

Descartes: Skepticism and the Purpose of the Meditations; The Dream Argument

1. The Agenda of the Meditations, announced and hidden

-Opening sentences of Meditation One:

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.

–CSM2: 17; compare our book, p.13

-from a letter to Mersenne, 28 Jan. 1641:

I may tell you, between ourselves, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle.

--CSMK3: 173

-So, Descartes's announced purpose is to establish something stable in the sciences: an understandable goal in the wake of scientific upheaval. But what is a being kept at least a bit hidden is something that is supposed to favor a particular type of physics.

2. The Structure of the Meditations

See opening sentences again. Tearing Down: Med 1; Building back up: Meds 2-6
Using (in an explicit, and also in a hidden, way), but also defeating, skepticism

3. Descartes and the Colors of the Physical World: A Parenting Story

-SQAR: Secondary Quality Anti-Realism (or what Adams calls "Primary Quality Realism")

-Descartes's use of skepticism to promote SQAR

4. Skepticism: Some General Points

force and scope of skeptical claims, arguments

Descartes's Dream Argument

This would all be well and good, were I not a man who is accustomed to sleeping at night, and to experiencing in my dreams the very same things, or now and then even less plausible ones, as these insane people do when they are awake. How often does my evening slumber persuade me of such ordinary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated next to the fireplace – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! *But right now my eyes are certainly wide awake when I gaze upon this sheet of paper. This head which I am shaking is not heavy with sleep. I extend this hand consciously and deliberately, and I feel it. Such things would not be so distinct for someone who is asleep. As if I did not recall having been deceived on other occasions even by similar thoughts in my dreams! As I consider these matters more carefully, I see so plainly that there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep. As a result, I am becoming quite dizzy, and this dizziness nearly convinces me that I am asleep.* – *Meditation I*, 5th paragraph (p. 14)

-different font: anti-skeptic digging in

-hands as an emblem of resistance to skepticism: G.E. Moore and Descartes

-What's the argument? What's the conclusion? force? scope?

-the basic structure of the argument – ppt

-E.M. Curley's (Descartes Against the Sceptics) rendering of Descartes's conclusion:

(5) None of my beliefs about ordinary-sized objects in my immediate vicinity are certain

-Going beyond the basic structure, a question potentially relevant to the force of the argument, and also to what's behind premises 1 and/or 2:

Does Descartes, in his dream argument, rely on “facts about dreaming” – like that we often dream, that our dream experiences are often very vivid, etc.?

-No: Barry Stroud (The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism):

When he first introduces the possibility that he might be dreaming Descartes seems to be relying on some knowledge about how things are or were in the world around him. He says, “I remind myself that on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions,” so he seems to be relying on some knowledge to the effect that he has actually dreamt in the past and that he remembers having been “deceived” by those dreams. That is more than he actually needs for his reflections about knowledge to have the force he thinks they have. He does not need to support his judgement that he has actually dreamt in the past. The only thought he needs is that is now possible for him to be dreaming that he is sitting by the fire, and that if that possibility were realized he would not know that he is sitting by the fire. Of course it was no doubt true that Descartes had dreamt in the past and that his knowledge that he had done so was partly what he was going on in acknowledging the possibility of his dreaming on this particular occasion. But neither the fact of past dreams nor knowledge of their actual occurrence would seem to be strictly required in order to grant what Descartes relies on – the possibility of dreaming, and the absence of knowledge if that possibility were realized. (p. 17)

-Yes: E.M. Curley (Descartes Against the Skeptics): Step in Curley's reconstruction of Descartes' argument:

(2) Sometimes I have, in dreams, experiences which I take to be of ordinary-sized objects in my immediate vicinity and which are so like my most vivid waking experiences that they are not, in themselves, certainly distinguishable from the waking experiences. (p. 56)

-So, who's right?

-Descartes does seem to appeal to, and partially base his reasoning on, facts about his past dreaming. That's the surface reading of the argument. So, presumption is against Stroud here: He owes a good reason to read the argument in his way.

