

Outline and critically assess Descartes's method of doubt

HPPH7010 – Essay 2

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'The scope, therefore, of Descartes's doubt is considerably less universal than it first appears to be on first reading' - Anthony Kenny

There is such an extensive array of work reflecting upon, commenting on, generative of discussion and examination of Cartesian doubt that to attempt to do more than provide example outlines in addition to how those outlines might be understood, and then critique those outlines in great depth would require far more scope than this essay provides. It is interesting to note how reflections on Descartes's method of doubt, including the common reference name of the subject has changed a little over time; an apt evolution of a process that itself is, arguably, a linear evolution of ones' understanding of one's own knowledge, over time. I will touch lightly on this while looking at definitions by Russell, Swartz, Kenny, Broughton, Newman Keiji & Maraldo. Following some brief outlines and attached criticism I offer a little by way of my own critique of those outlines and my understanding of Descartes's method of doubt.

We begin with Bertrand Russell in 1912. Russell, in his collected essays 'Problems of Philosophy' outlines, in an introductory paragraph, Descartes's 'system of doubt' - note at this point our discussion topic it is presented as a 'system' and Russell uses 'see' to refer to information received by the senses and processes by the doubter, whether visually or otherwise.

[Descartes] determined that he would believe nothing that he did not see quite clearly and distinctly to be true. Whatever he could bring himself to doubt, he would doubt, until he saw reason for not doubting it<sup>1</sup>

The result of this method in application, according to Russell, is outlined as such: '[Descartes] gradually became convinced that the only existence of which he could be quite certain was his own', and the sum of this position was that from the point of employing a 'systematic doubt' (Russell does not refer to it as 'Cartesian doubt' or a 'method [of doubt]') to all he could comprehend, perceive and communicate via his meditations, at that point in time resulted in a complete raising of knowledge such that all must lay in tatters as unproved until such times as the doubter could prove them (items of knowledge) true with certainty. So, for Russell's presentation of Descartes, to doubt means to exist.

To my mind this presupposition – to doubt means to exist – is a required point of departure for the employment of the system, as described by Russell. I imagine the result of the first employment of the process leads to a more evolved or positive cogito, which can then be employed as the departure point for all knowledge considered certain or true after the point of doubt, and so might continue to system, like an endless refinement of true knowledge. There are many tomes dedicated to Descartes' cogito and its implications and we cannot address them here however on reading Russell's outline Descartes's system of doubt presents a sort of pivot in a human life from which to demolish all prior knowledge and perception and from which to construct all new knowledge and perception. The potential for devastating or enlightening effects when employed by a single human mind or indeed a society is quite astonishing if we did not look any deeper into the practice of the system.

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Bertrand, 'The Problems of Philosophy', Oxford University Press, Oxford, p7-8

Next, we look at an outline from David Swartz published in 2017. In his 'Critique of Doubt' paper he summarises Descartes's 'questioning method' as such:

In his *Meditations*, with the ostensible intention of using the questioning method to affirm the first principles of knowledge, René Descartes sought something he could be absolutely certain about. What precedes Cartesian questioning is the presupposition that questioning, or doubt leads to knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Swartz tells us that such a presupposition, of course, can be traced back to Plato, and possibly to an even earlier time; Plato was concerned not only with the questioning method but also with uncovering a clear distinction between true and false knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Swartz marries the overlaying aspect of Cartesian doubt – that of 'certainty' of knowledge – with the basic principle of true or false knowledge. Is he suggesting Descartes was trying to glue the gap between false and true knowledge? The principle of this not-quite-yet atom-splitting separation of true and false knowledge is the reason I include this outline in the essay. For if doubt and question are interchangeable and both lead to knowledge that can be defined as true or false. Is Swartz pointing towards a cyclical rather than linear process of accumulation of knowledge that Descartes's method is trying to break free from? That is certainly how it is beginning to look to me.

To illustrate the end of the cyclical methods of questioning or doubt Swartz says:

To speak about the end of doubt is thus to speak about doubt's ultimate motive, its telos, its drive to expel falsehood, as well as to its ultimate death, when doubting is no longer possible. In fact, it appears that doubt itself desires its own death, wants to be expelled, eradicated. When we consider Descartes's final realization that he could not doubt that he doubts, we ought to realize from this that, when put to the test, doubt fails.<sup>4</sup>

So far, we have Russell and Swartz outlining the pursuit of absolute certainty and the death, by its own means of that pursuit. But how does that pursuit work in practice? In Anthony Kenny's 1987 book 'Descartes: A study of his Philosophy' he outlines 'Cartesian Doubt' as such:

