

On Descartes' Standard of Truth in his First Meditations

Joseph W. Kearns

March 4, 2004

Philosophy and Theology Tutorial; Mr. Sterling, Tutor

In his introductory *Synopsis*, Descartes states the goal of his *Meditations*:

“...Through a consideration of these arguments [for the existence of material things], one realizes that they are neither so firm nor so evident as the arguments leading us to the knowledge of our mind and of God, so that, of all the things that can be known by the human mind, these latter are the most certain and the most evident. Proving this one thing was for me the goal of these *Meditations*.”

We know from his *Discourse on Method* that of all the methods of discourse and demonstration that he had studied in the Philosophers, he was most impressed by the methodology of deductive, geometric proof, and sought to demonstrate his own conclusions with nearly mathematical certainty. [*Discourse on Method*, p. 19¹] In the *Meditations* themselves, he frequently uses geometric principles and knowledge as analogies to his main argument. [pp. 68, 70b] Unfortunately, his argument fails on two accounts, both arising from his unusual use of certainty itself as a fundamental element in his chain of reasoning. First, since his goal is certainty, his utilization of certainty itself as one of the steps in his reasoning raises the possibility that his argument is circular. Second, the subjective nature of certainty renders his conclusions essentially incommunicable to others.

His concern with certainty arises in the second paragraph of *Meditation One*, and is reinforced throughout this meditation each time he dismisses a class of ideas as uncertain or unreliable. In the introductory paragraphs to *Meditation Two* he explicitly states his goal of certainty. “I will stay on this course until I know something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least know for certain that nothing is certain.” [p.24] “What then will be true? Perhaps just the single fact that nothing is certain.” [p.24] He proceeds in the second meditation to disqualify, as uncertain, essentially every idea save one: He himself exists as a thinking thing. This does seem to be something that is necessarily true, in that it must be admitted if anything more whatsoever is to be said. To speak anything, to express any idea, one must have at least a subject. If all other possible subjects are dismissed as being uncertain, there remains only one subject about which anything could be predicated: the thinker himself. There must be at least one subject to begin with. And what can be predicated about this subject? Only that it must necessarily exist, and that its existence consists of thinking.

Note that as of this point, there need be no appeal to perceived certainty. The argument is so far only that, to form any subject-predicate idea at all, one must have a subject, and that the last possible subject that can be removed is the thinker. If we went back beyond this, we could say nothing at all.

At this point Descartes takes the step that, in my opinion, is fatal to his project. In the first full paragraph on page 35 he states,

“Surely in this first instance of knowledge, there is nothing but a certain clear and distinct perception of what I affirm. Yet this would hardly be enough to render me certain of the truth of a thing, if it

¹ Page numbers refer to the pagination of the French translation (for *Discourse*) or the Latin translation (for *Meditations*) of the Adam and Tannery editions, which correspond to the marginal numbers in the Hackett Edition.

could ever happen that something that I perceived so clearly and distinctly were false. And thus I now seem able to posit as a general rule that everything I very clearly and distinctly perceive is true.”

What, exactly, does he mean by perceiving “clearly and distinctly”? These words remain undefined in the Meditations, but seem clearly related to, and perhaps even synonymous with, his use of “certainty”. The problems with this formulation of truth arise because these are qualitative adverbs describing a mental activity that is wholly subjective, and not logically connected to the object that is so perceived. In this definition of truth, he fails to make any necessary connection between his felt certainty, or the “clarity” or “distinctiveness” of his perception, and the correspondence of that perception to something existing outside himself. Descartes is clearly aware of this, as he admits in relating his initial radical skepticism of all ideas about which he was formerly certain.

If it be argued that Descartes has not yet admitted the existence of anything outside himself, yet it must be granted that the very concepts of truth, falsehood, and deception, all of which he has utilized by this point in the argument, require some referent external reality in order to be meaningful. Descartes admits this in the second paragraph of page 37.

This definition of knowledge of truth, as being what Descartes perceives clearly and distinctly, is logically necessary for his next step in proving the existence of God. His possession of this single item of certain knowledge – that he himself exists as thinker – allows him to know what it is to know, and by contrast demonstrate that there are many ideas that he does not know, but doubts. He characterizes a thinking thing as “A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses.” It is from the recognition of doubt in himself that he tries to deduce the necessary existence of God. In recognizing his doubts, he finds himself able to think the possibility of having no doubts at all, but only certainty, i.e. of knowing everything he could turn his mind to, which he calls perfect knowledge. It is important to note here that Descartes, from this point forward, presumes this definition of truth as that which he perceives very clearly and distinctly. Without this, he cannot say that he “knows” anything true at all, and he cannot “know” that he doubts.

