

Marcelo de Araujo  
Scepticism, Freedom and Autonomy



# Quellen und Studien zur Philosophie

Herausgegeben von  
Jürgen Mittelstraß, Dominik Perler,  
Wolfgang Wieland

Band 58

Walter de Gruyter · Berlin · New York  
2003

# Scepticism, Freedom and Autonomy

A Study of the Moral Foundations  
of Descartes' Theory of Knowledge

by  
Marcelo de Araujo

Walter de Gruyter · Berlin · New York  
2003

© Printed on acid-free paper which falls within the guidelines of the ANSI to ensure permanence and durability.

*Library of Congress – Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

*Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Bibliothek*

Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the Internet at <<http://dnb.ddb.de>>.

© Copyright 2003 by Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, D-10785 Berlin

All rights reserved, including those of translation into foreign languages. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Cover design: Christopher Schneider, Berlin  
Printed in Germany

**to Eva, Raffael,  
Amândia, and José Cláudio**



## Acknowledgements

This book is a revised version of my doctoral thesis, submitted to Konstanz University, Germany, on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2002.

I would like to express my indebtedness to my family, for all their uncompromising support; to Michael Esfeld, who was willing to read and comment on parts of the manuscript since the very beginning of my research; to Holmer Steinfath, who read and commented on earlier versions of chapters four, five, and six; as well as to Fernando Rodrigues, for the help and encouragement since the beginning of my studies, and for the comments on different parts of the manuscript.

I am also indebted to Jacob Rosenthal, Su-Yeong Kim, and Raffael Iturrizaga, whose comments and criticism often forced me to revise my own position and, sometimes, even compelled me to steer my research on to an entirely new course; not to mention Waltraud Weigel, for her unfailing assistance at Konstanz University.

I am also grateful to my English proof-reader, Brian Hazlehurst, for his careful work; and to Sandro Reis and Christopher Schirmer, for their invaluable technical support. My heartiest thanks also to Dominik Perler, for his precious comments on the whole manuscript; and to Jürgen Mittelstraß, for his kindness in accepting to participate as co-examiner in my doctoral examination.

Above all, I should like to record my deepest indebtedness to Peter Stemmer, my doctoral supervisor. For the kindness and competence with which he helped me at every step of my research, I am most grateful.

Last but not least, I also thank CNPq, Brazilian National Scientific and Technological Development Council, for their financial support; and DAAD, Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, for a four-month scholarship at Goethe-Institut, Freiburg.



## Contents

INTRODUCTION .....	1
I: DESCARTES' THEORY OF JUDGEMENT .....	8
Introduction .....	8
1. Entertaining and Judging .....	9
2. Kinds of Thoughts: Ideas, Affections, and Judgements .....	15
3. Ideas: Picture-Like Thoughts and Propositions .....	18
4. <i>Facultas Cognoscendi</i> and <i>Facultas Eligendi</i> .....	27
5. Descartes' Ethics of Belief .....	30
6. Attention Voluntarism and Scepticism .....	34
II: TWO CONCEPTS OF FREEDOM .....	37
Introduction .....	37
1. Fourth Meditation: The Latin and The French Texts .....	37
2. Power of Choice and Spontaneous Assent .....	39
3 Arguments for Doxastic Voluntarism .....	46
4. Arguments for Attention Voluntarism .....	49
5. Freedom Before, and Freedom During the Action .....	58
6. The Concept of Attention .....	62
7. Scepticism and Free Will .....	70
III: SELF-DECEPTION AS A MENTAL STATE .....	73
Introduction .....	73
1. Dogmatic Self-Deception: The <i>Regulae</i> .....	73
2. Sceptical Self-Deception: The First Meditation .....	80
3. Imposition, Suspension of Judgement, and Freedom .....	86
4. The Meaning of <i>Imponere</i> in The First Meditation .....	89
5. Freedom, Scepticism and Early Modern Philosophy .....	94
5.1 Montaigne .....	97
5.2 Charron .....	98
5.3 Gassendi .....	101
IV: FREEDOM, AUTONOMY, AND SCEPTICISM .....	103
Introduction .....	103
1. Lack of Autonomy through Manipulation .....	103

2. Minimal Autonomy .....	108
3. <i>Cogito</i> and Autonomy.....	111
4. Autonomy and Epistemic Responsibility.....	117
5. Scepticism and Character Traits.....	124
V: THE SCIENCE OF GOOD LIVING.....	131
Introduction .....	131
1. Interpretations of Descartes' Moral Theory.....	131
2.1 The Biographical Accident Thesis.....	132
2.2 The Lack of Sincerity Thesis .....	134
2.3 The Lack of Originality Thesis.....	137
2.4 The Identity of 'Provisional' and 'Definitive' Morals Thesis.....	140
2. Deontological Approaches to Descartes' Moral Theory.....	142
3. Moral Certainty and Metaphysical Certainty.....	145
4. Scepticism and Everyday Life.....	151
5. The Moral Way of Knowing and the Science of Good Living.....	157
VI: DESCARTES ON VIRTUE ETHICS.....	163
Introduction .....	163
1. Descartes' Moral Theory and Virtue Ethics.....	163
2. The Moral Maxims.....	166
3. The First Maxim: Moral Paragons .....	167
4. The Second Maxim: The Virtue of Resolution .....	186
5. The Third Maxim: The Virtue of Prudence.....	191
6. The Fourth Maxim: The Examined Life .....	196
7. The Quest for Truth and The Highest Good.....	199
CONCLUSION .....	204
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	207
<i>INDEX NOMINUM</i> .....	235

