

THE SERIOUSNESS OF DOUBT & OUR NATURAL TRUST IN THE SENSES IN THE FIRST MEDITATION¹

David Macarthur

Introduction

In the Synopsis to the *Meditations*² Descartes assures us that ‘extensive doubt... provid[es] the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses’ (12). And in the Fifth Replies Descartes adds that it is essential to a proper understanding of the *Meditations* that ‘the entire testimony of the senses should be regarded as uncertain and even as false’ (350). But to deny our ordinary trust in the senses on the grounds of such ‘hyperbolic’ or ‘metaphysical’ doubts as that one might be dreaming or the victim of an evil demon is, as Descartes himself puts it, quite mad: ‘no sane person has ever seriously doubted that there really is a world and that human beings have bodies’ (16). We seem, then, to be confronted with a dilemma: on the one hand, the skepticism about the senses that we find in the First Meditation must be taken seriously. On the other hand, it is, in some sense, a sham. How, then, are we to understand these doubts?

Several influential commentators have opted for the second horn of the dilemma, arguing that the doubts are not really genuine. The skepticism to which the meditator commits himself has been variously described as ‘innocuously thin and undisruptive’ (Frankfurt, 1970, 16), ‘merely momentary’ (Rosenthal, 1986, 430), ‘merely hypothetical’ (Newman, 1995, 2.2), and a skepticism that ‘leave[s] us, provisionally, with a shadow of a doubt or unease’ (Wilson, 1978, 26). The general idea seems to be that despite the fact that we recognize that the skeptical hypotheses are incompatible with our ordinary grounds for belief they do not lead us to a genuine or stable suspension of judgment. In favour of this view is Descartes’ explicit aim not

to engender skepticism so much as to refute it (550). And opting for the second horn of the dilemma is the preferred view for those who question the general importance of skepticism in Descartes' thought. Many recent commentators have argued that Descartes is more concerned to establish the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of the new mathematical physics than he is to answer the skeptic.³

But, despite its initial plausibility, there are significant problems with this line. Firstly, the meditator's remarks seem to favour the first horn of the dilemma. He claims, for instance, that his doubts are not 'flippant or ill-considered' but 'based on powerful and well thought-out reasons' (21-2). Secondly, and more importantly, the doubts of the First Meditation are, as Descartes says, essential to his larger aim of bringing about in the reader of the *Meditations*, a significant cognitive transformation from an initial sense-based theory of knowledge and concept formation to a rationalist and innatist view in which the cognitive powers of the intellect, underwritten by God, take pride of place.⁴ It is hard to see how anything less than fully serious doubt could achieve that purpose, especially when one considers that some of the doubts about the role of senses in our cognitive lives survive the reconstructive work of the Sixth Meditation.

In the present paper I shall argue that the real problem here is the very idea that there is a dilemma that compels us to choose sides. We can hold *both* that the meditator's doubts are fully serious, *and* that they leave the perspective of common sense largely unscathed. The key to dissolving the dilemma is to see that the meditator observes a distinction between two levels of epistemic standards: the very demanding standards appropriate to certainty, understood in a rather technical sense of that term; and the commonplace standards appropriate to reasonable belief. The significance of this levels distinction has not been widely appreciated but it has important

consequences both for how we are to understand the skepticism about the senses that is at issue and for appreciating the extent to which Descartes acknowledges and retains our natural trust in the senses.

I aim to show that the meditator's skepticism about the senses specifically concerns the possibility of sensory certainties, and is quite serious. It is intended to lead one to a stable change of mind about what is most certain. But a skepticism about sense-based certainty leaves the matter of whether experience provides a reliable basis for belief untouched by reasonable doubt. Since the meditator's doubts presuppose very demanding standards they have no bearing on our assessments from within the common sense perspective. I defend this view by arguing that the methodological 'withdrawal of assent' from perceptual beliefs is a mere pretence that is compatible with continued endorsement. Despite the seriousness with which the method of doubt is pursued there is an important sense in which the meditator never doubts the basic deliverances of his senses. This helps explain the practical insulation of perceptual beliefs from skepticism. With one minor qualification, the meditator retains his natural trust in the senses throughout - although Descartes' rhetoric sometimes suggests otherwise.

Note that I shall be exploring the **skepticism about the senses** as we find it in the First Meditation. This paper does not purport to discuss all of the skeptical doubts of the First Meditation e.g. skepticism about mathematical truths, God's existence and reason. Instead I shall focus solely upon the ways in which the meditator's doubts bear on his perceptual beliefs. The rationale for this restriction is twofold: 1) in the first place Descartes describes the general aim of the skeptical doubts of the First Meditation in terms of 'freeing us from our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses' (12). I am

specifically concerned to qualify this ambition and argue that Descartes retains throughout his preconceived trust in the reliability of the senses; and 2) the Meditations has long been thought to provide the grounds for a radical form of external world skepticism which not only denies us knowledge, but also any reason to believe, in the existence of an external world. My discussion of Descartes' perceptual doubts is intended to show just how distant any such skepticism is from Descartes' own thoughts and intentions.

Skepticism & the Quest for Certainty

It is familiar that the meditator begins by assuming, without argument, that the stability and longevity of scientific knowledge requires a strong foundationalist epistemology, one whose foundations must be 'completely certain and indubitable'.⁵ This provides the motivation for his project, which he describes in these terms:

Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those that are patently false. (18)

Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false, and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain or, if nothing else, until I recognize for certain that there is no certainty. (24)

This project anticipates the eventual discovery of truths, epitomised by the 'cogito', which are indubitable so long as they are clearly and distinctly attended to. Such

certainties will ultimately repudiate the ancient skeptical challenge to reason and reasonable belief.⁶ But our present question concerns the nature of the skepticism about the senses that we find in the First Meditation. Although it is a commonplace that the meditator is engaged in a foundationalist quest for complete certainty, what is less commonly recognized is that this quest shapes the scope of the skepticism at issue.

