

Descartes *Meditations* – Module 3 – AQA

Meditation I – Things which can be called into Doubt

- Descartes rejects all his beliefs about the external world because they are doubtful and he wants to find a foundation that is indubitable to fix his beliefs on
- His arguments for universal doubt
 - Senses can be deceived
 - Perception / Bent Stick / Mirages
 - Dreaming
 - It is possible we are dreaming right now
 - Evil Demon (or God)
 - Could be systematically deceiving us, even doubtful about the truth $2+3=5$, as he could be tricking us there.

Critical Analysis of Descartes Method

- **Is immunity from doubt a criterion for knowledge?**
 - Surely this just leads to the inevitability of scepticism and if you set the bar too high, we will find out nothing.
 - It could be also argued that global scepticism is impossible.
- **Is knowledge = undoubtable?**
 - The world being flat was undoubtable in the 8th century
 - Epistemological certainty differs to psychological certainty
- **Are we really deceived by bent sticks?**
 - We know that these are illusions etc. and can spot them a mile off. We know when we are being deceived!
- **X requires ~X**
 - In order to be 'dreaming' we must have 'not dreaming' which we may not have according to Descartes. We must have a reality to contrast with a 'non reality'
- **Is it the senses that deceive?**
 - The senses do exactly what they are meant to do, it is the **world** that deceives
- **Laws of Logic**
 - If the laws of logic are doubted, then the whole *Meditations* is worthless
- **Descartes doesn't go far enough**
 - Does not explore deceptive memory for example
- **The possibility of doubt does not in itself necessarily make it dubious**

Conclusion

Descartes method on the surface looks good to get rid of all the dubious beliefs and then only have a firm foundation. However, he takes his doubt too far and at times is becoming a global sceptic which is an illogical position to hold (doubt requires certainty). Crucially, his criterion for knowledge is undoubtability and as shown this is not an epistemological method for certainty and a certainty could be wrong.

Meditation II – of the Nature of the Human mind; and that it is Easier to Know than the Body

Cogito

- **I am; I exist (I think therefore I am – Discourse)**
- This proposition is necessarily true every time I express it
- The mere fact that I am able to doubt my own existence means that I am here to doubt and thus I must exist.
- This is the point of foundation that Descartes will no build upon
- Surely it must be true that any thought requires a thinker, what exactly would 'just' a thought be? Every attribute must have a substance.

Problems

- Hume said when he inspected his thoughts he was aware of no 'I'
- Pre-supposes an 'I' to exist, the premise contains the conclusion.
- Lichtenburg – 'there are thoughts, therefore thoughts'
- Surely if he was being a through sceptic the evil demon could deceive him about this

The Wax

- Take a piece of wax – it is hard cold and makes a sound
- Put the same wax by the fire, the smell, the colour, the shape etc. are all destroyed
- All the sensations about the wax change yet we maintain it is still the same
- Perhaps this is because I can imagine the wax in all its forms, yet we are stuck as I could not possibly imagine all the infinite forms!
- So since I do not know the wax through the imagination or the senses, then it is clear that the wax must be understood through the **understanding only**
- Therefore it is clear to see that there is nothing easier to know than my mind.

Shows

- We have a mental operation thus confirming the *cogito*
- Some truths are *a priori* (rationalist)
- There is a distinction between the mind and the body
- I am essentially just a *thinking thing*

Problems

- Just because it is conceptually possible that the mind/body are distinct does not mean it is an ontological issue, in fact modern science has shown the brain can affect the mind.
- Water + H₂O, conceptually two things, ontologically the same
- Husband + Wife, conceptually connected, ontologically two things
- Surely the senses at least in **some** respect must be used to grasp the wax – both are required it is not just the understand.
- Is all our knowledge essentially *a priori*, how can we accept such radical rationalism – we must at least engage with the world to understand it. Experiments are necessary in the sciences.

Meditation III – of God; that he exists

Trademark Argument

- A cause must be up to its effect, either eminently or formally. For instance something cannot cause heat if it is not hot etc.
- There are two different realities, firstly we have **REPRESENTATIONAL REALITY*** which are **ideas in the mind**
- Secondly, we have **FORMAL REALITY** which are **actual things**
- These can be ranked in an order such as ‘God -> Human -> Tree’
- Since the cause must be up to the effect and humans are finite, and we have the idea of God within us who is infinite and we could not have caused him – that clearly this idea must have come from outside us
- The only thing that has enough formal reality to cause an idea of God is God himself and thus, God must have given humans the idea of him.
- Therefore, God exists.
- **This reality may be translated as objective/intentional/representation.*

Strengths

- As a basic principle, the cause must be up to the effect, for instance we cannot ever build a Nuclear Power Station out of string

