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Knowledge and Skepticism in Descartes' Meditations

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Scott Campbell is a senior philosophy major. He conducted his research with funding from a 2009

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My research is centered on the arguments of Rene Descartes, a 17th Century philosopher, in his work *The Meditations*. *The Meditations* is composed of six entries, which are six meditations, written in form of narration. His narrative takes form in an intricately composed piece of writing, a clever argument presented through a precise and fascinating procedure. However, the artful fashion in which he conveys his method is far from an immaculately composed calculation which Descartes leads one to believe. In this paper I will present Descartes' procedural destruction and following reassembly of the external world and his proposed discovery of the proper foundation of the sciences. I shall then discuss the unmistakable faults in his argument, presenting counter-arguments posed by Descartes' contemporaries and further offering my own objections. I will conclude by presenting a theoretical epistemology found beneath the surface of the glaring errors which Descartes ostensibly failed to recognize.

I. Methodological Doubt

Descartes chooses to exercise some fantasy in his narrative, initially claiming that nothing exists. Why is it that Descartes' *Meditations*, composed of such outlandish claims, remain a prominent piece of philosophical work? It is the riddle, comprised of absurd notions and bearing esoteric consequences which Descartes presents to begin his inquiries to understand how we know, what we know. These notions impel Descartes' complete upheaval of all knowledge and any possibility of our having knowledge. He totally negates all of existence, and does so with just three propositions: the refutation of the senses, "the dream regress", and the supposed existence of an "evil deceiver". Assuming total non-existence is hardly a conventional sentiment, and not one which any person would readily embrace. However, he so guilefully guides one through his thinking that it almost seems possible. Nonetheless, the idea that nothing exists is absurd. Reason would indicate that it should be a relatively simple task to dismiss the absurd; but this is not the case. The past four hundred years of philosophy has failed to offer a solution, and thus it has become a thorn in the side of philosophy to once and for all rid ourselves of this conundrum. I will begin by elucidating the ways in which Descartes brings all of existence into doubt.

Descartes' radical external world skepticism is an essential element in his work. With complete destruction of all knowledge and existence, he clears

the table to build his own epistemology. He reaches this radical point of skepticism by employing three propositions of doubt in his quest for a certain foundation of the sciences. He begins by evaluating what he thinks he knows. He states he must reject that which is even a potential item of doubt. Thus, to dismantle his false beliefs, he must undercut the foundations which support them. His first move toward complete skepticism is a stipulation which asserts that we must not trust that which has deceived us even once. Therefore, he continues, since we have been deceived by our senses we must not trust them. However, this only applies in ambiguous circumstances, so he calls upon an argument similar to one employed by the ancient skeptics, the dream regress.

The ancient skeptics employed the argument of the dream regress by asking how one knows that what one dreams is not actual reality, and conversely; how it is that one knows what we perceive as our waking hours not to be the fictitious. The ancient skeptics were not seeking to know anything, and in fact, they believed nothing could be known; so they committed themselves to a total suspension of judgment. This argument was one of many they employed to reject claims of knowledge. Descartes, on the other hand, places his own twist on the ancient tactic and employs the argument to eventually gain certainty. He asks if we may ever know we are not dreaming. He argues that since everything we experience in reality may be experienced identically in a dream, there is no way to discern whether or not we are dreaming. However this still leaves existence intact, because the elements of dreams resemble the elements of the actual world.

To call reality into doubt, Descartes then supposes the existence of an all powerful, evil deceiver, a supposition which he asserts he cannot know to be false. Descartes supposes that this deceiver has tricked him in every moment of what he perceived to be life, such that, every feeling and every experience Descartes ever had was merely a sequence synthesized by the deceiver. Thus he renders himself unto a state of complete uncertainty and denial of all known existence, since he cannot be certain that this deceiver does not exist. Now let us consider Descartes' recovery from this devastating state of non-existence.

II. Resurrecting Reality

Descartes reestablishes existence in a progression narrated through *The Meditations*. He exits the void of non-existence as he first stipulates his own existence with the famous revelation of "*Cogito Ergo Sum*" or; I think, therefore I am. This proposition evades the doubt of the senses, the dream regress, and even the evil deceiver. He must exist, for thought requires a thinker, deception requires a deceived, and dreams, require a dreamer; thus, he must exist as the necessary subject of these operations.

