

Topic 1

Foundations for Knowledge and Methodological Doubt

Descartes' method of doubt

In his philosophical masterpiece, the *Meditations on the First Philosophy* (1641), and in reply to the writings of contemporary sceptics, such as the essayist Michel de Montaigne (who questions whether we can have certain knowledge and whose motto was 'Que sais-je?' ('What can I know?')), Descartes begins his project to construct a foundation for knowledge and to show that there is at least one piece of knowledge which is beyond doubt. In the 'First Meditation', he starts by claiming that he has been struck by the large number of false beliefs he has accepted since he was a child, and resolves to 'demolish' all his beliefs, and afterward to construct the foundations of knowledge for a stable and lasting science.

In order to do this, Descartes states that it would be rather impractical to go through all of one's beliefs and show each of them to be false. Rather, it is sufficient to bring into question those beliefs that form the 'foundation' for all the rest and show that they are not certain, rather than that they are false: 'Once the foundations of the building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested' (Meditation 1). Attacking such basic principles means casting doubt on the evidence of the senses. The senses can deceive us, and as such many of the beliefs derived from them can be doubted. Doubt, he says, can be cast on other beliefs too, such as the belief that he is sitting by the fire in his dressing-gown — initially, he finds such a belief difficult to doubt, but after further reflection claims that it is possible that he is actually dreaming that he is sitting by the fire in his dressing-

gown, when in fact he is in bed, asleep: ‘there are many... beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible even though they are derived from the senses — for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on... How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events — that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire — when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!’ (Meditation 1). If we cannot always distinguish being awake from being asleep, then many of our beliefs can be thrown into doubt, even beliefs about our own bodies. Having sensations could be a product of our imagination, and even the sensation of having a body may be the product of our dream. We can also question our belief in ‘corporeal nature in general’: notions of extension, quantity, shape, size, etc.

Descartes goes on to distinguish between the physical sciences (physics, astronomy, etc.), which depend on composite notions (they conceive of objects as having specific sizes, shapes, etc.), and mathematics and logic (which do not depend on such notions). Knowledge obtained from the physical sciences is doubtful because it depends on the study of things which can only be known via our perceptions. Mathematical knowledge is deemed superior because it is certain knowledge. This is because it is known *a priori* and does not depend upon the physical existence of the items mentioned in mathematical propositions. For example, even if I am asleep, two and two added together equals four, and a square always has four sides. Descartes is then very much committed to the mathematical over the physical sciences as certain sources of knowledge, and advocates doubting all things the existence of which cannot be demonstrated. Certain simple, abstract universal things, he argues, must be real; these are things through which our knowledge is not based on sense experience, but is based on reason alone (Meditation 1).

The evil demon argument

It would seem then, at this point in his *Meditations*, that Descartes has arrived at something that can be known for certain. However, he goes on to question whether even the abstract ‘truths’ of mathematics are really certain and can really be called ‘truths’. Imagine a scenario, says Descartes, in which there is an ‘all powerful God’. How could we tell that such a God has not deceived us into believing that the evidence of our senses is true? Likewise, how could we tell that we were not being deceived into believing what we take to be mathematical truths? Someone might argue that the existence of an omnipotent God guarantees that these beliefs are true, because ‘God has not desired that I should be thus deceived, for He is said to be supremely Good’ (Meditation 1). But suppose that ‘I am so imperfect as to deceive myself ever’. At this stage in the *Meditations*, Descartes is ‘constrained to confess that there is nothing in all that I formerly believed to be true, of which I cannot in some measure doubt, and that not merely through want of thought or through levity, but for reasons which are very powerful and maturely considered’ (Meditation 1). And even if we grant that an omnipotent God guarantees that my beliefs are true, suppose that ‘not God... but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed all his... energies in deceiving me’ (Meditation 1). I might then think that two and two added together equals four, but I am being fooled. We could further imagine that this evil genius or malicious demon is deceiving our senses so that we experience a world that does not exist.

The subjective self

In all of this, one thing remains certain. Even if Descartes is being deceived, he is still thinking. From the very existence of his ability to doubt, he deduces that his own conscious self must exist — in other words, in order to doubt, he must exist. For Descartes, the one thing he can be certain of is knowledge of his conscious self. He concludes,

‘So... after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it’ (Meditation 2). This is famously expressed in his Discourse (Part 4) as ‘I think, therefore I am’ (‘cogito, ergo sum’ (in Latin)). This is perceived clearly and distinctly (Discourse, Part 4), and anything that I perceive clearly and distinctly is true (Meditation 3).

References

Descartes, Rene, *Discourse on the Method* [1637], in *Key Philosophical Writings*, translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane, edited and introduction by Enrique Chavez-Arviso (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1997).

Descartes, *Meditations* [1641], in *Key Philosophical Writings*, *ibid.*