Descartes’ Meditations

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Since intellectual varieties were being engendered by a skeptical crisis challenging all their basic assumptions & beliefs in philosophy, science, & theology in view of the wealth of new ideas, discoveries, changing life-situations (Renaissance, Reformation, & co., Counter-Reformation, & growing interest in skepticism (Montaigne cf. Sextus Empiricus), Descartes sought to build a secure foundation for knowledge and one that is compatible with the two main claims of religion: existence of God & human soul. So, he uses skeptical argument as an instrument of analysis.

1st Meditation:

Resolution to systematically doubt everything I can possibly doubt in order to see whether anything may be left which will resist doubt. If there is, then I may be able to proceed to find other certainties & thus construct a system on solid foundations.

Withholding Policy: Sort out opinions & assent to opinions that are not dubious & uncertain while withholding assent from dubious, uncertain opinions. Descartes breaks with the past to give philosophy a fresh start: a radical skepticism from which there is no return.

I should abstain from the beliefs, things both certain & uncertain which I have in my thoughts & that which I see clearly & distinctly that would be extremely contrary to reason & would cause me to be in great fear & horror. (VII. 30).

2 Features of method stand out:

(1) Holistic device: Epistemology as a method for examining the whole of the human understanding as a system of different states of the mind.

(2) Dream Argument casts doubt on the objectiveness of reality for when I sleep, we think we are awake. There are no “conclusive indications” by which sleep & wakefulness can be distinguished.

3) Deceiver Argument cast doubt on the objectiveness of reality for even an object as mathematical knowledge can even deceive mathematical knowledge.

Belief not at end of Meditation 1:

No assent to indubitable beliefs & doubts: (a) God exists; (b) all propositions of sensory experience, physics, anatomy, medecine, arithmetic, & geometry.

The whole edifice of knowledge is built upon the foundations of Impediment & deduction:

(1) Impediment: “an intellectual or sensory appearance of existence of a thing is no reason to doubt it is the case.” When examining nonentity of our senses & imperfect of our understanding, our senses & attentiveness mind us so readily & distinctly that we are wholly freed from doubts about their truth. Induction without clear & distinct knowledge is reserved for the object of my doubt & attentiveness, like a shape.

(2) Deduction: It is an absolute necessity from things that are known with certainty. Deduction is a necessary function because they both involve truth. By deduction we exclude truths from the object of our doubt & attentiveness.

Cave: means “that which is present & apparent to an attentive mind” (in the same way that objects are clear to our eyes); (2) “existence is a kind of inner illuminator that seems: I’m sure God exists, so...I’m sure something exists.

2nd Meditation:

A. Discovery of a certain & unshakable truth.

After dismissing Scholastic Aristotelian concept of change being as causal & natural due to the inherent difficulties of defining “cause” & “natural,” he concludes that it is thinking that stands as a basis for doubt. Doubt, understanding, effort, dreaming, seeing, smiling, and also imaginings & base sense perceptions.

Even a medicine man can’t doubt the being & behavior of many things, can’t deny the existence of any thing, there is no one person who also suggests that really do exist. There can be certain of my own existence nearly perfectly.

B. Wax Example:

I am certain that I am a thinking thing; (2) I am certain that I am a thinking thing, am distinctly & clearly aware of my own existence; (3) I am certain of my own existence independently of my own existence.

3rd Meditation:

A. Summary:

(1) I am certain that I am thinking; (2) I am certain that I exist; (3) I am certain that God exists; (4) I am certain that I am not a deceiver; (5) I am certain that the description of every thing exists.

B. Preliminary Discussion of Ideas:

(1) I have ideas that about the things of the world. The most common cause of error is the judgment that these ideas are existing in a reality that is distinct from my own.

(2) Fundamentally, this is a kind of error: innate ideas (ideas that originate in myself) are acquired by my intellect, so I can’t control them, so we can’t control the sensory content they can be organized or unorganized.

