

Descartes' *Meditations*

The AQA syllabus identifies Descartes' *Meditations* as a key text for the A Level in Philosophy as a whole. In this handout, I provide a commentary on the text, guided by the topics on the syllabus. I shall not consider objections to Descartes' arguments beyond those needed to clarify possible misunderstandings or to which Descartes himself provides a response. The aim of this commentary is to help you understand Descartes' arguments and claims, not to provide a critical evaluation of them.

Quotations and page numbers come from the edition of the text available at www.earlymoderntexts.com.

MEDITATION I

Descartes begins *Meditation I* by declaring that he has known for a long time that in order to establish anything 'in the sciences that was stable and likely to last' (p. 1), he would have to start from the foundations. He does not need to reject as *false* everything he thinks he knows, but he needs to avoid believing things 'that are not completely certain and indubitable'. To establish this certainty, he seeks to test his beliefs by doubting them. As he tries to call his beliefs into question, he repeatedly asks how he can *know* they are true. So he understands knowledge in terms of what is 'completely certain and indubitable'. If we can doubt a belief, then it is not certain, and so it is not knowledge.

So what can we doubt? Descartes notes that he has, in the past, been deceived by his senses - things have looked a way that they are not (p. 1). Things in the distance look small, for instance. Or, to supply a different example, a stick half-submerged in water looks crooked. But, Descartes remarks, such examples from unusual perceptual conditions give us no reason to doubt all perceptions, such as that I am looking at a piece of paper with writing on it. More generally, we might say that perceptual illusions are *special cases* (and ones we can frequently explain). Otherwise we wouldn't be able to talk about them as illusions. So they don't undermine perception generally.

Descartes then doubts whether he knows that he is awake (p. 1). I could be dreaming that I'm looking at a piece of paper. I could even have the thought, while I'm dreaming, that I'm not dreaming! There is no reliable way to tell whether I'm awake or asleep. This argument attacks all sense-perception, even the most mundane and most certain. I cannot know that I see a piece of paper because I cannot know that I am not dreaming of seeing a piece of paper.

We can object that there *are* reliable ways of distinguishing waking perception from dreaming, such as the far greater coherence of perception. But what Descartes means is that I cannot know, of my perception now, whether I am awake or asleep. The objection assumes that I can rely on my memory of what I have experienced to compare it with my dream. But what if I'm dreaming that I

remember this?

Descartes then claims that even if he were dreaming, and may be imagining particular physical objects, dreams are constructed out of *basic ideas* and these must correspond to something real - ideas of body, extension, shape, quantity, size, motion and time. He also reaffirms the truths of mathematics.

But he then casts doubt on even these claims by questioning whether God may have deceived him (p. 2). Is it possible that he could go wrong in adding 2 and 3? To the objection that God is good and wouldn't deceive Descartes like this (a point Descartes returns to later in the *Meditations*), Descartes introduces a further doubt. Suppose that God does not exist. Suppose, worse, that all my experiences are produced in me by an evil demon who wants to deceive me (p. 3). If this were true, I wouldn't know. So I cannot know that this is not true. Of course, Descartes 'habitual opinions' are *highly probable*, but they are not certain. Descartes uses the evil demon supposition to make sure that he doesn't believe anything he can't know. And it throws into doubt all beliefs about the external world, as they are based on my experience, which I am supposing the evil demon controls.

Discussion

By 'indubitable', Descartes doesn't mean that he has a *feeling* of certainty. That could vary from one person to another, e.g. you might *feel certain* that God exists or that your friends will never betray you. We can all make mistakes, and be certain of something when it is not certain. For Descartes, for a belief to be indubitable, it must be *infallible* in some way. This is where Descartes' method of doubt comes in. Using his best, most careful judgement, what he judges must be true. On one interpretation, Descartes is adopting the view that he can only have knowledge in cases in which it is impossible that he could be making a mistake.

However, it is rare that our evidence rules out the *possibility* of error. Infallibilism entails that we have very little knowledge (even if we still have many beliefs that are very probably true). Descartes brings *everything* into question. Unless he can build his way back out using only infallible beliefs, then infallibilism leads to scepticism, rather than secure knowledge.

MEDITATION II

Pp. 3-6

At the start of *Meditation II*, Descartes argues that, even if the evil demon is deceiving him, 'he will never bring it about that I am nothing while I think I am something' (p. 4). Why not? He cannot doubt that he exists: if he were to doubt that he exists, that would prove he does exist - as something that thinks. So he knows that he exists. He can't know that he exists *as a body* - his sense perception of his body, and of bodies in general, could be no more than a dream. But he cannot doubt that he thinks. The *cogito*, 'I think', is Descartes' first stepping stone to knowledge.

Could he nevertheless *be* a body, without knowing it? Descartes can't say, but at least his *knowledge* of what he is can't *depend* on his being a body, since he knows he exists but not whether he has a body. What he is is a thinking thing, 'a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wants, refuses, and also imagines and senses' (p. 5). This provides further knowledge of the self. I know which type of thought I am engaging in: I can't mistakenly think that I'm imagining when I'm conceiving, can't think I'm doubting when I'm willing and so on.

