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Argumentum ex Cartesio: A Study of Descartes' Employment of Arguments in His Meditations on First Philosophy

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Abstract

In his *Regulae* (Rules for the Direction of the Understanding), Descartes focuses on Arithmetic and Geometry as the methodological model for argumentation and learning generally. As a result, it is generally assumed that his *Meditations on First Philosophy* employs the deductive method utilized in Mathematics. Part of the difficulty in understanding the method of the *Meditations* stems from the fact the nowhere in the *Meditations* does Descartes explain the method he employs in this work. In fact, Descartes addresses the method of the *Meditations* in only one place, namely, in the Replies to the Second Set of Objections, where he contrasts the method of Geometry (which he refers to as 'synthesis') with the method of the *Meditations* (which he refers to as 'analysis'). In my paper, I turn to the Descartes' Dreaming/ Waking argument in the fourth and fifth paragraphs of the first meditation to illustrate how scholars have erred in their critical exegetical efforts, when they regard the *Meditations* as utilizing a logical mathematical-type approach in arguments in the search after truth. In the second half of my paper, I focus on Descartes' method of 'analysis', the only method that he insists he employs in his *Meditations*.

Keywords: dreaming, waking, method, argument, deduction, hyperbolic doubt

Methodology

Descartes makes abundantly clear in his correspondence with those seeking clarification on what he has written in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, that while he is concerned in this work to discover the first principles of human knowledge, the arguments that he utilizes to lead the reader to these first principles, especially, but not exclusively, in the first meditation, do not possess certainty, but rather 'verisimilitude'. The resultant concern for the commentator, of course, is to try to

understand how Descartes moves from such arguments to grasping the first principles of human knowledge. This is the chief matter that I address in my article, a topic which is largely neglected in the literature on the Descartes' Meditations.

Argumentum ex Cartesio: A Study Of Descartes' Employment Of Arguments in His Meditations On First Philosophy

In his Meditations on First Philosophy, Descartes sets out to discover the first principles of human knowledge, that is, what must be known before anything else can be known. In the Preface to the Principles of Philosophy, he refers to the subject which seeks these first principles of human knowledge as 'metaphysics' (HR 1, 210; CSM 11, 186). In the first meditation, he attempts to determine whether these metaphysical first principles can be established through the senses. When this fails, he devotes the remaining meditations to showing that reason is the source of the first principles of human knowledge. In this article, I turn my attention to the first meditation, and, more specifically, to Descartes' Dreaming/ Waking argument in the latter half of the fourth and in the fifth paragraph of the first meditation. I will examine a criticism of Descartes' approach put forth by Peter Simpson and Gilbert Ryle, and show that this criticism does not impact what Descartes is attempting to accomplish in his dreaming/ waking argument. In the second half of my article, I focus on Descartes' method of 'analysis', the only method that he insists he employs in his Meditations.

First, to Descartes' argument about dreaming and waking. The argument begins at the end of the fourth paragraph of the first meditation, when he recognizes that people who suffer from madness are delusional, in that their brains generate what they take to be reality: "...they constantly assure us that they think they are kings when they are really quite poor, or that they are clothed in purple when they are really without covering..." (M 46, CSM 11, 13). He rules out that he is mad, given that he is able to compare and contrast his perceptions, in order to determine which are likely true of reality. However, in the fifth paragraph, he raises the concern that he may suffer from madness when he dreams: "How often has it happened to me that in the night I dreamt that I found myself in this particular place, that I was dressed and seated near the fire, whilst in reality I was lying undressed in bed!" (M 46-47; CSM 11, 13) He then goes on to draw a contrast between waking and dreaming:

At this moment it does indeed seem to me that it is with eyes awake that I am looking at this paper; that this head which I move is not asleep, that it is deliberately and of set purpose that I extend my hand and perceive it; what happens in sleep does not appear so clear and so distinct as does all this. (M 47; CSM 11, 13)

