

Module 3: Foundationalism

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1. Introduction

Temporarily, we will suspend attempts at modifying the analysis of *knowledge* through an investigation its necessary and sufficient conditions. Instead our focus in the next three modules will be on trying to formulate the necessary and sufficient conditions for *epistemic justification*. Perhaps gaining a clearer understanding of what it means for a proposition to be epistemically justified, we can return to an analysis of knowledge with a clearer, more accurate, and more defensible understanding of what it means for *S* to know *p*.

In this chapter, we investigate *foundationalism* by articulating its necessary and sufficient conditions, assessing this articulation against a historical example in the work of French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes, and then testing various objections against this theory by looking at the work of American philosopher and logician Charles S. Peirce.

Section 2 distinguishes between basic justified beliefs and derived justified beliefs. Section 3 articulates the core tenets of foundationalism. Section 4 is a particular expansion upon the core of foundationalism. Here it is called *Classical Foundationalism*. Section

2. Basic and Derived Beliefs

Often when we are asked what *justifies* a certain belief or proposition, we appeal to another belief or proposition. For instance, consider the following:

John: Did you hear about the grizzly murder on the news? I can identify who the murderer is!

Frank: I don't believe you. How do you know who the murderer is?

John: I saw it with my very own eyes and happen to be in possession of the murder weapon.

Frank: Oh yeah?

John: Yep, my eye doctor says that I have perfect vision, the murder was in a well-lit room, and I happened to have a particularly good view of it.

Putting aside whether John has knowledge, you can see that Frank is skeptical about the underlying justification for John's claim to know the murder. In answering Frank's questions, John appeals to beliefs that he thinks grounds or provides justification for his belief. These are his perception of an event, viewing of the murder under normal conditions, and his possession of an item forensically tied to the murder. In other words, his belief is *based* on a set of other beliefs and these beliefs provide justification for the belief that he can identify the murderer.

We can propose a distinction between (i) those beliefs whose justification is wholly *derived* from other beliefs, and (ii) those beliefs whose justification is at least partially *not derived* from other beliefs.

(ii) Justification is wholly derived	inferential beliefs, indirect beliefs, non-basic beliefs, mediate beliefs
(i) Justification is at least partially not derived	intuitive beliefs, direct beliefs, basic beliefs, underived beliefs, immediate beliefs

There are many examples of beliefs whose justification is claimed to be basic or not dependent upon other beliefs. Some uncontroversial examples include:

1. Mathematical Truths (e.g. $2+2=4$)
2. Linguistic (Analytic) Truths (e.g. 'all bachelors are unmarried men', 'all gold is yellow')
3. Claims about one's own mental states (e.g. 'I feel pain', 'I have a warm feeling')

3. The Core of Foundationalism

The first step in our analysis is to articulate the *core* of foundationalism. This will be the necessary conditions which all versions of foundationalism share.

(F): (1) There are beliefs whose justification is basic and (2) all non-basic beliefs ultimately derive their justification from at least one of the existing basic beliefs.

A theory of epistemic justification supplements these two conditions by explaining what it means for S to be justified in p .

3.1 The Regress Argument

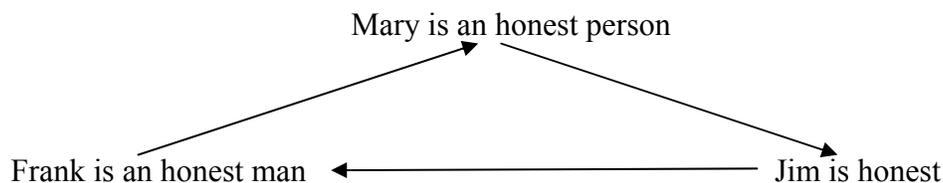
Motivating (F) are a series of arguments. One is called the *regress argument*. The argument is established by *reductio*.

1. Assume that there are no basic beliefs.
2. If there are no basic beliefs, then either (i) all beliefs are ultimately justified by beliefs that are not themselves justified, (ii) the ultimate ground of justification is circular, (iii) there is an infinite sequence of justification.
3. Options (i)–(iii) are impossible, false, or implausible
4. Therefore, the original assumption in (1) is false.
5. There must be at least one basic belief.

The argument hinges on two premises. First, it may be the case that (2) is not exhaustive of all the alternatives. More controversially, (3) requires additional argumentation to show that options (i)–(iii) are, in fact, impossible, false, or implausible. And, if it can only be shown that (i)–(iii) are implausible, then another argument is required to show that (5) is more plausible.

