might forgive him once, twice, three times, but after the fourth time, she would be certainly justified in not trusting him again!

Why then do we trust our senses?! We should not! We are simply foolish or irrational in doing so.

In other words, the skeptics thus show that since our knowledge comes from experience and since senses deceive us – are not trustworthy – it follows that our knowledge is not justified, and hence that it is not knowledge, but mere belief!

3. Descartes's Response to Skepticism

One of the main tasks that Descartes (1596-1650) undertook in his work *Meditations* was to meet the skeptical challenge. Descartes was writing in the 17th century and it is worthwhile to point out the time that he was writing in because of the overall intellectual atmosphere. This was a period of the Renaissance, which grew out of the collapse of the Medieval certainties. One by one the beliefs held by the Medievals to be quite certain began to be challenged. Much of it was due to scientific discoveries (Copernicus challenged the Ptolemaic system and claim that the Earth is not the center of the universe; Galileo challenged the Aristotelian and commonsensical physics; etc.), due to the voyages that led to the “discoveries” of new, previously unknown by the Europeans, lands (including the Americas, of course), and due to Reformation, which challenged the absolute establishment of the Church. This was also the time where the Ancient philosophers were began to be studied more thoroughly. During the Medieval time only Aristotle was being read and incorporated into Scholastic philosophy (in particular in the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas), though there were philosophers also influenced by Plato (St. Augustine, for instance). However, the general atmosphere was rather dismissive of the Ancient philosophers, who were thought to be barbarians. This has changed in the period of the Renaissance, where in particular the Ancient skeptics were began to be treated more seriously.

In this historical context, Descartes's undertaking seems even more heroic. For Descartes aims to meet the skeptical challenge by showing that, appearances to the contrary, there is certain knowledge that is immune to skeptical doubts. In fact, Descartes held a stronger conception of knowledge than that mentioned above. I will begin by describing Descartes's project and presuppositions in a little more detail.

3.1. Descartes's Project

Cartesian Conception of Knowledge

Descartes believes that knowledge involves three components: belief, truth, and certainty. We may believe things with various degrees of certainty. We may believe that bachelors are unmarried with a high degree of certainty. We may believe that we will eat pizza for lunch on Tuesday with a moderate degree of certainty. We may believe that we will fail a philosophy course (on the ground that a black cat ran across our path) with a low degree of certainty. Real knowledge, according to Descartes must be *absolutely certain*, it must be absolutely immune to doubt. (This is related to Descartes's foundationalism: only absolutely certain knowledge can lay at the foundation of our system of knowledge.)

Descartes's Rationalism

Descartes believed that genuine knowledge derives from reason. This claim is *prima facie* strange. Let's distinguish two kinds of knowledge: mathematical and empirical. Empirical knowledge is simply our knowledge of what goes on in the world. We know that birds fly, that this chair has a broken leg, that objects fall to the ground with a gravitational force, etc. Mathematical knowledge is the knowledge of mathematical truths, that $2+2=4$, that the angles of a triangle add up to 180° , etc. Descartes's claim is understandable with respect to mathematical knowledge. How do we know that $2+2=4$? Surely not by observation (not in the way in which we observe

that this chair has a broken leg, or that daisy is missing a petal). We know it by kind of thinking about it (inspecting our mind, if you will) and it kind of making sense to us – in fact so much sense that we could not possibly imagine what it could mean to think that $2+2=5$.

But how can our knowledge that this chair has a broken leg derive from reason? On the face of things, I know that this chair has a broken leg because I see it with my own eyes. In general, empirical knowledge appears to ultimately depend on the testimony of our senses (our own senses – in the case of mundane empirical knowledge, or our collective senses – in the case of scientific knowledge). It appears unintelligible at first sight that my knowing that this chair has a broken leg derives from reason.

And yet, this is exactly what Descartes claims, though it takes a while to appreciate why. The first thing to understand is that there is a difference between claiming that one *believes* that the chair has a broken leg and that one *knows* that the chair has a broken leg. The testimony of the senses may suffice for belief but it does not suffice for knowledge.

Descartes's Foundationalism

We seem prone to thinking that we not only believe but know many things. As I am writing this: I know that there is a computer screen in front of me, that I am drinking tea, that my fingers tap on a keyboard, that I am thinking hard about what next to write, etc. The skeptics have attacked such and other commonsense claims to knowledge as not living up to knowledge. The skeptics would want to claim that I do not know but merely believe that there is a computer screen in front of me, that I am drinking tea, that my fingers tap on a keyboard, that I am thinking hard about what next to write, etc. Descartes's project aims to rescue us from the skeptics' attack.

Descartes aims to construct a system (you could think of a house) of knowledge, where all kinds of knowledge we have will find their place. What we know about the world will have its place (its room in the house), what we know about ourselves will have another place. And there might be subspecies of knowledge that will be appropriately allocated. Descartes uses a particular procedure to build such a system. He thinks that he must first lay the foundations, which must be secure and strong enough to support the rest of the house. He will seek knowledge that is absolutely certain, that cannot possibly be doubted, to lay the foundation for the house of knowledge. Once the foundation is laid, he will see what else can be constructed. He will see whether we can know other things on the basis of *foundational knowledge*. (You can jump again and look at Figure 2 if you are curious, but you will see the connections only when you read carefully.) Descartes was a foundationalist because he believed that all knowledge can be grounded in foundational knowledge that must be certain.

(His model here is Euclid's geometry. However, Euclid was not trying to build a system of all knowledge, but only of geometrical knowledge. Euclid begins by laying down axioms (foundations), which state obvious geometrical truths. On that basis, he then *deduces* all theorems of geometry.)

