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Doubt

Introduction to the Problem

A question raised by many philosophers in recent centuries has been: ‘What can I know?’ Other versions of the same basic question might be: ‘What can I be certain of?’ or ‘What cannot be called into doubt?’ If a philosopher thinks we cannot know something – or that we cannot be certain of it, or that it must be called into doubt – then that philosopher is known as a *sceptic* about that thing. A sceptic is a doubter of something. *Scepticism* is a view that says things are in doubt.

A traditional example would be scepticism about whether there is a world of ordinary objects ‘out there’. We usually think we know there are such objects around us, and that we are not just experiencing the contents of our own minds. A sceptic about ordinary external objects would be someone who argued that we do not know this, that we cannot be certain of this, that this should be called into doubt. The kind of conversation which is the butt of jokes about philosophy, the ‘Can I know there is a glass of water here on the table?’ kind, is a conversation you might have with a sceptic about ordinary external objects.

Often a philosophical writer will use scepticism as a tool, in order to discover just what *can* be known, or what we *can* be certain about. Then the aim is to strengthen our confidence in knowledge by challenging it to beat the arguments of a sceptic. The sceptic need not be a real person. Rather one may simply *imagine* debating with a person who is determined to show that little or no knowledge is possible.

Debating with an imaginary sceptical opponent is an instance of a common technique used in philosophical writing: the technique of conducting a

dialogue. Some philosophers have actually written dialogue between two or more characters, Plato being the unparalleled master of this style. But there can be dialogue in more disguised forms in a piece of writing.

Very frequently a philosopher will make a point, then follow it with ‘But someone might object . . .’ or ‘Suppose someone were to say . . .’. An opponent pops up in the text in order that the author can ‘reply’, advancing his or her own case by answering an objection he or she has thought of. A still more disguised form is what we could call the ‘dialogue in a single voice’ an example of which we find in our first passage.

Introduction to Descartes

This short piece is one of the most famous pieces of philosophical writing. There can scarcely be a student of Western philosophy anywhere who has not read and puzzled over the First Meditation, written by the French philosopher René Descartes in 1641.

René Descartes (1596–1650) was one of the greatest thinkers of his day and is often called the father of modern philosophy. He did important work in physics and mathematics, and in philosophy was most influential for his views about the foundations of knowledge, and his distinction between mind (or soul) and body. He was in search of a complete system of knowledge, in which he would prove the existence of God, understand the nature of the human mind, and establish the principles on which the material universe can be studied. The *Meditations on First Philosophy* was published originally in Latin and in French. It is a masterpiece of compressed argument from the period of Descartes’s mature philosophy.

Descartes gives his First Meditation the title ‘What Can be Called into Doubt’. He tries here to press doubt to its limit. The basic pattern is this: the author argues that something or other can be doubted, finds a reason for resisting that doubt, then invents a new reason for pushing the doubt further, then finds another reason for resisting, then invents a new reason for doubting. That is why I called this a ‘dialogue in a single voice’.

Descartes is not a sceptic: he is using a dialogue with scepticism in pursuit of knowledge. But he is trying in the First Meditation to give the sceptical line of thought the strongest argument he can find. The aim is to discover certainty, but to do so only after making doubt as thorough as possible.

There are six Meditations altogether, and, although they form a relatively short work, Descartes announced large ambitions in its subtitle: he wanted to demonstrate the existence of God and the distinction between the body and the soul (the distinction known as dualism). But for now the reader should concentrate simply on the selected passage, which consists of the whole of the First Meditation in an English translation.

René Descartes, ‘First Meditation: What Can be Called into Doubt’

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last. But the task looked an enormous one, and I began to wait until I should reach a mature enough age to ensure that no subsequent time of life would be more suitable for tackling such inquiries. This led me to put the project off for so long that I would now be to blame if by pondering over it any further I wasted the time still left for carrying it out. So today I have expressly rid my mind of all worries and arranged for myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation, to the general demolition of my opinions.

But to accomplish this, it will not be necessary for me to show that all my opinions are false, which is something I could perhaps never manage. Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. And to do this I will not need to run through them all individually, which would be an endless task. Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested.

a → Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.

