

4.7 The Material World

4.7.1 Readings and Study questions

- Readings: Descartes, Meditation VI
- Study questions:
 1. What does Descartes mean when he talks about the material things as “the objects of pure mathematics”?
 2. What is so special about imagination that tells us that we can said that body exists?
 3. Descartes, p.117-120 (top) (From “And first of all” to “most obscure and confused) draws a list of 1. what we should accept as a teaching of the senses, 2. what we should continue to doubt about. Write down the two lists.
 4. How does Descartes finally reject the dreaming argument? Is it convincing?

4.7.2 Introduction

- **Two different thesis 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.

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 then considered the following argument (and rejected it): we must admit the existence of the external bodies as the causes of my ideas of them. 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 consistently 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
- At the very end: out of the dream argument? Again truthful God. Or relaxed epistemic context?

4.7.3 The existence of some external stuff

- The material things as **the object of pure mathematics**
 What does this mean? Remember the last 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 in space and time. Descartes holds that matter is ultimately reducible to just this: matter in space and time.

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

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

- 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 give an account of our faculty of imagination.

Note that the existence of some external stuff 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.

He has two arguments in the two paragraphs that follow.

- A big difference between imagination and intellect:

Claim to argue for (conclusion):

I clearly recognize that I have need of a particular effort of mind in order to effect the act of imagination, such as I do not require in order to understand, and this particular effort of mind clearly manifests the difference which exists between imagination and pure intellection.

The argument is based on the example of how we can conceive vs. imagine:

- the triangle or the pentagon
- the chiliagon (1000 sides) and the myriagon (10000 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”.

- 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
 2. 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, we have good reasons to believe that the body exists, but no decisive argument – only with good probability
- Whether some external stuff exists 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, and hence, 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. What reasons I had to doubt these beliefs
 3. What, among these beliefs, I can take as true, and what I should reject as highly doubtful

4.7.4 What we formerly took as true from the senses and why we rejected these beliefs

Former beliefs and reasons for them

- Here is a list of what I took to exist as a teaching from what I took to be my senses:
 1. our body
 2. pleasure, pains and other feelings

NOTE : feelings vs. emotions: an emotion is the result of a feeling's being processed by the brain. Various emotions can rise from similar feelings: for example, pain can result in either joy vs. sadness or fear vs. anger.

In Descartes' vocabulary: emotions are called passions
 3. appetites and passions
 4. secondary qualities of bodies
 5. that these qualities pertain to external bodies
- I had good reasons to do so:
 1. sensations do not depend on my will
 2. sensations are vivid
 3. I have no other means (for most cases) than sensations to judge the existence and qualities of bodies
 4. I even took every thought to be deriving from my senses
 5. and I took all this to be the teachings of "nature"

Under what reasons we doubted these beliefs

1. Senses are deceitful: towers and illusions
2. Feelings are deceitful: pain in a cut off leg
3. Dreaming argument
4. Evil Genius

5. Nature is not always a good guide – find an example !
6. I could have some unconscious faculty thanks to which I would be the cause of my sensations and feelings without being aware of it

4.7.5 What to take back as true

Descartes' strategy to prove the existence of the external material world is to prove that the external, material world is different from 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 body is thus essential for Descartes' argument.

Distinction body / mind

- Descartes' argument is based on the principle:
It is sufficient to be able to 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 in the case I have a body that I call mine, I as essentially a thinking thing am separated from it.
- Consequences:
 - I am not my body and my body is not me
 - We are mind before we are humans

My body and other bodies

- Imagination and feeling are modes of thought: their existence in me do not require the existence of anything else but me
- Moving, and changing place, however, requires the existence of an external, presumably corporeal, substance

- Passive feelings require the existence of an external substance
 - We have proved that something external exists. What can it be?
 1. God
 2. Bodies
 3. Some other creature
 - On the basis that God is not a deceiver, Descartes argues that options 1 and 3 are unacceptable
 - We have reached the conclusion that the corporeal substance exists on the basis of two main premise:
 1. God is not a deceiver
 2. There is nothing in me (as a thinking thing) that I am not aware of.
 - Finally, appealing again to the premise that God is not a deceiver, Descartes argues that *we should trust the teachings of nature*
- The main point to understand is that God has not given us the means to correct our tendency to believe in the existence of the material world.

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
- we live the union of body and mind as a third substance
- such union is confused and unknowable because it comes from our feelings

4.7.6 The significance of the teachings of nature

There is nothing in external bodies which is similar to my sensations and feelings

- Example

- Void (!!)
- Heat and colors
- Nature only teaches me what to avoid and what to seek: nature thus tells me about *bodies as they related to mine*. I should not make any further judgment about the nature of external bodies.

We have to take sensations and feelings as true, but only as reflecting the relation between the bodies and ours, as teaching us how the external bodies affect our bodies. We cannot go further and infer that whatever nature tells us about the bodies is true of the bodies.

A difficulty: the case of the hydropic

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

- 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 error why errors so conceived are not God's responsibility.

- The dropsical body is a defective machine
 - Analogy with the clock
 - Notice the *mechanical model of the body*
 - a “real error of nature”
- Answer:
 - difference between body and mind : divisible / indivisible
 - body : continuity in spacetime – there are always intervals in any causal process
 - it is all for the best that one kind of movement correspond to one kind of mind reaction, that is, the one which is most often the best for our health
 - any problem that occurs in the chain is going to produce the same effect on the brain, and result in the same reaction in the mind.

4.7.7 Out of the dream argument

Two interpretations

- Epistemic context: Descartes can relax his requirements
- 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

