

History of Philosophy

32 Descartes' Meditations 1

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Abstract:

This source provides an overview of **René Descartes' Meditations**, tracing his deductive journey from total skepticism to the establishment of certain knowledge. The text explains the famous "**Cogito, ergo sum**" (I think, therefore I exist) as an intuitive axiom that includes all forms of consciousness, such as doubting, willing, and feeling. Dr. Arthur Holmes details how Descartes transitions from this self-awareness to proving the existence of **God and the material world**, though critics like David Hume and Thomas Hobbes challenged his logic regarding the **soul and substance**. A central theme is the **representational theory of knowledge**, which suggests humans are directly aware only of their own mental states, creating a "gap" between the mind and external reality. Ultimately, the lecture highlights how Descartes' foundationalist approach set the stage for **modern epistemology** and the ongoing philosophical struggle to overcome solipsism.

Briefing Document:

Comprehensive Analysis of Descartes' Meditations: Epistemology, Self, and the Proof of God

Executive Summary

The philosophical project of René Descartes, as detailed in his *Meditations*, represents a foundational shift in Western epistemology. Moving from a position of radical skepticism to a system of indubitable certainty, Descartes employs a linear, deductive method to reconstruct human knowledge. The core of his system rests on the "Cogito" (*I think, therefore I exist*), an intuitive awareness of conscious activity that serves as the primary axiom for all subsequent proofs.

Key takeaways from this analysis include:

- **The Deductive Method:** Descartes' work is not a collection of disparate topics but a strictly ordered chain of reasoning where each conclusion serves as a premise for the next.
- **The Cogito:** This includes all forms of consciousness—doubting, perceiving, willing, and feeling—and distinguishes between the "acts" of the mind and the "contents" (ideas) of the mind.
- **Representational Theory of Knowledge:** Descartes posits that the mind has direct access only to its own internal states. The existence of everything else—God, other minds, and the material world—must be logically inferred.
- **The Problem of Substance:** Descartes identifies the self as a *res cogitans* (a thinking thing/soul), a move challenged by materialists like Thomas Hobbes and skeptics like David Hume.
- **The Causal Proof of God:** Utilizing the idea of God found within his own consciousness, Descartes argues that such an idea requires a cause of equal or greater reality, thereby attempting to move beyond the "solipsism of the present moment."

The Logical Framework of the Meditations

Descartes' system is designed as a foundationalist approach to knowledge. He begins by "clearing away the underbrush" of doubt to find a stable foundation upon which to build. The meditations follow a specific, necessary sequence:

Meditation	Primary Theme	Key Logical Development
I	I Doubt	Systematic skepticism; recognizing the lack of indubitable certainty.
II	I Exist	The inference that thinking/doubting necessitates a thinker.
III	God Exists	A causal proof of God based on the mind and the idea of perfection.

IV	Truth and Error	Establishing reason as a God-given, reliable faculty while accounting for human error.
V	Necessary Truths	Necessary truths regarding God and the nature of material bodies.
VI	Contingent Truths	Proof of the existence of material things and the external world.

The Cogito: The First Axiom

The realization *Cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I exist") is established in Meditation Two. Descartes views this not as an indirect proof, but as an intuitive truth known directly through introspective awareness.

The Scope of Thinking

Descartes defines "thinking" expansively. It is not limited to "cold intellectual activity" but encompasses the entirety of conscious life:

- **Intellectual:** Doubting, affirming, denying, and reasoning.
- **Volitional:** Willing, wishing, and hoping.
- **Sensory/Emotional:** Perceiving, imagining, and feeling.

Acts vs. Contents of Consciousness

A crucial distinction in Descartes' thought is the difference between:

1. **Acts of Consciousness:** The agency involved in thinking, doubting, or wishing. Self-consciousness reveals an *agent* who acts.
2. **Contents of Consciousness:** The objects of thought, such as ideas, images, concepts, or notions.

The Representational Theory of Knowledge

Descartes' epistemology is "representational," meaning the mind is directly aware only of its own internal ideas. These ideas are "representations" of external realities.

The "Descartes' Faux Pas"

As noted by philosopher William Temple, Descartes' claim that we are only directly aware of our own consciousness created the central problem of modern philosophy. If we only know our internal states, we must *prove* the existence of:

- **External Bodies:** Demonstrated through the transient properties of matter (e.g., the melting wax illustration).
- **Other Minds:** Known only through analogical inference (comparing another's bodily behavior to one's own).
- **God:** Proven through a priori reasoning within the mind.

Solipsism of the Present Moment

This theory leads to the risk of "solipsism"—the view that only the self exists. Descartes specifically faces the "solipsism of the present moment" due to:

- **Gappy Consciousness:** The discontinuity of consciousness during sleep.
- **The Problem of Memory:** Memory is merely a *present* representation of a past state; we have no direct awareness of the past.

