Philosophy 203: History of Modern Western Philosophy Hamilton College
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Meditations Two and Three

I. Seeking firm foundations

In the first Meditation, Descartes provides three arguments for doubt which call pretty much all of his beliefs into question: 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.
Like Archimedes and the lever, 43a-b.

II. The Cogito

One belief resists doubt.
Whenever I am thinking, even if I am doubting, I must exist.
We call this claim the cogito, which is Latin for 'I think'.
In a section of the *Discourse* which is not in our collection, Descartes formulates the cogito as, "I think; therefore I am."
This formulation is misleading, and the version in the *Meditations* is more careful.

The problem with the 'I think; therefore I am' formulation is that it makes the claim that one exists look like the conclusion of a deductive argument:

NC NC1. Whatever thinks, exists.
NC2. I think.
NCC. So, I exist.

In deductive arguments, conclusions are established as following from premises according to standard rules of inference.
NC, as a logical deduction, would require previous knowledge of the two premises.
Also, it would require previous knowledge that the conclusion follows from the premises.
But Descartes eliminated logical knowledge on the basis of the deceiver doubt.

Thus, the Cogito must not be a logical deduction according to prescribed rules from prior premises.
Descartes calls it a pure intuition.

The cogito establishes the existence of a thinker, as long as the thinker thinks.

> 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).

III. After the Cogito

Descartes concludes that he is a thinking thing.
His thoughts, our thoughts, may not tell us anything true about the world; the doubts about the content of thought remain.
But even if our thoughts are false, even if they misrepresent the world, they still appear to us.
Even if there is no table, we still seem to sense the table.
The doubts lead us to wonder if we are living in a dream-like world.
But that dream world consists of appearances, with certain characteristics.
First, I have direct access to my thoughts in a way that I seem to lack access to thoughts of others, if there are any others; my access to my thoughts is privileged.
Second, the doubts infect only my claims about what those thoughts represent.
They are indefeasible, as long as we take them to be just thoughts.

Note Descartes's distinction between sensing and seeming to sense.
We can not claim to be sensing, if we take sensing to be a relation between ourselves and an external world.
In contrast, ideas can not be false, considered only as images in our minds; that's seeming to sense.
We can get certainty about our beliefs, as they exist inside our minds.
The next step in the *Meditations* consists in examining these thoughts and seeing if they have any character which will help us make any conclusions beyond our thoughts.

Descartes has started to rebuild his knowledge, but he seems to be stuck with not much more than the cogito, which tells him just that he is a thinking thing, a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines, and senses.
We can distinguish a few mental faculties, in addition to sensing (seeming to sense).
We have an imagination, our capacity for representing or beholding sensory images, whether they represent anything outside of ourselves.
We have a capacity to make judgments, to affirm or deny, or to doubt.
We also have capacities for willing and refusing, and emotions, like happiness.

Beyond these capacities, we have little else.
Working from the inside out, Descartes is blocked by the doubts.
He decides to take another approach, working from the outside in.
He starts by considering the physical objects he does not yet know exist (since they are still subject to doubt.)

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.
Descartes claims that this conclusion is an error.
At the end of Meditation Two, he claims that our knowledge of bodies (if there are any) comes from pure thought, rather than sensing and imagining.

> 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).

This odd and provocative claim is the conclusion of the Meditation Two discussion about a ball of wax.

IV. The nature of bodies (the story of the wax)

Consider a ball of wax in two distinct state, 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.
In short, 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.
Such an image would have to represent to us all the possible states of the wax.
Our knowledge of bodies must therefore be distinct from our sensory images of them.

> 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:

W
- 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.

Descartes might be accused of cheating in W 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.
His conclusion, though, is really conditional: if we have any knowledge of physical objects, then it can not come from the senses.
The second possible 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 (45b).

Descartes here neglects a view on which any change in the properties of an object entails a change in the object itself.
This view may not be right, but it has defenders.
Heraclitus said that one can never step in the same river twice.
Since our constitution is always changing, we are different people at different times.
And the wax is different before and after melting.
The Heraclitean view, though, will not get Descartes any "firm and lasting" knowledge.
So, we will put it aside.

It remains for us to distinguish between the real and the apparent properties of 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.

> 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).

Bodies are things that can have sensory qualities, but which need not have any particular ones.
The same appears to be true of all other physical objects.
The same object may have many different appearances.
This is the position of Galileo, Newton, and Locke, as well as of Descartes.
Berkeley will disagree.

