

CARTESIAN SOLIPSISM

THE CHALLENGE OF SOLIPSISM

The skeptical scenarios entertained some centuries ago by the French philosopher, René Descartes, have lost nothing of their power to shake complacency. Their unsettling effect may be judged first-hand from a reading of the following passage:

How can you be certain that your life is not a continuous dream, and that everything you think you learn through the senses is not false now, just as much as when you are asleep? In particular, how can you be certain of this when you have learned that you were created by a superior being who, being all-powerful, would have found it no more difficult to create us just as I am describing, than to create us as you think you are?¹

How indeed? The least that may be said is that no reassuring answer is immediately forthcoming. Descartes himself devoted a considerable portion of his philosophical writings to an attempt (ultimately unsuccessful) to put to rest the skeptical questions he raised. Lest one be prompted in self-defence to dismiss the questions as the pointless preoccupations of an otherworldly intellectual, it should be noted that Descartes was a quite normal human being—at least to the extent that there is such a thing. By modern psychiatric standards he would be judged neither schizoid nor seriously paranoid. Moreover, when a young man, he fought duels, served in the army, travelled to Italy to see the investiture of the pope, and participated in the social whirl of Paris. Later when he withdrew to the quiet of the Dutch countryside to devote himself to more intellectual pursuits, his interests were neither otherworldly nor wildly theoretical: they ranged over optics, physics,

physiology, astronomy, and encompassed possible practical applications such as eyeglasses, fireplaces, and wheelchairs. As a result the above queries may lay serious claim to be those of an eminently practical and sane human being.

The issue raised is whether this world, which certainly appears solid, independent, and real enough, is in fact but a dream from which one will some day awake, perhaps at the prompting of a playful divinity. A scenario of the sort, when promoted into a serious account of the nature of the world, is one possible form of a particular skeptical thesis, solipsism. Solipsism may be loosely characterized as the terminal stage of eliminative egocentricity. The etymology of the term (Latin, *solus* and *ipse*), rightly suggests the doctrine that the self alone exists. Here, the self must be understood to encompass not only the solipsist but also those things of which the solipsist is aware. Thus, solipsism might be described alternatively as the thesis that a necessary condition for the existence of anything in the world is one's own awareness of it. Consequently, to qualify as a solipsist it suffices to make the claim that the everyday world exists only to the extent that one is aware of it.

The aim of the present book is to take up Descartes's failed enterprise and to show that the various forms of solipsism traceable to Descartes's writings are mistaken accounts of the world. Otherwise stated, the aim is to provide rational foundations for the belief that the everyday world does in fact exist independently of oneself. It might be wondered how such an undertaking could possibly be thought worthwhile. Solipsism clearly is an account that contradicts the everyday knowledge claims that all sensible individuals are inclined to make, and one that clearly has to be mistaken even if its falsity is not readily established. In addition it contradicts the claims most professional epistemologists are disposed to defend and hardly figures as a serious contender in present day heated debates. Hence, one might ask, why bother with solipsism? A brief word should be said on both points.

First with regard to everyday knowledge, the question is why one should bother to attempt to refute an account of the world so clearly mistaken. The answer lies in the tantalized exasperation provoked by solipsistic scenarios. Despite one's firm conviction that solipsism is absurd, all attempts to show its absurdity tend to have rather the contrary result of making it less preposterous. The upshot of even a modest number of valiant but fruitless sallies in defence of common sense is that one finds oneself concurring with the sentiments voiced by Immanuel Kant on the issue:

It still remains a scandal to philosophy and to human reason in general that the existence of things outside us...must be accepted merely on *faith*, and that if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof.²

The point here, of course, is not merely that one's belief in the existence of the everyday world has no rational foundation. If it were, the moral to be drawn might simply be that one must resign oneself to living irrationally, to making an irrational leap of faith into comforting arms the existence of which one has never seriously doubted. The scandal has deeper implications. Could it be that the everyday view of the world is mistaken? In the absence of good reasons for thinking the view to be true, as far as one can tell it may in fact be false. Conversely, could it be that there is some truth to solipsism? In the absence of good reasons for thinking the doctrine false, as far as one can tell, it may be true. Perhaps the world does in fact reduce to oneself and to those things one now actually perceives.

What then of the second point above, that present-day epistemologists do not take solipsism seriously? For the sake of accuracy it should be observed that if it is not taken seriously, it by no means follows that it has been ignored. This particular variety of skepticism is as familiar to professional philosophers in their quasi totality as are Platonic forms. It has elicited myriad negative responses. It has been castigated as a sophomoric frivolity, dismissed as irrelevant to practical concerns, or relegated to the role of the *absurdum* in *reductio ad absurdum* arguments. It has been characterized as an irrational demand for the impossible, or the deformed fruit of a misconceived epistemology. Alternatively, it has been condemned as a semantically aberrant and hence meaningless thesis arising from a linguistic confusion acting as a philosophical fly-trap. It has also been accused of covert self-contradiction, or of denying its own factual and conceptual presuppositions. On the most flattering estimate, it has been compared to an impregnable fortress and judged logically sound, indeed irrefutable, although incapable of being sincerely believed. With careful examination of the evidence, however, all these assessments of solipsism turn out to be mistaken in their near totality. The considerations on which they are based yield a few local successes but leave the doctrine essentially unscathed. When properly formulated, solipsism is found to be neither frivolous nor irrelevant nor absurd nor self-contradictory, nor senseless nor irrational. The challenge it poses to everyday beliefs is in fact still with us.

