Recap: last week we undertook to follow Descartes’ path of radical doubt in order to attempt to discover what, if anything, can be known for certain. This path of doubt took a progressive path. Descartes began by doubting the senses in general and then proceeded to show that there was a serious problem with all ordinary claims to knowledge by stating that there was no clear way of distinguishing dreaming from ordinary waking perception. Descartes, on this basis, further attempted to undermine even the belief in simple qualities firstly by invoking the hypothesis of God who could have created in us the impression that things exist even though they do not before ending with the even more radical proposition that there could exist an evil demon who has maliciously and deliberately given us beliefs that are not merely doubtful but actually false. This seemed to leave nothing immune to doubt.

At this point the second meditation opens. Descartes repeats that his point is to uncover what, if anything, can be known for certain. In restating that this is his quest he points to a parallel with a claim for knowledge used by the ancient mathematician Archimedes. Archimedes said that if we were able to find a firm and immovable point it would be possible from it to move the entire earth and Descartes suggests that, similarly, if he can find some truth, even one, that is certain and unshakeable, then he will be able to attain great things on this basis. The reasoning behind this claim is something that we will attempt to pursue before we go further.
There are three possible ways to understand it that are mentioned and distinguished by Gary Hatfield. Firstly, Descartes may be claiming that a certain first piece of knowledge would provide a principle that would serve like an axiom or postulate in mathematics from which other items of knowledge could be derived. Given the appeal we found in the First Meditation to the need to find a solid and durable ground for the claims of the sciences and the parallel we have found Descartes to make between his one certain claim and Archimedes’ view about the fixed point this would suggest again that Descartes views this one certain claim as providing a foundation for all subsequent knowledge. However, Hatfield mentions two other possible ways of understanding this claim concerning the one certain piece of knowledge. A second possible way of understanding the claim would state that some kind of knowledge contains in itself an implied connection to other sorts of knowledge. In other words, some kinds of knowledge make sense only as part of a system of claims, such as any particular numerical formulae only really making sense as part of the system of arithmetic, and this would be a different reason why Descartes made the parallel about Archimedes. This would involve us not in a foundationalist quest as we have assumed so far but rather in a quest to grasp the real system of knowledge and thus make the Cartesian quest a systematic one. However, there is a third possible way to understand the view that if one finds one certain piece of knowledge this will help us to uncover other pieces of knowledge. This would consist in the view that in uncovering the one certain piece of knowledge we have uncovered not just it but also the
way to know something, that is, we have found out *how* to know. This third claim would make the view we should adopt of the first certain item of knowledge a *methodological* one and make the *method* Descartes follows the key thing (in keeping with the fact that one of Descartesemdash;major works is called *Discourse on Method* and making the parallel with Archimedes a methodological kind of parallel). We will not find that just the argument of the Second Meditation alone enables us to make a decision between these different views of the role of the one certain truth in Descartes emdash;philosophy but will need to return to assessing it in future weeks when we got some sense of the connection between this one certain truth and other subsequent truths.

Just after making the parallel with Archimedes Descartes restates the point that it is impossible to establish anything sensory as certain and hence he cannot claim with certainty to have a body. Does this mean that he cannot even be certain that he exists? At this point Descartes discovers the one point that seems completely certain as even should it be the case that he is constantly deceived by an evil demon, still this in itself establishes that he does exist as the demon would not take all this trouble over something that does not exist. Furthermore, it is not possible to doubt that one exists as even to doubt it is to confirm it, the very act of doubting that I exist being a thought and a thought that I am having. This produces the famous statement: “I think, therefore I am”, *cogito ergo sum* (*Discourse on Method*) or “I am, I exist” (*Meditations*).
The first question we can pose concerning this claim is whether Descartes is right to think that it is certain. A doubt has been proposed about the *cogito* and was given by a philosopher called Lichtenberg. Lichtenberg claimed that to say “I exist” is to claim too much just from the evidence that there are thoughts and he alleged that all we can really claim is simply that “there is thinking going on” not that there exists a thinker. The basis of this claim comes from an appeal to what we can call the *phenomenology* of the situation. What I mean by this word is an examination of the immediate evidence of what we can say about what is given to us in thoughts. When we are thinking, whether we are thinking the *cogito* or thinking something else there is some content given that we are thinking so that the thought in question concerns something but, the suggestion here would be, this requires no reference to something being required to think the thought in question.

In fact, in the Second Meditation itself, Descartes pursues a strategy for trying to discover what the “I” is that thinks so lets first attend to this before seeing whether we think that Lichtenberg’s objection has a point. What Descartes does in investigating the notion of the “I” is to pursue a method of subtraction. He first looks at what, prior to undertaking the *Meditations*, he had thought was involved with the notion of the “I” in order to see what he can claim about it after the doubts of the First Meditation. Firstly, he mentions that he had previously thought that he was a human being but mentions that this term needs itself to be understood. The Aristotelian view was that a human being is a “rational animal” but
Descartes rejects this as a description of the “I” since it requires us to know what “rational” and “animal” really mean. Rather than adopt such a definition if we look instead at what comes normally to mind when considering the “I” we find such a structure of limbs as we call the body. Apart from the body however we also have the view that there is something that we could term the mind although again it is unclear what this term “mind” really means.

The “body” traditionally seemed something obvious and Descartes mentions now as involved with the idea of it a shape and location, the ability to occupy space in such a way that another body cannot (which we could term “impenetrability”) and perception by means of the five senses. However, Descartes doubts that our ordinary conception of body includes the notion of the ability to initiate movement mentioning that something outside of body seems needed for movement to begin.

