

Meditation 1: On what can be doubted

Descartes begins the First Meditation by noting that there are many things he once believed to be true that he has later learned were not. This leads him to worry which of his other beliefs might also be false. So he sets out to “tear down” his existing set of beliefs and to “rebuild” them from scratch. For this he needs a solid “foundation,” i.e., some beliefs that simply cannot be doubted. If he can find something absolutely certain to serve as an “epistemic foundation” (i.e., the foundation for all his beliefs), he then can begin building a new structure.

So, Descartes is searching for something certain, something that cannot be doubted. In order to find this kind of certainty, he sets out to doubt everything he can. It is not that he believes that everything he now doubts will subsequently turn out to be false, but rather this is the technique he employs to find something that is truly “indubitable.” This technique of doubting everything possible in order to search for certainty is known as his “Method of Doubt.” It consists in “withholding belief” from everything that even *might* be false.

Given that Descartes has indefinitely many beliefs, calling each of them into question one by one would take forever, so he instead tries to cast doubt on an entire *source* of beliefs, namely, the senses. Is it possible that the senses, as a whole, are an unreliable source of information? This might seem implausible at first blush, given how much confidence we typically have in our own sense experiences. So, he attempts to undermine this confidence in a number of successively stronger challenges to our justification in believing what our senses tell us.

First attack: We know that when we dream, we have experiences that (at least) *seem* like sense experiences when we have them, but that do not provide accurate information about the world we *seem* to be experiencing. If I dreaming right now, then I am laying down somewhere, and not seated in front of my computer. So, if I am dreaming right now, then the “information” my senses seem to provide me is not to be trusted.

So, *am* I dreaming right now? It seems that, as Descartes says, there are “no certain marks” by which to distinguish dreaming from wakefulness. Maybe I will be able to tell later that I was dreaming now, but right now, at this very moment, I cannot be sure that I won’t later wake up. But, of course, it is *always* “right now.” So, it seems, at any given moment, I can’t

be sure, at that moment, that I am not dreaming, and so at any given moment, I should not trust my senses.

Weakness of first attack: The “Dream Argument,” as it is sometimes called, succeeds in undermining my confidence in what I now seem to see and hear, but it doesn’t, by itself, call into question *all* of my beliefs based upon sense experience. How is that? Remember that all that Descartes has done at this point is to undermine my confidence that I am now awake and not dreaming. But the fact that I might now be dreaming does not mean that my entire previous life “might have been a dream.” Dreams, Descartes says, are like “painted images.” What he means by that is that dreams are “constructed” out of the “material” we received during waking experience. That is just what dreams are. At this point, he has posed no general challenge to our confidence in waking experience: his only challenge, thus far, concerns our confidence that we are now not dreaming. So, if I am dreaming right now, then I shouldn’t trust any of the specific things I now seem to see: maybe the computer is not now on my lap; maybe there are no such things as computers; maybe I don’t have a lap, etc. But if I am dreaming now, I must have been awake at some point in the past, and so even though I cannot trust any of the specific things I seem to see, I have (as of yet) no reason to doubt the fact that I have at least seen things with, for

example, colors and shapes. So, the dream argument causes me to doubt beliefs about the existence of particular things, but not some very general beliefs I have gained on the basis of the sense experiences I must have had in the past even if I am now dreaming.

Second Attack: So, the first attack does not cause me to call into question all of my beliefs based upon sense experience. Descartes now considers a much stronger attack: the existence of an all powerful God. Of course, I do not (at this point in the Meditations) *know* of the existence of such a being, but I can at least conceive of one. Now, if I was created by such an all powerful being, then, that being, being all powerful, could have made me such that I am *always* mistaken about the beliefs I draw from sense experience. An all powerful being could create me so that I *think* I see houses, trees, etc., even though none of these things actually exist.

Now, one might say, I don't know for sure that such a being exists, and so it would be silly to doubt the existence of the world around me because of the *possibility* of such an all powerful being. But this won't help, Descartes says. Suppose there is no such all powerful being. If so, then what created me (or caused me to exist) was not all powerful. But if what caused me to exist was not all powerful, then it is possible that I was made "defectively," in which case my senses might be made so that they always

provide me false information about the existence of an external world. It seems, in fact, that the less likely it is that I was created by an all powerful being, the more likely it is that I was made by a less than all powerful being, who might have made mistakes in my creation (or cause). But either I was caused to exist by an all powerful being, or I wasn't. If I was, that being could have made me so that my senses are always wrong, and I wasn't, it could be that my senses are defective, and so once again that they always deceive me. In either case, I should not trust my senses.

