

Rene Descartes on Doubt & Certainty



Rene Descartes(1596-1650)

Main (philosophical) works:

Discourse (1637)

Meditations (1641)

Principia Philosophicae (1644)

The Father of Modern Philosophy

Rationalist (Reason)

Dualism (Mind & Body),(Matter & Sprit), (Objective & Subjective)

➤ Sources of knowledge:

- Sense experience (empiricism)
- Reasoning alone (rationalism)

✓ We truly *know* only that of which we are certain (*a priori*). Since sense experience (*a posteriori* knowledge) cannot guarantee certainty, reason alone must be the means for getting knowledge

➤ **Sense experiences are often wrong.**

➤ **I might be wrong about whether I have a body or if there is a world apart from my imagination (it may be a dream)**

➤ **I might be wrong even about whether my reasoning abilities (e.g., $2+3=5$) can be trusted (evil genius); so I should suspend judgment**

DESCARTES' PROBLEM

- Descartes sets his face against old authorities and emphasized the practical character of philosophy and he took mathematics as the model of his philosophical method.
- He offers a program of human knowledge and sought to construct a system of thought which would possess the certainty of mathematics.

•He was in agreement with the great natural scientists of the new era: everything in [external] nature must be explained mechanically – without forms or essences, but he also accepted the fundamental principles of the time-honored idealistic philosophy and attempted to adapt them to the demands of the new science: his problem was to reconcile the mechanism of nature with the freedom of the human soul

Classification of the Sciences

- (a) The first part of true philosophy is metaphysics, which contains principles of knowledge – what came to be called epistemology, such as the definition and principle attributes of God, immortality of the soul, and of all the clear and simple ideas that we possess;**

- (b) Physics, true principles of material things, structure and origin of the universe, nature of the earth, of plants, animals and man**

Method & Criterion of Knowledge

➤ **Aim: to find a body of certain and self-evident truths.**

- **The method of mathematics is a key: begin with axioms which are self-evident, then deduce logical consequences.**

- **This method must be extended to philosophy.**

- **Descartes combs through the elements and levels of knowledge, examines and discards all those claims which are uncertain and arrives at...one thing is certain: that I doubt or think – It is a contradiction to suppose [think] that that which thinks does not exist at the very time when it thinks.**

Characteristics of Descartes' Philosophical Method

- **Accept as true only what is indubitable.**
- **Divide every question into manageable parts.**
- **Begin with the simplest issues and ascend to the more complex.**
- **Review frequently enough to retain the whole argument at once.**

Descartes or Cartesian Doubt

- The basic strategy of Descartes's method of doubt is to defeat skepticism on its own ground. Begin by doubting the truth of everything—not only the evidence of the senses and the more extravagant cultural presuppositions, but even the fundamental process of reasoning itself.
- If any particular truth about the world can survive this extreme skeptical challenge, then it must be truly indubitable and therefore a perfectly certain foundation for knowledge.

➤ **LEVELS OF DOUBT:**

a) Perceptual Illusion

b) The Dream Problem

c) A Deceiving God

The Method of Doubt

- The transition from opinion to knowledge requires a massive intellectual upheaval, according to Descartes.
- If he has a false opinion, it might be appealed to in support of some other opinion, and this can be a source of error.
 - So it would be best for him to get rid of all his false opinions.
 - But at the outset, he does not have any way of determining which of his opinions are false.
 - His only recourse is to treat any opinion that he had some reason to think *might* be false *as if it were actually* false.
 - In this way, he would do the best he could to empty his mind of all false opinions.

➤ Of course, he might well empty his mind of some true opinions by this method.

➤ If so, he could come to have knowledge of their truth once he learned to recognize the difference between what is true true and false.

- To illustrate this method, Descartes resorted to a "homely" example of someone trying to avoid another kind of contamination.

- Supposing he 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 wrong, how could he do that?

- Would he not first turn the whole of the apples out of the basket and look them over one by one, and then having selected those which he saw not to be rotten, place them again in the basket and leave out the others? (Reply to seventh set of objections to the *Meditations* AT481).

