

4.3 Self and Certainty

4.3.1 Readings and Study questions

- Readings: Descartes, Second Meditation
- Study questions:
 1. What are the main aims of this Meditation?
 2. Explain how, according to Descartes, the proposition "I think I exist" resists the argument of the evil genius.
 3. Explain how Descartes is led to the conclusion that he is "a thinking thing"
 4. Descartes spends some time discussing the nature of a piece of wax. Why does he do that? In other words, what is the role of this discussion in the overall argument of the Second Meditation? In order to answer to this question, you may want to find out first what is the conclusion that Descartes draws from the discussion of the piece of wax; and then see how the discussion can be logically related to this conclusion.
- Reflexion Questions:
 1. Do you find Descartes inference from "I think I exist" to "I am a thinking thing" convincing? Why? Why not?
 2. Do you think that Descartes has shown that we know our mind better than we know external bodies? Why? Why not?

4.3.2 Introduction

We have seen that Descartes takes so seriously the skeptical challenge that he pushes it to the extreme, much further than anybody else before him. That said, **never forget that Descartes' doubt is methodological**: he does believe neither that all his opinions are false, nor that his senses deceive him all the time, nor that he is dreaming all the time, nor that all what he formerly took as mathematical truth are produced in his brain by a all-powerful evil genius whose unique aim is to deceive him. He assumes all

these crazy ideas to be true only for the sake of true (= well grounded and well ordered) knowledge.

Descartes still goes to bed at night!

In brief, any criticism which does not take into account the methodological, hence provisional, aspect of Cartesian Doubt misses the point: this would amount to attacking a strawman.

Now, **notice the title of the Second Meditation** (it is always a good idea to read the title: they are supposed to tell you what to expect in there!):

Of the Nature of the Human Mind; and that it is more easily known than the Body

At least, we know now what we should find within this meditation.

Remember also that in the Preface, Descartes has promised that he will prove that the soul is distinct from the body. This is something to keep in mind: will he really show this?

4.3.3 I think I exist – the Cogito

Prospect for the research

- Alternative:
 - either will find something certain
 - or will have proved that nothing is certain

So that: *in both cases, the method of doubt will lead us to something certain*. If it was needed, this is another proof that the Cartesian Doubt is *only a means* to reach certainty. Descartes is *not* a skeptic.

- One single certainty is sufficient:

Archimedes	Earth	one point, fixed and immoveable
Descartes	True Knowledge	one thought, certain and indubitable

Descartes says that finding one point of certainty would give him the right to “great things are also to be hoped for”. How could that be? Imagine that we are playing Descartes’ game: we are taking as collectively false all the opinions we formerly had, from the existence of the

external world to the truth of logic and mathematics. Now imagine that it so happens that I find out one single certainty, say that Jalisco is a black cat. How could I forge great hopes for human knowledge from this? This would not allow us to go very far. So, the idea that one single certainty would give us high hopes for more knowledge relies on a hidden premise:

The missing premise is that, according to Descartes the entire body of knowledge is systematically unified.

This means two things:

1. All propositions are linked to each other;
2. The very same method (intuition and deduction) for searching the truth is applicable to all domains.

So, finding one single true propositions should allow us to:

1. find *the* method for truth;
2. derive the entire body of knowledge.

The Cogito

Here is what Descartes writes:

Then too there is no doubt that I exist, if he is deceiving me. And let him do his best at deception; he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I shall think that I am something. Thus, after everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement “I am, I exist” is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind

- The movement that leads to the discovery of the self is a *conversion* from the external world to the internal subjectivity. **The self is what is left when the entire world has disappeared.**

More precisely, ‘thinking’ is what is left, even when one appeals again to the evil genius.

- **Problems associated with two different interpretations of the Cogito:**

1. The Cogito as an **inference**: where does the proposition "All that think exist" would come from?
2. The Cogito is **the limit of the doubt** – how can we be sure that there is not other thought experiment that would cast a slight doubt on the idea that I exist?
3. The Cogito as a **genuine intellectual experience**, an evident intuition

Interpretation 3 seems to be the one favored by the restriction in the quotation above: the certainty of one's existence is guaranteed only:

- for that person only (first person experience)
- for the time the person is playing the game – that is, applies the **full attention** of his mind to doubt everything he can and experience the absolute evidence of the one thought which is certain: "I think I exist"
- Note on evidence, certainty and truth in Descartes' philosophy:
 - Evidence: warranty of certainty
 - Certainty: subjective vs. objective truth – something certain is not only something true, but also something the truth of which is well founded, and well founded in your own mind.
 - *The Cogito is not an objective truth* (independent of the person who thinks): it is evident and certain.

