

Chapter 4

Descartes and the Legacy of Ancient Skepticism

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Introduction

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was an intense interest among philosophers, scientists, and theologians in the arguments of ancient skepticism. Both Cicero's *Academica*, the principal source for the Academic skepticism of Arcesilaus and Carneades, and Augustine's *Contra Academicos* had long been available in the Latin West. In 1562 Henri Estienne published a Latin translation of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, a complete exposition from the third century CE of Pyrrhonian skepticism. (For details about the rediscovery of ancient skepticism and its impact on early modern philosophy, see Popkin 1979, Schmitt 1972, Schmitt 1983, Larmore 1998, and Floride 2002.) Descartes himself thought that the skeptical arguments he presents, and claims to refute, in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* are no different from the arguments of the ancient skeptics. In response to Hobbe's complaint that the First Meditation is a rehash of ancient material, Descartes insists that "I was not trying to sell them [the arguments for doubting] as novelties" (2:121; AT 7:171). In a passage from the Second Replies Descartes explains that "Although I had seen many ancient writings by the Academics and the Skeptics on the subject, and was reluctant to reheat and serve this stale cabbage, I could not avoid devoting one whole Meditation to it" (2:94, trans. alt.; AT 7:130). And in a letter of April or May 1638 Descartes writes that "Although the Pyrrhonists reached no certain conclusions from their doubts, it does not follow that no one can." (3:99; AT 2:38–9). He then suggests that the Pyrrhonists' doubts can be used to prove the existence of God. The skeptical arguments of the First Meditation are part of Descartes's method, the method of doubt, for identifying a small set of certainties (including the existence of God) that are to serve as the metaphysical foundations of science. Descartes's suggestion here is that what is new in his method are *not* the skeptical arguments themselves – for they are just the arguments of the ancient skeptics – but the use to which he puts these arguments. And so in *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* Descartes writes in reference to the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation that "I was not the first to discover such doubts: the skeptics have long been harping on this theme" (1:309; AT 8B:36–7).

There is, however, one difference between the arguments of the ancient skeptics and the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation. The ancient skeptics offered arguments

that, in different ways, were designed to generate *reasons for suspending judgment*. That is why Arcesilaus and other early Academics were commonly called “those who suspend judgment about everything” (οἱ περὶ πάντων ἐπέχοντες), and the standard Pyrrhonian skeptical arguments are presented by Sextus Empiricus as “modes of suspension of judgment” (τρόποι τῆς ἐποχῆς), that is, ways for the Pyrrhonian skeptic to bring herself or someone else to suspend judgment. A reason for me to suspend judgment about a proposition *p* is a reason for me to withhold assent both from *p* and from its negation (or from any proposition I recognize as entailing *p* or its negation). Descartes, in contrast, uses the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation to generate *reasons for doubt* (*rationes dubitandi*). A reason for me to doubt *p* is a reason for me to be less than certain that *p*. Defined in this way, a reason for doubt can but need not be a reason for suspending judgment. For it is possible for me to have a reason to doubt *p*, and so a reason to be less than certain that *p*, and nonetheless to have enough evidence for the truth of *p* to believe that *p* and to be justified in doing so. I know, for instance, that occasionally cars do not start in extreme cold. The fact that it is now extremely cold is, therefore, a reason for me to doubt that my car will start. But if I also know that in the past my car has always or usually started even in extreme cold, then I have enough evidence that my car will start to believe that it will start and to be justified in doing so. In this case my having a reason to doubt that my car will start just means that I am not certain that my car will start. Given my past experience with my car in extreme cold, my reason to doubt that my car will start is not a reason for me to suspend judgment about whether it will start.

Here I want to take up two questions raised by the distinction between reasons for suspending judgment and reasons for doubt. First: is Descartes right in thinking that the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation are no different from the arguments of the ancient skeptics? Is Descartes right in thinking, more specifically, that the way in which the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation generate reasons for doubt is no different from the way in which the arguments of the ancient skeptics generate what those skeptics, at least, regarded as reasons for suspending judgment? Second: does Descartes think that the reasons for doubt generated by the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation constitute *by themselves* reasons for suspending judgment about (for example) whether I have hands or whether $2 + 3 = 5$?

