Descartes 1: Radical Doubt

Last term you looked at ancient philosophy in the form of the works of Plato and Aristotle. This term we are going to look at what is described as “modern” philosophy and part of what I will be trying to explain this term is what makes “modern” philosophy “modern”. We are beginning with the work of Descartes. Descartes’ method in the Meditations is to free us from our preconceived opinions with the intent of seeking to discover the grounds on which we can truly be said to base our beliefs. He proceeds by attempting to discover what is stable in our knowledge by which he means to describe what it is that can be said to be known for certain. To discover what we can know for certain however means to find out what we can know beyond any doubt. Hence, to discover what is certain, we must first ascertain what can be doubted, and only if there are things that are in no way open to doubt, can we be said to have access to things that are certain. Before we look at the process by which Descartes sets out his method of radical doubt we should be clear as to why we need to undertake it. Descartes’ basic argument is important for understanding what he is doing in general. Firstly, he mentions the fact that in childhood one accepts as true many things that are later discovered to be false. On this basis he argues for the need to demolish the whole structure of one’s beliefs and start again from the foundations. This is what we might term the foundationalist reason for doubt and consists in the claim that for our knowledge to be reliable we need to establish the foundations on which it is built. The most important
element of establishing such foundations is that without them, he suggests, the sciences will lack stable and durable grounds. He hence ties the foundationalist reason for doubt closely to a concern with the basis of the sciences. Given that Descartes is working during the period of the Scientific Revolution this is not surprising but it is worth bearing in mind throughout what will follow as Descartes conceives of the task of philosophy as consisting in providing such a durable and stable ground for the sciences.

Rather than inspecting each item of belief Descartes goes to the root of the matter by describing the *foundations* of our ordinary beliefs. These ordinary beliefs rest upon the senses states Descartes. Normally, when I describe something as known, I am basing my claim on something that has come from the senses. However, as Descartes points out, we are often deceived by the senses and given that this occurs it is prudent, as he puts it, not to entirely trust that which has deceived us often before. Once we have come to this point we begin to notice the literary structure of the First Meditation. We have only just begun to doubt when we hear, from within the First Meditation itself, arguments against continuing our doubt. So the first objection that is brought against the procedure of doubt concerns the notion that there are many beliefs about which doubt is impossible and that to doubt them is to become like a madman who compares himself to a king. This is a statement from what we might describe as “common sense”. This position effectively consists in saying that I must be correct in relying on the *immediate evidence* I have concerning how things are.
Descartes rejects this statement on the grounds that the reasoning that I can be sure of what appears immediately to be in front of me ignores a central element of our experience: namely, that we have dreams. The appeal to dreams is the next stage in Descartes’ programme of doubt. When dreaming things often appear to me as distinctly as they do when I am awake and I can be as sure that what appears before me is really there when I am asleep as I am when I am awake. The argument from dreaming is to the effect that there is no sure criterion for being able to tell sleeping from waking and hence that each time that I think I really have objects in front of me they could merely be things I am imagining. In order to address this stage of Descartes’ programme of doubt therefore it is necessary for all of you to ask yourselves whether you can think of any criteria by which dreams can definitely be distinguished from waking appearances.

The next type of objection to the programme of doubting that Descartes considers is that even when I am dreaming the things that appear before me take their patterns from things that are real and that such general things as heads and eyes and bodies must exist since all appearances, even appearances in dreams, involve them. Even completely strange objects involve definite items such as colour and so we must be justified in thinking that such things as colour and shapes exist. There is a shift within this objection however as the original notion that even heads must be real is given up and the notion that there must be simpler things that form the elements of more complex ones is presented instead. The thrust of this objection turns on a distinction between different types of qualities objects
seem to possess with a notion here suggested that whilst some of the qualities of objects might be illusory there must be other, more simple qualities, that are real. The qualities assumed to be real by the one putting this objection are essentially quantitative aspects (number and size of things), their basic extension and the fact that whatever exists does so in space and time. On the basis of this notion that there are simpler, universal qualities of objects that are more real than more complex and particular qualities, this objection hopes to prevent the slide to an ever-greater doubt. As it is put in the first meditation, “whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides”.