Consider each option in turn. Option (i) states that all beliefs are ultimately justified by beliefs that are not themselves justified. Let ‘ $B1 \rightarrow B2$ ’ mean that $B1$ is justified by $B2$. Option (i) state that for all justified beliefs ultimately terminate in a belief that is not justified. So, why ‘ $B1 \rightarrow B2$ ’ means $B1$ is justified by $B2$, and $B2$ is not justified by any belief or anything else, i.e. $B2$ is not justified. Here is a concrete example, ‘Frank believes that John is the murder’, this belief is based upon his belief on a further belief that ‘All people with names that begin with the letter J are murders’. In this case, a belief is based upon another belief that is not itself justifiable.

Option (ii) states that the ultimate ground of justification is circular. Consider three beliefs, $B1$, $B2$, and $B3$. On option (ii), $B1 \rightarrow B2$, $B2 \rightarrow B3$, yet $B3 \rightarrow B1$. So, for example, John believes Frank is an honest man ($B1$) because Mary is an honest person and told him so ($B2$), John believes that Mary is an honest ($B2$) because Jim is an honest person and told him so ($B3$), yet John believes that Jim is honest ($B3$) because Frank is honest and told him so ($B1$). Justification, in case (ii), is circular.



Option (iii) states that the justificational chain can be infinitely long. So, $B1 \rightarrow B2$, $B2 \rightarrow B3 \rightarrow B4 \rightarrow \dots B\infty$. So, there is no end to the chain of justification, every belief is justified by another belief.

There are a variety of objections to options (i)–(iii). Option (i) looks unacceptable because it involves a set of unjustified beliefs dole out justification to other beliefs. Not only is this *prima facie* implausible, but if all beliefs rest upon a set of unjustified beliefs, then what possible criterion is there for choosing which set of unjustified beliefs confer justification upon other beliefs? In other words, if x justifies y , but x does not need to be justified in order to justify y , then it is possible to substitute a number of different arbitrary beliefs a , b , or c that also justify y .

Option (ii) looks unacceptable, not because it entails that some belief justifies another, but because the whole set of beliefs are self-justifying.

Option (iii) is implausible for psychologically it seems to imply that that we are unable to articulate why any of our beliefs are justified because it would require that we articulate an infinite number of beliefs.

4. Classical Foundationalism

In the previous section, it was claimed that foundationalism consists of two principal features:

(F): (1) There are beliefs whose justification is basic and (2) all non-basic beliefs ultimately derive their justification from at least one of the existing basic beliefs.

Additional theses can be added to (1) and (2) to make foundationalism a theory of epistemic justification.

(F_C): S is justified in $p = \text{Df.}$ (1) There is a belief q whose justification is basic and infallible for S , (2) p is either a justified basic belief or it deductively entailed by q , (3) p is infallible for S .

The essential additions to (F) in (F_C) are clauses concerning (i) the *infallibility* of S 's justification for p and (ii) that if p is not a justified basic belief, then it is *deductively* inferred from a belief that is infallible and basic for S .

According to the classical version of Foundationalism, S 's justification for any belief is ultimately derived from a basic, justified, and infallible belief p . This means that a variety of beliefs that we have about the objects of perception (e.g. that they exist) and those that we base upon past experiences are not justified. The reason is that it is possible for the objects of perception to be illusory and our memory to be mistaken. In contrast, mathematical and logical truths are justified, as well as those concerning our introspective mental states. Beliefs like 'all triangles have three sides', '2+2=4', and 'I am feeling pain right now' are infallible for we cannot be mistaken about them.

Not a Basic Justified Belief	Basic Justified Belief
Perceptual beliefs	Rational Intuition (Reason)
Memory	Introspection of Mental States (feeling of pain)

Objections to classical foundationalism are manifold, but a principal one is extensional. According to foundationalism, our beliefs about the existence of certain objects, if justified, must

be based upon rational intuition or introspection of mental states. But, our belief in the existence of objects is not obviously justified in this way since they are thought to involve inference from perception to the existence of object. So, we are not justified in the existence of objects inferred from perception. This leaves us with two questions: *are we justified in believing these objects* and, if we are, can a version of *classical foundationalism justify our belief in the existence of objects*?

Let us assume that we are epistemically justified in believing that material objects exist. If this is the case, our next step is to consider a foundationalist theory that claims that our belief in said objects are justified. For this, we turn to Descartes's *Meditation on First Philosophy*.

5. Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy

5.0 Summary of Meditations 1–6

It will be helpful to get a brief idea of all of the Meditations before reading the book. From our point of view, the basic idea is to argue for a classical foundationalist theory of epistemic justification. In addition to the two principal tenets of foundationalism, this also requires (1) that justified basic beliefs are infallible, and (2) derived beliefs are obtained by either deduction or some method that preserves the infallibility of belief.

In order to do this, Descartes begins with a skeptical method whereby he tries to eradicate any belief that is not infallibly known (Med. 1), discovers a number of justified basic beliefs that are undoubtable (Med. 2), derives the existence of God (Med.3), derives a method for using the intellect correctly (Med.4), employs this method for determining truths about the essence of material things (Med. 5), employs this method for determining the existence of material things (Med. 6).

5.1 Meditation 1

Descartes's approach in this Meditation is known as *methodological skepticism*. In order to determine a basic justified belief, doubt everything in search of that which is absolutely certain or to conclude that nothing is certain. His aim is not merely to doubt what is false, but everything that is not absolutely certain. So, provided it is possible to cast a shred of doubt on a belief, then it should be deemed *fallible* and therefore not an adequate foundation for conferring justification on other beliefs. He writes,

I will not need to show that all my opinions are false [...]. But reason now persuades me that I should withhold my assent no less carefully from opinions that are not completely certain and indubitable than I would from those that are patently false (AT VIII, 18).

With this criterion, Descartes proposes three scenarios that undermine different sources of justification: (1) *illusions* undermine sense perception, (2) *dreams* undermine sense perception, (3) the *evil demon* makes sense perception and various capacities of the intellect unreliable. Let's look at each of these in turn.

First, Descartes argues that beliefs formed from sense perception are not basic justified beliefs because the senses are not always reliable in cases where the object of perception is small or far away (e.g. optical illusions, distorted size of distant objects, small objects). Since the

senses do not give us clear knowledge of some components of reality, they are, in this respect, unreliable and so it is possible to cast a shred of doubt on the beliefs we base upon them.

However, there are some sensory information that seems more reliable. For example, about large objects or ones always close to use. For instance ‘This is my body! I am here in this classroom.’ Descartes example is the following:

I am sitting here next to the fire, wearing my winter dressing gown, that I am holding this sheet of paper in my hands, and the like (AT VIII, 18).

So, while our senses deceive us about small objects, objects far away, and so forth, they seem to be reliable about medium-sized objects that are always close to us.

Second, Descartes argues that beliefs formed from sense perception are not basic justified beliefs because the senses are not always reliable about the existence of these things since we perceive in dreams and the objects of dreams do not exist. Descartes writes,

How often does my evening slumber persuades me of such ordinary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated next to the fireplace—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! (AT VIII, 19).

Descartes claims that there is *no definitive sign* to distinguish being awake from being asleep. It may be that being *awake* is more distinct, but how do we know that this is not just all a dream? Thus, we can doubt that this is our body, that we are in fact opening our eyes, that we actually even have a body at all.

However, while we may not be justified in believing that our sense-perception gives us accurate information, the images of sense perception must correspond to *something*. Something must produce them. Also even if our senses deceive us, we still have mathematical knowledge left and knowledge of universals. For example, arithmetical truths like $2+3=5$ even if we are asleep, and conceptual truths like ‘a triangle has three sides’ is true even if we are dreaming.

Third, Descartes writes,

Since I judge that others sometimes make mistakes in matters that they believe they know most perfectly, may I not, in like fashion, be deceived every time I add 2 and 3 or count the sides of a square, or perform an even simpler operation, if that can be imagined? (AT VIII, 21)

Descartes suggests that if an extremely powerful demon existed, it would be possible for this demon to tricks us all the time. The result of this would be

but eventually I am forced to admit that there is nothing among the things I once believed to be true which it is not permissible to doubt (AT VIII, 21).

That is, Descartes concludes, at least here, that all of his former beliefs are susceptible to doubt, and that there appears to be no basic justified belief.

5.2 Meditation 2

The search for a justified basic belief is a search for an *Archimedean point*. Archimedes claimed that if he were given a place to stand, one strong point, and a large enough lever, he could move

the world. Descartes is after the same thing, an infallible justified basic belief that all further justification can be derived from.

In the previous Meditation, Descartes argued that we are not justified in believing the existence of our bodies because this was based upon sense-perception. Does it follow that if we have no body or senses *we do not exist*? According to Descartes, the answer is *no*. If we are being deceived, then there is *something* that is being deceived, and that something is *us*. Even if I am believe I have no body, it is an **I** who am being convinced (some sort of *awareness*). Descartes writes,

Thus, after everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement “I am, I exist” is *necessarily true* every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind (AT VIII, 25, my emphasis).

