

Lecture 03: Descartes

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Reasons are provided 'which give us possible grounds for doubt about all things, especially material things, so long as we have no foundation for the sciences other than those we have had up until now'

1. Cosmic Doubt

1.1. Cosmic deception

'How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now? What is more, since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable?'

Is this a reason to doubt all things?

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1. Is Descartes' appeal to cosmic deception supposed to provide reasons which give us possible grounds for doubt about all things?
2. If so, how is Descartes' appeal to cosmic deception supposed to provide reasons which give us possible grounds for doubt about all things?
3. Does it succeed?

Steve's attempt to answer question 2:

1. Sensory perception plus knowledge of platitudes alone do not enable you to know that you aren't cosmically deceived.
2. You do know this platitude: if you are drinking coffee, then you are not cosmically deceived
3. Suppose (for a contradiction) that sensory perception alone enables you to know you are drinking coffee.
4. Then you would be in a position to know you are not cosmically deceived on the basis of sensory perception plus knowledge of platitudes only.

5. Therefore sensory perception alone does not enable you to know you are drinking coffee.

'I had seen many ancient writings by the Academics and Sceptics on this subject, and was reluctant to rehearse and serve this precooked material' (Descartes 1984, p. 94, AT VII:130)

The usefulness of extensive doubt 'lies in freeing us from our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses.'

References

Descartes, R. (1984). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volume II. Cambridge University Press.