



Philosophy of Descartes

September 26, 2013

Dr. Cindy Ausec

Objectives

- ▶ Importance of Descartes
- ▶ His break with Scholasticism and Aristotelian tenets
- ▶ Method
- ▶ *Meditations on First Philosophy*
 - “Methodological” or “hyperbolic” doubt
 - *Cogito, ergo sum*
 - Nature of the Mind
 - Proof of God
 - Dualism of the Mind and Body

Rene Descartes 1596 – 1650

- ▶ French philosopher and writer who spent much of his adult life in the Dutch Republic
- ▶ Dubbed the “Father of Modern Philosophy” – *Meditations on First Philosophy* one of the standard philosophy texts
- ▶ Also influential in mathematics
- ▶ One of the key figures in the Scientific Revolution

Holistic View of Philosophy

Tree Metaphor

- ▶ Roots are metaphysics – It in Descartes' metaphysics where an absolutely certain and secure foundation is discovered
- ▶ The trunk is physics – provides the basis for the rest of the sciences
- ▶ Branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences (three principle ones are medicine mechanics and morals)

Against Scholasticism

- ▶ Broke with Aristotelian tenets
 - Rejected “substantial forms as explanatory principles in physics
 - Rejected any appeal to ends – divine or natural – in explaining natural phenomena
 - Rejected the thesis that all knowledge must come from sensation

Method

- ▶ Rejected the Aristotelian “syllogism” argument forms
 - Express only probabilities based on sensation
 - Conclusions derived from probably premises can only be probably
- ▶ Used geometrical-style demonstrations
 - Deduced from a set of self-evident
 - Ideas of geometry are clear and distinct

Meditations on First Philosophy

- ▶ Consists of six “meditations”
- ▶ Demonstrate that there is one intuitive truth that is beyond all doubt and from which the rest of human knowledge can be deduced
- ▶ Conducted from a first person perspective

First Meditation: Concerning Those Things That Can Be Called into Doubt

- ▶ Arguments for doubting all of his previously held beliefs
 - Observed that the senses sometimes deceive and you might be dreaming
 - Supposes an evil demon who is deceiving him
- ▶ “Methodological” or “hyperbolic” doubt
 - Purpose is to clear the mind of preconceived opinions that might obscure the truth
 - Goal is to find something that cannot be doubted

Second Meditation: Concerning the Nature of the Human Mind

- ▶ Tries to establish absolute certainty in his famous reasoning: *Cogito, ergo sum* “I think therefore I am”
 - The fact that I am thinking, implies that there must be something engaged in that activity, namely “I”
 - “I exist” is an indubitable and therefore absolutely certain belief that serves as an axiom from which other absolutely certain truths can be deduced

Second Mediation

- ▶ Concludes that he is a thinking thing – a mind “a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sense perceptions”
- ▶ The mind is by its nature not a body, but an immaterial thing
- ▶ The mind is a substance and the modes of thinking substance are its ideas

Third Meditation: Concerning God, That He Exists

- ▶ Three kinds of ideas
 - Fabricated – mere inventions of the mind
 - Adventitious – are sensations produced by some material thing existing externally to the mind
 - Innate – are placed in the mind by God at creation – Geometrical ideas are paradigm examples of innate ideas – idea of a triangle – three sided figure

Third Meditation

- ▶ The mind is better known than the body –
 - Wax Example – has certain properties that change when it melts – but it is still judged as wax

“And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment which is in my mind”

Third Meditation

- Wax example – establishes three important points
 - All sensation involves some point of judgment
 - What is unchangeable in the wax is its extension in length, breadth and depth, which is not perceptible by the senses but by the mind alone
 - Immaterial, mental things are better known and therefore, are better sources of knowledge than extended things

Third Meditation

- ▶ Theory of Causal Adequacy

“there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause”

Causal Adequacy Applied to Ideas

- ▶ Objective reality contained in an idea is just its representational content
- ▶ The formal reality contained in something is a reality actually contained in that thing
- ▶ A reality is contained in something eminently when that reality is contained in it in a high form such that:
 - The thing does not possess that reality formally
 - It has the ability to cause that reality formally in something else

Proof of God

- ▶ Used the “causal adequacy” theory to prove God’s existence
- ▶ Idea of God is the idea of infinite substance
- ▶ Only something that is actually an infinite substance can be the cause of this idea = God’s existence is the only possibly cause

Forth Meditation: Concerning the True and the False

“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. By “God” I mean the very being the idea of whom is within me, that is, the possessor of all the perfections which I cannot grasp, but can somehow reach in my thought, who is subject to no defects whatsoever. It is clear enough from this that he cannot be a deceiver, since it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend on some defect”

Fourth Meditation

- ▶ God is not a deceiver
- ▶ God cannot be the cause of human error
 - Human are the cause of their own errors – do not use their judgment correctly
 - God's non-deceiving nature serves to guarantee the truth of all clear and distinct ideas
- ▶ Implies that knowledge of God's existence is required for having any absolutely certain knowledge

For if I do not Know this “*whether there is a god, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver, I can never be certain of anything else*”

“*If I did not possess knowledge of God... I should thus never have true and certain knowledge about anything, but only shifting and changeable opinions*”

Forth Meditation

- ▶ Errors arise when the will exceeds the understanding such that something laying beyond the limits of the understanding is voluntarily affirmed or denied
- ▶ People make mistakes when they choose to pass judgment on they do not understand
- ▶ Judgments should only be made about things that are clearly and distinctly understood

Fifth Meditation: Concerning the Essence of Material Things, and Again Concerning God, That He Exists

- ▶ God is deducible from the idea of his nature just as the fact that the sum of the interior angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles is deducible from the idea of the nature of a triangle
- ▶ Idea of God is that of a supremely perfect being, with all perfections to the highest degree

God and Knowledge

“But once I perceived that there is a God, and also understood at the same time that everything else depends on him, and that he is not a deceiver, I then concluded that everything that I clearly and distinctly perceived is necessarily true.”

Sixth Meditation: Concerning the Existence of Material Things, and the Real Distinction between Mind and Body

- ▶ Dualism of the Mind and Body
 - The Nature of the body or extension is divisible into parts
 - Nature of the mind is understood to be “something simple and complete”

Summary

- ▶ Importance of Descartes
- ▶ His break with Scholasticism and Aristotelian tenets
- ▶ Method
- ▶ *Meditations on First Philosophy*
 - “Methodological” or “hyperbolic” doubt
 - *Cogito, ergo sum*
 - Nature of the Mind
 - Proof of God
 - Dualism of the Mind and Body