So, according to Descartes, this is a justified basic belief that is infallible. It is necessarily true. There is thus no possibility of it being false. The next question Descartes considers is ‘What is the *I* that exists?’ It is not, according to Descartes, a body. Descartes writes,

By “body,” I understand all that is capable of being bounded by some shape, of being enclosed in a place, and of filling up a space in such a way as to exclude any other body from it; of being perceived by touch, sight, hearing, taste, or smell; of being moved in several ways, not, of course, by itself, but by whatever else impinges upon it (AT VIII, 26).

So, the *I* that exists is not a body because bodies are known by sensory perception (which is not an infallible source of knowledge). Descartes claims that the *I* is the soul/mind. It is something that *thinks*! So, while we might be wrong about all our particular thoughts, we are infallibly justified in believing that we are a *thinking being*.

We should isolate two different arguments. The first is the **Cogito ergo sum** argument.

Argument for Cogito Ergo Sum	
P1	If I am being tricked (thinking) by my senses, by dreams, or by an evil demon, then it is <i>I</i> am being tricked.
P2	All thinking things are things that exist
C	I think, I am

This argument has a certain power behind it since as soon as you try to deny it, you reaffirm its truth. For example,

A: I don’t believe I exist.

B: Who doesn’t believe it?

A: *I* don’t.

B: How can you deny that you don’t exist if you don’t exist?

The second is Descartes’ argument for the **“I” as a Thinking Thing**

Argument for the “I” as a Thinking Thing
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P1	If I am being tricked by my senses, by dreams, or by an evil demon, then it is <i>I</i> am thinking something but am incorrect.
P2	Bodies are defined by being extended in space and don't think.
C	The thinking thing is not a body.

But if the *I* is not a body, then what is it?

But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions" (AT VIII, 28).

Descartes conclusion then is that there are at least two justified, infallible basis beliefs: (1) I exist and (2) I am not a body.

One lingering question is *how* it is known that I am not a body. Since it is not through sense-perception, Descartes argues that it is through rational intuition (see AT VIII, 30-34).

5.3 Meditation 3

At this point, while Descartes meets the criteria set forth by classic foundationalism concerning his existence and his being a thinking thing, there is a gap between the existing **subject** & all other existing objects. We know that we exist, but does anything else? How does Descartes derive the existence of external objects from the existence of himself? Descartes has two problems.

First, although we are justified in believing our own existence, from the fact that we have sense-perception of something does not mean anything exists independently of our thought (solipsism). Sensory perception may simply be an internal *mode of thought* such that while some sense-perceptions *do not* depend on our will, this does not mean that they proceed from things outside of us (since they could merely be the production of our dreams or subconscious)

Second, there is also the problem that even if things did exist, they might not resemble our sense-perceptions in any law-like way. This is a problem concerning skepticism about our sense-perceptions. There may be an object outside of us, but we do not clearly and distinctly perceive **that the things outside of us** (not the ideas *within* us) resemble our ideas in all respects. We don't perceive the connection between the two like we perceive the appearance.

Descartes tries to address each of these concerns. First, consider the argument for solipsism. The only reason that we doubt the existence of all other objects (and mathematical statements) is because we suppose that there is some evil demon (or God) that tricks us. If we could show that the evil demon hypothesis is not justified, we could reestablish certain mathematical truth, and obtain knowledge about certain abstract (or necessary properties) of things. So, the primary question to consider is the following: 'Is there any reason to believe that such an evil demon exists?'

If God does exist	then either he is a trickster or he is not.
If God does exist and he is not a trickster	then we <i>don't have</i> a reason to believe that he is a trickster
If God does exist and he may be a trickster	then we <i>have</i> reason to believe that he is a trickster

The **first** major conclusion of Meditation 3 will be “I am not alone in the world, but that something else, which is the cause of this idea, also exists” (AT VIII:42). This undermines *solipsism*. This is established by a proof for the existence of God.

