

# Descartes' argument of a true perception



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In this paper, my aim is to argue what way is best for us to understand Descartes' argument on how we arrive at a true perception of the world. I will be using excerpts from the second and sixth meditations in order to support my argument. I will be arguing that the mind and body are two separate and distinct things and one of which proves our existence. I will also clarify the difference between the mind and the imagination and perception so that we have a better understanding of the mind.

In the second meditation, Descartes makes a complex argument about how we arrive at the perception of the world. In this meditation he is trying to figure out if we do exist or not, he attempts to come to a conclusion by doubting all that he believes he knows. This leads to him coming up with his argument which he goes on to call the “ cogito”, ‘ Cogito ergo sum’ which is Latin for ‘ I think therefore I am’. Descartes uses the wax example to further drive his point on how we arrive at the perception of the world and also to clarify on what the mind is. He makes use the wax example to show us what extended things are. Descartes believes the body is separate from the mind and we know what it is quite distinctly. By body he understands it to be all that can be limited in shape, contained in some sort of space, and fills that space in such a way that every other body is excluded from it. Something that can be sensed by us in the world through our sensations and can be moved not by itself but by something else by which it is touched and from which it receives some sort of force (Descartes/Bennett, pp. 5).

Descartes comes to the conclusion that he exists because he is a thinking thing. And no matter how much you try to prove him otherwise you possibly cannot. He goes on to mention that even if there was an evil demon trying to

deceive him about his existence it has to be that he exists in the first place for him to be deceived because if he did not exist then how is he being targeted to be deceived? We are thinking things and what we are (this thinking being/mind) is separate from our body which he refers to as an extension of us. We can make use of perception and imagination to know that our bodies are separate from our minds. The wax argument helps us better understand this separation. In the wax argument Descartes posits that if we get wax from a honeycomb, this wax would be cold, solid, have a nice smell, have a taste, colour, shape and various other attributes we can sense. These attributes are what inform us on what the wax is. But when we start to experiment and melt the wax, all these present qualities of the wax that we perceive after taking it from the honeycomb would have undergone change and would be different. Now we have to ask ourselves, is this wax which has been melted still the same as the solid wax gotten from the honeycomb? Our reasonable answer would be 'yes' because it is in fact the same wax, it has just taken on a different appearance. So, from this we can tell that the wax itself has to be something other than the sensible qualities it holds. For Descartes, "this wax is a body which just a little bit before appeared underneath these forms, which now he can take in without these others" (Descartes/Bennett, pp6-8). The wax is something that is extended, flexible, and shapeable. We perceive the wax as a type of extended substance not through our senses, as we have seen that wax can change form and still remain the same, but through our intellect/understanding. We do not grasp things as they truly are except through the understanding. The intellect is what we make use of to deduce that we are thinking beings. If we now understand better the nature of the wax, then this methodology could also

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be used in relation to us to help us better understand how we perceive the world. We can take the wax to represent us, its primary qualities being a representation of our mind and its secondary qualities being an extension of it therefore representing our bodies.

In the meditation six, Descartes is distinguishing between the mind and the material world. According to him, material things can exist as long as they are subject to mathematics. So, things with extension, shape, and size could possibly exist. Understanding deals with pure concepts, but our imaginations picture images. The example Descartes uses is the example of the triangle and the chiliagon (Descartes/Bennett, pp. 27). If we think of a triangle, we know that it is a three-sided shape and so we will conjure a picture of a three-sided shape in our heads through our imagination when we think of a three-sided shape. And if we were to think of a chiliagon, which is a shape with a thousand sides, if we were to think of this shape, we have never experienced such a shape so the image which we will conjure in our minds would be a blur of what a thousand sided shape would look like because we have never experienced one but we still understand that a chiliagon is a shape with a thousand sides. Our understanding turns inwards to search the contents of our minds while our imagination turns outwards to the perception of material objects. The imagination concerns itself with the external world, so it is not essential to the mind. Now that Descartes has come to understand what our imaginations rely on, he has come to a realisation that the external world which he had cast into doubt might actually exist. But although our external world exists, we experience it through our perceptions. Our perceptions which Descartes has already come

to understand could be deceitful in the sense that if we dream, we do perceive things but these things that we perceive in dreams are not real. So, if our perceptions could deceive us then how are we meant to be sure that the external world exists? Descartes backs his claim by saying that God is the one responsible for putting all material objects in place and God can not possibly be deceiving us because he is not a deceitful God

(Descartes/Bennett, pp. 27/29). This is how we are to know that the external world exists according to Descartes.

In this paper I have shown how Descartes expects us to perceive the world, he expects us to perceive the world as one which has two sides, an internal aspect which consists of our minds, and an external aspect which consists of all material things. And we are meant to understand this world through the use of our perception and imagination. Our intellect is what makes us understand this world with the use of these faculties. We perceive objects and register them along with their primary and secondary qualities, once we have perceived an external body we can use our imagination to conjure images of said external bodies when we think about them but how we are able to make this relation between perceived objects and thought of objects is through the use of our intellect/understanding. The wax example showed us that our perception and imagination could be deceived as the melted wax which is the same as the solid wax had undergone change and therefore did not appear the same to us. The melted appeared different as all the secondary qualities of which we had related to the previous appearance of the solid wax are not there any longer, but the wax remains what it is. It is just the secondary qualities which have changed. But even though the

appearance of the wax changed we are able to piece together through the use of our understanding that this new formed wax with different external properties to it is still the same as that which was extracted straight from the honeycomb.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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