Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2005
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

Lecture Notes, October 3

I. The criterion for knowledge, and a problem for it

Descartes calls his criteria for knowledge clarity and distinctness, p 35.
The specific formulation is not important.
What is important is that there be some distinguishing mark.
Without such a mark, all searching for certainty is useless.

But there is a problem with any formulation.
Given any mark, or rule, for certainty, how do we know that we have the correct mark?
Appeal to the mark itself is circular.
We can not say that we clearly and distinctly perceive that clarity and distinctness is the right criterion.
Still, the Cogito does seem to contain some kind of undoubtable truth.

Compare Descartes' methodology with that of axiomatic sciences, like geometry.
In geometry, we start with two elements:
1) Basic axioms, or undisputable truths; and
2) Rules of inference which allow us to generate further theorems on the basis of already established ones.
With just these, we have a foundational system for geometry.

Similarly, Descartes has a starting point, the Cogito.
And now he has a rule for generating more truths: clarity and distinctness.
Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is necessarily true.

II. Accounting for false judgment

Before Descartes uses his new tool he tries to account for the false judgments which led him to the Meditations.
According to the discussion of the wax in Meditation Two, we know about objects through the mind alone.
The only properties we could ascribe to them were extension, and mutability.
That is, they are in space and time, and can take on innumerable forms, more than one can imagine.

The claim that we use the mind alone to know about physical objects seems outlandish.
Of course, we use the senses to acquire beliefs about trees and tables and the sun.
Descartes' point is that our sensory beliefs about these objects don't rise to the level of knowledge.
Consider a weaker claim than Descartes', that the senses alone are insufficient to generate knowledge and that we need reason in addition.
So, I can not see all the different shapes that the wax be molded into, but I can think about them.
Now, we seem to have two different beliefs about the wax.

First, that it has a particular shape.
This first idea is sensory.
But it is not knowledge.
The second belief is that it can take on innumerably many different forms.
This is not a sensory belief.
And it is knowledge.
Thus, a stronger claim, the one that Descartes does hold, is that the sense are irrelevant to knowledge.

It seems that the source of some of my errors is in believing that sensory experience leads to knowledge.

III. Resemblance Hypothesis

The resemblance hypothesis says that my ideas of objects resemble those objects.
Descartes rejects the Resemblance Hypothesis, p 35.

He provides an argument for the resemblance hypothesis:
1) I have ideas about objects involuntarily.
2) Involuntary ideas come from outside of me.
3) Objects send me their own likeness.
So, my ideas resemble their causes, i.e. physical objects.

Locke defends the resemblance hypothesis.
Berkeley does too, in an unexpected way.
Descartes, in rejecting the resemblance hypothesis, provides arguments against both the second and third premises.

Remember, that when you reject an argument, as Descartes does here, you should determine which premises are false.

IV. Descartes' rejection of the resemblance hypothesis

He agrees with premise 1), although says that those ideas can lead one astray.

Against Premise 2), he argues that he may have a heretofore unnoticed ability to create these 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.
The sci-fi example of people who don't make noise with their voices is the kind of example Descartes means.

Against Premise 3), he provides the example of the sun, p 39.
The senses tell us that the sun is very small.
We reason that the sun is very large.
It can not be both.
We decide in favor of reasoning, and against sensation.
Compare with the stars and candle of Meditation Six, pp 82-3.

We have discovered a reason for making errors: reliance on the Resemblance Hypothesis.
Notice that the arguments against the Resemblance Hypothesis are independent of the three doubts.

We would have this problem even if the exaggerated doubts were absent.
So, let's look at our ideas, and see if we can delete the ones which depended on the Resemblance Hypothesis.
Maybe that will leave us in better shape to conquer the doubts.

V. Cataloguing Ideas, the contents of the mind, p 37

1) Simple ideas
2) Emotions, or affects, (idea + feeling)
3) Volitions (idea + willing)
4) Judgments (E.g. 2+2=4; that I want or feel x or y; 'snow is white'; that an idea resembles an object)

Ideas of classes 1, 2, and 3 can not be false.
If I want something, or feel something, I want it or feel it.
"Ideas can not be false", p 37.
Only judgments can be true or false.
These are called 'propositions', in contemporary philosophy.

We have one more thing to clear up in MIII.
Then, we will look at Anselm's Ontological Argument. See the handout.
This is the basis of the argument for God's existence in Meditation V, pp 64-8.
Then, we will return to the end of Meditation Three and proceed from there.