

Meditating on Descartes, Part I
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First published in 1641, Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* is arguably one of the most important works in the history of philosophy. Having departed from the medieval habits of basing philosophical conclusions upon theological premises and writing exclusively in Latin, Descartes is considered the first “modern” philosopher by thwarting both trends. In addition, his nearly complete break with the Aristotelean tradition—resident in philosophy throughout the Medieval period—is further testament to his importance.

I: Certainty and Methodological Doubt

Descartes' central epistemic preoccupation is with *certainty*. Realizing that often many people believe things which are later discovered to be false, he sought to “raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations” of knowledge (AT 17). For Descartes, to build knowledge upon an uncertain foundation is a recipe for falsehood. Rather knowledge, just like a building, is only as secure as its foundation. If we begin from a solid starting place and argue correctly from this epistemically secure ground, then it follows that everything which is built upon it will also be certain.

His initial method of clearing the ground is that of *hyperbolic doubt*. Throughout the first Meditation, he systematically doubts everything which is possibly dubious, since that which admits doubt cannot be certain (by definition: certainty means being free from doubt). He does this in three major arguments: the fallible senses argument, the dream argument and the evil genius argument. Each in turn seeks to shed doubt upon a unique epistemic process: sense empiricism, judgment empiricism and concept empiricism, respectively.

The fallible senses argument (AT 18-9) seeks to establish that simple sense impressions can be misleading. Just as in water a straight straw looks bent or our visual awareness of small and distant objects are deceptive, Descartes argues that sensation cannot be a secure basis for knowledge. However, it may be argued that even though senses can be mislead, one can still *judge* veridically despite this. Just because I see someone flying, I might use my own judgment as a corrective measure to these mistaken impressions—to convince myself that my friend is not actually flying. Secondly, the dream argument (AT 19-20) seeks to deny just these judgments as a foundation. In dreams we often judge things about our circumstances, etc., which are not actual. While I am off dreaming of adventures and such, my body is lying unconscious in bed. Further, we are usually unaware of the fact that a dream is such while we are in the throes of sleep—we judge the dream to be actual. Thus, since there is a possibility that our lives are nothing but a dream, and there is no higher criteria to differentiate between the dream and reality, judgments admit doubt and must be cast aside. But even if our judgments are flawed, one still might argue the conceptual relationships such as ' $2 + 3 = 5$ ' and that 'a square has four sides' are still certain. Lastly, the evil genius argument (AT 22-3) seeks to cast doubt on our knowledge of conceptual relations. It is possible that there exists “an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever, who has directed his entire effort at deceiving me.” If this is the case, then our concepts may themselves be subject to doubt, since such an evil genius might be manipulating me into thinking that a square has four sides, when in fact it has twelve.

Note that Descartes need not establish the certainty of each mode of doubt here. All he needs to show is that they are *a priori* possible, and if so the target of these arguments are not certain—since that which is possibly false cannot itself be certain. Systematically, he dismantles the entirety of our knowledge—showing in the end that there is nothing about which we can truly be sure.

II: A Thinking Thing

In Meditation Two, Descartes stumbles upon such a foundational aspect which can serve as the basis for all knowledge, and halt our tail-spin of doubt from the first Meditation. This is nothing other than his most famous line, “I think, I am,” or in Latin “*cogito sum*” (AT 25).¹ The proper way to interpret this, I believe, is as *performative utterance*, which itself negates the possibility of doubt: for in order to doubt the *cogito* one must be thinking, and in so doing that establishes that there must be something which is thinking (the “I”). Thus, not only is the principle immune from doubt, but doubt itself serves as the warrant of its own certainty. From this point in the text onwards, the rest of what we know will be systematically rebuilt from this secure foundation.

The other substantive argument in the second meditation is the “wax argument,” (AT 30-1) which establishes two things: 1) the difference between primary and secondary properties and 2) that the nature of things is known most truly through the mind, not through the senses. Examining a piece of wax in two states, in its cold, solid state and its heated liquid state, each and every visual property seems to change. What was once opaque becomes translucent, what was solid is now liquid, what was cold is now hard, etc. However, we are sure through the mind (even though the senses seem to indicate otherwise) that it is the same wax. Further, there are qualities of the wax that do not change, namely that it has a shape, that it has a size, and that it has a specific motion.² Thus these “primary” qualities are known solely through the mind. From this it follows that “nothing can be perceived more easily and evidently” than through the mind alone. It is this that makes Descartes a *rationalist*, one who believes reason is a corrective measure against the senses, and that it is through reason one knows most truly.

