

## **Descartes and the method of doubt**

### **DOUBT AND CERTAINTY**

Descartes begins Meditation I by declaring that he has known for a long time that in order to establish anything ‘firm and constant in the sciences’ (95), he would have to start from the very foundations of all knowledge. He does not need to reject as false everything he thinks he knows, but he needs to ‘avoid believing things that are not entirely certain and indubitable’ (95). Descartes is adopting scepticism. He is only aiming to doubt, not to reject, his beliefs.

So Descartes begins by understanding knowledge in terms of certainty. To establish certainty, he tests his beliefs by doubt. Doubt, then, is the opposite of certainty. If we can doubt a belief, then it is not certain, and so it is not knowledge.

Descartes’ understanding of knowledge, certainty and the need for doubt have been strongly criticized. Many philosophers have argued that Descartes sets the standard for knowledge too high. It seems that Descartes thinks that knowledge must be indubitable; we must be unable to doubt it. If that is true, then the belief must be, in some way, infallible. However, this only seems to be true at the beginning of the *Meditations*. By Meditation III, Descartes argues that he can know whatever is ‘clear and distinct’. This is not indubitable nor infallible, because we can make mistakes, but what is clear and distinct is certain if we are careful.

But philosophers have also criticized Descartes’ idea of certainty. It appears to be psychological: he is after beliefs that he is certain of. And this is not the same thing as a belief being certain. After all, we can make mistakes, and think something is certain (we can be certain of it), when it is not certain. But, Descartes responds, this is where the Method of doubt comes in. Because we have the habit of jumping to conclusions, only the prudent can distinguish what is genuinely certain from that which merely seems so.

Certainty, as Descartes understands it, is not a feeling; it involves a type of rational insight. He later argues that only claims that are ‘clear and distinct’ can be certain, and these properties are established by what is immediately apparent to the mind. In Meditation III, he says ‘things which I see clearly cannot be other than as I conceive them’ (115). So certainty is tested by reason; things cannot be otherwise. Descartes thinks that certainty will establish truth, because what cannot be otherwise must be true. To show that something is certain in this way is to prove it must be true, so it is true.

(Philosophers have argued that Descartes doesn’t achieve this standard for many ideas, and so his method of doubting everything leaves us with scepticism, rather than finding the foundations of knowledge.)

It is important to notice that Descartes only doubts his beliefs in order to find what is certain. Because certainty is the opposite of doubt, finding out what he can and can’t doubt will establish what he can be certain of. Descartes’ doubt, as we will see, is very

‘methodical’. He could, he says, consider each belief of his in turn; but this would take forever. So instead he considers whether the principles on which his beliefs are grounded, principles like ‘believe what you perceive’, are certain or not. Descartes’ doubt is universal – he attacks his beliefs all at once by attacking their foundations; and it is hyperbolic, extreme to the point of being ridiculous, e.g. the possibility of an evil demon whose whole aim is to deceive me. But this is how it needs to be. One false or uncertain first principle can lead us completely astray, so he must attack these. And it is not easy, he remarks, to really withhold assent from beliefs we have held since we were children. We can’t doubt just by an act of will – that’s why he gives arguments, and hyperbolic doubt helps make the point and support the arguments.

## **ARGUMENTS FROM PERCEPTION**

Descartes begins his method of doubt by considering that he has, in the past, been deceived by his senses – things have looked a way that they are not. Things in the distance look small; sticks half-submerged in water look bent; and so on. But, Descartes remarks, such examples from unusual perceptual conditions give us no reason to doubt all perceptions, such as that you are looking at a piece of paper with writing on it. More generally, we might say that perceptual illusions are special cases (and ones we can frequently explain). Otherwise we wouldn’t be able to talk about them as illusions. So they don’t undermine perception generally.

