Chapter 10

Descartes's Use of Doubt

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In Part Two of the *Discourse on the Method* we find a remarkable resolution:

> regarding the opinions to which I had hitherto given credence, I thought that I could not do better than to undertake to get rid of them, all at one go, in order to replace them afterwards with better ones, or with the same ones once I had squared them with the standards of reason. (1:117; AT 6:14)

Two questions arise. What are these "opinions" to which Descartes had hitherto given credence? And what are the "standards of reason" by which they should be judged?

Early on in the First Meditation, Descartes tells us that his opinions come "either from the senses or through the senses" (2:12; AT 7:18). Those that come *from* the senses Descartes calls the "teachings of nature." For example, nature teaches that there are objects in the world around me resembling the ideas I receive from the senses in respect of shape and color, etc. (2:26; AT 7:38). Those opinions that come *through* the senses are the opinions of others, heard and then preserved in memory (1: 218–20; AT 6:35–8). From childhood Descartes absorbed the teachings of both nature and society and far into adulthood he holds these opinions to be "most true" (2:12; AT 7:18). So Descartes's "opinions" comprise almost all of the beliefs he finds himself with at the outset of his inquiry.

Descartes is dissatisfied with these opinions. For example, he remarks that

> When I say "Nature taught me to think this," all I mean is that a spontaneous impulse leads me to believe it, not that its truth has been revealed to me by some natural light. (2:26–7; AT 7:39)

Clearly, he thinks there is a higher standard to which he should aspire and he states it in the First Meditation:

> 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 my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. (2:12; AT 7:18)

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It looks as if Descartes means to abandon almost all of his beliefs until he can find reasons for holding them which render those beliefs "certain and indubitable."

There has been much debate over how to interpret these statements. It has been maintained that Cartesian certainty is an ideal which believers should aspire to rather than a standard which every reasonable belief must meet. And indeed, towards the end of the First Meditation, Descartes allows that the beliefs he is setting out to undermine are "highly probable opinions – opinions which, despite the fact that they are in some sense doubtful . . . it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny" (2:15; AT 7:22). This statement is important because it shows that the Cartesian skeptic allows that we have substantial, if inconclusive evidence for our various opinions. But Descartes does not here say that belief in p is reasonable provided the evidence makes p highly probable (*pace* Broughton 2002: 46, 87–8; see also MacArthur 2003: 169); he merely says that if the evidence makes p highly probable then belief in p is more reasonable than belief in not-p, a point which interests him because he is about to consider whether to adopt the supposition that his opinions are actually false. For all the quoted passage tells us, in the absence of certainty agnosticism may be the only option that is reasonable *tout court*. As we shall see, when Descartes considers this very point in the Fourth Meditation, that is exactly what he says (see also 2:53; AT 7:77).

It has also been maintained that the standard of certainty is meant to apply to belief only in a certain special context, in the context of scientific inquiry or in the course of our search for knowledge. (See Frankfurt 1970: ch. 2; Wolterstorff 1996: 180–218. Compare Broughton 2002: 7–18, 42–61; Burnyeat 1997: 118–20; Wilson 1978: 42–9). This reading gains support from Descartes's repeated insistence that his Method of Doubt has no application to practical affairs:

> As far as the conduct of life is concerned, I am very far from thinking that we should assent only to what is clearly perceived. On the contrary, I do not think that we should always wait even for probable truths; from time to time we will have to choose one of many alternatives about which we have no knowledge. (2:106; AT 7:149; see also 2:15; AT 7:23; and 2:172; AT 7:248; and 2:243; AT 7:351)

Some interpreters conclude, with Frankfurt, that the doubts of the First Meditation are "purely methodological" or that the rule of certainty is not intended by Descartes as "an ordinary rule for conscientious believing" (Broughton 2002: 46).

In this chapter, I shall argue that Descartes acknowledges the existence of a number of representational states governed by rather different normative standards. Belief or judgment is only one of these states, a state governed in all contexts by the rule of certainty. It is against our beliefs or judgments that the skeptical reflections of the First Meditation are directed. But when it comes to practical affairs, it is often appropriate to invoke another sort of representational state in the process of deciding what to do. These states – conjectures – are not governed by the rule of certainty and are thus immune to the skeptical reflections of the First Meditation.

