**Meditations on First Philosophy** – Descartes

Meditation One – Of the Things of Which we may Doubt

*Descartes outlines his method of doubt whereby he resolves to doubt everything he formerly thought he knew.*

Everything he knows came through or from his senses (ref. the British empiricists).

However, he was sometimes misled by his senses.

Therefore, this casts doubt on all knowledge he gleans from his senses (i.e. everything).

But surely there are some things he can’t reasonably doubt, e.g. that he is sitting by the fire holding a piece of paper, etc.?

But he could be dreaming.

But dream objects surely couldn’t be formed without some kind of prior external reference (e.g. a painter can paint amazing things but all variations of what actually exist).

He then admits as probably being true the most general and simplest objects; corporeal nature and extension, figure, quantity, number, place in, during, etc. (arithmetic, geometry, etc.) since these things all hold true even in dreams.

But he could even be deceived about these things (he gives the example of two plus three) if some “malignant demon” so desired it.

Meditation Two – Of the Nature of the Human Mind; And That it is More Easily Known Than the Body

*Concludes that even if everything around him can be doubted, there remains one thing he cannot doubt by virtue of the very fact that he is doubting or being deceived, that he (a doubting/thinking mind) exists and that it is more clearly known than the corporeal world.*

Resolves that like Archimedes who needed only a single, immovable point to move the world, if he can find a single, certain and indubitable truth, he may salvage his knowledge.

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| He considers that there may be a God who puts thoughts in his mind.But then maybe he is capable of producing thoughts in his own mind; he exists.But earlier he was persuaded that there was nothing in the world, no things, no minds, no bodies.But he couldn’t be persuaded that he didn’t exist, for he was persuaded; he exists.But what if a demon is deceiving him?Then he certainly exists (as long as he is thinking) as the thing being deceived; he exists. | I think, I exist |

He now tries to discover what ‘he’ is. He previously thought he was a ‘soul’ (with no clear definition yet) and body (an extended thing).

This body can move, think, perceive, etc. but he never attributed these capabilities to his body.

Because of the demon, he must jettison his belief in his body, which leaves his soul.

What is his soul? He eliminates the idea that it is something which can walk, be nourished, and perceive. It is instead, a thinking thing, a mind.

I think, I (a thinking thing, a mind) exist.

But what is a thinking thing?

It is a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines, and perceives.

But he still feels he knows corporeal things better than he knows himself. He strives to understand this:

He examines a piece of wax and notes that while all the properties of it can change (when it is melted), the wax itself still remains. What is it that persists even though all the properties change?

He strips away all of the ‘secondary qualities’ apprehendable to the *senses* (Descartes doesn’t use this term) as things incidental, leaving something extended, flexible, and movable. But what do these mean?

Flexible and movable means that he *imagines* the wax capable of physical change, but since this admits of an infinity of changes, it would seem it is impossible for him to be capable of imagining this. Extension also falls to the same argument.

It seems that the perception of the wax is neither an act of the senses nor of imagination. It is an *intuition of the mind*, i.e. it is only through mind that we know things as they are. Another way to say this is all perception/imagination takes place in the mind

He then concludes that if it is only through the intellect alone that he knows the corporeal world (even if it is all an illusion) then there is nothing more easily or clearly apprehended than his own mind.

Meditation Three – Of God: That He Exists

*Affirms that knowledge from “clear and distinct” ideas is certain. Also affirms a “natural light” which guarantees certainty in reasoning (without reference to the body). Concludes that God exists (Perfect idea of God requires a perfect cause; Descartes’ existence)*

Descartes decides that since he now knows one thing for certain, he also knows what is required to know something for certain. This knowledge comes in the form of a clear and distinct perception.

But wasn’t he only just deceived about the external world?

But the only thing he clearly and distinctly perceived was the idea (in his mind) which was true.

But he also thought those ideas corresponded to things outside him and in this he was deceived.

Next, he wants to divide his thoughts into classes and investigate them for truth and error:

Images of things are *ideas* – These can’t be false.

Willing, fearing, affirming, denying, etc. are *volitions or affections* – These also can’t be false.

*Judgements* – Inasmuch as these usually ascertain whether ideas bear some correspondence to the external world these can be false.

Now, Descartes classifies his ideas into three groups; innate, adventitious, or factitious.

He now considers objects that seem to come from outside him and thinks about their truth. In favour of their veracity are 1) they were taught to him by nature, and 2) he has no control over them.

He concludes however that neither of these can guarantee that his ideas match reality.

Now Descartes invokes the concept of ‘natural light’ which allows him to know that there must be at least as much reality in the cause as in its effect (i.e. what is cannot be produced by what is not, and the less perfect cannot be the cause of the more perfect).

Ideas are effects and must therefore be caused by something with at least as much reality as them.

An infinite regress of ideas is impossible so there must be a first idea.

Argument for God (1)

He now searches for some idea that he knows clearly and distinctly couldn’t have been caused by him (which therefore must have an external cause).

Corporeal objects fail (both secondary and primary qualities). He could have derived these from his clear and distinct idea of himself existing as mind.

The idea of God however couldn’t have come from him.

* He thinks he can’t get the idea of the infinite from the idea of the finite (because there is “clearly” more reality in the former).
* It can’t have arisen from nothing (as a result of his imperfection) because it is clear and distinct.

God must therefore exist.

Argument for God (2)

He also wonders if he could exist if there was no God.

