

The background features a blue-toned anatomical illustration of a human head in profile, facing right. The illustration includes various parts of the head and neck, with several circular diagrams overlaid on the face, possibly representing the eyes or other sensory organs. To the right of the head, there is a geometric diagram consisting of a vertical line segment labeled 'A' at the top and 'B' at the bottom, and a horizontal line segment labeled 'C' at the right end. Dotted lines connect these points, forming a right-angled triangle. The overall style is that of a scientific or medical engraving.

# Introduction to Philosophy

Descartes I: What Can be Called  
into Doubt

Jeremy Dunham

# Scepticism

## The Ancient Sceptics

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(i) The **Criterion** of Truth

# Scepticism

## The Ancient Sceptics

- (i) The **Criterion** of Truth
- (ii) Neither **Reason** nor **Experience** can lead us to Truth

# Scepticism

'We oppose what appears to what appears, or what is thought of to what is thought of, or crosswise (For example) the same tower appears round from a distance and square from nearby, against those who seek to establish that there is Providence from the orderliness of the heavens, we oppose the view that often the good do badly and the bad do well and conclude from that that there is no providence.'

Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*  
(2000:33)

# Scepticism as a way of life

'For those who hold the opinion that things are good or bad by nature are perpetually troubled. When they lack what they believe to be good, they take themselves to be persecuted by natural evils and they pursue what (so they think) is good. And when they have acquired these things, they experience more troubles: for they are elated beyond reason and measure, and in fear of change they do anything so as not to lose what they believe to be good. But those who make no determination about what is good and bad by nature neither avoid not pursue anything with intensity; and hence they are tranquil'.

Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism* (2000:27)

# Descartes and Scepticism: The First Meditation



## The Aims of the *Meditations*

1. To free us from all preconceived opinions
2. To lead the mind away from the senses
3. To make it impossible for us to have any further doubts regarding what we believe to be true

# Shaky Foundations

'Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realised that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything and start from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and able to last.' (7:17)



# The Withholding Policy

'Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do those which are patently false' (7:18).

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Believe	Withhold Assent
??	??
??	??

# The Withholding Policy

**Active Disbelief**

**Doubt**

**Not Completely Certain**

# The Withholding Policy

## Active Disbelief

1. I am the author of the *Meditations*
2. I shall live to 200

## Doubt

## Not Completely Certain

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1. I am the author of the *Meditations*
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## Doubt

1. I shall live to 110
2. Every Student in this room has read the first Meditation

## Not Completely Certain

# The Withholding Policy

## Active Disbelief

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## Doubt

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2. Every Student in this room has read the first Meditation

## Not Completely Certain

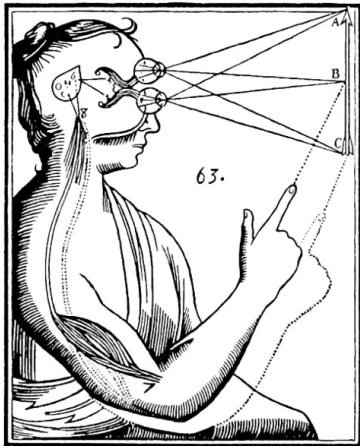
1. I have locked the front door to my house
2. I shall live to see 40

# The Withholding Policy

'Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do those which are patently false' (7:18).

Believe	Doubt
??	??
??	??

# Stage 1: Local Doubt



## Sensory Experience

- ▶ The **Foundations** of our Beliefs
- ▶ 'Whatever I have up till now accepted as most **true** I have acquired either from the **senses** or through the **senses**'. (7:18)
- ▶ Aristotelian Empiricism



# Stage 1: Local Doubt

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- ▶ P2) From time to time the senses deceive

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- ▶ P1) If the **senses** have deceived us, even if only once, we should not place too much trust in them
- ▶ P2) From time to time the senses deceive
- ▶ C) We should not place too much trust in the senses

# The Senses Deceive



# Stage 2: Global Doubt



## Sensory Experience

- ▶ The First Argument is Limited
- ▶ Could I be Mad?