Res Cogitans: The Thinking Thing

Descartes concludes that he is a *res cogitans*—a "thinking thing" or mental substance. He equates this substance with the soul or the immaterial mind.

Challenges to Mental Substance

- **Thomas Hobbes:** Raised the materialist objection: "Why shouldn't the thinking thing be a body?" (i.e., the brain). Descartes responded that he had an intuitive awareness of the mind but not the body.
 - **David Hume:** Argued that introspection reveals only a "bundle of ideas," not an underlying "agent" or "substance." Hume maintained that without direct awareness of mental agency, we must remain skeptical of the soul's existence.
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Meditation Three: The Existence of God

Having established his own existence and the presence of ideas in his mind, Descartes attempts to prove the existence of God using a causal argument.

The Causal Principle

Descartes relies on a "suppressed premise": the causal principle. He assumes that everything contingent must have a cause and that there must be as much reality in the cause as in the effect. This suggests that Descartes did not successfully suspend all prior philosophical conclusions (as noted by Etienne Gilson).

Classification of Ideas

Descartes categorizes the contents of his mind into three types:

Type of Idea	Definition	Nature
Innate	Built into the mind.	Potential source for the idea of God.
Adventitious	Derived from external causes (e.g., seeing a tree).	Involuntary; "nature teaches us" they have outside causes.
Factitious	Fictions created by the imagination.	Voluntary (e.g., a furry giraffe with polka dots).

The Argument

Descartes argues from his own status as a "finite, fallible, contingent thing." He possesses an idea of a perfect, infinite God. Since a finite effect (his idea) cannot originate from a finite cause (himself), the idea of God must be "adventitious" or "innate," placed there by an actual infinite being.

Philosophical Legacy and Criticisms

Descartes' work set the stage for two centuries of epistemological struggle. His "foundationalist" approach sought to escape skepticism, yet critics like David Hume argue it eventually leads back to it.

- **Direct Realism:** Later philosophers (such as Thomas Reid or G.E. Moore) rejected the representational theory, arguing for a "direct realism" where the mind apprehends the external world and the body immediately.
- **Intentionality:** Modern critics emphasize "intentionality," where the mind reaches out and directly apprehends objects, rather than just internal representations.
- **Causal Fatigue:** Some argue that if the mind were a purely immaterial substance, it would not experience physical fatigue, yet mental clarity is clearly linked to bodily states—a point Descartes accounts for by asserting a causal link between the body and mind after the body's existence is proven in Meditation Six.

Study Guide:

A Study Guide to Descartes' Meditations: An Analysis of Arthur Holmes' Lectures

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of René Descartes' philosophical journey through his *Meditations*, as analyzed by Dr. Arthur Holmes. It focuses on the transition from universal doubt to the establishment of the self, the nature of consciousness, and the proofs for the existence of God.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following ten questions in 2–3 sentences, based strictly on the provided text.

1. **What is the primary theme of Descartes' First Meditation, and how does it relate to his overall project?** The primary theme is "I doubt," where Descartes recognizes the lack of indubitable certainty and the skepticism prevalent in his era. This skepticism serves as the necessary "clearing of the

underbrush" to establish a firm, deductive foundation for his subsequent meditations.

2. **How does Descartes describe the scope of the term "thinking" in the context of the *cogito*?** Thinking is not limited to cold intellectual activity; it encompasses all conscious states and activities of the consciousness. This includes doubting, perceiving, imagining, affirming, denying, feeling, and acts of the will.
3. **What is the distinction between the "contents" of consciousness and the "acts" of consciousness?** The contents of consciousness refer to what one is thinking, such as ideas, images, or concepts, often called the "objects of thought." The acts of consciousness refer to the agency of the mind performing activities like wishing, hoping, doubting, or affirming.
4. **How does Descartes' illustration of the wax support his views on mental concepts versus physical properties?** Descartes observes that while the physical properties of wax change when heated (shape, color, state), the mental concept of "wax" remains the same. This demonstrates that the unchanging nature of an object is grasped by a mental concept rather than by transient physical qualities perceived through the senses.
5. **What is the "Representational Theory of Knowledge" as described in the text?** This theory posits that the mind is directly aware only of its own ideas and mental acts, which serve as representations of external realities. Consequently, the existence of everything external—bodies, other minds, and God—must be inferred or proven rather than known directly.
6. **What did William Temple mean by "Descartes' Faux Pas"?** Temple argued that Descartes' claim that we are only directly aware of our own consciousness was a "false step" that created the central problem of modern epistemology. This starting point forced philosophers to prove the existence of an external world and other minds, an issue that subsequent philosophy has struggled to overcome.
7. **How does the "solipsism of the present moment" arise from Descartes' philosophy?** It arises because consciousness is "gappy" and discontinuous, particularly during sleep. Furthermore, because memory is merely a present

representation of a past state, one cannot directly prove the continuity of the self over time, leading to the potential conclusion that only the "present moment" of the self exists.

