

# RENÉ DESCARTES

## OVERVIEW

René Descartes (1591–1650) was a French philosopher and mathematician. He is now widely regarded as one of the central figures in the history of modern Western philosophy.

Born at La Haye in Northern France, he studied at the Jesuit college of La Flèche, before going to Poitiers where he graduated in law in 1616. In his early life he travelled extensively – across Germany, Italy, Holland and France – and served, at times, as a soldier in both Protestant and Catholic Bavarian armies. In 1628 he settled in Holland, and lived and worked in that country until 1649 when, persuaded by an invitation to teach Queen Christina of Sweden, he went to Stockholm. Due to the cold Swedish Winter (and a rigorous teaching schedule) he contracted pneumonia, from which he died in 1650 at the age of 59.

Descartes' work is wide-ranging, and encompasses (among other things), music, physics, mathematics, optics, meteorology, geometry, theology, and physiology. In addition to this range, he was also a supremely *ambitious* thinker. This is clear from his philosophical project: to create, from scratch, indestructible foundations for an edifice of indubitable knowledge.

Seeing so much room for error and misdirection in the Aristotelianism of his peers, he found it necessary to return to basics: to cast aside the failed theories of the past, and to begin anew. It was, he thought, only once the foundations of knowledge were secured that any further scientific inquiry could be pursued.

His rejection of the dominant Aristotelian philosophy also marks him out as a somewhat *subversive* thinker. Aristotelianism, generally speaking, was the prescribed doctrine of the Church; rejection was akin to heresy, and those who challenged it explicitly were threatened with punishment, both corporal and capital. Similarly, Descartes' astronomical theories – found in *Le Monde* – espoused the Copernican system of astronomy for which the Inquisition had arrested Galileo Galilei (for which reason Descartes withheld his book from publication). This, of course, makes reading his works both exciting and challenging. To read his texts one must attempt to untangle the hints and allusions, and see through the smoke-screen thrown up to confuse the threatening authorities.

This teaching brief is separated into six main sections, which correspond to the six meditations in Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Descartes' text is short, funny and engaging and provides a suitable springboard to talk about the philosophical issues his work discusses. The sections are:

### 1. SCEPTICISM

### 2. THE 'COGITO', THE MIND AND THE BODY, AND HYLOMORPHISM

### 3. INNATE IDEAS, AND THE CAUSAL ARGUMENT FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE

### 4. THE PROBLEM OF ERROR

### 5. ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

### 6. THE EXTERNAL WORLD, MIND, BODY

These sections include overviews of some central arguments in Descartes' work, teaching suggestions, points of interest, proposed questions, and a selection of further reading (with internet links where possible).

## THE MEDITATIONS

*The Meditations on First Philosophy* (or simply, *The Meditations*) was published in 1641 and is, without a doubt, Descartes' most famous work. It is a short text, composed of six brief 'Meditations' – or intellectual exercises – yet in those few pages he attempts nothing less than the complete overhaul of what has become known as 'epistemology' – the study (*logos*) of knowledge (*episteme*). Introducing the book, he writes that one must 'demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations'.

The method he deploys in the six meditations is the 'method of doubt'. To achieve certainty and to fix surely on truth, he meticulously and methodically doubts everything he can until he reaches that which he cannot doubt – the unmoveable Archimedean point, upon which the rest of knowledge can be structured. Having found this stable resting place, he begins again to assess what we can and can't be certain of.

*The Meditations* is a profoundly subtle text, a subversive critique of Aristotelianism, filled with sophisticated theological and epistemology argumentation – and yet, for all this, it is a wonderfully engaging work. It has much in common with the spiritual guides common in the period, in which a narrator gently leads the reader on a journey of discovery. From a spot by the stove, wrapped in a dressing-gown, the narrator wonders about dreaming and madness, and examines what it is to be certain, and to be in error. These wonderings guide us, slowly but surely, to conclusions about God, and about our knowledge of the external world.

One should also bear in mind while reading *The Meditations*, that while in many ways charming there is a more sombre aspect to the text. It can be read as an attempt to find stability, certainty and religious reassurance in an uncertain, and often baffling world; and this interpretation resonates even more strongly when the reader considers that it was written very shortly after the death of Descartes five-year old daughter, Francine, from scarlet fever. There is a very personal element to the text, which is often forgotten.

The following sections are based around the six meditations, which are short and – with suitable guidance – can be used as primary teaching materials. It is suggested that the teacher set the students one meditation to read each week, which can then be analysed in class. Links to an online version of *The Meditations* are provided below, but all quotations here are from the edition of *The Meditations* compiled by John Cottingham (also cited below). References are to the meditation number, the section within that meditation, and the pages on which the passage appears in the Cottingham edition. Helpfully, Descartes' work also appeared with a series of objections and replies to his arguments from his contemporaries. A selection of these are included in the Cottingham edition, and a link is provided below.

*Point of interest: The Meditations is prefaced with a dedicatory letter to the Theology Faculty at the Sorbonne (one of the most eminent education establishments of the time). He asks for their approval for the cause of religion against the atheists – a clear attempt to ingratiate himself in order to avoid criticism for his controversial claims. Sadly, it didn't work, and for many years, Descartes suffered stinging criticism of his work from that quarter.*

*Point of interest: Descartes' father was not as impressed with The Meditations as subsequent readers have been. After receiving a copy of the book from his son, Joachim Descartes was reported to have described intense displeasure at having a son 'idiotic enough to have himself bound in vellum'.*