He rules out the idea that he created himself (how could he then not have perfect knowledge?) and that he always was as he is now so needed no creator (this is an interesting argument – each part of his life is completely independent on any other so existence in the past doesn’t guarantee existence in the future i.e. conservation (duration of a substance) and creation are no different in reality (only in our mode of thinking)).

On top of this he can’t find any power in himself whereby he could create himself.

He also rejects the idea that there were several causes that created him because one of the perfections that he conceives God to possess is unity.

God must therefore exist as a self-caused being who created him (Descartes).

Finally, he notes that the idea of God in his mind could not have come from his senses or his own wilful production; it is therefore innate and implanted by God.

Meditation Four – Of Truth and Error

*States that God is not a deceiver and concludes that error arises not from God but from his own failure to apply understanding to rein in his will*

God cannot deceive him because deceit involves imperfection.

God gave him the faculty of judgement.

So why does he sometimes make errors?

(He points out here that he shouldn’t be too quick to blame God for giving him less than perfect faculties because:

1. He is a limited being and can’t question God.
2. He shouldn’t consider himself individually apart from others, but needs rather to be aware that he is just a small part of what could be a perfect whole viewed from a higher perspective.

Descartes observes his errors occur in relation to two faculties; understanding (cognition) and the will (free choice).

He concludes that errors don’t arise from a defect in the faculties God has given him but from failing to restrain the will (from failure to *use* in the right way what God has given him). Understanding (through which ideas are clear and distinct) should precede the will; if it doesn’t then error follows.

On top of this he can’t complain to God:

* About his tendency to err because it is the nature of a limited being not to understand everything.
* About his will being more expansive than his understanding because the will is a single element and nothing can be taken from it without removing it entirely.
* About the role God plays in forming the acts of his will or judgements because they are wholly good and perfect (insofar as they depend on God) and the ability to make them is a much greater good than it would be were they lacking.
* About his tendency to err because this is better than everyone being the same.

Meditation Five – Of the Essence of Material Things; and, Again, of God; That He Exists

*Asserts some attributes of material things and concludes that God exists (ontological argument). Also concludes that it is because of the (non-deceiving) God that he can believe his clear and distinct ideas reflect the truth*

He starts to think about material things and asserts that he ‘distinctly’ (as opposed to ‘confusedly’) imagines a number of attributes that exist in objects including; extension, size, figure, situation, motion, and duration.

The (clear and distinct) idea in Descartes’ mind of God reveals that His existence and His essence are inseparable.

Therefore God must exist.

The necessity that compels his idea of God to include the attribute of existence is different from a winged horse, for example, because he literally cannot conceive of a being supremely perfect and yet lacking an absolute perfection (in existence).

Objection: Descartes has simply predefined God as having the attribute of existence.

Answer: As soon as Descartes thinks of God, he can’t not attribute all manner of perfections to Him. And since existence is a perfection it is impossible to imagine God not existing.

God then, as a non-deceiver, acts as a kind of guarantor for the truth of Descartes’ clear and distinct ideas.

Meditation Six – Of the Existence of Material Things and of the Real Distinction Between the Mind and Body of Man

*Concludes that external bodies exist (because God is no deceiver) and are different from the mind*

Objects of pure mathematics exist because he can conceive of them clearly and distinctly.

There is a difference between imagining and conceiving (pure intellection).

Pure intellection looks inwards while imagination looks outwards.

Therefore it is probable, but only probable, that external objects exist.

Uses God (and his notion of clear and distinct ideas) to support the thesis that mind and corporeal bodies (if they exist) are separate substances.

Imagining and perceiving depend on some underlying substance (mind).

Therefore aspects of corporeal bodies he perceives (changing place, assuming diverse figures, etc.) must also depend on some underlying substance (body).

Although his sensory impressions of external objects are obscure and confused, since all his clear and distinct perceptions of corporeal nature (those which are mathematically related) are derived from God and since God is no deceiver, corporeal objects )in their mathematically relevant faculties) exist.

Regarding other (secondary) qualities, since God is no deceiver, Descartes has the means of arriving at the truth even though his senses may deliver inaccurate information.

Although his mind and body are different, they are intimately connected as a unified whole.

He can arrive at the truth only if he subjects all his unclear and confused sensory impressions to clear and distinct examination by his mind (judgement).

But sometimes our judgements still mislead us (as in the case of sick people where their sick thoughts lead them to incorrect thoughts and dangerous actions). How can this happen if God is no deceiver?

Mind and body are completely different because:

* The mind is indivisible while the body is divisible.
* The mind does not get its impressions from the whole body but only from the brain.
* Any part of the body can be affected in the same way whether a certain part is moved or any part between the extremes is moved instead. In a cord with points A,B,C, and D, D is affected the same way whether A is moved (stimulated) or B is moved.

God set up the mind/body system so that certain movements in the brain lead to certain thoughts/inclinations/actions in the mind. This set-up is always to best preserve the mind/body.

It is to be expected that sometimes this system can malfunction but does not count against the nature of God because God designed the whole to be in harmony in the usual case.

Thus, we can detect errors and trust our senses because:

* Our senses usually indicate what is true (the opposite is the exception to the rule).
* We know the system is set-up to confer advantage to the body.
* We can use more than one sense to investigate the world.
* Memory allows us to connect past experience with present situations.
* The understanding lets us examine our sensory impressions more completely.

He also acknowledges differences between sleep and waking:

* Dreams are not connected in memory the way life is.
* Images and people don’t appear and disappear in waking life like they do in dreams, we can always determine where they came from and where they have gone in logical ways that exhibit coherency. If such a thing happened in real life, he would correctly think it an illusion produced by his mind.