Philosophy 203: History of Modern Western Philosophy Hamilton College
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Class 4 - January 27
Meditations Three through Six
Discourse, Part Five

0. Smart Chimps; Painting Elephant

I. The Causal Argument for God's Existence

The Meditation Three argument for the existence of God is, in short, that there is one idea which can not be merely constructed by myself.
The idea of God has properties which make it such that it can not be created by me, alone.
Since I have doubt, I can not be perfect.
I have the idea of perfection.
But, the idea of perfection can not have come from an imperfect source.
That would violate a general principle which prohibits something coming from nothing.
So, the idea of God must come from God.

To look more carefully at the argument, it will help to familiarize yourself with some terms Descartes uses.
The synthetic presentation of the content of the *Meditations* in the Second Replies can be helpful.
The objective reality of an idea is a quality that an idea has in regards to that which it represents.
The idea of God has more objective reality than the idea of a person, which has more objective reality than the idea of a mode (or property) of a person.
There are three kinds of objective reality: of modes, of finite substances, and of infinite substances.

In contrast, formal reality is what we ordinarily think of as existence.
The idea of Easter Bunny has the same kind of objective reality as the idea of myself.
Both ideas are of finite substances.
But, I have formal reality, whereas the Easter Bunny does not.

To prove the existence of God, Descartes relies on a general principle.

> R. There is more reality in the cause of something than in the effect.

From R, we can derive that something can not come from nothing.
R holds for ideas as well as for other objects, like physical ones.
Indeed, at this point in the presentation, R can only hold of ideas since we do not know that there are any other things.
R yields the particular claim that there must be more reality in the idea of God than there is in the idea of a person.
In fact, there is so much reality in the idea of God that we can not have constructed it ourselves.
The idea of God contains the ideas of all perfections.
But, I am imperfect, and could not have devised the notion of such perfections purely from my ideas.

> Although the idea of substance is in me by virtue of the fact that I am a substance, that fact is not sufficient to explain my having the idea of an infinite substance, since I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite... I clearly understand that there is

> more reality in an infinite substance than there is in a finite one. Thus the perception of the infinite is somehow prior in me to the perception of the finite... How would I understand that I doubt and that I desire, that is, that I lack something and that I am not wholly perfect, unless there were some idea in me of a more perfect being, by comparison with which I might recognize my defects (AW 51b)?

Descartes urges that the idea of God is imprinted on him, as a mark of the artist on his work, 53b.
Remember that all of my ideas must be innate, acquired, or created by me.
We have freedom to create ideas any way we wish.
But, the idea of God is not variable; it is the idea of infinite perfection.
So the idea of God can not be created by me.
The idea of God can not be acquired, since we have no sensory experience of God.
So, the idea of God must be innate.

Tlumak (pp 35-6) presents a rigorous version of the causal argument, which I paraphrase here.

T1. Ideas are like images in that they represent things as having certain characteristics.
T2. Some of the objects of my ideas are represented as having more formal reality than others (i.e. some ideas have more objective reality than others).
T3. Whatever exists must have a cause with at least as much formal reality as it has.
T4. Every idea must have a cause with at least as much formal reality as the idea represents its object has having.
T5. I have an idea of God as an actually infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, all-knowing all-powerful substance by whom I (and anything else which may exist) have been created.
T6. I do not have all the perfections which my idea of God represents God as having.
T7. I am not the cause of my idea of God. (From 4, 5, and 6)
T8. The cause of my idea of God is some being other than myself who possesses at least as much formal reality as my idea of God represents. (From 4, 5, and 8)
TC. So, God exists.

I have a couple of small worries about Tlumak's version of the argument.
In his original presentation, Tlumak, following Descartes, distinguishes between efficient, total, first, and principle causes.
Those distinctions are more work than necessary, for our purposes.
I eliminated the different kinds of cause without (I believe) doing harm to the argument.

More substantially, but still without doing harm to the argument, Tlumak says that the general principle T3 is an instantiation of the truth that something can not come from nothing.
In contrast, I think it is a more general principle from which the claim that something can not come from nothing follows.

