

Comments on second drafts of Descartes paper

PHIL 43904

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Some general points to keep in mind:

1. If you are arguing against a premise in someone's argument, it is better to develop a single sustained argument than to make several mostly disconnected suggestions, without developing any of them.
2. Every sentence in your paper should contribute something to your argument.
3. There is a difference between saying that something is 'not practical' and saying that it is false. If you should that there would be radical and disturbing consequences of believing one of Descartes' premises, that is not the same thing as arguing that the premise in question is not true. Sometimes things have disturbing consequences and are true.
4. Often people did not go quite far enough in explaining why their objections were objections. For example, many people argued that we must be able to know about material objects, since believing in them is useful. But does the fact that a belief is useful show that it is knowledge? If so, why?
5. People often made assumptions in their objections which needed more defense. For example: if some perceptions are false, others must be true; so, some of our perceptions must be true. But why should Descartes grant that if some perceptions are false, others must be true? Where is the impossibility in all of our perceptions of external objects being false?
6. Do not accuse Descartes of neglecting a point if you claim that it is one of his premises. If it is one of his explicit assumptions, then he is not neglecting it.
7. Many people gave arguments in which 'knowledge' appeared in the conclusion, whereas the premises talked only about 'trust.' This is a good indication that you are missing a premise which makes a connection between what we do or should trust, and what we know.
8. Saying that you think something is false is not the same thing as arguing against it.
9. Often, your objections against premises depended on ambiguities in your premises. For example, many people had a premise which said something like 'Dreams are indistinguishable from reality', and objected to this premises that dreams sometimes

are distinguishable from reality. But the original premise is ambiguous between ‘Some dreams are indistinguishable from reality’ and ‘All dreams are indistinguishable from reality.’ If what Descartes needs is the former interpretation, then it is not clear that the objection is to the point; if the latter, then it is. This is the sort of thing you might want to think about when considering how Descartes could reformulate his argument in reply to your objection.

10. Premises should be declarative sentences — they should express some claim. They should not be, for example, imperatives. Which one is: ‘If your senses deceive you, don’t trust them’?
11. Always, always use the simplest language possible to make your point.