Many commentators suppose that the whole of Descartes's skeptical argumentation in the First Meditation turns on the radical hypothesis that we are always dreaming or on the idea of an all-powerful deceiver. But if, as I maintain, it is the simple demand for certainty which drives Descartes's skepticism, these hypotheses must play a rather

more specialized role. Reviewing the argument of the First Meditation in the Sixth, Descartes remembers that while trusting the senses "I had many experiences which gradually undermined all the faith I had had in the senses" (2:53; AT 7:77), and he quotes examples of towers which looked round at a distance but square from close up, and so forth. Only then does he mention that "to these reasons for doubting I recently added two very general ones" viz. the dreaming and the evil demon argument. Elsewhere I have argued that the latter are introduced for a very specific purpose, to directly undermine our general belief that there are objects distributed in a space around us. And they do this in just the way that ordinary sensory error undermines our convictions about what is now before us, by depriving us of certainty on the point (Owens 2000: 119–24).

This chapter has two parts. In the first two sections I give Descartes's reason for thinking that belief labors under the stringent epistemic requirement enunciated in the First Meditation. Descartes must tell us why a failure to satisfy the demand for certainty could move a reasonable person to abandon belief and, I shall argue, the Fourth Meditation contains a persuasive answer to this question. In the last two sections, I shall show that, for Descartes, there are ways of representing the world to which this answer does not apply and so which are not subject to the demand for certainty.

The Role of Reflection

Having dissolved most of our convictions in the First Meditation, in the Second and Third Meditations Descartes draws our attention to beliefs which, it seems, can't be undermined in the same way, to beliefs which are certain. By the time we get to the Fourth Meditation, Descartes is ready to step back and give an account of how our faculty of judgment works: with the experience of epistemic failure followed by some epistemic success behind us, we are now in a position to describe the mechanism which underlies all this. The Fourth Meditation is the obvious place to look for Descartes's account of why reasonable belief requires certainty.

Here is what we find. Descartes starts by considering a case in which

> [A] my intellect has not yet come upon any persuasive reason in favour of one alternative rather than the other. This obviously implies that I am indifferent as to whether I should assert or deny either alternative, or indeed refrain from making any judgment on the matter. (2:41; AT 7:59)

Descartes immediately takes things further:

> [B] What is more, this indifference does not merely apply to cases where the intellect is wholly ignorant, but extends in general to every case where the intellect does not have sufficiently clear knowledge at the time when the will deliberates. For 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 my assent the other way. (*Ibid.*)

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From this Descartes at once draws the following conclusion:

> [C] If, however, I simply refrain from making a judgment in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly. (*Ibid.*)

Without "certain and indubitable reasons" we lack "sufficient clarity and distinctness." In this section, I'll offer a reading of the above passages, postponing objections until the next.

In Passage [A], Descartes says that if the evidence in favour of p is no greater than that in favor of not-p, this "obviously implies that I am indifferent" as to whether p. Is that really so? Wishful thinkers and careless believers are often heedless of the evidence. Why shouldn't "I" be one of them? Here Descartes is drawing our attention to the following fact: someone who judges that the evidence in favor of p is no stronger than that against it ("my intellect had not yet come across any persuasive reason") cannot get himself to believe that p by judging that he *should* believe that p given this evidence ("I am indifferent as to whether I should assert or deny either alternative"); reflection on such evidence will leave him feeling indifferent between the two propositions. This person is in the same situation as someone asked to form a view about whether the number of stars is odd or even; he might find himself with an ungrounded belief on this matter, but he couldn't arrive at it by reflecting on what he thought of as *reasons* for belief.

Here Descartes is not setting up his own epistemic standards, rather he is getting his standard from a fact about belief, namely that when human beings reflect on which of two equally well supported but incompatible propositions they ought to believe, that process of reflection generates no inclination to believe either. Where there are motivational forces at work apart from reflection, a view may still be formed but, so far as reflection on what strikes him as a good reason goes, the believer will be left agnostic on the matter. What should convince us of this is each person's "experience in his own case"; though "self-evident" these facts about our motivational psychology cannot be proved "by rational argument" (2:259; AT 7:377).

We are still a long way short of any demand for certainty, but Passage [A] does tell us something about the workings of Cartesian skepticism. Descartes sets out to undermine our beliefs by demonstrating that, as presently constituted, they fail to live up to a requirement which we ourselves acknowledge. And if the demand for certainty is to be the motor of an effective skepticism, it is essential that Descartes proceed in this fashion. Should he appeal to some standard of justification to which ordinary believers are not in some sense already committed, their doubts are more likely to focus on Descartes's standard than on the beliefs he disparages.

