

Class Five - Descartes' Sixth 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.
- **The First Meditation:** We've called everything into doubt all the things we believe in everyday life through the consideration of skeptical possibilities.
- **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 Third Meditation:** Starting from our own mind, we've established the existence of God by investigating the source of our idea of God recognizing that it cannot possibly come from our own reality but must come from the reality of God himself.
- **The Fourth and Fifth Meditations:** We considered the nature of false belief and the essences (but not yet existences of) material things.
- **Sixth Meditation:** Finally responding to the initial doubts of the First Meditation, establishing that there are material bodies, our own bodies included, and developing a conception of the relation between mind and body.

2 Getting Material Objects Back

- **Premise One:** "[God] has given me a great propensity to believe that they [my sensory ideas] are produced by corporeal things [that resemble them (or possess differences corresponding to them)]," (63).
- **Premise Two:** If my sensory ideas *aren't* produced by corporeal things that resemble them, God, who made me by nature to believe that they are, would be a deceiver.
- **Premise Three:** God is not a deceiver.
 - Descartes reaches this conclusion at the end of the third meditation (which we read). He reiterates it at the beginning of the fourth (which we didn't):

"I recognize that it is impossible that God should ever deceive me. For in every case of trickery or deception some imperfection is to be found; and although the ability to deceive appears to be an indication of cleverness or power, the will to deceive is undoubtedly evidence of malice or weakness, and so cannot apply to God," (43).
- **Conclusion:** So, in general, my natural inclination to believe that my sensory ideas are caused by corporeal things that resemble them is reliable. When I believe things about the world on the basis of sensory perception, I'm generally right.
 - **Some Caveats:** This conclusion requires some caveats and qualifications:
 - * Sometimes our senses deceive us, but we have some other God-given capacities through which we can correct the mistaken belief to which we're naturally inclined

- * In other cases, such as the appearance that the sun is dime-sized, the senses aren't really to blame at all, and we simply expect too much of the senses.
- **Question:** Let us grant the argument for the existence of God in the third meditation. Given that assumption, what do we make of this argument against skepticism about the external world?

3 Descartes's Modal Argument for Dualism and Its Contemporary Successors

- **Descartes's Modal Argument for Dualism:** On pages 61-62 Descartes puts forward an influential modal argument for dualism about mind and body. (Some terminology: "dualism" is the view that mind and body are separate, distinct entities rather than one single entity. "modal" just means that the argument crucially relies on the notions of *possibility* and *necessity* (traditionally conceived of as "modes" in which a proposition might be represented)).
 - **Premise One:** If it is possible to understand one thing apart from another, that means that the two things are distinct, since those things are capable of being separated, at least by God.
 - * **The Basic Point, Distilled:** The clear *conceptual* possibility of distinctness entails the *metaphysical* possibility of distinctness.
 - **Premise Two:** I understand my own essence as a thinking thing, and I can conceive of myself (as I did in the first and second meditations) as existing apart from my body.
 - **Conclusion:** So, it's really possible that I could exist apart from my body—God could have made things that way.
- **Kripke's Version of the Modal Argument:** Saul Kripke, one of the most important analytic philosophers of second half of the 20th century, develops a version of Descartes's argument in his 1980 book *Naming and Necessity*:

"Let 'A' name a particular pain sensation, and let 'B' name the corresponding brain state, or the brain state some identity theorist wishes to identify with A. Prima facie, it would seem that it is at least logically possible that B should have existed (Jones's brain could have been in exactly that state at the time in question) without Jones feeling any pain at all, and thus without the presence of A," (146).

Kripke elaborates this with the theory of names he defends in *Naming and Necessity*, but the argument is basically Descartes's.
- **Chalmers's Version of the Modal Argument:** David Chalmers, a very influential contemporary philosopher, also develops a version of Descartes's argument, which is, in some way, the opposite of Descartes's own:
 - **The Conceptual Possibility of "Zombies":** We can imagine "Philosophical Zombies," beings who behave exactly like us but who lack any sort of conscious experience.
 - * Think of the body as one fancy physical machine. It seems that we can imagine a "human machine" functioning without any conscious subject experiencing things from the perspective of that body.
 - **Descartes's Point:** Conceptual possibility entails metaphysical possibility.
 - **The Dualist Conclusion:** Consciousness cannot be identified with any physical processes, since it's possible to have those processes without consciousness.
- **Question:** What do we make of these sorts of arguments? Can we conclude from them that the mind can't be identified with states or processes in the brain?

4 Developing Cartesian Dualism

- **A Key Difference Between Mind and Body:** "The body is by its very nature always divisible, whereas the mind is utterly indivisible."

- The different faculties of the mind—sensing, willing, understanding, etc.—are not different parts of the mind, since “it is one and the same mind that wills, and understands, and has sensory perceptions,” (68).
- Every corporeal thing is divisible into parts—at least conceptually.

Descartes notes in passing that this observation constitutes another argument for establishing dualism, in addition to the modal argument considered above.

- **Mind and Brain:** There is one part of the body that bears the principal causal relation to the mind: the brain (or, perhaps, a small part of the brain, which Descartes identifies in other writings as the pineal gland).
 - Descartes’s understanding here is quite scientifically informed. He recognizes that the foot, for instance, doesn’t directly affect the mind when pinched, but, rather, a signal is sent through the nervous system up from the foot to the brain. The brain then brings about a pain sensation in the mind, which responds by sending a volition to the brain (move the foot away from the pinching stimulus), and this signal is then sent back down through the nervous system to the foot, which moves.
- **A Physiological Account of Perceptual Error:** Descartes recognizes that, given the way the human body works to register sensations, it is always possible to stimulate the brain in such a way that it seems that there is a pain occurring in the foot or (for instance) a bright light seen.
- **Question:** Given how Descartes’s account of sensation seems quite close to what we know scientifically, do we think that the dualism of mind and body that he endorses is compatible with our current scientific understanding of the body and brain?

5 Concluding Questions

- **Question:** The point of Descartes’s “method of doubt” was to call everything into doubt so that we can reconstruct things on solid foundations? Did the project succeed? Or are we left with doubt, but no real solution to it?
 - **Follow Up:** If we think Descartes doesn’t succeed, where do we get off the bus? If we accept what was done in Meditations One and Two, do we see another way of getting back the worldly knowledge we’ve called into doubt?