Tlumak rightly questions the central claim, at T4, that ideas must have causes that are at least as real as the object of that idea.
The claim is that if I have an idea of a rock, there must be a cause of that idea with at least as much reality (i.e. the ability to create) that rock.
The cause of my idea of the rock need not be the immediate source of my idea; I can just look at the rock.
But, it must be the first cause of my idea of the rock.

II. Problems for God

The proof of the existence of God raises some obvious conceptual difficulties.
Among them are:

G1. Evil, which seems to conflict with omni-benevolence.
G2. Error, which seems to conflict with omnipotence.
G3. Free will, which seems to conflict with omniscience.

Another problem with omni-benevolence, which we will discuss when we get to Leibniz, is that it seems to entail that this is the best of all possible worlds.
Such problems, though, are problems with Descartes's conclusion, not with his argument.
We will return to them through the first half of the course.

III. Getting Rid of the Deceiver, and Avoiding Error

We have finished our discussion of the Third Meditation, and are beginning the Fourth.
We have reasons to suspend judgment concerning our beliefs: the three doubts.
We have a criterion for restoring some of our beliefs: clear and distinct perception.
We have a criterion for continuing to doubt others: reliance on the Resemblance Hypothesis.

To proceed, we need to know that the criterion will not lead us astray.
At the beginning of Meditation Four, Descartes argues that the goodness of God secures the criterion.
A perfect God is all good, but the deceiver is not.
So, the argument is pretty simple: the goodness of an all-perfect good will overwhelm any worries about a deceiver, 54b.

GG GG1. Deception is a defect.
GG2. God has no defects.
GG3. So God is no deceiver.
GG4. God created and preserves me.
GGC. So, I am not deceived by God.

Unfortunately, as Descartes notes, this argument appears to be too strong.
If my creator and preserver can not, by her goodness, deceive me, it is a puzzle how I can ever err.
This puzzle is sometimes known as Descartes's problem of error.

PE PE1. God exists and is perfectly good.
PE2. God creates and preserves me.
PE3. My faculty of judgment therefore comes from God.
PEC. So, my judgments never err.

Since I do err, there must be a problem with PE.
Perhaps God is really the deceiver after all!

Since PEC is false, either one of the premises of PE must be false, or the conclusion does not follow from the premises.
Whatever solution Descartes discovers must not contradict the prior claims in GG.

Thus, Descartes is committed to all three premises PE1 - PE3.
His solution is to deny that PE is valid.
That is, he claims that PEC does not follow from the premises of PE.

To explain how we can err, Descartes presents what is know as a two-faculty theory of the mind, 55b-58a
Our minds have faculties both of will and of understanding.
Our power of willing is infinite, but our power of understanding is finite.
We err when we apply our will (and judge) outside our understanding.
The way to avoid error is to avoid judging unless you have a clear and distinct understanding.
If I clearly and distinctly understand that P then I know that P.
Remember, clarity and distinctness, as a criterion, is ensured by the presence of God.
The goodness of God ensures that there is no deceiver, no systematic deception.
I am the source of my error, and if I am careful not to judge hastily, I can be sure to never judge falsely.
Descartes's account of error thus allows small mistakes, but prevents systematic deception or misunderstanding.
I can be wrong about minor particular claims, but not about profound ones, like the existence of a physical world.
Now, we shall begin to reclaim that world.

IV. Applying the Criterion

Let's look back at the three-tiered classification of our beliefs I derived from the First Meditation.

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 arithmetic and geometry
Beliefs about logical and semantic truths

The possibility of a deceiver eliminated our Class III beliefs.
Having eliminated the deceiver, we can reclaim them, or at least the ones we perceive most clearly and distinctly.
Descartes reclaims mathematical truths in Meditation Five, 58b-59a.
These objects are known by proof, and are not sensory.
They are *a priori*, or innate, as Descartes calls them.
Sensory information is still in doubt, since the dream argument lingers, even with the defeat of the deceiver.
The problems of the resemblance hypothesis have not been resolved, but mathematical knowledge is not impugned, even in dreams.

