

## OVERVIEW OF THE *MEDITATIONS*

A. Overall title: *Meditations on First Philosophy: In Which the Existence of God and the Distinction between the Soul and the Body are Demonstrated*

The explicit goal is ontological, to show the existence of God and the relation of Soul or Mind and Body.

The implicit goal is to ground his mechanistic (non-Aristotelian) physics (and to show it is compatible enough with Church doctrine for him not to get in trouble with the Counter-Reformation Church like Galileo did– cf the 30 Years War as context).

B. Structure of the *Meditations*

1. Hyperbolic Doubt and the evil genius
2. Self as Thinking Thing; the piece of wax; intellect not sensation is ground of knowledge; self-knowledge of mind
3. Existence of God
4. Clear and Distinct Ideas as criterion of truth
5. Nature of corporeal existence; another proof of God's existence
6. Understanding vs imagination; Mind is distinct from, yet joined to, the body, forming a union

### *MEDITATIONS 1:*

"Concerning Those Things That Can Be Called Into Doubt"

(Hyperbolic doubt and the evil genius)

In order to find certain basis for knowledge, D wants to doubt not just what is apparently false, but even that which is not absolutely certain.

Hence he departs on three arguments for this "hyperbolic" (extreme) doubt.

1. Sensory illusion:
  - a. D says folks like this are insane, suffering from brain disorders (note that sensation is bodily).
  - b. D would have to be mad like them to use this as a method of doubt
2. Dreaming inducing illusion:
  - a. This gets rid of "composite things" / physical objects (physics, astronomy, medicine)
  - b. but arithmetic and geometry remain:
    - i. simplest and most general things
    - ii. shape, size, number, place, time (duration)
  - c. Common / residual opinion about God's veracity

3. The evil genius
  - a. Doubting the external world's existence, yet affirming the existence of false beliefs about the world as "bedeviling hoaxes of my dreams"
  - b. Doubting the body's existence, yet affirming the existence of false beliefs
  - c. But Descartes is lazy and falls back into his old opinions

*MEDITATIONS 2:*

"The Nature of the Human Mind: That It Is Better Known Than the Body":

(The thinking things, and the wax experiment)

A. First off is an extremely famous argument, usually called the "cogito" ("I think").

It boils down to this: even if I am deceived as to the object of my ideas (I think the world and the body exist) I cannot be deceived about the existence of the act of thinking, while I am thinking. Thus, "I am, I exist" is "necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind."

Two objections:

Is Descartes warranted in using "I"? Shouldn't he only be certain if he says that "thinking is happening" even when deceived about the existence of the objects of the thought?

Or, if you accept that there must be a thinker in order for thinking to happen, is Descartes warranted in identifying himself with that thinker, rather than just "a thinker exists when thinking is happening"?

B. Next, Descartes wants to know the nature of the "I" that necessarily exists whenever the activity of thought (even when one is deceived about the existence of the object of the thought) is going on. Here again he wants absolute certainty in his self-knowledge.

So he's going to reject Aristotle's "rational animal" which Descartes previously accepted (and now sees is just a doubtful opinion).

He's also going to examine habitual thoughts about himself:

1. that he had a body
  - a. shape
  - b. place
  - c. excludes other bodies from its space
  - d. perceptible
  - e. being moved (not by itself – passive matter)
2. that he has an (Aristotelian) soul
  - a. to which he attributes vegetative, sensory, and rational capacities
  - b. and whose nature he imagines as a rarified physical material

If he applies the evil genius criterion, he rejects habitual notions of body and vegetative, locomotive, and sensory capacities of the Aristotelian soul.

BUT with thinking, he's found his point of certainty! I am, I exist holds as long as he is thinking. He is "nothing but a thinking thing." *A res cogitans*.

And what are the activities that go under "thought"?

Purely mental: doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, refusing, "and also" imagining and sensing.

There is a unifying subject, an "I" underlying all these different activities: I doubt, I understand, I imagine, I sense (that is, I "seem" to see, hear, feel). AND, this "I" or unifying subject is NOT an object of the imagination (that is, the "I" is not a corporeal object, but only the object of rational thought).

C: The wax example. How is physical nature known?

There are many twists and turns here, but the main points are that the essence of physical bodies is extension and that understanding and not sensation is the ground of our knowledge of physical bodies.

Extension as essence of physical things is tied in with Descartes' project for a mechanistic physics. What does "essence" mean here? Everything about the wax can change except that it is extended: essence of something is what doesn't change and hence provides the ground for that which changes. Extension can be known intellectually, whereas qualities like colors and tastes and smells can't; they are like clothes, and must be "stripped" to reveal the "nakedness" of physical things, that is, extension as essence.

