

René Descartes (1596-1650): *Meditations on First Philosophy* 1641

His project is to establish the rationality of the human subject and in doing so recognizing God's rationality in Creation by seeing the rational principle in humans. Like Bacon's destruction of "false idols" of knowledge, he embraces a skeptical view but rational instead of empirical.

He refers to the "natural light of reason," which comes from Plato's cave myth, but Descartes' use is rooted in Saint Augustine who took Plato's metaphor of the "light of the Divine logos illuminating the object of our knowledge." Descartes reformulates this without the idea of Divine Logos and just calls it reason itself. No logos doctrine because he's not a scholastic and doesn't rely on a theory of forms from logos doctrine.

This is the influence of humanism. His Jesuit training also influenced his notion that God is Good.

The **subjective turn** in modern philosophy posits the **idea as objective reality through intuitive premises that are immediate as opposed to formal reality of the external thing that the idea represents. This is a representational theory of knowledge.**

For Plato an innate idea is something in your mind from a previous existence that is recalled. For Descartes, innate means it is native to us and of natural origin. Not a fiction we have made up but a kind of spontaneous idea that wells up in the mind.

This spontaneity is both mystical and a version of *a priori* experience, regarded as universal and necessary. Empiricists say we have no *a priori* knowledge.

During the Medieval period, there was a splintering of thought on Augustine's view of the light of the Logos from Divine Reason that enlightens the mind.

Bonaventure sticks with the Platonic / Augustinian conception of enlightening the mind

Aquinas picks up on Augustine in terms of exemplarism (archetypal ideas in the mind of God) but then shifts to the Aristotelian concept of the light of "natural" reason. Here the capacity seems to have the light. It's not the logos of the Gospel of John.

Overview:

Meditation 1: I doubt (methodological skepticism; intuition and deduction)

Meditation 2: I exist as a thinking being

Meditation 3: God exists

Meditation 4: Reliability of Reason & Problem of Error / Evil (a Good God wouldn't deceive)

Meditation 5: Necessary Truth Regarding Material Things

Meditation 6: Contingent Truths about Material Existence (Senses are reliable because a Good God gave them to us)

Philosophical Method: Deductive System of Axioms through an extending chain of proofs

Meditation 1: I doubt; therefore, I exist.

We all doubt. A necessary truth.

But doubting is a form of thinking, so *dubito* becomes, *cogito*

Including: doubting, perceiving, imagining, affirming, denying, acts of will, feeling – any conscious state of activity of the consciousness.

Intellect is not separate from emotion or will. It's like saying, "I am conscious; therefore, I exist."

Meditation 2: I Exist as a Thinking Being

Cogito; ergo sum

Within thinking:

1. Contents of consciousness: ideas, images, concepts, notions: the "what" of thinking or object of thought.
2. Acts of consciousness: The act of thinking. Pausing to reflect, affirm, doubt, etc.

There must be an agent that acts in conscious ways.

This is all intuitive, not inferred or known indirectly. It's known directly through introspective conscious awareness, which is (presumably) apart from the senses. Descartes presents this and unmediated through senses or bodily perceptions.

At this point he thinks he cannot even prove he has a body.

For Descartes, consciousness is only mental properties.

Wax illustration: the physical properties change when heated. Physical properties are transient and relative. But the *idea* of wax is a mental concept.

Sounds like Plato, right?

Representational Theory of Knowledge:

The Mind is aware of its mental ideas and acts. It projects external bodies and realities. These are not the real things but ***representations, which we have a direct experience of through intuition.***

The existence of objects in the world is inferred and indirect. Even God is indirectly experienced. God must be proven in consciousness *a priori* to experience. You have to prove that you have a body or that others exist or that there's an external world.

Later philosophers such as Hegel and existentialists will criticize Descartes here. There are certainly ethical implications for his solipsism.

Note that Descartes is a bit different from Kant, who tends to situate *a priori* itself as being in itself and unavailable to us.

There's also another problem. If I only exist when I think, what happens when I do not think? When I'm unconscious or fast asleep? I cannot, in Descartes' thought prove I existed in those states. How do I know that my past consciousness were mine in between states of sleep? Memory is a *present representation of the past consciousness*.

Descartes presents a solipsism of the present moment of consciousness.

Language issue:

In English, we have to use 'I' twice: **I** think; therefore, **I** am. The second 'I' appears as a kind of reflection.

This doesn't happen in Latin: *cogito; ergo sum*. The "ergo sum" is a *res cogitans* or "thinking thing / substance / entity." But where does the "thing" come in?

Yet Descartes calls this the existence of the "soul" or "immaterial mind." The scholastics following Thomas Aquinas had tried to do this in earlier philosophy.

Thomas Hobbes, a materialist, critiqued Descartes: Why shouldn't the thinking thing be a body?

Descartes says: First, I have no intuitive awareness of body as I do of mind; second, I do have some notion of a soul substance (what is "notion" here? It's unclear).

David Hume is more skeptical and said, We're aware of ideas, and in being aware of my mind, I'm only aware of a bundle of ideas I call mine, though not of what bundles them. He's talking about ideas, not acts.

So perhaps Descartes's philosophy hinges on the idea of a thinking agent.

At work here is a kind of **intentionality** *where the mind reaches out* and apprehends something in the world. It was common in earlier times for people to think the soul emitted out of the eyes like a flashlight beam.

Hobbes says, it may be sound to say, “I think; therefore, I exist” but not to infer from that an active agent or thinking thing.