There would seem, then, to be serious reasons for taking solipsism

seriously. In view of the widespread prevalence of the contrary opinion in philosophical circles, it will be necessary in a first step to show that solipsism still constitutes an unresolved problem for any serious thought about the world as well as any serious epistemology. To borrow a phrase from Ludwig Wittgenstein, the first step will be to show that the fly is still captive in the fly-bottle.

The second step will be to resolve the problem in the light of various lessons learned from the failure endemic to presently dominant trends in western philosophy. One important lesson, as we shall see, is the need to return to the epistemology practiced by Bertrand Russell and Edmund Husserl, where the attempt is made to meet skepticism on its own terrain. The latter task should in principle be achievable. In this regard Kant's characterization of solipsism is reassuring. For a particular epistemological position to be literally a "scandal to human reason," it must be profoundly unreasonable or irrational. As such it must be in conflict with some rational principles or procedures of human reason—and that despite the awkward circumstance that it is not immediately obvious what the principles or procedures may be. The explanation of their apparent absence must be not that they do not exist but that they have been overlooked, or better still, that they were once used but now lie forgotten somewhere, buried deep among the layers of past cognitive successes. On this initially not implausible view of the situation, the task of refuting solipsism reduces to an archeological one of excavating the long-buried rational foundations of human cognition.

INTRODUCING SEVEN CARTESIAN SOLIPSISTS

The ancestry of present-day formulations of solipsism is traceable to Descartes's philosophical meditations, albeit often with an important detour through the British empiricism of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. In Descartes's enterprise of methodical doubt, solipsistic theses serve as a foil to set off naively accepted opinions and as a prod to find unshakable foundations on which to erect knowledge of the world. Each of a number of distinct skeptical scenarios envisaged by Descartes in his quest for certainty may plausibly be judged to qualify as solipsistic. To complicate the situation further, many of the additional doubts entertained, if properly mothered, might be made to lead to skeptical positions also characterizable as solipsistic. Let us look at these two sources in turn.

Two solipsistic theses in particular figure very prominently in

Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*. One is introduced with Descartes's attempt to reassure himself that some of the things he perceives must be true. Surely he would have to be mad, Descartes tells himself, to doubt that he is sitting by the fire with a piece of paper in his hands, and yet, he reflects, he has often been convinced of just such things in dreams, when in fact he was lying asleep in bed. After thinking the matter over, he is astounded to realize that there are "never any sure signs" for distinguishing waking from dreaming.³ For all he can tell with any assurance, the world might be one vast dream he is having. The theme of the second solipsistic thesis is first quietly introduced with a reflection on God's goodness: it is perhaps not enough to appeal to God's benevolence for reassurance that one is not constantly deceived, Descartes muses, since God certainly allows one to be deceived at least some of the time. Shortly thereafter, the theme breaks in with full force. Descartes resolves to assume that the world with all its shapes and sounds, earth and sky, are not the creations of a benevolent God, but are mere delusions devised by "some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning" who devotes all his energy and talent to deceiving Descartes.⁴ He needs to entertain resolutely this fantastic scenario, he finds, in order to counterbalance the skewing of his judgment by the weight of past beliefs.

Both the above scenarios are powerfully skeptical. Both qualify as solipsistic in that according to each the world has no existence independently of the solipsist's awareness of it. They might be termed *Oncirata Solipsism* and *Demoniac Solipsism*, respectively. Descartes reasons that even if the world is solipsistic and hence does not exist, the solipsist at least must exist. On the supposition that what he now perceives arises like a dream through some inner faculty, it must nevertheless be the case that he exists as the dreamer. On the supposition that the world is the work of an archdeceiver bent on deceiving him, he, the intended target of the deception, nevertheless must exist. Likewise, in order for him to wonder whether anything exists, to have doubts, and entertain solipsistic scenarios, he must exist.

In Descartes's skeptical probing a third doubt inspired by perceptual illusion plays an important albeit secondary role. Early in the *Meditations* after declaring his intention to seek indubitable foundations, Descartes observes that he has sometimes found that the senses deceive, a circumstance he esteems suitable for the application of the maxim, "it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once."⁵ Later in the course of an ostensibly autobiographical confession, he expands his case somewhat by admitting the prevalence of sense error, and its extension into the most intimate of

matters, as is evident in the phenomenon of the phantom limb.⁶ Descartes repeatedly brings up the theme of sense illusion in the context of skeptical doubt, but tends to find it somewhat wanting for his purposes. The reason is that sensory illusion is a localized and recognizable phenomenon, a point he has his character, Polyander, bring out in *The Search after Truth*, and which he voices himself in the *Meditations*.⁷ He seems nevertheless to think that sense illusions do provide some cause for a general skeptical doubt which envisions the possibility that all sensory appearances are illusory. Such is implied by the fact that he speaks of 'adding' the two more powerful skeptical scenarios to the case already made by sense illusions, rather than of substituting the former two for the latter.