The most important point to notice is that in both of these statements of the project the meditator explicitly claims that the goal is to discover certainty understood in an especially strong sense. Whatever ‘holding back assent’ or ‘setting aside’ opinions comes to, it is conditional upon adopting complete certainty as his aim. What the meditator means by ‘certain’ is a conception of complete or absolute certainty, a state of conviction in the truth of a claim which cannot possibly be undermined by further or better reflection. In the Second Replies Descartes writes that what is at issue is ‘a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty’ (145). Although certainty, in this sense, does not imply truth, Descartes seems to assume that it is our best guide to truth.

Though it is by no means fully explicit in the *Meditations*, Descartes draws distinctions between three kinds of certainty: metaphysical certainty, psychological certainty and moral certainty.⁷ The first of these is the relevant notion for understanding the meditator’s project of discovering what is ‘completely certain and indubitable’. The ultimate goal of his inquiries is metaphysical certainty, something which is stably certain in the sense that it cannot *ever* be called into doubt, whether it is carefully attended to or not. A closely related notion is psychological certainty. This is a matter of the indubitability of something that is clearly and distinctly present to

one's mind e.g. that two plus three are equal to five. Psychological certainty is a necessary but insufficient condition of metaphysical certainty (cf. Curley, 1993, 21). The distinction between metaphysical and psychological certainty depends on Descartes' view that there is an important instability that attends the question of whether something is indubitable. What we cannot help assenting to as true under conditions of clear and distinct attention does not count as metaphysically certain if, when reflecting on it retrospectively and less attentively, we can imagine circumstances in which it is false. Without a proof of God's existence and goodness, we can suppose, under conditions of relative inattention, that our psychological certainties might be false (35-6, 69-70). With such a proof they become stable metaphysical certainties or what Descartes also terms *scientia* (141, 513). I shall return to the topic of moral certainty in due course.

The test for complete certainty that the meditator employs in the First Meditation, asking whether his former beliefs are indubitable or not, does not distinguish between metaphysical and psychological certainty. For that, the proof of God's existence is required. But this proof does not take place until the Third Meditation. And a reasonably extended discussion of the difference between psychological and metaphysical certainty is postponed until the Fifth Meditation. I will hereafter use the term 'complete certain' to refer to the meditator's conception of certainty, even though at this early stage in his reflections this notion has yet to be further clarified in order to distinguish metaphysical from psychological certainty. From the meditator's remarks in the First Meditation we know that indubitability is a necessary condition of the kind of certainty he seeks, under conditions of clear and distinct attention. So a belief will *not* count as certain, in this special sense, if it can be

supposed to be false under some imaginable circumstance, no matter how unlikely or bizarre.

The meditator's method is to show that what he (and, by implication, the reader) currently believes to be completely certain is, in fact, not completely certain, and so is unsuitable to satisfy the required epistemic task. Indeed, as many commentators have pointed out, Descartes' primary purpose is to lead the meditator to see that the senses are not the source of what is completely certain, or 'most true' (18). In order that the meditator's 'mind may be led away from the senses' (12), Descartes has the meditator subject his 'preconceived opinions' about what is completely certain to the method of doubt. If he can find *any* ground for doubting what he considers completely certain, however far-fetched or remote the doubts, then whatever else may be the case, he is not completely certain. The grounds he discovers are the dream and evil demon doubts.

It is very important to stress that the meditator's doubts are, as he puts it, not 'flippant' or 'ill-considered' (21). And, furthermore, the meditator's doubts must be understood relative to his explicit policy of discovering doubts that are based on 'powerful and well thought-out reasons' (21-2). What is at issue is not doubt per se, but *serious* and *reasonable* doubt. We are not to understand the meditator's doubts as mere feelings of irresolution or lacks of conviction, but as doubts for which there are good reasons relative to his quest. Of course, this allows for the possibility of cognitive progress. What seem to the meditator to be good reasons in the First Meditation might come to seem less than good later.

It has been seldom appreciated that the quest for complete certainty narrows the scope of the skepticism that the meditator considers to a *skepticism about the possibility of complete certainty*. His skepticism is carefully directed only at what the

meditator is, so he believes, completely certain of. Prior to this meditation, for example, he is of the opinion that some of his perceptual beliefs are completely certain. Of his core perceptual beliefs about ordinary objects under normal conditions of observation, he says that 'doubt is quite impossible' (18). But in this he turns out to be wrong: since doubt *is* possible in this kind of case, he is deprived of his sensory certitudes. To his amazement even the most favourable perceptual beliefs are not completely certain.

This doubt is completely serious. Although the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation will eventually be answered, they do not leave everything as it was previously. Descartes intends the doubts to allow for a re-conception of our certainties, especially the 'basic principles' of our folk epistemology concerning the relation between the senses and certainty. Descartes intends that we will come to see that we are more certain of God and the nature and contents of our own minds than we are of the existence of the external world (16). Nonetheless, by the Sixth Meditation the meditator has advanced to a position, at least if his arguments concerning God and the real distinction between mind and body are successful, from which he can recover some of his preconceived and formerly rejected sensory certainties e.g. that there is an external world, that humans have bodies, and so on. It is important to note, however, that the sensory certainties he eventually recovers are not the same as those that he pre-reflectively held prior to the doubts of the First Meditation. Indeed, there remains some question about what kind of certainty finally attaches to his beliefs about the external world. It does not seem to be the kind of metaphysical certainty that attaches to mathematical propositions, for example.

In any case, what must undergo transformation are the meditator's pre-reflective beliefs about what is completely certain and what is more certain than what.

Doubts about any of these prior beliefs are fully serious since, in some cases at least, they are intended to lead to a genuine change of view that is part of the enlightened position held by Descartes. Some commentators have raised questions about whether the meditator's doubts are really serious on the ground that they are entered into deliberately only as part of a method of inquiry. This has led some to speak of the doubts as 'merely hypothetical' (Newman, 1995, 2.2). But there is no need to deny seriousness on this basis. That a doubt is methodological in the sense of being a means to an end is perfectly compatible with its being a *genuine* doubt.

