

Descartes: Sixth Meditation

Last time, we discussed how Descartes seeks a new foundation for belief by undertaking the exercise of *radical doubt*: that is, by trying to doubt everything that can be doubted until he is left with what is absolutely certain, what cannot be doubted no matter what, what remains secure even if the entire world that seems to be around me doesn't exist. At the end of the second meditation, Descartes was left with two kinds of things that absolutely exist, no matter what, no matter whether he is awake or dreaming, or even if he is being deceived by an evil demon or genius. These two things were the "I" and the fact that the "I" thinks. Descartes reasoned that no matter what – whether the world really exists or not, whether he is awake or asleep – *he thinks*, so therefore he exists. "I think, therefore I am" is the only basis upon which to build any possibility of certain knowledge. And along with the fact that he thinks, Descartes reasoned, certain other things about himself come along. I might not know whether the outside world exists or not: I might not know whether this table that seems to be here is really there or not at all. But I do know that it *seems to me* that there is a table. Whatever happens – whether the things in the external world are real or not – still my *seemings* are real, no matter what. This is really the way it *seems to be* to me. As we saw last time, we can know immediately and with certainty that we really have sensory perceptions: this, at least, is beyond doubt. Descartes will call these sensory perceptions and other thoughts that we have, and know we have "Ideas." And now he will add these to the list of things that we can be certain of, the I together with its thought:

Attributes (categories) of thought at the end of the second meditation:

Doubting

Understanding

Affirming

Denying

Willing

Imagining

Sensory Perceptions/ Ideas

[Emotions]

[Beliefs]

We can now say that the "I" exists, and has all these things or properties. We can tell because the "I" has these properties no matter what happens: there is no scenario of doubt, no possible situation, in which these things don't go along with the "I" that I have proven to exist. But remember, though we now know a fair amount about the "I" or self, we still know nothing about the external world – about how things are in the world, about whether the objects of these ideas and representations really exist or really are anything like the way they are presented to us.

In the rest of the Meditations, Descartes will “get back” the external world on the basis of the properties of the thinking “I” – what the thinking “I” can know about itself will be the basis for proving the existence of the things that seem to exist in the external world. But it will also turn out that the properties of these things will be a bit different than we might think. How does Descartes do this? (summarizing some of the meditations that we’ll skip over.) An important part of his argument is the proof of the **existence of God**. Descartes has proven that the “I” exists, and that there are various Ideas that exist along with the “I.” But one of the ideas that the “I” has is the idea of God. And the idea of God, according to Descartes, is different from the other ideas that we have – for instance, the idea of the table or the idea of the fire. For the Idea of God is in itself *more perfect* than these ideas. It is so perfect, in fact, that we can tell from the idea alone that something perfect must have caused it to exist. This supremely perfect cause could only be God: so Descartes takes it that God exists.

The next step is to reason that God – Who, we have argued, must exist – also created me. The Idea of God is the Idea of a perfect and omnipotent creator, but also one who is completely good. It follows that **God would not deceive me** about the external world. The fact that there is a world outside, as there seems to be, follows from the fact that God exists and is not a deceiver. So we can now tell that there is an external world after all: the world is not just the world of my mind, or what appears to exist. There is a reality beyond me as well, that is causing the Ideas that I have to exist and take place in my mind.

But it nevertheless doesn’t follow that the external world is exactly the way we think it is. It might be **quite different than our Ideas suggest**. For even though we have shown that our Ideas do come from something outside us, we have no way (yet) of knowing whether they might be distorted, whether they might be bad representations of things in the world. Indeed, there’s good reason to think that they probably are bad representations. For think about my Idea of the sun. If I look at the sun, and look at an orange that I am holding, it looks like the sun is smaller than the orange. My Idea of the sun presents it as smaller than the orange: but I know that the sun is actually much, much bigger than the orange. Here, the Idea of the sun is misleading – it presents its object otherwise than it is.

To see what external objects really are like, we have to reflect about what we really know, what we know for sure about the form of external objects. And here we can notice that there are again certain things we can know just by thinking about ideas. For instance, consider my idea of a **triangle**. Now, we might not know whether there are *actually* any triangles anywhere in the world. But from the idea itself, I can know certain things. For instance, I can know that the sum of the angles of a triangle – *if any exists* – is 180 degrees. I can argue this without ever finding any real triangle; all I need is my Idea of a triangle.

Indeed, I can know certain other things about material objects just by reasoning about the Idea of material objects that is within me. I know, for instance, that material objects have a shape and a size. That is, they are **extended**: they have determinate spatial co-

ordinates. I also know that they can be divided or split apart. In fact, I can know just by thinking about all the *geometric properties of matter*. I can know just by thinking that material objects – if there are any – exist in space and have determinate sizes and shapes. These properties will certainly be properties of anything that I find in the external world.

But there are other properties that our ideas *represent* to us as holding of things in the external world, that **may not actually hold**. Consider the property of being hot. My Idea of the fire comes along with a certain sensation or feeling of heat: but do we know that there is anything in the fire itself that corresponds to this feeling? No, we don't. There could be nothing in the fire that turns out to be like heat: indeed, heat could turn out just to be a kind of motion, the motion of atoms and molecules. This motion produces or causes the Idea of heat in me, but there need not be anything in the fire itself that *resembles* or is *like* heat.

Accordingly, Descartes will identify *space with geometric properties*: size, shape, and motion. For Descartes, space is like a set of co-ordinates. Everything in space can be located in a precise place, and has a determinate extent. (In fact, Descartes is responsible for *co-ordinate geometry*, where we impose a system of co-ordinates in order to locate objects). All physical objects are in this space, and the real properties of physical objects are all “geometrical” properties: properties that can be described in terms of position, location, shape and size. In the real world there is no heat or cold, no colors and no sounds. There are just different particles, moving and re-combining in various shapes, producing these impressions on us, but not actually resembling the impressions or ideas themselves.

Now that we know something about the physical world and the bodies in it, we can begin to think about the relationship between the mind and the body. Descartes argues that the mind and the body are different things, and indeed that the mind is a different kind of *substance* than the body. That is, there is a *real distinction* between mind and body: they are completely different kinds of things, and they can never even conceivably be the same thing. Descartes' first argument for this is that I can imagine the mind existing without the body:

First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God. The question of what kind of power is required to bring about such a separation does not affect the judgement that the two things are distinct. Thus, simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing. It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body,