

## Descartes' sceptical arguments<sup>1</sup>

Descartes begins his *Meditations* by presenting three arguments that support scepticism, sometimes called the 'three waves of doubt'. In the first, he presents an argument from illusion to begin to question his knowledge from sense experience. In the second, he questions whether he can know whether he is awake or asleep. This challenges empirical knowledge more robustly. In the third, he presents his version of the 'brain in a vat' thought experiment: can he know that he is not being deceived in all his experience and thought by a powerful, malicious demon?

### ON DOUBT AND CERTAINTY

Descartes begins *Meditation I* by declaring that he has known for a long time that in order to establish anything 'in the sciences that was stable and likely to last', he would have to start from the foundations. He does not need to reject as false everything he thinks he knows, but he needs to avoid believing things 'that are not completely certain and indubitable'. To establish this certainty, he seeks to test his beliefs by doubting them. He adopts philosophical scepticism as his starting point. As he tries to call his beliefs into question, he repeatedly asks how he can know they are true. So he understands knowledge in terms of what is 'completely certain and indubitable'. If we can doubt a belief, then it is not certain, and so it is not knowledge. This procedure for establishing what we can know to be true is Descartes' 'method of doubt'.

If Descartes doubted each belief in turn, this would take forever. So he decides to question the principles on which his beliefs are based. We can understand this as his calling into question the general justifications we offer for our beliefs.

### AN ARGUMENT FROM ILLUSION

So what can we doubt? Descartes begins by presenting an argument from illusion as many of his beliefs are based on his sense experience. He notes that he has, in the past, been deceived by his senses - things have looked a way that they are not. Things in the distance look small, for instance. Or again, an oar half-submerged in water looks crooked.

But, Descartes remarks, such examples from unusual perceptual conditions give us no reason to doubt all perceptions, such as that I am looking at a piece of paper with writing on it. More generally, we might say that perceptual illusions are special cases (and ones we can frequently explain). Otherwise we wouldn't be able to talk about them as illusions. So they don't undermine perception generally.

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<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 189-93

## **THE ARGUMENT FROM DREAMING**

Descartes then doubts whether he knows he is awake. Sometimes when we dream, we represent to ourselves all sorts of crazy things. But sometimes we dream the most mundane things. I could be dreaming that I'm looking at a piece of paper. I could even have the thought, while I'm dreaming, that I'm not dreaming! There is no reliable way to tell whether I'm awake or asleep.

This argument attacks all sense perception, even the most mundane and most certain. I cannot know that I see a piece of paper because I cannot know that I am not dreaming of seeing a piece of paper. It questions whether we can tell what reality is like from what we experience, since those experiences could be no more than a dream.

We can object that there are reliable ways of distinguishing waking perception from dreaming, such as the far greater coherence of perception. But what Descartes means is that I cannot know, of my perception now, whether I am awake or asleep. The objection assumes that I can rely on my memory of what I have experienced to compare it with my dream. But what if I'm dreaming that I remember this?

Descartes then claims that even if he were dreaming, and may be imagining particular physical objects, dreams are constructed out of basic ideas and these must correspond to something real - ideas of body, extension, shape, quantity, size, motion and time. And so the truths of geometry seem secure, as to truths of arithmetic, such as ' $2 + 3 = 5$ '. Even if he is dreaming, this seems impossible to doubt.

## **THE EVIL DEMON**

But Descartes then casts doubt on even these claims of mathematics by questioning whether God may have deceived him. Is it possible that he could go wrong in adding two and three? To the objection that God is good and wouldn't deceive Descartes like this, Descartes introduces a further doubt. Suppose that God does not exist. Suppose, worse, that all my experiences are produced in me by an evil demon who wants to deceive me. If this were true, I wouldn't know, because my experiences would be exactly the same (just as with the brain in the vat thought experiment). So I cannot know that I am not being deceived by an evil demon.

Descartes uses the evil demon supposition to make sure that he doesn't believe anything he can't know. It seems that he can't know anything - that there is an external, physical world or even the basic truths of mathematics. Unless he can rule out the possibility that he is being deceived by an evil demon, then he can't be certain of anything. He has reached the point of global scepticism.

## DESCARTES' RESPONSE TO SCEPTICISM

Descartes' response to the global scepticism at the end of *Meditation I* is to use rational intuition and deduction. He begins with the *cogito*. He argues that even if an evil demon is deceiving him, Descartes can know that he exists and that he thinks. He can know about his own mind and the thoughts he has. He then builds on this by developing his theory of clear and distinct ideas. (For more on the cogito and clear and distinct ideas, see the handout 'Reason, intuition and knowledge'.) This enables him to argue that the truths of mathematics are indubitable, and so he can know these as well.

However, he still has no certainty about the causes of sense perception, and so the existence of a world of mind-independent physical objects. He has sensory experiences in his dreams as well, when he is not seeing or hearing at all. However, by exploring his ideas, he is able to know that his concept of a physical object is a concept of something extended in space, but that is all for now. At this point, Descartes cannot move beyond idealism.

Descartes' next move in reconstructing what he can know is to attempt to prove the existence of God relying just on the concept of GOD and other clear and distinct ideas, e.g. concerning causation. (See the handouts 'Descartes' Trademark argument', 'Descartes' cosmological argument' and 'Descartes' ontological argument'.) Not only can God's existence be known from the concept of GOD, but also a number of other truths about God's nature. Among these, one of the most important for Descartes' project is that God is not a deceiver and God is omnipotent. It is on this basis that Descartes meets the challenge of scepticism head on.

Because God is not a deceiver, then God would not allow incorrigible errors, but has given me the ability to form true beliefs (see the handout 'The Cartesian circle'). And so I can dismiss the possibility of the evil demon - if an evil demon were deceiving me, I would have no way of correcting my beliefs about the world. Among these beliefs is that physical objects exist and are extended in space. Because God can bring about anything that corresponds to a clear and distinct idea, and is not a deceiver, I can know that there are such physical objects, which I experience in perception. (For the full argument, see the handout 'Descartes' proof of the external world'.)

But how do I know that I am not dreaming? At the very end of the *Meditations*, Descartes also uses God's not being a deceiver to solve this objection. He accepts that we can tell the difference between dreaming and being awake, because memory connects up perceptions coherently, but not dreams, and because we can confirm our perceptions using different senses. This response is only available now (and not in *Meditation I*) because he has established that God is not a deceiver. Without that, we couldn't rely on memory in this way.

We must nevertheless be careful about what we claim to know through perception. Our sense perceptions are not 'reliable guides to the essential nature of the bodies located outside me, for on that topic they give only very obscure and confused information'. We can and do continue to make mistakes about what we perceive.

Our individual perceptual judgments will not qualify as certain in the way clear and distinct ideas do. In particular, we shouldn't think that our perceptions of physical objects as having properties of colour, smell, taste, temperature, and so on, resemble the objects themselves. The essential nature of physical objects is given not through sense experience, but through an a priori analysis of our concept of PHYSICAL OBJECT. Thus, Descartes ends up adopting indirect realism, drawing a distinction between primary and secondary qualities and defending the claim that we can know that physical objects have primary qualities but we cannot know that they have secondary qualities.