Consequently, Descartes reclaims the mathematical properties of objects (e.g. length, shape, and anything describable using mathematics).
This reclamation leads to Descartes' second argument for the existence of God, the ontological argument, 59b, which derives from a similar argument made by Anselm in the eleventh century CE.

V. Anselm's Ontological Argument

Descartes's ontological argument is very quick, and it might be useful to look at an earlier version of the argument, in the work of Anselm.
There are various consistent characterizations of 'God', to many of which Descartes alludes.

> Whatever necessarily exists
> All perfections, including omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence
> Creator and preserver

Anselm uses a different characterization: 'something greater than which can not be thought'.
These are definitions of a term, or a word, but not an object.
There is no presupposition in this characterization that such a thing exists.
Or, so it seems.

Anselm's ontological argument for God's existence (see handout)

AO AO1. I can think of 'God'
AO2. If 'God' were just an idea, or term, then I could conceive of something greater than 'God' (i.e. an existing God).
AO3. But 'God' is that than which nothing greater can be conceived
AO4. So 'God' can not be just an idea
AOC. So, God exists.

Anselm further argues that one can not even conceive of God not to exist.
This latter argument is not present in the *Meditations*, and need not concern us.

VI. Descartes's Ontological Argument

Descartes's version of the argument is simpler than Anselm's.
Anselm argued that the object which corresponds to the concept 'something greater than which can not be thought' must exist.
For, if we thought that the object which corresponded to that concept did not exist, then it would not be the object which corresponded to that concept.
There would be something greater, i.e. the object which does exist.
So, we give the name 'God' to that best possible object.

Descartes's version does not depend on our actual conception, or on our ability to conceive.
He merely notes that existence is part of the essence of the concept of 'God'.
This conceptual containment is similar to the way that having angles whose measures add up to 180 degrees is part of the essence of the concept of a triangle.
Or, as Descartes notes, like the concept of a mountain necessarily entails a valley.

The essence of an object is all the properties that necessarily belong to that object.
They are the necessary and sufficient conditions for being that object, or one of that type.
Something that has all these properties is one.
Something that lacks any of these properties is not one.
A chair's essence (approximately) is to be an item of furniture for sitting, with a back, made of durable

material.
The essence of being a bachelor is being an unmarried man.
A human person is essentially a body and a mind.
The essence of God is the three omnis, and existence.

VII. Objections to the Ontological Argument

Descartes's ontological argument starts by noting that the concept 'God' is that of a being with all perfections.
Since it is more perfect to exist than not to exist, the concept must include existence.
And if the concept includes existence, the object to which it corresponds must exist.
You can have the concept of a non-existing object just like God, but which does not exist.
But this would not be the concept 'God', by definition.

Caterus, a Dutch philosopher, noted in correspondence with Descartes that the concept of a necessarily existing lion has existence as part of its essence, but it entails no actual lions.
You can find Caterus's objection and Descartes's reply in the collection of Objections and Replies I have prepared on the website; Caterus was the first objector.
Some of us will look more closely at this objection on Monday.
Caterus is saying that we must distinguish more carefully between concepts and objects.
Even if the concept contains existence, it is still just a concept.

Similarly, Gaunilo, responding to Anselm, wrote that my idea of the most perfect island does not entail that it exists.
In fact, it may entail that it does not exist, since a non-existing island would be free of imperfections.
Still, the airfare would be pretty steep.

Gassendi, in the Fifth Objections, argues that existence is not a perfection.
Existence can not be part of an essence, since it is not a property at all.
If existence is not a property, then the ontological argument is unsound.
Some of us may look at Gassendi's objection in our next class.
Kant, later, pursues Gassendi's suggestion.
We will examine Kant's response at the end of the term.

