Descartes
Metaphysics & Epistemology
René Descartes: A Brief Overview

Descartes wrote much of his work in the language of scholarship of his day – Latin. His Latin name was “Cartesius” which is why we refer to his theories as Cartesian Substance Dualism and Cartesian Rationalism.

Descartes was a 17th century mathematician (discovered the Cartesian coordinate system and analytic geometry).

Descartes picked up (perhaps from Aristotle) the idea of “substance” as the basis of reality, but because he wanted to reconcile Christianity with the “New Sciences” he divided substance into two categories & three distinct parts: God, Mind and the Physical world including our bodies.

There was a serious concern in his time – as perhaps still in ours – that one could not be both a scientist and a believer in the Christian God – in other words, scientific enquiry might be tantamount to heresy. In fact, his work was not well received by the Church: In 1663, the Pope placed his works on the Index of Prohibited Books. However, after his death, his remains were moved to France and buried in the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris.
Descartes was a **substance dualist** (which is quite distinct from “duelist”) that is, he argued for two *categories* of substances: Immaterial (God and Mind or Soul whose principle attribute is thought – exists outside of physical space–time) and Material (body and the physical world the principle attribute of which is spacio–temporal extension, i.e. has mass, weight, dimension, occupies space and exists in time). It is a bit confusing because for Descartes, there are actually three substances but they fall into two categories described below.

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<th>Immaterial Substances</th>
<th>Material Substances</th>
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<td>God: that substance which needs no other thing in order to exist</td>
<td>The objective world including our brains &amp; bodies</td>
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<td>The Soul: self, mind, the realm of ideas and container of thoughts</td>
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Substances are defined as independent and distinct by Descartes. However, immaterial souls and the physical/material world (including our bodies and all objects in the natural world) are created by god and are dependent upon god for existence. Only God exists independently.

By dividing up substance in this way, god is real; part of the universe but not subject to the same rules of the physical world and likewise for the mind as separate from the body. For Descartes, no conflict between theology and physics thereby exists.
Cartesian Rationalism:

- Descartes’ Goal: Absolute certainty, based only on reason – on deductive logic – without reference to the senses or to induction based on past experience.
Descartes’ Beginning Point: “Radical Doubt”

Can we just assume that the material objective world, including our bodies exist pretty much as we perceive and experience them?

Descartes argued that one cannot arrive at certain knowledge if those conclusions are built on questionable premises or doubtful assumptions!
Problems with Empiricism:

- Descartes rejected empiricism – knowledge gained through sensory data and accordingly, inductive inferences drawn from experiential evidence for the following three reasons:

  - The problem of illusion
  - The problem of change
  - The “indistinguishability of the waking and dreaming states.”
Problems with Empiricism:

- The problem of illusion: our senses often lie – if we can’t tell when sensory data is a lie and when it is representative of reality – then we can never really trust them!

Trompe l'oeil
Egyptian style mural on building in Los Gatos, California.
Problems with Empiricism:

- **The problem of change:** Descartes uses a beeswax candle to show that everything one knows of it through one’s senses will change over time – what, then are the essential properties of the wax candle?

  - Before Lit – Smells sweet, is yellow, cold and hard.
  - After Lit – Has no smell, is colorless and is now liquid and hot.
The “indistinguishability of the waking and dreaming states.” If our dreams have ever convinced us at the time that we were awake, how can we be convinced now that we are not dreaming? The only confirmation is through sensory evidence – which has been shown to be unreliable!

“The Dreamer”
(Summer Evening)
1871, James Tissot, Musee D’Orsay, Paris, France
Problems with Empiricism:

- So...
  - We can doubt the evidence of our senses
  - Which implies that our knowledge of the material world based on those senses is doubtable
  - Which also implies that, since our bodies are part of the material world and known through sensory evidence, our material existence must also be placed in the doubtable column.
Cartesian Rationalism:

- What are we left with?
- “Cogito ergo sum.”
  (I think, therefore I am)

Descartes has found his first Truth – something that he cannot rationally doubt, since the very act of doubting proves the existence of the doubter! Notice that this only proves the existence of Descartes as a thinking unextended being & not the existence of Descartes as a physical being.

“Le Penseur” (The Thinker), by Auguste Rodin, at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor
What does this first truth imply for Descartes?

Descartes’ Criteria for Truth:
- **Clearness**
  - Those ideas which cannot be reasonably doubted
- **Distinctness**
  - Those ideas whose truth do not depend on sensory evidence – i.e. distinct from (sensory) experience.