- **This analogy does not work perfectly, though.**
 - **Descartes never tries to set aside all of his opinions.**
 - **He instead progressively casts doubt on various groups of opinions which are based on some preconceived notions that he had.**
 - **If he were indeed to set aside every opinion he had, he would have nothing left on which to base the rest of the investigation.**
- **After having taken as false as many of his opinions as are subject to the slightest rational doubt, Descartes could feel secure with those that he could not rationally doubt.**
 - **His basic strategy was to try to discover in his indubitable beliefs a mark of their truth, and then use that mark to recover some of the provisionally-discarded opinions.**
 - **In practice, it turns out to be harder to dispel the grounds for doubting some opinions than the grounds for doubting others.**

Doubts About Bodies

- A constant theme in Descartes is a distrust of the evidence that we take to be produced by the bodily senses (sight, touch, taste, smell, hearing).
 - Skeptics had always pointed to the conflicts between the sensible appearances of things.
 - For example, a tower seems round from a distance and square close-up.
 - The fact of perceptual variation provides some reason to doubt any opinion about the specific characteristics of material things formed on the basis of the way they appear in sense-perception.
- It might be thought that the doubt induced by perceptual variation is limited to objects with respect to which he is not in an optimal position: they are too small or too far away.
 - Opinions such as that he is sitting by the fire in his dressing gown seem to be beyond doubt, at least given that he is not mad.

- But one does not have to be mad to doubt what seems most obviously true about material objects.
 - Descartes notes that in his dreams he has often been quite convinced that he was sitting by the fire in his dressing gown when he was in fact lying naked in bed.
 - Moreover, he lacks any apparent means for determining whether he is dreaming or awake, so there is reason to doubt even the most obvious of his perceptually-based opinions about what is going on in the material world.

- At this point, Descartes for the sake of argument supposes that he is dreaming and has no body at all.
 - Even if this were so, the images of his dreams would have to come from something.
 - And if that something were not composite like his body, it would at least have to be something "even more simple and general."
 - First, there is "corporeal nature in general," along with its extension.
 - Second, there are the characteristics of corporeal things, such as their quantity, size, number, place and time.
 - In the *Second Meditation*, Descartes will argue that these are the fundamental attributes of bodies.

➤ He suggests that his opinions about these simple and general matters are not subject to rational doubt, because they are true whether he is asleep or awake.

➤ His examples are that two and three equal five, and that a square has at most four sides.

"It does not seem possible that such obvious truths should be subject to the suspicion of being false" (*Meditation One*).

➤ At this point, Descartes raises the strongest skeptical objection of all.

➤ It is based on a long-held opinion that he was created by a God who is powerful enough to do anything.

➤ If that opinion is true, it seems that God could have created no corporeal nature at all, yet made him in such a way that what appears to him looks just like a corporeal world.

➤ So now he has reason to doubt that a corporeal world exists.

❖ **When thinking about this God, Descartes comes to an even more fundamental doubt.**

➤ **He has the opinion that other people have made errors in matters about which they think they know most perfectly.**

➤ **He asks rhetorically whether God could have made him so as to be deceived all the time about such simple matters as whether two and three make five.**

➤ **And on the supposition that he came from some lesser cause than God, the possibility of his being "so imperfect that I am always deceived" is even stronger.**

❖ One of the main questions in Descartes scholarship is whether Descartes had dug a hole so deep that he could not climb out.

❖ Descartes is famous for having introduced "an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever, who has directed every effort at deceiving me" (*Meditation One*).

- It is easy to think that the evil genius would be capable of deceiving us in the way just described, i.e., by having made us to be radically imperfect.

- But in fact, the genius would be fooling us only in the first way described, merely by making everything appear the way it would were there a corporeal world.

❖ Because of this limitation, the scope of "demon doubt" is limited to his opinion about the existence of the material world.

➤ Descartes makes the supposition of an evil genius because his opinion would otherwise remain highly probable.

➤ He is intent on conceiving his old opinions as "wholly false and imaginary," for reasons that become clear only in the Second and Sixth Meditations, where Descartes argues for the separate existence of body and mind.

