

## Descartes' Sixth Meditation

Descartes' Sixth Meditation is long and complicated. My purpose here is to give you some sense of its overall structure. I will not go into detail explaining the arguments, but simply try to describe what is going on as it moves along. If I describe the forest, maybe you'll be able to recognize more of the trees.

As I noted in class, there are major themes in this Meditation, and this is indicated in the sub-title: "The existence of material things, and the real distinction between mind and body." The first topic occupies the greater part of the Meditation, and includes not just knowledge of the existence of material objects, but questions about what we can know about them. And the two themes are not neatly separated: arguments for the immateriality of mind occur in the middle of other discussions. While much of what he says here is relevant to questions about minds and bodies, I see only two real arguments for mind/body dualism, each only a paragraph long.

To make matters easier, I have numbered the paragraphs. You should do the same. By my count, there are 24 paragraphs in the Bennett edition we are using. I will also refer to the page numbers in the packets you downloaded for this class.

The first paragraph of the Sixth Meditation, on p. 16 of our text, makes two points: First, we can conclude that material objects are, at the very least, *possible*, because we have a clear and distinct idea of their essential nature. We don't yet know that they exist, but our understanding of geometry reveals that there is no contradiction in our idea of them. So, their existence is not logically impossible.

(Descartes equates "possibility" here with what God can create, and says that if he can form a clear and distinct idea of something, God can create it. I won't talk about this here, but a similar claim is made later in one of the arguments for mind/body dualism.)

Still in the first paragraph, Descartes claims that the existence of material things is at least "suggested" by our "faculty" of imagination. This discussion continues through the second and third paragraphs (now on page 17), where he describes the difference between imagining and

understanding, and his guesses about how imagination might work. I won't review those discussions here. The point, again, is to show that the existence of material things has a certain plausibility, given his understanding of the "faculty" of imagination.

But (paragraph 4) if we are to make the case that material objects exist, we need to look at sense perception. In paragraph 6, pp. 17-18, he reviews what he thought he knew about material objects before he began the Meditations. Paragraph 7 reviews the skeptical challenges raised at the beginning of the Meditations, and at Paragraph 8, p. 19, he begins to explain what he knows at this stage of Meditations, given all the "constructive" work that has gone on in the second through fifth Meditations.

Up till this point everything has pretty much been review. Now is when the real work of this Meditation begins. The first thing Descartes has come to know, after the skeptical challenges of the First Meditation, is the existence and nature of his own mind. The 9th paragraph contains the first explicit argument (in this Meditation) for the immateriality of mind. We will talk about this in class.

Paragraph 10 contains the argument for the existence of bodies. In the remainder of this Meditation, he will discuss what we can know about the properties of bodies, but paragraph 10 contains the entire argument for their existence. The argument here begins about half way down p. 19 with the following statement:

Now, I have a *passive* faculty of sensory perception, that is, an ability to *receive* and recognize ideas perceptible objects; but I would have no use for this unless something--myself or something else--had an *active* faculty for *producing* those ideas in the first place.

I quote this passage to point out that the goal here is to explain my "faculty" of passively receiving sensations. So, the argument that follows will concern what could explain my *ability* to passively receive sensations. I will refer back to this later.

The argument has the form of (what is called) a "disjunctive syllogism." Descartes claims that only three things could possibly explain this passively faculty in me--1) me, 2) bodies, or 3) God (or "some creature more noble than body"). He then argues that 1) and 3) won't work, implying that 2) must be correct. As I noted in class, this argument form can work only if 1) - 3) are *all* the possible explanations, and if his arguments against 1) and 3) succeed.

We discussed in class his argument that I can't myself be the active thing that causes these sensations to occur in my mind. I think what he says here raises some interesting questions, but it just doesn't seem convincing on its face. Maybe there is an argument that he *could* make that I cannot be the cause of these sensations, but he doesn't do much here to tell us what that argument might be.

The third possibility is that these sensations are caused in me by God, or by some other being "more noble than body." I think the last phrase is meant to include possibilities like the evil demon--something other than the existence of bodies that could cause ideas in my mind. Descartes rules this possibility out on the basis of the results of the Fourth Meditation. Since God is not a deceiver, we know God would not cause me to mistakenly believe in the existence of material objects, nor allow anything else to do so.

So, Descartes concludes, since we have ruled out all the other possibilities, we can infer that material bodies are the "active" things that explain my "passive" faculty of sensation.