4.3.4 What am I? I am a thinking thing – Sum res cognitans

Continuation of the method of doubt

- How are we going to figure out what we are? Should we look for **definitions**?
This is the method of the scholastics: divide the entire world in genus and species. Method of dichotomy.
 - 'Man is a reasonable animal': genus + distinctive characteristic
 - Another Example: Plato vs. Diogene: 'Man is a biped without feathers'

- **Descartes' criticism against the method of definitions:**

- the words used are obscure
- infinite regress
- in other places, he claims that definitions are at best good for the exposition, never for the discovery of truth, and most of the time a way to cover our ignorance.

- **So? How are we to figure out what we are?**

- Remember that **the method of doubt is universal**, so we should be able to use it here again.
- Descartes thus lists his previous beliefs about himself, and look whether there is any of these beliefs which can resist the doubt:

1. body – which I believed to know quite well: figure and extension, secondary qualities (color, odor...), and minimal mechanics. Note that this is not the modern mechanics but Aristotle's: no mention of the principle of inertia.
2. soul – which I did not understand quite well what it was – “a rarefied I-know-not-what”
Note that the description of the soul also corresponds to Aristotle's psychology (nutritive...)

CAREFUL! Descartes is not speaking in his own voice here, but relating the common, Aristotelian or scholastic, views on the body and the soul.

That we possess a clear knowledge of our body and an obscure knowledge of our soul is one of our strongest prejudices of the scholastic tradition, according to Descartes.

→ *Descartes' main aim in the Second Meditation is to prove that the exact opposite is true: i.e. that we know our soul better than we know our body.* This is what the title told us! So, we should expect Descartes to reverse the view he just stated.

I am not my body

The method of doubt allowed us to reject the existence of our bodies, but not of ourselves. Hence:

- We are not our bodies
- We are none of what is linked to our bodies – eating, walking, sensations
The dreaming argument is used again: I have dreamed that I was eating, walking, seeing, smelling etc...I might still be dreaming.

Note that, because they are linked to the body, *sensations are not evident*. Just as the existence of our body, the idea that our sensations are what is the most evident to us is mistaken (and a prejudice which is difficult to get rid off).

I am a thinking thing

- The only characteristic which I used believe was mine and which resists to the method of doubt is: *thinking*
SO: the only thing I can say for certain about me is: “I exist, I think” (or “I think I exist” as you wish).
- That said, is this what Descartes draws as a conclusion? No, he draws a much stronger conclusion:

Yet I am a true thing and am truly existing ...

Does this conclusion follow from his premises???? No, at least not if Descartes believes he gave any convincing argument for the thesis that he is a thing in the sense of a substance.

Principles of Philosophy, I, 51: definition of a substance:

by substance, we can understand nothing else than a thing which so exists that it needs no other thing in order to exist.

Three questions:

1. How can I conclude, just from the fact that I know that I am thinking, that I exist in the sense of a substance, that is, that I “need no other thing in order to exist”?

2. What is the justification for the idea that there is only one thing underlying the thinking ? Is the self necessarily one single thing remaining the same over time?

That I think might be the single thing I know about me for sure, but this does not imply that I am a unique being. This is a problem especially when one considers that the Cogito is valid for the instant when I have my full attention directed towards it. Who knows what I am between two Cogito? How can I infer anything about my persistence in time?

3. Moreover, these are old notions of the Old School...Is it legitimate to use them? Descartes takes it that they are the most self-understandable notions. Importance of natural light and intuition again.

Alright, but then, this falls under the Evil Genius argument, does not it?

—→ *In short: Descartes proved that "I think I exist" is true, he does not seem to prove that "I am a real thing" is true if "thing" is taken in the sense of 'substance'.*

Many take it that this is one of the big mistakes that Descartes did. Moreover, it is a mistake with long consequences, namely, Descartes' **dualism** – there two kinds of substances: soul-type things and body-type things

This resulted into at least two long lasting disputes:

1. the mind/body problem
2. do animals think?

4.3.5 What is a thinking thing?

A thinking thing is nothing imaginable

- Could we say more about ourselves, about what we are? **Should we use our imagination to figure out what we are?**
- I would say, of course not... What we imagine is often obscure, and will not resist the method of doubt.