➤ Contemporary theorists of knowledge tend to regard the existence of the evil genius as a doubt that must be cleared away before we can know that material things exist, rather than as a mere supposition.

COGITO, ERGO SUM

➤ I mistrust every report of my senses, I regard the material world as nothing more than a dream, and I suppose that an omnipotent God renders false each proposition that I am even inclined to believe. Since everything therefore seems to be dubitable, does it follow that I can be certain of nothing at all?

➤ Descartes claimed that one thing emerges as true even under the strict conditions imposed by the otherwise universal doubt: "I am, I exist" is necessarily true whenever the thought occurs to me.

➤ This truth neither derives from sensory information nor depends upon the reality of an external world, and I would have to exist even if I were systematically deceived.

“If I am deceived, then I must exist!”

I cannot doubt the truth of the statement, “I exist.”

I can't think that I am not thinking because then I am thinking; and if I am thinking, then I must exist. To doubt my own existence, I must exist!

Existence of the external world

- **God induced in us a deeply rooted conviction of the existence of an external world; if no such world existed he could not be defended against the charge of being a deceiver [similar to the evolutionary argument].**
- **The existence in my mind of dreams and hallucinations is not a counter argument since God has endowed me with the power of intellect to dispel and correct such delusions.**
- **This God is not a deceiver, but a truthful being, and our sensations must therefore be caused by real bodies.**
- **Descartes, strictly speaking, affirms one absolute substance – God and two relative substances – mind and body, which exist independently of each other but depend on God.**
- **Descartes holds that God has given the world a certain amount of motion: motion is constant: the germ of the principle of conservation of energy.**

The Cogito

- **“I think’ cannot be doubted.**
- **What am I? I am a thing that thinks. I cannot doubt this, yet I can doubt whether I have a body. So I can be separated from a body.**
- **The mind is a separate substance from the body.**

➤ I know with certainty *that* “I” exist (*Cogito ergo sum*), but

➤ *WHAT* am “I”?

➤ Am “I” my body? No, because I can doubt the existence of my body, whereas I cannot doubt the existence of myself (the “I”).

➤ “I” am a *thinking thing*, a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines, and has sensations.

➤ ***'Cogito ergo sum'*** is an indubitable proposition.

➤ **Doubting one's own existence presupposes one's existence.**

➤ **Now the questions arises:**

(a) What is the nature of the statement *'cogito ergo sum'*?

(b) Is it a syllogistic inference like, 'whatever thinks exists; I think; therefore, I exist'?

➤ Descartes says, it is not a syllogistic inference; it is rather a self-evident truth known “by a simple intuition of the mind.”

➤ The scholars are divided among themselves as to the exact nature of the transition from ‘*cogito*’ to ‘*sum*’.

Bernard Williams has shown, there is something unique about the '*cogito*' which cannot be replaced by any other verb, for instance, '*ambulo*'. '*Ambulo ergo sum*' is not as self evident as '*cogito ergo sum*'.

Ambulo ergo sum
I walk, therefore I exists

➤ **Descartes has already proved in the *Second Meditation* the existence of a thinking being who has a clear and distinct perception of mind as a thinking, non-extended thing.**

➤ **This is a proof of the non-mechanical mind which is different from the body and which is subject to mechanical laws.**

**Three metaphysical perspectives
relevant to the “mind-body problem”**

Metaphysical Dualism: Reality is two-dimensional, partly material and partly non-material (minds, ideas, souls, spirits, consciousness, etc.).

Metaphysical Materialism: Reality is nothing but matter-in-motion-in-space-and-in-time. There are no non-material realities.

Metaphysical Idealism: Reality is nothing but Mind, Idea, Soul, Spirit, Consciousness, etc. Matter does not exist (it's an illusion?).

Application to the “mind-body problem”

Metaphysical Materialism: A person is nothing but a physical organism (body only). "Mind" (consciousness) a feature (function, epiphenomenon) of the body.

Metaphysical Idealism: A person is “consciousness only” (mind, soul, spirit); not at all a material being.

Metaphysical Dualism: A person is a composite of (1) “mind” (consciousness, intellect, soul, spirit) and (2) body (automata).

References

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