The Structure of Skeptical Arguments

In the First Meditation Descartes, in the guise of the meditator, is seeking reasons to doubt the truth of as many of his beliefs as possible. He thinks that he has acquired most of his beliefs “either from the senses or through the senses” (2:12; AT 7:18), and he recognizes at once that the fact that the senses deceive him in some circumstances – when, for instance, an object is very small or far away – is not a reason to doubt the truth of any belief he forms on the basis of the senses in other and more favorable circumstances. For, the meditator explains,

there are many beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses – for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing

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gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? (2:13; AT 7:18).

But he then considers the possibility that these beliefs have been produced in just the way (whatever that is) the false beliefs of madmen are produced. The meditator dismisses this possibility only to consider next the possibility that he is now dreaming and that his beliefs that he is sitting by the fire, etc. have been produced in just the way (whatever that is) dreams are produced. Since at this point in the *Meditations* he claims to “see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep” (2:13; AT 7:19), the meditator concludes that now at least he cannot eliminate the possibility that he is dreaming. He takes *this* fact to be a reason to doubt the truth of all his beliefs about bodies. But the meditator does not regard the fact that now at least he cannot eliminate the possibility that he is dreaming as a reason to doubt the truth of his mathematical beliefs: “For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides. It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false” (2:14; AT 7:20). Yet the meditator has long held the belief that he is the creation of an omnipotent God, and this belief now leads him to consider a new possibility:

How do I know that he [an omnipotent God] has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now? What is more, since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may not I similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable? (2:14; AT 7:21)

The fact that now at least he cannot eliminate the possibility that *all* of his beliefs, including those beliefs whose truth seems completely evident to him, have been produced by an omnipotent God intent on deceiving him seems to the meditator to be a reason to doubt the truth of any belief he now has.

The principal skeptical arguments of the First Meditation – and by that I mean the dream argument and the deceiving God argument – are *skeptical scenarios* (Curley 1978:86–89, Broughton 2002:64–67). A skeptical scenario is a story about how I have acquired some or all of my beliefs according to which those beliefs are false or defective in some other way. A skeptical scenario constitutes a reason for doubt only if it satisfies both an explanatory and an epistemic requirement. For it must explain how I have acquired the beliefs which fall within its scope despite the fact that these beliefs are false or defective in some other way. And it must be the case that I cannot eliminate the possibility that I have acquired these beliefs in the way described by the skeptical scenario. Now two types of skeptical scenario can constitute a reason for doubt. A skeptical scenario of the first type is such that if I have acquired a belief in the way described by the scenario, then my belief is false. Call a skeptical scenario of this type a *false belief scenario*. A skeptical scenario of the second type is such that if I have acquired a belief in the way described by the scenario, it does *not* follow from this fact alone that my belief is false. It *does* follow that my belief is defective to the extent that it has a

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deviant causal history, but it is possible for a belief with this deviant causal history to be true. Call a skeptical scenario of this type a *deviant causal history scenario*.

A skeptical scenario of either type constitutes a reason for doubt, if it does, because it introduces an uneliminated, and perhaps ineliminable, possibility that the beliefs which fall within its scope are false. This is obviously the case with a false belief scenario. For the possibility that I have acquired a belief in the way described by a false belief scenario is just the possibility that that belief is false. But if I cannot eliminate the possibility with respect to a belief of mine that it is false, then I have a reason to doubt – where, at a minimum, that is a reason to be less than certain of – the truth of that belief. Suppose I believe (as, in fact, I do) that I have hands. The possibility that I have acquired this belief as a result of the machinations of an omnipotent and deceptive God is just the possibility that my belief that I have hands is false. If I cannot eliminate this possibility, then I have a reason to doubt – where, at a minimum, that is a reason to be less than certain of – the truth of my belief that I have hands.

