

Philosophy 1320: Theories of the Mind, Stern College - Yeshiva University, Spring 2007  
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Lecture Notes, January 31

I. Descartes' claim that knowledge of the material world comes from the mind alone, redux

Descartes' 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.

(I was interpreting Chanie as suggesting this weaker claim.)

But Descartes asserts a stronger claim, that the senses play no role in our knowledge.

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

While the weaker claim is more plausible, Descartes' 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.

Recall that our knowledge of the horse (or bus) rushing past us seems to go beyond the sensory impression of the horse (or bus).

For Aristotle, non-sensory knowledge was evidence of a passive intellect.

For Descartes, as for Plato, beliefs which are merely sensory are mere beliefs.

Anything which can count as knowledge must arise from the mind alone.

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

First, that it has a particular color, or texture.

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.

II. The new science and the primary/secondary distinction

Descartes' real goal in writing the *Meditations* was to form a firm foundation for the new science.

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.

That is, physical objects are essentially things which can have sensory qualities, but which need not have any particular ones.

The same object may have many different appearances.

This conclusion is sometimes called the primary/secondary distinction.

Boyle, Galileo, Newton, and Locke, as well as Descartes, all believe that physical objects really have their primary qualities, of size, shape, mass, motion, and number.

Note that all of these properties are mathematically describable.

They are all the properties that physicists need to construct physical theories.

Thus, Galileo writes that the book of nature is written in the language of mathematics, p 59.

And, Descartes writes that the only principles he needs are mathematical, p 62.

Secondary, sensory properties, are the result of interactions between our bodies and other bodies.

They are not, as Aristotle had it, real properties of external objects.

'Nominalism' refers to the claim that some words are merely names and do not denote real objects or properties.

We are all nominalists about fictional objects, like the Tooth Fairy.

Some people are nominalists about numbers.

Descartes, Galileo, Locke, and Hobbes are nominalists about secondary properties.

We will look at Locke's arguments for the primary/secondary distinction in the next section of this class.

Berkeley rejects the primary/secondary distinction, as we will also see later.

Here, we look at the arguments from Descartes and Galileo.

Descartes' discussion of the wax is an argument for the primary/secondary distinction.

Galileo argues for the distinction on analogy with a feather.

No one thinks that the tickle is in the feather.

Similarly, we should not think that the color, or odor, or taste, or heat, is in the object which we perceive as colored, odored, tasty, or hot.

All of these properties are just the result of contact with our senses.

They are not, as Aristotle would have, the result of our senses being changed to match the object.

Physical objects are just particles in motion, and they can communicate this motion to us, as they do with heat.

Descartes, in *Le Monde*, mentions that philosophers believe that sound is "nothing but a certain vibration of the air which strikes our ears (p 60)."

If my experience of sound really resembled the sound, then I would hear motion, not music.

Also in *Le Monde*, Descartes argues from analogy with words.

A word, like 'Rene', can make us think of something that is nothing like a word, like Rene.

Similarly, sensations, like my red quale, can make me think of something, like an apple.

But, there is no need to think that the apple resembles my red quale.

Descartes' presentation, in the second paragraph on p 60, is less clear than it could be.

But, his point is the same as Galileo's: there is no red in the apple.

There is something in the apple that makes me see it as red.

Descartes calls this a dispositional property.

A dispositional property is nothing more than a particular arrangements of particles.

There is nothing in the apple that resembles my sensation of red.

Compare with the stars and candle of the sixth meditation, p 85.

Descartes' point there is that we should not confuse the appearance of size with the scientist's evaluation of extension.

### III. The primary/secondary distinction and the gulf between mind and body

The mechanistic philosophy of the scientific revolution creates a gulf between the body and the mind. The seventeenth century was a time of great optimism, and we can see the optimism about being able to account for everything on the basis of mechanics in Descartes' writings.

Still, there seems to be something missing.

Consider Descartes's criticism of Aristotle's explanation of our sensations.

Aristotle said that our bodies literally change to match the qualities of the world we encounter.

Descartes rightly points out that there is a scientific error in Aristotle's theory.

But, Descartes' theory also makes errors.

Morton does a nice job of explaining the errors in Descartes' theory of perception, which relies on the idea that light particles are spherical and rotate at varying velocities.

Despite Descartes' error, contemporary theories of perception are consistent with his point that the impingement of our retinas by light causes us to see.

For both Descartes and the contemporary neuroscientist, we lack an explanation of the connection between my quale and its cause.

Why is it that such and such motions in the air cause me to hear a symphony?

Why is it that certain wavelengths of light cause me to see blue?

We will return to this hard problem, repeatedly.

Now, we will examine Descartes' theory of mind, and arguments for the independence of mind and body.

Descartes is a dualist, believing that there are minds (both finite and infinite) and bodies.

A monist believes that there is only one kind of substance.

Hobbes is a materialist monist.

Contemporary science tends toward materialism (and monism) by identifying the mind with the brain.

Berkeley is a different kind of monist, an idealist monist.

We have seen already that Descartes has rejected the commonsense principle that the things we know best are those we see and touch.

The title of the Second Meditation asserts that the mind is known better than the body.

Descartes' reflections on the wax bring him back to the mind, and improve our understanding of it, p 79.

Recall that Plato thought that the sensible world was a confused world of becoming, and that real knowledge was only of the forms.

Similarly, Descartes argues that knowledge of sensible things is secondary to knowledge of our minds.

The gulf between the self, the mind, and the world has broadened.

Not only has Descartes separated the mind from the body, he also recognizes that knowledge of bodies, if there are any, must be by judgment, and not by sensory awareness.

Descartes uses the example of the men passing by the window in overcoats.

We do not see the men, we infer that they are men.

They need not have overcoats to mask their true nature.

Bodies work the same way.

We must judge their true natures, with our minds, independently of seeing them.

In part, we must judge that people are (metaphorically) inside their bodies, since we have distinguished between minds and bodies.

But, the same point applies to ordinary bodies, to ordinary physical objects.

#### IV. Descartes' rule

A methodological point:

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.

Descartes calls his criteria for knowledge clarity and distinctness, p 80.

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.

Compare Descartes' 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.

The rule of clarity and distinctness is what distinguishes the argument for the mind/body in the sixth meditation from its earlier form in the second meditation.