Philosophy of Consciousness

Descartes

Lecture Reading Material for Topic Three
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Chapter 1

Descartes

We begin the task of clarifying the idea of a direct knowledge of consciousness with an investigation of Descartes’ *Meditations.* That is not to suggest that no other philosopher before Descartes is worthy of a similar investigation. In particular, Plato’s Myth of the Cave already presents an archetype of the philosophical task of escaping from a normal state of consciousness in order to attain to true philosophical knowledge. However, with Descartes, the parallels with what we have been saying become even more direct and definite. Firstly, Descartes does not explain himself in terms of an allegory, but, in presenting his method of doubt, provides an explicit series of steps aimed at putting his normal state of belief in the world out of play (as we are doing by stopping thinking). Secondly, in having secured what he believes to be a doubt-free foundation, Descartes attempts to find his way forward by means of *clear and distinct perceptions.* Similarly, in stopping thought, my direct ‘looking’ and ‘seeing’ into experience become the central means of apprehending truth. Thirdly, in attempting to doubt everything, Descartes arrives at what he considered to be the fundamental and indubitable truth of his own existence. As we will show, this indubitability is evidence that Descartes too had encountered a direct knowledge of consciousness, which he then (less successfully) attempted to bring to language.

1.1 The Method of Doubt

To make these parallels clear, we shall consider Descartes’ *Meditations* in the light of a pure (thought-free) state of consciousness. Our interest is in Descartes’ attempt to find an unshakeable ground of knowledge within himself. It is this *intent* that is significant. Rather than present and defend a position, Descartes sets about dismantling his own position, and in so doing provides a
demonstration by example that he invites his reader to follow. He does not want to prove anything (yet). He wants to indicate something he has discovered on the basis of his own meditative philosophical enquiry. His method of doubt is not an intellectual method, i.e. something to be merely read and considered in thought. He means that you and I also set about suspending any belief that we can in any way doubt. This is an experiment one has to perform, otherwise one does not discover whether there is indubitable knowledge (one merely acquires an opinion).

So, our intent is to listen to Descartes and not assume that we already know where he is going. To begin, he famously casts doubt on the existence of the world as it is known through the senses:

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 nor so distinct as does all this. But in thinking over this I remind myself that 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 (Descartes, 1996, p. 2).

Here Descartes is questioning our belief that the things and events of our waking life have their foundation in an external world that exists independently of our experiencing those events. The point is that I cannot be certain that such a world exists in itself. Descartes is astonished by this – it has hit him with the force of a realisation – one that causes him to actually suspend his belief in the existence of the external world. Similarly, if we are to fully understand Descartes, we too must suspend belief in the external world, not as an intellectual ‘as if’ exercise, but as a foundational shift in our understanding of experience, one where we too have the sense that it indeed could be true that I dream while I am awake.

Descartes now goes down another level. For even if I consider the independent existence of the external world to be an illusion, I can still hold certain propositions to be true that I can demonstrate independently of my senses. For example, I can think of an ideal Euclidean triangle, and on the basis of its formal definition, I can conclude that its angles must necessarily add up to 180°. In comprehending the triangle it seems I also comprehend the necessity of the relation between the angles. But even here, Descartes (the mathematician) want us to doubt:
And, besides, as I sometimes imagine that others deceive themselves in the things which they think they know best, how do I know that I am not deceived every time that I add two and three, or count the sides of a square, or judge of things yet simpler, if anything simpler can be imagined (Descartes, 1996, p. 3)?

If we take Descartes seriously (and we are), then this passage should make us pause. His idea is that it is at least possible that an all powerful God (or an evil demon, or myself, unbeknown to myself) could manipulate my basic processes of judgment so that I am deceived even in those matters that lie entirely within the realm of my immediate experience. We shall clarify what lies in this realm as we continue – for now it at least includes intuitions of idealities such as number and geometrical shape. The crucial question for us is how far Descartes intended this doubt to reach.