The hypothesis that the world is a generalized illusion is, properly speaking, not solipsistic as it stands. The concept of an illusion is that of something which is not really where it appears to be; thus, there is no inconsistency in the notion of an illusion continuing to be present to someone else when the solipsist is not perceiving it. Some further argumentation is required if the hypothesis of a generalized illusion is to lead to a properly solipsistic conclusion in which the illusion is the solipsist's personal illusion rather like an hallucination. Supposing this supplementary manoeuvre effectuated, we might term the resulting form of solipsism, *Phantasmata Solipsism*.

Yet another solipsistic doubt emerges in the *Meditations* in reflections subsequent to the above formulations of skeptical scenarios.⁸ Descartes reasons that in perception he does not clearly and distinctly perceive (as he had formerly assumed he did) that there are things outside him in an independent world, things that affect his senses and give rise to 'ideas' or images resembling their originals in the world. On reflection he finds himself compelled to endorse the more modest claim that he perceives merely that there are ideas present in himself. Descartes goes on to discuss the reasons he had for thinking there is an external world behind the sensuous copies of it. Of the two reasons he considers, the first, that nature teaches him as much, he dismisses as a mere natural desire to believe; the second, the fact that ideas do not depend upon his will, he judges insufficient to show any likeness between ideas and their presumed originals. He finds nothing to show that ideas do not arise like dreams, through the operation of some unknown faculty in himself. His conclusion is that it is only by blind impulse that he has believed that there exists an external world resembling his ideas of it.

The possible state of affairs envisaged in the above skeptical reflections may also be characterized as solipsistic. On the proposed hypoth-

esis, what is perceived of the everyday world is demoted to the status of a mere idea bearing no resemblance to an external source; the everyday world is construed to be an aggregate of the solipsist's private impressions or ideas or private representations or images. Since the latter were called *sensa* in the literature of some years back, the resulting solipsistic thesis might be termed *Sensa Solipsism*.

These four forms of solipsism constitute the four solipsistic theses more or less explicitly entertained by Descartes. They do not, however, exhaust the possibilities for deriving solipsistic positions from Descartes's skeptical reflections. The latter contain a variety of interesting doubts. In his discussion of the role of judgment in perception, Descartes appeals to a quite striking example: on his looking from a window at men crossing a square, he finds himself inclined to say he sees men in the street, whereas what he sees in fact are mere hats and coats which might well cover automatons.⁹ This notion of vestimentary ambulation may easily be expanded to yield a quite general skeptical doubt. It suggests the possibility that perceived objects become something quite different when unperceived, or better still, that they cease to exist altogether. A like suggestion is implicit in the analogy Descartes draws between dreams and paintings, which, given the perceptual context of the remark, comes down to likening perceived objects to colored façades.¹⁰ If the implications of such an analogy are vigorously pursued, then the assumption that an object visibly present has an inside and an unperceived far side is called into question, as is the assumption that things continue to exist when unperceived.

Such a general skeptical doubt must await the arrival of David Hume for its more explicit formulation. Hume thinks the doubt unanswerable, and proposes rather to examine the question, "Why we attribute a CONTINU'D existence to objects, even when they are not present to the senses."¹¹ Later still, it is given colorful formulation by Bertrand Russell with his hypothesis "that tables, whenever no one is looking, turn into kangaroos."¹² Not surprisingly, it figures among the skeptical scenarios to be found in Ludwig Wittgenstein's later musings: "The chair is the same whether I am looking at it or not—that need not have been true. People are often embarrassed when one looks at them."¹³ As noted earlier, a generalized doubt of the sort is nowhere explicitly entertained by Descartes. Indeed no suggestion of it may be found among the doubts to which an answer is proposed in the final section of the *Meditations*. As a result, it is best considered but second-generation Cartesian.

The skeptical thesis that things cease to exist altogether when unobserved by oneself clearly qualifies as solipsistic. It states that the

world is composed only of those things or parts of things actually perceived by the skeptic. Hence, it limits what exists to that of which the solipsist is aware. Since this variant of solipsism states the sole constituents of the world to be the ephemeral aspects of objects perceived by the solipsist, it might be termed *Ephemerata Solipsism*.

Consider a moment the import of the thesis. If one were a solipsist in this mode, one would hold that the world which now exists consists of the following items: the two white rectangles lined with print which are the surfaces of two pages of this book, the collection of indefinite outlines and shapes beyond the borders of the two white surfaces, perhaps a snatch of desktop or wallpaper; the rough bottom of the book pressing against one's hand, the benign voluminous mass of one's felt body of which the salient points are perhaps a contracted brow, a gently heaving chest, a protesting elbow and a shaking fitful foot; then behind oneself and to the left a soft and relentless ticking and, beyond that, an occasional muffled roar. Such would be the meager furniture of the world: the other pages of the book have ceased to exist, one's face has shrunk to a vague hovering heaviness, the desk to an unyielding prop and nebulous reddish-tan horizon, while the world outside the sparse remnants of the room is but a distant and capricious hum.