3.2. How would Descartes's Project Allow Him to Reject Skepticism?

The skeptic challenges various ordinary claims to knowledge. If Descartes can show that he can accommodate such claims to knowledge in his system of knowledge (where they will be suitably related to the foundations: certain knowledge) this will give him a powerful argument against the skeptic.

Just to give you a sense of what Descartes is after, let us construct a mini-house (which Descartes would ultimately reject as lacking a proper foundation). Let us *suppose* that our foundation is the claim that

(F) My perceptual beliefs are always true (veridical).

If we take (F) as our foundation, then we can infer that the beliefs I listed above which the skeptic challenges (that there is a computer screen in front of me, that I am drinking tea, that my fingers tap on a keyboard, that I am thinking hard about what next to write, etc.) are in fact not only what I believe, but also -- contra the skeptic -- what I know. I know that there is a computer screen in front of me because (i) it looks to me as if there is a computer screen in front of me (I have a perceptual belief that there is a computer screen in front of me), and (F) my perceptual beliefs are always true. Likewise I know that I am drinking tea, because (ii) I feel like I am drinking tea (I have a perceptual belief that I am drinking tea) and (F) my perceptual beliefs are always true. And so on.

In this way, I can infer various pieces of knowledge from what I accepted as the foundation. In particular, I can infer that I know those things that the skeptic challenged.

This is the shape that Descartes's response to the skeptic will take. Descartes will show how one can derive the claims to knowledge (traditionally challenged by skeptics) from the foundational certain knowledge.

Of course, Descartes would not accept (F) as the foundation. Why? Surely, (F) is not even true, my perceptual beliefs are sometimes false (when I am hallucinating, for example). And so, it is also not certain.

4. The Quest for Certain Foundations

4.1. The Method of Doubt

The foundation of knowledge from which all other knowledge could be inferred must be secure, it must be certain. (The more secure the foundation, the stronger and more secure the house. The more certain the foundation, the stronger will be Descartes's case against the skeptic.) Descartes wants absolutely certain knowledge to be the foundation for his system: knowledge that it would be not only *implausible* to doubt, but that it would be *impossible* to doubt.

How does one tell whether a claim to knowledge is impossible to doubt?

Descartes devises two master arguments which allow him to cast doubt on most of our claims to knowledge. The master arguments allow him to cast doubt on claims to knowledge that no person in her right mind would doubt. They allow him to cast doubt on most of our beliefs, thus showing them not to be certain knowledge. And this is very important to Descartes's purpose. His master arguments must be very inclusive, in particular they must include all the beliefs that the skeptics have as a matter of fact doubted. For only then, is it likely that the beliefs that the arguments will not be able to cast doubt upon will be indeed *impossible* to doubt (rather than merely implausible to doubt).

The Dream Argument

The first master argument is the dream argument which casts doubt on the veridicality (truth) of our perceptual beliefs (beliefs acquired through the senses, among them beliefs about the external world).

Ordinarily, we think that we know that the world is in a certain way, on the basis of our perceptions of the world. So, I know that there is a computer screen in front of me, because I see a computer screen in front of me (I have the perceptual belief that there is a computer screen in front of me). Since I know that there is a computer screen in front of me, there is a computer screen in front of me (I could not know what is false, see §2.2 above). The structure of the reasoning looks like this:

It looks to me that there is a computer screen in front of me.

So, I know that there is a computer screen in front of me.

The dream argument casts doubt on the transition from what appears to me to what I know (Remember that we are assuming that we cannot know what we can doubt, i.e. that knowledge is certain). It is possible that I might be dreaming that there is a computer screen in front of me. In such a case, if I were dreaming in bed, there would most likely not actually be a computer screen in front of me. Yet it would seem to be as if there is.

The challenge that Descartes puts forward is: How can we tell the difference between dreaming that there is a computer screen in front of me (where in fact there is none) and actually perceiving the computer screen? His point is that the difference between those situations is inaccessible by the subject. There might be a difference in reality but the only access to reality is via the way things seem to us. This is illustrated by Figure 1. The way the world seems to us might be the same when we are perceiving a bowl with strawberries and when we are dreaming about a bowl with strawberries. So, how can we tell whether we are dreaming or not. If we cannot tell, then we cannot be certain whether there is a bowl of strawberries or not!