Moreover, he exists as a thinking thing, since he discovers thought to be his essence. He can conceptualize himself as removed from a body, or any form of extended thing, but in no way can he separate himself from his thought. Descartes claims there is nothing he perceives with greater clarity than his own thought, which he realizes through the light of nature, an incorrigible faculty he comes to deem as clear and distinct perception. He explains this revelation,

But 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 [...] I now seem able to posit everything I clearly and distinctly perceive to be true. (Descartes: p.72 Med III)

This light of nature, or clear and distinct perception, is his second revelation of truth- that is, his mechanism for recognizing truth.

Utilizing this certainty of his own existence, and this instrument of recognizing truth, he moves to investigate what an idea is. Since he is a thinking thing, he further wonders what the cause of ideas is. To uncover this, he must first understand causality. He claims that, something may never arise from nothing; and further, that whatever is in an effect, must be eminently present in the cause. Therefore, something of greater perfection, cannot be caused by something of less perfection; and thus likewise, an idea may never come from nothing. Descartes then understands that there must be an idea that is capable of producing all the ideas he has, or may ever, have. This idea, in his calculation, must be God, a being of supreme perfection. He derives this conclusion from that fact that nothing present in him is able to even resemble the perfection which inheres to idea of the perfect being. He then concludes that this idea cannot originate in himself, but further must emanate from something external; that is, from the actual existence of the perfect being, God. Upon this perfect and thus necessarily non-deceiving God, Descartes then validates clear and distinct perception as an incorrigible faculty. Still Descartes maintains, and rightly so, that the senses must not be trusted at face value. That is, they are not guaranteed to provide actual impressions of reality. Nevertheless, he also retracts that they are to be completely rejected. He moves on to insist that sensory input must be integrated through reason to be validated and verified as certain. He illustrates this notions in *The Meditations* with an example where he depicts seeing people walking from afar, but all one can see is moving hats and coats; however, we know through reason that these are in fact people. Descartes thus posits that the senses do have value in ascertaining truth insofar as they are employed in corroboration with clear and distinct perception. Since God,

by Descartes' definition, cannot be a deceiver, God would not bestow upon him such deceptive resources. Now with the senses corroborated by reason, and the veracity of which verified by the integrity of God, Descartes validates the existence of the external world, setting the proper foundation for the sciences.

III. Critical Response from Descartes' Contemporaries

Descartes solves his riddle with the necessary existence of a benevolent God. This God, he claims, is the foundation for all knowledge. However, assertions made throughout *The Meditations* in establishing God's existence are dubiously conspicuous. If it is the case that the argument as whole can be dissected and shown to be erroneous, or at least miscalculated, then it would seem it should be more than possible to dissolve the initial doubts which provoke these claims. However, such a task is anything but simple. Unfortunately the refutation of Descartes' reassembly of the world, in the end, leaves his three propositions of doubt (his riddle of complete external world skepticism), intact. The magnitude which these three doubts span is so immense that finding a crawl space to evade deception may take more than a life time. So it will not be the dissolution of the doubts we will consider, but the dissolution of the argument presented to solve the proposed nullification of existence.

Descartes' argument, from the *cogito* to the vindication of the senses is muddled with flaws. I would like to discuss a few of these elements. The first to be considered is called The Cartesian Circle. As the name implies, it is a charge against Descartes for arguing in a circle. This is a fallacious form of argument in which one employs the premise, or premises, to prove a conclusion, but then uses the conclusion to obversely justify the premise, or premises.

