

## Cartesian Doubt in *Meditation 1*

### I. Background on Descartes and the *Meditations*

- (i) René Descartes was born 1596, died 1650; he lived in France, Holland, and Sweden.
- (ii) He wrote on philosophy, but also on optics and mathematics (“Cartesian coordinate system”).
- (iii) The *Meditations on First Philosophy* was published (in Latin) in 1641. *Meditations* were common as a religious genre, but less so for philosophy; both aim to engage and transform the reader:

“I do not advise anyone to read these things but those who have the ability and desire to meditate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from the senses as well as from all prejudices.” *Preface to the Reader*, p. 52 (1998 Hackett edition, trans. Donald A. Cress).
- (iv) Who is the thinker/narrator? Not Descartes himself, but a fictional individual who is a naive believer in common sense. During the course of *Meditation 1*, the naïf is in internal conversation with the skeptic.

### II. Method

- (i) “I realized that once in my life I had to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences” (59). [‘sciences’ here means ‘systematic bodies of knowledge.’]
- (ii) “[I]t will suffice for the rejection of all these opinions, if I find in each of them some reason for doubt.” (59).
  - If someone suggests you should question your belief about something, do you decide to doubt everything you believe? Why is Descartes undertaking this project of systematic doubt?
  - Descartes thinks that the only way to discover whether his beliefs are trustworthy is to investigate their foundations. If one suspects that one’s house is unstable due to rotten timber, the solution is to demolish it, provide secure foundations, and rebuild it. (In the *Objections and Replies*, Descartes uses the image of a barrel of apples that are beginning to rot. To prevent the rot from spreading, one tips all the apples out and inspects them, removing the rotten ones.)
- (iii) Descartes won’t be able to inspect every belief, of course. How does he proceed? “Nor therefore need I survey each opinion individually, a task that would be endless. Rather, because undermining the foundations will cause whatever has been built upon them to crumble of its own accord, I will attack straightaway those principles which supported everything I once believed.” (60)

### III. Perception and Illusion

Hypothesis: THE SENSES ARE A SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE.

A. *Whatever is sensed is as it appears to the senses.*

Problem: the senses have deceived me in the past, e.g., optical illusions (stick looks bent when partly submerged).

- Note that the counter-examples to (A) are examples of *external interference* in our perceptual processes. It seems that they occur only in unfavorable circumstances. Can we adjust the principle?

B. *If the circumstances are favorable, then whatever is sensed is as it appears to the senses.*

Problem: Suppose B is true, but you can never tell when circumstances are favorable. Then you couldn’t draw the conclusion that things are as they appear. But, the naïf argues, of course we can sometimes tell that we are in favorable conditions (e.g., “sitting here next to the fire, wearing my winter dressing gown” (60)). So:

C. *We can distinguish favorable from unfavorable circumstances; and if the circumstances are favorable then whatever is sensed is as it appears to the senses.*

Problem: The “insane” can have mistaken beliefs even in ideal conditions. Sometimes individuals hallucinate.

- Note that in such cases there is no *external interference*, but there is an *internal interference* in one’s perceptual processes. So we need to rule out both to have secure foundations.
- Descartes refuses to consider the possibility that he is insane: “But such people are mad, and I would appear no less mad, were I to take their behavior as an example for myself.” (60).

So we should adjust the principle:

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*D. We can distinguish favorable from unfavorable circumstances, and competent from incompetent perceivers; and if circumstances are favorable and the perceiver is competent, then whatever is sensed is as it appears to the senses.*

Problem: Even competent perceivers sometimes have vivid dreams. And “there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep” (60).

How often does my evening slumber persuade me of such ordinary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated next to the fireplace – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! (60)

Descartes’ point is that there is no “sure sign” based on the qualitative experience of dreaming that I am awake and not dreaming.

- You might protest: Of course I can tell the difference between dreams and waking experience! Dreams have a “dream-like quality.” And of course I can tell once I wake up I know I was dreaming before.
- But the claim that dreams have a ‘dream-like quality’ is of no use against the skeptical argument, if (i) the ‘dream-like quality’ is only noticed once you wake up and remember what the dream was like, or (ii) dreams don’t *always* have the ‘dream-like quality’. What is needed is a *sure sign*, i.e., a sign that will always be there to tell you are dreaming when you are.

#### IV. Knowledge of A Priori Truth<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps we cannot find a sure foundation for perceptual knowledge, but there are other sorts of knowledge, e.g., knowledge of very general things (e.g., that objects have color, shape, quantity, and so forth) and of things derived from this (e.g., arithmetic, geometry). (61)

Hypothesis: REASON IS A SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE.

Problem: Can we even reliably judge that we are in favorable circumstances and are competent *reasoners*?

- God might have brought it about that I have mistaken beliefs about all these things.
- But God is not a deceiver!!!

Problem revisited: Perhaps in fact there is no God. Or maybe:

...an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever, who has directed his entire effort at deceiving me. I will regard the heavens, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things as nothing but the bedeviling hoaxes of my dreams, with which he lays snares for my credulity. (62-3)

Could a malicious demon not only undermine our confidence in experience of the external world, but also confidence in our reasoning about general things? It seems so, for the naïf concludes:

But eventually I am forced to admit that there is nothing among the things I once believed to be true which it is not permissible to doubt – and not out of frivolity or lack of forethought, but for valid and considered reasons. (62)

#### Questions:

1. Note that Descartes dismisses madness as a source of error and replaces it with dreaming. Why? One possibility is that the insane are not only confused about their experiences, but have defective reasoning powers. In the case of dreaming, we continue to assume that the agent’s reasoning powers are intact. But what about the malicious demon? Does the malicious demon also call into question our reasoning powers? If so, then how can we carry on in rational inquiry about doubt at all?

2. Suppose that Descartes has established that *any* given experience may be a dream. Is entitled to infer that therefore *all* experience may be a dream? Consider a fair lottery. Any number has the same chance of winning as any other number. It is true that *anyone can win the lottery*. It doesn’t follow, however, that *everyone can win the lottery*. Is the reasoning about the lottery analogous to Descartes reasoning? Should we reject Descartes’ inference as well?

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<sup>1</sup> Roughly:

Empirical knowledge: S knows p *empirically* (a posteriori) iff S’s *reasons* in support of p rest on sense experience.

A priori knowledge: S knows p *a priori* iff S’s *reasons* in support of p do not rest on sense experience.

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