

4.7 The Material World

4.7.1 Readings and Study questions

- Readings: Descartes, Meditation VI
- Study questions:
 1. What is the main aim of the 6th meditation?
 2. What is the corporeal nature according to Descartes? How does Descartes establish its existence?
 3. What is Descartes' argument for his claim that the body is distinct from the mind?
 4. What exactly do my sensation of the external bodies tell me about these bodies?
 5. Why does the case of dropsy raise a serious objection to Descartes' view about the truth of the teachings of nature? Explain how the problem is similar to the one encountered by Descartes in the fourth meditation. How does Descartes explain such cases?
 6. Descartes seems to tell us that we are "taught by nature" that external bodies exist. In the first Meditation, however, Descartes had rejected the "teaching of nature" as reliable? What were his reasons for rejecting them? Why does he think he can discard these reasons now?

4.7.2 Introduction

- **Two different theses to recover in the 6th. Meditation:**
 1. Existence of some external stuff – this will be based on the additional premise that nothing can be in my mind of which I am not aware.
 2. The external stuff is a material world – this will be based on 1. the premise that the external cause of my ideas of the bodies is either God, or the material world, or another finite creature, 2. an argument against the first and the third options appealing to the truthfulness of God.

- **Descartes has formulated the problem of the existence of the external world in the 3rd Meditation**, when we were trying to get out of ourselves, that is, when we were trying to find out whether we could know for certain that there exists something else than ourselves as thinking things.
 - Descartes has considered and rejected the following argument. Why do we believe in the existence of the external world? Because we sense and feel it. What is so special about sensations and feelings that make us believe they have external causes? Descartes had considered and rejected the argument that sensations and feelings are non-voluntary and hence, caused by something else than myself.
 - The argument would go as follows:
 1. I have sensations which are independent of my will
 2. Sensations must therefore be caused by something else than myself
 3. Hence, there exists something external to my mind
 - The problem with this argument is that it contains a **hidden premise**: that sensations cannot be caused by myself in another way than by conscious will. This is precisely the assumption that Descartes targeted in his criticism of the argument: we cannot dismiss the possibility that we have a subconscious faculty which causes my sensations. In which case, I am the cause of my sensations, but I am not aware of it.
- **So, the main challenge in the 6th Meditation is to answer the objection that I could be deceived about the external world.** Descartes' strategy is to constantly use the **truthfulness of God** in order to answer the objection above:
 - in the end, if God is not deceiver, then I can trust my senses and the teachings of nature.
 - That said, he will also have to give an account of the fact that we are also often misled by our sensations and feelings

4.7.3 The probability that our own body exists: the faculty of imagination

Descartes takes the same starting point as at the beginning of the fifth meditation: our faculty to imagine material bodies. The question is: what can we deduce, regarding the existence of material body, from our faculty of imagination?

- **Claim: The plausibility of the existence of the material things as the object of pure mathematics**

- What does this mean? Remember the 5th Meditation: bodies are characterized in their essence by the properties of extension, figure, number and duration. Further, these properties of the bodies are precisely what geometry and arithmetics (hence, mathematics for Descartes) study.

—→ *What Descartes takes to be the material things “as the object of pure mathematics” is extension and duration. Descartes holds that matter is ultimately reducible to just this: extension and duration – this is what Descartes calls the corporeal nature of which we have a clear and distinct idea.*

Descartes gives two arguments for the plausibility of the existence of the corporeal nature:

- The material things as the object of pure mathematics *can* exist: God can have created them
- The material things *are likely* to exist: My imagination tells me that they exist

The latter premise obviously needs further support! This is the role of two paragraphs that follow.

- **Our faculty of imagination indicates that they most probably exist**

Definition: imagination: “a certain application of the faculty of knowledge to the body which is immediately present to us”

—→ *The main point is that to imagine consists in an application of the mind to the body. In other words, there is no imagination without body!*

That we are thinking things cannot alone give an account of our faculty of imagination.

IMPORTANT NOTE: the existence of external things is not derived from the fact that we have sense-perceptions but from the fact that we can imagine things. Imagination being a mode of thought, we are still relying on our thoughts to find out about the world.

To make his point, Descartes deploys two arguments in the two paragraphs that follow.

1. Imagination is different from pure intellection

Here is the conclusion of the paragraph:

At this point I am manifestly aware that I am in need of a peculiar sort of effort on the part of the mind in order to imagine, one that I do not employ in order to understand (48, col 2)

The argument for this conclusion is based on examples of how we can conceive vs. imagine:

- the triangle or the pentagon
- the chiliagon (1000 sides) and the myriagon (10,000 sides)

I can understand all of these by my understanding alone. However, only the first two can be imagined. Whenever I imagine, I therefore do something in addition, that is, to apply the concept of the triangle (or the pentagon) to the notion of extension.

