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### Descartes and the Dream Argument

Rene Descartes believes that the ideas one forms as a child are unreliable and should be rejected, and one must rebuild their worldview. Why are these ideas unreliable? Because they were formed without the use of deductive reasoning – there is some reason to doubt these views that aren't received through logic alone. Descartes argues that "it will suffice for the rejection of all of these opinions, if I find in each of them some reason for doubt" (105). This standard of Cartesian Doubt carries throughout the early meditations and causes Descartes to doubt everything except his own existence (110). One of the main arguments in favor of this radical doubt is that we cannot be sure that we are awake at all and our senses are not deceiving us at all times. Are the words I am typing on the screen physical or could it all be a dream? The Dream Argument made by Descartes in the First Meditation gives us reason to think that none of the information we learn from the senses is certain. Later, Descartes will reject this argument on the basis that we cannot imagine a chair or words on a screen without having an idea of a chair or words on a screen. I believe that Descartes' reasoning in the First Meditation before his bias toward faith clouded his reasoning was correct: there truly are no certain things in this world, and the logical possibility of a philosophical dream overwhelmingly suggests that nothing we can obtain from the senses is certain.

Once one is unsure whether or not we are awake, they cannot be certain that what they see or experience is real. The utter possibility that we could be dreaming and members of reality nullifies the certainty of physics, biology, and other fields where information is derived from the senses. A logically consistent universe could be formed where you are dreaming and all of your sensations are created by God or a God-like deceiver. There are few survivors of this doubt. For example, it is not logically possible that I do not exist – how else could I be doubting the existence of all other things? Mathematics and geometry also must exist and be correct. No matter what God or an evil deceiver trick you into believing through your senses, it is still impossible for the angles of a triangle to add up to something other than  $180^\circ$ . Descartes writes: “For whether I am awake or asleep, 2 plus 3 make 5, and a square does not have more than 4 sides” (106). If we adopt skepticism, we can only accept as fact information that has been “proved” in a mathematical sense – we must reject all of the physical sciences because they rely on observation and continuity of bodies. Only information that has been learned purely through logic can withstand the radical epistemic doubt in the thought experiment that Descartes conducts in the First Meditation.

It is true that not relying on the senses severely limits the amount of knowledge that can be gained. Can we really understand the true nature of the Universe without using any of the senses and with solely deductive reasoning? Descartes does not think so, and uses this as a medium to reject his prior Dream Argument. One cannot be merely imagining something without first perceiving it in the physical world. Even internal sensations must come from somewhere: “why should dryness in the throat warn me to have something to drink, and so on?” If Descartes had no idea of thirst, he would not be thirsty. But the sensation of dryness in

the throat creates his idea of thirst. We know today that this is very likely because of Evolution through Natural Selection, where those who had this sensation were more likely to seek out water and thus reproduce. Descartes believed that the existence of God was certain – and that He was not a deceiver. If God gave Descartes an idea of a table, but no table actually physically existed before him, God would be deceptive. Because the ideas of bodies do not come from God, these bodies must exist and our ideas of them must come through the perception of them (136). If one can clearly and distinctly perceive something, and there is no reason to think that their perception is wrong, then it must exist. I have no reason to think the words on the screen in front of me do not exist – so they must.

The largest fundamental difference between Descartes' two arguments is that the argument in the Sixth Meditation relies on the existence of God, skepticism does not. I am personally a Christian, but I do believe a logically consistent Universe that was created by the Big Bang in which life on Earth was spontaneously created and evolved through Natural Selection toward Homo sapiens can exist without the presence of God. If he believes he has proved the existence of God, Descartes would put himself as a "1" on the Dawkins Scale (Wikipedia), but I believe the mystery of faith cannot be proved under the standard of Deductive Reasoning. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). If a Universe without the existence of God is logically possible, then it is not certain that God exists. If it is not certain that God exists, then we cannot be certain that our ideas of bodies come from our perception; deception is possible. Is it really true that we cannot imagine bodies spontaneously? Even so, Descartes is presenting a false dichotomy between perception and God. He is forgetting that there is a third, logically consistent possibility: a being more powerful

than humans but is not God is deceiving us with these ideas. Many prominent scientists believe that the technological progress of humanity allowing us to simulate complex scenarios will eventually allow us to create a simulation that is indistinguishable from reality (Khan). If we are able to create an identical simulated reality, how do we know that our reality is not another being's simulated reality? Descartes living in the Renaissance Age and not seeing the advent of highly complex technology is not an excuse – his judgment is clouded by his faith which leads him to a biased argument that relies on his pre-existing beliefs about God. If God is no deceiver, then why would he place evidence around the Earth that contradicts Genesis 1, when His Word says that the Earth was created?

One possible objection to my skeptical standpoint is the principle of Occam's Razor. Occam's Razor states when two ideas compete, the one that requires less assumptions should be favored. Perhaps there are less assumptions in the idea that your senses are working as intended and seeing a physical object means that the object is there. However, I object not only to Occam's Razor but that it even applies here. I think assuming your senses are not deceiving you is a strong assumption. My senses tell me that the Earth is flat and stationary, that the Sun and Moon are the same size, and that frequencies played in a certain pattern sound pleasing. There are countless examples in which the senses are not to be trusted with certainty, and assuming your perception of a body is reality takes a leap of faith. Perhaps the idea that any assumptions are required at all in a thought experiment invoking Cartesian Doubt is misguided. The one doubting is not *assuming* that we live in a philosophical dream – it seems obvious that we are not. The doubter is just *not assuming* that we can be certain of anything that we have learned from the physical world.

Another critique of radical epistemic doubt is the implication that its validity would have for the sciences. If we can truly never be certain of any idea, then what is the value in doing any of the natural sciences where progress is dependent on human perception and thought? Are we stuck doing abstract math in an environment where conjecture is invalid, where proof is a standard for belief and progress? My own personal philosophy is to surrender to what is: I am finite; I am mortal. There is a limit to what I can do in my life, a limit to the knowledge that I can acquire. However, I believe that our purpose in life is to discover our nature and expand consciousness and knowledge. Scientific knowledge via Inductive Reasoning can never be certain, but the accumulation of scientific wisdom throughout human history has *certainly* benefitted me today. Eve blessed humanity with the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and we need to use our post-Fall self-awareness to understand ourselves and our nature and the nature of our Creator (or creator, whatever is our cause) (Peterson 56). Our purpose comes from our limitations, there is no need to do another experiment if we are certain that our senses had it right the first time.

To conclude, Rene Descartes takes opposing standpoints on the nature of physical things. Though he ends the meditations convinced that there is certain basis for their existence based on our clear and distinct perception of them, he made a compelling argument about reasons to radically doubt our senses. I suspect he had it correct to doubt our senses; knowledge via Inductive Reasoning cannot be certain. Descartes claims that arguments for the existence of physical things “are neither so firm nor so evident as the arguments leading us to the knowledge of our mind” (104). Nonetheless, we can be certain about the existence of our minds, and use our existence as a rational being to find out about our nature. Our Universe is

certainly governed by the Laws of Logic, but it is our responsibility as fallible creatures to determine how our Universe is governed by the Laws of Nature.

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