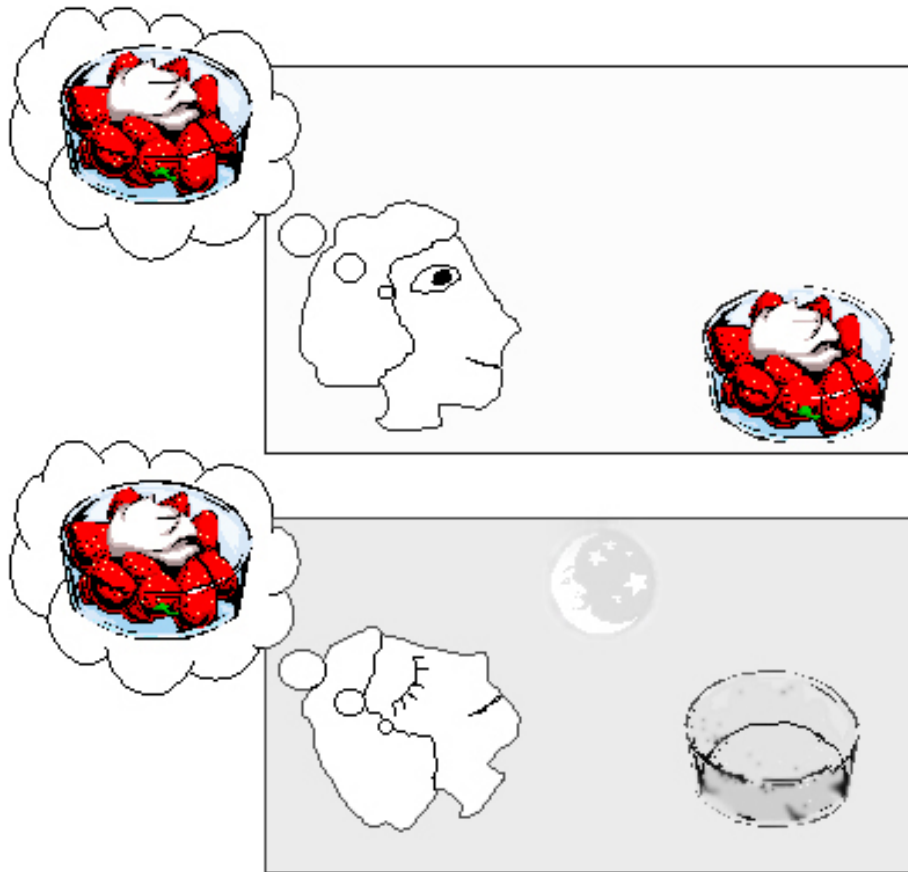


Figure 1. Being awake vs. dreaming

Can We Tell whether We Are Dreaming?

The only way out of the impasse here would be, if one could tell whether one is dreaming or being deceived. If I knew that I was not dreaming and that I was not being deceived, then I would know that what appeared to me was in fact the case. The problem is that we cannot be certain that we are not dreaming or that we are not being deceived.

It is important that you understand *why* we cannot be certain that we are not dreaming or not being deceived. Consider dreaming. Can you be certain that you are not dreaming now? In order to answer you need to reflect on how you would decide. It seems clear that the most important part will be played by what your senses tell you. Here is what my senses tell me now: It looks to me like there is a computer screen in front of me and a lamp and a window with a beautiful azalea plant behind it. I hear my children play in the kitchen and I take delight in having this minute to concentrate on Descartes. I could continue on, tell you about what my sense of touch and smell tells me. But I would be continuing on with more of the same – I would be relating to you what my senses tell me. But this total experience can be replicated *exactly* in a dream. Dreams frequently seem (*while we are dreaming*, of course) extremely real. No inscription appears to inform me “I am dreaming right now.” Might there be other ways to tell whether you are dreaming or not? Let’s try some:

Pinch Method. “Suppose I pinch myself. If I don't feel the pinch then I am dreaming, if I feel the pinch then I am not dreaming.” This method is based on the assumption that he cannot feel a

pinch in a dream. But clearly there are people who can have tactile dreams. If so then the pinch method is certainly not a full-proof method for telling whether one is dreaming or not.

Waking-Up-From-Dream Method. Suppose you wake up from a dream. This is a way of telling that (a) you were just dreaming and (b) that now you are awake and hence not dreaming. Unfortunately, this will not do as a full-proof method. It sometimes happens in a dream (call it master-dream) that you are dreaming about sleeping and about *dreaming* (call it slave-dream). You are then engaged in two dreams at the same time. Your waking up from the slave-dream does establish (a), viz. that you were dreaming, but it does not establish (b) that you are now awake and not dreaming. You are no longer having the slave-dream but you are still having a master-dream. (And of course, the same can be said for your awake experience right now and your belief that you woke up this morning.)

Neurologist-Friend Method. “Suppose I let my neurologist friend hook me up to a scientific apparatus that can tell whether I am dreaming or not.” Even if you do that, you are still the prisoner of your senses – you still know your scientist friend's verdict via your senses, and this is something that can easily be dreamt by you. Again, this is not a full-proof method for telling whether one is dreaming or not.

Crazy-Dreams Method. “But you just know a dream when you dream it.” This may be true for some dreams. Suppose it looks to me like there is a computer screen in front of me and a lamp and a window with a beautiful azalea plant behind it. I hear my children play in the kitchen and I take delight in having this minute to concentrate on Descartes. As I am tapping on the keyboard, the monitor opens up like a box, my mother-in-law comes out of it, I engage in a vivid argument with her, and then before I know it I am shouting at a green monster that gets bigger and bigger the louder I shout. The monster eats up the monitor, the azalea plant and everything in sight and I am left hanging in a void. Am I awake or am I dreaming? The verdict is pretty clear in this case. But this only shows that we can *sometimes* tell whether we are dreaming or not. We can tell when the dream is sufficiently surreal. But if my experience in the dream was not at all so strange but really quite normal, I would have no way of knowing that I am not dreaming. If my mother-in-law did not appear out of the monitor but came through the doorway, and if she were not getting bigger and bigger the louder I shouted, etc. I really would not be able to tell whether I was dreaming or not. But this is quite enough to make me uncertain as to whether right now I am dreaming or awake. Moreover, there are certainly real-life events that seem so unexpected that we feel like we are dreaming. So the expectedness of events is not a full-proof method for telling whether one is dreaming or not.

The problem here is quite general. How can you decide whether you are dreaming or not? By appeal to reason or to senses? Clearly not the former – we cannot prove to ourselves that we are not dreaming or that we are, for that matter. An appeal to experience, to the senses, seems the only chance. But the problem is that you can have the *same* experience whether you are awake or dreaming (see Figure 1). The senses are or of no help at all.

