

With the possibility of an evil demon in control, Descartes is left with very little to believe in, but as he ponders his situation, he comes to the conclusion that there is one thing, one believes that he still knows: *Cogito ergo sum* (in Latin) or literally in English: I think therefore I am. So, on Descartes view, even if the world around you is a lie created by an evil demon or an evil computer, the fact that you are able to perceive and think means that you exist in some shape or form. This does not mean your body, life, or world are real, but rather that you have some form of existence. Descartes then uses his foundational belief to construct an elaborate to prove that the rest of reality is real and true.



POWERFUL IDEAS: DESCARTES PROOF FOR EVERYTHING?

- 1) I will doubt everything.
- 2) As I doubt, I find I cannot doubt that I am thinking.
- 3) I think therefore I am.
- 4) I have a clear and distinct conception of God.
- 5) In order for a lesser being to have an idea of a greater being, that idea must originate with the greater being
- 6) Therefore, God exist.
- 7) God exist and is Good therefore he would not let the evil demon deceive us about the world.
- 8) Therefore, the world exists as we perceive it so long as we have a clear and distinct conception of it.

This argument has been scrutinized for nearly 400 years. In the time since the argument was presented, a number of logical flaws have been found in Descartes reasoning. The central problem with the argument is known as the "Cartesian Circle," and it is this he claims in premise 2 to know that God exist because he has a clear and distinct conception of him. Yet, it is God's existence in premise 4 and the fact that he makes clear and distinct perception true in premise 6 that allow you to trust in such perceptions. In other words, he presupposes a concept that he uses to prove that God exists.

To put it another way, Descartes argues that clear and distinct perceptions provide the foundation or basis for the truth of our beliefs and that is so because God, who is not a deceiver, would not allow Descartes to be mistaken about that which he clearly and distinctly perceives. Yet, this notion of clear and distinct perceptions and their truth requires God's existence, which he has yet to establish. As such Descartes cannot know that his

proof of God's existence is true or does not contain an error unless he assumes that his clear and distinct perception of the steps of his reasoning is correct. Thus, the criterion of clear and distinct perception depends on the assumption that God exists, which in turn depends on the criterion of clear and distinct perception.

"The Matrix Hypothesis threatens to undercut almost everything I know. It seems to be a skeptical hypothesis: a hypothesis that I cannot rule out, and one that would falsify most of my beliefs if it were true. Where there is a skeptical hypothesis, it looks like none of these beliefs count as genuine knowledge. Of course the beliefs might be true -I might be lucky, and not be envatted -but I can't rule out the possibility that they are false. So a skeptical hypothesis leads to skepticism about these beliefs: I believe these things, but I do not know them"

—David Chalmers, (2003), *The Matrix as Metaphysics*.

POWERFUL ANALYSIS: COULD GOD HAVE A REASON TO DECEIVE HUMANITY?

For a moment assume that Descartes' argument works in proving God's existence, does the ultimate conclusion follow as stated in premise 6? Can Descartes be certain that God would not allow an evil demon or computer to systematically deceive humanity? Maybe God has a reason, or needs to teach humanity a lesson.

Coherentism

Coherentism is an alternative theory of justification to Foundationalism and Reliabilism. Unlike Foundationalism, Coherentism denies the notion that there are basic foundational beliefs and instead argue that many of our beliefs are justified by other beliefs. To think of it metaphorically instead of a pillar of knowledge with a foundational belief at the base, there is a web of beliefs that in turn justify each other. According to Coherentism, whole systems of beliefs are justified by their coherence. This view also states that all of our beliefs must be compatible with one another. For example, if I believe X, Y, and Z, but if X contradicts Y and Z, then I cannot reasonably hold all three beliefs. One concern with the theory is that all of your beliefs could be compatible with one another and still all false. There could exist a coherent set of beliefs that all fit together but are ultimately false.