

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2005  
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## I. After the Cogito

Descartes has started to rebuild his knowledge, but he is stuck with just the Cogito. The cogito only tells him that he is a thinking thing, a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines, and senses. He decides to take another approach. He starts by considering the physical objects he does not 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 burn your tongue), and odor.

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 do not 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.

The conclusion is quite odd. Descartes might be accused of cheating here in two ways. First, he can not conclude anything about our knowledge of physical objects, since we don't even know that physical objects exist.

This first objection is unsuccessful, though.

His conclusion is really conditional: if we have any knowledge of physical objects, then it can not come from the senses.

The second cheat concerns whether the wax is the same before and after melting.

“Does the same wax remain? I must confess that it does; no one denies it; no one thinks otherwise.” (p 30)

Descartes omits here a view on which any change in the properties of an object entail a change in the object.

This view may not be right, but it has defenders.

Heraclitus said that one can never step in the same river twice.

By extension, since our constitution is always changing, we are different people at different times.

And the wax is different before and after.

This view, though, will not get Descartes any “firm and lasting” knowledge.

### III. The nature of physical objects, according to the New Science

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. See end of p 30.

That is, it is essentially something which can have sensory qualities, but which need not have any particular ones.

The same is true of all other physical objects.

The same object may have many different appearances.

This is the position of Boyle, Galileo, Newton, and Locke, as well as of Descartes.

Berkeley disagrees.

This is a central question for us: what is essential to the objects we perceive?

### IV. Descartes' metaphysics

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 will return to this problem with Locke and Berkeley.

The title of the Second 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).

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.

## V. The need for a criterion for knowledge

The goal of the Meditations was to achieve certainty through doubt.

If we want certain knowledge, we have to know that we know what we know.

That is, we need some kind of mark, or rule, which enables us to separate true knowledge from mere belief.

We only know one thing, so far: the Cogito.

So, we have to look at it, to see if we can find such a mark.

## VI. The criterion: clarity and distinctness

Descartes calls his criteria for knowledge clarity and distinctness, p 35.

What could these terms mean?

Elsewhere, he writes:

“Something is clear when it is present and apparent to an attentive mind, in the same way as we assert that we see objects clearly when, being present to the regarding eye, they operate upon it with sufficient strength” (Descartes, Principles I.45)

Note, that this is a metaphoric use of perception.

We can not see with our senses clearly and distinctly, but only with the mind.

Later Descartes refers to the light of nature, as the securer of truth, p 38.

This is to be distinguished from instinct, or being taught by nature.

Perhaps 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.

## VII. Our strategy for reading the rest of Descartes' *Meditations*

We will soon arrive at Descartes' argument for the existence of God in Meditation III.

It is very difficult and medieval.

There are many such arguments, or 'proofs'.

See the links to Thomas Aquinas on the website for empirical arguments.

Berkeley provides one, too.

Descartes provides two arguments in the *Meditations*.

These arguments are a priori, p 51.

They have to be, since we have not yet established the reliability of empirical experience.

We will skip the argument in Meditation III, and look instead at the argument for God's existence in Meditation V, pp 64-8.

Descartes derives his argument in Meditation V from Anselm's argument, so we will look at that first.

Then, we will look at Descartes' argument in Meditation V.

Then, we will go back to Meditation III, just after the argument for God's existence there.

And then we will proceed through the remainder of the *Meditations*.

So, read the Anselm handout for Monday, and look at the selection from MV.