The possible objection at this point then follows the pattern of doubt far enough to agree that the sciences that deal with complex objects such as physics, astronomy and medicine are doubtful whilst asserting nonetheless that the sciences that deal with simple objects such as the mathematical ones of arithmetic and geometry are sound and concern things that are certain, regardless of whether there is anything in nature like them.

In response to this objection, the objection as I would term it, from simple qualities, Descartes takes a step that *radicalises* the procedure of doubt considerably. He mentions in response to this argument the notion that there could exist an omnipotent God. The reason for introducing this notion is that if such a being exists then it could have brought it about, given that it is all-powerful, that nothing exists outside me even though it appears to me that such things exist. Gary Hatfield mentions two ways of understanding the hypothesis that Descartes invokes here. He suggests that
Descartes could mean either that God deceives us by intervening to give us false thoughts or that God designed us in such a way that we produce false thoughts spontaneously. The first type of view has been repeated in more recent types of philosophy. There is the suggestion, made by a contemporary philosopher, that we could all in fact merely be “brains in vats” that are being fed false beliefs through the medium of electric charges to the brain. Much of the same consequence follows if we have been defectively designed with the difference that in that case there is no need for God or anyone else to do anything to us as we are incurably afflicted in our nature with error.

When we look at how Descartes uses the hypothesis of the deceiving God we can see more clearly the function it plays in his strategy of doubt. Firstly, he mentions that God could have brought it about that there is no material world at all whilst making it seem to me that there is one (the “false belief” view). How would this affect our claims to mathematical truths? By ensuring that even if they are indeed truths we have no grounds for thinking that there is a world that they apply to. Hence the false belief view does not undermine mathematics directly, merely the applicability of mathematics.

After testing this argument Descartes goes on to make the point that others often go astray even when they are most convinced they have perfect knowledge and derives from this the thought that he could likewise go wrong every time he adds two numbers together. Since, as Descartes puts it, “God…made me the kind of creature that I am”, it is the defective design hypothesis that Descartes intends to use to reinforce his pattern of doubt and
this would undermine not just the applicability of mathematical truths but the claim that are any such truths at all.

A partial response to this doubt is considered in the form that God is supposed to be good and hence would not deceive me. In reply to this Descartes points out that the fact that we are often deceived is not something that can be disputed so how can even the deceptions that do take place be reconciled with God’s supposed good nature?

A more important response to this doubt is the denial that God exists. This would seem to remove the problem. However, if there is no God, then, since I am deceived and the capacity to be deceived is an imperfection in my nature, it would appear even more likely that in the absence of God that I am constantly deceived. The reason for saying this is that in the absence of God, there would be no notion that contained anything that was more powerful than myself. Given that I am constantly aware of my own imperfection, an imperfection that would, on the hypothesis that there is no God, be reinforced by the imperfection of all other things, there would be no ground at all for thinking that the belief in the existence of the supposed simpler things might not an effect of my constantly imperfect senses grasping things wrongly. Hence, Descartes now reaches the position of thinking that there is not one of his former ordinary beliefs about which a doubt may not be raised.

However, given the strength of preconceived opinions and prejudices, Descartes ends the meditation with a final device designed to really force one to consider the effect of his doubts. This device involves
giving us a reason for embracing the implication of the previous discussion concerning God. That is, a reason for thinking that our previous views are not merely *doubtful* but actually *false*. Descartes now takes the ultimate radical step in his programme of radical doubt. Rather than suppose that God exists, a notion that might be rejected, he will instead suppose that there exists an *evil demon* who sets out consciously and constantly to ensure that I am deceived in all things that I believe. On this view, all things that appear before me are delusions. Since it has proved impossible to guarantee that any thing that I perceive is real then there would appear no clear reason at all to believe that *anything* is real and hence the notion that there is active deception at the heart of the world and that it is intended that I should constantly be deceived is not a gratuitous notion but one that could easily be correct. Since it could be correct there would appear to be no grounds for certain assertion about anything and hence I could always be wrong about everything.