Once in his lifetime, Descartes said, a man who seeks truth must call in doubt whatever can be doubted...our beliefs constitute a shaky edifice on rotten foundations. The canvas must be wiped clean if reason is to paint upon it...We cannot, of course, test each belief in turn to see whether it admits of doubt; but we can examine the foundations on which our beliefs in general depend.<sup>5</sup>

An additional, perhaps more physical, outline follows: 'The most apparently solid of our beliefs derive from the senses; even the testimony of others comes to us through hearing'<sup>6</sup>

Kenny is quite clear here, I feel, in his summary, if florid, outline. The reader is presented with a relatable point of perspective for the broad principles of Cartesian Doubt. In even more common language, I read this as equating to – if a person cares about certainty, they must assume everything is uncertain and then like a knowledge inventory, check off what they can confirm. There are practical

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<sup>2</sup> David Swartz, A Critique of Doubt; Questioning the Questioning Method as a Means to Obtaining Knowledge, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol 51, No.2, University of Illinois Press, pp 40-52

<sup>3</sup> *Ibis*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibis*

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Kenny, (1987) *Descartes: A Study of his Philosophy*, New York, Garland pp14-39

<sup>6</sup> *Ibis*

implications of employing this method as stated above 'we cannot, of course, test each belief in turn'.<sup>7</sup> Does this suggest that Descartes is offering a loose inventory of completely certain knowledge and a more detailed inventory of the senses from which knowledge reaches the storehouse of the mind?

The idea of a piece-by-piece, practical approach to employing a method doubt regarding one's knowledge is explained directly by Descartes' analogy:

[Suppose a person] had a basket of apples, and fearing that some of them were rotten, wanted to take those out lest they might make the rest go bad, how could he do that? Would he not first turn the whole apples out of the basket, and look them over one by one, and then having selected this which he saw not to be rotten, place them again in the basket and leave out the others?

This instruction analogy is quite sufficient to explain the basic process but does of course bring about other dependent questions raised by concepts of the deceitful god or evil genius who might attempt to trick one into believing knowledge that was certain to them and not the doubter. These orbiting arguments are very well explained and long examined elsewhere.

The challenge Descartes presents to the reader amounts to this: 'How can you prove the falsehood of my entire system of innate ideas of simple indubitable natures linked by the arbitrary will of an omnipotent God?'

In short this is a very well rounded, informed, digestible and considerate opinion piece that serves as a solid foundational introduction to the makeup of Cartesian doubt for the scholar or layman.

Kenny walks the reader through the concepts of sense perception, unreasoning instinct, perceptible objects, self-deception, mathematics, the role of habit, universal doubt, pre-suppositions, scientific beliefs, conditional considerations, hesitations, suspensions, refutations, positive disbeliefs, veridical perception, fallacies, scepticism and sense correction, analytical empiricism and scholastic rationalism.

God, the deceitful god and the evil genius are discussed extensively towards the end of the article and used as vessels for the playing out of the theories or justification of the reflections Descartes experiences or suggests are experienceable.

Through Descartes journey via the mediums of metaphor, discussion, plain language, objections and counter objections, actualised meditations and contemplative orders

Kenny does this not only with his own ideas but, as he builds to conclusion(s), draws in the thoughts of J.L. Auston, Norman Malcolm, Hobbes, Gouhier, O W Bouwsma, Gassendi, Bourdin, Aquinas, communications with Mersenne and Arnauld. For me, there is additionally, perhaps un-deliberately, much to be drawn from the musings of Chuang-tzu in the sections discussing Descartes validation method of distinguishing between dream and waking selves; a distinction Chuang-tzu perhaps would feel is not entirely necessary or valid for qualitative 'truth'.

There are some conclusions reached which resolve in the reader a good deal of understanding but leave, none the less, perhaps by design a degree of doubt and some further questions over the validity of Descartes theory and meditations on doubt as a route to true knowledge.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibis*

Kenny weaves threads from a number of Descartes writings, occasionally to bolster, sometimes to question and often to contradict Descartes own statements. This feels a little unfair, given that not all was written in the same sitting, or indeed, to my knowledge, at the same time. (*For me, a human must surely be allowed to change his mind and or not be held accountable for everything he says in his history.*).

At this point, we have Russell and Swartz outlining the pursuit of absolute certainty and the death, by its own means of that pursuit and Kenny showing us how to practically employ that pursuit. With these basic principles in place, it is worth exploring a little around one of the more contentious orbiting arguments.