Another reason for questioning the seriousness of the doubts is the apparent lack of conceptual space for the concept of *deciding* to doubt. If I could acquire a doubt by simply willing it, then I could doubt something irrespective of its truth or falsity and I could know that I did so. Since doubt is logically tied to truth in so far as it is an attitude of withholding assent as to the truth of a proposition, mere wilful doubt without regard to truth or falsity is a kind of irrationality. The problems here mirror those with respect to deciding to believe (cf. Williams, 1973, ch. 9).

Fortunately we need not suppose that the meditator does decide to doubt. What he decides to do is to engage in an inquiry whose goal is complete certainty. The doubts are not wilful but naturally arise out of a consideration of this objective. Since indubitability is a test for complete certainty, he must subject his former beliefs to the test, namely, whether they can be doubted in any way at all. The existence of *any* possibility of error no matter how trivial, far-fetched or improbable, is all that the meditator requires to eliminate a candidate for the rightful title of certain in the technical sense he employs. *Any* merely possible doubt becomes a reasonable doubt in the special context of a quest for complete certainty.⁸ That is why the meditator can rightly say that it is *reason* and not a whim or desire that leads him to withhold assent,

in some (yet to be determined) sense, from any opinions, even reasonable or justified ones, so long as they are in the slightest way doubtful.

Two Levels of Epistemic Standards

Let us consider the sensory doubts and the way they are shaped by the quest for complete certainty in more detail. Even though the meditator has been deceived in his sensory beliefs about objects that are very small (e.g. fleas) or far distant (e.g. towers) and so forth, nevertheless sensory beliefs about near and familiar objects under normal observation conditions - which I shall call *core* perceptual (or sensory) beliefs - are the first example of something he accepts as completely certain or beyond doubt.

In raising the question ‘Am I now dreaming?’ the meditator is amazed by the fact that ‘there are never any *sure* signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep’ (my emphasis; 19). Note the emphasis on being sure. The fact that there are no *sure* (or completely certain) signs to distinguish dreaming from waking must not be equated with the lack of any signs at all. The meditator never denies that it is more reasonable than not for him to believe he is awake on the basis of signs that are reasonably taken to distinguish dreaming from waking. That is, the doubt that the meditator raises concerns whether he is sure or completely certain that he is awake and not dreaming; and he concludes that he is not so sure or certain as he had thought. But there is no suggestion that he seriously doubts the reasonableness, all things considered, of believing that he is awake on the basis of his current experience.

The implication of this line is that the meditator does not regard the dream doubt as a reasonable doubt about his core perceptual beliefs. That he does not

understand the dream doubt in this more radical way is also made clear by his Sixth Meditation claim that what distinguishes dreams and genuine experience is the greater coherence of the latter:

For now I notice that there is a vast difference between [being asleep and being awake], in that dreams are never linked by memory with all the other actions of life as waking experiences are. (89)

This response is obviously not intended as a reply to a radical dream doubt about one's present perceptual beliefs, since it is so patently inadequate (cf. Carriero, 1987, 224-5). A radical skeptic could easily reply, as Hobbes in fact did, that the question concerns how we can distinguish veridical perception from dreams since one might simply dream that any putative criterion of veridical perception, such as coherence, is satisfied. Descartes' response is quite inadequate if understood as addressing a radical skepticism that raises the question whether any sense-based belief is justified. That ought to lead us to wonder whether this is the best understanding of it.⁹

The evil demon doubt is even more likely to be thought of as far-fetched and ridiculous, the kind of doubt that does not constitute a reason to doubt that experience provides adequate justification to believe that there is an external world. If we leave aside its role in calling into question mathematical and geometrical certainties, its function with respect to the senses is akin to the dream doubt. Although it does not constitute a reasonable doubt about our perceptual beliefs, it does constitute a reasonable doubt about our sensory certainties. It, too, is a skeptical scenario employed to show that the senses are not the source of complete certainty as we had been inclined to think. The meditator's skeptical 'daze', and later, his sense that he has

‘fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool’, can be, in part, explained this way: he is shocked to be disembarrassed of his ‘preconceived opinion’ that ‘whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses’ (18).

The strong suggestion is that radical sensory skepticism is not at issue in the First Meditation. Rather than regard Descartes’ treatment of the dream doubt in the Sixth Meditation as an oversight on Descartes’ part, it is more charitable to understand the meditator as respecting the ordinary distinction between far-fetched doubt and reasonable doubt, and holding that the radical dream and evil demon doubts are too far-fetched to be taken seriously when the question at issue is what we are to believe or not. I shall return to this point and its connection with our common sense perspective later.

For now, it is important to note that in considering the dream doubt, in particular, a reader might be strongly inclined to a more radical skeptical position than the meditator himself adopts. Many philosophers are inclined to think that the dream doubt *does* constitute a reasonable doubt about whether the senses provide adequate justification for our perceptual beliefs. My point is simply that this is not the meditator’s position. He can be understood as adopting the contrary view that any such doubt would be quite unreasonable, and not to be taken seriously on account of the much greater coherence of waking experience.

In distinguishing between the completely certain and the reasonable in this way, the meditator seems committed to a distinction between two levels of epistemic appraisal. Restricting our attention to the perceptual case, we can represent this distinction as follows:

1) Epistemic standards relevant to the evaluation of the reasonableness of holding core perceptual beliefs e.g. the meditator's belief that he is wearing a winter dressing gown or that he is awake;

and

2) Epistemic standards relevant to the evaluation of the certainty of perceptual beliefs e.g. the meditator's 'preconceived opinion' that he is sure (or completely certain) that he can tell the difference between dreaming and being awake.

