

Descartes Overview & Med. 1

What do we know? How do we know it?

An overview of Descartes' Hyperbolic Doubt and Meditation 1

René Descartes (1596 – 1650) is often thought of as one of the principal founders of modern scientific thought. Much of what he was concerned with involved what we know, and how we come to know it. In short, Descartes wanted to establish a solid foundation upon which we could build all other (future) knowledge. His attempts in this direction are exemplified in his two most famous works: *Discourse on Method* and *The Meditations*. We will be studying the latter work in some detail.

So what is Descartes' starting point? How does one go about finding out what we know and how we come to know it? Initially, questioning what we know and how we know it may seem daft. We learn things from our experiences – through sight, sound, taste, smell and touch (traditionally thought of as the five senses). Think of all the things we learn about the world through them; we see colour in the world and can distinguish between objects on such grounds (“could you pass me the green pen as opposed to the red one?”), we come to understand danger (“don't touch that frying-pan, it's hot!”), we come to know what food we like and dislike through smell and taste and so on. These are just a few of the almost infinite number of ways in which our senses inform us about the external world (i.e. what is around us). By combining what our senses reveal to us with our ability to reason, we have developed definite scientific methods of establishing knowledge and truth. The science of astronomy, for instance, reveals many things in the universe that our senses, on their own, cannot (the existence of dark matter, for instance). Through physics and chemistry we have developed an atomic model of the physical world – atoms, too, are beyond the scope of normal perception. Moreover, we learn from our memory, and rely on the advice and knowledge of others; the past informs our knowledge of the present and shapes our decisions for the future. We understand that knowledge is more or less fallible having strong and weak justifications for our beliefs. To illustrate this point: suppose that a friend I trusted said to me that all the news reports in the newspapers were false. I might – as a consequence – begin to distrust my friend's judgement; or, if he provided me with compelling reasons, I might begin to distrust the papers. Whatever the case, I would need to find evidence that either corroborated or falsified his assertion and it would be on that basis that the strength of his justification and my belief would rest. Some beliefs seem more justifiable than others; mathematical calculations ($2+3=5$, for instance) seem certain; other claims can be doubted

much more readily (“my pet cat understands every word I say”, for instance).

So, what's the problem? Surely, I have just outlined some of the means by which we come to understand the external world? And, surely, this must be the solid foundation for knowledge that Descartes was searching for? – If we are to find out the bases of our knowledge claims then it would make sense to start with how we justify them; this is what Descartes set out to do. He did so however, by examining the initial grounds upon which we make claims of knowledge – namely, the senses – rather than taking them for granted as we have been doing up until now. Descartes believed that, once such grounds had been established as wholly reliable (i.e. certain), we could subsequently and unproblematically build all our knowledge upon them; his was a quest for certainty.

Descartes devised a test for certainty. The test was that he could only be certain of those things that could not, in any way (or in principle), be doubted. Everything else had to be rejected. Put another way: if there is any reason to doubt a source of information, that source should be dismissed from consideration and treated as unreliable. The five senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch) fall into this category. Descartes' point is that since we know that the senses sometimes deceive us, how do we know that they do not always deceive us? He gives an example of a straight stick looking curved (at least at some angles) if we put it in water; other examples include various kinds of optical illusions (mirages, for instance). So what can we know if we no longer trust the senses? – Surely, this is going too far. Although we know that the senses sometimes deceive us, there must be occasions when we can trust them. Consider holding out your hands in front of your face: we can see them and feel them. Moreover, the fact that we seem to be able to distinguish between those times when our senses deceive us from those times when they provide a genuine representation of reality (contrast holding two hands in front of your face with the stick in water example) surely shows that all we need to do is to find those instances where our senses always deliver the truth. But consider this: it is possible to create certain experiences by stimulating certain parts of the brain. It is possible to get someone to see colours, for instance, by stimulating those parts of the brain that give us colour experiences. There is also the phenomenon of phantom limbs – those people who have lost limbs but still claim to feel sensations in those areas where the limbs once were. So, we can still have experiences without the corresponding reality. I can see a particular colour when there is no colour there; and it is possible to have pain in places

where one has no limbs. Is it still certain that I see my hands in front on my face?

