

Chapter 2

Descartes, First Meditation

2.1 Homework

Readings :

- Descartes, first Meditation
- BGD 2 (Larmore)

Study Questions :

1. Explain how Descartes justifies that he rejects as false “*all* the opinions which [he] had formerly accepted” (my emphasis) even if he does not know for sure that these opinions are all false.
2. To what aim does Descartes decide to reject all his beliefs as false?
3. Reconstruct the argument about dreaming: which kind of knowledge does it allow Descartes to put into doubt?
4. Why does Descartes need to appeal to the hypothesis of an evil genius to reject all his opinions and judgments as doubtful?

Text Analysis : Evil Genius Argument from “Suppose then that I am dreaming” to “if I want to discover any certainty”

Discussion Question: The power to doubt

2.2 The Cartesian Doubt: Hyperbolic, Methodological, Radical

A new Foundation of knowledge – Why?

Contrast

- What we take as true: unreliable sources + contingent order
- Order and rational foundation are the only warrant of true knowledge.
- *The Cartesian Doubt: Take as false anything that I am not certain is true*

Hyperbolic – The Cartesian doubt is deliberately excessive: any slightly doubtful proposition is considered false

- Acceptable method?
- Possible? Contrast: doing metaphysics / everyday life

Methodological – The Cartesian doubt is not to be taken as a defense of skepticism

Contrast:

- Assumption for the sake of the argument
- Belief with pragmatic consequences

Radical : The Cartesian doubt attacks the roots of knowledge, so that the entire edifice collapses.

Aristotle: the basis of all our current knowledge are the senses.

2.3 The senses

The classic argument – Optical Illusions

How much do we take from it?

The Dream Argument – there is no sufficient criterion to tell that we are awake (not dreaming)

Note that we have sufficient criteria for telling we are dreaming, but that's not the problem!

2.4 The Evil Genius: Mathematical Notions and Metaphysical Doubt

Our representations and the spacetime framework – Argument by analogy with painting

- The point is *not* that there must be something out there for us to be able to have representations at all.

- The point is that any representation is itself “*made*” of something: However unrealistic your dream is, you still dream of stuff embedded in a spacetime framework

Descartes will ultimately identify matter with spacetime

- Such a spacetime framework is the object of mathematics (geometry, analysis)

Can we doubt mathematical notions? – The Deceiving God

Your job!

2.5 The power to doubt

- Absolute power of the doubt: the entire building of knowledge is down

- Absolute power of doubt = absolute power of the faculty of judgment = absolute *power of the will* – power to assent or dissent

Strong claim: I possess the freedom and power to reject as false any of my possible beliefs

