

Understanding Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy

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In studying Descartes' meditations, it is important to find implication in the introduction and conclusion of the material, just as it is likewise important to delve into the body of ideas that beef up the entire text to validate his discussion. In his introduction, Descartes ponders on how he has held false beliefs in his early youth, and how he has adopted such in his childhood. He further notes that he had wanted to wait until his age is mature enough to go over these beliefs and re-evaluate reasons for such beliefs.

He further implies that the retirement age is the best suited for this kind of meditations, when one has a lot of time for quiet reflections and is not preoccupied by passions, hobbies or interests. The time which Descartes considered in completing his meditations is important in studying his work, because it may have an influence in the overall nature of his text. Descartes was born in 1596, while Meditations was written in 1641. Therefore, Descartes was about 45 years old at the time.

His age - when one has explored the academia in over two decades of adulthood - affirms his introduction that he had waited long before taking the time to meditate on his old beliefs and find the underlying philosophical paradigms behind it. Descartes notes that by the time that he starts writing of his meditations, he has no single idea or concept in his mind that had not previously come to him through his senses, and he deems it necessary to reexamine such beliefs now that he has the time to do so, because somehow, he sees that the human senses can lie, " and it is wiser not to trust entirely to anything by which we have once been deceived." (Descartes, Meditation VI: On the Existence of Material Objects from Body)

The irony in deciding whether Descartes was convincing or not, lies in his argument that senses can be deceptive. After all, he is one body separated from all the rest, and therefore everything he is, including everything he says, is subject to the perception of yet another separate body, another set of senses. In Meditation VI: On the Existence of Material Objects and the Real Distinction of Mind from Body, Descartes makes a firm stand that external material objects can come to being only in the power of God.

Insofar as they are the subject of pure mathematics, I now know at least that they can exist, because I grasp them clearly and distinctly. For God can undoubtedly make whatever I can grasp in this way, and I never judge that something is impossible for Him to make unless there would be a contradiction in my grasping the thing distinctly. (Descartes, Meditation VI: On the Existence of Material Objects from Body) Descartes, however, does not stop in stating that it is possible that such materials exist.

He uses the occurrence of mental images as explanation of what could be deemed possible or believable according to the perception of objects. Descartes was not convincing in his refutation of external world skepticism, only because he was inconsistent in his reasoning. While he has raised valid points as to the validity of the external world, his basis for his concluding statements include the matter of the matter being deceptive. For instance, he says that when he speaks or hears of a triangle, he easily associates it to a word in his vocabulary, which is accompanied by mental image of three lines bordering a figure.

Yet, in the case of another shape, say a chiliagon, he knows from his vocabulary that it is a figure with a thousand sides; but he cannot imagine a

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mental image that is exactly appropriate for the word. This, he says, is the difference that previous sensible perception could make. As he has not seen a chiliagon, he says he cannot imagine it. He further asserts that imagination is only a collection of previously perceived objects. Hence, as he has not seen a chiliagon, he could not make a mental picture of it.

In his meditations, however long he has waited to sit on it, Descartes seems to have been so confused to refute external skepticism while faithfully sticking to logic and without literally jumping from one point to another. Early on in his meditations, he states that senses can deceive; then later on, he insinuates that because an object has been perceived by the senses, then it exists. He goes on further to say that because God is powerful, then he can create all these external objects, and make them appear separated from one another in his power.

That God is powerful should have not been a problem for general discussion. However, he got too lost in his own discussion that he has failed to reconcile the body of his text to its introduction and conclusion. He was not consistent, and therefore, not convincing in any way. To enumerate his arguments of the proof that the body is distinct from the soul, he begins by making an assertion that God can create anything that he can perceive. In support of this line of thought, what then, created God? Descartes further states that his soul is a reality distinct from his body.

The problem is he has already said that the senses can be deceptive. How then does become able to isolate the body from the soul, when he has not in anyway, touched or seen a soul before? He also insinuates that man, as a thinking object, can exist without a body. Once again, he offers no plausible

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logical flow of thought behind this, except God is powerful and that he could make it happen. As proof of the reality of external material things, Descartes states that if independent material things do not exist, God is a deceiver, and follows that line of thought with another point, that states, God is not a deceiver.

First, Descartes assassinates the deceiving senses; then, he resorts to saying that man cannot imagine anything he has not perceived; then he settles to saying that God is powerful. But now that I begin to know myself better, and to discover more clearly the author of my being, I do not in truth think that I should rashly admit all the matters which the senses seem to teach us, but, on the other hand, I do not think that I should doubt them all universally.

There was no flow, no logical reconciliation, and definitely no solid consistent statement that glues all of his points together, except God is powerful. Therefore, Descartes could have just done away with the long introduction of how he has come to realize that he needs to reevaluate his perception of material and external objects; because he could have just summarized his entire refutation in one sentence, such as, God is powerful, and so external material things exist.