While the world may appear appallingly meager on this view, it is nevertheless susceptible to further erosion from skeptical doubt. *Ephemerata Solipsism* limits skeptical scrutiny to the existence of unobserved portions of the world, and takes no stand on an array of further issues. Among these are the possible illusory nature of the observed phenomena (Is the desktop really reddish tan?), the dispositional properties automatically attributed but not actually observed at the time (Would the white pages burn?), the correlation of facets in one sense modality with those in another (Are the printed pages and the felt heaviness two aspects of one material object?). These various characteristics of observed partial objects (or *ephemerata*) would be called into question with a strict application of the general Cartesian rule of withholding assent where doubt is possible and hence casting a skeptical eye on all characteristics not actually observed. Descartes's hedged claim simply to seem to see and hear, as opposed to really seeing and hearing, is a first firm step in this direction. What is observed may be illusory; hence, there is cause to suspend judgment on any claim that what is perceived is really where it seems to be.

This first firm step breaks into a sprightly trot only with David Hume's skeptical scrutiny of causal connections.¹⁴ As Hume points out, causal relations are discoverable only through experience. No

analysis of the cause, no reasoning could ever conclude what a stone will do when left unsupported in the air, or what will happen when one billiard ball meets another. Experience shows that a number of cases of an event of one kind are followed by an event of another kind. From these observations it is inferred that in unobserved cases events of the first kind are followed by events of the second. Yet, Hume asks, what rational grounds do the observed cases provide for concluding that the unobserved ones will behave in like fashion? Hume's own answer is that they provide none, and that habit alone is the motor for drawing the conclusion. A solipsist who denies the existence of anything unperceived, might with equal rigor at this point agree that there are no rational grounds for any extrapolations from observed regularities to unobserved ones.

In a final step it might be denied that there is any correlation between visual phenomena and tactual or auditory ones. The world would consequently be reduced to an assembly of colored façades and concomitant but otherwise unrelated sounds and feelings. These radicalized ephemeral items answer to one description of what are termed "sense data" in the literature. The radicalized version of Ephemera Solipsism might be termed *Sense Data Solipsism*.

Sense Data Solipsism so defined has much in common with the earlier encountered thesis of *Sensa Solipsism*. The *sensa*, or images or representations that make up the world of the *Sensa Solipsist* are presumably equally lacking in the various nonostensible properties denied to sense data. *Sensa* and sense data differ, however, in one important respect. To say that a thing is a *sensum* is to imply that it is an image, that it is sensed, that it is 'in the mind' and consequently a constituent in a private world. To say that an item is a sense datum is to imply nothing of the sort. A sense datum is an object stripped of all but its ostensible characteristics and, as such, may conceivably exist unsensed. It is important to note that the skeptical problems arising in connection with each are different problems. The point was noticed by Hume who distinguishes two skeptical questions,¹⁵ that of why we attribute continued existence to objects (the question of Ephemera and Sense Data Solipsism) and the question of why we suppose objects to have an existence independent of the mind (the question of *Sensa Solipsism*).

The skeptical doubt as to whether other people have minds may likewise take two closely related forms. One of these coincides with *Sensa Solipsism*. The *Sensa Solipsist*, shut up in a private world of sensations, asks not only whether there is a public world but also whether there are other private worlds, worlds similar to that made

up of the solipsist's sensations and private to other people. For this reason, the issue of solipsism is sometimes found to coincide with the issue of the existence of other minds. Now, to complicate matters, a skeptical doubt as to the existence of other minds may also arise on the terrain of Ephemera or Sense Data Solipsism. Just as it may be asked whether unobserved tables and chairs continue to exist when one turns away from them, so also it may be asked whether the private experiences of other people—their feelings, pains, dreams, and imaginings, all unobserved by oneself—exist in fact. The denial that they do is one of the denials contained in Ephemera Solipsism. Since the issue of unobserved private items such as feelings is a somewhat different issue from that of unobserved public objects such as tables and chairs, it may be convenient to distinguish it. Consequently, that part of the thesis of Ephemera Solipsism that denies the existence of the private experiences of other people could be given a special name, *Monopsyche Solipsism*.

Thus, seven forms of Cartesian solipsism can be distinguished. Each states that the world, or what is commonly considered to be the world, exists only to the extent that the solipsist is aware of it. The four first-generation forms of Cartesian solipsism—Oneirata, Demoniac, Phantasmata, and Sensa Solipsism—characterize the world as the solipsist's personal world, a dream, a demon-induced fiction, a personal illusion, or an aggregate of sense impressions. Of the three second-generation forms of solipsism, Ephemera Solipsism restricts membership in the world community to those portions of things of which the solipsist is actually aware; Sense Data Solipsism advocates an identical ontological restriction while denying in addition any putative unobserved characteristics to the chosen few admitted by Ephemera Solipsism; and Monopsyche Solipsism pursues the one issue of the experiences of other minds and denies the existence of any alleged private entities such as pains, feelings, or dreams experienced by other persons.

PRECURSORS IN ANTIQUITY

A word of commentary is perhaps not misplaced on the characterization of these seven forms of solipsism as Cartesian. It may plausibly be argued that many of the forms are based on doubts entertained by various Greek philosophers of antiquity and that consequently it is somewhat incorrect to use terminology which attributes the resulting forms of skepticism to Descartes. The issue merits the opening of a short parenthesis.

