

CARTESIAN DOUBT AND METAPHYSICS

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Abstract

Since Descartes, the nature of doubt has played a central role in the development of metaphysics both positively and negatively. Despite this fact, there has been very little discussion centering round the specific nature of doubt which led, for example, to the Cartesian discovery of the *cogito*. Certainly, the role of doubt has been well recognized: through doubt Descartes arrives at his indubitable first principle. But what can it mean to doubt the *existence* of the sensible world? This would seem to rest upon the assumption that we have clear and distinct knowledge of the precise nature of what existence is and indeed of what it means to be. As it stands, Descartes' initiates his *Meditations* upon certain definite assumptions that demand more thorough interrogation. In this paper and presentation, I examine the possible assumptions inherent in the Cartesian method of doubt within the first and second meditation and the manner in which this leads to the discovery of the *cogito*. I consider a number of essential questions in light of this: What presuppositions lie at bottom to Cartesian doubt? What is the precise nature of metaphysical doubt? What can it mean to doubt the existence of the sensible world?

1. Introduction: The Role of Doubt in the *Meditations*

To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Everyone dreams. Some people remember every detail of their dreams, others very little. I for one tend to remember my dreams. I've at times experienced entire sagas, from seafaring epic voyages, to space travel and intergalactic warfare, to nightmares worthy of a horror film. Dreams are fascinating. An individual can literally experience every possible "reality". But what is most fascinating about dreams and what will likewise serve as the primary topic of consideration here, is the very odd fact that most dreams are often experienced as though they were real. *As though they were real*. These words point to a deeper underlying ambiguity inherent in the nature of what it means to be coupled with what it means to be as a subject of conscious experience. For when we consider the meaning more thoroughly we recognize that we are both quite aware of what the "real" is, but yet simultaneously we seem to be ignorant of precisely what this knowledge entails. In other words, we experience a dream as though it were real, and it is only when we later awaken and compare the dream to waking experience that we finally realize (at times with a sigh of relief) that the dream only *seemed to be real*. It is this latter recognition that is here essential, as it must necessarily be tied to some more fundamental insight. But what is this insight? What is the real that we recognize while awake and compare to the "reality" of last night's dream?

In many ways, the above questions and considerations serve as the basis for those reflections on the nature of existence and reality found within the *Meditations* of Descartes, although there the real is examined from a quite different perspective, that is, from doubt, which is methodically pursued throughout. A brief summary of the important points of this Cartesian process will here suffice. Thus in the first *Meditation*, Descartes casts the sensible waking world into doubt on the basis of what I will here refer to, borrowing from Kant, as *Cartesian Analogies of Experience*. First, there is the analogy of authority; second, the analogy of the senses; third, the analogy of dreams.¹ Following these analogies, the whole of the sensible world is held in suspension through doubt, at which point the *res cogitans* surfaces, the thinking thing necessarily implied and tied at bottom to the act of doubt itself. But can the waking world be cast into doubt on the basis of the above analogies? If not, then what is the basis for doubt? Is there any real basis at all? These questions are considered in what follows below. In particular, I examine the possible assumptions tied to Cartesian doubt as such. The point here is not necessarily to remove the basis for doubt, as if to say that the sensible world cannot be cast into doubt at all, which as will be seen, is simply incorrect. Rather, the idea is to consider whether or not the above analogies serve as a firm basis for doubt, as Descartes thinks, or whether there is not perhaps some more fundamental basis which Cartesian doubt assumes throughout.

2. The Cartesian Analogies of Experience

In considering the above questions, I turn first to a detailed examination of the process of doubt and the analogies as above stated. As the issues dealt with in the *Meditations* involve a realm of human experience of which we are all familiar, to that extent it seems much more effective to consider them directly from the perspective of our own inner encounters. In view of this, I turn now to the sensible world of waking experience. In examining this world, we first recognize all the phenomena of which we are familiar: buildings, moving things, telephone poles and wires, plants, trees, the blue sky, clouds and so forth. We feel the wind upon our faces and the warm heat of the sun. Rocks feel solid, feathers soft. At this point, we might wonder whether or not doubt of reality comes to the fore. Are all these things real? But what is interesting here is the fact that at this point, everyday waking experience just does not lead us into such “heady” skepticism. Rather, doubt of reality tends to arise according to more specific conditions, which we then relate back to this original everyday encounter.

