On several occasions, Descartes rightly remarked that the skeptical doubts rehearsed in Meditation I were not particularly novel (AT vii, 130, 171; viiiB, 367). Most of them had figured in the writings of the ancient skeptics and, with the publication of a Latin translation of Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in 1562, had inspired a host of neo-Pyrrhonian thinkers in France, beginning with Montaigne’s *L’Apologie de Raymond Sebond* (1580) and continuing with Charron’s *De la sagesse* (1601) and La Mothe Le Vayer’s *Dialogues faits à l’imitation des anciens* (1630–1). Meditation I raises worries, for example, about the general reliability of our perceptual beliefs, given the ease with which we make mistakes in this area. It also argues that, some dreams being as vivid and detailed as any waking experience, we are unable to determine at any given moment whether we find ourselves in the one state or the other. All these tropes, as Descartes conceded in the *Second Replies* (AT vii, 130), were like a lot of “warmed over cabbage.”

There are two important exceptions to the commonplace character of the doubts Descartes invoked. The first is that even the existence of an external reality is put into question: on what basis can we truly claim to know that a world exists apart from our own minds and ideas of things? This challenge did not form part of the ancient repertoire. Not by accident, Greek skepticism stopped short of putting into doubt the existence of the world, since it aimed to constitute a way of life (Burnyeat 1982). Viewing skeptical argument as simply an epistemological tool, Descartes was able to extend its scope to the very notion of a mind-independent reality.

The other exception is a kind of doubt that Descartes did claim to be unprecedented, at least if we can regard as reliable the transcript which Frans Burman made of their conversations in 1648 (AT v, 147). It is the possibility that an omnipotent God may have given us a nature such that we fall into error even in those matters which we have every reason to regard as certain. On this point, Descartes was not, however, so innovative as he supposed. For though unknown
to the ancients, this doubt had already been explored by various medieval thinkers (Gregory 1974), as well as by Montaigne (1999 ii, 512–13, 527). The doubts presented in Meditation I are not therefore particularly remarkable for their content; that is, for the possibilities of error which they raise in order to call into question various claims to knowledge. Their originality has to do instead with the manner in which they are deployed and, even more, with the purpose they are meant to serve.

Though no skeptic himself, Descartes showed a rare appreciation of the shape that skeptical argumentation ought to take. In general, the philosophical skeptic sets out to challenge, not this or that particular belief, but the very possibility of human knowledge. Thus, the only coherent approach must be to bring to light the contradictions within the standpoint of those who claim to know various things about the world. It would be illegitimate to appeal to any notions of one’s own about, say, the unreliability of perception or of reasoning (since the skeptic supposedly lacks all knowledge), and it would be ineffectual to invoke any assumptions alien to the position under scrutiny. One must instead discredit claims to knowledge by showing how they conflict with other views and principles that their advocates already accept or would have to admit. Skeptical arguments ought properly to proceed by internal demolition. Neither in the seventeenth century nor in our own time has this requirement always been well understood, though the ancient skeptics (both Pyrrhonist and Academic) usually hewed to it closely (Annas and Barnes 1985: 14, 45, 53). Unlike many modern thinkers, Descartes grasped the point as well, if we may judge by the structure of Meditation I.

In the third paragraph, he introduced a broadly “empiricist” conception of knowledge in the form of the principle that “everything which up until now I have taken as most true I have learned either from the senses or through the senses” (AT vii, 18). This principle, by no means one he would endorse himself, is then subjected to a series of skeptical doubts, whose common feature is that they each undermine from within a different and increasingly beleaguered version of the idea that knowledge derives from the senses. They do not lean on premises belonging to his own philosophy, but solely on views that an empiricist wedded to such a principle would have to acknowledge. (The distinction between “from” and “through” the senses, so Descartes explained to Burman [AT v, 146], is one between what we have seen ourselves and what we have heard from others.)