The last activity Descartes lists is 'senses'. But doesn't sense perception involve having a body? So doesn't the fact that I sense establish the existence of physical objects? No, because, Descartes notes, I have sensory experiences in my dreams as well, when I am not seeing or hearing at all. 'Sensing' is just having sensory experiences. Understood like this, independent of their cause, these experiences are nothing more than a form of thinking, and so don't depend on having a body.

Discussion

What does it mean to say 'I exist' or 'I think'? Descartes claims that 'I' am a thinking *thing*. I am the *same* thing from one thought to another. But can Descartes know this? The evil demon may deceive him: perhaps there is only a *succession of thoughts*, nothing that persists between thoughts which is a *single* thing. Descartes' response, in an appendix to the *Meditations* called 'Objections and Replies', is to say that thoughts logically require a thinker. But even if we agree that there can't be a thought unless something thinks it, that doesn't entail that the 'thinker' is a subject that persists from one thought to another. As soon as Descartes says that to be a thinker is to doubt, will, imagine and so on, he assumes we can say these activities belong to the *same* subject, that he (the same thinker) does all this.

Pp. 6-8

Descartes discusses the concept of a physical object when discussing the nature of his mind. He has argued that 'sensing' is just having sensory experiences - whether physical objects are the cause of these experiences is not known. This is puzzling, so he considers perceptual experiences further, focusing on the example of perceiving a piece of wax (p. 6). His question is, 'exactly what is it that I think a piece of wax, as a physical object, is?' He is seeking to understand our concept of physical object or substance. (In the argument that follows, 'imagination' is the faculty that deals with images, including those derived from sense experiences.)

1. When I melt a piece of wax, it loses all of its original sensory qualities (the particular taste, smell, feel and shape it has).
2. Yet I believe it is the same wax.
3. Therefore, what I think of as the wax is not its sensory qualities.
4. What I think is the wax is what remains through the changes of its sensory qualities.
5. This is a body, something that is extended - i.e. has size and shape and takes up space - and changeable, i.e. its sensory and spatial properties can change (p. 7).
6. I know that the wax can undergo far more possible changes, including changes in its extension, than I can imagine.
7. Therefore, my concept of the wax as extended and changeable does not derive from my imagination (and therefore it does not derive from perceptual experiences).
8. Therefore, I 'perceive' (comprehend) the wax as what it is (as opposed to its sensory qualities) by my mind alone.
9. Only this thought of the wax, and not the perceptual experience of it, is clear and distinct.

Descartes finishes by commenting that the wax he comprehends by his understanding is the same wax that is presented by images from the senses. Although we say we 'see' the wax (through vision), in fact we judge (through understanding) that it is present from what we see.

Descartes' question is not about the wax itself, but about his experience, knowledge and concept of it. This is shown by his comment, on p. 8, that '[w]hat I see might not really be the wax; perhaps I don't even have eyes with which to see anything.' He doesn't, at this stage in the argument, know that there are physical objects. But he knows he has experiences of them. And it is this - his concept of what he experiences - that he is exploring. The argument is intended to show that the concept of a physical object does not derive from sense experience, but is part of the understanding. (We can add that this means that it is innate.)

Descartes only turns to the question of whether anything corresponds to our concept of PHYSICAL OBJECT in *Meditation V*.

MEDITATION III

Pp. 9-10

At the start of *Meditation III*, Descartes reflects on the *cogito*. He finds that his certainty in it rests on how the idea presents itself to his mind. So he argues (p. 9),

1. 'In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting.' (A note on terminology: this phrase, 'clear and distinct', is the usual translation of Descartes' Latin phrase *clarus et distinctam*. However, the text at www.earlymoderntexts.com uses 'vivid and clear'. Because 'clear and distinct' is much more common, I shall stick with it.)
2. If clarity and distinctness do not guarantee truth, then I cannot know that I exist.
3. I do know that I exist.
4. Therefore, 'as a general rule... whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.'

This argument lays the foundations for Descartes' theory of rational intuition. Descartes has defended the *cogito* as a claim that he knows to be true just by thinking about it. What enables him to know it is that it is an idea that is 'clear and distinct'.

What does this mean? Descartes doesn't say in the *Meditations*, but gives this definition in his *Principles of Philosophy* (Pt 1, §45): an idea is clear 'when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind - just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility.' An idea is distinct if it is clear and 'it is so sharply separated from all other ideas that every part of it is clear'. In the *Meditations*, again drawing on an analogy with vision, Descartes connects clear and distinct ideas to what he calls 'the natural light': 'Things that are revealed by the natural light - for example, that *if I am doubting then I exist* - are not open to any doubt, because no other faculty that might show them to be false could be as trustworthy as the natural light' (p. 11). So, for Descartes, rational intuition is the 'natural light', our ability to know that clear and distinct ideas are true.