Let's examine the rest of the quotation. Passage [B] suggests a much stronger requirement on reasonable belief: that belief in p must be supported by "certain and indubitable reasons" i.e. *conclusive* evidence for p. Again this claim is supported with an assertion about what happens when we *reflect* on our grounds: "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 my

assent the other way." This confirms our earlier hypothesis that Descartes is testing the adequacy of certain reasons by asking whether reflection on them can motivate belief. He now suggests that reflection on merely probable grounds cannot do the trick. On this reading, it comes as no surprise when, in Passage [C], Descartes moves from these points to the conclusion that certainty is, in fact, the correct normative standard for belief.

One might well wonder about the plausibility of the claims Descartes makes about reflective indifference. Do I really feel indifferent about whether to believe p or not-p when the evidence strongly (though not conclusively) favors p? Don't I often form the belief that p in these circumstances because I think I have sufficient evidence for p? I shall tackle this worry in the next section, but first I want to connect the above passages from the Fourth Meditation with the doubts of the First.

The "I" of the above passages is an engaged epistemic deliberator trying to work out what he should believe about a certain matter on the basis of the evidence before him; he is not evaluating beliefs which have already been formed. Yet in the First Meditation Descartes does appear to be subjecting beliefs which he has already to an unfavorable evaluation. For Descartes, these tasks are connected: the way to evaluate a belief in p which is based on evidence e is to ask yourself whether you could have formed a belief in p simply by reflecting on the probative force of evidence e. That is the test the meditator applies so destructively in the First Meditation. Descartes demands that the conclusions of the epistemic evaluator be grounded in the more fundamental perspective of the epistemic deliberator and his attempt to live up to this demand leads to skepticism.

In the Seventh Replies, responding to Pierre Bourdin, Descartes sums up his procedure in the First Meditation with a homely analogy:

> Suppose [Bourdin] had a basket full of apples and, being worried that some of the apples were rotten, wanted to take out the rotten ones to prevent the rot spreading. How would he proceed? Would he not begin by tipping the whole lot out of the basket? And would not the next step be to cast his eye over each apple in turn and pick up, and put back in the basket only those he saw to be sound, leaving the others? (2:324; AT 7:481)

Frankfurt (1970: 19–20) takes this passage to be confirmation of his view that Descartes's "rejection" of all his beliefs is purely methodological and so need not be based on any prior examination of the grounds for them: it is little more than the decision to undertake such an examination. But there is a two-stage process here of which tipping the apples out is only the first.

In the First Meditation, Descartes initially asks us to evaluate our current beliefs from the perspective of someone who is trying to decide whether or not to form them. This procedure does indeed involve the sort of methodological distancing which Frankfurt equates with the Doubt. Having got us to adopt this perspective, Descartes reminds us of various sources of error which are usually ignored when such beliefs are formed and asks whether we can explicitly discount them from our new perspective. The answer is that in good conscience we cannot and so, as epistemic deliberators, we find ourselves unable to endorse our own beliefs. It is at *this* stage, only a little further on in the First Meditation, that Descartes invites us to abandon these beliefs.

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But why adopt this rather roundabout procedure? Why proceed via the standpoint of the epistemic deliberator? Why not just appeal directly to our intuitions about what one is and is not entitled to believe? To put the question another way: why does the First Meditation take the form of a meditation? Why insist that its skeptical argumentation must be stated in the first person? When Descartes addresses these questions (2:110–13; AT 7:155–60) he insists that the meditation form is indispensable, but he is less clear about the reason for its indispensability. I shall side with Foucault (1998: 405–6) and against, for example, Wilson (1978: 4–5) in maintaining that Descartes's use of the first person is essential to the *cogency* of the skeptical argumentation in the First Meditation.

The Need for Certainty

Imagine you are expounding the First Meditation in Epistemology 101. In an attempt to get your students to take Descartes seriously, you say: "Here is this man standing before this barn. He doesn't bother to go around the back of the barn to establish that it is not a mere facade. He concludes simply from the look of it that it is indeed a barn. Isn't he being unreasonable in ignoring the possibility that what's before him is a mere facade?" That way of putting the point won't do the trick. The students will respond that, by the standard usually applied to such situations, the man would be unreasonable *not* to ignore this possibility (unless he has grounds for thinking he is on a film set, etc., etc.). And Descartes has yet to show why the standard we normally apply is, in fact, inappropriate.