Short Argument for the Existence of God: Against Solipsism	
P1	I think therefore I am (Med.2)
P2	I cannot be mistaken about my ideas, although can be mistaken about the source of them.
P3	There can never be more <i>objective reality</i> in the effect (i.e. the idea) than there is <i>formal reality</i> in the cause (i.e. object of the idea). ¹
P4	I have an idea of an infinite substance that is perfect.
P5	My idea of an infinite substance is the most objectively real idea that I have
P6	The idea of an infinite substance cannot be caused by nothing, by reflection on my own nature (a finite substance), or upon the nature of other finite substances.
C	The only possible cause of the idea of an infinite substance is the existence of the infinite substance

Let’s consider each of these premises. Premise #1 and #2 are relatively uncontroversial or at least turn on considerations in earlier meditations. **Premise #3** states that there can never be more *objective reality* in the effect (i.e. the idea) than there is *formal reality* in the cause (i.e. object of the idea). This is another way of saying that things always have more reality than the ideas of those things. That is, if a thing *causes* an idea, that thing has more reality than the idea itself. **Premise #4** states that I have an idea of an infinite substance that is perfect. This premise does not ask us to accept that God exists, only that we have an idea of God in our minds. That is, we have an idea of a substance that is infinite, independent, supremely intelligent and powerful, and that created me along with everything else that exists. **Premise #5** states that my idea of an infinite substance that is perfect is the most objectively real idea that I have. This is somewhat unclear, so let’s clarify and defend it with an argument.

Argument the Infinite Substance is the Most Objectively Real Idea	
P1	To have more being is to be better (or have more reality) than to have less being
P2	Infinite beings have more being than finite beings (since the infinite contains the finite)
C	My idea of an infinite substance that is perfect is the most objectively real idea that I have

Premise #6 states that the idea of an infinite substance cannot be caused by reflection on my own nature (a finite substance) nor can it be given to me from another finite substance (e.g. a

¹ What Descartes means by “formal” and “objective” reality is somewhat of an issue. One way to think about it is *formal* reality refers to actual or existing things while *objective* reality refers to our representation or idea of things. Any idea that *can* actually be thought (so not contradictions) has objective reality. Some ideas can have more objective reality than others because **some ideas depend upon other ideas (accidents depend on the substance)**. For example, the idea of the number 1 has less objective reality than the idea of *number in general* since the former depends upon the latter. One principal thesis that Descartes advances is “there must be at least as much [reality] in the efficient and total cause as there is in the effect of that same cause” (AT VIII 40). This means that **all ideas** have a cause but **some** of these ideas will be caused by other ideas (e.g. ideas about the material world).

horse, a mountain, another person). Descartes spends a good amount of time considering how we might have acquired our idea of God (or infinite substance). The thought is that maybe we acquired this idea by another means. He considers (at least) *four* possibilities

- (1) Obtained from our ideas of other finite things (men, animals, or angels)
- (2) Obtained by negating a finite idea
- (3) Obtained from nothing or nowhere
- (4) Obtained from introspection of myself because I am god

Against (1), Descartes claims that our idea of God is not obtained from our reflection upon finite things (ourselves, men, animals, or angels). That is, we have other ideas given to us via sense (animals, angels, etc.), testimony, and imagination, but these cannot be the cause of the infinite substance. Since these objects are finite, we can certainly compound new finite objects, but never an infinite one. From compounded finite substances, we only get a larger finite substance, and not an infinite one, for take any finite set of numbers and add them to another set, the result will be another finite set

Against (2), Descartes argues that the idea of God is not obtained from negating a finite substance (AT VIII 45-6). His argument seems to be that we don't obtain our notion of the infinite by merely saying it is not the finite (not clear why). Instead, he claims that our perception of the infinite is *prior* to the finite.

Argument that Perception of Infinite is Prior to the Finite (AT VIII 46)	
P1	If we understand something that thinks, doubts, desires, lacks, and is not perfect, then we must understand the thing that knows all, does not desire, and is perfect
P2	We do understand something that has these properties
C	Our perception to the infinite is <i>prior</i> to the finite

The argument seems to be that we cannot know ourselves without a being that we can *contrast* ourselves with, so as soon as we know ourselves, we get the idea of God. Therefore, the idea of God is not obtained through *negating* a finite thing but is necessary for understanding a finite thing.

Against (3), Descartes argues that our idea of God is not simply nothing (AT VIII 46-7). The idea cannot merely be false since it has the most *objective reality* in terms of ideas. Calling the idea of God a mere nothing contradicts Descartes's claim that there must be at least *as much reality* in the *cause* as there is in the *effect*, and since we have an idea of *God*, which is an infinite substance, independent, supremely intelligent and powerful, and perfect — this is not a mere nothing but an idea that has the most reality

Against (4), Descartes claims that the idea of God cannot come from introspection of ourselves for two reasons. One possibility is that we are God (AT VIII 47-49). Descartes claims that if we were God, we would be perfect, and therefore would never error and the question about whether we were God would not occur to us. Secondly, Descartes considers that we might be perfect (like God) but these perfections are only in us *potentially*, i.e. we will ultimately be God. But, this does not work because the definition of God is an *actually infinite thing* not a thing that just continues to get better (*a potential infinite*). Finally, we cannot be the source of the infinite idea because it cannot come from our own finite nature (a body, a soul that is finite, etc.).

