

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2006  
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Lecture Notes, February 22

I. Quiz: Describe the cogito.

II. The story of the wax, continued

We considered a ball of wax in two distinct states.

Descartes concluded that knowledge of the wax, if we have any, must not come from our senses.

For, we know the wax, but our senses could not tell us that the wax is the same in both states.

For this, we use reason, or inference.

Another way to state Descartes's position is that we do not have an image of the essence of the wax, or of wax in general.

We only have images of its different forms, or appearances.

Our knowledge of something must be distinct from our sensory images of it.

Descartes's 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 possible 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.

### III. Strong and Weak claims about the role of the senses in knowledge

Descartes's claim that knowledge of the world, if there is any, must come from the mind alone seems ambiguous between two positions.

There is a weak claim, that the senses are insufficient for knowledge.

On the weak claim, we use the senses to gather information, and in conjunction with reasoning, which is purely mental, we arrive at knowledge.

The weak claim is fairly uncontroversial.

We seem to have some ability beyond the senses which helps us know about the wax.

But Descartes asserts a stronger claim, that the senses are irrelevant to knowledge.

He says that knowledge of physical objects comes from the intellect (or mind) alone.

While the weaker claim is more plausible, Descartes's point is that any information we get from the senses does not rise to the level of knowledge.

We can believe that the chair is blue, but we can never know this, since this is a sensory belief.

Further, we know that the wax can take more forms than we could possibly imagine: more shapes, more sizes, etc.

So, this knowledge must go beyond anything that could come from the senses.

We seem to have two different types of beliefs about the wax.

First, that it has a particular shape.

This first idea is sensory.

But it is not knowledge.

The second belief is that it can take on innumerable many different forms.

This is not a sensory belief.

And it is knowledge.

Descartes truly holds the stronger claim.

### IV. The nature of physical objects

According to the new science, the wax is just a body which can take various manifestations, hot or cold, sweet or tasteless, etc., but is identified with none of these particular sensory qualities. See end of p 30.

That is, it is essentially something which can have sensory qualities, but which need not have any particular ones.

The same is true of all other physical objects.

The same object may have many different appearances.

This is the position of Boyle, Galileo, Newton, and Locke, as well as of Descartes.

Berkeley disagrees.

The central question for us is: What is essential to the objects we perceive?

That is, what properties do objects really have, and are not merely appearances?

### V. Descartes's metaphysics

Remember that metaphysics is the study of what exists.

Here is a catalogue of Descartes's metaphysics:

- 1) God;
- 2) Finite intelligences;
- 3) Extended objects.

The wax is “Only... something extended, flexible, and mutable,” p 31.  
If we want to discover what the wax truly is, we have to judge with our minds.  
There is too much confusion in our senses.  
We will return to this problem with Locke and Berkeley.

The title of the Second Meditation asserts that the mind is known better than the body.  
Even if we don't know about bodies, yet, we can make some conclusions about our minds.  
All of these reflections just bring us back to the mind, and improve our understanding of it, p 33.

## VI. The need for a criterion for knowledge

The goal of the Meditations was to achieve certainty through doubt.  
If we want certain knowledge, we have to know that we know what we know.  
That is, we need some kind of mark, or rule, which enables us to separate true knowledge from mere belief.  
We only know one thing, so far: the Cogito.  
So, we have to look at it, to see if we can find such a mark.

## VII. The criterion: clarity and distinctness

Descartes calls his criteria for knowledge clarity and distinctness, p 35.  
What could these terms mean?  
Elsewhere, he writes:  
“Something is clear when it is present and apparent to an attentive mind, in the same way as we assert that we see objects clearly when, being present to the regarding eye, they operate upon it with sufficient strength”  
(Descartes, Principles I.45)  
Note, that this is a metaphoric use of perception.  
We can not see with our senses clearly and distinctly, but only with the mind.

Later Descartes refers to the light of nature, as the securer of truth, p 38.  
This is to be distinguished from instinct, or being taught by nature.

Perhaps the specific formulation is not important.  
What is important is that there be some distinguishing mark.  
Without such a mark, all searching for certainty is useless.

But there is a problem with any formulation.  
Given any mark, or rule, for certainty, how do we know that we have the correct mark?  
Appeal to the mark itself is circular.  
We can not say that we clearly and distinctly perceive that clarity and distinctness is the right criterion.  
Still, the Cogito does seem to contain some kind of undoubtable truth.

Compare Descartes's methodology with that of axiomatic sciences, like geometry.  
In geometry, we start with two elements:  
1) Basic axioms, or undisputable truths; and  
2) Rules of inference which allow us to generate further theorems on the basis of already established ones.  
With just these, we have a foundational system for geometry.

Similarly, Descartes has a starting point, the Cogito.  
And now he has a rule for generating more truths: clarity and distinctness.  
Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is necessarily true.

## VIII. Accounting for false judgment

Before Descartes uses his new tool he tries to account for the false judgments which led him to the Meditations. According to the discussion of the wax in Meditation Two, we know about objects through the mind alone. The only properties we could ascribe to them were extension, and mutability. That is, they are in space and time, and can take on more forms than one can imagine. It seems that the source of some of my errors is in believing that sensory experience leads to knowledge.

The resemblance hypothesis says that my ideas of objects resemble those objects. Descartes rejects the Resemblance Hypothesis, p 35.

We will pick up on Monday with the Resemblance Hypotheses, and spend much of the remainder of the term discussing it.

## IX. Our strategy for reading the rest of Descartes's *Meditations*

We will soon arrive at Descartes's argument for the existence of God in Meditation III. It is very difficult and medieval.

There are many such arguments, or 'proofs'.

See the links to Thomas Aquinas on the website for empirical arguments.

Berkeley provides one, too.

Descartes provides two arguments in the *Meditations*.

These arguments are a priori, p 51.

They have to be, since we have not yet established the reliability of empirical experience.

We will skip the argument in Meditation III, and look instead at the argument for God's existence in Meditation V, pp 64-8.

Descartes derives his argument in Meditation V from Anselm's argument, so we will look at that first.

Then, we will look at Descartes's argument in Meditation V.

Then, we will go back to Meditation III, just after the argument for God's existence there.

And then we will proceed through the remainder of the *Meditations*.

So, read the Anselm handout for Monday, and look at the selection from MV.

Most of all, make sure to have completed the assigned sections of Meditation Three.

I should note that when I say, "Make sure to have completed the assigned sections of Meditation Three," I mean that you should have read the material, and worked through the questions on the reading guide. You should be prepared to ask questions on the parts that you have not understood.