

Doubting *per impossibile*

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Descartes, as it is well known, wanted to rebuild the sciences on a secure foundation he tried to uncover in metaphysics. In his *Meditationes de Prima Philosophiae* he gives us an account of what he takes to be the “premier principe de la philosophie” (AT VI 32^{22–23})¹ and what I will henceforth call the *Cogito*. The privilege of the *Cogito* resides in its resistance to what Descartes calls ‘*scepticism*’.

Descartes’ sceptic is not only someone who doubts that we have any knowledge, i.e. any beliefs meeting a certain given standard of justification, but what one might call a *Pyrrhonian* sceptic, someone who doubts the existence of a standard of knowledge, not only of beliefs meeting such a standard.² Descartes thought it worth while to (try to) prove the sceptic wrong not because he doubted that we have any knowledge. Instead he aimed to show that and how we can *defend* our knowledge claims against someone who questions their legitimacy. He wanted to prove our entitlement to them by showing that they are not only true, but justifiedly taken to be so. Not satisfied with the mere fact *that* the sceptic is wrong – because there is something we know – he wanted to show *why* the sceptic is wrong. To achieve this, he had to show more than just that we know something; he had to show that we know that we know something, i.e. that we know that the sceptic is wrong. This is the task of the *Cogito*: to prove the untenability of universal doubt by refuting the evil demon hypothesis and *thereby* to establish a standard of knowledge.

To induce, in us and in the Cartesian thinker, the most general and far-reaching doubt one may entertain (AT VII 158¹³) and thus to uncover the most certain of our beliefs, Descartes mounts a sceptical argument in three steps in *Meditation One*, leading to the ‘bracketing’ (on grounds of dubitability) of larger and larger classes of truths, for reasons Descartes takes to be valid and rational (AT VII 21^{26–30}). In a first step, the Cartesian thinker of the *Meditations* notes the existence of sensory illusions:

Nempe quidquid hactenus ut maxime verum admisi, vel a sensibus, vel per sensus accipi; hos autem interdum fallere deprehendi, ac prudentiae est nunquam illis plane confidere qui nos vel semel deceperunt. (AT VII 18^{15–18})

Tout ce que j’ay receu iusqu’à present pour le plus vray & assuré, je l’ay appris des sens, ou par les sens: or j’ay quelquefois éprouvé que ces sens estaient trompeurs, & il est de la prudence de ne se fier jamais entierement à ceux qui nous ont une fois trompez. (AT IX/I 14)

The conclusion drawn in the last clause, *never* to rely on sense perception (“a sensibus”) nor on testimony (“per sensus”), may seem a little too quick.³ It makes sense, however, if we place it in its epistemological context: if my senses are not always reliable, then this method of forming beliefs is not fool-proof; barring further information, I must consider it as at any instant potentially unreliable. I am not justified in assuming the reliability of my senses *unless* I have at my disposal a way of knowing that they are reliable at the times when they are. I cannot, however, detect such optimal sensory conditions without relying on my senses: bracketing their evidence, I cannot establish their reliability. This is why I am forced to conclude **A2** from **A1**:

A1 It is possible that my senses deceive me.

1. All references to Descartes are to the standard edition by Adam & Tannery (1996).

2. The distinction is Sextus’s: “Pyrrhonian skepticism is a more radical position [than academic skepticism]. It holds that the academics are dogmatic even to affirm the impossibility of certain knowledge and denies that propositions differ in their probability. A judgement of probability can be made only by someone who possesses a standard of knowledge and truth. But the existence of such a standard is just what the pyrrhonians question. Since probability cannot guide our choices, they propose to follow custom.” (Curley 1978: 12)

3. The transition is even hastier in the *Discours*: “Ainsi, à cause que nos sens nous trompent quelquefois, je voulais supposer qu’il n’y avoit aucune chose qui fût telle qu’ils nous la font imaginer.” (AT VI 31^{30–32})

A₂ It is always possible that my senses deceive me.

The Cartesian thinker has to go further than even this, however. He cannot justifiably assert of *any* instance of sense perception that his senses did not deceive him on that occasion. To do this, he would have to know that conditions were optimal – which he cannot, if he has not prior sensory assurance that they were. Because the proposition that they conditions are optimal is itself doubtable, he must treat it as if it were false (AT VII 18^{4–10}) – he must assume the worst case scenario, that his senses always deceive him:

A₃ It is possible that my senses always deceive me.

