A Beginner’s Guide to Descartes’s *Meditations*

Gareth Southwell

*For Gran, and in loving memory of Gramps, who have never failed in their love and support, or in the patient hope that one day I might earn a living – or even get married.*
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The seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes is considered by many to be the founding father of modern philosophy. However, just as it has been said that the European philosophical tradition can best be thought of as 'a series of footnotes to Plato', so it may be argued that the importance of Descartes lies more in the problems he identified and tried to answer, than in the success of the actual solutions which he proposed. Many philosophy courses at all levels will therefore at some point involve, to greater or lesser degree, reference to Descartes’s philosophy. So, wherever scepticism is discussed, or the issue of how we may be certain about our knowledge is addressed, where the nature of the mind is considered, or the possible existence of the soul is debated, Descartes is likely at some point to put in an appearance.

However, Descartes is also important in other respects. Firstly, he is in many ways representative of an age. The seventeenth century marked a turning point in Western society as it moved away from tradition and dogma (represented by the Catholic Church) towards scientific inquiry. Descartes’s concerns are thus also those of science, of a man who is looking to establish how we can find things out for ourselves instead of merely relying on the dictates of authority – whether those of the state or of religion. That said, Descartes was actually a complex individual who, to a modern eye, appears to be riven with contradictions: as a man of science he was concerned with the advancement of knowledge by solely rational means; however, as a religious believer, he was also keen to find arguments in support of religious doctrine and thereby convince non-believers of its truth. This combination of scientific zeal and religious faith is perhaps difficult for the majority of modern people to empathize with. However, to others, this aspect of Descartes’s philosophy will no doubt be a point of interest in itself.
Introduction

For those interested in Descartes's philosophy in general, the *Meditations* provides an ideal introduction to his thought in that it contains pretty much all of his main philosophical opinions. The purpose of this book is therefore to provide help to those studying the *Meditations* (at whatever level), those who encounter Descartes as part of a philosophy course, those who touch upon his philosophy as part of other studies, and finally, those who merely have a general interest in the man and his ideas. So, whether you are a philosophy student or not, this book is, I hope, written in a way that does not require any specialist knowledge or acquaintance with philosophy, while at the same time avoiding being in any way simplistic or patronizing.

Regarding the structure of the book, the first chapter deals with all the background needed to gain an understanding of the context of Descartes's ideas. This first chapter is not actually essential to a clear understanding of Descartes's philosophy, but it will help to show how Descartes's ideas fit into their historical context (for those who are interested). The second chapter provides a non-critical, step-by-step overview of the *Meditations* itself, and my main purpose here is to present the central ideas and concerns in as clear a way as possible, while also trying to maintain the narrative flow of Descartes's text. The third and final chapter provides a critical analysis of Descartes and his philosophy through the topics it touches upon. Here, I have tried to give an overview of the types of criticism that Descartes's ideas have received, as well as showing how these concerns relate to various topics within philosophy.

I have tried to keep notes to a minimum, but where they exist, they are mostly for those who wish to follow up any references, quotations, or directions to further reading that I make (for this reason, I have placed them at the end of the book). Sometimes, also, these notes contain information which would interrupt the flow of the writing, or relate to a topic that I do not cover because, however interesting, it is not directly relevant.

In Appendix A I have provided an overview of the *Meditations* itself, briefly detailing the arguments as they occur. In Appendix B, there is a summary of certain parts of Descartes's published correspondence with his contemporaries (the *Objections and Replies*), where those who wish to delve more deeply into the text will find useful material. Following this, there is a glossary where the reader can find simple definitions of certain terms used in the book.

There is a bibliography at the end for those who want to delve into the subject more deeply through further reading. I have grouped the works listed under headings with a few lines of description so that the undergraduate, A-Level student, student from another discipline, or general reader, can hunt down the book that would best suit his or her needs.

Finally, I am responsible for the website www.philosophyonline.co.uk, where can be found notes relating to a number of areas of philosophy (including Descartes). In producing this guide it has been my intention to try to keep the information which is freely available on the site distinct from the published material. So, for instance, on the site the eager student will find a fully annotated online edition of the *Meditations*, study questions, a guide to exam technique, and other study-related material which would only detract from the more general purpose of this text. On a small number of occasions the same material (certain tables and summaries) can be found in both places. However, this is a very infrequent occurrence, and in general the two resources are independent and complementary to one another.

If you have any comments, questions, suggestions, wish to report any spelling mistakes, typos, factual inaccuracies, or undertake any of the other wonderful things that email is good for, then you can contact me by using the form on the website.

I hope you enjoy the book.

Gareth Southwell
Chapter 1

Background

Life of Descartes

René Descartes was born on 31 March 1596 in the small town of La Haye in the Touraine region of France (which, for this reason, was renamed La Haye-Descartes in 1802, and subsequently, in 1967, simply Descartes). His mother having died when he was only one year old, he lived from that time on with his elder brother and sister in the house of his maternal grandmother. Between the ages of ten and eighteen he attended the Jesuit College of La Flèche at Anjou (he remained a devout Catholic throughout his life), and around 1614–15 he moved to a house just outside Paris, where he chose to live alone. It is while living here that he seems to have suffered a nervous breakdown. The next year he attended the University of Poitiers, where he studied not philosophy, but civil and canon law, and also possibly a little medicine.

At the age of twenty-two, keen to get some experience of the world, he began to travel. In 1618 he enlisted in the Dutch army as a gentleman soldier, where he first met Isaac Beeckman, a Dutch philosopher and scientist, who rekindled Descartes’s interest in such matters.

On his return to France in 1619, Descartes seems to have undergone some sort of mystical experience which was to change his life. The revelation took the form of three consecutive dreams, and is understood to have left Descartes with the conviction that the universe was divinely designed and ordered on rational principles. This revelation, combining as it does aspects of both science and religion, is perhaps central to understanding Descartes and his outlook on life – and especially his purpose in writing the Meditations.

Over the next ten years, Descartes travelled to various parts of Europe, ranging between the Netherlands, Italy, and France, but never settling in one place for too long. During this time, he had contact with various scholars, scientists, and philosophers, and through conversation, debate, and correspondence, began to formalize his own views more clearly. In 1628, however, he moved to the Netherlands, where he lived – albeit in different places – for the next twenty years.

In 1635, a daughter, Francine, was born to Hélène, a serving maid at the house where he had been staying in Amsterdam. However, while Descartes seems to have taken a growing interest in the child, and to have contributed financially to the welfare of both mother and daughter, the relationship with Hélène seems to have been a short-lived thing. Tragically, however, his relationship with his daughter was also not destined to last very long, and she died of a fever at the age of five.

During this time, Descartes’s reputation had been steadily growing. His Rules for the Direction of the Mind had been completed in 1628, but was not to be published until after his death. Another work, his projected revision of current scientific knowledge, De Mundo, was almost ready for publication when, in 1633, Descartes heard of the fate of Galileo (with whom his work shared a Copernican – therefore heretical – view of the solar system), so he

René Descartes (1596–1650)
Background

withheld publication. Slowly, however, over the next few years, he tentatively released those parts of this material which he considered would not offend the Church, until in 1637 he released A Discourse on Method, which collected much of the already published material in one volume, and contained his theories on light, meteors, and some discoveries in analytic geometry. The volume also contained the first account of his scientific and philosophical method, and it is this introductory part which is now most famous. In 1641, he reworked these philosophical ideas into the first text of the Meditations on the First Philosophy, which was originally published in Latin. It was this text which was to generate the most controversy amongst philosophers, theologians, and scholars (both for and against), and during most of the 1640s Descartes’s time was taken up with defending and expanding upon the philosophical ideas presented there. The Principles of Philosophy followed in 1644, and restated the main ideas of the Meditations, together with certain of Descartes’s theories concerning the structure of the universe and the nature of the soul. The final work to be published during his lifetime, The Passions of the Soul, was Descartes’s attempt to put ethics on a scientific footing, and it appeared in 1649.

In the last year of his life he moved to Stockholm to tutor Queen Christina of Sweden. Apparently, the Queen — a habitual early riser — would arrange meetings with Descartes at 5 a.m. in a large, poorly heated, and draughty room. Little wonder, then, that he duly caught the cold which eventually led to his death, from pneumonia, on 11 February 1650, shortly before his fifty-fourth birthday.

The Cultural Context

No ideas exist in isolation from their historical context, and the further away the ideas are from the present day, the more need there is to understand the times which gave birth to them. In Descartes’s case, the time is the seventeenth century, and the place is western Europe. However, while it is true that Descartes was a French philosopher, many philosophers and scholars of the time chose to write in Latin, thus providing a common academic language for thinkers from most European countries.  

As I have already mentioned in the Introduction, this period marked a turning point in the history of ideas. It was a time when the power of the Catholic Church was still great, but when old ideas were being challenged through the growth of scientific inquiry. When Galileo pledged his support for the Polish astronomer Copernicus’s idea that the Sun was the centre of the universe in a work published in 1632, he was soon after imprisoned by the Inquisition. This event had a great effect on Descartes, and (as noted above) he put off publishing his philosophical work while he thought out the best way to introduce his ideas without incurring the wrath of the Church (when he finally did publish his Discourse and Essays some years later, it was anonymously).  

Philosophically, Descartes’s approach can be contrasted with the traditional approach of the time, which we now refer to as scholasticism. Descartes sometimes refers in his writing to the ‘philosophy of the schools’ or ‘schoolmen’. By this, he means the philosophical tradition which had become established in such schools or early universities as existed by the middle of the thirteenth century in cities all over Europe (the leading two existed in Paris and Oxford).  

The activities of these schools were based largely on the study of the works of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 bc) and the writings of his commentators. This led to a very formal, strict, and narrow focus almost solely on Aristotle’s works and method, resulting in a tight union between Aristotelian philosophy and Christian doctrine (or rather, the Catholic Church’s interpretation of the teachings of the Bible). As you may imagine, this environment was not very conducive to the development of scientific method or free thinking, and the power of the Church ensured that any philosopher with unconventional views could be branded a religious heretic and face imprisonment, torture, or even death (which is one of the reasons why Descartes dedicates the Meditations to the Doctors of Theology in Paris!).  

