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All page references and quotations from the Meditations are taken from the 1995 Everyman edition. In the Meditations, Descartes embarks upon what Bernard Williams has called the project of 'Pure Enquiry' to discover certain, indubitable foundations for knowledge. By subjecting everything to doubt Descartes hoped to discover whatever was immune to it. In order to best understand how and why Descartes builds his epistemological system up from his foundations in the way that he does, it is helpful to gain an understanding of the intellectual background of the 17th century that provided the motivation for his work. We can discern three distinct influences on Descartes, three conflicting world-views that fought for prominence in his day. The first was what remained of the mediaeval scholastic philosophy, largely based on Aristotelian science and Christian theology. Descartes had been taught according to this outlook during his time at the Jesuit college La Flech and it had an important influence on his work, as we shall see later. The second was the scepticism that had made a sudden impact on the intellectual world, mainly as a reaction to the scholastic outlook.

This scepticism was strongly influenced by the work of the Pyrrhonians as handed down from antiquity by Sextus Empiricus, which claimed that, as there is never a reason to believe  $p$  that is better than a reason not to believe  $p$ , we should forget about trying to discover the nature of reality and live by appearance alone. This attitude was best exemplified in the work of Michel de Montaigne, who mockingly dismissed the attempts of theologians and scientists to understand the nature of God and the universe respectively. Descartes felt the force of sceptical arguments and, while not being sceptically disposed himself, came to believe that scepticism towards

knowledge was the best way to discover what is certain: by applying sceptical doubt to all our beliefs, we can discover which of them are indubitable, and thus form an adequate foundation for knowledge. The third world-view resulted largely from the work of the new scientists; Galileo, Copernicus, Bacon et al.

Science had finally begun to assert itself and shake off its dated Aristotelian prejudices. Coherent theories about the world and its place in the universe were being constructed and many of those who were aware of this work became very optimistic about the influence it could have. Descartes was a child of the scientific revolution, but felt that until sceptical concerns were dealt with, science would always have to contend with Montaigne and his cronies, standing on the sidelines and laughing at science's pretenses to knowledge. Descartes' project, then, was to use the tools of the sceptic to disprove the sceptical thesis by discovering certain knowledge that could subsequently be used as the foundation of a new science, in which knowledge about the external world was as certain as knowledge about mathematics.

It was also to hammer the last nail into the coffin of scholasticism, but also, arguably, to show that God still had a vital role to play in the discovery of knowledge. Meditation One describes Descartes' method of doubt. By its conclusion, Descartes has seemingly subjected all of his beliefs to the strongest and most hyperbolic of doubts.

He invokes the nightmarish notion of an all-powerful, malign demon who could be deceiving him in the realm of sensory experience, in his very

understanding of matter and even in the simplest cases of mathematical or logical truths. The doubts may be obscure, but this is the strength of the method – the weakness of criteria for what makes a doubt reasonable means that almost anything can count as a doubt, and therefore whatever withstands doubt must be something epistemologically formidable. In Meditation Two, Descartes hits upon the indubitable principle he has been seeking. He exists, at least when he thinks he exists. The cogito (Descartes' proof of his own existence) has been the source of a great deal of discussion ever since Descartes first formulated it in the 1637 Discourse on Method, and, I believe, a great deal of misinterpretation (quite possibly as a result of Descartes' repeated contradictions of his own position in subsequent writings).

Many commentators have fallen prey to the tempting interpretation of the cogito as either syllogism or enthymeme. This view holds that Descartes asserts that he is thinking, that he believes it axiomatic that 'whatever thinks must exist' and therefore that he logically concludes that he exists. This view, it seems to me, is wrong.

It should be stated on no occasion, in the Meditations, does Descartes write 'I am thinking, therefore I am', nor anything directly equivalent. Rather, he says: "Doubtless, then, that I exist...and, let him deceive me as he may, he can never bring it about that I am nothing, so long