

# Descartes' method of doubt



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Explain Descartes' Method of doubt; what does he hope to accomplish from this method; is Descartes a skeptic?

Descartes began 'Meditation One' of his classic *Meditation on First Philosophy* by saying that throughout his life, he had acquired several opinions and beliefs which he later discovered to be false ( 17-18 ). The main goal of Descartes was to find a foundation on which knowledge can be built. That is Descartes wanted to find a certainty or truth which could not be doubted beyond dispute. He agrees with Plato that knowledge requires certainty, but reject Plato idea that physical world is not knowable. What does it means to be certainty? Descartes main problem was how to achieve this certainty. In order to achieve this aim, Descartes adopted a systematic method known as the method of doubt. The method of doubt teaches us to take our beliefs and subject them to doubt. If it is possible to doubt, then we treat them as false, and we need to repeat this process until we are unable to find something to doubt on. The main point is that we treat all our beliefs as false until we find a foundation which is undoubtable, and we used the undoubtable things to build up everything on it. The method of doubt will be elaborated based on: doubting the senses, doubting the physical world (dream), and imagining that there exists an evil genius.

Descartes begins by pointing out that our senses are unreliable. He questions all knowledge that he had acquired either from the senses or through the senses. He noticed that if the senses had deceived him even once, they were no more trustworthy. " It is a mark of prudence never to place our complete trust in those who have deceived us even once." ( 18-19 ). For example, He often mistook what he saw at a distance such as straight

thing look bent, round thing look oval, square thing look round, and mountains look purple (—). In addition, even the impression Descartes received in the moment he was directly looking the fire before him while he was writing proved not to be reliable ( 19 ). How did Descartes know that he was not really in insane or dreaming? He answers this question by saying that our immediate impressions are so vivid that they must be real.

However, Descartes contradict his answer by saying that he always dreamed of sitting before the fire while writing ( 19 ), and some of these dreams becomes visible to him quite vividly. Hence, he could not be sure that he was not dreaming at that moment. According to this doubt, Descartes confirmed that all the knowledge received through the senses must be temporarily prevented from continuing because there are not certain. In addition, we can doubt that what our senses give us is accurate, but they cannot be the foundation of building true knowledge or certainty.

In addition, Descartes continues his method of doubt by assuming for the sake of argument that we are dreaming about everything. If we are dreaming about everything, there is still some knowledge that is acquired within the dream itself. This means that although we can doubt that all the images and ideas that we see in our dreams refer to some outward reality. However, we can consider these images and ideas in their simple components in order to see if any of images and ideas might be true in themselves. After rejecting all simple components of images and ideas which are based on senses such as color, sound, etc., Descartes came to the simple truth of mathematics. Which is that one plus two equals three does not depends on any sensible experience, but is gotten entirely from our minds

despite of whether we are asleep or awake. Descartes used this principle to reach at a clear and distinct idea which is beyond all doubt. Therefore, we can say in words that one plus three equals four, but we cannot actually think in our minds that it equals four but three.

Furthermore, Descartes took his search for the truth that is beyond any doubt to the extreme by imagining that there is an 'evil genius'. Descartes consider the evil genius to be someone who has the power of God, but who is not good. The 'evil genius' is determined to deceive us into thinking that there is a physical world when in fact there is none. For example, using the famous Matrix movie, the machines that are used in the movie would be considered as the 'evil geniuses'. Everything would seem to us to be real just like in the matrix, but none of it would be real. However, Descartes does not actually believe that this 'evil genius' exists, but there is no way to ruled it out based on our sensory experience. Hence, how can we doubt that one plus two does not equals three when our minds necessarily admit that it equals three? Descartes used the concept of the 'evil genius' to hypothesize that maybe there is an 'evil god' who is deceiving us from getting the correct answer. Even though, we always think that one plus two equals three. Maybe this god is actually tricking us, and in reality it equals four. Descartes linked this circumstance where we are absolutely confident about our belief toward a certain fact, but despite this confident we often discover later that we had mistaken about the fact. This might be the case for our mathematical truths in which an 'evil god' is deceiving us from getting the correct solution to a problem every time we count or do the mathematics.

Moreover, Descartes main objective of using the method of doubt was to find a foundation on which truth or true knowledge can be built. Descartes wanted to find a certainty or truth which could not be doubted beyond dispute. The question what does it means to be certainty? as posed in above introduction can be define as being unable to doubt what we know.

Something that cannot be possibly be doubted is certain. By 'possible to doubt', Descartes means any possibility what so ever. This will guarantee that whatever cannot be doubted really is certain. Therefore, if one could find something that was truly undoubted in this sense, we could use it in a valid argument like a syllogism. The conclusion of which would be that the world exists in the way that we think it does. In addition, Descartes was skeptical in his arguments. This is he apply reasoning and critical thinking to determine validity of his arguments. He was able to find supported conclusion and not the justification of a preconceived conclusion.

To conclude, Descartes developed the method of doubt to find certainty. For the purpose of this method, if we can doubt a belief then we treat that belief as false. He applies this method systemically. He doubts that the world is the way it appear to be, he doubts that there is a physical world at all, and finally he doubts the mathematical truths. However, the one thing that Descartes cannot doubt is that while he doubts, he must exist. Even if there was an 'evil genius' and if he was deceiving me in to thinking that there was a physical world when in fact there is none, it could not be the case that I think that there is a physical world if there weren't a me to deceived. Therefore, when I am thinking, I know I exist and this cannot be doubted. Using this method of doubt, Descartes finally found certainty which is he exist as a

thinking thing, whether there is a physical world or not he cannot doubt he exists. This is the foundation he plans to build back all of the stuff he previously doubted as cited in the introduction.