Many have doubted that the Cartesian thinker could rationally entertain something like **A₃** – if I need my senses to establish that they deceived me on another occasion, they argue, the hypothesis of permanent sense deception does not make sense. Though it is clear that Descartes is not *committed* to **A₃** and that neither **A₃** nor **A₂** can plausibly said to follow from **A₁**, such worries, I think, misunderstand the nature of Descartes' project. Though Descartes requires reasons for doubting, he requires those to be neither true nor assertable by the Cartesian thinker.⁴ They are reasons for doubting in the sense that they present the Cartesian thinker with scenarios he is in no position to exclude. The Cartesian thinker cannot exclude the possibility of universal sense deception merely on the basis of the observation that the assertability of “my senses deceive me” requires some veridical sense perceptions. But neither can he *deny* their veridicality – *when* they are reliable – justify my knowledge claims based on them. So the sceptic needs to take another step.

This second step is known as the “dream argument”:

Quasi scilicet non recorder a similibus etiam cogitationibus me aliàs in somnis fuisse delusum; quae dum cogito attentius, tam plane video nunquam certis indiciis vigiliam a somno posse distingui, ut obstupescam, & fere hic ipse stupor mihi opinionem somni confirmet. (AT VII 19^{17–22})

Mais, en y pensant soigneusement, je me ressouvien d'avoir esté souvent trompé, lors que je dormais, par de semblables illusions. Et m'arrestant sur cette pensée, je voy si manifestement qu'il n'y a point d'indices concluans, ny de marques, assez certaines par où j'en puisse distinguer nettement la veille d'avec le sommeil, que j'en suis tout etonné; & mon estonnement est tel, qu'il est presque capable de me persuader que je dors. (AT IX/I 15)

Contrary to the first, this second step rules out the possibility that there might be conditions under which knowledge claims about material objects are justified. Trusting my senses to establish their reliability is a perfectly respectable procedure; but I am never entitled to trust my senses to answer the question whether I might be sleeping now. I can only know that *p* by present sensory evidence if certain conditions *C* hold – but I can find out whether *C*, for the conditions *C'* which have to obtain for that may differ from *C*. Not so with dreaming: I cannot find out that I am dreaming – for *if* I am dreaming, I cannot find out anything whatsoever. As I can never find out that I am dreaming (at that time), I can never know that I am awake (at that time), not being able to rule out a possibility I would not detect if it were actual.⁵

Whereas the argument from sensory illusion undermined any knowledge claims based on present sensory evidence, the dream argument carries the doubt further by making any knowledge about material things unclaimable: it thereby undermines any contingent knowledge claim whatsoever, including most examples of what has been called *the contingent a priori*. There is, for any such proposition, whether a priori or not, a circumstance in which it would be false and I may dream that this circumstance obtains.⁶ As with the first step, the Cartesian thinker infers **B₂** from **B₁**, and then finds no grounds to rule out **B₃**:

4. He explicitly says to Bourdin that reasons for doubting may themselves be doubtable: “Eae enim sunt satis validae rationes ad cogendum nos ut dubitemus, quae ipsae dubiae sunt, nec proinde retinendae, ut jam supra notatum est. Atque validae quidem sunt, quandiu nullas alias habemus, quae dubitationem tollendo certitudinem inducant.” (AT VII 473^{27–474}³), “Verissimum enim est, nihil admittendum esse ut verum, quod non possimus probare esse verum, cum de eo statuendo vel affirmando quaestio est; sed, cum tantum de effodiendo vel abdicando, sufficit quod suspicemur.” (AT VII 553^{18–22})

5. What then about the coherentist criterion Descartes provides us with in the *Sixth Meditation*? It only works given the assumption that there is a time *t* when I am not sleeping – and this we know only after having established the legitimacy of at least one knowledge claim: “Potest verò Atheus colligere se vigilare ex memoriâ antea vitae; sed non potest scire hoc signum sufficere ut certus sit se non errare, nisi sciat se a Deo non fallente esse creatum.” (AT VII 196^{11–14})

6. It is not required that my conception is a coherent one: most of us dream very weird things. It might seem difficult to imagine dreaming that I am not here now or that I am not Philipp Blum but in fact it is not. I may dream that I am dead or a multiply located universal, that I look into my passport and find another name written in it, that I look into the mirror and see nothing etc. That reasons to doubt are not

- B₁** It is possible that I am now dreaming.
- B₂** It is always possible that I am dreaming (then).
- B₃** It is possible that I am always dreaming.

