

4.6 Rational Truths, the Ontological Argument and the Cartesian Circle

4.6.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Descartes, Fifth Meditation
- Study Questions:
 1. How does Descartes restore the truth of mathematics and Logic? Where does Descartes think these truths come from?
 2. What is metaphysics? What is epistemology?
 3. How do rationalists and empiricists differ concerning their epistemology?
 4. How do rationalists and empiricists differ concerning their metaphysics?
 5. Reconstruct Descartes' proof of the existence of God. What kind of argument is it? What objection can be raised against this kind of argument?

4.6.2 Introduction

The fifth Meditation marks the beginning of the re-construction process. Now that we have :

1. A sure method to attain actual truth: clear and distinct ideas,
2. The assurance that these truths remain true even outside of my full attention (thanks to a truthful God),

we can proceed to reconstruct our knowledge.

Mathematical truths were the last piece of our beliefs of which we doubted the truth (through the hypothesis of an Evil Genius) in the first Meditation. Following the proper method, it is the first one to be restored... Meditation 6 will be devoted to the external world.

Thus, the *Meditations* have a symmetrical construction:

1. destruction: external world, rational truths
2. Finding the method: Cogito and power of the mind
3. Finding the method: Truthful God

4. Answer to objection for the method: explanation of the possibility of error

5. Getting the rational truths back

6. Getting the external world back

So, let us talk about rational truth and innate ideas. This should be the occasion for us to talk for the first time about rationalism vs. empiricism a little seriously.

4.6.3 From the criterion of truth to the rational truths

Get the rational truths back

- Direct application of the method we have found in the 4th meditation: what do I conceive clearly and distinctively?
- Descartes here starts the exploration of all these ideas that are clear and distinct in my mind. Given the criterion above, all these ideas are true. By this, Descartes does not mean that they necessarily correspond to anything in the outside world: *they are true as ideas*.
- Controversial example: Descartes takes the example of the bodies. What do we conceive clearly and distinctly of bodies? Descartes completes here what he began with the piece of wax: the characterization of bodies. Bodies are characterized as having:
 - extension
 - number
 - figure
 - duration
- These are the only properties that I understand fully about bodies. A consequence is that physics, in order to be accurate, should give an account of the physical bodies only in terms of these properties. No appeal to anything else than figure and number in space and time.

→ *According to Descartes, the true physics is geometrical and considers matter as reducible to extension. Only this way can physics be scientific for it then deals with necessary essences, and not contingent beings.*

4.6. RATIONAL TRUTHS, THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT AND THE CARTESIAN CIRCLES

—→ Now that we focus on these clear and distinct ideas in our mind, we can spend some time understanding what they are

Ideas are innate

There are many controversies on the notion of ideas in Descartes: I shall try to give you a rather uncontroversial view.

- Ideas are innate – they are either “in” our understanding, or they are our understanding itself
 - Clear reference to Plato’s doctrine of reminiscence:

Their truth is so open and so much in accord with my nature that, when I first discover them, it seems I am not so much learning something new as recalling something I knew beforehand (45, col.1)

- That said, be careful: Descartes’ ideas are not Plato’s forms, for there are good reasons to take it that *Descartes’ ideas do not exist independently of the mind.*
- One interesting consequence: to grasp the truth of mathematics consists in grasping the evident truth, or certainty, of innate ideas. This talks against any kind of authority: to teach geometry is nothing but to make you aware of, recognize the evidence of, and hence understand the ideas that are already in you mind.
- Even if they do not exist independently of the mind, Descartes’ ideas have a kind of *objective reality* : they are robust and stable. I cannot do everything I want with them. They are not of my fabrication. They have some kind of reality, even if they are, of course, not material (that is, they do not exist in the same manner as the physical objects).

For example, when I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists outside of my thought anywhere in the world and never has, the triangle still has a certain determinate nature, essence, or form which is unchangeable and eternal, which I did not fabricate, and which does not depend on my mind. (45 col 2)

- Answer to objection: rejection of empiricism: I did not get my idea of the triangle from the observation of triangle-shaped stuff in the world.