Our perception of physical objects isn't, in fact, clear and distinct, though they can *seem* so (p. 10). On reflection, Descartes sees that what was clear was 'merely the ideas', i.e. the sensory experiences, but not what causes them. Mathematical claims, such as ' $2 + 3 = 5$ ', remain clear and distinct, and Descartes cannot doubt them. Or rather, he can only doubt such a claim when he thinks not

about the claim, but about the power of God (or an evil demon) to deceive him. So, *at the time we consider it*, a thought which is clear and distinct we must believe to be true. But in order to be sure, when we are not focusing on it, that the clear and distinct thought really is true, we need to know that we are not being deceived by God (or an evil demon). Descartes' next task, therefore, is to show that we can know this.

Discussion

An objection called 'the Cartesian circle' argues that Descartes cannot establish that clear and distinct ideas guarantee truth.

Descartes has said that when he turns away from a clear and distinct idea itself to consider the power of God to deceive him, he can doubt that it (or any clear and distinct idea) is certain. Now, when trying to prove the existence of God, Descartes relies on what he can clearly and distinctly perceive, because this is the only way he can know anything. But given his own admission, it seems that Descartes needs to prove that God exists before he can claim to know what he clearly and distinctly perceives. It seems that he says

- I am certain that God exists only because *I am certain of whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive*; and yet
- *I am certain of whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive* only because I am certain that God exists.

But this is circular. Descartes cannot rely on clear and distinct ideas before proving God exists, but he cannot prove that God exists without relying on clear and distinct ideas. So he is stuck - he cannot take clear and distinct ideas to guarantee truth.

But perhaps the objection misinterprets Descartes. I *can* be certain of what I clearly and distinctly perceive without knowing that God exists, but *only at the time* that I focus on that specific thought. In other words, while I am clearly and distinctly perceiving some *particular proposition*, then I can be certain of that proposition. But when I turn my attention away from it, I no longer perceive it clearly and distinctly, I only *remember* that I did so. And this is no guarantee of truth. However, once he has shown that God exists, Descartes claims in the 'Objections and Replies', he can know the *general principle* that whatever is clear and distinct is true. He doesn't need to focus on a particular clear and distinct idea to know it is true; he can know it is true by knowing that it is clear and distinct.

But is Descartes entitled to claim that he can be certain of what he clearly and distinctly perceives, even at the time he perceives it, while it is still possible that he is being deceived by God (or an evil demon)? He can respond that God (or the demon) cannot bring about anything 'in which I see a plain contradiction' (p. 10), and to deny a clear and distinct idea (e.g. to say that $2 + 3$ does not equal 5) is a contradiction.

Perhaps the best interpretation of this is that clear and distinct ideas are *necessarily* true, at least at the time when one thinks them.

Pp. 10-17

In the 'Trademark argument', Descartes tries to prove that God exists just from the fact that we have a concept of GOD. This concept, which he argues is innate,

is like a 'trademark' that our creator has stamped on our minds (p. 17).

Descartes identifies three possible sources of any idea (p. 10):

1. it derives from something outside my mind, such as I experience in sense perception;
2. I have invented it;
3. it is innate. (Descartes explains this as 'it derives from my own nature', but he also uses the usual rationalist argument that it can't be explained by our experience (or invention).)

We cannot in general be certain which of the three types of cause an idea has (p. 11). Which is the source of the concept GOD?

Before answering that question, Descartes embarks on a long defence of the claim that a cause must have at least as much 'reality' as its effect, and that the cause of an idea must have as much reality as what the idea is an idea *of*. These are difficult and highly controversial claims. The idea of 'degrees of reality' is strange to us, but was a standard part of medieval metaphysics.

1. A 'substance' is defined as something that can exist independently, such as the mind, God and physical objects.
2. An 'attribute' is a property of a substance - the attribute of mind is thought, while extension is the attribute of physical objects.
3. A 'mode' is a particular determination of a property. So ideas are modes of the mind - specific ways of thinking.

A substance has more reality than an attribute, because a property cannot exist without a substance, and so is dependent on it. There can be no thoughts without a thinker. Modes, therefore, also have less reality than substances. Ideas are modes of the attribute 'thought', which is possessed by thinking substances.

Descartes applies these thoughts to cause and effect. He simply takes it to be a clear and distinct idea that the cause of something must contain at least as much reality as its effect (p. 12). From this, he derives the claim that something can't come from nothing (p. 13). But in fact, it is easier to work the other way around - something can't come from nothing, and so whatever is part of the effect must have originated in the cause. For instance, a stone can only be created that contains the qualities of the stone (what is needed to make a stone). Something hot can't derive its heat from something cold.