- As Descartes says, deciding to appeal to our imagination in order to figure out what we are is similar to deciding to take a nap in order to figure out what we see in front of us.
- **Why does Descartes even mention this?** How could we consider a second to appeal to our imagination after all what we have doubted up to now?
- This can be seen as a rhetorical device to bring up, little by little, that whatever is body-like is less well known than whatever is mind-like.

The point is this:

- Anything that you can imagine, you imagine as extension, figure and movement.
- Now, these are the fundamental attributes of the bodies.
- Hence, whatever you can imagine is body like.
- But we admitted that we are none of these attributes which are linked to our body (for we rejected that we know for sure we have a body)
- Conclusion: *The point is not only that our imagination is an obscure tool. The point is that our imagination cannot give us but images of body-like things. But 'thinking' has precisely been found to be: 'anything which is not linked to our body'. So that, quite literally, we are nothing imaginable.*

A thinking thing: any mental activities

- Descartes has a very broad notion of what is thinking: he includes in there all our mental activities: doubting, desiring, understanding, imagining, feeling
- *This is because "thinking" was characterized negatively as "anything which is not linked with the body: the entire mental realm*
- CAREFUL: I can doubt that external objects exists, but I cannot doubt that I feel *as if* they were here !!

Even my sensations and desires (which typically involve the consideration of an external object) are proofs that I exist as a mental activity.

This is to say that you know better your feelings and sensations on the subjective side than on the objective side. Descartes has completely turned head to toe both:

1. our normal way of thinking about what is more well known or not between the external objects and our internal mental representations;
2. the Skeptics' argument that knowledge is impossible because we are stuck in our subjective representations.

—→ *Descartes maintains that we actually know better our subjective representations than the external objects which they are supposed to represent! The fact that we are stuck in our subjective representations is precisely what is going to allow us to find out some truth. In short, subjectivity is not the problem but the solution for finding the truth according to Descartes.*

This thesis, quite controversial you will admit, is what is the remaining of the Meditation is about.

4.3.6 Stripping a piece of wax – or that the mind is better known than the body

Precisely because such a claim is so controversial, Descartes needs to produce a persuasive arguments. One way to this is to start with the prejudice we have that we know well the external bodies.

Descartes wants to show instead that what you know about the bodies 1. is what you know with your understanding and not the sense; 2. that this comforts further the idea that what you know best is your mind and what is in it.

The piece of wax – what is it? Senses and Imagination are inadequate

Descartes gives an analysis which seems to be an instance of a very classical argument: what something truly is is whatever remains the same when the thing undergoes changes. That said, **the real aim of the argument is not to determine what is the fundamental nature of the wax, but**

rather how we know it. The claim will be that we know the wax by our understanding, and neither by our senses nor by our imagination.

Indeed, look at the conclusion:

But I need to realize that the perception of the wax is neither a seeing, nor a touching, nor an imagining. Nor has it ever been, even though it previously seem so; rather it is an inspection on the part of the mind alone [...]. (33)

How does Descartes arrive to this conclusion??

- Descartes considers a **particular piece of wax**:

Why a particular and not the wax in general? “wax” in general, or “bodies” are general notions which are obscure. What people believe they know very clearly are the “particulars”. (Note: against Aristotle again, taken as the philosopher of common prejudices)

- The piece of wax seems to be known as **perceived by the senses**:

1. taste
2. smell
3. seeing
4. touch
5. hearing

- **Change and Identity – the senses are inadequate**:

What follows is a classical argument to distinguish either **substance and attributes**, or **primary and secondary** qualities. The point is to see what remains the same under change.

1. P1: The piece of wax can change;
2. P2: But I know the piece of wax as being still the same;
3. CC1: there is something I know of the wax which remains the same when the piece of wax undergoes changes;
4. Unstated Premise: only unchanging aspects of something constitute what I know truly of it;

5. P3: the sensitive qualities do not remain
6. CC2: the sensitive qualities are not what I truly know the piece of wax is;
7. P4: what remains is that it is extended, flexible and mutable;
8. CC3: Instead, I truly know of the piece of wax as extended, flexible and mutable

Note that Descartes **does not conclude that the true nature of the wax is to be extended, flexible, and mutable. Rather, he tries to figure out how we know these qualities.**

- **Imagination is inadequate**

The same argument goes concerning flexibility, mutability and extension: I cannot imagine but particular forms, movements or sizes. I may be able to imagine an indefinite number of forms, movements and shapes. However, I cannot imagine the indefinite flexibility, mutability or extendability itself.

—→ *The imagination cannot grasp the infinite possibility of changes itself. This can be only conceived, that is, grasped by the understanding.*

CONCLUSION: Neither the senses nor the imagination make me know the particular piece of wax.

