

Descartes and evil genius



**ASSIGN
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In the first meditation, Descartes goal as he clearly state is to find indubitable knowledge that can provide a firm foundation to the sciences especially the social sciences. This has since then been termed as the theory of knowledge. In this meditation, Descartes notices that in the due course of his life, he had accepted false beliefs and that these false beliefs had infected other beliefs that he had based upon them. His overall aim as stated in the meditation is to suspend any judgment concerning any of his beliefs which he considers to be evenly and slightly doubtful.

Thus in the first meditation, he seeks to suspend all his beliefs about the physical world and consequently regards himself as a prisoner who in real sense enjoys his imaginary freedom while he is sleeping and dreads waking up in the physical world. He thus seeks to set aside his beliefs until such a secure and perfect basis in which to adopt any of them is formed and in this regard, he seeks to find some new beliefs that can not be doubted in truth.

It is only after finding these new beliefs that Descartes, according to the first meditation, can reconsider all other questionable beliefs that he had set aside thus deciding which to accept and which one to reject (John, 1998, p. 23). In the first meditation, Descartes base his argument on the basis of various aspects. Firstly, he believes that his sensory system occasionally misled him and secondly that sometimes while dreaming, he believes that he is awake which according to him is a fallacy. The dream argument that he later puts forth is unable, according to him, to challenge all the beliefs that he holds.

A third aspect that he consider is the likelihood that God created him to be deceived more so by the various beliefs that he held. In regard to this,

Descartes considers God to be powerful enough to create him in a way that even his internalized beliefs deceive him. This argument as put forth by Descartes assumes that there exists no difference between the occasional and systematic deception. If the above aspects then do not hold, Descartes argue that he was then produced or created by some unexplainable inferior cause (Hatfield, 2002, p. 31).

At the end of this mediation, Descartes adopts the argument of the evil genius or what has today been commonly referred to as the evil daemon in which he concurs that the absence in truth of the four named aspects leaves the possibility of the existence of a malevolent demon that is exceedingly powerful enough to deceive him. The argument proposes that the very act of thinking is in fact misguided by this evil genius. Thus the evil demon in the evil demon argument is a personification who is considered to be more powerful, deceitful and misleading.

To him, this personification presents a complete illusion of the physical world and inclusive here are the people in this world to the sensory system of Descartes. The evil genius thus presents the senses of Descartes with a complete illusion of his body including all the known bodily sensations whereas in fact there exists no body. In his argument, he did not directly rebut the accusation of the evil demon being omnipotent but simply asserted that the act of describing and defining something with attribute that can only belong to God does not imply that that something can be actually be held as the supreme God (Dicker, 1993, p. 28).

In examining the dream argument and the evil argument, the evil argument has been considered to be more superior in explaining the truthfulness and

in adopting various beliefs. Descartes himself leaned more on the evil genius argument than on the dream argument offering the reason as that, the dream argument tends to leave many of the beliefs that he held unchallenged thus could not be fully relied upon to offer a perfect explanation as to the deceitfulness of these beliefs. In the dream argument, he puts forth two premises.

Firstly, when dreaming, he occasionally mistakenly thinks that he is wide awake. This implies that when dreaming, he cannot tell whether or not he is dreaming. Further discussion produces another premise and that is; even when awake, he is not in a position to tell whether or not he is dreaming. In practical situations however, the two premises will not always be legitimate. For example, if you suppose that you have a bad situation in which you are blind, it would then be difficult to be sure if this was the case; maybe it is just dark outside.

It follows therefore that, it would not be impossible to tell that you are sighted if that was the case. This seemingly gives a case in which people in a bad situation can not tell that they are but those in the good situation can tell that they are in a good situation (Hatfield, 2002, p. 42). On the contrary, Descartes seems to hold the opinion that the case of dreaming is a special one thus if the bad situation was that 'I am dreaming' then the bad situation is that 'am awake'.

Thus he holds the opinion that, for any experience that a person has and as much as it seems to indicate that such a person is awake, it is also possible for such a person to have the same experience while dreaming. This is an extreme fallacy in certain cases such as being in a bad situation or being

drunk. In other words there are certain situations, experiences and clear minded thoughts that one can only have while awake while on the other hand, it is possible to contend that there are no experiences that one can only have when awake.

In this regard, there exists no method of testing whether a person is awake and not just dreaming. It can also be argued that for a person to have a clear knowledge and understanding of the physical world and on the basis of his or her sensory experiences, he or she has to know that he is not dreaming. Still it is possible to argue that one cannot have knowledge of anything about the physical world on the basis of the external experiences.

Moreover, the dreaming argument relies heavily in the role of the natural light in the doubt and vindication of knowledge as per Descartes. In this regard, the argument poses two critical questions. Firstly, can the Cartesian doubt be really extended to principles of natural light and secondly, is Descartes in any way vindicating the natural light in some other way. The adoption of the role of the natural light in forming the basis of the dreaming argument is highly erroneous and leads one to highly doubt the argument.

In addition, there is no immediate way to be sure that what the senses tell about the physical world is objectively true or whether the world revealed by these senses actually does exist (Dicker, 1993, p. 57). On the other hand and as stated earlier, the evil genius argument assumes no difference occasional deception and systematic deception unlike the dreaming argument which saw doubt as being the result of only systematic deception. The evil genius argument best explains even the things that Descartes himself sees as self evidently true.

It tends to give a better explanation as to why there exists doubt as to the truth of ones believes. Unlike in the use of the data of the sense perception, Descartes seems undecided as to the reason why the external truths are different than they way they are when he is directing his attention to them. The evil daemon argument thus seems to be valid in most of the cases that involves individual's experiences and the perceptions of that experience by such and individual. In the light of the evil genius argument, it is still possible to know that "I exist" and "am thinking".

In the second meditation, Descartes himself expresses a proposition as "I think therefore I am". According to him, one is a substance one that is purely rational with the aim of grasping the reasons for things. He contends that the distinction between the mind and the body based on the ability to separate the thoughts in thinking from extension is only tentative. In this regard, thinking and extension can in the end be connected and it may be that modes can exist apart from the substances though these things may seem inconceivable (John, 1998, p. 74).