It is worth noting that Descartes presents the dream argument as well as the deceiving God argument as a false belief scenario. If I am dreaming that p and believe that p because I am dreaming that p , it does not follow, and Descartes does not think it follows, that my belief that p is false. But Descartes thinks that in the past he has dreamed that p and believed that p because he was dreaming that p , and his belief that p was false. “How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events – that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!” (2:13; AT 7:19). The possibility Descartes, in the guise of the meditator, considers here and claims he cannot eliminate is not just the possibility that he is dreaming that he is wearing a dressing gown and sitting by the fire, but that he is dreaming that these things are so when in fact they are not. So in the First Meditation the dream argument involves the scenario in which I believe that p because I am now dreaming that p when in fact it is false that p . Moreover, in the context of the method of doubt Descartes consistently presents the possibility that he is dreaming as the possibility that he is dreaming that p when it is false that p . In Part Four of the *Discourse on the Method* Descartes writes that “considering that the very thoughts we have when awake occur while we sleep without any of them being at that time true, I resolved to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more than the illusions of dreams” (1:127; AT 6:32). In the *Search for Truth* Eudoxus, Descartes’s mouthpiece, asks: “How can you be certain that your life is not a continuous dream, and that everything you think you learn from the senses is not false now, just as much as when you are asleep?” (2:408; AT 10:511–12). And, finally, in Part One of the *Principles of Philosophy* Descartes’s second reason for doubting beliefs acquired on the basis of the senses “is that in our sleep we regularly seem to have sensory perception of, or to imagine, countless things which do not exist anywhere” (1:194; AT 8A:6).

A deviant causal history scenario, too, introduces the possibility that the beliefs which fall within its scope are false, though it does so more obliquely than a false belief scenario. To see this recall that if I have acquired a belief in the way described by a deviant causal history scenario, then it does *not* follow from this fact alone that my belief is false. In this respect a deviant causal history scenario is different from a false belief scenario. But at the same time – and this is the important point – if I have acquired a belief in the way described by a deviant causal history scenario, then it does *not* follow

from this fact alone that my belief is true. If I have acquired a belief in the way described by a deviant causal history scenario and that belief is true, it is true only by accident. So the possibility that I have acquired a belief in the way described by a deviant causal history scenario is just the possibility that I have acquired that belief in a way that is compatible with its being false. This possibility, in turn, introduces the possibility that my belief is false. That is why if I have not eliminated the possibility that I acquired a belief in the way described by a deviant causal history scenario, I have a reason to doubt the truth of that belief.

Suppose that unlike Descartes we treat the dream argument as a deviant causal history scenario. Suppose, further, that I believe that I am holding a piece of paper in my hands. If I am now dreaming, it does not follow that my belief is false. For I might be dreaming that I am holding a piece of paper in my hands while I am in fact holding a piece of paper in my hands. But if I am now dreaming, then I have not acquired my belief in the way I think I have acquired it. For I think I have acquired my belief because I see and feel the paper in my hands. But if I am now dreaming, then I do not see or feel anything. Moreover, I think that *if* I have acquired the belief that I am holding a piece of paper in my hands because I now see and feel the paper in my hands, then it is not an accident that my belief is true. For it follows from the fact that I now see and feel the paper in my hands (and do not merely seem to see and feel it) that my belief that I am holding a piece of paper in my hands is true. The possibility that I am now dreaming is the possibility that I have acquired my belief in a way which, unlike seeing and feeling the paper in my hands, does not entail its truth. So the possibility that I am dreaming is in the first instance the possibility that I have acquired my belief in a way that is compatible with its being false. That possibility, in turn, introduces the possibility that my belief is false. That is why if I have not eliminated the possibility that I am now dreaming, then I have a reason to doubt the truth of my belief that I am holding a piece of paper in my hands.

Consider, in this connection, the following kind of case. Suppose as a member of a jury I believe, on the basis of the testimony of someone I take to be a reliable witness, that the suspect was in Cincinnati on the night of the murder. The defense attorney then introduces the possibility that the witness is unreliable, at least about this matter, and on reflection I find I cannot eliminate this possibility. Now if the witness is in fact unreliable, it does not follow that my belief that the suspect was in Cincinnati on the night of the murder is false. Sometimes an unreliable witness provides true testimony on a matter about which he is unreliable. But if the witness is unreliable about the matter, if I believe that the suspect was in Cincinnati on the night of the murder solely on the basis of the testimony of this unreliable witness, and if my belief is true, then it is true only by accident. The possibility that the witness is unreliable is in the first instance not the possibility that my belief is false, but the possibility that my belief, being based on the testimony of an unreliable witness, has been acquired by me in a way that is compatible with its being false. *This* possibility, in turn, introduces the possibility that my belief is false. That is why if I cannot eliminate the possibility that the witness is unreliable, then I have a reason to doubt the truth of my belief that the suspect was in Cincinnati on the night of the murder.