The Dream Argument Summarized

Now, if we cannot be certain that we are not dreaming or that we are not being deceived, we cannot be certain that what we see, hear, etc. is the way we see and hear it (or indeed that it exists at all).

It looks to me that there is a computer screen in front of me.

If I were dreaming then while it would look to me that there is a computer screen in front of me, very likely there would not in fact be one, so I could not be certain that there is a computer in front of me.

I cannot be certain that I am not dreaming.

I cannot be certain that there is a computer in front of me.

So, it's not the case that I know that there is a computer in front of me.

The Scope of the Dream Argument

The possibility that I am dreaming will cast doubt on every perceptual belief I have, every belief that is based on the testimony of the senses:

I cannot be certain that there is a computer screen in front of me.

I cannot be certain that my children are in the kitchen.

I cannot be certain that there is an azalea plant outside my window.

⋮

Moreover, since I can apply this argument to *all* my beliefs about the external world, my very claim to know that the external world exists is called into question too! How do I know that the external world exists? Well, ultimately through knowing particular things about it. But if *all* my knowledge about particular things happening in the external world is called into question then so is my belief that the external world exists.

The same holds about my beliefs about my body. How do I know that I have a hand? Well, I see it and I feel it. But I could be dreaming about that. How do I know that I have a foot? I see and I feel it, but I could be dreaming about that too. And so on. If I can apply this doubt to each part of my body then surely I will call into doubt that my body exists as well.

Can I know that people other than myself exist? Well, no. I surely believe that they do but my beliefs are ultimately based on my senses. And I could be dreaming about hearing them, seeing them, etc. So I cannot know that there are other people in the world.

In this way, the dream argument casts doubt on all perceptual beliefs and on some other beliefs, which are ultimately grounded in perceptual beliefs.

The Evil Demon Argument

The second master argument is the evil demon argument which casts doubt on the veridicality (truth) of most our beliefs: perceptual beliefs as well as beliefs based on reason (like mathematical beliefs such as $2+3=5$).

Once again, the evil demon argument casts doubt on the transition from a belief concerning the way things appear to me to a purported claim to knowledge. Descartes imagines that when we entertain the thought that $2+3=5$, a feeling of utter obviousness accompanies this thought, which is why we say that the claim that $2+3=5$ is true. Descartes asks us to imagine an evil demon. He does not think that such a demon exists, but at this point he is only working with possibilities. It is surely possible that such a demon could exist. He would be all-powerful but

wicked. The demon could also play around with our ideas. When we entertain the thought that $2+3=5$ he could remove the accompanying feeling of obviousness and replace it with the sense of falsehood, as a result of which we would disagree with

It appears to me that $2+3=5$ (or that there is a computer screen in front of me).

If I were deceived by an evil demon then while it would appear to me that $2+3=5$ (or that there is a computer screen in front of me), very likely this would not be the case, so I could not be certain that $2+3=5$ (or that there is a computer screen in front of me).

I cannot be certain that I am not being deceived by an evil demon.

I cannot be certain that $2+3=5$ (or that there is a computer in front of me).

So, it's not the case that I know that $2+3=5$ (or that there is a computer in front of me).

The evil demon argument casts doubt not only on perceptual beliefs but also on mathematical knowledge. Jointly, the two master arguments cast doubt on a great many beliefs we hold. They disqualify practically everything we claim to know about the external world from counting as certain knowledge.

Note that the arguments also disqualify all scientific knowledge from counting as certain knowledge. Our knowledge of a general law may be argued to rely/be supported (in part) by the positive experimental results. This means that some scientists must have *known* (not merely believed) how the experiments came out. But if the scientists were dreaming or were being deceived by an evil demon when it appeared to them that the state of the measuring devices showed support for the general law, then they cannot be certain that the state of the measuring devices did indeed support the general law.

4.2. The Foundation

There is at least one thing that in all the doubting, Descartes finds that he cannot doubt: that he doubts, and more generally that he thinks. This is the first item that passes the master arguments without being cast doubt upon. For even if I am dreaming that I think, I still think, for dreaming is one way of thinking. Even if I am being deceived when I think that the tea is hot (for it is actually cold), I still think. I *think* that it is hot. In fact, in order to be deceived one must think. So there is one thing I know for certain: that I think. I cannot be wrong about the fact that I think. Thus, we have one piece of our foundation:

(1) I know that I think.

Other pieces follow. First, Descartes observes that from the fact that I think it follows that I exist. This is because only what exists can think.

Here is a neat argument that is supposed to show that the fact that I exist follows from my thinking that I exist.

I think that I exist

Either I am being deceived when I think that I exist or I am not being deceived when I think that I exist.

If I am being deceived when I think that I exist, then I exist (because only things that exist can be deceived).

If I am not being deceived when I think that I exist, then I exist (because I am not being deceived in thinking that I exist).

So, in either case, I exist.

So, we might include another piece to our foundation:

(2) I know that I exist.

You should note here that Descartes is quite careful in specifying the sense of (2). At+ this stage, to say that I exist is not yet to say very much about me. The only thing I *can* know at this point is that I exist *as a thinking thing*. I know this because I know that I think and so I know that there must be something that does the thinking, *me*. But this is not to say that I can know that I exist in the way I usually think about myself as existing. Most importantly, I do not yet know that I have a body. In other words, The ‘I’ in (2) is quite abstract – it only picks out a certain aspect of me albeit the most fundamental one (according to Descartes).