## INTRODUCTION

Most of the time, we make a diversity of assertions about our environment and ourselves. Except for the occasions on which we are not being sincere, or in which we are, for instance, playing a role in the theatre, these assertions are also an expression of our beliefs. In stating, for example, that Paris is the capital of France, we mean that the proposition 'Paris is the capital of France' is true, and that we have towards this proposition a belief-attitude, i.e. we *believe* that it is actually the case that Paris is the capital of France. We often come to make statements of this kind as the result of a decision to convey some information about our environment, to answer a question, or to resume mentally some piece of information somehow stored in our memory. Statements like 'Paris is the capital of France', accordingly, may be considered things we can *decide* to make. But is our belief that Paris is the capital of France also something we actively make, something for which we may be held responsible? The ordinary use of language seems to point to opposite directions here. On the one hand, we can perfectly imagine, for instance, a man 'asking' his wife to believe that what he is saying is true, while she interrogates herself whether she 'should' actually believe what her husband is saying. The use of verbs like 'ask' and 'should' in this context seems to be an indication that, at least in principle, we can believe something as the result of a decision to comply with someone's request, or to do what we should do. On the other hand, we do not ordinarily say that we 'make' or that we 'perform' beliefs, but that we 'have' or that we 'hold' them. By the same token, we do not usually say that we have or hold statements, but that we make them.

The extent to which our beliefs are subject to some kind of decisional procedure is a philosophical question which has been contemporarily discussed in the context of a debate, usually referred to as the 'ethics of belief'. The last few decades have witnessed a resurgence of interest in this question. Since approximately the end of the seventies, a great number of authors have dedicated themselves to questions relative to the nature of the relationship between our beliefs and our will, i.e. whether our beliefs are voluntary, whether we have some kind of control over them, the extent to which we may be held

responsible for our beliefs, etc.<sup>1</sup> An interesting aspect of this debate is the fact that Descartes is commonly seen as a philosopher who conceived of the relationship between beliefs and will in a quite unusual way. Because Descartes affirms in the *Meditations*, in the context of his theory of judgement, that we are free to affirm or to negate ideas at will, it has been commonly argued against him that his theory entails the quite implausible thesis that we could freely determine the content of our beliefs. Indeed, according to Descartes, in situations in which we have equal evidence pro and con the truth of an idea, we *should* suspend judgement by neither affirming nor negating this idea. But we are still free, Descartes argues, to affirm or to negate this idea. Affirming or negating an idea in Descartes' sense is not simply a matter making a statement irrespective of our own personal attitude towards it. In affirming an idea, we commit ourselves to its truth, we *believe* it to be true. In like manner, when we negate an idea, we believe it to be false. Accordingly, if we could affirm or negate an idea at will, we should also be able to believe or disbelieve it at will. But this seems to be an implausible thesis, for when we have equal evidence for and con the truth of an idea, we do not decide to believe or disbelieve it, we simply suspend judgement independently of considerations as to whether we *should* suspend judgement or not.

Against this line of criticism, a major thesis I intend to defend in the present work is that, according to Descartes, we have only an *indirect* control over our beliefs. We can actually come to form beliefs in a voluntary way in that we can fail to attend to relevant evidence at the moment when we make a statement. This thesis, however, is neither new nor unproblematic. It is not new because some commentators have already sought to point out the importance the concept of attention has in Descartes' theory of knowledge. And it is not unproblematic because it is unclear why a person might divert her attention from relevant evidence for the truth of a proposition  $p$  and, consciously, come to form the false belief that non- $p$ . Coming to form a belief in spite of evidence to the contrary is a clear case of self-deception. If this is so, then the thesis that we have an indirect control over our beliefs, inasmuch as we have a direct control over our attention, is, in fact, a thesis about the possibility of self-deception. But is there a place for the philosophical problem of self-deception in Descartes' theory of knowledge?

The problem of self-deception, as I intend to show, plays a decisive role in Descartes' refutation of scepticism. In the *First Meditation*, Descartes advances some sceptical hypotheses in order to put into question our ordinary knowledge

---

<sup>1</sup> I will refer to some of these works in the first chapter.