But, he urges, that this contrast between waking and dreaming in terms of clarity and distinctness cannot be accepted, because "on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions, and in dwelling carefully on this reflection I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish

wakefulness from sleep that I am lost in astonishment. And my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I now dream". (M 47; CSM 11, 13)

Peter Simpson and Gilbert Ryle have put forth the following criticism of Descartes' Dreaming/ Waking argument:

It is a standard criticism of Descartes' dream argument that it must necessarily fail because it is inconsistent with itself: it has to assume the truth of what it sets out to deny. It concludes that there is no difference between dreaming and waking, and that our experiences may be false delusions, while the premises, which liken waking to dreaming and assert the illusory character of the latter, presuppose that there is such a difference. As Ryle has said in a criticism of the argument from illusion, "just as it makes no sense to talk of counterfeit coins when there are no genuine ones to contrast them with, so it makes no sense to talk of illusory experiences like dreams without waking and veridical ones to contrast them with." I believe that... this criticism is correct.

If Descartes' had intended his Meditations to be a logical search for first principles, then the criticism by Simpson and Ryle (and others) would be on the mark: without knowing the veridical experiences that we are capable of having, it makes no sense to speak of illusory experiences. I will show that, in his Meditations, Descartes does not intend to undertake a logical search for first principles. As a result, criticisms of his approach in the Meditations, which focus on standards that a logical approach must meet, are inappropriately applied to what he is attempting in this work. One of the problems confronting the commentator is that Descartes does not set out in the Meditations, the method that he utilizes in this work. As a result, his procedure is subject to misunderstanding, given that it is typically assumed by commentators that he employs the deductive method of Geometry in the Meditations. In this regard, we need to deal with two topics: hyperbolic doubt which is introduced in the first meditation and is utilized throughout the Meditations, and Descartes' method of analysis in the Meditations, which he sets out in the Replies to the Second Set of Objections. I begin my study with Descartes' employment of hyperbolic doubt in the Meditations.

Hyperbolic Doubt

Descartes first introduces hyperbolic doubt, that is, doubt which goes beyond what reason is able to approve, in the second paragraph of the first meditation. He informs us that he will examine those principles through which empirical beliefs are admitted into consciousness. These principles are guides, regarding which beliefs should be admitted into consciousness as true, and which beliefs should be rejected. And, he continues, if he finds that a principle has at any time led him to error, or may lead him to error, then he will reject the principle, and all beliefs admitted into consciousness through this principle: "[I]f I am able to find in each one some reason to doubt, this will justify my rejecting the whole" (HR 1, 145; CSM 11, 12) . One such principle

relevant to our discussion is the principle of clarity and distinctness, which initially enables him to distinguish waking from dreaming: “At this moment it does indeed seem to me that it is with eyes awake that I am looking at this paper...what happens in sleep does not appear so clear and so distinct as does all of this” (M 47; CSM 11, 13). Nevertheless, he recalls that on many occasions in sleep he has been deceived by similar illusions - some of his dreams possess the clarity and distinctness he associates with being awake - with the result that he sees so manifestly “that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep that I am lost in astonishment. And my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I now dream” (M 47; CSM 11, 13). His argument here is clearly not reasonable, but is rather hyperbolic, holding that, because he has at times been deceived into thinking that he is awake when he is asleep and dreaming, that he should regard all sense experiences as occurring in dreams.

In the Third Set of Objections to Descartes’ Meditations, Thomas Hobbes’ acknowledges Descartes’ argument that we have no reliable criterion for distinguishing waking from dreaming, but he questions why Descartes developed this argument (and others) in the first meditation, since all of this has been adequately covered by Plato and other ancient philosophers. In his reply to Hobbes, Descartes offers three reasons for introducing hyperbolic doubt in the context of the Dreaming/Waking argument:

[M]y reason for employing them [was] partly that I might prepare the readers’ minds for the study of intellectual matters and for distinguishing them from matters corporeal, a purpose for which such arguments seem wholly necessary; in part also because I intended to reply to these very arguments in the subsequent Meditations; and partly in order to show the strength of the truths I afterward propounded, by the fact that such metaphysical doubts cannot shake them. (HR 11, 60-61; CSM 11, 121)

Each of Descartes’ reasons for employing hyperbolic doubt requires some discussion.