P1) The idea, *Cogito ergo sum*, is undeniably true

P2) The essential qualities of this idea – those qualities which make it a truth are clearness and distinctness

In order to be true, all subsequent propositions must also be clear and distinct.
Descartes’ Concept of Innate Ideas:

If Descartes’ ideas do not come from experience, where do they come from? Descartes concludes that they must be innate. The simple form of this argument is a disjunctive syllogism:

P1) Ideas are either from our senses (gained after we’re born) or they are innately born within us (before birth)
P2) The idea of my own existence (Cogito ergo sum) is not from experience

C) The idea of my own existence must be innate.
Descartes’ Concept of Innate Ideas:

- He called them “intuitions of the mind.” (p.168)
- They are nonempirical – having their source in reason alone. (p.169)
- They are self-evident and are held universally among all rational humans.
- This innate knowledge includes:
  - Knowledge of self (one’s mind)
  - Knowledge of a perfectly good God
  - Understanding of the basic rules for deductive inferences – those underlying principles which make reason reasonable. (p.171)
The Existence of God:

- Remember that this is one of Descartes’ big agendas – to fit god in as a necessary and integral piece of his sciences. The basic argument comes in two versions (not included in your readings)

- **Argument A:**
  - P1) I have an innate idea of my own existence
  - P2) I cannot be the author of these ideas – This would require me to know the ideas before I know them.
  - P3) There must be some other greater mind – a universal mind which is capable of controlling and directing these innate ideas – this greater mind we may call god.

  
  
  C) This god/ universal mind must exist (gives us Aristotle’s kind of god)
The Existence of God:

- The first argument does not give us a perfect – all good god – only an ultimate mind. Therefore Descartes has a bit more work to do in order to prove the existence of the particular god he needs. Descartes essentially borrows this ontological argument from the medieval philosopher, Saint Anselm of Canterbury.

- **Argument B:**
  - P1) I have a clear and distinct idea (innate intuition) of God as an infinitely perfect being
  - P2) Any being which is perfect except for the fact that it did not exist would not be infinitely perfect.
  
  
  C) God must exist (gives us the Christian version of God)
Descartes’ God

- It will be important to understand just what Descartes includes in the essential qualities of this god in the second argument – as it is through these qualities that Descartes will be able to prove the existence of the material objective world.

- Traditional Qualities of a Perfect God:
  - Omniscient – all knowing
  - Omnipotent – all powerful
  - Omnipresent – everywhere at once
  - Omnibenevolent – all loving (all good will)
Descartes considers the possibility of “evil demons and deceivers” (p.170) whereby we are fooled by all our “lively impressions” of the material body and that no such physical realm really exists – that is we are after all – just disembodied minds. He rejects this possibility – without relying on his senses by referring to the very nature of the god introduced in argument B. Again we see another disjunctive syllogism…
Evil Demons & The Material World:

- P1) I have very many lively and powerful impressions & sensations of a material objective world & a body
- P2) Either these impressions are given rise by the independent reality of that material world or they could be all false, caused by “evil demons & deceivers”
- P3) Because God exists; these impressions cannot be the wholesale product of “evil demons & deceivers”
  - SP1) God is neither powerless against them nor ignorant of them, nor are they invisible to him
  - Sp2) God is not an evil demon or deceiver

C) These impressions must be of a real and independently existing material world (and not just an idea in my mind).
Notice that Descartes is *not* claiming that the material world exists because we see it; instead he *is* claiming that we see the material world because god would not allow us to be so thoroughly deceived – illusion can be explained because our senses are fallible – only God is perfect.

Descartes treats the body as essentially a machine – our bodies apart from our minds function as automata with our senses driving certain mechanisms such as when we thirst we take a drink – or when we feel hunger we eat.
Some Problems with Descartes’ Argument:

- **Circularity** – At several points in the argument, Descartes assumes his conclusion in the premises to prove the conclusion. Here’s a couple of examples:
  - *Cogito ergo sum* – *Cogito = I think*, so he assumes his existence to prove his existence (he uses the verb form of first person singular to prove the existence of a singular person)
  - His reliance on innate ideas & reason – these ideas must be true because god is perfect and is the original author of all such ideas – but he uses his innate idea of god to prove god’s existence as a perfect being.

- **His confidence that god is perfect** – Even if one granted the existence of god, one need not necessarily grant that such a god is perfect. Similarly, one cannot get to the fact of something’s existence by describing it. Kant wrote that there is a difference between asking what something is like and asking if there are any – existence is not an attribute of perfection.

- **Problem of Causal interaction** – will be discussed in next section of class (Mind/Body) – if the two categories of substances have nothing in common and are utterly distinct they cannot interact causally – to interact two things must have at least one point in common