

Deconstruction of the  
rationalist philosopher  
rene descartes  
philosophy essay



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This deconstruction of a rationalist philosopher such as Rene Descartes is influenced primarily by a heavy exposure to Nietzsche, Marx, Kierkegaard, and Foucault. Upon a personal philosophical synthesis of these philosophers to my self, a reexamination of Descartes produces astonishment that such work is considered honorable and fame-worthy.

Rene Descartes is considered to be the founder of analytical geometry, as well as an important contributor to the scientific method, and finally, a philosopher. However, a philosophical scrutiny of this logician shows reveals that there is some legitimate substance lacking in his analysis and attempts to reach truth, and instead only achieves convictions. Such a realization and conclusion implores to unveil the ambiguity of Descartes' philosophy and discredit him as an honorable philosopher (while not touching the mathematician).

### **On the Begging of Questions and Initial Fallibility**

Rene Descartes opens his meditations by recognizing that his conceptions of the world are largely based on shaky foundations and uncertainties, and thus sets out to apply himself to the general destruction of all his former opinions. In the opening, Descartes describes the nature of the task, " Now it will not be necessary... to prove that they [his former opinions] are all false... [but] the slightest ground for doubt that I find any, will suffice for me to reject all of them." (Descartes, 95)

Immediately we are faced with the illegitimacy of such a claim, for it supposes that Descartes is liable to reject all which he doubts. That is, he is

liable to reject some true things, and accept some false things so long as he has certainty of them and he would necessarily embrace this.

Descartes uses this idea consistently when he claims that that which is known by the senses cannot be accepted as certain or true (and perhaps he is committing one of many fallacies when he implies that certainty equates truth). However, he claims that some things which are known by the senses, such as that he is holding paper, are ridiculous to doubt, for that is the kind of doubt that would have him “ assimilate myself to those insane persons whose mind are so troubled...” (Descartes, 96) Here he most conspicuously begs the question as to what is certain and real, and thus sets the stage for a fest of question-begging which ensues for the remainder of the meditations.

A side note concerning his illegitimacy is that when Descartes claims to have doubted everything, he still uses memory and language. Yet how can he trust these faculties - especially if he were to apply the same reason to them as he did to his senses - that it is imprudent to trust anything which has ever deceived him? Indeed, Descartes cannot doubt everything from the beginning, and for the sake of Construction accepts some premises which are likely to be faulty. (Harrison-Barbet, 127)

## **The Dream Problem**

Continuing in the deconstruction, Descartes mentions a most interesting point: that “ there are no conclusive signs by means of which one can distinguish clearly between being awake and being asleep.” (Descartes, 96)

Descartes attempts to eliminate the ambiguity of what is real and not by implying that that which is doubtless in both the real world and the dream

world is doubtless in itself, such as algebra, geometry, and astronomy.

However, though these mathematics may appear to be true, it is still fairly uncertain which world is the real one.

## **The Evil Genius / God Problem**

Descartes suddenly introduces the concept of a God. Supposing that there is a being “ who is all-powerful and by whom I was created and made as I am,” (Descartes, 98) Descartes poses the question as to how he can be certain that that which is established, of the indubitably of mathematics, is not the object of deception by a more powerful being, and his existence and nature are of a major concern for the meditations.

First, Descartes proposes the possibility that there is “ not a true God, who is the sovereign source of truth, but some Evil Genius, no less cunning and deceiving than powerful, who has used all his artifice to deceive me.”

(Descartes, 100) What Descartes means by “ true God” is uncertain here, as is his term “ Evil Genius,” but clearly the latter is an illusionist who is in the habit or practice of deception. Descartes supposes that this Evil Genius is all-powerful, so that if he is real, then God cannot be, and vice-versa, but simultaneously he professes that the suspension of all judgment and building up his knowledge from only that which is certain protects him from the illusions of the Evil Genius. He does not consider the rational implication that this may lead him to an infinite regress of uncertainty, as in the case of suspecting that he is suspecting something to be untrue, for this is most detrimental to the object of building a foundation and structure of certainty.

## The Cogito

Descartes supposes that perhaps there is nothing which is certain, nor certain to exist, except his self - his ego. That is, given the existence of a deceptive Evil Genius, and given that Descartes thinks, it must be logical that that which thinks must exist, and therefore, despite any deception, Descartes exists, and thus Descartes has attained a point of reference and the foundation of all of his knowledge.