On one reading, it could be that I am mistaken that two and three make five because I am asserting this on the basis of a demonstration that I incorrectly remember. Similarly, it could be that I incorrectly count the sides of a square because my memory errs concerning the number of sides I have already counted. In both these cases, the doubt concerns the veracity of any thought I may have concerning the past, or of any judgment I make whose truth relies on something that is not immediately present to me (‘now’).

On a second reading, it could be that my very judgment ‘now,’ concerning a state of affairs that I perceive ‘now’ could be in error, such as my placing a group of two counters on a table next to a group of three counters and my perceiving (‘seeing’) that there are, in front of me now, a group of two and a group of three and that their unity is a group of six. Or I could draw a square on the same table, and while looking at the square ‘now’ I could assert that the square has five sides, on the basis that I perceive ‘now’ that the square has five sides. In neither case have I counted, I have perceived how many elements there are.

The second doubt goes further than the first in allowing that my immediate perceptual judgments (my ‘seeings’) concerning the content of my experience (as experience) could be in error. If doubt goes this far then we descend into unintelligibility and absurdity, for we must then doubt that the words we use have any stable reference. For example, I may assert (and believe) that I see a table in front of me when really I am having a visual experience of a chair. Such a case could be understood (externally) as the misapplication of the word table when I ‘should’ have been using the word chair. However, if I also believe that the chair I am seeing is a table, e.g. I believe it has a hard, flat surface with four corners, even though my visual experience is of cushions, arms and
so on, then my experience of a coherent world has ‘come apart.’

Such a ‘coming apart’ is indeed possible, as the neurological evidence attests.\textsuperscript{1} Is this what Descartes intended? For if we doubt experience at this level, how are we to make any intelligible assertion concerning a ground of certain knowledge? Surely, every assertion has the form of a relation between the language used to make the assertion and the matter that is asserted? And if all truth is founded on this relation, i.e. on our certainty of a correspondence between statements and the state of affairs they assert, and we now doubt this (inner) certainty of correspondence, then how can any knowledge statement be immune from doubt?

\subsection{1.2 The Circularity of Descartes’ Doubt}

At this point, if we consider the logical forms of Descartes’ arguments, certain contradictions begin to emerge. Firstly, as is well-known, he \textit{did} conclude that we have one item of indubitable knowledge, namely the knowledge that “I am, I exist”:

So that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come
to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each
time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it (Descartes, 1996, p. 5).

Secondly, he was clear that “I ought no less carefully to withhold my assent from matters which are not entirely certain and indubitable than from those which appear to me manifestly to be false” (Descartes, 1996, p. 1). From this we can infer that Descartes’ doubts concerning the validity of addition and counting should also cause him (and us) to suspend such mathematical knowledge. But, according to our earlier considerations, if I doubt that two and three make five, then I should also doubt that “I am, I exist,” i.e. because I could be deceived in my use and understanding of language. And if I can be deceived in my use and understanding of language, then no linguistic proposition can be certain. Descartes himself realises this point part-way through the third meditation:

I am constrained to confess that it is easy to Him [God], if He wishes it, to cause me
to err, even in matters in which I believe myself to have the best evidence. And, on
the other hand, always when I direct my attention to things which I believe myself to
perceive very clearly, I am so persuaded of their truth that I let myself break out into

\textsuperscript{1}For instance, consider Oliver Sacks’ famous case of the man who mistook his wife for a hat (Sacks, 1985).
words such as these: Let who will deceive me, He can never cause me to be nothing while I think that I am, or some day cause it to be true to say that I have never been, it being true now to say that I am, or that two and three make more or less than five, or any such thing in which I see a manifest contradiction. And, certainly, since I have no reason to believe that there is a God who is a deceiver, and as I have not yet satisfied myself that there is a God at all, the reason for doubt which depends on this opinion alone is very slight, and so to speak metaphysical. But in order to be able altogether to remove it, I must inquire whether there is a God as soon as the occasion presents itself; and if I find that there is a God, I must also inquire whether He may be a deceiver; for without a knowledge of these two truths I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything [my emphasis] (Descartes, 1996, pp. 11–12).