VIII. Dualism and Monism

While Descartes only discusses the reclamation of mathematical beliefs from what I called Class III beliefs, we can proceed with the understanding that Descartes believes he has secured all such clear and distinct perceptions.
Class I beliefs are mainly not the sort that can be called knowledge, given the problems of the resemblance hypothesis.
It remains for us to reclaim those of Class II that we can.
Specific sense properties of physical objects will never be reclaimed, since they too suffer from the problems of the resemblance hypothesis.
But, by the end of the Fifth Meditation, we still have no argument for, say, the existence of a material world.

Descartes reclaims the material world in two stages.
By the end of the *Meditations*, he has defended a dualist view.
Descartes countenances three types of substances:

S1. God (infinite mind);
S2. Persons (finite minds); and
S3. Extended objects (bodies).

In the first sentence of the Fourth Meditation, he says that our quantity of knowledge of these things comes in this order.
We know a lot about God, some about minds, and very little about bodies.

S1 and S2 are similar in kind; they are both mental substances.
So, we call Descartes a dualist: he believes that there are minds (both finite and infinite) and bodies.
A monist believes that there is only one kind of substance.
Berkeley is a monist who believes that there are only minds.
Hobbes is a monist who believes that there is only matter.
Contemporary science tends toward Hobbesian materialism by identifying the mind with the brain.

IX. Removing Doubts

We reclaimed Class III beliefs only after removing the third doubt.
Descartes does not remove the dream doubt until the very end of Meditation Six.

> The hyperbolic doubts of the last few days ought to be rejected as ludicrous. The goes especially for the chief reason for doubting, which dealt with my failure to distinguish being asleep from being awake. For I now notice that there is a considerable difference between these two; dreams are never joined by the memory with all the other actions of life, as is the case with those actions that occur when one is awake (68b)

This passage is puzzling, especially the claim that the dream argument is the chief reason for doubting.
One might wonder why such a solution was not available in the First Meditation.
Descartes's solution to the problem of error eliminated the possibility of widespread, systematic doubt.
The dream argument concludes widespread, systematic doubt.
Descartes's solution to the problem raised by the dream argument, the demand for a criterion to distinguish waking from dreaming experiences, depends on his newfound surety in the existence and goodness of God.
Without the security of the criterion of clear and distinct perception, Descartes's rejection of the dream argument is implausible.
Similarly, if one rejects Descartes's arguments for the existence and goodness of God, the dream doubt is not so easily eliminable.

The existence and nature of the physical world was brought into doubt by the dream argument.
Descartes now sees a way of judging clearly and distinctly whether we are dreaming.
So, he can reclaim the objects brought into doubt by the dream argument.
Still, we must be careful not to be misled by the (false) resemblance hypothesis.
Descartes reclaims the material world in two stages: an argument that it can exist, and an argument that it does exist.

X. The Material World *Can* Exist

> I now know that [material things] can exist, at least insofar as they are the object of pure mathematics, since I clearly and distinctly perceive them. For no doubt God is capable of bringing about everything that I am capable of perceiving in this way (61).

God is omnipotent.
So, she can create anything that I can perceive.
In fact, she can create anything that does not create a contradiction.
She may not be able to create a round square, or a sphere that's both blue and red all over.
Still, the question remains whether she did in fact create these things.

XI. The Material World *Does* Exist (64b)

MW MW1. I seem to sense objects.
MW2. If I seem to sense objects, while there are none, then God is a deceiver.
MW3. God is no deceiver.
MWC. So, material things exist.

Of course, only the mathematical properties of this material things are known clearly and distinctly.
Their sensory properties are impugned by the resemblance hypothesis.
That is, we never defeat the illusion doubt, in the way that we reject the other two arguments for doubt.
We just do not know what these things are like in themselves, aside from their mathematical properties.
In particular, for Descartes, the essential property of a material thing is its extension.

