

# Class Four - Descartes' Third Meditation

Philosophical Perspectives II - Ryan Simonelli

January 12, 2023

## 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.
- **The First Meditation:** We've called everything into doubt through the consideration of scenarios in which everything we ordinarily believe is false, first imagining that we're dreaming and so all of our apparent perceptual knowledge is false, and then imagining that there's an evil demon deceiving us into falsely believing even what it seems we can hold onto as knowledge if we're dreaming.
- **The Second Meditation:** We've established just one thing that we know for certain: our own mind, the essence of which is thinking (which, recall, includes such things as judging, willing, sensing, and so on).
- **The Task of the Third Meditation:** We now need to try to get from within our own mind, the realm of what we've established certainty, to something outside of our own mind.

## 2 Some Preliminary Distinctions and Concepts

- **Different Kinds of Thoughts:** The domain of which we currently have certainty is our own thoughts, and we can distinguish between different kinds of thoughts.
  - **Images/Ideas:** When I imagine something such as the sky, an angel, or a chimera, we say I have an *image* or *idea* of one of these things.
  - **Volition and Emotions:** When I am want to eat cake, am determined to eat cake, or fear that I've eaten too much cake, these are *volitions* (actions) or *emotions* (affections).
  - **Judgments:** When I think that two plus three equals five or that I exist, these are *judgments*.
- **Three Possibilities on the Origins of Ideas:** For any idea, it seems that there are three possibilities as to its origin:
  - **Innate:** Ideas that I either have or am capable of arriving at through my own nature. These seem to include "my understanding of what a thing is, what truth is, and what thought is," (30).
  - **Inventions:** Ideas that I invent, constructing them from other ideas. These clearly include ideas of "sirens, hippogriffs and the like," (31).
  - **From Without ("Adventitious"):** Ideas that are neither innate nor invented but have their source in something outside of me.
    - \* It *seems* that our sensory ideas are from without. We're naturally inclined to think, when we seem to hear a sound, for instance, that it comes not from us, but from the outside. But this is just what we're doubting in supposing that we might be dreaming.
- **The Basic Question:** Is there any idea that I have such that I can reason from it to the claim that there is something outside of me that is the *cause* of that idea?

### 3 The Argument for God: Preliminaries

- **The Causal Principle:** “There must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause,” (33).
  - **A Physics Example:** If one billiard ball strikes another billiard ball thereby causing it to move, the force of the first billiard ball (the cause) must be at least as strong as the force of the second billiard ball (the effect).
  - **Another Physics Example:** If a nuclear bomb causes a big explosion, there must be at least as much potential energy in the atoms that constitute the bomb as there is kinetic energy in the big explosion.

These are two examples from physics, but Descartes takes this principle to apply *completely generally*, across not just physical things and events, but mental events and ideas as well.

- **Two Kinds of Reality:** Descartes draws the following crucial distinction:
  - **Formal Reality:** The real existence of something, be it a substance or state.
  - **Objective Reality:** Reality that something has just insofar as it is an “object” of a representation, that which is “contained in” the representation as the thing that the representation is a representation of.
    - \* **Example:** If I really desire a donut, the donut that is the object of my desire has objective reality. If I check my pantry for a donut, and there is none, the object of my desire has no formal reality, but it has objective reality simply insofar as it exists as the object of my desire.
- **General Point on the Source of the Contents of Ideas:** The objective reality of any idea must ultimately have its source in some formal reality from which it is derived.
  - **No Regress:** Some ideas can come from other ideas, and so their objective reality can be traced to other objective realities, but ultimately, ideas must get their content from something which is not itself merely an idea.
  - **The Picture Analogy:** Ideas are like pictures or paintings. We may construct a painting in which we dream up some elaborate mythical creatures but, ultimately, the images we paint must be sourced in what we’ve actually seen. These real things must provide the ultimate content for our imagined ideas.
    - \* Recall the painting analogy discussed in the First Meditation in the context of the dreaming argument. It’s the same principle that’s being invoked here.

This doesn’t yet show that the formal reality in which our ideas are sourced is anything other than our own.
- **The Crucial Thought:** “If the objective reality of any of my ideas turns out to be so great that I am sure the same reality does not reside in me, either formally or eminently, and hence that I cannot myself be its cause, it will necessarily follow that I am not alone in the world, but that some other thing which is the cause of this idea also exists,” (34).

