

Philosophy 203
History of Modern Western Philosophy

Russell Marcus
Hamilton College
Spring 2010

Class 3 - Meditations Two and Three

too much material, but we'll do what we can

Topics for today

1. The cogito
2. The wax argument
3. Descartes's rule
4. The resemblance hypothesis
5. The causal argument for God's existence

Seeking firm foundations

- Three arguments for doubt
 - ▶ 1. Illusion
 - ▶ 2. Dream
 - ▶ 3. Deceiver.
- Each of the three doubts corresponds to a set of beliefs eliminable on the basis of that doubt.
 - ▶ Class I: Beliefs about the sensory nature of specific physical objects, or the existence of distant or ill-perceived objects.
 - ▶ Class II: Beliefs about the existence and nature of specific physical objects, and the physical world generally.
 - ▶ Class III: Beliefs about universals, like color, and shape, the building blocks of physical objects; and about space and time.
 - Beliefs about numbers, and geometrical entities.
 - Beliefs about logical and semantic truths.
- In order to rebuild his beliefs, Descartes seeks a single starting point.
 - ▶ Archimedes and the lever

The Cogito

- One belief resists doubt.
 - ▶ Whenever I am thinking, even if I am doubting, I must exist.
 - ▶ 'Cogito' is Latin for 'I think'.
- The problem with the 'I think; therefore I am' formulation
 - ▶ NC1. Whatever thinks, exists.
 - ▶ NC2. I think.
 - ▶ NCC. So, I exist.
- NC, as a logical deduction, would require
 - ▶ previous knowledge of the two premises; and
 - ▶ previous knowledge that the conclusion follows from the premises.
- But Descartes eliminated logical knowledge on the basis of the deceiver doubt.
- Descartes calls the cogito a pure intuition.
- But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines, and senses (45a).
 - ▶ imagination, for representing or beholding sensory images
 - ▶ a capacity to make judgments, to affirm or deny, or to doubt
 - ▶ capacities for willing and refusing
 - ▶ emotions, like happiness

Ideas can not be false

- Distinguish sensing from seeming to sense.
- The doubts lead us to wonder if we are living in a dream-like world.
- But
 - I have direct access to my thoughts: privilege.
 - The doubts infect only my claims about what those thoughts represent: indefeasibility.
 - Ideas can not be false.
- The next step: examine these thoughts and see if they can help us make any conclusions beyond our thoughts.
- No luck; let's come back the other way.

Topics for today

- ✓1. The cogito
2. The wax argument
3. Descartes's rule
4. The resemblance hypothesis
5. The causal argument for God's existence

Knowledge of bodies comes from the mind along

- We generally think that our knowledge of physical objects is the result of sense experience.
- We see a chipmunk, perhaps represent it to ourselves in imagination, and then we know about the chipmunk.
- “I now know that even bodies are not, properly speaking, perceived by the senses or by the faculty of imagination, but by the intellect alone, and that they are not perceived through their being touched or seen, but only through their being understood” (47a).



The Ball of Wax, 45b



- First, it is cold, hard, yellow, honey-flavored, and flower-scented.
- Then, after it is melted, the wax becomes hot and liquid, and loses its color, taste, and odor.
- All of its sensory properties have shifted.
- We have images of the wax, in several incompatible states.
- But we do not have an image of the essence of the wax, or of wax in general.
- “I grasp that the wax is capable of innumerable changes of this sort, even though I am incapable of running through these innumerable changes by using my imagination... The perception of the wax is neither a seeing, nor a touching, nor an imagining...even though it previously seemed so; rather it is an inspection on the part of the mind alone “(46a).

Descartes's argument that knowledge of the world comes from the mind alone:

W1. Knowledge must be firm and lasting.

W2. What we get from the senses is transient and mutable.

W3. So our senses do not give us knowledge.

W4. We do have knowledge about the wax.

WC. So, our knowledge of physical objects must come from the mind alone.

Two possible cheats

- We don't even know that physical objects exist.
 - if we have any knowledge of physical objects, then it can not come from the senses.
- Is the wax same before and after melting?
 - “Does the same wax remain? I must confess that it does; no one denies it; no one thinks otherwise” (45b).
 - Descartes neglects the Heraclitean view.
 - The Heraclitean view, though, will not get Descartes any “firm and lasting” knowledge.



Real and apparent properties of bodies

- 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.
- “Perhaps the wax was what I now think it is: namely that the wax itself never really was the sweetness of the honey, nor the fragrance of the flowers, nor the whiteness, nor the shape, nor the sound, but instead was a body that a short time ago manifested itself to me in these ways, and now does so in other ways... Let us focus our attention on this and see what remains after we have removed everything that does not belong to the wax: only that it is something extended, flexible, and mutable” (46a).

Descartes's metaphysics

- S1. God (infinite mind);
- S2. Persons (finite minds); and
- S3. Extended objects (bodies).

Strong and weak claims about the role of the senses in knowledge

- Weak claim: the senses are insufficient for knowledge.
 - ▶ We use the senses to gather information
 - ▶ In conjunction with reasoning, which is purely mental, we arrive at knowledge.
 - ▶ Fairly uncontroversial
- Strong claim: the senses are irrelevant to knowledge.
 - (OK, maybe that's a bit too strong.)
 - ▶ Knowledge of physical objects comes from the intellect (or mind) alone.
 - ▶ Any information we get from the senses does not rise to the level of knowledge.
 - ▶ We can believe that the chair is blue, but we can never know this.
 - ▶ We know that the wax can take more forms than we could possibly imagine: more shapes, more sizes.
 - ▶ We don't see potential colors.
 - ▶ Our knowledge that there are other potential shapes and colors must go beyond anything that could come from the senses.
- Two different types of beliefs about the wax.
 - ▶ It has a particular shape, color, and other sense properties.
 - not knowledge
 - ▶ It can take on innumerably many different forms.
 - knowledge

The priority of mind

the mind is known better than the body

“There is not a single consideration that can aid in my perception of the wax or of any other body that fails to make even more manifest the nature of my mind” (47a).

