

Handout 3: Descartes's First *Meditation*

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
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THE EXPLICIT PURPOSE OF THE *MEDITATIONS*

On the last handout I suggested that the secret purpose of the *Meditations* is to “destroy the principles of Aristotle”; i.e., to undermine scholastic physics and make way for Descartes’s new, mechanistic theory of nature. By contrast, the explicit purpose of the *Meditations* is to prove “by natural reason” that God exists and that the soul does not die with the body (*Meditations*, 1). In his prefatory letter to the *Meditations*, Descartes expresses great confidence that he has succeeded in this goal:

...these arguments are such that I believe there is no way open to the human mind whereby better ones could ever be found (2).

He says that his arguments are “certain and evident” and that they “equal or even surpass those of geometry in certitude and obviousness” (2-3). (Consider these claims in light of the general skepticism endorsed by Montaigne.) What makes Descartes feel the right to claim such certainty on behalf of his arguments? The answer lies in the “method of doubt” which he employs in the First *Meditation*.

THE METHOD OF DOUBT

Descartes begins the First *Meditation* by noting “how numerous were the false opinions that in my youth I had taken to be true, and thus how doubtful were all those that I had subsequently built upon them” (13). Since he knows that many of his beliefs are based on false opinions, he is not sure which of them he can trust and which he can’t. One way to respond to this realization would be to go through his beliefs one by one and evaluate them, keeping those he deems trustworthy and ditching those he doesn’t. But this is not a realistic plan. Instead, Descartes says that he has to “raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations” (13).

For his beliefs to be certain, Descartes thinks that they must rest on certain foundations. How can he construct those certain foundations? Descartes’s technique for doing so is known as the method of doubt. If he finds “some reason for doubt” regarding any beliefs, he will “withhold assent” from them (13). By pursuing this method rigorously, he will (he hopes!) discover some beliefs which he has no reason to doubt. These beliefs will serve as the certain foundation upon which he can build a secure body of knowledge.

Suppose I were to ask you whether you believe that ice is cold. You'd probably reply, "Yes." Then if I were to go on to ask you why you believe that, you'd likely say, "Because it feels cold when I touch it!" This belief "rests on" (in Descartes's phrase) your senses – the reason you believe ice is cold is that this is what your senses tell you. And for a huge number of things that you believe, you'd probably give a similar answer. Moreover, you're probably highly confident that ice is cold. In general, it's probably safe to assume that you are highly confident of most of your sense-based beliefs. You are probably in the position that Descartes describes himself: "Surely whatever I had admitted until now as most true I received either from the senses or through the senses" (14).

But can sense-based beliefs provide Descartes with the certain foundations he needs? In the rest of the First *Meditation*, Descartes will apply the method of doubt to argue that the answer is "no". As it will turn out, he has reason to doubt *all* of his sense-based beliefs. Thus, he must withhold assent from each of them; none can serve as the foundation for his knowledge.

Before we get to his argument, note just how strong this claim is. Descartes is saying that his senses cannot be the foundation of his knowledge. This is at odds with common sense; we often treat vision and touch as the most secure sources of information. He is also implying that if he can trust his senses at all, he needs some non-sensory justification for doing so.¹

THREE SKEPTICAL ARGUMENTS

A *skeptical argument* attempts to show that we cannot know or be certain of something we ordinarily believe. Descartes considers three increasingly radical skeptical arguments that he has reason to doubt all of his sensory beliefs. The first he rejects, but the second and third he accepts.

THE SENSORY DECEPTION ARGUMENT

The first argument is quite brief, and echoes one of Montaigne's complaints:

"I have noticed that the senses are sometimes deceptive; and it is a mark of prudence never to place our complete trust in those who have deceived us even once" (14).