This fallacy couched in Descartes' prolix was exposed by Descartes' contemporaries, Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Gassendi. They were given copies of *The Meditations* before it was publicly circulated to respond and object--and object they did. They each presented this very issue in their *Objections to The Meditations*. Arnauld wrote,

I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists. But we can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. (Arnauld: p.150)

Descartes' first step of committing this crime of argumentation occurs through instituting the proposition of clear and distinct perception, which he asserted as an incorrigible faculty in the beginning of *Meditation* III. He exercises this faculty as

he maneuvers his way through his conceptualization of ideas. This inquiry leads him to question the modes of causality, specifically the cause of ideas. The combination of these examinations finally leads Descartes to a clear and distinct understanding of the initial cause of all ideas, a cause which necessarily exists, and that cause must be God. Yet despite having previously applied this incorrigible faculty of clear and distinct perception, Descartes proceeds to justify the veridical nature of this faculty upon God in *Meditation* IV. So, he uses this method to find God, despite not having proven the method to be valid. He offers no justification because initially he cannot. Instead, he asserts a rule stating that which is clearly and distinctly perceived is always true. Thus, with unjustified means, he arrives at the existence of God. Upon this conclusion he then reverts back to show clear and distinct perception to be valid based upon this new knowledge of a non-deceiving God. Here we see an unwarranted premise which invalidly proves a conclusion, followed by the unwarranted premise being justified by the invalid conclusion; this is a text book case of begging the question in circular argumentation. Hence, his triumphs over the evil deceiver and escape from the dream regress have miserably failed. He may know he exists, but that is all--if he even knows so much. Second, we should consider a quite interesting problem offered from a position of uncompromising logic. This point of view was offered by another individual who received an advance copy of the text, a Jesuit, Pierre Bourdin. Bourdin wrote to Friar Marin Mersenne, a friend of Descartes (and the man responsible for issuing these early copies of *The Meditations*), and said; "I have tried to treat him as courteously as possible but I have never seen a paper so full of faults" (Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch: 64). He provides a few interesting points in response to Descartes' escape from the skeptical abyss through the establishment of his own existence. He argues against Descartes' claim that despite an inability to differentiate between reality and dreaming, Descartes is nonetheless clearly and distinctly aware that he is thinking in any dream; and therefore, must exist as the subject of this thought. Bourdin rejects that Descartes may have any clear and distinct perception of anything if he is dreaming. Since the act of thought which Descartes supposes, may be occurring in a dream, it is then also only a dream that this act of thought is so clearly evident. Thus, no matter how Descartes attempts to pose his clear and distinct thought in regard to the dream regress, his supposed awareness is nothing but a dream, and hence containing no reality, offering no way out of the skeptical labyrinth.

Bourdin's next point centers on Descartes' stipulation of complete skepticism, denying all existence. Since Descartes has established that nothing exists and has embraced this position, for Bourdin, that is the end of Descartes' road. He claims that

this position is intrinsically an eternal catacomb. If in the first premise nothing exists, it cannot be that anything may follow to be established as existing. Bourdin says,

Nothing exists, you do not exist; you are not thinking; you are not conscious[....]If the proposition 'Nothing exists' is true, then the proposition 'You do not exist and you are not thinking' is necessarily also true[...]you insist that the proposition 'Nothing exists' is true. Therefore the proposition 'You do not exist and you are not thinking' is also true. (Bourdin: 342)

Simply, if nothing exists, even oneself, consequently, by embracing this claim Descartes subjects himself to an inescapable nothingness. Bourdin recommends that Descartes adjust his premise to allow himself a possibility of establishing certainty of any knowledge.

Further, another critical issue may be raised in relation to Bourdin's perspective. According to Descartes' theory of causation, something cannot come from nothing. If he believes this to be true, and if in fact he establishes this state of endless emptiness, he cannot, according to his own theory of causality, escape this nothingness. Thus, when he does assert that he exists as a thinking thing, after the fact of his skeptical annihilation of existence, he contradicts his own metaphysics. As he would then come from nothing, which Descartes says cannot be. Therefore, he cannot be, and the *cogito* is lost.

IV. Proving God and a Rising Suspicion

Despite the calm elegance and natural comfort offered to the reader through the narrative, the argument formulated by Descartes is far from pristine. The flaws seem so glaring and blatant, that it leaves one with a peculiar wonder of how Descartes missed these errors. The fallacy of begging the question by circular reasoning is not any secret. It is an elementary form of fallacious argumentation and is no minor oversight. In fact, it singlehandedly undermines his entire argument. Since God is the basis for Descartes' entire epistemology and this fallacy negates the establishment of God, this fallacy negates his entire epistemology. These errors are so grave and so evident it gives rise to suspicion; could it be that he was not sincere? Even if, somehow, Descartes did in fact overlook these factors, what may be said about his proof of God's existence? Aside from the exhaustive lengths taken in its prose, it is shocking how feeble this proof turns out to be.