What I know about the piece of wax is known by my understanding

- Unstated Premise: only three sources of knowledge: senses, imagination and understanding
- Only one candidate remains: the mind in the sense of pure reason: “an inspection on the part of the mind alone”

Language is deceiving

The point here is to insist on the fact that **what we take as genuine perceptions are really judgments of the understanding.**

- I say: “I see, feel, hear etc. the wax” instead of “I judge the wax” and this is misleading

- Example: hats in the street – just hats and coats? robots? men? A *judgment* is involved in the statement: “I see men in the street” – sole perception is not enough to make that statement.
- Descartes takes the opportunity to draw a methodological rule: **do not draw any conclusion about reality from the usage of language.**

I know better through the mind than through the senses

- Descartes has argued that:
 1. Particulars bodies are not well known by the senses and/or the imagination
 2. Particulars bodies are known in their true nature by a pure intuition of the mind
 3. Any sensation in fact relies on a judgment of the understanding
- It remains to say that this way of knowing is *better* than the one we believe we have through the senses

Note that Descartes *does not* say that the knowledge we get of the wax through the mind is better because it is knowledge of the true (objective) nature of the wax. Instead, he claims that the knowledge we get of the wax through the mind is better because **it is clearer and more distinct** – both *subjective* properties.

—→ *If Descartes’ arguments hold, then we have just proved that we know particular bodies better by an intuition of the understanding than by our senses and our imagination. This is a big claim. It will be important for the remaining of the Cartesian system, which relies entirely on this idea that clear and distinct intuitions are true. See the third Meditation*

Humans and animals

Descartes makes a bold statement about the human mind and animals: no justification as far as I can see. He seems to believe he proved that the mind is different from the body. But did he, really?

That I understand things through my mind is comforting the idea that I know my mind better than my body

The end of this Meditation does not seem to follow from what precedes it:

- Descartes has, at best, shown that we know particular bodies better by an intuition of the mind than by our senses and imagination
- He concludes that we know our mind better than anything
- How could that follow?
- The only way to make sense of it is to say that:
 1. Intuitions, whatever their object, are the way of the best knowledge
 2. I have an intuition of my mind
 3. Hence, I have the best knowledge of my mind
- But it still does not follow that I know my mind better than the bodies ! For if I have intuitions of the bodies, I know them just as well than my mind!
- We need yet another hidden premise: a intuition which does not contain anything related to bodies is clearer than an intuition about mental stuff only.

Then, my intuition of my own mind is clearer than any intuition I have of the external bodies

- There is also an argument against the prejudice we have that we know particular bodies better than our own mind:
 1. Take the prejudice for true: we know the particular bodies very well
 2. But it has been proved that, if we know them at all, we know them though the mind
 3. To know through the mind makes you aware of the fact that you have a mind
 4. *So: every time you claim you know the particular bodies, you are committed to claim that you know the mind as well.*

4.3.7 Conclusion

The second meditation is more constructive than the first:

- An essential part of it is of course the **Cogito** – the proof that there is one single indubitable truth: that “I think, I exist”
- With the Cogito is also introduced the notion of **intuition of the mind**, which is also an essential element of Descartes’ philosophy, more precisely of Descartes’ **epistemology** or theory of knowledge: whenever you focus your attention on the fact that you are thinking now, you *cannot* doubt it, and neither can you doubt your existence. *The discovery of truth is a subjective experience.*
- The famous passage of the piece of wax is important to understand: Descartes does NOT argue that the piece of wax is extension in time (even if this is also what he believes), that is to say, *he does not make a metaphysical point about the nature of the wax, rather: he makes an epistemological point about the way we know the wax.* His point is that **we know what things are through the mind and not through the senses and the imagination**, despite what we might think.

Now, there are some problematic inferences within the text, mainly:

1. that I am a thinking thing in the sense of substance – for all we know, we are certain to exist only as the instant when we focus our attention on our thinking
2. that I know my mind better than the bodies – for all we know, any intuition is equally good knowledge whatever its object

Let’s keep these in mind when reading what follows!

4.4 God and Certainty

4.4.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Third Meditation
- Study Questions:
 1. What is the “general rule” for finding the truth that Descartes accept? how does he argue for the validity of the rule?
 2. Why does Descartes need to prove the existence of God?
 3. Descartes spends a lot of time discussing the various of ideas we have? What is the point of this discussion? That is to say, how is he going to use the results of this discussion?
 4. What is Descartes’ main argument for the existence of God? (try to reconstruct the structure of it)
 5. Do you think Descartes’ argument for the existence of God is valid? Do you think it is sound?
- Reflexion Question: To what other arguments does Descartes ‘proof’ of the existence of God make you think? Do you find this kind of argument convincing? Why? Why not?