Argument:

- There are some mathematical notions, of which I haven't seen any example in the world – even awfully imperfect.

- Yet I have a clear and distinct idea of these notions, and I can prove mathematical truths about them

- So, mathematical notions do not originate in my senses

Example: Chiliogon (thousand sides), Imaginary numbers, you name it!

- Conclusion on Innate Ideas in Descartes' philosophy:
 - The mode of existence of ideas in Descartes' philosophy is really controversial. See the article on Descartes' ideas in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy for more details if you want.
 - The most important point is that we end up with innate ideas, which are objective and eternal truths.

4.6.4 Rationalism vs. Empiricism – Round 1

In the discussion above, we touched an important topic for us this semester: the debate between Empiricism and Rationalism. I propose to lay out the essential elements of the debate.

- **Two related questions:**

1. What is the world like?
2. How do we know what the world is like?

1. is a question of *metaphysics*

2. is a question of *epistemology*

Here are the definitions:

4.6. RATIONAL TRUTHS, THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT AND THE CARTESIAN CIRCLES

Definition 8 – Metaphysics

Metaphysics is the sub-discipline within philosophy which studies what the ultimate nature and fundamental constituents of reality. This includes the study of which beings exist and what kind of being they have (how they exist).

meta – after

physics – nature

Definition 9 – Epistemology

Epistemology is the sub-discipline within philosophy which studies the ways in which we know. This includes the study of the processes by which we gain knowledge as well as the nature of the knowledge we gain.

episteme = knowledge

logos = theory/science/study

Your options for answering 1. typically depends on how you answer 2.

- **Two main problems:**

- Rational knowledge and mathematical truths
- The problem of universal

- **Two main options:**

Two main options for epistemology and the related metaphysics in modern philosophy:

1. Empiricism
2. Rationalism

Definition 10 – Empiricism

Empiricism is the view that:

- (epistemology) All knowledge comes from experience
- (metaphysics) The only fundamental constituents of reality are concrete (and observable) particulars

Definition 11 – Rationalism

Rationalism is the view that:

- (epistemology) *Some knowledge comes from another source than experience*
- (metaphysics) *There exists some other kinds of beings in addition to concrete particulars*

longrightrightarrow All this is very rough: let's see what these two views involve in more details

Rationalism vs Empiricism – Epistemology

- **Empiricism**

- What empiricism does and does not involve:
 - * What empiricism DOES NOT involve:
 - that no a priori reasoning is possible
 - that no abstract reasoning is possible
 - * What empiricism DOES involve:
 - that a priori reasonings give us only consistent systems of relations between ideas or concepts.
 - most of the time, that we have no abstract ideas, but rather use our particular ideas in an abstract way.
 - * Most importantly: empiricism generally involves that our knowledge of the world is not perfectly grounded – there is no true foundation for knowledge –
A form of scepticism about our knowledge accompanies empiricism
- The challenge for empiricism: to give an account of abstract knowledge
 - how did we get the Abstract concepts? we have only particular ideas, and abstract reasoning amounts to reason on particular ideas with abstract reasoning
 - how did we get the logical laws?

- **Rationalism**

4.6. RATIONAL TRUTHS, THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT AND THE CARTESIAN CIRCLES

- What rationalism does and does not involve:
 - * What rationalism DOES NOT involve:
 - that all knowledge comes from reason and a priori reasoning: the senses retain an important role. None of the rationalists pretend to deduce the order of the universe in looking solely at the propositions of Logic and Mathematics.
 - that reason is an efficient mean to complete and perfect knowledge – all “rationalists” admit limitations of human abilities.
 - * What rationalism DOES involve:
 - defiance vis à vis the senses
 - there is some knowledge which is outside of the power of the senses
 - reason is the means to that kind of knowledge
 - that kind of knowledge is superior to the one, if any, obtained by the senses
 - that kind of knowledge is knowledge of necessary truths (to be contrasted with contingent truth)
- The challenge for rationalism: if not from experience, where do our knowledge come from?
 - innate ideas?
 - innate propositions?Plus, if we possess innate ideas or innate propositions in our minds:
 - How come we are not aware of them all the time?
 - How can we become aware of them?