In attempting to prove God's existence, Descartes utterly failed. I see no substantial difference between his assessment of the cause of ideas parlayed into a proof of God's existence and that of Saint Anselm's ontological argument as proof of

God's existence. Anselm's argument, of the 11th century, goes (condensed) as follows:

- 1: God is something than which nothing greater can be thought.
- 2: Even a fool must admit that something than which nothing greater can be thought necessarily exists in the understanding, as this is understood upon hearing and what is understood must exist in the understanding.
- 3: Something that than which nothing greater can be thought cannot exist solely in the understanding.
- 4: Since that which exists in reality is greater than that which exists solely in the understanding.
- 5: But if that than which nothing greater can be thought only existed in the understanding, then something greater could be thought than that than which nothing greater can be thought.
- 6: But this is not possible, so that than which nothing greater can be thought must exist in reality.

Therefore: God exists. (Anselm: 415)

However, this proves nothing; there is no actual necessity. He simply posits ideas and in an entanglement of concepts and prolix, he concludes God's existence. But all he may really say is, if God were to exist, nothing greater could be conceived. Much is the same for Descartes; if it were the case that our ideas indeed needed a corresponding actuality from which their objective reality (our mental image or concept) emanates, then God would exist. Further, and related in an even closer manner to Anselm's argument, are the implications drawn by Descartes through stipulating the perfection of God. He claims that since God is most perfect, and that which exists has more perfection than that which is merely conceived, God therefore necessarily exists. If it were the case that Anselm's argument had weathered the testaments of time and had truly proven the existence of God, Descartes would not have needed to prove God existed. However, since Anselm's argument proved nothing, why did Descartes adopt such a similar line of reasoning for his own proof?

Descartes writes with such an air of confidence that deigns to identify the one true method of attaining truth and grounding knowledge. I appreciate this writing insofar as it displays a clever craft of a theoretical epistemology, but in no way can I subscribe to the actual content of his fantasy. It is undeniable that Descartes was a man of remarkable intellect, so it does not seem possible that he was unaware of these defects. However,

I do understand the mere occurrence of these mistakes does not prove anything. Nevertheless, the barefaced manner in which they appear is certainly dubious; and I find it outright suspicious. The remainder of this paper will explore ideas regarding a potential hidden agenda behind *The Meditations*.

V. Dissimulation Theory

The idea that Descartes had a hidden agenda in his work may be formally addressed as *dissimulation theory*. Louis Loeb explains, “According to dissimulation hypotheses, Descartes, in *The Meditations*, intentionally misrepresented important aspects of his philosophy” (Loeb: 243). Given the highly speculative nature of such hypotheses, there are many different views, or approaches, one might take here. I will focus on Descartes’ appeal to divine veracity as grounds for the function of clear and distinct perception (upon which Descartes would prove the existence of the external world,) as an insincere notion.

To begin, we must understand a tactical inconsistency regarding the function of the evil deceiver in *Meditation I*, contrasted with its application in *Meditation III*. In *Meditation I*, the deceiver is an instrument to raise complete doubt regarding sensory experience, and simulates the external world to seem to exist when in reality it does not. As Descartes explains,

I will suppose [...] an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever, who has directed his entire effort at deceiving me. I will regard the heavens, the air, the earth, the colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things as nothing but the bedeviling hoaxes. (Descartes: 62)

This is a quite severe assertion pertaining to a vast range of doubt. In *Meditation III*, the deceiver, who remains intact, assumes a different application than we see in the *Meditation I*. In *Meditation III* it is not the material world in question, rather it is the deceiver’s potential ability to compromise clear and distinct perception: Descartes asserts,