In fact, Descartes realized so well that skeptical argument needs to operate by internal demolition that in the next Meditation he turned the tables on the skeptic by means of the very same strategy. The truth of our own existence as thinking beings is one that the skeptic cannot deny, except on pain of contradiction. “Cogito, ergo sum” provides, moreover, the cornerstone of an alternative conception of knowledge that the Meditations have as their mission to develop. In this respect, Descartes’ use of skepticism broke altogether with precedent. Having an acute understanding of the pattern of argument used by the ancient
skeptics, he went on to exploit it as a tool for the construction of his new “first
philosophy."

The empiricist principle that is first demolished and then replaced is, in fact,
nothing other than the very basis of Aristotelian philosophy. In Aristotle’s De
anima (432a7), for example, we find the statement that “since no one can ever
learn anything without the use of perception, it is necessary even in speculative
thought to have some mental image to contemplate.” By showing that empiricism
cannot withstand the skeptic’s doubts, and by then drawing out a body of truths
which those doubts are themselves powerless to impugn, Descartes hoped to
convince the reader to move beyond the two warring camps of the day, Aristotelian
scholasticism and skepticism, and in the direction of his own position, which rested
on a non-empiricist theory of knowledge. Meditation I, as he observed in the
Synopsis (AT vii, 12), aims to detach the mind from its dependence on the senses
(ad mentem a sensibus abducendam). The first benefit of this intellectual reorienta-
tion would be to establish the metaphysical truths listed in the subtitle of the
Meditations – the existence of God and the real distinction between mind and
body. But the latter result, he believed, would serve in turn to validate another
anti-Aristotelian component of his thought, namely his mechanistic physics which
no longer attributed to bodies quasi-mental powers or “substantial forms.”
Nowhere in the Meditations did Descartes name Aristotelianism as the principal
philosophical target of the skeptical arguments with which he begins his investiga-
tion. But a letter to Mersenne of January 28, 1641 spells out his intentions
explicitly:

> These six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not
tell people for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them.
I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth,
before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle. (AT iii, 298)

The overall structure of Meditation I comes most clearly into view if we regard
it as a dialogue which Descartes has staged between the empiricist and the skeptic,
in order to prepare the way for the introduction of his own doctrines (Larmore
1998, 2000). In this light, its key moves are less likely to be misconstrued. We
will not suppose, for example, that the premises on which either party relies are
ones that Descartes would want to endorse. At the same time, however, we can
more easily spot the decisive way that his views do intrude themselves. The dia-
ologue is orchestrated in accord with a rule brought in from the outside. The
Aristotelian succumbs to the skeptic’s doubts in virtue of a supposed dictate of
reason (ratio): “the least grounds for doubt that I find will suffice to make me
reject all [my opinions]” (AT vii, 18). Descartes’ rationale for imposing this prin-
ciple of indubitability will occupy us later on. Let us first look in more detail at
the back-and-forth between empiricist and skeptic which makes up the heart of
Meditation I.
The Skeptical Demolition of Empiricism

The meditating “I,” we must be careful to remember, is not necessarily to be identified with Descartes himself. In Meditation I, it generally represents a point of view to which he suspects his reader harbors some allegiance, but whose allure he intends to dispel. Each of us, says the “I,” should pause and reflect at least once in our lives on the worth of all our existing beliefs, examining their credentials, not one by one, but with regard to the foundations (fundamenta) on which we suppose they rest. With this demand Descartes agreed, of course. But when the meditator goes on to declare that “everything which up until now I have taken as most true I have learned either from the senses or through the senses,” we meet that Aristotelian principle which scarcely inspired Descartes’ own thinking. In his early notebooks of 1619–22, known today as Cogitationes privatae, Descartes does seem to have adhered to a sense-based epistemology (AT x, 218–19), but he had certainly abandoned it by 1628, when writing his Rules for the Direction of the Mind (see AT x, 395f). Aristotelian empiricism had become his chief philosophical adversary. In the Discourse on Method (AT vi, 37), he noted disparagingly that a constant refrain of scholastic philosophy was that “there is nothing in the intellect which has not previously been in the senses.”

