

Descartes: Skepticism and the Purpose of the Meditations; The Dream Argument

1. The Structure and the Agenda of the Meditations, announced and hidden

-The basic structure of Descartes's Meditations is a skeptical tearing down of his previous opinions (in Meditation One), followed by a building back up of a new view of the world (in Meditations Two through Six). This structure, along with the purpose of the Meditations—it is hoped that the resulting new view will be more stable and certain—is announced in the opening sentences of Meditation One:

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. --Cot, tr., AT 17.6

-But picking up on that phrase, “in the sciences,” another purpose of the Meditations, this one kept hidden below the surface a bit, and involving Descartes's “physics” in particular, is indicated in this letter from Descartes to Mersenne, 28 Jan. 1641:

I may tell you, between ourselves, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle. --CSMK3: 173

-Descartes's announced purpose is to establish something stable in the sciences: an understandable goal in the wake of the scientific upheaval of his day. But what is a being kept at least a bit hidden is something that goes beyond just arriving at a more certain view of the world, whatever that view may turn out to be—something that is supposed to somehow favor a particular type of physics. But what aspect of Descartes's physics was he promoting, and how was his procedure in the Meditations somewhat secretly promoting that view?

2. Descartes's Use of Skepticism to Promote His Physics

-See the Adams reading for a brief account of the “modern,” “mechanistic” science Descartes sought to promote and the “Aristotelian/scholastic” (Adams uses the phrase “medieval Aristotelianism” here) view it sought to supplant. We will discuss this at a later meeting. For our current purposes (understanding Descartes's sneaky use of skepticism), what's important is that Descartes's view involved what Adams calls “Primary Quality Realism.” This is based on a distinction, important to Descartes and others of his day (including philosophers we will discuss later in the semester), between what were called the “primary” and the “secondary” sensible qualities of bodies (physical objects). What Adams calls “Primary Quality Realism” (p. xv.3), but which he should perhaps have called “Primary Quality **ONLY** Realism,” denied that secondary qualities, at least as we perceive them, really characterize bodies (so the view could have been called “Secondary Quality **Anti**-Realism”). As Adams explains, moderns held this view in two forms:

Though they agreed that there is nothing in bodies resembling the qualities immediately present to our minds in the perception of secondary qualities, Primary Quality Realists disagreed about the analysis of secondary qualities. Some, such as Galileo, identified them with sensations and held that tastes, odors, colors, and so forth do not reside in the bodies perceived as having them, but only in the perceiver. Others, such as Boyle, allowed that secondary qualities may be ascribed to bodies, but only as powers that they have, by virtue of their primary qualities, to affect sentient beings. The secondary qualities, Boyle insisted, are not anything real in a body distinct from its primary qualities. (p. xv.6)

-No colors (in the “bodies” (physical objects) we see as having them)!: I think of Descartes as being in Adams’s first camp (like Galileo). This means he denies that secondary qualities characterize bodies: they are properties only of items in perceivers’ minds. This can be a tough pill to swallow—especially in the case of colors, I think. Adams does a good job of capturing the intuitive problem (for both types of PQR):

In either of these versions, Primary Quality Realism presents us with a physical world that is very different from what it appears in sense perception to be. In place of the colors, tastes, smells, and so forth that fill our sensory fields and form so large a part of our ordinary picture of the world, and that certainly do not seem to be only powers, we are offered a world of geometrical properties and motions—little more than a mathematical framework—plus perhaps some powers. It is a world that is not even grey, except in the sense that it is able to make us see grey. (p. xv.9)

-But how does Descartes use skepticism to help sell this somewhat distasteful view?: Well, he skeptically takes the physical world away from us, and then when he heroically wins it back, it doesn’t come back with its colors intact. How does this help? I answer with a parenting story.

Descartes’s Dream Argument

This would all be well and good, were I not a man who is accustomed to sleeping at night, and to experiencing in my dreams the very same things, or now and then even less plausible ones, as these insane people do when they are awake. How often does my evening slumber persuade me of such ordinary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated next to the fireplace – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! *But right now my eyes are certainly wide awake when I gaze upon this sheet of paper. This head which I am shaking is not heavy with sleep. I extend this hand consciously and deliberately, and I feel it. Such things would not be so distinct for someone who is asleep.* As if I did not recall having been deceived on other occasions even by similar thoughts in my dreams! As I consider these matters more carefully, I see so plainly that there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep. As a result, I am becoming quite dizzy, and this dizziness nearly convinces me that I am asleep. – *Meditation I*, 5th paragraph (AT 19)