So in terms of Descartes' project of replacing Aristotelian physics, there are no substantial forms (the essence of a horse cannot be extracted from consideration of the horse; there is no "horseness") or final causes (horses are created by God to give people useful tools for transportation or food growing), just pieces of raw extended matter bumping into themselves and forming / dissolving composite objects. That is, there is no horseness, even if there are material objects composed in such a way to yield horses; and if we can use horses, that's just a lucky accident and not the result of God's beneficent plan.

Perception is not sensation, but is really "an inspection on the part of the mind alone." When perception / understanding concentrates on extension as essence of physical things, then its ideas are clear and distinct.

At the end, is a very important conclusion: once I realize that perception is not sensation or imagination but is really understanding, then I realize that my mind is the prime object of perception, that which is most clearly and distinctly perceived / understood. I am more certain about my mind than I am about physical nature.

*MEDITATIONS 3*

RECAP: goal of the *Meditations*: provide the metaphysical foundations for a mechanistic science. In a famous image from the *Principles* (written just after the *Meditations*), Descartes talks about the "tree of knowledge": metaphysics (knowledge of God and the soul – its distinction from the body) is the roots; physics is the trunk; and the particular sciences (among them medicine and morals) are the branches.

I) MOTIVATING THE ARGUMENT FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE: how can we expand the circle of certainty beyond the point of the cogito?

D reviews the finding of yesterday: he is a think that thinks; this is the extent of what he knows with certainty, what cannot be doubted.

He now finds he has a criterion for truth: when he knows the *cogito*, he has a "clear and distinct perception of what I affirm."

He then proposes as a general rule that whatever he has a clear and distinct perception of is true.

But then he remembers he used to feel certain about a lot of things, sensory images as coming from external things, and truths of mathematics.

He then recalls the evil genius: he might have fooled me about sensory images, and even about math (even if he couldn't fool me about the existence of the activity of thought).

But doubt of math via the evil genius is "very tenuous, and, so to speak, metaphysical."

So let's see if we can remove the evil genius as basis for doubt: does God exist, and is he a deceiver? If we can prove that He exists and that He is not a deceiver, we can expand the circle of certainty beyond the *cogito* and provide a metaphysical foundation for the sciences. The cogito is the point of certainty that survives the hyperbolic doubt occasioned by the thought of the evil genius, but unless we can establish God's existence and trustworthiness, we're stuck at the point of the *cogito* with nowhere to go.

II) WHAT KINDS OF THOUGHTS DO I HAVE?

Many thoughts are "ideas" or images of things. They represent things; they stand in for them.

There are other thoughts that take different forms, for example, when I will, or fear, or affirm, or deny, there is some thing that I grasp as the subject of my thought, yet I embrace in my thought something more than the likeness of that thing. Some of these thoughts are called volitions or affects, and others are called judgments.

[Or in another translation: "though I always perceive something as the subject of the action of my mind, yet by this action I always add something else to the idea which I

have of that thing; and of the thoughts of this kind some are called volitions or affections, and others judgments."]

Other thoughts are acts of willing, fearing, affirming, or denying. These are complex: there is an object (a house, a lion, a person ...), AND "something more" than this thought-about object. This "something more" can be 1) a "volition" or desire; 2) an "affect" or emotion; 3) a "judgment" or a "truth stance" (I'm making up this term) toward that object.

Volition or desire: I can want to a) build a house, or b) run away from a lion, or c) get a date with this person.

Affect or emotion: I can be a) awestruck by a house; b) be afraid of a lion; or c) be happy that this person wants to go out with me.

Judgment: I can a) affirm that this is a house I'm looking at; b) deny that that sound in the distance is a roar of a lion; c) be uncertain whether my friends think it's a good idea that I go out with this person.

This concept of complex ideas (objects plus "something more") will have distinguished descendants.

In the analytic tradition, complex ideas will be called "propositional attitudes." There are lots of different positions here, but by way of introduction, let's say this.

First, by convention, we write "p" for a "proposition," a statement that is true if certain states of affairs obtains. For instance, "p" could be "I win the lottery." That proposition is true if I really did win the lottery. So "p" is the analytic way of talking about what Descartes means by the object of the idea. It's what happens to ideas once the "linguistic turn" is taken. Ideas for the early analytics are thoughts whose contents are propositions; that is, ideas are statements whose truth conditions depend upon states of affairs; they aren't pictures of things, as they are for Descartes.

Now, let's talk about the "something more." Here the syntax is "Subject-Verb-that p." For instance, "I desire that p" means, "I want the state of affairs that makes "p" true to happen" or "I want "p" to be a true statement." Those are both equivalent to "I want to win the lottery."

