

Descartes' *Meditations*: Background

The Search for a Theory of Knowledge

One of the major preoccupations of western philosophers has been the problem of knowledge and the challenges posed by both skepticism and empiricism. Influenced by the dramatic technological and theoretical achievements of modern science, philosophers such as René



After Frans Hals, Portrait of René Descartes, n.d.

Descartes (1596-1650) formulated theories about what knowledge is and what conditions must be satisfied in order for a human being to know that $2+3=5$, that all emeralds are green, that all human beings evolved from a common ancestor, or that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder".

Descartes was not the first philosopher who tried to formulate a theory of knowledge. The western preoccupation with knowledge goes back to the ancient Greeks and beyond. So, for example, in Plato's *Theataetus* Socrates attempts to formulate an adequate definition of knowledge. What seems clear to Socrates is that to know something, at least two conditions must be met:

1. I must **believe** it, and
2. It must be **true**.

Suppose, for example, I claim that the President of the United States makes public policy decisions only after consulting an astrologer, and I believe this because I read it in a blog on the *Huffington Post* website. Now, even if it is true that he's doing this, you may want to say that I can't really know it for a fact because I have no legitimate basis for believing such a claim. Surely, believing a claim made by a *Huffington Post* blogger is not sufficient for having real knowledge. Something else is needed. The additional condition that must be met, Plato concludes, is that we must have a sound basis — a "**justified true belief**" — in order to have real knowledge. The problem then is to determine what is sufficient to **justify** a true belief.

Modern epistemologists, beginning with Descartes, came to think that to really know a thing, the very **possibility** of being mistaken had to be ruled out entirely. Thus, I could not claim to know that the stock market will crash next year unless it is absolutely **impossible for me to be mistaken**. But this is not a condition that can be easily satisfied. How many things could any one of us claim to know with absolute certainty? Probably very few, if any at all.

However, the hope was that if we could find a basis or **foundation** built of a few **certain truths**, then, armed with the correct principles of **logical reasoning**, a firm and unshakable edifice of knowledge could be constructed on top of that foundation. Descartes' primary concerns were to find a firm basis for both his **theological** and **scientific** beliefs. (It's worth noting that Descartes' purpose in writing the *Meditations* was to reconcile the competing claims of the Christian Church and of modern physics for authority over the life of "Man".)

Descartes was a Catholic and a theist. As a member of the Church and a prominent intellectual of the time, he felt compelled to defend the two principle dogmas of his faith against the challenge mounted by the atheists. The two dogmas are, (1) that God exists, and (2) that the soul is separate from the body and not subject to decay or destruction. Those loyal to the Church were expected to accept these claims on **faith** alone, i.e. **independent** of any **reasons** one might have for believing them. Of course, faith is not going to carry much weight with non-believers

who already think such claims are false. So, if you were going to convert these non-believers, you would have to appeal to their sense of **reason**. When the Lateran Council under the direction of Leo X (1512-17) called upon philosophers to defend their faith by producing arguments to support the belief in God and the immortality of the soul, philosophers such as Descartes took this task seriously.¹

But Descartes was also an advocate of the "new physics". He was convinced that Galileo's scientific method, which emphasized mathematical description and close observation, had finally put western science in a position to provide human beings with knowledge of the natural world and the "ways of God". It was in the new science that Descartes found an approach to the explanation of the physical world that relied primarily on careful **observation** and descriptions formulated in terms of **mathematical** formulae. The hope here was that the diversity and richness of the material world of Nature would ultimately be reducible to a few simple mathematical principles. The problem was that a **causal explanation** of the world, describable in purely mechanistic and mathematical terms, included no reference to Divine Providence.

Finally, such a deterministic explanation of the world left no room for **freedom of the will**. And without that, human beings would be nothing more than complex machines, incapable of governing their own behavior and accepting moral responsibility for their actions. Thus, the new physics constituted a radical departure from the earlier medieval science which had to reconcile all of its conclusions with the *Bible*.

What Descartes felt he needed was a foundation for scientific knowledge that would not rule out a Supreme Being who creates and watches over the events of this world. Descartes believed he had discovered sound arguments for just such a foundation.