Note again that Descartes reverses the usual order: pure thinking is easy, imagining takes a “particular effort”.

2. Our imagination is most easily conceived as relating to a body

1. I can conceive of myself without imagination – it is not a necessary element of my nature as a “thinking thing” – the imagination thus relates to something else than my sole mind

2. I can easily conceive of my imagination if I postulate that I have a body:

Inference to the best explanation:

- the only explanation we can find for us to possess the faculty of imagination is that we have a body – we have a clear and distinct idea of what body could be

- However, that we have a clear and distinct idea of bodies, and that we can imagine bodies does not imply that there exists something outside which is what we take to be bodies.

—→ *So, the best explanation we have for the fact that we can imagine things is that our body exists. That said, we do not have any decisive argument – only a good probability*

- **The investigation of our imagination cannot lead further**

A this stage, the question of whether external bodies exist or not remains open. We cannot prove the existence of the external world in the sole basis of our clear and distinct ideas.

We need to reach out of the realm of the clear and distinct ideas. This means that we shall not expect to reach any kind of true certitude.

Descartes thus has to tackle the issue through the investigation of the nature of sense perception. He gives his program for the remaining of the Meditation:

1. What he formerly took to be true on the basis of what I took to be sense perception
2. The causes for which I took these to be true
3. What reasons I had to doubt these beliefs
4. What, among these beliefs, I can take as true, and what I should reject as highly doubtful

4.7.4 The existence of the corporeal nature as distinct from the mind

Descartes' strategy to prove the existence of the external material world is going to argue that:

1. The external, material world is different from us;
2. It has some impact on us

If it is different from us and has some impact on us, then it must exist, and exist as a separate being.

—→ *To prove that the body is distinct from the mind is thus essential for Descartes' argument.*

Descartes follows the program described above.

What we formerly took to exist from the teachings of our senses:

Descartes gives the list of what we ordinarily take to exist as a teaching from what I took to be my senses:

1. our body
2. pleasure, pain and other feelings
3. appetites
4. passions (what we now call emotions: joy, sadness, anger etc)
5. secondary qualities of bodies: heat, color
6. external bodies, as the bearers of these qualities.

Reasons why we took these to exist:

1. sensations do not depend on my will:
 - sensations are present only if I use what I take to be a sense organ
 - sensations are always present whenever I use what I take to be a sense organ
 - *Sense organs seemed necessary and sufficient for sensations.*
2. sensations are vivid, indeed, more vivid than my thoughts
3. Given these facts, my conclusions were:
 - it seemed impossible that sensations come from myself
 - it seemed much more reasonable to think that they come from external bodies
 - I naturally took these external bodies to resemble my sensations of them
 - I even took every thought to be deriving from my senses
 - and I took all this to be the teachings of “nature”, independently of any kind of logical argument.

Reasons for which we doubted these beliefs

1. External senses can be deceitful: towers and illusions
2. Internal senses (feelings) can be deceitful: pain in a cut off leg
3. Dreaming argument
4. Evil Genius
5. Objections to the “reasons” to believe given above :
 - a. Nature is not always a good guide – find an example !
 - b. I could have some unconscious faculty thanks to which I would be the cause of my sensations and feelings without being aware of it

—→ *Here (p.50, top of col. 2), Descartes has finished the inventory of our previous thoughts. We now need to move forward, rejecting both the naïveté of our childhood (taking every sensation as corresponding to the properties of external bodies, and the universal doubt 1(because we now know that there is no evil genius, better: that there is a truthful God))*

Distinction between my body and my mind

This is an essential part of the argument for the existence of external bodies: *the point Descartes wants to make is that the corporeal nature is essentially distinct from the mind*

- Descartes’s argument is based on the principle:
It is sufficient to be able to clearly and distinctively conceive one thing apart from another to deduce that they are different.
- So, here is the reasoning
 1. I have a clear and distinct idea of myself as a mere thinking thing (without a body)
 2. I have a clear and distinct idea of body without thought
 3. Hence, even if the body that I call mine exists, I am essentially a thinking thing and such essence is separated from this body.

- Consequences:

- If I have a body, I am not my body and my body is not me;
- We are mind before we are humans;

—→ *Descartes has argued that if the body we call ours exist, then it is essentially distinct from us as thinking things.*

The existence of the corporeal substance

From the distinction between the body and the mind, Descartes proceeds to prove the existence of the corporeal substance through its effects.

