

Infallibilism and the Cartesian circle

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Infallibilism and certainty

Knowledge is more than true belief; a belief can be accidentally true, true without the believer having any evidence for its truth. Knowledge requires some form of justification (or reliability). How strong does justification need to be to turn true belief into knowledge? How is it related to certainty? The strongest claim we could make is that knowledge has to be *infallible*. A weaker view would say that evidence only needs to make the belief *more probable*.

Infallibilism seems plausible because if I know that *p*, then I can't be mistaken about *p*, because no one can know what is false. And since knowledge is justified, if I know that *p*, I am justified in believing that *p*. And so if I am justified in believing that *p*, *p must* be true. This makes knowledge very difficult, since it is rare that our evidence rules out the *possibility* of error. A consequence of infallibilism, then, is that it opens the door to scepticism. However, I will argue at the end that this argument for infallibilism is flawed.

Is Descartes an infallibilist? He understands knowledge in terms of what is 'completely certain and indubitable'. He 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'.

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. Descartes is only aiming to doubt, not to reject, his beliefs. The sort of doubt Descartes employs is 'hyperbolic'. Descartes does not test his beliefs, e.g. that the external world exists, by whether there is good evidence against them; but by whether it is *possible* that his beliefs are mistaken. In other words, doubt as the test for knowledge is not a matter of what *is doubtful*, in light of the available evidence; the test is what *can* be doubted.

So it seems that Descartes thinks that knowledge (at least the foundations of knowledge) must be *indubitable*; we must be *unable* to doubt it. If that is true, then the belief must be, in some way, infallible. However, this only seems to be true at the beginning of the *Meditations*. By *Meditation* III, Descartes argues that he can know whatever is 'clear and distinct'. This is not indubitable nor infallible, because we can make mistakes, but what is clear and distinct is certain *if we are careful*.

Objection and reply

Descartes' understanding of knowledge, certainty, and the need for doubt have been strongly criticized. Many philosophers have argued that Descartes sets the standard for knowledge too high. Furthermore, his idea of certainty appears to be psychological: he is after beliefs that *he* is certain of. And this is not the same thing as a belief *being certain*. After all, we can make mistakes, and think something is certain (we can be certain of it),

when it is not certain. But, Descartes responds, this is where the Method of doubt comes in. Because we have the habit of jumping to conclusions, only the prudent can distinguish what is genuinely certain from that which merely seems so.

Once we recognize the distinction between my being certain and a belief being certain, we can argue that certainty is not relevant to knowledge; what is really relevant is justification. 'Being certain' is not the same as 'being justified'. We can be certain of beliefs that are not justified – and because the belief is not justified, it is not knowledge. Descartes seems to assume that if we are not certain of a belief, it is not justified. But perhaps this is wrong; perhaps we can be uncertain of beliefs that are justified. This is, at least, a question worth discussing. Is certainty necessary for knowledge? If we can provide an account of justification that doesn't mention certainty, then maybe not. If it is enough for a belief to be justified that the evidence makes it more probable (how much more, though?), then we don't need certainty for justification.

Certainty, as Descartes understands it, is not a feeling; it involves a type of rational insight. He later argues that only claims that are 'clear and distinct' can be certain, and these properties are established by what is immediately apparent to the mind. In *Meditation III*, he says 'things which I see clearly cannot be other than as I conceive them'. So certainty is tested by reason; things *cannot* be otherwise. Descartes thinks that certainty will establish truth, because what cannot be otherwise must be true. To show that something is certain in this way is to prove it must be true, so it is true.

Clear and distinct ideas

The *cogito* is the first clear and distinct idea. When Descartes reflects on why he is certain of it, he says 'In this first knowledge, there is nothing except a clear and distinct perception of what I affirm'. He goes on to argue that *at the time we consider it*, a thought which is clear and distinct we must believe to be true, we cannot doubt it. To be clear, an idea must be 'open and present to the attending mind'; to be distinct, it must not only be clear, but precise and separated from other ideas, so that it 'plainly contains in itself nothing other than what is clear' (*Principles* I.45).