4.4.2 Introduction

What we have after the Second Meditation:

- The certainty that I exist every time I focus my attention on it and for that time only
- That my mind participates in the entirety of my knowledge: contrary to the scholastic view that knowledge comes from the senses, Descartes claims that even our sensations are products of a process of the mind – judgment of understanding.

The third Meditation’s title is : “Concerning God, That He Exists”. So, we should expect a proof of the existence of God in this meditation. The question we want to keep in mind is: why is Descartes so concerned about

proving the existence of God? Why does it come just after the proof of my existence by the Cogito? Knowing Descartes, it is not in order to please the Church men. Instead, the *order* in which he proceeds should follow the *proper* method. It might be more important for us to understand why Descartes needs God than to figure out whether or not he has proved the existence of God.

4.4.3 A criterion of indubitable truth and the necessity to prove that God is truthful

Clear and Distinct Perceptions of the Mind

- Here is Descartes' argument for taking "as a general rule that everything that I very clearly and very distinctly perceive is true" (34):
 1. I am certain that I am a thinking thing
 2. There is nothing that assures of this proposition is true except a clear and distinct perception of it
 3. Hence, I can be certain of everything that I perceive in the same way, that is, clearly and distinctively

→ *So, truth takes nothing more than this: a clear and distinct perception.*

- Clear and Distinct:

From the *Principle of Philosophy*, I, 45:

- clear: a perception is said to be clear if and only if it is manifest to an attentive mind – clarity is to be contrasted with obscurity
- distinct: a perception is said to be distinct if and only if it contains only one clear thing when considered by an attentive mind – distinction is to be contrasted with confusion

Note that distinct perceptions are a subset of clear distinctions: a perception must be clear in order to be capable of being distinct. The converse does not hold: a perception can be clear but not distinct. For example, my perception of some pain in my body is very clear, but confused (*Principle of Philosophy*, I, 46).

Clear and distinct ideas are characterized by:

1. their capacity to resist to doubt
2. their cognitive “luminance” – they are “enlightning”

- What truths that were rejected in Meditation I can we hope to get back with the above criterion of truth?

- neither the existence of particular bodies the existence of which I took from sense perception

- nor even the idea that there are external objects (even if not as I see them)

Why are perceptions of external objects from the senses are not clear and distinct? Because, as Descartes has argued in his analysis of the piece of wax, nothing in what I know of external objects is clear except the ideas in my mind.

- Thanks to the criterion of the clear and distinct perception, Descartes hopes to get the most simple of the rational truths back:

But what about when I considered something very simple and easy in the areas of arithmetic or geometry for example that two plus three make five and the like? Did I not intuit them at least clearly enough so as to affirm them as true?
(34, column 2)

- Why the most simple only? Because our criterion works as the instantaneous intuition of the certitude of a simple proposition. Anything that requires some deductive reasoning does not qualify for a clear and distinct perception (See *Rules*, 3, for the distinction between intuition and deduction).

- But how is that even possible? How come the objection of the Evil Genius would not apply here?

The need for a truthful God

- Look closely at paragraph three: it all depends on where you put your attention:
 - If you look into your self and perceive the mathematical truth, then they are as indubitable as the Cogito
 - If you turn your attention to the objection of the Evil Genius, then they become doubtful

→ *Note the extreme importance of the notion of attention for Descartes.*
- This means that:
 - we do have found a criterion of truth
 - but certainty lasts only as long as your attention is focused on the rational truth considered
 - considering then the objection of the evil genius, then a “very slight and so to speak metaphysical doubt” remains.

→ *The main point is: evident certainty is reliable just because of the actual presence of its content to the attentive mind. For this reason, it is the truth of an instant only.*
- So, from the first truth we found, we have derived a criterion of truth: anything else that I perceive in the same way is just as true as the Cogito. This imply that, just as the truth of the Cogito:
 - it will be a subjective certainty;
 - it will last just for so long as I perceive it.

→ *The conclusion is then: we need to prove that there is no evil Genius. For, up to now, all we have is that we are certain of the rational truths only for the time of our perception of them.*

If we want more than truth that are actually certain, that is, if we want *eternal truth*, then the proof that no evil Genius is deceiving us is required.

