



Exploring Philosophy - Audio

Descartes, doubt and knowledge

Winifred

John Cottingham is Professor Emeritus in Philosophy at the University of Reading.

In this audio recording he is talking to Christina ... author of Book Four, about the philosopher Descartes.

Christina

John, I would like to start by asking you a very simple but very fundamental question: what is the aim of Descartes method of doubt? What did Descartes want to achieve by doubting everything?

Professor John Cottingham

Right. He felt that many of the things that he had been brought up to believe were unreliable. And he was particularly interested in replacing the science, what we would call the science of his time, which he thought quite rightly was full of unreliable assumptions and explanations which didn't really work. So he wanted to clear away the rubbish. He uses the metaphor of sweeping everything away and starting right from the foundations in order to build something in the scientists that we stable and likely to last. Quoting approximately from the first paragraph of the Mediations of 1641. In order to clear away the rubble he uses doubt. He asks am I absolutely certain that this is true. So the doubt is essentially a kind of filter or sieve. He wants to use it to filter out everything that's unreliable, dubious, shaky, and be left only with what is absolutely solid.

Christina

Can you explain to me how Descartes method of doubt works?

Professor John Cottingham

It has several levels. The first level is doubts about the senses and here he follows a long tradition which goes back to Saint Augustine and to Plato of casting doubt on the senses as an essentially unstable source of knowledge. The senses Descartes says sometimes deceive us. One famous example is the stick in water, which looks bent. My sight tells me it's bent. Actually it's straight. Another example is the sun, which if you look up in the sky looks to your eye about the same size as the moon whereas actually it's immensely, vastly, almost

unimaginably bigger. So the senses don't always reveal what's correct. So that's the first level – doubting the deliverance of the senses. And then even more radical is the second level where he takes propositions or statements that you might think were immune from doubt about the senses. For example here is a table in front of me. Seems absolutely obvious and yet says Descartes I might be dreaming in which case I'm not sitting here in the studio with a table in front of me I'm still at home in bed. So even here is a table in front of me might be doubted. And then the third and final level is the malicious demon. This is a scenario, an imaginary scenario, that there's a powerful and malicious devil or demon who is beaming into my mind all sorts of false sensory information. For example my impression that there is a planet earth, that there is a sky, earth, sea. All these data may just be imaginary impressions that the demon is feeding into my mind rather like the modern scenario of The Matrix perhaps, in order to deceive me. There may be says Descartes no external world, no sky, no earth and all these things may just be illusions or fantasies.

Christina

So Descartes doubts it seems everything. But is there something left, something that cannot be doubted for Descartes.

Professor John Cottingham

Yes there is. Perhaps the best known example is the famous “cogito ergo sum”, I am thinking therefore I am. However much I push doubt if I start doubting I am thinking I am still thinking because doubting is a kind of thinking. And if I'm thinking then there's nothing that could make it true that I don't exist. At least as long as I'm thinking because I might stop existing at any time. But as long as I'm thinking then it must be true that I exist.

Christina

Are these the sort of foundations from which Descartes thinks he can bit by bit reconstruct his knowledge but also his trust in his senses and in his powers of reasoning etc

Professor John Cottingham

Yes these very simple truths which I can just intuit if you like, I can just see they must be true. These are the foundations and from these he will build up an entire system of knowledge. Of course in a way there is an element to faith even there that the mind's fundamental powers are reliable as he later put it “a reliable mind is God's gift to me.” So it may be that some sort of trust based on – ultimately on his Creator is smuggled in there or presupposed there right at the beginning. But that would take us on to a much bigger issue.

Christina

Well not everybody has been a fan of Descartes method of doubt. In particular I would like to ask you about what Hume said about Descartes type of doubt. First of all Hume thought

nobody could really doubt everything as Descartes did but more important I think Hume wrote that Descartes doubt would be entirely incurable, that there would be in a way no coming back from such doubt. Do you think Hume is right?

Professor John Cottingham

I think he is. If you doubt absolutely everything, everything, you could never really get going on thinking in the first place on meditating. So even to start his meditations Descartes must take some things for granted. For example he must take for granted his basic grasp of meaning of language, of the connections between concepts so there is no such thing as sweeping everything away. My own view is that Descartes doesn't try to destroy everything. He systematically invites us to doubt the senses, to doubt external objects, to doubt fundamental data that may not be produced by the world at all. But I think he still relies on basic rules of meaning and logic and language, which he needs. So I'd accept the criticism but say that Descartes in a sense meets it.

Christina

I would like to move to something slightly different. I mean intimately connected of course. You have written, you John have written that Descartes aim to find permanent foundation of knowledge rests on a misconception. Can you explain why? Can you explain what you meant by that?

Professor John Cottingham

Yes. There's a model of knowledge which Descartes inherited from his classical forebears from Aristotle particularly which that knowledge must always be deduced from prior and better known premises and these premises must ultimately go back to something which is self evident and that would give you a structure of permanent solid guaranteed knowledge. Nowadays I think most philosophers, and I think I'd agree with them would say that is over ambitious. We can't achieve permanence in that way. If you think of how science works it doesn't really aspire any more to build an edifice of totally reliable unshakeable knowledge. On the contrary it proceeds by revolutions, challenges, changes. It constantly modifies what's gone before and this is as the philosopher of science Karl Popper put it, an unending quest. We never reach a bedrock of total certainty. As again Popper says it's a matter of conjectures, which are then tested, possibly refuted, may have to be modified. So that search for permanence I think is probably a mistake. However, in Descartes' favour we do I think want our science to be reliable. We don't want preconceived opinions. We don't want prejudices. We don't want to accept things just because we've been told them but we want to try and get to what is well supported, what is reliable, what is as fundamental as we can make it. So I think there is something that's right about Descartes quest but something perhaps that's a bit over ambitious.

Christina

So do I understand you correctly? You think that critical part of Descartes project in a way is more valuable to us than his method or his aim to construct a completely stable edifice of knowledge.

Professor John Cottingham

Yes I think the critical part his insistence that we shouldn't rely on received authority but should strike out on our own in a way in the quest for truth, that dynamic critical project is crucial. It's part of what we still mean I think by science. The scientist takes nothing for granted prepared to challenge everything.

Christina

So this is already a very good reason to read Descartes I think. Are there other reasons to read Descartes nowadays?

Professor John Cottingham

Yes I think that there are many. One which we've covered is this idea of rejection of authority and a critical spirit of enquiry. A second would be that Descartes has a conception of philosophy as systematic. He was very interested in the idea of a unified template for knowledge and in his science he found that in mathematics. He had the idea that however complicated reality looked it operated in accordance with ultimately very simple mathematical principles, which were absolutely clear and distinct. He may have got the details wrong in his own science; in fact his own science was swept away by Newton soon after his death. But the ideal of mathematical science is one we still have and I think it's quite inspiring and quite important, very important. The idea that different areas of human knowledge connect and fit together is a fascinating notion. The other important element I think is the idea of reason. Descartes is often called a rationalist which means roughly that he had a belief in the power of reason to uncover the truth. There are elements of that that are problematic. We clearly can't use reason alone. We need other things like the data of experiments and so on. But the image of the enquirer who sets out armed with the tools of what Descartes called the light of reason the "lumen naturale", the natural light. Or the "lux ..." – the light of reason. And he is prepared to accept only what can be rationally show to be the case. That I think is another inspiring ideal.

Christina

Okay. Thank you very much.

Professor John Cottingham

Thank you.