

Descartes Midterm

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In this paper I will outline and briefly analyze the series of arguments for skepticism presented in Rene Descartes's first *Meditation*.

The first argument proceeds from the fallibility of the senses. In it, Descartes claims that his senses have deceived him, and as one ought not ever trust completely any who has even once been deceitful, that he ought never to trust his senses completely; and thus, that any beliefs he has come to hold on the basis of sense experience are dubitable or uncertain. Of course, the implication is that any of us, you or I, could make the same argument based on our own subjective experiences, coming to the conclusion that we ought not to trust our own senses completely either, and thus that all our own sense-based beliefs are dubitable or uncertain.

At first glance, there may appear to be a paradox to this argument, as it proceeds from what appears to be a sense-based premise to a conclusion that we ought not trust beliefs based on senses; thus we ought not take the premise for granted, and thus have reason to doubt the conclusion, in which case the premise actually could be taken for granted, and so forth. However, there are two ways of resolving this apparent paradox. The first is to note that the first premise does not in fact rely on the senses, though it does regard the senses. The reason we would be inclined to call it a sense-based beliefs is that we come to believe that one sense-based belief is false on the grounds that another sense-based belief contradicts it, and that other belief is more strongly held because it is corroborated by many other sense-based beliefs (induction upon which may be what tells us that the former belief is incompatible with the latter). However, this elaborate reasoning on the grounds of a preponderance of sense-based evidence is not necessary to prove our first premise; it is merely enough that we have some set of contradictory sense-

based beliefs, and then from reason alone we can then determine that some of those beliefs must be false, though we cannot be sure which ones. Further, even if the first premise were empirical, it would still not entail a paradox, for the conclusion is merely that we must never *completely* trust our senses, i.e. that sense-based beliefs are not absolutely certain. They may still meet other, lesser epistemological standards, such as being rational or justified or known; and thus such an argument could enable us to know (even on the grounds of sense-based premises, though not with absolute certainty), that no sense-based belief can be known with absolute certainty.

The argument is the dream argument. This argument proceeds from the premise that there is no way to tell whether or not you are dreaming, and thus, that it is in all circumstances epistemologically possible that you might be dreaming — that is, it is always true that as far as you can know, you might be dreaming. From this premise, it follows that we can never be certain that we are actually perceiving all of the things that we believe we are perceiving; we might actually just be dreaming it all instead. Thus, we can never be certain about any of our sense-based beliefs, for if those sensations are actually those of dreams and not of perception, then those beliefs (about the objects we think we are perceiving and so on) will be false. This argument nicely circumvents the fear of paradox that the first one does, for the premise does not even appear to be empirical in nature. It does not claim that we have in the past mistakenly believed our dreams to be real; it merely claims that it is always epistemologically possible that we are dreaming, which is a claim based on reason alone.

But the most powerful of the arguments in the first meditation is the evil genius argument. In this argument, Descartes claims that it is conceivable that there is no material world at all, no other minds, nothing at all but some nigh-omnipotent Evil Genius and oneself, the both merely disembodied souls; and all perceptions of the world are falsely sent into one's mind by the Evil Genius. Like the dream argument, this argument reasons from an a priori premise that it is epistemologically possible that my perceptions are not of any actual world, but mere illusion.

But it is even stronger in that it does not presume that there is an actual world and that one can merely never be sure that one's perceptions are actually of it; it does not even rely on the (perhaps dubitable) claim that there is no way to distinguish dreams from waking life. Rather, it claims only that it is epistemologically *possible* that there could be, by some fantastic circumstance, some illusory state of mind indistinguishable from true perception of reality, from which it follows that it is epistemologically possible that we may be in such a state and thus that any of our perceptions may not be of reality, and thus all sense-based beliefs are dubitable.

But the Evil Genius argument goes even further than undermining all sense-based beliefs, and attempts to undermine even beliefs based on pure reason, the "eternal truths". It is purported that the Evil Genius could cloud our thoughts every time we contemplate one of these eternal truths, causing us to consistently arrive at an incorrect answer. So, for example, when we attempt to add five to seven (presuming the correct sum is actually twelve), the Evil Genius could let us to count up the five, then cloud our minds to think we had counted to six already, or had only counted to four; so as we then count seven more, we could have counted to 11 or 13 instead of 12, and always come to this same answer and thus never discover the error of our ways. The argument is then that this may in fact be what happens every time we try to verify that five plus seven in fact equals twelve; the Evil Genius may fool us into believing that this is so, although it actually is not. Further attempting to bolster the prima facie absurd claim that our beliefs about eternal truths may be false, Descartes invokes God's omnipotence. He claims that God is not limited even by the laws of logic and mathematics, and that those laws are thus only because God believes them to be, not vice versa. Thus, though God wills the eternal truths to be necessarily true, he does not will them to be thus necessarily; that is, he might have willed them otherwise. Thus it is epistemologically possible that what we believe to be eternal, necessary truths in fact are not, for God could have willed them to be some way other than we believe them to be, whilst we could have been deceived into falsely believing as we presently do.

If the Evil Genius argument is successful, it thus casts doubt on both the senses and upon pure reason, leaving us with, it seems, nothing at all certain. But further, it does not only show that none of our beliefs meet the high bar of absolute certainty, but that all our perceptions and reasoning are consistent with the complete absence of any external world at all, much less other minds or other times in the past or future. Thus, any evidence we may come up with is likewise consistent with such a solipsistic worldview, and so we cannot rule out such a possibility, or even decrease its epistemic probability, on the grounds of any amount of evidence. In short, for all we know, we may know nothing at all but that fact itself, that we know nothing at all.