claims. But Descartes himself admits, towards the end of the *First Meditation*, that he still has 'far more reasons' to believe his customary opinions than to disbelieve them. For this reason, Descartes argues, he will 'deceive himself' with the sceptical hypothesis according to which there possibly is an evil genius who deceives us in every knowledge claim. But Descartes also advances a straightforward reason to indulge himself in self-deception: in suspending judgement with respect to every knowledge claim, we avoid the possibility that an evil god 'imposes' anything on us. The central thesis I defend in this work is that Descartes envisaged the existence of an evil god as a threat, not only to the validity of our customary knowledge claims, but rather as a menace to our freedom. There are good reasons to assume that freedom understood in this sense, as something we would not have if it is true that we are constantly manipulated by an evil god, may be comprehended as a conception of human autonomy. Descartes endorses a sceptical attitude in the *First Meditation* because, like the sceptic, he assumes that we can only escape the manipulations of an evil god – and, thus, guarantee our own autonomy – in that we refrain from making any judgements at all. But, against the sceptic, Descartes also seeks to show in the *Fourth Meditation* that freedom, in a proper sense, does not amount to the state of indifference in which we find ourselves after the general suspension of judgement. Freedom (or autonomy), in a proper sense, consists in not accepting as true anything but clear and distinct ideas. It is only when we employ the criterion of truth based on the notions of clearness and distinctness, not following any authority other than the authority of reason, that we have freedom in its highest degree.

This thesis goes against the grain of a commonly accepted view according to which the problem of scepticism for Descartes was a purely epistemological affair. Against this view, I purpose to show that Descartes envisaged the sceptical challenge as a moral problem. Descartes, like the sceptic, was concerned with a conception of the good life in which the notion of autonomy, understood in simple outlines as a capacity to be held responsible for one's own actions and opinions, plays an important role. But Descartes' criticism of the sceptical attitude is that a good life does not depend on the general suspension of judgement the sceptic advocates. A good life depends, among other things, on our systematic quest for truth, in our spontaneous assent to clear and distinct ideas. Because Descartes envisaged the refutation of scepticism as a moral problem, I also submit in the present work an interpretation of Descartes' moral theory which largely departs from most scholarly treatments of this theme. My thesis is that most interpretations of Descartes' moral theory have been biased by a deontological conception of ethics. In moral matters, however, Descartes was far closer to ancient moral

conceptions than to modern moral theories which became current after Kant. My thesis is that Descartes defended a version of a virtues ethics theory, and that his so-called 'provisory morals' must be comprehended in eudaimonistic terms.

I would like now to describe the main lines of the arguments I develop in each of the six chapters of this book.

In the first chapter, I present Descartes' theory of judgement. This theory is based on the thesis that our judgements depend on the interaction of two different faculties: the understanding and the will. Through the understanding we conceive ideas, while through the will we affirm or negate them. This thesis, however, presents a number of problems which have not passed unnoticed to many critics of Descartes. Firstly, there is a problem relative to the nature of ideas. On the one hand, Descartes defines ideas as a mental image of things. But if ideas are picture-like thoughts, it is unclear how we could 'affirm' or 'negate' them. What is capable of being affirmed or negated are not pictures, but propositions. My thesis is that for Descartes ideas always have a propositional content. I try to establish this thesis by analysing some texts where Descartes discusses the relationship between language and thoughts. Another problem relative to Descartes' theory of judgement is that, according to some critics, it entails a strong version of doxastic voluntarism, i.e. the thesis that our beliefs are voluntary. This problem has been commonly pointed out in the context of the ethics of belief debate. I will examine the extent to which this line of criticism is valid in the second chapter. I conclude the first chapter with the suggestion that, if it is true that Descartes defended doxastic voluntarism, or even a more moderate version of the thesis that we have some voluntary control over our beliefs, then the sceptic could always argue to be *free* to form his belief at will.

In the second chapter, I present Descartes' conception of freedom, which Descartes properly introduces in the *Fourth Meditation*. Descartes proposes two quite different conceptions of freedom. On the one hand, he defines freedom as an ability to 'go to both sides'. In this case, being free means being able to choose in an unconstrained way either of two contrary sides. On the other hand, freedom is defined as spontaneous assent to clear and distinct ideas. In this case, being free means not being able to fail to do what reason shows us to be good, or believe what reason shows us to be true. I demonstrate, firstly, that with the first definition of freedom, Descartes had in mind the so-called *in utramque partem* style of argumentation, which was a widespread rhetorical technique in the philosophical disputes of his time. This kind of argumentation was also commonly used by the sceptics who claimed that, because we can always argue both for and against the truth of whatever

propositions, we should suspend judgement about all our knowledge claims. Secondly, I try to show, against a common line of interpretation, that neither the *Meditations* nor texts posterior to the *Meditations* support the thesis that Descartes would have committed himself to a strong form of doxastic voluntarism. My thesis is that Descartes defended, in fact, attention voluntarism, i.e. that we are free to direct our attention only to the evidence that supports the truth of a proposition, while we deliberately ignore the evidence that supports its falsity. Because we have this kind of *indirect* control over our beliefs, we can also avoid holding any belief at all. We can, indeed, always counterbalance the cogency of some evidence for the truth of a proposition  $p$  by pointing out some sceptical hypothesis which undermines the truth of  $p$ . In view of this, what Descartes argues against the sceptical attitude, is that the sceptic simply *wants* to stay in the state of doubt. But is this kind of reply to the problem of scepticism justified? If the sceptic prefers to remain in the state of doubt, he simply deceives himself. But if he deceives himself, then, apparently, he does not really pose a problem to our attempt to proving the possibility of knowledge.