Lex Newman's criticism of Janet Broughton's in-depth treatment of the subject in the book 'Descartes's 'Method of Doubt' is an interesting take of an interesting take. Newman accounts:

On Broughton's interpretation, Descartes builds up indefeasible knowledge from an epistemically privileged class of truths. These favored truths constitute a subset of clear and distinct truths. Whereas the certainty of ordinary clear and distinct perception is defeasible by the deceiving God hypothesis, the certainty of the privileged truths is utterly immune to doubt. Which truths belong to the favored set?<sup>8</sup>

Among those favored ideas are "I exist," "I am doubting," "I desire to know more," "I seem to see a light," "I have an idea of God," and "Something cannot come from nothing. But mathematical ideas are *not* among the favoured few, despite their clarity and distinctness; not even the idea that two plus three equals five is indubitable<sup>9</sup>

This example makes interesting reading, if only for me, as an example of Newman's need for *absolute clarity* of doubtful definitions. What is principally essential, however, is Newman's use of 'class of truth' and 'favored truths' to distinguish between and illustrate a hierarchy of 'clear and distinct truths'. This separation of absolute does, by its existence raise doubt over how absolute 'absolute' can be and so brings the question not 'when is absolute, absolute?'. This atom-splitting enquiry does seem a little defeatist/absurd, given the quest for truth, owing to the direction of travel of the ever more fanciful linguistic gymnastics; a pattern of enquiry from which there can surely be no result satisfactorily sufficient?

With the outlines above and a little further exploration in how we define truth I am mindful to provide some critique by reflection on what I have read and what others have presented. From what I can gather from Descartes, Russell, Swartz, Kenny, Broughton and Newman is that the ultimate prize of the method of doubt is true knowledge in absolute indefeasible form. The method is systematic deconstruction of present knowledge at the point of employment of doubt and sequential reconstruction of the now-new-knowledge with substantially more confidence and a new refreshed and re-invigorated certainty. This is undoubtedly (should we say super-absolutely?) 'a' way to super-certainty but I would like to pose a question that has occurred to me while processing these outlines. I will do that not by grammatical question, for as we have seen, questions lead to more atom-splitting questions.

It is worth, for this reader certainly, to consider the correlation of the outline of Descartes' method of doubt with similar outlined 'methods' of seeking truth. It is worthwhile because Descartes suggests

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<sup>8</sup> Lex Newman, 'Rocking the Foundations of Cartesian Knowledge', Critical Notice of Janet Broughton 'Descartes's Method of Doubt', The Philosophical Review, Jan 2004, Duke University Press, pp101-125

<sup>9</sup> Janet Broughton, Descartes's Method of Doubt, Princeton University Press, 2003, Princeton, p181

one can think their way to 'certainty' by systematic exclusion of knowledge through a purposeful process, whereas the principles of Zen would have the practitioner arrive at the same or certainly very similar situations not by ever decreasing enquiry or doubt but by simply letting go of what the practitioner thinks they know (what Descartes' asks us to doubt).

We can see some support for the correlation here – following an in-depth examination of zen via self-reflection in Keiji and Maraldo's 'Standpoint of Zen' paper (1984), we are presented with a comparison of Descartes's doubt by way of Socrates and Augustine, suggesting Descartes's doubt is perhaps an amalgam of Socrates self-examination and Augustine's intense doubt?

From their study of Zen, Keiji and Maraldo explains Descartes' principles as follows:

In fact, by taking this path he attained the indubitable conviction through which he could proclaim "I am." Until he reached that point, he proceeded by considering as unreliable anything that could be doubted for any reason whatsoever. In his case too the method of philosophy was implicitly a method of self-investigation. It was his resolve - and his practice - in self-investigation to adopt this method and carry it through rigorously. Thus he placed everything in doubt, from all things appearing in the world to studies like mathematics.<sup>10</sup>

They progress their argument further:

The certainty of existence meant a realized self-awareness, and vice versa. The certitudo Descartes discovered in coming to the realization "I think, therefore I am" was of this nature. This "I am" suggests the actuality of the self in ordinary life; but insofar as the "I am" denotes the point of return of a self which underwent a radical doubt and its reversal, the way of self-investigation enfolded in it is far from ordinary. It is, rather, an "I am" possessing a philosophically (i.e., ontologically) founded certainty. It is not the kind of "I am" that anyone is aware of, as already misunderstood by philosophers of that time.<sup>11</sup>

And via this understanding and clarification of standpoint Keiji and Maraldo arrive at their comparison where the 'method' is like Zen and where it also immediately departs from Zen:

The way by which Descartes arrived at the existence and realized awareness of the self was in nature close to the Zen investigation of self. From that point on, however, the character of his thinking took a new turn. Taking the "I think, therefore I am" as a new starting point, he proceeded to the problem of God and further to the problem of our cognitive knowledge of the natural world and things in it. When he used methodical doubt, all these matters were held in reservation; but now this thinking took on the character of inference<sup>12</sup>

While Keiji & Maraldo compares the arrival at the process as similar, the exchange of 'truth' upon arrival and the point of departure of similarity I do think this allows some questions to be raised around potential exploration of the difference in the currency of both outcomes. have taken great interest in the difference between the methodical doubt of Descartes and the authentic doubt of Zen. Keiji and Maraldo present the problem of the differences in doubt as such:

This methodical doubt, however, was not doubt in its authentic sense, a doubt which grips one's whole body-mind, in which the self and all other things in their entirety become one big

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<sup>10</sup> Nishitani Keiji and John C. Maraldo, *The Eastern Buddhist*, Spring 1984, New Series, Vol 17, No 1, Spring 1984, p1-26

<sup>11</sup> *Ibis*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibis*

question-mark, as is the case with the "great doubt" in Zen. Rather, Descartes' point of arrival is the place where the great doubt, in the authentic sense of the word, first begins. The great doubt does not consist in excluding various possible data by means of doubt in its usual sense. Rather it begins with the Cartesian *sum cogitans*, the self-knowing self-being, the ego itself. It begins where the very self which has been brought back to itself by way of such ordinary doubt, which has returned to its own self-being *simpliciter*, once again becomes problematic for and to itself.

We can see here some similarity and parallel with Descartes's explanation that senses of self and knowledge during formative years are what ultimately lead to a situation where 'once in a man's life, he must question everything'.

As a reflective practice it feels in keeping with the process of doubt that I conclude this essay with my own outline and critique of what I understand Descartes' 'Method of doubt' to be, post reading the above authors and commentary.

If I were to distil what I *think* I have gleaned from such esteemed Philosophers and scholars while researching this paper and export it to an individual with no recognisable prior engagement with the subject I would do so as thus:

Descartes paused one day and asked himself (questioning) if he could be certain that anything he had taken for granted as certain in his existence until the point of pausing was a valid representation of what he might have experienced.

This pause allowed for a suspension of his beliefs in himself and his experience and allowed for the process (method) of doubt to begin. This process involved employing a continual questioning of all sense and perception of experience from this 'paused' point forth. Descartes acknowledged that being engaged in the process required a perpetual state of questioning and doubt in order to resolve life experience into a perpetual forward moving/evolving state of certainty, from which there would be no need to question anything at all. While Descartes expresses this process as [at least] once in a lifetime, I would imagine, in effect, once the method is complete there is such a shift in one's cognition that to deny a perpetual state of doubt/certainty would be somewhat counter-intuitive. Indeed, to employ the erasure of perceived knowledge or experience and commit to acceptance of that erasure in perpetuity would somewhat resemble a state of childlikeness often sought by the Taoists and Zen Buddhists.

Upon investigating the method of doubt presented by Descartes in his meditations we have seen how this is outlined by Russell, Swartz, Newman and Broughton, and, compared by Keiji & Maraldo. We have explored how a doubter employs the method of Descartes and seen in brief the difference between methodical and authentic doubt, the similarity of outcome from those different doubts via far eastern Zen. I wonder if the absence of the Christian God in Zen is where the paths deviate?

In summary, Descartes's principle is clear, if laboured, and I would agree with him should be employed at some point in life by all humans, but he does seem to make terribly hard work of it. The tone and atmosphere of Descartes journey to true knowledge via his meditations is all terribly pensive, perhaps this is an echo of Socrates and Augustine or perhaps just part of the Western way or the influence of guilt via Descartes' God, devious or otherwise, we do not know but I do wonder where doubt and guilt with a God figure fit into Descartes' ideas. A Zen monk, on the other hand, while no less arduous in principle, does seem to have a much shorter pathway to true knowledge simply by unburdening

himself of what he has accumulated by way of knowledge via his authentic doubt. The principle is the same, the result is similar, but the methods appear to be quite separate.

It is interesting, to me, that Bertrand Russell entered a simple paragraph in his essay by way of outline describing Descartes's system of doubt and hailing Descartes as the 'father of Western Philosophy', over time this has become of course 'Cartesian doubt' and the 'method [of doubt]' and been very extensively questioned and examined by scholars and philosophers, seemingly to gain insight, provide theory and 'truly' understand what Descartes meant. A process one might be tempted to say constituted doubt in the mind of the scholar.

The end result for the doubter, one avenue suggests, leads to a place of acceptance of true knowledge after the fact, an intelligence position compared to a Zen-like state if held up against what the Zen-doctrines suggest [or don't suggest, depending on your reading]. The quest for true knowledge via Descartes is one of methodically de-constructing what one believes one's world to be but while a Zen monk might discover true knowledge in perpetuity once employed, I do not keep much store in the mind's ability to deny the perpetual nature of doubt is following Descartes.

There is no new insight or knowledge here but outlining Cartesian Doubt and providing some critique by way of research and by way of a little conjecture regarding Zen has, I hope, fulfilled the brief of the essay. I do however, now, have my doubts.