Thus, Descartes claims that the only way we can receive the idea of an infinite substance is if it is actually given to us (put into us) by an existing God. Descartes concludes then the only possible cause of the idea of an infinite substance is the existence of the infinite substance. That is, since we have the idea of God, and the idea cannot come from ourselves or others, it must come from God. Thus, if the argument works, then God exists, and solipsism is false.

The **second** major conclusion of Meditation 3 is that since “God necessarily exists” (AT VIII 45) and that God “cannot be a deceiver, for it is manifest by the light of nature that all fraud and deception depend on some defect” (AT VIII 52), it follows that there is no evil demon that tricks us and our senses are not wholly deceptive. This undermines *skepticism* that was produced by the evil demon. Here is Descartes’s Argument for the God not being a Deceiver.

Argument that God is not a Trickster: Against Skepticism of the Evil Demon	
P1	God exists and God is defined as an infinite substance that is supremely perfect
P2	Only non-perfect beings intentionally deceive finite beings ²
C	Therefore, God is not an evil demon

So, Descartes argues that solipsism and extreme skepticism are refuted, and that our belief in the existence of God is justified.

5.4 Meditation 4

According to Descartes, we are justified in all of the following beliefs: (1) not only do we know that we exist, (2) that we are thinking things, and (3) that God exists and is not tricking us. Meditation 4 is dedicated to two issues, the *method for gaining truth* and the proper use of our *free will*.

Descartes argues that we are justified in believing that our intellect is capable of providing us with a method for gaining truth (or other justified beliefs). He argues from the fact that we exist, the definition of God, God’s existence, and the consequence that God does not deceive us, to the conclusion that our intellect (when used correctly) furnishes beliefs for which have justification and are infallible.

Faculty of Judgment is Not Worthless	
P1	If God created us, then God gave us a faculty for judgment
P2	If we have a faculty for judgment given to us by God, then it cannot be the type of faculty that will always end in deception (for God is not a trickster)
C	Therefore, the proper use of our faculty for judgment will not result in deception

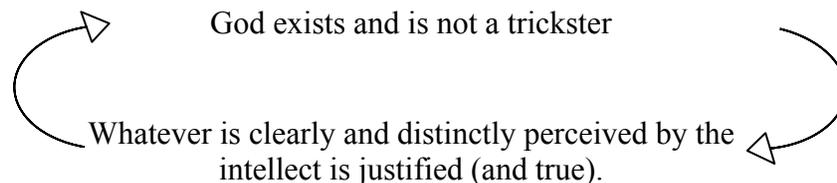
Given that the faculty of judgment (or intellect) is not wholly subject to err, Descartes proposes a method for determining infallible justified beliefs. A belief is justified and infallible provided the belief is clear and distinct to our intellect. Provided we are able to clearly distinguish the object from another, we are justified in our belief in that object. We err or have unjustified beliefs when we let our will extend beyond our intellect. That is, when we choose to believe something that is not clear and distinct to our intellect. Descartes writes,

² We also might need to add the caveat that “only a non-perfect being would allow finite beings to be deceived by a being greater than them”. This would ensure that God would prevent us from being tricked by evil demons.

[D]uring these last few days I was examining whether anything in the world exists, and I noticed that, from the very fact that I was making this examination, it obviously followed that I exist. Nevertheless, I could not help judging that what I understood so clearly was true; not that I was coerced into making this judgment because of some external force, but because a great light in my intellect gave way to a great inclination in my will (AT VII, 58-9).

While Descartes considers a number of subsidiary questions about *why* God gave us a finite understanding, our primary concern here is that Descartes gives us a method for *obtaining* other justified beliefs. That is, provided our belief is not grounded on the will to believe something that fails to be clear and distinct to the intellect, we are justified in our belief. That is, provided the belief is clear and distinct to the intellect, the belief is justified and infallible.