# Stage 2: Global Doubt

## The Argument From Madness

- ▶ P1) If it is possible for certain people to be deceived regarding beliefs which appear certain, such as that I truly have a body, I am wearing clothes and that I am sitting on a chair, then it could be the case that I am being deceived

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- ▶ P2) Madmen are frequently are deceived regarding such beliefs
- ▶ C) It is possible that my senses deceive me in a *fundamental way*

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## Reasons to Doubt the Second Premise

- ▶ There is, for Descartes, a sharp distinction between the **rational** and the **irrational**

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## Reasons to Doubt the Second Premise

- ▶ There is, for Descartes, a sharp distinction between the **rational** and the **irrational**
- ▶ For Descartes 'while *man* can still go mad, *thought*, as the sovereign exercise carried out by a subject seeking the truth, can no longer be devoid of **reason**. *The History of Madness* (Foucault, 2006: 47)

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- ▶ P1) If it is possible for certain people to be deceived regarding beliefs which appear certain, such as that I truly have a body, I am wearing clothes and that I am sitting on a chair, then it could be the case that I am being deceived
- ▶ 'How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire - when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!' (7: 19)

# The Argument from Dreams

Possible Conclusions:

1. I cannot be absolutely certain whether or not I am at this moment dreaming



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## Possible Conclusions:

1. I cannot be absolutely certain whether or not I am at this moment dreaming
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## Possible Conclusions:

1. I cannot be absolutely certain whether or not I am at this moment dreaming
2. I cannot know whether or not I am ever truly awake. It could be the case that I am always dreaming
3. 'I cannot say why I should unquestioningly regard waking experience of physical objects as *real*, when there are no marks to distinguish it from the *illusions of dreams*.'

## The Argument From Dreams

- ▶ P1) If my experiences can report to me as true that I am walking, wearing clothes and sitting by the fire (or any other variety of similar common propositions) when it is not true that I am doing any of these things, then I have no reason to trust the evidence of my senses.

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- ▶ 'or if perhaps they manage to think up something so new that nothing remotely similar has ever been seen before - something which is therefore completely fictitious and unreal... although these general kinds of things - eyes, head, hands and so on could be imaginary, it must be at least admitted that certain other simpler or more universal things are real'. (7: 20)

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- ▶ These things are: 'the shape of extended things; the quantity, or size and number of things; the place in which they may exist, the time through which they endure, and so on.' (7: 20)

'So a reasonable conclusion from this might be that physics, astronomy, medicine and all other disciplines which depend on the study of composite things, are doubtful; while arithmetic, geometry and other subjects of this kind, which deal only with the simplest and most general things, regardless of whether they exist in nature or not, contain something certain and indubitable. For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides. It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false.' (7:20)

# Stage 2: Global Doubt

## The Argument From Dreams and the Painter

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## The Argument From Dreams and the Painter

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- ▶ We do not need to have experienced these through the senses, they are products of the 'intellect'
- ▶ Our 'visions in sleep' could have been composed by the intellect alone
- ▶ Therefore, it is possible to doubt the senses fundamentally

# Stage 3: Hyperbolic Doubt

## The Evil Demon - *Genium Malignum*

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- ▶ Why do we believe that God is not only omnipotent, but also omnibenevolent?
- ▶ The **Imperfect Nature** Problem

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## RECONSTRUCTION (Based on Wilson, 2003:

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## RECONSTRUCTION (Based on Wilson, 2003:

1. I believe that God is good, but I do not know if this belief is true
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3. As I do not know that it is true that 'God is Good' then it must be placed into doubt
4. As it could be true that 'God is evil' then I must doubt all the propositions that I believe to be true

# The Meditator at the end of Meditation 1

Believe	Doubt
	<p>A good God exists</p> <p>All propositions of...</p> <p>Sensory Experience</p> <p>Physics</p> <p>Astronomy</p> <p>Medicine</p> <p>Arithmetic</p> <p>Geometry</p>

# Reading

## 1. THIS WEEK: Descartes' *Meditations* MEDITATION 1

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1. THIS WEEK: Descartes' *Meditations*  
MEDITATION 1
2. NEXT WEEK: Descartes' *Meditations*  
MEDITATION 2