

Descartes' Evil Demon *Keith Crome*

Introduction

It is perhaps the case that contemporary readers of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* are most taken with the idea of the Evil Demon invoked by René Descartes in the first *Meditation*.¹ In the process of systematically establishing everything which he can doubt in order to discover if there is anything of which he can be certain, Descartes appeals to the figure of the Demon. 'All powerful and cunning', and supposed by Descartes to devote all its energies to deceiving him, the Demon strikes a chord through its numerous parallels in films such as the *Matrix* and *Total Recall*.²

Whilst these parallels are testimony to the imaginative richness of the idea of the Evil Demon, they are less obviously a tribute to its serious philosophical status.³ Certainly the fiction of the Demon is intended to appeal to our imaginations, but in so doing it does not function in a way we normally associate with the imagination, which, as David Hume observes, ordinarily delights in forming monsters and joining incongruous shapes and appearances at the slightest opportunity.⁴ As striking as the idea might be, the figure of the Demon does not inflame the imagination and force us to believe things that are not true; rather, it is a device, a means by which Descartes, supposing all he used to think true to be false, holds himself to all the doubts he has legitimately raised concerning those things he has customarily held to be the case and which by force of habit he is wont to continue to believe.

By recognising that it is the imagination that is captured and put to use by the meditating subject in order to pursue his rationally constructed train of doubt and not the meditating subject who is captured by his imagination, we could now begin a philosophically productive enquiry into Descartes' conception of the faculties of imagination and reason and the relation between them. I do not, however, want to pursue directly such an enquiry here for I am interested in another question that is provoked by the figure of the Demon. The *Meditations* are enquiries of an epistemological and ontological kind in which Descartes establishes what it is possible to know, what knowledge itself is and the nature of what is known. Evil, whose realm is commonly regarded as being limited to the sphere of ethics, would appear to have no significant place among such concerns.⁵ Nevertheless, the fiction of the Evil Demon places the concept of evil at the very heart of 'the method of doubt'. Given that this is the case, my interest is in determining what evil is for Descartes. I hope additionally to establish the identity of the Evil Demon.

1. Resolution To Doubt

To discover who the Evil Demon is and what Descartes means by evil it is necessary to confront Descartes' thinking in the first *Meditation* where he sets out on the path of doubt. Descartes begins by invoking his present uncertainty about what he knows to be true. 'Some years ago', he says, 'I noticed how many false things I had accepted as true in my childhood, and how doubtful were the things that I subsequently built on them.'⁶ The recognition that the knowledge he had acquired on false grounds is, if not

itself necessarily false, at best dubious, leads him to resolve to overturn all his beliefs, everything he once thought he knew. To accomplish this Descartes tells us that it is not necessary for him to show that all his former beliefs are false. This would require a certainty of knowledge as yet unavailable to him and hence would be an impossible undertaking. Instead it is sufficient to withhold assent from anything that is not completely certain and indubitable. Neither is it necessary, he says, to investigate each belief individually. Rather, he need consider only the foundations of his beliefs, since once the foundations are undermined everything built on them will collapse.

The principal and most immediate source for all those things Descartes has 'accepted as being most true up to now' are the senses.⁷ Yet, Descartes recalls that there have been occasions on which his senses have deceived him: things seen from far away have sometimes looked very different when seen close up, and things that were very small have on close inspection appeared otherwise than when they were seen at first glance. On the grounds that it is unwise to trust anything or anyone who has deceived us, if only once, he concludes the senses ought not to be trusted at all.