To rescue the lecture, first let's try to say *why* the laxer standard seems appropriate. Some might maintain that there is nothing to add here: it is just a fact that our epistemic norms don't require that check. I agree that explanation must end somewhere, but need it come to a halt quite so quickly? Isn't there a story to be told about why we don't demand that our subject check that every barn he sees has a back before concluding it is a barn? Human beings need beliefs, they need to have convictions about a whole range of matters – to satisfy their curiosity, to ground their emotional lives as well as for more practical purposes. That's why it would be unreasonable to demand the elimination of every possible source of error. Asked to defend our conclusion that the subject's conviction was reasonable, we would note that someone with a finite capacity to collect, store, retrieve, and evaluate evidence can't always be holding out for more: at some stage, he must form a view on the basis of the evidence he has now got if he is ever to form a view at all.

Given this, how do we present the skeptic's point in a way that might carry conviction? Do as Descartes suggests and get the students to look at things from the standpoint of an epistemic deliberator. Suppose you start with no view about whether there is a barn before you and then try to get yourself to form a view by reflecting just on what you see from the spot on which you are standing. Try telling yourself the very story you told a moment ago, all that stuff about the constraints you labor under and your need to make up your mind. It doesn't seem to have the required impact; it doesn't seem to be the sort of thing which could (just insofar as you are rational) convince you to form a view about whether there is a barn before you.

We are now in a position to support the claims Descartes makes about indifference. First, it *is* true that I feel reflective indifference in the face of inconclusive evidence, at least once I am clear that I would need to invoke pragmatic considerations to make up my mind. However much the inconclusive evidence is stacked in favor of p and against not-p, I could always wait for more, and purely evidential considerations will never explain why I don't wait for more. To motivate belief, to explain why we make up our minds, we need to invoke pragmatic considerations, but *reflection* on such considerations does not make one's mind up: in that sense, it leaves one feeling indifferent, just as Descartes says. Our minds may be made up because of these pragmatic constraints, but *reflection* on these considerations won't move us.

Descartes puts his skeptical argumentation in the form of a meditation precisely to bring this fact home to us; the inefficacy of reflection on pragmatic considerations is evident once we are persuaded to adopt the essentially first person standpoint of the epistemic deliberator. That's why Descartes is so insistent that the reader must "join me in meditating" (2:112; AT 7:158) if he is to rid himself of the prejudices and preconceptions which he brings to the *Meditations*. We'd miss his point if we simply evaluated beliefs we had already formed from the outside, as it were.

Does the above line of reasoning make an appearance in Descartes's text or is it something we must attribute to him to make sense of what he does say? Before answering, let me first rephrase the points just made. In the eyes of an "external" evaluator there are two distinct questions one can ask about a prospective belief: (a) should the believer form a view about whether p; (b) given that he should form a view, should he believe that p or that not-p? But from the first person standpoint of the epistemic deliberator, this distinction evaporates. For the prospective believer themselves, there are not two separate questions: should I now form a view about whether p? If so, which view should I form? Insofar as reflection on certain considerations persuades him that he ought to form a view on whether p is true, such reflection can do so only by persuading him of the truth (or falsity) of p. In getting us to meditate, Descartes makes this fact plain.

This line of thought comes close to the surface of Descartes's text a little earlier on in the Fourth Meditation where he gives his theory of error:

> When I look more closely at myself and inquire into the nature of my errors . . . I notice that they depend on two concurrent causes, namely on the faculty of knowledge which is in me, and on the faculty of choice or freedom of the will; that is they depend on both the intellect and the will simultaneously. Now all that the intellect does is to enable me to perceive the ideas which are subjects for possible judgments; and when regarded strictly in this light, it turns out to contain no error in the proper sense of that term. (2:39; AT 7:56)

To get error, I must endorse or assent to the ideas served up by the intellect when those ideas are, to some degree, obscure or confused and assent is an act of will.

Coming to believe p involves settling on p (rather than not-p) as the better option and settling on now (rather than later) as the time to make up your mind about whether p is true. Following Descartes, we might call the faculty which tackles the former issue "the intellect" and the faculty which resolves the latter issue "the will".