... I should at the first opportunity inquire whether or not he can be a deceiver. For if I am ignorant of this, it appears I am never capable of being completely certain about anything else.(35, first column)

Completely certain means here: certain for good, and not only at the moment of the intuition

4.4.4 Ideas

In order to reject the hypothesis that an all powerful evil genius is constantly deceiving him, Descartes wants to prove that 1. God exists; and 2. He is truthful (Note that this is sufficient to reject the existence of the Evil Genius, but not necessary: it would have been enough to prove that no all powerful god exists for example).

The proof of the existence of God is going to rely on the question of the nature and the origin of our ideas.

Remember that we are stuck in our selves and our subjective minds. In other words, we are stuck with our ideas. The question is whether there is anything in these ideas of ours which allow us to accept anything else that ourselves as existent. It would be nice, for example, if the fact that we have ideas of something implied that that something exist outside ourselves. We have thus to see is what can be the origin of our ideas.

So, Descartes starts with a classification of our ideas and a discussion of their possible origin(s). As usual, we start with our common beliefs (our prejudices) and apply a rational method of doubt.

Classification of ideas

- Restriction of the notion of ideas to representations, by contrast to volitions, affections and judgments
- Error: only in judgments. Ideas, volitions and affections are always true by themselves. It is only when I make a judgment that I can err. The “principal error” is to judge that my ideas are mirroring external objects.
- Three kinds of ideas:

Innate – give the understanding of a simple truth and, or so I believe, are coming from my own nature – Ex: thing, truth, thought

Adventitious – are about and, or so I believe, are coming from the external objects – Ex: noise, sun, fire

Fictitious – are about imaginary things and, or so I believe, are coming from my imagination – Ex: sirens and hyppogriffs

I have no proof that adventitious ideas are reliable images of external objects

Both innate ideas and fictitious ideas seem to come from myself: the most common hypothesis is that **adventitious ideas find their origin in external object.**

If this could be proved, then we would be able to escape the “prison of the self” in which we are stuck right now: we could derive the existence of tons of external things on the basis of the fact that we have ideas of these things.

This is, however, the hope that Descartes is going to destroy first. Here is how:

- Let see first what our justifications are for our prejudice:
I believe that adventitious ideas are images of external objects because:
 1. it seems natural to believe so – note that you do not have to teach it to kids!
 2. adventitious ideas do not depend on my will;
 3. it seems obvious that the effect of external objects are similar to these external objects
- Descartes argues against 1, 2 and 3 in the three paragraphs that follow:
 1. spontaneous inclination is not natural light but impulses which I know can make me err – for example, it might be good for you to be scared if you hear a big noise without any apparent origin, but such survival kit is no where near a criterion for knowing that something dangerous is around;
 2. I could possess an unknow faculty which does not depend on my will and produces the ideas of external objects. From the fact that they do not depend on my will it does not follow that they originate in external objects: simple counter examples are the ideas that come from the natural impulses (fear, joy etc.): they do not depend on my will, but they could originate in myself only.

3. I have many examples of ideas that do not resemble their objects. For instance, the idea I have of the sun from the sense is different from what I know the sun is (by my understanding of science).

—→ *Thus, this is not thanks to the adventitious ideas that we are going to escape our solitary certainty of our own existence as a mind.*

Reality and causes of ideas

- Distinction: material, formal, and objective reality of ideas
 1. Material reality of ideas:

Ideas are all the same as modes of thought. Their material reality, what they are made of is just “thought”.
 2. Formal reality of ideas:

Ideas differ as for what they represent: an idea of a dog has not the same form as an idea of a man. The formal reality of an idea correspond to its content, or its object.
 3. Objective reality of ideas: the reality of their object
 - Claim: the more real are the object of an idea, the more “real” is the idea itself
 - Example: the idea of a substance (a body) has more objective reality that the idea of a accident (its color)

In what sense? The objective reality of an idea is its reality as a representation of an object.
 4. Extreme example: the idea of God is the highest degree of objective reality
- Causal Principle– appeal to natural light: “there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that same cause”
 - Corollary: nothing more perfect can proceed from the less perfect
 - Conclusion: application of the causal principle to ideas: not only the actual stone must have a cause which has at least as much perfection as the stone, but also the idea of the stone in me must have a cause which has at least as much perfection as the stone.

- Consequence: It will be sufficient for me to find an idea which has more objective reality than I have formal reality to be certain that something else than me exists. In other words, all I have to do in order to prove that I am not the only thing existing is to find an idea which content has something I do not have myself. For according to the above, I cannot be the cause of such idea.