With this distinction in mind, we can understand the dream doubt as presupposing the epistemic standards relevant to the evaluation of complete certainty. The meditator engages in doubts that lead him to deny his pre-reflective belief that he is completely certain that he can tell whether he is awake. Note that the meditator can do that without doubting whether it remains, for all his doubts, more reasonable than not to believe that he is, in fact, awake.

The Realm of the Reasonable

It is important to see that denying that a belief is completely certain is quite compatible with continued commitment to it on the basis of its reasonableness, all things considered. Although his perceptual belief that he is awake is not completely certain, there is no indication that the meditator understands the dream doubt to actually undermine his commitment to this belief. With regard to the meditator's core

perceptual beliefs this is, I take it, his general attitude. By way of textual support for this claim, consider the following passage:

I shall never get out of the habit of confidently assenting to [my habitual] opinions, so long as I suppose them to be *what they in fact are*, namely *highly probable opinions* - opinions which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful, as has been shown, it is *still more reasonable to believe than to deny*.
(22; my emphasis)

Here the meditator explicitly acknowledges the epistemic standards relevant to the ordinary appraisal of perceptual beliefs: namely, probability and reasonableness. This standard must, of course, be distinguished from the much more demanding standard that is appropriate to beliefs that aspire to complete certainty. It is this very demanding standard that he applies in order to carry out his project. Note, however, that even *after* considering the dream doubt and the possibility that his creator may not be God, and despite the pejorative connotations of 'habit', the meditator continues to endorse his habitual beliefs, including his perceptual beliefs. He does not deny or doubt them. It is simply that, for his purposes, he is not interested in reasonable or probable belief. All that matters is that they are not completely certain, which is not at all the same thing as being uncertain or doubtful in the ordinary senses of these terms.¹⁰

Thus the meditator observes the following distinction between two levels of epistemic appraisal:¹¹

1) Standard 1 (The Reasonable) - appraisal in terms of reasonableness and probability.

2) Standard 2 (The Completely Certain) - appraisal in terms of indubitability.

The difference in these two standards allows conceptual space for a distinction between doubts about complete certainty and doubts about reasonableness, since the epistemic standards relevant to complete certainty are much more stringent and demanding than those that are relevant to reasonableness. It is important not to confuse this distinction between two levels of epistemic evaluation with the quite different idea of epistemic levels associated with the thought that epistemic attitudes can themselves become the objects of higher-level epistemic attitudes.¹² For example, in the First Meditation there is the distinction between:

i) First-order perceptual beliefs

and

ii) Second-order epistemic beliefs about i).

The meditator takes up a reflective stance towards his prior beliefs and wonders which of them are completely certain or not. As we have seen, the meditator enters his meditation with the second-order epistemic belief that his core perceptual beliefs are completely certain. Notice that we can, in principle, apply the two different levels of epistemic standards to beliefs at the first- *and* second- (and higher) orders. However, our concern is with first-order perceptual beliefs and the fact that we can

subject them to two quite distinct standards or tests: a test for complete certainty; and a test for reasonableness. A belief that failed the test for reasonableness would ipso facto fail the test for complete certainty. But the converse does not hold. It is important to see that the mere fact that a belief fails the test for complete certainty in no way implies that it fails the test for reasonableness.

One might wonder whether there is any real difference between a skepticism about complete certainty and a skepticism about reasonable belief (i.e. radical skepticism) on the following ground: if a belief is not completely certain on the ground that it is possible to imagine a far-fetched scenario in which it is false, then that belief is, at least, *very slightly* doubtful. This is quite correct but it misses the point. Acknowledging that a belief is very slightly doubtful in this sense is not the same as accepting that there is a reasonable or serious doubt about it, all things considered. For example, I can acknowledge that my belief that my father and mother are my biological parents is very slightly doubtful (e.g. perhaps I was switched with someone else at birth) without accepting that this possibility constitutes a reasonable doubt about it. Such slight doubt does not lead one to be, actually, in doubt. Furthermore, one *cannot* simply assume that doubts that are reasonably raised in a context of the meditator's special quest will also constitute reasonable doubts in the context of our more ordinary and mundane inquiries. In order to count a belief as completely certain, the meditator must exclude *every* counter-possibility to its truth. But, of course, it is definitely *not* the case that for a belief to count as reasonable (or more reasonable than not) that one must exclude every possible way it might be false. Reasonable believing involves ruling some possibilities out of consideration as irrelevant or too far-fetched or simply mad.

Pretence of Falsity and Genuine Doubt

A difficulty for the present account concerns how we are to interpret passages in which the meditator does seem to commit himself to radical skepticism, passages that suggest that experience provides inadequate or insufficient reason to believe that the external world exists? For example, in the Synopsis Descartes writes about the 'extensive doubts' of the First Meditation as 'freeing us from our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind might be led away from the senses' (12). The meditator aims at the 'the general demolition of [his] opinions' (18) including, it seems, his perceptual beliefs. And he claims that 'there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised' (21). On the face of it, these remarks seem to suggest that every perceptual belief is subject to a reasonable doubt. But it is important to recall that the meditator is employing doubts in order to test which of his beliefs are completely certain or not. A belief fails the test if he can imagine it to be false under some circumstance, no matter how ridiculous or far-fetched the imagined scenario. A belief such as that I am holding a piece of paper in my hands, in circumstances in which I can see and feel that I am doing so, will thus fail the test even if the only reason to doubt is patently unreasonable by our ordinary standards e.g. that there may be an evil demon producing global hallucinations in me.

The main point is that for a belief to fail the test of complete certainty does not imply that it lacks grounds or justifications that are sufficient for our continued endorsement of it. We need not suppose that the dream or evil demon doubts constitute a reasonable doubt about the *justification* or *truth* of core perceptual beliefs. The meditator never finds good reason to doubt that he is there, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding a piece of paper in his hands. That is, he never finds good reason to doubt that these beliefs are highly probable or more

reasonable than not. What he finds reason to doubt is whether these beliefs are completely certain, something that he was in the habit of believing. That is to say, the meditator, on this reading, only raises a question about the complete certainty of his belief in the existence of the external world. And his conclusion is that this belief is not completely certain since the senses are not capable of providing this kind of reassurance. Yet he never raises the problem of how there can be any reason at all to think that an external world exists on the basis of experience. He simply does not engage the issue of such radical skepticism.

