

# Descartes' Skepticism in the First Meditation

Yanzhe Wang

Queens University

Kingston, Ontario, Canada

**Abstract.** This paper offers a critical examination of the methodological skepticism presented by Descartes in his First Meditations. It analyzes two primary arguments for doubting all prior beliefs: the unreliability of sensory perception and the necessity of establishing a foundation for certain knowledge. Subsequently, the paper challenges Descartes' radical skepticism, arguing that no conclusion derived through his method of doubt can be empirically verified. Furthermore, the article examines potential counterarguments concerning the certainty of mathematical truths and offers critical responses. The analysis demonstrates that, due to the inherent limitations of human perception and the inevitable influence of prior beliefs on the reasoning process, Descartes' project ultimately fails to establish a verifiable foundation of knowledge.

**Keywords:** Descartes, skepticism, First Meditation, methodological doubt, epistemology, foundationalism, sensory perception.

## 1. Introduction: The Necessity of Cartesian Skepticism

This paper explores the reasons and necessity of questioning existing beliefs from Descartes' perspective and offers a rebuttal. The necessity and reasons for Descartes' 'hyperbolic skepticism' in *Meditations I* are described. Descartes argued that only by questioning all previous beliefs can one arrive at a solid foundation of knowledge because one cannot trust any of one's perceptions (Descartes 146). This radical doubt is what distinguishes his method from more moderate forms of skepticism (Williams 65). Secondly, I will present a rebuttal to Descartes' skepticism of his prior beliefs. Descartes' foundation of knowledge cannot be proven to be true or false. Subsequently, I will propose a possible rebuttal that Descartes may have made, arguing that there is solid and correct knowledge in the world. Finally, I will refute Descartes' argument that people cannot have correct knowledge of things about the outside world and that they cannot come to correct conclusions by thinking.

## 2. The Two Pillars of Descartes' Doubt

Descartes questioned all of his previous beliefs for two reasons. Firstly, he believed that our sensory perceptions are deceptive, so all external knowledge and beliefs gained through our senses could be incorrect. This epistemological crisis is central to understanding his methodological doubt (Cottingham 32). Secondly, he believed that truth could only be found by questioning everything that could be questioned, or what he called 'the need for certain knowledge.' First, Descartes believed that any knowledge acquired through sensory perception, whether directly or indirectly, is deceptive. He argued that our senses can deceive us, as when the silo in the distance was initially mistaken for a lighthouse (Descartes 145). This example illustrates the fallibility of sense perception, a theme explored in depth by early modern philosophers (Popkin 45). Additionally, Descartes

posited the possibility that an all-powerful, evil demon could manipulate our perceptions, causing us to believe false things (Descartes 146). The evil demon hypothesis represents the most extreme form of his skepticism (Frankfurt 78). Thus, Descartes raises doubts about the nature of reality, questioning our perception of the world and suggesting the possibility that we may be living in a dream world (Descartes 145). This challenges the accuracy of our sensory perceptions, as they may not be reliable indicators of reality. The second reason Descartes insists on eliminating all the previous beliefs is that he believed that pushing everything before belief was necessary to determine what was truly right. This is because a person's ideas are built upon their childhood ideas, and if those are incorrect, then all subsequent ideas will also be incorrect. This analogy can be compared to building a house; if the foundation is distorted, then the entire building will be distorted. The architectural metaphor for knowledge is a recurring theme in Descartes' works (Gaukroger 112). If one is going to go after what is the right thing to do, Descartes suggests that "I would have to seriously purge out all the insights that I have historically taken for granted in my lifetime and start again from the ground up" (Descartes 146). Thus, he aims to know the true thing in this world by doubting all his previous beliefs.

Descartes believed that it is immensely important for people to reject their previous ideas for two main reasons. Firstly, people cannot build up the right ideas without overturning their previous beliefs. Secondly, to recognize things around them correctly and think rationally, individuals must be willing to set aside their preconceived beliefs. Only by doing so can one construct a completely accurate structure of thought. First, Descartes believed that people's previous ideas were based on falsehoods, such as deceiving one's sensory perceptions or being deceived by an all-powerful evil demon, which means that people were not living in reality (Descartes 146). Therefore, people's present ideas are necessarily false because they have been built upon previous false ideas. To develop a proper understanding, it is essential to have a solid foundation of accurate concepts. Thus, it is necessary to relinquish any preconceived notions that may hinder the acquisition of accurate concepts.

Secondly, Descartes argued that situations where people believe things from childhood that have taken them a decade or more to solidify have caused them to think with unconscious preconceptions. These preconceptions can continue to influence people and lead to false perceptions. As Descartes wrote in Meditation One: "My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief" (Descartes 146). The power of habitual thinking is a significant obstacle to achieving certainty (Broughton 93). If we do not eliminate the limitations imposed on us by previous concepts, we will continue to affirm previous misconceptions out of habit, and we will never be able to perceive things in the outside world correctly or objectively or to think rationally. He stated, "I would like, by turning my will in exactly the opposite direction, to pretend for the moment that these former views are entirely false and imaginary" (Descartes 146). Descartes advocated the method of doubt, which involves temporarily rejecting all previously held beliefs to perceive things correctly. This approach allows for the removal of the distorting influence of previously held ideas and constructs a structure of correct beliefs. Descartes believed that by questioning enough things, one could identify the right thing to use as a basis for a structure of right ideas.