To give you an idea of the sort of problems the early scientists faced in this period, consider the theory of gravity. Now, Aristotle’s system predicts that any two objects falling to the ground will differ in their speed according to their weight. So, a heavier object will fall faster than a lighter one. This is because, according to Aristotle, every object will seek its ‘natural place’ in the universe, and heavy objects — because of their weight — will do so faster than light ones. However, in a famous experiment, the Italian philosopher and scientist, Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), tried to show how this was wrong. He is said to have taken a cannon ball and a small musket ball, and, in front of a crowd of witnesses, to have dropped them both off the famous Leaning Tower in Pisa, Italy. However, rather than arriving at the ground at different times — as Aristotle would have predicted — the balls seemed to land at more or less the same time. The only factor which alters the rate at which objects fall, Galileo concluded, is air resistance. Therefore, the more surface area a thing has, the more the air will slow it down — hence, things with a smaller surface area, or aerodynamic things (which are designed to have little air resistance — such as arrows and aeroplanes) fly faster through the air.
The Purpose of the Meditations

The Meditations, or to give it its fuller title, Meditations on the First Philosophy, was published in Latin in 1641. In many ways, it is a restatement and refinement of ideas which Descartes had already developed in his earlier work, the Discourse on Method, but expressed at greater length and in a narrative format. The book contains six Meditations, each of which is supposed to take place on a different day. The reader is thus led, step by step, along with Descartes on his journey towards – hopefully – the same conclusions as the author.

The main theme which propels the narrative of the Meditations is the search for certainty. Cleverly, Descartes presents the text as if it is an answer to the theological sceptics and unbelievers who have questioned such things as whether there is a God, and whether the soul exists (and is immortal). However, in doing this, he also sets out his method for finding truth in the sciences. In this way, Descartes is also hoping to release the hold that Church dogma and the followers of Aristotle, and scholastic philosophy in general, have had over the development of philosophy and science, and at the same time to establish a way in which science, philosophy, and religion can coexist in harmony.

The problem, then, for both scientists and philosophers, was that the dogma of the Church and the doctrines of Aristotle were thought together to represent the last word on the nature of reality. Scientific experiment, therefore, was not so much unthought-of, but rather not thought necessary, since all that we may wish to know can be worked out from consideration of the so-called first principles that govern reality (such as formed the basis of Aristotle’s ideas regarding falling bodies). However, many of these first principles were themselves based on speculation, and under certain circumstances (such as Galileo’s experiment from the tower in Pisa), could in fact be seen to be wrong. Thus Descartes saw his first task as being to utilize certain sceptical arguments in order to expose these false assumptions, and ultimately arrive at the true first principles.

The method Descartes employs in the Meditations to achieve this has become known as his ‘method of doubt’. Thus he begins not by stating things which he thinks are true and building upon them, but by asking the simple question, ‘Is there any one thing of which we can be absolutely certain?’ In tackling the problem in this way, Descartes attempts to find the one thing beyond all doubt upon which we can build our knowledge – the very first principle, so to speak.
Chapter 2
Explanation and Summary of Main Arguments

Introduction

This chapter is intended to provide a clear and easy-to-understand overview of the Meditations, argument by argument. I think that it is important to get a feeling for the Meditations as almost a type of story (it might be called, 'How I Overcame Doubt and Uncertainty, Found the One Indubitable Truth, and Guaranteed Knowledge of the External World' by René Descartes – or something catchy like that). Just as stories have a narrative or sense of logical progression and connection, so the Meditations can be viewed as a sort of journey. This may be summarized – very broadly – as follows:

1. Beginning with his everyday opinions, the author comes to realize that many of them are based on false assumptions or unwarranted assertions.
2. Through rigorous questioning and use of sceptical argument the author finds that he is able to doubt everything he once thought that he was certain of – even his own existence.
3. However, the darkest hour being before the dawn, it suddenly occurs to Descartes that he can be absolutely sure of at least one thing: while he thinks, he must also exist (the famous Cogito ergo sum: 'I think, therefore I am').
4. From here, the traveller is able to light his way back along the still difficult way home.
5. Arriving back, things are not what they were. He is changed from his journey, yet now possesses the key knowledge that allows him to understand the world and himself better.

The six Meditations appear to take place on six separate days. So, in the course of the text we sometimes come across phrases like 'The Meditation of yesterday …' or '… in the same way that I yesterday examined the idea …' This gives the impression of a journal or diary, and we are encouraged by Descartes to follow him in his thoughts on a parallel journey of our own:

I would advise none to read this work, unless such as are able and willing to meditate with me in earnest, to detach their minds from commerce with the senses, and likewise to deliver themselves from all prejudice.

The Meditations therefore has a personal tone which is rarely found in philosophy – one of the things which possibly accounts for its lasting appeal. In summarizing and commenting on the arguments, therefore, I have tried to retain this sense of narrative progression and shared journey. For convenience's sake, however, I have also provided a simplified overview of the arguments in table form (this can be found in Appendix A).

Finally, I would not wish the summary of the arguments presented below to substitute for an actual reading of the Meditations itself. Firstly, the notes are meant to aid understanding and not merely to paraphrase Descartes. So, in doing this, I have added some of my own illustrations and examples. Thus, anyone studying Descartes needs to know which bits actually come from Descartes, and which from me (and I'll never tell!). Secondly, for any serious student, there are complex points and additional detail that I could not or would not wish to render in a summary. This extra information is vital for a serious study of Descartes and is key to any discussion or disagreement about 'what he is really getting at'. Lastly, reading the Meditations is, once you get past the sometimes long-winded prose, a genuine enjoyment. I won't say, 'Or your money back!', since there is no accounting for taste (and I don't have much money). However, reading the text first hand can give you a better idea of what Descartes was trying to achieve and thus help develop a sympathetic reading of the text – and not just a caricature formed from secondary reading or discussion. However, please bear in mind that while I do not pass judgement on the arguments in summarizing them, that is not to say that I agree with them. On the other hand, while I critically examine those same arguments in Chapter 3, it is also not necessarily true that I disagree with them. Ultimately, in a guide of this sort my personal opinions do not matter, and my main purpose is to help you start to think about these issues for yourself in an informed way. So, while it is almost impossible to be completely impartial, I have made every effort to be so.
Explanation and Summary of Main Arguments

Meditation I: About the Things We May Doubt

Introduction

We've all had the thought. You're sitting there in your pyjamas, wondering if you should have had that last cup of coffee so late in the evening, when it strikes you: how can I be certain that I know anything? How do I know that I am not mistaken about everything? That life is not a dream, that everyone I spoke to today wasn't in fact a robot, and that there isn't an evil demon whose sole enjoyment in life comes from making me believe a whole lot of nonsense? (Well, maybe not everyone – perhaps, in fact, only philosophers.)

We may credit Descartes with being one of the first philosophers to entertain these thoughts in a sober-headed, 'I'm going to get to the bottom of this', sort of way. Realizing the importance of this issue, and also that the problem isn't just going to go away, he sets about analysing his opinions, beliefs, and attitudes with a view to seeing how certain they are. In fact, this is no little undertaking, for Descartes is not just setting out to rid himself of false opinions, but furthermore to reject everything which is in the least bit uncertain. He is not going to do this belief by belief, however, but rather – as he says – by 'an assault first on the principles on which all my former opinions were based'.

So, even at this early stage, Descartes is concerned with finding out why his beliefs are uncertain, and declares himself determined 'to begin afresh from the foundations'. But what do these foundations consist of?

Admittedly, not all of us are concerned with the necessity of establishing 'something firm and constant in the sciences'. However, inasmuch as we can follow Descartes's journey, we are all concerned with personal knowledge and the need to be certain about things. Again, I think this is one of the most appealing things about the Meditations in that it presents the problem of knowledge in terms of personal experience. Admittedly, the discussion can get quite surreal at certain points of Descartes's narrative (as it can in any philosophical discussion), but the starting point at least is one that we can practically engage with immediately. This is also, I think, why certain types of sceptical argument remain popular themes in film and literature, because they start with what is familiar to us (our immediate experience of the world).

The Argument from Illusion

The first big conclusion that Descartes arrives at concerns the actual source of his information about the world:

Everything I have accepted up to now as being absolutely true and assured, I have learned from or through the senses. This is not to say that Descartes believes that the only way we receive our ideas is through our senses – this would make him an empiricist (and, in fact, he is a rationalist – a distinction which I will go into later). What he is saying is merely that human beings are mostly reliant on the impressions that we receive through our senses in order to make judgements, gather information, establish proof, etc. However, he also notes that our senses can mislead us. This is, in fact, quite an old idea in philosophical circles, having been introduced (or at least popularized) by Plato. Both these philosophers believed that the senses could, on occasion, provide us with wrong information and that, as a result, we should not place total trust in them. Furthermore, they were both rationalists and had a similar suggestion as to how we might achieve true knowledge (but this is skipping ahead somewhat – let's get back to the subject of the senses).

The Bent Stick

The argument that the senses mislead us and cannot be trusted is commonly known as the argument from illusion. In other words, it is the view that what we see, hear, feel, etc., may be an illusory representation of what really exists. A famous example often used to illustrate this supposed illusion is the fact that
when a straight stick is half submerged in water it appears bent. Other examples include the occurrence of mirages (where, for example, the heat of a desert, or a hot road, may make it appear that there is a stretch of water up ahead, when in fact there is not), optical illusions (such as lines of equal length appearing unequal under certain conditions), and the appearance of light from stars which, because of the time taken for the light to reach us, are in fact no longer there (obviously, this last example would have been unknown to Descartes since the finite speed of light was yet to be discovered – though it still illustrates an aspect of the same problem that would have concerned Descartes).

Descartes’s conclusion from all this is that, because the senses have once deceived us, we should not trust them at all. This, he admits, may seem to some to be an extreme conclusion, for aren’t there ordinary perceptions that we have everyday that are completely trustworthy – such as the perception that I am sitting here now, reading this sentence? This sort of perception does not take place under unusual situations (such as the mirage), or involve distant objects (such as the stars), so why can’t we trust it?

The Argument from Dreaming

It is at this point that Descartes introduces his second major sceptical argument: the argument from dreaming. Have we not all, he argues, at one time or another, dreamt that we were awake, or sitting in a chair reading? Well, perhaps not all of us – or even most of us. Perhaps, once again, only philosophers. However, his argument remains a powerful one: most of us would admit, even if we have not directly experienced it ourselves, that it is possible to dream that we are awake – and furthermore, not to know it!

