Descartes and Foundationalism

Cogito, ergo sum
Descartes and Foundationalism

- Who was René Descartes?
  - 1596-1650
  - Life and Times
  - Notable accomplishments
    - modern philosophy
      - mind body problem
      - epistemology
    - physics
      - inertia
      - optics
    - mathematics
      - functions
      - analytic geometry
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- Descartes used an architectural metaphor for knowledge
  - Building a great tower requires very firm foundations
  - Similarly, knowledge depends on a foundation of propositions known with absolute certainty
  - One model for this is axiomatic geometry, first codified by Euclid.
- Two features
  - The axioms are ‘self-evident’
    - cannot be false
    - are absolutely certain
  - The theorems follow from axioms
    - Follow by pure logic
    - Inherit certainty

Euclid of Alexandria (lived around 300 BCE)
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- **Euclid’s Axioms:**
  - Axiom 1: Things which are equal to the same thing are also equal to one another.
  - Axiom 2: If equals be added to equals, the wholes are equal.
  - Axiom 3: If equals be subtracted from equals, the remainders are equal.
  - Axiom 4: Things which coincide with one another are equal to one another.
  - Axiom 5: The whole is greater than the part.
  - Postulate 1: It is possible to draw a straight line from any point to any other point.
  - Postulate 2: It is possible to produce a finite straight line continuously in a straight line.
  - Postulate 3: It is possible to describe a circle with any center and distance.
  - Postulate 4: It is true that all right angles are equal to one another.
  - Postulate 5: It is true that, if a straight line falling on two straight lines make the interior angles on the same side less than two right angles, the two straight lines, if produced indefinitely, intersect on that side on which are the angles less than the two right angles.
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- Euclid’s Fifth Postulate
  - Another way to state it: if you have a line and a point off that line, there is exactly one line which is parallel to the first line
  - Is this ‘self-evident’?
  - There are consistent geometrical systems that deny it
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- Descartes’s Method of Doubt
  - Use to discover the foundations of knowledge
  - For any proposition, consider if there is any way (any way at all, no matter how weird) to put it in some (any at all, no matter how small) doubt
  - Example: Justin Trudeau is Prime Minister
    - Can we find a way to doubt this?
    - Easy – it could be that he just died this second
  - The method is applied to classes of beliefs (e.g. beliefs formed by perception, or memory, or etc.)
  - An indubitable proposition is one that passes Descartes’s test: it cannot be put into doubt
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- Descartes’s Method of Doubt
  - A posteriori beliefs
  - These are beliefs based on the senses, memory, testimony etc
  - Dreaming, hallucination and illusion give reasons for putting such beliefs into doubt
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- Basic skeptical argument based on the method of doubt:
  - Any proposition, $P$, is doubtful if there is a possible situation (a ‘$P$ deceptive situation’) in which that proposition would seem to be true but would really be false
  - We can’t tell whether or not we are in a $P$ deceptive situation
  - Since we can’t tell whether or not we are in a $P$ deceptive situation, we might actually be in one
  - If we are in one then $P$ is false
  - Therefore, $P$ might be false
  - If $P$ might be false, we don’t know that $P$
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- Descartes’s Method of Doubt
  - A priori beliefs based upon logical or mathematical reasoning
  - Some of these actually rely on memory ... 
  - What about beliefs such as ‘2 + 2 = 4’ or ‘a square has four sides’
  - Descartes’s *Evil Genius* argument
  - Does it apply to utterly simple a priori propositions?
  - I have doubts here about Sober’s interpretation of Descartes about this (check for yourself, see the *Meditations*, numbers 1 and 2 in our textbook)
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- Descartes’s Method of Doubt
  - Are there any propositions that survive the acid of the method of doubt?
  - Descartes thought this one did: I exist
  - Any proposition which is such that if you think it it must be true will survive the method of doubt
  - Are there others
    - I am conscious
    - NOT ‘I see a dog’ but ‘I seem to see a dog’
    - For any proposition you are inclined to believe, P, just adding ‘it seems to me that P’ will give a doubt free proposition
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- **Descartes and Mental Certainty**
  - Descartes believed that we could not be mistaken about our own mental states (a thesis sometimes labeled the *incorrigibility* of the mental; we might also define the *transparency* of the mental = if we are in a mental state, X, we will know we are in X)
  - General incorrigibility and transparency do not seem very plausible
    - unconscious mental states
    - self-deception
  - But what about the current contents of consciousness as we experience them?