III: The Existence of God

The subject of most of the third Meditation is the existence of God. Methodologically, Descartes feels that he needs to prove that God exists and that he cannot be a deceiver in order to remove some of the ground for doubt (AT 36). He offers here an argument known historically as the “cosmological argument.” The argument itself is deceptively simple, but it relies upon a set of distinctions and terms that may be unfamiliar to the modern reader. I shall endeavor to explicate these first.

Of those things that I can be said to know include 1) ideas, 2) volitions or affects and 3) judgments (AT 37). From the nature of volitions, it follows that they cannot be false (For example, does it make sense to tell me that it is false that I like enchiladas? It seems odd). Likewise, even though ideas can be “materially false,” i.e., not correspond to anything in reality, it is not false that I have such an idea. Thus, judgments seem to be the most frequent cause of error.

Ideas can be of three kinds: 1a) innate (from me but not caused by me), 1b) fictitious (from me and caused by me) or 1c) adventitious (not from me and not caused by me). He first takes up the question of adventitious ideas, since it is most questionable that things appear as they actually are caused by objects outside of me. I have good reason for believing that adventitious ideas are not caused by me,

1 Note that the cliché version of this expression is not what is written in the text. The *Meditations* says “I, think; I am” [*ego sum, ego existo*] is necessarily true whenever I utter it or conceive it in my mind.” (AT 25) Elsewhere, in the *Principles of Philosophy* (I, 10), he gives his famous quotation. The common mis-formulation “I think therefore I am” appears elsewhere in his *Discourse on Method*, originally written in French: “*Je pense, donc je suis.*” One should not import that formulation to the *Meditations*, as the addition of the word “therefore” would likely cause one to interpret the *cogito* as an inference (an invalid one at that), and it would thereby lose its performative character—negating its possibility as a foundational principle.

2 Not here it is not important which exact size and shape it has, but *that* it has a size and a shape—whatever that may be. Of course the wax will change size and shape when heated, as most compounds will.

since they seem to be taught by nature and are not subject to my will (AT 38). Although neither is sufficient to conclude that these thoughts agree *completely* with their objects. An example he offers is the sun: we have a visual idea that the sun is about the size of a quarter, and an astronomical notion that dictates the sun is many times larger than the earth (AT 39). Both ideas cannot resemble the same thing.

The basis for his cosmological proof is the principle that nothing comes from nothing (*ex nihilo nihil fit*). A corollary notion here is that there must be at least as much reality in the cause of the idea as there is in the idea itself (AT 40-1).³ As to the 'levels of reality,' there are three: *formal reality* is capable of producing as much reality as the idea, and is used by Descartes in the way we understand 'real' things, as existing in the world. An idea has *objective reality* in mental representation of a thing (in the mind).⁴ Finally, *eminent reality* is such that it can produce any degree of reality in the effect. Since formal reality is "more real" than objective reality, it follows that all ideas which have objective reality in representation must have at least as much reality either formally or eminently as the idea itself, otherwise something would have come from nothing. Further, although ideas may not be perfect representations of objects,⁵ there must be real things corresponding to those ideas.⁶ Lastly, since I am merely at this stage a thinking thing, there are no ideas which could surely come from my own nature alone.

Now, I have in my mind an idea of a God, which he defines as "a certain substance that is infinite, independent, supremely intelligent and supremely powerful, and that has created me along with everything else that exists." (AT 45) Since this idea of an infinite God must have as much reality formally or eminently as there is objectively in my mind; and since I am finite, it follows that the idea could not have caused by me—thus cannot be fictitious. Therefore, since nothing can come from nothing, the idea must have been caused by something adventitiously which has formal reality (God). There must be an infinite being.

The last part of the Meditation deals with some objections to this argument, and builds in some clarifications. I will not explicate all of these here. However, the last few paragraphs are important. Here is where he establishes that the idea of God must be innate, and from the infinite nature of God it follows that He cannot be a deceiver (AT 51-2). Since God is a perfect being and deception is an imperfection, God cannot therefore be a deceiver.

Discussion Questions:

1. Is the *cogito* a necessary truth, as Descartes seems to think? Are there objections one can offer to illustrate its doubtfulness? Why or why not?
2. Is the cosmological argument sound? Does the existence of the idea of an infinite being imply that there exists an infinite being? Why or why not? You may want to consider some of the objections to the argument (AT 45-51) in connection with this.
3. Does Descartes establish what he sets out to do, viz., to prove that God exists and is not a deceiver? Does this remove his ground for doubt as he thinks? Why or why not?

³ One might find a loose analogue here with the conservation laws in physics (mass, energy, motion, etc.).

⁴ This is counterintuitive for those who are used to the contemporary distinction between subjective (in the head) and objective (in the world). Here he means objective as we mean subjective.

⁵ Here he offers the sun as an example (AT 39)

⁶ Possible objection: what formally real object corresponds to the idea I have of a unicorn?