Firstly, however, Descartes supposes the existence of an Evil Genius, and has not refuted the possibility of an infinite regress in which it is possible that he is being deceived about the proposition that Descartes assumes to be true: that an Evil Genius exists, or he does not.

There has been a great wealth of criticisms concerning Descartes' cogito, that if we were to focus on this, we would be quite repetitious and dreary, and thus this essay will presume the cogito just as Descartes has - that is, that he exists, with reference to a single instance of such criticism from respect:

"[The cogito] commits the error of circular reasoning; for the 'I' in 'I am' is already presupposed in the 'I' of 'I think', and any necessity it possess is a matter of logic which has nothing to say about actual existent things..."

(Harrison-Barbet, 126) Indeed, what has Descartes truly doubted before he makes this claim? Everything except what he needs in constructing, it seems - he has already presumed an "I", and besides that already has a conception of what "thinking" is (and necessarily what "not thinking" is).

Indeed, Descartes has not doubted everything as he had attempted.

(Nietzsche BGE, 24) This habit of not doubting everything and making leaps in logic serve very well in order to create the Cartesian Structure, which is more the goal than reaching truth, though Descartes seems to imply that a structure and Truth would be equal.

## **The Infinite as Beyond Logic and Understanding**

In Meditation three, Descartes attempts to prove the existence of God, in which, according to his own logic, he is unsuccessful. One of Descartes unwritten premises is that God can be known by logic. Considering a being who is solely a creator, this may be possible, but Descartes' God is characterized by being "infinite." Thus the question that is most prudent to ask is if God can be known through logical means. Logically, this would mean that there is something to which God is not superior, and therefore calling him an infinite being and knowable through logic is just contradictory.

"What we cannot do, according to Kierkegaard, is believe by virtue of reason. If we choose faith [or belief] we must suspend our reason in order to believe in something higher than reason." (McDonald) Indeed, Kierkegaard makes a worthy reaffirmation of the futility of trying to know something which is above reason through reason. Supposing, however, that Descartes' God so desires, then of course he could be known by logic indeed, but what is next to be examined is if the finite can know the nature of the infinite.

Descartes has claimed the potential existence of some supreme, infinite being, and is attempting to gain knowledge about him. However, Descartes is a mortal, finite being, who cannot, without the will of God, grasp the will or nature of the infinite. By definition, even if God allowed this to him, God may

have just as well disallowed this. That Descartes presumes that God is allowing himself to be known, and also that he allows himself to be known through logic is a presumption which relies heavily upon two very shaky supports: that God's will is for himself to be understood or known, and that God is not a deceiver. It seems that it is simple for all knowledge claims to have a base which, ultimately, lies in some unproved assumption (even mathematics, according to Russell), but it is precisely Descartes' unique doubting method which makes it so that we cannot grant him the benefit of the unproven assumptions which he makes.

The attacks upon the knowledge of God through logic presented above can be applied to Descartes' suppositious argument that his conception of God cannot have originated within himself. His claim to this argument is that he is finite, whereas God is infinite, and that the idea of something which is more real cannot originate with something which is less real.

Here Descartes is not considering the alternative. That is, he is already begging the question that God exists or is real, when he should also consider that perhaps the idea of the existence of God is less real than himself. This would mean that, even according to his argument, his idea of God may be an illusion, thus making him more real and existing than God or the idea of God, whereas this idea is only an idea, and his existence is real. Therefore, he would be the creator of something more imperfect (the illusion), thus being more perfect than the idea of God, which, according to his Cartesian logic, is a legitimate argument which he has failed to consider.

In considering that his idea originated from God, he is begging the question that God exists. Furthermore, Descartes claims that he cannot doubt the idea of God because he has a clear and distinct perception that it is true.

Once more, despite the shakiness of the presumptions base and logic, with the “ proof” of God, Descartes is successful at beginning to convince himself that there are some things which he can begin to believe and accept.

