

## Lecture 3: Dreaming and the Evil Demon

### 1. Recap

We are getting into engaging with Descartes main project. Remember the general outlines: Descartes wants to overturn the old Aristotelian physics. He thinks we are led into error about how the world is our senses seem to present a world rich with real qualities. However, really the physical world is the corpuscularian world revealed by modern, mathematical science.

We need to re-examine the foundations for our beliefs. Understand how the senses really work. Descartes prosecutes this project using the method of doubt: try to provoke doubt in all our beliefs. Then we see which ones we can be certain of and re-admit them to our understanding of the world.

He is using a sceptical method to get to a non-sceptical outcome: a certain foundations for human knowledge that will provide the intellectual backbone for a new understanding of nature.

Last time we look at the argument from hallucination/illusions. Today we continue looking at the method of doubt by looking at two further sceptical considerations: the dreaming argument and the evil demon argument.

### 2. The Dreaming argument

Here's one additional reason to doubt your beliefs: How can I distinguish dreaming from genuine experience (page 13)? If it's possible that at any time I am dreaming, I must doubt all my apparent experiences. They fail the certainty test.

1. I sometimes have vivid dreams that are qualitatively indistinguishable from the most obviously genuine, normal perceptions.
2. Therefore, I cannot distinguish vivid dreams from the genuine perceptions.
3. Therefore, even the genuine perceptions do not provide certain knowledge. After all, I can doubt them because I could be dreaming.

The obvious problem: the argument seems self-defeating.

- A) If Descartes can assert (1), then he can distinguish dreaming from genuinely perceiving. This makes (2) false.
- B) If Descartes cannot tell dreams and waking life apart then (2) is true. But, this means that he cannot assert (1) since he is unable to make any comparison.

So, if Descartes is able to raise the argument, he must be able to distinguish dreaming from waking, and this means that the argument fails.

Would it help him to say that he only believes (but doesn't know) that there is a distinction between dreaming and genuinely perceiving? What would make him believe this if he is unable to compare dreams and reality?

Descartes: the dreaming argument does not undermine all beliefs: mathematical knowledge and beliefs in the simple natures (the painter analogy).

Is this right? Mightn't  $2+3=6$  in a dream? On Descartes' behalf: We can distinguish between:

- a) Walking in Los Angeles in a dream – something being true in a dream.

b) Dreaming that you are walking in Los Angeles – dreaming that something is true.

These two can come apart (you might in fact be walking in San Francisco in the dream, but be thinking you are in LA). Because of this, there's a difference between its being true in a dream that  $2+3=6$  and dreaming that  $2+3=6$ .

### 3. The Evil Deceiver Argument

Descartes writes (p. 15):

I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds, and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things. ... I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree.

1. If there exists a malevolent Demon who enjoys deceiving me, then all my beliefs (sensory experience, physics, arithmetic, geometry, logic) are false – they do not correspond to what there is.
2. I cannot exclude the possibility of the Evil Deceiver – nothing that I believe rules it out.
3. Therefore, the truth of all my beliefs is doubtful. My beliefs do not pass the certainty test and therefore I should give them up.

#### **Objection 1:**

My belief that  $2+3=5$  could only be false if it could be that  $2+3=6$  in the Evil Demon Scenario. But this is logically impossible. Not even an omnipotent God could do what is logically impossible – this is not a constraint on anyone's omnipotence. Logical possibility (coherence) sets constraints on what it makes sense to say.

**Response:** But can't we still get ourselves in a state where we doubt whether  $2 + 3 = 5$  – think of being drugged so that you have the feeling of certainty directed at false propositions. How do you know you are not in that position?

#### **Objection 2:**

The evil demon argument seems a bit arbitrary. Descartes has discounted the possibility that he is mad since otherwise he would not be able to reason properly and the whole project of the *Meditations* would be undermined.

So, shouldn't he equally discount the possibility that he is deceived about everything? In this case too, he could not reason properly, and the rest of the *Meditations would be pointless*.

In fact, even if the Evil Deceiver argument undermines many of Descartes' beliefs, it does not make him revise all of them, or so Descartes will claim. It is those beliefs that Descartes will build his system on later.