—→ *The main point in the foregoing analysis is that Descartes applies the causal principle to the objective reality of ideas. Various ideas differ in so far as they represent various things. These various represented things are not nothing. They have various degrees of reality. So, the principle of causality applies here as anywhere else: the reality of the objects represented in our ideas must have causes, and such causes must be powerful enough to produce these ideas.*

IMPORTANT NOTE: BE CAREFUL: Descartes is not saying that there exists external objects in the world corresponding to my ideas and which have different degrees of reality. The reality he talks about is the *reality of the idea*, not of the object. But it is the *objective reality of the idea*, i.e. the reality of the idea due to how much reality would have the corresponding object if it was real.

This could seem like a very strange idea. But let's bear with Descartes.

4.4.5 God is the cause of my idea of God

God only can be the cause of my idea of God

- Catalog of my ideas:
 1. idea of God
 2. corporeal and inanimate things
 3. angels, animals or men
- Of which of these can I be the cause?
 1. I can be the cause of my ideas of angels, animal or men, by composition;
 2. I can be the cause of my ideas of corporeal things – of both the unclear and the clear and distinct parts of these ideas;

3. In passing: notion of material falsity: ideas are not formally false (as such, they are just what they are, neither true or false), but they can be materially false, that is, they can represent as existent something which is not;
4. It remains only the idea of God.

- The idea of God:

I understand by the name of “God” a certain substance that is infinite independent, supremely intelligent, and supremely powerful, and that created me along with everything else that exists – if anything else exists. (38, col. 1)

- none of these characteristics could be proceeding from me alone: *a finite substance (me) cannot have created the idea of an infinite substance.:*

For although the idea of substance is in me by virtue of the fact that I am a substance, that fact is not sufficient to explain my having the idea of an infinite substance, since I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite (38, col. 1)

- Conclusion: “Thus, from what has been said, I must conclude that God necessarily exists”

Objections and Answers

- Objection 1: I produce the idea of the infinite as a negation of the finite
Answer: it goes the other way: it is because I can conceive of the infinite, that, by comparison, I understand my finitude.

Thus the perception of the infinite is somehow prior in me to the perception of the finite; that is, my perception of God is prior to my perception of myself. (38, col. 1)

- Objection 2: the idea of God is materially false (it does not represent anything), so that it can be produced out of nothing
Answer: no materially false ideas are clear and distinct, but the idea of God is clear and distinct

- Objection 3: the idea of god is not clear and distinct, for I cannot comprehend the infinite

Answer: it is enough to conceive God as possessing all perfections to have a clear and distinct idea

- Objection 4: I am perfectible: I could be more perfect than I think and have *potentially* all the perfections that I conceive being actually in God. Indeed: I already notice that I am perfectible (my knowledge grows) and I cannot see any limit to it. This potentiality to infinity could be the origin of my idea of the infinite.

Answer: my potential perfections are not the perfections I conceive in God

1. that my perfections increase is already a proof of my imperfection
2. from the fact that my perfections can indefinitely increase, it does not follow that they can ever be actually infinite
3. re-formulation of the causal principle for the objective reality of an idea: cannot be caused by potential reality in the cause

→ *The idea of God is the idea which allows me to get out of my lonely subjectivity. The idea of God is the idea of the actual infinite, of which I cannot be the source, since I am myself infinite. This argument relies on an important distinction between the actual infinite and the potential infinite.*

NOTE: the distinction between the *actual infinite* and the *potential infinite* is important in mathematics. Even if it has been somewhat forgotten today, the notion of actual infinite has been difficult to deal with. It is only with Cantor (beginning 20th) that mathematics manage to deal with it. It remained a matter of controversy for the constructivists. For more details, see for example: <http://www.math.vanderbilt.edu/~schectex/courses/thereals/potential.html>, or the articles “Constructive Mathematics” and “Intuitionism in the Philosophy of Mathematics” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy”.

4.4.6 God is cause of my existence

Descartes’ cosmological argument

From whom if not from God could I derive my existence?

- Candidates:
 1. myself
 2. my parents or something less perfect than God
- Myself: No, for otherwise I could not conceive that I am imperfect
 Objection: I have always existed: it takes as much power to be brought into existence as it does to remain existent at every instant
 The existence of God only assures that I keep existing through time
- Something less perfect than God: regression to infinite: need for an ultimate cause
- Several causes together, each of which possesses some of the perfections that I conceive together in God: no for I have the idea of the unity of these perfections

—→ *Descartes offers here a version of a classical argument, the so-called “cosmological argument”, which derives the existence of God as the first, necessary, cause of a chain of secondary, contingent causes. More can be said about cosmological arguments*

Cosmological arguments: Main idea

Reference: Bruce Reichenbach, “Cosmological argument”, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

The main idea of cosmological arguments is to answer the typical metaphysical question: **Why is there something rather than nothing?**

These arguments stem from humans’s **wonder about the very existence of the universe**. Contrast this with the wonder about the world’s order, as in the design argument.