Rationalism vs Empiricism – Metaphysics

- **Your metaphysics depends on your epistemology:**
 - typically, you accept in your ontology only what you “know” exists.
 - Knowledge is still defined as justified true belief.
 - So: you accept in your ontology what you have good justification to believe is existent in the world.

Therefore, what you accept or not depends on what you take to be acceptable justification for knowledge. In particular, in the context of

modern philosophy, it depends on whether you are an empiricist or a rationalist.

- **Three important questions for your metaphysics:**

1. What kinds of entities exist: material objects? ideas? universals?
2. How are they related to one another: is the world rationally ordered? are there laws of nature?
3. What is our status (as humans) in this world?

- **Metaphysics for the Empiricist**

- Realism concerning the observable:

The senses are to be trusted: what we observe exist. Hence, the material world exists.

- Agnosticism concerning the unobservable:

- Rule: do not postulate anything existent beyond the observable
- So: do not postulate the existence of unobservable entities (electrons or universals),

Note that this is not saying that electrons do not exist: only that we would better remain agnostic as to the existence of what we cannot observe.

- Nominalism concerning ideas:

- ideas are not postulated as mind-independent entities
- abstract ideas are words: they do not correspond to anything real
- there are no universals

- Concerning the order of the world: 2 options:

- there is an underlying causal order, but it remains unknown to us
- there is no such causal order – no laws of nature and fundamental contingency

- According to your answer to the last question:

- EITHER events in the world are determined and/or necessary
- OR there is room for fundamental contingency (in particular, the regularities may well change)

4.6. RATIONAL TRUTHS, THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT AND THE CARTESIAN CIRCLE

- **Metaphysics for the Rationalist**

- Typically, as a rationalist, you will consider that there is the world is in rational order, that is to say, there are necessary (causal) connections at the fundamental level. So you are very likely to endorse the following views:
 - * Realism about laws of nature – and you have to say how much our scientific laws capture of such laws of nature
 - * Determinism and/or Necessity of the events in the world.
- Now, you may want to take one or several of the following **realist** views.
 - * Realism about the observable material world
 - * Realism about the unobservable entities
 - * Realism about ideas
 - * Realism about universals
 - * Realism about laws of nature – and you have to say how much our scientific laws capture of such laws of nature
 - * The last one implies: Determinism and/or Necessity of the events in the world.
- NOTE: Being a realist concerning X means that you maintain at least that: X exists.
And, in addition, you can maintain that:
 2. X exists independently of minds.

4.6.5 Descartes' ontological argument

- Descartes is going to try to apply the above to the idea of God: just as we can investigate *a priori* the nature and properties of a triangle, we could investigate the nature of properties of God.
In short then: my idea of God contains his existence. Hence God exists.
- Two comparisons:
 - the triangle : I cannot take conceive a triangle without conceiving it such that the sum of its angles equals two right angles;
 - the mountain and the valley: I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley.

- Two objections considered:
 - the mountain and the valley could not exist – the answer is that we did not deduce the existence from the idea but we realized that the idea of God is inseparable from the idea of God
 - it is not necessary to think about God that way – Descartes' answer is to distinguish between :
 - (1) 'it is not necessary to think about God' and,
 - (2) 'it is not necessary, when we think about God, to think about Him that way.'

Descartes accepts (1) but rejects (2). You may never think about God – that is, fully turn your attention to the clear and distinct innate idea of God, but if you do, you must conceive him like Descartes says. The reasoning relies on a true idea of God, not on a fictional one.