Descartes quickly rejects this argument. While he concedes that the senses sometimes deceive us "when it is a question of very small and distant things," this does not mean that we have reason to doubt *all* of our sensory beliefs. For example, he says, he "simply cannot doubt" his sensory belief that he is "sitting here next to the fire, wearing my winter dressing gown, that I am holding this sheet of paper in my hands, and the like" (14). These beliefs are all based on immediate, vivid, up-close-and-personal sensory experience. So even if Descartes has reason to doubt his sensory beliefs about very small and distant things, he doesn't yet have reason to doubt *all* of his sensory beliefs.

The next two skeptical arguments are both very famous.

¹This claim plays an important role in the secret purpose of the *Meditations*. According to mechanism, the material world is different from how it appears to us. If our senses are not the foundation of our knowledge, then it would not be surprising if the true nature of reality is at odds with what our senses tell us. By arguing that we cannot treat the senses as sure foundations, Descartes is laying the groundwork for the mechanistic view that the material world is not exactly as the senses represent it. For example, mechanists like Descartes typically denied that bodies have colors. Our belief that bodies are colored is, for Descartes, a sensory illusion.

THE DREAM ARGUMENT

Descartes goes on to note that he is “a man who is accustomed to sleeping at night,” and realizes that in his “evening slumber” he often comes to believe “that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated next to the fireplace—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!” (14). He concludes:

“As I consider these matters more carefully, I see so plainly that there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep” (14).

Descartes is here suggesting the following argument:

- (1) I cannot distinguish with certainty being awake from being asleep.
- (2) If I cannot distinguish with certainty being awake from being asleep, then I have reason to doubt all of my sensory beliefs.
- (3) So, I have reason to doubt all of my sensory beliefs.

The argument is valid. Is it sound? First, let’s consider premise (1). Is it true? I don’t know about you, but I’m certain that I’ve never had a dream as coherent and predictable as my current sensory experience. In my dreams, wild and unexpected things happen all the time. First I’m in elementary school eating lunch with my mother’s childhood friend; then all of a sudden I’m driving across the Golden Gate Bridge in a hovercraft; then I’m playing Tetris with my dog; then... You get the idea. So perhaps there is a “definitive sign” by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep: if my sensory experience is coherent and predictable, then I’m awake. (As we’ll see, Descartes himself suggests something very much like this at the very end of the Sixth *Meditation*.) But for the sake of argument, let’s accept premise (1). Now we’ll turn to Descartes’s response to premise (2).

THE PAINTER ANALOGY

Suppose that you are dreaming right now. Descartes first suggests that this doesn’t give you reason to doubt all of your sensory beliefs. Here is why:

“...the things seen during slumber are, as it were, like painted images, which could only have been produced in the likeness of true things, and that therefore at least these general things—eyes, head, hands, and the whole body—are not imaginary things, but are true and exist. For indeed when painters themselves wish to represent sirens and satyrs by means of especially bizarre forms, they surely cannot assign to them utterly new natures. Rather, they simply fuse together the members of various animals” (15).

Just as a painter cannot represent an entirely new creature but must confine herself to recombining the features of other creatures, so too our dreams cannot present us with *entirely* false streams of sensory experiences. They must recombine the features of sensory experiences we have actually had. So even if the Dream Argument gives me reason to doubt that I’m in a room full of other people right now, it doesn’t give me reason to doubt that there are other people—or, at least, that there are things similar enough to other people that at least some of my beliefs about them are secure. This suggests that the Dream Argument leaves our general sensory beliefs about the world around us unscathed. Rephrased, the Dream Argument would be this:

- (1) I cannot distinguish with certainty being awake from being asleep.
- (2) If I cannot distinguish with certainty being awake from being asleep, then I have reason to doubt my sensory beliefs *about my current surroundings*.

∴(3) So, I have reason to doubt my sensory beliefs *about my current surroundings*.

Yet just after this passage, Descartes takes a step back. He suggests that a painter might “concoct something so utterly novel that nothing like it has ever been seen before” (14). And thus, he says, “even these general things—eyes, head, hands, and the like—could be imaginary” (14). This suggests that my dreams could be entirely false. And if that’s right, then it seems that the original version of the Dream Argument is sound (provided we accept premise (1)).