I have already pointed out one reason that the Meditations keep silent about the philosophical pedigree of the empiricism they attack: Descartes did not want to give his Aristotelian-minded readers an excuse to dismiss his book straight away. But there was also another reason. Embodied creatures that we are and impelled from infancy to view the world in terms of the body’s needs, we have a natural inclination, he believed, to suppose that knowledge must derive from the senses. Aristotle and his followers simply put this common sentiment into systematic form (see AT vii, 441–3). Consequently, the skeptical arguments of Meditation I are aimed at more than just one doctrinal school. Their object is a way of thinking to which every reader must feel some attraction. As Descartes remarked to Burman in discussing the matter, everyone trusts in the senses at a pre-philosophical level (AT v, 146). Indeed, this deep-seated tendency continued to drive other mechanists of the time, such as Gassendi and Hobbes, despite their similar opposition to Aristotelian physics, to look to sense experience as the source of all knowledge. The empiricism under investigation no doubt included these contemporary variants as well.

In recent years, the complaint has often been voiced that the Meditations presuppose without argument a “foundationalist” model of knowledge (Williams 1986). After all, the need to build up our beliefs on secure foundations (fundamenta) is cited twice in the first two paragraphs (AT vii, 17, 18). This objection fails, however, to do justice to the dialectical situation in which Descartes found himself. The notion that all knowledge rests upon an ultimate, authoritative source of belief was already well ensconced. It shaped the various kinds of empiricist epistemology that pervaded the thinking of his time, most notably the scholastic
establishment. Once we recognize the philosophical adversaries against whom Descartes was battling, we will see that he did not so much inject his own foundationalism as seek to replace the reigning form with another. The key respect in which Meditation I is slanted in favor of Cartesian preconceptions consists instead, as I have noted, in the demand that our beliefs be immune to “the least grounds for doubt,” and I shall return to what lay behind this requirement below (in the section ‘Cartesian Certainty’).

One apparent obstacle to regarding empiricist notions of knowledge as the target of Meditation I is that Descartes brings up for discussion the validity of mathematical beliefs. Unconcerned about whether their objects exist in the physical world (in rerum natura: AT vii, 20), such beliefs survive the doubt about whether, for all we can tell, we may be dreaming, and succumb only to the later doubt about whether an omnipotent God may be a deceiver. Many have supposed that mathematics is understood here as having a basis other than the senses, their reliability having been discredited by the former doubt, and that Descartes must have in mind his own view of mathematics, since the latter doubt reappears in Meditation III to challenge the reliability of his new criterion of knowledge, clear and distinct perception, with particular reference once again to mathematical beliefs (AT vii, 35–6).

But this interpretation goes wrong for a number of reasons. According to the Synopsis, the aim of Meditation I is to detach the mind from the senses. Nowhere in this Meditation does Descartes mention any other theory of knowledge than the one formulated at the beginning, which holds that everything (Nempe quidquid) accepted as true rests upon sense experience. The “perspicuous truths” of mathematics are described as containing “something certain and indubitable” (AT vii, 20) and as being such that we think we know them perfectly (21), but never as being clearly and distinctly perceived. Moreover, it is not difficult to understand how an empiricist could maintain the validity of pure mathematics even after the doubt about dreaming had undermined all sense-based beliefs about the natural world. One had only to follow Aristotle in holding that mathematical concepts, once abstracted from experience, can be reasoned about independently of their corresponding to anything in nature. Though the supreme doubt involving an omnipotent God can be made to apply, not just to this abstractionist account of mathematics, but also to the view that mathematical concepts are innate and mathematical truths clearly and distinctly perceived, it does not assume so broad a scope until (in Meditation III) this new non-empiricist conception of knowledge has been introduced. The status of mathematical beliefs in Meditation I offers a perfect example of the way that Descartes has organized the text around two standpoints, neither of them his own – the empiricist’s and the skeptic’s.

