I THINK

THEREFORE I AM

RENE DESCARTES (1596–1650)
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IN CONTEXT

Epistemology

APPROACH

Rationalism

Episodes

4th century BCE: Aristotle argues that whenever we perform any action, including thinking, we are conscious that we perform it, and in this way we are conscious that we exist.

c. 420 BCE: St. Augustine writes in *The City of God* that he is certain he exists, because if he is mistaken, then all proves his existence—in order to be mistaken, one must exist.

AFTER

1781: Immanuel Kant argues against Descartes, but adopts the *I think, therefore I exist*—as the least reliable point of his idealist philosophy.

Descartes lived in the early 17th century during a period sometimes called the Scientific Revolution, an era of rapid advances in the sciences. The British scientist and philosopher Francis Bacon had established a new method for conducting scientific experiments, based on detailed observations and deductive reasoning, and his methodologies had provided a new framework for investigating the world. Descartes shared his excitement and optimism, but for different reasons. Bacon considered the practical applications of scientific discoveries to be their whole purpose and point, whereas Descartes was more fascinated by the project of extending knowledge and understanding of the world.

During the Renaissance—the preceding historical era—people had become more skeptical about science and the possibility of genuine knowledge in general, and this view continued to exert an influence in Descartes' time. So a major motivation of his "project of pure enquiry", as his work has become known, was the desire to rid the science of the encumbrance of skepticism once and for all.

In the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes' most accomplished and rigorous work on metaphysics (the study of being and reality) and epistemology (the study of the nature and limits of knowledge), he seeks to demonstrate the possibility of knowledge even from the most skeptical of premises, and from this, to establish a firm foundation for the sciences.

Descartes' work *De Homine* argues that a biological look at the causes of knowledge. In it, he suggests that the problem is in the link between vision and conscious action.

Meditations is written in the first-person form—"I think, therefore I exist"—because he is not presenting arguments in order to prove or disprove statements, but instead wishes to lead the reader along the path that he himself has taken. In this way, the reader is forced to adopt the standpoint of the meditator, thinking things through and discovering the truth just as Descartes had done. This approach is reminiscent of the Socratic method, in which the philosopher gradually draws out a person's understanding rather than presenting it already packaged and ready to take away.

The Illusory World

In order to establish that his beliefs have stability and endurance, Descartes takes to be two important marks of knowledge, he uses what is known as "the method of doubt." This starts with the meditator setting aside any belief whose truth can be doubted, whether slightly or completely. Descartes' aim is to show that, even if we start from the strongest possible skeptical position, doubting everything, we can still reach knowledge. The doubt is "hypothetical" (exaggerated), and used only as a philosophical tool, as Descartes points out: "No sane person has ever seriously doubted these things."

Descartes starts by subjecting his beliefs to a series of increasingly rigorous skeptical arguments, questioning how we can be sure of the existence of anything at all. Could it be that the world we know is just an illusion? We cannot trust our senses, as we have all been "deceived" by them at one time or another, and so we cannot rely on them as a sure foundation for knowledge. Perhaps, he says, we are dreaming, and the apparently real world is no more than a dream world. He notes that this is possible, as there are no sure signals between being awake or asleep. But even so, this situation would leave open the possibility that some truths, such as mathematical axioms, could be known, though not through the senses. But even these "truths" might not in fact be true, because God, who is all-powerful, could deceive us even at this level. Even though we believe that God is good, it is possible that he made us

**An optical illusion of parallel lines that are made to look bent can fool our senses. Descartes thinks we must accept nothing as true or given, but must instead strip away all preconceptions before we can proceed to a position of knowledge.**

"It is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things." —René Descartes
An evil demon capable of deceiving humankind about everything cannot make me doubt my existence if he tries, and I am forced to question my own existence, this only confirms it.

us in such a way that we are prone to errors in our reasoning. Or perhaps there is no God—in which case we are even more likely to be imperfect beings (having arisen only by chance) that are capable of being deceived all the time.

Having reached a position in which there seems to be nothing at all of which he can be certain, Descartes then devises a vital tool to help him to avoid slipping back into preconceived opinions: he supposes that there is a powerful and evil demon who can deceive him about anything. When he finds himself considering a belief, he can ask: "Could the demon be making me believe this even though it was false?" and if the answer is "yes" he must set aside the belief as open to doubt.

