

Part II

Rationalists

Chapter 4

Descartes

4.1 Introduction



Figure 4.1: Descartes

4.1.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Descartes, *Meditations*, Letter of Dedication, Preamble, and Meditation 1
- Study Questions:
 1. What are Descartes' main aims in the *Meditations*?
 2. What does it mean that Descartes is foundationalist?
 3. What kind of reasoning does Descartes think is able to lead us to the truth?
 4. Explain how Descartes justifies that he rejects as false “*all* the opinions which [he] had formerly accepted” (my emphasis) even if he does not know for sure that these opinions are all false. To what aim does Descartes decide to reject all his beliefs as false?

5. Reconstruct the argument about dreaming: which kind of knowledge does it allow Descartes to put into doubt?
6. Why does Descartes need to appeal to the hypothesis of an evil genius to reject all his opinions and judgments as doubtful?

4.1.2 Descartes, the Man and the Works

Descartes (1596-1650) :

- High school: La Flèche – best high school in Europe
- Master in law
- Mitigated view on education
- Travels all across Europe to learn from the “great book of the world”
- Settles in Holland, for the tranquility and freedom that this country offers
- Never got married, had a relation with his servant, had one daughter who died at an early age
- Motto: “Bene vixit qui bene latuit”: he has lived well who could escape attention (letter to Mersenne 1634) – extremely cautious: did not publish *The World*, because of Galileo’s troubles with the Church.

Towards his philosophy :

- Dissatisfaction with the Aristotelian philosophy
- Insight that he has to found a new system of philosophy (dreams) – Descartes is radical in his project
- Preference for pragmatic matters (Medicine, Technology and Morals)

Works :

- *Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence* 1629
- *The World* and the *Treatise on man* 1633
- *Discourse on Method* 1637
- *Meditations on First Philosophy* 1640 (Latin) 1647 (French)
- *Principles of Philosophy* 1644
- *The Passions of the Soul* 1649
- Plus an extended correspondence...in particular with Elizabeth

4.1.3 *The Meditations, Aim and Method*

Topic and Style – Metaphysics. Autobiographical style and analytical, by contrast to synthetic, order:

- description of an intellectual journey
- the *Principles* are in synthetic order (textbook)
- analytic order is more appropriate for issues of metaphysics: the topic is so hard that a full involvement and a full attention of the mind is needed. Only the thought in the first person warrants this (See Second Objections and Answers).

Avowed Aim : According to the Preamble: the aim is to provide a definite proof of the existence of God and the separation of the soul from the body

The proof is supposed to be definite because it has as much (if not more) *evidence and certainty* than mathematical proof: something that any mind can understand and take for himself

His ultimate goal is different though, and it is not a small project: p. 25:

“here I am once more to treat the same questions about God and the human mind, together with the starting point of the whole of first philosophy”

Letter to Mersenne (1/18/1641):

“I may tell you, between ourselves, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle”

→ Contrary to the appearances, Descartes is NOT a theologian. His project goes beyond the rational proof of the existence of God and of the distinction between the soul and the body. These two are part of a bigger project, which consists in *giving a definite foundation for the new science*, that is, the scientific knowledge that has developed since the Renaissance. The “First Philosophy” is ultimately supposed to serve as the roots of the entire tree of knowledge (the metaphor is taken from Descartes himself in the Letter-Preface to his *Principles of Philosophy*, another of Descartes’ favorite metaphors: building construction).

Descartes is, in that sense, a foundationalist :

Definition 7 – *Foundationalism*

Foundationalism is the view according to which there exists an absolute foundation of all knowledge. More precisely: all inferential knowledge ultimately rests on self-justified beliefs, on the knowledge of non-inferential propositions.

To say it more simply, we can conceive of our body of knowledge as bunch of propositions. Now we take each proposition to be true because it can be “inferred” (for example, logically deduced) from other propositions. The problem is that not all propositions can be justified this way: we would have an infinite regression. So, how are the core propositions justified? A foundationalist believes that the entire body of knowledge can be inferred from a few propositions which are self-justified, and which thus provide a true foundation for our body of knowledge.

The rational stance – Descartes explains his exclusive commitment to rational reasoning

- Descartes has to defend the project of using rational reasoning for defending the tenets of the Church (by contrast to faith and trust in the authorities)
 - Not for the believer but for the atheists
 - Reason easier and more certain
 - The new method transforms the old arguments into definite demonstrations
- Two requisites for the reader:
 1. to be free of prejudices
 2. to be able to be detached from the senses

That these requisites are rarely fulfilled is an obstacle for the comprehension and acceptance of Descartes’ work.

To fulfill these requisites amounts to adhere to Descartes’ project of deriving an entire system of philosophy from rational reasoning only, from within the individual thinker’s mind and nothing else. The project is to reason from inside.

By contrast, the senses and the prejudices are two *external* origins of thoughts and beliefs. Thoughts which are produced this way are never truly thought through, and the corresponding beliefs are not rationally justified.

- In the Preface (p.24), Descartes repeats the same requisites, but adds one: that his philosophy be considered in order. The notion of order is very important in Descartes’ philosophy. Proper order is the result of proper method. Rational reasoning goes hand in hand with proper order.