Ideas are more complicated. As modes of thought, the 'intrinsic reality' of all ideas is the same, and less than the reality of my mind, which is a substance. But ideas also represent something, e.g. an object, a size, a tune, a mind, God. Some of these things - object, mind, God - are substances; others - a size, a tune - are modes. The degree of reality of the thing that the thought is about determines the idea's 'representative reality' (p. 11). Just as we need to be able to explain where the heat in something hot comes from, so we need to be able to explain the representative reality of an idea. Just as heat comes from something hot, so an idea with a certain representative reality must come from something with at least as much intrinsic reality (p. 12). Here is a common-sense example: if we discover a picture of a sophisticated machine, even though it's just a *picture*, we think it must be the product of an advanced society or a highly fertile imagination (Bernard Williams, *Descartes*, pp. 138-9). It is what it is a picture *of* that makes us

think the cause is sophisticated. Where could the 'sophistication' of the machine in the picture come from except a mind that is itself just as sophisticated? The cause must have as much 'reality' as the machine in the picture.

We can now apply this to the concept GOD. As a concept, it is a mode, and so it seems my mind - a substance - could cause it, just as my mind causes many other ideas. But the special features of what GOD is a concept *of*, namely something infinite and perfect, mean that it has a representative reality *greater* than the intrinsic reality of my mind. If I invented the concept, it would contain things - infinity and perfection - that are not in its cause, because I am imperfect and finite. But this is impossible - there must be as much reality in the cause as in the effect. So only God, being perfect and infinite, could create a concept of something perfect and infinite.

With this in place, Descartes argues:

1. I have the concept GOD.
2. The concept GOD is a concept of something infinite and perfect (pp. 11-12).
3. As a mind, a thinking substance, I can think up (create) many ideas, including ideas of people and physical objects (pp. 13-14).
4. But I am finite, while the concept GOD is of something infinite (p. 14).
5. Therefore, it is a concept of something with more reality than my own mind.
6. The cause of the concept GOD must have as much reality as what the concept is of.
7. Therefore, my mind could not have created it.
8. The only possible cause is God.
9. Therefore, God exists.

Descartes considers and rejects an objection to (4), namely that I have all the perfections I attribute to God, and so could invent the concept (p. 15). But given that I am in doubt, I clearly do not have infinite knowledge - I am not infinite, but finite.

Discussion

We can object that we can form the idea of GOD from experience by abstraction and negation. We are familiar with things - such as ourselves - being finite and imperfect, so we can form the concepts of NOT-FINITE (INFINITE) and NOT-IMPERFECT (PERFECT).

Descartes rejects this proposal (p. 14). The idea of imperfection or lack depends upon an idea of perfection; we can't recognize that we are imperfect *unless* we have an idea of perfection with which to compare ourselves.

This argument seems to work in other cases, e.g. REAL and REALITY. It is intuitively plausible that our concept REAL is not an abstraction from NOT-UNREAL - how could we first have experiences of what is unreal on which UNREAL is based? Our experiences are fundamentally of what is real, so REAL is the primary concept.

But does it work for PERFECTION and INFINITY? It is much harder to argue that it does. PERFECTION and INFINITY are arguably challenging and unclear concepts. What is it, exactly, to think not merely of the *absence of limits*, but of something for which there could be no limits? Yet Descartes claims that we have a very powerful - clear and distinct - positive idea of God as perfect and infinite, and not

some hazy notion of something indefinitely great. Yet he also accepts that, as a finite mind, he cannot 'grasp' this thought, but he merely 'understands' it (p. 14). With this admission, his claim that the concept of GOD is clear and distinct and involves a positive conception of God's infinity and perfection is unpersuasive.

Pp. 15-16

Descartes then offers a cosmological argument. It is unusual because the only thing that Descartes knows to exist, at this point in the *Meditations*, is himself. So Descartes asks what causes *his* existence, rather than the existence of the universe. As the argument is long and complicated, I have divided it into sections.

1. If I cause my own existence, I would give myself all perfections (omnipotence, omniscience, etc.).
2. I do not have all perfections.
3. Therefore, I am not the cause of my existence.
4. A lifespan is composed of independent parts, such that my existing at one time does not entail or cause my existing later.
5. Therefore, some cause is needed to keep me in existence. My existence is not uncaused.
6. I do not have the power to cause my continued existence through time.
7. Therefore, I depend on something else to exist.
8. I am a thinking thing and I have the idea of God.
9. There must be as much reality in the cause as in the effect.
10. Therefore, what caused me must be a thinking thing and have the idea of God.
11. Either what caused me is the cause of its own existence or its existence is caused by another cause.
12. If its existence is caused by another cause, then its cause is in turn either the cause of its own existence or its existence is caused by another cause.
13. There cannot be an infinite sequence of causes.
14. Therefore, some cause must be the cause of its own existence.
15. What is the cause of its own existence (and so, directly or indirectly, the cause of my existence) is God.

Descartes adds a further argument, picking up premise (5).

16. Some cause is needed to keep me in existence.
17. There cannot be an infinite chain of causes because what caused me also causes my continued existence in the present.
18. My parents, or any other supposed cause of my existence, do not keep me in existence.
19. The only cause that could keep me in existence is God.

