

Handout #1: Descartes' 2nd Meditation

I. The Method of Doubt

By the time we can “think for ourselves” we each have a substantive number of beliefs. We believe many of the things that our parents and teachers told us, even though we had no way to verify these things on our own. We trust our senses and our memories even though they are highly fallible. We must all admit, therefore, that it is highly likely that some of our assumptions are false. But how can we rid ourselves of false beliefs?

The Method of Doubt: “Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least recognize for certain that there is no certainty.”

Cartesian Foundationalism: True propositions that cannot be rationally doubted are known with certainty and can be safely assumed. These *indubitable* propositions are *foundational*. One is only rationally justified in believing a non-foundational proposition if one can convincingly argue for that proposition from premises that are foundational.

Questions: What can be doubted? Are any propositions indubitable and so foundational in Descartes' sense? Is it psychologically possible for you to doubt what you seem to perceive or seem to remember perceiving? How many propositions can we derive from the “indubitable propositions” we cannot genuinely doubt? Does the Method of Doubt lead to substantial skepticism?

II. Cogito Ergo Sum

The Cogito Argument

- (1) For any proposition P: If it is not possible for an evil being of “supreme power” to convince me of P when P is false, then I cannot rationally doubt P.
- (2) It is not possible for an evil being of supreme power to convince me that I am thinking when it is false that I am thinking.
- (3) I cannot rationally doubt that I am thinking.

Thus, Descartes concludes, the proposition that he is thinking is a foundational proposition. Moreover, Descartes claims,

- (4) If I am thinking, then I exist.

Thus, Descartes concludes, if he cannot doubt the proposition that he is thinking, and he knows the proposition that he is thinking entails the proposition that he exists, he cannot doubt the proposition that he exists.

Thus, Descartes concludes, the proposition that he exists is a foundational proposition.

Descartes' Argument for Premise (2):

- (5) An evil being has convinced me that I am thinking, but I am not thinking. (Assumption for reductio ad absurdum.)

- (6) I am convinced that I am thinking.
(7) I am not thinking.
(Conjunction elimination: (5).)
(8) I am convinced of something. (Existential instantiation: (6).)
(9) If I am convinced of something, I must be thinking. (Analytic or definitional truth?)
(10) I am thinking.
(Modus ponens: (8) & (9).)
(11) I am not thinking and I am thinking.
(Conjunction Introduction: (7) & (10).)

Since (5) entails a contradiction it *cannot* be true. Thus (2) must be true.

Sub-argument for (9): To be convinced that x I must consider the proposition that x and endorse that proposition. To consider a proposition is to engage in thought. To engage in thought is to think. Therefore, if I am convinced that x, I must be thinking.

III. The Conceivability Argument for Object Dualism

- (12) Descartes can rationally doubt that his body exists. (Descartes can doubt the existence of everything in the “external world.”)
(13) Descartes cannot doubt that he exists.
Therefore,
(14) Descartes is not his body. (Descartes is none of the things in the corporeal or “external” world.)

“I am not that structure of limbs which is called a human body. I am not even some thin vapour which permeates the limbs—a wind, fire, air, breath or whatever I depict in my imagination; for these are things which I have supposed to be nothing. Let this supposition stand; for all that I am still something.”

What then is Descartes?

“But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.”

What, according to Descartes, are sensory perceptions supposed to be? They are *seemings*.

“I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called ‘having a sensory perception’ is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking.”

Questions: Is Descartes right to think that an evil being of supreme power could not induce him to falsely believe that he seems to see, hear, and be warmed? Are facts about what he seems to see, hear, and feel truly foundational? (In Meditation VI, Descartes expresses doubts as to whether imagination and sensation are really part of his essence.)

IV. An Initial Division of Metaphysical Positions

Dualism

Object Dualism: Minds exist. Bodies exist. Minds are not bodies.

Substance Dualism: Mental stuff exists. Physical stuff exists. Mental stuff is not physical stuff.

Property Dualism: Things have physical properties. Things have mental (or psychological) properties. Mental properties are not physical properties.