We must pause here to examine the quantitative element in Descartes’ definition of truth. Clarity, distinctiveness, and certainty are all ideas that are described in terms of magnitude or degree. Something is more or less clear and distinct; one is more or less certain. While it may be conceivable that there could be a maximum degree of each of these things, it is certain that there can be “zero” clarity, distinctiveness, and certainty, and varying degrees of each from “zero” to whatever maximum there may be. Hence, simultaneous with any idea of “great clarity” is the idea of lesser clarity, and so with distinctiveness and certainty.

Whenever we become aware of at least two points in a continuum, we become aware of a dimension, so to speak, between those two points, and simultaneously aware of the possibility of extension in either direction beyond those points. On seeing one’s first dog, one might assume that all dogs, if there were any others, would be about the same size. Seeing a second, definitely smaller dog raises naturally the idea that dogs come in differing

sizes, and there might be dogs both smaller and larger, and likewise with any description that admits of degree.

In choosing “great clarity and distinctiveness” as his definition of knowledge, Descartes undermines his argument for God based upon an idea of perfection. He is aware of “knowing” that he, the thinker, exists. He is aware that others of his thoughts have less clarity and distinctiveness; he doubts. He labels this doubting a defect, and can think the possibility of a thinker who does not doubt, but knows all. Since the cause of an idea must have as much reality as the idea, and since Descartes does not find perfect knowledge in himself, he concludes that there must exist one who actually has such perfect knowledge.

The problem is that his only definition of knowledge is that *which he has already achieved* in one particular thought, which, as far as anyone can possibly reason, is the maximum certainty possible. He cannot describe any more certain knowledge than that he exists as thinker. Hence, he already contains in himself the only standard of truth he has identified. All he has perceived in the other thoughts, of which he is less certain, and which undoubtedly exist in him, is that they do not measure up, in the dimension of certainty, to this one thought. Compared to this one “very clear and distinct” thought, these thoughts are less so, and hence reveal the dimension of a continuum as described above. The thought that there could exist something or someone in whom all thoughts would be the same “length”, so to speak, is simply the extension to all these other ideas, *already found in the thinker*, a certainty already found in one idea *in the thinker*. Hence, he need not look elsewhere for a sufficient cause of this idea of perfect knowledge.

In my opinion, a similar argument can be made for all the other perfections that he attributes to God. All that is required to conceptualize “perfection” in any quality is two ideas that differ in that quality, and then extension by simple addition in the “greater” direction. For example, he is aware of his own extension in time, of having duration. He is similarly aware of ideas of events that have less duration in time. He can construct the idea of infinite duration by simply thinking the addition of these shorter durations to his longer duration *indefinitely*, as Euclid does with lines in Definition 23 and Postulate 2 of his Elements.

Yet, even if we grant this step in Descartes demonstration, we cannot avoid the circularity that ensues. After thus establishing the existence of a perfect God, he reasons that such a God would never deceive him, and hence would give him only reliable faculties of reasoning and perception. [p. 54] From this it follows: “...Once I perceived that there is a God, and also understood at the same time that everything else depends on him, and that he is not a deceiver, I then concluded that everything that I clearly and distinctly perceive is necessarily true.” [p. 70]

But this is only what he inserted into the argument back at the beginning of the third meditation. Does it seem surprising that, having assumed as an early step in the argument that whatever is perceived very clearly and distinctly is true, we find, near the end of the argument, that whatever is perceived very clearly and distinctly *must* be true? It is an odd argument for a famous geometer, who would know that the production of a contradictory

conclusion at the end of a proof can prove the original premise wrong, but that arriving at the premise again at the end of the proof proves nothing!

One might legitimately ask what standard of truth, other than clarity and distinctiveness, could be applied to the results of our reasoning. Even in geometric reasoning, do we not start from postulates and common notions whose only claim to truth is that they are, somehow, clear and distinct to us? While this is so, it remains a characteristic of geometric proofs that, after the initial positing of the non-provable premise, all subsequent steps are justified using the rule of non-contradiction, not apparent clarity. Furthermore, whatever doubt attaches to the foundational postulate is inherited, undiminished, by every subsequent step in the proof, as is apparent from the “uncertainty” expressed by Lobachevsky and others regarding Euclid’s Fifth Postulate and all the theorems based upon it, including the Pythagorean theorem which Descartes repeatedly invokes as “true”. Furthermore, Descartes does not merely *apply* this standard to various steps in his argument, but makes the standard, itself, a *step* in the argument, as discussed above.

