2.2 Method of Doubt

Descartes opens the First Meditation asserting the need to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations (AT 7:17). The passage adds:

Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. (AT 7:18)

In the architectural analogy, we can think of bulldozers as the ground clearing tools of demolition. For Knowledge building, Descartes construes skeptical doubts as the ground clearing tools of epistemic demolition. Bulldozers undermine literal ground; doubt undermines epistemic ground. Using skeptical doubts, the meditator shows us how to find some reason for doubt in all our preexisting opinions.

Descartes' ultimate aims, however, are constructive. Unlike the skeptics, who doubt only for the sake of doubting, Descartes aims to cast aside the loose earth and sand so as to come upon rock or clay (Discourse 3, AT 6:28i 29). Bulldozers are typically used for destructive ends, as are skeptical doubts. Descartes' methodical innovation is to employ demolition for constructive ends. Where a bulldozer's force overpowers the ground, its effects are destructive. Where the ground's firmness resists the bulldozer's force, the bulldozer might be used constructively using it to reveal the ground as firm. Descartes' innovation is to use epistemic bulldozers in this way. He uses skeptical doubts to test the firmness of candidates put forward for the foundations of Knowledge.

According to at least one prominent critic, this employment of skeptical doubt is unnecessary and excessive. Writes Gassendi:

There is just one point I am not clear about, namely why you did not make a simple and brief statement to the effect that you were regarding your previous knowledge as uncertain so that you could later single out what you found to be true. Why instead did you consider everything as false, which seems more like adopting a new prejudice than relinquishing an old one? This strategy made it necessary for you to convince yourself by imagining a deceiving God or some evil demon who tricks us, whereas it would surely have been sufficient to cite the darkness of the human mind or the weakness of our nature. (Objs. 5, AT 7:257i 58; my italics)

Here, Gassendi singles out two features of methodic doubt — its universal and hyperbolic character. In reply, Descartes remarks:

You say that you approve of my project for freeing my mind from preconceived opinions; and indeed no one can pretend that such a project should not be approved of. But you would have preferred me to have carried it out by making a simple and brief statement that is, only in a perfunctory fashion. Is it really so easy to free ourselves from all the errors which we have soaked up since our infancy? Can we really be too careful in carrying out a project which everyone agrees should be performed? (Replies 5, AT 7:348)

Evidently, Descartes holds that the universal and hyperbolic character of methodic doubt is helpful to its success. Further appeal to the architectural analogy helps elucidate why. Incorporating these features enables the method to more effectively identify first principles. Making doubt universal and hyperbolic helps to distinguish genuine unshakability from the mere appearance of it.
Consider first the universal character of doubt — the need to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations (Med. 1, AT 7:17). The point is not merely to apply doubt to all candidates for Knowledge, but to apply doubt collectively. Descartes offers the following analogy:

Suppose [a person] had a basket full of apples and, being worried that some of the apples were rotten, wanted to take out the rotten ones to prevent the rot spreading. How would he proceed? Would he not begin by tipping the whole lot out of the basket? And would not the next step be to cast his eye over each apple in turn, and pick up and put back in the basket only those he saw to be sound, leaving the others? In just the same way, those who have never philosophized correctly have various opinions in their minds which they have begun to store up since childhood, and which they therefore have reason to believe may in many cases be false. They then attempt to separate the false beliefs from the others, so as to prevent their contaminating the rest and making the whole lot uncertain. Now the best way they can accomplish this is to reject all their beliefs together in one go, as if they were all uncertain and false. They can then go over each belief in turn and re-adopt only those which they recognize to be true and indubitable. (Replies 7, AT 7:481)

That even one falsehood would be mistakenly treated as a genuine first principle — say, the belief that the senses are reliable, or that ancient authorities should be trusted — threatens to spread falsehood to other beliefs in the system. A collective doubt helps avoid such mistakes. It ensures that the method only approves candidate first principles that are unshakable in their own right: it rules out that the appearance of unshakability is owed to logical relations with other principles, themselves not subjected to doubt.

How is the hyperbolic character of methodic doubt supposed to contribute to the method's success? The architectural analogy is again helpful. Suppose that an architect is vigilant in employing a universal/collective doubt. Suppose, further, that she attempts to use bulldozers for constructive purposes. A problem nonetheless arises. How big a bulldozer is she to use? A light-duty bulldozer might be unable to distinguish a medium-sized boulder, and immovable bedrock. In both cases, the ground would appear immovable. The solution lies in using not light-duty, but heavy-duty tools of demolition — the bigger the bulldozer, the better. The lesson is clear for the epistemic builder: the more hyperbolic the doubt, the better.

A potential problem remains. Does not the problem of the light-duty bulldozer repeat itself? No matter how firm one's ground, would it not be dislodged in the face of a yet bigger bulldozer? This raises the worry that there might not be unshakable ground, but only that which is yet unshaken. Descartes' goal of utterly indubitable epistemic ground may simply be elusive.