So let me now outline the course of the Meditation (AT vii, 18–22) as a dialogue between these two positions. Not only the main steps, but also the reason why one follows upon another, will then stand out clearly. The empiricist (paradigmatically, the Aristotelian) amends his fundamental principle again and again,
in response to each new charge by the skeptic that he is caught in an internal contradiction, until at last, reduced to silence, he must admit defeat:

**Empiricist:** Knowledge is possible on the basis of sense experience.

**Skeptic:** But perception of small and distant objects is fallible.

**Empiricist:** Nonetheless, perception of close, medium-sized objects is veridical.

**Skeptic:** What of the possibility that you are mad?

**Empiricist:** I would be mad even to consider that possibility.

**Skeptic:** Still, you must acknowledge that in the past you have mistaken dreams, which turned out false, for veridical perceptions. As a matter of fact, there are no sure signs by means of which dream perceptions can be distinguished from waking ones. How can you rule out the possibility that any perception of some close, medium-sized object is really a dream?

**Empiricist:** Even so, the sensible elements of any perception, whether I am awake or dreaming, resemble things in reality.

**Skeptic:** For all you know, these sensible elements could be purely imaginary.

**Empiricist:** Maybe, but the simplest elements in these perceptions -- mathematical notions of extension, quantity, and magnitude -- express truths even if they do not refer to anything in nature. Pure mathematics remains certain.

**Skeptic:** Still, there is the possibility of an omnipotent God, who created you and could have given you a mind such that even what you think you know most perfectly is actually false. Or if you believe your origin must have been some natural and more imperfect course of events, you will have all the more reason to wonder whether your mind does not mislead you here.

**Empiricist:** [silence].

Reconstructing the arguments in this fashion helps to guard against two frequent sources of misinterpretation. First, it will not be wrongly assumed that either the empiricist’s assumptions or the skeptic’s doubts express Descartes’ own views (although it was certainly his view that the empiricist cannot successfully answer the skeptic). Consider the doubt about dreaming, for example. Descartes did not hold that we cannot reliably distinguish dreaming from waking, since later in Meditation VI (AT vii, 89–90) he explained how, given his principles, we can do so. He was persuaded that the empiricist has no dependable basis for making the distinction, and this failing is what he used the skeptic’s doubt to point out. Thus, the dreaming doubt takes for granted that if we do have a waking perception of a close, medium-sized object, then the perception is veridical (the challenge being whether we can determine that we are, in fact, awake). Such an assumption is
scarcely one that Descartes himself would endorse, as the mechanistic theory of vision laid out in the *Dioptrics* makes plain. There he argued that though our sensory organs respond systematically to the world, the images they give us under the best of circumstances need not resemble the way things are (AT vi, 112–13). The assumption reflects instead the Aristotelian idea that perception under normal conditions is not subject to error (Feyerabend 1978), and that is why the skeptic is portrayed as turning it against the empiricist. Some have thought that the doubt concerns whether waking experience is veridical (Wilson 1978: 20–4). But Descartes described it from beginning to end as concerned with the difference between waking and dreaming (AT vii, 19, 89), and its eventual resolution consists in showing how to determine that we are awake: we check whether our perception coheres with the rest of our experience (AT vii, 90). This doubt, like the others, proceeds by drawing out an internal contradiction within the position of the Aristotelian empiricist.

Secondly, it becomes evident why one doubt in particular, the idea that we might be mad, is not taken seriously. “I would seem no less mad,” exclaims the meditator, “if I were to apply the madman’s case to my own” (cf. AT vii, 19). Some have claimed that Descartes dismissed this kind of doubt because questioning whether we are even sane would wreck the very enterprise of reasoning about the proper basis of belief (Frankfurt 1970: 38) – that he refused, unlike sixteenth-century writers such as Erasmus and Montaigne, to acknowledge folly as an abiding possibility, since his goal was to establish the sovereignty of reason and to make us “masters and possessors of nature” (Foucault 1972: 56–8). Strictly speaking, however, the one who rejects the doubt about madness is not Descartes himself but rather the empiricist, whose reliance on the senses provides the object of investigation. (This is made explicit in the undated dialogue entitled *The Search for Truth* [AT x, 511].) The chance that we may be mad forms no part of the Aristotelian’s perspective, or indeed of anyone’s who follows the natural inclination to trust in the senses. Moreover, Descartes has the skeptic go on to raise another possibility, that we may be dreaming, which the empiricist cannot similarly exclude, and this challenge succeeds in undermining from within the same conviction against which the previous doubt was aimed: the reliability of perception under apparently normal conditions. Meditation I does not hold back on doubts that might imperil Descartes’ own views. It focuses on those which the empiricist cannot disarm, since its aim consists in showing that empiricism offers no match for the traditional weapons of the skeptic.

