

Handout 6: The Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth *Meditations*

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
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In the last three *Meditations*, Descartes defends many interesting claims with novel arguments; we will not be able to discuss all of them. We will focus on the following four topics:

1. *The problem of error*: if God is not a deceiver, why do I sometimes form mistaken beliefs?
2. *The existence of the material world*: do bodies exist, and how can I know?
3. *The nature of the material world*: what are bodies like?
4. *Mind and body*: are mind and body distinct, and if so what is their relationship?

THE PROBLEM OF ERROR

At the beginning of the Fourth *Meditation*, Descartes makes the following observation:

For if everything that is in me I got from God, and he gave me no faculty for making mistakes, it seems I am incapable of ever erring. [...] I nevertheless experience that I am subject to countless errors (36).

Since God is not a deceiver, he cannot have given Descartes a mental faculty that inevitably leads him to make mistakes; this is why his clear and distinct perceptions must be true. And yet Descartes makes mistakes! How is this possible, if everything in him is from God?

Short answer: Descartes holds that all of his errors result from his *freely misusing* his mental faculties. God hasn't given him any mental faculties that *inevitably* lead him to believe falsehoods. His errors are all attributable to his own will, and not to God. So the fact that he sometimes errs does not imply that God is a deceiver.¹

The somewhat longer answer: Descartes thinks that when he judges that some proposition *p* is true, two mental faculties are operating in him. The first is his intellect, which is what enables

¹Note that the problem of error is similar to a more well-known problem: the *problem of evil*. Simply put, the problem of evil is the problem of explaining how, if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect, there can nonetheless be evil in the world. Wouldn't such a being prevent all evil from occurring? Descartes's response to the problem of error is analogous to a common response to the problem of evil, known as the *free will response*. According to this response, evil is caused by the free choices of people. If God were to prevent evil from occurring, he would thereby limit human freedom, which (according to the free will response) would be even worse than allowing freely chosen evils to occur.)

him to understand the proposition p . The other is his will, which chooses to affirm that p is true. His intellect is limited: there are many things he cannot understand, and of those things he does understand, many are not understood clearly or distinctly. By contrast, he thinks, it doesn't make sense to say that his will is limited. His will is nothing more than his ability "to affirm or deny, to pursue or to shun" (38). As such, though God's will is "incomparably greater [...] both by virtue of the knowledge and power that are joined to it [...], when viewed in itself formally and precisely, God's faculty of willing does not appear to be any greater" (38). So in Descartes (unlike in God), the will can extend beyond the intellect; the former is unlimited, while the latter is limited.

Sometimes Descartes does "not contain the will within the same boundaries [as the intellect]; rather, I also extend it to things I do not understand. [...] [I]n this way I am deceived and I sin" (39). When his intellect presents to him a thought that he does not clearly and distinctly perceive, and his will assents to that thought, he is "not using [his] freedom properly" (40). Errors occur when Descartes freely assents to things that he does not clearly and distinctly perceive. Clear and distinct perception is different. In clear and distinct perception, the intellect presents him with something to which his faculty of willing is compelled to assent.

This explanation of error assumes that it is *only* his clear and distinct perceptions that compel Descartes's assent. I do not see an argument for this claim anywhere. If Descartes's assent were sometimes compelled by confused or indistinct perceptions, and he could thereby be compelled to make mistakes. Then God would be a deceiver – a result Descartes is keen to avoid.

Descartes also suggests that it is never permissible to believe something that he doesn't clearly and distinctly perceive:

[I]f I hold off from making a judgment when I do not perceive what is true with sufficient clarity and distinctness, it is clear that I am acting properly and am not committing an error. But if instead I were to make an assertion or a denial, then I am not using my freedom properly. Were I to select the alternative that is false, then obviously I will be in error. But were I to embrace the other alternative, it will be by sheer luck that I happen upon the truth; but I will still not be without fault (40).

If Descartes correctly judges that p is true but does not clearly and distinctly perceive that p is true, he is not using his freedom properly. This implies that he should believe only what he clearly and distinctly perceives; with everything else, he should hold off on making a judgment. As we'll see, this admonition is in tension with a principle he lays down in the Sixth *Meditation* – a principle he uses to prove the existence of the material world.

THE EXISTENCE OF THE MATERIAL WORLD

Recall the Rule of Truth:

The Rule of Truth. If I clearly and distinctly perceive that p is true, then p is true.

In the Sixth *Meditation*, Descartes defends what we'll call the Rule of Some Truth:

And surely there is no doubt that all that I am taught by nature has some truth to it; for by "nature," taken generally, I understand nothing other than God himself or the ordered network of created things which was instituted by God (AW 65a).

What does Descartes mean when he says that he is “taught by nature” that something is the case? Earlier, in the Third Meditation, he said that this just means that he is “driven by a spontaneous impulse to believe” it.² So whatever he is driven by a spontaneous impulse to believe is something that has “some truth to it”. What does that mean?