## READING

- René Descartes – *The Meditations on First Philosophy*.  
<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/descartes/meditations/meditations.html>
- Objections and replies: <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfbits/desco34.pdf>
- Cottingham, John (ed.) (1996) *Meditations on First Philosophy, with Selections from the Objections and Replies* (Cambridge University Press)
- Kenny, Anthony (1968) *Descartes: a Study of his Philosophy* (New York: Random House)
- Cottingham, John (1986) *Descartes* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell)
- Sorrell, Tom (1987) *Descartes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Rorty, A.O. (ed.) *Essays on Descartes' Meditations* (Berkeley: University of California Press)
- Entry on Descartes in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes/>
- Entry on Descartes in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*  
<http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/P045?ssid=269864897&n=1#>

## 1. SCEPTICISM

*Keywords:* scepticism, Montaigne, dreaming argument, malicious demon, god

‘...there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised; and this is not a flippant or ill-considered conclusion, but is based on powerful and well thought-out reasons...’ – *First Meditation* (22) (Cottingham p.15)

*Teaching suggestion: Challenge the students to tell you something true. Question everything they say (‘how do I know you’re not lying to me?’). Can we really trust what people – students or teachers – say?*

*The Meditations* starts with Descartes discovering numerous reasons to doubt what he knows. This ‘sceptical’ position – claiming everything one believes to be uncertain – was popular at the time of Descartes’ writing having been popularised sixty years before by Michel de Montaigne, in his ‘Apology of Raymond Sebond’, (itself a return to the kind of sceptical view found in the writings of the ancient Pyrrhonians).

Descartes, following Montaigne, provides numerous arguments for doubting what we commonly believe. As he goes from (a)–(d) he becomes less and less certain about what he knows.

### Arguments for scepticism

a) *Sense deception:* We trust our senses, but our senses are often wrong. Consider how often we mistakenly think we see something when we don’t (e.g. a friend, who we see in the distance, turns out to be someone else entirely).

‘...from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.’ – *First Meditation* (18) (Cottingham p.12)

b) *Hallucination:* Even though our senses sometimes deceive us, there are still some things that we find very difficult to doubt. For instance, you will find it hard to doubt that you are currently reading this. Students in a classroom will find it hard to doubt that they are there in the classroom. And yet, we all know of people who have hallucinated seeing things; how can we say we’re not hallucinating?

‘...how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass.’ – *First Meditation* (19) (Cottingham p.13)

c) *The Dreaming Argument*: Of course, even more common than hallucination is dreaming. And in our dreams, it often appears that we are awake. How exactly, can we persuade ourselves that we're not dreaming now?

'As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. The result is that I begin to feel dazed, and this very feeling only reinforces the notion that I may be asleep.' – *First Meditation* (19) (Cottingham p.13)

d) *Malicious demon*: When people hallucinate or dream, they perceive things erroneously. However, when we dream, our dream-worlds are made up from things we've perceived in our waking lives – friends, and family, and so on. Even if we do manage to dream up something completely new, a hippogriff, say, at least the colours, and the shapes must be real. So, surely, though we may doubt when we're awake or asleep, we cannot doubt that there really are these things?

The dreaming argument will not make us question whether colours and shapes are real. Other kinds of 'universal thing', which cannot be questioned, include quantity, size, and number of things, and so on.

'...whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides.' – *First Meditation* (20) (Cottingham p.14)

Descartes says: *wrong!* It is possible to imagine that even these thoughts are delusions. A being like God could certainly make it seem like these things exist when they don't. At this point in the text, the narrator introduces the reader to his famous friend, the Malicious Demon.

'I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me.' – *First Meditation* (22) (Cottingham p.15)

This demon, of 'the utmost power and cunning', could deceive us into thinking that  $2+2=4$ , and that the earth and sky, and shapes and sounds exist. More recently, philosophers have modified the imaginary case, and describe a brain in a vat, which an evil scientist is manipulating with electrodes and chemicals to conjure up the sensation of, e.g. walking in the park. The point is that, once these scenarios have been imagined, how can we know them to be false? We simply can't. And this is Descartes' ultimate argument for scepticism.

*Teaching suggestion: Ask the students to close their eyes and to imagine that instead of sitting at their desks, they are in fact just brains bobbing around in vats. Would they be able to tell the difference between the two? How?*

What is the point of these arguments? The Pyrrhonians and Montaigne used sceptical arguments to calm an unsatisfiable urge for knowledge, and to help us resign ourselves to the fact that some things are simply beyond our ken. They used sceptical techniques to humble us, and make us happy with our lot. Of course, one wonders whether they would always have this effect – it seems more than possible that being told you can never know anything might have debilitating consequences. If you can't know anything for sure, what's the point in trying to improve our knowledge?

Descartes, however, did not deploy these arguments in the same way as his predecessors. He wanted to use these sceptical techniques in a new way. The point was not to demonstrate our limited human natures, but rather to clear the way for us to acquire new, certain knowledge. (See 'the Method of Doubt' in (2), below).

'Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations.' – *First Meditation* (18) (Cottingham p.12)

## QUESTIONS

- a) Can you know that you're reading this sentence?
- b) What might be some positive consequences of maintaining a 'sceptical' attitude? What about negative consequences?
- c) What is knowledge useful for?
- d) Why can't knowledge gained through sense experience be trusted as a basis for knowledge?

## READING

- René Descartes – 'First Meditation: What Can Be Called Into Doubt':  
<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/descartes/meditations/Meditation1.html>
- Michel de Montaigne – 'An Apology of Raymond Sebond', from the *Essays*:  
[http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ZeMyn3msO2oC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ZeMyn3msO2oC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)
- Williams, Bernard. (1996) 'Introductory Essay' in Cottingham's edition of *The Meditations*
- Frankfurt, H. (1970) *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes' Meditations* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill)
- Entry on Montaigne's scepticism in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/montaigne/#MonSce>
- Entry on scepticism in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:  
<http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/P045?ssid=269864897&n=1#>





## 2. THE 'COGITO', THE MIND AND THE BODY, AND HYLOMORPHISM

*Keywords:* Method of doubt, the Cogito, Mind/Body dualism, hylomorphism, Aristotelianism

'Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognise something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least recognise for certain that there is no certainty.' – *Second Meditation* (24) (Cottingham p.16)

Descartes is often misinterpreted to have been a sceptic. Even commentators from the time thought there was 'nothing new' in his sceptical approach. In fact, there was something *profoundly* new with his use of doubt. He wanted to use the sceptical techniques to demolish anything that was uncertain and, as a result, to reveal that which was *beyond* doubt. This is often called his 'Method of Doubt'. In the *Second Meditation*, he considers that which is beyond doubt.