There are many interesting passages in the phenomenological tradition dealing with what the analytics call "propositional attitudes," but I'll leave that to you for further study.

### III) THOUGHTS BY THEMSELVES VERSUS THOUGHTS AS REPRESENTATIONS.

So, first, let's go back to "ideas" as images of external things. By themselves (just as an image that appears to me, rather than as an image making a claim that the external thing exists and is like the image) they are neither true nor false.

The same thing with desires and emotions; even if I desire or fear / love evil or non-existent things, it's true that I desire or fear / love that evil or imaginary thing (to own a unicorn, let's say).

So, what about judgments? Here there's a place for me to make a mistake, especially when I judge that the ideas (images) are like the external things they represent.

#### IV) KINDS OF IDEAS

This is a complex section, but basically what's important for us is that ideas that seem to come from outside me aren't completely trustworthy: 1) they could actually come from a hidden faculty inside me; 2) they might not resemble their objects. So it's really only been an untested habit that I've had that makes me think representations are trustworthy.

#### V) SOME TECHNICAL TERMS

##### A) Formal and objective reality

Formal reality of a thing = the reality of the thing as it exists in the universe

Formal reality of an idea = its mere existence as a mental act (as a mode of a mind; see below)

Objective reality of an idea = the "level" of formal reality of the object of the idea, that is, the formal or existent reality of what the idea represents.

##### B) Substance / attribute / mode or accident; and finite vs infinite substance

These terms will be crucial to Spinoza. For now, let's just say that for Descartes

Substance = that which exists of its own accord, exists independently of other things. There are two kinds of finite substance for Descartes, body and mind; God is an infinite substance.

Attribute = the most basic way a substance exists, the essence of a substance; it's that which stays the same even when modes change. Extension is the attribute of bodily substance, and thought is the attribute of mind or soul, thinking substance.

Mode (or "accident") = that which exists only in relation to a substance; that which "modifies" a substance; it's a way that the attribute of a substance is changed. For instance, a particular shape is a mode of a physical substance; you never get shapes except as modes of physical things. And, a particular thought is a mode of a thinking thing; you never get thoughts without a thinker (recall Med II).

For physical things ("bodily substances"), their attribute, the fundamental way they exist, is extension (remember the piece of wax). So when a bodily substance changes its shape, size, or motion, its modes change, but its attribute, extension, stays the same; whatever shape, size, or motion a physical thing has, it stays an extended thing.

For minds or souls, their attribute, the fundamental way they exist is thinking; (remember the beginning of Med II; the essence of mind or soul is not vegetative, locomotive, or rational powers; nor is it a mist or otherwise rarefied physical thing; rather, the essence of mind is thought). So even when a mind changes its modes, that is, it thinks different thoughts with different contents (now I'm thinking of a house, and now a lion ...), it stays a thinking thing.

Having said that, though, here's a twist: a finite substance for Descartes depends on God, which is an infinite substance and doesn't depend on anything else.

You will notice that the attribute of thought and the attribute of extension don't really have anything in common (there are some technical issues here about duration, number, unity, and so on, but let's let that go for the time being). So if extension is the attribute of bodily substance and thought the attribute of mind or thinking substance, then the problem of their interaction arises.

Descartes was pushed on this problem by Princess Elisabeth in their correspondence after the publication of the *Meditations*. In his last book, the *Passions of the Soul*, he elaborates his theory of the pineal gland, the organ of the brain where the "animal spirits" (we would probably say "neuronal firing patterns") of the body can affect the mind and vice versa. So Descartes is a dualist, who accepts interaction of mind and body. (Some modern folks are dualists, but not interactionists. For them, mind is "epiphenomenal": it's different from the brain but it can't affect the brain either; it's like the steam whistle of a locomotive, or like the shadow cast by a body: it's produced by the body, but doesn't affect the body.)

We're going to see how Spinoza tackles this problem later on: accepts that thought and extension are the two main attributes human beings can access, but for him they are (two of the infinite) attributes of the single substance God, and don't interact, but are "parallel." It's an amazing doctrine, and we'll see how it works later.

## VI) CAUSAL THEORY OF REPRESENTATIVE IDEAS AND THE "GREAT CHAIN OF BEING"

Next, Descartes says that there must be as much (formal or existent) reality in the cause of something as in the effect. This implies something like a hierarchy of reality of things: some are more real or more perfect than others. If something lacks something, it's less perfect than what doesn't lack it. For instance, a plant has a power of nutrition, but it lacks the power of locomotion, so it's less perfect than an animal, which has what the plant has (nutrition), plus something else.

