

Candidate 4 evidence

Knowledge and Doubt

In "Meditations on First Philosophy", Descartes begins his writing by recognising that many things he has come to believe in his life may actually be subject to doubt and be unreliable. From this he believes that it is his duty as a philosopher to undertake a project eliminating all of his doubtful knowledge in order to rebuild from the ground up in the hopes to achieve great things in his field with a robust system of knowledge.

In his first meditation, Descartes establishes his method of doubt, a process he describes by comparing to picking rotten apples out of a basket, leaving nothing but pure knowledge that is in no way dubitable.

He first sets out to eliminate as much as possible so as not to make the task an arduous one, starting with the most primordial source of knowledge, the senses. Descartes says that the senses are unreliable as they have been known to deceive us in the past regarding situations like observing objects from very far away. He says that even if he trusts his senses the majority of the time it would be unwise to place faith in something that has been known to deceive you even once. This last piece of reasoning will appear again in his writings and is a crucial argument for eliminating doubt. His next argument addresses the type of sense information that he finds difficult to disregard, that after a quick reflection on his current situation, he struggles to deny that he is sitting by his fire, wearing a dressing gown and writing, comparing himself to a madman who thinks his head is made of glass if he were to deny such information. This brings us to the dreaming argument.

The dreaming argument is one that uses reasoning in a very effective way, how is Descartes to know that all of his immediate sensory perception is not in fact some grand illusion conjured by his mind while he is actually laying asleep, reflecting on times when that very situation has happened. Surely there are no sure signs of being able to distinguish the dreaming world from the waking one? Some may try to argue with Descartes here by claiming that even if there are no signs of being asleep while dreaming, the waking world has a layer of distinction or vividness to it that allows you to be certain of it and know that you are awake. This argument however gets caught up on the analogy of a dream, which Descartes is merely using as a tool to point out how susceptible the mind is to deceit and is just a lack of a better analogy due to the time of writing. If Descartes were to write his meditations today, I am confident he would have called it the Matrix Argument or something similar, where he is able to describe an indistinguishable computer simulation of reality. I think Descartes' use of reason shines here and any criticism it is subject to is most likely attacking his choice of comparison, not his rationality and the true point of the argument.

The next tool he uses to expand his doubt is his Deceiving God Argument, in which Descartes uses his belief in some supreme being to point out that, should such a being exist who is able to create the universe and all life, it is just as conceivable that he would be able to ensure Descartes goes wrong whenever he tries to assert anything he claims to be, including a priori knowledge in his statement saying that such a being could easily make it that he go wrong any time he tries to add $2+2$ or count the sides of a square. This is another piece of excellent reasoning as we have no way of rationally accepting the existence of such a deity without also accepting that this level of deceit would also be in their power. However, there are two common criticisms to this argument. The first tries to claim that the God Descartes speaks of is also said to be utterly benign, and it would be completely foreign for a loving God to deceive his creations in such a way, once again Descartes reasoning comes out on top here when he points out that if this were the case, then deception of any kind should be seen as equally foreign to God's principles, (implementing the same piece of reasoning that made the senses argument) unfortunately we have already proven that the senses God made for us do this very thing, so the critique fails. Similarly, some may claim that they have no belief in such a God, so the argument is unconvincing to them. To this Descartes points out that if it were not a perfect deity that created him and he in

fact came about as a result of some random series of events, then he is even more likely to imperfect himself and the chance of deception or error becomes even greater!

In Meditation 3, after establishing his Cogito, Descartes then returns to the beginning of his process by withdrawing all his senses and images of physical things. He will now try to use the certainty found in his Cogito to try to establish the same level of certainty somewhere else. He examines what allowed him to be so certain of his Cogito and defines his "Clear and Distinct" rule as a result, describing something as being clear when it can be present to the attentive mind, and distinct when it is able to be separated from all other perceptions. He also says that once he found his Cogito, he saw it with such clarity and distinction that there was no possible way of doubting it. He then claims that he will be able to use the clear and distinct rule to determine if something he casts his mind to can be certain, saying that if he is able to see it clearly and distinctly then it must be true. When Descartes tries to justify this belief however, his reason does not meet the mark.

He tells us that his faith in the clear and distinct rule comes because of his ability to see the cogito clearly and distinctly combined with his certainty that the cogito is true. He claims that if seeing something clearly and distinctly was not sufficient evidence to verify something's truth, then the cogito would be open to doubt. However, the Cogito is not open to doubt as doubt itself is a form of thinking, which confirms the Cogito. As the Cogito is not open to doubt it must be concluded that seeing something clearly and distinctly is sufficient evidence to take it as true. This is an example of poor reasoning. Here Descartes has mistaken a necessary condition for a sufficient one, granted the Cogito can be seen clearly and distinctly and also doesn't appear to be open to doubt, there may be some other reason for this to be the case. For example, if we say that a dog has brown fur, and that we know all dogs are mammals, we can use the same reasoning to assert that any other animal with brown fur must also be a mammal, which we can easily see is not the case.

Another example of Descartes reason lacking the robustness that was seen in his earlier meditations is when he considers the existence of a loving God, something that he must prove in order to establish his trust in a priori knowledge. This example is called the Cartesian circle, and is named so due to Descartes' use of circular reasoning. He claims that he is able to clearly see in his mind the impression of a loving god, distinctly from other perceptions, allowing him to conclude that God exists. But he needs God to exist in order to justify the validity of this reasoning, hence the paradoxical nature of this argument.

To conclude, I believe that in his first Meditation, Descartes method of doubt is very robust. He sets out with a clear goal in mind and has a very strong tool to do so, defended by a good use of reason. However, it could be said that Descartes method was in fact too successful and created so much doubt that he backed himself into a corner, surrounded by so much uncertainty that he had presented himself with a very difficult task of getting out of it, loosening his firm grip on solid rationality as a result in Meditation 3 when he tries to build upon the discoveries made in Meditations 1 and 2. I believe Descartes ability to reason was successful at confirming certainty in Meditations 1 and 2. However, as said by himself, that was never his ultimate goal and as a result when he tried to build upon the foundations he managed to find, his use of reason became shakey.