The skeptic emerges victorious at the end of Meditation I, only to have his own strategy of internal demolition turned against him in the next. The proposition *sum* (“I am”), the meditator realizes, is one that the skeptic cannot coherently
doubt. Plainly, sum is supposed to prove undeniable in virtue of a premise, cogito (“I think”), but the precise way in which the skeptic is thereby defeated has long been the subject of controversy. If cogito, ergo sum is understood as an argument in which Descartes himself advances a premise and draws a conclusion (see, for example, Kenny 1968: 51–5), no skeptic need feel discomfited. Such an argument seems hopelessly circular, since any reasons for not yet assenting to a conclusion as elementary as sum would entail doubts about the premise as well. Besides, ever since antiquity, skeptics had pointed out a basic difficulty in regarding proof as a vehicle of knowledge: the premises themselves stand in need of justification, yet seeking to prove them too must lead to an infinite regress.

Some have therefore denied that the refutation of the skeptic hinges on an inference from “I think” to “I am” (Hintikka 1962). But what can ergo signify, if not an inferential connection? Though the famous phrase itself – cogito, ergo sum – does not appear in the Meditations, but only in the Replies (AT vii, 140), as well as earlier in French in the Discourse on Method, Meditation II clearly presents sum as a conclusion following from a premise to the effect that one is thinking. For instance, the meditator first formulates the point by saying: “If I convinced myself of something, then I certainly existed” (AT vii, 25).

The solution lies in recognizing that the inference does not, at least initially, constitute an argument advanced by Descartes himself. Instead, it is the skeptic who provides the premise. (The pioneers of this approach were Frankfurt [1970: 111] and Curley [1978: 84–8], though neither sees that Descartes is thereby deploying against the skeptic the skeptic’s own strategy of internal demolition.) The sentences leading up to the one just quoted reproduce the skeptic’s point of view: ‘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 convinced myself. . . .’ So too in the next two formulations of the indubitability of sum, which follow in rapid succession (AT vii, 25): the premise to the effect that he is thinking comes from the skeptic, when he states his doubt involving an omnipotent deceiver. Cogito, ergo sum enters the scene, not as an argument that Descartes himself puts forward, but as an inference whose import the skeptic cannot elude. It points out a truth about existence (sum), to which the skeptic cannot help but commit himself by the very act of exercising his skepticism. As a result, he contradicts himself when claiming to suspend judgment about the truth or falsity of all propositions. The cogito serves to undermine from within the skeptic’s position, just as the skeptic demolished the position of the empiricist.

Of course, if even the skeptic must acknowledge the certainty of sum, then so must everyone. Cogito, ergo sum thus becomes an argument which we all can endorse in our own voice. Accordingly, the meditator promptly switches from demolishing from within the skeptic’s position to announcing a truth which everyone – Descartes included – will now take as established, no matter what else they may believe: “I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind” (AT vii, 25).
Two points of detail call for discussion. First, the skeptic is portrayed in Meditation II as asserting that there is no world or that there is an omnipotent deceiver, such assertions embodying the fatal premise to the effect that he is thinking. Yet obviously no real skeptic would ever make such statements, as Gassendi complained in the Fifth Objections (AT vii, 257–8). The business of skepticism is not to deny prevailing views, but to raise possibilities of error. Descartes knew this very well. He had the skeptic speak in the assertoric mode because, as he explained at the end of the previous Meditation (AT vii, 22; also 59, 461), it is easier to withhold assent from beliefs of the sort in question – subject to doubt, yet still more likely to be true than false – if they are imagined to be false. Moreover, formulating the doubts in the properly hypothetical mode will not avert the evil day. Insofar as the skeptic claims that he doubts that anything can be known to exist, he falls into self-contradiction, since that very claim entails that he is thinking and thus that he exists. In fact, the Principles of Philosophy (1, art. 7) and The Search for Truth (AT x, 515) present the self-refutation of the skeptic in just this fashion.