Now suppose *pace* Descartes that reasonable belief could be based on a sufficiency of inconclusive evidence. Then there would always be two questions to address. First, what is the data served up by the intellect? Does it make p look more or less plausible than not-p? Evidence alone seems relevant here. Second, is the data served up by the intellect sufficiently convincing and the issue sufficiently pressing to make it reasonable for us to form a view on the matter right now?

The fact that Descartes gives the will a role to play in the process of belief formation might make it look as if he thought that the formation of a belief requires us to attend firstly to the clarity of the ideas served up by the intellect and secondly to those other considerations which determine whether it would be sensible to make a decision now, to assent to the proposition which the intellect presents to us. But while Descartes allows that there are indeed two independent sources of epistemic *motivation* here, this does not mean he thinks there are two different kinds of *reason*. When it comes to judgment (rather than conjecture), the will has no reasons for assent except those derived from the intellect:

> the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand. Since the will is indifferent in such cases, it easily turns aside from what is true and good, and this is the source of my error and sin. (2:40–1; AT 7:58)

The *only* reasons for belief are served up by the intellect or, to put the point in Descartes's words, "it is clear by the natural light that the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will" (2:41; AT 7:60).

Given this, if the intellect gave us only probable evidence we would never be entitled to form beliefs. Possessing merely probable evidence and reflecting on what he ought to believe, the believer could answer the question as to *how much* probable evidence is sufficient to justify belief only by going beyond the deliverances of the intellect, only by employing his will in a way that seems illicit not only to Descartes but also to the believer himself. As we have seen, a rational believer cannot control his beliefs by making judgments about what he should believe given the non-evidential constraints on his mental life.

The only way for the believer to retain reflective control over his mental life is to insist on certainty; mere probability, however great, will never do for belief. Practical affairs might require us to make assumptions about how things are, assumptions whose truth the understanding does not assure us of; here the will must go beyond the deliverances of the intellect. But to allow our will to play an independent role in determining our judgments is to enter a region in which it seems *to ourselves* that we have nothing to go on in the way of reasons for belief, though we may still find ourselves with (irrational) convictions. In that sense, our will is *indifferent* whenever the intellect is uncertain.[1]

We have arrived at the conclusion that certainty is required for justified belief. Isn't this rather alarming? Is it ever possible to meet this standard? I don't find a clear answer in Descartes. In some moods he appears to think that one can and should confine one's beliefs to matters about which one can be absolutely certain. The Sixth Meditation contains an attempt to show how careful checks can enable us to avoid

making erroneous judgments based on the deliverances of the senses. For example, speaking of the judgments we make about the shape and size of particular objects, he remarks that:

> Despite the high degree of doubt and uncertainty involved here, the very fact that God is not a deceiver, and the consequent impossibility of there being any falsity in my opinions which cannot be corrected by some other faculty supplied by God, offers me a sure hope that I can attain the truth even in these matters. (2:55–6; AT 7:80)

On the other hand, Descartes was pessimistic about the capacity of human beings to take his advice and he ends the *Meditations* with the following words:

> since the pressure of things to be done does not always allow us to stop and make such a meticulous check, it must be admitted that in this human life we are often liable to make mistakes about particular things and we must acknowledge the weakness of our nature. (2:62; AT 7:90; see also 1:289–91; AT 8A:389–91)

We don't make time to check the back of that barn even though true justification requires "certain and indubitable reasons."

It is now clear why Descartes thinks that certainty is required for justified belief. But we are not yet out of the woods. Why doesn't the demand for certainty apply with equal force in the practical sphere?

Descartes's Conjectures

The (temporary) success of Descartes's skeptical argumentation leaves him facing the question: how is one to act without belief? Now one could refuse to answer this question. One could maintain that once theoretical reason has been undermined, there is no point in looking for *reasons* for acting one way rather than another. Instinct may ensure that one behaves in a certain fashion, but practical reasoning is at an end. This is not Descartes's view. Such an abdication of responsibility for one's mental life would be anathema to Descartes, who places self-control at the center of his ethical theory (e.g., 1:384; AT 9:446). The temporary demise of theoretical reason leaves practical reason intact and Descartes uses the latter to govern his life as a skeptic. For example, he pursues knowledge, a pursuit which involves him making the judgment that knowledge is good and having views about how best to attain it (1:124–5; AT 6:28). Descartes's skeptical inquiry is meant to be an activity fully under his control because consciously directed at an aim which is judged to be both worthwhile and attainable.