The argument from dreaming is peculiarly powerful, then, for anything to which we may lay claim as proof that we are not dreaming may in fact form part of the dream itself. ‘But what if I pinch myself?’, you might say, ‘That feels real. Therefore, I cannot be dreaming.’ But when dreaming, the most fantastic things may happen and you may still think that they are real. How, then, can you be sure that the same thing is not happening now? In other words, your belief about what is real is related to your ability to be convinced of the fact, and if we are more easily convinced of things when we are dreaming, then anything could seem real to our dreaming self.

Dismayed with the powerful hold that the dreaming argument seems to have over him, Descartes looks for some consolation in the nature of dreaming itself. This he finds in the fact that, even if the images he is presented with in the course of his life are all false, and part only of some dream or grand illusion, some of the parts of which they are made up must at least have some reality. In other words, the dream images of individual objects – such as ships, people, animals, books, etc. – may not actually exist, but in considering them we can see that they involve more general ideas, such as shape (e.g. the roundness of an apple) and number (how many apples there are). So, while apples themselves may not exist, the principles of mathematics and geometry which the idea of apples involves may still apply, since such principles do not rely on the existence of anything for their truth. In other words, even if ‘round things’ do not exist, the idea of ‘roundness’ does. This is an important point for Descartes in that it allows him to establish a distinction between ‘sciences which have for their end the consideration of composite objects [i.e. things made up of many parts]’ – such as physics, astronomy, medicine – and sciences which ‘regard merely the simplest and most general objects’ – such as mathematics and geometry. Since the latter are not affected by the existence or non-existence of apples (but merely concern such ideas as ‘roundness’), we cannot be mistaken about the truths which those studies involve (such as the truth of the equation that the circumference of a circle is equal to twice pi times its radius or ‘2πr’).

For whether I am awake or sleeping, two and three added together always make five, and a square never has more than four sides; and it does not seem possible that truths so apparent can be suspected of any falsity or uncertainty.¹⁰

This idea will be important again later in the Meditations when Descartes is looking for a means of establishing just which ideas are most trustworthy and why. However, for now, it is important just to notice that, for Descartes, the ideas which have least connection with the senses are valued most.
Explanation and Summary of Main Arguments

The Evil Demon/Argument from Deception (Part One)

The final sceptical argument which Descartes entertains in the first Meditation goes furthest of all. Having already considered that the senses may be faulty, or that he may be dreaming, he now goes on to consider whether it might not be possible that he is even mistaken about the things which he has so far considered most certain – such as that the world exists, or that \(2 + 2 = 4\). Maybe, he reasons, it is possible for an all-powerful being to make it so that he is deceived even in regard to these apparent certainties. However, since God is by nature good, it seems unlikely that he should create human beings so that they may be systematically deceived regarding such beliefs all of the time. Still, this might not be beyond the capabilities of an all-powerful, supernatural being with evil intentions. Hence, the important question becomes, ‘Who is responsible for my existence?’ On the one hand, if his creator has good intentions, then the likelihood of our being constantly in error becomes less (for it would be against the nature of such a good being to create us so as never to know the truth regarding anything). On the other hand, if humans have been created by an evil demon of some sort, then the trustworthiness of these perceived truths is undermined (for such a being might be malicious enough to create us so as to be constantly mistaken).

This type of argument is known as the argument from deception and common examples of it can be found in many guises. For example, the idea that we are deliberately deceived by malevolent beings is a plot device of the Matrix films. For those of you who have been living in a remote cave in the Himalayas for the last ten years and aren’t familiar with the plot, it revolves around the main character, Neo, who discovers that the world which he had up until now thought was ‘real’ is in fact a computer generated ‘virtual reality’. In philosophy, this is similar to what is known as the brains in vats scenario, where it is imagined that what we think of as reality is no more than a series of electrical impulses fed to our disembodied brains as they sit in the laboratory of some deranged scientist. Other examples of deception can be found, of course, but the main theme is usually that we are deliberately deceived on just such a grand scale as Descartes imagines.\(^1\) Since it is, in a way, the most extreme and powerful form of scepticism, Descartes will return to this argument again later on. However, for now, he is content to introduce the type of doubt that it represents and to argue that, combined with the previous two arguments – those from illusion and dreaming – there is a strong case for doubting the basis of all of our knowledge, and therefore a correspondingly strong need to find a way of guaranteeing it.

It should however be noted at this point that Descartes’s deception argument differs from the brains in vats scenario in one important respect: Descartes is not asking, here, ‘Am I merely the brain?’ for, since the brain is a physical thing, and he can only presume at this point the existence of the physical world through his mental perceptions, this would be to assume the existence of something physical. What he is asking, rather, is ‘Am I merely the mind?’ (or a sum of perceptions), or even the question, ‘Do I really exist?’. Until Descartes can prove the physical world is real, his mental experiences are all that are real to him. This is an important point when he later comes to distinguish between the mind and body (remember: Descartes believes in the existence of two separate substances (mind and matter) – he is a ‘mind–body dualist’, not a ‘brain–body dualist’). The brains-in-vats scenario, therefore, represents a modern-day sceptical equivalent of Descartes’s evil demon argument which does not require us to assume the existence of immaterial substance (i.e. soul or spirit).

Summary

Curiously, regarding all these questions which he has raised, Descartes is at this stage at something of a loss, for he says, ‘I have certainly nothing to say in
reply to such reasonings'. This is an example of one of Descartes's attempts to draw the reader into the process of reasoning. Instead of saying, 'As I will later argue, the answer to these doubts can be found . . .', he attempts to create a sense of there being a shared problem, as if to say, 'Well, dear reader, where do we go from here?' The method of doubt thus proves quite a good tool for storytelling. So, for the purposes of arriving at one thing certain, he will suppose that 'the heavens, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds, and all external things that we see, are only illusions and deceptions' and that he will consider himself as 'having no hands, eyes, flesh, blood or senses'.

For, even if he is not able to arrive at absolutely certain knowledge, he may at least 'take great care not to accept into my belief anything false'. This is the essence of his method of doubt – that is, the means whereby he hopes to achieve some form of reliable truth.

Descartes's main purpose in this first Meditation has been to undermine our commonly held beliefs regarding reality and our certainty regarding our knowledge of it. Furthermore, he has also shown that the importance of these arguments lies in their identifying the exact source of our problems. Firstly, he identifies the untrustworthiness of the senses; secondly, that we do not seem to have a means of guaranteeing which perceptions are real, and which are false; and thirdly, that we do not have a foundation upon which to base all our knowledge (without which, he implies, we are doomed). It is these problems which he will spend the remaining five Meditations answering.

Meditation II: Of the Nature of the Human Mind; and that it is Easier to Know than the Body

Introduction

The second Meditation picks up where the first left off, and we find Descartes in determined mood to press on with his quest. Applying his illusion, dreaming, and deception arguments, he recalls that he had concluded not only that it was possible that the world did not exist (at least in the form in which he took it to), but also that his body, because it was a part of the physical world, might not exist either. Therefore, the 'Descartes' that begins the second day's Meditation is dramatically less substantial than the one which began the first. Nonetheless, he is determined to continue doubting, even if it produces nothing more certain than the conclusion that 'there is nothing certain in the world.'

The Evil Demon (Part Two) and the Cogito

Demons probably never really get the credit they deserve. With their reputation for evil, ill-will, and general malevolence, it is often overlooked what positive purpose their existence may occasionally serve. Certainly, without the concept of such a being, Descartes might have never arrived at his most famous utterance.

Having so far doubted the existence of the world and, more drastically, his own body, Descartes ultimately comes to question the nature of his own existence. For, he asks,

Am I so dependent on body and senses that I cannot exist without them?

It is a question which many philosophers have asked, and it continues to play an important role to this day. Am I just the mind? Is it possible that consciousness can exist without physical embodiment? Is there something such as a soul that might survive death? All these questions, as I mentioned in the Introduction, are of central importance to Descartes. As a religious believer, he is interested in proving two main points: firstly, that the mind (or soul) is the true essence of the human being; secondly, that it is possible to conceive of this essence as existing separately from the body. But how does he set about doing this?
Explanations and Summary of Main Arguments

The key step lies in the role played by the evil demon. Descartes points out, quite rightly, that however powerful this evil, deceiving demon is, while he (Descartes) is being deceived, it is at least true that he (Descartes) exists.

There is therefore no doubt that I exist, if he deceives me; and let him deceive me as much as he likes, he can never cause me to be nothing, so long as I think I am something. So that, after having thought carefully about it, and having scrupulously examined everything, one must then, in conclusion, take as assured that the proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true, every time I express it or conceive of it in my mind.20

This is the big breakthrough for Descartes because, whatever else is the case, it must be true that while he is thinking, he must exist. This is famously summed up in the Latin phrase – the Meditations was originally published in Latin, remember – Cogito ergo sum: 'I think, therefore I am'. Ironically, we don't actually find this phrase in the Meditations itself, but in another of Descartes's writings, the Discourse on Method.21 However, the conclusion reached here is the same one, and the argument is most commonly referred to simply as the Cogito (which I shall call it from now on).

A Thinking Thing

Having decided that he must exist, Descartes then goes on to ask what in fact this means. For, it's all very well being absolutely certain that 'I exist', but what is the nature of this 'I'? First of all he rejects common definitions – such as 'man' and 'rational animal' – because they lead to yet other questions and wrangles about definition (what we mean by 'man', 'rational', and so on). So, restricting himself solely to those ideas which occurred to him when he considered his direct experience of himself, he concludes that he seems to be two things: a body, which is composed of physical parts; and a soul (or mind), which seems to possess the capacity for being conscious, having sensations, making decisions, etc.

However, having decided this, he recalls the evil demon scenario and its potential to deceive us. Now, as he has already pointed out, it is possible for him to conceive of himself as existing without a body, and that its existence may be part of a dream or some great illusion. Furthermore, many of the various activities of which he is capable – eating, walking, seeing, etc. – seem to be dependent upon the existence of the body (and therefore cannot properly be said to exist separately from it). But what, then, is his true nature?