However, a stronger scepticism can arise from thinking about perception: perception only ever informs us what the world looks like to us. How do we know anything about what it is ‘really’ like? Descartes’ argument from perceptual illusions notes a difference between appearance and reality. Maybe this distinction applies to all ‘appearances’, all perceptions, and the world is nothing like how it appears. Descartes suggests this possibility, but for different reasons, with his argument from dreaming.

## **AN ARGUMENT FROM DREAMING**

Descartes extends his doubt by appealing to dreaming: he is ‘a man, and consequently...in the habit of sleeping’ (96). Sometimes when we dream, we represent to ourselves all sorts of crazy things. But sometimes we dream the most mundane things. Yet ‘there are no conclusive signs by means of which one can distinguish clearly between being awake and being asleep’ (97). So how can we know that what we experience we perceive rather than dream?

This argument attacks all sense-perception, even the most mundane and most certain. You cannot know that you see a piece of paper because you cannot know that you are not dreaming of seeing a piece of paper.

Some philosophers have responded to Descartes by claiming that there are, in fact, certain indications by which we can distinguish perception from dreaming, such as the far greater coherence of perception. But Descartes could respond: we could be dreaming a perfect replica of reality. Do we really know that all dreams have less coherence than perception? We cannot know that what is apparently perception is not really a particularly coherent dream.

Other philosophers argue that this response makes no sense. The concept of a dream depends upon a concept of reality that it contrasts with. If everything were a dream, we

wouldn't be able to have the concepts of dreaming and reality. So it literally doesn't make sense to suppose that everything is a dream. While the objection makes a good point about our concepts of dreaming and reality, it isn't conclusive. First, we might argue that even in a dream, we can dream that we wake up, but we are still asleep. Perhaps the development of our concepts of 'dream' and 'reality' are analogous: they refer to a difference within our experience, but this doesn't mean that the whole of our experience is disconnected from reality in the way that we think dreams are. It is not obvious that this supposition makes no sense. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the objection misunderstands scepticism. Descartes does not need to say 'perhaps everything is a dream'; he only needs to argue that we cannot know when we are dreaming and when we are awake. This would allow us to develop concepts of dreaming and reality on the basis of our different experiences; but the correct application of those concepts isn't secure.

However, Descartes presents a different argument. At the very end of the *Meditations*, Descartes agrees that we can distinguish between dreaming and waking experience, by the greater coherence of perception (168). But this answer, he claims, is not available to him at the beginning of the *Meditations*, because of the possibility of the evil demon.

Before introducing that possibility, Descartes presses the argument from dreaming further. It may seem that 'whether I am awake or sleeping, two and three added together always make five' (98). But people do make mistakes about matters they believe they know certainly. And so even truths of logic and of mathematics come under attack. Descartes says, 'it is possible...that I should be deceived every time I add two and three' (98). Are not just his perceptual experiences, but also his thoughts, open to doubt?

## **THE DEMON**

In order to take his scepticism to heart, Descartes introduces the suggestion that God does not exist and that all our experiences are produced in us by an evil demon who wants to deceive us. The possibility of the demon means that it is possible that even if I could tell the difference between being awake and dreaming, my experiences when I am awake are no more real than when I am dreaming. All beliefs about the external world and events in time is thrown into doubt, as it is based on my experience, which the evil demon controls. And all knowledge, such as mathematics, I believed I had on the basis of thought alone is undercut, because the demon can control my thoughts, too.

### **Total deception**

Descartes has reached a point of total deception. If he has no mental agency, no control over his mind at all, over what he experiences or what he thinks, then the very idea of knowing anything seems to be undermined.

In Meditation II, however, Descartes reconsiders this idea, and argues that, even if the evil demon exists, there is one thing he can be sure of. And in Meditation VI, Descartes goes on to resolve the issues that led him into doubt in the first place. To do this, he needs to establish, in reverse order, that there could be no evil demon deceiving him; that he is not dreaming, and that a physical world, including his body, really does exist; and that he can trust his senses. The answers to all these doubts, it turns out, is that God exists and is not a deceiver.