Perhaps the architectural analogy breaks down in a manner that serves Descartes well. For though there is no most-powerful literal bulldozer, perhaps epistemic bulldozing is not subject to this limitation. Descartes seems to think that there is a most-powerful doubt — a doubt than which none more hyperbolic can be conceived. The Evil Genius Doubt (and equivalent doubts) is supposed to fit the bill. If the method reveals epistemic ground that stands fast in the face of a doubt this hyperbolic, then, as Descartes seems to hold, this counts as epistemic bedrock if anything does.

Hence the importance of the universal and hyperbolic character of the method of doubt. Gassendi's suggestion that we forego methodic doubt in favor of a simple and brief statement to the effect that we're regarding our previous knowledge as uncertain (Replies 7, AT 7:481) misses the intended point of methodic doubt.

Before turning attention to the First Meditation demolition project, I want to address what I believe are significant misconceptions about the method of doubt. Two of these are suggested in a passage from the pragmatist Peirce:

We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy. These prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim [viz., the maxim that the philosopher must begin with universal doubt], for they are things which it does not occur to us can be
questioned. Hence this initial skepticism will be a mere self-deception, and not real doubt. A person may, it is true, in the course of his studies, find reason to doubt what he began by believing; but in that case he doubts because he has a positive reason for it, and not on account of the Cartesian maxim. Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts. (1955, 228f)

It is a misconception that universal doubt is intended to result from the mere effort to adhere to the maxim as if by sheer effort of will. To the contrary, Descartes introduces skeptical arguments precisely in acknowledgement that we need reasons for doubt:

I did say that there was some difficulty in expelling from our belief everything we have previously accepted. One reason for this is that before we can decide to doubt, we need some reason for doubting; and that is why in my First Meditation I put forward the principal reasons for doubt. (Replies 5, appendix, AT 9a:204)

Another misconception is suggested by Peirce's reference to a doubt in our hearts. Distinguish two kinds of doubt, in terms of two kinds of ways that doubt can defeat knowledge. Some doubts purport to undermine one's conviction or belief call these belief-defeating doubts. Other doubts purport to undermine one's justification (whether or not they undermine belief) call these justification-defeating doubts. What Peirce calls a doubt in our hearts is suggestive of a belief-defeating doubt. The resulting misconception is that only belief-defeating doubts can undermine knowledge. Longstanding traditions in philosophy acknowledge that there may be truths we believe in our hearts (as it were), but which we do not know. This is one of the lessons of methodic doubt. The skeptical doubts are supposed to help us appreciate that though we believe that 2+3=5, and believe that we're awake, and believe that there is an external world, we may nonetheless lack Knowledge. Justification-defeating doubts are sufficient to undermine Knowledge, and this is the sort of doubt that Descartes puts forward.

A related misconception has the method calling not merely for doubt, but for disbelief or dissent. One of Gassendi's objections reads in this manner. He seems to take Descartes to be urging us, quite literally, to consider everything as false, a strategy which, as he says to Descartes, made it necessary for you to convince yourself of the skeptical hypotheses (Objs. 5, AT 7:257f 58). But Descartes' method does not require us to dissent from the beliefs it undermines. Surely the spirit (even if not always the letter) of the invocation to doubt is that we are to hold back our assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as we do from those which are patently false (Med. 1, AT 7:18).

Finally, a common misconception has it that the universality of doubt undermines the method of doubt itself, since the sceptical hypotheses themselves are so dubious. But this misses the point of the method: namely, to extend doubt universally to candidates for Knowledge, but not also to the very tools for founding Knowledge. As Descartes concedes: there may be reasons which are strong enough to compel us to doubt, even though these reasons are themselves doubtful, and hence are not to be retained later on (Replies 7, AT 7:473f 74).

3. First Meditation Doubting Arguments

3.1 Dreaming Doubt

Historically, there are at least two distinct dream-related doubts. The one doubt undermines the judgment that I am *presently* awake ð call this the ÊNow Dreaming Doubtê The other doubt undermines the judgment that I am *ever* awake (i.e., in the way normally supposed) ð call this the ÊAlways Dreaming Doubtê A textual case can be made on behalf of both formulations being raised in the *Meditations*.

Both doubts appeal to some version of the thesis that the experiences we take as dreams are (at their best) qualitatively similar to those we take as waking ð call this the ÊSimilarity Thesisê The Similarity Thesis may be formulated in a variety of strengths. A strong Similarity Thesis might contend that some dreams are experientially indistinguishable from waking, even subsequent to waking-up; a weaker thesis might contend merely that dreams *seem* similar to waking *while* having them, but not upon waking. Debates about precisely *how similar* waking and dreaming can be, have raged for more than two millennia. The tone of the debates suggests that the degree of qualitative similarity may vary across individuals (or, at least, across their *recollections* of dreams). Granting such variation, dreaming doubts that depend on weaker versions of the Similarity Thesis are (other things equal) apt to be more persuasive. I want to consider a textually defensible formulation that is relatively weak. (Note, however, that some texts suggest a strong thesis: ÊAs if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleepê (Med. 1, AT 7:19, my italics).)