Another attribute is thinking, and I here discover an attribute which does belong to me; this alone cannot be detached from me. I am, I exist; this is certain; but for how long? For as long as I think, for it might perhaps happen, if I ceased to think, that I would at the same time cease to be or to exist. I now admit nothing which is not necessarily true: I am therefore, precisely speaking, only a thing which thinks, that is to say, a mind, understanding, or reason, terms whose significance was hitherto unknown to me.22

This is another vital step for Descartes. Having assured himself of the certainty of one thing – the truth of the Cogito argument – he has now also identified that one essential activity which defines him: thinking. He is not an eating thing, a breathing thing, a dancing thing, a practical-joke-playing thing, or a stamp-collecting thing, for none of these activities can conceivably exist without the body or the physical world (whereas, he argues, the activity of thinking can). And what is a thinking thing? It is

a thing that doubts, perceives, affirms, denies, wills, does not will, that imagines also, and which feels.23

Now, of these pure activities of the soul, some are more trustworthy than others, because what they deal with is less reliant upon the idea of some 'outside' world. As you may remember, this is the reason why Descartes prefers mathematics to geography: the first deals with pure ideas alone, whereas the second relies, to some extent, on the accuracy of information which we receive through the senses. Accordingly, then, Descartes favours those mental activities which have little or nothing to do with the senses. Thus, the imagination, which relies to some extent on the reality of physical things (of which it forms images), is to be trusted no more than our perceptions of the external world itself (i.e. at this stage of his argument, not at all).

The Piece of Wax

Having arrived at these conclusions about himself, his true nature, and which activities of the mind are trustworthy, Descartes nonetheless admits that the external world still seems more apparent and easily understood than his own mind – even though he has just seemingly proved to himself that the opposite is true. However, according to his arguments, he can only really be sure that he exists and possesses knowledge of his own nature; the existence of the external world, on the other hand, is doubtful, and its true nature difficult to comprehend. Why, then, are we tempted to think the opposite (i.e. that the
world is more easily known than ourselves)? Descartes puts this down to force of habit: we are more used to thinking of the world as 'real', and less used to examining our own mental nature. But, having come to interesting and useful conclusions about the 'internal' world, he now begins to wonder what the nature of this 'external' world is.24

As an example, Descartes considers a piece of wax 'which has just been taken from the hive'.25 He lists its qualities - its taste, smell, colour, texture, etc. - before placing it near a flame.

What remained of its taste is expelled, the smell disappears, its colour changes, it loses its shape, it grows bigger, becomes liquid, warms up, one can hardly touch it, and although one taps it, it will no longer make any sound. Does the same wax remain after this change?26

If the wax loses all these qualities after being heated, what is there that defines its true nature? We might imagine it to be, Descartes says, a sort of substance without qualities that has a certain shape, is flexible and movable. However, when we really think about it, we do not understand the wax by being able to imagine it in one way or another, but rather by being able to comprehend its behaviour under different conditions.

I must therefore agree that I could not even conceive by means of the imagination what the wax is, and that it is my understanding alone which conceives it.27

Therefore, knowledge - even of the physical world - does not come from the information which we receive through the senses, but through the role which the mind plays in understanding that information. It is this latter view which is what makes Descartes a rationalist, as opposed to the former one, which would make him an empiricist.

This is an extremely important stage in Descartes's argument. First of all, what is taking place is a switch in emphasis: from thinking that the 'external' world is more easily understood than our own 'internal', mental one, Descartes arrives at the opposite conclusion. The world of mental perceptions is most easily understood because we have direct access to it (to our perceptions and ideas); however, the external world can only be accessed indirectly through its interaction with the senses, and the creation of perceptions which are meant to stand for or represent these physical things (the ability to do which Descartes calls the 'imagination'28). However, as Descartes shows with the wax example, such perceptions can be misleading: the wax is solid, now it is liquid; it is yellow, now it is translucent; and so on. The true nature of the wax does not therefore consist in what we can understand of it through smell, sight, taste, etc., but rather through reason and logical deduction. Furthermore, the more our knowledge of something is arrived at through purely logical and mathematical principles, the more certain it will be. Therefore, since knowledge of the external world relies to some extent on sense perception (which can be misleading), the most certain and easily knowable things are those whose truth does not rely on sense perception.

The analysis of the wax has therefore allowed Descartes to reach the following conclusions:

1. The imagination (in Descartes's sense of the term) provides us with misleading impressions of the 'external' world.
2. However, certain ideas within the mind can be known with much greater certainty than perceptions which stem from 'outside' of the mind.
3. Therefore, the mental world can be known with much greater certainty than the physical one.
4. The most certain knowledge is based upon contemplation of ideas alone, and does not involve the evidence of the senses. Therefore, the more we rely upon sense perception, the more uncertain our knowledge will be; the more independent of sense experience our knowledge is, the more certain it will be.

It is tempting, here, to see Descartes as being someone who would frown upon scientific experiment (because experiment relies on sense perception). However, this is not the case. He is not arguing that we do not need experiment - on the contrary, his own interests show that he was a keen empirical
Explanation and Summary of Main Arguments

investigator – but merely that our greatest certainty resides in knowledge which is based on rational principles, and it is these which we must seek out in our investigations into the physical world (which is what makes him a rationalist). I will return to this topic later on.

Summary

In this Meditation Descartes has reached the conclusion that a clearer understanding of the physical world must spring from the use of judgement and reason, as opposed to relying purely on what ‘appears to be the case’ through perception via the senses and use of the imagination. Ultimately, then, the true nature of things in the external world is not revealed ‘through seeing them and touching them, but only because we conceive them in thought’. 29

The other important consequence of this finding for Descartes is that, since the greatest understanding of things comes via the intellect, how much easier and certain our knowledge of our own minds be than that of the physical world. The mind and its contents, therefore, are more easily known than the world and its contents. Thus, in identifying his essential nature as a ‘thinking thing’, and concluding that this activity – in its purest form – has nothing to do with the ‘outside’ world, he is able to lay the foundations for arguing that mind and body are separate and distinct substances (of which, more soon).

Meditation III: Of God; that He Exists

Introduction

The role played by God in philosophical arguments has diminished almost to nothing in modern-day philosophy (outside philosophy of religion, of course). However, in Descartes’s day, religious belief was the norm and atheism almost non-existent. Two of Descartes’s philosophical contemporaries, the German Wilhelm Leibniz and the Dutchman Baruch Spinoza, both incorporated the notion of a greater being into their philosophical systems, while the Irish philosopher Bishop George Berkeley assumed a world where all existing things were thoughts in the mind of God. 30 However, as religious belief has declined – and atheism and agnosticism increased – philosophy has concentrated on forms of justification which do not rely on appeal to the divine. Another reason for this, however, lies in the fact that for God to be able to act as a guarantee of anything, you must first prove that He exists. 31 It is this goal that Descartes sets himself in the third Meditation.

Clear and Distinct Ideas

In the two Meditations covered so far, Descartes has occasionally talked about how clear an idea is, or of clearly and distinctly perceiving that something is the case. However, up until now, he has not provided an analysis of what this means, or given any justification of the concepts. However, since this will be important in the discussion that is to follow (concerning the existence of God), he sets about doing so now.

Firstly, he asks, ‘what is required to make me certain of something?’ 32 In relation to the Cogito, ‘there is nothing except a clear and distinct perception of what I affirm’. 33 And so,

consequently it seems to me that I can already establish as a general rule that all the things we conceive very clearly and distinctly are true. 34

So, taking the truth of the Cogito argument as a standard against which to measure all other forms of knowledge, Descartes argues that it is these qualities which it possesses – its clarity and distinctness – which guarantee its being true. Therefore, in examining the contents of his mind, Descartes finds that some ideas appear more clear and distinct than others. For instance, the ideas which he formerly held to be true about the existence of objects in the physical world now seem much less well-formed than those involving mathematics. In fact, mathematical and logical ideas seem so clear and distinct that the only thing which could convince him that they were not true would be if the evil demon argument were true – which is why, ultimately, he needs to prove that God exists and is not a deceiver (i.e. God has not created him in order that he should be easily deceived about such certainties).

However, before I move on to that topic, there remains something more to be said about clear and distinct ideas. The idea, as it is presented in the Meditations, is rather vague and is dealt with briefly. In fact, it seems that all it amounts to is the assertion that some ideas appear more self-evidently true than others. We can expand upon this definition, however, if we consider some of Descartes’s comments elsewhere in his writings. For instance, in The Principles of Philosophy, he provides a more detailed explanation:

I term that clear which 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. But the distinct is that which is so precise and different from all other objects that it contains with itself nothing but what is clear. 35
Explanation and Summary of Main Arguments

Basically, if I said to you, 'Do you see that cat over there?' and it was only two feet away from you, and it was broad daylight, and there was only one cat in the room, etc., then you could be said to 'clearly perceive' the cat. Now, if I said, 'Do you see that cloud which looks like a cat?' and the clouds were constantly shifting, and the light was fading, and it only looked like a certain one-eared, one-eyed cat that I had when I was a child, etc., then you could say that 'the resemblance of the cloud to a cat is not clearly perceptible'. So, part of the concept of the clarity of an idea involves how apparent it is, and to what extent the idea forces itself upon your attention without you having to look for it. Descartes himself uses the example of being in pain: if you have toothache, for example, there is no sense in which you can wonder, 'Am I really in pain? Is it really pain which I feel?'. The sensation is definitely present, and is in this sense 'clear'.

So much for clear, but what about distinct? This seems to concern the extent to which an idea is independent of other ideas. So, for instance, mathematical concepts are very distinct – you could not confuse '3' with '4', for instance (at least, once you have learnt these concepts). However – to use Descartes's example once more – the knowledge one has of being in pain, while it is clear, is not distinct. To illustrate this, think of having toothache. You may feel the pain intensely, but as to where the problem is, exactly, or what the cause is, the pain itself gives you a confused and imprecise idea (you may feel an infection of one of your back teeth as a more general pain spreading over the side of your face). One interesting point which arises from this is that while ideas can be clear and distinct (the best sort), or clear and not so distinct (the not-so-good sort), they cannot be unclear and distinct. In other words, if an idea is distinct, it must also be clear. So, if you don't confuse the concepts of '3' and '4', it is partly because their meaning is clear to you, and they are distinct because you can clearly distinguish between the meanings of the two terms."

The Division of Ideas

Having established the reason why particular ideas are more certain than others, Descartes now sets about grouping the contents of his mind under certain categories according to the role each has in our mental life.