There are interpretative issues here. Palmer, for example, says that in the *Meditations* Descartes claims that the foundation is (2), while in the *Discourse on Method* he claims that it is “I think therefore I am”. The latter certainly cannot be the foundation for it is not a piece of knowledge but an argument, i.e. a transition from one piece of knowledge (“I think”) to another (“I am”). If it were to be treated as a piece of knowledge it would have to be a conditional of the form “If I think then I am”. But nothing follows from my knowing that if I think then I am unless I *also* know that I think. *Cogito ergo sum* marks the first transition in the system, not the foundation of it. It is object to some dispute whether even in the *Meditations* “I am” constitutes the foundation, for Descartes establishes this claim via the claim that I think. In short, if on the quiz you are asked to say what the foundation of Descartes’s system is, choose “I think” as the answer, but bear in mind that opinions are divided on this point.

In addition to knowing *that* I think, I know *what* I think. When I think that there is a computer screen in front of me, I can be wrong about *there being a computer screen in front of me*, but I cannot be wrong about *my thinking that there is a computer screen in front of me*. If it seems to me that the tea is hot, I may be wrong about the tea *being* hot, but I cannot be wrong about *it seeming to me that the tea is hot*.

I believe that the blackboard is black. It is possible that I am being deceived about the blackboard being black: for it is possible that the blackboard is in fact green. In general, whenever it is possible to be deceived about p, it must be possible: (A) that one believes that p is true and (B) that p is in fact false. (To see how this applies to the above example, substitute “the blackboard is black” for p.)

Descartes says that while I can be deceived about the blackboard being black, I cannot be deceived about *my thinking that the blackboard is black?* (In other words, we are now substituting “I think that the blackboard is black” for p.) If I were to be deceived about *thinking that the blackboard is black*, it would have to be possible: (A) that I believe that [I think that the blackboard is black] and (B) that I do not think that the blackboard is black. But surely if condition (A) is satisfied then (B) can’t be satisfied. If (A) is satisfied, i.e. if I believe that [I think that the blackboard is black] then I think that the blackboard is black, so (B) is not satisfied.

This shows that I cannot be deceived about *what* I think.

(3) I know what I think, suppose, believe, etc.

In general, this will be true for what I feel and think: I cannot be wrong about the contents of my mind.

Descartes thinks also that one cannot be wrong about what sensations one feels. If I feel a certain sensation (e.g. pain), then I know that I feel it. I cannot be wrong about whether I feel pain or not. Likewise, I cannot be wrong about whether I itch or not, whether I feel hot or cold, whether I feel terrified or not, etc.

(4) I know what I feel.

Descartes's thesis that I cannot be wrong about the contents of my mind (claims (3) and (4)) is known as the thesis of the incorrigibility of the mental.

4.3. Two Characteristics of Foundational Knowledge

This is quite an accomplishment. It already seemed like the two master arguments are going to cast doubt on every piece of our alleged knowledge, and yet Descartes has managed to rescue quite a bit. It is important, however, to note two facts about the knowledge that is claimed to be certain.

First, the knowledge thus far is necessarily **first-personal** (hence the use of 'I'). *I know* that *I* feel pain, but *I* do *not know* with the same certainty that *you* feel pain. I may think that you feel pain, but I may be wrong about it (you may be pretending after all). The same goes for thoughts: *I know* that *I* think the sun is out, but *I* do *not know* with the same certainty what *you* think.

Extra: There is but a small step to concluding that I do not know *that* you think at all, or even that you can think. In other words, I do not know that any other person, beside me, has a mind at all. This is a famous difficulty for Descartes's view, known also as the "other minds problem."

Second, all the knowledge thus far produced concerns my **psychology**: I know *that* I *think*, I know *what* I *think* and I know *what* I *feel*. All these are aspects of my mental being. I do not yet know anything about the external (non-mental) world. This also concerns my knowledge that I exist. When I know that I exist, I only know that I exist as a thinking thing, I do not yet know that I exist as a body. (I could be deceived about being a body but I could not be deceived about being a thinking thing.)

5. Can We Know Anything About the External World?

Common-sense tells us that we know basic things about the external world (e.g. that there is a desk in front of me) on the basis of perceiving them (Philo: “How do you know that there is a desk in front of you?”; Bubba: “‘cause it’s there”; Philo: “You mean because you see it, i.e. it appears to you that it is there”). In an argument form:

It seems to me that p (e.g. there is a desk in front of me).

So, p (there is a desk in front of me).

If such an argument form were valid, we could indeed claim to know things about the world. But the problem with this is that, as Descartes points out on the behalf of the skeptics, the argument is invalid. It does not follow from the fact that the world seems to be in a certain way, that it is that way. I could be dreaming. I could be deceived.

But! (Here comes the general form of Descartes’s solution:) Suppose that God exists. Since God is omnibenevolent, He would not allow me to be deceived. Thus God would be the warrant of the veridicality (truth) of my perceptions. (This is slightly more complex, see below.) The first task though is to prove the existence of God. Once we can claim to *know* that God exists, we can then proceed to claim to *know* things about the external world.

(Note also that the task of *proving* that God exists is imperative for Descartes. Faith does not suffice any more. This is because we must *know* that God exists in order to know anything about the external world.)

5.1. Do We Know that God exists?

Here is one of Descartes’s arguments (Palmer discusses other formulations):

My idea of God is an idea of a perfect being.

An effect cannot have more perfection than its cause.

So, the cause of my idea of a perfect being is a perfect being, viz. God himself.

An existing effect must have been caused by an existing cause.

So, God exists.

There are problems with this argument (of course) but it also has some intuitive appeal. Consider the central premise (the second one): An effect cannot have more perfection than its cause. There is something inherently plausible about it. Whatever perfection there is in an effect has to come from somewhere – where could it possibly come from than its cause or causes?

