From the start, the basis of philosophy has been a distinction between truth and appearances. The philosopher has always sought to discern the true from the false, and especially from the specious false: true generosity from specious extravagance, the true friend from the specious flatterer, and true universals from the specious coming and going of sensory particulars.¹ Modernity, the age of the individual, has given centre stage to the problems raised in antiquity about the reliability of private experience and private judgment: how can we be sure that our senses are accurate and our reasons well founded? These were the first questions addressed by René Descartes in his Meditations of 1641, in response both to prevailing scholastic theories of knowledge, and to the challenge offered by the Pyrrhonist scepticism uncorked in the previous century.²

The first Meditation seeks a foundation for knowledge—something which cannot be doubted. The material world is out of the question, since our senses deceive us every day. To give the case put forward in the sixth Meditation, and recycled today in undergraduate textbooks, square towers look round in the distance—a standard example from early modern scholastic philosophy.³ Moreover, very often we think we are awake, when in fact we are

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¹ Aristotle, Ethics 4:1; Plutarch, De discrimine adulatoris et amici; Plato, Republic 6.
² The literature on Descartes and his Meditations is, of course, almost unplumbable, and I will not attempt to plumb it here. The Pyrrhonic context of the Meditations was most famously elaborated in: Richard Popkin, The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1960).
³ René Descartes, Meditationes 6, in his Oeuvres, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 12 vols. (Paris: Cerf, 1897–1913), 7:76. The example, presumably commonplace even in antiquity, is raised in Lucretius, De rerum natura 4:353, and Sextus Empiricus, Adversus mathematicos 7:208.
dreaming. How then can we know that we are not dreaming now? Even mathematical truths are not safe from doubt: although God would not deceive us into believing that 2 and 2 are 4, a malicious spirit or demon (genius aliquis malignus) could. But how are we to discern true belief, and true experience, from the sensory or intellectual errors threatened by the demon?

This was looking rather like the medieval question of discretio spirituum: only what was there a problem of spiritual experience was here a problem of experience as a whole. It was even couched in the same language. Jean Gerson (1363–1429), still the standard authority on the subject in Descartes’s time, had compared discretio to the discernment of dreams from waking life. This is not to suggest that Descartes had Gerson in mind when he penned the first Meditation, and there is good evidence that he did not himself take the demon hypothesis seriously, even if he should have done. But the similarity is remarkable, and, speaking historically, more than a coincidence. The same problem, whatever its motivation, invited the same frame.

Descartes, however, was moving in a very different direction and expressed no interest in the complexities of Church teaching on the matter. He simply assumed that we cannot discount the possibility of demonic deception, and so we cannot trust the general reliability of our senses—at least, not until the existence of a beneficent, non-deceiving God has been established. This is achieved by the light of reason: it is reason that tells us we exist, and reason, with its “clear and distinct ideas,” that proves the existence of God. With God in place, the value of sensory evidence can be safeguarded, since He

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Descartes, Meditations 1, in Oeuvres, 7:22. See also Stuart Clark, Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 293.