The first division that he makes is a threefold one involving images (or ideas as he calls them), volitions or affections, and judgements. Images are simply representations of things (such as an image of a man, or a cloud, or a blue car) and need not in themselves be false. Just having a mental image of a blue car is not in itself mistaken – unless, of course, it refers to some specific intention (such as thinking it is in the garage, which might be mistaken – not least because both garage and car might not even exist!). Secondly, volitions (things which involve acts of will) and affections (how we feel about things) are similarly immune to being false. The reason for this is that simply wanting or not wanting something (desiring a new car, for instance) is not something that can be false (for, even if it turns out that the car does not exist, at least it is still true that I desire it). The same thing goes for affections: not liking cheese is something which can still be the case even if it turns out that what I thought was cheese was only actually 'virtual cheese', fed to me by an evil scientist as I sit as a brain in a vat. (Can brains 'sit'? Well, you get the idea.). However, the third main category – that of judgements – does in fact rely upon the existence of things outside the mind (with one important exception, which I shall come to in a moment). For instance, if I say, 'There is a blue sofa in the next room', that is something which can be true or false (either because there is or isn't a sofa in the next room, or – more drastically – because the real world doesn't exist, and it's all a dream, or some other type of illusion). Philosophers would say, therefore, that statements that can be true or false have truth value.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Idea</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Truth Value</th>
<th>Related to the External World?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Images</td>
<td>Mental Representations of things</td>
<td>An image of a blue car</td>
<td>None (simply having an image is neither true nor false)</td>
<td>Not necessarily (it may not exist!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affections</td>
<td>Expressions of desire, or like or dislike, towards something</td>
<td>I would like to own a blue car. That's a nice shirt, I hate cheese.</td>
<td>None (having a desire or attitude is neither true nor false)</td>
<td>Not necessarily (it may not exist!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgements</td>
<td>Propositions</td>
<td>There is a blue car outside my house.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Mostly...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see, only judgements have any truth value, while the mere fact that we have an image, or a desire, need have no bearing on anything at all ('I like cheese' is not saying, 'cheese exists' – it may only be dream cheese!).
Furthermore, the images, affections, and volitions that we find in our minds do not necessarily have any connection with the external world (I may have made them all up). Judgements, however, mostly concern the existence of circumstances independent of me. So, when I say, 'the car is blue', I am also asserting, 'there exists a physical object that corresponds to my idea which exists independently of me'. However, not all judgements are of this sort (I shall return to this in a moment).

Having established that judgement concerning ideas is the only category that directly concerns knowledge, Descartes sets about subdividing this category according to how these ideas originate. The three categories of ideas are factitious, adventitious, and innate. Factitious ideas are ones that I might invent myself – the examples Descartes gives are 'sirens, hippogryphs, and all other similar chimera' – by which he basically means 'any imaginary thing that I can think of that has no basis in reality' (i.e. which has been created in my mental fact-ory). Secondly, adventitious ideas come from outside the mind and have an external cause for their existence – Descartes’s examples are hearing a noise, seeing the sun, or feeling heat. Lastly, there are innate ideas. These have no external cause and are not created by the mind, but are rather there from the start (i.e. from birth). Examples would be mathematical concepts: Descartes would argue that we do not discover them from experience. For instance, it would be odd to think of us arriving at the concept of '3' by constantly coming across groups of things and finding that, yes, indeed, that object and that object and that object do in fact make '3'. Numbers are not that sort of concept. On the other hand, however, we do not merely devise mathematical concepts as convenient ways of categorizing the world (as we might invent the rules of a game, or name something). There is no logical reason why game rules can't change, or why we can't rename a certain thing, but if mathematics were like that then the whole possibility that we could use it to describe reality (via physics, etc.) would completely collapse.

The keener among you may have noticed that there would appear to be a contradiction here. Earlier I stated that innate ideas may mostly be classed under judgements, which in turn I defined as those ideas which can be true or false since, in general, they involve some assertion about the real world (e.g. 'there is a blue car outside my house'). However, the definition of innate ideas that I have just given implies that certain ideas can be true independent of outside circumstances. So, for instance, '2 + 2 = 4' will be true whether or not the two pairs of objects I am counting actually exist (or whether, for instance, I have failed to notice that there are actually five objects). We may say then, more precisely, that innate ideas represent a unique category of judgement: firstly, they are judgments (which thus have truth value); secondly, their truth is independent of external circumstances. Therefore, they may be contrasted on the one hand with things which do not in themselves have any truth value (images, affections, and volitions), and on the other hand with judgements whose truth is reliant upon circumstances in the 'external' world (i.e. judgements concerning factitious and adventitious ideas).

The above table shows that, of these three categories of idea, only innate ideas are independent of external circumstances. Factitious ideas need to be referred to the outside world to be true (or not), and whether adventitious ideas are true depends on the degree to which our senses are reliable, etc. However, innate ideas are independent of the world in that the truths which they embody are certain, regardless of whether our senses deceive us, or whether we are living in a permanent dream.

It is worth us spending a moment or two, here, as the concept of innate ideas is an important one not only for Descartes, but for other rationalist philosophers as well (in fact, the question of whether or not innate ideas actually existed was a central point of difference between rationalist and empiricist philosophers). However, the idea was not new and may be said to have originated with Plato, who believed that certain ideas were not learnt, but merely 'remembered'. Plato believed in reincarnation and that our knowledge of innate ideas was somehow instilled in us between lives. However, Descartes – being a
Christian — based his view on the idea that God somehow implanted the ideas in our mind, or that their existence was a consequence of His having created the human mind in a certain way. This is not to say that Descartes thought that we were born already knowing them, but merely that, through experience, it was possible to discover them (although their truth was independent of experience). In this sense, we may say that innate ideas are a priori (a Latin term meaning ‘from what is before’), the opposite of which would be a posteriori (meaning ‘from what comes after’), referring to knowledge which is dependent upon experience. 41

The Origin of Things

Having finalized his categories, Descartes first asks what reason we have for considering that the ideas of external objects that we possess actually originate from objects which truly exist independently of us. The first argument he considers is that the belief that such objects exist is ‘taught me by nature’. 42 But what can this amount to? In invoking nature, we are not talking about our ‘natural reason’ — i.e. our ability to see when something is clearly and distinctly true, or the ‘natural light’ as he calls it — for he has already argued that there are plausible, logical reasons for not automatically accepting the existence of such objects. What people commonly mean when they use ‘nature’ in this way, however, is that it seems ‘natural’ to believe something (as in, ‘Naturally, I assumed that you had let the cat out’). However, as Descartes has already shown, it is just these sorts of ‘natural’ beliefs or impulses that we ought to be on our guard against (he returns to this topic in more detail in the final Meditation).

The second argument that he considers is that these images, since they do not seem to originate from my own will (I am not conscious of creating them), must originate from outside (and so are trustworthy representations of objects that actually exist). However, there are two reasons for rejecting this: firstly, just because I am not aware of producing such images does not mean that there is not in fact some power within me that is responsible (such as happens with dreaming); secondly, even if such objects are the cause, this does not mean that such images are true representations of them, since quite often — as the argument from illusion has shown — our senses can present misleading information on the true nature of the world (consider mirages, bent sticks, etc.).

Moving on, Descartes now examines the ideas themselves with a view to determining if there is any quality in them that might help decide whether they may exist separately from him. Firstly, he notes that some ideas seem to contain more ‘reality’ than others. For instance, ideas which represent actual substances seem to possess more ‘objective reality’ than, as he says, ‘those which represent to me only modes or accidents’. 43 For instance, a chair is more objectively real than a shadow, or a patch of reflected light. The reason for this is that there is an underlying substance to the chair which seems to persist through the various changes in perception that I have in relation to it. In other words, the light may change, the colour, shape, and size (in relation to position) may alter, but there is something which seems to persist through these surface changes. As with the wax, there would seem to be some substance which possesses these changing features, and which our intellect can comprehend. Contrast this with the changing features themselves — the shadow and light — which seem less ‘substantial’. Their existence seems more fleeting, relative, and changeable, and there seems to be an important sense in which they are dependent on other things for their existence. Put simply, then, the idea of the chair is more substantial — possesses more reality — because it acts as the basis for the less substantial ideas. (I will return to this distinction later when I look at ‘primary and secondary qualities’, as they are termed.)

Ultimately, Descartes also notes that the idea of God is more real than even the idea of physical substances.

Moreover, the idea by which I conceive a God who is sovereign, eternal, infinite, unchangeable, all-knowing, all powerful and universal Creator of all things outside himself, that idea, I say, has certainly more objective reality in it than those by which finite substances are represented to me. 44

You may say that this still leaves the idea of what is ‘real’ somewhat undefined, and partly subjective (a criticism to which we shall return later). Slowly, however, Descartes is creeping towards his main objective in this Meditation: might he be able to prove the existence of God?

The Trademark Argument

Having divided up the contents of the mind and shown that some ideas are more real than others, it remains for Descartes to prove that God is not a deceiver. This is important, you may recall, because without this proof, everything which he has so far established — the Cogito, that he is a thinking thing, that that which is clearly and distinctly perceived must be true — will all be for nothing, for it may yet be true that he is the subject of deception. To disprove this, therefore, he must not only prove God’s existence, but must account for the fact that God so created us that we occasionally seem to fall into error. The second of these objectives he reserves for the fourth Meditation, but the first he tackles now (though it is only the first of two arguments that he presents for the existence of God).
The first step of the argument lies in the notion that there is ‘as much reality’ in a cause as in its effect. What does he mean by this? To illustrate his point, think of a good-sized bullet hole. Now, if someone wants to know which type of gun fired the bullet, and I said, ‘This one’ (producing a water pistol), then you would laugh. An average water pistol is not capable of producing such a hole. Another way of saying this is that ‘there is inadequate potential in the proposed cause (the water pistol) to produce the effect (the bullet hole)’. So, in rejecting the water pistol as a possible cause of the bullet hole, we are employing something similar to Descartes’s principle. ‘Show me the real gun,’ you might say, ‘the one which is actually capable of making this hole.’ Similarly, then, if we replace the bullet hole with the idea of God, the gun with God Himself, and the power of the gun with the idea of perfection, then we can begin to understand what Descartes is getting at. If, with any of the ideas in his mind – but especially that of God – Descartes can conclude that he was not the cause of it (and it cannot have originated from nothing), then whatever that idea implies was its creator must necessarily exist (for this reason, this is known as the causal adequacy principle).

Of the ideas in his mind, most of them could be said to have originated from Descartes himself, since they do not possess anything which he himself does not possess. The ideas he has of men, animals, angels, physical objects – all, it can be argued, could be formed by piecing together ideas that he has of himself, or that he might easily have created. However, the idea of God seems to be different.

