

Philosophy 1320: Theories of the Mind, Stern College - Yeshiva University, Spring 2007  
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Lecture Notes, January 29

## I. Descartes' method, and the cogito

Descartes published the *Discourse on Method*, in French, in 1637.

The *Meditations* was published in Latin, in 1641, with Objections and Replies.

In the first meditation, which is not reprinted in Morton, Descartes begins to sort through his beliefs.

Descartes' stated goal is to provide a firm foundation for all knowledge, to separate truth from falsity and necessary truth from contingent truth.

His real goal is to provide a philosophical framework for the new science of Galileo and Newton.

His method is to deny everything he believes, and then accept just those beliefs of which he can be certain.

Elsewhere, he uses the analogy of cleaning an apple cart which contains some rotten apples by dumping out the whole cart and then putting back just the good ones.

Descartes provides three arguments for doubt.

1. Illusion: My senses can deceive me, in cases of optical, or other sensory, illusions, or hallucinations.
2. Dreams: If we are dreaming, any beliefs which rely on our senses are called into doubt. We can dream or imagine things that do not exist, including our own bodies.
3. The Deceiver: If there is a powerful deceiver who can place thoughts directly into our minds, then we can not be certain of anything.

At the beginning of the second meditation, which is where our excerpt begins, Descartes notices that the conclusion of the deceiver argument is too strong.

The argument Descartes uses is called the Cogito.

"I exist," must be true whenever I am thinking.

The Cogito establishes the existence of a thinker, as long as the thinker thinks.

Further, Descartes concludes that since we can doubt that anything physical exists, we must not be identifiable with our bodies.

Thus, Descartes denies the old Aristotelian view of the soul, as merely a distinct aspect of our matter.

We will return to this argument for the distinction of mind and body, augmented, in the sixth meditation.

For now, grant that we are thinking things, for that is all that we can conclude from the cogito.

We must be identified with just our thoughts.

We are things that doubt, understand, affirm, deny, will, refuse, imagine, and sense.

We can not learn much from these thoughts about the world outside of us.

For, we can be sure only of the thoughts, not of the world around us.

We can not even be sure that there is a material world.

But even if my thoughts and images do not truly represent an external world, they still appear to us.

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

## II. Knowledge of the material world, and the denigration of the senses

We ordinarily think that we know about physical objects through our senses.

At the end of the second meditation, Descartes concludes that we know of them only by mental inspection, through our minds alone.

This is his conclusion of a discussion about a ball of wax.

Consider a ball of wax in two distinct states.

First, 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.

We have images of the wax, in several incompatible states.

The imagination is our capacity for sensory images.

Distinguish the imagination from another mental capacity, that of judging.

(And we can distinguish these abilities 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.

Descartes' argument that knowledge of physical objects must come from the mind alone:

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

To resist the odd conclusion, 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.

For, if it is not the same wax, then the second premise is false.

We can have sensory knowledge of wax<sub>1</sub>, the wax before melting, and of wax<sub>2</sub>, the wax after melting, and the different properties don't make a contradiction, since wax<sub>1</sub> is a different object from wax<sub>2</sub>.

"But does the same wax remain? It must be admitted that it does; no one denies it; no one thinks otherwise (p 78)."

Descartes neglects a view on which any change in the properties of an object entails a change in the object.

Remember the Heraclitean view on which any change in an object's properties makes a new object.

This Heraclitean view may not be right, but it has defenders.

Since our constitution is always changing, we are different people at different times.

We might, as Shira suggested, find a pragmatic way of grouping all the different waxes, or grouping the

many things that I think of as me.

The Heraclitean view, though, will not get Descartes any “firm and lasting” knowledge.

So, Descartes’ argument resists these two accusations.

Another way to state Descartes’s position on our knowledge of the material world 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.

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