Yet although the senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance, there are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses – for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are

paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass. But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.

[b]→ A brilliant piece of reasoning! As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake – indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events – that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when, in fact I am lying undressed in bed! Yet at the moment my eyes are certainly wide awake when I look at this piece of paper: I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing. All this would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep. Indeed! As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. The result is that I begin to feel dazed, and this very feeling only reinforces the notion that I may be asleep.

Suppose then that I am dreaming, and that these particulars – that my eyes are open, that I am moving my head and stretching out my hands – are not true. Perhaps, indeed, I do not even have such hands or such a body at all. Nonetheless, it must surely be admitted that the visions which come in sleep are like paintings, which must have been fashioned in the likeness of things that are real, and hence that at least these general kinds of things – eyes, head, hands and the body as a whole – are things which are not imaginary but are real and exist. For even when painters try to create sirens and satyrs with the most extraordinary bodies, they cannot give them natures which are new in all respects; they simply jumble up the limbs of different animals. Or if perhaps they manage to think up something so new that nothing remotely similar has ever been seen before – something which is therefore completely fictitious and unreal – at least the colours used in the composition must be real. By similar reasoning, although these general kinds of things – eyes, head, hands and so on – could be imaginary, it must at least be admitted that certain other even simpler and more universal things are real. These are as it were the real colours from which we form all the images of things, whether true or false, that occur in our thought.

[c]→ This class appears to include corporeal nature in general, and its extension; the shape of extended things; the quantity, or size and number of these things; the place in which they may exist, the time through which they may endure, and so on.

[d]→

e→ So a reasonable conclusion from this might be that physics, astronomy, medicine, and all other disciplines which depend on the study of composite things, are doubtful; while arithmetic, geometry and other subjects of this kind, which deal only with the simplest and most general things, regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not, contain something certain and indubitable. For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides. It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false.

And yet firmly rooted in my mind is the long-standing opinion that there is an omnipotent God who made me the kind of creature that I am. How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now? What is more, since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable? But perhaps God would not have allowed me to be deceived in this way, since he is said to be supremely good. But if it were inconsistent with his goodness to have created me such that I am deceived all the time, it would seem equally foreign to his goodness to allow me to be deceived even occasionally; yet this last assertion cannot be made.

Perhaps there may be some who would prefer to deny the existence of so powerful a God rather than believe that everything else is uncertain. Let us not argue with them, but grant them that everything said about God is a fiction. According to their supposition, then, I have arrived at my present state by fate or chance or a continuous chain of events, or by some other means; yet since deception and error seem to be imperfections, the less powerful they make my original cause, the more likely it is that I am so imperfect as to be deceived all the time. I have no answer to these arguments, but am finally compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised; and this is not a flippant or ill-considered conclusion, but is based on powerful and well thought-out reasons. So in future I must withhold my assent from these former beliefs just as carefully as I would from obvious falsehoods, if I want to discover any certainty.

f→ But it is not enough merely to have noticed this; I must make an effort to remember it. My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom. I shall never get out of the habit of confidently assenting to these opinions, so long as I suppose them to be what in fact they

are, namely highly probable opinions – opinions which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful, as has just been shown, it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny. In view of this, I think it will be a good plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself, by pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary. I shall do this until the weight of preconceived opinion is counter-balanced and the distorting influence of habit no longer prevents my judgement from perceiving things correctly. In the meantime, I know that no danger or error will result from my plan, and that I cannot possibly go too far in my distrustful attitude. This is because the task now in hand does not involve action but merely the acquisition of knowledge.

- [g]→ I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things. I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation; and, even if it is not in my power to know any truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree. But this is an arduous undertaking, and a kind of laziness brings me back to normal life. I am like a prisoner who is enjoying an imaginary freedom while asleep; as he begins to suspect that he is asleep, he dreads being woken up, and goes along with the pleasant illusion as long as he can. In the same way, I happily slide back into my old opinions and dread being shaken out of them, for fear that my peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labour when I wake, and that I shall have to toil not in the light, but amid the inextricable darkness of the problems I have now raised.
- [h]→

Commentary on Descartes

When we read a piece of philosophical writing, we are in most cases looking for a conclusion, and an argument which carries us to that conclusion. The conclusion is what the author is trying to convince you of. So to locate the conclusion you should ask, as you read: What am I supposed to believe, according to the author?

