

Descartes
philosophical motive
for using doubt in
meditations
philosophy essay



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Descartes' Meditations are a search for the ' First Principles' of Philosophy. In order for the Meditator to achieve an understanding of the principles of Philosophy, the Meditator must be certain that what they believe to be true, can in no way in their own mind be wrong. Hence, Descartes' use of the ' Method of Doubt' which is used as "...an attempt to get the meditator to put aside his pre-critical sensory oriented picture of the world"[1]through the use of four stages, outlined within the Method Descartes works to prepare our minds for a withdrawal from the senses, to ensure that it is "...impossible for us to doubt any further...we later discover to be true."[2]

Within the ' Method of Doubt', Descartes talks of the mind and its reliance upon the senses "...whatever I had admitted until now as most true I received...from or through the senses"[3]. However, Descartes believes that the senses are somewhat misleading when it comes to deciphering the reality or truth of an object, mainly that of what we see for example i. e. " distant objects"[4]. From this we can see that Descartes is trying to get the Meditator to understand, that knowledge gained from the senses is not always concrete in its truth or reality. Cottingham describes this as a " Clearing of the mind"[5], Descartes' motive is highlighted as a form of insuring certainty of knowledge, again, Cottingham sums up Descartes motive as " replacing the senses with something more refined"[6]. Descartes motive according to Kenny is a "...meditative technique...to cure the mind of excessive reliance upon the senses"[7], as strong argument as it is more accessible for people to understand, as those whom Hobsbawm would call enlightened understand that knowledge comes from the intellect, and not from what we experience. This leads many to criticise Descartes, as in order

to discount knowledge gleaned from the senses, one would need to recognise when an error has taken place, thus distinguishing right and wrong, LaBossiere compares Descartes method to the understanding of Optical Illusions stating that through our experiences of the senses we can see "...through the deception"[8], thus the senses can bring about true understanding, therefore disproving Descartes belief the senses provide a false truth.

Beginning stage two of the ' Method of Doubt', Descartes identifies the way in which dreaming and the idea of madness calls into question his beliefs regarding the senses, questioning the reality of his self"...deny these hands and entire body are mine"[9]. Descartes concludes that the images of the insane are on a par with the images of dreams, and therefore believes that considering the ideas we see when dreaming are a more accessible and effective way of doubting the senses; as not all of us have experienced madness, yet most have dreamt. Kenny adds "... madmen have the delusion their bodies are made of glass"[10], and argues how can Descartes believe his senses are more trust worthy than the madman's? Taking Kenny's question further, we can see that Descartes doesn't need to think himself mad, as he himself states he sometimes has dreams as "...wild"[11]as the experiences of the insane. From this we can understand that Descartes motive is to highlight the way in which our experience of sensory actions shapes our understanding of what is real. Rorty believes although Descartes' argument surrounding the idea of dreaming is very simple, it still works effectively to show how we can't be sure we are " always dreaming"[12], thus how can we be sure of anything. Again LaBossiere, argues that whilst

we may not know if what we perceive to be true in the 'waking world', we still "have good grounds for believing that the 'waking' world is fundamentally different from the 'dream' world"[13]; showing that although we may not have exact answers when it comes to reality, we still understand through our sense what is real and what isn't, the fact I dream I am a Millionaire doesn't make me one, as when I wake my bank balance remains the same as before; hence Descartes argument of sensory reliance can be proven to in fact work to verify reality and truth.

However, Descartes furthers his argument in stage three of the 'Method of doubt'; and queries whether reality stems from the imagination rather than the senses. In this case using the image of the painter as an analogy, assuming himself to be dreaming and that all perception of reality is imaginary, Descartes compares dreams to "...painted images, which could only have been produced in the likeness of true things"[14], in other words we may not have an understanding of the reality of images we dream, but like the painter whom paints images that may not be of true reality, we can recognise images we ourselves know to be real; de Vinci's Medusa would be an example of this. It would be futile to assume a female existed with snakes for hair, although we have experience of each object in its own reality, thus Descartes believes just as paintings represent real objects, can that not mean that our dreams also represent objects that "... i have experienced when awake"[15]. Here we can see that Descartes' motive is to show that there are such rational truths such as size, and shape which are universally recognisable and seem not to be imaginary, and thus we can sort reality from non-reality through our intellect and not rely upon our senses.

Cottingham believes that through doubt, Descartes has sorted “ scientific truth from Imagination”[16], and therefore proven we are in fact living in reality, not the dream world Descartes fears.

Descartes must go further to doubt, these apparent universal truths in order to be clear he has a true understanding of philosophical foundations.

Descartes supposes that they could be the work of an Imperfect Creator that is so powerful that he can deceive Descartes in to believing that “ there is no earth at all”[17]. Descartes wonders if this said God is powerful enough to deceive him of the world’s existence, then he must also have to power to deceive him of even the basic truths, “...deceived every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square?”[18]The motive of the all-powerful God is to show Descartes Meditators that there are always external forces working against our innate understanding of reality and truths, in other words our experience and senses are always working to deceive us just as the Imperfect Creator does. Descartes also believes that we ourselves are also imperfect beings for allowing ourselves to slip back into “ old habits and laziness”[19], and therefore again relying upon our senses to guide us in understanding reality and truth. Kenny sums up Descartes theory of the Imperfect being as “ the more likely we are to be so imperfect as to be always in error”[20]. Descartes would agree with the view point as he believed “...the more probable it will be that I am so imperfect that I am always deceived.”[21], therefore reverting back to the old ways of relying upon the senses. Going as far as to doubt his own doubt, Descartes understands that many would rather except that the imperfect creator does not exist, however, he argues such as it would be fair for those to argue

against the existence of a deceptive God, no counter argument provided can bring about the greatest of certainty concerning reality or truth. Carriero argues that the introduction of a deceptive God would be like “worrying we might trip over the corner of a circle”[22], the fact that its existence has not been proven means that Descartes’ possibility of an omnipotent being has no credible testimony, thus, “we have no reason to except even the possibility of such as being”[23]. Overall we can assume Descartes has fallen into the trap of reverting back to relying upon a belief in the senses.

Descartes outlines his philosophical motive at the very beginning of Meditation One, in order for him to fully understand the reality and truth of philosophical foundations he must, “...raze everything to the ground and begin again...”[24] Overall this is the general process of the Method of Doubt, to question the very knowledge that we consider to be truth in order to achieve complete certainty that we know, can actually be true. Descartes reaches the conclusion that “.... natural sciences are doubtful, while mathematical sciences have an element of certainty”[25]; mainly because Mathematical science has a structure that is able to withstand the method of doubt, as the senses play no role in building its foundations. This leads us to see that the process of doubt used by Descartes flows from stage to stage eliminating the possibility of being wrong, and eventually, quenches the “natural desire for truth”[26]. Quite Simply the ‘Method of Doubt’ is a philosophical institution that works to provide “that sort of pure intellectual clarity...needed for metaphysics”[27]