It is worth noting, however, that this strategy may fail to work against the skeptic who does not assert that he doubts, but expresses his point of view interrogatively, as Montaigne (1999 ii, 527) did with his “Que sais-je?,” and did so precisely in order to avoid the similar charge of self-refutation which Augustine (De civitate Dei XI. 26) had lodged against the skeptic (Larmore 1998: 1149–50, 1170; 2004). Oddly, Descartes never took up the challenge represented by Montaigne’s formula.

A second point has to do with the structure of the inference itself. Does not sum follow from cogito only in conjunction with another, general premise stating that whatever thinks, exists? Different passages in Descartes’ writings suggest contrary answers to this question. In the Second Replies (AT vii, 140–1), he denied that cogito, ergo sum works as a syllogism, which would certainly require appeal to a major premise of that sort. In the Principles of Philosophy (1, art. 10), however, he appeared to concede that the inference assumes that “it is impossible that that which thinks should not exist.” Asked by Burman about the seeming inconsistency, Descartes explained (AT v, 147) that though the general premise is presupposed by the inference, it does not in Meditation II figure explicitly before the mind; it is not yet an item of knowledge. At that stage, he said, “I am attending only to what I experience within myself,” and I recognize the inference, in the words of the Second Replies, as “something self-evident by a simple intuition [intuitus] of the mind.”

It well behooved Descartes to reply in these terms. If the general truth, “whatever thinks, exists,” had to be known in order for us to see that sum follows from cogito, then the inference could not serve to undermine from within the position of the skeptic, who certainly lays no claim to such knowledge. But the reply also involves a broader aspect of Cartesian thought, which he went on to spell out to Burman. In cases like the one at hand, “we do not separate out these general propositions from the particular instances; rather, it is in the particular instances
that we think of them.” Some inferences we intuit as compelling without having to grasp explicitly the principles that make them valid; in fact, only by analyzing such inferences do we come to recognize the truth of those principles. In other words, “whatever thinks, exists” may be logically prior to our apprehension of the truth of **sum**, but it comes afterwards in the development of our thinking, or, as Descartes would say, in the “order of reasons” (AT iii, 266–7).

Such views about inference belong to what has been called Descartes’ “intuitionism” (Belaval 1960: 23–83), and they appear once again in Meditation III, where he begins to set out his own conception of knowledge. We must be able, he believed, to intuit some propositions as true without appealing to a criterion of truth, for only so can we learn what the correct criterion is – and only so, it might be added, can the ancient skeptical problem of the criterion (how is the choice of a criterion to be justified if not by invoking the criterion itself?) be disarmed. Accordingly, the meditator turns to the one basic truth in his possession, namely, **cogito, ergo sum**, and extracts from it a standard of truth, clarity, and distinctness of perception, to replace the discredited idea of relying on the senses:

I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting . . . So I now seem able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true. (AT vii, 35)

In this way, then, the self-refutation of the skeptic delivers the very basis of a new, non-empiricist conception of human knowledge. What exactly Descartes meant by a “clear and distinct” perception, besides simply its indubitability, has always been difficult to nail down, of course. But that for him the basic truths we thus arrive at stem from focusing on our own thought independently of the senses is perfectly plain. Such is the way we grasp our own existence. And as we attend more closely to our nature as thinking beings, we also see, for example, that our idea of material body, as essentially an extended substance enduring through a series of changes, comes not from the senses or the imagination, but from the mind alone. That is one of the lessons of the wax example given in Meditation II (AT vii, 31). Ideas of this sort count as “innate,” deriving from the “power of thinking within us” (AT viiiB, 358), and they make up the **a priori** framework within which alone, according to Descartes, we can go on to acquire knowledge from experience.

