Notes for week of March 29. Paragraph references will be given in class. Page references here refer to the Hackett edition of the *Meditations*.

Introductory

Our next focus is epistemology, or theory of knowledge. The project of epistemology is to try to answer the question when human beings can be said to have knowledge when they believe something. One traditional account of knowledge holds that two things are required for our beliefs to count as knowledge: justification and truth. If one’s belief is both justified and true, then it counts as knowledge. Consider some illustrations:

So a major part of the epistemologist’s project is to figure out when we have good reason for thinking that our beliefs are true, and when we should think that there is reason to doubt those beliefs. This is Descartes’s project.

Descartes

Descartes opens the Meditations with a justification for his project. He says several “years have now passed since I first realized how numerous were the false opinions that in my youth I had taken to be true, and thus how doubtful were all those that I had subsequently built upon them. And thus I realized that…I had to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations.” (p. 13) One example of a false belief that Descartes might have in mind here is the belief in geocentrism. Geocentrism is the view that the earth is the center of the universe and the sun, all of the planets, and the fixed stars revolve around it. Philosophers and scientists in the seventeenth century were arguing for heliocentrism—the view that the planets revolve around the sun. At the time, this was a highly controversial view. Galileo, for example was tried for heresy and imprisoned for advocating heliocentrism. So, Descartes’s thought is that this kind of example shows that we should be suspicious even about firmly entrenched beliefs, and we have good reason for thinking carefully about which of our beliefs we have reason to doubt. Descartes considers a succession of reasons that we might have for doubt.

Reasons for Doubt (p. 14)

1)The senses sometimes deceive me.

2) It’s possible that I am insane.

3) I might be dreaming.

The first two reasons are rejected by Descartes as not good reasons for general doubt. Yes, the senses sometimes deceive us. For example, the road always looks wet in the distance, but that’s a mirage. Cold things sometimes feel wet. The tops of the Rocky Mountains look like clouds. However, Descartes thinks that our experience is that we can usually rely on our senses if we are dealing with things that are not too small, or too distant. Your senses do not deceive you about the fact that you are sitting in front of your computer/phone. So, you do not have reason to doubt that belief. Next, Descartes admits that people sometimes suffer from delusions that cause them to believe all kinds of strange things, e.g., that they have heads made of clay or that they are made of glass. Again, Descartes rejects this as a good general reason for doubting one’s beliefs. He says he would be mad to believe that he is mad.

Next he gives The Dream Argument. He says that

This would be all well and good, were I not a man who is accustomed to sleeping at night…How often does my evening slumber persuade 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! But right now my eyes are certainly wide awake when I gaze upon this sheet of paper. This head which I am shaking is not heavy with sleep. I extend this hand constantly and deliberately, and I feel it. Such things would not be so distinct for someone who is asleep. As if I did not recall having been deceived on other occasions even by similar thoughts in my dreams! As I consider these matters more carefully, I see so plainly that there are no definite signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep. (p. 14)

The following is a reconstruction of the moves of the argument.

1) If I can know that I am not now dreaming, there must be some definite sign that allows me to distinguish between my waking and dreaming states.

2) There is no such sign because any feature of my experience that I point to could be something that I am dreaming.

3) I cannot know that I am not now dreaming.

4) I have reason to doubt most of my beliefs about the external world.

The crucial move in the argument is the idea that there is no sign that you can point to that shows that you are not dreaming. That your experience is vivid, that you remember waking up in the morning, that you remember your past experiences, are all things that you could be dreaming. So, you cannot know that you are awake if it is true that you need some definite sign in order to be said to know this. This gives you reason to doubt almost all of the beliefs that you have right now. As Descartes points out, right now you believe that you have a head and hands, but maybe you do not. The head and hands could be a dream construction. Descartes thinks that there are some beliefs that are not cast into doubt by the argument. He says that “whether I am awake or asleep, two plus three makes five, and a square does not have more than four sides.” (p. 15)

One major objection to the argument is the motivated challenge objection. According to this objection the challenge that one might be dreaming is unmotivated. There is not a sufficient reason to treat the possibility that one might be dreaming as a ground for doubting. It’s a possibility that one should not take seriously. To see how this is supposed to work, we will consider some examples of unmotivated and motivated challenges.

First, we consider unmotivated challenges. Suppose you sit down with a friend for a coffee. You are looking out at the yard and you see a robin. You say to your friend, “Look. It’s first robin of spring.” She replies. “It could be a stuffed robin.” Your belief, in this example, is that you are looking at a robin. The friend’s challenge to that belief is supposed to give you a reason to doubt. The reason to doubt is that it could be a stuffed robin. I predict that you would not take the challenge seriously. You might say “Why in the world would you say that?” to your friend, not “Oh yeah, you are right. It could be a stuffed robin.” The challenge is unmotivated. Although it is possible that the robin is stuffed, we do not take that possibility seriously.

Here is another example. Suppose someone is testifying about a crime that she witnessed. Suppose that the defense lawyer gets up and says “we have reason to doubt your testimony because you could have dreamed that you saw the crime.” Once again, we have a challenge to the person’s belief, that she saw the crime, and the challenge is supposed to give her, and those in the courtroom, reason to doubt. However, the challenge is unmotivated. No one should take it seriously. They should not say “Oh yes. The witness could have dreamed that she saw the crime, so we had better set that fellow free.”

So the objection to the dream argument is that the challenge that we might be dreaming is like the challenge that the robin could be stuffed, or the challenge that the witness dreamed her testimony. All of these things are possible, but not possibilities that should be taken seriously. So, although it possible that you are dreaming right now, the challenge is unmotivated.

To think about this objection, it will help to think about motivated challenges. So, in the stuffed robin case, suppose that stuffed robins are common in your area as lawn ornaments, and you have been fooled by them before. When your friend suggests that the robin could be stuffed, you would take the challenge seriously. You might, then, wait around to see if the robin moves. The challenge is motivated because you have been fooled before. This gives you reason to doubt your belief that you are looking at a robin.

Here is another example from my own experience. I’m driving along with my partner and I see a black bear on the side of the road. I say “Look, a bear.” He says “It could be one of those black bear silhouettes.” Now, in the area of the Appalachian Mountains where we have our fishing shack, these black bear cut-outs are very common, and I have been fooled by them. So, I take the challenge seriously because of my past experience. The challenge is motivated.

The final argument for doubt that Descartes considers in Meditation I is The Evil Genius Argument (pp. 15-17). It is meant to cast doubt on the beliefs about arithmetic and geometry that are left intact by the dream argument. Here is my reconstruction of that argument.

1) An omnipotent evil genius could deceive us about all of our beliefs concerning the external world, arithmetic, and geometry.

2) There could be such a demon.

3) We could be deceived even about truths such as 2+3=5.

4) We have reason to doubt all of our beliefs about the external world, arithmetic, geometry.

What are some objections to this argument?