4.2 The Cartesian Doubt

4.2.1 The project and the method

Descartes’ general project is to build a new foundation for science : Why? because none of what we take for true is truly rationally justified:

- it comes from our youth, in which sensations are overwhelming and our power of judgment is poor;
- such history of learning is contingent: it does not correspond neither to rational foundation, nor to a rational order (we did not learn what we know by rational deduction).
- SO: we possess body of beliefs, which are neither fully founded, nor properly ordered. Hence, all these beliefs are nothing but prejudices.
- By contrast, the true system of knowledge is both ordered and founded – rationally unified. True foundation and proper order are the true warrants of certainty.

→ *It is important to remember that the ultimate goal of the Cartesian Doubt is not destructive, quite the opposite: it is to found the new science.*

Method: Methodological and hyperbolic doubt : The Cartesian doubt is:

- *universal*: rejects all opinions without exception;
- *hyperbolic* – deliberately excessive: any slightly doubtful proposition is considered false – this is a choice, not a confession of ignorance;
- *radical*: attacks the roots of knowledge, so that the entire edifice collapses.

→ *Is this a reasonable procedure? Does not Descartes throw the baby with the bath water? It seems that, since he rejects some true knowledge as false, he is mistaken and loses precious knowledge. Analogy with a bag of apples, in which some are contaminated (Reply to the Seventh Objection AT 481). The crucial point is that the Cartesian doubt is **methodological***

Descartes uses doubt as a means : his doubt will not have any consequences as far as the normal, everyday life is concerned. He does not cast any true doubt either on his needs to eat or on the institutions. The Cartesian doubt is part of an intellectual procedure, not to be applied practically.

→ *The requisite is to be free from the outside world necessities*

- maturity of mind
- mind in peace (no passion)
- no care
- leisure

See also the before last paragraph: Descartes admits

- that it is difficult to doubt all your beliefs
- that there is much more reasons to believe these opinions than not to believe them

But again, this is not the point: the point is to *use* doubt as a method to found true knowledge.

4.2.2 The senses: The Dream Argument

The foundation of all our current knowledge are the senses – this is a scholastic thesis, which Descartes implicitly attacks here: their truthfulness is thus what is to be rejected first.

- Senses are deceiving: right, but Descartes does not consider this easy and traditional argument as sufficient – it would seem that we can give a list of criteria for having a good perception of something (is that true? what about optical illusions?),
- The dream argument: we could think that appealing to madness is not convincing, but we, sane people, have experienced a kind of “sane madness”: dreams

Now Descartes’ point is that *there is no sufficient criterion to distinguish dream from reality*.

Note that we *have* sufficient criteria to say we are dreaming (you fall from a building and you don’t die, you fly...). But this is not what Descartes is after: he is asking for a criterion which would be sufficient to tell that we are awake! His argument is that there is none.

- Here again, even the slightest doubt is hyperbolized: “Now let us assume that” our representations of the bodies in the external world, as well as my own body, are illusions.
- Note that here again, the doubt is methodological: it is an *assumption*

4.2.3 Mathematical Notions: The Evil Genius Argument

The most fundamental constituents: Extension and Duration – What is left when I take out of my body of knowledge the existence of the external bodies and my own body?

- Representations are made of something

It might seem that the point is that representations being representations of something, there must be something out there for us to be able to have representations at all.

But *this is not* the point here. Descartes is not saying that because there are representations, there must be something in the world which corresponds to our representations. Instead, he remains within the realm of representation.

- Argument by analogy: painting

- painters cannot invent colors // we cannot invent the corporeal nature

Any imaginary representation, even the most inventive there is, represent some bodies.

- The corporeal nature: extension in time; extension has some figure and some magnitude – Beware! This is brand new and anti-Aristotle. Extension, duration,

figure and number are going to be the fundamental attributes of bodies in the Second Meditation. This correspond to the *mechanistic view of the world*: the world is not made of particular substances characterized by specific qualities and function as in Aristotle's view. Rather, the world is extension and duration, both characterized with quantities.

- THUS: the point is that Representations themselves are *made of* something: However crazy is your dream, you still dream of extended stuff in space and time
- SO: There are some notions that are more difficult to doubt than the composed bodies: they correspond to *mathematical notions*, by contrast with natural sciences.

Can we doubt mathematical notions? – The Deceiving God / Evil Genius

- How do I know that God does not deceive me? Again, note that Descartes does not pretend to show that God is deceitful, but only that it is a workable hypothesis in the context of the hyperbolic doubt, by which we commit to take as simply false anything of which we are not completely certain.

Descartes applies the same method here as before: God (just as the senses) deceives me sometimes: therefore I assume He/She is deceiving me all the time

Argument against objection of benevolence: *reductio ad absurdum*

- The case of the atheist:
 - The atheist takes that the origin of the world (and us) is not a God, but rather something less powerful
 - Assumption: the less powerful the “creator”, the less perfect the “creation”
 - So: the atheist has even more reasons to doubt that he or she can reach *any* kind of knowledge.

→ *Is this argument valid? Is it sound?*

Conclusion – nothing is indubitable in my body of knowledge. The entire building is down.

4.2.4 Conclusion: Will and Attention against Habits

The absolute power of doubt is the absolute power of the faculty of judgment, which is also the absolute *power of the will*.

It is certainly a powerful power, but which is always threatened by the *habit* we have to assent to our long cherished opinion. *The full attention* of our mind is required to use our reason. Habits are one of the worse enemy of knowledge according to Descartes – what we do with habits we do without thinking about it.

Even in the hypothesis that there is an evil genius who deceives me in every matter, I possess the liberty to reject whatever he sends to me as true.

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 lead 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.

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 cogitans

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 really 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 truly know 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 not 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 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 distinction 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 truly 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!