

**Philosophy 203**  
***History of Modern Western Philosophy***

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**Hamilton College**  
**Spring 2012**

Class 3 - The Cogito, Certainty, and  
Sense Experience  
Meditations Two and Three

# Business

- ▶ Blindsight
- ▶ Panel Presentations Schedule
  - ▶ Large groups (esp.  $n > 3$ ) are difficult to manage.
  - ▶ Distribution of work, inclusion
- ▶ *Inception*, Wednesday evening
  - ▶ Movie at 7pm
  - ▶ Discussion at 9:30pm
  - ▶ Feel free to come to one without the other.
- ▶ 47 slides today

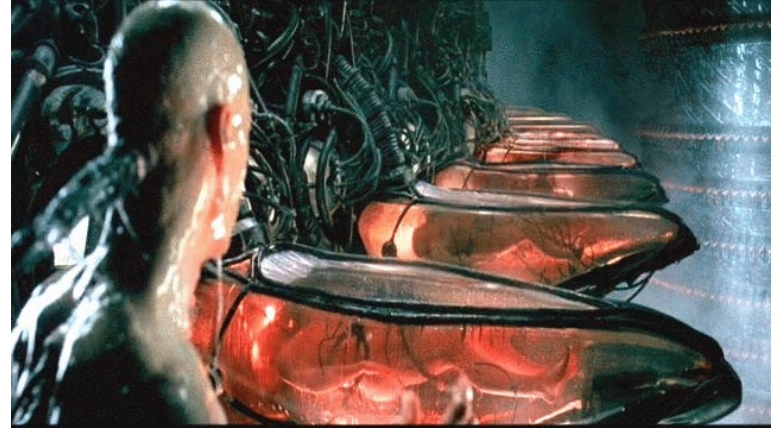
# Topics for Today

1. Finish the Doubts
2. The Cogito
3. The Wax Argument
4. Descartes's Rule
5. Foundationalism
6. The Resemblance Hypothesis
7. The Solipsistic Barrier

# What Survives the Dream Doubt?

- Mathematical claims
  - $7+5=12$
  - the tangent to a circle intersects the radius of that circle at right angles'
- Logic
- Semantic facts
  - 'Bachelors are unmarried.'
- Universals/properties
  - color, shape, quantity, place, time
  - the "building blocks"
  - The properties remain, even if only in our minds.
  - "It is from these components, as if from true colors, that all those images of things that are in our thought are fashioned, be they true or false" (AW42).

# The Deceiver



- What if there were a powerful deceiver who can place thoughts directly into our minds?
- The *Matrix* (and similar)
  - According to such examples, our thoughts really happen in brains.
  - There is a physical reality, but it is unlike the one we perceive.
  - In contrast, 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 beliefs, we notice that just about all of them can be called into question.
- Nothing, it seems, is certain.

# Seeking Firm Foundations

- Three arguments for doubt
  1. Illusion
  2. Dream
  3. Deceiver.
- 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 arithmetic and geometry
    - Beliefs about logical and semantic truths
- In order to rebuild his beliefs, Descartes seeks a single starting point.
  - Archimedes and the lever

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# The Cogito

- One belief resists doubt.
- Whenever I am thinking, even if I am doubting, I must exist.
- 'Cogito' is Latin for 'I think'.
- At least my existence, as long as I am thinking, can not be seriously doubted.



# Augustine (5th Century CE)

## Honor Code Violation by Descartes?

“But, without any delusive representation of images or phantasms, I am most certain that I am, and that I know and delight in this. In respect of these truths, I am not at all afraid of the arguments of the Academicians, who say, What if you are deceived? For if I am deceived, I am. For he who is not, cannot be deceived; and if I am deceived, by this same token I am. And since I am if I am deceived, how am I deceived in believing that I am? for it is certain that I am if I am deceived. Since, therefore, I, the person deceived, should be, even if I were deceived, certainly I am not deceived in this knowledge that I am. And, consequently, neither am I deceived in knowing that I know. For, as I know that I am, so I know this also, that I know” (*City of God*).

# Why the Cogito is Not an Inference

- In the *Meditations*, *Descartes* does not write, “I think; therefore I am.”
- That formulation presumes a syllogism:
  - NC1. Whatever thinks, exists.
  - NC2. I think.
  - NCC. So, I exist.
- A logical deduction would require
  - previous knowledge of the two premises; and
  - previous knowledge that the conclusion follows from the premises.
- But *Descartes* eliminated logical knowledge on the basis of the deceiver doubt.
- *Descartes* calls the cogito a pure intuition.