**Cartesian Certainty**

Let us now return to the demand for indubitability which Meditation I lays down at the outset as regulating the dialogue between the empiricist and the skeptic:
Since reason \([\textit{ratio}]\) 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, it will be enough to reject them all if I find in them the least grounds for doubt \([\textit{aliquam rationem dubitandi}]\). (AT vii, 18)

Descartes is often accused of having simply assumed that knowledge aims at certainty. But the problematic element is not so much his quest for certainty (it sounds strange to say “I know it’s raining but I’m not certain”) as the particular meaning that he attached to that notion, which comes to the fore in this passage. No belief will count as certain if we cannot eliminate even the slightest, most improbable way in which it might turn out to be false. Showing an otherwise exemplary understanding of the properly internal strategy of the skeptic, why should Descartes have apparently decided in this case to impose from without a principle of his own, having it shape the skeptic’s doubts?

For consider: though indubitability is presented as a dictate of reason, it is not a principle that an empiricist would necessarily be inclined to endorse. On the contrary, I have already noted that for Aristotle sense perception serves as the basis of knowledge because of its reliability, not under all possible, but under normal conditions: ordinarily, the Aristotelian would say, we may feel certain of the truth of what we see, even if the occasional dream may trip us up. Indeed, empiricists or not, we generally consider a belief to be certain if we have disposed of the sorts of error that we have some positive reason to fear or that we have some evidence to think may be at work. We do not feel the need to remove every conceivable doubt, however improbable. Descartes surely knew this well. Why, then, is the skeptic allowed to insist that knowledge must be indubitable?

The answer lies in the sentences that immediately precede the announcement of this demand. There it is said that the evaluation of claims to knowledge (on the part of the empiricist, as it turns out) will take place under rather extraordinary conditions: “I have freed my mind of all cares \([\textit{curis}]\) and have arranged for myself a solid stretch of free time \([\textit{otium}]\)” (AT vii, 17–18). When time is short and resources limited, when practical concerns are in play and we must act, we cannot afford the luxury of rejecting every belief for which we can imagine the slightest grounds of doubt. We must go with the view for which there is deemed to be sufficient evidence. But, Descartes supposed, pursuing knowledge for its own sake is a different affair. If we look only to reasons for belief that have to do with the truth and falsity of opinions (as opposed to the utility of adopting them), if our business is not action, but solely knowledge (AT vii, 22), then indubitability becomes an appropriate objective. As he put the point in the \textit{Discourse on Method}: “Since I now wished to devote myself solely to the search for truth, I thought it necessary to . . . reject as if absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see if I was left believing anything that was entirely indubitable” (AT vi, 31).

The situation in which the meditator finds himself is one which Bernard Williams aptly called “pure enquiry” (1978: ch. 2). In this setting, Descartes sup-
posed, reason requires that we seek beliefs that are immune to every conceivable doubt. Given that he showed so fine an appreciation of the skeptic’s proper form of argument, he presumably held as well that if people having an empiricist conception of knowledge do not see themselves bound by this dictate of reason, that is only because they are letting the demands of action interfere with the exclusive search for truth. Were they to pursue knowledge alone, they too would endorse the rule of indubitability, and thus the skeptic is entitled under the present circumstances to hold them accountable to it.

The question remains why Descartes should have thought that the object of pure enquiry must consist in the indubitable. Unfortunately, he never explained his reasons, proceeding as though the point were obvious. But that is not so at all. On his telling, suspending all practical concerns would leave us with but a single purpose, “the search for truth.” In reality, we would be confronted with at least two distinct goals: acquiring truths, but also avoiding falsehoods. The two aims are not the same, since if we were interested only in the former, we would believe everything, not worrying about how many false beliefs we took on in the process; whereas if we cared only about the latter, we would believe nothing, for that would mean immediate success. Each of these options is irrational, to be sure. We need to pursue the two goals in tandem. Yet plainly there are in principle many ways to do so. Since the two goals can come into conflict with one another (methods of acquiring truths often give us falsehoods too, avoiding sources of error can mean missing certain truths as well), we have to determine which should take precedence in various sorts of circumstances. Thus, different kinds of rankings, different cognitive policies, are possible.