Note one essential feature of this argument is that (like St. Anselm’s argument, of which it is a version) it is *a priori* (it does not depend on any empirical facts). Unlike St. Thomas Aquinas’ proofs which presuppose certain facts about the world and so presuppose that the external world exists, this argument does not presuppose that the external (non-mental) world exists. This is an essential feature of this argument since Descartes needs God to prove that the external world exists. If he used one of Aquinas’ proofs which presuppose the existence of the external world, he would be involved in a circle. (You might be wondering about the second premise. Does it not speak about causes and effects and so does it not presuppose the external

world? But Descartes can reply that there are causes and effects among ideas too – in a mental world.)

Aside from the problems involved in understanding just what Descartes means by “perfection,” the standard problem has to do with the fact that it is not implausible to think of certain “perfect” ideas as arising from a combination of (arguably) less “perfect” ideas. For instance: I have an idea of an infinite time line. What caused this idea in me? (If the answer is my teacher, then we only need to ask further: what caused the idea in the teacher, etc.) One possibility would be that suggested by Descartes: it probably was not the infinite time line itself, but it may have been a suitably infinite being (i.e. God).

But there is an alternative explanation – perhaps I have caused myself to have the idea of infinity thus: I developed the concept of finitude: of a limited time line, say. Then I have added to it the idea of negation. Thus, I developed the idea of an *un*limited time line. It is plausible to think that the idea of infinity is much more perfect than the ideas of finitude and negation together. But if so then the alternative explanation of how my idea of infinite time came about is a counterexample to the second premise of the argument. The effect (the idea of infinite time) has less perfection than the cause (the ideas of negation and of finite time).

Descartes might respond that we are just confused about the causes and effects here. We are assuming that the effect (the idea of infinity) has only two causes (the idea of negation and the idea of finitude). This might appear like a counterexample to his principle because, whatever perfection is, the idea of infinity has certainly more of it than the two other (meager) ideas combined. But, Descartes might say, we are wrong in thinking that the idea of finitude and the idea of negation are the only causes of *someone's* coming to form the idea of infinity. What we are excluding from the picture is *the person* and *her reason* with (among other things) the capacity to combine ideas. It is certainly arguable (especially if one believes in the power of reason) that there is no less perfection in *reason* than there is in the idea of infinity.

Pending reasons to the contrary, we can add another item to our house of knowledge:

(5) I know that God exists

5.2. God and the Possibility of Deception

Although there are real questions whether Descartes can claim to *know* that God exists, let us suppose that he does. The question now is: Are we being deceived in our thoughts about the external world? There are at least three possible answers:

- (i) We are always deceived when we think about the external world.
- (ii) Most of the time, we are deceived when we think about the external world.
- (iii) Most of the time, we are not deceived when we think about the external world.
- (iv) We are never deceived when we think about the external world.

Two of the answers can be excluded immediately. (i) and (ii) is excluded by appealing to God's omnibenevolence. God would not allow us to be deceived always (i) or most of the time (ii) since deception is evil. (iv) is contradicted by facts: we sometimes err (we dream, hallucinate, etc.).

One has to be a little careful here. It is not enough to refute (iv) simply by appeal to facts. For once Descartes has proven that God exists, and has claimed that deception is evil, one is left wondering why God would let us be deceived at all. (Think about the problem of evil at this point and responses to it.) One way of arguing would be to say that while a lot of deception is evil, a little can not only be tolerated but is actually a good thing. It helps in the development of epistemological virtues. The fact that we are sometimes wrong makes us more cautious, more alert, possibly more tolerant. It provides incentive for searching for truth. (It makes philosophy possible ☺) And so on. Option (iv) would preclude or at least make it harder for us to develop in these ways.

It appears then that (iii) is the true answer. Now, (iii) might well be true, but how does this help in Descartes's project? After all, we are seeking something that would ground our claims to knowledge. If (iv) were true, if we were never deceived, then we could make the required inferences, and so claim to know things about the external world:

- It seems to me that p (e.g. there is a desk in front of me).
- (iv) I am never deceived because God exists and He would never deceive me.
- So, p (there is a desk in front of me).

But (iv) is false. On the other hand, (iii) is true but does not help much in making the inferences.

- It seems to me that p (e.g. there is a desk in front of me).
- (iii) Most of the time, I am not deceived when I think about the external world.
- So, ...

It does not follow that there is a desk in front of me for it is *possible* that right now I am being deceived. So, it looks like we are back to square one in the project against the skeptic.

But the impression that no ground has been gained is erroneous. The next three sections are devoted to three different ways of showing that. First, Descartes can argue that while he has not shown that we can be certain of any particular belief about the external world, he has shown that we can be certain that the majority of our beliefs are true – he has refuted global skepticism if not local skepticism (§5.3). Second, he can make an even stronger claim that we can be certain

about some particular beliefs (structuring beliefs) that are central to our understanding of reality (§5.4). Third, he claims that there is in fact a criterion for telling which of our beliefs are true, viz. those we acquire while having clear and distinct perceptions (§5.5).

5.3. Global versus Local Skepticism

(In what follows, I will be sometimes speaking of a belief-system. A belief-system is the set of *all* your beliefs, of everything you believe to be true. Here are some members of my belief system: I believe that the external world exists, I believe that it is 4:25am now, I believe that emotion is an integral part of knowledge, I believe that George W. Bush is the 50th President of the USA. I believe that it will probably be unbearably hot today. I believe that I should post these notes as soon as possible. And so on. As you see on my example, your belief system includes a multifarious bunch – *all* your beliefs.)

