Welcome to the second of three lectures on skepticism and the appearance reality gap, which are a part of this larger section of the course on epistemology.

We left off last time with Descartes somewhat in a state of despair. Remember, Descartes is trying to find rational grounds for human knowledge, trying to determine what the rational grounds for human knowledge are. He has discovered that neither sensory experience nor deductive reasoning can constitute those foundations, those grounds. So not only has he rejected the basic picture of human knowledge offered by the empiricists, by John Locke, but he has rejected the more standard — the traditional rationalist view of knowledge in which it’s deductive reasoning that forms the base or bottom of human knowledge.

And so Meditation Two begins, I think as we left off last time, with Descartes expressing some worries, some concerns, that perhaps his investigations will be ultimately — will ultimately fail. And remember that what’s at stake are some very important conceptions of human nature and of the relative standing of human beings in the order of creation and with respect to one another. Descartes is committed to the idea that human beings are intellectually autonomous — that is, that each individual human being is able to acquire knowledge on his or her own — and second that human beings are fundamentally rational or reasonable. That is, the things that we believe have a solid basis, have rational justification.

And so there’s an awful lot at stake here. Not just the human self image, but also the standing of science. Remember that the scientific revolution is predicated — and the whole enlightenment, in a sense, is predicated on the idea of intellectual autonomy and the idea — on the rejection of external authority in the sphere of human knowledge as well as in politics. So there’s an awful lot at stake here for Descartes. Given how negative the first meditation was, given how Descartes seems to have shown that neither sensory experience nor deductive reasoning can constitute the
grounds of human knowledge, Descartes has some reason to be concerned.

Nonetheless, Meditation Two — in Meditation Two Descartes quickly picks himself up, dusts himself off, and resumes his quest, and he very quickly comes to a realization. The realization concerns two beliefs that he finds cannot be doubted on any grounds. That is, that even in light of all the skeptical doubts expressed in Meditation One, even in light of the argument from error, the argument from dreaming, the argument from the malicious demon, Descartes finds two beliefs which survive all those various forms of doubt. And the beliefs are the belief that I am currently thinking and the belief that I currently exist.

Descartes says that for each person these beliefs, when they are held in their mind — all right. So when I think I am currently thinking or when I think I currently exist, Descartes says these beliefs cannot be doubted on any grounds. Their truth is absolutely necessary and knowledge of them is absolutely indubitable. He says this on the bottom of pages 16 to the top of page 17 in your readings. This is paragraph 25.

He rehearses the skeptical worries. He says — at one point he says, “Am I not at least something but I have just said that I have no senses and no body.” In other words, he’s just entertained skeptical doubts about whether he has a body at all. “This is the sticking point. What follows from this am I not so bound up with a body and with senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world — no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies — does it now follow that I, too, do not exist? No. If I convince myself of something, then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case, I, too, undoubtedly exist if he is deceiving me. And let him deceive me as much as he can. He will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition — I am, I exist — is necessarily
true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind,” unquote.

So Descartes wants to say that the belief that I’m currently thinking and the belief that I exist are indubitable. They cannot be doubted. Their grounding — their justification is absolutely air-tight. And his reasoning here is quite ingenious. Descartes makes the following point. “How can I doubt that I am currently thinking? After all, to doubt something is to think, a doubt is a kind of thought. So the very active doubting, I’m thinking, proves that I am thinking. It follows from this, of course, that the belief that I exist also is beyond all doubt. If I’m thinking or doubting, then I have to exist in order to think or doubt. If I’m being deceived by a malicious demon, then I have to exist in order to be deceived. And so just as the belief that I think cannot be doubted, the belief that I exist cannot be doubted and the reasons that they cannot be doubted are the same. To doubt them is to confirm them.”

And this is an important realization because if Descartes has identified certain beliefs that cannot be doubted, beliefs whose truth is necessary, then he’s at least partly on his way towards finding the rational grounds for all human knowledge. Because he can now examine, well, what characterizes these indubitable beliefs? What is it about these — what types of beliefs are these? And then once he’s sort of gotten an answer to that, he can start to sort of reconstruct his belief system, his system of knowledge, on the basis of these foundational or grounding beliefs.