The ranking that Descartes in effect adopted, the particular weighting of the two goals of pure enquiry that lies behind his phrase “the search for truth,” is not difficult to make out. If the slightest, unlikeliest grounds for doubt suffice to preclude assent to a proposition, then avoiding error is being considered as always coming ahead of acquiring truths. We are never to set about satisfying the latter goal unless we have assured ourselves of having fully complied with the former. “The search for truth” is therefore a rather misleading formulation of what Descartes had in mind, since steering clear of error was a more important concern.

It seems equally clear, however, that other ways exist of ordering these two goals under the conditions of pure enquiry. Instead of making the avoidance of error always paramount, for instance, we might decide to give it greater weight only when the errors in question are of the sort that occur in the normal course of events and that there is thus some reason to expect. As for the possibility that we may have made an unusual kind of mistake (because, say, we were dreaming), we would then accord it less importance than the chance of discovering some truth by eliminating simply the ways of going wrong that we have good grounds to fear. The sciences operate in more or less this fashion, and they do not appear to count as any less “pure” for doing so. Yet many today who do not think of themselves as followers of Descartes still suppose that practical concerns alone lead us to settle
for less than indubitability, claiming as they do that, because Cartesian certainty is unattainable, the very idea of “pure theory” must also be abandoned.

One example was Bernard Williams himself. He claimed that if time were not short and resources not limited, we would want as many of our beliefs to be true as possible, and, as he noted, the best way thus to maximize the “truth-ratio” among our beliefs would be to reject all those containing the least possibility of error (Williams 1978: 46–9). Because we would thereby end up believing almost nothing, Williams concluded that the ideal of “pure enquiry” has to be discarded (1978: 210). The mistake in this reasoning should now be apparent. Truth acquisition and error avoidance, even when pursued for their own sake, admit of many different combinations.

If Descartes had any basis for holding that reason requires indubitability, once all practical concerns are suspended, it must be that he thought more was involved than just the pursuit of those two goals. And that was indeed the case. Consider again the (un-Cartesian) principle that we need only dispose of the normal possibilities of error in order to accept a proposition as true. This principle is useless without a prior conception of what constitutes the ordinary course of experience. It must already be clear what sorts of error we have good grounds to worry about. A policy of this sort makes sense therefore only if we can place from the start the prospects of human knowledge within a comprehensive view of the world. If, as I pointed out earlier, Aristotle saw in sense experience a reliable source of knowledge whenever standard forms of error have been eliminated, it is therefore no accident that he also thought we determine the nature of perception itself by seeing how it fits into the natural order. To understand the mind’s powers, he wrote (De anima II. 4), we must look at its distinctive activities, and to understand the latter, we have to ascertain the sorts of objects on which they are typically exercised.

Descartes, by contrast, rejected the notion that knowledge is to be defined by reference to a general picture of the mind’s place in the world. That would be to put the cart before the horse. We cannot rightly claim to know what the world is like, unless we first settle what it is to know. The proper starting-point, as he announced in the Rules for the Direction of the Mind, is to take the mind by itself, to consider the knowledge (mathematics) it can acquire independently of the world, and then to draw from this case a general method of enquiry, relying on “order and measure,” which will determine what may count as knowledge of any subject whatsoever (AT x, 377–8). It was two of Descartes’ core convictions – the primacy of epistemology and the priority of method over subject-matter – that ruled out accepting anything as true just because we have no ordinary reason to doubt it. Reason, he supposed, requires that we take care of every possible sort of error because only so can reason map out by its own lights the basic architecture of the world. Herein lies the real basis of the skeptic’s assumption in Meditation I that only indubitable beliefs will do.