Descartes' belief is that we should, therefore, reject all beliefs derived from the senses as capable of providing a foundation upon which we can build knowledge. This is the beginning of what (in Descartes' own terms) is known as *hyperbolic doubt* (or exaggerated doubt). To a point, this phrase indicates that even Descartes had reservations about the scale and far-reaching consequences of his doubting (for the time-being however, we'll let this pass).

Having shown that our senses cannot be relied upon, Descartes attempts to find grounds for certainty elsewhere. What about our general understanding of reality? As we've seen, most of that understanding comes from our senses which have already been shown to be fallible. However, we should remember that Descartes' project is to sort through the different kinds of justifications for our beliefs and establish some kind of foundation for knowledge by finding those that are resistant to doubt. If we cannot place our faith in the five senses, then perhaps our ability to reason will deliver the certainties that he desired. Some beliefs seem more justifiable than others; consider again, the apparent certainty of mathematical calculations as opposed to the illusion (derived from the senses) of a straight stick appearing curved in water.

In *Meditation 1* Descartes says that even in dreams one still knows that $2+3=5$ and that a square always has four sides. So, it would seem that the outcomes of mathematical calculations can be known irrespective of what our senses tell us; certainly this is what Descartes hoped, as it would show that a foundation for knowledge could be established on such grounds. However, introducing the idea of dreams raises a different problem for Descartes: how does one know whether one is dreaming or not? How do we distinguish dreams from reality? We see colours in dreams and we can feel pain, fear and anger in dreams. Perhaps all the objects we are acquainted with in the world (walls, chairs, tables, knives, forks etc.) are part of a vast hallucination or dream? Descartes talks about sitting by his fire in his dressing gown but claims that he has also dreamed something similar. Perhaps we are just part of a dream world; perhaps our brains are being stimulated in such a way as to make us believe in an external, mind-independent physical reality? – You might argue against this by saying that one can distinguish between dreams and reality through coherence. Reality is always coherent and dreams are not. But is it not possible to have a coherent fairytale? Moreover, if our brains are being stimulated in particular ways, it is

perfectly possible that such stimulation could result in coherent experiences.

Nevertheless, none of this seems to invalidate mathematical claims (and other claims of reason such as: a red object cannot simultaneously be blue and green). It would seem that these kinds of deduction are safe from corruption by hallucination. However, bear in mind the idea of brain stimulation and how it can make us experience certain kinds of sensations and thought patterns. In a slightly different way, Descartes makes the same argument. He introduces the idea of an all-powerful evil demon that controls what we perceive and how we think. It is important to remember however, that Descartes never believed in the existence of such a demon but that he is using it as a device to make a philosophical point. The point is this: that even those things such as mathematical calculation can be doubted. How? – Well, if I can be made to believe in the existence of colours and sensations that, in reality, are not there then what good reason is there for me to believe that my ability to reason correctly has not also been tampered with? Thinking, after all, is an aspect of perception. If I couldn't think, I couldn't perceive. Put another way: I might believe (or perceive) that I am reasoning correctly when I say that $2+3=5$ but how can I be sure? How can I (with any confidence) say that my belief that I am reasoning or thinking correctly is any more reliable than my perceptual claims (what I feel, taste, smell, see and hear)?

So what are we left with? We can't rely on our senses and even our ability to reason is questionable. It would appear as though Descartes set out to find a solid foundation for knowledge but only succeeded in proving that no such foundation exists. So, is there anything we can know – that is, know without any possibility of doubt? There is one thing. Even if all knowledge derived from the senses can be doubted and even if one's ability to reason correctly can be doubted, there is still something that can be said with certainty: there is thinking going on. In other words (and this is Descartes' most famous phrase), "I think therefore I am". The evil demon may be able to undermine the reliability of my senses and even my ability to reason but it cannot stop me from thinking; even if everything I think is wrong, I still must exist in order to be able to think all those wrong things. This (my own existence), Descartes claims, is the one thing I can be certain about. As long as I think, I can know I exist. Is this the foundation for knowledge that Descartes was looking for? What can one build on it if all else can be doubted? In subsequent classes we will examine various kinds of response to Descartes. For now however, you'll have to live with doubt!