According to Descartes, the one thing that we know for sure is that whenever we are thinking, we must exist. This indubitable truth was derived by him from his "method of doubt", i.e. by arguing that you cannot claim to know a thing if it is possible, without contradiction, to imagine that it is false. With his method of doubt, Descartes set out in his *Meditations* to examine every one of his most fundamental and cherished beliefs to see if it was possible to doubt them. Eventually, he worked all the way down to doubting his own existence. But in doing so he realized one thing for sure — he must **exist**. Descartes reasoned as follows:

I cannot fail to exist, for even when I doubt that I really exist and think that I may only be dreaming that I exist, there must be something that dreams or doubts that it exists. Whatever that thing is, I know that, (a) it must exist in order to doubt or dream that it does, and (b) I am that thing that doubts or dreams. Thus, whenever I **think** I exist (or that I don't exist), at that moment I **must** exist.²

Now, from the knowledge of his own existence and from the mere **idea** of God as a perfect being, Descartes went on to formulate a proof for God's existence. And with his own existence assured along with that of an all-powerful, knowing, benevolent, omnipresent, and eternal God, Descartes attempted to show that all sorts of knowledge would follow.

Some Metaphysical Details

Descartes also believed, perhaps uncritically, that everything that exists is either a **substance** or an **attribute (property)** of a substance. This concept of substance was an ancient and problematic one. It was assumed to be the underlying and unknown basis or ground to which properties are attached. It is the thing we are talking about when we claim that a thing has certain characteristics. So, for example, when I say "This rose is red", according to Descartes there must be some **thing** to which the **property redness** is attached. The same is true for all other properties of the rose. In other words, the substance is the thing to which all the properties

¹ See Descartes' "Letter of Dedication" to the *Meditations*.

² Cf. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1979, 13-17 (17-25).

of the rose — its color, shape, size, smell, texture, etc. — belong. But the substance **as substance** is not itself a property. Since properties are what we perceive when we perceive a thing, it follows that **substances cannot be perceived**. A substance exists apart from its properties and depends on nothing else for its existence. The problem is that, if we have no experience or perception of substance, and if we can't in principle detect it, on what basis can we justify the claim that it exists?

Now, given Descartes' view that everything that exists is either a substance or an attribute of a substance, since **self**, **matter**, and **God** are not mere properties, they must be substances. And this is a belief that Descartes, it seems, never subjected to doubt even though he was prepared to doubt the existence of things that **are** observed by us.

Descartes' Philosophy of Mind

According to Descartes, everything in the universe is either a body or a mind. Since the individual mind is identified with the self and is the center of all thinking — what Descartes calls a *cogito*, an "I think" — it follows that we know our minds more completely and directly than we know our bodies, and we "observe many more qualities in our mind than in any other thing".³ All the qualities of the mind — willing, imagining, desiring, hoping, doubting, perceiving, etc. — are **modes** of one of our basic **powers**:

- **volition** — the power to will, or
- **understanding** — the power to seek the truth and gain knowledge.

The will is entirely free and infinite, which is to say that we can will anything. Our powers of understanding, however, are limited and we risk falling into error and confusion when our will oversteps the limits of our understanding.

Descartes also distinguishes between

- **thinking** — cognition of the world as it is, which is to say, composed of **immaterial** (non-physical) **minds**, and **material** (physical, extended) **things**, characterized by their length, breadth and depth, and
- **sensing** — perception of a world of things that are possessed of color, sound and smell.

But there is a problem for Descartes' theory of knowledge, brought on by his "mind-body **dualism**" and his distinction between the mental and the physical. If the world is divided into minds which are entirely **non-material** on the one hand, and physical objects which are fully **material** on the other, then how is it possible for the mind to know anything about, or have any contact whatsoever, with a physical world of material objects? If the mind does not "make contact" with objects (because there is nothing in the mind to make contact with), how could it acquire information about those objects or affect them in any way?

Descartes' solution was to posit the existence of **ideas** (representations) as a link between the immaterial mind and the material world of things outside the mind. Thus, "true" ideas in the mind accurately represent the objects in the world that **cause** those ideas.

Finally, notice that since the self is essentially a thing that thinks, what we are in direct contact with and **know** most intimately are **the contents of our own minds**. Thus, if I want a cup of coffee and I'm thinking about going to the cafe to get one, my **wanting coffee** is a fact about which I could not possibly be mistaken. Thus, Descartes assumes that our experience is characterized by an "incorrigibility of introspection".

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³ W. T. Jones, *Hobbes to Hume: A History of Western Philosophy*, Vol. III, 2nd ed., New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969, 180.