It is undeniable that the majority of the doubts entertained by Descartes and leading to solipsism are very similar to doubts entertained previously by the Greeks. Perhaps the clearest instance of such precedence is to be found in the doubt leading to Oneirata Solipsism. In the course of a discussion of Protagoras's views on perception, Plato has Socrates raise Descartes's question of how we may determine whether we are now awake or merely dreaming.¹⁶ Significantly enough, Socrates characterizes the question as a familiar one. In this particular passage Plato uses it to provoke doubt regarding the existence of objects of sense perception. If Cicero's reports are accepted as accurate, then the skeptics of the New Academy in their disputes with the Stoics likewise presented a number of the points made later by Descartes in formulating his doubts. According to Cicero, they argued that it is quite possible in principle for dreams and waking states to be indistinguishable, and that at the time of actual dreaming, dreams are undistinguished (even indistinguishable) from waking states.¹⁷ It would clearly be mistaken to view the dream hypothesis as a Cartesian invention.

The skeptical doubts elicited by the phenomenon of perceptual illusion are even less of a Cartesian innovation. The above-mentioned passage in which Socrates raises the possibility of a dream world is part of a broader discussion of dreams, hallucinations, and illusions and their implications for perception as a source of knowledge. At another point Plato has Socrates declare the senses to be "inaccurate witnesses" that invariably mislead and are best ignored in the search for truth.¹⁸ The particular notion that sense illusion makes the senses deceptive witnesses to be mistrusted is a notion found even more clearly in the thought of Epicurus, although with implications inversely construed. According to Cicero, Epicurus emphatically denied that there is such a thing as sense illusion at all, his reasoning being that "if one sense has told a lie once in a man's life, no sense must ever be believed."¹⁹ The declaration finds a familiar echo in Descartes's above-noted claim that one instance of sense illusion is sufficient to raise the issue of the reliability of any of the senses at any time. Sense illusion leads Pyrrho to declare (reportedly) in a still more skeptical vein that "things are by nature equally undeterminable, admitting of neither measure nor discrimination," a conclusion endorsed and defended by Sextus Empiricus, particularly in his Seventh Mode.²⁰

Sensa Solipsism would also seem to have been anticipated in its essential lines by Greek philosophy. It was a common view that perception is representational. Empedocles' theory of effluences which

emanate from bodies and enter the pores of sense organs giving rise to percepts is echoed in its main lines by Leucippus and Democritus as well as Plato. The supplementary view that in perception sensations are transmitted from the senses to the brain is apparently even more ancient, since Theophrastus attributes it to Alcmaeon, a pupil of Pythagoras.²¹ A representational theory of perception is also presupposed by both sides in the debate between Stoics and Academic skeptics over the Stoic thesis of cataleptic impressions. The latter are defined by Zeno to be faithful impressions that guarantee their own truth in that they are molded from their objects in a form that they could not have if they had come from some different object. The Academics, for their part, contend that there are no such impressions and that any true impression could have a false one exactly like it.²² From the latter contention it follows, of course, that insofar as it can be judged from the impression itself, the impression may be the effect of nothing in the world. The Academics refrain from drawing anything approaching a solipsistic conclusion and are content to substitute the likelihood and presumption of truth for the certainty defended by the Stoics. Sextus Empiricus naturally draws the more sanguine conclusion that there is no way of determining whether appearances are similar to external realities, or even whether there are any real objects or not—to which he appends the corollary that it cannot be known whether sensation apprehends anything.²³ Such a skeptical position is remarkably close to that of *Sensa Solipsism*.

Of the skeptical hypotheses which Descartes entertains in the *Meditations*, only one appears not to have been entertained by the ancients, the hypothesis of a wily demon addicted to deception. Indeed, it would seem that the envisaged skeptical scenario must be attributed squarely to Descartes. Its main character, interestingly enough, is the moral antithesis of the one who ultimately manages to put Descartes's doubts to rest. The scenario is absent from the earlier work, *Discourse on the Method*, in which the key role is played solo by the dream hypothesis. It must have been conceived by Descartes some time between 1637, when the *Discourse* was published, and 1641, the date of publication of the *Meditations*. God's goodness is for Descartes the ultimate guarantee of the existence of the world in the *Discourse* as in the *Meditations*. Hence, one might almost say that after finding the answer to his question, Descartes discovered what the question was.

The three second-generation forms of Cartesian solipsism, *Ephemerata*, *Monopsyche*, and *Sense Data Solipsism*, would both seem to have been anticipated to a not insignificant degree by Greek