To sum up this part of the discussion. A skeptical scenario constitutes a reason for doubt, if it does, because it introduces the possibility that the beliefs which fall within

its scope are false. A deviant causal history scenario introduces this possibility less directly, and so less perspicuously, than a false belief scenario. If Descartes recognized this fact, it provided him with a reason to present the dream argument as a false belief scenario rather than a deviant causal history scenario.

The Arguments of the Ancient Skeptics

The arguments of the ancient skeptics did *not* take the form of either kind of skeptical scenario. The Stoics claimed that knowing, rather than merely believing, something about the world was a matter of assenting to a particular kind of perceptual experience they called a “cognitive impression” (καταληπτική φαντασία). The Stoics were also committed to the principle that a person ought to assent only to cognitive impressions. Call this principle *the Stoic maxim for assent*. The Academics, beginning with Arcesilaus and continuing to the end of the skeptical Academy in the first century BCE, challenged the Stoic claim that at least some perceptual impressions are cognitive impressions. The Academics presented several arguments for *the indiscernibility thesis*. This is the thesis that every true impression is such that some false impression just like it is possible. (For the indiscernibility thesis, see Cicero, *Academica* 2.40–1, 2.77–8, 2.83; Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus mathematicos* 7.154.) The Stoics themselves conceded that *if* every true impression is such that some false impression just like it is possible, then no impression is a cognitive impression. So if the Academic arguments for the indiscernibility thesis are successful, these arguments in conjunction with the Stoic maxim for assent constitute a reason *for the Stoic* to withhold assent from every impression and to suspend judgment about everything.

The Academics offered two principal arguments for the indiscernibility thesis: an argument from the existence of twins or perceptually indiscernible objects and an argument from dreams and madness. (For these arguments see Cicero, *Academica* 2.48, 2.83–5, 2.88–90; Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus mathematicos* 7.402–405, 7.408–410.) Cicero reports that the Academics also presented an argument from the capacity of God to produce in us false but convincing impressions (Cicero, *Academica* 2.47). Many commentators take these Academic arguments to be skeptical scenarios (or, more precisely, false belief scenarios). For they think that with these arguments the Academics claim to have introduced with respect to *any* perceptual impression a person entertains the uneliminated, and ineliminable, possibility that the impression is false. (See Sedley 1982:263, Striker 1996a:139, and Striker 1996b:160.) So, on this line of interpretation, the Academics argued that if I have the impression that this person is Socrates, I cannot eliminate the possibility that this impression is false. For I cannot eliminate the possibility that I formed this impression as a result of looking not at Socrates but at his twin, or because I am now dreaming or mad and someone else or no one at all is now before me, or because God has produced this impression in me when it is in fact false.

But consider the Academic argument from twins or perceptually indiscernible objects. *If* it is supposed to introduce an uneliminated and ineliminable possibility, then it is a dismal failure. And that is because in the case of my impression (for example) that this person is Socrates, the argument leaves intact claims to knowledge on my part

whose truth enables me to eliminate the possibility that my impression is false because I am looking not at Socrates but at his twin. If I know that Socrates has no twin because (for example) I know that his mother reports that he has no twin, and I know that Socrates' mother is a reliable source of information on the matter, then I can eliminate the possibility that I am looking not at Socrates but at his twin and that for this reason my impression is false. For the Academic argument offers no consideration which calls into question my claim to know that Socrates has no twin or the other claims to knowledge on which this claim is based. Hence, the argument does not show that I cannot eliminate the possibility that Socrates has a twin and that I am looking not at Socrates but at his twin. In fact, it is difficult to see how the Academics (or anyone else) could construct a skeptical scenario with a scope of any significance on the basis of the fact that twins exist or that two or more objects are perceptually indiscernible.