Here Descartes creates a situation from which he cannot escape. For if nothing is certain until he can establish whether there is a God (and whether He is a deceiver), then how can such an establishment take place? The (short) answer is, for Descartes, it cannot. This is because he already assumes the only ground of certainty is God Himself and the arguments he uses to show that God exists rely on the certainty he attaches to his clear and distinct perceptions of the truth of particular propositions. But these clear and distinct perceptions only gain their certainty (for Descartes) if God exists and He is not a deceiver. So Descartes is caught in a circularity of doubt from which no proof or certainty can emerge.

1.3 Descartes’ Discovery

At this point, given Descartes’ method of doubt is logically unfit to provide the kind of foundation for faith and the sciences that he envisaged, we should ask what Descartes’ actually achieved. If we stay with the logical form of his project, then we must conclude his theistic dualism is of little interest, aside from having motivated so many others to correct him. But our concern is not with the outer form of Cartesianism but with the inner significance of Descartes’ project. The question is: did he escape from his normal everyday state of consciousness, and if so, what did he discover?

Descartes’ doubt, in the first instance, enabled him to realise that his belief in the existence of the external world is, in fact, a belief, and not a certainly given truth. Although this belief is a part of the fabric of experience, the method of doubt created a separation in Descartes between a
pure subject of experience and the world existing ‘in’ and ‘for’ that subject. Descartes then sees it is possible (thinkable) that we dream while we are awake. In this way he discovers a world of immanent subjective experience. He also discovers that this entire world is immune from his preliminary doubting:

Finally, I am the same who feels, that is to say, who perceives certain things, as by the organs of sense, since in truth I see light, I hear noise, I feel heat. But it will be said that these phenomena are false and that I am dreaming. Let it be so; still it is at least quite certain that it seems to me that I see light, that I hear noise and that I feel heat. That cannot be false; properly speaking it is what is in me called feeling; and used in this precise sense that is no other thing than thinking [my emphasis] (Descartes, 1996, p. 7).

As Husserl is later to recognise, Descartes has uncovered the world of pure phenomena, i.e. purified of their reference to an independently existent external world. He is in the presence of ‘what is,’ of pure experience ‘now,’ of that which ‘cannot be false.’ Insofar as he does not add anything to this state (i.e. by thinking about it), he has left his normal everyday consciousness behind. Descartes also recognises that in order to maintain this state he must not revert back towards his former beliefs. Instead he must only trust to what he can clearly and distinctly perceive:

I am certain that I am a thing which thinks; but do I not then likewise know what is requisite to render me certain of a truth? Certainly in this first knowledge there is nothing that assures me of its truth, excepting the clear and distinct perception of that which I state, which would not indeed suffice to assure me that what I say is true, if it could ever happen that a thing which I conceived so clearly and distinctly could be false; and accordingly it seems to me that already I can establish as a general rule that all things which I perceive very clearly and very distinctly are true [my emphasis] (Descartes, 1996, p. 11).

Here we must be careful to distinguish between Descartes’ understanding of ‘thinking’ and our own. For Descartes, ‘thinking’ encompasses all possible acts of consciousness (including perceiving), whereas, for us, thinking and perceiving are entirely distinct ways of understanding. This is not just a terminological difference. As we shall see, it was Descartes’ failure to understand this distinction that caused him to leave the world of pure phenomena behind and attempt to prove
the existence of God. Nevertheless, I shall take it that Descartes’ method of doubt has enabled him to enter into a state of pure ‘looking’ and ‘seeing’ which he then describes in the language of clear and distinct perceptions. It is on this basis that he ‘sees’ that no pure phenomenon of experience can be false. It is also on this basis that he realises what he takes to be the fundamental and indubitable truth: “I am, I exist.” It is in this realisation he first encounters what we have called a direct knowledge of consciousness.