(1) The readers’ minds must be prepared for the study of intellectual matters and for distinguishing them from matters corporeal, because Descartes holds that the senses prejudice us into believing that ideas received through the senses are the true metaphysical ideas, from which the first principles of human knowledge can be derived. In the Replies to the Second Set of Objections, Descartes elaborates on the ill effects of sensory prejudice in metaphysics:

...[N]othing in metaphysics causes more trouble than the making the perception of its primary notions clear and distinct. For, though in their own nature they are as intelligible as, or even more intelligible than those the geometrician study, yet being contradicted by the many preconceptions of our senses to which we have since our earliest years been accustomed, they cannot be perfectly apprehended except by those who give strenuous attention and study to them, and withdraw their minds as far as possible from matters corporeal. Hence if they alone were brought forward, it

would be easy for anyone with a zeal for contradiction to deny them. (M 102-103; CSM 11, 111)

Descartes' insists that the true metaphysical ideas are innate, that is, they are devoid of empirical content (he often calls them 'pure'), and they were given to us by God. The influence of the senses prevents us from apprehending these innate ideas, and, therefore, until the 'preconceptions of our senses' are removed, metaphysical knowledge cannot be obtained. Two central topics in the Meditations where this arises are, first, in the second meditation, when Descartes, having established that he exists, proves that he exists as a thinking thing; and in the third meditation, when he attempts to know God through his idea of God. In both instances - knowledge of the self; and knowledge of God - he shows that the true ideas of the self and of God are not revealed through the senses. These ideas are innate, given to him by God, and are not subject to change or modification:

It only remains to me to examine into the manner in which I have acquired this idea [of God] from God; for I have not received it through the senses, and it is never presented to me unexpectedly, as is usual with the ideas of sensible things; nor is it likewise a fiction of my mind, for it is not in my power to take from or to add anything to it; and consequently the only alternative is that it is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me. (M 71; CSM 11, 35)

Accordingly, the need to eliminate all sensory influences, if he is to grasp the true innate ideas of the self and of God. The hyperbole in his doubts ensures that sensory ideas will no longer be regarded as the true ideas of the self and of God, or of any other metaphysical ideas, and this will facilitate his search for the true innate ideas, which are the foundation of metaphysical knowledge. In other words, once all empirical ideas are shown to be unreliable as the path to truth in metaphysics, his writings in the Meditations can direct his (and our) attention to those innate ideas through which the first principles of metaphysical knowledge can be grasped. As he teaches in the Replies to the Second Set of Objections, "if the reader care to follow it and give sufficient attention to everything, he understands the matter no less perfectly and makes it as much his own as if he had discovered it. But it contains nothing to incite belief in an inattentive or hostile reader..."(M 101; CSM 11, 110) The hostility that Descartes has in mind is found in those who are still under the influence of sensory - based beliefs, e.g. empirical ideas of the self and/ or of God, which he holds can never lead the mind to the metaphysical first principles that he is seeking.

Toward the end of the first meditation, immediately before introducing the evil genius hypothesis, he explains that the true starting point of his metaphysical inquiry into the first principles of human knowledge is indifference:

For these ancient and commonly held opinions [learned through the senses] still frequently revert to my mind...That is why I consider that I shall not be acting amiss, if, taking of set purpose a contrary belief, I allow myself to be deceived, and for a

certain time pretend that all these opinions are entirely false and imaginary, until at last, having thus balanced my former prejudices with my latter, [so that they cannot divert my opinions more to one side or the other], my judgment will no longer be dominated by bad usage or turned away from the right knowledge of the truth. (M 49; CSM 11, 15)