- **There must be a kind of substance separate from me**

1. Imagination and feeling are modes of thought: their existence requires the existence of the *substance of thought*
2. Moving, and changing place are also modes of something, but something which is not thought: these requires the existence of a substance
3. Passive feelings also require the existence of an external substance

- **This substance must be the corporeal substance**

We have proved that a substance, external to myself, exists. What can it be?

1. God
2. Bodies
3. Some other creature

The core of the argument now comes:

1. *God is not a deceiver*
2. I have no other faculty which tells me that the external substance that causes my sensations is something else than the corporeal substance
3. Hence: the external substance which causes my sensation is the corporeal substance

The core of the argument is that God has not given us the means to correct our tendency to believe in the existence of the material world. So, the idea that there could be something in me of which I am not aware and which causes my sensations is rejected. I can now trust my senses

CAREFUL THOUGH! \longrightarrow *Descartes does not conclude that the external bodies exist the way in which I sense them: He argued only that the corporeal substance – that is extension and duration – exist, not that my sensations correspond to the properties of external bodies !*

4.7.5 Sensations and the teachings of nature

It remains to investigate to what exactly my sensations correspond. Descartes tells us that, because God is not a deceiver, I have good reasons now to believe the “teachings of nature”. But pay attention to the details:

And surely there is no doubt that all that I am taught by nature has some truth to it. (p.51, col 2)

\longrightarrow *Descartes does not tell us that our sensations are entirely truthful, but rather that there is some truth to it. It remains to determine what kind of truth! This is crucial because we still need to understand in what sense and to what extent our sensations, feelings and emotions can be deceitful!*

So: what is it that we can take as true from the teachings of nature?

1. The union of body and mind

That I have a body that I can consider mine is the first and main teaching of nature.

Descartes holds together that:

- body and mind are two essentially distinct substances
- my body and my mind are intermingled – I am not in my body like a pilot in a vessel
- such union is confused and unknowable because it comes from our feelings

\longrightarrow *In fact, it is one of the central pillars of Descartes’ philosophy that, besides the thought and the corporeal substance, there is a third substance, which is the union of the mind and body. This is a very difficult issue within*

Descartes' philosophy though, and we won't be able to spend much time on it.

The external bodies and their effect on me

That there external bodies which have different effects on my own body is the second most important teaching of nature.

- I must take as the teachings of nature the facts that:
 1. To the differences in sensations must correspond differences in the bodies.
Careful:
 - I feel hot and cold
 - this does not mean that there is heat and cold in the external bodies
 - but only that there is a difference between the bodies that I feel as hot and cold which explains the difference in my sensations
 2. My “whole self” – body and mind – can be affected by the external bodies
- However, I should not take as teachings of nature
 - anything that concerns the mind only
 - anything that concerns the body only
 - *only what concerns the union*

—→ *Nature only teaches me what to avoid and what to seek for the well being of my whole self, i.e. the union of body and mine. Nature thus only tells me about bodies as they related to myself. I should not make any further judgment about anything else than these relation (good or bad). In particular, I should not make any further judgment about the properties of the external bodies.*

Descartes gives some examples of this kind of unjustified inference:

 - Void (Descartes does not believe that the void exists!)
 - Secondary qualities: heat, color etc ...

- Conclusion: Descartes has now shown:
 - what is true about the teaching of nature
 - how come that I found the senses to be deceitful

—→ *Just as in Meditation 4 about errors, our senses, gift of God, are not deceitful by themselves. My deception comes only from the fact that I misunderstand the significance of their teaching.*

But I see that in these and many other instances I have been in the habit of subverting the order of nature. For admittedly I use the perceptions of the senses (which are properly given by nature only for signifying to the mind what things are useful or harmful to the composite of which it is a part, and to that extent they are clear and distinct enough), as reliable rules for immediately discerning what is the essence of bodies located outside us. (p.52 col 2)

But are the teachings of nature always reliable, even if taken as telling us how the external bodies affect ours?

Objection: aren't there some teachings of nature that are truly deceitful?

It seems that the explanation above is not enough: nature seems to be sometimes misleading even concerning what is useful or harmful for my whole self

Examples: dropsy

- The problem of error arises in a similar manner as it did in the Fourth Meditation.
 - In the 4th Meditation:
 1. God is not a deceiver
 2. My faculties for judging were given to me by God
 3. I cannot err when I judge

The mere fact that I do err reduces Descartes' argument to absurdity if he does not account for error, and explain why errors so conceived are not God's responsibility.

- In the 6th Meditation:
 1. God is not a deceiver
 2. What nature teaches me is nothing but what God teaches me
 3. I cannot err in following the teachings of nature

Again, the mere fact that I can do myself some harm in following my natural feelings and desires would reduce Descartes' argument to absurdity if he did not account for error, and why errors so conceived are not God's responsibility.

