

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2005
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Lecture Notes, February 16

I. Reviewing the argument about the wax

Descartes' 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.

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

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).

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.

III. 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.

IV. 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.

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.

V. 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 Wednesday, and look at the selection from MV.