Because it occurred to me that some God could perhaps have given me a nature such that I might be deceived even about matters that seemed most evident [or clear and distinct....] On the other hand, whenever I turn my attention to those very things that I think I perceive with such great clarity, I am so completely persuaded by them[...]so long as I think I am something, he will never bring it about that I am nothing[...] For it is true that I do exist. Nor will he even bring it about that perhaps two plus three might equal more or less than five[...]Because I have no reason for thinking that there is a God who is a deceiver, the basis for doubting[...]is very tenuous and[...]metaphysical. (Descartes: 70-71)

How is it that at this point in *Meditation III*, only with the knowledge that he exists as a thinking thing, is Descartes able to so drastically undermine the previously attributed ubiquitous force of negating existence from the evil deceiver? It seems that there is no justifiable way. Further illustrating the inconsistency of the deceiver’s application is the severity applied to the doubts in *Meditation I* which encompass even arithmetic, as Descartes says, “others sometimes make mistakes in matters that they believe they know most perfectly, may I not, in like fashion, be deceived every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square” (Descartes: 61)? Whereas in *Meditation III* (as we saw in the former quote, 70-71), this doubt is rendered “tenuous”.

One thing remains quite clear at this point; Descartes did not treat the doubts raised in *Meditation III* as seriously as he did when he initially called them into the picture in *Meditation I*. As Loeb writes, “Descartes constructs the hypothesis of *Meditation III* in a way that enables him to minimize the doubt it generates, that is, to treat the doubt as slight in contrast to the doubt of *Meditation I*” (Loeb: 253). This indicates that if Descartes was insincere regarding the doubts of *Meditation III*, what must follow is an inspection regarding whether or not Descartes was sincere regarding these doubts in the first instance. However, regardless of his sincerity in *Meditation I*, due to the inconsistent application of these doubts, he therefore undermines his solutions to these problems; which are his proof of the existence of God, his appeal divine veracity—but moreover, the epistemological position placed upon God. For if the doubt he is answering is not taken seriously, then neither should its solution; or, if the doubt is serious, but must be minimized so to be toppled, the solution is rendered worthless. Conclusively, if the argument is inconsistent, it is invalid and we must not accept Descartes’ proof of God or anything which he asserts as contingent upon it. With these elements withdrawn, is there an epistemological position we may extract from Descartes’ work?

Henceforth we shall regard God as a dispensable element of Descartes’ epistemology presented in *The Meditations*. Now we must consider the role of *Meditation I*, presenting complete external world skepticism. The onset of these doubts are set forth most sincerely by Descartes; or if not, to at least be taken seriously. They ring the bells of the ancient skeptics, preaching “*ephoche*”, employing a transposed “*isothernia*” which shall plague any form of Philosophy; including the Aristotelian. However Descartes is in no way a classic skeptic, he has birthed a new, modern form of skepticism. Descartes’ skepticism reveals his hidden agenda, so whether or not he was fully sincere in entertaining the idea of the evil deceiver; he fully intended that we should. For his reduction of knowledge in itself is a cunning act, as it is assembled to reflect, or “to

set the stage”, for the introduction of his metaphysics; that is, without warrant Descartes induces an epistemological crisis in specific relation to his theory. As Michael Williams claims, “But Descartes does not acknowledge the theoretical considerations that mandate this reduction of skepticism to a theoretical problem in epistemology. Rather, he represents the reduction as a condition of making his project practicable” (Williams: 124). This subvert introduction is seen progressively through the presentation of doubts in *Meditation I*, as he immediately attacks the senses, though they are not fully dispelled since the concessions made against them only apply to ambiguous instances. To completely nullify the senses, and further, our ability to differentiate reality from what is fiction, he summons the dream regress. Finally, he nullifies reality itself with the evil deceiver. However that, which remains, even with no sense of reality, is the mind. This is the real revelation procured through this procedure, and the arrival at this condition was not an innocent conclusion which Descartes realized through pure introspection. Williams explains, “We see, then, that the progressive doubt of the Meditations is informed throughout[....]Descartes’ distinctive skeptical problems, and the metaphysical framework that makes it possible to raise them are introduced together” (Williams:129).

