

Descartes: Scepticism, Certainty, and Truth

- 1562: publication of Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in Latin; revival of ancient scepticism: Montaigne, Gassendi, Locke (mitigated scepticism).
- Scepticism: knowledge is impossible, unattainable or fallible; epistemic modesty.
- Agrippa's five modes of suspending judgement (ἐποχή): (1) Discrepancy: disagreement about almost anything (2) Infinity: "what is brought forward as a source of conviction for the matter proposed itself needs another such source, which itself needs another, and so *ad infinitum*, so that we have no point from which to begin to establish anything, and suspension of judgement follows." (3) Relativity: any claim is relative to culture, time, and so on. (4) Assumption: refuse to go further, make dogmatic claim. "We have the mode from hypothesis when the Dogmatists, being thrown back *ad infinitum*, begin from something which they do not establish but claim to assume simply and without proof in virtue of a concession." (5) Circularity: repeat yourself, justification is justified by what it aims to justify.
- Ataraxia (ἀταραξία): "Suspension of judgement is a standstill of the intellect, owing to which we neither reject nor posit anything. Tranquillity is freedom from disturbance or calmness of the soul. [...] But when they suspend judgement, tranquillity follows as it were fortuitously, as a shadow follows a body."¹
- Motivation for rationalism: a new foundation for knowledge, anti-scepticism; hence focus on indubitable truths and *scientia* or certain knowledge.
- Descartes exploits doubt as *method* to show that sense experience cannot yield certainty: "But immediately I noticed that while I was trying thus to think everything false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth, '*I am thinking, therefore I exist*' [*je pense, donc je suis*] was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy that I was seeking" (*Discourse on Method*, AT VI 32, CSM I 127). "So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, [*ego sum, ego existo*] is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind" (*Second Meditation* ¶3).
- Meditator: "I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So now I seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true" (*Third Meditation* ¶2). In short: I know with certainty that I am a thinking thing. This knowledge is

1 From: Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, ed. J. Annas & J. Barnes (2000), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Bk I, §§165, 168, 10, and 29 (in that sequence).

based exclusively on a clear and distinct perception (CDP) of its truth. If CDP was fallible, it could not produce this knowledge. Hence, CDP is infallible.

- Combine with ‘withholding policy’ (*First Meditation* ¶10): do not accept proposition when it is possible to doubt it, since dubious (i.e. possibly false) propositions cannot generate knowledge. CDP does not yield dubious beliefs.
- CDP: an inner intellectual act of direct apprehension or immediate understanding. It is *clear*, when ‘present and accessible to the attentive mind’, and it is *distinct*, when ‘sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear’, i.e. does not contain implications that give rise to doubts (cf. *Principles of Philosophy* I §45).
- Problem: how do we know when perceptions are clear and distinct? “But please note, distinguished Sir, that the difficulty does not seem to be about whether we must clearly and distinctly understand something if we are to avoid error, but about what possible skill or method will permit us to discover that our understanding is so clear and distinct as to be true and to make it impossible that we should be mistaken” (Gassendi, *Fifth Objections*, AT VII 318, CSM II 221). “This I do not dispute; but I maintain that I carefully provided such a method in the appropriate place, where I first eliminated all preconceived opinions [prejudices] and afterwards listed all my principal ideas, distinguishing those which were clear from those which were obscure and confused.” [...] As for the method to enabling us to distinguish between the things that we really perceive clearly and those that we merely think we perceive clearly, I believe [...] that I have been reasonably careful to supply such a method; but I have little confidence that those who spend so little effort on getting rid of their preconceived opinions [prejudices] that they complain that I have not dealt with them in a ‘simple and brief statement’ will arrive at a clear perception of it” (*Fifth Replies*, AT VI 362, 379; CSM II 250, 260).
- Meditate with Descartes: learn how to achieve CDP; from obscure and confused to clear and distinct ideas; cognitive exercises to reverse persistent preoccupation with sensible things.
- Confused perception contains something that is not understood or is concealed, or something of which we are ignorant. Perceptions can be clear but not distinct: pain. We “commonly confuse this perception with an obscure judgement they make concerning the nature of something which they think exists in the painful spot and which they suppose to resemble the sensation of pain” (*Principles of Philosophy* I §46).
- Process of *clarification*: a perception becomes distinct by (i) excluding from it what does not belong to that nature (elimination), (ii) including in it what belongs to the nature of its object (expansion), so that (iii) what belongs to the object’s nature is no longer confused with what does not belong to something else. Paradigm example of clarifying and ‘defusing’ process: *Second Meditation*.²

2 For details, see Patterson, S. (2008). Clear and Distinct Perception. In J. Broughton & J. Carriero (eds.), *A Companion to Descartes* (pp. 216–34). Oxford: Blackwell.

