

SKEPTICISM

RENÉ DESCARTES'S *MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY*

I. KNOWLEDGE AND SKEPTICISM

We ordinarily think that we know a vast number of things about the world and the things in it. The difficulty, however, is that there are any number of arguments designed to show that we know nothing (or next to nothing) about the world.

II. CARTESIAN SKEPTICISM

1. Descartes begins by noting that he has some false or questionable beliefs. He doesn't like the fact that he has such beliefs, so he wants to get rid of any belief that might be false. The goal here is to have only true beliefs (or at least as few false beliefs as possible).
2. To this end, Descartes says that he will toss out any belief that is "not entirely certain and indubitable." So Descartes claims that if a belief is to count as knowledge, it must be both certain and indubitable.
 - ⇒ **CERTAINTY** has something to do with truth. In particular, a belief is certain if it is not possible for the belief to be false. (CAN'T BE FALSE)
 - ⇒ **INDUBITABILITY** has something to do with doubt. In particular, a belief is indubitable if it is not possible for me to doubt the belief. (CAN'T BE DOUBTED)
3. Since Descartes is tossing out all beliefs that are uncertain or dubitable, he need not look at his beliefs one by one to determine whether they are false. He can simply see which *kinds* of beliefs are uncertain or dubitable, and then toss out all beliefs of those kinds.
4. "All that up to the present time I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses."
5. Levels of doubt
 - A. Descartes' doubts about "things which are hardly perceptible, or very far away."
 - (1) My senses sometimes deceive me in the worst perceptual situations, that is, when things are hardly perceptible, or when they are very far away.
 - (2) I can doubt my senses in the worst perceptual situations if my senses have even once deceived me in such situations.

- (3) Therefore, I can doubt my senses in the worst perceptual situations, that is, when things which are hardly perceptible, or when they are very far away.

B. Descartes' doubt about *all* of his perceptual beliefs

- (1) I can doubt my senses in *all* perceptual situations if I can *now* – in what I take to be the *best* perceptual situation – doubt my senses.
- (2) I can now doubt my senses.
 - (3) I can now doubt my senses if I might now be dreaming.¹
 - (4) I might now be dreaming. For I have often dreamed that I was in a situation very similar to the situation in which I now take myself to be, and furthermore there “are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep.”
 - (5) Therefore, I can now doubt my senses.
- (6) Therefore, I can doubt my senses in all perceptual situations.

C. Descartes' doubts about mathematical and geometrical beliefs

- (1) I can doubt mathematical and geometrical things if it is possible for something to be deceiving me about such things.
- (2) It is possible that some all-powerful evil genius is deceiving me about mathematical and geometrical things.
- (3) Therefore, I can doubt mathematical and geometrical things.

- 6. Descartes says at last that he “feel[s] constrained to confess that there is nothing in all that [he] formerly believes to be true, of which [he] cannot in some measure doubt.” This means that nothing that he believes is indubitable. So he must at this point toss all of his beliefs.

III. CARTESIAN ANTI-SKEPTICISM

But not all is lost. Descartes suggests in the end that there is at least one thing that is certain and indubitable. What is this thing? It's this: I exist whenever I think. Here are his arguments.

- (1) A thing that *persuades* itself that it does not exist cannot fail to exist, since it must exist in order to persuade itself that it does not exist.
- (2) Therefore, if I persuade myself that I do not exist, it follows that I do in fact exist.
- (3) A thing that is *deceived* into believing that it does not exist cannot fail to exist, since it must exist in order to be deceived into believing that it exists.
- (4) Therefore, if I am deceived into believing that I exist, it follows that I do in fact exist.

¹ We can throughout this argument replace “I might now be dreaming” with “I might now be a brain-in-a-vat.” When we do this, we get a contemporary Cartesian skeptical argument.

- (5) Persuading myself that I don't exist entails that I exist, and being deceived into believing that I don't exist entails that I exist.
- (6) So it is certain that I exist whenever I persuade myself that I don't exist and whenever I am deceived into believing that I don't exist.
- (1) A thing that *doubts* that it exists cannot fail to exist, since it must exist in order to doubt that it exists.
- (2) Therefore, if I doubt that I exist, it follows that I do in fact exist.
- (3) If (2) is true, then I cannot rationally doubt that I exist, that is, it is indubitable that I exist.
- (4) Therefore, it is indubitable that I exist.

Descartes has now found a certain and indubitable belief, and he can begin to rebuild his knowledge on the foundation of that belief.

HILARY PUTNAM'S "BRAINS IN A VAT"

I. THE BRAIN-IN-A-VAT SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT

- (1) I can doubt my senses in *all* perceptual situations if I can *now* – in what I take to be the *best* perceptual situation – doubt my senses.
- (2) I can now doubt my senses.
- (3) I can now doubt my senses if I might now be a brain-in-a-vat.
- (4) I might now be a brain-in-a-vat. For my perceptual experiences are hypothesi exactly similar to those of my counterpart brain-in-a-vat. Thus, to put the point in Cartesian terms, there "are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish" being a brain-in-a-vat from being the sort of embodied creatures we take ourselves to be.
- (5) Therefore, I can now doubt my senses.
- (6) Therefore, I can doubt my senses in all perceptual situations.

II. PUTNAM'S STRATEGY

- Putnam argues, in essence, that (4) is false.
- Here's what he says:
 - The premise that *I might now be a brain-in-a-vat* is, in a certain way, self-refuting. If we can consider whether the premise is true or false (and we can), then it is false; hence, it is false that I might now be a brain-in-a-vat.
- But *why* is (4) self-refuting?

III. PUTNAM'S STORY ABOUT REFERENCE (INTENTIONALITY)

- Similarity of thought/words – not even exact similarity – won't do the trick

- Consider the thought experiment about humans who live in a world without trees
- Consider also the thought experiment about hypnotized speakers of Japanese
- What *does* reference require?

Reference requires an appropriate connection to the real world (p. 34).

- (a) This connection will be *causal* (but not *merely* causal).
- (b) This connection will require a *sensitivity to the continued existence of things* in the real world.

IV. THE SELF-REFUTING NATURE OF THE CLAIM THAT YOU MIGHT BE A BRAIN-IN-A-VAT

- According to Putnam's account of reference, when brains-in-vats think, their thoughts do not refer to (are not about) brains, vats, or even trees. For
 - a) brains-in-vats thoughts are causally connected neither to brains nor to vats nor to trees, and
 - b) brains-in-vats thoughts are sensitive to the continued existence of neither brains nor vats nor trees.
- Notice, now, that Premise (4) of the BIV skeptical argument *means* that I might now be a *brain-in-a-vat*. It means, that is, that I might now be a real brain in a real vat. Thus,
 - If I am *not* a brain-in-a-vat, then I cannot truthfully assert 'I might now be a brain-in-a-vat'.
 - If I *am* a brain-in-a-vat, then since my thoughts/words can refer neither to brains nor to vats, I once again cannot truthfully assert 'I might now be a brain-in-a-vat'.
- Thus, premise (4) of the BIV skeptical argument is self-refuting – there is no situation in which I can truthfully assert that it is true.