The answer comes a bit earlier in the Sixth *Meditation*. Descartes is considering whether bodies (“corporeal things”) exist. He first notes that he finds himself with “the ideas of sensible things” – ideas, that is, that seem to come to him via sensation. Moreover, God has “given me a great inclination to believe that these ideas issue from corporeal things” (52) – i.e., to believe that his ideas of sensible ideas are caused by bodies. Do his sensible ideas come from bodies? Well, they could come from God, or from “some other creature more noble than a body.” But, he concludes, if either of these things were the case, God would be a deceiver, for he has given Descartes “no faculty whatsoever for making this determination” (52). If his great inclination to believe that there are bodies were incorrect, Descartes would have no way of finding out whether this was so. Thus God would have given him a great inclination to believe p with no way of finding out that he is wrong; hence, God would be a deceiver.

This suggests the following principle:

The Rule of Some Truth. If I have a great inclination to believe that p is true, and no faculty for determining that p is false, then p is true.

Right after the passage I discussed above, he writes, “And consequently corporeal things exist” (52). Made explicit, his argument is:

- (1) I have a great inclination to believe that bodies exist.
- (2) I have no faculty for determining that bodies do not exist.
- (3) If I have a great inclination to believe that p is true and no faculty for determining that p is false, then p is true. (Rule of Some Truth)

∴(4) So, bodies exist.

I too have a great inclination to believe that bodies exist. (Don’t you?) So we can accept premise (1). What about premise (2)? Descartes says nothing to explain why we should accept it. It is a very sweeping negative claim. Without a defense of (2), Descartes’s argument for the existence of the material world is incomplete.

THE NATURE OF THE MATERIAL WORLD

Descartes warns us that “perhaps not all bodies exist exactly as I grasp them by sense, since this sensory grasp is in many cases very obscure and confused” (52). But, he goes on:

²It’s important to note that Descartes’s phrase “taught by nature” is not equivalent to “shown by the light of nature”. Seeing by the light of nature is the same as clearly and distinctly perceiving; Descartes says that “whatever is shown me by this light of nature, for example, that from the fact I doubt, it follows that I am, and the like, cannot in any way be doubtful (AW 49a).” Being taught something by nature, by contrast, is nothing more than having a strong spontaneous inclination to believe it. There are ample reasons for Descartes to doubt those things he has a strong spontaneous inclination to believe (e.g., that he has a body, etc.).

[A]t least they do contain everything I clearly and distinctly understand—that is, everything, considered in a general sense, that is encompassed in the object of pure mathematics (52).

This recalls the secret purpose of the *Meditations*. Descartes clearly and distinctly understands those properties of bodies that can be depicted in purely mathematical term (i.e., extension and motion). He does not clearly understand “light, sound, pain, and the like” (53). A bit later he has another list of suspect properties: “colors, sounds, odors, tastes, levels of heat, and grades of roughness, and the like” (53). Descartes is laying the groundwork for his mechanistic physics: he does not clearly and distinctly understand any properties that cannot be described purely in terms of extension, and hence (he thinks) in terms of pure mathematics. Concerning those properties that cannot be given a purely mathematical treatment, he says:

I rightly conclude that in the bodies from which these different perceptions of the senses proceed there are differences corresponding to the different perceptions—though perhaps the latter do not resemble the former (53).

This claim anticipates the distinction that John Locke (whom we’ll read later this semester) will draw between “primary” and “secondary” qualities. Primary qualities are those aspects of material things that we can understand independently of our sensory experience of those things. Secondary qualities, by contrast, we can understand only in terms of sensory experience. Primary qualities include shape, location, and motion. Secondary qualities include color, scent, taste, and sound. (This is not exactly how Locke draws the distinction, but we’ll see more on that later!)

For Descartes, bodies have primary qualities, but they do not have secondary qualities (“primary” and “secondary” are not terms that Descartes uses, but they are useful for capturing a distinction he did believe in). He is what we would today call an “eliminativist” about secondary qualities; he holds that they do not really exist (i.e., nothing is colored, there are no sounds, smells, or tastes). His philosophical justification for this position is that while primary qualities can be clearly and distinctly understood, secondary qualities can only be identified with the aid of the imagination.³ He nowhere offers an argument from this claim to the conclusion that secondary qualities do not exist. Rather, he holds out hope for a complete, purely mathematical account of the physical world – one that would have no place for secondary qualities.

MIND AND BODY

In the Sixth *Meditation*, Descartes argues that his mind is “really distinct” from his body. By “really distinct”, Descartes means that they are distinct things (the word “really” comes from the Latin *res*, which means “thing”.) Since he has identified himself with his mind (i.e., the thinking thing), this means that he is distinct from his body.