Within the class of beliefs that are not completely certain (i.e. not indubitable) we have the following two categories of belief:

- i) Reasonable beliefs that, despite being ‘very slightly doubtful,’ one continues to endorse e.g. my belief that I am wearing a dressing gown.
- ii) Beliefs that one rejects on the grounds that they are genuinely doubtful or false e.g. my belief that the distant tower is round.

The meditator initially tells us that for the purposes of his quest he will withhold assent from reasonable or probable opinions just as carefully as he does from patently false beliefs in so far as they are not ‘completely certain and indubitable’. This is misleading for it suggests that the meditator ceases to believe these things but, as we later learn, that is not the case. They are, rather, simply ‘set aside’ by *pretending* they are false, an attitude that cannot be equated with actual disbelief or doubt.¹³ To believe that P is to take P to be true, whereas to doubt that P is to be undecided whether or not P; it is to waver or vacillate on the question of the truth of P.¹⁴ If I doubt that P then I

cannot sincerely either affirm or deny it. But to merely *pretend* that P is false is not, therefore, to doubt or deny that P.

We can accept that our perceptual beliefs admit of ‘the slightest doubt’ without ceasing to rationally endorse them for in our everyday critical practices we rule these doubts out of serious consideration as far-fetched and unreasonable. That is why the meditator tells us that he will *pretend*, for the purposes of his project, that his highly probable and reasonable beliefs are false. He will treat them *as if* they are false. We need not think his endorsement of reasonable beliefs is actually suspended; it is merely mentally bracketed ‘for a time’ according to a methodological pretence:

I think it will be a good plan to... deceive myself, by pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary. (22)

It is not clear what it means to knowingly deceive oneself that a belief is false, but it cannot be the same as actually doubting or disbelieving it. For the point of his speaking of ‘deception’ here draws attention to the fact that what is at issue is something he continues to believe. And this is also clear from the availability of such beliefs in the context of action.

The Perspective of Common Sense

Apart from metaphysical and psychological certainty, Descartes also recognizes a category of moral certainty. This is in fact a species of probable belief which is treated ‘as if’ completely certain for practical purposes. In the *Discourse*, Descartes writes that:

in practical life it is sometimes necessary to act upon opinions which one knows to be quite uncertain just as if they were indubitable. (AT VI 31; see also AT VIII A 327.)

He gives as an example the belief of those who have never been to Italy that Rome is a town there. Even though everything speaks in favour of this belief it *could* be that all the testimony and evidence has been fabricated to mislead – though this is something that we would ordinarily suppose was highly unlikely. Similarly, core perceptual beliefs are not completely certain; we could now be dreaming. But they are, for all that, morally certain. They form a reasonable or justifiable basis for action. I want to argue that it is the meditator's acceptance of just such morally certain perceptual beliefs that explains the otherwise puzzling way in which practically necessary beliefs are insulated from the skeptical doubts he raises. Whatever perceptual beliefs are required for action are taken to be immune to this skepticism. He believes himself entitled to peremptorily brush aside the charge that skeptical doubt is incompatible with living:

I know that no danger or error will result from my plan, and that I cannot possibly go too far in my distrustful attitude. This is because the task now in hand does not involve action but merely the acquisition of knowledge. (22)

If it is thought that the meditator raises the problem of radical skepticism then the meditator's insulation of beliefs for the purposes of action seems inconsistent and ad hoc. For to undermine all of one's sensory beliefs, including the belief that one has a body, *is* to threaten the very basis of one's actions.¹⁵ To form an intention to act

presupposes beliefs about one's body and the environment, which are put in question by radical skepticism.

Descartes was fully aware of the philosophical commonplace that since action presupposes belief in the existence of external objects, it is incompatible with radical skepticism on the ground that such skepticism leads one to suspend belief in the existence of the external world. Indeed he appeals to this very point in his criticism of Pyrrhonian skepticism.¹⁶ So it is significant that he explicitly holds that the skepticism at issue in the First Meditation is consistent with practical life. As Descartes puts it to Bourdin: 'the kind of extreme doubt which, as I frequently stressed, is metaphysical and exaggerated [is] in no way to be transferred to practical life'(460). Once again, a charitable interpretation leads us to deny that radical skepticism is the kind of skepticism at issue in the First Meditation.¹⁷

The practical insulation of core perceptual beliefs does not come about by fiat but is simply a consequence of the fact that these beliefs are never called into serious question on the basis of reasonable doubt. What are called into doubt are his pre-reflective certainties and the conclusion he arrives at is that they are less certain than he had previously thought. A virtue of this way of reading the First Meditation is that it avoids the need to suppose that Descartes is confused about the implications of the meditator's doubts for action. Practical life presupposes many and various perceptual beliefs. The meditator may pretend that these beliefs are 'as if' false for theoretical purposes but he does not deny that he is committed to them for practical purposes, and reasonably so. Whatever the meditator means exactly by pretending to himself that his beliefs are false, he takes this attitude to be compatible with some kind of continued endorsement which is available should he be required to *act* for practical purposes.¹⁸ The pretence is *mere* pretence.

The distinction between the theoretical and the practical corresponds to the distinction between the two levels of epistemic standards that the meditator recognizes. His theoretical goal and his doubts are directed at complete certainty. We might reconstruct the meditator's plan as one in which he will, for theoretical purposes, 'hold back' assent to anything that is not completely certain. This standard of assent is, of course, much more demanding than any that we employ in our ordinary practice of acquiring and criticising empirical beliefs.¹⁹ He can be confident that his theoretical doubts will have no bearing on his practical life because they leave the question of the reasonableness (or moral certainty) of his perceptual beliefs completely untouched. As Descartes puts it:

However, we must note the distinction... between actions of life and the investigation of the truth. For when it is a question of organizing our life, it would, of course, be foolish not to trust the senses, and the skeptics who neglected human affairs to the point where friends had to stop them falling off precipices deserved to be laughed at. (351; see also AT VI 31 and AT VIIIA 5.)