By the name God I understand an infinite substance, eternal, immutable, independent, omniscient, omnipotent, and by which I and all the other things which exist (if it be true that any such exist) have been created and produced. Such a concept, Descartes argues, cannot have originated with him because he is just a finite being, whereas the idea of God that he has represents an infinite one. This said, Descartes anticipates some objections to his argument:

1. Firstly, that he himself does not possess a true idea of infinity (and so the idea of an infinite being does not require an infinite cause). This he rejects because, he says, if he did not really possess the idea of infinity, how else could he get the idea that he himself is imperfect and finite (without a perfect and infinite being with which to compare himself)?

2. Next, the idea cannot have originated out of nothing, because – unlike, for instance, the ideas of ‘heat’ and ‘cold’ – it is ‘very clear and distinct’. So, even if he can’t comprehend such an idea – which he admits he cannot – it has to be there in some real sense in order for it to act as a real comparison.

3. Perhaps, even though he is not infinite, all-powerful, etc., he may potentially be so, so that the idea might originate from the idea of his own future potential. However, he rejects this also because a finite thing (such as he is) does not approach being infinite by degrees. That is, no matter how much his own power and knowledge increase, they can only ever get bigger, not become limitless (which is the true idea of infinity).

Having listed and rejected these objections, Descartes now considers another possible problem with the argument. What if there were no God? What other cause could there be for his own existence? Descartes lists three possible sources of origin: himself, his parents, or another source less perfect than God.
Firstly, then, himself: is Descartes his own creator? There are all sorts of reasons why Descartes rejects this. First of all, he argues, if he was his own creator, wouldn’t he have given himself all the perfections of which he has ideas (oh, and a beautiful wife, lots of money, a mansion on the Italian Riviera, and a sports car – I’m assuming that time is not a constraint here)? Also, he points out that the creative force behind something must also constantly maintain its existence (as God is said to sustain Himself and the whole universe). However, since he is not aware of any power in himself that might accomplish that, he finally rejects this possibility.

Secondly, what about some other cause less powerful than God? This Descartes rejects because such a cause would beg the question of what created that cause, and so on, until we would have to suppose some all-powerful first cause which was at the same time capable of sustaining its own and the universe’s existence from moment to moment.

Lastly, Descartes considers the possibility that his parents created him. While there is a sense in which this is literally true (his parents are responsible for his physical conception), there is no sense in which either can be said to be responsible for his continued moment-to-moment existence, or the creation of him as a thinking thing (that is, a mind or soul).

So, having rejected these other possibilities, Descartes finally arrives at the conclusion that God is not only the cause of his existence, but also the cause of his having the idea of God in the first place.

Summary

Having identified the idea of God as the idea that possesses the most ‘objective reality’, Descartes has spent the whole of this (quite long and difficult) Meditation in attempting to prove that he could not have got the idea from anywhere else. Having done this, and because of the principle that there must be as much reality in the cause as in its effect, the presence of the idea of an infinite being proves that such a being must, in fact, exist. Just as a workman leaves some sign of his having created something – as a painter signs a canvas – so God has left his trademark via the idea of Himself. In addition to this, since the concept Descartes has is of a perfect being, God cannot in fact be a deceiver (and have purposely created Descartes as a flawed being), since ‘deceit stems necessarily from some defect’, and the concept he has of God includes the attribute of perfection. God, therefore, not only exists, but is also a good and non-deceiving creator. How, then, does it happen that Descartes is sometimes deceived or falls into error? This is the subject of the next Meditation.

Meditation IV: Of Truth and Error

Introduction

So far Descartes has achieved a lot of what he set out to do: he has identified the weaknesses in our current state of knowledge; he has shown that if we are to achieve certainty then we must base our knowledge on something absolutely certain, and discovered that thing (the truth of the Cogito); he has established that when we clearly and distinctly perceive things, we cannot go wrong; and he has provided assurances that God exists and is not responsible for any errors that we may commit in our search for knowledge. However, he now needs to find the reasons why such errors do in fact occur.

The Reason for Error

Firstly, Descartes notes that he has not only the idea of God, but also that of God’s opposite – nothing, or non-existence. Furthermore, he seems to find himself midway between these two extremes: he is not in any way as perfect as God, nor is he totally imperfect. He is a finite, limited being, and although God has created him with adequate senses and mental apparatus, they are nonetheless finite. If, then, his mind and senses are not faulty, what is the reason for error? Descartes concludes that

my being mistaken arises from the fact that the power which God has given me of discerning the true from the false is not infinite in me.\(^4\)

In other words, it is the scope of his understanding which is limited. However, there is still a problem. When we make mistakes, it is not simply because we are limited in our knowledge, but rather because we don’t know something that we ought to know. So, I cannot know exactly what another person is thinking (I cannot have the same access to his thoughts as I have to my own). However, while not knowing such a thing may be a limitation, it is not a mistake (to assume that he is thinking something which he is not would be a mistake). Limitation in itself is therefore not itself responsible for error, and so the problem seems to resurface: why do we fall into error?

Next, Descartes wonders, since God ‘always wills what is best’,

is it more advantageous then for me to be deceived than not to be deceived?\(^5\)

First of all, he replies, we should not really second-guess God. We cannot know what He knows, and for all we know there is a good reason why our understanding is limited. Secondly, we might consider the bigger picture, for while
our understanding seems imperfect to us, in relation to the whole of creation (of which we don’t have an overview), it might fit God’s plans perfectly. This second argument is a bit like saying, ‘Birds don’t have opposable thumbs, but they don’t really need them for the day-to-day business of being-a-bird’.

So much for the reasons why God isn’t to blame, but what about the reasons why we are prone to fall into error? The argument put forward by Descartes involves his definition of the separate roles of the understanding and the will. Our power to understand is limited, but – as he has already argued – there may be good reasons for that. Anyway, for a finite thing, it is sufficient for its purposes (and, as we have seen, limitation is not the same thing as error). However, regarding our power of will, he can see no reason why we should not consider it perfect and unlimited. In other words, we are restricted in our understanding, memory, imagination, etc., but whatever the case, we can always say ‘yes’ or ‘no’, do or not do a thing – is there anything else in the exercise of will than this? Therefore, neither will nor understanding seems to be directly responsible for my falling into error. But if neither power is faulty, then how do they lead to mistakes? Descartes’s answer is that it is due to the use that we make of them:

Whence, then, arise my errors? From this fact alone, that the will being much more ample and extended than the understanding, I do not contain it within the same limits, but extend it also to things I do not understand, and the will being of itself indifferent to such things, very easily goes astray and chooses the least instead of good, or the false instead of the true, which results in my falling into error or sinning.”

The Importance of Being Indifferent

Descartes has argued that if we can restrain our will from affirming or denying things of which we do not possess a sufficient understanding, then we can avoid falling into error. But how do we know when to withhold our judgement? The answer lies, he says, in the extent to which we feel indifferent or compelled to pass judgement. In other words, when an argument seems so logically conclusive that we feel that we must hold it to be true – as with theCogito – then that is exactly the sort of feeling we should use as a guide to truth. On the other hand, if we simply feel indifferent whether something is true or not, and do not feel compelled one way or the other, then we should simply withhold our judgement.

It is important to note that the feeling of compulsion which Descartes is talking about here is not any emotional feeling or strong desire, but rather the realization that an idea is ‘clearly and distinctly’ true. On the other hand, the indifference he describes also has nothing to do with personal tastes or interests – I may feel indifferent to finding the answer to certain questions in chemistry or physics (because I am not interested), but that does not mean that the questions involved aren’t capable of being answered conclusively.

Summary

Having defended God against the charge of faulty workmanship, Descartes has managed to lay another stone of the foundations of his building of secure knowledge. Thus, if we can follow the principles that he has set out, we need not have cause to blame our limited intellect, or the fact that our will can sometimes be used to assert things beyond our understanding. Rather, if we restrict ourselves to asserting only those things of which we possess a clear and distinct understanding, then not only will we not fall into error, but we will be using both will and understanding as God intended.

Meditation V: Of the Essence of Material Things; and, Once More of God, that He Exists

Introduction

We have come a long way from the doubts of the first Meditation, and if the whole of the Meditations can be viewed as a sort of ‘there and back again’ journey, then it is at this point that we begin to sight home. In the first Meditation, Descartes’s first doubts were directed at our knowledge of the real world. Now, having established a certain basis for knowledge, and set out principles whereby we may avoid going wrong, he is ready to begin tackling the subject of the true nature of the world whose existence he first called into question. However, in addition to the trademark argument he proposed in the last Meditation, Descartes presents us here with another argument for the existence of God intended to show how we are compelled to ‘clearly and distinctly perceive’ that He exists.

Ideas of Material Things

Up to now, Descartes has postponed answering the question of the extent to which – if at all – the physical world as we perceive it is real. However, having arrived at the point where he must now do this, his first step is not to look
outside himself, but rather to examine the contents of his own mind. In doing so, he finds a number of ideas relating to objects – such as size, shape, position, motion – and these allow him to distinctly perceive how such objects might interact, move, change over time, etc. But has he produced these ideas himself, or have they originated outside him?

Firstly, he rejects the idea that he has somehow manufactured these ideas himself, because, after investigation, these objects possess properties which he had not foreseen, could not have predicted, and so could not have invented. For example, consider a triangle. If I discover some property of triangles – such as that their internal angles add up to 180° (a fact which, for argument’s sake, I will suppose I do not know) – then I cannot be said to have invented that shape.

Secondly, he also dismisses the idea that I have somehow learnt these ideas through the senses (as the empiricists argue), because, if he had done so, how could he then conceive of geometrical shapes which he has never seen in material form (such as the chiagon, or ‘thousand-sided shape’, which he will consider in the next Meditation)?

Both these objections point to the fact that the very idea of physical objects embodies mathematical principles which are independent of experience, and therefore innate. So, whether or not physical objects actually exist, the idea of them – as things with dimension, shape, duration, and motion – is a clear and distinct one. Therefore, such objects may exist, because we can conceive of them clearly and distinctly in this way. The essence of material things is there fore the idea that our understanding of them allows us (as it was with the wax). Furthermore, since this understanding is based on mathematical principles (e.g. size, weight, change over time, etc.), the ideas contained therein cannot be false. Of course, we may make mistakes involving maths and geometry (when adding up or multiplying, calculating shape, etc.), or we may even make mistakes as to how such ideas relate to the real world (e.g. we may imagine something to be structured differently than it really is – think of the ongoing investigations into the nature of the atom in physics). However, the principles involved remain the same, and as long as we base our knowledge on clear and distinct perceptions, then those perceptions will be – within limits – relatively trustworthy.

