Philosophy of Consciousness

Topic 3
Descartes’ Meditations
The Method of Doubt: Is It a Dream?

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).
The Method of Doubt: Deception

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)?

• Does my memory deceive me?
• Do my perceptions deceive me?
• Does language deceive me?
I am, I exist.

I suppose, then, that all the things that I see are false; I persuade myself that nothing has ever existed of all that my fallacious memory represents to me. I consider that I possess no senses; I imagine that body, figure, extension, movement and place are but the fictions of my mind. What, then, can be esteemed as true? Perhaps nothing at all, unless that there is nothing in the world that is certain.

But how can I know there is not something different from those things that I have just considered, of which one cannot have the slightest doubt? Is there not some God, or some other being by whatever name we call it, who puts these reflections into my mind? That is not necessary, for is it not possible that I am capable of producing them myself? I myself, am I not at least something? But I have already denied that I had senses and body. Yet I hesitate, for what follows from that? Am I so dependent on body and senses that I cannot exist without these? But I was persuaded that there was nothing in all the world, that there was no heaven, no earth, that there were no minds, nor any bodies: was I not then likewise persuaded that I did not exist? Not at all; of a surety I myself did exist since I persuaded myself of something [or merely because I thought of something]. But there is some deceiver or other, very powerful and very cunning, who ever employs his ingenuity in deceiving me. Then without doubt I exist also if he deceives me, and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I think that I am something. 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.
God as the Ground of Certainty

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 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).
The Circularity of Descartes’ Doubt

• Nothing is certain [for Descartes] unless he can establish that there is a God and that He is not a deceiver
• How can he achieve this?
  • By means of clear and distinct perceptions
• But how can Descartes be sure his clear and distinct perceptions are not deceiving him?
  • Only if there is a God and He is not a deceiver
• So how can Descartes establish that there is a God and that He is not a deceiver?
  • By means of clear and distinct perceptions
• But how can Descartes be sure his clear and distinct perceptions are not deceiving him?
  • Only if there is a God and He is not a deceiver
Descartes’ Discovery

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).

• Descartes has uncovered the world of pure phenomena, i.e. purified of their reference to an independently existing external world. He is in the presence of ‘what is’ of pure experience ‘now,’ of that which ‘cannot be false.’
The Truth of Perception

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).

• Remember: Descartes considers feeling and perception to be forms of thinking – this is more akin to our notion of cognition i.e. being conscious-of something
Direct Knowledge of Consciousness

• Despite the lack of final certainty in Descartes’ position, he continues on the basis that he has demonstrated a single and indubitable truth: ‘I am, I exist’.

• While he allows the ‘slight,’ ‘metaphysical’ possibility that he could be deceived, he believes he has answered this by proving that God exists and that He is not a deceiver.
  • And yet it is easy to demonstrate that Descartes’ ‘proof’ of the existence of God is not immune from doubt.

• Isn’t Descartes correct anyway? Is it not the case that I do know without doubt that ‘I am, I exist’?
  • How can I know this as a certainty, given that I could be deceived about the meanings of the words I am using?
  • Is it possible there is an immediate knowledge of existing (of being conscious) that precedes language?
Immediate Experience

• What Descartes’ discovered in doubting everything that could be doubted was that he could not doubt the being of the one who doubts
  • Hence he exclaims: ‘Let who will deceive me, He can never cause me to be nothing while I think that I am.’
• But Descartes identifies the certainty of being with the thought that ‘I am.’
  • And I can doubt the validity of every thought, for I may be deceived about the language I am using – for to what am I referring when I say ‘I’? And what does it mean that I ‘am’?
• The knowledge that Descartes (and you and I) have that cannot be doubted is not the proposition or thought that ‘I am’ but the immediate experience of being now – this is what makes the thought that ‘I am’ true
Who Am I?

• So what does immediate experience show us? Does it reveal an ‘I’ in the sense of the being of a thinker?
• No (test this). In the immediacy of experience now there is no thought and no thinker, there is just the experience itself, whatever it is, the table appearing ‘there,’ the sound of the wind in the trees, the sensation in ‘my’ hand, and so on…
• These pure phenomena of experience are as they appear – their being is their appearing – there is no ‘other world’
• Within that pure ‘flowing’ of immediate experience there is no independent ‘I’ that knows itself as somehow distinct from the experience
• But the experience *itself* is conscious – otherwise it is not an experience at all – perhaps we could say that in being conscious, the experience knows itself?
The Phenomena of Experience

• Descartes shows he has encountered this place of immediate experience when he says:
  • 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*;
  • Why is that the phenomena of immediate experience cannot be false?
    • Because they are immediate, i.e. there is no mediation of reflection or thought that posits the experience as being a certain way ‘in reality’
    • However deceived I may be concerning my experience in relation to some external or objective world – it is still the experience that it is, e.g. my seeing a snake is still an experience of seeing a snake even when ‘in reality’ there is a stick in front of me.
The Thinker

• So Descartes did encounter something he could not doubt – his immediate experience (consciousness) now.
• But he was unable to distinguish between the being of experience and the being of the thinker that reflects on experience and puts it into language.
• This thinker attempts to abstract itself from immediate experience in order to know it as something that can be thought about (instead of being it).
• In apprehending the certainty of the being of experience (consciousness), the thinker exclaims ‘I am, I exist’.
• But the thinker is no more than the thought ‘I am, I exist’ – something that emerges and disappears again, while consciousness endures – allowing the thought its little time in the sun.
Perception and Reflection

• Put another way, Descartes was not able to draw a clear distinction between (direct or immediate) perception and (indirect or mediate) reflection

• For example:
  ... 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).

• How did Descartes obtain this idea that there is a faculty of judgment which rests in my mind that infers I see men on the basis of actually seeing hats and coats?
Descartes’ Theory of Perception

- Can I have a ‘clear and distinct perception’ that I ‘see’ hats and coats and then ‘infer’ that they are men?
- If I doubt everything that can be doubted then I can also doubt I am seeing hats and coats, so this is not a matter of doubt but of inquiry into immediate experience.
- If I ‘look’ into immediate perceptual experience, can I distinguish such a division between what my eyes see and what my mind judges?
- No. As far as immediate experience is concerned, my perceptions are indivisible. In the case that Descartes describes I would naturally perceive people walking by in the street, and could only artificially (by reflecting) bring myself to think that what I am really seeing are hats and coats.
- Clearly Descartes has a theory of perception – that it is divisible into ‘mere’ sensory experience (of hats and coats) and intellectual judgments (that there are men underneath) – a theory he takes to be obviously true.
  - It is on the basis of prior reflection that he believes his theory to be true, which he then misinterprets as clear and distinct perception...
Bringing Experience to Language

• It is one thing to stop thinking and encounter pure experience, it is another to bring pure experience to language.

• Bringing experience to language means bringing it 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 – as Descartes did with his theory of perception and again in his ‘proof’ that God exists.

• 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 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.
The Problem of Pre-Conceptions

• 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 certain (17th century) pre-conceptions that he was unable to ground in immediate experience.

• The question is: What are our (21st century) pre-conceptions?