

Rene Descartes (*Meditations, I & II*)



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Points to Remember

- ◆ Exams and assignments will draw from **texts**, in-class lectures, and lecture power-points on all topics.
- ◆ A lecture powerpoint only contains highlights of the lecture, and is therefore, not a substitute for it. I recommend that you bring pen and paper to class, and take extensive notes on the lecture on your end.

Modern Philosophy

- ❖ History of Philosophy through categories: Ancient, Medieval, Modern, Contemporary.
- ❖ These are not just chronological divisions, but signify varying sets of conceptual commitments.
- ❖ Modern Philosophy: break from the medieval world-view.
- ❖ Philosophy as critique: Constantly questions even what it establishes —> philosophy does not escape its own rebellious nature.

Modern Philosophy contd.

- ❖ Rise of the individual: centering of the human.
- ❖ Debates on Human Reason and Experience: trying to understand what these are and the roles they play in cognition (possibilities, limits, scope, criteria, etc.)
- ❖ “Faith” by demonstration.
- ❖ A scientific temperament!

Modern Philosophy contd.

- ❖ Backdrop and Trajectories: Epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical debates came hand-in-hand with social and political philosophy.
 - ❖ Colonization of the world by European powers: rise of imperialism.
 - ❖ Propels an age of political critique: on political regimes, rights, equality, democracy, society as a contract, etc.
 - ❖ Profound inequalities also propels an age of social critique: civil liberties, inequality in rights, demand of rights for oppressed groups, injustice and oppression.

Rene Descartes

- ❖ 1596-1650.
- ❖ Doubt to Skepticism: The tradition inspires Descartes, but he tries to innovate.
- ❖ From Doubt to Certainty: doubting our way to certainty!
- ❖ New version of Rationalism, centered on Individualism
—> rational standards of justification.
- ❖ Empiricism will be a counter to this.

Rene Descartes contd.

- ❖ Math (especially analytic geometry) appealed to him
—> Descartes wrote on geometry.
- ❖ Certainty of its demonstrations (clarity and distinctness).
- ❖ Clarity and distinctness as criteria of truth.
- ❖ His work in philosophy is focused on arriving at clarity and distinctness.

Rene Descartes contd.

- ❖ He challenged medieval conceptions of science.
- ❖ Allied himself with Galileo's views — Galileo was being condemned by the larger community at the time.

Rene Descartes contd.

- ❖ Emphasizes the mechanistic character of the universe (even if created by God, runs on mechanistic principles).
- ❖ Radical nature of this vision (break from the medieval world-view) —>
 - ❖ *Meditations* ends up on the list of forbidden books of the time.

Discourse on Method

- ❖ Book: *Discourse on Method* - a search for rules, which would direct the intellect in a proper way.
- ❖ Four rules: if properly followed, these should be sufficient.
- ❖ The Method of Doubt —> a systematic methodology for philosophical inquiry.

Discourse on Method contd.

1. Never accept anything as true, if you do not have evident knowledge of its truth:
 - > not accepting unexamined assumptions, avoiding opinions (doxa), and avoiding haste.
2. Analysis:
 - > breaking up a problem into parts, for improved understanding.

Discourse on Method contd.

3. Synthesis:

—> to order thoughts in a way that we begin with simplest elements, and then proceed to the more complex ones.

4. To make enumerations complete and reviews comprehensive that you can be sure of leaving nothing out:

—> comes from his faith in the aptness of deduction, which requires setting up all steps properly so that the conclusion clearly follows from these.

Discourse on Method contd.

Rule 1: To avoid hastiness and preconceptions:

- ❖ Accept only that, which is “clear” and “distinct.”
- ❖ Things that we have no occasion to doubt.
- ❖ He has mathematical propositions in mind when he is thinking about this criterion.

Discourse on Method contd.

- ❖ “Clear” – something is “clear” when it is “present and apparent to an attentive mind”
 - > i.e., accept nothing fuzzy, indefinite, etc.
(*Principles of Philosophy*).

Discourse on Method contd.

❖ “Distinct” – “so precise and different from all other objects that it contains within itself nothing but what is clear.”

—> no ambiguity in meaning should be there.

An idea must not only be clear in itself, but it should also be impossible to confuse with any other idea.

The Method of Doubt

- ❖ In the history of intellectual thought, groups (Skeptics like the Pyrrhonists, etc.) used doubt as a method for undermining the testimony of the senses, and casting doubt on reasoning.
- ❖ The Problem of the Criterion – why should I think that what I believe is true? How do I distinguish True from False.
- ❖ Doubt as a first response: generates a perspective on both knowledge and reality.

The Method of Doubt contd.

- Descartes' strategy —>
 - To beat the skeptics at their own game of doubting — to doubt to the point until we can arrive at certainty.
 - This method of radical doubt is known as **The Method of Doubt**, which you see in *Meditation 1*.

The Method of Doubt contd.

- Descartes' strategy —>
 - The first step sets up the stage for making such radical doubt possible (accept nothing except that which is clear and distinct).
 - From such radical doubt, he will deduce other facts, which would be true —> move from mistrust with the given to certainty.