### **3. The First Rebuttal: The Unverifiable Foundation**

I disagree with the notion that Descartes doubted all previous beliefs since any conclusions that arise from Descartes' doubts about all previous beliefs cannot be proven to be true. According to Descartes, if all previous exposure to external things could be false and deceived by an evil demon causing us to make bad judgments, then we have to doubt all previous beliefs (Descartes 146). Descartes doubted his previously held beliefs because he could not confirm them. He suspected that we could be living in a dream world, be deceived by demons, and not be able to trust our perceptions (Descartes 145-146). Although his reasons for doubting were valid, he was unable to achieve his purpose of building a solid foundation of knowledge of what exists by doubting everything that came before. This problem highlights what some commentators call the "Cartesian Circle" (Doney 125). Descartes was unable to establish a firm basis of knowledge by questioning everything that preceded him because he could not verify any of the conclusions he reached through his doubts. He doubted previous beliefs because they could not be verified in the three possibilities he presented, being deceived by a devil, having an unreliable perception, and living in a dream. However, any conclusions he drew could not be authenticated in those possibilities. Therefore, even if he doubted all previous beliefs and arrived at what he believed to be correct knowledge, that knowledge could never be verified as true.

### **4. A Cartesian Counterargument: The Certainty of Mathematical Truths**

Descartes may argue that not all knowledge from the external world is unverifiable, and therefore knowledge built upon reliable external knowledge through reflection is often accurate. For instance, arithmetic and mathematics deal only with the simplest and most direct things, and they contain something certain and indubitable, regardless of whether they exist in nature or not. "Regardless of whether they exist in nature or not, contain something certain and indubitable" (Descartes 145). It is based on simple and general principles, and even if we are in a dream, or we have a false perception, our dreams can only mimic what exists in reality. Therefore, this knowledge is real and applicable in the dream world, making it correct. The certainty of mathematical truths is a key element in Descartes' epistemology (Curley 58). By building upon this infallible knowledge, we can draw accurate conclusions no matter whether we are living in reality or not. And these conclusions utilize knowledge built on being correct from the most general, simple things in the world, and don't need any validation. Because they are correct, built on correct knowledge that is derived from basic things.

### **5. Critiquing the Mathematical Certainty Argument**

Descartes' possible rebuttal contains two unconvincing points. Firstly, he claimed that correct and reliable knowledge could be obtained by observing the most common and easily understood things in the world, but this is not always the case. Secondly, even if this reliable knowledge did exist, one could not necessarily draw correct conclusions based on it because the correctness of one's thinking process cannot be proven. Firstly, Descartes argued that perception of the outside world is unreliable due to the possibility of being deceived by evil demons (Descartes 146).

Therefore, knowledge based on observations of general and ordinary things is also unreliable. While he believes that there must be something true in this world, for example, Descartes uses arithmetic and geometry to illustrate his point when he states, "Whether we are in a dream or reality, we cannot deny that a square has four sides" (Descartes 145). It should be noted that the square's definition as a geometric shape with four sides is based on human perception, which may not always be reliable. Therefore, this knowledge cannot be considered entirely trustworthy, as humans can be deceived by their perceptions or even by devils. The reliability of simple natures has been questioned by many critics of Descartes (Wilson 145). Thus, Descartes' claim that there is verifiable knowledge in the world may not be valid, and there may be no solid foundation of knowledge in the world. Secondly, if we assume that there is knowledge in the world that contains objective truth, such as arithmetic or geometry, those who try to reach correct conclusions can only base their thinking on these truths. However, as Descartes pointed out when one thinks, one inevitably applies previous patterns of thought that are based on previous beliefs (Descartes 146). Even with the correct knowledge, wrong conclusions can still be reached due to flawed thinking. Prior beliefs inevitably influence people's current thinking. Descartes argued that questioning all previous beliefs and retaining only the correct ones can lead to knowledge that contains truth. However, a new question arises: how can individuals determine the correctness of their prior beliefs? For instance, some people may question whether a square truly has four sides. However, it is possible that the concept of sides never existed in the first place and was fictionalized by devils to deceive humans. Even if individuals acknowledge that they are being deceived by the devil, they may be so accustomed to their current way of thinking that they are unable to adopt a new perspective after rejecting their prior beliefs.

## **6. Conclusion: The Unverifiable Nature of Cartesian Certainty**

In summary, Descartes believed that it was necessary to question all pre-existing beliefs because they could potentially be incorrect. He argued that people could not always trust their perceptions and that misconceptions could prevent them from building a solid and correct foundation of knowledge through thought (Descartes 145-146). Therefore, he suggested that people should contemplate the most general and ordinary truths in the world to establish a reliable foundation of knowledge. However, Descartes was unable to establish the validity of what is now accepted as true knowledge, as our external perceptions cannot be fully trusted. Additionally, Descartes was unable to prove the accuracy of people's thought processes, as they are influenced by their pre-existing beliefs, which may or may not be correct (Descartes 146). Therefore, all the conclusions that Descartes drew by contemplating what he believed to be the correct knowledge that exists in the world are unprovable.

## **References**

- Bailey, Andrew, and Robert M. Martin. *First Philosophy*. Second Edition, Broadview Press, 2015.
- Broughton, Janet. *Descartes's Method of Doubt*. Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Cottingham, John. *Descartes*. Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- Curley, E. M. *Descartes Against the Skeptics*. Harvard University Press, 1978.

Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by John Cottingham, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Doney, Willis, editor. *Descartes: A Collection of Critical Essays*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1968.

Frankfurt, Harry G. *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes's Meditations*. Bobbs-Merrill, 1970.

Gaukroger, Stephen. *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

Popkin, Richard H. *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*. Revised edition, Harper & Row, 1968.

Williams, Bernard. *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*. Penguin Books, 1978.

Wilson, Margaret Dauler. *Descartes*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.