Discussion

One might object that my continued existence doesn't require a cause because *nothing changes* - I simply continue to exist. If I cease to exist, *that* requires a cause. But this misunderstands both causation and continued existence. I am sitting on a chair - nothing is changing. But there is a cause of this continued state of affairs, namely gravity and the rigidity of the chair. Should either of those *standing conditions* change, then I would no longer be sitting on the chair. I'd either be floating (no gravity) or sitting on the ground (collapsed chair). That people don't die at any given instant is the result of whatever it is that keeps them alive. Therefore, we should accept that my continued existence does require a cause. It is worth noting that what causes my continued existence must itself continue to exist - it can't be a cause in the past, since my continued existence

must be caused from moment to moment.

We might object, however, that my continued existence is simply dependent on the immediately preceding state of affairs, and so we don't need to say that what caused me to exist in the first place also keeps me in existence. For instance, my bodily processes keep me alive at any moment, but they didn't give me life. But this forgets that Descartes is talking about his *self*, which is his mind, not his body. Descartes has argued that he, his mind, is an entirely separate substance from the body. So what keeps a mind in existence through time? If it was something in his mind itself, he would know, he claims. And it can't be his parents - they only gave existence to his body (if he has one). The only explanation he can think of is God.

It is worth noting, then, that we could argue that Descartes is wrong to think that minds are separate substances from bodies. If we are bodies, then our continued existence could be caused by the ever-changing physical conditions of our bodies and environment.

Pp. 16-17

At the end of *Meditation III*, Descartes draws two conclusions from his arguments. First, he returns to the question of the source of his concept GOD (p. 16). He has argued that he cannot have invented it, and he adds now that it doesn't come from the senses. So it must be innate.

Second, Descartes set himself to show not only that God exists, but also that God wouldn't deceive us (nor allow an evil demon to deceive us).

1. God exists.
2. By definition, God is supremely perfect.
3. 'The natural light makes it clear that all fraud and deception depend on some defect' (p. 17).
4. (By definition, something that is supremely perfect can have no defects.)
5. Therefore, it is not possible for God to deceive us.

By this, Descartes does not mean that we cannot make mistakes! As he clarifies in *Meditation VI*, he means that God 'has given me the ability to correct any falsity there may be in my opinions' (p. 30). We are assured that once we have done all we can to avoid error, and form beliefs on the basis of clear and distinct ideas, then we will not go wrong. But we are not assured of anything more than this.

Descartes doesn't spell it out, but God's existence is enough to rule out deception by an evil demon as well.

1. God is supremely powerful.
2. If God is supremely powerful, then an evil demon could only deceive us if God allowed it.
3. If an evil demon is deceiving me, then I have no way of correcting my false opinions.
4. If I have no way of correcting my false opinions, then God is a deceiver.
5. Therefore, if God permits an evil demon to deceive me, then God is a deceiver.
6. God is not a deceiver.
7. Therefore, God will not permit an evil demon to deceive me.

But can we know what God will or won't do or allow? In *Meditation IV*, Descartes allows that we cannot know God's purposes (p. 19), but we don't need to. If we

have no way of correcting our false beliefs, this would frustrate what we are, namely rational minds seeking the truth using clear and distinct ideas. We don't need to know what God's purposes are in order to know that this would amount to God being a deceiver, which is contradictory to being supremely perfect.

(As *Meditation IV* is not part of the syllabus, I shall not comment on it here.)

MEDITATION V

Descartes opens the meditation by reflecting on which ideas of his are clear and distinct, and in doing so, he claims to discover an important truth - that if he can clearly and distinctly think of some object, *x*, having a certain property, then it is true that *x* has that property. For example, you may think that there can be triangles whose internal angles don't add up to 180 degrees, but reflection proves this impossible. Our thought is *constrained* in this way. The ideas we have determine certain truths, at least when our ideas are clear and distinct. Once you make the idea of a triangle clear and distinct, you understand that its internal angles add up to 180 degrees, and this shows that this is, in fact, true.

Descartes then applies this to the concept of God, producing a version of the ontological argument. The argument itself is very brief:

The idea of God (that is, of a supremely perfect being) is certainly one that I find within me...; and I understand from this idea that it belongs to God's nature that *he always exists*.
(p. 24)

Once Descartes adds that existence is a perfection, his argument becomes this:

1. I have the idea of God.
2. The idea of God is the idea of a supremely perfect being.
3. A supremely perfect being does not lack any perfection.
4. Existence is a perfection.
5. Therefore, God exists.

Descartes accepts that it is easy to believe that God can be thought of as not existing. But careful reflection reveals that this is a self-contradiction. To think that God does not exist is a contradiction in terms, because it is to think that a supremely perfect being lacks a perfection (existence). Thus, we can know that it is true that God exists. In fact, it shows that God must exist. A contradiction in terms does not just happen to be false, it *must* be false. So to say 'God does not exist' *must* be false; so 'God exists' must be true.