Meditation 3: God exists

He needs to argue from either or both of these:

1. Existence of the Mind
2. Actual Ideas I have: The idea of God being one

He tries to construct a causal argument:

Descartes argues the mind is a finite, fallible and contingent thing. Limited and subject to error. It is entirely dependent on other things.

Suppressed premise: There are causal relations in reality. I.e., there must be a cause for my mind.

Three kinds of Ideas:

1. Innate
2. Adventitious (come to us from outside agents or causes, involuntary)
3. Factitious (fictional, voluntary)

He relies on a eurochristian abstraction: “Nature” by implying “Nature makes evident that...” Here Descartes is implicitly relying on medieval philosophy, even though he claims to have suspended all judgment.

He argues the idea of God is not a factitious one that I cause, nor is it adventitious. According to Descartes:

1. The idea of God has the fullest kind of “objective reality.”
2. The idea of God is involuntary.
3. I am a contingent thinking thing.

The idea of God seems to be distinctive. His idea needs a clear definition. He identifies clarity and distinctness with objective reality.

The “objective reality” here is the idea.

The formal reality must be as great as the effect. For him the cause is: “Nature teaches us,” which is an adventitious idea. We learn it in the course of experience.

“The idea by which I conceive a God – sovereign, eternal, infinite immutable, all knowing, all powerful, the creator of all things that are outside of himself.” He claims this has more objective reality.

The idea of a perfect, infinite being more powerful than myself is itself so powerful that I cannot conceive it as of my own making. It is involuntary. Therefore, God exists.

How can a finite creature think of an infinite thing if the idea were not outside of myself?

His parents cannot be the cause.

It is innate in the same way the idea of myself is innate. In fact, the idea of myself is also put in there by God and I am in some way am like him, an image of him, though finite. The effect bears witness to the cause, so in bearing witness to my own self-reflection and aspire to something better and greater I am assured that this was put there by God.

Meditation 4: Reliability of Reason & Problem of Error (Good / Evil)

The God who exists is a perfect being who could not deceive.

This is a cause-effect argument for the existence of God, not cosmological or teleological like Aquinas who argued from the design of the cosmos. It's not ontological like Anselm, who tried to analyze the existence of God and show that it would be a logical self-contradiction to deny the existence.

He can't make his ontological argument until meditation five.

Meditation 5: Necessary Truth Regarding Material Things

Develops an ontological argument for the existence of God.

He deals with Concepts / Thought objects and logic.

Says both matter and God have logically necessary truths that we can know independent of experience (analytic concepts).

The essence of matter is that it occupies space: size, shape, density – spatial properties. The essence of matter has spatial properties. If we can know any logically necessary truths about space, then we can know them about any possible matter.

This is the science of geometry, which he uses as an example: the idea of a triangle.

Necessary truths about triangles:

1. They must have 3 angles.
2. They add up to 180 degrees in Euclidean geometry.

He moves to the science of physics as an a priori science, like optics, which was prevalent in his day. He has a mechanistic view of human bodies and nature.

God is a concept, not an object of sense observation.

Switches from discourse on Essence of God to Existence. He says God is the Essence of Existence.

By doing so he makes a parallel between the necessary truths of Geometry and necessary truth of God's existence. Existence is to the concept of God as adding up two right angles is to the existence of a triangle.

Echoes Anselm in God as highest of beings.

He argues:

Either God exists or God does not exist

Either A or Non A

Non A is a self-contradictory position and therefore false. The contradiction being that you cannot say of one whose essence is to exist that that one cannot exist.

Therefore, A exists and is necessary.

Final paragraph claiming certitude of science depends on knowledge of true God, now that I know him. The existence of God as perfect being is in pure mathematics.

This argument is system dependent on medieval hierarchy of being.

The objection to it today is that the existence of God is not *logically* necessary. Some argue God's existence is *ontologically* necessary and not contingent on anything, but to say that God is *logically* necessary is harder to make. Descartes is confusing logical necessity with ontological necessity.

Meditation 6: Contingent Truths about Material Existence

Belief does not ride on whether a conclusion follows on the logical outcome of its premises.

Sensory Objects:

Here he gets to the question of whether or not he has a body.

According to his method, he needs to start with states of consciousness of which he defines three:

1. Conception: having a body is logically possible.
2. Imagination: Factitious ideas about bodies. To image a real or nonreal thing. There can be external or spatial referents, but imagination just provides some sort of persuasion.
3. Sensation: logical possibility if God is good and does not give me deceptive senses.

You can make cause effect arguments for other bodies and other minds by analogy.

What about Hallucinations?

If God's perfect, how is it that we are deceived regularly in our senses?

Descartes: Our bodies are made up of many parts that may cause conflicts in our sensory perception. The will and the intellect are both involved. The error involves the judgment that misreads sensations.

Problem: Mind-Body relation have different essences somehow conjoined

Body = spatially extended thing

Mind / Soul = thinking thing

Descartes seems to intend the tension here because he's set himself out to prove the existence of the soul which can survive death. So, the soul has to be a functionally separate thing.

Descartes says mind and body exist in a cause-effect relationship with each other.

But *how does it happen?*

Descartes says it's in the pineal gland. But this still has not told us anything about how.

He says, "Animal spirits" move through "canals" in the body through glands. The gland is "suspended in the canals of the spirits."

Nowadays arguments for brain dependence push away from a dualistic mind-body problem.