Short Paper one

Phil 1000

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In the First meditation, Descartes presents the idea that our perceptions are not completely reliable and any belief in the world is relatively doubtful. To get this conclusion, Descartes provide three arguments: deception argument, dream argument and evil demon argument.

Opening with the Descartes’s reflection of many knowledge in his life come from perception and sensation, he propose the first deception argument. Because Descartes wants to rebuilt his whole superstructure of science, a feasible way is to divide his knowledge into dubitable and indubitable and discard all dubitable things. At the same time he finds that all the indubitable things is acquired by smell, touch, taste, sight and sound and he thinks only small and distant things have opportunity to conceive him. However, when he notice his hand, he realized that even a concrete thing like his hand or body, there is still possibility that at this very moment he is dreaming and all these things are not true. Before a further thinking, Descartes negate the possibility that he is a madman, otherwise all the analyses are useless .

Furthermore, in which comes to the dream argument he could not find any clear distinction between dream and reality to help him know where he is. The reason why we could not do that is because the composition of dream is comes from reality, even a painter compose two totally irrelevant subjects to create a new one, like a mermaid, the composite parts are drawn from real things. In such case, everything we use our perception to get in reality has chance to be seen in our dream, which means they are trustless because at that moment we can’t know if it is in our dream or reality. Whereas, math could be the exception, because math is not a subject that we have to learn based on our perception, we don’t touch, smell, taste math etc. Also it is obvious that one plus one is two no matter in dream and reality. So in first and second arguments, Descartes tries to proposes a pervasive doubt to the world except arithmetic or geometry which based on simple things rather than sensation.

The third argument is a further doubt of the first two, about math. If we can doubt anything, why can’t we doubt math? Firstly, Descartes supposes that there is an all-good and powerful God who creates everything, so God also has the ability to deceive himself to let him can’t see the true result of two plus two is five rather than four. However, it is clearly that Descartes also does not believe or he doesn't choose to believe the so-called “kindness” God would deceive himself so that he conveys another possibility that there is an evil rather than God who make those tricks to us. The goal of God one looks like a bridge between the first two arguments and third one. Descartes assumes there is no sky, air, earth and all the objects in this world are delusive dreams which is implemented by Evil demon. Because God could not deceive us since God is all kind, the only possibility is there is a “supremely powerful and intelligent ” evil demon who “does his utmost to deceive me”. In this argument, Descartes wants to convey since all the world, the sky, color are not true, if we want to learn this world, we have to use a skeptical processing method, even if we can’t find what is true, at least we know what is false and wouldn’t be cheated by them. This new assumption not only makes up the impossibility of deception of God but also imply the trustless of math. After this argument, Descartes has successfully built his whole outline of pervasive doubt.

The third argument is the highlight and deepest part of this meditation. If we compare three arguments together, The first two arguments Descartes doubt everything in the world except math by using the flaw of perception and sensation. Then in the beginning of the third argument Descartes proposes a possibility of a deceiving God who trick human, but he denied this thought immediately because God has the all-good character. So Descartes create another role as powerful as God but lack of good quality to make his skepticism toward everything. The different between the first two arguments and the third one is in the first one, the reason we are deceived is because our own problem---flaw of perception and sensation, however in the Evil demon argument, the problem is not our sense, all our misunderstanding to the world is because Evil demon deceive us.

A possible objection would based on Bouwsma’s essay, Descartes’ Evil Genius. In two scenarios Evil demon can’t get the expect result from Tom even Evil demon finally make Tom realizes that his belief and understanding is illusion which makes Evil demon feel frustrated. From my perspective is since demon is on another level which is superior than Tom, for Tom, the world is still what he sees, the flower is still what he see in every morning, Milly is real Milly he sees everyday and smell as well, so when Demon told Tom the flower is not the real flower but a new fake flower and the real flower is destroyed by him, it is not surprised that Tom can’t understand Demon’s claim. Although for Demon, the fake flower is not real because Demon knows what is the real flower looks like, for Tom, the “fake” flower is just the real flower because he has no experience about what a (for Demon) real flower looks like, so there is no way that Tom could somehow gain a powerful capability or a new kind of sense “cerpicio” to tell the difference and understand what demon has done to this world. In such case, what Demon has done has no impact on Tom.

A possible response from Descartes to this argument is even Demon feels frustrated and disappointed about the result that Tom can’t find he is being deceived all the time, it still doesn't approve Demon’s trick is not successful. However this actually prove that demon’s deception is too successful to be broken.

I agree with Descartes’ response. As Evil demon who has superior power than human. If human is under the control of demon, there is no need for demon to think if they can deceive human because human will feel and sense the world in terms of what demon want them feel. if human and demon are in two totally different world and demon has no impact on human. In this case, no matter demon feels confuse or happy with the result, it won’t change Tom. Actually, as long as demon choose to believe Tom or human are deceive by his trick, it is enough.

However, I have a personal idea about the Descartes’ definition of “supremely good” in the assumption of God part. If God is on a higher or the highest level, it is likely that God has different understanding of “good”. According the Descartes’s definition of good, as an individual, the most important and impressive feeling is about himself/herself. So if God do good thing to each individual, god is good. On the other way round, if God do bad thing like deceive individual from truth then god is bad. On the one hand, for example, on the prairie, lion have to eat deer and deer have to eat grass for survive. How could we not let lion eat anything but still alive. Even one specific deer is dead, but other deer have chance to survive and the balance in the prairie is not broken. On the other hand, let we suppose that once a lion almost ate a deer, finally deer ran away but was injured. This seems like a bad thing for deer but the deer has become more alert since then. So it is hard to give a concrete definition about good or bad. perhaps it is bad from our point of view but good from God’s perspective. So it may not be a good reason to detour God argument from this point.