Descartes still insists that even if the painter creates something *completely* novel: “yet certainly at the very least the colors from which they fashion it ought to be true” (15). Likewise even if the things we see in dreams are totally false, “one has to admit that at least certain other things that are even more simple and universal are true” (15). What are these “certain other things”? They are the basic ingredients out of which sensory experiences are constructed, and even if all the particular experiences we have are the product of our dreams, our sensory beliefs about these basic ingredients are still. Descartes gives us a list of the basic ingredients:

“Corporeal nature in general, together with its extension; the shape of extended things; their quantity, that is, their size and number; as well as the place where they exist; the time through which they endure, and the like” (15)

Beware the philosopher’s use of “and the like”! I can’t detect any inner unity in this list, and thus I’m not at all sure how I would go about filling in the “and the like”. But the items on this list are the very same properties as those that Descartes and his fellow mechanists held were the fundamental properties of matter (well, time is not a property of matter, but motion is, and motion can only occur in time). So it turns out that the Dream Argument, together with the Painter Analogy, is very cleverly constructed to lead us to the conclusion that one has reason to doubt all of one’s sensory beliefs except those concerning the basic mechanistic properties of matter.

As it turns out in the next paragraph, though, these beliefs are not even be best thought of as sensory at all. Descartes regards all of these ingredients as the subject matter of “arithmetic, geometry, and other such disciplines, which treat of nothing but the simplest and most general things and which are indifferent as to whether these things do or do not in fact exist” (15). In other work, Descartes denied that our knowledge of arithmetic and geometry is based on the senses. So even if the Dream Argument does not give us reason to doubt our beliefs about “corporeal nature in general, together with its extension [etc.]” it does apparently give us reason to doubt most, if not all, of our sensory beliefs.

THE DECEIVING GOD ARGUMENT

By employing the method of doubt, Descartes has now eliminated most if not all sensory beliefs as candidates for his certain foundations. Beliefs about arithmetic, geometry, “and other such disciplines” remain unscathed. His final skeptical argument, however, leads him to doubt even these.

“How do I know that [God] did not bring it about that there is no earth at all, no heavens, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, and yet bringing it about that all these things appear to me to exist precisely as they do now? Moreover, since I judge that others sometimes make mistakes in matters that they believe they know most perfectly, may I not, in like fashion, be deceived every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or perform an even simpler operation, if that can be imagined?” (15)

Descartes’s argument here appears to be the following:

- (1) I can’t be certain that God hasn’t deceived me about the matters I believe I know most perfectly.
- (2) If I can’t be certain that God hasn’t deceived me about the matters I believe I know most perfectly, then I have reason to doubt even those things I believe I know most perfectly.
- ∴(3) So, I have reason to doubt even those things I believe I know most perfectly.

He briefly considers someone who might respond to premise (1) by asserting that since God is “said to be supremely good” he would not have deceived Descartes in this way. But, as Descartes points out, if it were contrary to God’s goodness to massively deceive his creatures, then it would seem that it is also contrary to his goodness to occasionally deceive them. And yet no one would deny that we are occasionally deceived. So the fact that God is said to be supremely good does not appear to threaten premise (1)—at least, not yet. We’ll come back to this issue in the next *Meditation*.

One thing that is important to see about this argument is that it does not require that Descartes be capable of *imagining* what it would be like for God to have deceived him about the sum of three and two or the number of sides of a square. It doesn’t seem possible to imagine what that would be like. Try, and you’ll see what I mean. Premise (1) is supported simply by the idea that God, if he exists, “is able to do anything” (15). This is a traditional part of the conception of God: God is omnipotent. If God’s able to do anything, then God’s able to deceive Descartes about how many sides a square has. Thus Descartes can’t be certain—at this point in the *Meditations*, at least—that God hasn’t deceived him about these matters.

The upshot of the Deceiving God argument is:

“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 arguments” (16).

This is an extremely strong claim, and it suggests that Descartes’s attempt to find certain foundations for his knowledge is doomed to failure. He, of course, does not believe that it is. We’ll see why in the Second *Meditation*.