## **On the Reason for Existence**

Now, Descartes presents a most interesting argument. He claims that he exists, and that this existence must have a cause, which may be from himself, that he has always existed, his parents, something less perfect than God, or God, and that he could exist for no other reason. (Wikipedia, argument outline)

Descartes' naiveté in the matter of refuting his goals will be exploited here. Firstly, he supposes that perhaps he created himself, but refutes this by claiming that if this had been the case, he would have made himself perfect. “ If I were [God] I should certainly doubt nothing, I should conceive no desires, and finally I would lack no perfection of which I have in me some idea .” This is a very adolescent approach to refuting this, for one may simply ask how Descartes knows the nature of God once more. Indeed, If Descartes were God and his own creator, is it not possible that he would make himself ignorant to alleviate his boredom of omniscience? Is it not possible that he would make himself believe that he is human? By Descartes' definition, God can do anything he wills, and thus how can Descartes' claim to know what God would like? This arrogance is mirrored in a poor refutation



of his argument. Perhaps he has convinced himself that he is not God, but this refutation is a very dim one. Furthermore, how does he know the nature of perfection? Descartes is supposing that as he is right now is imperfect. He does not consider that perhaps he is a perfect being: indeed, that perhaps the consideration that he is imperfect, that he is lacking, that he is finite, and doubting everything, perhaps all are functions of perfection, including considering a wrong conception of perfection. This would make Descartes a perfect being, but nonetheless one who is confused and perhaps discontented, but Descartes fails to even consider this, instead reverting to an old idea of perfection, which by now has evolved from simply "supremely existing" to being doubtless and undesiring too.

Descartes' other sources of existence will not be refuted because they are so embarrassing, but he then wonders how, given that God exists, he received this idea. He quickly dismisses that it was created by him, begging the question, and asserts that it is an innate idea, and that it was placed there by God at birth. He gives no substance to this claim, and concludes the third meditation with a most disturbing note: that God is not a deceiver.

This attempt to shed light upon the nature of God is once more an arrogant question-begging leap. Descartes claims that deception is an imperfection. How he knows this, or how he can possibly know what perfection is, he leaves uncertain and assumed once more. Apparently, it is because he has an idea of perfection, and deception is not as perfect as the absence of deception in his mind. However, it is essential to understand that this very idea is reliant on the premise that this is indeed the case. For if God is a deceiver, then he is essentially equal to the Evil Genius, and may have well <https://assignbuster.com/deconstruction-of-the-rationalist-philosopher-rene-descartes-philosophy-essay/>

placed a wrong idea of perfection in Descartes' mind. Descartes' claim that deception is imperfect stems from the premise that "deceit stems necessarily from some defect," which is a horrendous question-begging root, for he automatically disregards any of these "defects" as attributes of God simply because that is the way in which he conceives of them. That is, anything which he conceives of as bad, therefore, is bad. He doesn't question his ability to make this claim. However, this is alright for Descartes, for he is desperate to erect his structure of certainty already - why not skip and ignore some steps so long as he can have certainty?

### **On the Benevolence of God**

Descartes claims that God must be benevolent, and gives substance to this claim by further claiming that God cannot be a deceiver, since deception is imperfect. This idea of perfection stems from his clear and distinct ideas of perfection, which are true by virtue of all of his doubtless claims being true due to the premise that God is not a deceiver. However, God's benevolence is dependent upon Descartes' clear and distinct perceptions, which thus creates a very circular reasoning.

And what of the nature of God? Can omnipotence truly coexist with omnibenevolence? Supposing, as Descartes has, that there indeed exists an infinite being who is supreme to all other things ever conceivable and existing, there arises the paradox of an infinite benevolence. Can God be both omnibenevolent and omnipotent? For indeed, if he were omnibenevolent, then he would necessarily have no capacity for malice, and thus once more not be infinite. Can it be possible that Descartes is considering that, if God should so will it, he could not express pure malice? Is God thus

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limited? Is he then still an infinite God? Perhaps his idea of benevolence was instead opposite to perfection, and he has just proved the existence of the Evil Genius?

These utterly absurd assumptions which the finite mortal being Descartes attempts to make about the nature of God are truly disturbing. Indeed, even through logic, what is understandable about God is that we may be wrong in all of our conceptions of him, but we may also be right in some. Indeed, Descartes miserably failed to examine that nothing can be certain about that which is more infinite than our finite understandings.

Thus, the premise of the omni-benevolence of God which Descartes claims through his circular reasoning will not be granted to him, and anything further built upon the expectations that all of his clear and distinct ideas are true, and that God is not a deceiver, are built on top of such a shaky foundation that will be considered as unreliable sources of truth and reason.