How will Descartes behave in other matters until he recovers his earlier knowledge? Having resolved to rid himself of his opinions in Part Two of the *Discourse*, Descartes begins Part Three by sketching a "provisional moral code" to guide him "lest I should remain indecisive in my actions while reason obliged me to be so in my judgments" (1:122; AT 6:23). In content, Descartes's provisional moral code resembles that which guided the Pyrrhonian skeptics who wished to "live by appearances." But unlike

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Descartes, the Pyrrhonians made no practical judgments: they *were* guided by instinct (Sextus Empiricus 1994, 1: 23–30).

Descartes sets himself to

> obey the laws and customs of my country . . . and governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions – the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live. (*Ibid.*)

Here Descartes is not passively acceding to the dictates of common sense and the weight of public opinion. Rather, he is actively choosing to adopt certain opinions because he judges them appropriate. But if these opinions are not beliefs, what are they?

We can discover what sort of state we are dealing with here by looking at the reasons Descartes gives for adopting "the most moderate and least extreme opinions." First, there is "probability":

> since in everyday life we must often act without delay, it is a most certain truth that when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions, we must follow the most probable. Even when no opinions appear more probable than any others, we must still adopt some. (1:123; AT 6:25)

It would be quite wrong to conclude from the First Meditation that any opinion is as probable (or improbable) as any other. As we have seen, Descartes clearly states that his "habitual opinions" remain "highly probable" (2:15; AT 7:22), something he could know only via the intellect. (On this point, as on the role of practical judgment, Cartesian skepticism may be closer to Academic than to Pyrhonnian skepticism: Sextus Empiricus 1994, 1: 226–31.) The only serious candidates for retention are opinions which appear at least as probable as their competitors, so we are "aiming at truth" when we adopt these opinions. But such opinions are unlike Cartesian judgments in that evidence isn't the only consideration relevant to their adoption: here the will has reasons of its own.

Descartes says that having abandoned his earlier opinions,

> I was sure I could do no better than follow those of the most sensible men. And although there may be men as sensible among the Persians or Chinese as among ourselves, I thought it would be most useful for me to be guided by those with whom I should have to live. (1:122; AT 6:23)

Now I take it that no one who forms opinions which appear improbable to Descartes will count as reasonable in his eyes. Still, a variety of opinions pass this test and Descartes proposes to adopt the opinions of those "with whom I should have to live." Clearly, there are good pragmatic reasons for this policy: social coordination is effected and social harmony enhanced if we all act on the basis of shared assumptions about the world. When Descartes adds that "in order to discover what opinions they really held, I had to attend to what they did rather than what they said," he clearly has such considerations in mind.

Descartes goes on:

> Where many opinions were equally well accepted, I chose only the most moderate, both because these are always the easiest to act upon and probably the best (excess usually being bad) and also so that if I made a mistake, I should depart less from the right path than I would if I chose one extreme when I ought to have pursued the other. (1:122–3; AT 6:24)

Here Descartes notes further relevant pragmatic considerations: he should adopt opinions which he can act on easily and without incurring great risks if they turn out to be wrong.

So what kind of beast are these opinions which Descartes recommends as a substitute for belief? They are "conjectures" (2:41; AT 7:59) or guesses. Reasonable guesses are based on evidence. True, we can make a guess even when we have no evidence, but we can't reasonably guess that p regardless of whatever evidence we do have. In that sense guesses "aim at the truth." On the other hand, we don't guess just with the aim of getting it right. We'll make a guess when we expect to benefit from making that guess and so the need for social coordination, avoidance of risk, etc. will help to determine which guess we make (Owens 2003: 289–93).

Furthermore, there is no problem with controlling our guesses by reflecting on both the evidential and the pragmatic considerations which together make these guesses reasonable. Take one of Descartes's own examples. I am hungry, indeed starving, and the only food available is apples. It occurs to me that these apples may be poisoned, though there is no sign of this. Here I tell myself that to preserve life, I must take a view and assume they are not. I can get myself to do this by reflecting on these practical necessities and on the difficulty of obtaining a cast iron guarantee that the apples are safe. And because reflection on the probative force of these considerations does *not* (insofar as I am reasonable) leave me in a state of indifference as to what I ought to do, these considerations justify my guessing that the apples are safe and then eating them. Indeed, Descartes goes so far as to say that I would be "insane" not to eat the apples (3:189; AT 3:423).

