

## **Descartes, the cogito and clear and distinct ideas**

### **THE COGITO**

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.

In this argument, Descartes lays the foundations for his rationalism. 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’ (113). He goes on to argue for the general principle that at the time he considers it, a thought which is clear and distinct he must believe to be true, he cannot doubt it.

The status of the cogito as the first certainty, and how he has arrived at it, also lays the foundations for Descartes’ dualism.

### **Do ‘I’ exist?**

What does it mean to say ‘I exist’ or ‘I think’? We will see below that Descartes claims that ‘I’ am a thinking thing, a substance. Many philosophers have thought he means to show that I am the same thing from one moment in time to the next. The same ‘I’ persists from one thought to another. But how can Descartes be certain of this? Philosophers have objected that, with the hypothesis of the evil demon, Descartes cannot know that there is anything that persists in time which is a unity. There is only a succession of thoughts. When this objection was presented to him, Descartes’ response, in the appendix to the Meditations called ‘Objections and Replies’, is to say that thoughts logically require a thinker. This claim, he thinks, is clear and distinct, so we can be certain of it.

That depends what he means by a ‘thinker’. If he means a subject that persists over time, then this is not obvious. It doesn’t seem to be contradictory to deny it. Perhaps the evil demon is simply creating a series of false thoughts, among which is the thought that a thinker, a substance, an ‘I’, exists. How could Descartes know otherwise?

But by ‘thinker’, Descartes may only mean a momentary subject of a thought: there can’t be a thought unless something thinks it. Descartes is not arguing here that this thinker persists in time. But then there is a question whether this is enough for Descartes’ later arguments. If I don’t exist over time, only at a moment, it is difficult to see how I could ever know more than the thoughts ‘I exist’ and ‘I think’. As soon as Descartes says that to be a thinker is to doubt, will, imagine, and so on, he assumes we can say these activities belong to the same subject, that he (the same thinker) does all this. But that

means he is taking it for granted that thinkers persist in time. But we have argued that Descartes can't know this.

## **CLEAR AND DISTINCT IDEAS**

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). We saw that the cogito is the first clear and distinct idea. When Descartes reflects on why he is certain of it, he says 'In this first knowledge, there is nothing except a clear and distinct perception of what I affirm' (113). He goes on to argue that at the time we consider it, a thought which is clear and distinct we must believe to be true, we cannot doubt it.

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' (115).