# Descartes on the Self

- But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines, and senses (45a).
  - imagination, for representing or beholding sensory images
  - a capacity to make judgments, to affirm or deny, or to doubt
  - capacities for willing and refusing
  - emotions, like happiness
- Distinguish sensing from seeming to sense.
  - The doubts lead us to wonder if we are living in a dream-like world.
  - But I have direct access to my thoughts: privilege.
  - The doubts infect only my claims about what those thoughts represent: indefeasibility.
  - Ideas can not be false.
- The next step: examine these thoughts and see if they can help us make any conclusions beyond our thoughts.
- No luck; let's come back the other way.

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# Knowledge of Bodies From the Mind Alone

- We generally think that our knowledge of physical objects is the result of sense experience.
  - We see a chipmunk, perhaps represent it to ourselves in imagination, and then we know about the chipmunk.
- Not so fast, says Descartes:
  - “I now know that even bodies are not, properly speaking, perceived by the senses or by the faculty of imagination, but by the intellect alone, and that they are not perceived through their being touched or seen, but only through their being understood” (47a).



# The Ball of Wax



- First, it is cold, hard, yellow, honey-flavored, and flower-scented.
- Then, after it is melted, the wax becomes hot and liquid, and loses its color, taste, and odor.
- All of its sensory properties have shifted.
- We have images of the wax, in several incompatible states.
- But we do not have an image of the essence of the wax, or of wax in general.
- “I grasp that the wax is capable of innumerable changes of this sort, even though I am incapable of running through these innumerable changes by using my imagination... The perception of the wax is neither a seeing, nor a touching, nor an imagining...even though it previously seemed so; rather it is an inspection on the part of the mind alone “(46a).

# **Descartes's Argument That Knowledge of the World Comes From the Mind Alone**

W1. Knowledge must be firm and lasting.

W2. What we get from the senses is transient and mutable.

W3. So our senses do not give us knowledge.

W4. We do have knowledge about the wax.

W5. Knowledge which does not come from the senses must come from the mind alone.

WC. So, our knowledge of physical objects must come from the mind alone.

# Two Possible Cheats

- We don't even know that physical objects exist.
  - Descartes's conclusion is that if we have any knowledge of physical objects, then it can not come from the senses.
- Is the wax same before and after melting?
  - "Does the same wax remain? I must confess that it does; no one denies it; no one thinks otherwise" (45b).
  - Descartes neglects the Heraclitean view.
  - The Heraclitean view, though, will not get Descartes any "firm and lasting" knowledge.
- No honor code violations here.





# Real and Apparent Properties

- 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.
- “Perhaps the wax was what I now think it is: namely that the wax itself never really was the sweetness of the honey, nor the fragrance of the flowers, nor the whiteness, nor the shape, nor the sound, but instead was a body that a short time ago manifested itself to me in these ways, and now does so in other ways... Let us focus our attention on this and see what remains after we have removed everything that does not belong to the wax: only that it is something extended, flexible, and mutable” (46a).
- We’ll come back to the appearance/reality distinction in a moment.

# Descartes's Metaphysics

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

# The Role of the Senses in Knowledge

- Weak claim: the senses are insufficient for knowledge.
  - We use the senses to gather information
  - In conjunction with reasoning, which is purely mental, we arrive at knowledge.
  - Fairly uncontroversial
- Strong claim: the senses are irrelevant to knowledge.
  - Knowledge of physical objects comes from the intellect (or mind) alone.
  - 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.
  - We know that the wax can take more forms than we could possibly imagine: more shapes, more sizes.
  - We don't see potential colors.
  - Our knowledge that there are other potential shapes and colors must go beyond anything that could come from the senses.
- Two different types of beliefs about the wax.
  - It has a particular shape, color, and other sense properties.
    - not knowledge
  - It can take on innumerable many different forms.
    - knowledge

# The Priority of Mind

the mind is known better than the body

“There is not a single consideration that can aid in my perception of the wax or of any other body that fails to make even more manifest the nature of my mind” (47a).

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- 8. Causal Argument for God's Existence

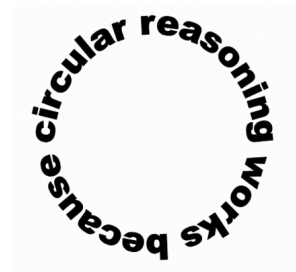
# Descartes's Rule

- We need some kind of mark, or rule, which enables us to separate knowledge from mere belief.
- We start with the Cogito.
- “Surely in this first instance of knowledge, there is nothing but a certain clear and distinct perception of what I affirm. Yet this would hardly be enough to render me certain of the truth of a thing, if it could ever happen that something I perceived so clearly and distinctly were false. And thus I now seem able to posit as a general rule that everything I very clearly and distinctly perceive is true” (47).
- How can we apply this rule?