³His discussion of the triangle and the chiliagon at the beginning of the Sixth *Meditation* is helpful for understanding this idea. Descartes says that he understands what a triangle is: it’s a figure bounded by three lines. But he can also imagine a triangle: he can “envisage with the mind’s eye those lines as if they were present; and this is what I call ‘imagining’” (48). By contrast, while he can understand what a chiliagon is (it’s a figure with a thousand sides), he can’t imagine a chiliagon – what he imagines when he tries to imagine a chiliagon is “no different from the figure I would represent to myself were I thinking of a myriagon [a figure with 10,000 sides] or any other figure with a large number of sides” (48). Thus there are things he can understand without being able to imagine. Secondary qualities are qualities he can imagine, but cannot understand.

The Sixth *Meditation* contains two arguments for the real distinction. The first and more famous of the two is called the Conceivability Argument:

First, I know that all the things that I clearly and distinctly understand can be made by God such as I understand them. For this reason, my ability clearly and distinctly to understand one thing without another suffices to make me certain that the one thing is different from the other, since they can be separated from each other, at least by God. [...] [B]ecause on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, insofar as I am merely a thinking thing and not an extended thing, and because on the other hand I have a distinct idea of a body, insofar as it is merely an extended thing and not a thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and could exist without it (51).

The question of how to reconstruct the Conceivability Argument, and whether it can be successful, is a matter of great scholarly controversy. Here is my proposal:

- (1) I can clearly and distinctly understand myself as a thinking thing existing without a body.
- (2) If I can clearly and distinctly understand X as being F, then God, if he exists, can make it the case that X is F.
- (3) God exists.
- ∴(4) So, God can make it the case that I, as a thinking thing, exist apart from my body.
- (5) If X can be made to exist without Y, then X is really distinct from Y.
- ∴(6) So, my mind is really distinct from my body.

Let's go through the argument step by step.

Premise (1) is, I think, motivated by the Second *Meditation*. There, Descartes had resolved to regard as false all those things he had any reason to doubt. One of these things was that he had a body. But even while regarding this as false, he was still able to make some positive claims about what sort of thing he was; i.e., that he was a thinking thing (a thing that “doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses”). So he can clearly and distinctly understand himself as a thinking thing existing without a body.

Premise (2) is motivated by the nature of clear and distinct perception, together with the fact that God is omnipotent; i.e., that God can do anything that is possible. If I clearly and distinctly understand something, then I do not understand it as having anything incompatible with its nature (recall the explanation of “clear” and “distinct” given in Handout 4). So if I clearly and distinctly understand X to be F, then being F is compatible with X's nature. God is omnipotent. So provided that being F is compatible with X's nature, God can make it the case that X is F.

Premise (3) is proven by the Causal Argument in the Third *Meditation*. (It is also proven by a different argument in the Fifth *Meditation*, which we didn't discuss.)

Premise (4) follows from (1), (2), and (3).

Premise (5) follows from what is often called “Leibniz's Law”, or “The Principle of the Indiscernibility of Identicals”:

Leibniz's Law. If $X = Y$, then X is F if and only if Y is F .

Leibniz's Law is plausible; it just says that if X is the same thing as Y , then X has all of the properties that Y has. Now consider the property of being something that can be made to exist even if Y does not exist. Y does not have that property; Y cannot be made to exist if Y does not exist. So if X has that property, then X has some property that Y does not. Hence X and Y are not identical; they are distinct.

And premise (6) follows from (4) and (5).

The second argument that Descartes gives for the real distinction is called the Divisibility Argument (AW 67a). It goes like this:

(1) All bodies are divisible.

(2) I am not divisible.

∴(3) So, I am distinct from my body.

As above, Leibniz's Law is in the background here. If my body is divisible, but I am not, then my body has a property that I lack; hence (by Leibniz's Law) I am distinct from my body. Descartes's theory of physics commits him to premise (1). He holds that matter is infinitely divisible; there are no atoms. Here is what he says to motivate premise (2):

For when I consider the mind, that is, myself insofar as I am only a thinking thing, I cannot distinguish any parts within me; rather, I understand myself to be manifestly one complete thing. Although the entire mind seems to be united to the entire body, nevertheless, were a foot or an arm or any other bodily part to be amputated, I know that nothing has been taken away from the mind on that account. Nor can the faculties of willing, sensing, understanding, and so on be called "parts" of the mind, since it is one and the same mind that wills, senses, and understands (56).

The assumption that minds are indivisible is common to Descartes and his immediate successors. When we come to some later philosophers, this assumption will be called into question.

Even though the mind and body are not identical, Descartes holds that together they form a kind of unity and can in some sense be thought of as one thing. He is "most tightly joined and, so to speak, commingled with" his body: "so much so that I and the body constitute one single thing" (53). But given that mind and body are not only distinct, but have different primary attributes, how can they interact in this way? This question was pressed forcefully by Princess Elisabeth, whose letters to Descartes will be the focus of our next Handout.