philosophers. The Pyrrhonian resolve, as stated by Sextus Empiricus, not to assent to anything non-evident, might be considered an ancestor of sorts to both these forms of solipsism, particularly since the doubt, as Sextus notes, "does not concern the appearance itself but only the account given of that appearance."²⁴ The concept of an appearance itself is, of course, not too far removed from that of a sense datum. Furthermore, to the extent that any belief in continued existence or in unobserved characteristics generally might be considered to depend in some way on inductive generalization, it is possible to consider skepticism about induction to be a precursor of sorts to the doubt leading to Ephemera and Sense Data Solipsism. Sextus does indeed voice such skepticism with his enunciation of the following dilemma: "If only some instances are reviewed, the induction will be insecure; if all are reviewed the task is impossible since the instances are infinite."²⁵ Consequently, he might lay some claim to be rightfully listed in the direct ancestry of those two forms of solipsism. In fairness to Descartes, however, it should be noted that the skepticism of Sextus is a general one regarding the possibility of determining how things really are, as distinct from how they merely seem to be now. Sextus presents nothing to vie with Descartes's striking hypothesis of hats and coats covering machines, that is, nothing to suggest doubts regarding things or events in places hidden from observation. Thus, if Descartes's claim is one of second-generation ancestry to Sense Data Solipsism, Sextus might reasonably claim to be ranked as showing among the great-grandparents.

Despite the numerous anticipations of Descartes's skeptical doubts and lines of argument, his solipsistic theses differ from the corresponding positions entertained by Greek philosophers in one notable respect: their resolute egocentricity as opposed to the egalitarianism of the latter. Where Descartes asks if *he* is dreaming, Socrates asks if *we* are dreaming; and where Descartes speaks of *his* impressions, his Greek precursors speak merely of impressions. The difference often amounts merely one of emphasis, yet because of it, the theses entertained by the Greeks are more aptly characterized as skeptical, while those of Descartes are solipsistic. The deliberately personal approach taken by Descartes to epistemological problems would seem to be quite absent from ancient philosophy prior to Augustine. For this reason, the solipsistic versions of the skeptical theses are perhaps best characterized as Cartesian.

On circumstantial evidence alone the Augustinian influence on Descartes must be judged to be sizeable. Descartes's methodical doubt leads him to the rock of certainty of his own existence, an exis-

tence that cannot be doubted as long as he doubts or otherwise thinks. Descartes's discovery echoes the following passage from Augustine's work, *On the Trinity*:²⁶

Yet who ever doubts that he himself lives, and remembers, and understands, and wills, and thinks, and knows, and judges? Seeing that even if he doubts, he lives; if he doubts, he remembers why he doubts;...whoever doubts about anything else ought not to doubt of all these things, which if they were not, he would not be able to doubt of anything.

Depicted here is a Cartesian egocentric island of certainty immune to skeptical doubt. It would suffice to add perceiving or sensing to the list of intellectual operations envisaged and to entertain the skeptical notion that nothing else is known in order to reach a position akin to Sense Data Solipsism or to Sensa Solipsism. If Pyrrho, Plato, or Alcmaeon had read the church fathers, Cartesian solipsism might have preceded Descartes by two thousand years. As matters stand, however, there remains good cause to characterize the solipsistic theses as Cartesian. In virtue of the striking family resemblance between solipsistic and more general skeptical theses, the task of answering Cartesian solipsistic doubts will on occasion be found to coincide with that of answering some more ancient skeptical doubt.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL TASK

The seven forms of Cartesian solipsism come close to dividing into two tidy groups of theses; those that deny the reality of observed things and their characteristics, and those which deny the existence of unobserved things and their characteristics. Phantasmata, Oneirata, and Demoniac Solipsism each clearly belong in the first group. Ephemera Solipsism belongs squarely in the second group along with Sense Data and Monopsyche Solipsism. The troublemaker is Sensa Solipsism. This particular form of solipsism might with good reason lay claim to membership in both groups. Insofar as it denies that the representations present in perception resemble their unobserved originals, it denies the reality of the world that figures in the representations, and consequently, it qualifies for membership in the first group. Insofar as it denies the existence of the originals, it denies the existence of something unobserved and hence qualifies for membership in the second group. The bivalence of membership suggests that Sensa Solipsism might best be classed in neither group, and left

rather to form a group of its own. On this line of thinking we have three types of Cartesian solipsism describable as follows:

1. *Unreal World Solipsism*, which states that the world is unreal in that it is one's personal illusion or dream, or demon-conjuration.
2. *Observed World Solipsism*, which states that the world exists only in as much as it is perceived by oneself.
3. *Internal World Solipsism*, which states that the world of one's own representations is all that exists.

In place of the commonsense view, each type of solipsism proposes a metaphysical thesis that is a revised account of the nature and structure of the world. In each case, it implies that the everyday world does not exist. Thus, each of the three types of Cartesian solipsism raises in its own way the metaphysical question of whether the everyday world exists. The resulting three questions run as follows:

1. Is the world real, or is it only an illusion, or a dream, or a hoax?
2. Does that part of the world unperceived by oneself cease to exist?
3. Is there any external world corresponding to one's representations?

To each of these metaphysical questions there corresponds one of the following three epistemological problems:

1. *The Problem of Reality*: What rational grounds are there to think that the things one perceives are real rather than unreal in some way?
2. *The Problem of Unobserved Existence*: What rational grounds are there to think that anything exists other than what one now actually perceives?
3. *The External World Problem*: What rational grounds are there to think there is an external world resembling the world such as one perceives it to be?