We might conclude, using language Descartes employs elsewhere (1:130; AT 7:38 and 1:289–90; AT 8A:328), that I am entitled to a "moral certainty" that the apples are not poisonous. But matters are different when the question is whether I ought to believe that the apples are safe. Belief requires "metaphysical certainty" (Curley 1993: 14–20). Yet most of us do not just guess that the fruit we eat is safe, we believe this and we believe this even though we acknowledge that evidence might come along which showed the fruit we eat to be unsafe. Are such beliefs reasonable? Can we get ourselves to believe that the apples are safe by reflecting that we have enough evidence to believe this, given that we can't spend our whole lives investigating the matter and so forth? Such reflections don't have the same power to convince us of the truth of this proposition as they do to get us to act on the assumption that it is true and so (for Descartes) these considerations cannot constitute reasons for belief. One who believes that the apples are not poisonous does so because they feel an urge to believe this, not because it seems to them that they are entitled to this belief (2:259; AT 7:377).

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It is now clear that the line of thought which prevented us taking inconclusive evidence as sufficient reason for belief does not apply to those conjectures we make for practical purposes. But what are the principles of reasoning we employ when formulating and revising our conjectures? And what is their status? Descartes hints at the sort of thing he has in mind when stating the second maxim of his provisional moral code:

> to be as firm and decisive in my action as I could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once I had adopted them, with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain. In this respect I would be imitating a traveler who, upon finding himself lost in a forest, should not wander about turning this way and that, and still less stay in one place, but should keep walking as straight as he can in one direction, never changing it for slight reasons even if mere chance made him choose it in the first place. (1:123; AT 6:25; see also 3:97; AT 2:35)

This looks like a familiar principle for decision making under uncertainty, one which can arguably be known *a priori* and with certainty (*pace* Gilson 1947: 243). In this it is like the principle mentioned earlier when Descartes said, "it is a *most certain truth* that when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions, we must follow the most probable" (my emphasis). So the demand for certainty is met by the principles of practical reason (compare Wolterstorff 1996: 181 and Marshall 1998: ch. 2).

To sum up, when Descartes says that his doubts apply to "the investigation of truth" and not to "the actions of life" he is not suggesting that belief should be abandoned only in science and not in life. Rather, he means us to abandon belief across the board while planning the actions of life with a quite different tool: conjecture. Both belief and conjecture "aim at the truth," yet while we can use fallibilist norms to govern our conjectures, we cannot use them to regulate our beliefs. That is why the Cartesian doubt undermines our convictions without hobbling our practical reasoning.

Descartes's Suppositions

Having laid out his provisional moral code in Part Three, Descartes begins Part Four of the *Discourse* as follows:

> Since I now wished to devote myself solely to the search for truth, I thought it necessary to do the very opposite and reject as if absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see whether I was left believing anything that was entirely indubitable. (1:126–7; AT 6:32)

Here Descartes is going beyond mere agnosticism. He "supposes" that nothing is such as our senses make it appear, that all the arguments he had previously taken to be demonstrative are unsound, and resolves "to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams" (*ibid.*). It is one thing to abandon ordinary beliefs because they are uncertain, quite another to imagine or "pretend" that these beliefs are false. Yet this pretence is also recommended towards the end of the First Meditation (2:15; AT 7:22).

Clearly, we must distinguish two rather different cognitive attitudes – conjecture and supposition – both of which Descartes employs during that phase of his intellectual journey which follows the abandonment of belief and only one of which is intended as a practical substitute for belief. Conjecture aims at truth in a way that supposition does not: a false guess is failure as a guess, a false supposition is no failure as a supposition. Whilst one can assume for the sake of argument something that one believes to be false, one can't sincerely conjecture or guess that p when one believes that not-p. Conjectures are constrained by probability, suppositions are not (Owens 2003: 290).

For action we need probable conjecture, not mere supposition. So when Descartes lays down which opinions he should use to govern the skeptical phase of his life, he is concerned with adopting conjectures and not with making suppositions. But once he has a background of opinion in place, he opens Part Four with the announcement that it would be sensible to make certain suppositions in order to pursue one of his practical projects, the search for knowledge. As Descartes explains in the Fifth Replies:

> it is often useful to assume falsehoods instead of truths in this way in order to shed light on the truth, e.g., when astronomers imagine the equator, the zodiac, or other circles in the sky, or when geometers add new lines to given figures. (2:242; AT 7:350)

But how can mere supposition help him in the search for knowledge? I suspect supposition plays more than one role for Descartes and I shall consider only the most important of them.