In the third chapter, I deal with the problem of self-deception in Descartes' theory of knowledge. Firstly, I examine some passages from the *Regulae*, where Descartes criticises the attitude of the scholastic philosophers who 'persuade themselves' that there is nothing they do not know. Then, I examine a passage from the end of the *First Meditations*, where Descartes, provisionally assuming a sceptical position, affirms that he will 'deceive himself' with the hypothesis that there is an evil god who constantly manipulates us. While the problem of self-deception in the *Regulae* concerns the deliberate acquisition of a false belief, the problem of self-deception in the *First Meditation* concerns the deliberate avoidance of any belief at all. In both cases, however, the consequence of self-deception is the attainment of a desirable mental state. In deceiving themselves, the scholastic philosophers enjoy a feeling of self-satisfaction resulting from the false belief that there is nothing they do not know. In like manner, in suspending judgement with respect to any knowledge claim, the sceptic puts himself in a state of 'indifference'. My thesis, then, is that in the state of indifference, because he avoids commitment to any belief at all, the sceptic can argue to be more free than the persons who hold some belief. He is more free because he is not subjected to the possible manipulations of an evil god. What Descartes must demonstrate against the sceptic, therefore, is that freedom, in a proper sense, does not involve the state of indifference in which the sceptic strives to remain.

In order to show that Descartes actually envisaged the problem of scepticism in this way, I conclude the third chapter with some historical

considerations on the problem of scepticism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I point out some key texts by three major thinkers of that time, namely Charron, Montaigne and Gassendi, where a sceptical attitude was clearly defended as a sort of strategy to preserve our own freedom against dogmatic impositions.

In the fourth chapter, I examine Descartes' second definition of freedom, namely freedom understood as spontaneous assent to clear and distinct ideas. My thesis is that, in the light of some contemporary approaches to the concept of autonomy, there are good reasons to comprehend the sceptical scenario Descartes describes, at the end of the *First Meditations*, as a threat to our autonomy. I draw a distinction between minimal autonomy and full autonomy. We are minimally autonomous in that we refrain from making any judgement at all and, thus, avoid the possibility of being manipulated by an evil god. We are, on the other hand, fully autonomous when we follow the criterion of truth, and assent only to clear and distinct ideas. In both cases, what is in question is an attitude of prudence against the possibility that we are manipulated, i.e. that we cannot recognise ourselves as responsible for our own actions and opinions. I try to show, then, that in the *Meditations* Descartes was not simply interested in demonstrating the validity of a criterion of truth based on the notions of clearness and distinctness. He was also interested in showing that we must develop a 'disposition' to employ this criterion in our quest for truth. To be sure, we can at a first moment recognise the validity of the criterion of truth, but owing to overconfidence on the authority of tradition or to the misleading influence of passions, we may at a second moment deflect our attention from the reasons which demonstrate the validity of the criterion and fail to use it. For this reason, Descartes argues that we have to persevere in our decision not to attend to these irrational factors, and to concentrate our attention only on the proof of the validity of the criterion of truth, until we have acquired the 'habit' of using it in our quest for truth. I conclude the fourth chapter with the thesis that, both in his theory of knowledge and in his moral theory, Descartes recommended the acquisition of the same 'habit', namely the 'virtue' of 'resolution.'

In the fifth chapter, I submit an alternative approach to the most common readings of Descartes' moral theory. Firstly, I distinguish four main lines of interpretation in the Cartesian scholarship. The first line of interpretation argues that Descartes failed to develop a fully-fledged moral theory due to his early death. The second one sustains that Descartes was not sincere in his pronouncements on moral matters. The third one holds that Descartes did not advance any moral theory which differs in any special respect from the theories of his contemporaries. And the fourth one has it that Descartes would have

realised towards the end of his life that we cannot really found, on purely rational grounds, a moral theory, so that his so-called 'provisional morals', advanced in the third part of the *Discours*, turned out to represent his final view on moral matters. I seek to show that these interpretations have been biased by a deontological conception of ethics, namely by the assumption that a moral theory concerns an examination of problems relative to concepts such as duties, obligations, rights, etc. Because we do not find a discussion of these concepts in Descartes' texts, many commentators have drawn the conclusion that a moral theory remained as a sort of undeveloped project in Descartes' works. I try to show, then, Descartes' contribution in this area must be examined in the context of an eudemonistic conception of ethics. Moral questions for Descartes were questions relative to the way we should live in view of the attainment of a good life. Considered in these terms, Descartes' moral theory proves to be far closer to ancient moral theories than to modern ones. A moral theory for Descartes must be comprehended, accordingly, as the 'science of good living'.