Then you should ask: What does the author do to make me believe that? In other words, try to locate the argument the author uses to reach that conclusion. So let us apply this approach to the First Meditation.

Before continuing with the commentary, go back to the text of the First Meditation, and try to answer this question: What is the conclusion that Descartes is trying to persuade the reader of by the end of the Meditation?

Descartes's first two paragraphs are introductory. He tells us what the argument is going to be about (doubting his former beliefs) and what motivates it (the need to find some certainty). In these first two paragraphs Descartes states his *aims* quite clearly. He speaks of 'the general demolition of my opinions' and says that 'for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt'. If he carries out these aims, the conclusion of his argument will be:

There is reason to doubt everything I believe.

You will not find these exact words in the text – this is my formulation of what I think Descartes's conclusion should be.

It is vital in reading philosophy that you take time to formulate in your own words the proposition that you think is at issue in a text. A good method is to write down your formulation and have it in front of you as you read. Sometimes a great part of your work will be directed towards finding the author's precise conclusion, so you should be prepared to revise your formulation as you read. Attempting to state the conclusion in writing, if necessary deleting it and re-stating it a few times, would be a good use of your time, and note paper, while reading. This kind of active reading is usually more fruitful than waiting passively for something in the text to strike you.

The above proposition 'There is reason to doubt everything I believe' should be the overall or final conclusion of Descartes's train of thought, if he carries out what he says he aims to do. The argument to show what can be called into doubt begins in earnest in the third paragraph. Reading on from here, we should next ask: Where in Descartes's text is the overall conclusion actually reached?

It can be easy to locate an author's conclusions if they are clearly signposted. An author may say: 'So we can conclude...' or 'So a reasonable conclusion from this might be...'. But sometimes a conclusion might simply be signalled by 'Therefore...' or 'So...'. Or it may be more hidden, or even merely implied.

Read from the third paragraph of the First Meditation, and answer this question: Where does Descartes state his overall conclusion that there is reason to doubt everything he believes?

There is an explicit conclusion at the place marked [e]→ in the text: 'So a reasonable conclusion from this might be...' But is this the conclusion we are looking for?

No, because here Descartes is concluding that only *some* branches of knowledge are in doubt, while others are ‘certain and indubitable’ – there is no reason, so far, for him to doubt everything. It takes more argument before we arrive at the overall conclusion.

Make sure you understand the difference between the conclusion at [e]→ and the stated overall conclusion. If you have not found the statement of the overall conclusion in the text, keep looking.

Look carefully at the passage starting at [f]→. It is in these two sentences, ‘I have no answer to these arguments...’ and ‘So in future I must withhold...’ that Descartes states his overall conclusion. ‘I... am finally compelled to admit that...’ means effectively ‘I conclude that...’; and *what* Descartes is compelled to admit is ‘that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised’. For our purposes this says the same as ‘There is reason to doubt everything I believe.’

Two long paragraphs follow this conclusion. In them Descartes comments on the difficulty of remembering that every belief is doubtful, and invents a scenario (that a malicious demon might be deceiving him) as a means of counteracting his habitual confidence in his beliefs. The very last sentences, from [h]→ to the end, do not really seek to convince us of anything more than the overall conclusion already stated, but rather make clear in dramatic fashion just how difficult it is to remain convinced of that conclusion. ‘Normal life’, in which we happily believe many things without asking whether we should doubt them, exerts a strong pull on the thinker.

Now we are in a position to look at the arguments which Descartes hopes will carry us to the sceptical overall conclusion.

I remarked earlier that Descartes’s method here could be called a ‘dialogue in a single voice’. From the third paragraph the argument advances in a series of ebbs and flows: the author adopts the point of view of sceptical doubt, then resists it, then gives more reasons for doubt, and so on.