It is most evident that Descartes insists the senses take a back seat to the intellect. The intellect, for Descartes, is the foundation of knowledge. He poses what he believes to be an indelible presentation that the intellect, or faculties of reason, is epistemologically prior to the senses. That is, as Loeb suggests, from *The Meditations* one might extract, “the conception of a *hierarchy of cognitive faculties*” (Loeb: 254). This is to say, there is a foundationalist approach employed by Descartes in *The Meditations* that is not built upon God. *The Meditations* established all truth upon the perfection of God, deeming God as most basic. However, as we observe through the method of doubt, God itself is lost as nothing exists. Critically, and of utmost importance, what is known before God as Descartes was confronted with the supposition of an evil deceiver, is the fact that Descartes himself exists; that is, the *cogito*. This is the crucial point of divergence from what Descartes presents at face value, and what is hypothesized in this theory of dissimulation. The most fundamental element to his position is the assertion; I think, therefore I am; this piece of knowledge is the most epistemologically basic, not God. Therefore, it is the mind that grounds the “pyramid” of knowledge without the validation of God. Descartes questions in the beginning of *Meditation III*,

But 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 [...]

I now seem able to posit everything I clearly and distinctly perceive to be true. (Descartes: 70)

Again, we are introduced to the essential mechanism of ascertaining truth, prior to God. This was, however, invalid in the literal context of *The Meditations*, but as we’ve dismissed the role of the supreme being, clear and distinct perception fits comfortably as the intellectual foundation which prescribes our affirmation of beliefs. Descartes expounds on this notion when he speaks about “the light of nature,” a notion I take this to be synonymous with clear and distinct perception (in a quite poetic way), describing the function of our mind in its purest form. As Descartes characterizes, “There is [...] no other faculty that I can trust as much as this light and which could teach that these things are not true” (Descartes: 72). Here we have a notion of an incorrigible substratum upon which we may employ the formulation of belief. As Loeb writes, “The claim that reason is epistemologically basic, and hence epistemologically prior to sense-perception in particular, is not itself deduced as a consequence of Divine veracity” (Loeb: 257). Hence our ability to reason is the mode of which all these faculties and sensations will be filtered unto the light of nature.

It is important to consider the process of understanding Descartes imposes upon not only as to further illuminate the structure of our gaining knowledge but to further disavow the Academics. Descartes claims that our errors are “a privation or a lack of some knowledge that somehow ought to be in me” (Descartes: 82). He further asserts that errors occur as a result of our ability to freely choose in action or belief. That is, our free choice runs awry as we apply fallible resources of knowledge in adjudicating potential choices. This is a misguided and perfidious procedure which leads one to *misjudge*, and elect false beliefs. This process of vindicating a given proposition, or choice, is judgment. Our judgments are the process toward of understanding. Our understanding is the process of our knowledge. Therefore, it would follow from this line of thought why Descartes made such a grandiose stipulation which guaranteed veridical inveteracy; “for as often as I restrain my will when I make judgments, so that it extends only to those matters that the intellect clearly and distinctly discloses to it, it plainly cannot happen that I err” (Descartes: 87). Therefore clear and distinct perception, the pure function of mind (the light of nature), is the key to knowledge. These intellectual epiphanies occur as a result of the properly functioning, interacting, and ordered set of cognitive faculties. That is, the application of proper reasoning in regard to matters of judgment. It is the role of reason to adjudicate that which is understood and that which is confused. For reason can discriminate, or correct, any entity with which it is presented. Therefore, and most importantly, reason can defy and correct that which is known

by the senses, thus, conclusively showing that the senses are not epistemologically prior to the mind.

V. Conclusion

Thus, Descartes does not wish to establish external world skepticism. Rather, he wishes to ground the senses and knowledge of external existence upon the function of the epistemologically prior faculties of the intellect. He buttresses this intention upon the stipulation that reason cogitates all the sensory input we receive. However, and undeniably so, an immense amount of what we know, and who we are, and become, is predicated by everything we externally experience. For Descartes, this is good and well. Nonetheless, the basis of judging and understanding our experiences is not focally through the senses--but through the mind. Conclusively, *The Meditations* suggest that knowledge ferments through the intellect, whether or not God exists.

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