We might here reflect upon the days of our youth. Riding bicycles on trails in the woods, playing football, and so on. If we look back even further, we may imagine ourselves once again as very young children. It is there that we encounter the first analogy of authority. Think of all the many things children take for real: talking stuffed animals, invisible friends, the tooth fairy, Santa Clause, monsters in the closet. Even more significant, we may consider those various figures as our parents and early elementary school teachers, whose word we took for truth, whose authority we took for absolute. We relate to this world and its power structures as a reality that is absolute and unquestionable. We take the word of the parent as sure, the world of childhood fantasy as an authority in and of itself—*as though it were real*. So here again we encounter this strange notion. Here we relate to “realities” which are later cast into doubt. For as we grow older, as the intellect matures, we slowly awaken from slumber of the child and realize that our parents and teachers are fallible and that the authority of fantasy must bend its knee before the stern hand of the “real”. With Paul we might say that: “As I child I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, but when I became a man, I put away childish things”. (1 Corinthians 13:11)

Of course, we needn’t rely upon childish fancies alone in order to discover times as older and mature adults that we have been deceived. This then leads us to the second analogy of the senses. As an example, when young I would often go camping in the Appalachians. There were occasions at night while sitting beside the fire when a twig would snap in the woods and turning to look I seemed to stare at the figure of an animal in the forest, but in directing my flashlight upon it, I quickly realized that it was nothing more than a tree or a bush waving in the wind, branches falling, leaves reflecting the moonlight through the dark shadows. For other examples, in the distance we often mistake a figure for a friend and waving them toward us feel embarrassed when we discover the person to be a stranger. So also there is the trivial example of the stick that appears bent in water which, when pulled out, now appears straight. Through these latter reflections we may with Descartes come to the conclusion that through the senses we are often led into error regarding our judgment of that which is.

Were the above two analogies the only examples at our disposal, we might not perhaps ever come to question the existence of the sensible world as such. In order to doubt the whole, we require rather a more

compelling ground and reason. So we turn to the third analogy of dreams, as indeed it is with dreams that the *whole* of the waking world stands forth as something that only seems to be. What is interesting here, as above indicated, is that we relate to things within the dream and indeed to the entire dream world itself in precisely the same way as we relate to things in our everyday waking world. A few examples should suffice. We generally view both worlds from a first person perspective. Likewise, phenomena in the dream world seem identical to phenomena within the sensible world: we encounter a spatial horizon, temporality, specific entities in motion, colored things, things that talk or just make noise, and so on. It is only upon reflection, after the fact of the dream that the question of existence and thus the comparison of the difference between these two worlds is brought to the fore. But what is the basis of this difference? If we consider without bias the manner in which we relate to things within both worlds, surprisingly, it must be admitted that there is in fact *no* immediate recognizable difference from the perspective of experience. Of course, there are more *specific* differences. Within the dream world we encounter that which, from the perspective of the waking world, we call *fantastical*. Monsters, demons, ghosts, etc., appear and haunt our dream world. We fly without wings, float through walls, feel sometimes held down by an invisible force, find ourselves at other times immensely powerful and so on. But what is odd about these experiences is the fact that while we experience the fantastical, we relate to this as any other thing in any other world. In other words, we relate to the fantastical within the dream world as though it were real, only recognizing a difference upon waking and after the fact of reflection.