If the senses are not useful for determining truth, i.e. the nature of the world, Descartes needs to account for the purpose of our sense ideas.
What are they good for?
For Descartes, it seems puzzling that God would give us senses since they are not useful in our quest for knowledge.
He resolves this puzzle by claiming that the senses provide natural protection of our bodies, 65a-b.
This is just the best structure for humans.
Since the body must have a method for transmitting information to the brain, it is bound to be imperfect.
It is better to be deceived once in a while, than not to have any information for the protection of the body.
See 66a and 68a.
The important point is that bodies are perceived by the mind, and only have extension as a real property.
The others are confused representations.

Still, our errors make God seem deceptive, since she could prevent them.
Descartes uses the mind/body distinction to block this accusation.

XII. The Mind/Body Distinction

We have reached the last important topic in the *Meditations*, perhaps the one with the most lasting impact.
Descartes argues that we are, essentially, thinking things, i.e. minds alone.

> From the fact that I know that I exist, and that at the same time I judge that obviously nothing else

> belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists entirely in my being a thinking thing (AW 64a).

In other words, the mind is distinct from the body.

Descartes provides two arguments, though most attention gets paid to the first.

MB MB1. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my mind, independent of my body.
MB2. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my body, independent of my mind.
MB3. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate, can be separated by God, and so are really distinct.
MBC. So, my mind is distinct from my body

MB3 is especially contentious.
The ability of an omnipotent God to separate two objects may not be relevant to the nature and relations of those objects.
Even if there were a God who could separate my mind from my body, perhaps my mind is, in fact, just a part of, or an aspect of, my body.

We could weaken the third premise to remove reference to God.

MB3*. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate are really distinct.

Substance dualism may not follow from MB3*.
Some philosophers believe that MB3* supports a weaker conceptual dualism.
Conceptual dualism just says that we have distinct concepts for the mind and the body.
It is, essentially, a semantic thesis, and not a metaphysical one.
In contrast to substance dualism, conceptual dualism is not very controversial.
We might express the original MB3 as saying that conceptual dualism entails substance dualism.

MB1 and MB2 rely on characterizations of the mind and body.
Descartes characterizes the mind as that which thinks.
In the *Principles*, he says that every substance has one essential characteristic.

> To each substance there belongs one principal attribute; in the case of mind, this is thought, and in the case of body it is extension. A substance may indeed be known through any attribute at all; but each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred. Thus extension in length, breadth and depth constitutes the nature of corporeal substance; and thought constitutes the nature of thinking substance. Everything else which can be attributed to body presupposes extension, and is merely a mode of an extended thing; and similarly, whatever we find in the mind is simply one of the various modes of thinking (*Principles of Philosophy* 53).

The core characteristic of thought, for Descartes, is consciousness.
Bodies, on the other hand, are mere machines.
In fact, our bodies are no different in kind from those of other complex animals.
We have similar sense organs, and brain structures, for example.
Cartesians were convinced of the absence of animal souls, and some were notorious vivisectionists.
Descartes's writings on animal souls are in themselves ambiguous.

The most obvious distinction between humans and animals is our ability to reason, our mental qualities.
In the *Discourse*, Descartes further characterizes the distinction between bodies/machines and minds on the basis of language use and behavioral plasticity, 33a.
No machine, he says, including an animal, can use language, or solve a wide range of problems.
Descartes's observations remain salient, today, and are central in debates over artificial intelligence.
Machines have made great strides in language use, but plasticity remains a problem.
While some machines can be trained to do a particular task even better than humans, no machine has the ability to adapt, change, and apply its intelligence to a variety of tasks.

If the mind is essentially thinking, and the body is essentially extended, the mind and the body are clearly distinct things.
Descartes claims that we may confuse the nature of mind and body because of the union of our minds with our bodies.
For example, consider our faculty of imagination, the mind's ability to receive images from the senses.
It seems that we first receive images, and then reason about them, 63a.
Descartes argues that this Aristotelian picture is misleading.
We can even exist, and think, without imagination, p 64a.

Descartes has separated thought from sensation, perhaps his most remarkable achievement.
On Cartesian dualism, the senses have been demoted from their lofty position as the origin of all knowledge.
The senses merely provide natural protection of our bodies.