As in the case of the triangle, it is not *our thinking it* that makes the claim (that God exists) true. Just as the concept of a triangle forces me to acknowledge that its internal angles add up to 180 degrees, so the concept of God forces me to acknowledge that God exists. Furthermore, I cannot simply *change* the concept in either case; I can't decide that triangles will have two sides nor that God is not a supremely perfect being. I haven't invented the concept of God, such that it includes existence. I discover it.

God is the only concept that supports this inference to existence, because only the concept of God (as supremely perfect) includes the concept of existence (as a perfection). We can't infer the existence of anything else this way.

Discussion

If it is self-contradictory to say that God does not exist, then is 'God exists' an analytic truth? Or is it a synthetic truth that we know a priori? Descartes doesn't have the concepts 'analytic' and 'synthetic', so he can't provide the answer in those terms. But in his replies to objections, he argues that because our minds are finite, we normally think of the divine attributes - omnipotence, omniscience, existence, etc. - separately and so we don't notice that they entail one another. But if we reflect carefully, we shall discover that we cannot conceive of any one of the other attributes while excluding necessary existence. For example, in order for God to be omnipotent, God must not depend on anything else, and so must not depend on anything else to exist.

MEDITATION VI

Pp. 27-30

In *Meditation VI*, Descartes turns to the question of whether physical objects exist. He has argued, in *Meditation I*, that this is not something that we can simply know through perception. So then in order to prove they exist, we need to undertake a number of preliminary steps.

1. We need to understand our *concept* of a physical object - what is it that we think exists?
2. We need to show that this is a *coherent* concept, not something self-contradictory (like the concept of a round square).
3. We need to show that it is *possible* that physical objects exist.

With all that in place, we can then argue that

4. Physical objects do, in fact, exist, and we can know this.

Descartes analyzed (1) in *Meditation II*. Our concept of a physical object, once we have made it clear and distinct, is of something extended and changeable. The argument in *Meditation V* establishes (2). It shows that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true. So physical objects, if they exist, really are extended and changeable. Descartes argues for (3) and (4) in *Meditation VI*.

Step (3) is straightforward.

1. I have a clear and distinct idea of what a physical object is.
2. (God exists and is supremely powerful.)
3. The only reason for thinking that God cannot make something is that the concept of it is contradictory.
4. Therefore, God can make physical objects.
5. Therefore, it is possible that physical objects exist.

To prove (4), Descartes first considers two arguments that aim to show that the existence of the external world is the best hypothesis. But he is dissatisfied because neither of them gives us certainty, which he thinks is necessary for knowledge.

The first argument is from imagination (p. 27). He begins by showing that the faculty of imagination is different from the faculty of understanding.

1. The imagination uses images, e.g. imagining a triangle. But the understanding

does not. When working mathematically with a chiliagon - a two-dimensional figure with 1,000 sides - we cannot imagine the figure.

2. Imagining takes more effort than understanding.
3. Therefore, imagination and understanding are different.
4. Imagination is not essential to me, while understanding is. I cannot be me (a thinking thing) without understanding, but I can be me without imagination.
5. The best explanation for all these differences is that imagination depends upon having a body. Imagination draws its ideas from the body, which makes its ideas sensory images and difficult to work with, and makes imagination not essential to a thinking thing. Being purely mental, understanding draws its ideas from itself, making them non-imagistic and easy to work with, and is essential to a thinking thing.
6. Therefore, it is probable that the body exists.

It is, however, only *probable*, so the argument doesn't give us knowledge of the existence of physical objects.

The second argument is from perception (p. 28). It is natural to think that we know that physical objects exist because we perceive them. Our perceptions are both involuntary and 'much more lively and vivid' than imagination or memory. One explanation is that they are caused by physical objects that exist independent of our minds. But Descartes reminds us of his arguments from perceptual illusion and dreaming (p. 29). The *mere fact* that perceptual experiences are vivid and involuntary isn't enough to show that they are caused by mind-independent physical objects.

It does, however, provide the starting point for his next argument (p. 30). I have added in missing premises in brackets, some of which Descartes assumes because he has argued for them previously.

1. I have involuntary perceptual experiences of physical objects.
2. (These experiences are caused by some substance.)
3. If the cause of my perceptual experiences is my own mind, my perceptual experiences are voluntary.
4. Because I know my mind, I would know if my perceptual experiences are voluntary.
5. Therefore, because I know that my perceptual experiences are involuntary, I know that the cause of my perceptual experiences is not my own mind.
6. Therefore, the cause must be some substance outside me - either God or physical objects.
7. If the cause is God, then God has created me with a very strong tendency to have a false belief (that physical objects exist) that I cannot correct.
8. If God has created me with such a tendency, then God is a deceiver.
9. (God is perfect by definition.)
10. (Therefore,) God is not a deceiver.
11. (Therefore, God did not create me with a tendency to have false beliefs that I cannot correct.)
12. (Therefore, if God exists, I do not have such a tendency.)
13. Therefore, if God exists, the cause of my perceptual experiences of physical objects is the existence of physical objects.
14. (God exists.)
15. Therefore, there is an external world of physical objects that causes our perceptual experiences.