So once again analysing the *structure* of the piece may help the reader to follow it. At [a]→ the word ‘But’ introduces the first reason for doubt: the senses have been unreliable, so we should call into doubt beliefs we acquire from or through the senses. But the very next sentence (‘Yet...’) is from the point of view of someone resisting doubt; some things the senses tell us cannot be denied, or doubted. The voice of doubt replies straightaway (‘Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen...’), only to receive the objection ‘But such people are insane...’ And so on.

Starting at [a]→ mark out for yourself those passages (one or more sentences) which you think are advancing reasons for doubt, and those which you think are objections to the doubt. Proceed to the overall conclusion at [f]→.

You will find it helps to pay attention to connecting words such as ‘But’, ‘Yet’, ‘And yet’, ‘Unless’, ‘Nonetheless’. But in the paragraph marked [b]→ Descartes uses the ironic expressions ‘A brilliant piece of reasoning!’ and later ‘Indeed!’ for similar purposes.

If you can see clearly where doubt is being advanced and where it is being resisted, you can now follow the separate arguments for doubt in the First Meditation.

The first argument for doubt is based on the idea that the senses have deceived us in the past, and so should not be trusted.

About this first argument. (1) Ask yourself: What would be some examples of the senses deceiving us? (2) Evaluate the argument: Does the fact of the senses sometimes deceiving us really give us reason not to believe in anything they seem to be telling us?

The second argument centres on the thought that some people have mad beliefs: if Descartes were like these people, then beliefs of his which seem undeniable to him could be completely wrong. But Descartes’s line in response to this doubt is that he cannot proceed with his philosophical argument at all on the basis that he might be insane. He must take it for granted that he is sane.

The next argument, contained in the paragraph marked [b]→, is the argument about dreaming, which is generally rated as one of Descartes’s most powerful sceptical moves.

Read just the paragraph marked [b]→, preferably more than once. Ask yourself: (1) Is Descartes right in saying ‘there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep’? (2) If he is right about that, why exactly does it call his beliefs into doubt?

In this argument Descartes first makes the point that for any ordinary belief he has – for example ‘that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire’ – the very same could merely seem to be the case in a dream. However, that point itself is not sufficient to advance the doubt. The anti-sceptical voice points out that ‘I know what I am doing’ right now when I am awake and looking at things, touching them, and so on. The sheer fact that I *could* have the same experiences when asleep does not remove certainty from my present beliefs.

But by the end of the paragraph Descartes realizes that unless he can *know that he is not dreaming now*, the possibility of there being a dream exactly like waking life is a threat to his knowledge. If he cannot know that he is not dreaming now, then for everything he now thinks he knows, it is possible that he is merely dreaming that he knows it. To dream that he knows something is not to know it. The result would be that he cannot know anything.

Before continuing, stop reading Descartes and think for yourself about these two questions: (1) Can you know that you are not dreaming now? (2) If you cannot know that you are not dreaming now, does it mean that you cannot know anything?

Both are rather hard questions. For now, note that *if* you answer No to question (1) *and* answer Yes to question (2), then you seem to have reached a sceptical predicament, where indeed you cannot really know anything.

However, Descartes does not see the Dreaming Argument as completely settling the issue of doubt. Total doubt is resisted in the passage that begins with the sentence ‘Nonetheless...’ ($\boxed{c} \rightarrow$), leading on to the conclusion at $\boxed{e} \rightarrow$ that some things are certain. Notice that in this paragraph Descartes argues *by analogy*. The distinction between what can be doubted by the Dreaming Argument and what cannot is *like* a distinction familiar in paintings. The text makes the analogy crystal clear. The expression ‘like paintings’ at $\boxed{c} \rightarrow$ marks the entrance into the analogy; the phrase ‘By similar reasoning’ at $\boxed{d} \rightarrow$ the exit from it.

In other words, Descartes is not really talking about the distinction between real and imaginary things in paintings. He is interested in mathematical knowledge and knowledge of the basic nature of the material world: there are basic truths here we can know with certainty, even if our beliefs about more specific kinds of things are doubtful. (It is worth wondering if Descartes is right here: might not the Dreaming Argument be more powerful than he realizes? For instance, why couldn’t he just be dreaming that it is certain that two and three added together are five?)