### 4 The Argument for God: The Basic Argument

- **Three Kinds of Ideas:** We’ll investigate the objective reality of three kinds of ideas that we have:
  - **Inanimate Corporeal Things:** Ideas of things like the wax from the last meditation, my waterbottle, and so on.
  - **Animate Corporeal Things:** Ideas of animals, other people, and angels.
  - **God:** The idea that I have of a “substance that is infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and which created both myself and everything else (if anything else there be) that exists,” (36).

- \* **Note:** This is not supposed to be a hodge-podge of independent attributes, but, rather, these attributes essentially constitute a unity: “the unity, the simplicity, or the inseparability of all the attributes of God is one of the most important perfections which I understand him to have.”
- **Question:** Do we really have a clear idea of God, as Descartes supposes that we do?
  - **A Distinction:** For Descartes, we don’t really *grasp* the infinite, but we nevertheless know the infinite in that we have *some* understanding of it.
 

“To grasp something is to embrace it in one’s thought; to know something, it is sufficient to touch it with one’s thought.”
- **Investigating the Origins of the Three Kinds of Ideas:**
  - **Inanimate Things:** There’s nothing in the ideas of inanimate things that seems to require that they be sourced from anything but my own formal reality.
  - **Animate Things:** Ideas of animate corporeal things seem that they can be constructed from those of inanimate things, myself, and God.
  - **God:** The objective reality of this idea, Descartes argues, must be sourced in a formal reality external to myself.
- **The Basic Observation:** It seems that the objective reality of God is of a sort that could not possibly have its source in my own formal reality since God’s attributes, as they exist in my idea of God, categorically exceed the reality of those I actually have.
  - **Finite vs. Infinite Substance:** The idea of God being a substance could have originated with me, but the idea of an *infinite* substance could not, since I am essentially finite, and “there is more reality in an infinite substance than a finite one,” (36).
- **Some Loose Ends:** Once God is established, there’s some loose ends that can be tied up:
  - **Explanation of the Idea of God:** It makes sense that I’d have the idea of God, since God himself would have reason to put this idea in me.
  - **God Is Not a Deceiver:** Any sort of deceit would depend on some defect or imperfection, so, since God is perfect, he cannot possibly be a deceiver.

## 5 A Related Argument Against Skepticism

- **Contemporary Discussions of Skepticism:** Since Descartes’s discussion in the *Meditations* and up to this day, Cartesian skepticism has been a central problem in philosophy, and many people have basically agreed with the Descartes up through the first two *Meditations*. Very few people, however, have thought that the correct response to skepticism goes through a proof of God as Descartes would have it. Here, there are essentially two different options:
  - **Abandoning the Certainty Requirement:** One might think that one needs to drop the idea that we can know that external objects exist for certain, and that we merely have probabilistic reason to think that there are external objects. This is what Russell thinks.
  - **Providing Another Way to Move from “Inside” to “Outside” with Certainty:** We could also try to give a version of the same sort of argument Descartes gives but which relies simply on our ordinary ideas of corporeal things and moves to the idea that they must have their basis in external things.
 

**Donald Davidson’s Causal Response to Skepticism:** “In the simplest and most basic cases, words and sentences derive their meaning from the objects and circumstances in whose presence they were learned. A sentence which one has been conditioned by the learning process to be caused to hold true by the presence of fires will (usually) be true when there is a fire present; a word one has been conditioned to hold applicable by the presence of snakes will refer to snakes. Of course very many words and sentences are not learned this way; but it is those that are that anchor language to the world.

[...]

The fallout from these considerations for the theory of knowledge is revolutionary. If words and thoughts are, in the most basic cases, necessarily about the sorts of objects and events that commonly cause them, there is no room for Cartesian doubts about the independent existence of such objects and events. Doubts there can be, of course. But there need be nothing we are indubitably right about for it to be certain that we are mostly right about the nature of the world. Sometimes skepticism seems to rest on a simple fallacy, the fallacy of reasoning from the fact that there is nothing we might not be wrong about to the conclusion that we might be wrong about everything. The second possibility is ruled out if we accept that our simplest sentences are given their meanings by the situations that generally cause us to hold them true."

## 6 Quick Rundown of the Fourth and Fifth Meditation

- **Fourth Meditation:** I make mistakes sometimes; this is because I'm finite and imperfect rather than infinite and perfect like God.
- **Fifth Meditation:** Inquires into the ideas of material things. Our ideas of such things is purely intellectual, and through the intellect, we know that such things are possible. Also provides another proof of God, similar to Anselm's famous "Ontological Argument."