

10. POSTSCRIPT: THE SELF AND THE WORLD

1. Descartes and 'the external world'

In chapter 1 we looked at the relation between Descartes' conception of what he is and his suggestion that knowledge of the world of material things is dependent on knowledge of God. On the basis of his doubt about the existence of the material world Descartes builds an argument for the claim that he is something quite distinct from any material being. Thus, Descartes concludes that he lies outside the world of material things, and so his knowledge of that world is dependent on certain 'effects' that it has on him. When he 'sees and feels' a chair what he is immediately aware of is not the material object itself but simply a state of himself that he assumes is caused by the chair. And so it is only through a demonstration of the existence of a truthful and benevolent God that he can have any grounds for believing that there is a material world at all, or that that world is at all as he normally takes it to be.

It is, however, possible that there is a relation between Descartes' doubt and his conception of what he is that runs in, so to speak, the opposite direction.

In the Preface to the Meditations Descartes offers the following advice to potential readers: 'I would advise none to read this work, unless such as are able and willing to meditate with me in earnest, to detach their minds from commerce with the senses, and likewise to deliver themselves from all prejudice'.^[1] He adds, in the Synopsis, that the utility of the doubt on which he is about to embark lies, in part, in the fact that: 'it delivers us from all prejudice, and affords the easiest pathway by which the mind may withdraw itself from the senses'.^[2] We should, I think, be struck by the way in which Descartes speaks in the same breath of 'delivering us from prejudice' and 'detaching ourselves from the senses'. It is true that he later offers what he suggests are reasons for being suspicious of the senses. But my point at the moment is that, even before he asks himself what it is possible to doubt, he takes it to be clear that detachment from the senses is a goal to which we must aspire if we are to embark on a serious search for truth. Indeed, he offers the fact that it will help us to achieve this detachment as a reason for following the path of doubt. Now this is rather startling in that we might have supposed that any serious search for truth will necessarily make extensive use of the senses. Is not the person who closes her eyes and blocks her ears precisely the one who does not want to know the truth?

Well, there are, no doubt, certain areas in which the search for truth might be aided by closing one's eyes and blocking one's ears. Mathematics might be one. And so perhaps philosophy is another. (For many, after all, the idea of philosophy is indissolubly associated with armchairs!) But to think that Descartes' starting point might be defended in this way is to misunderstand the character of his enterprise. For Descartes' aim is not to establish whether there is one particular class of truths that can be known: philosophical truths. He is concerned to establish whether anything can be known. And yet he insists, apparently without argument, that one of the most familiar grounds for a claim to know something - namely, the fact that I observed what I claim to know - is not to be taken seriously.

Is it possible that assumptions about what he himself is - or, at any rate, assumptions about his relation to the material world that surrounds him - are at work at the very start of Descartes' thinking? Is he assuming that the contact between my hand and the table is not quite the unmediated contact between me and the table that we might have supposed; and so that the knowledge of the table that I take myself to have through the sense of touch is not quite what it seems? This suspicion is, perhaps, reinforced when we remember the ease with which Descartes moves between supposing, on the one hand, that 'the sky, the air, the earth' and so on do not exist and, and on the other, that he himself is 'without hands, eyes, flesh, blood, or any of the senses'. He seems, from the start, to be thinking of his own body as

simply one object among the others he encounters in the world. As we might put it, he seems to be thinking of his own hands, eyes, and so on as things that he comes across in the world, rather than as being part of himself: the self that comes across things in the world, believes that that is a bull in the field, doubts whether the floor will support his weight, and so on. With that, he finds no difficulty in the idea that it might make sense to ascribe beliefs and doubts to a being - namely, himself - who, 'lacking a body', lacks a life in which there is a place for avoiding that field, or treading gingerly on the floor boards.

Perhaps, then, Descartes' idea that one who is seriously engaged in the pursuit of truth must doubt the existence of the material world depends on a picture of what he himself is. For if I were a bodily being - a being in the same world as that of trees and tables - then there would, it seems, be no room for a doubt about the existence of that world. So if Descartes is to drive a wedge - a place for his doubt - between 'me' and 'the world', then my body must lie on the side of the world.