Finally, Descartes deploys the following argument: certain rational truths may be hard to grasp for some of us, but that does not make them less clear and distinct to those who manage to see them

Example: right triangle and Pythagores' theorem : the truth of the theorem does not jump on you before you give it your full attention. But once you get it, you cannot deny its absolute truth. That the triangle is right and that the square of the length of the hypotenuse is the sum of the squares of the two other sides are *rationally inseparable*.

Descartes of course believes claims that the same applied to the idea of God and its inseparability from existence.

- Note that this means that the idea of God is a rational truth, just as mathematical notions. This means in turn that we do not need but our reason to understand properly God. No need for any mystic faculty, inspiration or ungrounded faith: reason alone gives the best understanding of God.

—→ *This was Descartes' version of the ontological argument for the existence of God. As I am sure you already realize, there is a lot of question begging in ontological arguments. That said, we should keep in mind that Descartes does not propose an argument based on an arbitrary definition. Instead, his argument is based on his theory of clear and distinct ideas, the truth of which we are compelled to accept by nature whenever we turn our*

4.6. RATIONAL TRUTHS, THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT AND THE CARTESIAN CIRCLE

full attention to it. In short then, Descartes' argument is a refinement of the classical ontological argument, and certainly works better. It is still problematic though, in particular because it admits the possibility of a necessary existence, something Kant will reject for example.

4.6.6 Ontological arguments: history and assessment

Source: Graham Oppy, "Ontological Arguments", SEP

Main idea

Ontological arguments are purely a **a priori argument** – no observation of the world involved.

The main idea is that **the very notion of God implies His existing**. "God", as "God", necessarily exists.

The arguments typically appeal to controversial notions: a priority, necessity...

The arguments also typically appeal to controversial notions as their main premise: the idea of God as perfect being, greatest being...:

Of course, the premises of ontological arguments often do not deal directly with perfect beings, beings than which no greater can be conceived, etc.; rather, they deal with descriptions of, or ideas of, or concepts of, or the possibility of the existence of, these things. However, the basic point remains: **ontological arguments require the use of vocabulary which non-theists should certainly find problematic when it is used in ontologically committing contexts** (i.e not inside the scope of prophylactic operators such as "according to the story" or "by the lights of theists" or "by the definition" which can be taken to afford protection against unwanted commitments). (Oppy, my emphasis)

History

Saint Anselm of Canterbury (11th century): God:= *a being than which no greater can be conceived* must exist, otherwise something greater exists.

Descartes: God:= *a supremely perfect being* cannot lack existence.

Leibniz add to Decartes’s argument, that the idea of all perfections co-existing together in a single being – the idea is coherent.

Best Criticism: I. Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason* – existence is not a “predicate” (more later...)

20th: still vivid discussion:

On the one hand, Kurt Gödel, Charles Hartshorne, Norman Malcom, Alvin Plantinga – modal ontological argument.

On the other hand: Lewis.

Taxonomy

According to the taxonomy of Oppy (1995), there are seven major kinds of ontological arguments, viz:

1. **definitional ontological arguments**
2. **conceptual (or hyperintensional) ontological arguments**
3. **modal ontological arguments**

From Oppy:

“ [...] Examples of each follow. These are mostly toy examples. But they serve to highlight the deficiencies which more complex examples also share.

1. God is a being which has every perfection. (This is true as a matter of definition.) Existence is a perfection. Hence God exists.

2. I conceive of a being than which no greater can be conceived. If a being than which no greater can be conceived does not exist, then I can conceive of a being greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived namely, a being than which no greater can be conceived that exists. I cannot conceive of a being greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived. Hence, a being than which no greater can be conceived exists.

3. It is possible that that God exists. God is not a contingent being, i.e., either it is not possible that God exists, or it is necessary that God exists. Hence, it is necessary that God exists. Hence, God exists. (See Malcolm (1960), Hartshorne (1965), and Plantinga (1974) for closely related arguments.)”

