

Besides, the mind has so much in it by which it can make its conception of itself distinct that what comes to it from physical objects hardly seems to matter.

And now I have brought myself back to where I wanted to be. I now know that physical objects are grasped, not by the senses or the power of having mental images, but by understanding alone. And, since I grasp physical objects in virtue of their being understandable rather than in virtue of their being tangible or visible, I know that I can't grasp anything more easily or plainly than my mind. But, since it takes time to break old habits of thought, I should pause here to allow the length of my contemplation to impress the new thoughts more deeply into my memory.

Commentary and Questions

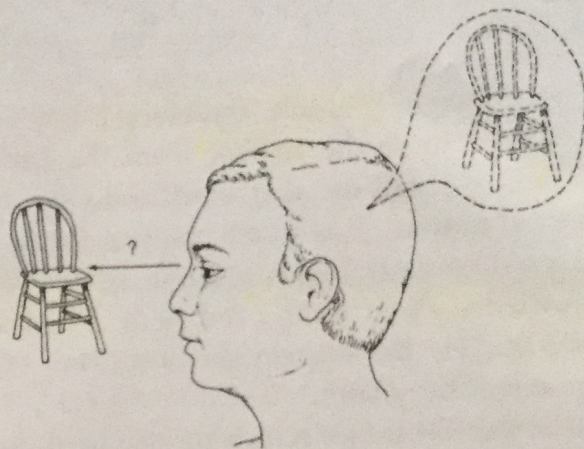
Descartes seems to have gotten nowhere by doubting. What to do? He resolves to press on, suspecting that the terrors of skepticism can be overcome only by enduring them to the end. The monster in the child's closet will disappear only if the child can muster the courage to look at it directly. If we avert our eyes in fear, we will not conquer.

The particular horror, of course, is that all our beliefs might be false—that nowhere would they connect at all with reality. If Descartes has carried us with him to this point, we know that we have lots of ideas and beliefs, but whether any one of them represents something that really *exists* must seem quite uncertain. Perhaps they are just webs of illusion, like those spun by a master magician—or the evil demon.

Descartes here presents a pattern of thought that deserves a name. Let us call it the representational theory of knowledge and perception, or the **representational theory** for short. The basic ideas of this theory are very widely shared in modern philosophy. We can distinguish five points:

1. We have no immediate or direct access to things in the world, only to the world of our ideas.*

2. "Ideas" must be understood broadly to include all the contents of the mind, including perceptions, images, memories, concepts, beliefs, intentions, and decisions.
3. These ideas serve as *representations* of things other than themselves.
4. Much of what these ideas represent, they represent as "out there," or "external" to the mind containing them.
5. It is in principle possible for ideas to represent these things correctly, but they may also be false and misleading.



In *Meditation I*, Descartes draws a certain consequence of the representational theory. It seems that mind and world could be disconnected in a perplexing way, that even the most solid ideas might represent things all wrong—or maybe even not represent anything at all! This possibility, foreshadowed by the ancient skeptics and by William of Ockham in his reflections on God's omnipotence, provokes thinkers to try to find a remedy. What we need is a bridge across the chasm between mind and world, and it is clear that it will have to be built by inference and argument. We want *good reasons* to believe that our ideas represent the "external" world truly. But the good reasons must be of a peculiar sort. We have to start this construction project while isolated on one side, restricted in our choice of materials to those available there. It is from the vantage point of the mind that we try to stretch the girders of our argument across the gulf to the world.

We will examine Descartes' effort to build such a rational bridge. The difficulty of that task is

*The American philosopher John Searle calls this view that we only perceive our *ideas* of objects "the greatest single disaster in the history of philosophy over the past four centuries." In *Mind: A Brief Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 23.