As he thinks further about it, he realizes — he has a second realization. And the second realization is that thinking comes in many, many varieties. Remember, we’re using the word thinking or thought in the broadest possible sense. A thought is simply an idea in the Lockean sense. And so there are as many different types of thoughts as there are types of ideas. If I have — so if I can be absolutely certain that I am currently thinking, then I can be absolutely certain of any variation on I think. So if thinking comes in many different forms, which of course it does, and I can always be certain that
I am currently thinking, then there’s going to be a whole bunch of things — beliefs concerning my own thoughts that I can be certain about.

And the best way to explain this is — so as not to remain hopelessly abstract — is to take an example. So here’s two propositions, okay? Two things I might believe. The first is that I see a podium. The belief is that I see a podium. And here’s the second one. The second one is that I believe that I seem to see a podium. Now, you might say, “Well, what’s the difference between those?” or “What possible meaningful difference could the addition of the word seem play in the second sentence?” And let me try to explain the difference while keeping in mind the point, which is this idea that the indubitability of the belief that I’m currently thinking is actually a very, very broad set of — constitutes a very broad set of certainties.

When I say that I see a table, I am not only — I’m reporting two things. I’m reporting a thought content in the sense of a Lockean idea. I am reporting a certain mental picture. To put it in bad English but very suggestive, when I say that I see a podium, one thing that I’m saying is I’m having a podium-ish experience. I’m having a podium-ish idea.

Now, the second thing that I’m saying, of course, when I say that I see a table is I’m saying there is an actual podium causing the podium-ish idea. So the statement I see a podium has two implications. It implies a certain mental experience, a certain thought — I use that word deliberately — and it also implies the existence of an external object, in this case a podium.

Notice, however, that the second proposition, I seem to see a table, only implies a thought content. When I say that I seem to see a table, I am only implying, I am only saying, that I am having a certain idea. That a certain mental picture has popped into my head. That I’m having a podium-ish experience. It implies nothing about there existing an external object that is the podium. When I say I seem to see a podium, I
am leaving open the possibility that there is actually no external object at all. I seem to see a podium is true, even if I’m dreaming the podium.

And that, indeed, brings us right back to the point that we were making. The statement *I seem to see a podium* is a variation on the statement *I think*. I’m gonna say it again. The statement that *I seem to see a podium* is a variation on the statement *I think or I am currently thinking*. Having a mental experience of a podium is an instance of thought. And just like the belief that I currently am thinking, the belief that I currently seem to see a podium is also immune to all doubt. It’s true even if I’m dreaming the podium. It’s true even if I’m being manipulated by the malicious demon that I seem to see the podium. The truth of the statement that I seem to see a podium holds irrespective of the doubts that I might try to fling against it.

Descartes says, on pages 19, paragraph 29, towards the bottom — he says, “It is the same eye who has sensory perceptions or is aware of bodily things as it were through the senses. For example, I am now seeing light, hearing noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep so all of this is false.” In other words, he’s saying, look, if I’m dreaming, then I’m not seeing a light, I’m not hearing a noise. Then he goes on: “Yet I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false. It can be false that I’m hearing a noise. It can’t be false that I seem to be hearing a noise. This cannot be false. What is called having a sensory perception is strictly just this, and in this restrictive sense of the term it is simply thinking. To say I seem to see a podium, to say that I seem to hear noise, is simply to report a thought content, an idea, and thus is simply a variation on saying I am thinking.”

The reason I emphasize this so much is because from this second realization Descartes establishes a basic epistemological position and it goes something like this. We can be absolutely certain about the contents of our own thoughts. It is our beliefs concerning our own thoughts that constitute the foundations of our knowledge. In other
words, before I know anything about tables, I know that I’m having a certain kind of mental experience. Before I know anything about noises or about lights, I know that I’m having certain kinds of mental pictures go through my head. It’s from those mental pictures that the search for knowledge begins. We begin by having mental experience. We then try to figure out what are the external causes of those mental experiences, and that figuring out is the process of acquiring knowledge about the world.

The question — the problem is, how do we identify some sort of rational procedure by which we can move reliably from the first set of beliefs to the second? How on the basis of a mental experience can I reliably infer an external occurrence? How on the basis of the fact that I’m having a podium-ish experience can I reliably acquire information about the actual podium or even that there is an actual podium?