In the sixth chapter, I examine the so-called 'provisional morals' of the *Discours*. My thesis is that, in calling it 'provisional', Descartes did not mean that it should be replaced at some time in the future by a 'definitive' moral doctrine. His morals was 'provisional' in that what counts as a good life always remains subjected to reassessment in view of some relevant information we may obtain in the future. I try to show, then, that Descartes' moral theory may be envisaged as a kind of virtue ethics. At the end of this chapter, I examine the extent to which the quest for truth is, according to Descartes, constitutive of a good life. In the light of some contemporary accounts on the problem of the good life, I seek to show that for Descartes, even if we do not dedicate our whole life to the rational quest for truth, we must anyway try to establish, on rational grounds, the extent to which our goals are really worth pursuing, i.e. whether the goals we aim at are likely to fulfil the expectation we have towards them, and whether we can expect to achieve them in view of our own personal limitations. The conclusion I seek to draw in this chapter, then, is that Descartes' theory of knowledge was ultimately developed in view of a conception of a good life.

## CHAPTER ONE DESCARTES' THEORY OF JUDGEMENT

### *Introduction*

In our everyday lives there is a variety of types of knowledge about which we do not raise any doubt: that there are other persons in the world, that there is not an abyss just outside our door, that three plus two equal five, etc. If asked as to how these things are known, most people are likely to reply that it is simply *evident* that these things are true. But for all we know, is evidence a reliable indication that what is evident is also true? Could it not be the case that there is an asymmetry between evidence and truth, i.e. that what appears to us with utmost evidence may, strictly speaking, be false? Among a diversity of issues Descartes deals with in the *Meditations*, the problem of how evidence relates to truth is of special importance. Descartes begins the *Meditations* by calling everything into question, even the most evident propositions of mathematics. But after attentive inquiry he comes to the conclusion that evidence is the best, indeed the only reliable criterion of truth we possess. In what follows it is not my intention to examine every step of Descartes' argument leading to the proof that evidence – understood as clearness and distinctness – is a reliable criterion of truth. For this reason, I will not examine here, for instance, Descartes' alleged proof for the existence of God. Nor shall I attempt to present a detailed account of the *cogito*, Descartes' famous argument to show that he himself exists as a thinking thing independently of the existence of an evil god. My intention in this chapter is to examine a specific moment of the argumentative itinerary described in the *Meditations*, namely Descartes' theory of judgement.

It is in the *Fourth Meditation* that Descartes advances his theory of judgement. In this theory he makes an important distinction between, on the one hand, the simple apprehension of a mental content and, on the other hand, the act of affirming or negating this content. Descartes characterises the act of affirming or negating a mental content as a will-dependent operation. His theory of judgement, thus, is marked by a strong volitional component. In view of this, I intend to examine, firstly, the role that the will, understood as the faculty responsible for the act of affirming and negating, plays in Descartes'

theory of judgement. And secondly, I intend to point out some difficulties Descartes' theory involves. These difficulties have been traditionally discussed in the context of a debate called the ethics of belief.

### 1. Entertaining and judging

Although Descartes' theory of judgement is properly developed in the *Fourth Meditation*, some important aspects of his theory were already anticipated in the *Second* and *Third Meditations*. For this reason, it would not be amiss to start our discussion by examining what is said in these texts. Towards the end of the *Second Meditation* Descartes advances the so-called 'piece of wax argument.' What this argument aims to establish is that it is not by means of sense perception, but through the understanding that we know that an object remains the same one throughout time. Let us suppose, for instance, that at time  $t_1$  we observe a piece of wax with a number of empirical qualities, i.e. qualities that we perceive through our sense organs. It has, then, a specific flavour, consistency, temperature, colour, odour, etc. At time  $t_2$ , after it has been exposed to higher temperature, each one of its previous qualities changes. Nevertheless, we admit that it is one and the same piece of wax both at  $t_1$  and at  $t_2$ . But how can we establish its identity if none of its empirical qualities remained unchanged from  $t_1$  to  $t_2$ ? Descartes' point is that it is an error to believe that it is by means of sensual perception that numerical identity is established. What has not changed between  $t_1$  and at  $t_2$  is the fact that the object of our perception is perceived as an *extended thing*. But we do not directly perceive the piece of wax as an extended object, we infer it from what we immediately perceive, namely its primary qualities. We do not see or feel extension – at any rate not in the same fashion we see or feel a piece of wax with such and such specific qualities. Rather, we conceive it through the understanding (*La. mens*).<sup>1</sup>

In our pre-philosophical attitude we generally assume that an object remains the same one throughout time, because some of its sensual properties usually remain unchanged. If the piece of wax mentioned above had not been heated between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , we would certainly assume that it is the same object at  $t_1$  and at  $t_2$  just because its qualities did not vary. But what the piece of wax

---

<sup>1</sup> AT vii, 31, l. 25. Following common usage in the Cartesian scholarship, I will use the initials 'AT' as an abbreviation for the standard edition of Descartes' complete works edited by C. Adam and P. Tannery, followed by the volume, page, and line number.

argument shows is that we can change every sensual property of an object, and nevertheless, in a certain sense, retain the selfsame object. We retain the selfsame object in that it remains extended throughout time. Descartes argues that both the unsophisticated plain man and the enlightened philosopher perceive one and the same piece of wax at  $t_1$  and at  $t_2$ . But while the former argues for the identity of the object by virtue of the sameness of sensual perception (it is the same colour, the same, odour, etc. both at  $t_1$  and at  $t_2$ ), the latter argues for the identity of the object by virtue of the sameness of a 'mental perception' (Lat. *mente percipitur*)<sup>2</sup>, i.e. because the object is perceived as an extended thing both at  $t_1$  and at  $t_2$ . To 'perceive something through the mind' in this case means: from what is presented to the mind through sense perception, to *infer* the existence of a property that cannot in itself be sensually perceived, namely being extended.