This hierarchy of perfection is often called the "Great Chain of Being." At the top of the Chain would be what is perfect, what lacks nothing – God, the infinite substance. At the bottom would be a mode of a finite substance: say a shape that a piece of wax has for just a minute as it's carried nearer or farther away from a candle.

He will then say that representative ideas must come from – be caused by – things that have as much formal or existent reality as the objective reality of the idea. (Remember that an

idea has an object; the level of reality of the object of the idea is different from 1] the formal or existent reality of the idea, its existence as a mental act; and 2] is also different from the reality of the thing as it exists in the universe, the formal reality of the thing.)

So, if Descartes has the idea of "other men, or animals, or angels" in him, he could be the author of those ideas, mixing and matching from his other ideas.

But if Descartes has the idea of a perfect God in him, he can't be the author of that idea because he's not perfect (he makes mistakes, he's going to die, he can't create the universe). Therefore, since Descartes does have that idea, and it wasn't able to be created by him, it must have come from outside him, and it must come from something that has as much reality or perfection as in the object of the idea. Since that objective reality is perfect, the thing that causes that idea must itself be perfect, that is, God. Thus it must be that God, the cause of Descartes's idea of God, exists, and is perfect.

[Skipping the objections and replies]: And if God is perfect, that means He is not a deceiver, since "by the light of nature" it's clear that deception relies on a defect.

[Anticipating Med IV]: If God is not a deceiver, then I can trust the criterion of clear and distinct perception, even when it goes beyond the *cogito*.

Before he moves on, Descartes says something we will come back to in Spinoza: contemplation of God provides us "the greatest pleasure of which we are capable in this life."



Descartes, *Meditations* III, Causal-Representational Proof for the Existence of God

PRELIM: "Ideas" for Descartes are representations, something like an image or picture of the thing that is represented.

So we have four things to keep distinct:

1. The mind, which houses ideas.
2. The ideas, as psychological events.
3. The content of the idea, that is, the representations (the pictures) of things in the world.
4. The thing in the world that is represented (and that is judged to cause the ideas).

-- SEE DIAGRAM BELOW --

FIRST STEP: There must be as much (formal or existent) reality in the cause of something as in the effect.

To understand this, we have to understand two things: 1) the term "formal reality"; and 2) the implicit presupposition of levels of reality.

- a. "Formal reality" is paired with "objective reality."
  - a. Formal reality is the reality of a thing as it exists.
    - i. The formal reality of thing in the world.
    - ii. The formal reality of an idea as psychological event.
  - b. Objective reality: the reality of the representational content of the idea. This corresponds to, though is distinct from, the formal reality of the thing that is represented.
- b. Levels of reality: This is sometimes called "The Great Chain of Being," the idea that there is a hierarchy of levels of reality. If something lacks something, it's less perfect – it's less real – than what doesn't lack it. For instance, a rock has only existence. A plant has existence and nutrition. An animal has existence, nutrition, locomotion, and sensibility. A human has (limited, mortal) existence, (sometimes faulty) nutrition, (declining power of) locomotion, (sometimes fallible) sensibility, (sometimes misled) judgment, and (sometimes misled) reason. Angels have existence, locomotion, sensibility, reason, and immortality. God has all that, and more, and all that in a perfect way.

SECOND STEP: I habitually judge that ideas are caused by the thing in the world that they represent.

THIRD STEP: So, putting the first and second step together, an idea must have been caused by a thing that has as much formal (existing) reality as there is objective (representational content) reality in the idea.

FOURTH STEP: Descartes surveys his ideas and finds that he could have invented almost all of them.

- a. That is, his level of reality as an existing / thinking, thing is such that he has as much formal reality as there is objective reality in (the representational content of) his ideas of rocks, plants, animals, other men, (and even angels).
- b. That is, he could put together innate ideas of substance, extension, thinking, and duration, and experiential (adventitious) ideas of other things, and create the ideas.
- c. So his judgment that those ideas come from outside (are caused by the things that are represented in his ideas) is habitual and doubtful.

(Remember the reason for Med 3: Descartes must prove the existence of a trustworthy God so that he can apply his criterion of clear and distinct understanding beyond the point of absolute indubitable certainty, the cogito. Only when he's able to be certain about things other than the cogito can he build his mechanistic science.)

FIFTH STEP: But Descartes has an idea of a perfect being, an infinite substance, God.

- a. Descartes as an imperfect thinking thing doesn't have the level of formal reality necessary to have invented an idea with the representational content or objective reality of a perfect God.
- b. Since a cause must have the level of formal reality of its effect, and things as causes of ideas must have at least the level of formal reality as in the objective reality of the idea, then the idea of God must have been caused by an existing perfect being

CONCLUSION: therefore God exists as perfect being

