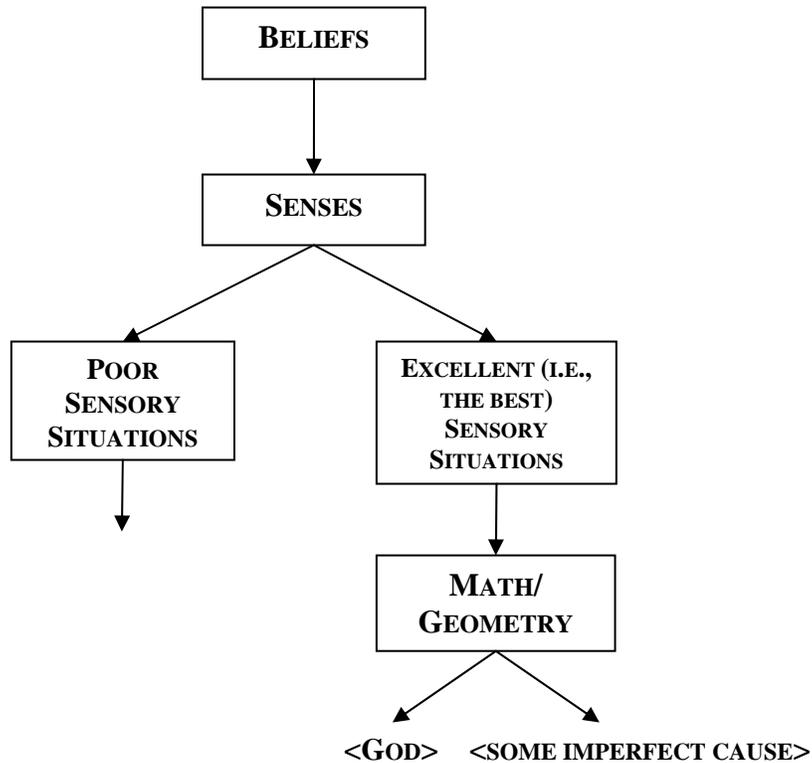


NOTES ON DESCARTES' *MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY*
PHIL 202: Modern Philosophy / Tim Black / Fall 2008
California State University, Northridge



What leads Descartes from the Excellent-Sensory-Situations box to the Math/Geometry box is this: *the dream argument*. In *Meditation 1*, Descartes claims that since God allows us to be deceived about math and geometry on *some* occasions, it is not inconsistent with God's goodness that we be deceived about math and geometry on all occasions. Moreover, the supposition that some imperfect cause is responsible for our faculties does nothing to help us overcome the worry that we be deceived about math and geometry on all occasions. It appears, then, that our beliefs are groundless.

1. CARTESIAN SKEPTICISM

- 1.1. All things that are not completely certain and indubitable are things to which I should not assent.
 - 1.1.1. CERTAINTY has something to do with truth. In particular, a belief is certain if it is not possible for the belief to be false. (CANNOT BE FALSE)
 - 1.1.2. INDUBITABILITY has something to do with doubt. In particular, a belief is indubitable if there is no reason at all for me to doubt the belief. (CANNOT BE DOUBTED)
- 1.2. Nothing is completely certain and indubitable.
- 1.3. Therefore, I should assent to nothing.

2. CARTESIAN ANTI-SKEPTICISM

2.1. *Cogito ergo sum*

- 2.1.1. A thing that is convincing itself that it does not exist cannot fail to exist while it is convincing itself that it fails to exist.
- 2.1.2. I am a thing that is convincing itself that it does not exist.
- 2.1.3. Therefore, I cannot fail to exist while I am convincing myself that I fail to exist. (That is, it is *certain* that I exist while I am convincing myself that I fail to exist.)
- 2.1.4. If it occurs to me that 2.1.3 is true, then there is no reason at all for me to doubt the belief that I exist while I am convincing myself that I fail to exist.
- 2.1.5. It occurs to me that 2.1.3 is true.
- 2.1.6. Therefore, it is *indubitable* that I exist while I am convincing myself that I fail to exist.

