

emphasized in the dramatic rehearsal of skeptical worries about knowledge in *Meditation I*. And we can now see that these worries hover around the representational theory. The gulf between mind and external reality seems immense.* We might remember Archimedes, who says, "Give me a lever long enough, and a place on which to rest it, and I can move the earth." Descartes thinks that if he can find just one certainty, he might, like Archimedes, do marvels. He might just build that bridge.

Q8. To what certainty does Descartes' methodical doubt lead? Is he right about that?†

The principle "I think, therefore I am" is often referred to as the *cogito*, from the Latin "I think" and we will use that shorthand expression from time to time. It is worth emphasizing that in the *cogito* Descartes has an example of *knowledge*, of knowledge about *reality*, and so of *metaphysical knowledge*. He has thrown the first plank of his bridge across the chasm.

Note that Descartes rejects the standard, long-accepted way of answering the question, What am I? (p. 324). According to a tradition that goes back to Socrates (and is codified by Aristotle), the way to answer such a question is to give a *definition*. The traditional way to define something will tell you (a) what *genus* it belongs to and (b) the *difference* between it and other things in that genus. Not surprisingly, this is called *definition by genus and difference*. A human being is said to belong to the genus *animal*; and the difference between a human and other animals is that a human is *rational*. Human beings, Aristotle says, are *rational animals*.

Descartes objects to such a definition because it simply calls for more definitions; you need next

a definition of *animal* and a definition for *rational*. Then, presumably, you will require definitions for the terms used to define *them*. And so on.

This whole process has to come to ground somewhere. There must be some terms, Descartes thinks, that do not need definition of this sort, but whose meaning can just be "seen." These will be the *simple* terms. From them, more complex terms can be built up. We see in Descartes' rejection of the traditional definition procedure an application of the second and third rules of his method. He is searching for something so simple, clear, and distinct that it just presents itself without any need for definition. He is looking for something **self-evident**. If that can be found, he can use it as a foundation on which to build more complex truths.

Q9. What, then, does Descartes conclude that he is?

Note that Descartes briefly considers the view that he may after all *be* a body, or some such thing, even though he does not *know* he is (p. 325).^{*} But he does not try to refute it here; that proof comes in *Meditation VI*. Here he is interested in what he knows that he *is*—not in what he can infer that he *is not*.

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- Q10. Why does Descartes rule out the use of the imagination in answering the question, What am I?
- Q11. What is included in "thinking," as Descartes understands the term? (See p. 325.) Note how broad the term is for him.
- Q12. Suppose I feel certain that I see a cat on the mat. Is it certain that there is a cat on the mat? What, in this situation, *can* I be certain of?
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How difficult it is to stay within the bounds of what I know for certain! As Descartes says, his "mind enjoys wandering." And so it is with us. I, too, keep slipping back into the error of thinking that I know *sensible* things best—this desk, this computer keyboard, this hand. (Do you find that too?)

*Other thinkers after Descartes also wrestle with this problem. Locke recognizes the gulf but papers it over, Berkeley settles down on one side of it, Hume despairs of a solution, Kant redefines the problem so as to make the gulf (partially) disappear, Hegel denies there is a gulf at all, and Kierkegaard opens it up again. The problem is not dead today.

†Descartes' central idea here is anticipated by Augustine in his refutation of the skeptics. See pp. 232–233.

^{*}This is the view that Thomas Hobbes urges against Descartes. See "Minds and Motives" in Chapter 14.