The argument from twins or perceptually indiscernible objects is more successful if we see it as an attempt by the Academics to establish the truth of certain counterfactual conditionals. For the Academics think that the truth of the indiscernibility thesis follows from the truth of these counterfactual conditionals. So assume that Socrates does not have a twin, that I know this fact about Socrates, and that as a result of looking at Socrates I form a true impression that this person is Socrates. On my view the Academics argued that even with these assumptions in place the following counterfactual conditional is true:

- (A) *If Socrates had a twin, i.e., if there were someone who is perceptually indiscernible from Socrates, and if as a result of looking at Socrates' twin I had formed the false impression that this person is Socrates, my false impression would have represented the person before me (= Socrates' twin) as Socrates in just the same way my true impression represents the person now before me (= Socrates) as Socrates.*

The Academics think the counterfactual conditional (A) is true if it is possible for Socrates *to have had* a twin, i.e., if it is possible for there *to have been* someone who is perceptually indiscernible from Socrates. They argue that this, in turn, is possible if it is possible for two objects to be perceptually indiscernible from one another. The simplest way to prove that it is *possible* for two objects to be perceptually indiscernible from one another is to appeal to two objects that *actually are* indiscernible from one another, i.e., two eggs or two snakes or two identical twins. This is just what the Academics do.

But what follows? If (A) and other counterfactuals like it are true, the Academics argue, then every true perceptual impression of Socrates is such that some false impression just like it is possible. If that is so, then the indiscernibility thesis is true with respect to impressions of Socrates and no true impression of Socrates is a cognitive impression. For if it is possible for Socrates to have had a twin, then for any true impression of Socrates it is possible for there to have been a false impression, formed as a result of looking at Socrates' twin, that represents the object being perceived (= Socrates' twin) as Socrates in just the same way the true impression represents the object actually being perceived (= Socrates) as Socrates. But, the Academics will continue, what is true with respect to Socrates is true with respect to *any* perceptible object. (That is why Cicero says that if two objects are perceptually indiscernible from one another, then

everything will be called into doubt (*Academica* 2.84.) For any perceptible object *O*, it is possible for there to have been an object *O** distinct but perceptually indiscernible from *O*. If that is so, then for any true impression of *O* it is possible for there to have been a false impression, formed as a result of looking at *O**, that represents the object being perceived (= *O**) as *O* in just the way the true impression represents the object actually being perceived (= *O*) as *O*. If this is so, then for any object *O*, no true impression of *O* is of a kind which could not be false; therefore, for any object *O*, no true impression of *O* is a cognitive impression. If that is so, then there are no cognitive impressions. *That* conclusion in conjunction with the Stoic maxim for assent compels the Stoic to withhold her assent from every impression and to suspend judgment about everything.

The Academic argument from dreams and madness can be understood in the same way. Even if I am awake and sane when I entertain the true impression that this person is Socrates, and even if I know that this is so, the Academics argued that nonetheless it is possible for me to have entertained in a dream or episode of madness a false impression that represents it as being the case that Socrates is before me in just the way my true impression now represents this as being the case. But what is true with respect to my impression that this person is Socrates is true with respect to any true perceptual impression I entertain. If that is so, then every true impression is such that some false impression just like it is possible. Hence, no true impression is a cognitive impression. The Academic argument from dreams or madness, then, need not challenge my claim to know that, in entertaining a true impression that this person is Socrates, I am not now dreaming or mad. The argument purports to show only that it possible for me to have had in a dream or episode of madness a false impression which represents it as being the case that Socrates is before me in just the way my true impression that this person is Socrates represents this as being the case. That is true even if I can eliminate the possibility that now, in entertaining the impression that this person is Socrates, I am dreaming or mad. For an eliminated possibility is still a possibility. It is, however, a consequence of the Academic argument that if I do know that I am not now dreaming or mad, my knowing this cannot depend on my having an impression that represents something as being the case (e.g., that the person before me is Socrates) in a way that no false impression could. (For a much more detailed presentation and defense of this interpretation of the Academic arguments, see Perin 2005.)