### The Cogito

The sceptical arguments, (a)–(d), will have caused us to wonder whether we can be certain of anything. What remains? 'Perhaps', as Descartes says, 'just the one fact that nothing is certain.' We might even doubt our own existence!

But there is cause for hope. Even in (d), his malicious demon argument, there is reason to believe that we know *some* things. The evil demon can make me believe a world exists when it does not – but something remains: surely, if I am being deluded, than I exist! This is the heart of what has become known as 'the Cogito'. Whatever else, I cannot doubt that *I* am doubting. I exist!

However, as Descartes rightly points out, it is not clear exactly what 'I' is here. What am I? What *kind* of thing exists? Again, he applies his Method of Doubt. We typically take ourselves to be humans, a particular kind of animal, with heads and torsos and arms and legs and so on. But can we be certain that we have the bodies we think we have? The evil demon could delude us into thinking we are humans (as could the evil scientist, playing with the brain in the vat) – so we should reject the thought that we are animals.

What remains? *Thinking*.

'At last I have discovered it – thought; this alone is inseparable from me. I am, I exist – that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. For it could be that were I totally to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist. At present I am not admitting anything except what is necessarily true. I am, then, in the strict sens only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason... But for all that I am a thing which is real and which truly exists.' – *Second Meditation* (27) (Cottingham p.18)

This, then, is the first thing of which Descartes can be sure; that I exist, and that I am a thinking thing. This is the thought behind his famous declaration: *I think therefore I am*. Or, in the Latin: 'cogito ergo sum' (hence, 'the Cogito')

*Teaching suggestion: Go around the room and ask the students to say what they are 'fundamentally'. What kind of beings are they? Is being a student something fundamental, or can you stop being a student? What can't you stop being and continue to exist?*

### The Mind, the Body

In the introduction (above) it was noted that Descartes' writings are subversive because they challenge the Aristotelian orthodoxy of the day. It is in the *Second Meditation* that we begin to see how Descartes' view clashes with Aristotle's.

The Cartesian view, just described, is that though we may doubt that we are material things, i.e. creatures with bodies, we cannot doubt that we are *thinking* things. There is a good reason, therefore, for saying that we are fundamentally, *immaterial* thinking things – we are not essentially bound to our bodies, and can theoretically be separated from matter.

Descartes held that there are two things – the mind and the body – and that the mind is completely separable from the body. This view is known as 'mind/body dualism'. Importantly, this dualism clashed with the prevailing Aristotelian picture, called 'Hylomorphism'. Dualism will be discussed more in (6), but here it will be helpful to get a better impression of the Aristotelian alternative.

*Point of interest: In 1624, there was to be a public discussion in Paris about Aristotle's works. Over one thousand people turned up. Unfortunately, the Sorbonne put a ban on the teaching of any proposition critical of Aristotle, so the discussion was cancelled. This is just one example of the kind of social pressure Descartes was under to conform to the dominant Aristotelianism.*

### Hylomorphism

In contrast to Descartes, who thought that humans could be separated into an immaterial part and a material part, Aristotle saw humans (and everything else for that matter) to be irreducible composites of matter (*hylō*) and form (*morphe*). This doctrine is quite alien to modern minds (not least because of the influence of Descartes), so some examples will be instructive here.

a) *Lump and statue*: Imagine you've got a lump of clay, which you mould into a small elephant. Aristotle would say that the clay was the *matter*, and that its elephant shape was the *form*. Can you imagine separating the shape from the clay? It doesn't seem so.

b) *Hatchet*: You take a piece of wood, and a block of iron, and you make a hatchet. Again, there is *matter* and *form*. Crucially, however, Aristotle thinks that form is *more*

than just the shape of a thing – it's the way it behaves too. The form of the hatchet is more than just its shape (consider, for example, a hatchet made out of wax – would that be a hatchet? It wouldn't cut anything!). In this case, the matter is formed in a certain way to *perform* a certain function: chopping. Again, can you imagine this being separated from the matter?

c) *Human*: Humans are made of matter – flesh and bones – but this matter also has a certain *form*. The human form is more than the characteristic human shape – it's the way humans typically behave as well. When discussing humans, Aristotle talks of 'form', or 'psuche' in roughly the same way we talk of 'a life' – the biological processes that go on, the way a human eats and reproduces, and talks and *reasons*. Can you imagine a biological life being separated from flesh and bones?

For Aristotle the answer was 'definitely not'. And since Aristotle saw reason and the intellect to be part of the human 'form', he would not have agreed with the Cartesian claim that thinking can be divorced from the body. It is along these lines that Descartes was criticized by his Aristotelian peers, as the following quotation indicates:

'...although I clearly and distinctly know my nature to be something that thinks, may I, too, not perhaps be wrong in thinking that nothing else belongs to my nature apart from the fact that I am a thinking thing? Perhaps the fact that I am an extended thing may also belong to my nature.' – *Fourth Objections* (Cottingham p.74)

Teaching suggestion: Ask the students to try and imagine being ghosts, or other immaterial beings. How easy is it to imagine lacking a body? All our senses depend on our body – can we conceive of existing without having these sensations? And if we have no body, would be situated in a particular place? Where would we be?

