

Class #5 - The External World and the Mind-Body Distinction
Descartes, Meditation Six and *Discourse*, Part Five

0. [Smart Chimps](#); [Painting Elephant](#)

I. Dualism and Monism

By the end of Meditation Five, Descartes believes that he has secured what I called the Class III beliefs (and what Descartes sometimes calls the eternal truths) as clearly and distinctly perceived. Class I beliefs, specific sense properties of physical objects, are not the sort that can be called knowledge, given the problems of the resemblance hypothesis. It remains for us to examine and reclaim those of Class II that we can. In particular, by the end of the Fifth Meditation, we still have no argument for 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.
As I mentioned, 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.

II. Removing Doubts

We reclaimed Class III beliefs only after removing the third doubt.
By parity of reasoning, one might expect Descartes to remove the second doubt before proceeding to Class II beliefs.
But 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 solution to the problem raised by 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.

III. The Material World *Can* Exist

To argue that the material world can exist, recall Descartes's Galilean view of the physical world as essentially mathematical.

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.

But physical objects, considered as mathematical objects instantiated, are consistently conceivable.

Still, the question remains whether God did in fact create these things.

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

To argue that the material world does exist, Descartes depends on the goodness of God.

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.

As we saw in the wax argument, in the sun argument, and in the candle argument of the Sixth Meditation, the sensory properties of material things are impugned.

Only the mathematical properties of the material world are known clearly and distinctly.

That is, Descartes never defeats the illusion doubt in the way that he rejects 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 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.

V. 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 for that distinction, 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.

VI. Arnauld's Objection

Consider the following objection, in the spirit of Arnauld's worries in the Fourth Objections, 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.

VII. 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.

VIII. 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.

IX. 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).

On the surface, this argument looks very poor.

- IS IS1. The body dies.
- IS2. The soul is not the body.
- IS3. We have no reason to believe that the soul dies just as the body does.
- ISC. So, the soul does not die.

One might improve the argument somewhat.

- IS* IS*1. The body dies.
- IS*2. The soul is not the body.
- IS*3. We have no reason to believe that the soul dies just as the body does.
- IS*4. The body and soul, being different substances, have different properties.
- IS*C. So, the soul does not die.

Still, not all objects which have different properties share no properties.

I have different properties from you, but we share some properties (like having noses).

I have no further support for, or interest in, this argument.

X. 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