The Ontological Argument

Suddenly, it occurs to Descartes how he might adapt all this talk of triangles to supply another argument for the existence of God. The way he does this is through distinguishing between the concepts of existence and essence. In regard to physical objects, we have seen that we can have the idea of objects without necessarily supposing that they actually exist. For instance, I can think of a golden pyramid, and that object must possess all the properties that pyramids possess (those properties are essential to it – it would not be a pyramid without them). However, whether such a pyramid actually exists, we do not know. So, we may distinguish between the idea of a thing (its essence), and that thing’s existence.

However, when we consider the idea of God, the case is somewhat different. As a triangle or a pyramid has essential properties (without which it would not be a triangle or a pyramid), so does God. Now, apart from such qualities as omnipotence (being all-powerful), omniscience (being all-knowing), and omnipotence (being all-powerful), God also possesses the property of eternal existence. However, if He didn’t exist, then the idea of God would not possess this property. Therefore, since it is an essential property of the idea of God that He exists eternally, then God must exist (i.e. ‘existence’ must also be an essential property of God). In this way, God is different from other things we might imagine (such as golden pyramids) whose existence is separate from their essence. This is called the ontological argument because it involves an analysis of the concept of God’s being or existence (ontology means literally, ‘relating to the nature of being and existence’).

Descartes anticipates three main objections to this argument. Firstly, some might argue that we may conceive of God as not existing, and that His existence may therefore be separate from His essence. However, this cannot be so. Descartes replies, for another property of God is that of perfection, and non-existence would represent a flaw in the idea of God. Hence, since He is perfect, He must also exist.

Secondly, it may be argued that while it may not be possible to conceive of God without thinking of the idea of His existing, it does not follow that there is anything being. For instance, just because we may not conceive of mountains existing without valleys, this does not necessarily mean that any mountains or valleys actually exist. Descartes’s reply to this is that, once again, the idea of God is different in that we cannot separate the idea of His existence from His other properties. Furthermore, because we can clearly and distinctly perceive that existence is necessarily part of the concept of God, then the idea must be true (i.e. it must correspond to reality).

Lastly, it may be objected that, even if the idea of God necessarily implies that He exists, it is not necessary that we think of the idea of God in the first place (so, if the idea does not exist, then neither might God). Descartes replies that whenever we think of a being greater than ourselves, then we are necessarily led to the idea of God, and contained therein is the idea of His necessarily
existing. Similarly, imagine that we did not possess the idea of a triangle. Even so, it would nonetheless be true that when we consider the mathematical properties of certain shapes, we would be forced to arrive at the same idea. So, for Descartes, such ideas as 'God' and 'triangle' are similar in that they are true whether anyone is aware of them or not, because once we think of certain things, we are forced to arrive at those ideas.

The role played by God in Descartes's arguments cannot be underestimated, for, as Descartes says himself, regarding God's existence:

certainty concerning all the other truths depends on it so absolutely that, without this knowledge, it is impossible ever to know anything perfectly.\(^3\)

The reason for this is, once again, the possibility of an evil demon. Because, no matter how 'clear and distinct' ideas appeared to Descartes, if he did not possess the knowledge that God exists then it would still be possible that he could be mistaken in his certainty. However, with God, he is assured of the reliability of the principle of clear and distinct ideas, and can use them as a basis upon which to build his knowledge of the world and of himself.

Summary

In this Meditation, Descartes has accomplished two things. Firstly, he has shown that the essence of material objects lies in their correspondence to the principles of mathematics and geometry. All knowledge that we may possess of the physical world, therefore, must be based on these principles. Secondly, he has provided another argument for the existence of God (the ontological argument). In doing so, he has reinforced the whole structure of his arguments, and provided the last-but-one step in his search for certainty.

Meditation VI: Of the Existence of Material Things, and of the Real Distinction between the Soul and the Body of Man

Introduction

As Descartes concluded in the previous Meditation, we know that material things may exist because it is possible to clearly and distinctly conceive of them. However, proving that something \textit{may} exist is different from proving that it \textit{does}. For instance, we may conclude that such a thing as the Loch Ness Monster \textit{may} exist (for it to be some sort of surviving \textit{pleiiosaur}, for example), but that does not mean that it actually \textit{does}. So, in this Meditation, Descartes's main task is to find a conclusive argument for the existence of material things. In doing this, he also seeks to achieve something else: a clear distinction between mind and body. This view, known as \textit{Cartesian dualism}, has been implicit in much of the \textit{Meditations} so far, but it is only at this point that Descartes explicitly states it and explores its consequences.

Note: This Meditation is quite long and difficult to summarize. The topics that Descartes raises are not completely 'clear and distinct' from one another and in talking about one thing he frequently introduces another thing from a separate topic. So, in grouping the subjects under headings I have had to change slightly, for the sake of convenience, the order in which things appear in the text, and split up topics that Descartes treats together. However, the summary is otherwise an accurate account of the text and of Descartes's arguments.

Imagination and Understanding

As we have already seen, Descartes has come to consider some faculties essential to his true nature (as a thinking thing), while others are inessential (he can do without them and still be 'Descartes'). However, as he turns his attention once more onwards in search of some guarantee that physical objects actually exist, he finds that while his power of understanding seems to be able to deal in pure concepts (such as those of maths), his imagination seems to deal only in images or representations of things. But representations of what? It is tempting to say, 'representations of material objects', but how does he know this? It should just be noted here that by \textit{imagination} Descartes has in mind the production of all mental images, and not just the use of that faculty to produce, well, \textit{imaginary} things, such as hippocrepis.)

While he cannot at this point be certain, it nevertheless seems likely that, just as the understanding turns inwards to look upon the contents of the mind, so the imagination turns outwards to the perception of material objects. In other words, both activities need an object, and since the object of understanding is oneself (or the ideas within the mind), the object of imagination must be \textit{something else}. He backs this argument up by pointing out that understanding and imagination are different types of activity. For instance, take the idea of a triangle: we may understand it conceptually via the understanding (e.g. through analysis of its mathematical properties), or we may rely upon a mental image. Now, this works fine for certain simple images, but what about complex ones? What about \textit{a dodecahedron} (a thousand-sided shape). Descartes asks. We would be unable to form a clear mental picture of such a shape so that, for
instance, we could picture it differently from a myriagon (a ten-thousand-sided shape). However, through the faculty of the understanding we may conceive of the difference clearly.

The point of this argument is to show that the imagination is inessential to the pure self, and that its real use lies in dealing with images. However, since these images are not needed for any understanding of our essential self (of 'what I am'), they may be required for some sort of understanding of material things. In this sense, the imagination may act as a sort of 'go-between' for the mental and physical worlds. However, for the purposes of proving that material things exist, Descartes is unhappy with this argument as it is only really a probable one. What he is actually looking for is an utterly convincing reason why the physical world must exist.

Summary of Doubts

Descartes recalls that he once believed – before this whole business began – that sense impressions give him information regarding material objects through taste, sound, colour, etc. Might this sort of information provide him with the sort of proof that he is looking for? To find out, he says, he needs to learn more about the nature of the senses that provide him with such information.

What then follows is basically a summary of the Meditations to date, with an emphasis on how this all relates to the senses. Descartes's steps are as follows:

1. In line with the former things I believed, the various sense impressions that I received (heat from the sun, sensations of touch, etc.) suggested that material things actually existed.
2. Furthermore, since I could not call these objects before me or banish them at will (as I might do with imaginary things), and since the impressions that I received from them were fresher and more real than I could create myself, then this seemed to suggest that the objects indeed existed independently of me.
3. For these reasons, it seemed likely that these ideas were true representations of those objects.
4. Also, since sense impressions seemed more real than mere ideas, it appeared that all ideas must have as their stimulus something outside me.
5. As one of the objects in the world, my body seemed to be different from others in that I actually experienced the things that happened to it (pain, pleasure, etc.), whereas for other objects this did not happen.

This suggested that I was related to my body in a way that I was not related to other objects, and that I could not be separated from it.

Due to this connection, therefore, just as my body teaches me that I am hungry by a certain sensation, perhaps other objects teach me as to their nature by the sensations they produce in me (e.g. that fire is hot)?

However, further thought showed me that this was not always the case:

a. There were occasions when it seemed 'natural' to assume about something was in fact false (e.g. mirages, viewing things at a distance). However, this was true not only of judgements involving 'external' things, but also of assumptions involving internal sensations (e.g. when someone feels sensation in a 'phantom limb').

b. It seemed possible that I was dreaming, or that the same process was somehow at work even when I was 'awake'.

c. Since I did not know who created me, there could yet have been some evil demon whose sole purpose it was to deceive me.

d. Perhaps there was an as yet unknown faculty which falsely produced in me these perceptions of physical objects.

This summary takes us roughly up to the end of the first Meditation, at which point Descartes had more or less rejected the evidence of the senses as being untrustworthy. However, having now answered those doubts concerning his existence, the existence and nature of God, and how he may be certain of his own knowledge, he is in a better position to evaluate the evidence of the senses:

But now that I am beginning to know myself better and to discover more clearly the author of my being, I do not think in truth that I ought rashly to accept all the things which the senses seem to teach us, but also I do not think that I ought to doubt them all in general."

So, while he still doesn't trust them blindly (as he once did), he does not now wholly distrust them either.