In this passage Descartes rehearses an age-old argument against, in all likelihood, the legendary figure of Pyrrho of Elis who is said to have tried to live a life completely without belief and is reputed to have had to rely on the help of his friends to avoid walking into fires or falling off cliff tops etc. Descartes' point is that practical life is insulated from the kind of skeptical doubts considered by the meditator because these doubts simply by-pass the ordinary reasonable and probable beliefs that we require in

order to conduct our practical lives. Assent, although in some way held back, is not withdrawn.

Practical life is not an abandonment of reason and the search for truth. Its primary difference from the meditator's quest lies in its less stringent epistemic standards and in its acknowledgment of our need to trust the senses. The perspective from which Descartes judges Pyrrho foolish is the perspective of common sense, the perspective from which we engage in practical deliberation and decide how we are to act. It is from this same perspective that Descartes characterises radical skepticism as insane:

The great benefit of these arguments is not, in my view, that they prove what they establish - namely that there really is a world and that human beings have bodies and so on - since *no sane person has ever seriously doubted these things*. (15-6; my emphasis).

Descartes follows common sense in thinking that to take radical skepticism seriously would be a form of madness. The reasonableness of doubting is, of course, context-sensitive. To raise the dream and evil demon doubts in an ordinary practical inquiry would be madness. Indeed to raise these doubts in ordinary theoretical inquiries (e.g. in a court of law or in a scientific laboratory) would also, and quite properly, be regarded as mad. Nonetheless, to raise these doubts in the context of the quest for complete certainty is, on the contrary, entirely reasonable since the test for such certainty is indubitability. A recognition of the peculiarity of the epistemic standards that the meditator adopts is clear from his reference to his quest as occurring only 'once in the course of my life' (17). The project to be undertaken is very unusual

and special, something quite out of the ordinary. When the meditator says that he is ‘finally compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised’ (21-2) he does *not* mean that the dreaming doubt or evil demon doubts are reasonable doubts to raise within our ordinary practice of assessing perceptual beliefs. Ordinary standards of reasonableness in the critical formation of beliefs are simply not relevant for the purposes of this project. So it is no criticism of the meditator's doubts that they are, for everyday practical purposes, beside the point, unreasonable or irrelevant. The extraordinary quest for complete certainty is not something one need ever embark upon in the ordinary course of reflection upon one's beliefs in the pursuit of a human life. It follows that the meditator never abandons the view that his core perceptual beliefs are more reasonable than not, notwithstanding a thorough consideration of the dream and evil demon doubts. Although he pretends his perceptual beliefs are false, he remains committed to them, believing, quite reasonably, that he is sitting by a fire, wearing a winter dressing gown, holding a piece of paper in his hands and so on.

Whether we think of Descartes’ account as affirming or denying our natural trust in the senses depends upon how we characterise what this trust consists in. Descartes characterises the meditator's (and, by implication, our) initial and unreflective attitude to the senses in these terms:

Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. (18)

I take it that ‘most true’ is here functioning as a synonym of ‘certain’ in the meditator’s special sense (i.e. complete certainty). This reading is borne out by the

immediately following reference to a class of 'beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses' i.e. core sensory beliefs. Since, as Descartes demonstrates, these beliefs are dubitable after all, we must conclude that they are not completely certain. The moral seems to be that our natural trust in the senses is misguided. But that conclusion is conditional upon accepting the assumption that ordinary folk *do* think that their core sensory beliefs are certain in this strong sense.

Let us distinguish two (not incompatible) versions or dimensions of our natural trust in the senses:

(1) Absolute Trust in the Senses - thinking that core sensory beliefs (i.e. those concerning near and familiar objects under normal conditions of observation) are completely certain (indubitable).

(2) Ordinary Trust in the Senses - thinking that core sensory beliefs are a reliable source of true beliefs.

Descartes assumes that ordinary folk trust the senses absolutely. By making the assumption that our pre-reflective attitude to core sensory beliefs is a matter of indubitable certainty, Descartes makes it easier to appear to be repudiating pre-reflective opinion.²⁰ But it is possible to question Descartes' assumption. If we suppose that our natural trust in the senses is better characterised in terms of ordinary trust (i.e. *moral* certainty), then there need be no adverse consequences in acknowledging that these beliefs fail the test of indubitability. Perhaps Descartes' intended target -- pre-reflective folk and philosophical theories built upon pre-

reflective folk attitudes to the senses -- is not his actual target since fewer people than he thinks absolutely trust the senses. But whether one absolutely trusts the senses or not, it is most important to see that Descartes also holds that ordinary folk have an ordinary trust in the senses. And he shares enough of the perspective of common sense never to repudiate this familiar kind of trust in his own case. The meditator continues to endorse his core perceptual beliefs even whilst considering his skeptical doubts.

Descartes intended the meditations as whole as a kind of therapy to lead the mind away from the senses. And this in several respects, as subsequent Meditations make clear: 1) in contrast to what we ordinarily believe, the senses are not the source of what is 'most true'; 2) nor are secondary qualities such as colour genuinely in, or 'resemble' anything that is genuinely in, material objects;²¹ 3) nor do we derive our basic metaphysical concepts by abstraction from the senses as, say, Aristotelian Schoolmen thought. In the present paper I have only discussed the first aspect of this cognitive transformation. The skeptical doubts serve a crucial role in this gradual transition of a reader presumed to embrace a sense-based epistemology to one that prioritizes the pure intellect as the source of complete certainty and truth.²² It no doubt helps to serve this larger purpose for Descartes to claim to have discovered, within folk epistemology, a misplaced absolute trust in the senses. But we should not overlook the fact that Descartes retains throughout an ordinary trust in the senses. There is no reason to think that he ever questions the ordinary assumption that the senses are, for the most part, an important and trustworthy source of true belief.