The version of Pyrrhonian skepticism on offer in Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* generates a reason for suspending judgment by appealing to conflicting appearances. Suppose the tomato on the table appears red to me. A Pyrrhonian skeptic of the sort described by Sextus will submit for my consideration the fact that the tomato appears some other color, e.g., yellow, either to me in other circumstances or to someone else or to a creature of another kind. According to Sextus the fact these two appearances conflict is *not* by itself a reason for me to suspend judgment about the color of the tomato. But for Sextus if there is no rational basis for resolving this conflict of appearances, then I *do* have a reason to suspend judgment about the color of the tomato. And Sextus argues that there is no rational basis for resolving this conflict of appearances by arguing that any consideration I might take as a reason to believe that the tomato is red rather than yellow, or *vice versa*, including the fact that the tomato appears red to me now, produces an infinite regress or relies on an arbitrary assumption or involves

reasoning in a circle. But if this is so, and if neither an infinite regress nor an arbitrary assumption nor reasoning in a circle constitutes a reason for belief, then I have no reason to believe that the tomato is red rather than yellow, or *vice versa*. And *that* fact is a reason for me to suspend judgment about the color of the tomato.

Note that Sextus' argument from conflicting appearances need not satisfy the explanatory and epistemic requirements a skeptical scenario must satisfy. For in generating a reason for suspending judgment about the color of the tomato Sextus need not provide an explanation of how the tomato could appear red to me, or of how I could believe that the tomato is red, when in fact it is not. (But contrast here Curley 1978:88–9.) Sextus proceeds on the assumption that I will suspend judgment about the color of the tomato if I take myself to lack any reason to believe that the tomato is one color rather than another. That is why his strategy is to undermine the status of *any* consideration, and especially the fact that the tomato appears red to me now, as a reason to believe that the tomato is red. But he does *not* execute this strategy by first describing a way in which the tomato could appear red to me, or I could come to believe that the tomato is red, when it is not, and then claiming that I cannot eliminate the possibility that the tomato appears red to me, or that I have come to believe that it is red, in this way. If I believe that *p*, Sextus simply introduces an alternative candidate for belief *q*, and then employs very general arguments (the so-called 'Agrippan modes': see *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.164–177) that purport to show that I have no reason to assent to *p* rather than to *q*, and *vice versa*.

It seems to me, then, that Descartes was mistaken in thinking the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation are just the arguments of the ancient skeptics. The arguments of the First Meditation generate reasons for doubt by introducing in different ways the uneliminated, and perhaps ineliminable, possibility that the beliefs which fall within their scope are false. Neither the Academic nor the Pyrrhonian skeptical arguments do this. The Academics do argue that for any true perceptual impression I form, there are various way in which I could have formed a false impression that is identical in certain important respects to my true impression. But they do *not* argue that for any impression I form, I cannot eliminate the possibility that in fact I have formed my impression in one of these ways. The Pyrrhonian skeptic generates a reason for me to withhold my assent from some candidate for belief *p* by arguing that I have no reason to assent to *p* rather than to some alternative candidate for belief *q* (where *q* is or entails the negation of *p*). The truth of *that* conclusion does not require that there is some possibility I cannot eliminate that *p* is false, but only that I have no reason to think that *p*, rather than *q*, is true.

Reasons for Doubt vs. Reasons for Suspending Judgment

In the special context of the First Meditation, a reason for doubting the truth of a proposition *p* is a reason to withhold assent from *p*. For there Descartes devotes himself to the general destruction of his beliefs, and with that end in view he declares that

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 which are

patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all of my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. (2:12; AT 7:18)

Call the principle that I should withhold my assent from p if I have a reason for doubting p the *strong maxim for assent*. (I borrow this term from Broughton 2002:44–5.) The strong maxim for assent transforms a reason for being less than certain that p into a reason to withhold assent from p .

There is a point in the First Meditation where it seems to the meditator as if he has given up all of the beliefs he possessed at the outset of his inquiry in the *Meditations*. This is the point at which he announces that “I . . . am finally compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised; and this is not a flippant or illconsidered conclusion, but is based on powerful and well thought-out reasons (*validas & meditatatas rationes*) (2:14–15; AT 7:21–22). Many commentators attribute to the meditator here the claim that he has “powerful and well thought-out reasons” for doubting the truth of his belief that he has hands, for example, or his belief that $2 + 3 = 5$. (See Frankfurt 1970:48, Curley 1978:106, Stroud 1984:12; Macarthur 2003:160–164.) But the meditator makes no such claim here. He claims to have “powerful and well thought-out reasons” only for the second order conclusion:

- (C) For each of my former beliefs, there is at least some reason for doubting the truth of that belief.