The salient feature here is that Descartes held this truth of his own existence above all others (even above the truth of mathematical propositions) although he was unable to explain exactly why. On reflection he conceded that God could deceive him, but still wanted to protest: “Let who will deceive me, He can never cause me to be nothing while I think that I am.” Here Descartes is on the cusp of realising that in the moment I am conscious without reflection, there is a direct knowledge of being conscious, of existing, that does not permit of doubt because it is not the knowledge of the truth of a proposition, it is a direct knowledge of being now. It is this direct (pre-propositional) knowledge of consciousness that cannot be doubted. In saying “I am, I exist” Descartes is only attempting to bring this knowledge to language.

However, as we know, language introduces doubt. Perhaps I am misled in my understanding of the meanings of the words I use. And who or what am ‘I’? Perhaps my world has ‘come apart’ in some way that I do not realise, so that my self-understandings, memories and perceptions are unstable and confused. If so, is the proposition “I am, I exist” still certain? Descartes, in the end, and under the pressure of such doubts, had to admit he could not be certain. And yet, he remained split, unsettled and unconvinced.

The way out of this impasse is to recognise that even if my experience has become incoherent, it is still the experience that it is. ‘I’ cannot be deceived about unreflected experience because ‘I’ am not asserting anything concerning that experience. In not reflecting, ‘I’ am not separate from that experience. There is the experience, and the experience is conscious (otherwise there would be no experience). In this pure (thought-free) state, consciousness reveals (shows) to itself whatever it is that is being experienced ‘now.’ In this ‘showing to itself’ there is no room for doubt, for there is no separation of an ‘I’ that could reflect and doubt.

To be conscious without thought (reflection) is to know what it is to be conscious directly and immediately. One simply has to ‘see’ this is true, not as a timeless proposition, but by continual verification ‘now’ and ‘now’ and ‘now.’ Such knowledge is immune from doubt because it is beyond doubt. Once thought is relinquished, it is simply not possible to doubt what is revealed,
because to doubt one needs to think. So, the indubitability of pure experience is a simple tautology. And yet there remains (in each moment) the immediate accessibility of the knowledge of what it is to be conscious. This knowledge is utterly subjective – it cannot be verified by anyone else – and it cannot be known by the ‘I’ of everyday consciousness. Everyday consciousness is a ‘consciousness of.’ It ‘knows’ that there is a cat in the garden, that ‘my’ foot is itching, and so on. But it cannot encounter a direct knowledge of consciousness, it can only think about such knowledge.

1.4 Perception and Reflection

Descartes’ fundamental oversight was not seeing the distinction between his clear and distinct perceptions and his (after the fact) reflections on experience. It is the thought-free state of pure or direct perception that remains immune from doubt. Any subsequent attempt to reflect on what is perceived – to conceive or think it – breaks the immediacy of the direct perception and allows the reflection to frame the experience according to the pre-understandings that structure the reflecting mind.

It should be noted here that in distinguishing between perception and reflection we are not saying that concepts have no role to play in perception. To address such a question would involve us in another kind of enquiry. Instead, we are looking directly into experience and giving names to the distinctions we find. For us, the state of pure or direct perception is what remains when the otherwise continuous stream of inner thought and reflection is left behind. It is in this state that I first clearly and distinctly perceive the experiential world. Descartes does not fully understand the state because he already possessed a theory of perception:

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\text{... when looking from a window and saying I see men who pass in the street, I really do not see them, but infer that what I see is men... And yet what do I see from the window but hats and coats which may cover automatic machines? Yet I judge these to be men. And similarly solely by the faculty of judgment which rests in my mind, I comprehend that which I believed I saw with my eyes (Descartes, 1996, p. 9).}
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Here Descartes abandons his immediate experience and begins to theorise. If we stay with experience itself, I do see men wearing hats and coats and I am aware of no act of (conscious)

\[\text{\footnote{Such as McDowell’s investigation of mind and world (McDowell, 1994).}}\]
judgment. Therefore I can quite correctly say that I see men walking in the street. In contrast, I have to leave the state of pure perception and deliberately reflect on my experience before I can separate out the visual experience of hats and coats and conceive the possibility that there may be something other than men occupying those items.