Let us distinguish between global and local skepticism. Global skepticism claims that you cannot be certain of any of your beliefs: it is *logically possible* that *all* your beliefs are false. Local skepticism is a weaker position. According to it, you cannot be certain whether a particular belief is true or false. I believe that there is a computer screen in front of me. But, according to the local skeptic, I cannot be certain that it is here (I might be just dreaming after all).

Unrestricted, local skepticism leads naturally to global skepticism. Suppose that I admit that I cannot be certain that there is a computer screen in front of me now (because, on reflection, I might be dreaming). I then seem forced to admit that I cannot be certain of this belief on other occasions (for the same reason). If I reflect on a sufficient number of my beliefs, I seem to be inevitably led to global skepticism, to the realization that I could be wrong about *all* of my beliefs about the external world, not just this or that one.

Arguably, this is indeed what is problematic about skepticism. The problem is not that I cannot be certain that *this* belief of mine is true. We have no problem in admitting our *occasional* fallibility. The problem is in taking this to be a ground for claiming that it is possible that we know nothing at all. In other words, the problem lies in taking local skepticism to be a ground for global skepticism.

But Descartes does too refute global skepticism. Global skepticism is refuted by appeal to the omnibenevolence of God. God would not let me be totally deceived. It is therefore *impossible* for *all* of my beliefs to be false. In fact, Descartes system licenses us to believe that *most* of our beliefs about the external world are true. (If it were otherwise, we would be largely deceived. Recall that while there are reasons to tolerate some deception, it has to be the exception rather than the rule.)

The invocation of the existence of an omnibenevolent omnipotent God allows us to drive a wedge that prevents the local skepticism from turning into global skepticism. So, we can add the following claim to our house of knowledge:

(6) I know that most of my beliefs about the external world are true.

5.4. Structuring Beliefs

So, I know that most of my beliefs are true. But, the local skeptic reminds me, I still do not know *which* particular ones.

Some help can be obtained by reflecting on the fact that some of our beliefs are more central to us than others. Contrast the belief “I have a body” with the belief “I have a pimple on my ear.” The former belief is central to my understanding of my place in reality in a way that the latter is not. To see this imagine how your belief-system would change if you had the contrary beliefs. (The idea here is that we can judge the importance or centrality of a belief by seeing how it affects other beliefs.)

How would your belief-system (which includes your beliefs about what you should do) change if you believed “I do not have a pimple on my ear.” Likely, you would not believe (as you might do now) that you should cover your ear in every possible way. You would not believe (as you might now) that you look ugly with a pimple on your ear – you might believe that your ear is quite beautiful. You would not believe (as you might now) that everyone pays attention to your ear constantly. And so on. Your belief-system *would* change if you had a different belief on the matter but the changes would be rather minute in the large scheme of things.

Now imagine that your belief-system includes the belief “I do not have a body.” This would mean that you only believed that you were a soul. Would the substitution of this belief for the belief that you have a body change your belief-system? Whoa! And how! Just imagine the beliefs about what you should do during the day “I should take a shower, brush my teeth, have breakfast, drive the kids to school, talk to my boss about getting a pay raise, type some memos, talk to Joe, go to the meeting, deliver my presentation, drive to the store, pick up some groceries for dinner, cook dinner, be nice to Jones while he is a guest in my house, check that the kids have done homework, watch the late news, go to sleep.” Do these in any way presuppose that you have a body? Clearly so. It does not make sense to think that you should brush your teeth if you don’t have them. Nor does it make sense to want to talk to Joe if you have no speech apparatus to talk with. In fact, it is safe to assume that your belief-system would crush if it turned out that you in fact do not have a body. Most of your beliefs would turn out *false*, would not make any sense at all.

Let us call such beliefs *structuring beliefs*. Beliefs such as “I have a body” structure our very understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. Structuring beliefs are presupposed by the majority of other beliefs we have. This means that if we were wrong or deceived about a structuring belief, we would be thereby wrong or deceived about most of our beliefs! And we know (6) that we cannot be deceived about most of our beliefs. So, we also know that we cannot be deceived about our structuring beliefs.

Which of our beliefs qualify as structuring beliefs is admittedly harder to judge. But we can be certain about some:

(7) I know that the external world exists.

I can be wrong about the details of what goes on in the external world but I can be certain that it exists. My belief-system as it is presupposes that the external world exists. (Most of my beliefs presuppose that the external world exists and we know by (6) that most of my beliefs are true.)

(8) I know that my body exists.

Likewise, my belief-system presupposes that I have a body that is part of this external world. Hence, I can be certain that my body exists (it would be evil of God to let me be deceived about something like that).

There are possibly other structuring beliefs of which we can be certain for the same reasons:

- (9) I know that other people exist.
- (10) I know that other people have minds.

And so on.

5.5. Clear and Distinct Perceptions

This is already to know quite a bit – especially in comparison with what we knew at the destructive stage of the application of the master arguments (§4). So far, however, with the exception of a few (albeit important) beliefs, we have no way of establishing any particular beliefs about the external world as things we know to be true. But Descartes believes that his system can offer more. He believes that there is (and must be) a way of telling whether we are being deceived or not in particular cases.

Descartes claims that sometimes our thoughts are clear and distinct and sometimes not. It is when they are clear and distinct that we are *not* being deceived. Thus, we need to split option (ii) (see §5.2 above) into two possibilities:

- (ii-1) When my perceptions are clear and distinct, I am never deceived
- (ii-2) When my perceptions are not clear or distinct, I may be deceived.