Conclusion

We have been considering the skepticism about the senses as we find it in the First Meditation in light of the widespread and influential view that it is a sham and not really serious. I have argued that this view misrepresents the issues in so far as it ignores or overlooks the crucial difference between the strict epistemic standards required for a belief to count as certain (in a particularly demanding sense) and the more lenient epistemic standards required for a belief to count as reasonable, or more reasonable than not, from our common sense perspective. The meditator's far-fetched possibilities of error show that sensory belief cannot be completely certain. But such doubts can properly be dismissed as mad or unreasonable doubts relative to these ordinary epistemic standards. Only in the special context of his quest for complete certainty do these doubts *become* reasonable and fully serious doubts, on the ground that the test for such certainty is indubitability. This is important since only serious doubts could lead one to a lasting change of mind about the source of complete certainty, replacing the senses with the intellect.

Another consequence of this levels distinction is that the meditator can quite properly retain his core perceptual beliefs throughout. Understood relative to his special quest, the skepticism the meditator raises is solely concerned with the possibility of sensory certainties. It is a skepticism directed at a very demanding epistemic status that he presumes to characterise our folk attitude to core perceptual beliefs. But with respect to our common sense perspective, however, no good reason for doubt is discovered and the meditator acknowledges that such beliefs are more reasonable than not even in the face of his 'metaphysical' doubts. Given that action only requires probable or reasonable belief, Descartes is quite correct in his sense that skepticism about the possibility of complete certainty is compatible with action. The meditator's 'withdrawal of assent' is a mere pretence, a dramatic way of focusing his

attention solely upon his goal of complete certainty; but it is not to be taken literally. Hence Descartes' remark that 'no sane person has ever seriously doubted that there really is a world' (15-16).

There is a qualification, however. We may regard the meditator's natural trust in the senses as shaken if Descartes is right in thinking it includes a dimension of absolute trust. But whether he is right about that or not, it is crucial to see that Descartes is not engaged in the wholesale repudiation of ordinary trust in the senses that his rhetoric may sometimes suggest. This is an important corrective to the traditional view that Descartes begins his *Meditations* with a universal doubt that demands a quite unrealistic suspension of belief about all material things.²³ Peirce (1991, 55-6) famously castigated Descartes by remarking that 'We cannot begin with complete doubt... Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt on our hearts'. But this criticism simply overlooks the way his doubts are tailored to the quest for complete certainty and, consequently, the significant sense in which Descartes does not doubt the testimony of his senses. Although Descartes holds serious doubts about the sense-based epistemologies of ordinary folk and Aristotelian Schoolmen, he retains the good sense not to deny that our sensory certitudes, even if not quite as certain as we had thought, are at least much more likely to be true than false, even in spite of the possibility of error.

Bibliography

- Alston, W. 1980. "Levels Confusion in Epistemology," *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).
- Burnyeat, M. 1982. "Idealism & Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw & Berkeley Missed," *Philosophical Review*, 91: 3-40.
- Carriero, J. 1987. "The First Meditation," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 68: 222-48.
- Clarke, D. 1982. *Descartes' Philosophy of Science* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press).
- Cottingham, J. 1992. Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Curley, E. M. 1978. *Descartes Against the Skeptics*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).
- — — 1993. "Certainty: Psychological, Moral, and Metaphysical" in *Essays on the Philosophy & Science of Rene Descartes*, ed. S. Voss (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Descartes, R. 1985/1637-48. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Vols. I-III*, ed. & trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Frankfurt, H. 1970. *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co.)
- Hatfield, G. 1986. "The Senses and the Fleshless Eye: The Meditations as Cognitive Exercises" in Rorty ed. (1986).

- — — 1990. *The Natural and the Normative* (Cambridge: MIT)
- Hume, D. 1975/1748. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding* 3rd edition (Oxford: Clarendon)
- Markie, P. 1992. “The Cogito and Its Importance” in Cottingham ed. (1992)
- Newman, L. 1995 (updated 1999), “Descartes’ Epistemology” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Zalta (Stanford University)
- Peirce, C.S. 1991. *Peirce on Signs* ed. Hoopes, J. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press)
- Rorty, A.O. 1986. Ed. *Essays on Descartes' Meditations* (Berkeley: University of California Press)
- Rosenthal, D.M. 1986. “Will and the Theory of Judgment,” in Rorty ed (1986).
- Sextus Empiricus 1994. *Outlines of Scepticism* trans. J. Barnes, and J. Annas, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Striker, G. 1996. *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Williams, B. 1973. *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- — — 1983. “Descartes' Use of Skepticism” in Burnyeat ed. (1983).
- Williams, M. 1986. “Descartes and the Metaphysics of Doubt” in Rorty ed. (1986).
- Wilson, M. 1978. *Descartes* (London: Routledge)

¹ I'd like to thank two anonymous reviewers of this journal for helpful comments on a previous draft of this paper.

² All references to Descartes' writings are to the following English version of his work: 1986. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* ed. & trans. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., and Murdoch, D. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Unless otherwise stated, numerical references are to AT VII.

³ Carriero (1987, 222) writes: 'Modern Descartes scholars... see the importance of the doubts raised in the First Meditation as lying not so much in the skeptical challenges they present, but rather in the way they advance his scientific program.'

⁴ The initial position of the meditator is cleverly characterised so that it can be taken both as a description of the position of folk epistemology *and* of the neo-Aristotelian Scholastic doctrine that Descartes had been exposed to in his schooling.

⁵ As Michael Williams (1986, 124-5) writes: 'There is no argument anywhere in Descartes' *Meditations* to show that common sense recognizes the conception of justification, embodied in the metaphor of foundations, on which Descartes' definitive doubt depends.' I would only add that the same goes for science. The existence of the meditator's strong foundationalist requirement on scientific knowledge was by no means the prevailing assumption in the 17th century. Descartes' correspondents, Gassendi and Mersenne, both advocated a fallibilist conception of science, which gave up the demand for certain foundations. This makes Descartes' lack of any argument for his assumption all the more surprising.