#### QUESTIONS:

- a) Why can't the Malicious Demon persuade Descartes that he does not exist?
- b) How can we say what kind of creatures we are fundamentally?
- c) What is the difference between hylomorphism and dualism?
- d) Are we disembodied thinking things?

#### READING

- René Descartes – 'Second Meditation: The nature of the human mind, and how it is better known than the body':  
<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/descartes/meditations/Meditation2.html>
- Entry on hylomorphism in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-psychology/>

- Entry on dualism in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism/>
- The Third Objections (Hobbes) and Descartes' replies:  
<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfbits/desco34.pdf>
- Carriero, J.P. (1986) 'The Second Meditation and the Essence of the Mind', in A.O. Rorty (ed.) *Essays on Descartes' Meditations* (Berkeley: University of California)
- Markie, P. (1992) 'The *Cogito* and its Importance' in J. Cottingham (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes* (Cambridge University Press)
- James, Susan (2000) 'Feminism in Philosophy of Mind: The Question of Personal Identity' in M. Fricker and J. Hornsby (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press)

### 3. INNATE IDEAS, AND THE CAUSAL ARGUMENT FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE

*Keywords:* empiricism, rationalism, innate ideas, formal/objective reality, the causal argument

Descartes presents a proof for the existence of a thinker. And unlike the empiricists, who turned to their sensory experience (*empeiria*) to find out what exists, he does so solely by analysing his *ideas*. He does not consult the external world at all – he just inspects his *thoughts*, and uses his rationality to extrapolate knowledge (and is thus sometimes called a 'rationalist').

Descartes' project involves shutting off any influence from the external world. Consequently, he claims that these ideas he is examining cannot have come from *outside* his mind. He holds, therefore, that there are things that we know without consulting the external world; there are ideas that are already present in our minds before we turn to our senses. This position is called 'innatism' – which roughly means 'inborn': we already had these ideas when we were born (though it takes time to realize it).

In the Third Meditation, Descartes studies ideas in greater depth, and tries to work out what we can know about them.

*Teaching suggestion: Ask the students if they can remember their very first ideas. What is their earliest memory of thinking?*

#### Formal/objective reality

Irrespective of whether or not they correspond to actual things outside our minds, there are still things we can say about our ideas. That they exist, is one thing. We have them. We can also say that they have different *content*. Think of all the different things you think about: cats, dogs, tea-time, etc. Our ideas have 'objective content' – they are focussed on *objects*.

On one level, then, all our ideas are the same *type* of thing. I.e. they're all *ideas*. They all have the same *form*. As Descartes puts it:

'In so far as the ideas are <considered> simply <as> modes of thought, there is no recognizable inequality among them: they all appear to come from within me in the same fashion.' – *Third Meditation* (40) (Cottingham, p.27–28)

However, on another level, our ideas are different. Their *objective* content is different. Sometimes we have ideas about water-melons, sometimes we have ideas about Bruce Willis. As Descartes puts it:

'...in so far as different ideas <are considered as images which> represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely.' – *Third Meditation* (40) (Cottingham, p.28)

What is important for Descartes is that objective content comes in *degrees*. He states this by saying that though they all have the same 'formal reality', certain ideas have greater 'objective reality' than others.

Compare, for example, an idea of God, and an idea of a brick. They both have the same 'formal reality' – they're both ideas. Yet they have different 'objective reality'; when we think about God – an infinite, perfect being – we're thinking about something greater than a brick – a finite, imperfect being. Thus, Descartes writes:

'Undoubtedly, the ideas which represent substances to me amount to something more and, so to speak, contain within themselves more objective reality than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents. Again, the idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God, eternal, infinite, <immutable,> omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of all things that exist apart from him, certainly has in it more objective reality than the ideas that represent finite substances.'  
– *Third Meditation* (40) (Cottingham, p.28)

These claims, Descartes states, can be made without us ever considering the external world.

### Causal adequacy principle

So what if the objects of some ideas are greater than others? They're still just ideas – there's no reason to think their objects actually exist ...or is there?

In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes writes the following knotty sentence:

'Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause.' – *Third Meditation* (41) (Cottingham, p.28)

What does this mean? The sentence is a version of the Aristotelian claim that 'nothing comes from nothing'. I.e. that things don't just appear for no reason – there's always a cause. Descartes takes this to be self-evidently true ('by the natural light'). He also takes it to be transparently true that the cause must either be more powerful, or just as powerful as its effect. This is an extension of the first principle; if nothing comes from nothing, a weak cause cannot produce a more powerful effect. The combination of these claims is sometimes called the 'causal adequacy principle'.

Descartes writes:

'It follows from this both that something cannot arise from nothing, and also that what is more perfect – that is, contains in itself more reality – cannot arise from what is less perfect. And this is transparently true not only in the case of effects which possess <what the philosophers call> actual or formal reality, but also in the case of ideas, where one is

considering only <what they call> objective reality.' – Third Meditation (41) (Cottingham, p.28)

These are tricky thoughts to grasp. Fortunately, Descartes illustrates these points with an example of the idea of a complex machine (found in his *Replies*).

### *The engineer's machine*

Imagine an engineer has an idea of the designs for a brilliant machine – a computer, say, that will do her homework for her. Her idea is very detailed; she knows exactly how it works, what items she needs to make it, what it looks like on the inside, and precisely what it will do.

Since nothing comes from nothing, we must ask: *where this idea has come from?* It couldn't have just sprung fully formed in her mind. Either she needs to be clever enough to have thought it up herself *or* she needs to have copied the designs from someone else who is clever enough to have thought of it. That is, the scientific knowledge of the engineer needs to be great enough to produce the objective reality of the idea.