But this is problematic since now Descartes argument now seems to be *circular*. From Meditations 1–3 we know that the thinking thing exists, God exists, and God is perfect. All of this seems to be justified by the tacit assumption that whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive is infallibly justified. But here in Meditation 4, Descartes now tells us that it is *because* God exists, is perfect, and has created our faculty of intellect, that whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive is infallibly justified. But, what justifies what? Does our belief in God’s existence and perfection justify the correct use of our intellect or does our belief in the correct use of intellect justify the belief that God exists. It is not clear which belief is more basic (more foundational).



This is a problem for Descartes’s version of classical foundationalism since in order for either one of the above beliefs to be a basic justified belief that is infallible, at least some of its justification must not be based on other beliefs. Without this, the circularity is *vicious* since neither of the two beliefs has independent justification. For our purpose, however, we will assume that the more foundational position is the following: *whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived by the intellect is justified (and true)*. And, we will assume that this is the criteria employed to justify the existence of God, and the fact that God is not a trickster, and the proof of these two propositions provides **additional** justification for the claim that *whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived by the intellect is justified (and true)*.

5.5 Meditation 5

At this point, Descartes has proved his own existence, God’s existence, and has undermined extreme skepticism about the capacity of the intellect. Also available at this point in the text is a criterion for determining what beliefs about the essence of material things are justified. In this Meditation, Descartes has two principal goals: (1) Prove the Existence of God (again), and (2) prove that from the method specified in Meditation 4, we are justified about the material essence of objects.

Meditation 5 begins by examining the notion of *continuity*. He writes,

I do indeed distinctly imagine the quantity that philosophers commonly call “continuous,” that is, the extension of this quantity, or rather of the thing quantified in length, breadth, and depth. I enumerate the various parts in it. I ascribe to these parts any sizes, shapes, positions, and local movements whatever; to these movements I ascribe any durations whatever (AT VIII, 63).

According to Descartes, one essence of material things that is known distinctly are geometrical shapes understood quantitatively. That is, according to Descartes, although triangles, cubes, and other shapes may not exist, their essential properties are independent of the will. The proof of this is found in the fact that various properties can be demonstrated as belonging to geometrical figures. For example, the fact that the three interior angles of a Euclidean triangle are equal to two right angles is not something dependent upon the mind but an objective property of the triangle as a continuous (geometrical) figure.

Descartes claims that although when considering continuous (geometrical) objects, we cannot demonstrate their existence, the case is different when it comes to God. Descartes argues that typically, we can distinguish between an objects *essence* and *existence* such that an object may have essential properties but that object may not exist. For example, it may be part of the essence of a unicorn that it has a horn protruding from its head, but this does not mean that any unicorns exist. Likewise, it may be part of the essence of a triangle that it have three sides and that the longest side is opposite the largest angle, but this does not mean any geometrical triangles exist. However, Descartes argues that when we consider the essence of God, part of God’s essence entails that God exists. Descartes writes,

[e]xistence can no more be separated from God’s essence than its having three angles equal to two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle, or than the idea of a valley can be separated from the idea of a mountain (AT VII, 66).

Descartes argument for why God’s existence is inseparable from God’s essence is known as the *ontological argument*. A short-form of the argument runs as follows

1	God’s essence is that of an infinite substance having all of the perfections.
2	Existence is a perfection
3	Therefore, God exists.

5.6 Meditation 6

The goal of Meditation 6 is to prove that some material objects exist. From his consideration of geometrical objects, Descartes claims that “I know that they *can* exist, at least insofar as they are the object of pure mathematics, since I clearly and distinctly perceive them” (AT VII, 71, my emphasis). However, there remains a question as to whether they *do* exist.

In order to determine whether they *do* or not, Descartes considers two principal sources of our representation of things: the *imagination* and the *senses*.

Descartes defines *imagination* as follows:

For to anyone paying very close attention to what imagination is, it appears to be simply a certain application of the knowing faculty to a body intimately present to it, and which therefore exists (AT VII, 72).

It is not very clear that this is the case. Descartes clarifies this argument as follows.

The first step involves a conceptual distinction between the *intellect* and the *imagination*. Descartes claims that these are two distinct modes of understanding geometrical objects. Consider, for example, a triangle. You can, according to Descartes, picture in your mind's eye what this looks like, you can imagine each of its three sides distinctly. Now, asks Descartes, picture in your mind two different figures. One of these is a thousand-sided figure while the other is a thousand-and-one-sided figure. Conceptually, the thousand-sided figure is distinct from the thousand-and-one-sided figure insofar one has a property that the other does not, namely an additional side. However, these figures are distinctly known because of the *intellect* and not the *imagination*. That is, our visual separation of the two is confused because looking at both side by side, we are unable to distinguish which has more sides.