Problems

- Although the above may be true, it is a different story when applying cause and effect to ideas – it is surely possible that although we couldn’t make ‘God’ we could conceive of him
- We can conceive of beings with more ‘representational reality’ than us by negating our finite qualities
 - *Descartes argued you cannot have an idea of infinite*
- Science has undermined the cause and effect principle by showing that it may be possible for something to come from nothing.
- What exactly is ‘more reality’ how can something have ‘more reality/existence’ – seems absurd

Meditation V - of the Essence of Material Things; and, Once more of God, that He exists

Ontological Argument

- If I conceive a shape, it has certain immutable truths about it (Pythagoras theorem)
 - *But you get this from the external world*
- No, as I can imagine shapes I have never experienced and still work out truths of them
- God is the most supremely perfect being
- Existence is a perfection
- Trying to separate existence from God is like trying to separate a mountain from a valley.
- Therefore, God must exist (*a priori analytic truth*)

Problems

- **Existence is not a predicate (Kant)**
 - Let us take an advert in the paper for a 'blonde banjo playing woman' – we receive no replies. Now, we then add 'and exists' – this does not add anything to the advert – showing that existence is not a property. It would be absurd to say that my essay is better if it exists than if it does not!
- **Referential Logic Failure**
 - Even if we accept that existence is tied to God, then if he exists then he must have existence. However, it does not follow that God therefore actually exists in reality
- **Most excellent Island**
 - We could make the 'most excellent' anything exist using the same logic.
 - *This has been challenged as an island etc. has no intrinsic maximum.*
- **Cartesian Circle**
 - How do we know God exists?
 - Because what I perceive clearly and distinctly is true
 - Why must that be true?
 - Because God exists.
- **Sociological**
 - God is still highly debated on and thus showing it is not a simple analytic truth

Meditation VI – Of the existence of material things, and of the Real distinction between the soul and the body of Man.

Imagination

- When I imagine something, it is present to my mind
- Imagination is distinct from thought
 - *I can think of a chiliagon but cannot imagine it*
- Effort is required for imagination, but not for thought
- Imagination is not essential to me, I can exist without it
- Thoughts turn to your own ideas, yet imagination to your body
- Imagination seems to require the existence of a body – not for certain thought.

Problems

- Again, the issue of conceptual to ontological. Just because I can think I exists without an imagination does not mean it is not essential ontologically to me

Reasons for thinking that material objects exists

- Ideas appeared against my will
- More vivid than ideas I imagine
- All ideas from the imagination come from the senses
- I sense pain and pleasure in my body, but not objects external to me
 - **Dreaming**
 - **Phantom Limb Syndrome**
 - **Sense deception due to perspective**
 - **Deceived in my own nature**
 - **Unknown faculty that produces these images from within**

Mind Body distinction

- The mind is divisible while as the body isn't (can't have ½ a thought)
- Argument from knowledge
 - I am certain I exist as a thinking thing, but unsure about my body
 - Therefore I am a thinking thing, and distinct from my body
 - **I doubt that 2 right angles are the angles in a triangle, but they are – thus showing that his ability to doubt does not show the distinction.**
- Argument from extension
 - The mind is a *res cogitans*
 - The body is a *res extensa*
 - Therefore, they must be distinct

Material Objects exist

- I have ideas come to me against my will_(of external objects etc.)
- This faculty is in something other than myself
- This something must have as much reality as the intentional reality it produces
- This could only be done by God **or** *res extensa*
- God is not a deceiver
- Therefore, material objects exist

Mind Body relation

- I am not like the pilot in the ship who would not feel if he crashed into an iceberg, I am intimately joined to my body due to experiences of pain and pleasure
- It therefore must be that both our minds and bodies are intermingled with each other
- **SUBSTANCE DUALISM**
- X is a mental state, Y is a physical state
- It is logically possible that X exists and Y does not [not contradictory]
- Therefore X is not the same as Y – thus they must be separate.
- Leibniz's Law – *Identity of indiscernibles*

Problems

- How do the two parts interact with each other? A contemporary philosopher coined Descartes Dualism the 'ghost in the machine'. It seems impossible to understand how the non-physical can interact with the physical – for instance, how does the desire to type this make me type it?
- The issue of conceptual vs. ontological, we can imagine that the mind is distinct, yet modern science has shown that the mind appears reliant on the brain.
- Are the mind and body really distinct? Some of Descartes arguments for distinction actually fail but also with modern philosophy now centring on a materialist approach to the mind/body problem and science going somewhat toward showing how the physical alone can cause supposed 'mental states' – this is starting to undermine his theory

Dual Aspect Theory – We have a mental part and a physical part
Materialist – we just have the body, nothing else (well how do you explain consciousness?)