Thus, we have the possibility that God is indeed a deceiver, and both the deconstruction and the early reconstruction will be reexamined.

### **The Evil Genius / God Problem Reexamined**

Descartes' early doubts concerning the Evil Genius and God reappear, and the concept that the Evil Genius and God are the same is a possibility, though it must be admitted, that this is rather unknown. Indeed then, Descartes was correct in doubting everything, for indeed, everything may be a deception and an illusion, and everything he may seem to know has the potential to be false. (The Radical Academy)

## **The Dream Problem Reexamined**

When considering that God/Evil Genius may be real and existing, and possibly deceiving, the Dream Problem is given a whole new perspective. Indeed, even the things which are “ true” in both the real world and the dream world, such as mathematics, may be deceptions created and placed into Descartes’ mind by this infinite being. This would mean that Descartes would truly have no knowledge of what is real and what is a dream, if even his conceptions of “ real” and “ dream” are legitimate conceptions in the first place. This leads us to Descartes’ most genuine statement from the beginning of his treatise, that “[maybe] there is nothing certain in the world.” (Descartes, 102)

## **Beyond Infinity**

The reasons for which Descartes’ arguments following the establishment of the existence of an infinite being are invalid is because he constantly refers to this infinite to propagate that he cannot be wrong in what he conceives because he believe the existing God to be benevolent and not a deceiver. However, since this premise is so weak, his structures of mathematics and sciences, and then in the end senses and other bodies are so unstable that, even if true, are inconsistencies based on a weak premises which do not deserve to be examined. Descartes fails to achieve truth (but not in building a structure).

## **Conclusion: On the Philosophy of his Mind – A Structure of Secure Certainty**

It is most appropriate to mention an analysis of Descartes’ meditations and what he has achieved. Rene Descartes began his meditations by hoping to  
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eliminate all doubt and achieve certainty. By the end of the meditations, it appears that he has done just this. However, his flaws, incessant question-begging, and absurd philosophical method have been pointed out above, thus raising the inquiry of the coexistence of the absence of doubt and truth.

Descartes' primary aim was to eliminate doubt, and by the very end he is shown to be doubtless indeed. However, the matter is different when concerning truth. Descartes has mentioned that in his life he has struggled to find something certain, and the Cartesian Structure which he has constructed for himself is perhaps the very thing for which he had been searching. Indeed, Descartes may now rest easily accepting that everything which he clearly and distinctly perceives is true, and that everything he considers, therefore, is essentially true for he believes that he could not be deceived.

Yet this goes back to an original concern of rejecting truth or accepting untruth. By the end of the Meditations, it is clear that truth and untruth are for Descartes merely functions of what is certain and what is doubtful. That is, for him, truth or untruth is a quality which an idea gains as one is accustomed to it (such as in the Cartesian Structure), and so long as he is doubtless about it, he is living his philosophy well.

Essentially what this means is that, though Descartes may fail at reaching truths logically, at least he removes doubt from himself, and may rest easily. It is for this reason that the Cartesian philosophy is one which is a philosophy solely for Descartes (and perhaps those of similar mental properties). That is, this philosophy, which is based upon comfort in certainty and anti-doubt,

cannot have a universal application to all humans, but only for himself, for perhaps he alone can achieve a comfort with this exact method.

Thus, Descartes' reconstruction provides him with a method for removing doubt, but cannot be used by others to remove doubt, nor to reach much truth, for their psychological states vary from Descartes', who has created a system which works for himself (it is considered that this may work for some others, but these are generally not considered here, thus only slightly mentioned in these parentheses).

Thus, has Descartes eliminated doubt? Indeed, yes he has, and it just so happens that he has achieved this psychological state philosophically. However, it is not a philosophical state of truth at all - perhaps solely the state of potential truth. For Descartes, however, it is simpler, clearer, and more distinct to conceive of these two as synonymous as he takes a nap from six long and excruciating meditations, allowing him the luxury of defining metaphysical and epistemological as he pleases. His philosophy is essentially the propagation of his psychology in the erection of his Cartesian Structure, that this structure is the very thing necessary to discard doubt. Or in Friedrich Nietzsche's words, " every great philosophy so far has been... the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary unconscious memoir." (BGE, 13)