When we then recall the possibility that there exists an evil demon however we are reminded that none of the things that belong to body can really be said with certainty to be part of the “I”. All that can be said to belong to this “I” with certainty is thought, it is inseparable from the “I”.

The next point we can make however is that not only is thought claimed to be inseparable from the conception of the “I” but that what is meant by the notion of the “I” by Descartes is that the separate thoughts are connected together. Even in the simple claim “I think, therefore I am” we have a chain of reasoning and for this chain of reasoning to work the distinct thoughts presented in the parts of the claim made must be held together in a stream of
thought that retains the previous thought in some sense even as the present thought goes on. The ability to retain the previous thought whilst the next one is moved on to is what is required for the thinking to go on and this is what is meant in saying that in addition to the thoughts there is also a thinker. That this would be the kind of answer Descartes would give to Lichtenberg is clear from the subsequent way in the Second Meditation that the cogito is examined. Descartes writes for example: “Is it not one and the same ‘I’ who is now doubting almost everything, who nonetheless understands some things, who affirms that this one thing is true, denies everything else, desires to know more, is unwilling to be deceived, imagines many things even involuntarily, and is aware of many things which apparently come from the senses?”

Here we find many distinct kinds of act all joined together in the awareness that I have that I am thinking. In thinking I am aware not merely that I think and that I can think the cogito but also that the thinking of the cogito is carried out by the same thinker that doubts everything else and that in doubting everything else also carries out other acts (such as desiring to know more, being unwilling to be deceived, imagining many things being aware of the data that apparently comes from the senses). That all these distinct acts are involved in thinking and in my awareness that I am thinking is what seems to require reference not merely to the distinct acts in question but also to myself as the one carrying out the acts and in bringing the different acts together as discreet and distinguishable experiences I am undergoing.
However not only have we found here a possible reply Descartes could make to Lichtenberg concerning the certainty of the *cogito* but we can also see here a clear kind of claim about the nature of the “I” that is worth emphasising as well. This is that the “I” that exists is essentially an “I” of thought, not an essentially embodied “I”.

Another point can be added to our claims concerning the “I” which is that the “I” is what experiences the appearances that we have previously called *perceptions* of bodies and sensory qualities. Regardless of whether or not these bodies and qualities exist I cannot deny that I experience the appearance of them. Hence not only do I exist and have thoughts that include the notion that I perceive things separately from myself but the things perceived *are* separate from myself at least to the degree that I could exist without any one of the things I imagine I am perceiving existing, hence I am *independent* of them.

It is hard to believe, however, that the things I think exist externally to me might well *not really* be external at all and that their physical nature might be just an illusion. Normally I take bodies to be the most real of all things. Descartes now introduces an example intended to show that bodies are not, as we normally think, the most real of all things. The example he gives is that of a piece of wax. The piece of wax appears to have a number of sensory qualities: a taste, a smell, colour, shape and size as well as tactile qualities such as hardness and coldness. Furthermore, if tapped, a sound can be produced from it. So it has all the qualities any body is normally thought to have. But if we put the wax next to the fire we will notice all its qualities
change: the taste and smell are eliminated, the colour changes, the shape and size are altered, it becomes liquid rather solid, hot rather than cold and it will no longer make a sound if tapped. But, is the wax that comes away from the fire the same as the wax that was brought before the fire? Everyone will surely say yes but if so then what makes it possible to say that the same piece of wax exists if all its sensory qualities have altered?

If we forget all the qualities listed so far and concentrate on what has remained constant in the wax then all we can list is the fact that it takes up space, that is, it has extension. But even so we note now that its manner of being extended is susceptible to a great number of changes and that it could become smaller or larger and still be the self-same piece of wax. This entails that what makes it possible for me to describe this wax, as being the same as it was before, despite all the changes, does not reside in any of the sensory appearances it presents to me but rather an act of judgment I make. Thus it is that the act of the mind that is steady and firm when best occupied with its own operations rather than being based on the data of the senses.

Should I be looking at a group of people at a slight distance from myself then I only see certain aspects of them and I fill in the rest and make a judgment to the effect that I am perceiving people but on the evidence of my perception alone they could be robots or alien creatures and indeed this problem exists even with people near me. Whilst neither of these arguments has in fact shown that what appears to me to be a physical body is not that but merely an idea they have demonstrated clearly that what is stable in the conception of bodies is in fact not itself bodily or sensory in any degree but
is rather intellectual. Since this is so the true nature of what appears before me appears to at least be grasped in its essence by ideas even if it should be something bodily that exists but in fact there is now no clear reason for thinking that that which appears before me as bodily really is bodily. At the very least we can say now that the existence of ideas and mental characteristics is *more certain* than the existence of bodies and physical characteristics.

Thus two matters appear to be established in the second meditation: that the most certain thing is that I exist and the second, that mental things are more certain than physical things. On the grounds of the first point, that my existence is the most certain thing in the world, Descartes founds modern philosophy through what is often termed the “turn to the subject”. Philosophy in modern terms begins from this premise of assuming that the subject’s self-certainty is the true starting point of philosophy as opposed to the ancient attempt to begin by describing the true nature of things.

A series of problems remains at this point. Firstly, on what grounds can I be sure of my identity with another who seemingly was named the same as I when between this other and myself there could have been a moment of absence of thought and in this moment annihilation of the earlier I? (Problem of personal identity) Secondly, even if I grant my own existence as certain, I have no grounds for thinking that you also exist. Perhaps I am indeed the only one with a mind. (Problem of other minds) Thirdly, since only mental notions seem certain I still have no real grounds for thinking
that there exists a world that is separate from me in the sense that there are other things than me. (Problem of the existence of the external world.)