This is why I’ve entitled this part of the course “Skepticism and the Appearance Reality Gap.” There is a gap — there is a step that has to take place between my knowledge of my own mental experiences which are beyond all doubt and my knowledge of the external world which is subject to all kinds of doubts: the dreaming argument, the error argument, the malicious demon argument. It looks like what’s required is some kind of a rational procedure, some kind of a method by which we can reliably move from beliefs about mental contents to beliefs about external objects.

And, indeed, this is precisely what Descartes is going to set out to provide or to offer: a kind of reliable procedure from which we can move from beliefs about our own mental states, beliefs about our own thoughts, to true beliefs about the external world. Because, of course, in the pursuit of knowledge, what we ultimately want to know about is the external world. We don’t just want to know about our mental pictures. We don’t just want to know about our own thoughts.

Let me say one thing about what characterizes these foundational beliefs. I seem to blank a blank. All these variations or reports of thought contents have a
certain common characteristic that explains their indubitability. They're not known deductively. That is, they're not deduced and they're also not known by way of sensory perception.

So how are they known? What are the characteristics of these foundational beliefs? What characterizes the necessity or the indubitability of our beliefs about our own thoughts? The reason why — the way that we know them is by way of direct unmediated intuition. And the only way to explain this is to speak in terms of metaphors. For Descartes the mind is a little bit like a private room. Imagine you are in your private room. Imagine this private room, this interior space, in which you, the self, the I, the letter I — you the self is there and in that room with you are your thoughts. The external world is like the rooms outside the door which you have no direct access to. The only way to the outside rooms is through some mediation, through some mechanism, right? Either the senses or through deductive reasoning, inferences. But our knowledge of what’s in the room is immediate and direct.

So to continue the metaphor, if you and I are standing in the same room, I have a kind of a direct access to you. If I’m told that somebody’s outside the room, I can only either infer it or find some way to look out of the room, some method by which to look out of the room. But in terms of who’s in the room with me, my access is direct and unmediated. Now, again, this is a metaphor for what Descartes is talking about. The idea is we have direct, unmediated, intuitive access to our own thoughts. You don’t need to infer what your thoughts are and you don’t need to observe via the senses what your thoughts are. You, the interior self, are in the same room with your own thoughts and thus have direct unmediated access to them.

Our knowledge of the external world, on the other hand, is always mediated. There’s always some procedure between us and the object. Either a set of inferences, a deduction, or perceptual observations. We get to that external object through our
eyes, through our ears, through our noses, and so on and so forth. And it is precisely
in the process of mediating between self and world, between subject and object, that
the doubts arise. If you notice, the skeptical arguments in the first meditation go
directly to that point of mediation. They question the validity of perception, they
question the validity of inferences. These are the mediators between the self and the
world, between the subject and the object, and it’s in those mediations that the
possibility of error or the possibility of deception, the possibility of dreaming arises.

So our foundational beliefs, these beliefs about our own thoughts which
constitute the ground, the foundation of everything that we know, we know these by
direct acquaintance, by unmediated intuition, and thus no doubts can arise with respect
to them. Our knowledge of the external world, on the other hand, is always mediated
by way of either perception or deductive inference, and it’s there at that point of
mediation that the possibility of mistake and a falsehood arise.

So what we’re left, then, with is with a very specific task and with two very difficult
challenges. Let me try to articulate the task as well as the challenges. In terms of the
task, our task is to figure out how on the basis of our intuitively known, absolutely
certain foundational beliefs concerning our own thoughts we can reliably deduce or
observe the external world that is allegedly the cause of those thoughts. And, as I said
before, what’s wanted here is some kind of reliable procedure and it’s precisely a
reliable procedure or method that Descartes is going to try to provide.

The challenges, of course, are daunting and there are two fundamental
challenges. Both of these challenges speak to this appearance reality gap, speak to
this gap between the subject’s picture of things and the things as they actually are in the
external world. Two specific challenges arise. The first is to overcome the problem of
mismatch between our mental picture of the world and the external world itself. We
know that the idea of a thing only partly resembles the thing. We know that from
Locke. Our idea of the thing has both primary and secondary qualities. The thing as it exists externally only has primary qualities.