Problems with the second attack: The problem here, if there is one, is that the skeptical challenge seems even *too* strong. It would seem that an all powerful God could make me so that even my ability to reason always leads me into error. But if that is the case, it would seem that I shouldn't trust my ability to reason. But it is my reason that leads me to see that an all powerful creator could make me so that my reason leads me astray. So, if I should not trust my reason, then, it seems, I should not trust the reasoning that tells me that I should not trust my reason! There is something self-defeating about this whole approach, something like sawing off the tree branch that I am standing on. If I shouldn't trust even my ability to reason about the most basic things, then, it turns out, I shouldn't trust the very

reasoning that tells me that I shouldn't trust my reason. Where does one go from here?

It is unclear what Descartes really thinks here. Maybe he just doesn't want to portray God as a being who would intentionally deceive him. In any event, after some discussion of God, he moves on to talk, instead, about an "evil demon." This is a being who is powerful enough to make me have sense experiences that are not true, but who is not, like God, all good.

Third Attack: Maybe there is an "evil demon" who communicates directly with my mind, causing me to have all the sense experiences I do, even though there is no physical world at all. That is, maybe the world consists solely of my mind and the mind of this evil being deceiving me. If this is the case, then I should not trust any of the "information" I receive from the senses. Recall, it is not that Descartes believes that this is actually true. Rather, he is searching for certainty, i.e., for something that he simply cannot doubt. But, with the evil demon hypothesis, he finds that it is possible to doubt all of the information he gets from his senses. So, nothing based upon sense experience can count as absolutely certain, and so none of it can form the epistemic foundation that he is searching for.

Fourth Attack: At the beginning of the Second Meditation, Descartes reviews what he has established in the First Meditation. Maybe

there is some evil demon who deceives him, and so that all his sense experience comes from this demon, and none of it is true. But, he asks himself, is this evil demon necessary in order for him to cast doubt on all of his sense experience? Couldn't it be the case that he, himself, is the cause of all of his sense experiences? In short, his answer is "yes."

With this fourth attack, I think we see that the first three attacks were really only trying to "warm us up" for this final skeptical challenge to sense experience. If Descartes had begun by saying that maybe we simply "hallucinate" everything, we might not have continued reading. So, he has taken us to this point more gradually, starting with phenomena, dreaming, that we are all familiar with. But these were just "approximations." Once we think about it, we see that we cannot be certain of the veracity of any of our sense experiences. They could all be false.

Certainty at last: But, where do we go from here? I can doubt the existence of anything outside of myself as it is conceivable that I myself am somehow the cause of all my sense experiences. But can I doubt my own existence? No, Descartes says. If I doubt, I must exist in order to doubt. If I am deceived by God or an evil demon, I must exist in order to be deceived. If I am conscious, in any form whatsoever, I must exist in order to

be conscious. So, we have now found the one thing I can be absolutely certain of: *I am, I exist*. This must be true (at the very least) whenever I say it or mentally conceive it.

In Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, Descartes phrases this conclusion in a different, but (in English) more familiar manner: *cogito ergo sum*. I think, therefore I am.

This brings us to the end of the “destructive” phase of Descartes' Meditations. Remember that he set out to “demolish” all his previous beliefs in the attempt to find certainty, and then attempt to “rebuild” his beliefs on the basis of a certain foundation. He now thinks he has found that indubitable foundation. The rest of the Meditations will consist of his attempt to “reconstruct” a system of beliefs upon this foundation.

It is worth noting, however, that over the history of philosophy, there have been many people who found Descartes' *destructive* phase in the Meditations far more convincing than the remaining *constructive* phase. There are those, that is, who think that Descartes has succeed in showing that the only think he knows with any certainty is that he, himself, exists, but that he has failed to show that he knows anything else. Recall that all of this

is supposed to be going on, for all of us, in the “first person.” That is, we should each be following Descartes’ reasoning for ourselves. So, it seems that at this point in the Meditations, all that *I* can know is that I myself (or, as we shall soon see, my mind) exist. But, if the critics of Descartes are right, then this is *all* that I can know: I know that I exist and that I am having the mental experiences I do, but I know nothing else whatsoever. There is a name for this position: *solipsism*. Now let’s be clear: Descartes is not himself a solipsist. He is about to begin the constructive phase of the Meditations, and he thinks that this construction process succeeds. The solipsists believes that Descartes’ destructive phase was successful, but that his attempts at constructing anything beyond “I think therefore I am” fail.

Moving on: Descartes thinks he has now established *that* “I am.” His next task will be to investigate “*what* I am.” He knows he exists, but what *is* this thing that he knows to exist? His answer, in a word: a *mind*.