Of course, the question is how can I say that I perceive men wearing hats and coats (rather than, say, nameless blobs of colour moving) and at the same time assert that perception precedes language? The brief answer (which will be elaborated later) is that my perception of there being men in the street contains an implicit expectation of how the perception will unfold. For example, should a hat tilt backwards I expect to see a face. This does not require me to form an assertion of what is happening in order to understand what is happening. It is enough that events broadly unfold according to my (perceptual) expectations. This is not an ungrounded theory. It is my experience that I still perceive the world without thinking ‘there is a cat,’ ‘there is a table,’ and so on.

So Descartes, despite discovering a state of pure consciousness on the basis of his method of doubt, is almost immediately misled by a pre-existing understanding of perception as something separable from ‘mere’ sensory experience. Once he allows this theory to overrule his actual perception, the purity of his original insight is corrupted. He then begins his descent back into the world of his pre-existing opinions and beliefs, from which he unsuccessfully attempts to prove the existence of God.

Nevertheless, Descartes made a tremendous discovery. He found the lumen naturale, the natural light, which makes manifest the clear and distinct perception of truth:

I cannot doubt that which the natural light causes me to believe to be true, as, for example, it has shown me that I am from the fact that I doubt, or other facts of the same kind (Descartes, 1996, p. 13).

For Descartes, the first and unassailable truth is the truth of the light itself. His expression “I am, I exist,” his certainty that this cannot be doubted, is his realisation that consciousness ‘is now.’ What he fails to explicitly recognise is the extraordinary nature of this realisation and the state he has attained in order to reach it. As a result, rather than scrupulously maintain a state of pure perception via the complete suspension of all his former beliefs, he falls back into a state of thoughtful reflection and identifies the truth of his realisation with its assertability, and hence

\footnote{cf. Husserl’s account of object perception (Husserl, 1997).}
with language. Once he reflects, Descartes can doubt his realisation, as any realisation can be doubted, because he can doubt his own use of language, and even his sanity. Now he needs God to underwrite his knowledge, because only if God is no deceiver can he be sure that his reflections are reflections of the truth. Nevertheless, and despite reasoning in this way, Descartes still attempts to prove that God exists on the basis of his clear and distinct perception of the truth of certain propositions. His instincts say that he sees the truth, even though his conscious reason has concluded otherwise.

1.5 The Problem of Conceptualisation

From the perspective we are taking here, Descartes is an initiator. He sets in motion the foundational inspiration of Western scientific culture: the idea that truth can be discovered on the basis of one’s own experience (rather than on the basis of received authority). More than that, in his method of doubt, Descartes attempts to clarify the very ground of truth, and discover a fixed point of certainty upon which the entire edifice of Western science can be constructed. This ground is to be revealed through clear and distinct perceptions made manifest in the natural light of reason.

However, when we examine Descartes’ actual philosophy, it becomes clear that the truth claims he makes on the basis of his clear and distinct perceptions do not possess the kind of certainty that he hoped for. This is because, in practice, Descartes was unable to distinguish between his clear and distinct perceptions of truths revealed in direct experience, and certain basic beliefs that so coloured his experience that he mistook them for perceptions of the truth. As an example, we need only remember his attempt to prove the existence of God:

There is no doubt that those [ideas] which represent to me substances are something more, and contain so to speak more objective reality within them [that is to say, by representation participate in a higher degree of being or perfection] than those that simply represent modes or accidents; and that idea again by which I understand a supreme God, eternal, infinite, [immutable], omniscient, omnipotent, and Creator of all things which are outside of Himself, has certainly more objective reality in itself than those ideas by which finite substances are represented [my emphasis] (Descartes, 1996, pp. 13–14).