Assuming that we accept the conclusion of the Fourth Meditation, it seems to me that Descartes' argument rejecting the third possibility really does all the work. If God is not a deceiver, it seems, then nothing other than the existence of bodies could explain why God gave me a faculty of passively receiving sensations. In other words, if the argument against the third possibility works, it rules out *any* other explanation. If so, we needn't worry about the weak argument against 1) or the lack of any argument that 1) - 3) are the only possible explanations: if God is not a deceiver, the existence of bodies is the only remaining solution.

So, if we accept all of this, then Descartes has shown that material objects must exist, as the only explanation of my *ability* to passively receive sensations. But he has not shown that the existence of a material object is necessary to explain any *particular* sensation I might have, but only the more general fact that I have sensations at all. For any particular experience I might have, it is still possible that I am hallucinating rather than perceiving a material object. He has not given us any *criteria* by which to distinguish the two cases. He established at most (again, assuming that the argument here works) that I can't *always* be hallucinating, not that I *never* hallucinate, or even that I have any reliable way to tell the two apart.

What follows this, starting with Paragraph 11 on p. 20, is a long discussion of what else I can know about material objects. Descartes wants to establish that I can trust at least some of “what nature teaches me” about these objects. (In some translations, these are referred to as my “natural inclinations” to believe certain things about the world.)

Paragraph 12 notes that “nature teaches me” that I have a body, and that I should no longer doubt this.

Paragraph 13 claims that nature also teaches me that I am not “in” my body the way a sailor is “in” a ship. Rather, mind and body are closely “intermingled.” We will talk about this in class.

But by paragraph 15, Descartes begins to note that sometimes I can be mistaken about what I “learn” from nature. He considers a number of examples and tries to explain them, but by Paragraph 16 (p. 21), he sees a real problem. Since God creates nature, if what nature teaches me (if my natural inclinations) lead me astray, doesn’t that undermine the goodness of God?

This looks very much like the problem of the Fourth Mediation. But if his argument there succeeded, why should he need to revisit it here? I’ll leave you to think about that.

Paragraph 17 describes the kinds of cases (where “nature” leads me astray) that seem most problematic to Descartes. One of his examples concerns a body that “suffers from dropsy.” Someone who has this condition has too much fluid in their body, and yet continues to drink more water. (There is an actual medical condition called “water intoxication,” where the body chemistry gets “out of whack” from drinking too much water. It can lead to coma or death.) Someone with dropsy, presumably, is thirsty all the time. Nature teaches them that they should drink water when they’re thirsty, but, for them, drinking more water is harmful. So, it looks like we shouldn’t trust what nature teaches us. And since “nature” is simply the world that God has created, it seems that we need some kind of explanation of all of this that doesn’t call God’s goodness into doubt.

The discussion that follows gets rather complex. The crux of the problem is articulated in Paragraph 18, on p. 22 Paragraph 19 makes a claim about the natures of minds and bodies that he will appeal to in trying to solve the problem, and constitutes the second main argument for mind/body dualism. Paragraphs 20 - 23 (now on p. 23) illustrate how this is supposed to work.

The crux of his thinking here is that bodies, being composed of spatial parts, are subject to decomposition, to breaking into separate pieces. The body send signals to the mind, and these signals cause various kinds of ideas to take place in the mind. Nature (i.e., God) has designed the mind to respond in certain ways to these signals. Descartes' defense here seems to be that there is no problem in the design of how the mind responds to signals from the body (and so no cause to worry about the goodness of God). My "natural inclinations" can lead me astray, not because the mind/body design is somehow flawed, but because bodies can break and send the wrong signals to the brain. In the example of amputee pain, the claim is that the amputee feels pain in a limb that's no longer there because the body is sending the very same signal to the brain as it would if the limb were still there. So, the problem is solved because of the very nature of material objects, and not because of any flaw in how God designed how minds and bodies interact.

I won't even begin to try to evaluate any of this. But there is some interesting stuff here. Look at what he says in paragraph 20, and then compare this to what he said back at 13. Do you see any tension between what he says in these two places?

The Meditations end with Paragraph 24, where Descartes concludes that he now is in a place to see that all his skeptical worries about "the falsity of" the senses were "laughable" and based up "exaggerated doubts." Of course we can tell the difference between when we are awake and when we are dreaming! Yes, I can still make mistakes. But, I should no longer doubt "what is unanimously confirmed by all my senses as well as my memory and intellect. From the fact that God is not a deceiver it follows that in cases like this I am completely free from error."