# On Clarity and Distinctness

- “I call a perception ‘clear’ when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind - just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception ‘distinct’ if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear” (*Principles of Philosophy* I.45).
- We can not see with our senses clearly and distinctly, but only with the mind.
- The light of nature formulation
  - “Whatever is shown me by this light of nature, for example, that from the fact that I doubt, it follows that I am, and the like, cannot in any way be doubtful. This is owing to the fact that there can be no other faculty that I can trust as much as this light and which could teach that these things are not true” (49a)
- The specific formulation of the criterion is not important.
- Without a mark, all searching for knowledge, on Descartes’s terms, is fruitless.

# The Cartesian Circle



- Given any mark, or rule, for certainty, how do we know that we have the correct mark?
- Appeal to the mark itself is circular.
- Later, Descartes argues that the goodness of God secures the criterion of clear and distinct perception.
- That argument seems to rely on the use of the criterion in the argument for the existence of God.
- The problem of Cartesian circularity is one of the more vexing and interesting in Descartes scholarship.
- Still, the cogito does seem to contain some kind of undoubtable truth.
- If we can grasp what it is that makes the cogito unassailable, perhaps we can find the surety elsewhere.



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# Foundational Systems

- F1. Basic axioms, or undisputable truths; and
- F2. Rules of inference
  - Rules allow us to generate further theorems on the basis of already established ones.
- Definitions
- Distinguish the axioms in importance
- F1 and F2 are the core.
- Descartes's synthetic presentation in Second Replies
- Euclid's *Elements* (see website)
- Spinoza's *Ethics*

# The Synthetic (Geometrical) Version

- Descartes provides definitions, postulates, common notions, and derived propositions.
- Definitions:
  - thought, idea
  - objective reality, formal reality
    - setting up the proof of God's existence
  - substance, mind, body,
  - God, essence, distinctness
- Already in the definitions, we can find some worries about Descartes's project.
  - "By the word "thought" I include everything that is in us in such a way that we are *immediately aware* of it... By the word "idea" I understand that form of any thought through the immediate perception of which I am *aware* of that very same thought "(94).
  - Unconscious thought
  - Blindsight

# The Rest of the Synthetic Version

- Seven postulates:

1. Frailty of the senses
2. Security of pure thought
3. Self-evidence of logic, including the logic of causation (but see the Common Notions, as well)
4. Connection between ideas and objects (compare to Definition IX)
5. The idea of God includes necessary existence.
6. Contrast clear and distinct perception with obscure and confused perception
7. Security of clear and distinct perceptions

- Ten common notions:

1. We can ask about the cause of any thing.
2. Each instant is independent of every other, so that creation and preservation are indistinct.
3. Nothing can be uncaused.
4. Whatever reality is in a thing is formally or eminently in its first cause.
5. Our ideas require causes which contain formally the reality which exists objectively in the ideas.
6. There are degrees of reality: accidents, finite substances, infinite substance.
7. Our free will aims infallibly toward the good.
8. Whatever can make what is greater can make what is less.
9. It is greater to create (or preserve) a substance than an accident.
10. The ideas of all objects contain existence; only the idea of a perfect object contains necessary existence.

- Propositions

1. Ontological argument for God's existence
- 2-3. Causal arguments for God's existence
4. Distinction of mind and body

# The Synthetic and the Analytic

- The single, Archimedean point of the *Meditations* is almost completely absent from the synthetic presentation.
- Meditations:
  - Cogito - God - Clarity and Distinctness - Free Will - Mathematics - Mind/Body distinction
- The synthetic version hardly mentions mathematics or the cogito.
- The order is different.

# Foundations and Method

- A starting point for the *Meditations*: the cogito
- A rule for generating more truths: clear and distinct perception

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# The Resemblance Hypothesis

- The source of some of my errors is in believing that sensory experience leads to knowledge.
- The central claim underlying beliefs in the veracity of sense experience might be called the resemblance hypothesis.
- The resemblance hypothesis says that my ideas of objects are like the objects as they are in themselves.
- Descartes rejects the Resemblance Hypothesis.
  - replacing Aristotelian accounts of our knowledge and the world with views consistent with the new science





# Aristotle on Perception



- Aristotle had taken sensory qualities to be properties of external objects.
  - Perception occurs when our sense organs change to be like the world around us.
  - Our bodies are enformed by the properties (or forms) of the objects we perceive.
- The redness and sweetness of an apple are real properties of the apple itself.
  - I see the apple as red because my eye itself is able to change to red.
  - Our senses are thus attuned to the external environment.
- When we see a yellow lemon, our eyes become yellow; when we taste its bitterness, our taste buds become bitter.
- “What can perceive is potentially such as the object of sense is actually” (Aristotle, *De Anima* ii 5, 418a3-4),
- Similarly, in thinking, our minds are changed to match the forms of other objects in the world.
  - Our ideas resemble their causes.
- Objects really have the properties that we perceive them to have.