-An attempt to outline the argument (go to ppt)

1. There are no certain signs by which I can tell whether I am awake or dreaming
 2. If there are no certain signs by which I can tell whether I am awake or dreaming, then I cannot be certain that I am awake and not dreaming
 - ∴ 3. I cannot be certain that I am awake and not dreaming (from 1,2)
 4. If I cannot be certain that I am awake and not dreaming, then I cannot be certain that I am really seated by the fireplace
 - ∴ 5. I cannot be certain that I am seated by the fireplace (3,4)
- Generalizing:
- ∴ 6. I cannot be certain of any of my perceptual beliefs about ordinary-sized objects in my immediate vicinity

-but notice how much of that had to be supplied
-and notice in particular how the force of the intended skepticism ascribed here had so little basis—the “certain” in “certain signs” of some translations of a phrase Descartes uses
-and while we’re here: let’s have a little general discussion of the force and the scope of skeptical claims and arguments
-but for some back-up here: A reason to think we’re at least on the right track is that in his rendering this argument, the eminent Descartes scholar, E.M. Curley, in his book *Descartes Against the Skeptics*, ended up with this rather similar conclusion (to what was apparently a 5-step argument):

(5) None of my beliefs about ordinary-sized objects in my immediate vicinity are certain

(Comparing my wording in (6) with Curley’s in his (5), I think I must have been looking at Curley’s rendering when I formulated the generalized conclusion when first writing my outline of the argument)

-But this only gives the basic structure of the argument, and leaves open the answer to a question potentially relevant to the force of the argument, and also to what for Descartes may lie behind what we have rendered as the argument’s premises (1, 2, and/or 4):

Does Descartes, in his dream argument, rely on “facts about dreaming” – like that we often dream, that our dream experiences are often very vivid, that in dreams we are deceived about our surroundings, etc.?

-No: Barry Stroud (*The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*):

When he first introduces the possibility that he might be dreaming Descartes seems to be relying on some knowledge about how things are or were in the world around him. He says, “I remind myself that on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions,” so he seems to be relying on some knowledge to the effect that he has actually dreamt in the past and that he remembers having been “deceived” by those dreams. That is more than he actually needs for his reflections about knowledge to have the force he thinks they have. He does not need to support his judgement that he has actually dreamt in the past. The only thought he needs is that is now possible for him to be dreaming that he is sitting by the fire, and that if that possibility were realized he would not know

that he is sitting by the fire. Of course it was no doubt true that Descartes had dreamt in the past and that his knowledge that he had done so was partly what he was going on in acknowledging the possibility of his dreaming on this particular occasion. But neither the fact of past dreams nor knowledge of their actual occurrence would seem to be strictly required in order to grant what Descartes relies on – the possibility of dreaming, and the absence of knowledge if that possibility were realized. (p. 17)

-Yes: E.M. Curley (*Descartes Against the Skeptics*): Step in Curley’s reconstruction of Descartes’ argument, very much used to support the skeptical conclusion on that reconstruction:

(2) Sometimes I have, in dreams, experiences which I take to be of ordinary-sized objects in my immediate vicinity and which are so like my most vivid waking experiences that they are not, in themselves, certainly distinguishable from the waking experiences. (Curley, p. 51)

-So, who’s right?

-Descartes does seem to appeal to, and partially base his reasoning on, facts about his past dreaming. That’s the surface reading of the argument. So, presumption is against Stroud here: He owes a good reason to read the argument in his way.

-Stroud’s reading would have the skeptical argument driven by the bare possibility that one is dreaming

-p is a bare possibility for S iff p is possible for S, but p is a possibility that is very slight or remote from S’s point of view, and S has no good basis for thinking that p is or might well be true, and S’s only basis for accepting the possibility of p is the negative basis that S cannot effectively rule it out that p is true

-the BIV hypothesis is a bare possibility – though, for illustration, we can consider circumstances in which it would be a more substantial possibility (or see *The Appearance of Ignorance*, Ch. 7, pp. 246.4 -247.3)

-But Descartes’s attitude toward the dream possibility doesn’t seem to be what we would expect if he thought this were just a bare possibility. Contrast Descartes’s “dizziness” statement at the end of the dream argument with his attitude toward the deceiving god (or evil genius) possibility, which Descartes does seem to think of as a bare possibility. Descartes writes that the evil genius possibility is “very slight, and, so to speak, metaphysical,” or, as our translation has it, “very tenuous and, so to speak, metaphysical” (AT 36.8).