That I am always dreaming, then, describes an epistemic possibility for the Cartesian thinker of the *Meditations* – not in the sense of describing a world in which he, for all he knows, might be (for he may also know that he is, from time to time, awake), but in the sense of expressing a belief he can never rule out on the basis of present evidence alone. The dream argument, then, leaves almost nothing untouched, sparing only necessary truths, which are true in all circumstances, and a fortiori true in all circumstances one may dream to obtain. Getting rid of these is the aim of the next step.

The third and final step in Descartes' argument is the *malin génie* hypothesis:

Verum tamen infixam quaedam est meae menti vetus opinio, Deum esse qui potest omnia, & a quo talis, qualis existo, sum creatus. Unde autem scio illum non fecisse ut nulla plane sit terra, nullum coelum, nulla res extensa, nulla figura, nulla magnitudo, nullus locus, & tamen haec omnia non aliter quam nunc mihi videantur existere? Imò etiam, quemadmodum iudico interdum alios errare circa ea quae se perfectissime scire arbitrantur, ita ego ut fallar quoties duo & tria simul addo, vel numero quadrati latera, vel siquid aliud facilius fingi potest?" (AT VII 21¹⁻¹¹)

Toutesfois il y a longtemps que j'ay dans mon esprit une certaine opinion, qu'il y a un Dieu qui peut tout, & par qui j'ay esté créé & produit tel que je suis. Or qui me peut avoir assuré que ce Dieu n'ait point fait qu'il n'y ait aucune terre, aucun Ciel, aucun corps estendu, aucune figure, aucune grandeur, aucun lieu, & que neantmoins j'aye les sentimens de toutes ces choses, & que tout cela ne me semble point exister autrement que je le voy? Et mesme, comme je juge quelquefois que les autres se méprennent, mesme dans les choses qu'ils pensent scavoir avec le plus de certitude, il se peut faire qu'il ait voulu que je me trompe toutes les fois que je fais l'addition de deux & de trois, ou que je nombre les costez d'un carré, ou que je juge de quelque chose encore plus facile, si l'on se peut imaginer rien de plus facile que cela. (AT IX/I 16)

The Cartesian thinker here entertains the possibility that he might be fooled even in things he considers most certain – due to the manipulation of an omnipotent evil demon who perverts his epistemic instincts and makes him spontaneously assent to propositions which are in fact false.⁷ The evil demon hypothesis is thus more than the supposition that I might err in the most certain of my beliefs – it is the far scarier supposition that I might err in them *precisely because* I hold them to be the most certain. It is for this reason that the Cartesian thinker is led to infer **C₂** from **C₁**, and is in no position (yet) to exclude **C₃**:

- C₁** It is possible that I am deceived in what I consider most certain.
- C₂** In all my beliefs am I possibly deceived.
- C₃** It is possible that I am deceived in all my beliefs.

Because **C₃** states an epistemic possibility, all our knowledge claims are undermined, including our presumed knowledge of simple mathematical (AT VIII/I 6⁸⁻²⁰), logical and other necessary truths, throwing the Cartesian thinker into a state of despair. The doubt induced by consideration of the evil demon hypothesis is thus maximal.⁸

We will see below that, by proceeding a *facilioribus ad difficiliora*, the analytic method brings with it a distinction between two senses of “primary”: it starts from what is *prima facie primary*, i.e. most familiar to us, carrying us to what is *primary in itself*, the true ground on which a given body of (alleged) knowledge rests. The world, in itself,

required to be coherent overall scenarios, as long as they achieve their intended effect which is helping us to get rid of our beliefs, marks another respect in which pyrrhonian differs from academic scepticism.