In order to sustain the indifference which he has achieved by the end of the first meditation, Descartes introduces the hypothesis of the evil genius, which alleviates the need to review the arguments developed through hyperbolic doubt already presented against the senses:

I shall then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me...(M 49; CSM 11, 15)

The evil genius hypothesis will no longer be needed, once Descartes arrives at the point where he can begin to emerge from this state of doubt. He identifies this point in the opening paragraph of the fifth meditation:

Now (after first noting what must be done or avoided , in order to arrive at a knowledge of the truth) my principal task is to endeavor to emerge from the state of doubt into which I have in these last days fallen...(M 80; CSM 11, 44)

(2) Descartes makes clear to Hobbes that he intends to reply to the arguments put forth in the first meditation in the subsequent meditations. This is a necessary step, given that, in the first meditation, hyperbole was utilized to eliminate all of his sensory beliefs, so that he will no longer be influenced by his senses in his search for the first principles of human knowledge. However, once he has discovered the first principles of human knowledge, he must, without hyperbole, return to evaluate his sensory beliefs, to establish which are reliable, and which are not reliable. A hint regarding this occurs in the penultimate paragraph of the first meditation, when Descartes reflects momentarily on his hyperbolic doubts regarding the senses, and takes a more reasonable appreciation of his sensory beliefs:

For these ancient and commonly held opinions still revert frequently to my mind...nor will I ever lose the habit of deferring to them or of placing my confidence in them, so long as I consider them as they really are, i.e. opinions in some measure doubtful, as I have just shown, and at the same time highly probable, so that there is much more reason to believe in than to deny them. (M 49; CSM 11, 19, italics added; not in the text)

Once again, therefore, we see that Descartes is proceeding strategically through his employment of hyperbolic doubt, which requires the reader to give her/himself over to the teachings of the Meditations, despite the fact that such teachings run counter to accepted beliefs and to the standards of reason. As we learned earlier, he is very clear about this in the Replies to the Second Set of Objections, when he urges that “if

the reader care to follow it and give sufficient attention to everything, he understands the matter no less perfectly and makes it as much his own as if he had discovered it. (M 101; CSM 11, 110)

(3) Descartes insists that the hyperbolic doubts he raised in the first meditation will reveal that all beliefs obtained through the senses are dubitable, and, therefore, that the metaphysical principles he is seeking cannot be empirically based. In the third part of his answer to Hobbes in the Replies to the Second Set of Objections, as to why he elaborated on the hyperbolic doubts in the first meditation, he insists that he did so “partly in order to show the strength of the truths I afterward propounded, by the fact that such metaphysical doubts cannot shake them.” He does not explain to Hobbes why this is the case: I will provide an explanation here.

The hyperbolic doubts introduced in the first meditation all pertain to Descartes’ empirical beliefs: by the end of the first meditation, all of his empirical beliefs, and those principles through which these beliefs are admitted into consciousness, have been shown to be dubitable. Immediately following the first meditation, he is concerned with beliefs which are based solely on innate ideas, namely, his belief in the existence of himself as a thinking thing (in the second meditation), and his belief that a veracious God is his creator (in the third meditation): neither of these beliefs presupposes, or depends upon, Descartes previously knowing anything about God. In other words, these beliefs can be known to be true without the divine guarantee. In one passage in the Replies to the Second Set of Objections, Descartes explains about such beliefs that they cannot be shaken, even if he grants that there exists a deity intent on deceiving him:

To begin with, directly we think that we rightly perceive something, we spontaneously persuade ourselves that it is true. Further, if this conviction is so strong that we have no reason to doubt concerning that of the truth of which we have persuaded ourselves, there is nothing more to enquire about; we have here all the certainty that can reasonably be desired. What is it to us, though perchance someone feigns that that, of the truth of which we are so firmly persuaded, appears false to God or to an Angel, and hence is, absolutely speaking, false? What heed do we pay to that absolute falsity, when we by no means believe that it exists or even suspect its existence? We have assumed a conviction so strong that nothing can remove it, and this persuasion is clearly the same as perfect certitude. (HR 11, 41; CSM 11, 103)

While Descartes acknowledges that mathematical ideas are also clear and distinct, he does not include them within the category of ideas of the intellect, which he can never doubt about believing them to be true, because the truth of mathematical claims can be challenged by the hypothesis of a deceiving deity.