-Stroud's reading would have the skeptical argument driven by the bare possibility that one is dreaming

-p is a bare possibility for S iff p is possible for S, but p is a possibility that is very slight or remote from S's point of view, and S has no good basis for thinking that p is or might well be true, and S's only basis for accepting the possibility of p is the negative basis that S cannot effectively rule it out that p is true

-the BIV hypothesis is a bare possibility – though, for illustration, we can consider circumstances in which it would be a more substantial possibility (or see *The Appearance of Ignorance*, Ch. 7, pp. 246.4 -247.3

-But Descartes's attitude toward the possibility doesn't seem to be what we would expect if he thought this were just a bare possibility. Contrast Descartes's "dizziness" statement at the end of the dream argument with his attitude toward the evil genius possibility, which Descartes does seem to think of as a bare possibility. Descartes writes that the evil genius possibility is "very slight, and, so to speak, metaphysical," or, as our anthology's translation has it, "very tenuous and, so to speak, metaphysical."

-On Stroud's reading, it's hard to make sense of Descartes's eventual escape from the dream argument in the last paragraph of Med. VI (p. 68b.1-.7). For isn't it barely possible that one should have dreams that cohere with the recollection of one's life as well as do waking experiences? So, if all Descartes is asserting is a bare possibility of dreaming, how is that mere bare possibility dismissed by the type of considerations Descartes brings against the dream argument?

-But does the dream argument undercut itself if it relies on such "facts" about dreaming?

-Does Descartes get the "facts about dreaming" right?

-No: J.L. Austin (Sense and Sensibilia):

Another erroneous principle which the argument here seems to rely on is this: that it must be the case that "delusive and veridical experiences" are not (as such) "qualitatively" or "intrinsically" distinguishable – for if they were distinguishable, we should never be "deluded". But of course, this is not so. From the fact that I am sometimes "deluded", mistaken, taken in through failing to distinguish A from B, it does not follow that A and B must be indistinguishable. Perhaps I should have noticed the difference if I had been more careful or attentive..." (p. 51)

I may have the experience ... of dreaming that I am being presented to the Pope. Could it be seriously suggested that having this dream is "qualitatively indistinguishable" from actually being presented to

the Pope? Quite obviously not. After all, we have the phrase “a dream-like quality”; some waking experiences are said to have this dream-like quality, and some artists and writers occasionally try to impart it, usually with scant success, to their works. But of course, if the fact here alleged were a fact, the phrase would be perfectly meaningless, because applicable to everything. (p. 48)

We all know that dreams are throughout unlike waking experiences. (p. 42)

-Yes: Curley: Cites research (reported in W. Dement, “An Essay on Dreams,” in *New Directions in Psychology*, II):

The physiological data describe a central nervous system that is, in fact, behaving as if it were receiving a high level of sensory input from the environment ... its neurophysiological properties resemble those of the active waking state

[REM mental activity is] not only more complex [than non-REM mental activity occurring in sleep], but presents an essentially complete perceptual field ... just as in the waking state, all sensory modalities are ordinarily present in the dream ... with many details in each mode. (quoted at pp. 63-64 of Curly)

-What is dreaming like? Supposing we do have all manner of false perceptual beliefs while dreaming, how do we know we're not dreaming when we're not?: Some (fairly Cartesian) thoughts

Reading Priorities

1. Meditation 1 through 4th paragraph of Meditation Three: pp. 13-25.7 of our book
 - Watch for what the scope of Descartes's skepticism is at various points in Meditation One, and also for clues as to what its force is.
 - Watch especially for material that bears on the question of *universal* skepticism: Is it Descartes's considered view that all of his beliefs have been cast into doubt?
 - Watch for the back-and-forth between the skeptic and anti-skeptic, with the anti-skeptic “digging in” at various points – as illustrated in dream argument, above.
2. Adams, pp. xii-xix
3. The rest of the Meditations