Modern versions of Descartes' story do not speak of 'non-material minds' and 'evil demons'. They speak instead of the possibility that I might be a brain in a vat being manipulated by a mad scientist. But if you have felt some sympathy for the general direction of argument of this book you will not be inclined to think that the difference between disembodied souls, on the one hand, and brains in vats, on the other, is of great importance. What separates the idea that the 'real me' is an immaterial mind from the idea that it is a material brain is of far less significance than what separates both of those from the idea that I am the human being: the being that others encounter in their relations with me. For if one holds the latter view one is, as I have said, going to have difficulty identifying the point at which the demon, or mad scientist, works his evil deed. If I am this human being, and if, with that, there is no room for doubt about whether this human being exists, can there really be room for doubt about the existence of other solid bodies with which I, this human being, am in constant interaction? The point here, it should be stressed, is not simply that I am in causal interaction with the world: that the world has effects on me and I have effects on the world. Both the dualist and the identity theorist can acknowledge that. We might, rather, express the point in this way: if there is no room for doubt about the existence of this embodied being - me - there is no room for a doubt that the movements of this being are sometimes impeded by other extended, tangible, beings.

2. Knowledge and action

But perhaps the matter is better expressed in terms of a certain picture of knowledge. As a recent author has expressed the view that we find in Descartes: 'To know reality is to have a correct representation of things - a correct picture within of outer reality'.^[3] It is of no consequence whether we think of this representation as being an image in an immaterial mind or as being a neural structure in a brain. For both approaches are equally marked off from one that understands knowledge, not in terms of the notion of picturing, but in terms of that of acting. The Cartesian paradigm of one who knows the way through the wood is a mind or brain with a 'representation' of the path; and the Cartesian paradigm of one who knows that a stone is approaching his head, or that he is confronted with another in pain, is a mind or brain with the appropriate 'representation'. The alternative paradigm will speak instead of a human being walking confidently through the wood, a human being ducking, a human being responding with pity and help, and so on. It is in seeing someone behave in these ways that we see most clearly and directly someone who has knowledge of the situation with which she is confronted.

I spoke of these as alternative 'paradigms' of knowledge. It is, of course, clear that one may know or believe something yet not act in the ways in question. The point can be put by saying

that these cases are secondary. If we maintain that, despite the fact that he does nothing about it, Jones knows or believes that his daughter is in severe pain then some special explanation is needed. On the Cartesian view, it is the reverse. Knowledge or belief is, in itself, simply an inner mirroring of outer reality. It is when my knowledge finds expression in action that we need to postulate some further factor that explains its doing so.

But isn't it the Cartesian who is right here? It is being suggested that we see someone who knows that a stone is approaching her head, or someone who knows that she is confronted with a person in pain, in seeing someone who ducks out of the stone's path, or who responds to the other with help and sympathy. But, it will be said, this cannot be right since one who, for example, knows that a stone is flying towards her head will only duck if she also desires not to be hit by the stone. We must, then, think of the behaviour that we see, not as in some sense being knowledge, but as being the product of a certain combination of knowledge and desire. The knowledge itself must be an inner state which, in conjunction with certain desires or feelings, has certain behaviour as a causal upshot.

The idea that all human behaviour is to be explained in terms of a combination of beliefs and desires that cause it is one that has a very powerful hold within philosophical thinking about a wide range of issues. Yet it is not, it should be noted, an idea that seems to be reflected in our normal ways of thinking and speaking of human behaviour. We ask 'Why is he calling the doctor?' and receive the reply 'Because his daughter has broken her leg'. We ask 'Why did she duck?' and receive the reply 'Because the stone was heading straight for her'. The replies, which make no reference to desires, explain her behaviour by pointing to her reasons for acting in these ways: that is to say, features of her situation - not of herself - that she might offer in justification of what she did.

Now to this it is commonly replied that we only take these to be adequate explanations because we take it for granted that the individual has the desire to help his daughter, or the desire not to be hit by a stone; we can, in cases like these, safely omit reference to the desire in question because such desires are sufficiently widespread not to require explicit mention. Well, perhaps. But in the absence of some kind of argument for this claim we might wonder whether it is not just the product of the philosophical picture of knowledge that we are calling into question. If we think of knowledge or belief as being an 'inner' representation of an 'outer' reality then we will think that something else is needed - a desire - if knowledge is to be converted into action. But if we don't picture the matter in that way we may be more ready to take our normal ways of speaking at face value.