At this point, it seems as though Descartes has put himself into an impossible position—nothing seems beyond doubt, so he has no solid ground on which to stand. He describes himself as feeling helplessly tangled around by a whirlpool of universal doubt, unable to find his footing. Scepticism seems to have made it impossible for him even to begin his journey back to knowledge and truth.

The First Certainty

It is at this point that Descartes realizes that there is one belief that he surely cannot doubt: his belief in his own existence. Each of us can think or say: "I am, I exist" and while we are thinking or saying it we cannot be wrong about it. When Descartes tries to apply the evil demon test to this belief, he realizes that the demon could only make him believe that he exists if he does in fact exist; how can he doubt his existence unless he exists in order to do the doubting?

This axiom—"I am, I exist"—forms Descartes' First Certainty. In his earlier work, the Discourse on the Method, he presented it as: "I think therefore I am", but he abandoned this wording when he wrote the Meditations: as the inclusion of "therefore" makes the statement read like a premise and conclusion. Descartes wants the reader—the meditating "I"—to realize that as soon as he considers the fact that he exists, he knows it to be true. This truth is instantly grasped. The realization that I exist is a direct intuition, not the conclusion of an argument.

Despite Descartes' move to a clearer expression of his position, the earlier formulation was so catchy that it stuck in people's minds, and to this day the First Certainty is generally known as "the cogito", from the Latin cogito.
When someone says 'I am thinking, therefore I am,' he recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind. René Descartes

From the start, one of the main arguments against Descartes' view was the use of the term "I" in "I am, therefore I exist." Although Descartes cannot be wrong in saying that thinking is occurring, how does he know that there is "a thinker"—a single, unified consciousness doing that thinking? When he gives the right to assert the existence of anything beyond our thoughts? On the other hand, can we make sense of the notion of thoughts floating around without a thinker? It is difficult to imagine detached, coherent thoughts, and Descartes agreed that it is impossible to conceive of such a state of being. However, if one were to disagree, and believe that a world of thought with no thinker is genuinely possible, Descartes would not be content to believe that he exists, and would thus be forced to reach his First Certainty. The existence of thoughts would not give him the solid ground he needed.

The problem with this notion of thoughts floating around without a thinker is that reasoning would be impossible. In order to reason, it is necessary to relate ideas in a particular way. For example, if Descartes was born near Tours, France, and was educated at the Jesuit College Royale, in La Flèche. Due to ill health, he was allowed to stay in bed until late in the mornings, and he formed the habit of meditating. From the age of 16 to 17, he concentrated on studying mathematics, breaking off his studies for four years to volunteer as a soldier in Europe's Thirty Years War. During this time, he found his philosophical calling, and after leaving the army, he settled first in Paris and then in the Netherlands, where he spent most of the rest of his life. In 1649, he was invited to Sweden by Queen Christina to discuss philosophy, he was expected to get up very early every morning for his normal practice. He believed that the new regime—and the Swedish climate—caused him to suffer from insomnia, of which he died a year later.

Key works
1637 Discourse on the Method
1641 Meditations on First Philosophy
1644 Principles of Philosophy
1662 De homine Fugues

Certainty as a premise from which to derive further knowledge—all he needs is that there be a self for him to point to. So if I exist, only by success in pointing to the meditator, then he has an escape from the whirlpool of doubt. An unreal thinker

For those who have misunderstood Descartes to have been offering an argument from the fact of his thinking to the fact of his existence, we can point out that the First Certainty is a direct intuition, not a logical argument. Why, though, would it be a problem if Descartes had been offering an argument?

As it stands, the apparent inference "I am thinking, therefore I exist" is raising a major premise, that is, in order for the argument to work it needs another premise, such as "anything that is thinking exists." Sometimes an obvious premise is not actually stated in an argument, in which case it is known as a suppressed premise. But some of Descartes' critics complained that this suppressed premise is not at all obvious. For example, Hamlet, in Shakespeare's play, though a great deal, but it is also clearly true that he did not exist.

Renaissance and the Age of Reason

and to establish a firm, rational foundation for knowledge. He is also well known for proposing that the mind and the body are two distinct substances—one material (the body) and the other immaterial (the mind)—which are nonetheless capable of interacting. This famous distinction, which he explains in the Six exhibs, became known as Cartesian dualism. However, it is the rigor of Descartes' thought and his rejection of any reliance on authority that are perhaps his most important legacy. The centuries after his death were dominated by philosophers who either defended his ideas or those who took as their main task the reevaluation of his thought, such as Thomas Hobbes, Benedict de Spinoza, and Gottfried Leibniz.