Meditations

The title:

Meditations on the First Philosophy: In which the existence of God and the distinction between Mind and Body are demonstrated.

Published in 1641.

“First Philosophy”

- ❖ Phrase derived from Aristotle —> a search for the first principles of things.
- ❖ Whole of philosophy is like a tree —> roots are metaphysics, trunk is physics, branches are the other sciences.
- ❖ Metaphysics as first philosophy.
- ❖ Physics gives us detailed knowledge of material things —> First philosophy inquires whether material things are the only things there are.

Importance of Rational Demonstration for Faith

“I have always considered that the two questions respecting God and the Soul were the chief of those that ought to be demonstrated by philosophical rather than theological argument. For although it is quite enough for us faithful ones to accept by means of faith the fact that the human soul does not perish with the body, and that God exists, it certainly does not seem possible ever to persuade infidels of any religion, indeed, we may almost say, of any moral virtue, unless, to begin with, we prove these two facts by means of the natural reason.”

(Prefatory Note to the *Meditations*)

Structure of the *Meditations*

- 1: Sets out the problem (Can anything be known?)
- 2: That I exist.
- 3: That God exists.
- 4: Why we make mistakes and how to avoid them.
- 5: That material things might exist, and again that God exists.
- 6: That material things do exist and are distinct from souls.

Meditations 1

- ❖ On things that can be brought within the sphere of the doubtful.
- ❖ Style: Descartes is having a conversation with himself, and takes the reader on a journey with him.
- ❖ Stages of Doubt —> each is more extreme than the previous one.

Doubt

What kinds of things can you generally doubt?

Stages of Doubt

Stage 1: Doubting the Senses and the Argument from Illusion:

- ❖ Not to put trust in the senses since these often deceive us —> oasis, bent stick in water, etc.
- ❖ The senses cannot be trusted since they sometimes deceive us.
- ❖ Since these deceive us sometimes, what guarantee is there that this is not always the case?

Stages of Doubt

But pause:

“But it may be that although the senses sometimes deceive us concerning things which are hardly perceptible, or very far away, there are yet many others to be met with as to which we cannot reasonably have any doubt, although we recognize them by their means. For example, there is the fact that I am here, seated by the fire, attired in a dressing gown, having this paper in my hands and other similar matters.” (1-7)

Stages of Doubt contd.

Stage 2: The Dream Argument:

- ❖ Having concluded that he would be insane to think that his senses mislead him completely, he goes on to consider whether he is now dreaming.
- ❖ “At the same time I must remember that I am a man, and that consequently I am in the habit of sleeping, and in my dreams representing to myself the same things or sometimes even less probable things, than do those who are insane in their waking moments.” (1-7)

Stages of Doubt contd.

- ❖ Things that he is currently seeing like sitting in a chair by the fire can easily be reproduced in a dream.
- ❖ Worse, it could also be the case that his questioning of the fact that he is dreaming is itself a dream.

Stages of Doubt contd.

“... in thinking over this I remind myself that on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions, and in dwelling carefully on this reflection I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep that I am lost in astonishment. And my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I now dream.” (1-7)

Stages of Doubt contd.

- ❖ However, it is reasonable to assume that the ideas that dreams represent might have real counterparts.
- ❖ “At the same time we must at least confess that the things which are represented to us in sleep are like painted representations which can only have been formed as the counterparts of something real and true. ... there are at least some other objects yet more simple and more universal, which are real and true; and of these just in the same way as with certain real colours, all these images of things which dwell in our thoughts, whether true and real or false and fantastic, are formed.” (1-7)

Representational Theory of Knowledge

In Meditations 1, Descartes gives a Representational theory of knowledge:

- ❖ A dominant way of thinking about knowledge in western philosophy.
- ❖ We have no direct access to things in the world but only to our ideas (thoughts in the mind).

Representational Theory of Knowledge contd.

- ❖ Ideas: perceptions, memories, conceptions, etc.
- ❖ Ideas are representations of things in the world, which are external to the mind.
- ❖ It is possible for ideas to represent things either correctly or falsely, in which case they would mislead us.

Stages of Doubt contd.

- ❖ There are some things, however, that seem to be so general that they seem to be beyond doubt.

“For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three together always form five, and the square can never have more than four sides, and it does not seem possible that truths so clear and apparent can be suspected of any falsity [or uncertainty].” (1-7)

Stages of Doubt contd.

Stage 3: The Evil Demon Argument:

- ❖ Most powerful argument for doubting our beliefs about the world —> the most extreme form of doubt.
- ❖ What if there is an evil demon (all powerful), whose sole purpose is to deceive us? Such deception would be all pervasive (even mathematical truths would be dubitable) —> there would be absolutely no certainty.

Stages of Doubt contd.

- ❖ “And, besides, as I sometimes imagine that others deceive themselves in the things which they think they know best, how do I know that I am not deceived every time that I add two and three, or count the sides of a square, or judge of things yet simpler, if anything simpler can be imagined?” (1-8)

Stages of Doubt contd.

