

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2004
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Lecture Notes, September 27

I. After the Cogito

Descartes has started to rebuild his knowledge, but he's stuck with just the Cogito.
So he decides to take another approach.
He starts by considering the physical objects he doesn't yet know exist.
How did we think we knew about physical objects?
Obviously, through our senses.
But Descartes realizes that this is an error.
See p 34, the end of the Second Meditation.
This is the conclusion of a discussion about a ball of wax.

II. The story of the wax

Consider a ball of wax in two distinct states (p 30).
First, when it is cold, hard, yellow, honey-flavored, and flower-scented.
Then, bring it near a flame.
The wax now becomes hot and liquid, and loses its color, taste (although it now will scald your tongue), and odor.

III. The philosophy of the New Science

See end of p 30.
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.
This is the position of Boyle, Galileo, Newton, and Locke, as well as of Descartes.
Berkeley disagrees in a strong way.
This is a central question for us.
What are physical objects, and how do we know about them.

IV. Descartes' argument concerning the wax

Read through the end of p 31.
We seem to have images of the wax, in several incompatible states.
The imagination is our capacity for sensory images.
Distinguish this from another mental capacity, that of judging.
(And we can distinguish these from other capacities of the mind, such as willing and refusing, and emotions, like happiness.)
But we don't have an image of the essence of the wax, or of wax in general.

The argument:

- 1) Knowledge must be certain (firm and lasting).
 - 2) What we get from the senses is uncertain.
 - 3) So our senses do not give us knowledge.
 - 4) We do have knowledge about the wax.
- So, our knowledge of physical objects must come from the mind alone.

Remember that metaphysics is the study of what exists.

Here is a catalogue of Descartes' metaphysics:

- 1) God;
- 2) Finite intelligences;
- 3) Extended objects.

The wax is "Only... something extended, flexible, and mutable" (p 31).

If we want to discover what the wax truly is, we have to judge with our minds.

There is too much confusion in our senses.

We'll return to this problem with Locke and Berkeley.

Remember: these conclusions are hypothetical.

We don't yet know that any objects exist.

The title of this Meditation asserts that the mind is known better than the body.

Even if we don't know about bodies, yet, we can make some conclusions about our minds.

All of these reflections just bring us back to the mind, and improve our understanding of it (p 33).

V. To repeat the main conclusion

If there are any physical objects, our knowledge of them must come from our minds alone, and not from the senses.