Finally, because of the subjectivity of this standard of truth, its use in such a foundational manner undermines the communicability of Descartes’ ideas. Certainty and clarity are descriptions of states within the thinker or perceiver, not characteristics of the objects of consideration. Descartes cannot transfer, to the reader, his certainty about any of the steps in his demonstration. At whatever point the reader says to himself, “Well, the logic of that step is certainly not clear to me”, the demonstration effectively ends. It becomes simply a communication about what Descartes believes, rather than a demonstration in the geometric or mathematical sense.

It may be that Descartes has presented the best argument possible for the existence of God, the soul, and a generally reliable sensory faculty in man. However, it should not be pretended that it has the certainty of a geometric proof, or that it has attained sufficient power that we ought to be convinced by it.

Notes on Rene Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy

- His interest in questions of God and the soul seem to be genuine. In First Philosophy, at least, he considers little else.
- His method is a radical self-reliance, ie., self-reliant at its root.
- His standard of truth is whatever is very clear and very distinct. 35b: “Do I not therefore also know what is required for me to be certain of anything? Surely in this first instance of knowledge, there is nothing but a certain clear and distinct perception of what I affirm. Yet this would hardly be enough to render me certain of the truth of a thing, if it could ever happen that something that I perceived so clearly and distinctly were false.”
- The development of this standard is somewhat tautological, but what other standard of certainty can there be besides certainty itself?
- What is meant by “clear and distinct”? Does this refer to clearly logical (law of non-contradiction) certainty only, or to subjective certainty, though it be very strong. If the latter, then how does he avoid the problem illustrated in the Meno, that one may be quite certain about something which is found to be untrue, or at least remains uncertain.
- In 36a he implies that his standard of clarity is the law of non-contradiction. He admits that God could overturn even this, so, before re-accepting this, he must turn to the nature of God.
- Consider his use of the triangle’s having 2 right angles. This follows from Euclid’s fifth postulate, which has long been recognized as uncertain in the former, strictly logical sense. Did Descartes not know this? Or, knowing it, does he mean thereby to propose a pragmatic standard of truth based upon feelings of relative certainty?
- All his conclusions about the reality of corporeal bodies, and the general reliability of the senses, are deduced through the step that establishes the existence and nature of God.
- Even the reliability of his reasoning is guaranteed only by the existence of God.
- Is his reasoning chain-like or web-like?
- His initial thought, *je pense donc je suis*, is foundational because, without it, absolutely nothing can be said, because there would be no possible subject.
- Likewise, the thought if his being the object of an evil genius’ deceptions requires his existence as object. But of course, the evil genius’s existence is not established.
- Given that “I” is the only subject, what can be predicated of the subject, other than its existence? What can a subject “do” except predicate?
- That does “think” mean? As a process, what is being processed? In Descartes’ method, the thinker is discovered with contents already occupying his mind.
- He must, for example, have concepts of another, of an outside vs inside world. He has thoughts of bodies and senses, and even if his thought is to reject those ideas, that thinking requires those ideas, as well as ideas of negation and existence.
- He has an idea of error and truth, of there being a world behind his thought world with respect to which his ideas either correspond or do not. 37b Descartes assumes an external reality when he speaks of deception.