The “powerful and well thought-out reasons” the meditator takes himself to have for (C) are, of course, the skeptical scenarios introduced in the First Meditation. Now (C) states that for each of the meditator’s former beliefs, he has some reason for doubting the truth of that belief. So it follows from (C) that if the meditator formerly believed that p , he now has a reason for doubting p . But (C) says or implies nothing about *the kind of reason* the meditator has for doubting p . In particular, it does not follow from (C) that the reason the meditator has for doubting p renders his belief that p *unreasonable*. If he has a reason for doubting p , then this reason renders his belief that p *uncertain*. For his belief that p is certain just in case he has no reason for doubting p . But a reason for doubt can undermine a belief’s claim to certainty without undermining its claim to reasonableness. And Descartes, in the guise of the meditator, does not think that the reasons for doubt raised in the First Meditation undermine the reasonableness of his former beliefs. For he continues to describe those beliefs as “highly probable opinions – opinions which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful, as has just been shown, it is still much more reasonable (*multo magis rationi consentaneum*) to believe than to deny” (2:15; AT 7:22). (For this point see especially Broughton 2002:47–9 and cf. Macarthur 2003:166–171.) The fact that Descartes does not think that the reasons for doubt raised in the First Meditation undermine the reasonableness of his former beliefs explains why elsewhere he characterizes these reasons for doubt as slight (2:25; AT 7:36), metaphysical (2:25; AT 7:36, 2:121; AT 7:172, 2:308; AT 7:460, 2:373; AT 7:546), and exaggerated (2:61; AT 7:89, 2:159; AT 7:226, 2:308; AT 7:460).

This fact also explains why, by his own report, it is difficult for the meditator to give up his former beliefs or, if he does give them up, to avoid forming them again. The

meditator, like anyone else, is disposed to believe whatever he regards as the most reasonable candidates for belief. That is why he introduces the pretense of the malicious demon. This thought experiment is supposed to aid the meditator in overcoming the psychological obstacles to giving up beliefs he regards as reasonable. If he formerly believed that p , but now recognizes that he has a reason for doubting p , the meditator is supposed to retract his assent from p . That is what the strong maxim for assent tells him to do. The problem is that while the meditator recognizes that he has a reason for doubting p , he also continues to regard his belief that p as reasonable. He continues to think, in other words, that his reason for doubting p notwithstanding, he has more reason to assent to p than to withhold assent from p . And it is difficult for someone in that position to avoid believing that p .

There is an important passage in the Seventh Replies where Descartes explains the sense in which the reasons for doubt raised in the First Meditation are “powerful and well thoughtout”:

There may be reasons which are strong enough to compel us to doubt, even though these reasons are themselves doubtful, and hence not to be retained later on, as I have just pointed out. The reasons are strong so long as we have no others which produce certainty by removing the doubt. Now since I found no such countervailing reasons in the First Meditation, despite meditating and searching for them, I therefore said that the reasons for doubt which I had found were ‘powerful and well thought-out’ (2:319; AT 7:473–4).

Descartes’s remarks here seem to me to require careful explication. In the First Meditation the meditator thinks that the skeptical arguments he considers compel him to doubt that he has hands or that $2 + 3 = 5$ *only* in the sense that they compel him to accept that there is some reason for doubting he has hands or that $2 + 3 = 5$. These arguments generate “strong” reasons for doubt in the sense that they provide the meditator with *genuine* grounds, however slight, for doubting that he has hands or that $2 + 3 = 5$. Since, moreover, the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation provide the meditator with genuine grounds for doubting not one or two beliefs, but each member of a very large class of beliefs, the meditator thinks that these arguments compel him to accept the second order conclusion (C). But, as we have seen, Descartes in the guise of the meditator does *not* think that the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation compel him to doubt in the sense that they rationally compel him to give up his belief that he has hands or that $2 + 3 = 5$. (If this were the sense in which these arguments compelled the meditator to doubt, the strong maxim for assent would be otiose.) The meditator continues to regard his beliefs as reasonable, and for this reason it is difficult for him to give up those beliefs. Descartes’s point here in the Seventh Replies, I think, is that in the First Meditation he did not have any reason at all for denying the second order conclusion (C). A reason for denying (C) would be a reason for the meditator to think that for at least one of his former beliefs, there is no reason at all for doubting the truth of that belief. In the absence of a reason for thinking that at least one of his former beliefs is immune to doubt, the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation provide the meditator with strong reasons for thinking that *all* his beliefs are subject to doubt.