It was surprising to be told, in *Meditation I*, that we cannot know from sense experience that physical objects exist. It is even more surprising to be told, in *Meditation VI*, that we can nevertheless know that physical objects exist using a priori reasoning.

Pp. 29-33: on the mind and body

According to a traditional metaphysics that Descartes accepts, a substance is an entity, a thing, that does not depend on another entity for its continued existence. It has 'ontological independence'. For example, this handout is a (physical) substance.

1. Substances are also understood by contrast with properties.
2. Substances are what possess properties. The chair (substance) is solid (property). Properties can't exist without substances - they depend on substances to exist. Solidity depends on things being solid; the property 'being 1 metre long' depends on something being that long; and, Descartes claimed, thoughts can't exist without a thinker.
3. Substances persist through changes in properties - something can change from being 1 metre long to being 1.1 metres long, e.g. by growing. Obviously, the property 'being 1 metre long' does not persist through this change. Or again, a thinker can think a series of thoughts - the thinker persists, the thoughts do not.

Substance dualism holds that there are two fundamentally different types of substances: physical (or material) substances ('bodies', physical objects) and mental substances (minds). It claims that minds do not depend on bodies in order to exist, i.e. minds can exist separated from any body. Minds and bodies are ontologically distinct and independent. People who believe that the mind is the soul, and the soul can continue to exist without a body after death, are usually substance dualists.

In *Meditation II*, Descartes established that he exists as a mind (a thinking thing). Now, in *Meditation VI*, he has just established that physical objects exist. So the question arises: what is the relationship between them? On p. 29, Descartes presents the following argument for substance dualism:

1. I have a clear and distinct idea of myself as something that thinks and isn't extended.
2. I have a clear and distinct idea of body as something that is extended and does not think.
3. If I have a clear and distinct thought of something, God can create it in a way that corresponds to my thought.
4. Therefore, God can create mind as something that thinks and isn't extended and body as something that is extended and does not think.
5. Therefore, mind and body can exist independently of one another.
6. Therefore, mind and body are two distinct substances.

In (1) and (2), Descartes appeals to his concepts of mind and body. In *Meditation II*, he analyzed mind as something that thinks and body as something that is extended (has a size and takes up space). We can understand (1) and (2) to entail the claim that it is conceivable that mind can exist without body. Nothing in our concepts rules this out.

In *Meditation VI*, Descartes adds (3). Assuming that God is omnipotent, the only

reason for thinking that God cannot make something is that the concept of it is contradictory. The concepts of mind and body aren't self-contradictory. So God can create the mind and the body just as Descartes conceives of them - a thinking thing and an extended thing. We can summarize (3), (4) and (5) in terms that don't refer to God: it is possible that mind can exist without body.

How does Descartes get from (5) to (6)? A substance is something that does not depend on another thing in order to exist. In other words, a substance can exist independently, on its own.

We now have a simpler form of this argument:

1. It is conceivable that mind can exist without body.
2. Therefore, it is possible that mind can exist without body.
3. Therefore, mind and body are distinct substances.

It is important for Descartes' argument that our clear and distinct ideas of mind and body are *complete* and *exclusive*. The mind is *nothing but* thought; the body is *nothing but* extension. We know this to be true, he says, because the ideas of mind and body are clear and distinct.

Descartes claims that mind and body have different properties - thought and extension. This provides another argument that they cannot be the same thing: if they were the same thing, they would have the same properties. Leibniz later formalized this claim in his principle of the indiscernibility of identicals: if two things are identical (i.e. are just one thing), then they share all their properties. Why? Because one thing cannot have different properties from itself. So if two things have different properties, that proves that they cannot be one and the same thing.

In case we aren't convinced that mind and body really do have different properties, Descartes provides an additional argument (p. 33). The mind does not have any parts and cannot be divided:

When I consider the mind - i.e. consider myself purely as a thinking thing - I can't detect any parts within myself; I understand myself to be something single and complete... the faculties of willing, of understanding, of sensory perception and so on, these are not *parts* of the mind, since it is one and the same mind that wills, understands and perceives.

Willing, understanding and perceiving are properties of the mind, different ways of thinking. By contrast, the body does have parts. You can literally lose part of your body, e.g. a hand. So the body - physical substance - is divisible into parts, but the mind - mental substance - is not. So mind and body are entirely distinct types of thing.

So, if the mind and body are two distinct things, how are they related? Descartes says that

[n]ature also teaches me, through these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I (a thinking thing) am not merely *in* my body as a sailor is in a ship. Rather, I am *closely joined to it - intermingled* with it, so to speak - so that it and I form a unit'. (p. 30)

Because 'a unit' doesn't sound like 'two separate things', this claim and its implications are puzzling.

Reflecting on perception, sensation and feeling, we notice that we perceive that we have bodies, and that our bodies - this particular physical object that we have a close and unique relationship with - can be affected in many beneficial and harmful ways. This is brought to our attention through our bodily appetites, like hunger and thirst, through emotions, such as anger, sadness, love, and through sensations, like pain, pleasure, colours, sound and so on. All these experiences have their origins in the body.

