Cartesian Skepticism

How much wearable tech can I use before I'm technically a cyborg?

It doesn't matter because you're a software simulation created by humans who perished after the technological singularity.

And you're programmed to scoff at what I just said.

Crazy old coot.
I have always thought that two topics — namely God and the soul — are prime examples of subjects where demonstrative proofs ought to be given with the aid of philosophy rather than theology. For us who are believers it is enough to accept on faith that the human soul does not die with the body, and that God exists; but in the case of unbelievers, it seems that there is no religion, and practically no moral virtue, that they can be persuaded to adopt until these two truths are proved to them by natural reason. And since in this life the rewards offered to vice are often greater than the rewards of virtue, few people would prefer what is right to what is expedient if they did not fear God or have the expectation of an after-life. It is of course quite true that we must believe in the existence of God because it is a doctrine of Holy Scripture, and conversely, that we must believe Holy Scripture because it comes from God; for since faith is the gift of God, he who gives us grace to believe other things can also give us grace to believe that he exists. But this argument cannot be put to unbelievers because they would judge it to be circular.

–Descartes’ dedicatory letter to the Sorbonne
René Descartes (1596-1650) is considered the father of modern philosophy.

In addition to being a philosopher, he was also a renowned mathematician and scientist.

His most famous work is *The Meditations*

Just as Plato used Socrates to lead the reader in discovering the philosophical truths, Descartes invites the reader to take on the mindset of the Meditator, because he believes it will lead you to a deeper understanding of the foundations of our knowledge—particularly our knowledge of the existence of God and the soul.
The Method of Doubt

- Beliefs are often built on other beliefs. If we can remove all our false beliefs, we can be guaranteed to be building on a good foundation.

- The method Descartes gives us for doing this is the Method of Doubt:
  
  *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.*

- According to the Method of Doubt, Descartes refuses to believe anything which can be doubted; this way, we can hope to find exactly what we are certain of—what is beyond doubt!
The Method of Doubt

- Doubt is contrasted with belief or assent
- By doubting everything, Descartes is withholding belief
- Knowledge is classically defined as Justified True Belief (JTB); thus, doubting everything implies knowing nothing
- Philosophers use the name *Pyrrhonian* skepticism for the view that does not claim to knowledge or lack of knowledge
- This can be contrasted with *Academic* skepticism that claims to know that we do not know anything
- Universal Academic skepticism is self-refuting, so typically people are only Academic skeptics about a particular kind of knowledge (such as Hume with knowledge of causal connections).
The Method of Doubt

- Another noteworthy feature of Descartes’ method is that he is trying to find firm foundations—indubitable beliefs on which we can build all other beliefs. We call this kind of view foundationalism.

- The classic example of a foundationalist project is Euclidean geometry, where we derive all of geometry from 5 postulates.

- As in the mathematical case, if we reject one of our foundational beliefs, we will have to reject all of the things derived from it.

- Thus, as the Method of Doubt calls into question various beliefs which are foundational in our current belief structure, we will be forced to doubt all the less foundational beliefs based on them.

- Also note that his goal is to establish a basis for the sciences. His science textbook he wrote later opened with arguments much like The Meditations.
The First Meditation

- Descartes’ doubt can be thought of in three stages:
  - In stage one, Descartes notes that the beliefs he considers himself most sure of come from the senses/sensory experience.
  - But sometimes our senses mislead us (e.g. when we see something far away and mistake what it is).
  - Thus, our first category of doubt will be our senses in “weird” circumstances.
  - As long as we are sensing things close to us and not looking through strange refractive glass or mirrors then we cannot doubt our senses (such as that you are here, in this classroom, hearing me), but we should doubt any sensory beliefs regarding other circumstances.
The Dreamer Argument

- In stage two Descartes realizes that, like a madman, he too has experiences of not-real things every night when he dreams

  *I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep.*

- Since we cannot know whether or not we are asleep, we can doubt whether or not this classroom is as we experience it, so per the Method of Doubt, we must withhold assent.
Causes of Dreams

- Descartes next considers if I at least know that there is something which gave me the ideas which dreams recombine.
- I may not know that the world is exactly the way I am perceiving, but I know there are chairs and trees and voices and smells in the world, even if those could be recombined in various ways in my dreams.
- Of course, we could imagine there being nothing remotely like a chair in the world, but it was merely recombining various colors the way an artist does. So we can doubt whether there are objects causing our various ideas of objects.
- But we can at least be sure that there are the various colors and other components of my experience which could be recombined to make me think there is a chair.
External World Skepticism

- Thus, we can doubt the existence of any object outside our minds, because we have doubted the foundational beliefs on which those beliefs were based, namely our belief in the ability of our senses to give us knowledge of the world.
- The only things we know are the various concepts and experiences immediately in our minds.
- We have thus reached *External World Skepticism*—the belief that one cannot know anything outside one’s own mind.
Philosophers distinguish knowledge which comes from experience, *a posteriori* knowledge, from knowledge which does not come from experience, *a priori* knowledge (though not everyone agrees there is *a priori* knowledge).

Descartes has undermined *a posteriori* knowledge, but if there is any *a priori* knowledge then that is still ok.

The main candidates for *a priori* knowledge are mathematical and logical truths, such as $2+3=5$ or *modus ponens*.

Other candidates include that I am having experiences of various kinds, and certain basic metaphysical truths (such as “for any fact there is a sufficient explanation of that fact,” “out of nothing nothing comes” ).
What’s left?

- Even if there are *a priori* truths, we still don’t seem to be immune from error regarding them.
- We often see people give wrong math answers, and otherwise be wrong when they are most sure of themselves.
- Also, for all I know, an omnipotent God is deceiving me.
- We cannot say that God is so good that he would not let us be deceived, because we are deceived all the time, so it can’t be that God ensures we are not deceived.
- If there is no God, then whatever process brought me about could just have easily led me to be mistaken all the time.
- Thus, I could go wrong in even simple mathematical truths or truths about color.
- Thus, even *a priori* claims can be doubted, so we must not assent to them.
We have reached a point at which all our former beliefs can be doubted.

However, we are still inclined to believe them as likely, even if doubtable.

Thus, if we are truly to not be deceived by our former prejudice and in fact reach certain foundations, we should suppose all of our former beliefs false.

Thus, I should assume a malicious demon exists whose sole purpose is to deceive me.
Should we be total skeptics?

- The “malicious demon” is the ultimate standard of doubt. It is difficult to believe you are right on anything if an omnipotent creature exists solely to deceive you.
- Do you think any *a posteriori* beliefs survive the evil demon?
- What about any *a priori* beliefs?