At this point, Descartes has only argued that we can know a clear and distinct idea to be true at the time we hold it in mind. However, he goes on, we cannot think of that one thing all the time so as to keep perceiving it clearly. When our attention is turned away from it, we can no longer be certain of it, even though we remember that we were certain of it. This is because we can go wrong, we can *think* we clearly and distinctly perceived some idea when we did not. In order to be certain that what we once thought was clear and distinct really is certain, we need to know that we are not being deceived by an evil demon. Descartes sets out to show that we can know this, because we can know that God exists, and would not allow an evil demon to deceive us, nor would God deceive us.

The Cartesian circle

In trying to prove the existence of God, Descartes will, of course, have to rely on what he can clearly and distinctly perceive, because this is the only way he can know anything. But Descartes also needs to prove that God exists for us to know what we clearly and distinctly perceived. This leads to a famous objection: that he uses the existence of God to establish his doctrine of clear and distinct ideas, and that he uses his doctrine of clear and distinct ideas to establish the existence of God. It seems that he says

- 1) I am certain that God exists only because *I am certain of whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive*; and yet
- 2) *I am certain of whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive* only because I am certain that God exists.

But Descartes, in his replies to objections, rejects this reading. I can be certain of what I clearly and distinctly perceive without knowing that God exists, but *only at the time* that I perceive it. God's existence adds a *general* certainty that what I clearly and distinctly perceive is true: 'When I said that we can know nothing for certain until we are aware that God exists, I expressly declared that I was speaking of knowledge of those conclusions that can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments by which we deduced them.'

In other words, there are two interpretations of the phrase in italics, and one interpretation is used in (1) and the second in (2). According to the first interpretation, while I am clearly and distinctly perceiving some *particular proposition*, then I am certain of that proposition. But because of the possibility of the evil demon, I lose this certainty as soon as I turn my attention away from it, as I may be deceived that I did perceive it clearly and distinctly. So I don't yet know that proposition is true unless I'm actually attending to it.

In his proofs of the existence of God, Descartes uses our clear and distinct understanding of the idea of God, held in mind throughout the proof. Having proved God's existence, he can now claim (the second interpretation, in 2 above) he is certain that *whatever* he has clearly and distinctly perceived, he can be certain of. And he is certain of this *general principle*, linking clearness and distinctness to truth, because God exists, and is no deceiver.

The difficulty facing Descartes is whether he is entitled to claim that he can be certain of what he clearly and distinctly perceives, even at the time he perceives it, while it is still possible that he is being deceived by a demon. His response is that it is simply our nature to assent to such clear and distinct thoughts – we cannot but believe them, because 'things which I see clearly cannot be other than as I conceive them'.

Rejecting infallibilism

The argument for infallibilism that we began with rests on a logical error. Infallibilism is the claim that 'if I know that p, then I can't be mistaken about p'. But this claim is ambiguous, i.e. it has more than one possible meaning, depending on how one understands the 'can't'. Here are two ways to understanding the claim:

Reading 1: 'It can't be the case that if I know that p, I *am* mistaken that p.'

We should agree with this; in fact, it is analytically true. By definition, you cannot know what is false.

Reading 2: 'If I know that p, (I am in a position that) I *can't possibly* be mistaken that p.'

This is what infallibilism claims. It is a much stronger claim than Reading 1, because it says that not only am I *not* mistaken, but I *can't possibly be* mistaken that p. Obviously, there are many cases in which I *could* be mistaken that p, but in fact I am not.

Furthermore, if my true belief rests on evidence, there are good reasons why I am not mistaken. Nevertheless, I *could be*; this isn't impossible.

The argument for infallibilism used Reading 1 to support Reading 2. But this is a mistake. The two claims are distinct, since one is a claim about whether I *am* mistaken, and the other is a claim about whether I *could be* mistaken. So if we are going to accept infallibilism, we need some other, independent reason for believing Reading 2. Perhaps Descartes offers us such a reason when he claims that knowledge requires certainty, given to us in clear and distinct ideas, and certainty requires that I can't be mistaken.