However, this doesn't mean that mind and body are united as one and the same thing. Descartes carefully considers what the idea of the mind really involves. He argues that we can still conceive of ourselves existing complete without imagination or feeling, i.e. without those ways of thinking that are informed by the body.

Nevertheless, our experiences of our bodies through bodily sensations and emotions show that the connection between the mind and body is very close: 'These sensations are confused mental events that arise from the union - the intermingling, as it were - of the mind with the body' (p. 30). If mind and body were not intermingled, then 'I wouldn't feel pain when the body was hurt but would perceive the damage in an intellectual way, like a sailor seeing that his ship needs repairs' (p. 30).

Furthermore, this union of mind and body is a union between the mind (the whole mind - it doesn't have parts) and the *whole* body. We feel pain in the various parts of our body. The mind does have a privileged link with the brain (a point of causal connection in the pineal gland), but the mind does not feel all pains to be in the brain! So Descartes argues that the mind is joined to all parts of the body - the point about the pineal gland is really just a physiological observation about causal pathways.

Descartes himself found it difficult to understand how it is that the mind and body are distinct substances, yet form a 'unit'. In a letter to Princess Elisabeth, 28 June 1643, he wrote

it seems to me that the human mind can't conceive the soul's distinctness from the body and its union with the body, conceiving them very clearly and both at the same time. That is because this requires one to conceive them as one single thing and at the same time as two things, which is contradictory.

He offers a suggestion as puzzling as it is illuminating: the idea of the union between mind and body is a third 'basic notion' alongside the ideas of mind and body. The idea of mind is known by the intellect, the idea of body is known by the intellect aided by the imagination, but the union of mind and body is known most clearly through the senses. It is the ordinary experience of life that gives us an understanding of this union, rather than philosophical reflection.

Given that the union of mind and body is a third 'basic notion', is it a notion of a *third* type of *substance*? Is there one new type of thing here, created from the unification of two distinct types of thing? Descartes says, in a letter to Regius, December 1641, that 'since the body has all the dispositions necessary to receive the soul, and without which it is not strictly a human body, it could not come about without a miracle, that a soul should not be joined to it'. The comment that, unless united to a soul, a body is not a *human body*, suggests (but not conclusively) that the 'human body', body and soul together, can be considered as a substance in its own right, a substance created from the union of body and soul.

However, philosophers don't agree on whether or not this is the implication we should draw from his union theory.

To the question, 'What am I?', Descartes' first answer is 'a thing that thinks', and he repeats, on p. 30, that we can imagine ourselves existing 'whole' without feeling or imagination. But is it any less true to say 'I am a human being, a union of mind and body, an *embodied* mind' than 'I am a mind'? The mind takes on the body's experiences as its own, i.e. we refer our sensations, emotions, etc., to our *selves*. We 'own' these states just as much as we 'own' our thoughts. We experience ourselves as embodied minds, not just minds.

Descartes accepts all this, but his argument that minds can exist without bodies leads him to say that to lose the experiences that depend on the body would not be to lose our identities.

Pp. 30-4: on deception

On p. 30, Descartes links the idea that God is not a deceiver to the idea of nature in two ways. First, 'everything that I am "taught by nature" certainly contains some truth. For the term "nature", understood in the most general way, refers to God himself or to the ordered system of created things established by him'. So, if we are careful, we can learn truth from nature, because God has created nature.

We might object that God's purposes are inscrutable, so we don't know if He has set up nature in such a way that we come to know the truth. We cannot know whether God might have arranged it so that we believe in an external world when there wasn't one. Can we trust our senses to deliver the truth about physical objects?

Although Descartes allows that we cannot know God's purposes, he argues that the objection fails. And this is the second link to nature, this time human nature. He provides an extensive argument regarding how we learn from our sensations, when they go wrong, etc. Descartes recommends caution here. Judgements about what properties physical objects have, and about particular perceptions, can be obscure and confused. We can and do make mistakes about what we are perceiving. But God has given us the means to correct mistakes and avoid error. If, therefore, we take care and only assent to clear and distinct ideas, we can arrive at knowledge. If this were not so, if we had no way of correcting our error, such a mistake would constitute a frustration of our essential nature as rational minds. We cannot help but assent to what we clearly and distinctly understand. And it is difficult to reconcile ourselves to the idea that God would create beings and then thwart the exercise of their very essence. We don't need to know what God's purposes are in order to judge that this would amount to God being a deceiver.

At the very end of the *Meditations*, Descartes also uses God's not being a deceiver to solve the objection that he may be dreaming. He accepts that we can tell the difference between dreaming and being awake, because memory connects up perceptions coherently, but not dreams, and because we can confirm our perceptions using different senses (p. 34). This response is only available *now* (and not in *Meditation I*) because God is not a deceiver. Without that, we couldn't rely on memory in this way.