If we then return to the waking world, we encounter a rather perplexing relationship between these two worlds. We get up in the morning, make a cup of coffee, go about our daily business, and so forth. As in the dream world, within the waking world, we relate to things *in precisely the same way*. So we might ask, what is the difference between these two worlds? Admittedly, on the surface there seems to be no immediate recognizable difference. Whether awake or asleep, we relate to whatever world we encounter, and indeed it seems to *any possible world*, in precisely the same way. Following this, with Descartes we are thereby led to the final and culminating reflection: *What if the world is nothing but a dream? What is real?* This is then the basis of what I have here referred to simply in terms of Cartesian doubt of the sensible world. Cartesian doubt follows from reflection upon the three above analogies, for it is upon their basis that the sensible world is cast into doubt.

3. What is Real?

It is at this point that we now pause in our reflections to consider a problem. Does Cartesian doubt serve as a firm basis for doubt of the sensible world? Evidently, dreams here stand forth as weighty evidence in support of doubt. We relate to the whole dream world as though it were the whole of reality. But what is the basis of this? Consider the dream world once again. Upon reflection, we judge that from the perspective of the waking world, the dream admittedly only *seemed to be*. Alternatively, we conclude that insofar as we were deceived by our dream to that extent we may equally be deceived while awake. But does this second judgment follow necessarily from the first? This seems not to be the case. Indeed, the problem is that we relate to the dream world as though it were the sensible world and so encounter the two as *one*. In consequence, there must be some definite ground upon which the two worlds are linked together as *same* within consciousness. For indeed, after the fact of reflection we say that the dream experience was *like* the waking experience. But the notion of “likeness” further indicates that this unity is incomplete and that through it there must thereby be some expression of *difference*. What then is the basis of sameness? What is the basis of difference?

Consider first what serves to link the two worlds together as same. Here we might identify the specific character of that which is exhibited through each world, including the fact that each is first *some kind of world*, exhibiting a manifold of phenomenally connected objects, bound to space and time, moving, colored, etc. Undoubtedly, this occupies both the “space” of the dream world as well as the waking world. We might further identify essential laws that belong to both worlds collectively. We find that every visual surface is colored, that every tactile object has distinctive qualities attached to it (temperature, texture, etc.). Likewise, although the laws of physics are recognizably distinct *a posteriori* (e.g., within the dream world we often defy gravity), we yet relate to such laws as though they were laws of *any possible world*. In particular, we might say that we consider each distinct world in a certain sense as just an extension of *world as such*.

So why then do we consider the waking world real as opposed to the dream world? For we do not say that the waking world is *like* the dream world, but rather the opposite, that the dream world is *like* the

waking world. For the sake of argument, let us imagine an individual who has never experienced a dream (never dreams or never remembers their dreams). Akin to a person blind from birth who has never seen color, she might ask us, "What are dreams like?" In response, we might say pointing, that dreams are just like this present reality that you and I now witness, though slightly different. If she then pressed us to identify the ground of the difference between both worlds, we might ask her to close her eyes and to recall within memory all that she has just now seen. Following this we might then assert that dreams are *like* our memory of waking experience, though again unlike memory, we generally relate to the dream *as though it were real*.

So what is the precise ground of the *difference* between these two worlds? We have seen that from the perspective of experience, we relate to both worlds as though they were one and same. It is only after the fact of reflection that we come to a recognition of difference, that indeed the dream world is *like* the waking world. The basis of this difference is accordingly both iconic and chronological. We reflect upon the dream and identify it as same insofar as it bears the *stamp* of the real, but we alternatively call it different insofar as it only an image, as it were, an echo and reflection—an imitation which arises *after the fact* of that which it imitates. It is accordingly and precisely here that the ground of the assumption inherent in Cartesian doubt is identified. The assumption is that the dream world (and the other analogies to a lesser extent) serves as a firm basis for doubt of the waking world when in fact, reflection reveals now only the reverse: that the waking world serves as a firm basis for doubt of the dream world *which is like it*. For indeed we say that the dream world is *like* the waking world, and so doubt the actuality of the former on the basis of the latter. But in doubting the latter, in doubting the waking world, what can now serve as a basis? At best, we may use our newfound recognition of the seeming nature of the dream world as but an *analogy*: that as I am often deceived in the dream, so too I may now be deceived while awake. But as it stands, we have here *only* an analogy and this simply does not serve as a firm basis for doubt of the world of waking experience.