Mind and Body

Now that Descartes is prepared to admit some of the evidence of the senses, he sets about defining the true relationship between the mind and the body:

because, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself in so far as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and because, on the other hand
I have a distinct idea of the body in so far as it is only an extended thing but which does not think, it is certain that I, that is to say my mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it.²⁴

In other words, body and mind are not only separate, but also represent different types of thing. Descartes and his contemporaries might talk about this in terms of substance (a technical term in philosophy meaning, roughly, 'that which possesses properties'). So, for Descartes, physical substance was not capable of thought, but possessed extension (this just means that it was 'extended' in different directions in space, having length, breadth, and height). The essential activity of mental substance, however, was thinking, but it was not extended in any way (in other words, it did not occupy space, possessing no size or shape). Thus, another reason why we should consider both substances as separate and distinct is that, while matter is divisible (we may cut it up into parts), mind is not (there are no 'parts' to my mind, only different activities).²⁵

An important consequence of these arguments is that they can be used to reinforce the doctrine of the soul. If mind and body were inseparable, for instance, then the soul might die with the body. However, separability allows for its continued existence. Furthermore, dualism also mirrors Descartes's other assertions concerning knowledge: if dualism is true, then certainty resides with that which we truly are (i.e. our mental self), and the innate ideas and principles with which it is furnished; on the other hand, however, the physical self—which is really only a vehicle for our true self—is more closely allied with perceptual illusion and the possibility of error.

This said, at other points Descartes also seems to entertain the idea that mind and body act very closely together indeed. Our natural feelings on the matter are that I am not only in my body, as he puts it, 'like a pilot in his ship' (we might also say, 'like a driver in a car'), but closer, 'indeed, so compounded and intermingled with my body, that I form, as it were, a single whole with it'.²⁶ If this were not the case, he argues, we would be aware of bodily sensations (such as pain and hunger) indirectly via—for example—visual knowledge (in the same way that we might notice that our car's door had been scratched), and not directly through sensation. This idea is often called the intermingling thesis, in that it imagines that the two substances can seep into each other (like different coloured paints), or intermix with one another (like handfuls of different coloured pebbles, perhaps). This might be said to provide a problem for Descartes (which we shall examine later) in that it is difficult to see how two so different types of substance can intermingle.

The Existence of the Physical World

While body and mind are distinct, there remain questions over the status of some of the other faculties which the mind possesses. Firstly, the faculties of perception and imagination seem in part to be intellectual (they involve a degree of intellectual activity), and yet they may also be considered in part distinct from my true self in that they are activities that my mind does in relation to physical things. The power of moving and changing bodily posture, however, seems to be merely a physical thing with no intellectual activity, and therefore would seem to belong properly to some physical substance.

Yet other faculties exist whose purpose it is passively to receive sense impressions, and others actively to produce them. Once more, however, these have no intellectual content, and would therefore seem to imply the actions of some external thing upon the mind. Now, it could be that God has placed these images in Descartes's mind, but since this would represent a sort of deception on God's part (because such images seem to come from external physical objects) — and, remember, God is no deceiver — then such impressions must come from the fact that Descartes in fact does possess a physical body, which is one of a number of similar physical objects which exist in a material universe.

Thus, after a long and arduous journey, Descartes finally decides that corporeal objects exist. However, they are perhaps not exactly as we perceive them through the senses, for perception by the senses is very obscure and confused in many ways; but at least I must admit that all that I conceive clearly and distinctly, that is to say, generally speaking, all that is comprised in the object of speculative geometry, is truly to be found in corporeal things.²⁷

By 'speculative geometry', Descartes merely means the sort of abstract consideration of triangles, squares, etc., that persuaded him that the physical world was possible. So, like any good rationalist, Descartes is still looking at the real world somewhat suspiciously, and only really trusts the mathematical and geometric principles that govern the world, and not the world itself.

What we have here is a distinction which has become very important in the history of philosophy. Not only for Descartes, but for other rationalists—and even some empiricists—knowledge of physical objects could be divided into those things which we could objectively know (size, shape, weight, etc.), and those things which were to some degree subjective (colour, texture, smell, taste, etc.). Thus, objective knowledge is primary and represents clear and distinct knowledge; secondary qualities, however, are much more closely allied to the senses, and are thus correspondingly more uncertain and changeable.
It should be noted here that this distinction is not one that Descartes employs explicitly, but is rather one that is suggested by his account of physical substance. However, later philosophers—such as Locke—formalized this distinction, and it became a point of some controversy (e.g., which qualities were primary and which secondary, what such a distinction means for our knowledge of the world, etc.). However, the distinction is beset with problems, and we shall look at these in more detail in a later section.

Natural Teachings

At this stage of the Meditation, Descartes addresses the tricky topic of what he terms 'natural teachings'. In most cases of being mistaken, Descartes is confident that, 'I have within me the means of knowing these things with certainty.' For, because God is not a deceiver, Descartes has the capacity to correct his own mistakes—so long as he is careful to limit his judgements in line with his understanding. However, there are a great many cases where it would appear that we are taught certain truths by nature. But what does Descartes mean, here, by 'natural teachings'? Firstly, he does not mean what is commonly termed the 'natural light' (the 'light of reason' or power of rational thought), by which ideas are seen as clearly and distinctly true (or not). Nor, by 'nature', does he mean those things which just so happens are true of the world (such as 'the nature of gravity'). What he does mean is those impulses by means of which the physical world (especially our own body) communicates to us. How does it do this? Well, when I am hungry, I feel a certain sensation in my stomach and I know that I need to seek out food. Similarly, when I feel pain, I know that I have to avoid the thing causing it, or to seek out that cause in order to eradicate it. On the other hand, feeling pleasure might make me seek out a certain thing in order to have that experience again. So, in this sense, nature teaches that there are objects in the world, some harmful and some harmful, which surround our own body, and that certain actions in respect of them are good, and other actions bad. Furthermore, the perceptions that we receive from them give us a more or less correct idea of each object's nature. So, fire is hot and can cause us pain; certain foods taste nice and are good for us, and so on. Therefore, what Descartes means by 'nature' is, in a way, a type of instinctual reaction to things. In this sense, such reactions involve non-rational assumptions about the nature of the world, and furthermore, since there are a great many of them, it would be very useful to Descartes in his search for certainty for him to find some way of trusting them (at least in part).

However, in order to do this, he must find the reason why there are obvious cases where it might be argued that this instinct goes wrong. An example that Descartes gives is where we eat food that has (unknown to us) been poisoned. In one sense, the initial pleasure we feel from eating such food is misleading (the food will eventually harm us). However, we can excuse this mistake, he argues, because our natural desire (i.e., the desire to eat good-tasting and normally nutritious food) is not what harms us, but merely our ignorance of the presence of the poison.

On the other hand, there is another example which would seem to point to a deeper problem. Imagine, Descartes says, that someone who is ill has a desire to drink because they are thirsty, yet—because of their illness—to do so would in fact be harmful (such as can be the case with *dropsias*), a disease whereby the body retains excess fluid in its tissues. Now, the case here is somewhat more problematic than the case of the poisoned food, because the body would seem to desire naturally what in this situation would be bad for it. Descartes says that it is tempting to compare this situation to having a faulty clock: the body, like the clock, has been designed to work in a particular way (to desire water when it is thirsty); however, owing to its faulty working (being ill), it no longer does the job it should (i.e., it resembles a broken clock).

However, Descartes rejects this analogy, because a broken or poorly designed clock would imply a bad designer (i.e., God). Furthermore, he points out that the temptation to say that all people are like broken clocks is due to a human perception of what 'good' or 'bad' function is. In other words, we look at the fact that the body desires water even when it would be harmful to it as a malfunction of the body, when in fact the body is just functioning as it should (just because a person is *dropsical* does not mean that they cannot be thirsty). For, he says, there are times when natural teachings (such as being thirsty or
Explanations and Summary of Main Arguments

hungry) would be harmful to our overall well-being and should therefore be resisted. However, just because this can happen, it does not mean that such impulses are wholly false.

Descartes supports this assertion by pointing out that having competing or ultimately harmful natural impulses is not in itself the problem. The mind does not receive impressions from all over the body, but only through the common sense (or brain). So, for instance, when the nerves in the foot are stimulated somewhere along the pathway to the brain (and not in the foot itself), the sensation will be felt as if it were in the foot (even though the foot itself has not been touched). However, if the body was so set up that the mind was habitually presented with the sensation as if it were somewhere along the nerve channel, or in the brain itself, then far more harm would generally result (because most of the time the sensation would actually be in the foot). Thus, the mind only receives that sensation which – generally speaking and in most cases – is best fitted to keep it in the best of health. Similarly, in the case of dropsy,

although dryness of the throat does not always arise, as it usually does, from drink being necessary for the health of the body, but sometimes from quite the opposite reason, as is experienced by those with dropsy, yet it is much better that it should deceive in this case, than that, on the contrary, it should always deceive when the body is well, and the same holds true in other cases.

In other words, the clock is not badly designed, but – like many other aspects of the human being – merely limited in its use. It does its job, but sometimes this basic function is the wrong thing in a particular context (such as when ill with dropsy).

The point with natural teachings, therefore, is that while they are in general trustworthy, they are in the final analysis only an indication of bodily needs, sensations, etc. So, we must use our reason to arrive at decisions which are best for us, only using our natural impulses as a guide. All our senses can, of course, help in doing this, and something which comes from one particular source can be checked by all the others (just as hallucinations cannot be touched, and so become apparent). The fact that all the different impressions can be checked against one another via reason is therefore a further argument that God has indeed given us the wherewithal to overcome such limitations.

Out of this springs, ultimately, an answer to the dreaming argument. Our memory cannot connect the events of dreams together in the same way as it can with real life; and things in dreams tend not to behave in a way that is coherent with all that we know of the world (things just disappear without reason, people and locations change suddenly, etc.). The dreaming argument fails, therefore, when it is brought before the jury of all our senses and faculties.

Summary

Descartes has put a lot into this Meditation – and he has had to. Partly, the length and complexity of it stems from the fact that he is – as I’ve already pointed out – tying up a lot of loose ends. It is as if, as he is writing, more things that need to be said are occurring to him. Of course, as I warned at the beginning of this summary, this makes the whole Meditation somewhat difficult to follow – and especially to summarize. However, having finally reached his destination, Descartes has fulfilled all of his promises: he has found his absolute certainty, proved that there is a God (who in turn guarantees that we are not completely deceived), established a way in which we may be certain of particular things, and shown the road to gaining a true understanding of the physical world. He has also, along the way, defined the relationship between the mind and the body, and, consequently, supported the notion of the existence and immortality of the soul.

So, the journey over, he has arrived back where he began. Some things are the same – the real world still exists – but others are different. The evidence of the senses must now be taken with a ‘pinch of salt’, and we can only say that we really know something when we clearly and distinctly perceive it. However, our minds are more than up to the task, and our natural impulses – though limited under certain circumstances – mostly provide us with a good starting point for our enquiries.

Therefore, his work over, on the seventh day Descartes rested.