

Question: **'All the world's a dream.'** How can we be sure that it is not?

Problem = circularity of arguing that there exists more than the present content of our minds

e.g. I know there exist in the world objects, which are nothing more than a collection of sense impressions in my mind, because I have the evidence of my sense impressions.

1. **Descartes' answer:**

a) **Certainty = own existence as a thinking/doubting thing**
doubting my existence = evidence of my existence

b) **Clear and distinct ideas** = indubitable

c) **Problem = solipsism**

d) Answer = **God as the only bridge between own existence and external world – God must exist because:**

(i) **Ontological argument**

(ii) **The lesser cannot give rise to the greater/** the imperfect to the perfect

Therefore the **external world = not an illusion, because:**

(i) **God would not deceive us** – only a limited imperfect being would do this

(ii) God created us so that if we **use our faculties correctly** we can avoid making mistakes

(iii) Clear and distinct ideas = using our faculties correctly

Causation = a clear and distinct idea therefore sense impressions, which are not of our own making, are caused by something

e) **Circularity -- 'Cartesian circle':**

(i) To prove God's existence we must start from certain principles and axioms

(ii) We know these = correct because we clearly and distinctly perceive their truth

- (iii) But how can we trust our clear and distinct perceptions?
Because God is perfect and benevolent and wouldn't deceive us by giving us a mind capable of error if used correctly
- (iv) But then we can't trust our clear and distinct ideas until we know God exists, and we can't prove God exists without relying on clear and distinct ideas

2. Empiricists: Locke, Berkeley, Hume

World = not a dream because,

- a) **Sense data** = unproblematic – primitive authenticity

but Russell – table looks different from different perspectives:

- (i) Colour = different under different lighting
- (ii) Shape = depends upon position of the observer
- (iii) Texture – smooth to human eye – rough under a microscope
- (iv) etc.

- b) **Perception:**

but (i) observation = theory laden

e.g. witnesses to a crime

(ii) perception = ruled by conventions

e.g. Herskovits

(iii) shapes our selection of data and interpretation

e.g. gestalt theory

- c) **Objects:**

(i) **Locke** – our experience = caused by physical objects

(ii) **Berkeley** – we only have experience of the **ideas** objects cause in us – therefore a consistent empiricist must give up

I. Causal theory of perception

II. Notion of physical objects

(iii) **Berkeley = 3-fold division of ideas:**

I. Ideas – 'imprinted to the senses'

II. Hopes, fears, desires, etc.

III. Memories, imagination

(iv) Berkeley – **physical objects** as permanent & objective = **myth**

-- we can't make inferences to material things which we can no way perceive

I. mental event cannot represent anything that is not an idea

II. if material objects = different from ideas we can have no way of knowing them

Therefore the world could be an illusion

d) **God hypothesis = the escape from solipsism:**

(i) **Locke** – the 'divine architect'

(ii) **Berkeley:**

I. Explains how things can continue to exist when not being perceived by anyone – to exist consists in being perceived

II. Accounts for the series of ideas that occur and the regularity of the patterns

III. Ideas = 'imprinted on the senses by the author of nature' – the universal mind constantly perceives all the ideas and makes us aware of groups of them at various times

But you are not forced to accept the God hypothesis – therefore this still doesn't successfully dismiss the possibility of the world being just a dream.

i.e.

It cannot successfully free us from the possible malicious influence of the evil genius.

e) **Without the God hypothesis:**

(i) **Hume:**

I. **nothing exists beyond appearances** presented to our senses

II. an object in the external world just *is* the name we give to a certain **collection of ideas or sensations**

III. all ideas, including Descartes' 'innate ideas', ultimately
derive from experience

IV. physical objects must be considered an illusion -- we can
have no knowledge of the existence of physical objects as
relatively permanent things, distinct and independent of
us. For this we would have to be able to observe the
sensation and the physical object separately and clearly
this is exactly the point at issue.