It is more difficult to make sense of a passage from the Fourth Meditation (2:40–1; AT 7:58–60). Suppose I consider a proposition p and I cannot discern any reason to believe either p or its negation. In this case my will is “indifferent” (*indifferens*) – I feel no inclination to assent either to p or to its negation. Descartes claims that if by an exercise of will I were to assent either to p or to its negation, I would be at fault. For even if my resulting belief is true, it is true only by accident. More importantly, I have given my assent to a proposition whose truth I did not clearly and distinctly perceive: in Descartes’s language, the determination of my will has preceded the perception of my intellect. Now consider, as Descartes proceeds to do, a different kind of case. I am considering a proposition p , and though I recognize a reason for doubting p , I still regard myself as having more reason to assent to p than to assent to its negation or to suspend judgment. I am, according to Descartes, in a situation in which “probable conjectures” (*probabiles conjecturae*) incline me to assent to p . But, Descartes writes,

although probable conjectures may pull me in one direction, the mere knowledge that they are simply conjectures, and not certain and indubitable reasons, is itself quite enough to push assent the other way. My experience in the last few days confirms this: the mere fact that I found that all my previous beliefs were in some sense open to doubt was enough to turn my absolutely confident belief in their truth into the supposition that they were wholly false (2:41; AT 7:59).

Descartes here seems to me to misrepresent the experience of the meditator in the First Meditation. For there the meditator claims that it is difficult for him to withhold his assent from his former beliefs *despite* the fact that he has reasons for doubting the truth of each of those beliefs and, therefore, that he does not have “certain and indubitable reasons” for them. The meditator thinks he can detach himself from beliefs he continues to regard as reasonable only by engaging in make-believe. So if his initial confidence in the truth of his former beliefs turns into the supposition that those beliefs are false, that transformation is the product *not* of the meditator’s recognition that his reasons for his beliefs fall short of certainty and indubitability, but of a psychological trick (the pretense of the malicious demon).

Two Puzzles

Descartes, then, thought that the reasons for doubt generated by the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation do *not* by themselves constitute reasons for suspending judgment. It seems to me that Descartes’s view here raises at least two puzzles.

The first puzzle is *why* Descartes thought the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation undermine claims to certain knowledge but not claims to reasonable belief. Descartes’s view is puzzling given the fact that many philosophers and theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries used the arguments of the ancient skeptics – the very same arguments Descartes thought he was rehearsing in the First Meditation – in their effort to prove that there is no rational basis for religious belief. These arguments were taken to show that there is no (epistemic) reason to accept the basic articles of Christianity or to endorse one side rather than another in the religious controversies

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that dominated the early modern period. Montaigne, for example, thought that reflection on the arguments he found in Sextus Empiricus would lead a person to suspend judgment on a wide range of matters, including matters of religion, and would thereby place her in the best possible condition to receive the gift of faith from God. (See e.g., Montaigne 1965:375, Popkin 1979:42–65, and Larmore 1998:1147–52).

The second puzzle is a puzzle about the precise force of the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation – arguments that, in one form or another, continue to preoccupy philosophers today. *If these arguments undermine claims to certain knowledge, do they also undermine claims to reasonable belief? And if these arguments undermine claims to reasonable belief, how do they do so?* How, that is, do they leave us in a position, if they do, in which we have not only a reason to doubt, and so a reason to be less than certain of, the truth of our beliefs about the world, but also a reason to give up those beliefs and suspend judgment? That is the position in which in different ways the arguments of the ancient skeptics, if successful, leave us. And if Descartes is wrong in thinking that the reasons for doubt generated by the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation do not by themselves constitute reasons for suspending judgment, it is the position in which these arguments, if successful, leave us.

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