

## PHILOSOPHY, lecture December 13

Contents: Rene Descartes` (1596-1650) metaphysical **dualism** (mind and body)

Key words:

Dualism,

Methodical scepticism

Rationalism

Methods od doubt

Cogito ergo sum

Alter ego issue

Subjectivism

Mind-body problem

**Methodical scepticism** – doubt in order to find certainty

**Classic scepticism** – certainty is unavailable for man

### “The Method of Doubt

The Method of Doubt involves **treating all your former beliefs as if they were false**. You should only believe something if you are absolutely certain that it is true: the slightest doubt about its truth should be sufficient to reject it. **The fact that you can doubt it doesn't prove that it is false**; it may well turn out to be true. However, the merest suspicion that it might be false is enough to render it unsuitable as a foundation for the edifice of knowledge. That has to be built on indubitable knowledge.

[...] The point of this method was that it might allow Descartes to discover some beliefs which were **immune from** doubt and which would thus serve as foundations for his reconstruction of knowledge on sound principles. At worst it would show him that everything could be doubted; that nothing was certain.

**The Evidence of the Senses** In the First Meditation Descartes introduces this Method of Doubt and applies it rigorously to his former beliefs, beginning with those he has acquired through the five senses. **His senses have sometimes deceived him**. For instance, he has made mistakes about what he could see in the distance. On the principle **that it is wise never to trust what has once deceived you**, he resolves not to trust the evidence of his senses. But, despite sometimes being deceived about objects in the distance, surely he couldn't be deceived about some facts acquired through the senses, such as that he is sitting in front of a fire in a dressing gown holding a piece of paper? Descartes's response to this is that, on the contrary, he might be mistaken even about something so apparently certain as this. Since in the past **he had dreamt** that he was sitting by the fire when in fact he was lying in bed asleep, he can't be sure that he is not now dreaming. **But even in dreams things such as heads, hands, eyes and so on appear, which must be likenesses of things in the real world**. So surely we can be certain that these types of object exist. The existence of more abstract notions such as size, shape and extension (by which he means the quality of taking up space) seems even more certain. Whether you are asleep or awake,  $2 + 3 = 5$  and a square never has more than four sides. These things do indeed seem certain. But Descartes shows all these to be only apparent certainties. To do so he uses the thought **experiment of the evil demon**.

**The Evil Demon** What if there is a **powerful and malicious demon who constantly manipulates what you experience and understand?** Every time you look at an object in the world what is really happening might be that the demon is producing an illusory experience which you take to be reality but which is really his creation. [...] Now **every time you add 2 and 2 together it comes to 5. But how can you be sure that this isn't because the evil demon, or the operator of the virtual reality machine, is tricking you?** Perhaps the demon has introduced a 'bug' into your calculations so that you always get the wrong result. [...] when we are searching for a belief which is immune from doubt, the thought experiment of the evil demon provides a very strong test. Any belief which can pass this test, which you are sure hasn't been misleadingly implanted by the demon, must be certain indeed. At this stage in his *Meditations* Descartes is tempted to believe that absolutely everything can be doubted".

But:

"The certainty which he discovers, the turning point in his philosophy, has come to be known as the Cogito, from the **Latin Cogito ergo sum ('I think, therefore I am')** [...] The Cogito Descartes's point is that even if the evil demon does actually exist and is constantly deceiving him, there is still something about which he cannot be tricked, namely his own existence. It is impossible for him, Descartes, to doubt his own existence; and Descartes believes that his readers, on reflection, will come to the same conclusion about their own existence. **Any thought that you have indicates that you, the thinker, exist. This is true even if you are completely confused about the content of your thought.** [...] as long as you are having a thought at all, then this shows that you must exist. Notice that the 'I' that Descartes believes he has shown to exist whenever he is thinking is not to be identified with his body. At this stage he can still raise all his former doubts about whether or not his body actually exists, or exists in the form he thinks it does. Only thinking is inseparable from his existence. The most that he can show from the Cogito is that he is essentially a thinking thing".

**"Cartesian Dualism** Descartes's belief that he can be more certain of the existence of himself as a thinking thing than as a body suggests a division between the mind and the body. The mind is the real Descartes (or whoever) whose body may or may not exist. The mind can outlive the body. This sharp separation between mind and body has come to be known as Cartesian Dualism. **Descartes believes that mind and body, although in principle separable, interact, and consequently his view is sometimes also known as interactionism"**.

The subjective reality is more certain than an external one.

Alter ego problem (other self problem): how can I know that others exist?

How can I know that my body exists?

The solution is **God** who guarantees that our knowledge about existence of others and body is true.

### **Mind-body problem**

There are two different substances:

1. mind, soul, a thinking and non-extended thing; main attribute - thinking – mind does not exist in a space; it thinks only
2. body, matter, an extended and non-thinking thing, main attribute – spatial extension – body exists in a space and does not think at all.

Mind- body problem: How can we think an interaction between them? The problem is that contact between them seems to be impossible because of the diversity of their natures.

**The Wax Example** Descartes describes a piece of wax taken from a honeycomb: it still has a faint taste of honey, smells of flowers, and is hard and cold. As he puts it close to the fire its taste and smell are lost and its colour, shape and size all change. It becomes liquid and hot to the touch. The point of this example is to demonstrate that although we might think that we get an understanding of what the wax is via our sensory experience of it, in fact all the information we get about the wax in this way can change. Yet it remains the same piece of wax despite the changes. Descartes's explanation of how this is possible is that understanding the essence of the wax, what it is that makes it this piece of wax and not another thing, involves a judgement which goes beyond sensory experience. And this judgement, which is a thought, once again demonstrates to Descartes the greater certainty he has about his own existence as a thinking thing than about the nature and existence of the material world. This example reveals Descartes's rationalism, that is, his belief that we can acquire knowledge of the nature of the world by reason alone, a view which contrasts sharply with empiricism, which in its strongest form is the view that all our knowledge of the world must be acquired via the senses".

[Quotes: Nigel Warburton, Philosophy: The Classics, pp. 103-120]