- The **main assumption** underlying such wonder is that **the world’s existence is not necessary**: it is **contingent**. Things can be or not be. Nothing exists necessarily in our universe.
- **A second assumption** for most of these arguments, is that **change is ruled by causality**. In simple words, things change because of the cause of the change. If we apply this principle to the passage from ”not

be” to ”be”, or the ”coming to be”, then, anything that comes to be come to be from a cause.

—→ *Thus, two main assumptions:*

1. The world is contingent – it does not exist necessarily
2. Causal Principle: every contingent being has a cause of its being.

Cosmological arguments: History

The cosmological arguments have a long history. Descartes is by no means original here. And he is not the last one to use it either !

Aristotle: unmoved mover necessary to explain constant movement of the universe

Religious tradition: Christian or Islamic:

“**Aquinas**” **argument** (Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274) formulates it later): impossibility of an essentially ordered infinite regress: the world must have a **first cause**

Kālam argument: temporal impossibility of infinite regress (the world must have had a **beginning**)

Enlightenment: Leibniz and Clarke: add to this the Principle of Sufficient Reason (The world have a **sufficient cause**). For example in Leibniz’ *Monadology*:

32. [Our reasonings are grounded upon the principle] of sufficient reason, in virtue of which we hold that there can be no fact real or existing, no statement true, unless there be a sufficient reason, why it should be so and not otherwise, although these reasons usually cannot be known by us.

Criticism by Hume and Kant in the 18th century – mainly because these arguments are based on an illegitimate use of reason, that is, a use of reason beyond the secured realm of experience.

Still a matter of controversy in the 20th century.

Cosmological arguments: Structure

Reichenbach's sketch of the argument:

1. **From experience:** A contingent being exists (a contingent being is such that if it exists, it can not-exist)
2. **Causal Principle:** (Principle of Causation or Principle of Sufficient Reason): This contingent being has a cause or explanation of its existence.
3. The cause or explanation of its existence is something other than the contingent being itself.
4. **Principle of Excluded Middle:** What causes or explains the existence of this contingent being must either be solely other contingent beings or include a non-contingent (necessary) being.
5. **Contingent beings alone cannot cause or explain the existence of a contingent being.**
6. Therefore, what causes or explains the existence of this contingent being must include a non-contingent (necessary) being.
7. Therefore, a necessary being (a being which, if it exists, cannot not exist) exists.

Possible "beings" to fill in Premise 1:

- things in motion (Aristotle)
- caused events (Aquinas)
- contingent existing things (Aquinas)
- whole series of effects (Duns Scotus: this is Demea's)

The key to failure or success of the argument: Premise 5. Premise 5 states what counts as a good explanation or cause for contingent being. If the requirement is strengthened to a requirement of a sufficient reason, and if the contingent being we are talking about is the universe, then the cause must be:

- **outside** the contingent universe, and distinct from any part of the universe.
- **supernatural** (no natural cause is satisfactory) – intentional for example

Cosmological arguments are subjects to many criticisms. One obvious target is the Causal Principle.

4.4.7 The idea of God is innate

It will be recalled that we have distinguished three possible origins for our ideas: innate, adventitious, or fiction. Now the idea of God is:

- not adventitious: it never presents itself to me unexpectedly
- not a fiction: I cannot do whatever I want with it
- so it must be innate – mark of the author in me

It remains to see whether God is a deceiver or not. Given that He is all perfect, that should not be possible, but we might need further argument.

4.4.8 Conclusion

The third meditation gave us:

- A general rule for immediate truth: clear and distinct ideas
- “Proofs” that God exists, which only ensures that these ideas remain true when I am not focusses all the force of my attention on them
- We’ve had two proofs:
 1. From the objective reality of ideas and the causal principle: the objective reality of the idea of the infinite cannot originate in anything else than something infinite
 2. From my contingent existence and the causal principle: the chain of existing contingent beings requires a first, non-contingent cause – call it God.

Now, if we can show that God is not a deceiver, we’ll be assured that our clear and distinct ideas remain true even when we don’t focus our attention on them.