- Descartes rejects the idea of a broken machine.
 - Analogy with the clock
 - Could it be that my body is deviating from its nature?

Descartes rejects this explanation because it deals with the body only – a defective machine. But the teachings of nature concern the union of the body and the mind, not the body only. In this sense, that the man having dropsy feels like drinking while drinking will be harmful to him is “a true error of nature”.

- Descartes now gives his explanation for why sometimes our sensations are deceitful, even concerning what is useful / harmful to us:
 1. While the mind is indivisible, the body is divisible and constituted of various parts
 2. There is only one point of contact between the body and the mind: in the brain
 3. Any sensation as it appears to the mind results from a long string of causes in the various parts of the body

Example: the sensations “pain in my left foot” in my mind is the result of an harmful effect on my foot + some long mechanism of transmission along the nervous system up to the brain
 4. To a given string of causes corresponds only one sensation, that is, the sensation that is the most useful for our health: in the case of the foot, ‘pain in the foot’ instead of ‘maybe a nerve somewhere has been pulled between the foot and the brain’ is going to be the unique message.

This implies that any problem that occurs in the string of causes is going to produce the same effect on the brain, and result in the same reaction in the mind. This is the origin of our errors in our sensations.

5. Conclusion: Due to the composition of the mind and body, there is genuine possibility of error – that is, whenever a “string” is pulled by something else than its regular cause.

4.7.6 Conclusion on the Material World

My sensations are more often truthful than deceitful

Notice that, as expected, we did not get any perfect certainty about our sensations. Just that they are more often truthful than deceitful.

Unlike in the case of our understanding, there is no definite method to reach the truth about how the external bodies affect us.

Rules of thumb for checking on sensations

Still, God has given me means to cross-check my sensations:

- use the various senses
- use memory to tie the sensations together

Out of the dream argument

Coherence between the various faculties that God gave me – and no means to say that it is otherwise. God not being a deceiver, I should be assured that I do not dream

In the 6th Meditation, Descartes has not recovered everything he had put into doubt at the beginning of the *Meditations* concerning the external world.

- What we have recovered are:
 1. The existence of the corporeal substance (extension in time) as existing separately of us and the substance of thought
 2. The (almost always) truthfulness of the teachings of nature concerning the effects of the external bodies on our whole self

- What remains doubtful are
 1. All the inferences I used to make about the properties of the external bodies on the basis of the effect they have on me
 2. Some of the teachings of nature may also be deceitful

4.8 Conclusion on Descartes

What you should be able to explain about Descartes:

Epistemology (theory of knowledge): Descartes' rationalism

1. The method of doubt: what it is and what it is for
2. The criterion of clear and distinct ideas, with the special importance of the full attention of one's mind
 - Intuition is nothing but understanding our innate ideas, which present themselves to the mind as clear and distinct ideas.
 - When we intuit a clear and distinct idea, not only the simple idea is present to the mind, but also its relationships with others clear and distinct ideas: we fully understand the various properties of the triangle when we intuit the triangle.
3. Anything, including the external bodies, is known better through our understanding – that is, through intuition and deduction – than through our senses or feelings

In other word, intuition and deduction allow for a superior kind of knowledge, the only one that gives us certainty: a priori knowledge
4. Truth as certainty: what is subjective in Descartes' notion of truth: without God, truth as certainty is personal and lasts only for the time of the intuition.
5. That God's existence guarantees the eternal truth of clear and distinct ideas
6. The theory of error: the possibility of error arises from our use of the will beyond the understanding. God is not responsible for this for both perfections he gave us is perfect in its kind.
7. Systematism: the entire body of knowledge forms a perfectly ordered system. Any true proposition concerning any subject is logically linked to the rest of true propositions

So, we can, at least in principle, derive the entire body of knowledge by intuition and deduction

(In fact, Descartes gives some role to experience: the role of choosing between two equally possible hypotheses.)

Metaphysics

1. That we are essentially thinking things
2. That we have innate ideas
3. That thought is thus a substance, of which I and the ideas are forms
4. That the corporeal substance is a distinct substance from the mind
5. That the corporeal substance is essentially extension in time
6. That the union of our body and our mind is like a third is another clear idea we have, but which exact content is confused:
 - the teachings of nature, being the result of such union, are reliable concerning how the external bodies affect our own – but not concerning the properties of external bodies themselves.
 - but these teachings are always confused due to the properties of the body and the way the mind and the body interact with one another, and hence can be truly deceitful in some rare cases
7. About free will:
 - will is infinite
 - indifference is the lowest grade of freedom
 - that is, we are all the more free than our choice is constraint by our understanding