The solipsistic claim in each case is that there are no good grounds to support the commonsense view of the world and that, consequently,

belief in the truth of that view is not rational. The solipsist's case could in principle take the form of a positive argument in favor of the solipsistic thesis, or more modestly, it might simply consist in pointing out the apparent absence of grounds for the everyday view. The general procedure in the latter case is simply to throw the solipsistic theses up for consideration and to ask for reasons for thinking that the common-sense view is any more likely to be true. This course is more or less the one followed by Descartes. It is also the one we shall take.

Our task in what follows will be to find some way of showing that there are rational grounds for thinking that the world of our everyday assumptions does exist, and that the various solipsistic scenarios are inaccurate accounts of the nature of the world. Ideally, these grounds will provide a conclusive proof, but failing such a proof, a demonstration of high probability or likelihood would be most welcome. Failing both of these, a demonstration that solipsistic theses are less likely to be true than the commonly held views would still be a positive result. Ironically enough, much contemporary discussion of the issue begins at the latter point, that is, by assuming the greater plausibility of the everyday view to be obvious.

It should be noted that in principle a skeptical challenge to commonsense claims may take any of at least two forms. One of these forms voices the complaint that the evidence is insufficient to warrant a claim to absolute certainty. Skepticism that questions or denies such absolute certainty might be labeled *certainty skepticism*. A second form of skepticism doubts or denies that the evidence provides any warrant whatever for commonsense claims. This form might be called *warrant skepticism*. An intermediate form of skepticism affirms that there is as much evidence for as against commonsense tenets and consequently might be termed *equipollent skepticism*. This latter form, which is the one pursued by Sextus Empiricus, will be ignored in what follows so as not to complicate further an already complicated discussion.

Clearly, Cartesian skeptical scenarios may in principle be so presented as to support a skeptical thesis in either of the two modes, certainty or warrant skepticism. The dream hypothesis, for instance, may be used to draw either of two conclusions: that the reality of the world is never absolutely certain or that there is no reason whatever to think that the world is not a dream. The skeptical doubts entertained by Descartes tend to veer rather toward warrant skepticism. It is true enough that Descartes's enterprise of systematic doubt involves a withholding of assent from "opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable"²⁷ and, as such, certainly seems to

qualify for inclusion in the category of certainty skepticism. On the other hand, later in the course of the investigation Descartes speaks of his doxastic plight in the following dramatic terms: "It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top."²⁸ The suggestion is clearly of a deeper deficiency than a mere lack of absolute certainty. The situation is similar when he examines the reasons he has for believing a world exists external to his mind and concludes, "all these considerations are enough to establish that it is not reliable judgement 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."²⁹ His realization is not that he is less than absolutely certain but that he has no warrant at all.

With David Hume too, skepticism is clearly a matter of warrant. Hume asks for rational grounds or reasons for thinking there is any causal connection whatever in a particular succession of events.³⁰ His question is not that of whether one may be absolutely certain of such a connection. In more recent times, in contrast, the tendency has been to construe the skeptical challenge in terms of certainty. The trend has been encouraged both by Bertrand Russell's skeptical reflections together with Moore's widely discussed discussion of them, and by Peter Unger's influential modern version of Cartesian demonology featuring an evil scientist stimulating captive, electrode-studded brains.³¹ In what follows, we shall be concerned with solipsistic theses primarily in the mode of warrant skepticism. For reasons that will be discussed later, certainty skepticism cannot properly be considered to constitute a genuine epistemological problem.

It will be assumed throughout what follows that the various solipsists are eminently rational beings. The convictions or doubts of an irrational skeptic are of no more interest for our purposes than is the skeptic's personal taste in culinary or vestimentary matters. It is a mistake to conceive of a skeptic as a cantankerous and obdurate individual, whom one has to convince somehow of the truth of beliefs held by all 'normal' human beings. The skeptic is oneself, oneself in one's more thoughtful moments, and hence presumably in a rational frame of mind.

To avoid possible misunderstanding, it should be noted that rationality of frame of mind is a matter of being concerned with evidence. The evidence in question may be anything that lends support to the belief and so makes it more likely to be true. A concern with rationality is thus ultimately a concern with truth. The term 'rational' should

be confused neither with 'sensible' nor even with 'reasonable'. A rational skeptic is clearly not a sensible person, nor even necessarily a reasonable person in the everyday sense. The skeptic Hume, as one might point out, was both an eminently sensible and reasonable person, but in being reasonable he espoused the various beliefs his skepticism called into question. Likewise, a sensible belief need not be a rational one. Hume considered a belief in the existence of the familiar everyday world to be sensible enough but far from rational; he thought it to be based on habit with no possible rational foundation, and whatever Hume's errors on the issue, they were not conceptual. On the other hand, a reasonable belief may on occasion coincide with a rational one. Such is the case when what is meant by 'a reasonable belief' is a belief supported by sound evidence or good reasons. Very often, however, by 'a reasonable belief' is meant a belief that fits in well with the body of generally accepted beliefs about the world. Since it is not immediately clear how such a fit makes the belief likely to be true, it is best for our purposes to suspend judgment on the issue of whether such beliefs qualify as rational.

To facilitate future reference to the point, let us set up a principle which may be termed the *Rational Assertion Truism*, or RAT for short.

RAT: A rational affirmation is a function of supporting evidence.