8. **What was Thomas Hobbes' primary objection to Descartes' definition of the "thinking thing"?** Hobbes questioned why the "thinking thing" (the agent of thought) could not be a physical body or brain rather than an immaterial soul. He challenged the leap from the act of thinking to the existence of an immaterial substance.
9. **Describe the three types of ideas Descartes identifies in Meditation Three.** Descartes distinguishes between "innate" ideas, "factitious" ideas, which are voluntary fictions created by the individual (like a pink polka-dotted giraffe), and "adventitious" ideas. Adventitious ideas are involuntary and come from external causes, such as the perception of a tree.
10. **What "suppressed premise" regarding causality is found in Descartes' arguments?** Descartes relies on the causal principle—that every contingent thing or idea must have a cause—despite claiming to have suspended all judgment. This principle is used to argue that finite minds and the idea of God cannot be self-existent and must be produced by an ultimate cause.

Part II: Answer Key

1. **Theme of First Meditation:** Focuses on doubt and the problems of skepticism. It is the initial step in a deductive chain to find an indubitable axiom.
2. **Scope of Thinking:** Includes all conscious activities: intellect, emotion, will, perception, and imagination.
3. **Contents vs. Acts:** Contents are the objects (ideas/images); acts are the agency (the process of doubting, affirming, or wishing).
4. **Wax Illustration:** Shows that physical properties are transient while the mental idea of the substance is stable and known by the mind.
5. **Representational Theory:** Direct awareness is limited to internal mental states; external reality is an indirect inference.

6. **Descartes' Faux Pas:** The error of starting with internal consciousness, which isolated the mind from the external world and other minds.
7. **Solipsism of the Present Moment:** Caused by the discontinuity of consciousness and the reliance on memory (a present state) to affirm past existence.
8. **Hobbes' Objection:** Suggested the "thinking thing" might be corporeal (a body/brain) rather than an immaterial soul.
9. **Three Types of Ideas:** Innate (built-in), Factitious (self-made/fictional), and Adventitious (external/involuntary).
10. **Suppressed Premise:** The causal principle; the assumption that all contingent things (minds and ideas) require a cause to exist.

Part III: Essay Questions

1. **The Deductive Method:** Analyze Descartes' use of a deductive system in the *Meditations*. How does he attempt to move from an initial axiom to a comprehensive system of thought, and what are the potential risks of this linear reasoning?
2. **The Problem of Personal Identity:** Discuss the challenges Descartes faces regarding memory and the "gaps" in consciousness. How do these issues lead to the "solipsism of the present moment," and why is this problematic for establishing a continuous "self"?
3. **Mind-Body Dualism and Its Critics:** Compare Descartes' view of the *res cogitans* (thinking thing) with Thomas Hobbes' materialism. How does Descartes defend the idea of an immaterial soul against the suggestion that the brain is the organ of thought?
4. **Representationalism vs. Direct Realism:** Contrast Descartes' representational theory of knowledge with the "direct realism" mentioned by later critics like Thomas Reid and the existentialists. How does the distinction between "direct" and "indirect" awareness change the philosopher's task?

5. **The Role of Preconceptions:** Using Gilson's analysis as a reference, evaluate Descartes' claim of performing "presupposition-less" thinking. To what extent did medieval philosophical conclusions and the causal principle influence his "original" system of thought?
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Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

- **Adventitious Ideas:** Ideas that come to the mind from external sources or causes; they are characterized as being involuntary.
- **A Priori:** Knowledge or justification that is independent of experience; in Descartes' case, proofs based on the contents of consciousness rather than empirical evidence.
- **Cogito, Ergo Sum:** "I think, therefore I exist." The foundational axiom Descartes identifies in Meditation Two as indubitable.
- **Deductive System:** A logical method where conclusions are drawn from initial axioms through a linear chain of reasoning.
- **Factitious Ideas:** Ideas that are voluntarily created by the mind; fictions or inventions of the imagination.
- **Innate Ideas:** Ideas that are inherent to the mind rather than derived from external experience or self-construction.
- **Intuition:** Direct, introspective awareness or knowledge that is not mediated by proof or sense perception.
- **Notion:** A term Descartes uses to describe his understanding of soul substance; it is less "clear and distinct" than an idea, implying an imaginative or less explicit grasp.
- **Representational Theory of Knowledge:** The view that the mind does not perceive external objects directly, but only the mental representations (ideas) of those objects.
- **Res Cogitans:** Literally a "thinking thing"; the mind or soul as an immaterial substance and agent of conscious activity.

- **Solipsism:** The philosophical position that only the self exists or can be known to exist.
- **Substance (*Res*):** An underlying reality, entity, or agent that supports conscious states and activities. It does not necessarily refer to something physical.