

Descartes perception of the nature of wax essay

[Health & Medicine](#), [Body](#)



Descartes argues that perception of the world around us relies more on the mind than that of the body. The body or moreover the senses collect sensory information like touch, taste, sight, smell and then this information is relayed to the mind. The mind then collates this information and turns it into something we can understand. So when we look upon something with our eyes, our eyes are in fact tools used by the mind to form a proper understanding under mental inspection of the object.

Descartes uses the example of a piece of wax to illustrate the point that we know our minds better than we know our bodies or the bodies that surround us. The wax appears to us first as a solid, it smells of flowers and may have a certain taste or feel but we also know it to take on the form of a liquid. So although we see it as a solid before us we know it can also be something completely different to all of the senses. We know this with our minds as our sensory information tells us that one or the other is true but our minds using understanding of transitional states know both is possible and that objects can take on different shapes and properties.

“[P]erception is neither a seeing, nor a touching, nor an imagining. [R]ather it is an inspection on the part of the mind alone” (Section 31).

Thus senses alone cannot derive the machinations of the physical world because they can be deceived; he knows this because on occasion they have been deceived so by that example if they can be deceived once they can likely be deceived again. He comes to the conclusion that the mind is the only thing we can be certain of.

This draws us back to the beginning of Descartes argument in meditation one, which is his doubting of all that he knew up to this point. He

understands a lot of his knowledge is derived from his senses and information passed down and both those sources can be called into question. So he starts by attacking the foundations of his knowledge so that he can begin a fresh and try to discern one factor which he knows without a doubt to be true from which he can build new beliefs on. So in his first meditation is he questions the validity of the beliefs he held up to that point.

He realised then that the only thing he knew absolutely for certain was that “I am, I exist” (Section 25) from this he is certain he exists in some capacity because he is thinking and feeling and is self aware but he is yet to establish what exactly he is. He goes on to elaborate that because he is thinking he must be a thing that thinks; a thinking thing. When Descartes talks about thinking he’s speaking broadly about the soul and the mind as sort of being one and the same, the mind is the spiritual component of the entity. That is a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, has a will of its own, refuses, has an imagination and senses.

Descartes asserts that the senses are used in the process of thinking, without the senses the mind would have nothing to think about.

“ Yet I certainly do seem to see, hear, and feel warmth. This cannot be false. Properly speaking, this is what in me is called 'sensing (sentire).' But this, precisely so taken, is nothing other than thinking (cogitare)” (Section 29) Although the senses collect all this information it is the mind that makes sense of them, without the mind, it’s just noise and lights, the mind gives all this sensory information meaning.

Descartes then determines that he uses his mind to understand abstract concepts like the nature of his own existence but it is the senses that are the

tools used to examine physical things. His senses have little to no relevance in discerning whether or not he exists because they can be deceived. You can't just cut your hand and say ' I feel pain, I exist' because that feeling could be a deception, when Descartes says that he exists he's saying he is aware of his own ability to think, not his ability to take in possibly deceptive sensory information.

He then elaborates on this by using the wax example to properly illustrate the point that we only truly understand physical bodies by inspecting them with the mind and not the senses alone which lie to us.

The wax is solid to the touch and we know this by touching it, it has a smell, we know this by smelling it but then when heat is applied, it ceases to be a solid and the smell dissipates. It changes completely and although our sensory information picks up on this without the mind linking the phenomena of a solid becoming a liquid and telling us that this is indeed the same piece of wax we just knew to be a solid, the senses would deduce that it is not in fact the wax we just examined.

“ Relying only on the physical senses would lead to the conclusion that the wax in its original form is a different substance than the wax in its later form, yet no one claims that both are not the same substance” (Section 30).

This proves that the sensory information given off by wax is not in fact a helpful description of the wax itself because now we are aware that the wax actually has non-sensory elements as it can change its shape and consistency.

So how can we understand something that changes its properties so drastically? Descartes assumes it's his imagination, but then he realises it

would be impossible to imagine all the possible permutations the wax may have. So he abandons this idea of the imagination discerning the change in the wax.

So now that sensory information and the imagination have been eliminated all that's left is the mind. The mind is the only vehicle that can be responsible for my understandings of the various forms the wax may take on.

Descartes does not say out right that the senses are worthless only that understanding is undertaken by the mind and not the senses. He then states that you may see people outside and your senses tell you they are people but all you see are hats and coats that could be disguising robots or aliens but only the mind can tell you the truth in these matters as the senses discern that they are in fact people by how they are dressed.

“ they are not perceived (percipi) through their being touched or seen, but only through their being understood, I manifestly know that nothing can be perceived more easily than my own mind” (Section 34)

We use our senses to help determine the nature of beings but the senses alone are not able to know the truth of those things, the only reliable way of determining the nature of being is the mind.

So to truly know the nature of something the senses and the mind must be used in unison to gather a full picture of the object in question.

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