The principle is simply a partial explication of what is meant by 'rational'. Translated into more concrete terms, what the principle states is that for it to be a rational assertion that P is true, P must be true on the evidence. Likewise, for it to be a rational affirmation that P is more likely to be true than Q, the evidence must make P more likely than Q to be true.

Serious difficulties arise on the issue of what constitutes supporting evidence. For the present, let it be said merely that the criterion to be used is the old-fashioned one of 'seeing' that the evidence does actually make the statement in question more likely to be true. This is the criterion used by Descartes when he finds that the alleged evidence of his senses provides no sure sign that he is not dreaming or by Hume when he argues "that there is nothing in any object consider'd in itself, which can afford us a reason for drawing a conclusion beyond it," and hence that we have no reason to draw inferences from experience.³² Unless there is a graspable truth-conferring connection between datum and hypothesis, the datum is not to be considered evidence for the hypothesis. In particular, a datum is not to be considered evidence on the mere ground that it counts as evidence in the

practice of the community. To accept a datum as evidence on such a ground would be analogous to laughing at a joke simply because everyone else is laughing.

As noted earlier, current philosophical literature contains a wealth of discussion and argument purporting to refute solipsism in general or, more modestly, some particular variant of the thesis. Consequently, our first task is the review and evaluation of this profusion of views. Since the vast majority of these discussions and arguments endorse or presuppose a nonfoundationalist account of knowledge, a word on the distinction between this type of account and a foundationalist one is perhaps in order.

A foundationalist epistemology, the conception of which is imputable to a considerable extent to Descartes, in its traditional form sees its task as that of tracing the origin of all knowledge to the data of experience in conjunction with a set of indubitable or self-evident rational or necessarily true principles including rules of inference. The contradictory or denial of the foundationalist approach is the view that the traditional foundationalist enterprise is quite misconceived, and that the correct account must recognize that any cognitive enterprise presupposes in some manner or other the existence of everyday objects, full-blown material things such as envelopes, pigs, hands, and spruce trees. This latter epistemological position is termed "coherentism" in current philosophical jargon, but the label is somewhat inappropriate. While it is true enough that the criterion of coherence does and must play a crucial role in such a view, the terminology nevertheless has two serious enough defects: it incorrectly suggests that foundationalism must reject the criterion of coherence, and it obscures the essential distinction between the two positions which is that one attempts to base knowledge of the world on awareness of something less than full-fledged objects, whereas the other denies the feasibility of any such attempt. In what follows, we shall use the more appropriate term, *objectualism*, to designate the view that any cognitive enterprise must assume the existence of at least some everyday objects and hence also knowledge of, or warranted belief in, the existence of these objects. *Foundationalism* may be said to be the view that no such assumption is necessary and that any knowledge of, or warranted belief in, the existence of everyday objects is to be justified ultimately in terms of more fundamental experiential evidence.

Epistemic objectualism should obviously not be confused with the semantic theory of objectualism to the effect that actual individuals may be constituents in propositions.³³ Interestingly enough, epistemic objectualism entails the view that there is no problem of solipsism. If

objectualism is true, and any correct account of cognition must assume the existence of everyday objects, then the falsity of solipsistic theses follows more or less as a corollary of a correct account of cognition. From the point of view of objectualism, any difficulty there may appear to be in answering solipsistic doubts arises only within the context of the mistaken foundationalist enterprise. From the point of view of solipsism, the assumption of existence is unwarranted, and furthermore false. While the existence assumption makes objectualism appear in a strong position with regard to skepticism, it is also the great weakness of the approach. An assumption of existence is vulnerable to challenge; it implies a factual claim that certain items exist in the world, a claim which, if not defended, is gratuitous.

Our examination of the purported refutations of solipsism will begin with the commonsense view of G. E. Moore and of his plethora of later-day witting and unwitting disciples to the effect that commonsense truths are known and are much more certain than any skeptical considerations that may be marshalled against them. Moore's response to skepticism is a good point of departure, not simply because it so closely adheres to an everyday point of view or because it contains, as it were, the first green sprouts of modern versions of both the objectualist and the foundationalist positions. The great merit of the commonsense claim to know the everyday truths denied by skeptical theses is that it quite effectively (albeit unintentionally) underscores the impressive strength of the skeptical challenge and the futility of the attempt to answer the skeptic by an appeal to everyday knowledge claims. Given the quasi-universal assumption in present-day epistemology that such claims are warranted, the point is an excellent one from which to begin.

Having brought the problem into clearer focus, we shall in subsequent chapters examine proposed solutions. We shall first turn briefly to three unsuccessful strategies for a summary dismissal of solipsism, strategies featuring the charges that solipsism is pragmatically irrelevant, self-referentially self-destructive, and unreasonably over-demanding. We shall then undertake a review and assessment of the wealth of proposed coherentist answers to skepticism. Certain of these appeal to actual perceptual procedures and experience (chapter 4). Others purport to establish that skepticism is self-destructively parasitic in that its theses presuppose factual data denied by the theses themselves (chapter 5). Yet others appeal to the conditions of linguistic meaningfulness (chapter 6). Others again maintain that skepticism is parasitic on a conceptual scheme of which it denies some of the conditions, and that its theses deny the conditions of their own