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PHIL 153 Paper 2: Descartes

Descartes makes the disconcerting argument that we cannot trust knowledge obtained by use of sense data or our knowledge that is obtained without use of sense data. However, this is simply a starting point; it is a practice in doubt to help us avoid committing formal error and instead consider carefully the evidence such that we might arrive at the right conclusion. Descartes gives a reason to reject each category of knowledge, then goes on to refute both of those reasons. He says the reason we cannot trust our senses is that they have deceived us in the past, so they are not reliable sources of information. Descartes says that the reason that we cannot trust our a priori beliefs is that there may be an evil genius who decided to “create us in such a way that we shall always be deceived even in the things that we think ourselves to know best” (Principles). After tearing down fundamental beliefs, Descartes builds them by arguing that thought necessitates existence, God exists and is not a deceiver, and thus our beliefs can be trusted somewhat even though we are fallible.

Meditation 2 contains the famous statement *Cogito ergo sum* - “I think, therefore I am”. If I think I exist, then some mental activity is going on, and therefore a “thinking thing” (which we will say is me) exists. If I think someone is tricking me into believing that I exist, that is still a thought and therefore a thinking thing still exists. So as long as I am thinking, I can be certain that I exist. This negates the evil genius hypothesis in one specific area. This meditation also establishes a distinction between body and mind: I can be certain that my mind exists, but I do not yet know that my body exists.

The next belief Descartes reinstates is the belief in God. In meditation 3, Descartes first establishes that anything that can be clearly and distinctly perceived must be true, and then he uses this to prove the existence of God. If something is clear, that means you cannot help but notice it. If something is distinct, that means you cannot mistake it for something else. Descartes notes that people, even if they don’t believe in God, nevertheless have a clear and distinct idea of what God is: the most perfect being. Descartes also says that the more perfect something is, the more perfect its cause must be. Since the idea of God is so perfect, that means that this idea must be caused by something that is perfect in every way. Neither I nor anything else I know is perfect, so the cause of my belief in God must be God himself. God is the sum of all perfections, and one such perfection is existing. Therefore, this perfect God, who is the cause of our idea of God, must exist. However, Descartes has not yet proven that God is not a deceiver. To do this, he explains that deception is not a perfection. Therefore, even though God is all powerful, he has no will to deceive, and thus he will not deceive us.

This naturally begs the question: if God isn’t the cause of our mistakes, then who or what is? God cannot be deceiving me, he cannot have given me a faculty for making mistakes, and he cannot have given me imperfect faculties for detecting the truth. If he were to cause me to err, that would contradict God’s power, God’s will, or both. And yet we humans make many mistakes, so something must be causing us to make those mistakes. To solve this problem, Descartes establishes a certain duality: intellect and will. The intellect thinks about things and whether or not they are true. The will judges things to be true or false. The intellect is finite; the free will given to us by God is infinite. If we use our intellect properly, we will not mistakes. However, sometimes we judge things we do not fully understand. It is in these cases that we are prone to error, but such error is the result of our own poor judgement and not of God himself. Thus Descartes circles back to his central idea: we must always use our intellect to think carefully and withhold judgement from an idea until we can be certain that it is true.

In Meditation 6, Descartes explains how we can be certain that our bodies exist. To do this, he considers two different faculties: imagination and intellect. Intellect, as established before, is simply thinking about things. Imagination, on the other hand, is thinking about things and visualizing them in space. Imagination, then, requires sense data, which comes from the body. I would not have the ability to imagine things if I did not have a body and did not exist in material space. As established in Meditation 1, I am a thinking thing. However, these two are not mutually exclusive. I have a body and a mind, both of which are parts of a whole. I am a union of body and mind. My body and mind both provide me with valuable information about the world, I just need to be careful to examine the information presented and consider whether or not it is accurate.

Although Descartes breaks down many fundamental ideas by doubt, he uses Meditations 2 through 6 to go back and rebuild essential foundations stronger. There are several important takeaways from Descartes’ arguments. First, it is important and a valuable pursuit to doubt what we once held firm, not for the sake of being eternally skeptical, but simply so that we can re-examine our beliefs and be sure that we do, in fact, have the right beliefs. Secondly, we can be certain that we exist. Thirdly, we can believe in God - that God is perfect, that God exists, and that God is not a deceiver. Fourthly, we can remember that we have both will and intellect, and that we must use both carefully, as improper use of will or intellect may cause us to make mistakes in judgement. Sixthly, we can know that not only do our minds, exist, but so do our bodies. Each person is a union of their body and their mind and ought to carefully consider data from both sources. Thus the method of Descartes’ is not constant skepticism so much as constant examination, and Clara will do well to remember this as she continues her studies.

Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. 4th ed., Hackett Publishing Company, 1998.