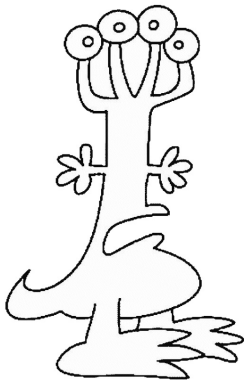
# Galilean Physics



- By the time of Descartes's writing, it was difficult to see a way to make the Aristotelian view of perception, and its concomitant resemblance hypothesis, plausible.
  - Worries about the scientific plausibility of the doctrine of enformation.
- Galilean physics: all causes are impetus.
  - collisions of billiard balls
  - transfers of momentum
- Nothing could be given to us by external objects except their motions.
- We can not be given sense properties like taste or color.
- It is thus a fundamental principle of the new science that objects as we experience them may be very different from how they are in themselves.

# Appearance and Reality

- Physical objects are really extended things, made of parts which may or may not be in motion, both together and relative to each other.
- Depending on how its parts, the atoms, unite and move, an object affects us in different ways.
- Their arrangement, along with our sensory apparatus, determines how we experience an object.
- The same object may have many different appearances.
- I see yellow lemons.
- Another person, or an alien with a radically different sense apparatus, could have different visual sensations of the same object.



# The Primary/Secondary Distinction

- The distinction between the real properties of a physical object, how it is in itself, and how the object appears through our senses.
  - Locke argues for a primary/secondary distinction, as we will see later in the term.
  - Berkeley rejects the primary/secondary distinction, as we will also see later.
  - Descartes's discussion of the wax is an argument for the primary/secondary distinction.
- Galileo argues for the distinction on analogy with a feather which might tickle us.
  - “When touched upon the soles of the feet, for example, or under the knee or armpit, it feels in addition to the common sensation of touch a sensation on which we have imposed a special name, ‘tickling’. This sensation belongs to us and not to the hand. Anyone would make a serious error if he said that the hand, in addition to the properties of moving and touching, possessed another faculty of tickling, as if tickling were a phenomenon that resided in the hand that tickled” (Galileo, *The Assayer*, 275).
- Physical objects are just particles in motion, and they communicate this motion to us.



# Descartes on the Primary/Secondary Distinction

- The analogy with words (in *Le Monde*)
  - A word, like 'René', can make us think of something that is nothing like a word, like René.
  - Similarly, sensations, like my conscious experience of red, can make me think of something, like an apple.
- We might call whatever is in the apple that makes me see it as red a dispositional property.
  - A particular arrangements of particles
  - "[Sound is] nothing but a certain vibration of the air which strikes our ears" (*Le Monde*, AT XI.6).
  - If my experience of sound really resembled the sound, then I would hear motion, not music.
- Descartes believed that physical objects have extension as their essence.
  - Extension is mathematically describable, as is motion.
  - The mathematical nature of both extension and motion were essential to the Galilean view of the world.

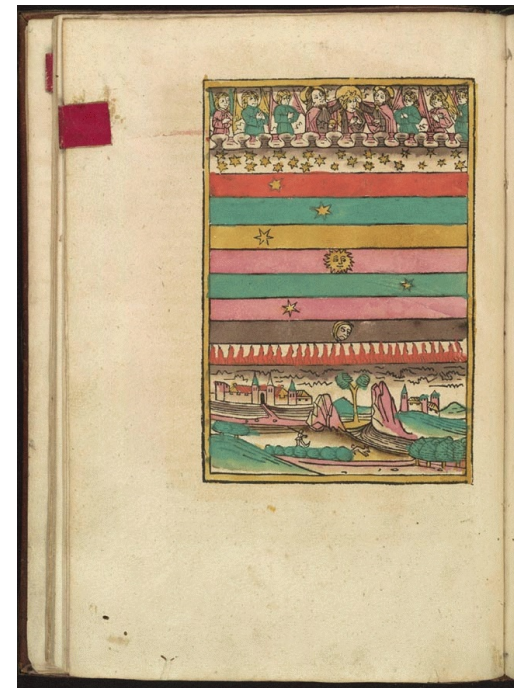


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René

# Mathematics and the World

- “Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth” (Galileo, *The Assayer*).
- Similarly, Descartes writes that the only principles he needs are mathematical.
- “The only principles which I accept, or require, in physics are those of geometry and pure mathematics; these principles explain all natural phenomena, and enable us to provide quite certain demonstrations regarding them” (*Principles of Philosophy* II.64).
- Extension and motion are real properties of physical objects; sense properties are unreal.



