

Class Three - Descartes' Second Meditation

Philosophical Perspectives II - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Quick Recap

- **The Task of the Meditations:** Call everything that can possibly be doubted into doubt, demolishing everything, so as to be able to rebuild on rock-solid foundations.
- **Doubting All Sensory Experience:** We can imagine that we're dreaming, and so it seems that we can't know with certainty any of the objects that we seem to know through sensory experience.
- **Doubting Even More than That:** Even things that seem like we can know in a dream, we can call into doubt by imagine an all-powerful evil demon who gets us to believe such things as $2+3=5$ even when it in fact doesn't.
- **Where we're left:** It seems like we're in a whirlpool there's *nothing* we can grab onto, nothing with certainty that we can take hold of to start to climb our way out.

2 One Thing I cannot doubt

- **The Minimal Task:** Perhaps I can get out of doubt "if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable," (20).
- **Starting with Doubt Itself:** I've doubted everything I can possibly doubt. Operating on the principle that, if something can be doubted I will doubt it, "I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it follow that I too do not exist?"
- **Thinking Entails Being:** "No: if I convinced myself of something [or thought anything at all] then I certainly existed."
- **The Limits of the Power of the Evil Demon:** [L]et him deceive me as much as he can, he will
- **The Famous Expression of this Point:** Last class, I misremembered that the famous "cogito ergo sum" ("I think therefore I am") appeared in the *Meditations*. This is the most famous place where he discusses the argument summed up by that statement, but it actually doesn't appear here. It appears in French in *Discourse on Method*. The famous Latin statement of the "cogito" appears only in *The Search for Truth by Natural Light*, an posthumously published dialogue (of which we only have a part) written after the *Meditations*:

"dubito, ergo sum—vel, quod idem est—cogito, ergo sum" ("I doubt, therefore I am—or what is the same—I think, therefore I am.")

3 Descartes' Minimal Conception of Self

- **Not a Rational Animal:** Intuitively, I'm inclined to think of myself as a human being, a "rational animal" as Aristotle said. Recall Aristotle's conception of the human being:
 - **Living things:** Engage in nutrition, growth, and reproduction.

- **Animals:** Engaged in living activity (eating and reproducing) by perceiving the environment and actively going about about it, finding food, running away from predators, and so on.
- **Rational Animals:** Engage in perceptive and activity, *rationally*, perceiving reasons and acting for reasons.

But Descartes, doubting that he even has a body, cannot think he is a rational animal:

“But what about the attributes I assigned to the soul? Nutrition or movement? Since now I do not have a body, these are mere fabrications. Sense-perception? This surely does not occur without a body, and besides, when asleep I have appeared to perceive through the senses many things which I afterwards realized I did not perceive through the senses at all.

- **Not a Body or a “vapor which permeates the limbs:”** Once again, all of these things have been “supposed to be nothing,” (23).
- **Just a Thinking Thing:** With which attribute traditionally assigned from the soul can I really identify? “Thinking? At last I have discovered it—thought; this alone is inseparable from me,” (22). “I am, then, in the strict sense, only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason—words whose meaning I have been ignorant of until now. But for all that I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of thing? As I have just said—a thinking thing,” (22-23).
- **A Criterion of Identity Over Time:** “I am, I exist—that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. For it could be that were I totally to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist,” (22).
- **A Joke:** Rene Descartes walks into a bar and orders a drink. When he finishes his drink, the bartender asks him if he would like another. Descartes replies, “No, I think not,” and disappears in a puff of logic.

4 Bertrand Russell’s Objection

- **An Excerpt from Russell’s *Problems of Philosophy* (1912):** [S]ome care is needed in using Descartes’ argument. ‘I think, therefore I am’ says rather more than is strictly certain. It might seem as though we were quite sure of being the same person today as we were yesterday, and this is no doubt true in some sense. But the real Self is as hard to arrive at as the real table, and does not seem to have that absolute, convincing certainty that belongs to particular experiences. When I look at my table and see a certain brown colour, what is quite certain at once is not ‘I am seeing a brown colour’, but rather, ‘a brown colour is being seen’. This of course involves something (or somebody) which (or who) sees the brown colour; but it does not of itself involve that more or less permanent person whom we call ‘I.’ So far as immediate certainty goes, it might be that the something which sees the brown colour is quite momentary, and not the same as the something which has some different experience the next moment.