However, having drawn this conclusion, Descartes immediately raises an objection: if it is certainly reasonable to doubt what the senses tell us about those things that they perceive only weakly and faintly, it would nonetheless be incredible to call into doubt much more powerful, striking and immediate perceptions, such as that of the body, the fact of its presence, its actuality here and now. 'How could I deny that these hands or that this body is mine', he says, 'unless perhaps I think that I am like some of those mad people whose brains are so impaired by the strong vapour of black bile that they confidently claim to be kings when they are paupers, that they are dressed in purple when they are naked, that they have an earthenware head, or that they are a totally hollowed-out shell or are made of glass.'⁸

As ready as we might be to assent to this apparently quite reasonable objection we should nevertheless examine it a little more closely. The initial argument for doubting the evidences of the senses is expressed in universal terms: '*Everything*', Descartes says, 'that I accepted as being most true up to now I acquired from the senses or through the senses. However, I have occasionally found that they deceive me, and it is prudent *never* to trust those who have deceived us, even if only once'.⁹ The reason why this doubt is universal and without qualification is that the senses themselves afford no sure criterion by which it is possible to distinguish a true from a false perception. For example, it is not so much that on standing near to a tree I discover it in truth to be much larger than my initial view of it from a distance had led me to believe. Rather, I have two different views of the tree which, with respect to size, are incompatible. At best I can say only that one of the two appearances is false, without knowing which one it is.

The appeal to the experience that one has of one's own bodily presence and along with it those things that derive their vivacity from their proximity to that presence, does not, as far as I can see, provide any reason for limiting the scope of the initial doubt concerning the evidence of the senses. What criterion is furnished by this experience that is absent from those other things which are derived from the senses and which are essentially dubitable? What assures us that our immediate perception of our body and situation is itself true?

It is perhaps the case, then, that we would misunderstand the nature of the appeal to the body if we think of it as simply furnishing evidence that resists doubt. As Michel Foucault has argued, it is not so much the evidence of the *body* that resists being doubted, but everything connected to the currentness of the person in the act of pursuing the method of doubt.¹⁰ For Descartes, between the knowledge that it is necessary to doubt and carrying out the resolution to doubt there is all the difference in the world, and the problem that he addresses when he invokes the sensory evidence of his actual situation is that of *exercising* his reasons for doubt. In effect, what Descartes admits is that his resolve is unsettled by the spectre of madness: if I pursue my doubt this far, he is saying, would I not be effectively mad? And if I were, would I then be able to effectively doubt, would I be able to carry out my resolution consistently so as to discover the truth? What authority would any conclusion carry if the doubt that establishes it is equivalent to madness?

2. The Place of the Evil Demon in the Method of Doubt

Having recognised what is at issue at this point in the First Meditation is a difference between the logical extent of the doubts raised and the willingness to actually exercise such doubts, we are now in a position to understand the structure of what follows and in particular the function played by the Evil Demon in the method of doubt.

If the meditating subject cannot think himself mad and if this appears to prevent him from doubting, it is nevertheless the case that he can readily recall that he is 'a man who is used to sleeping at night and having all the same experiences while asleep or, sometimes, even more improbable experiences than insane people have while awake?'¹¹ Such a memory enables Descartes to carry out his resolution to doubt by not only calling to mind an entire order of deceptive experiences which replicate in kind the perception he has now, but also by awakening in him a confusion that affects him whilst he is pursuing his current train of thought. Certainly, it at first seems to him that the perception he has of the sheet of paper before him, his head which he shakes and his hand which he opens and feels, would not strike him so forcibly and clearly were he dreaming, but he then recalls previous occasions when he had assured himself that he was awake in just this way whilst he was in fact dreaming. The very clarity that might be supposed to distinguish a real perception from an imaginary one in fact applies equally to both waking experiences and dreams: noting this produces a 'feeling of confusion' which, Descartes says, 'almost confirms me in believing that I am asleep'.¹²

The 'feeling of confusion' sown in him by such memories enables him to carry out his resolution to doubt since he can now suppose himself to be asleep and imagine that not only does he not shake his head or open and feel his hand, but that he has neither head nor hands nor body. By imagining that he is dreaming Descartes is able to doubt all sensory images – the entirety of those things he hitherto believed most true.