Monism

Object Physicalism: Bodies exist, and either minds don't exist or they are some of the bodies that exist.

Substance Physicalism: Physical stuff exists, and either mental stuff doesn't exist or it is some of the physical stuff that exists.

Property Physicalism: Things have physical properties, and either nothing has mental properties or mental properties are some of the physical properties that things have.

Idealism: Minds exist and have mental properties. Either bodies don't exist or they are minds (or parts of minds). Either nothing has physical properties or physical properties are mental properties of a certain sort.

Questions: What concepts of physical and mental are used in these definitions? Is it analytic or "definitional" that if physical objects exist, they occupy space? Is it analytic that if mental objects exist, they do not occupy space? Is it analytic that physical properties (and relations) are properties of (or relations between) spatial entities? Is it analytic that the physical properties and kinds are just those that the theories of physics (in their current or some future form) mention? What about biological properties or economic properties or the properties studied by scientists in other disciplines?

V. Some Objections to Descartes' Arguments

A. An Objection to the Conceivability Argument

"Quantifying In" and Non-Trivial Identities

(15) John doubts that Samuel Clemens is clever.

(16) John does not doubt that Mark Twain is clever.

(17) Samuel Clemens is not Mark Twain.

A Common Claim (Denied by Some): (17) does not follow from (15) & (16). To get a valid argument for (16) we need to *export* 'Mark Twain' and 'Samuel Clemens' from within the scope of 'doubts' to a position outside the scope of this verb. Though the above argument is (arguably) invalid, the following argument is valid; (18) & (19) deductively entail (20).

(18) Samuel Clemens is a man who John doubts to be clever.

- (18') $\exists x[(x=\text{Samuel Clemens}) \ \& \ \text{Doubts}\{\text{John},[\text{Clever}(x)]\}]$
 (19) Mark Twain is not a man who John doubts to be clever.
 (18') $\neg(\exists x[(x=\text{Mark Twain}) \ \& \ \text{Doubts}\{\text{John},[\text{Clever}(x)]\}])$
 (20) Samuel Clemens is not Mark Twain.
 (19') $\neg(\text{Samuel Clemens}=\text{Mark Twain})$

Questions: Is (19) true or false? (It's false, right?) Is (19) entailed by (16)? (This is more difficult to decide.) Consider then the following logically valid argument:

- (21) Descartes is not one of the things that Descartes doubts exists.
 (21') $\neg(\exists x[x=\text{Descartes} \ \& \ \text{Doubts}\{\text{Descartes},[\text{Exists}(x)]\}])$
 (22) Descartes' body (and the animal with that body) is one of the things that Descartes doubts exists.
 (22') $\exists x[x=\text{Body of (Descartes)} \ \& \ \text{Doubts}\{\text{Descartes},[\text{Exists}(x)]\}]$
 (23) Descartes is not his body (nor the animal with that body).
 (23') $\neg(\text{Descartes}=\text{Body of (Descartes)})$

To resist Descartes' argument for object dualism we need to deny (21) or (22). But does either premise seem false once Descartes has applied his method of doubt to his beliefs in physical objects and become convinced by his cogito argument?

B. An Objection to the Cogito Argument

Lichtenberg's Objection: From 'I am thinking' one can only infer 'Some thinking exists' not 'I exist'

- (23) It is raining.
 (24) If it is raining, then it exists.
 (25) It exists.
 (26) I am thinking.
 (27) If I am thinking, I exist.
 (28) I exist.

(23)-(25) is not a good argument. (Or is it a good argument for the existence of the atmosphere?) Might we say the same about (26)-(28)?

Question: Can it be that I am thinking even though nothing is thinking, just as it can be raining even though nothing is raining? (Or is something raining? The sky?) Is 'I' a referring term? (Elizabeth Anscombe famously argued that it is not.) Descartes answers, "The fact that it is I whom am doubting and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer."

Radically anti-Cartesian theories of the referent of "I": (1) Hume's bundle theory. (2) Buddhist "nothingness" conception of the self.