Carol Grace Meehan

Phil 1000

Dr. Kelly Jolley

Short Paper 1

February 25, 2019

Descartes first meditation

In Descartes first meditations he begins by setting up the premises for a problem that the next five meditations attempt to solve. Descartes is aware that he has dubitable and indubitable beliefs. He wants to discard himself of all things dubitable but first, he must decipher between the two.

Instead of going through each belief, one-by-one, he decides to test the sources of his beliefs. This allows for him to have a solid foundation for his beliefs. Descartes starts with the one thing that he is most certain about, his senses. Questioning his senses leads us to three other arguments; deception, dream, and demon.

In his first argument, he targets the deception of his sensory beliefs. Descartes knows that his hands are in fact his hands, and he can; see, touch, taste, smell, and hear. However, he mentions that we are sometimes deceived by our senses. For example, when a building, from far away, looks like one structure but from up close it is in fact a different structure. These examples cloud Descartes mind, but he remains certain his up-close sensory beliefs are not deceiving him. This leaves Descartes with the understanding that deception renders only some sensory beliefs dubitable, like far away things, but not all of them, like knowing your hands. Unless you are dreaming which might allow for all your sensory beliefs to be dubitable.

Descartes’s next argument is the dream argument that calls into question the leftovers of the deception argument. We arrive at this argument because Descartes is looking at his hand, and then has the thought that he could be dreaming that he is looking at his hand. He questions our sensory beliefs by the possibility that our reality is a dream, and how do we determine the difference between real life and a dream. For example, if I was having a dream right now that I am typing on my computer, hearing the clicking sound from my keyboard, when I am lying asleep in my bed, then my sensory beliefs would be deceiving me. So how do you determine the difference? Descartes believes that there is not a clear distinction between being awake and dreaming. Which means we cannot trust all our sensory beliefs. So, if we do not have sensory beliefs what are we left with? Our non-sensory beliefs. ( use example to explain )

Descartes then explains how math and geometry are not based on sensory beliefs and that you could also dream about math, and it still be accurate. This allows for the possibility that our dreams are based on our reality. Which means we might be dreaming now but at some point, in the past, we also must have been awake. This argument leaves us with calling our non-sensory beliefs in to question. What Descartes means by non-sensory beliefs is our understanding of math and geometry or our idea of a higher power, like God. He proposes this idea that if we were created by an all-powerful God, it could be possible for him to deceive us into believing two plus two equals four when it does not. Instead of portraying God as deceptive he creates the possibility of an Evil Demon. In which the Evil Demon can fool you into believing false things, like math or deceiving our senses. All Descartes needs is the possibility of an Evil Demon to make our non-sensory beliefs dubitable. If this is the case this allows for both our sensory and non-sensory beliefs to become dubitable. In conclusion of the demon argument, Descartes then becomes certain that he cannot trust both math and all his senses. This would mean that nothing we perceive through any of our senses to be true is true. Are we even inside our own bodies or are we being deceived into thinking we possess a body?

With each argument, Descartes worry is deepened by the possibility that the world he knows may not actually exist. First, he allows for some of his sensory beliefs, the distant and small things, to be called into question. Next, in the dream argument, he renders all his sensory beliefs questionable and is left with his non-sensory beliefs like math. Then all his beliefs are rendered dubitable in the Evil demon argument. This leaves Descartes with nothing, which like stated at the beginning of the first meditation, was what he had to do to in turn form true beliefs. This slippery slope leads to questions that could cause so much damage, that Descartes attempts to rebuke in his following meditations.

In the evil demon argument, Descartes proposes that he knows something is certain only if he can conclude that it is not dubitable. Although, if he is being deceived by an evil demon then the ‘certain’ things like his senses he believes are now considered dubitable. I object the possibility of an evil demon capable of deceiving our senses. His tactics would not work on us, because we have cognitive thought and would be able to detect manipulation. At the end of the demon argument in the first meditation Descartes has rendered everything dubitable but he is still searching for certain knowledge. As we saw in in both scenarios of Bouwsmas’ essay, Tom is not fazed by the change in his reality. In the first, through his senses, he can tell that the flowers are now paper and that Milly is not flesh and blood anymore. In the second the demon strips away Tom’s reality but thinks he deceives Tom by creating an illusion, but Toms senses remain the same. He can touch, smell, taste, and hear just like he could in his normal reality. Tom could detect that he was being deceived by a higher power through his senses, that Desecrates deems unreliable. While I believe that the evil demon can manipulate us, I also believe that we would have no means to determine the deception or illusion and therefore be unaware of it. Like in Bouwsmas essay, the demon and Tom have different definitions of illusion because of their differences of mortal versus immortal perception. What is a thick illusion for the demon is just Toms reality. I believe that the idea of an evil demon is not beyond a reasonable doubt but it would be useless against humans and the search for what is indubitable.

If Descartes were to hear my objection I think that he would say the proof of the effect that the evil demon has on a human is not what he is trying to do. He would say that the evil demon is only made to illustrate the possibilities of some higher powers deceiving us. Also, I believe that Descartes would agree that the illusions Bouwsmas explained do not affect humans’ reality because they are unaware of it. And if there is just the possibility this gives him the premise to continue with his meditations. The first meditations are the broken pieces that Descartes uses to build back his ideas in meditations two through six.

I support Descartes response because I think that Descartes proposes this idea to get his readers to doubt their own cognitive thoughts, and place these irrational fears in the reader's mind. Which allow for the reader to cling to what Descartes suggest as an answer to the damage he has caused. Descartes presents this argument as just one example of something that calls into question everything we perceive to understand. Descartes manipulatively sets the premises to work in his favor for his argument to be perceived as correct.  Descartes starts out with the intentions to clear his mind and start with nothing, which the Demon argument successfully accomplishes. I believe that Descartes himself does not even believe that an evil demon is possible, just that he chooses this option as one of many possibilities for doubting all our cognitive thoughts.