V. But it is a convenient assumption we might have to accept:

'... the sceptic ... must assent to the principle concerning
the existence of body, though he cannot pretend, by any
arguments of philosophy, to maintain its veracity. ... That is
a point which we must take for granted in all our
reasonings.'

(ii) **Kant:**

I. Like Berkeley and Hume he accepts there are two worlds:
-- the 'noumenal' world, the world in itself, independent of
us and unknowable in itself;
-- the 'phenomenal' world, which we know as a result of our
own active processing of sense data

II. Phenomena = objects we construct to have objective
knowledge from sensations

III. An object = merely a bundle of sensations (Hume) +
organised by our mental structures into perceptions, and
perceptions into conceptions

Therefore, we can never know the world in itself, only the phenomenal world,
which leaves open the possibility that it may be a dream or illusion.

= the legacy of Descartes' metaphysical self

Our only starting point for knowledge of the external world is our own
momentary conscious experiences. As these are private, they alone won't
allow us to move from here to the public world of lasting physical objects.

Question: **Explain and examine critically the role played by**

clear and distinct perceptions in Descartes' attempt to arrive at certainty.

Explanation

1. **Source of certainty** = reason/intuition – non-empirical:

a) **Man = 'a think which thinks'**

Therefore,

(i) First certainty = my own existence – 'I think therefore I am'

(ii) Problems of evil genius/dreams/illusions = dispelled by this one certainty

(iii) Even if I doubt my existence, the act of doubting confirms it

b) **Clear and distinct ideas:**

(i) Perceptions = immediate & unproblematically known
e.g. fear

(ii) What they might resemble = inferred from the ideas they cause in us = the causal theory of perception

e.g. Wax

I. Extension – 'intuition of the mind' = the only essential property
-- senses/imagination = unable to picture all shapes

II. Intellect – clear and distinct ideas = mathematical/geometrical properties – extended in 3 dimensions

(iii) Objects in material world exist

I. because God has given us a 'very strong inclination' to believe in physical objects – therefore they must exist – because God = no deceiver

II. that God exists and is perfect and benevolent and no deceiver = clear and distinct idea

Critical examination

1. Danger of **solipsism**:

a) But **Wittgenstein's private language theory**

-- makes solipsism incompatible with our having a language through which to express it

b) Descartes thinks in a **public language**:

Therefore (i) Hasn't escaped from the possibility that he still may be deceived by this into believing something that is a dream or illusion

(ii) Therefore must build a bridge between private experience and the public world =

clear and distinct ideas + God hypothesis

2. **God's existence** = necessary to escape from solipsism – a bridge to outside world:

But a) **Ontological argument** defines God into existence

b) **Assumes God = good/honest/non-deceiver**

-- evidence to the contrary e.g. natural disasters

c) **Cartesian circle**:

(i) To prove God's existence we must start from certain principles and axioms

(ii) We know these = correct because we clearly and distinctly perceive their truth

(iii) But how can we trust our clear and distinct perceptions? Because God is perfect and benevolent and wouldn't deceive us by giving us a mind capable of error if used correctly

(iv) But then we can't trust our clear and distinct ideas until we know God exists, and we can't prove God exists without relying on clear and distinct ideas

d) Descartes: **some propositions = clear and distinct without God's guarantee** e.g. $2 + 2 = 4$:

But (i) these = trivial/tautologous

(ii) if you go further than self-confirming propositions infallible guarantee vanishes

Therefore (iii) **fatal dilemma**:

either I. it begins and ends with **uninformative** propositions

or II. advances to more **informative** propositions at the cost of losing certainty and necessity

Re. Berlin: 'Propositions are either certain and uninformative or informative and not certain. Metaphysical knowledge which claims to be both certain and informative is therefore in principle not possible.'

3. **Evil genius**:

- a) Having introduced the evil genius D has no way of getting rid of him
- b) It undermines his confidence in reason as thoroughly as his confidence in God bolsters it