If it is indeed the case that I am never deceived when my perceptions are clear and distinct, then I can claim to *know* things about the external world *as long as* my perceptions are clear and distinct:

It seems to me *clearly and distinctly* that *p* (e.g. there is a desk in front of me).

- (ii-1) I am never deceived about clear and distinct perceptions

So, *p* (there is a desk in front of me).

The only question then is, Why is (ii-1) true? Moreover, the criterion of clarity and distinctness seems to contradict Descartes's early (Meditation I) admission that there is no way of telling whether one is dreaming or not, whether one is being deceived or not.

In response, one might argue on behalf of Descartes that while God would allow us to be deceived sometimes, he would make sure that there was a criterion for us to tell at least that we are right when we are right (such as the criterion of the clarity and distinctness of our ideas). And in response to the second challenge, one might say that at the point of Meditation I, we have no way of knowing that there is a way of telling whether we are deceived or not because to know what the criterion is we need to appeal to God. So, to know whether I am not being deceived when I think that there is a desk in front of me, I need to know that God exists, and that is a knowledge that is unavailable to me at the early stage of the inquiry.

So, we can add one final bit of knowledge:

- (11) I can know (with certainty) those things about the external world that I perceive clearly and distinctly.

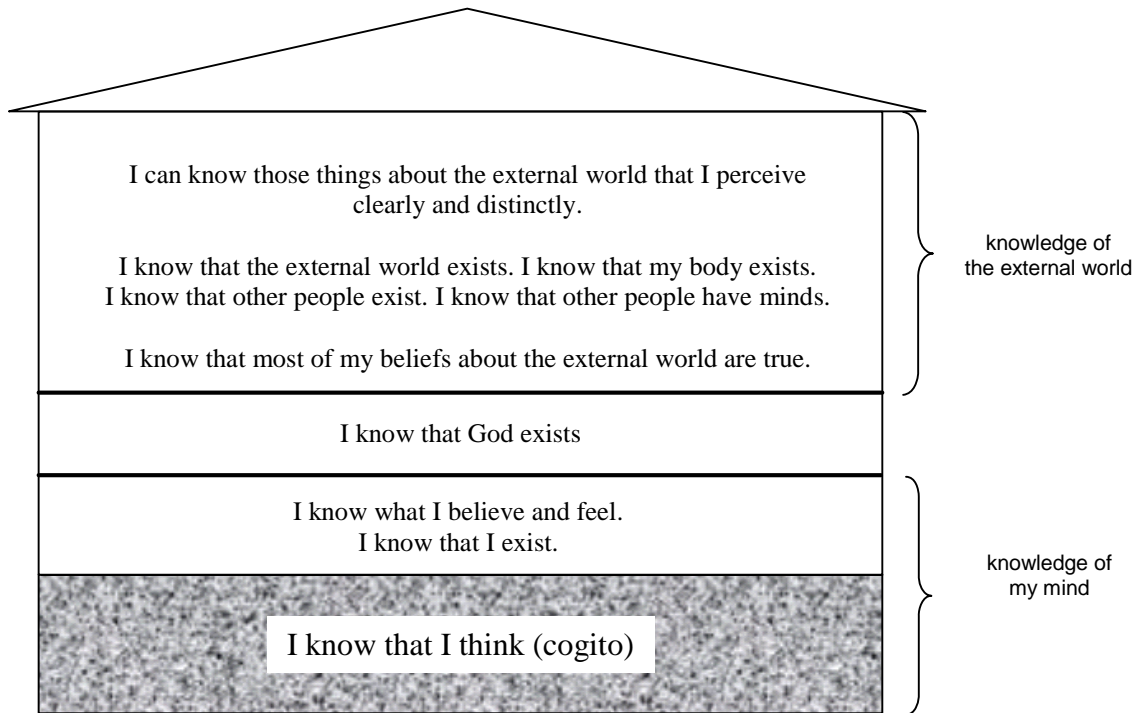


Figure 2. Descartes’s House of Knowledge

6. Descartes’s Rationalism Again

I said at the beginning that Descartes was a rationalist. He believed that genuine knowledge derives from reason. Recall that you were (or should have been) puzzled by this claim at least with respect to empirical knowledge. “How could he think that my knowing that this chair has a broken leg derives from reason?,” you (should have) wondered. Now you know.

The testimony of the senses may suffice for belief but it does not suffice for knowledge. In order to claim that you have any knowledge of the external world you had to engage in the *Meditations* with Descartes, first rejecting all your claims to knowledge, then slowly rebuilding them on a solid foundation of beliefs that you could be quite certain about (foundational knowledge). In so constructing a system of knowledge you are able to find a place for all kinds of knowledge, including empirical knowledge. You are able to appreciate the fact that there might be circumstances where you will not be quite certain about your beliefs (that the chair has a broken leg, etc.). But even with respect to empirical knowledge there are some beliefs that you can be quite certain about – that the external world exists, that you have a body, etc. You can be wrong about the details (that this chair has a broken leg, that this is a fly rather than a bumblebee, that your leg was not amputated) but you can be sure that you are not wrong about what I called the structuring beliefs, those beliefs that are fundamental to our understanding of reality and our place in it. You can be sure about those because it would be evil on the part of God to let you be deceived about something so fundamental. Since God exists and is omnibenevolent, we are not deceived about them. Hence, we can know with certainty that the external world exists (that it is not just a part of our dream or some deceptive scheme), that each

one of us has a body, etc. Moreover, there are certain circumstances (when we have clear and distinct perceptions) where we can be quite certain even of the details of what the world is like.

But to understand how this is all possible, you needed to meditate – you relied on your reason. Ultimately then all your knowledge – even your knowledge of the external world is based on reason.