*Teaching suggestion: Ask the students whether they can imagine 'something' coming from 'nothing'? Try and draw out exactly what we mean by these terms – is this a question about causation? Must everything that happens have a prior cause? Does this include ideas?*

### *Causal argument for the existence of God*

Descartes marshals these claims to provide an argument for the existence of God. He asks whether there are ideas we have, like the idea of the brilliant machine, which cannot have come from ourselves. One possible candidate presents itself: the idea of God.

But why, exactly, is the objective reality of the idea of God too great for us to have caused it?

The idea of God is an idea of an 'eternal, infinite, <immutable,> omniscient, omnipotent' being'. And, as Descartes sees it, infinite objects are more perfect than finite objects, so the objective reality of the idea of God cannot come from a finite being such as oneself. It can only be caused by God.

This argument, known as the 'causal argument' for God's existence, can be set out in the following:

- a) A cause must have greater, or the same, reality as its effect.
  
- b) An idea's objective reality can only be caused by something with equal or greater formal reality.

c) The infinite reality of the idea of God can only be caused by God's actual infinite formal reality.

In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes argues that simply through the careful analysis of his innate ideas, he can reach a proof for the existence of God.

'I recognize that it would be impossible for me to exist with the kind of nature I have – that is, having within me the idea of God – were it not the case that God really existed.' – *Third Meditation* (52) (Cottingham, p.35)

*Teaching suggestion: Ask the students if there are other ways of trying to prove God's existence. Would Descartes have seen miracles to be good evidence? It is also helpful to ask why we would want to prove the existence of God. Is there some value in having 'faith' in God's existence, rather than knowing that God exists?*

## QUESTIONS

- a) Does the causal argument for God's existence depend on being able to understand God? Can we understand God?
- b) What is the objective reality of an idea about God?
- c) Do we have innate ideas?
- d) Can nothing really come from nothing?

## READING

- René Descartes – 'Third Meditation: The Existence of God'  
<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/descartes/meditations/Meditation3.html>
- Entry on Innate Knowledge in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy:  
<http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/P027?ssid=784209007&n=1#>
- Entry on Empiricism vs. Rationalism in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rationalism-empiricism/>
- Hobbes' Objections to the Third Meditations (found here, on page 46):  
<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfbits/desco34.pdf>
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#### 4. THE PROBLEM OF ERROR

*Keywords:* ideas, will, judgment, clarity and distinctness, faculty of the intellect, faculty of the will

‘...since God does not wish to deceive me, he surely did not give me the kind of gaulty which would ever enable me to go wrong while using it correctly... There would be no further doubt on this issue were it not that what I have just said appears to imply that I am incapable of ever going wrong.’ – *Fourth Meditation* (54) (Cottingham, p.37–38)

Having presented a proof for the existence of God in the *Third Meditation*, Descartes is faced with a problem. We were created by God, he says, a being who is omnipotent, omniscient and *omnibenevolent* – and we know this because we have an innate idea of God, which could not have come from us. But – he says, remembering the worries with which he began the meditations – we make errors. We make errors *constantly*, whether we’re doing maths, or seeming to perceive things. How can God, who is omnibenevolent, all good, deceive us in this way?

Again, Descartes way of solving this puzzle is to turn – not to the external world – but to the structure of our thoughts.

##### Different thoughts

In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes differentiates our thoughts into roughly three kinds.

a) *Ideas*: These are thoughts with objective content. They thoughts of *things*. Descartes describes them as thoughts that are ‘as it were the images of things’ – *Third Meditation* (37) (Cottingham, p.25)

b) *Emotions*: We also have thoughts that have an added element to the objective content. I might have an idea of an ice-cream, and I might also *want* the ice-cream.

‘...thus when I will, or am afraid... there is always a particular thing which I take as the object of my thought, but my thought includes something more than the likeness of that thing.’ – *Third Meditation* (37) (Cottingham, p.26)

c) *Judgments*: In addition, we also make judgments. For instance, I might think that it’s *good* that I want an ice-cream, or that it’s *bad*, or – in a sceptical frame of mind – I might judge that the ice-cream doesn’t actually exist.

This last type of thought is interesting because unlike ideas and emotions, judgments can be *true* or *false*.

'...whether it is a goat or a chimera that I am imagining, it is just as true that I imagine the former as the latter. As for the will and the emotions, here too one need not worry about falsity; for even if the things which I may desire are wicked or even non-existent, that does not make it any less true that I desire them. Thus the only remaining thoughts where I must be on my guard against making a mistake are judgements.' – Third Meditation (37) (Cottingham, p.26)

However, while Descartes thinks we can, and often *do*, make false judgments, he also thinks that there are some judgments that are more obviously true than others. Consider the following examples of judgments, and what one would need to show that they were true.

(i) *Koalas live in Australia*. We judge that this is true – but why? Because other people tell us it's true. Should we believe everything anyone tells us? No. To be able to show that koalas live in Australia, we would have to go to Australia and find some koalas living there (and make darn sure that they *are* koalas, and not some other kind of marsupial).

(ii) *The moon is not made of cheese*. When people tell us the moon is made of cheese, we assume they're joking. But how would we show that this judgment is true? We cannot trust other people. At the end of the day scientific records could be falsified. The only sure-fire way of knowing that the moon is not made of cheese is to go up there and check (assuming, of course, that we're not a brain in a vat).

(iii)  $2+2=4$ . Mathematical judgments seem to be more obviously true than the judgments (i) and (ii). If we know what '2' means, and what '4' means, we can't help but agree that ' $2+2=4$ '.

Teaching suggestion: Get the class to think of some more ideas which contrast in a similar way. What ideas cannot we not but assent to? What things might we conceive of as having been otherwise?