Despite the Cartesian emphasis on the individual's own immediate access to his or her own mental states, the pictures philosophers offer of our 'inner life' often seem to bear little close scrutiny. Does introspection reveal that when I duck to avoid an approaching stone, or stop to help someone in pain, my behaviour is preceded by an inner combination of belief and desire? Isn't the Cartesian simply 'finding' whatever he has decided that his theory needs? Now we should not, perhaps, make too much of this kind of objection; for the Cartesian image of infallible self-knowledge is not one that we should accept. Still, if we take as our starting point, not the isolated observer of the passing scene, but the human being responding to the world in which she is placed, we may arrive at a very different picture of the individual's knowledge of the world.

3. An 'absolute conception'

Wittgenstein writes:

Language - I want to say - is a refinement, im Anfang war die Tat ("in the beginning was the deed") [4]

... it is a primitive reaction to tend, to treat, the part that hurts when someone else is in pain ... [5]

I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination. As a creature in a primitive state. Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination.[6]

Pity, one may say, is a form of conviction that someone else is in pain.[7]

It is in a similar spirit that Heidegger writes:

[T]he less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is - as equipment.[8]

Our discussion, in chapter 7, of Wittgenstein's remark 'My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul' drew on ideas that are closely linked with these passages. I suggested that we must consider the possibility that the special range of attitudes that I have towards other human beings does not require the underpinning of some belief that I hold about them: the possibility that the attitudes are what is most basic in my relation to another. Now we briefly considered an objection to this proposal - an objection that might be more fully articulated in this way:

To take such reactions as given is to acquiesce in a picture of the world that is thoroughly coloured by our own reactions to what we encounter. Is it not central to the task of the philosopher that she stands back from her natural reactions to her experience and asks whether these reactions are really justified in view of that with which she is confronted? Is it not central to the task of the philosopher that she tries to articulate what might be called an 'absolute conception' of the world: a picture of the world that would be accessible to, and acceptable to, any rational being no matter how that being may differ from us in its natural reactions to the world? For example, while I may pull away in disgust from slugs or spiders I must recognise that this is simply a reflection of a personal peculiarity, and so should not take my reaction to embody a recognition of 'the objective disgustingness of slugs and spiders'. My ambition should be to form a picture of the world that is not, in that sense, coloured by my own responses to what I encounter.

This has been a central ambition of many philosophers. It is an ambition that is reflected in images of the person as, first and foremost, a mind that passively receives impressions from the world. The Cartesian picture of the self as a being that is radically distinct from the bodily being - the being in the world with its rich set of responses to what it encounters - may have its deepest roots here: in an image of real knowledge as involving a pure mirroring of a situation.

That ideal is one that has a powerful hold on many - perhaps most - who are drawn to philosophy. It may constitute a formidable obstacle to a full acceptance of the image of a person that has been defended in this book. The other side of this, of course, is that a proper assimilation of this image may weaken the hold of that ideal. That is not to say that we will

give up the idea that we have an obligation to try to think straight: an obligation to overcome the blindness, prejudice, and so on that often clouds our understanding of a situation which confronts us. It is to say that we will look for other models of what might be involved in doing that. The Cartesian model of clear thinking - that which involves disengagement from my responses to what confronts me - is not the only possible model. To see this, one should broaden the range of one's examples. For example, might I not feel that it is when I see a film of people caught up in war or famine that I appreciate for the first time what is really happening there? The relevant case here is not one in which I 'learn new facts' about what is going on, but rather one in which my feelings become engaged in a way in which they were not before. In such a case, it is not, we might feel, that my engagement involves colouring, but rather that my previous disengagement involved blindness.

That is a controversial example. And the above quotations from Wittgenstein and Heidegger are not only controversial, but difficult too. Closely linked with that, the Cartesian picture of knowledge, and the associated conception of the task of philosophy, are extraordinarily resilient. I do not for one second suppose that what I have said in this chapter might be sufficient to break the hold of those ideas. My aim has simply been to give some indication of how questions about the nature of a person that have been central to this book might be linked with questions about knowledge that have always been central to philosophy.

Further reading

The different paradigms of knowledge, and their relation to particular views of the self, are discussed in Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: see especially chapter 8, on Descartes, and chapter 9, on Locke. In Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry, Bernard Williams develops the notion of an 'absolute conception' of the world, and discusses the importance such a notion has in Descartes' thinking. Two clear and accessible books which help to place Wittgenstein's thought in relation to the issues raised in this chapter are Fergus Kerr, Theology After Wittgenstein, and Oswald Hanfling, Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy (see especially chapter 7). A useful introduction to Heidegger's thought is Stephen Mulhall, Heidegger and Being and Time; chapter 1 is of most relevance to the concerns of this chapter.