

Modern Philosophy – Lecture 2 Study Guide

Title: Radical Doubt (René Descartes)

Key Themes

- **The question:** *What do I really know?*
 - **Method of Doubt:** Systematically doubt everything until something indubitable remains.
 - **Shift to the self:** Foundational certainty begins not with God or nature, but with the **thinking self**.
 - **Rationalist foundation:** Contrast to Bacon's empiricism; Descartes grounds knowledge in reason, not senses.
 - **Certainty as the goal:** Secure foundations for the sciences, religion, and philosophy.
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Historical & Intellectual Context

- **Late 1500s ferment:** Descartes (b. 1596) grows up amid new sciences and conflicts.
 - **Anatomy & Mechanism:** Vesalius (anatomy), Harvey (heart as pump), Hobbes (humans as machines). Raises the question: *where is the soul?*
 - **Cosmology:** Copernicus (1543) → heliocentrism; Galileo (1610) → telescope, moons of Jupiter. Conflict with Church (1616 condemnation, Galileo's trial and house arrest).
 - **Descartes' move:** Leaves France for tolerant Netherlands to think and publish freely.
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Descartes' Meditations (1641)

Meditation I: Method of Doubt

- **Project:** Clear away falsehoods to build on a **secure foundation**.
- **Sources of beliefs:**
 - Parents, teachers, books → fallible.
- **Senses:** primary candidate, but sometimes deceive (illusions, sickness, distance).
- **Dream Argument:** How do I know I'm not dreaming right now? Dreams can feel real → undermines trust in sense experience.
- **Mathematics seems certain ... but:**
- **Evil Demon Hypothesis:** A powerful deceiver could corrupt even our logical/mathematical reasoning.
- **Conclusion:** Nothing is beyond doubt. Radical skepticism as the starting point.

Meditation II: The Cogito

- **Archimedes' fulcrum metaphor:** Need one immovable point to leverage all knowledge.
- **Discovery:** *Cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am").
- Even if deceived, dreaming, or mistaken → there must be an **I** who thinks.
- Self-contradictory to deny one's own existence while thinking.
- **Foundation found:** The self as a **thinking thing** (*res cogitans*).
- Activities of the mind: doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, refusing, imagining, perceiving.
- **Modern turn:** Knowledge begins with the **certainty of consciousness**, not God, tradition, or sense perception.

Meditation III: Proof of God

- **Problem:** To trust reasoning, need assurance against the evil demon.
- **Strategy:** Argue from the **idea of God** within the mind.
- **Causal principle:** Effect cannot have more reality than its cause.
- Imperfect beings cannot generate the idea of a perfect being.
- Therefore, a perfect God must exist to place this idea in me.
- **Consequence:** If God exists and is good, then:
 - He would not systematically deceive us.
 - Proper use of senses and reason → trustworthy.
- Foundation now secured for knowledge of the body, external world, and science.

Contrasting Approaches

- **Bacon:** Start with *empirical data* and induction, build outward cautiously.
 - **Descartes:** Start with *radical doubt* → indubitable self → reason and God.
 - Both: **Reject uncritical tradition**, aim for a **modern foundation** for knowledge.
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Important Quotes / Definitions

*“Several years have now elapsed since I first became aware that I had accepted... many false opinions for true.” – **Meditation I***

*“I will at length apply myself... to the general overthrow of all my former opinions.” – **Meditation I***

*“I think, therefore I am.” (**Cogito, ergo sum**) – **Meditation II***

*“It is manifest... there must be at least as much reality in the cause as in its effect.” – **Meditation III***

Summary (5–7 sentences)

Descartes begins by asking what can truly be known, adopting the **method of doubt** to clear away uncertain beliefs. He shows that **senses deceive**, dreams blur waking and illusion, and even mathematics could be manipulated by a hypothetical **evil demon**. In this radical skepticism, one truth survives: *Cogito, ergo sum* – the certainty of the **thinking self**. From this foundation, Descartes argues that the **idea of a perfect God** could not have originated in an imperfect mind, so God must exist. God’s goodness guarantees the reliability of our faculties when properly used, removing the threat of universal deception. Thus, Descartes provides a **rationalist**

foundation for knowledge, beginning with the self, proceeding to God, and then to the world. His project exemplifies the modern turn: ambitious, critical, and self-grounded.

Questions for Review

1. Why does Descartes begin with **doubt** rather than with truths or dogmas?
 2. How does the **dream argument** undermine trust in the senses?
 3. What is the significance of the **evil demon hypothesis**?
 4. Explain why *Cogito, ergo sum* is indubitable.
 5. What is the difference between being a **thinking thing** and having a **body**?
 6. Summarize Descartes' argument for the **existence of God**.
 7. How does Descartes secure the **trustworthiness of reason** against skepticism?
 8. Compare Descartes' rationalist starting point with Bacon's empiricist method.
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Key Terms (quick reference)

- **Method of Doubt / Hyperbolic Doubt** – systematic skepticism to test for certainty.
 - **Cogito, ergo sum** – “I think, therefore I am”; foundational certainty of the self.
 - **Res cogitans** – the thinking thing (mind, consciousness).
 - **Dream Argument** – possibility that all experience could be dreamlike illusion.
 - **Evil Demon Hypothesis** – thought experiment to doubt even mathematics and logic.
 - **Causal Adequacy Principle** – effect cannot have more reality than its cause.
 - **Clear and Distinct Perception** – Descartes' criterion for truth.
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