4. Conclusion: The *Cogito* as Ground of Doubt

But we do in fact doubt the real existence of the waking world and in many ways we seem to have good grounds for doing so. If the above analogies do not serve as a basis, then what does? The only other possible conclusion is that the ground of doubt arises from precisely that which Descartes discovers within the second meditation through the process of doubt itself. In other words, the only authentic ground of doubt would seem to arise on the basis of the *cogito*. For with Descartes we assert that the "I" at ground to that which thinks is beyond doubt insofar as thinking implies really existent being.² It is in the encounter with the thinking subject that we may then turn to the waking world and inquire directly: *Is this world as real as I know myself to be?* Here we obtain a firm basis for doubt.

But still more, our doubt of the waking world arises not out of insight into the essence of our own being, but rather out of logical certitude. In the first place, inherent in the *cogito* is recognition that the statement, "I do not exist", asserts a contradiction. For if I do not exist, then I cannot claim to be non-existent. Therefore the ego must necessarily exist and the assertion must be false. Secondly, and more interesting, we can affirm the "real" existence of the *cogito* regardless of whether or not we actually know what it means to be.³ In other words, without knowing what existence is, we feel confident in our affirmation of the real existence of the thinking consciousness. It is then upon this basis that we doubt the existence of the waking world. For unlike consciousness wherein we recognize a definite and necessary relationship of existence, we do not immediately recognize any such relationship between the waking world as such and its existence as such.⁴ As it turns out, rather than serving as a basis for the existence of the waking world, the *cogito* would seem to serve as a very sure basis for doubt.

What then does Cartesian doubt achieve? At bottom, we might say that Descartes never clearly recognized the authentic ground of doubt although it must be admitted that he unwittingly assumes it throughout. The *cogito* serves as the only firm basis for doubt of the existence of the waking world, but the story is not yet over, for it may well be the case that the *cogito* likewise serves as the basis and ground for the existence of the waking world. In conclusion, doubt of the existence of the waking world is at bottom based first (1) upon the subject's certitude of his or her own existence despite ignorance of what this it actually means to be and second (2) on the basis of the fact that no necessary connection between the sensible waking world and its existence *has yet* to be clearly established by anyone. From all this we may conclude that until the latter second connection has been established, the question of the existence of the waking world must inevitably remain open and in doubt.

Endnotes

¹ By “analogy” I mean Descartes’ use of an example of deception within experience, which is then related, by analogy, to the possible deception of the sensible world. As to the analogies: the first (*I Med.*, sec. 1-2), “Already some years ago I have noticed how many false things I, going into my youth, had admitted as true”; the second (*I Med.*, sec. 3-4), “Yet I have found that these senses sometimes deceive me”; and the third (*I Med.*, sec. 5-6), “on other occasions I have also been deluded in dreams by similar cogitations”. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Ed. & Tr. George Heffernan, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1990), pp. 86-91. Mathematical certainty and the so-called evil genius will not play any part in the discussion here. The reason for this has to do with the fact that doubt of self-evidence does not arise within the *Meditations* in entirely the same way as that of the above-mentioned analogies—nor does it impress itself upon the waking sensible world.

² Here the question of the precise nature and essence of the ego is quite immaterial to our argument.

³ And this in fact points to a much deeper problematic inherent in the Cartesian analysis which Kant rightly identifies, although he inevitably veils its true source on account of his transcendental idealism.

⁴ This could mean either of two things: (1) that no such relationship exists or (2) that a relationship exists but remains as yet concealed to knowledge (unclear and indistinct). Given the latter case, the task would then be to interrogate the relationship and ground of this seeming distinction more thoroughly.