Example (iii) is an example of an idea – like the 'cogito' – which, once it is entertained, cannot be denied. It is, to use Descartes' phrase, a 'clear and distinct' thought. Mathematical truths, and truths about innate ideas, are more transparent to us than truths about the external world. They are revealed to us by what Descartes calls 'the natural light', which was bestowed on us by God:

'Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light – for example that from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on – cannot in any way be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty both as trustworthy as the natural light and also capable of showing me that such things are not true.' – *Third Meditation* (39) (Cottingham, p.27)

Point of interest: Throughout the Meditations, and in Descartes' wider work, there is a continual use of these visual metaphors; he talks of clarity, and illumination, and natural light. It is interesting, perhaps, that for a thinker who is trying so hard to maintain a critical distance from the senses that his discussion is pervaded by this metaphorical language.

Thus, God has given us a faculty to see past error, and towards truth.

And yet...

### Error

These musings on judgment, and truth and falsity, lead to a worry, which Descartes articulates at the start of the *Fourth Meditation*:

'To begin with, I recognise that it is impossible that God should ever deceive me. For in every case of trickery or deception some imperfection is to be found; and although the ability to deceive appears to be an indication of cleverness or power, the will to deceive is undoubtedly evidence of malice or weakness, and so cannot apply to God.

Next, I know by experience that there is in me a faculty of judgement which, like everything else which is in me, I certainly received from God. And since God does not wish to deceive me, he surely did not give me the kind of faculty which would ever enable me to go wrong while using it correctly.

There would be no further doubt on this issue were it not that what I have just said appears to imply that I am incapable of ever going wrong. For if everything that is in me comes from God, and he did not enow me with a faculty for making mistakes, it appears that I can never go wrong... But when I turn back to myself, I know by experience that I am prone to countless errors.' – *Fourth Meditation* (54) (Cottingham, p.37–38)

*Teaching suggestion: Ask the students to read through this short passage and try and explain what he means by it.*

Descartes is puzzled. How can we err? God is not a deceiver – because God is perfect. And God would not have given me an imperfect nature without reason – because that would have been unfair, and God is not unfair. So *why do we err?* Descartes presents two possible reasons.

a) We don't understand God. It would be presumptuous to think that we do.

'...it occurs to me first of all that it is no cause for surprise if I do not understand the reasons for some of God's actions; and there is no call to doubt his existence if I happen to find that there are other instances

where I do not grasp why or how certain things were made by him.’ – *Fourth Meditation* (56) (Cottingham, p.39)

b) We also find the following somewhat enigmatic passage in the *Fourth Meditation*:

‘...what then is the source of my mistakes? It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand. Since the will is indifferent in such cases, it easily turns aside from what is true and good, and this is the source of my error and sin.’ – *Fourth Meditation* (58) (Cottingham, p.40–41)

Despite what Descartes says there’s nothing simple about this passage. It invokes a number of distinctions that he makes between the different faculties we possess. Most importantly, he makes the distinction between the *faculty of the intellect*, and the *faculty of the will*.

*The faculty of the intellect* refers to our God-given ability to perceive and present ideas. These are the ideas that are then subject to possible judgment (e.g. The idea ‘I see a flower-pot in front of me’ can be judged to be true or false). *The faculty of the will* refers to our ability to judge that which the intellect has put forward.

What Descartes is saying in the above passage is that, due to our finite natures, the scope of the intellect is limited. The scope of the will, however, is boundless – and we fall into error when we make judgments about ideas the intellect presents, which are not ‘clear and distinct’. Error comes about because I make judgements about things I do not know about.

Crucially, this is not a failing on the part of God because error is not the result of faulty faculties, but rather of the *misuse* of these faculties. The failing is ours. Thus Descartes writes:

‘The cause of error must surely be the one I have explained; for if, whenever I have to make a judgement, I restrain my will so that it extends to what the intellect clearly and distinctly reveals, and no further, then it is quite impossible for me to go wrong. This is because every clear and distinct perception is undoubtedly something, and hence cannot come from nothing, but must necessarily have God for its author.’ – *Fourth Meditation* (62) (Cottingham, p.43)

## QUESTIONS

- a) How easily can we separate our thoughts into different types?
- b) Are some ideas more ‘clear and distinct’ than others?
- c) Why would God have given me boundless free will?
- d) Why do I err?

## READING

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## 5. ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

*Keywords:* ontological argument, clarity and distinctness, triangles, circular reasoning

'Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge about anything else until I became aware of him.' – *Fifth Meditation* (71) (Cottingham, p.49)

As one reads the *Meditations*, it becomes increasingly clear that God has a considerable part to play in the construction of Descartes' mighty edifice of knowledge. It is only because God has bestowed these rational faculties on us that we can see our way past error, and achieve certainty. It is unsurprising, therefore, that in the *Fifth Meditation* Descartes presents another proof for the existence of God.

Once more, he avoids turning to the external world to prove God's existence. He does not cite miracles, or received scripture. He turns again to our ideas.

Teaching suggestion: It is maintained from the start of the *Meditations* that this clear and distinct reasoning will illuminate any mind that attends to it properly. Ask the students whether they think that these thoughts about God would appear clearly to believers of a polytheistic religion (i.e. one with many Gods).

### Triangles

What else can we say about the structure of our thoughts? Some of them are perceived more clearly and distinctly than others – and mathematics seems to furnish us with a number of these clear and distinct ideas. We perceive that 2 added to 2 is 4 as soon as we think it. Indeed, so obvious is this truth to us, Descartes says, that when I consider it 'it seems that I am not so much learning something new as remembering what I knew before' (*Fifth Meditation* (64)) This is a clear expression of his belief that some ideas – like mathematical ones – are innate (see section 3 above).

As well as being innate, these ideas appear to be in a certain sense *independent* from us. We can think of them at will, but we cannot change them (I could not, for example, make it the case that  $2+2=5$ ), and we are constantly discovering new things about them. And this suggests that such things might exist apart from us.