This position of relative certainty does not last long, however. The voice of doubt returns, to argue that an all-powerful God could bring it about that *everything* I believe is false. This would be inconsistent with God’s being supremely good (says the voice of the objector) – but (replies the voice of doubt) you might as well say it would be inconsistent with God’s goodness if he let me be deceived ‘even occasionally’. But he does let me be deceived occasionally, so it cannot be inconsistent with his nature. Therefore total deception cannot be inconsistent with his nature.

I have re-arranged the argument here, to try to make it a little clearer. That is often a useful device as you read. Step back from the text, re-order the steps of the argument, and add steps (premises or conclusions) that seem to be missing.

Finally Descartes poses a dilemma: if *there is* an all-powerful God, he could have deceived me about everything; if *there is no* God, there is nothing to guarantee that I am, as it were, well enough made to be safe from constant error. Either way, I could be going wrong in all my beliefs.

Ask yourself: how persuasive is this argument? In particular: (1) Is it not easier to think that a perfect God would allow me to go wrong sometimes than that he would allow me to be totally in error? (2) Is it clear why my beliefs are all in doubt if there is no God?

If his overall conclusion is right, then Descartes ought to stop trusting any of his existing beliefs, if he is serious about avoiding error. In order to suspend his trust in his beliefs, he invents an extreme and fantastical picture (at [g]→): ‘some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me.’

To spell things out a bit more, we might construct a sceptical Malicious Demon Argument which runs:

- 1 For all I know, a malicious demon could be systematically making me believe only things that are false.
- 2 So, for all I know, all my beliefs could be false.
- 3 So I have reason to doubt all my beliefs.

It is quite legitimate, as part of your reading of Descartes’s text, to set out an argument in this way, and begin to explore whether it is convincing.

When you have looked at the different parts of Descartes’s argument in something like the above manner, you have asked: What is the author trying to convince me of? (What is the conclusion?) and How does the author try to convince me? (What are the arguments?) Now you are in a good position to ask yourself: Am I convinced? Do you think the conclusion is true? Do you think the arguments are good ones?

Considering the whole of the First Meditation, write down in your own words the argument for Descartes’s overall conclusion which you think is the most persuasive.

It must be said that among philosophers reflecting on the First Meditation recently the Dreaming Argument and the Malicious Demon Argument are the two often thought to be most persuasive. But that is by no means the end of the story.

We can criticize even apparently strong arguments: they may contain false steps, or the steps may not hold together properly, or they may remain stubbornly puzzling. To show that an argument has any of these features is to begin to do philosophy oneself. Good philosophical reading generates philosophical writing.

Good philosophical reading is active, interrogative, and open-minded. Actively divide up the text to find its structure, and make your own formula-

tions of conclusions and arguments. Ask what the author is trying to do and whether it convinces you. Listen to the author's case impartially before making up your mind whether you agree, and use your imagination to think of examples, consequences, and objections.

Descartes's First Meditation raises wider philosophical issues which you can debate at any level. Is he right to be looking for certainty in the first place? Is knowing something a matter of being certain about it? Must knowledge be founded on something absolutely beyond doubt? Does it make sense to think of calling all one's beliefs into doubt at the same time? Can we understand knowledge by considering Descartes's highly artificial scenario of a single mind all by itself scrutinizing its own thoughts? Descartes paints such a vivid picture of his initial sceptical situation that we may be beguiled into thinking that this is the only philosophical approach to the topic of knowledge.

The reader who reads with an open mind, slowly and actively, looking for structure, interrogating the text in detail, is likely to acquire eventually the power to debate these larger questions competently.

Reading philosophy, then, is a skill (or perhaps a set of many skills). The commentary in this chapter has tried to show the beginner something of the kind of work needed to help this skill develop. You should expect such development to be a slow, cumulative process. The more you work at your reading, the more you will be engaged in doing philosophy yourself. The more you are engaged with philosophy, the more acute your reading abilities will become.

The remaining commentaries in this book are designed to guide the reader in developing the skill of reading philosophy, by providing the opportunity to think about further philosophical questions in more or less the manner suggested in this chapter.