

Descartes Notes

PHIL410

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Overview, Descartes - Kant: the Central Issue

- Descartes and the Representation/Reality distinction: Once representation is distinguished from reality, we find difficulty in bridging the gap between them in such a way that we can assure ourselves of knowing the one via the other. Descartes encounters this problem almost immediately, and his resolution of it is widely regarded as a failure.
- Hume's development of the skeptical response: Hume embraces the apparently skeptical consequence of Descartes's failure to bridge the representation-reality divide. He argues that prototypically rationalist concepts cannot derive from sensation. We are faced then with the question how they can be thought to apply to (or, be satisfied by) the empirical.
- Kant's effort to resolve the problem: The satisfaction of a priori concepts in the empirical is Kant's primary task. Satisfaction is possible, on his account, because the empirical is not entirely mind-independent. A consequence of this view is that metaphysics penetrates not to ultimate reality, which remains necessarily beyond intellectual grasp, but rather to the conditions of human experience of the appearance of ultimate reality.

Descartes's Project: Doubt, Dreams, and Demons

- Descartes's primary project is to demonstrate the possibility of empirical knowledge. This is especially important in the 17th Century, given the emergence then of quantified "science".
- Descartes recognizes that some of his beliefs must be false. Hence, the project of demonstrating the possibility of empirical knowledge requires first eliminating the risk that the demonstration be "infected" by some unnoticed false belief. Consequently, he sets about "quarantining" any belief not demonstrably certain; only these beliefs will figure in his project. Note that this establishes a high standard of knowledge justification.
- Descartes's quarantining method is the famous "Method of Doubt," which presupposes a *foundationalist* conception of belief-structure. Our beliefs, he maintains, rest upon the twin suppositions that sensation and reason are reliable belief-forming processes.¹ In order to be sure that he "checks" each and every one of his beliefs for uncertainty, Descartes adopts the efficient measure of evaluating these two suppositions. Either of two results will occur: either all of Descartes's beliefs will thus be shown to be unreliable, and his project a failure, or he will find some belief or other resistant to this doubt. Such doubt-resistant

¹ Note the further, basic assumption that sense and reason are our two belief-forming processes.

beliefs will in other words be certain, a potential foundation for his overall project of demonstrating the possibility of empirical knowledge.

- The Dream and Evil Demon arguments are the means by which Descartes applies doubt to the above foundation principles. If he could be dreaming, then he cannot be sure that the information of his senses is reliable. And if he could be being deceived (in every way possible) by an evil demon, then he cannot be sure that his reasoned judgments are true (much less the information of his senses). Note that the Evil Demon argument alone is sufficient for his purposes.

Representation, Reality, and the *Cogito*

- Descartes carefully distinguishes the *representation* of an empirical (or mathematical) reality from that reality per se. This distinction is particularly strong in the preliminary stages of the Dream argument, where he juxtaposes the experience (representation) of sitting, dressed, by the fire with the fact of lying, sleeping, in bed.
- Note, now, that where knowledge is concerned, the relationship between representation and reality is to be an *evidentiary* one: the experience (i.e., mental representation) of being seated by a fire is to be taken as evidence for the fact (reality) that one is seated by a fire.
- However, once we note that representation (evidence) and reality are *not* one and the same (not *numerically identical*), we must admit the possibility that they *diverge* (i.e., are *disparate*, *diverse*, i.e., are not one and the same but number *two*, metaphysically speaking). Unless, that is, we can find some reason for thinking that given one we must have the other, it is at least logically possible that a representation occur without the reality that it depicts obtaining. The Dream and Evil Demon hypotheses are simply ways of pointing out the fact of this logical possibility.
- In the *Cogito*, however, we appear to have an exception to the representation/reality disparity. In the representation (thought), “I think,” we find that the reality *I exist* is *not* a logically distinct fact. Insofar as the ‘I’ in ‘I think’ refers to the subject of that very thought, in the very moment of its occurrence, we must admit that this thought furnishes indefeasible evidence for the fact asserted in ‘I exist’. This evidence cannot fail, because its existence is *not distinct* from the fact of my existing that it depicts: the one cannot obtain without the other.
- Thus, where representation and reality typically diverge (are not one and the same thing), we find the possibility of a false representation. But in the case of the *Cogito*, representation and reality do not and cannot diverge, and so, seemingly, there is no possibility of a false representation.
- Descartes can extend this finding to include the contents of thought, he thinks. Whether I am thinking about my existence, or doubting the existence of my toes, or wishing that I could be in France, that particular thought-content would seem to be inseparable from the act of entertaining it. This gives us what Descartes thinks of as the *in corrigibility of mental states*: I cannot be wrong in my beliefs about what I am thinking about. Or more broadly, I cannot be mistaken about the current content or nature of my experiences. (Whether this is a safe extension of

Descartes's *Cogito* may be open to dispute, particularly if it requires that the subject beginning the thought be identical with that with which it ends.)