But is it not the case that there are truths that are constant, irrespective of whether we are awake or asleep? If there are such truths, they would be the elements that underlie our sensory and imaginary perceptions and from which they were ordered. Accordingly, Descartes considers the possibility that 'physical nature in general and its extension...the shape of extended things; also their quantity, or their size and number, similarly the place in which they exist, the time through which they last...'

are real.¹³ And, if this is indeed the case, then it follows that those sciences that are concerned with such simple and general things, and which are indifferent to their actual existence, provide us with truths that cannot be suspected of falsity, for as Descartes has it: 'whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together always make five and a quadrilateral figure has no more than four sides.'¹⁴

As these truths are of a non-sensory, intelligible kind, any doubt about them must itself be of a like kind. There now opens a series of considerations that lead Descartes to the hypothesis of the Evil Demon. Among his ideas, Descartes recalls one, long fixed in his mind, of an all-powerful God who has created him. Could not he have arranged that the simplest and most universal things such as the earth, sky, extended bodies, shape, magnitude and place all appeared to exist whilst not really doing so? Could it not also be the case that God 'may have caused me to be mistaken... when I add two and three together, or think about the number of sides in a quadrilateral figure, or something even simpler if that can be imagined?'¹⁵

To such an argument it might be objected that God, whose attributes include benevolence and goodness in the highest degree as well as omnipotence, would not deceive anyone in this way nor allow anyone to be so deceived. In response Descartes reminds us that should it be admitted that God is the author of our being, then it must also be admitted that he has made it so that we are sometimes mistaken or deceived. Since that is the case, it does not follow that it would be contrary to his nature to make it that we are always mistaken or deceived. But why suppose that such a God exists? Might it not be that the idea itself is fictitious? Even were that the case it would not follow, Descartes argues, that all other purely intelligible truths would be secured from doubt; for 'since to be deceived and mistaken seems to be some kind of imperfection', the less powerful and less perfect the being that created me was, the more liable it is that I am constituted in such a way to be always mistaken.

However, and as Descartes says, recalling what he has already once before been forced to admit: 'it is not enough simply to know this'; it must also be 'kept in mind'.¹⁶ The meditating subject must be induced to hold his doubts present before himself. He must train his attention on them, lest those 'familiar beliefs', which return despite himself and against his will, sway his judgement in so far as it is bound to them 'by established custom and the law of familiarity'.¹⁷ Such an inducement is found in the hypothetical figure of the Evil Demon. On the supposition that this demon devotes all its energies to deceiving him, Descartes imagines that there is no earth, air, sky, no colours, shapes or sounds, nothing external to him and that he has in actuality no hands, no blood, no senses at all, but falsely believes himself to possess such things: body, shape, extension, motion and place are all unreal.

3. The Resolution of Doubt

There are, then, two orders operative in the First Meditation. There is an order of *demonstration*, for which it is a matter of the logical and evidential grounds for the propositions advanced. It consists in the series of negative proofs that structure the method of doubt. The truths Descartes held on the basis of external authorities, those supplied through the senses and imagination, the truths of ideas of a non-sensory and non-imaginative origin are all shown to lack the self-evidence they might have been supposed to contain.

On the other hand, there is an order bearing on the *exercise* of meditating itself, in which the meditating subject applies himself to actually doubting. The Evil Demon, as I have argued, is invoked by Descartes in relation to this order. The omnipotence and omnimalevolence of the Demon elicits the application of a controlled vigilance on the part of the meditating subject; through it Descartes is able to counteract the perversity of his judgement which is otherwise and ordinarily led by habit and a kind of laziness back to its old opinions. However, if the fiction of the Demon serves to exercise and discipline the will of the meditating subject, it is in turn exorcised by the discovery of the *cogito*, a discovery made possible through the very exercise and discipline the Demon occasions. As Descartes observes, for all that there is an all powerful and cunning deceiver dedicated to constantly deceiving he cannot bring it about that I am nothing, because it is indubitable that if I am deceived, I exist. Through the self-certainty of the doubting, thinking subject, what I above called the 'resolution to doubt' comes to offer itself as the resolution of doubt. Thinking, turning its attention upon itself, becomes apparent to itself in act and in its actuality, and Descartes is thence led to propose 'I think, I am'. Expressing and embodying the presence of thought to itself this proposition is, Descartes says, necessarily true for himself whenever it is stated or conceived by him.