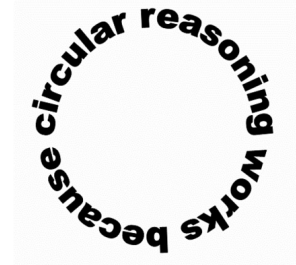
Topics for today

- ✓1. The cogito
- ✓2. The wax argument
- 3. Descartes's rule
- 4. The resemblance hypothesis
- 5. The causal argument for God's existence

Descartes's Rule

- 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.
- “Surely in this first instance of knowledge, there is nothing but a certain clear and distinct perception of what I affirm. Yet this would hardly be enough to render me certain of the truth of a thing, if it could ever happen that something I perceived so clearly and distinctly were false. And thus I now seem able to posit as a general rule that everything I very clearly and distinctly perceive is true” (47).
- On ‘clarity’ and ‘distinctness’:
 - ▶ “I call a perception ‘clear’ when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind - just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception ‘distinct’ if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear” (*Principles of Philosophy* I.45).
- We can not see with our senses clearly and distinctly, but only with the mind.
- Light of nature formulations
 - ▶ “Whatever is shown me by this light of nature, for example, that from the fact that I doubt, it follows that I am, and the like, cannot in any way be doubtful. This is owing to the fact that there can be no other faculty that I can trust as much as this light and which could teach that these things are not true” (49a)
- The specific formulation of the criterion is not important.
- Without a mark, all searching for knowledge, on Descartes’s terms, is useless.

The Cartesian Circle



- 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.
 - Later, Descartes will argue that the goodness of God will secure the criterion of clear and distinct perception.
 - But that argument seems to rely on the use of the criterion in the argument for the existence of God.
- This problem, called the problem of Cartesian circularity, is one of the more vexing and interesting in Descartes scholarship.
- Still, the cogito does seem to contain some kind of undoubtable truth.
- If we can grasp what it is that makes the cogito unassailable, perhaps we can find the surety elsewhere.

Foundational systems

- F1. Basic axioms, or undisputable truths; and
- F2. Rules of inference which allow us to generate further theorems on the basis of already established ones.
- In addition to F1, one might introduce some definitions.
- And, one might distinguish among the axioms, F1.
- But, F1 and F2 are really the core; with just F1 and F2, we have a foundational system.
- Descartes's synthetic presentation in Second Replies
- Euclid's *Elements* (see website)
- Spinoza's *Ethics*

The Synthetic (Geometrical) Version of the *Meditations*

- Like Euclid, Descartes provides definitions, postulates, common notions, and derived propositions.
- Definitions:
 - ▶ thought, idea
 - ▶ objective reality, formal reality
 - ▶ substance, mind, body,
 - ▶ God, essence, distinctness
- In the definitions of objective and formal reality, Descartes is setting up the proofs of God's existence, to which we will turn, shortly.
- Already in the definitions, though, we can find some worries about Descartes's positive project of reclaiming our knowledge.
- Definitions 1 and 2: "By the word "thought" I include everything that is in us in such a way that we are *immediately aware* of it... By the word "idea" I understand that form of any thought through the immediate perception of which I am *aware* of that very same thought "(94).
 - ▶ Unconscious thought
 - ▶ Blindsight

The rest of the synthetic version

- Seven postulates:
 1. Frailty of the senses
 2. Security of pure thought
 3. Self-evidence of logic, including the logic of causation (but see the Common Notions, as well)
 4. Connection between ideas and objects (compare to Definition IX)
 5. The idea of God includes necessary existence.
 6. Contrast clear and distinct perception with obscure and confused perception
 7. Security of clear and distinct perceptions
- Ten common notions:
 1. We can ask about the cause of any thing.
 2. Each instant is independent of every other, so that creation and preservation are indistinct.
 3. Nothing can be uncaused.
 4. Whatever reality is in a thing is formally or eminently in its first cause.
 5. Our ideas require causes which contain formally the reality which exists objectively in the ideas.
 6. There are degrees of reality: accidents, finite substances, infinite substance.
 7. Our free will aims infallibly toward the good.
 8. Whatever can make what is greater can make what is less.
 9. It is greater to create (or preserve) a substance than an accident.
 10. The ideas of all objects contain existence; only the idea of a perfect object contains necessary existence.
- Propositions
 1. Ontological argument for God's existence
 - 2-3. Causal arguments for God's existence
 4. Distinction of mind and body

Compare synthetic and analytic presentations

- The single, Archimedean point of the *Meditations* is almost completely absent from the synthetic presentation.
- Meditations:
 - Cogito - God - Clarity and Distinctness - Free Will - Mathematics - Mind/Body distinction
- The synthetic version hardly mentions mathematics or the cogito.
- The order is different.

Foundations and method

- A starting point for the *Meditations*: the cogito
- A rule for generating more truths: clear and distinct perception

Topics for today

- ✓1. The cogito
- ✓2. The wax argument
- ✓3. Descartes's rule
 - **We'll pick up with 4 and 5 on Thursday!**
- 4. The resemblance hypothesis
- 5. The causal argument for God's existence

For Next Class

Meditations Four through Six

Discourse, Part 5

Send me an email for your
presentation

▶ Three choices!