Descartes begins Meditation I by declaring that he has known for a long time that in order to establish anything ‘firm and constant in the sciences’, he would have to start from the very foundations of all knowledge. He does not need to reject as false everything he thinks he knows, but he needs to ‘avoid believing things that are not entirely certain and indubitable’. Descartes is adopting scepticism. He is only aiming to doubt, not to reject, his beliefs.

So Descartes begins by understanding knowledge in terms of certainty. To establish certainty, he tests his beliefs by doubt. Doubt, then, is the opposite of certainty. If we can doubt a belief, then it is not certain, and so it is not knowledge.

It is important to notice that Descartes only doubts his beliefs in order to find what is certain. Because certainty is the opposite of doubt, finding out what he can and can’t doubt will establish what he can be certain of. Descartes’ doubt, as we will see, is very ‘methodical’. He could, he says, consider each belief of his in turn; but this would take forever. So instead he considers whether the principles on which his beliefs are grounded, principles like ‘believe what you perceive’, are certain or not. Descartes’ doubt is universal – he attacks his beliefs all at once by attacking their foundations; and it is hyperbolic, extreme to the point of being ridiculous, e.g. the possibility of an evil demon whose whole aim is to deceive me. But this is how it needs to be. One false or uncertain first principle can lead us completely astray, so he must attack these. And it is not easy, he remarks, to really withhold assent from beliefs we have held since we were children. We can’t doubt just by an act of will – that’s why he gives arguments, and hyperbolic doubt helps make the point and support the arguments.

**ARGUMENTS FROM PERCEPTION**

Descartes begins his method of doubt by considering that he has, in the past, been deceived by his senses – things have looked a way that they are not. Things in the distance look small; sticks half-submerged in water look bent; and so on. But, Descartes remarks, such examples from unusual perceptual conditions give us no reason to doubt all perceptions, such as that you are looking at a piece of paper with writing on it. More generally, we might say that perceptual illusions are special cases (and ones we can frequently explain). Otherwise we wouldn’t be able to talk about them as illusions. So they don’t undermine perception generally.

**AN ARGUMENT FROM DREAMING**

Descartes extends his doubt by appealing to dreaming: he is ‘a man, and consequently…in the habit of sleeping’. Sometimes when we dream, we represent to ourselves all sorts of crazy things. But sometimes we dream the most mundane things. Yet ‘there are no conclusive signs by means of which one can distinguish clearly between being awake and being asleep’. So how can we know that what we experience we perceive rather than dream?

This argument attacks all sense-perception, even the most mundane and most certain. You cannot know that you see a piece of paper because you cannot know that you are not dreaming of seeing a piece of paper.

Some philosophers have responded to Descartes by claiming that there are, in fact, certain indications by which we can distinguish perception from dreaming, such as the far greater coherence of perception. But Descartes could respond: we could be dreaming a perfect replica of reality. Do we really know that all dreams have less coherence than perception? We cannot know that what is apparently perception is not really a particularly coherent dream.

Descartes presses the argument from dreaming further. It may seem that ‘whether I am awake or sleeping, two and three added together always make five’. But people do make mistakes about matters they believe they know certainly. And so even truths of logic and of mathematics come under attack. Descartes says, ‘it is possible…that I should be deceived every time I add two and three’. Are not just his perceptual experiences, but also his thoughts, open to doubt?

**THE DEMON**

In order to take his scepticism to heart, Descartes introduces the suggestion that God does not exist and that all our experiences are produced in us by an evil demon who wants to deceive us. The possibility of the demon means that it is possible that even if I could tell the difference between being awake and dreaming, my experiences when I am awake are no more real than when I am dreaming. All beliefs about the external world and events in time is thrown into doubt, as it is based on my experience, which the evil demon controls. And all knowledge, such as mathematics, I believed I had on the basis of thought alone is undercut, because the demon can control my thoughts, too.

**Total deception**

Descartes has reached a point of total deception. If he has no mental agency, no control over his mind at all, over what he experiences or what he thinks, then the very idea of knowing anything seems to be undermined.

**Activities**

Use the How to Read Philosophy guide to flag the article and make detailed notes. Then answer the questions below.

**Questions**

1. *What is Descartes hoping to achieve by doubting his beliefs?*
2. *Give 2 further examples of occasions when your senses have deceived you (try to think of ways in which your sense of taste, touch, smell or hearing have been deceived).*
3. *Explain why Descartes rejects the claim that illusions mean we can’t trust our perception.*
4. *Do you think we can know that what ‘we experience we perceive rather than dream’? Can you provide an argument for your view?*
5. *If we are totally deceived, can we know anything at all?*