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Descartes' "Basket of Apples" Analogy

In Descartes' first meditation, he begins the process of doubting all of his beliefs. He does this in three different stages: 1) rejecting sense perceptions, 2) rejecting dreams, 3) rejecting a malicious demon.

In the first stage, Descartes rejects beliefs known by his senses on the grounds that "if you have once been deceived by your senses, then you should always be skeptical of them." He argues that one may view a tower from a distance and think that it is a round-shape, but then upon closer examination, realize that it is in fact a square-shape. Even though the senses on the second occasion seem to correct the first incorrect perception, the senses have still once deceived you and therefore, according to Descartes, one still has grounds to be skeptical of them.

In the second stage, Descartes rejects the idea that one can have certainty of his actions because when he is dreaming, everything that is not real appears to be real. A possible rejection to this argument could be that dreams are always chaotic and obviously not of reality, but Descartes argues that this is simply not true, for he has at times been dreaming that he was in his nightgown, sitting by the fire, and then woke up to realize that he was actually lying in bed, dreaming.

In the third, collective stage of doubt, Descartes presents an idea of a malicious demon and claims that if there were a God that was the cause of everything in the world, then it is possible that he deceives the mind into thinking the wrong things. He then concludes that

because God is a benevolent God, it would be contradictory of his nature to be a deceiver, and therefore God is not a deceiver, and there is no malicious demon.

After meditation on these three stages of doubt, Descartes feels he has successfully and justly abandoned all previous beliefs and can begin building a belief system starting with the one belief he can know to be true: that he exists and is a thinking thing.

Gassendi questions Descartes as to why he needs to reject all of his beliefs, and Descartes draws an analogy of a basket of apples (the apples being representative of his beliefs), and says that if there were rotten apples in the basket, then one would remove all of the apples at one time, rather than one by one, because the rot of an apple can spread to other apples in the basket, eventually contaminating all of them.

Gassendi rejects this reply of Descartes and argues that since beliefs cannot literally contaminate other beliefs in the way that apples contaminate other apples, that Descartes is using a disanalogy. Descartes replies with the idea that one false belief can lead to other false beliefs, and therefore the rejection of all beliefs was necessary.

This does not appear to be a solid argument, for while it is possible that one false belief can lead to other false beliefs, it is also possible that false beliefs can lead to true beliefs. Descartes does not mention that one would only come to this conclusion by “lucky accident”, but he still does not account for other possible true beliefs that could remain unaffected by false beliefs.