Perceiving a piece of wax as the same object both at  $t_1$  and at  $t_2$  is not simply *entertaining* something, i.e. being conscious of the presence of something with a specific quality or set of qualities.<sup>3</sup> In the French text of the *Second Meditation* Descartes refers to the perception of a piece of wax as the same object both at  $t_1$  and at  $t_2$  as a kind of action: *...sa perception, ou bien l'action par laquelle on l'aperçoit...*<sup>4</sup> But what kind of action is it? This is the action of making a judgement. From the fact that we entertain a given mental content, we *judge* that something about the external world is the case. The problem, however, is that our ordinary language is quite misleading in this regard. We can use a verb like 'to see' either to refer to the simple apprehension of a mental content, without committing ourselves to the truth of what is apprehended, or to refer to the assumption that what is apprehended is the mental representation of something real in the external world.<sup>5</sup> In order to make this point clearer let us consider an example Descartes proposes in the *Second Meditation*. Suppose we look through the window and see outside something covered with a coat and a hat. It looks like a human being in every respect, although we do not see anything but a coat and a hat. We would spontaneously say: 'I see a person outdoors wearing a coat and a hat'. But, strictly speaking, we do not *see* a person. What we actually see are just a coat

<sup>2</sup> AT ix, 31, l. 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. 'entertain', in *Oxford English Dictionary*: (10) *Keep or maintain in the mind*; (b) *Admit to consideration*; *receive (an idea)*; (11) *Occupy the attention, time, etc.*

<sup>4</sup> AT ix, 24 (emphasis added).

<sup>5</sup> AT ix, 25: *...je suis presque trompé par les termes du langage ordinaire; car nous disons que nous voyons la même cire, si on nous la présente, et non pas que nous jugeons que c'est la même, de ce qu'elle a même couleur et même figure...* (emphasis added).

and a hat beneath which there might well be, instead of a person, a robot cleverly disguised as a real human being. From the fact that we see a hat and a coat, we immediately *judge* that what we actually see is a person.

In the context of the *Second Meditation* it is still unclear whether the external world really exists or not. The proof of the external world will be offered only in the (last) *Sixth Meditation*. But it is nevertheless still correct to speak of the perception of a physical object in the context of the *Second Meditation*, provided only that 'perception', in this case, is understood as the simple fact of entertaining a mental content. 'Seeing' in this case does not mean 'judging', but simply 'thinking to see', i.e. having the presence of a mental content without assuming that what we think to see does actually correspond to something in the external world. What is questioned in the *Second Meditation*, therefore, is not our capacity to entertain the idea of a piece of wax, but the truth of the judgements by means of which we relate ideas to something real in the external world. In view of this, at the end of the *Second Meditation*, Descartes returns to an important point he had already made at the beginning of the *Second Meditation*: even on the supposition that there exists an evil god deceiving me in every knowledge claim, the very fact that *I think* cannot be put into question; and for this reason *I* can also conclude that *I myself do exist*. But now, Descartes argues, we can arrive at the same conclusion – that *I myself exist as a thinking being* – by considering the fact that we *see* objects:

*...il peut aussi arriver que je n'aie pas même des yeux pour voir aucune chose; mais il ne se peut pas faire que lorsque je vois, ou (ce que je ne distingue plus) lorsque je pense voir, que moi qui pense ne sois quelque chose.*<sup>6</sup>

When Descartes affirms here that he does not draw a distinction between 'seeing' and 'thinking to see', he means that 'seeing' in this case does not mean 'judging', but simply entertaining a mental content.<sup>7</sup> His point, then, is

<sup>6</sup> AT ix, 26 (emphasis added).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. AT ii, 36, l. 5-12: *...il n'y a rien qui soit entièrement en notre pouvoir que nos pensées; au moins en prenant le mot de pensée comme je fais, pour toutes les opérations de l'âme, en sorte que non seulement les médiations et les volontés, mais même les fonctions de voir, d'ouïr de se déterminer à un mouvement plutôt qu'à autre etc., en tant qu'elles dépendent d'elle, sont des pensées.* Cf. also AT, ix, 23: *...je suis le même qui sens, c'est-à-dire qui reçois et connais les choses comme par les organes des sens <Lat. tanquam per sensus> (...) Mais l'on me dira que ces apparences sont fausses et que je dors. Qu'il soit ainsi; toutefois, à tout le moins, il est très certain qu'il me semble que je vois, que ouïs, et que je m'échauffe; et c'est proprement ce qui en moi s'appelle sentir, et cela, pris ainsi précisément, n'est rien autre chose que penser.* (emphasis added).

that we are able to entertain a mental content or, what amounts to the same thing, that we can think, in spite of the sceptical doubts raised in the *First Meditation*.

