

Descartes: Skepticism and the Problem of the Cartesian Circle

The Painter Analogy (paragraphs 6-8 of M1, pp. 14.8-15.7): Wrangling over the scope of the skepticism generated by the dream argument.

-It's clear that particular perceptual judgments ("such particulars as these," p. 14.9) are thought to be lost.

-But through "painter" reasoning, a physical world with certain general kinds of properties seems to be spared. After some negotiation, the arithmetical and geometrical properties are selected for this honor. What Descartes seems to retain (so far) is that there is an external world, that is characterized by such properties, in some arrangement or other. The properties in question sound like "primary qualities." Colors themselves seem excluded from the ranks of the "true colors" (p. 15.3) of our experiences.

Two Kinds of Skeptical Arguments: 1. Arguments by Skeptical Hypotheses:

Recall from last time (the ppt), we rendered Descartes's dream argument in this way:

1. There are no certain signs by which I can tell whether I am awake or dreaming
2. If there are no certain signs by which I can tell whether I am awake or dreaming, then I cannot be certain that I am awake and not dreaming
- ∴ 3. I cannot be certain that I am awake and not dreaming (from 1,2)
4. If I cannot be certain that I am awake and not dreaming, then I cannot be certain that I am really seated by the fireplace
- ∴ 5. I cannot be certain that I am seated by the fireplace (3,4)

Generalizing:

- ∴ 6. I cannot be certain of any of my perceptual beliefs about ordinary-sized objects in my immediate vicinity

This was just to get its basic structure. We wondered whether, on a closer look, Descartes meant to be relying on "facts about dreaming," in support of what appear above as premises 1 and/or 2.

But we can view Descartes's dream argument as an instance of a still more general, more basic type of skeptical argument: as an Argument by Skeptical Hypothesis, which utilizes a skeptical hypothesis, H, which tells a story in which O, something one might ordinarily take oneself to have a firm grasp of, is false, but which explains how one might have come to falsely believe that O, and attacks one's grasp of O in this general way:

1. It is in some way an open question whether H is true
2. If it is in some way an open question whether H is true, then it is in some way an open question whether O is true
- ∴ 3. It is in some way an open question whether O is true.

Where H is *I am dreaming*, O is *I am seated by the fire*, and the way the question is being alleged to be open concerns a lack of knowledge, we get this form of the dream argument:

1. I don't know that I'm not dreaming
2. If I don't know that I'm not dreaming, then I don't know that I am seated by the fire
- ∴ 3. I don't know that I am seated by the fire

There can be other interesting Arguments by Skeptical Hypotheses that employ other Hs, like that one is a BIV, that the world was created just 5 minutes ago, complete with evidence of great age, and, as we're about to see, Descartes's Deceiving God / Evil Genius hypothesis

Two Kinds of Skeptical Arguments: 2. Evidentialist Arguments:

Another basic kind of skeptical argument we'll encounter is this (here we give names to each of the basic forms of premise):

Evidentialist Arguments

1. Evidentialist Requirement: Beliefs of type A do not / cannot have status J unless they are properly based on beliefs of type B
2. Unmeetability Premise: Beliefs of type A are not / cannot be properly based on beliefs of type B
- ∴ 3. Beliefs of type A do not / cannot have status J

So, for instance:

1. You cannot be justified in believing anything about the external world unless your beliefs about your sensations, together with self-evident necessary truths, give you good reasons for holding those external world beliefs
2. Your beliefs about your sensations, together with self-evident necessary truths, do not provide good reasons for your external world beliefs
- ∴ 3. Your external world beliefs are not justified

Descartes's Deceiving God / Evil Genius Argument (par. 9 thru the end of M1, pp. 15.7-17.4)
-Doesn't really depend on God, as Descartes makes clear in par. 10. It can be the doubt that, as Descartes puts it toward the end of Meditation Five, "I am so constituted as to go wrong sometimes about what I think I perceive most evidently" (A&G; close to our translation at p. 46.8).

-I think the argument suggested here is a case of the basic ("classic," we might say) form of skeptical argument by skeptical hypothesis that I call the "Argument from Ignorance," and that goes like this:

1. I don't know that not-H
2. If I don't know that not-H, then I don't know that O
- So, C. I don't know that O,

Where 'H' is a skeptical hypothesis (here, that I'm the victim of a deceiving god), and 'O' is something I would ordinarily think I know (here, for instance, that $2+3=5$, or one of the other items from the bottom of p. 15).

-Force? I put the argument in terms of knowledge, but that was mainly because "know" is so short and easy to work with. What force Descartes really intends here is a very tricky matter to which we will return.

-Scope?, How are we to generalize this skeptical conclusion? Is this an argument for Universal skepticism??!!

a. in favor of US:

1. M1, par's 9-10 (pp. 15.8-16.5)
2. M3, par 4 (p. 25.1-.7)

b. against US:

1. M2, par's 1-3 (pp. 17.4-18.3)

2. structure of the Meditations: If you're going to "rebuild" something stable, as Descartes clearly thinks he succeeds in doing, you need some "foundation" on which to build

-But at any rate, it seems that the external physical world has been lost to doubt at this point

The Problem of the Cartesian Circle

-Descartes seems to seek to remove the doubt that infects his "clear and distinct" perceptions by proving that there is a good God who would not allow him to be deceived about what he c&dp'd. But isn't that...circular?

-Arnauld's formulation (from the Fourth Objections):

I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists.

But we can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists, we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and evidently is true. (CSM2: 150)

- James Van Cleve ("Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle," The Philosophical Review 88 (1979): pp. 55-91) handily summarizes the problem as arising because Descartes:

appeared to commit himself to each of the following propositions:

(1) I can know (be certain) that (P) whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true, only if I first know (am certain) that (Q) God exists and is not a deceiver

(2) I can know (be certain) that (Q) God exists and is not a deceiver, only if I first know (am certain) that (P) whatever I clearly and distinct perceive is true (p. 55)

-In dilemma form: What is the initial status of Descartes's clear and distinct intuitions: 🖐 or 🧠 ?

Tying together the problem of the Circle and the problem with interpreting the scope of the skepticism of Meditation One as being universal: There's a general **apparent problem of uncertain starting points**. The Circle can be a problem even if the scope of the skepticism isn't universal, so long as some of Descartes's needed starting points fall within the scope of his initial skepticism. But if the scope of the initial skepticism is universal, then Descartes's needed starting points definitely do fall within the scope of that initial skepticism.

How We Will Proceed: Identify Descartes's starting points (the premises Descartes is willing to help himself to without argument), look at his arguments leading to the "Rule of Truth," then return to the problem of the Circle.

Descartes's starting points seem to be limited to two classes of truths: self-evident metaphysically necessary truths and truths about his own states of consciousness that are self-evident to him. These are the starting points of "Classical Foundationalism." (Note that perceptual beliefs about the external world are excluded.)

Next time, we will see how Descartes seeks to show various things from that meager starting point – including how he seeks to show that there is an external world, after all. It turns out, Descartes thinks he needs to prove the existence of a perfectly good God to do show that, too. This prompted one of my favorite quips ever in philosophy, from one of our authors, David Hume: "To have recourse to the veracity of the supreme Being, in order to prove the veracity of our senses, is surely making a very unexpected circuit."

Reading

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
4. KDR, "Descartes, Epistemic Principles, Epistemic Circularity, and *Scientia*"