The relatively weak thesis I have in mind is this: that the similarity between waking and dreaming is sufficient to render it *thinkable* that a dream experience would *seem* realistic, even when reflecting on the experience, while having it. As Descartes writes: Êevery sensory experience I have ever thought I was having while awake I can also think of myself as sometimes having while asleepê (Med. 6, AT 7:77). This version of the Similarity Thesis is endorsable by those who never recollect dreams that seem, on hindsight, experientially indistinguishable from waking; indeed, it's endorsable even by those who simply do not remember their dreams to any significant degree.

This weak Similarity Thesis is sufficient to generate straightaway the Now Dreaming Doubt. Since it is thinkable that a dream would convincingly *seem* as realistic (while having it) as my present experience seems, then, for all I Know, I am now dreaming.

Recall that Descartes' method requires only a justification-defeating doubt, not a belief-defeating doubt. The method requires me to appreciate that my present belief (that I'm awake) is not sufficiently justified. It does not require that I give up that belief. (I might continue to hold it on some merely psychological grounds.) Nor does the belief need to be false ð I might, in fact, be awake. The Now Dreaming Doubt does its epistemic damage so long as it undermines my reasons for believing I'm awake ð i.e., so long as I find it *thinkable* that a dream would *seem* this good. The First Meditation makes a case that this is indeed thinkable. As Descartes writes: Êhere are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleepê (Med. 1, AT 7:19).

The conclusion ð that I don't know that I'm now awake ð has widespread skeptical consequences. For if I don't Know this, then neither do I Know that I'm now Êholding this piece of paper in my hands,ê to cite an example the meditator had supposed to be Êquite impossibleê to doubt. Reflection on the Now Dreaming Doubt changes his mind. He comes around to the view that, for all he knows, the sensible objects of his present experience are mere figments of a vivid dream.

Much ado has been made about whether dreaming arguments are self-refuting. According to an influential objection, Similarity Theses presuppose that we *can* reliably distinguish dreams and waking, yet the conclusion
of dreaming arguments presupposes that we cannot. Therefore, if the conclusion of such an argument is true, then the premise stating the Similarity Thesis cannot be. Some formulations of the thesis do make this mistake. Of present interest is whether all do specifically, whether Descartes makes the mistake. He does not. Interestingly, his formulation presupposes simply the truism that we do in fact distinguish dreaming and waking (never mind whether reliably). He states his version of the thesis in terms of what we think of as dreams, versus what we think of as waking: "every sensory experience I have ever thought I was having while awake I can also think of myself as sometimes having while asleep" (Med. 6, AT 7:77). This formulation avoids the charge of self-refutation, for it is compatible with the conclusion that we cannot reliably distinguish dreams and waking.

Does Descartes also put forward a second dreaming argument, the Always Dreaming Doubt? I believe there is strong textual evidence to support this, though it is by no means the standard interpretation. (I make a case for this interpretation in my 1994.) The conclusion of the Always Dreaming Doubt is generated from the very same Similarity Thesis, together with a further skeptical assumption, namely: that for all I know, the processes producing what I take as waking are no more veridical than those producing what I take as dreams. As Descartes writes:

[E]very sensory experience I have ever thought I was having while awake I can also think of myself as sometimes having while asleep; and since I do not believe that what I seem to perceive in sleep comes from things located outside me, I did not see why I should be any more inclined to believe this of what I think I perceive while awake. (Med. 6, AT 7:77)

The aim of the Always Dreaming Doubt is to undermine not whether I'm now awake, but whether sensation is produced by external objects even on the assumption I'm now awake. For in the cases of both waking and dreaming, my cognitive access extends only to the productive result, but not the productive process. On what basis, then, do I conclude that the productive processes are different that external objects play more of a role in waking than in dreaming? For all I know, both sorts of experience are produced by some subconscious faculty of my mind. As Descartes has his meditator say:

[T]here may be some other faculty [of my mind] not yet fully known to me, which produces these ideas without any assistance from external things; this is, after all, just how I have always thought ideas are produced in me when I am dreaming. (Med. 3, AT 7:39)

The skeptical consequences of the Always Dreaming Doubt are even more devastating than those of the Now Dreaming Doubt. If I do not know that normal waking experience is produced by external objects, then, for all I know, all of my experiences might be dreams of a sort. For all I know, there might not be an external world. My best evidence of an external world derives from my preconceived opinion that external world objects produce my waking experiences. Yet the Always Dreaming Doubt calls this into question:

All these considerations are enough to establish that it is not reliable judgment but merely some blind impulse that has made me believe up till now that there exist things distinct from myself which transmit to me ideas or images of themselves through the sense organs or in some other way. (Med. 3, AT 7:39-40)

The two dreaming doubts are parasitic on the same Similarity Thesis, though their skeptical consequences differ. The Now Dreaming Doubt raises the universal possibility of delusion: for any one of my sensory experiences, it is possible (for all I know) that the experience is delusive. The Always Dreaming Doubt raises the possibility of universal delusion: it is possible (for all I know) that all my sensory experiences are delusions (say, from a God's-eye perspective).