Since we have put aside the doubts for a moment, it might be useful here to limn Descartes's metaphysics.
According to Descartes, there are three types of substances:

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

Of course, at this point in the *Meditations*, Descartes has not yet concluded the existence of anything except one instance of S2.
But, it might be handy to keep this list in mind.

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

Descartes's claim that knowledge of the world, if there is any, must come from the mind alone seems ambiguous between two positions.

There is a weak claim, that the senses are insufficient for knowledge.
On the weak claim, we use the senses to gather information, and in conjunction with reasoning, which is purely mental, we arrive at knowledge.
The weak claim is fairly uncontroversial.
We seem to have some ability beyond the senses which helps us know about the wax.

Descartes asserts a stronger claim, that what we get from the senses can not rise to the level of knowledge.
Knowledge of bodies comes from the intellect (or mind) alone, since senses information is insufficient.
While the weaker claim is more plausible, Descartes's point is that 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, since this a is sensory belief.
Further, we know that the wax can take more forms than we could possibly imagine: more shapes, more sizes.
There might be colors and odors beyond our ability to sense.
We don't see potential colors.

Our knowledge that there are other potential shapes and colors must therefore go beyond anything that could come from the senses.

We have two different types of beliefs about the wax.
First, that it has a particular shape, color, and other sense properties.
These first ideas are sensory.
But they are not knowledge.
The second type of belief is that it can take on innumerably many different forms.
This is not a sensory belief.
And it is knowledge.

VI. The priority of mind

The title of the Second Meditation asserts that the mind is known better than the body.
Thus, Descartes's presentation of the *Meditations* follows the epistemic order: we first know minds, then bodies.
Even though we don't know about bodies, at this point in the *Meditations*, we can make some conclusions about our minds.
In fact, we won't get to Descartes's argument that bodies exist until the Sixth Meditation.

Our investigation into the wax led to hypothetical conclusions about bodies: if there are any bodies, this is what they, and our knowledge of them, would be like.
Even on the relaxed supposition that there are bodies, we attain actual knowledge of our minds.

> 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).

All of the reflections about hypothetical bodies bring us back to our minds, and improve our understanding of them.

VII. The criterion for knowledge

The goal of the *Meditations* was to achieve knowledge through doubt.
As I noted, Descartes's concept of knowledge is strong, including a KK thesis: if we want knowledge, we have to know that we know what we know.
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.

> 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).

What could these terms 'clarity' and 'distinctness' mean?

Elsewhere, Descartes writes:

> 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).

Note, that Descartes's use of 'perception' is not limited to sense 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 a guarantee of truth.
The light of nature is to be distinguished from instinct, or being taught by nature.

> 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).

Perhaps the specific formulation of the criterion is not important.
What is important is that there be some distinguishing mark.
Without such a mark, all searching for knowledge, on Descartes's terms, 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.
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.

VIII. Some notes on Descartes's method, including a discussion of Euclid's *Elements*

Warning: this section of the notes contains quite a bit of discussion that both is ancillary to our central concerns and presupposes that we have read more of the *Meditations* than we have.
It will make more sense, I suspect, in a couple of weeks.

We can compare Descartes's methodology with that of axiomatic sciences, like geometry.
In geometry, and all foundational systems, we start with two elements:

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 gives a synthetic presentation of the content of the *Meditations*, which I have assigned for next week, in the Second Replies.

The synthetic presentation follows the structure of Euclid's *Elements* precisely.
Similarly, Spinoza's *Ethics* follows the synthetic, or formal, method I described.

To better understand the structure of such systems, it might be useful to look at Euclid's *Elements.*
I'll discuss that presentation just a bit here, since we won't discuss it in class, then.
There is an excellent, perspicuous version on line.

The Elements starts with definitions, adding five geometric postulates and five more general logical axioms, or common notions.
From the postulates and axioms, all the remaining propositions are derived.
The definitions do not assert the truth or existence of any of the objects to which they refer.
For example, Definition 12 says that an acute angle is an angle less than a right angle.
But, it does not claim that there are any acute angles or right angles.
The common notions are not particularly geometric; they are more properly called logical.
To call the common notions into question would be appropriate in a Cartesian project of founding all of our knowledge.
But, since the logical axioms apply so broadly, any questions about them would not be worries about the geometry of the Euclidean project, but about our beliefs more generally.
So, concerns about the foundational project of *The Elements* really focuses, first, on the status of the geometric postulates, and, second, on the derivations of the myriad propositions from the definitions, postulates, and common notions.
Geometers have studied both questions, for millennia.
Philosophers focus on the former ones.