In the second step, Descartes argues that the imaginative faculty is *not* a part of one's personal essence or existence. In Meditation 2, Descartes argued that the *thinking thing* was known through *the intellect alone* and not through sensation nor through the imagination. If our essential nature does not depend upon the faculty of imagination, then it is possible to remove this faculty and we would remain essentially the same entity we are now. However, since *we do imagine*, something else must be responsible for the two different modes of conceiving geometrical bodies. But what?

In order to explain the fact that we geometrical objects are conceived in two different ways, Descartes suggests that our *minds* are joined to a body, such that whenever *imagines* an object, it is really the mind *thinking through the body*. Descartes writes,

As a result, this mode of thinking may differ from pure intellection only in the sense that the mind, when it understands, in a sense turns toward itself and looks at one of the ideas that are in it; whereas when it imagines, it turns toward the body and intuits in the body something that conforms to an idea either understood by the mind or perceived by the sense (AT VII, 73).

So, Descartes appears to be claiming that there are two different ways of thinking, and that the best explanation of imagination is that at least one material body exists (our body). However, Descartes does not find this argument particularly satisfying. He writes that the existence of the corporeal object is “only a probability” and “even though I may examine everything carefully, nevertheless I do not yet see how the distinct idea of corporeal nature that I find in my imagination can enable me to develop an argument which necessarily concludes that some body exists” (AT VII, 73). So, at least from a consideration of the *imaginative faculty*, Descartes does not claim that our beliefs about the existence of material objects are infallible.

Although a consideration of the imaginative faculty does not justify beliefs in the existence of material objects, Descartes claims that justification might be obtained through a consideration of *sensation*. Descartes argument is the following:

1	We have the power to sense spatial objects.
2	This is source of these objects is not from the understanding since (i) the production of

	sensations is produced against our will and because (ii) sensations are spatial and spatiality is not a part of the essence of a thinking thing (AT VII, 79)
3	Therefore, sensations are either produced by God or by existing material objects.

However, Descartes does not think the material objects are produced by God.

1	Sensations are either produced by God or a material substance
2	Not God since this would be an act of deception. God would produce ideas in us that have spatial extension but such things would not exist.
3	Therefore, material objects must exist. Our essence as a pure intellect receives ideas from outside of us. Receives them from an independent substance, which is spatially extended matter.

Thus, provided Descartes's arguments are convincing, he has shown that a classical foundationalist theory of justification is plausible and that *we are justified* in believing in the existence of material objects. Since, for Descartes, material existence offers the only possible option for explaining how we get these ideas of material things.

6. Moderate Foundationalism

Let us reconsider the central claim of classical foundationalism.

(F_C): S is justified in $p = \text{Df.}$ (1) There is a belief q whose justification is basic and infallible for S , (2) p is either a justified basic belief or it deductively entailed by q , (3) p is infallible for S .

One problem with classical foundationalism is that the theory is *too strong* for it requires that basic beliefs be *infallible* and derived justified beliefs must be deduced. We might weaken classical foundationalism by allowing basic beliefs to be *fallible* and allowing derived justified beliefs to be inferred by induction.

(F_M): S is justified in $p = \text{Df.}$ (1) There is a belief q whose justification is basic and fallible for S , (2) p is either a justified basic belief or it is inferred from q , and (3) there is no evidence that defeats q .

Questions

1. In lectures 1 and 2, Descartes contends that a number of different beliefs we previously held to be true are doubtable (e.g. mathematical truths, the existence of objects). In lecture 3, Descartes contends that what it takes for an idea to be true is that it is clearly and distinctly perceived. What *exactly* is being doubted?

- a) That we are actually having *ideas* inside of us (about unicorns, etc.)
- b) That we are thinking beings
- c) That our ideas actually correspond to *things* that resemble them in all respects.

2. At the beginning of lecture 3, what methodological move does Descartes make in order to investigate whether we can believe in mathematical truths?

- a) Argue that it is blatantly obvious and doesn't need explanation
- b) Investigate the existence of God and whether God is a trickster
- c) Invoke the authority of Great Philosopher Aristotle, claiming that Aristotle proved this and no further investigation is needed
- d) Investigate biblical claims of the Bible and whether or not it contends that God exists.

3. For Descartes, in the third Meditation, what kinds of ideas can be true or false

- a) Judgments, such as "That chair is blue"
- b) Exclamations, such as "Wow!" or "Fantastic!"
- c) Questions, like "Is there a cow in that barn?"
- d) Imperatives or Commands, such as "Pass me that fork!"