But when I took anything very simple and easy in the sphere of arithmetic and geometry into consideration, e.g. that two and three together made five, and other things of the sort, were not these present to my mind so clearly as to enable me to

affirm that they were true? Certainly if I judged that since such matters could be doubted, this would not have been so for any other reason than that it came into my mind that perhaps a God might have endowed me with such a nature that I may have been deceived even concerning things which seemed to me most manifest. But every time that this preconceived opinion of the sovereign power of a God presents itself to my thought, I am constrained to confess that it is easy to Him, if he wishes it, to cause me to err, even in matters in which I believe myself to have the best evidence. (M 59-60; CSM 11, 25)

No comparable concern arises regarding his awareness of himself existing as a thinking thing, and of the existence of God as his creator. The question, of course, is why this is the case? I will now explain.

With innate ideas, Descartes' concern is always with whether what he is thinking corresponds to what he is thinking about. His concern is that a deceiving deity may be causing him to think matters in a certain way, but that this way of thinking does not correspond to reality. In mathematics, despite the fact that he must think the relation between *relata* in a certain way, e.g. that $(3+2) = 5$, he considers that if God is a deceiver, then God can bring it to pass that $(3+2)$ does not equal 5, and Descartes may never be able uncover this. Hence, in the case of mathematics, what he finds he must think about certain relations may not be the case at all. On the other hand, when he discovers the necessary relation between thought and existence in the *Cogito ergo Sum*, he can be confident that this relation is true, because what he is thinking is identical to what he is thinking about. No deception, not even by God, is possible here, because the problem of correspondence can never arise. There is a transparency with the *Cogito ergo Sum*, which never occurs with mathematical claims:

What of thinking? I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often? Just when I think...I do not now admit anything which is not necessarily true: to speak accurately I am not more than a thing which thinks, that is to say a mind or soul...(M 52-52; CSM 11, 18)

I turn now to Descartes' attempt to show that knowledge of God as Descartes' creator is not subject to doubt. I will not be dealing with his full treatment of the topic of God here, but only with the epistemological concern as to whether he is able to know God with certainty, simply through his idea of God. In the anti - penultimate paragraph in the third meditation, he explains:

It only remains to me to examine into the manner in which I have acquired this idea from God; for I have not received it through the senses,...nor is it likewise a fiction of my mind, for it is not in my power to take from or to add anything to it; and consequently the only alternative is that it is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me. And one certainly ought not to find it strange that God, in creating me, placed this idea within me to be like the mark of the workman imprinted on his work;

and it is likewise not essential that the mark shall be something different from the work itself. (M 70; CSM 11, 35)

For Descartes, to have the idea of the self is to have the idea of God in that thought.

To show that the awareness of the self and God is reliable, and, therefore, indubitable, it would have to be shown that the awareness of God through the awareness of the self is like the awareness of the self: there must be no distinction between what I am thinking, and what I am thinking about. But how, in the case of God, can this be upheld? Descartes offers his explanation in the Replies to the Fifth Set of Objections through an illustrative analogy, which clarifies his position that the idea of God is 'as it were, the mark of the workman imprinted on his work':

When you ask whence I get my proof that the idea of God is, as it were, the mark of a workman imprinted on his work, and what is the mode in which it is impressed, what is the form that mark, it is very much as if I, coming across a picture which showed a technique that pointed to Apelles alone as the painter, were to say that the inimitable technique was, so to speak, a mark impressed by Apelles on all his pictures in order to distinguish them from others, but you replied with the questions: 'what is the form of that mark?' and 'what is its mode of impression?' Such an enquiry would seem to merit laughter rather than any reply. (HR11, 221; CSM 11, 256)