The Rule of Reason, and the Cartesian Circle

- Descartes's effort to extend his knowledge beyond the *Cogito* appears to fail.
- This effort involves the so-called *Rule of Reason*, promulgated at the beginning of Meditation III. Based upon his experience in the *Cogito*, Descartes reasons that "whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true." This rule, he asserts, is a generalization of the force of the *Cogito*. But in generalizing the "clarity and distinctness" of that perception, Descartes would seem to lose the relative epistemic safety of representation-reality unity. The same clarity and distinctness would seem to attend the perception that $2 + 2 = 4$; but in this case, since reality and representation diverge, on his account, clarity and distinctness would seem to be insufficient for knowledge.
- Consequently, as he himself acknowledges, Descartes is compelled to provide some assurance that the rule is true. This is the work of the remainder of Meds. III, beginning of IV, and V, in which he argues for the existence and trustworthiness of God. If he can demonstrate that God exists and is not a "deceiver", then he will infer that the rule of reason is true. The thought here is that since (a) God is his maker and (b) Descartes has no means of determining that his faculty of reason is unreliable, God would have given him a deceptive nature were his faculty of reason in fact unreliable, making God himself a deceiver, which is incompatible with the general idea of a good God.
- However, as many commentators have objected, the argument by which the rule of reason is established appears to be viciously circular. If the question is whether "clear and distinct" reasoning reliably produces true belief, then it would seem that any "clear and distinct" reasoned argument to that effect cannot establish that point. I.e., since he must use reasoning to establish that God exists (and if that is an instance of diverging representation and reality), he cannot then use his argument that God exists to establish the reliability of reason.
- Descartes's attempt to demonstrate the reliability of the senses will also fail, if he cannot establish the rule of reason's truth. For without an established trust in reason, he cannot argue effectively that God's non-deceiving nature assures him of the non-deceptiveness of his senses.

Reason and Empirical Knowledge

- Apart from the seeming failure of his overall project, Descartes provides an important account of the roles of reason and sensation in empirical knowledge.
- The role of reason is paramount, making Descartes a Rationalist. This is the upshot of Descartes's discussion of the ball of wax in Med. II. There, Descartes asks by what faculty we know the nature of (understand, perceive) ordinary physical objects.
 - o The properties detected by sense include: hard, white, smelling of honey, cool, round; yet later, soft, clear, without odor, hot, pooled. But sense lacks the capacity to identify these two sets of properties as properties of the same one thing. In addition to these properties, we understand the ball

- of wax to be malleable, changeable, persisting, which properties go beyond the immediate power of sense to represent.²
- It is not by the imagination that we understand the ball of wax to be malleable, changeable, persistent, argues Descartes. For we understand the malleability of the wax to imply an infinite range of possible shapes, whereas the imagination is capable of only determinate representation, a finite array of possible shapes.
 - Only reason, argues Descartes, is capable of representing the wax as infinitely variable, persisting through change. Consequently, Descartes concludes that it is by this faculty that we know ordinary physical objects.
- Descartes also tends to emphasize the clarity and precision of conceptual (rational, reasoned) representation as against that of the senses, which he characterizes as unclear or confused. While the senses are perhaps more vivid, there is perhaps something to this claim. Compare, for example, the clarity and precision of Newton's formulation of gravitational force ($F = gm_1m_2/r^2$), on the one hand, with the smell of a rose. The smell of the rose is distinctive, but it lacks, arguably, the precise detail of a mathematical formula. [Perhaps the smell is simply more complex? and we lack precise means of identifying its features?]
 - However, given his failure to demonstrate a strict relationship between reasoned representation (conception) and reality, we must ask how the two might be connected. Even were Descartes's argument to succeed, we might well ask: how is a conceptual representation related to an empirical reality? If the information does not accrue via the senses, how do we apprehend it? Descartes speaks here of the "judgments" that we make concerning physical bodies. But by his own argument such judgments outstrip the information provided in sense. How, then, do we judge, on a given occasion, that a series of impressions is that of a persisting body? Why think that any such judgment is true of anything external to us?
 - There are a number of distinct problems, here:
 - One is the problem of associating the "metaphysical properties" of a thing with anything given in sense.
 - Another is the problem of associating concepts generally with anything given in sense.
 - Hume will call particular attention to the first of the problems in his critique of causation and other metaphysical concepts.

² I shall refer to these as the "metaphysical properties" of an object.