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4This identification is understandable, given we have to wait for the 20th century philosophy of Heidegger before the distinction between truth and assertability is made explicit (Heidegger, 2002).
Here the philosopher who previously took such pains to establish a single basic truth (I am, I exist) finds there is ‘no doubt’ that there is more ‘objective reality’ in ideas that represent ‘substances’ than in ideas which represent ‘modes or accidents.’ He fails to investigate the provenance of these concepts, and now freely asserts that all the premises of his argument are ‘manifest by natural light.’

Nevertheless, by recognising the parallels between Descartes’ method of doubt and our own investigation of consciousness, we can see that he was on the right track. He made the breakthrough into the domain of pure consciousness but was unable to distinguish the underlying essential structures of this domain from his pre-existing understandings. Consequently, he was unable to adequately conceptualise what he had discovered. The method of doubt allowed him through the door, so to speak, but once inside Descartes began to ‘read into’ his experience pre-existing conceptual distinctions that were not directly informed by that experience, but rather by the tradition in which Descartes was educated.

This is the problem of conceptualisation. To enter a state of pure unreflective perception is one thing – one has the immediate experience, it is what it is, it cannot be false. However, as a philosopher, it is not enough simply to remain within the truth of my immediate experience. In order to speak of experience, I must bring my perceptions to language, and that means bringing them under objective, publicly understandable concepts. It is this procedure that is fraught with the possibility of error. For I continuously interpret my experience according to a certain framework of understanding that, in the first place, I acquired from the culture within which I grew to maturity. And it is not as if I could do without this framework of understanding – for without the framework I cannot make myself comprehensible.

What is needed is to bring my immediate experience to concepts in such a way that those concepts reflect the experience itself and not what I already believe that experience to be. This is not as difficult as it may first appear. For we already possess a natural ability to form concepts. How else did we, as children, acquire the concept of a dog, or a chair, or a table? It is not as if we had the nature of concept formation explained to us beforehand. We quite naturally learnt to...

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5That is not to say that my perception of a snake in this moment, cannot turn into a perception of a stick in a later moment. Once I perceive the stick, I re-evaluate my previous experience and take it to have been an illusion. In making that re-evaluation, I now consider my first perception to have falsely presented the objective (intersubjectively shared) world. Nevertheless, the initial experience, as an immediate experience, was still an experience of perceiving a snake, and, as such, was true in itself – i.e. without reference to an external reality outside of my immediate perceptual experience.
bring our perceptual experience under the requisite concepts. However, a child has an important advantage over the adult, in that (initially) the child lacks high-level pre-conceptions concerning what it is they are experiencing. They do not think about what they are doing, they simply ‘look and see’ what the various objects have in common that belong to the particular concept class that they are learning. In contrast, we, as reflecting adults, especially as philosophically educated adults, encounter the domain of direct experience already primed with an understanding of what it is that we experience. It is this understanding that interferes with and blocks our natural concept forming abilities.

So, the primary issue is not how to form adequate concepts of experience, but how to keep our existing pre-conceptions concerning the meaning and structure of experience out of play. If we can do that then our natural ability to form new concepts on the basis of pure observation is free to operate. Descartes doubted only to the point of realising that he could not doubt his immediate experience. And he recognised that the signature of this realisation was his clear and distinct perception of its truth. But he was unable to maintain his pure perception of immediate experience. Instead, he was misled by feelings of certainty concerning the truth of propositions that he was unable to ground in immediate experience.

Ironically, Descartes entertained the idea that there could be a deceiver working against him to subvert the truth, only to reject this on the basis of an argument that deceptively purported to prove there is a God who would not allow Descartes to be so deceived. In fact, Descartes is deceived by himself, by his own feeling of self-certainty, and by his lack of self-knowledge concerning the pre-conceptions he brought to bear on his own experience.
References


