

In by understanding
or 'pure intellection',
and



In this paper, I will extract an argument from a passage in Descartes's Sixth Meditation, in which he distinguishes imagination from intellect by the consideration of various geometric shapes with his main conclusion being that imagination requires more mental effort than intellect. His argument is as follows.

First, he asks us to consider a triangle. We can think of a triangle as a mental image or we can discern its properties by 'pure intellection' or understanding. We can think of a triangle not only as a three-sided shape enclosing space, but also by its properties; as a thing that has three sides. Hence, there are things that we can imagine and things that we can understand- this is his first premise. On the other hand, when I think of a chiliagon (a thousand-sided figure), I can understand it by its properties, just as easily as I can understand a triangle by its properties. However, I cannot create a mental image of it; I cannot imagine it.

We can imagine triangles, but can only understand chiliagons. Hence, there are things, like the chiliagon, that we can understand, yet cannot imagine. Descartes states it is by habit alone that we, at times, confound understanding with imagination. We may confuse imagination with intellect in the thinking of shapes like a chiliagon, but in cases like the chiliagon, our imagination sees no difference between it or a myriagon for example; thus, it is purely by our intellect that we can discern between the two.

Hence, there are things, that can only be distinguished by understanding or 'pure intellection', and not by imagination. We see that it takes us more effort to produce the image of shape in our head- be it a pentagon or a chiliagon-

than simply understanding its properties. Imagining their mental images, if at all possible, takes a lot of effort. And this is another major distinction between imagination and intellect; imagination requires more mental effort to produce than intellect.

Thus, there are things that take us considerable mental effort to imagine, yet little to no effort to understand. In summary, imagination and understanding are different. There are things that can be understood, but not imagined. There are things that can only be distinguished by understanding, but not by imagination. And of those things that, we believe, can be imagined and understood, imagining them is much more difficult than understanding them.

After establishing these premises and conclusions, we can anticipate the next argument Descartes will make concerning imagination and intellect.