

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2006
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: <http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org>
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

Lecture Notes, February 21

I. The Deceiver: the third argument for doubt

In the first meditation, Descartes provides three arguments for doubt which call pretty much all of his beliefs into question.

1. Illusion
2. Dream
3. Deceiver

We applied the first two doubts to our list of beliefs:

1. I am wearing an orange shirt.
2. We breathe air.
3. Too much candy is unhealthy.
4. The chair is blue.
5. Our bodies are made of cells.
6. The soul is eternal.
7. The universe is infinite.
8. Ray Charles is not God.
9. God exists.
10. Science progresses.
11. Time moves forward.
12. I know something.
13. I exist.
14. Colors exist.
15. Bachelors are unmarried.
16. $2+2=4$.

We noticed that some of the beliefs at the bottom of the list resisted doubt on the basis of illusion and dreams. Even if I am dreaming, colors exist, bachelors are unmarried, and $2+2=4$. So, we needed a stronger doubt to finish the job of providing reasons to doubt all of our beliefs.

For the third doubt, Descartes wonders about the status of his beliefs if there is a powerful deceiver who can place thoughts directly into Descartes's mind.

We need not worry about whether this deceiver is God, or a demigod, or a demon. Neither need we assert the existence of a deceiver or a God. All we need is to imagine the possibility of a deceiver, which is easy enough to do.

Compare the deceiver hypothesis to the *Matrix* or to the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis. Note the differences.

According to those two examples, our thoughts really happen in brains.

But the brains are being fed misleading information.

There is a physical reality, but it is unlike the one we perceive.

On the other hand, the deceiver hypothesis is consistent with the non-existence of the physical world.

We could be disembodied minds, whose thoughts are directly controlled by an independent source.

When we apply the deceiver hypothesis to our list, we notice that just about all of our beliefs can be called into question.

In terms of the metaphor of the house of knowledge, Descartes has razed (brought down) the house, and now needs to rebuild from new foundations.

Each of the three doubts corresponds to a set of beliefs eliminable on the basis of that doubt.

Class I: Beliefs about the sensory nature of specific physical objects, or the existence of distant or ill-perceived objects.

Class II: Beliefs about the existence and nature of specific physical objects, and the physical world generally.

Class III: Beliefs about universals, like color, and shape, the building blocks of physical objects; and about space and time.

Beliefs about numbers, and geometrical entities.

Beliefs about logical and semantic truths.

In order to rebuild his beliefs, Descartes seeks a single starting point.

Like Archimedes and the lever, pp 23-24.

II. The Cogito

It turns out that one belief, number 13 on our list, resists doubt.

“I am, I exist” must be true whenever I am thinking.

We must be careful with the Cogito, pp 24-5.

It can not be:

1) Whatever thinks, exists.

2) I think.

So, I exist.

This representation, as a logical deduction, would require previous knowledge of the two premises.

Also, it would require previous knowledge that the conclusion follows from the premises.

But we eliminated logical knowledge on the basis of the deceiver doubt.

Thus, the Cogito must be more of a pure intuition.

It establishes the existence of a thinker, as long as the thinker thinks, pp 25-6.

I am a thinking thing, a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines, and senses.

III. After the Cogito

Descartes concludes that he is a thinking thing.

What can he learn from these thoughts?

These thoughts may not tell him anything true about the world outside of him.

But even if the thoughts are false, they still appear to Descartes.

Even if there is no table, we still seem to sense the table, in a privileged and infeasible way.

Note the distinction between sensing and seeming to sense.

Ideas can not be false, considered only as images in our minds.

We can get certainty about our beliefs, but only inside our minds, and not of the outside world.

Descartes has started to rebuild his knowledge, but he is stuck with just the Cogito.
The cogito only tells him that he is a thinking thing, a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines, and senses.
He decides to take another approach.
He starts by considering the physical objects he does not yet know exist.
How did we think we knew about physical objects?
Obviously, through our senses.
But Descartes realizes that this is an error.
See p 34, the end of the Second Meditation.
This is the conclusion of a discussion about a ball of wax.

IV. The story of the wax

Consider a ball of wax in two distinct states (p 30).
First, when it is cold, hard, yellow, honey-flavored, and flower-scented.
Then, bring it near a flame.
The wax now becomes hot and liquid, and loses its color, taste (although it now will burn your tongue), and odor.

Read through the end of p 31.
We have images of the wax, in several incompatible states.
The imagination is our capacity for sensory images.
Distinguish this from another mental capacity, that of judging.
(And we can distinguish these from other capacities of the mind, such as willing and refusing, and emotions, like happiness.)
But we do not have an image of the essence of the wax, or of wax in general.

The argument:

- 1) Knowledge must be certain (firm and lasting).
 - 2) What we get from the senses is uncertain.
 - 3) So our senses do not give us knowledge.
 - 4) We do have knowledge about the wax.
- So, our knowledge of physical objects must come from the mind alone.

The conclusion is quite odd.
Descartes might be accused of cheating here in two ways.
First, he can not conclude anything about our knowledge of physical objects, since we don't even know that physical objects exist.
This first objection is unsuccessful, though.
His conclusion is really conditional: if we have any knowledge of physical objects, then it can not come from the senses.

The second cheat concerns whether the wax is the same before and after melting.
"Does the same wax remain? I must confess that it does; no one denies it; no one thinks otherwise." (p 30)
Descartes omits here a view on which any change in the properties of an object entail a change in the object.
This view may not be right, but it has defenders.
Heraclitus said that one can never step in the same river twice.
By extension, since our constitution is always changing, we are different people at different times.
And the wax is different before and after.
This view, though, will not get Descartes any "firm and lasting" knowledge.