So one problem is to overcome the mismatch between our mental picture of the world and the external world itself. The challenge is to overcome Descartes’ argument from error. The argument from error is the argument that speaks to this mismatch between appearance and reality.

The second challenge is even more difficult, more daunting, and the second challenge is to justify the belief that there is any external world at all. Entirely aside from the question of mismatch between my picture of the world and the world as it actually is, there’s the much more difficult question: what justifies my believing that there is any world beyond my ideas at all? In other words, why isn’t Barclay correct? Remember Bishop Barclay who argued that everything is an idea in the mind, that even the primary qualities are purely mental phenomena, and Barclay’s point is there’s no reason to think there is anything beyond the mental picture.

Given that you only ever have direct awareness of the mental picture and never have direct awareness of what is allegedly beyond the mental picture, what is allegedly behind the proverbial curtain, what grounds are there to think that there’s anything at all? How would we prove, for example, that we’re simply not thinking entities living in a perpetual ongoing dream? Such a hypothesis would be entirely consistent with everything that we experience, as much so as the view that what we experience is caused by an external object or by a world full of external objects.

So these are our two specific challenges and they’re not easy challenges. I will tell you right now that I do believe that some sort of procedure or method will be sufficient to overcome the mismatch problem. That is, if we assume an external reality, indeed it is going to be by way of some sort of procedure or methodology that we square the appearance reality mismatch, that we overcome the appearance reality
mismatch. Indeed, think about the scientific method itself.

The method that Descartes proposes here and also in the discourse and method which we haven’t read is a kind of early scientific method. Think about what the scientific method is intended to sort of do. It’s intended to make sure that the conclusions you come to are true and are not misled by misleading appearances, right?

One aspect of the scientific method, for example, is that in the case of any study where one is making generalizations, one has to be sure that one has a representative sample of what one is talking about. This is a way to assure that first appearances which may be misleading don’t find their way into your conclusions.

So I would submit to you that what our current scientific method about is in part about overcoming the appearance reality mismatch and I do think that methods and procedures can ameliorate or can lessen that appearance reality mismatch. However, I do also believe that the second problem is insurmountable. I do not believe that there is any way to prove or otherwise justify the existence of the external world as separate from our experience of it. Descartes believes that he does have such a solution. I will discuss it and I will attempt to explain why few have found it to be compelling.

And then we’ll talk about — there were several reactions to the failure of Descartes’ project, for the perceived failure of Descartes’ project. One reaction was to try and find better proofs for the external world. To a certain extent this is what Immanuel Kant tries to do. But another reaction was to, in a sense, rein things in and say, “Look. Rather than trying to prove everything beyond a reasonable doubt, why don’t we instead outline the limits of rational inquiry? Perhaps beliefs like the belief in the existence of the external world are not things to be proven, but starting assumptions.”

And that’s, in a sense, the line that people like David Hume and Thomas Reid are going to take, and that is the line that we will pursue in this course. You should be
aware, however, that there have been — that there are multiple ways of reacting to Descartes’ apparent inability to prove the existence of the external world and thus to prove that there is — to show that there’s any rational reason to think that anything exists outside of our own minds.

So what we’re gonna do next time, and we’re now on the next time part of the lecture, we’re gonna look at what — the procedures that Descartes recommends for overcoming the problem of mismatch between our mental picture of the world and the way the world actually is. Also we’re going to discuss how Descartes intends to solve the problem of the existence of the external world.

Let me leave you with two things to think about as you continue your reading. Descartes is going to employ a thought experiment concerning a ball of wax in order to demonstrate the kind of procedure that he thinks will allow us to overcome the appearance/reality mismatch — the mismatch of appearance and reality. I want you to read through the ball of wax experiment and tell me — explain to me what does it prove vis-a-vis the two challenges that I outlined, Challenges 1 and 2. What does the ball of wax experiment prove with respect to 1 and 2. Second question I want to ask is what does it leave unexplained. So those are the two questions I will leave you with as you continue reading in Meditation Two.

Next time we will complete our discussion of Descartes and of skepticism and the appearance reality gap, and we will move on to the next and final part of this part of the course. And I thank you very much and we’ll see you next time.