The discovery of the *cogito* brings together, then, both the demonstrative and executive orders at play in the First Meditation, its evidence deriving not from a content or ground exterior to it, but from itself, from its very act. With this discovery, the omnipotence of the Evil Demon is undone; the evidential authority of the *cogito* is such that, as the Second Meditation shows, the 'I' cannot be deceived in everything. If the Evil Demon is not what it is supposed to be – if no sooner than it is invoked it is in fact shown to be intrinsically limited in its power and cunning, what is it? And what does all this tell us about the Cartesian concept of evil?

4. The Nature of Evil and the Identity of the Evil Demon

Given that the Evil Demon's capacity to deceive is limited in the face of the first truth, in order to discover who or what the Demon is, it will be necessary to examine the Cartesian concepts of truth and error. These Descartes advances in the Fourth Meditation, entitled 'Truth and Falsehood'.

Having assured himself of the first truth – *cogito, sum* – in the Second Meditation and in the Third the existence of God, Descartes now argues that God would never deceive. Deception, he argues, is not, as it might seem, evidence of cleverness or power, but of malice and folly and thus it cannot be attributed to God. Certainly, as we have already seen, the intention to deceive is incompatible with absolute intelligence and power since it is impossible to deceive the meditating subject about everything: if I think that I am, I am.

However, acknowledging that God, the author of his being, does not deceive him leaves Descartes with a difficulty, which he states as follows:

I experience a certain faculty of judgement in myself, which just like everything else that is in me, I received from God. Since God does not wish me to be mistaken he obviously did not give me a faculty such that, when I use

it correctly, I could ever be mistaken. There would be no further doubt about this, except that it seems to follow that I can never be mistaken; for if everything I possess comes from God and if he did not give me a faculty for making mistakes, it seems as if I could never be wrong about anything.¹⁸ In short, the problem that Descartes now faces is how to reconcile our undoubted ability to judge something true when it is not, or similarly something false when it is not, with God's perfection. This he does by distinguishing two faculties, the faculty of knowing, or the intellect, and the faculty of choosing, or the will.

According to Descartes, the intellect perceives ideas, about which a judgement can then be made by the will. Thus, and in contrast to many modern philosophers, Descartes does not think the act of judgement as simply the connecting together of ideas; rather, for him, judgement is the act of assuming a position towards such ideas, of judging them to be correct or not, assenting to them, denying them or, as when one doubts, refraining from either assenting to them or denying them. To take a relatively simple example, my intellect perceives the idea of heat, about which I may then either judge that it is something real and existing or not, or suspend my judgement by choosing neither to affirm nor deny its reality and existence.

Descartes recognises that our intellect is finite, there are perhaps many things of which we have no idea, many ideas we have forgotten, but for Descartes this lack of knowledge is not in itself a cause of error. We could have many more ideas than we do and yet be no closer to the truth for all that; conversely, we could have fewer ideas, but judge truly those we have. Thus, in so far as it merely perceives ideas, the intellect contains no error. It is in judging ideas that errors arise.

If we consider the will, which exercises judgement, then we find, Descartes says, that unlike the intellect, it is infinite and perfect. Simple in so far as it consists in the ability to either to do or not do something – that is to seek or avoid something, affirm or deny something – the will cannot be limited without being abolished; a lesser will would be no will at all.