XIII. Arnauld's Objection

Consider the following objection, in the spirit of Arnauld's worries, to Descartes's argument.
If Descartes's argument is valid, then this argument is valid:

AO
- AO1. I have a clear and distinct understanding of Clark Kent, as someone who can not fly.
- AO2. I have a clear and distinct understanding of Superman, as someone who can fly.
- AO3. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate, can be separated by God, and so are really distinct.
- AOC. So, Clark Kent is not Superman.

AOC is clearly false.
But, the form of AO is the same as the form of MB.
Descartes should respond by finding a difference between the two arguments such that AO is unsound while MB remains sound.
Descartes could insist that we do not have a clear and distinct understanding of Clark Kent, for example.
Instead, our knowledge of him is inadequate.
Denigrating our knowledge of Clark Kent solves the problem with the Superman argument.
But, that solution might rebound on the first premise of Descartes's original argument.
We have to wonder whether our knowledge of the body is also inadequate.
Perhaps, if our knowledge of the mind were adequate, then we would understand that the mind is the body, and not distinct from it.
Hobbes, for example, urges this view.
We will return to some of these topics next week, and throughout the course.

XIV. Descartes's Second Argument for the Mind/Body Distinction

Descartes's second argument for the mind/body distinction is based on the divisibility of bodies, 67a.

DB DB1. Whatever two things have different properties are different objects.
DB2. The mind is indivisible.
DB3. The body is divisible.
DBC. So, the mind is not the body.

In response to DB, we might again just not have noticed that the mind is in fact divisible.
There are other attributes of the mind and soul, which Descartes discusses elsewhere.
Descartes mentions that these other attributes contribute to the argument for the distinction between the mind and the body.
The most important attribute is Descartes's argument that knowledge of God is innate, impressed on the soul of human beings like the mark of a painter on his work.
Also, Descartes discusses the distinction between willing and understanding, which helps account for the problem of error.
The way in which discussions of these attributes contributes to the main argument is that they serve as support for the claim that we have a complete understanding of the mind, without any material attributes.

XV. Descartes, Plato, and the Relation Between the Mind and the Body

Plato argued that the world of sensation, or becoming, is not the real world.
The real world is the world of being, the world of the forms.

In the Fourth Objections, Arnauld claims that Descartes has returned to Plato's view, but Descartes denies it, in response.
For Descartes, we are primarily our minds.
But our bodies are part of us, as well.
Descartes steers a narrow path between the old Platonic view that our bodies are completely inessential and a materialist view on which we are just our bodies.
For Plato, the body is at best merely a vessel for the soul.
For Descartes, we are tied to our bodies in a remarkable way, unlike a sailor and ship, 65a.
We do not merely observe injury to the body, but have a special relationship to it.
Philosophers call this relationship privileged access.

XVI. Immortality

Lastly, notice that Descartes does not even broach the subject of the immortality of the soul in the *Meditations*.
He does discuss it very briefly at the very end of the *Discourse.*

> When one knows how different [the mind and the body] are, one understands much better the arguments which prove that our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body, and consequently that it is not subject to die with it. Then, since we do not see any other causes at all for its destruction, we are naturally led to judge from this that it is immortal (34).

I leave the evaluation of this argument to you.

XVII. Topics for Review

1. Three doubts:
    - Illusion
    - Dream
    - Deceiver
2. Skepticism
3. Three classes of beliefs
4. Rationalism and empiricism
5. *A priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge
6. The cogito
7. Clarity and distinctness as criteria for knowledge
8. Resemblance hypothesis
9. Three sources of ideas (innate, acquired, produced by me) and their characteristics.
10. The problem of error and Descartes's account of error
11. Descartes's metaphysics: infinite mind, finite minds, bodies
12. Necessary truths (e.g. those of mathematics) and how we know them
13. The ontological argument for God's existence
14. The role of our senses
15. The possibility and existence of physical objects
16. The mind/body thesis