The distinction between simply entertaining a mental content and making a judgement on the basis of what is entertained, will be resumed in two different passages of Descartes' *Replies to the Objections to the Meditations*. In the *Third Set of Replies* Descartes argues that there is a distinction between, on the one hand, perceiving something and, on the other, having some kind of attitude towards the object of our perception. In order to make this point clearer Descartes considers the following example:

*Il est de soi très évident, que c'est autre chose de voir un lion, et ensemble de le craindre, que de le voir seulement; et tout de même, que c'est autre chose de voir un homme qui court, que d'assurer <Latin: affirmare> qu'on le voit.*<sup>8</sup>

'Fearing' and 'affirming' are examples of two different attitudes we can have towards the object of our perception. We *see* a lion and immediately react with the feeling of fear; in like manner we *see* a man run and immediately assume that it is true that a man is running. Descartes' example, however, does not make it explicit that in these two situations the verb to 'see' is being employed with two different meanings: 'judging' in the first case, and 'entertaining' a mental content in the second case. Someone who sees a lion and reacts with a feeling of fear, has already made a judgement: there is a lion before me, I can *see* it, and I would better run lest I should become its prey. It does not make any sense in this case to say that I fear the mental image of a lion.<sup>9</sup> The feeling of fear is related, not to my simply entertaining the idea of a lion, but to my *conviction* that there is a lion out there in the external world. In the second case, on the other hand, the object of perception, what is *seen*, is the mental image of a man who is running. The simple apprehension of this mental content, considered in itself, is not yet a judgement. But we can apprehend this mental content and immediately assume that a man is running.<sup>10</sup> What is clear in this passage from the *Third Set of Replies* is that we must draw a clear-cut distinction between perceiving something and having

<sup>8</sup> AT ix, 142 (emphasis added).

<sup>9</sup> There are certainly cases in which someone cannot even think about a lion without being gripped by a feeling of fear or panic. These unusual cases are not being considered here. But even in such cases we realise that there is a distinction between the object of our perception (the simple thought of a lion) and our affective reaction to it.

<sup>10</sup> See also AT iii, 430, l. 14-16: *frequenter enim animadverti, ea quae homines iudicabant ab ijs quae intelligebant dissentire.*

some kind of attitude towards the object of our perception. What, however, is not immediately clear from the simple consideration of the example proposed by Descartes, is that we can hierarchize such reactions according to the kind of object of our perception. At a first moment, we simply apprehend a mental content, for example, the mental representation of a lion. At a second moment, we assume that there obtains a correspondence between our representation and the external world. We make, then, a judgement of the form 'there is a lion before me'. At a third moment, because we judge that it is true that there is a lion before us, we effectively react with the feeling of fear. Descartes resumes this problem in the *Sixth Set of Replies*, where he distinguishes the three degrees of sensing.

In the *Sixth Set of Replies*, Descartes points out three different meanings the expression 'sensing something' may have. At a first level, 'sensing' means solely the stimulation that external objects cause in our sense organs. When we see, for instance, a bird in the garden, the light reflected by the bird causes some physical change in our retina, from which nerve impulses are triggered and pass through the optic nerve to the brain. Thus, at the first level seeing a bird in the garden is nothing but a physical process in our body, occasioned by the presence of a bird in the garden.<sup>11</sup> At a second level, seeing a bird in the garden is understood as the awareness of a mental content. The difference between the first and the second levels is explained on the basis of Descartes' doctrine of the distinction between body and mind. It is not my intention, however, to examine this theme here. Descartes' point is that body and mind are so narrowly united that when, at the first level, we see a bird in the garden (when our nervous system undergoes some kind of change due to the presence of a bird in the garden), we become immediately *aware* of the presence of a mental content. Thus, at the second level, seeing a bird in the garden means to become conscious of the apprehension of a mental content. At this level there is not yet the assumption that what is apprehended in the mind is, actually, the mental representation of a real object in the external world.<sup>12</sup> But at a third level, 'sensing' something is the judgement we make on the basis of what occurs at the second level.<sup>13</sup> We apprehended a mental content and then we also immediately affirm that what we see is a bird in the garden. On the basis

<sup>11</sup> AT vii, 437, l. 17-19: *...atque in hoc cerebri motu, qui nobis cum brutis communis est, primus sentiendi gradus consistit.*

<sup>12</sup> AT vii, 437, l. 19-23: *Ex ipso vero sequitur secundus <sc. gradus>, qui ad solam coloris luminisve ex baculo reflexi perceptionem se extendit, oriturque ex eo quod mens cerebro tam intime conjuncta sit, ut a motibus qui in ipso fiunt afficiatur...*

<sup>13</sup> AT vii, 437, l. 30 – 438, l. 1: *... ideoque hic ad tertium sentiendi gradum retulerim...*

of sense impression (what happens at the second level), we make judgements about an object in the external world.