All our errors occur, Descartes argues, in the discrepancy between the extent of the will and that of our knowledge and our failure to restrain the former within the limits of the latter. If I affirm or deny that which I do not understand perfectly clearly and distinctly to be the case, I over-extend my judgement; I act rashly and hubristically and either fall into error or discover a truth for which I can give no good reasons. And even in the latter case I am at fault, for, Descartes says, 'it is evident by the natural light of reason that the perception of the understanding should always precede the determination of the will'.¹⁹

Thus, for Descartes, all falsehood originates in and from ourselves: we alone are the source of the errors we make. It is not even the case, as is sometimes asserted, that Descartes holds that our senses or our bodies deceive us; the senses are truth-neutral; it is only in the act of judging the perceptions of the mind, its ideas, that error proper originates. Given that this is the case, the Evil Demon – a figure devoted to deception and inducing error – can only be ourselves, albeit in a guise that we are not able to recognise at first. More exactly, the Demon is simply the subject that does not know

its own nature and ground, the subject that has not discovered its true identity or being; that does not know itself as the *cogito*, the presence of thought to itself.

But what, then, is evil for Descartes? Not only is the Evil Demon potentially able to deceive us because of our tendency to judge on matters about which we have insufficient knowledge, it is a figure conjured out of our ignorance of our own essential natures. Descartes does nothing less than situate evil within the domain of knowledge, identifying it in essence with error.²⁰ Evil, in other words, is for Descartes an epistemological deficiency. As has long been recognised, it is in the primacy accorded to epistemology that the radicality of the Cartesian project resides. With the figure of the Evil Demon, Descartes both sharpens the traditional view of evil and dislocates it. At least since Plato, evil has been thought of as occasioned by ignorance – if I act badly it is because I do not know, or do not correctly understand, what the good is. With Descartes, however, evil is not simply occasioned by ignorance; it is identified with it.

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¹ It is possibly the case that Descartes' contemporaries were no less struck by this figure. Certainly, Descartes himself felt the Evil Demon to be his original contribution to the development of scepticism. See J. G. Cottingham (ed.), *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). Richard Popkin, in *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) locates the original impetus for the figure of the Demon in the trial at Loudon of a priest, Grandier, 'accused of infesting a convent with devils'. This case aroused a great deal of interest in the demoniac and raised the question of whether someone possessed of such an ability could influence and deceive a judge and jury at a trial. 'In the light of the issues about the reliability of evidence,' Popkin suggests, 'Descartes may have seen that if there can be a demonic agent in the world, apart from Grandier's case, a serious ground for scepticism is involved'. (p. 181)

² R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy in Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, ed. D. Clarke, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1998), p. 22.

³ Popkin betrays something of such a concern when, introducing the historical source for the Demon hypothesis, he says that this might serve to explain 'why this sort of scepticism with regard to our faculties might have struck one as a forceful and serious idea' (op. cit. p. 180).

⁴ See D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. T. L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 97. In the passage in question Hume continues: 'And while the body is confined to one planet, the thought can in an instant transport us into the most distant regions of the universe, or even beyond the universe, into unbounded chaos [...] What was never seen, or heard of, may yet be conceived; nor is anything beyond the power of thought, except what implies an absolute contradiction'. Ibid

⁵ Descartes would appear to corroborate this view in the Prefatory 'Summary of the Following Six Meditations' in which he says 'one should note that there is no discussion there [in the Fourth Meditation] about sin, that is a mistake made in pursuing good and evil, but merely of mistakes that occur in deciding truth and falsehood', op. cit, p. 16. However, as my argument here shows, if Descartes is certainly stating the facts, he is nonetheless disregarding the force of his own insights.

⁶ Ibid. p. 18

⁷ Ibid. p. 19

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. Both emphases are mine.

¹⁰ M. Foucault, 'My Body, This Paper, This Fire' in *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, ed. J. D Faubion (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 2000), p. 407. My reading of this part of the first *Meditation* is largely indebted to Foucault's rich and powerful analysis.

¹¹ R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, p. 19.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 20

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 21.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 44-5

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 49

²⁰ This view is one that is confirmed by Etienne Gilson in his doctoral thesis, *La Doctrine Cartésienne de la liberté* (As Anthony Kenny puts it, Gilson argues that the 'problem of evil presented itself to Descartes above all as the problem of error'. See A. Kenny 'Descartes on the Will' op. cit.)