

Descartes and the quest for certainty – by Jim Stuart

I believe it is still fairly standard in UK University Philosophy Departments for Rene Descartes' *Meditations* to be required reading by first-year undergraduates. And quite right too. In the words of my old University Professor – "It is the best piece of short philosophy ever written".

The *Meditations* has many virtues as a piece of inspiring philosophical writing. Brevity is certainly one of them. But also clarity, lack of technical terms, and a sense of adventure. The reader feels she is joining Descartes on a journey to, once and for all, discover the truth about the world and oneself.

Just as Alfred North Whitehead once said that all philosophy was "footnotes to Plato", much of post-Cartesian philosophy has been a response to Descartes' bold claims. So what are Descartes' 'bold claims'? I suggest these are some of the most significant ones:

1. Foundationalism: Truth has to be based on secure (i.e. certain) foundations
2. Certainties can follow from certainties by sound rational (i.e. logical) argument
3. "*Cogito ergo sum*" gives us the first two certainties – (i) I can be certain I am thinking now and (ii) I can be certain I exist
4. By sound logical inference, I can also become certain that God exists
5. I can be certain God is infinite, perfectly good and no deceiver
6. Before establishing God exists, I can only be certain of my present mental states
7. After establishing God exists, I can be certain of some other truths, as He is no deceiver – for example, that a world exists outside my mind and that I have existed for a period of time
8. I can also be certain that I am an immaterial substance who is distinct from a physical body, although joined to a particular body during an earthly existence
9. I have direct infallible knowledge of my current mental states
10. My mental states are independent of what exists in the outside world

Of these ten or eleven bold claims, subsequent philosophers have challenged all of them. Some of them have held up better than others. Which of them do you think are true?

Today, I'd like us to examine these claims. I'll start by putting my cards on the table: I think (2) is true but all the others are false.

Take for example the famous "*Cogito ergo sum*". I think Georg Christoph Lichtenberg was the first to say that the most we can say with certainty at any moment is that some thinking is going on. We cannot deduce a thinker, certainly not a thinker (a substance) who has existed over a period of time.

The two proofs of God's existence have been challenged for various reasons. Perhaps the most common reason is that they involve Descartes arguing in a circle. He needs to rely on sound logical inference to prove that God exists, but he later acknowledges that he needs the existence of a good God to be able to rely upon his logical reasoning.

Descartes' doctrine of the existence of an immaterial soul ran into objections straight away. How can an immaterial substance interact with a material substance (the subject's brain)? Descartes' reference to the pineal gland was not very convincing.

I think the first claim is worth an extended discussion. Descartes' distrust of what he had been told by his teachers and what he had read in books of philosophy seemed to many to be a healthy scepticism and a good starting point for the intrepid seeker after truth. Rather than just believe what I have been told, I should, at least once in my life, seek to work out what I believe for myself. And what better way to do this

than to doubt everything I can possibly doubt, then build up an edifice of truth based on what I cannot possibly doubt.

I think the main attraction of this foundationalist approach is that it is the only way to get any certainties. Further, the thought experiment of the evil demon can be perfectly well updated for today's materialist. The updated thought experiment is that involving my brain not being located in my body somewhere in Nottingham, but being located somewhere else entirely in a vat of nutrients with all my nerve endings being connected to a supercomputer which stimulates my nerve endings to give me the illusion that I'm existing as a fully-intact human being currently reading out a philosophical introduction in a house in Nottingham. Can you be certain you are not currently a brain in a vat?

The alternative to Descartes' foundationalism is the sort of coherentism put forward by the German philosopher Otto Neurath. He said we should view our attempt to seek the truth as a case of a ship at sea where our individual beliefs are the planks of wood which make up the ship. We cannot return to dry dock to replace all the planks in one go, we must replace them one by one whilst we remain at sea. Our seeking after truth must involve the "Neurath's boat" analogy.

I agree with Neurath here, but one disadvantage of this analogy is that I must give up on the idea of having any certainties. Each of my individual beliefs may be false.

But what about my current mental states? Can I not be certain of what I am currently thinking and feeling? Unfortunately, I think not. Ludwig Wittgenstein put forward what was termed the "Private Language Argument". Really it is an "Anti-Private Language" argument as he argues that we cannot invent a private language which identifies our various mental states with certainty. The problem with such a private language is that "what seems right to me is right; hence one cannot talk in terms of being right or being wrong". We learn our first language in the presence of others, and only after mastering this public language can we refer to our subjective mental states. As against what Descartes believed, we can be no more certain of our inner thoughts and feelings, than we can of the presence of tables and cats in the room at present.

I agree with both Neurath and Wittgenstein, and so, unfortunately, Descartes' bold method of doubting everything to establish certainties and probabilities must ultimately be rejected. What do you think?

Finally, let me say something about Descartes' claim ten above – the claim that my mental states are independent of what exists in the outside world. Over the last fifty years or so, influential arguments by Hilary Putnam and Donald Davidson suggest that our beliefs and our other propositional attitudes depend on the objects in the world around us. For example, I can only have thoughts about water or about Boris Johnson because both water and Boris Johnson exist. If an identical twin of mine who lived on a far away planet where there was a colourless liquid with the identical visible properties of water, but made with a different molecular composition, then my identical twin would have different beliefs to me even though everything seemed the same to me and my twin. Similarly my twin would not have beliefs about Boris Johnson but rather beliefs about the Boris Johnson *doppelganger* on the twin planet. This view about the mind is called 'externalism'. One advantage of externalism is that it breaks down the separation between my inner self and the outside world. The sceptic has a harder job arguing against the externalist than he does against Descartes. Without a sound proof in the existence of God, Descartes' outlook is vulnerable to sceptical argument.

[I recommend Philosophy Club members read Descartes' *Meditations* before the meeting if you can. This should help to focus the discussion. As I say, the book is short and a pdf version can be downloaded free from the internet. See https://yale.learningu.org/download/041e9642-df02-4eed-a895-70e472df2ca4/H2665_Descartes%27%20Meditations.pdf Skip the introductions and start on page 6]