

Lecture Two: Descartes' Project and Attack on the Senses

1. Recap

Last time we set out the context for what was going on at Descartes's time. Politically and religiously we have a growing individualism. Philosophically we're seeing a clash between the old **Aristotelian** philosophy and the results of empirical science. As we give ever better reductive explanations of the movement of bodies, rotation of planets etc, we see natural teleology being forced out of the world.

We are seeing a move away from metaphysical and theological speculation to epistemology – the study of what we know. Seen in the growing popularity of the 'idea' idea: we experience the world via representations of it. Once this **representationalism** is in place then epistemology is going to be a central concern: how do we know our ideas are accurate?

These trends are driven in part by Descartes, in particular by his work in the meditations, which we begin to get to grips with today.

2. Descartes Aims

What does Descartes set out to achieve in this work? Note the subtitle: ***In which are demonstrated the existence of God and the distinction between the human soul and the body***

"The great benefit of these arguments is not, in my view, that they prove what they establish – namely that there really is a world and that human beings have bodies, and so on – since no sane person has seriously doubted these things. The point is that in considering these arguments we come to realise that they are not as solid or transparent as the arguments which lead us to knowledge of our own minds, and of God, so that the latter are the most certain and evident of all possible objects of knowledge for the human intellect. Indeed this is the one thing that I set myself to prove in these Meditations." (Synopsis).

Descartes thought that certain core beliefs, opposed to his metaphysics were the natural result of human development. We unreflectively hold that bodies are composed of properties manifest to the senses – including colours, sounds, tastes, odours (the Aristotelian "real qualities"). By pushing our senses beyond their real bounds we come to Aristotelian conclusions. If we want to see things properly, then we are going to have to look again at our foundational beliefs.

Format: addressed to the meditator. It's helpful to see Descartes as leading you through these passages, asking you to think about what he says and engage in his doubts.

6 Meditations together with Objections and Replies: From Caterus; Mersenne (2 sets); Hobbes; Arnauld; Gassendi; Bourdin.

1. Meditator engages in a process of doubt.
2. Meditator finds that the existence and nature of his own mind are better known than are material things.
3. Meditator considers two proofs of the existence of God.
4. Meditator learns to guide judgement in order to find truth and avoid error.
5. Meditator considers the essence of material things and considers another proof for the existence of God.
6. Meditator discovers a real distinction between mind and body and proves the existence of material things.

3. The Method of Doubt

Descartes calls his philosophical method 'The Method of Doubt'. He introduces it in the first two paragraphs of the *Meditations* (page 12).

Scepticism: There is no knowledge; we do not know anything; we can never reach the truth.

Correspondence theory of truth: A claim or a belief is *true* when it *represents* the world as being in a certain way *and* the world really is in that way.

Epistemic: anything to do with knowledge.

Epistemic markers (signs, indications) of truth:

1. **Certainty:** A belief is certain for me when I am in a position of information which is sufficient to rule out **in my mind** the hypothesis that the belief is false.
2. **Justification:** A belief is justified for me when I am in a possession of information which **entitles** me to take it that the belief is true.

In the beginning of the first *Meditation*, Descartes says that (page 12):

1. I will review all my beliefs and suspend them.
2. I will proceed by examining first my most fundamental beliefs. I will then reject these and all the other beliefs based on them.
3. I will re-admit them only if they are 'completely certain and indubitable'.

According to Descartes, this method out all knowledge based on sensory experience. Ordinarily, we accept the following **principle of charity**: If things appear thus and so, then they indeed are thus and so. We can trust our senses.

In the First Meditation, Descartes wants to argue against this principle.

His first argument then goes something like this:

1. From time to time, I have been deceived by the senses.
2. We should never trust completely those who have deceived us once.
3. Therefore, we should never trust the senses completely.

4. Argument from Illusion

Premise 1: Sometimes we experience illusions (or hallucinations).

Premise 2: If we sometimes experience illusions, we cannot always trust our senses.

Conclusion: Therefore, we cannot always trust our senses.

First Response: Reformulate the Principle of Charity. According to the new version:

If things appear thus and so and conditions are **standard**, then things are thus and so. By standard, we mean no hallucinations or illusions.

This would make the hallucinations and illusions seem irrelevant. The person who defends knowledge based on sensory experience didn't mean that sensory experiences are always reliable. In the hallucination cases, the standard conditions do not obtain.

Descartes' Anticipation: How can I tell that I am perceiving truly and that the conditions are standard? I could be a madman. If I don't know that I am in the standard conditions, then I cannot use the new principle of charity as justification for my beliefs based on my senses.

Second Response: Reformulate the Principle of Charity again. Now:

If things appear thus and so under **standard conditions** to a **normal observer**, they are indeed thus and so.

This principle begins to look vague and arbitrary. Its sole motivation is to rule out counter-examples. All it seems to say is that 'When conditions and the observer are such that they observe truly that things are thus and so, things are thus and so.'

Conclusion: no informative, non-trivial principle of sensory reliability can be formulated to save the senses from universal doubt.

Descartes seems to be aware that the scope of this argument is limited – for instance it won't touch beliefs we don't get from our senses. We will see next time how he tries to push these sceptical doubts further.