7. That the possibility envisaged is one of a perversion of what one might call our ‘epistemic instincts’, our spontaneous and almost inevitable belief in certain very simple and (seemingly) evident propositions, is made even clearer in the *Discours* and the *Principes*: “Et parce qu’il y a des hommes qui se méprennent en raisonnant, même touchant les plus simples matières de géométrie, et y font des paralogismes, jugeant que j’étais sujet a faillir autant qu’aucun autre, je rejetai comme fausses toutes les raisons que j’avais prises auparavant pour démonstrations.” (AT VI 32³⁻⁹); “Dubitabimus etiam de reliquis, quae antea pro maximè certis habuimus; etiam de Mathematicis demonstrationibus, etiam de iis principiis, quae hactenus putavimus esse per se nota: tum quia vidimus aliquando nonnullos errasse in talibus, & quaedam pro certissimis ac per se notis admisisse, quae nobis falsa videbantur; tum maximè, quia audivimus esse Deum, qui potest omnia, & à quo sumus creati.” (AT VIII/I 6⁸⁻¹⁵)

8. Descartes calls it “summa de omnibus dubitatio” (AT VII 15⁸⁻¹³). Cf. also his comments on the relevant passage to Burman: “Reddit hic [VII 22²²] auctor hominem tam dubium, et in tantas dubitationes conjicit ac potest...” (AT V 147) The inclusion of mathematics is explicitly stated at AT VIII/I 6⁸⁻²⁰. Curiously, both Kennington (197: 444) and Soffer (1987: 41) have denied that mathematical statements are doubted in *Meditation One*, partly on dubious methodological and systematic grounds which will be discussed below.

i.e. independently of our beliefs about it, has a certain epistemological structure; some truths are *by themselves* more evident, certain and epistemologically basic than others. The epistemic activities of humans, on the other hand, exhibit another, and possibly divergent, pattern. Custom, training and talent bring it about that some truths are more accessible, more easily graspable and more familiar to (some of) us. It is the task of the right *method* to make these two orderings match, i.e. to make what is most familiar in itself most familiar to us. This is the rationale of the method of doubt.

The evil demon hypothesis is the suspicion that the epistemic capacity underwriting the possibility of such a transition is fatally flawed: that we may in principle be incapable of matching our epistemic instincts, what we find plausible or evident, to what really *is* plausible or evident (in itself). The sceptical scenario, then, is that what I find most plausible might be false precisely *because* I find it plausible.⁹

The Cartesian sceptic (the philosophical opponent of the *Meditations*) is not someone who believes or says that everything we believe is false. Instead, he believes that all our knowledge claims (our beliefs of the form “I know that *p*”) are unwarranted, i.e. that there are possible situations (**A₃**, **B₃**, **C₃**) we are not justified to exclude where they are false – not so much because what we claim to know would be false in that situation, but because we would, in the imagined circumstances, not know it. The possibility we are called upon to exclude by the sceptic, then, is not one in which what we believe to know is false, but the possibility that our knowledge claims are true only by chance, that the link between belief and truth underwriting them, while obtaining in the actual world, is not within our epistemic reach and cannot be conclusively established to hold. The doubt, then, is that if we know something, then we know it only by chance. The sceptic thereby challenges our entitlement to all our knowledge claims – not by producing a scenario in which they are false, but one that makes them unjustified and thus unclaimable in the methodological context of a refoundation of our whole system of beliefs.

9. As with the other two sceptical hypotheses, it does not have to be coherent to achieve its intended effect: it does not have to depict a possibility which might in fact obtain. It is enough if it describes a situation which the Cartesian thinker is in no position to *rule out*. Descartes himself takes a malin génie to be *impossible*: both because he shows its incoherence in the Second Meditation and because it is incompatible with the true nature of God. Cf. his remarks to Burman: “Loquitur hic [AT VII 22²⁵] auctor contradictoria, quia cum summâ potentiâ malignitas consistere non potest.” (AT V 147) It has to be noted, however, that showing that the malin génie hypothesis is impossible, is *not* Descartes’ main aim – even a hypothesis entertainable only *per impossibile* undermines our knowledge claims, if it keeps popping up. We have to be able to *show* that it is impossible, thereby vaccinating ourselves against it.

References

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