According to Descartes, the idea of God stands to the idea of the self in a manner analogous to the relation between a painter's technique and works of art which result from this technique. As such, the idea of God is contained in the awareness of oneself as a thinking thing, in a manner analogous to the way in which the observation of a painting contains within itself the technique of the artist who created the painting. Just as observing the painting aids in apprehending the technique through which the painting has come to be, so by meditating on the self as a thinking thing, he comes to understand the only way in which he could have come to be. Therefore, when apprehending God within the awareness of the self, there is no basis for a distinction between what he is aware of, and what this awareness is about, in the same way that when apprehending the technique in a painting there is no basis for a distinction between what is apprehended and what the apprehension is about. The technique that an artist employs in creating a painting is not a copy of the artist's technique; rather it is the artist's technique in creating the painting. Similarly, the idea of God which Descartes discovers through meditating on the idea he has of himself is the mark of the workman imprinted on his work: this idea is not a copy of God's mark or technique; rather it is God's mark or technique. Again here, therefore, there is no basis for a distinction between what he apprehends about God in the idea of the self and what this apprehension is about. It is in this way that indubitability pertains to the awareness of God in the awareness of the self.

The Method of Analysis in the Meditations

I want now to address the method of analysis, which Descartes utilizes throughout the meditations. As I pointed out earlier, the only place where Descartes discusses the method he utilizes in the Meditations is in the Replies to the Second Set of Objections (M 101-104; CSM 11 110-113). Since the Cartesian analytic method is designed to remove sensory prejudice to the point of indifference, so that the primary notions of metaphysics can be apprehended clearly and distinctly, the method of analysis must have the role of rejecting claims (this is particularly evident in the first meditation, but is also evident in subsequent meditations.). Further, analysis must also direct the mind to the appropriate primary notions, once the manifold prejudices have been removed. Second, since the foundation of certainty for Descartes is to be found in the certainty of the metaphysical first principles, it follows that, prior to apprehending these first principles, any argument which he employs as a means to assist in apprehending the primary notions will lack certainty. For this reason, deductive arguments, which are presented in the context of his method of analysis prior to knowing that a veracious God is his creator, will fall short of demonstrative certainty, and this would include the proofs of God's existence in the third meditation. The sceptical arguments employed by Descartes in the first meditation are also ones which fall under the rubric of the method of analysis, and two comments that he makes in the Replies to Objections regarding arguments in the first meditation should be borne in mind.

The first of these comments appears in the Replies to the Third Set of Objections, when Descartes mentions that the arguments employed in the first meditation "were provided by me only as possessing verisimilitude." (HR II, 60; CSM II, 121) In other words, these arguments appear to be true, but they are not true. They have heuristic and rhetorical value, rather than being sound arguments. And, in his second comment, in the Replies to the Fifth Set of Objections, Descartes urges that what is false may be employed in directing the mind toward its primary notions (HR 11, 206; CSM 11, 242) Two instances of utilizing falsities in seeking the truth are first, the evil genius hypothesis; and second, the utilization of calculations involving objective and formal reality in the third meditation in the two proofs for the existence of God. He offers no proof for these concepts, and he ignores the fact that, in the first and third meditations, he had cast doubt on all mathematical calculations.

The result of my study is to show that the reading of the Meditations, along the lines offered by Peter Simpson and Gilbert Ryle in the context of the Dreaming/ Waking argument, is an inaccurate assessment of what Descartes is seeking to accomplish in this work. Descartes' approach is not logical; it is rhetorical and strategic. It requires that the reader give sufficient attention to what Descartes has written, and internalize it, so that the reader can grasp the same innate ideas as Descartes is grasping, in order to attain knowledge of the metaphysical first principles he is seeking.

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