Descartes on certainty

DESCARTES, CERTAINTY, AND KNOWLEDGE (MEDITATION I)

Infallibilism is the view that knowledge must be certain, and that this certainty is provided by infallibility. This can seem plausible because if I know that p, then I can’t be mistaken about p, because no one can know what is false. And since knowledge is justified, if I know that p, I am justified in believing that p. And so if I am justified in believing that p, p must be true. This makes knowledge very difficult, since it is rare that our evidence rules out the possibility of error. A consequence of infallibilism, then, is that it opens the door to scepticism.

Is Descartes an infallibilist? He begins Meditation I by declaring that he has known for a long time that in order to establish anything firm and constant in the sciences (p. 95),

he would have to start from the very foundations of all knowledge. He does not need to reject as false everything he thinks he knows, but he needs to avoid believing things that are not entirely certain and indubitable’ (p. 95).

So Descartes begins by understanding knowledge in terms of certainty. To establish certainty, he tests his beliefs by doubt. Doubt, then, is the opposite of certainty. If we can doubt a belief, then it is not certain, and so it is not knowledge.

Objections

Descartes' understanding of knowledge, certainty and the need for doubt have been strongly criticized. Many philosophers have argued that Descartes sets the standard for knowledge too high. It seems that Descartes thinks that knowledge must be indubitable; we must be unable to doubt it. If that is true, then the belief must be, in some way, infallible. However, this only seems to be true at the beginning of the Meditations. By Meditation III, Descartes argues that he can know whatever is ‘clear and distinct’. This is not indubitable nor infallible, because we can make mistakes, but what is clear and distinct is certain if we are careful. What he means by ‘cannot doubt’ is that, when I consider p carefully, I am unable not to believe it. Using my best, most careful judgment, I judge that it is impossible that it should be false: the proposition ‘is necessarily true each time it is expressed by me, or conceived in my mind’. We can say that in order for my belief that p to be justified, I must be certain of it in this way. And by this, Descartes means I cannot doubt it.

But philosophers have also criticized Descartes’ idea of certainty. It appears to be psychological: he is after beliefs that be is certain of. And this is not the same thing as a belief being certain. After all, we can make mistakes, and think something is certain (we can be certain of it), when it is not certain. But, Descartes responds, this is where the Method of doubt comes in. Because we have the habit of jumping to conclusions, only the prudent can distinguish what is genuinely certain from that which merely seems so.
Certainty, as Descartes understands it, is not a feeling; it involves a type of rational insight. He later argues that only claims that are 'clear and distinct' can be certain (see below), and these properties are established by what is immediately apparent to the mind. In Meditation III, he says

things which I see clearly cannot be other than as I conceive them. (p. 115)

So certainty is tested by reason; things cannot be otherwise. Descartes thinks that certainty will establish truth, because what cannot be otherwise must be true. To show that something is certain in this way is to prove it must be true, so it is true.

THE COGITO (MEDITATION II) AND CLEAR AND DISTINCT IDEAS (MEDITATION III)

Descartes argues there is one thing he can be completely sure of, even if the evil demon exists: that he thinks, and from this, that he exists. He cannot doubt that he thinks, because doubting is a kind of thinking. If the demon were to make him doubt that he is thinking, that would only show that he is. Equally, he cannot doubt that he exists: if he were to doubt that he exists, that would prove he does exist – as something that thinks. The cogito, ‘I think’, is Descartes’ first certainty, the first stepping stone to knowledge. When he reflects on why he is certain of the cogito, he says

In this first knowledge, there is nothing except a clear and distinct perception of what I affirm (p. 113).

He goes on to argue for the general principle that at the time be considers it, a thought which is clear and distinct he must believe to be true, he cannot doubt it. To be clear, an idea must be

open and present to the attending mind;

to be distinct, it must not only be clear, but precise and separated from other ideas, so that it

plainly contains in itself nothing other than what is clear. (Principles I.45)

Descartes extends the certainty of the cogito to all thought and sensory experience – even if I cannot know the truth of what I think or experience, I can know that I think or am experiencing this. Just as I cannot doubt that I am thinking, I cannot doubt that I am thinking about the body, or experiencing a sensation of light.