4.6. RATIONAL TRUTHS, THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT AND THE CARTESIAN CIRCLE

(I took out a few of the kinds of arguments distinguished by Oppy for simplicity)

4.6.7 Objections to the ontological argument

Ontological arguments are not persuasive

... even if they have fascinated philosophers for centuries...

Problems are:

- sometimes: invalid
- pretty much all the time: premises that only theists would accept – unsound

From Oppy again:

(1) Definitional arguments: - Ontologically committing vocabulary is introduced solely via a definition.

- Question begging: The inference from ‘By definition, God is an existent being’ to ‘God exists’ is patently invalid; while the inference to By definition, God exists is valid, but uninteresting. In the example given earlier, the premises licence the claim that, as a matter of definition, God possesses the perfection of existence. But, as just noted, there is no valid inference from this claim to the further claim that God exists.

(2) Conceptual arguments: Ontologically committing vocabulary is introduced solely within the scope of hyperintensional operators (e.g. believes that, conceives of, etc.).

Often, these operators have two readings,

1. one of which can cancel ontological commitment,
2. and the other of which cannot.

- On the reading which can give cancelation (as in the most likely reading of John believes in Santa Claus), the inference to a conclusion in which the ontological commitment is not canceled will be invalid.

- On the reading which cannot cancel ontological commitment (as in that reading of John thinks about God which can only be true if there is a God to think about), the premises are question-begging: they incur ontological commitments which non-theists reject.

In our sample argument, the claim, that I conceive of an existent being than which no greater being can be conceived, admits of the two kinds of readings just distinguished. On the one hand, on the reading which gives cancelation, the inference to the conclusion that there is a being than which no greater can be conceived is plainly invalid. On the other hand, on the reading in which there is no cancelation, it is clear that this claim is one which no reasonable, etc. non-theist will accept: if you doubt that there is a being than which no greater can be conceived, then, of course, you doubt whether you can have thoughts about such a being.

Modal arguments: Arguments with premises which concern modal claims about God, i.e., claims about the possibility or necessity of God's attributes and existence.

Suppose that we agree to think about possibility and necessity in terms of possible worlds: a claim is possibly true just in case it is true in at least one possible world; a claim is necessarily true just in case it is true in every possible world; and a claim is contingent just in case it is true in some possible worlds and false in others.

Some theists hold that God is a necessarily existent being, i.e., that God exists in every possible world. Non-theists do not accept the claim that God exists in the actual world. Plainly enough, non-theists and necessitarian theists disagree about the layout of logical space, i.e., the space of possible worlds.

The sample argument consists, in effect, of two premises: one which says that God exists in at least one possible world; and one which says that God exists in all possible worlds if God exists in any. It is perfectly obvious that no non-theist can accept this pair of premises. Of course, a non-theist can allow if they wish that there are possible worlds in which there are contingent Gods. However, it is quite clear that no rational, reflective, etc. non-theist will accept the pair of premises in the sample argument.

Parodies... for fun

Again from Oppy:

4.6. RATIONAL TRUTHS, THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT AND THE CARTESIAN CIRCLE

(1) By definition, God is a non-existent being who has every (other) perfection. Hence God does not exist.

(2) I conceive of a being than which no greater can be conceived except that it only ever creates N universes. If such a being does not exist, then we can conceive of a greater being namely, one exactly like it which does exist. But I cannot conceive of a being which is greater in this way. Hence, a being than which no greater can be conceived except that it only ever creates N universes exists.

(3) It is possible that God does not exist. God is not a contingent being, i.e., either it is not possible that God exists, or it is necessary that God exists. Hence it is not possible that God exists. Hence God does not exist.

