Descartes, Meditation One (1641)

**The project:** Descartes stated that, if we are to get at truth—if we are to build up something firm and lasting—then we need to start from scratch, clearing away all of our previously held beliefs, and build from the ground up.

**The method of doubt:** In order to pursue his project, Descartes begins by rejecting any belief that is not completely certain, so that he can build up truth ONLY from those beliefs that ARE certain. In order to determine which beliefs are certain, he goes through the following considerations:

1. **Doubting the senses:** The foundation of all belief is the senses. But, the senses are known to be defective. Sometimes, they deceive us. Therefore, the information we receive from the senses is not certain.

   *Reply:* Sometimes the senses do deceive us. But, surely lots of beliefs that come from the senses are impossible to doubt; e.g., that I am sitting here, typing up notes, that I have a body, and hands, etc. Surely, such things ARE certain.

2. **I could be dreaming:** In the past, I have dreamt that I am sitting, typing up notes, with a body, and hands, etc. So, there is no way to be certain that you are not dreaming NOW. Therefore, the things that the senses tell us are not certain.

   *Reply:* But, I am certain that I am not dreaming now. My present experiences are simply too VIVID to be a dream.

   *Rebuttal:* Some dreams are SO vivid that we mistake them for reality. So, again, there is no way for you to be certain that you are not dreaming NOW. Therefore, the things that the senses tell us are not certain.

   *Reply:* At the very least, we must admit that things in dreams are derived from SOMETHING real. So it seems that, at the very least, the things that the senses perceive are like that. That is, things like color, matter, extension, shapes, quantities, sizes, numbers, and duration must be derived from things that exist SOMEWHERE in reality. So, at the very least, it is certain that matter, sizes, shapes, quantities, and colors, etc. exist somewhere. These are the things within the domain of arithmetic, geometry, etc; so those studies seem to be the ones that give us truths that are certain.

3. **God could be deceiving me:** What if there were really no extension, or size, shape, matter, time, etc., and we only THINK these things exist because an omnipotent God is making it APPEAR to us as if there ARE those things. Such a
God would even have the power to deceive us into thinking $2+2=4$, or that a square has 4 sides, even if those things were in fact false. There is no way of being certain that such a God is not deceiving us in this way RIGHT NOW. Therefore, the senses do not make us certain of anything; even studies such as arithmetic and geometry cannot provide us with certainty of anything.

Reply: A good God would not allow us to be deceived in this way.

Rebuttal: But, everyone admits that we ARE in fact deceived by our senses at least sometimes. So, surely, if God exists, then He (at least sometimes) allows us to be deceived.

4. An evil genius could be deceiving me: In any case, if the deceitful God example is unsatisfactory, it could still be the case that some evil genius is deceiving me. Such an evil genius could deceive me into believing that I am sensing a material world, with sizes, shapes, colors, duration, etc. (and that $2+2=4$, and squares have 4 sides, when in fact these things are false), such that ALL that I presently believe to be true is actually false.

Conclusion: Therefore, it seems that, perhaps, there is NOTHING that is certain.

But, we should be agnostic about everything, unless it is known with certainty. That is, we should “withhold assent” and not believe something unless it is certain. For this reason, we should not believe anything at all. For, “even if it is not within my power to know anything true, it is certainly within my power to take care resolutely to withhold assent from what is false..."