-On Stroud’s reading, it’s hard to make sense of Descartes’s eventual escape from the dream argument in the last paragraph of Med. VI (AT 89-90). For isn’t it barely possible that one should have dreams that cohere with the recollection of one’s life as well as do waking experiences? So, if all Descartes is asserting is a bare possibility of dreaming, how is that mere bare possibility dismissed by the type of considerations Descartes brings against the dream argument?

-Uneasy question: But does the dream argument undercut itself if it relies on such “facts” about dreaming?

-Does Descartes get the “facts about dreaming” right?

-No: J.L. Austin (*Sense and Sensibilia*):

Another erroneous principle which the argument here seems to rely on is this: that it must be the case that “delusive and veridical experiences” are not (as such) “qualitatively” or “intrinsically” distinguishable – for if they were distinguishable, we should never be “deluded”. But of course, this is not so. From the fact that I am sometimes “deluded”, mistaken, taken in through failing to

distinguish A from B, it does not follow that A and B must be indistinguishable. Perhaps I should have noticed the difference if I had been more careful or attentive..." (p. 51)

I may have the experience ... of dreaming that I am being presented to the Pope. Could it be seriously suggested that having this dream is "qualitatively indistinguishable" from actually being presented to the Pope? Quite obviously not. After all, we have the phrase "a dream-like quality"; some waking experiences are said to have this dream-like quality, and some artists and writers occasionally try to impart it, usually with scant success, to their works. But of course, if the fact here alleged were a fact, the phrase would be perfectly meaningless, because applicable to everything. (p. 48)

We all know that dreams are throughout unlike waking experiences. (p. 42)

-Yes: Curley: Cites research (reported in W. Dement, "An Essay on Dreams," in *New Directions in Psychology*, II [note: this is from the 1970s, so these "New Directions" are no longer so new!—nor is the empirical information up-to-date]):

The physiological data describe a central nervous system that is, in fact, behaving as if it were receiving a high level of sensory input from the environment ... its neurophysiological properties resemble those of the active waking state

[REM mental activity is] not only more complex [than non-REM mental activity occurring in sleep], but presents an essentially complete perceptual field ... just as in the waking state, all sensory modalities are ordinarily present in the dream ... with many details in each mode. (quoted at pp. 63-64 of Curly)

-KDR: some fairly Cartesian thoughts about dreaming and skepticism: The big question: Supposing we do have all manner of false perceptual beliefs while dreaming (which I doubt), and supposing our dream experiences are (or were [I mean to be going subjunctive here, not past]) often as vivid, complete, and "lifelike" as ordinary waking experiences (which I also doubt—and which seems more than Curley is willing to claim: "many details" doesn't get it done), all of which Descartes may have thought, how do (or would) we know we're not dreaming when we're not?: Descartes seems to me to get this pretty much right: again, see AT 89-90. Related questions: 1. When we form simple perceptual beliefs, we seem to do so fairly directly, giving no thought to how our current experience hooks up with our long history of experience of the world. Is it plausible to suppose we are guided by our current experience's coherence with our past if we give no thought to that? (Brutally brief answer: Yes, I think so. I think we are plausibly guided by our background awareness of the coherence of our experience, even where we give no thought to it. All that's needed to show that we are in the relevant ways being guided by this coherence is that we would become suspicious and wouldn't hold our perceptual beliefs, or at least wouldn't hold them as confidently as we do, if that coherence were lacking. And that seems plausible. If in my current alert state of mind I were suddenly to find myself having the experience of fighting a dragon near some old-looking castle, with no apparent explanation of how I got to be in that situation, I think I'd be suspicious!) 2. Why then are we fooled when we are dreaming? (Brutally brief answer: supposing we are fooled, it's probably because we are then quite stupid—or put more nicely, not so alert.)

Reading Priorities

1. Meditation 1 through 4th paragraph of Meditation Three: AT 17-36
 - Watch for what the scope of Descartes's skepticism is at various points in Meditation One, and also for clues as to what its force is.
 - Watch especially for material that bears on the question of *universal* skepticism as we turn to Descartes's deceiving God hypothesis: Is it Descartes's considered view that all of his beliefs have been cast into doubt?
2. The Adams reading
3. The rest of the Meditations (AT 37-90)