2.2. WHAT IS THIS I?

- 2.2.1. I am a human being. But what's a human being?
 - 2.2.1.1. A rational animal? No.
 - 2.2.1.2. Something with both a body and a soul? No.
 - 2.2.1.2.1. I can doubt whether I have a body.
 - 2.2.1.2.2. The soul is a "tenuous" thing.
 - 2.2.1.3. I am a thinking thing, i.e., a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, imagines and has sensory perceptions: "thought; this alone is inseparable from me."
- 2.2.2. None of the things grasped through the imagination is relevant to my knowledge of myself.
- 2.2.3. Imagining is simply contemplating the shape or image of a corporeal thing.
- 2.2.4. Therefore, it is unreliable (since all corporeal things are in doubt).

2.3. A WORRY, AND DESCARTES' RESPONSE

- 2.3.1. WORRY: "The corporeal things of which images are formed in my thought, and which the senses investigate, are known with much more distinctness than this puzzling 'I' which cannot be pictured in the imagination."
- 2.3.2. RESPONSE: The wax example
 - 2.3.2.1. What features are inseparable from the wax?
 - 2.3.2.1.1. Extension
 - 2.3.2.1.2. Flexibility
 - 2.3.2.1.3. Changeability
 - 2.3.2.2. "[T]he nature of this piece of wax is in no way revealed by my imagination [or by my senses], but is perceived by the mind alone."
 - 2.3.2.3. Thus, the *intellect*, rather than the imagination, is responsible for our understanding of the nature of all things, even of corporeal things.
 - 2.3.2.4. Each act of the mind makes it "much more distinct and evident" that I exist.

2.4. THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

2.4.1. I have an idea of *an infinite being*, i.e., a being that is “eternal, infinite, [immutable,] omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of all things that exist apart from [me]” (p. 30).

2.4.2. There must be as much formal reality in the total cause of an idea as there is objective reality in the idea itself.

2.4.2.1. FORMAL REALITY: The reality that an object has independent of one’s thinking (i.e. having an idea) of that object. [This is the *actual* reality, independent of thought, of an object.]

2.4.2.2. OBJECTIVE REALITY: The formal reality that a thing is presented as having (in an idea).

2.4.3. Therefore, there must be as much formal reality in the total cause of my idea of an infinite being as there is objective reality in the idea itself.

2.4.4. I am a being that is created, limited and substantially finite.

2.4.5. Therefore, something other than me is the total cause of my idea of an infinite being.

2.4.6. Therefore, there is something other than me, and that thing is a being that is “eternal, infinite, [immutable,] omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of all things that exist apart from [me].”

2.4.7. Therefore, God exists.

2.5. GOD’S NATURE

2.5.1. God has all of the perfections.

2.5.2. The will to deceive is an imperfection.

2.5.3. Therefore, “it is impossible that God should ever deceive me.” (p. 99).

2.5.4. Moreover, “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” (p. 99).

2.5.5. “God does not wish to deceive me” (p. 99).

2.5.6. Therefore, “[God] surely did not give me the kind of faculty which would ever enable me to go wrong while using it correctly” (p. 99).

2.5.7. Therefore, my faculty of judgment is such that it *never* “enable[s] me to go wrong while using it correctly.”

OBJECTION: Why do I *ever* go wrong?

DESCARTES’ RESPONSE:

1. Error depends both on the will and on the intellect.

2. I err when the scope of my will exceeds the scope of my intellect.

3. So far as Descartes knows, the universe as a whole might be more perfect “because some of its parts are not immune from error.”

4. We can avoid error, according to Descartes, by “withhold[ing] judgment on any occasion when the truth of the matter is not clear.”

2.5.8. Therefore, when I use my faculty of judgment correctly, not even a malicious demon

can make that faculty deceive me.

2.6. ANTI-SKEPTICAL CONCLUSIONS

- 2.6.1. Given the conclusion expressed in 2.5.8, we can effectively eliminate *the malicious demon hypothesis*, i.e., the hypothesis that a malicious demon makes it so that our faculties deceive us even when we use them correctly.
- 2.6.2. Given the conclusions in 2.5.3 and 2.5.8, we can effectively eliminate *the dreaming hypothesis*, i.e., the hypothesis that at this moment, in an optimal perceptual situation, our sensory experiences are simply the products of a dream.
- 2.6.3. Having eliminated these two hypotheses, we have found our way out of the skepticism that Descartes attempts to establish in the *First Meditation*.