

What does Descartes consider true in the first meditation on first philosophy?



« Supponam igitur non optimum Deum, fontem veritatis, sed genium aliquem malignum, eundemque summe potentem & callidum, omnem suam industriam in eo posuisse, ut me falleret: putabo coelum, aërem, terram, colores, figuras, sonos, cunctaque externa nihil aliud esse quam ludificationes somniorum, quibus insidias credulitati meae tetendit: considerabo meipsum tanquam manus non habentem, non oculos, non carnem, non sanguinem, non aliquem sensum, sed haec omnia me habere falsò opinantem: manebo obstinate in hac meditatione defixus, atque ita, siquidem non in potestate meâ sit aliquid veri cognoscere, at certe hoc quod in me est, ne falsis assentiar, nec mihi quidquam iste deceptor, quantumvis potens, quantumvis callidus, possit imponere, obfirmatâ mente cavebo. »



The 1647 French translation by the Duc de Luynes

Synopsis

The aim of this analysis is to determine what René Descartes (☞1596, †1650) considers true in the first meditation of his work « *Meditationes de prima philosophia* » (1641). In this analysis, the Latin-English translation « *Meditations on First Philosophy* » (3rd ed., Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1993) by Donald A. Cress was used.

I will divide this inquiry in two primary parts: explicit and implicit statements. Explicit statements are those made "in plain words", while implicit ones are statements which are necessary for coherence between other explicit statements or opinions, by the laws of logic, but not explicitly stated.

The reason is the different nature of the statements, and this division should thus facilitate critical study of this text when comparing to Descartes' original text.

I will begin with a very brief description of Descartes' method.

Descartes' method

Descartes starts out by making clear that he intends to abandon all notions that he can doubt for any reason. Following this *modus*

operandi, he hopes to find some unquestionable, inevitable, forever true statement to serve as a firm basis upon which he can build knowledge, that thus also will be forever true. I will call this method "**the rationalistic method**".

Explicit statements

In his discussion of how to use the rationalistic method in practice, he clearly states that he does not need to examine the totality of all opinions, but rather only the foundations; the basic principles. He assumes that shaking what he calls the foundations, will also shake everything he considers built upon those.

Furthermore, from some reflective considerations, Descartes states that there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep. Let us call this principle "**the relativity of reality**".

These two statements lead to a conclusion that all *a posteriori* perceptions, that is, all sensations and the like, must be doubted, since one cannot tell whether one is dreaming or not, and thus determine what is real and what is not.

Furthermore, all *a priori* perceptions (mathematics, etc.) must also be doubted, motivated by the possible existence of an evil God/demon influencing these in a way to differ from what is true and real. Let us call this "**the evil demon principle**".

The final conclusion Descartes comes to in his first meditation is thus that all *a priori* and *a posteriori* perceptions must be doubted, and that in turn meant all knowledge must be doubted, due to the rationalistic principle (discussed below). He notes, in closing, that even though he might not know anything for sure, he can at least «avoid» what is false.

Implicit statements

One important, implicitly stated opinion is the belief in the rationalistic method to restore and build up knowledge. Descartes assumes that knowledge may be built up, step by step, from an unshakeable foundation, that is, he had a rationalistic view upon knowledge and truth. The unshakeable foundation would guarantee the eternal nature of the knowledge. This of course implies that there is some sort of absolute reality. It may be noted that this view has been challenged by several modern philosophers. To continue the naming convention of above, we shall call this "**the rationalistic principle**".

Of course, Descartes also makes the assumption that reason and logic (the laws of logic, including *tertium non datur*), which he uses, are valid and sufficient tools for attaining knowledge and asserting truth or falsity. This will be called "**the common sense principle**". However, do not confuse common sense with logic for this reason.

Summary of statements

To summarize, using the notions defined above:

Explicit

The rationalistic method

The relativity of reality

The evil demon principle

Implicit

The rationalistic principle

The common sense principle

These together lead to the conclusion of the meditation: all perceptions must be doubted.

Discussion

It should be noted that in the processing of the original text during this analysis, some provisional statements/reflections leading to the statements discussed above have been omitted. The reason for this has basically been the author's opinion that these statements in the context of this analysis do not contribute towards a clear-cut picture of Descartes' principles, but rather give a somewhat blurred view. Those wishing to study these closer, are referred to Descartes' original text.

The reader should be alerted that especially those statements given as implicit in this text might not be complete or even correct at all times, depending on the total world view of the reader. This is because they are, at least some of them, to be formed from a comparison of Descartes' text with the mentioned world view, which might very well differ from time to time and person to person.

Also, it is worth pointing out that Donald A. Cress, author of the translation used, notes in the book that he used the original Latin text, rather than a later French translation that some consider better. What impact this might have had on this analysis is hard to tell, but the reader should however be aware of this fact.

Bibliography

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