Consider, Descartes says, a triangle:

'When... I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind. This is clear from the fact that various properties can be demonstrated of the triangle, for example that its three angles equal two right angles, that its greatest side subtends its greatest angle,

and the like; and since these properties are ones which I now clearly recognize whether I want to or not, even if I never thought them at all when I previously imagined the triangle, it follows that they could not have been invented by me.' (*Fifth Meditation* (64) (Cottingham, p.45)

So, he is saying, even if some evil demon had deluded me into thinking there were triangles out there in the world (found in Toblerones and witches' hats) it cannot be denied that they have these properties. All triangles have three sides. Their angles add up to 180 degrees. And so on. We can be certain that triangles really do have these properties, irrespective of whether or not there are triangles in the world, and these properties are not invented by me.

### The ontological argument

This line of reasoning opens up another way for Descartes to argue for God's existence.

'But if the mere fact that I can produce from my thought the idea of something entails that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it, is not this a possible basis for another argument to prove the existence of God? Certainly, the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one which I find within me just as surely as the idea of any shape or number. And my understanding that it belongs to his nature that he always exists is no less clear and distinct than is the case when I prove of any shape or number that some property belongs to its nature.' (*Fifth Meditation* (66) (Cottingham, p.45)

He claims that one of the properties of God is God's *existence* – and just as we cannot deny that triangles have their properties (of e.g. having three sides), we cannot deny that God has this property. This, at least, is how he starts.

However, even Descartes recognises this is a little bit dodgy. Surely people can have an idea of God that doesn't attribute existence to God. Atheists, presumably, think about God without saying one of God's necessary properties is existence. Further argumentation is needed.

The key here is that Descartes sees existence to be a perfection – and since God is, by definition, *perfect*, and has all perfections, this might include *existence*. But is existence really a perfection?

*Teaching suggestion: Get the students to imagine their perfect ice-cream. Imagine it being the greatest ice-cream ever – it has all of your favourite flavours, as many scoops as you want, all the sugary syrups, a flake and a cherry on top. You're imagining the perfect ice-cream. Or is it? How much better would it be if it actually existed?*

Descartes claims that existence is a perfection.

'...it is not necessary that I ever light upon any thought of God; but whenever I do choose to think of the first and supreme being, and bring forth the idea of God from the treasure house of my mind as it were, it is necessary that I attribute all perfections to him, even if I do not at that time enumerate them or attend to them individually. And this necessity plainly guarantees that, when I later realize that existence is a perfection, I am correct in inferring that the first and supreme being exists.' – *Fifth Meditation* (68) (Cottingham, p.47)

### A problem

There is a problem here. The ontological argument depends on the claim that whatever Descartes 'clearly and distinctly' apprehends is *true*; it is because he 'clearly and distinctly' sees triangles to have 3 sides, and so on, that he takes it to be true. However, as was seen in the *Third* and *Fourth Meditation*, our faculty for perceiving 'clearly and distinctly' is given to us by God. The problem is that Descartes' reasoning may be *circular*.

- 1) God has given me the faculty for perceiving things 'clearly and distinctly'.
- 2) I perceive clearly and distinctly that God exists.
- 3) Whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true.
- 4) God exists.

This worry is put forward by Descartes' friend, Arnauld:

'I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists. But we can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists, we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and evidently is true.'

Whether or not Descartes can escape from this circular reasoning has been the subject of much discussion. If he cannot then this may seem to be a considerable issue for his overall project. As has been repeatedly emphasized, God plays a central role in Descartes' deconstruction of scepticism, and without God, it is not clear that his edifice of knowledge can get off the ground.

### QUESTIONS

- a) Is existence a perfection?
- b) What kinds of things can we apprehend 'clearly and distinctly'?
- c) What is Descartes' ontological argument for the existence of God?
- d) What is the Cartesian circle?



## READING

- René Descartes – ‘Fifth Meditation: The Essence of Material Things, and the Existence of God Considered a Second Time’  
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## 6. THE EXTERNAL WORLD, MIND, BODY

*Keywords:* imagination, pure understanding, external world

'It remains for me to examine whether material things exist. And at least I now know they are capable of existing, in so far as they are the subject-matter of pure mathematics, since I perceive them clearly and distinctly. For there is no doubt that God is capable of creating everything that I am capable of perceiving in this manner; and I have never judged that something could not be made by him except on the grounds that there would be a contradiction in my perceiving it distinctly. The conclusion that material things exist is also suggested by the faculty of imagination, which I am aware of using when I turn my mind to material things...' – *Sixth Meditation* (72) (Cottingham, p.50)

In the sixth and last meditation, Descartes sets out once and for all to prove the existence of the external world, which he has for so long held in doubt. Here we find the culmination of his attempts to overcome the reign of the evil demon and the dreaming doubts. His method, remaining fully in line with his rationalism, is to turn once more, to his ideas.

### *Imagination and pure understanding*

He begins by drawing a distinction between 'imagination' and 'understanding'.

*Imagination:* For Descartes, imagination is not necessarily what we mean by imagination. For us, 'imagination' has connotations of creativity and originality. For Descartes, it refers more to that which we see in our mind's eye. It has a visual aspect.

'When I imagine a triangle, for example, I do not merely understand that it is a figure bounded by three lines, but at the same time I also see the three lines with my mind's eye as if they were present before me.' – *Sixth Meditation* (72) (Cottingham, p.50)

In this quotation, we also get an indication of what Descartes means by 'understanding'.

*Understanding:* Understanding does not necessarily have a visual element to it. One need not see a triangle in the mind's eye to understand that it has three sides, and so forth. Descartes draws out the contrast between these two modes of thinking by comparing our thoughts about a triangle – which we can both imagine and understand quite easily – and a chiliagon. A chiliagon has a thousand sides – a fact which we can apprehend immediately, but which is less easily grasped by our

imaginations (compare, for instance, a mental image of a thousand-sided polygon, and a million-sided one).