Thus it is our particular thoughts and feelings that have primitive certainty. And this applies to dreams and hallucinations as well as to normal perceptions: when we dream or see a ghost, we certainly do have the sensations we think we have, but for various reasons it is held that no physical object corresponds to these sensations. Thus the certainty of our knowledge of our own experiences does not have to be limited in any way to allow for exceptional cases. Here, therefore, we have, for what it is worth, a solid basis from which to begin our pursuit of knowledge, (7-8).

- **From Russell’s *A History of Western Philosophy* (1946):** Descartes’s indubitable facts are his own thoughts—using “thought” in the widest possible sense. “I think” is his ultimate premise. Here the word “I” is really illegitimate; he ought to state his ultimate premise in the form “there are thoughts.” The word “I” is grammatically convenient, but does not

describe a datum. When he goes on to say "I am a thing which thinks," he is already using uncritically the apparatus of categories handed down by scholasticism. He nowhere proves that thoughts need a thinker, nor is there reason to believe this except in a grammatical sense. The decision, however, to regard thoughts rather than external objects as the prime empirical certainties was very important, and had a profound effect on all subsequent philosophy

- **Question:** What do we make of Russell's objection? What do we think Descartes would say in response? Does Descartes presuppose as much as Russell takes him to? Might Russell actually presuppose more than Descartes does?

5 Developing a Conception of the Subject

- **Spelling out the Various Modes of Thinking:** "Thinking" is a very general term, and can actually be quite a bit of more specific activities of which one can be certain in just this way:

"But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling and also imagines and has sensory perceptions," (24).

- **The Restricted Sense of "Sensory Perception" or (perhaps better) "Sensory Experience":** Though we might use the expressions "see," "hear," "feel," and the like to describe our experiences, we must use these expressions in a special way. Normally, when we talk of "seeing a bottle," for instance, this implies that there is a bottle that I see. Since I doubt that there's a bottle (since I'm supposing I'm dreaming), I can't describe my experience as one of actually *seeing* a bottle, but, rather, as one of merely *seeming* to see a bottle:

"I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking," (24).

- **An Interesting Fact About the "Seeming" Locution:** Clearly, there's a difference between *seeing a bottle* and *seeming to see a bottle*, for the second but not the first is compatible with there being no bottle there. But is there a difference between seeming to see a bottle and seeming to seem to see a bottle?

6 The Wax Example

- **The Point of the Example:** Descartes wants to show that not just that our knowledge of the *existence* of the mind is more sure than our our knowledge of the existence of bodies, but also that our knowledge of the *nature* of the mind is more sure than our knowledge of the nature of bodies.

- **The Example:**

Let us take, for example, this piece of wax. It has just been taken from the honeycomb; it has not yet quite lost the taste of the honey; it retains some of the scent of the flowers from which it was gathered; its color, shape and size are plain to see; it is hard, cold and can be handled without difficulty; if you rap it with your knuckle it makes a sound. In short, it has everything which appears necessary to enable a body to be known as distinctly as possible. But even as I speak, I put the wax by the fire, and look: the residual taste is eliminated, the smell goes away, the color changes, the shape is lost, the size increases; it becomes liquid and hot; you can hardly touch it, and if you strike it, it no longer makes a sound. But does the same wax remain? It must be admitted that it does; no one denies it, no one thinks otherwise. So what was it in the wax that I understood with such distinctness?

Evidently none of the features which I arrived at by means of the senses; for whatever came under taste, smell, sight, touch or hearing has now altered—yet the wax remains.

- **Question:** What is the wax itself, if we can't think of what it is in terms of any of its sensible qualities?
- **Descartes's Point:** Whatever conception of the wax itself that we have based on "purely mental scrutiny" (26). In that case, however, it seems that we should be able to achieve a much clearer conception of our own selves.
- **A Funny Comic:** <https://existentialcomics.com/comic/214>

7 Where We're Left and Questions We Have

- **Where We're Left:** We've done what we've set out to do in this meditation: we've found "just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable," (20).
- **Where Do We Go from Here?** How can we possibly get anywhere from here? It seems that we're necessarily going to be restricted to what's *inside* our own minds. How are we possibly going to get, from here, to *outside* our own minds?