Konrad von Megenberg, Buch der Natur (Book of Nature). Augsburg: Johannes Bämmler, 1481

# Nominalism



- '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.
- Galileo and Descartes are nominalists about sense properties, what Descartes calls the content of our imagination.
- Still, for many people, especially those who resisted Galilean physics, the essence of the Aristotelian view, the claim that our perceptions match the nature of the outside world, persisted.

# Descartes's Argument for the Resemblance Hypothesis

RH1. I have ideas about objects involuntarily.

RH2. Involuntary ideas come from outside of me.

RH3. Objects send me their own likeness.

RHC. So, my ideas resemble their causes, i.e. physical objects.

- Descartes accepts RH1, although says that those ideas can lead one astray.
- Descartes provides arguments against both RH2 and RH3.

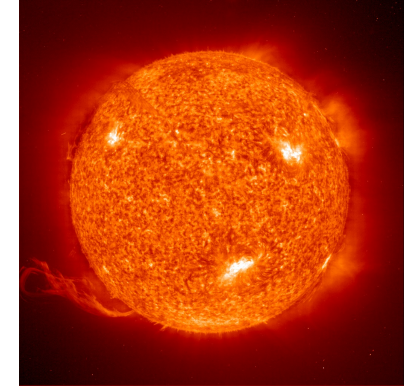


# Against RH2

RH2. Involuntary ideas come from outside of me.

- We may have an unnoticed ability to create images.
- As with dreams, we may create these ideas without realizing that we are doing so.
- Or we may have another faculty inside us for making these sensations.

# Against RH3



RH3. Objects send me their own likeness.

- The senses tell us that the sun is very small.
- We reason that the sun is very large.
- “Both ideas surely cannot resemble the same sun existing outside me; and reason convinces me that the idea that seems to have emanated from the sun itself from so close is the very one that least resembles the sun” (49a-b).

# Consequences of Rejecting the Resemblance Hypothesis

- Three classes of ideas, depending on their origins
  - Innate ideas are *a priori*; they are not instinctive abilities, but pure intuitions are among the innate ideas.
  - Acquired ideas are *a posteriori*, or empirical; they are derived from sense experience.
  - Ideas that I create, like those of fantasy and imagination, are also empirical.
- Only acquired and created ideas are subject to errors from the resemblance hypothesis.
- So, we have a serious account of our earlier errors.

# The Resemblance Hypothesis and the Doubts

- The arguments against the Resemblance Hypothesis are independent of the three doubts.
- We can delete the ideas which depended on the Resemblance Hypothesis.
- We now have reasons to keep the rotten apples out of the basket: the three doubts.
- We have criteria for putting good apples back into the basket: the criterion for certainty, clear and distinct perception.
- And we also have a criterion for recognizing bad apples: reliance on the Resemblance Hypothesis.

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# The Solipsistic Barrier

But what about when I considered something very simple and easy in the areas of arithmetic or geometry, for example that two plus three make five, and the like? Did I not intuit them at least clearly enough so as to affirm them as true? To be sure, I did decide later on that I must doubt these things, but that was only because it occurred to me that some God could perhaps have given me a nature such that I might be deceived even about matters that seemed most evident. But whenever this preconceived opinion about the supreme power of God occurs to me, I cannot help admitting that, were he to wish it, it would be easy for him to cause me to err even in those matters that I think I intuit as clearly as possible with the eyes of the mind. On the other hand, whenever I turn my attention to those very things that I think I perceive with such great clarity, I am so completely persuaded by them that I spontaneously blurt out these words: “let him who can deceive me; so long as I think that I am something, he will never bring it about that I am nothing. Nor will he one day make it true that I never existed, for it is true now that I do exist. Nor will he even bring it about that perhaps two plus three might equal more or less than five, or similar items in which I recognize an obvious contradiction.” And certainly, because I have no reason for thinking that there is a God who is a deceiver (and of course I do not yet sufficiently know whether there even is a God), the basis for doubting, depending as it does merely on the above hypothesis, is very tenuous and, so to speak, metaphysical. But in order to remove even this basis for doubt, I should at the first opportunity inquire whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether or not he can be a deceiver. For if I am ignorant of this, it appears I am never capable of being completely certain about anything else (AW 47b-48a).

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