- He has an idea of an evil genius, hence an idea of deception,
- What if all those concepts were truly removed? What could he think? If “I” is the only subject, what can be predicated without reference to any other idea which contain in them other possible subjects, or any input from the senses? Nothing.
- If no thought can be entertained except “I am”, then one has a tautology: “I think the only thought possible, that I exist.” And “my thinking this shows that I exist”. There must be more content to his thought to carry his argument forward.
- So let us grant that he has other thoughts, feelings, and sensations, and that the multiplicity of these is required, not accidentally the result of some prior experience of which we can say nothing. The thinking self is found with some thought content beyond merely its own existence.
- It is this content which raises subsequent questions, of imperfection and uncertainty, for example. So, the ideas underlying the found content can be either all false, some false, or all true.
- Insofar as Descarte’s primary concern seems to be the existence of things; himself, God, and other bodies; we might consider not primarily whether thoughts which are predicates are true, but whether their subjects exist.
- His next step depends upon a peculiar type of thought, his awareness of uncertainty. It is clear and distinct to him that he does not know everything, that some thoughts are clear and distinct while others are not. (“Just the single fact that nothing is certain.” 24b)
- This is a return to the issue of certainty. What type of thought is, “I am uncertain”? “I have doubts, I do not know, I am uncertain” are all thoughts about the same object, or about the same issue: certainty.
- What is certainty? It is a self-referent concept, referring to some quantity in the thinker. One can be more or less certain. One can be marginally more or less certain. There are no identifiable quanta of certainty.
- Certainty does not relate to the truth of the idea thought. Again, Descartes acknowledges this. It relates only to the strength of belief, even to a self-assessment of correctness. There is nothing objective, and nothing shareable, in certainty. One cannot communicate one’s certainty, but only some expression of the measure of one’s certainty.
- What makes one certain about an idea? Its coherence with, and non-contradiction of, other ideas which one takes to be true. Hence examination of certainty, in general, is simply an examination of coherence, not truth.
- D. begins with the assumption that certainty of a high degree corresponds with truth of an idea. 35b To use a geometric magnitude as an analogy, he finds a line of a certain length, and accepts that as “knowledge”.
- He then finds other lines in the field which are shorter, in comparison with this one. He finds, in himself, more than one idea, and finds varying certainties associated with these ideas. He find also the idea that all the lines could be the same length, and wonders where such an idea could originate. He implies that such an idea must come from an actual mind in which all the lines are the same length, else where could the idea come from?

- This, to me, is quite unconvincing. It seems clear to me that such an idea comes readily from his original idea of complete certainty about his own existence, which he found in himself by simple subtraction of all thought except the thinker, without resorting to God. The concept of defect is simply a value-laden comparison of a smaller to a greater. We do not think of small line segments as “defective”, but merely shorter than any given longer one. Since his original idea of certainty has no reference to anything except itself, but does establish a magnitude (perceptible only to D, of course) any other ideas, examined with respect to this same dimension, would be expected to be either greater or lesser. If it were greater, he would have to shift his foundation to this idea. If shorter, then his description of this shortcoming as a defect is a value which he adds, without establishing a reason for so doing.
- If we say, “but where did that value come from?” the answer is simply, from his own choice of certainty as the highest value. Remembering that certainty is coherence with other ideas held by the thinker, all he has noticed is that several of his ideas do not, apparently, cohere well. He can think the possibility that all his ideas would so cohere that they were all “very clear and distinct”. But he does not need to posit an external being for whom this is so; his gold standard was found in himself, in the certainty of the initial thought, “I am a thinking thing”.
- Nevertheless, D does not take this route. Instead, he posits another being, in many ways like himself, yet differing in being “perfect” and “infinite”. Other than showing that infinite need not be simply the negation of the finite (which doesn’t prove that he is actually thinking infinity as a separate idea from indefinite addition) he does not define perfection or infiniteness as applied to being, except as being somehow more or better than what he finds in himself. He argues that he could not have these ideas from something in himself, and hence their reality must come from another, outside himself, that must exist.
- Again in this, his standard for establishing the truth of his statements is that these ideas are the most clear and distinct.
- By developing further ideas of God, always with the “clear and distinct” standard of truth, he finally arrives at 70b, that the nature of this God is such that his original standard, by which it was all launched, is thereby certified as true.
- In 28b, he defines “a thing that thinks” as “a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses.” The latter two seem to presume the existence of an outside world of bodies. How can he define these two terms without reference to bodies? In 28a he defines imagining as just that.
- One might say that Descartes finds corporeal bodies themselves just in these words, “imagine” and “sense”. He looks inside and finds a mental activity which seems concerned with objects existing outside the intellect, and thereby infers the existence of such objects. Why not go right to that conclusion?
- If all these things are thinking, and do not necessarily have to relate to external truths (e.g. We could be asleep), how to avoid total solipsism?

-

Possible Main Points:

- It is ironic that one of the founding documents of the Age of Reason must prove the existence of an infinite, all-powerful, and good God in order to prove the reliability of reason itself.

- Descartes' argument rests upon an standard of truth which is inadequate to support it, and which makes it essentially incommunicable to others.