In particular, the fifth postulate, the parallel postulate, tuned out to be not quite as secure as the others.
Indeed, Euclid seems to have recognized worries about the parallel postulate, since he does not invoke the fifth postulate freely; rather, he waits until he absolutely requires it.
Euclid's parallel postulate states that if a straight line falling on two straight lines makes the interior angles on the same side less than two right angles, the two straight lines, if produced indefinitely, meet on that side on which are the angles less than the two right angles.
We frequently study the parallel postulate in an equivalent form, known as Playfair's postulate, which says that given a line, and a point not on that line, there exists exactly one line which passes through the given point parallel to the given line.
Both the parallel postulate and Playfair's postulate, it turns out, are equivalent to the claim that the sum of the angles of a triangle is 180 degrees (pi).

But now consider an interstellar triangle, formed by the light rays of three stars, whose vertices are the centers of those stars.
The sum of the angles of our interstellar triangle will be less than pi, due to the curvatures of space-time corresponding to the gravitational pull of the stars, and other large objects.
Space-time is not Euclidean, but hyperbolic.
In hyperbolic geometry, instead of there being one line that we can draw parallel to the given line in Playfair's postulate, there are an infinite number of lines.

Hyperbolic geometry is just one of two classes of non-Euclidean geometries.
Riemannian, or spherical, geometry, results when one replaces Playfair's postulate with the claim that there are no lines parallel to the given line.
Non-Euclidean geometries were developed in detail in the nineteenth century after two millennia of trying to prove the parallel postulate from the other postulates.
That is, geometers were uncomfortable with taking the parallel postulate as a given.
They wanted it to be derived from other givens.
But, the other givens seemed pretty much unassailable.

The synthetic version of the *Meditations* was based precisely on Euclid's *Elements*.
Like Euclid, Descartes provides definitions, postulates, common notions, and derived propositions.
The resulting system looks different from the one in the *Meditations*, though the derived propositions are the same.
Descartes starts with a set of 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.
If, as in *The Elements*, the definitions do not beg questions of existence, then we can proceed to examine the postulates.
On the other hand, if the definitions already assume the existence of anything, then the whole project is suspect.
Some definitions are not at all contentious, and, like Euclid's definitions, avoid begging questions of whether any objects have the properties defined.

> Two substances are said to be really distinct from one another when each of them can exist without the other (73)

Definition IX, though, is particularly worrisome.

> When we say that something is contained in the nature or concept of something, this is the same as saying that it is true of that thing or that it can be affirmed of that thing (73).

This definition will be central to the ontological argument for God's existence in Meditation V.
We will look at that argument on Thursday; see the course website for some further readings on the ontological argument, cribbed from an earlier course of mine.

It is also worth noting that Definitions 1 and 2 have proved to be particularly contentious.

> 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 (72).

The possibility of unconscious thoughts undermines these definitions.
Freud, Adler, and Jung aside, contemporary cognitive scientists are interested in phenomena like blindsight, in which visual processing occurs unconsciously.

Descartes takes 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

He takes 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.

Then, he derives his central propositions

1. Ontological argument for God's existence
2-3. Causal arguments for God's existence
4. Distinction between mind and body

Notice that the foundation in the Second Replies is quite different from that in the *Meditations*.
In particular, the cogito is almost completely absent from the synthetic presentation.
If we were to sketch the foundation as presented in the *Meditations*, it might look:

Cogito - God - Clarity and Distinctness - Free Will - Mathematics - Mind/Body distinction

The synthetic version hardly mentions mathematics or the cogito, and the order is different.

Remember that Descartes is presenting what he takes to be obvious and incontrovertible definitions and first principles as the foundation of all that will follow.
These first principles are, as Euclid's postulates, supposed to be given to us immediately.
Any worries about presuppositions in the synthetic presentation are probably worth pursuing, and might make a good paper topic.
For now, we will put these aside, and return to our central concerns.

Descartes has given us a starting point for the *Meditations*: the cogito.
And now he has a rule for generating more truths: clear and distinct perception.