At this point, Descartes has only argued that we can know a clear and distinct idea to be true at the time we hold it in mind. However, he goes on, we cannot think of that one thing all the time so as to keep perceiving it clearly. When our attention is turned away from it, we can no longer be certain of it, even though we remember that we were certain of it. This is because we can go wrong, we can think we clearly and distinctly perceived some idea when we did not. In order to be certain that what we once thought was clear and distinct really is certain, we need to know that we are not being deceived by an evil demon. Descartes sets out to show that we can know this, because we can know that God exists, and would not allow an evil demon to deceive us, nor would God deceive us.
THE CARTESIAN CIRCLE

In trying to prove the existence of God, Descartes will, of course, have to rely on what he can clearly and distinctly perceive, because this is the only way he can know anything. But Descartes also needs to prove that God exists for us to know what we clearly and distinctly perceived. This leads to a famous objection: that he uses the existence of God to establish his doctrine of clear and distinct ideas, and that he uses his doctrine of clear and distinct ideas to establish the existence of God. It seems that he says

1. I am certain that God exists only because I am certain of whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive, and yet
2. I am certain of whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive only because I am certain that God exists.

But Descartes, in his replies to objections, rejects this reading. I can be certain of what I clearly and distinctly perceive without knowing that God exists, but only at the time that I perceive it. God’s existence adds a general certainty that what I clearly and distinctly perceive is true:

When I said that we can know nothing for certain until we are aware that God exists, I expressly declared that I was speaking of knowledge of those conclusions that can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments by which we deduced them.

In other words, there are two interpretations of the phrase in italics, and one interpretation is used in (1) and the second in (2). According to the first interpretation, while I am clearly and distinctly perceiving some particular proposition, then I am certain of that proposition. But because of the possibility of the evil demon, I lose this certainty as soon as I turn my attention away from it, as I may be deceived that I did perceive it clearly and distinctly. So I don’t yet know that proposition is true unless I’m actually attending to it.

In his proofs of the existence of God, Descartes uses our clear and distinct understanding of the idea of God, held in our mind throughout the proof. Having proved God’s existence, he can now claim (the second interpretation, in 2 above) he is certain that whatever he has clearly and distinctly perceived, he can be certain of. And he is certain of this general principle, linking clearness and distinctness to truth, because God exists, and is no deceiver.

The difficulty facing Descartes is whether he is entitled to claim that he can be certain of what he clearly and distinctly perceives, even at the time he perceives it, while it is still possible that he is being deceived by a demon. His response is that it is simply our nature to assent to such clear and distinct thoughts — we cannot but believe them, because things which I see clearly cannot be other than as I conceive them (p. 115).

GOD IS NOT A DECEIVER

God, then, underwrites our certainty in clear and distinct ideas when we are not considering them. Descartes’ claim to know that God is not a deceiver rests on his idea of God. First, he used the idea of God to prove that God exists in both the trademark and ontological arguments. Second, in those proofs, we saw it was an essential part of the
idea of God that God is perfect. God, therefore, would not deceive us, as this would be an imperfection.

What does Descartes mean by this? It is important to note that Descartes explicitly denies that his invocation of God means we must be infallible. Rather, Descartes’ claim is that God

has permitted no falsity in my opinion which he has not also given me some faculty capable of correcting (p. 158).

The Method of doubt, and the central importance of clear and distinct ideas, is the best we can do in correcting our tendency to have false beliefs. By God’s not being a deceiver, then, we are only assured that once we have done all we can to avoid error, and are judging on the basis of clear and distinct ideas, then we will not go wrong.

God is essential to establishing the existence of my body and material objects in general. But can we trust our senses to deliver the truth about material objects? Descartes recommends caution here. These judgements – about what properties material objects have, and about particular perceptions – ‘are very obscure and confused’ (158). We can and do make mistakes about what we are perceiving. But, again, we can know that God has given us the means to correct mistakes and avoid error. If, therefore, we take care and only assent to clear and distinct ideas,

I may conclude with assurance that I have within me the means of knowing these things with certainty. (p. 158)