    - Could you right now be suffering excruciating pain and not know it?
    - Could you right now believe you are suffering excruciating pain and be wrong?
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- Clear and Distinct Ideas
  - Descartes wondered what made it the case that some beliefs could not be in error
  - He labeled the feature: clearness and distinctness
    - Clarity = what is present and apparent to the mind
    - Distinctness = every feature of the idea is clear
  - Example: the belief that there is a book in front of me
    - This is not clear and distinct
    - This idea involves (1) the experience of seeming to see a book and (2) the idea that the book is existing in the world
    - Only (1) is clear and distinct
    - It is what we can know for certain ‘directly’
  - The ‘rule of truth’ = whatever we think of which is clear and distinct must be true
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- Descartes and Mental Certainty
  - Mental certainty gives us a set of indubitable beliefs
  - Recall the architectural metaphor
    - A foundation must be (1) solid
    - A foundation must be (2) suitable for the building
  - Maybe they are a solid foundation, but are they extensive enough to rest all our knowledge on
  - That is, how do we get from mental certainty to knowledge of things beyond our own minds?
  - Or again, doesn’t doubt re-infect our beliefs as soon as move from ‘I seem to see a cat’ to ‘There is a cat’?
  - What could we add to our foundations to get us ‘outside our own minds’?
  - Descartes thought we needed to know that God existed!
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- Descartes and God
  - How would this work?
    - If God exists (and created us and the world) but we are not able to know anything despite all the evidence before us, then God would be a deceiver
    - But God is no deceiver
    - Therefore, if God exists, we can know things (when we have good evidence)
    - I think this means something like: if we have done everything we should about finding the truth, then if we are wrong, then it is someone else’s fault (no fault of our own)
    - God has no faults however
  - (Note connection to problem of evil ....)
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- Descartes and God
  - How did Descartes prove that God exists?
  - Causal argument (recall the first 2 ways of Aquinas)
    - My idea of God is of a perfect being
    - There must be as much ‘perfection’ in the cause of an idea as there is represented perfection in the idea itself
    - Therefore, the cause of my idea of God must be a perfect being = God
  - Descartes used the word ‘objective reality’ for what is represented in an idea (or picture, etc)
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- Descartes and God
  - Objective and formal reality
  - Consider a picture of a horse
  - The formal reality is whatever the picture is made out of (paper and ink or whatever)
  - The objective or represented reality is a horse
  - Descartes’s principle is that there must be as much formal reality in the cause of the picture as there is objective (represented) reality in the picture.
  - A picture of a horse should be traced back to something like a horse ....
  - (think about how this would work for a unicorn picture)
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- **Descartes and God**
  - One problem here is that for a complex idea, we might construct the idea from simpler (and less perfect) parts.
  - The idea of God might be constructed from our ideas of limited knowledge, limited goodness and limited power plus the idea of *negation*
  - Thus the idea of God = not limited power + not limited knowledge + not limited goodness
  - We don’t have to trace this idea back to a single supreme being
  - (Descartes denied this: he thought out idea of infinity was prior and did not arise from negation)
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- The Cartesian Circle
  - I need to know that the rule of truth is valid
  - I can know this if I know that a non-deceiver God exists
  - I can prove that God exists
  - But, the proof that God exists rests on a argument
  - The parts of that argument have to be known to be true
  - They are known to be true because they are clear and distinct
  - But clearness and distinctness guarantee truth only if we know that God is no deceiver
  - Thus, we are reasoning in a circle!
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- The Cartesian Circle
  - Is there a way out of the circle?
  - The ‘memory answer’
    - Maybe the rule of truth is absolute
    - But it applies only to what we can understand or conceive of ‘in a flash’ of thought
    - If we have to remember the steps of an argument, then error can creep in (memory is not infallible)
    - (you can see if this makes sense by reading Descartes’s Meditations 2 and 3)
  - Even if the memory answer is right, it requires that we be able to grasp the proof of God’s existence in as simple a thought as ‘I think therefore I exist’
  - Is that plausible?
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- Is foundationalism doomed?
  - Other forms are possible
    - phenomenalism
    - probabilism
- One thing that makes Descartes’s version of foundationalism so hard to defend is
  - The Internal Certifiability of knowledge
  - What happens if we drop this requirement