- ❖ Contemporary version of the argument: Brain-in-a-vat (an evil scientist stimulates the brain artificially to have perceptions, such that the brain lives in an illusion that what it perceives is real — on waking up it finds that all objects were unreal).
 - ❖ Everything is dissolved into a sea of doubt at this stage —> must suspend judgement about truth.

Stages of Doubt contd.

- ❖ “And just as a captive who in sleep enjoys an imaginary liberty, when he begins to suspect that his liberty is but a dream, fears to awaken, and conspires with these agreeable illusions that the deception may be prolonged, so insensibly of my own accord I fall back into my former opinions, and I dread awakening from this slumber, lest the laborious wakefulness which would follow the tranquillity of this repose should have to be spent not in daylight, but in the excessive darkness of the difficulties which have just been discussed.” (1-8)

Stages of Doubt contd.

Questions to think about:

- ❖ Do you think that anything would be as certain as to survive this extreme form of doubt?
- ❖ Can this kind of doubt be countered?

What Now?

- ❖ Doubt takes us to the point:
 - ❖ Maybe everything is a web of illusion created by an evil genius who is extremely powerful
 - ❖ —> this results in a wide gulf between our thinking and external reality
 - ❖ —> a horrifying thought!

What Now?

“I suppose, then, that all the things that I see are false; I persuade myself that nothing has ever existed of all that my fallacious memory represents to me. I consider that I possess no senses; I imagine that body, figure, extension, movement and place are but the fictions of my mind. What, then, can be esteemed as true?” (1-9)

From Doubt to Certainty

- ❖ *Meditations 2* is a way out of the hopelessness of eternal doubt.
- ❖ To what certainty does methodical doubt lead?

From Doubt to Certainty contd.

- ❖ Having rejected sense experience as a source of absolute certainty (since they mislead us sometimes, there is no guarantee that they wouldn't do so all the time), he turns inwards to the mind.
- ❖ Insight: To be deceived (even by an all-powerful demon), the thing deceived must exist
 - ❖ “Cogito ergo sum:” (Latin) – “I think, therefore, I am.”

From Doubt to Certainty contd.

“Then without doubt I exist also if he deceives me, and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I think that I am something. So that 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.” (1-9)

From Doubt to Certainty contd.

Cogito ergo sum (“I think, therefore, I am”):

- ❖ Follows from, “I am doubting (or getting deceived), therefore, I am.”
- ❖ Doubt is a species of thinking (genus).
- ❖ Thought alone cannot be taken away: it may be the case that none of the things of which I have mental images really exist, but the ability to have mental images does exist.

From Doubt to Certainty contd.

“What of thinking? I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often? Just when I think; for it might possibly be the case if I ceased entirely to think, that I should likewise cease altogether to exist. ... to speak accurately I am not more than a thing which thinks, that is to say a mind or a soul, or an understanding, or a reason, which are terms whose significance was formerly unknown to me.” (1-10)

From Doubt to Certainty contd.

Why do you think Descartes prefers to derive certainty by looking inwards

—> (Cogito ergo sum), rather than saying, for instance, “I come to class, therefore, I am?”

From Doubt to Certainty contd.

- ❖ In case of “I come to class, therefore, I am” —> this pertains to senses, which he has already established as being untrustworthy.
- ❖ Descartes’ rationalism: Mind and Body are separate, and reason’s superiority over bodily emotions are a criterion for certainty.
- ❖ The activity that defines existence is thinking —> the ego cogito as a “thing which thinks” (1-10).
 - ❖ Centrality of the human (the “I”).

The chewing gum exercise

- ❖ How does the chewing gum change after you chew it, that is, what about it changes?
- ❖ Would you still say that it is the same piece of gum and not something else (say for instance, a piece of chocolate)?
- ❖ Why would you say it is the same?

The chewing gum exercise contd.

Physical appearances or mental images generated by the senses do not really confirm that the chewing gum remains the same before and after chewing.

- ❖ —> what defined it before like shape, consistency, taste, etc. have dramatically changed.

The chewing gum exercise contd.

- ❖ It is the intellect that helps us understand this persistence in the middle of change, i.e., the fact that it has certain properties, it changes by virtue of these laws, etc.
- ❖ Contents of the mind like principles, concepts, etc. give us access to its real nature (knowledge).
- ❖ When based wholly on sense experience, our knowledge is imperfect and confused.
- ❖ When we bring rational judgement (such as inference, etc.) to bear on this, it becomes clear and distinct.

Descartes' Rationalism

- ❖ Our language is defective —> when we say that we see people on the street, what we visually see is a bunch of coats and hats that could very well be covering robots.
- ❖ I judge that there are human beings, and not robots — and judgment is in the mind.

Descartes' Rationalism contd.

- ❖ Descartes as a Rationalist – criterion comes from the intellect.
- ❖ Note: although he does not reject God, soul, etc., everything comes down to what the “rational” mind finds to be clear and distinct enough to be beyond doubt—> rejects faith without rational demonstration.
- ❖ Nothing can be more easily apprehend than the human mind.
- ❖ Knowledge is an axiomatic system (so deduction works).