Imagine Descartes finds himself feeling quite certain of something, perhaps of a mathematical demonstration. Descartes tells us that "my nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and very distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true" (2:48; AT 7:69); it looks as if he can't doubt the demonstration. (See also 2:25; AT 7:36 and 1:207; AT 6:21.) Yet, in the First Meditation, Descartes notes that "others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge" and asks "may I not 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; see also 1:194; AT 8A:6). So while he may be unable to doubt the demonstration now, he can see how a time may come when some more or less subtle fallacy is pointed out to him. Does this sort of reflection provoke a doubt about what is clearly and distinctly perceived?

Various answers to this question have been canvassed and a full response would involve addressing the problem of the Cartesian circle. But on one point at least there is some agreement among commentators – things clearly and distinctly perceived cannot be doubted by the Cartesian skeptic in the sense in which those opinions which come from and through the senses can and ought to be doubted (cf. Williams 1983: 345–50; Wolterstorff 1996: 189). True, Descartes speaks of doubt in both contexts and does not explicitly distinguish two forms of doubt (2:101; AT 7:141; and 2:308; AT 7:460). But unless we make this distinction in reading him we will find it hard to explain his insistence that he can't fail to believe whatever he clearly and distinctly perceives. And there is a further point. Descartes must rely on his clear and distinct perceptions in order to carry out the *reductio* proofs with which he fends off these threatening suppositions. How could he believe in the cogency of such proofs unless he also

believes in what he clearly and distinctly perceives (Wolterstorff 1996: 214–15; Owens 2000: 126–7)?

Supposition plays a crucial role in the construction of these proofs by *reductio*. Descartes reacts to "doubts" about what is clearly and distinctly perceived by *supposing* that the proposition in question is wrong or the argument invalid and then seeing what follows from that supposition. If some absurdity follows, then he has a demonstration that no such error exists. A mere supposition or guess that they are valid would provide no basis for a firmer belief in their validity. It is precisely this strategy which Descartes employs to deal with the most radical of his skeptical hypotheses, one which occurs in both the *Principles* and the *Meditations*:

> we have been told that there is an omnipotent God who created us. Now we do not know whether he may have wished to make us beings of the sort who are always deceived even in those matters which seem to us supremely evident; for such constant deception seems no less of a possibility than the occasional deception which, as we have noted on previous occasions, does occur. (1:194; AT 8A:6; see also 2:25; AT 7:36)

Reflection on this possibility is not meant to render our clear and distinct perceptions doubtful, which would be impossible. Rather, it leads Descartes to make the supposition that there is such a deceitful God in an effort to derive an absurdity from it, which he does (to his mind) successfully in the Third Meditation (2:35; AT 7:51).

There is much more to be said on the matters raised in this section. What I hope to have established is that (a) we must not confuse the conjectures which govern the life of the Cartesian skeptic with the suppositions which he makes in the course of it and (b) we must distinguish the doubts which force the Cartesian skeptic to adopt conjectures in place of his former beliefs from the "doubts" which are resolved by supposing that what is clearly and distinctly perceived might be false.

Note

1 In Passage [A] Descartes says the absence of persuasive reasons "obviously implies that I am indifferent as to whether I should assert or deny either alternative, *or indeed refrain from making any judgment on the matter*" (my emphasis). According to this final clause, I am indifferent not only about what to believe but also about whether to form any belief on the matter at all. Yet Descartes concludes Passage [C] by saying that I *ought* to suspend belief in these circumstances. So how can indifference as such be indicative of the absence of a reason? This difficulty might tempt someone to read "indifference" as referring to a power of choice, a power which I have regardless of my reasons. But Descartes is quite clear that indifference is something which I feel "when there is no reason pushing me one way or the other" and that "if I always saw clearly what was true and good . . . it would be impossible for me ever to be in a state of indifference" (2:40; AT 7:58; see also 3:245; AT 4:173; and 3:233; AT 4:115). The way out of this difficulty is to read "indifference" here as referring to an indifference of the intellect: our intellect provides no indication as to what we should do with our power of assent. It does not follow that the will feels indifferent between assenting and not assenting: where we have no guidance from the intellect, we see that we ought not to assent.

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