These different kinds of reactions we have toward the object of our perception occur at great speed. This process occurs so quickly because of habit. At an early age, Descartes argues, we have a variety of sense impressions on the basis of which we make different judgements, many of which are false. As time goes by we correct many of our earlier judgements. But when, at a later time, as grown-up individuals, we have the same kinds of sense perception again, we do not make the same judgements as before, i.e. we do not repeat the entire process by means of which we have corrected our judgements. We simply *remember* the judgements we have made in the past. But this leads us to think that there is no distinction at all between simply having a sense impression and making a judgement. In order to illustrate this point, Descartes considers the following example: due to the phenomenon of refraction a stick in water *appears* to us as a bent object. A child who sees a stick in water is likely to judge that this object is actually bent. But upon examination the child learns that this judgement is false. At a later time, as a grown-up individual, when the person in question has a similar kind of sense impression, she will not make the same judgement again, i.e. she will not repeat every step of the examination that has enabled her to judge that the stick is upright, although it still *appears* to her as a bent object. She will simply remember the judgements she has made in the past when she found herself in the same circumstances.<sup>14</sup> We save a lot of time in that we do not have to examine the things that appear to us a second time, with the same degree of attention with which we have examined them at the first time of their appearance. But the problem is that the speed at which we pass from the simple perception of a mental content to the formulation of a judgement, makes us think that there is no difference at all between them. Descartes' theory of judgement, however, is based on this fundamental distinction between *apprehending* a mental content and *affirming* that what is apprehended corresponds to something real in the external world.

---

<sup>14</sup> AT vii, 438, l. 4-15: *Sed in hoc tantum differentia est, quod ea quae nunc primum ob novam aliquam animadversionem judicamus, intellectui tribuamus; quae vero a prima aetate, eodem plane modo atque nunc, de iis quae sensus nostros afficiebant judicavimus, aut etiam ratiocinando conclusimus, referamus ad sensum, quia nempe de iis tam celeriter propter consuetudinem ratiocinamur et judicamus, aut potius judiciorum jam olim a nobis de rebus similibus factorum recordamur, ut has operationes a simplici sensus perceptione non distinguamus.*

## 2. Kinds of thoughts: ideas, affections, and judgements

In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes advances another important thesis related to his theory of judgement. He argues that judgements, and only judgements, are the bearers of truth and falsity.<sup>15</sup> It is only with reference to judgements that we can say that something is true or false. In order to establish this thesis Descartes starts by proposing a sort of classification of types of thoughts we can have. Thought, in principle, is everything we are aware of. This also includes mental operations and mental states such as imaging and willing something.<sup>16</sup> Descartes recognises, then, three different classes of thoughts: 'ideas' (Lat. *ideae*), 'volition or affections' (Lat. *voluntates, sive affectus*), and 'judgements' (Lat. *judicia*)<sup>17</sup>. Ideas, he argues, are 'like images of things' (Lat. *tanquam rerum imagines*).<sup>18</sup> We can have ideas, not only of real objects such as trees and stones, but also of things that do not really exist, such as winged horses, or a golden mountain. An idea can also be accompanied by different attitudes. I can for instance entertain the idea of a sunny day and simultaneously 'add' (Fr. *j'ajoute*)<sup>19</sup> my desire that today is a sunny day. This would be an affective reaction to the mental representation of a sunny day. In like manner, I can entertain the same idea of a sunny day and

---

<sup>15</sup> Descartes also occasionally speaks of 'materially false ideas', i.e. ideas which are false whether or not they are affirmed in a judgement. His point is that our ideas of colours, odours, sounds, and other secondary qualities are so confused, that we could not really consider them as representations of objects. In these cases, an idea might be considered false irrespective of its affirmation or negation. In this book, however, I do not intend to examine Descartes' conception of 'materially false ideas'. For a detailed account of this problem see e.g. Richard Feld, 'Descartes on the material falsity of ideas', in *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 102, 1993, p. 309-334, and M. Wilson, 'Material falsity and objective reality', in *Descartes*, 1978, p. 101-119. The *locus classicus* for this problem is the following passage from the *Third Meditation* (AT vii, 43, l. 21-30): *...lumen et colores, soni, odores, sapores, calor et frigus, aliaeque tactiles qualitates, nonnisi valde confuse et obscure a me cogitantur, adeo ut etiam ignorem an sint verae, vel falsae, hoc est, an ideae, quas de illis habeo, sint rerum quarundam ideae, an non rerum. Quamvis enim falsitatem proprie dictam, sive formalem, nonnisi in iudiciis posset reperiri paulo ante notaverim, est tamen profecto quaedam alia falsitas materialis in ideis, cum non rem tanquam rem repraesentant...*

<sup>16</sup> AT vii, 160, l. 7-13: *Cogitationis nomine complector illud omne quod sic in nobis est, ut ejus immediate conscii sumus. Ita omnes voluntatis, intellectus, imaginationis et sensuum operationes sunt cogitationes. Sed addidi immediate, ad excludenda ea quae ex iis consequuntur, ut motus voluntarius cogitationem quidem pro principio habet, sed ipse tanem non est cogitatio.*

<sup>17</sup> AT vii, 37, l. 3-12.

<sup>18</sup> AT vii, 37, l. 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> AT ix, 29.