*Teaching suggestion: Go around the class and ask the students how clear their mind's eye really is. Get them to close their eyes and think of their parents – how easy is it? What about picturing their own faces? Then ask them what it feels like to think the thought '2+2=4'. Is there a visual element to it? How separate are these modes of thinking?*

Having articulated these general differences between imagination and understanding, Descartes asks whether imagination is 'a necessary constituent of my own essence'. Can I imagine myself as lacking imagination? If I can then imagination is not fundamental to our natures. He suggests that we can.

'...if I lacked it, I should undoubtedly remain the same individual as I now am' – *Sixth Meditation* (73) (Cottingham, p.51)

And this leads him to think that the imaginative mode of thinking must depend on something distinct from the thinking thing that I am. And *this* suggests a probable argument for the existence of an external body. Thus Descartes writes:

'...I can easily understand that, if there does exist some body to which the mind is so joined that it can apply itself to contemplate it, as it were, whenever it pleases, then it may possibly be this very body that enables me to imagine corporeal things. So the difference between this mode of thinking and pure understanding may simply be this: when the mind understands, it in some way turns towards itself and inspects of the ideas which are within it; but when it imagines, it turns towards the body and looks at something in the body which conforms to an idea understood by the mind or perceived by the senses.' – *Sixth Meditation* (73) (Cottingham, p.51)

There is something decidedly wishy-washy about this argument – and even Descartes wonders at its validity. It is simply not clear that the best way of explaining the imagination is to describe it as a faculty of an extended body.

Fortunately, this argument from imagination is only intended to get us in the right spirit. In the *Sixth Meditation*, Descartes deploys another argument, which invokes the power of God.

### *The existence of the external world*

Descartes' argument for the existence of the external world runs as follows:

a) Whether or not they actually exist, I have in a faculty for perceiving external things. Or, as Descartes has it:

'a faculty for receiving and knowing the ideas of sensible things.' (*Sixth Meditation* (79) (Cottingham, p.55)

b) These ideas of external things – chairs, tables, etc. – must come from somewhere.

c) They do not come from me, because they are produced without my co-operation. If I were the one producing them, with some other faculty, I'd know about it.

'these ideas are produced without my cooperation and often even against my will.' (*Sixth Meditation* (79) (Cottingham, p.55)

d) If I don't produce my ideas of sensible things myself, these ideas must come from elsewhere. (i) Maybe they come from the external world? (ii) Maybe they come from an evil demon?

e) I can never know whether (i) or (ii) holds.

(This is the sceptical position... which he is about to overrule, with-)

f) Since God has given me no way of knowing whether (i) or (ii) holds, but *has* made me such that I believe my ideas of chairs and tables come from chairs and tables, there *must actually be chairs and tables*. If there weren't God would be a deceiver – and God cannot be a deceiver!

'[God] has given me a great propensity to believe that [these ideas] are produced by corporeal things. So I do not see how God could be understood to be anything but a deceiver if the ideas were transmitted from a source other than corporeal things. It follows that corporeal things exist.' – *Sixth Meditation* (80) (Cottingham, p.55)

Given that we know that God is not a deceiver, and that we cannot help but believe in an external world, there really must be an external world. This is, ultimately, Descartes' argument for the existence of the external world. It is his defense against scepticism. And, as is fully consonant with the arguments above, it emerges – so he claims – from a careful and meticulous examination of our ideas, and not our senses.

### *Mind and body and a parting problem*

Descartes also uses the argument in the *Sixth Meditation* as an opportunity to reiterate the distinction between mind and body. There, in addition to the previous discussions, he points out another great difference between the mind and the body, which becomes evident when we attend again to our thoughts.

'...there is a great difference between the mind and the body, inasmuch as the body is by its very nature always divisible, while the mind is utterly indivisible. For when I consider the mind, or myself in so far as I am merely a thinking thing, I am unable to distinguish any parts within myself; I understand myself to be something quite single and complete. Although the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, I recognize that if a foot or arm or any other part of the body is cut off, nothing has thereby been taken away from the mind.' – *Sixth Meditation* (86) (Cottingham, p.59)

*Teaching suggestion: Is this true? Aren't there some parts of the body which can't be cut off? In his Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity, Sydney Shoemaker puts forward the infamous story of brain transplantation – what would Descartes have made of the tale of a brain being taken out of a body and transferred to another?*

*Teaching suggestion: How closely does this thought of Descartes' correspond to our own thoughts? Do we really think that our minds are indivisible? And does the fact that our body parts can't (naturally) survive when separated from the vital organs suggest that our body is somehow unified too?*

There is a final problem here. Throughout the *Meditations*, Descartes has repeatedly emphasized the distinction between the material, extended body, and the immaterial, non-extended, thinking mind. One question which has occurred to some readers is: *how exactly do the mind and the body interact?*

In the normal run of things we think that our minds have control over our bodies: we can move our limbs by thinking about it. But how can an immaterial thing have causal effects on material things? Descartes' suggestion that the pineal gland in the brain is the point of contact between soul and body will seem under-developed to contemporary readers.

*Point of interest: There was a reason why Descartes fixed on the pineal gland as the special part of the brain in which the interaction between mind and body could be conducted. He was, alongside his philosophical work, an amateur anatomist, and on cutting open the human skull found that the brain – which is roughly symmetrical – has two of every one of its parts, apart from the pineal gland.*

## QUESTIONS

- a) What is Descartes' final argument for the existence of the external world?
- b) Can Descartes' project work without God?
- c) Can the mind really be distinct from the body?
- d) Does Descartes always rely on the examination of his ideas, as he claims to?

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