⁶ There is not the space to pursue this matter in the present context. Suffice it to say that the 'cogito' is supposed to rehabilitate the faculty of reason from a skeptical misconception of reason as unable to provide a sufficient basis for holding any belief whatsoever. Using the method of doubt, Descartes discovers within himself truths about his current thoughts and feelings without any appeal to a criterion of truth. This is of critical importance since ancient skepticism had techniques of argument designed to undermine any such criterion. Of course, the Cartesian response involves an essential and questionable appeal to God to guarantee that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true. Cf. Striker (1982) and Burnyeat (1982).

⁷ For a detailed discussion of these three kinds of certainty in Descartes' work see Curley (1993).

⁸ Contra Curley (1993, 24), it is not that 'Descartes has set the evidential requirements for a valid ground of doubt so low.' It is simply the nature of the quest for absolute certainty that *any* doubt (i.e. any possibility that things may be otherwise) is a reasonable ground for doubt about there being such certainty.

⁹ Of course, there are important dimensions of the dream doubt than I do not consider here. Carriero (1987, 243) argues that the painter's analogy associated with the dream doubt is meant to help forward 'Descartes' overarching concern to win the meditator over to nativism from scholastic abstractionism' by way of what he calls a 'proto-innatist perspective.' The idea is that Descartes means to nudge us towards the possibility that the contents of a dream are innate and so do not presuppose non-deceptive perception.

¹⁰ Descartes misleadingly uses the term 'uncertain' to mean, simply, not certain.

¹¹ Peter Markie (1992) correctly notes that Descartes employs two levels of epistemic appraisal, corresponding to certainty and reasonableness, and that the *First Meditation* doubts are directed at claims to certainty. However, he does not go on to say that that leaves reasonable perceptually-based belief untouched by any reasonable doubt.

¹² William Alston (1980) discusses a different type of 'levels confusion in epistemology' between *P* and *S knows that P* (where *S* is a subject and *P* is an empirical proposition) in relation to what he calls, with due caution, Cartesian skepticism. This is understood as an argument apparently capable of undermining any particular empirical knowledge claim. Alston's main concern is to criticize this argument on the grounds that it conflates *knowing that P* with *knowing that one knows that P*.

¹³ I reject the view of commentators such as Curley (1993, 15) who take the methodological withdrawal of assent to imply disbelief: 'But if we take him at his word, he does not at that stage believe that he has a body, that there is a sky, earth, and so on.'

¹⁴ Note that I am offering these remarks as an explanation, not a definition, of doubt.

¹⁵ Margaret Wilson (1978, 46) claims that 'Descartes was confused about the relation between his sort of 'doubts' and action,' on the surprising grounds that real doubt about the external world has no logical implication for action. This seems to be an oversight. If one doubts one has a body then such doubt is, at least, incompatible with action in any ordinary sense of the term.

¹⁶ The prima facie incompatibility of skepticism and action is an important and familiar criticism of Pyrrhonism, repeated by both Descartes and Hume. However, it seems to me that both philosophers underestimate the resources Pyrrhonists had to respond to this criticism. Sextus (1994), for example, distinguishes two kinds of belief, natural (passively acquired) belief and rational (actively acquired) belief, and he claims that skepticism only requires disowning the latter.

¹⁷ Of course, an interpreter might try to accommodate the practical insulation of belief in the context of radical skepticism by down-playing the seriousness of the spirit in which the problem was originally raised. As we have seen, one might think that the meditator's doubts are merely hypothetical and not genuine doubts. And this might seem consistent with the aim of the *Meditations* as a whole, which is quite clearly not to engender skepticism. But the consequence of questioning the seriousness of the doubt is that it is hard to explain the meditator's explicit reference to them as such (21). And although a merely hypothetical doubt is compatible with action, it is difficult to see how such non-genuine doubts could bring about any genuine cognitive transformation, especially with regard to certainty, which is the primary purpose of the *Meditations*.

¹⁸ When C.S. Peirce (1991, 55) later called Descartes' strategy here 'mere self-deception' he may have been questioning the intelligibility of this attitude of believing that P whilst pretending to oneself that P is false. Peirce's point seems to be that in so far as one is prepared to act as if one believed that P then it is hard to see what sense can be made of the claim that one is *pretending* that P is false.

¹⁹ It even seems unrealistic when one considers complex logical or mathematical propositions. For example, shortly after the publication of the proof of Fermat's last theorem a mathematician might have assented to the proof by appeal to authority despite harbouring some slight doubt about the result, at least until she has satisfied herself of its correctness.

²⁰ One might think our natural trust in the senses is simply a matter of ordinary trust on the grounds that although we do not *normally* doubt our core sensory beliefs, we would not want to say that it is *impossible* to doubt them. Alternatively, the amazement that the skeptical doubts typically engender may be understood as evidence that Descartes is right to think that we have an absolute trust in the senses. The issue is important since it bears on who might be a candidate for the cognitive transformation that Descartes intended the *Meditations* to induce. The general question is: to what extent can we, as readers, identify with the figure of the meditator in order to undergo the same transformative process?

²¹ I do not think Descartes means the meditator to ultimately give up making such judgments as 'That grass is green'. What he expects, if the Meditations has done its job, is that the meditator will no longer suppose that this truth consists in the perceived quality, greenness, being 'in' (or 'resembling' something in) the grass.

²² Hatfield (1990, 59) writes: 'Descartes used skepticism in the context of a set of 'cognitive exercises' intended to better acquaint the reader with his or her intellectual faculties.'

²³ Hume (1975, 12.1: 149) for instance, claims that Descartes 'recommends a universal doubt not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties.' And he goes on to say that, given our nature, such doubt is quite impossible for human beings.