And a recent one:

There are some very nice parodic discussions of Ontological Arguments in the literature. A particularly pretty one is due to Raymond Smullyan, in *5000 BC and Other Philosophical Fantasies*, in which the argument is attributed to "the unknown Dutch theologian van Dollard". A relatively recent addition to the genre is described in Grey (2000), though the date of its construction is uncertain. It is the work of Douglas Gasking, one time Professor of Philosophy at the University of Melbourne (with emendations by William Grey and Denis Robinson):

1. The creation of the world is the most marvellous achievement imaginable.
2. The merit of an achievement is the product of (a) its intrinsic quality, and (b) the ability of its creator.
3. The greater the disability or handicap of the creator, the more impressive the achievement.
4. The most formidable handicap for a creator would be non-existence.
5. Therefore, if we suppose that the universe is the product of an existent creator, we can conceive a greater being namely, one who created everything while not existing.

6. An existing God, therefore, would not be a being than which a greater cannot be conceived, because an even more formidable and incredible creator would be a God which did not exist.
7. (Hence) God does not exist.

4.6.8 Conclusion: Closing the Cartesian Circle

Closing the Circle: Rational truths and the foundations of true science

At the end of the 5th Meditation, Descartes “closes the circle”:

- Without God, I get the evident truth of clear and distinct ideas for the time I focus my full attention on them.
- But as soon as I turn attention from them, I cannot know their truths anymore:
 - “And thus I would never have true and certain knowledge about anything, but merely fickle and changeable opinions” if I were “ignorant of God”
 - Thanks to the existence of God, we can be sure that our clear and distinct ideas are eternal and necessary truths. The memory that I have focussed my attention on a clear and distinct idea, associated with the truthfulness of God, guarantees that this idea is necessarily and eternally true.

This in turn proved that a true and well founded science about rational truths is possible – which was one the main aims of the whole Meditations.

A circular argument?

Beware of the so-called “Cartesian circle”.

- A quick reading could make you think that Descartes’ account, from the third to the fifth Meditation, is circular, and viciously circular:
 1. the existence of a truthful God relies on the truth of clear and distinct ideas
 2. the truth of clear and distinct ideas relies on the existence of a truthful God
- There might be difficulties and controversies on how to make sense of these two claims, but if there is something which is *not* controversial in the literature, it is that the construal above is *not* adequate to characterize Descartes’ argumentation.

4.6. RATIONAL TRUTHS, THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT AND THE CARTESIAN CIRCLE

- The two claims above form a vicious circle only if the “truth of clear and distinct ideas” is construed in the same way in both. This is, of course, what Descartes does not.
- In particular, the ontological argument is not what closes the reasoning about clear and distinct ideas: it is a consequence of it. The arguments which are supposed to guarantee the eternal truth of the clear and distinct ideas are the arguments in the Third Meditation (The argument from the objective reality of the idea of God and the cosmological argument).
- What is the point of the ontological argument then? Descartes really believes that he is deploying the essence of God, as he would not for the essence of the triangle. The point is not so much to prove the existence of God than to achieve the best knowledge of Him.
- Back to the so-called circle, there are various interpretations, here is the one I favor:
 1. the existence of a truthful God relies on the truth of clear and distinct ideas, which are certain because evident whenever I conceive them with my full attention
 2. the eternal truth of clear and distinct ideas relies on the existence of a truthful God
- This interpretation takes it that clear and distinct ideas are subject to the evil genius argument, but only when my full attention is not on the clear and distinct ideas. However, whenever my full attention is devoted to them, then I am compelled by my nature to accept them.
- On the other hand, only the existence of a truthful God gives me the *eternal truth* of my clear and distinct ideas: the atheist could find the truth of geometry, but could not construct a full bodied well grounded science, for he would have to rely on his memory for this. Only the believer is assured of the eternal truth of mathematics.

→ *At the end of Meditation 5 then, we have recovered the entirety of the a priori sciences (essentially logic and mathematics). The foundation we needed for doing so is the clear and distinct intuitions associated with the truthfulness of God. What remains to be recovered is the external world, and with it, the empirical sciences (physics, biology etc).*

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. How should we understand Descartes' claim that our mind do *not* relate to our body like "a pilot in a vessel"?
 5. What exactly do my sensation of the external bodies tell me about these bodies?
 6. 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?
 7. 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 minds 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! → *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)

→ *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

→ *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