Advancement ideas: produced by considering external in my mind. Either fabrication, they can’t be examined, or acidents, or manipulated by mind (e.g., sensory idea of heat next to fire).

C. First Case of Proof for God’s existence from the fact that I have an idea of thing:

I have an idea of intellectual substance, independent, irresistible & intelligent, & powerful:

(1) That idea of God is distinct from the idea of myself. The idea of God is an intellectual activity or vision of such clarity that it leaves no doubt about the existence of God.

(2) Sinister device: It proceeds to answer the objections to the idea of God;

(3) God is nothing else than a perfect intellect.

Descartes concludes that he is a thinking spirit, & concludes that there was God, who also thinks, & therefore, God exists.

4th Meditation:

A. The Possibility of Error:

The Argument for Universal Doubt:

(1) I doubt sensory experience:

(i) the color, cause, the touch, the temperature, (2) I doubt sensory experience:

(ii) the color, cause, the touch, the temperature, shape, all the other things.

(3) God can’t be diverse from my own knowledge, the only thing God can do is deceive me.

B. Preliminary Discussion of Ideas:

(1) I have ideas that about the things of the world. The most common cause of error is the judgment that these ideas are existing in a reality that is distinct from my own.

(2) Innate ideas (ideas that originate in myself) are acquired by my intellect, so I can’t control them, so we can’t control the sensory content they can be organized or unorganized.

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5th Meditation:

A. Reflection on experiences of math & abstract concepts:

While the demon can make me hallucinate any object that I perceive, the demon can’t make me see color, taste, texture, warmth, & scent without making me see things, shape, motion, & shape. Thus, I find properties concerned with extension & duration: length, breadth, depth, size, shape, position, & movement.

(2) When I discover particular things about these properties, it seems to me accompanied by sensory images as if they were present before me. A pentagon too can be understood but not imagined- a chiliagon, a hexagon.

B. Ontological Proof for God’s existence:

1. I have a general principle that when I consider an idea, all that I perceive clearly & distinctly as pertaining to the things really does pertain to it. (2) I understand clearly & distinctly that necessary existence belongs to the essence of God; (3) Thus, existence really does belong to the essence of God & thus, exists.

6th Meditation:

A. Knowing that God is not a deceiver & God created me along with all my capacities. I also know that I’m not always in error. The error cannot be due to the correct operation of any faculty which God has created in me, for this would make God a deceiver. I must inquire, therefore, into how it is possible that I can error even though I’m the product of a benevolent God.

(1) Error is due to the concurrent operation of the will & intellect. (2) Error comes in the will, in its judgments, going beyond what the intellect clearly & distinctly perceives.

(3) God cannot be blameworthy for giving me a free or unlimited will which is possible for an ace, & thereby, fall into error.

B. Thus, the way to avoid error is to refrain from judgment until our intellect sees the truth clearly & distinctly. Only make judgments that are clear & distinct. If you don’t then you will make mistakes when you choose to pass judgment on things that you do not fully understand. So the will should be restrained within the bounds of what the mind understands in order to avoid error. Refrain from making dubious judgments.

B. Preliminary Discussion of Ideas:

(1) I doubt sensory experience:

(i) the color, cause, the touch, the temperature, shape, all the other things.

(2) Innate ideas (ideas that originate in myself) are acquired by my intellect, so I can’t control them, so we can’t control the sensory content they can be organized or unorganized.

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Descartes concludes that he is a thinking spirit, & concludes that there was God, who also thinks, & therefore, God exists.

Deductions are similar to intuition because they both involve truth. By deduction we use the intellectual activity or vision of such clarity that it leaves no doubt about the existence of God.

(1) When I discover particular things about these properties, it seems to me accompanied by sensory images as if they were present before me. A pentagon too can be understood but not imagined- a chiliagon, a hexagon.

E. Existential corporeal things definitely exist, confirms that he has a personal body to which he is attached, & learns that neither his sensations nor perceptions resemble their causes in external world (VII. 78-80).

C. Learns how body is organized, & how to use the senses, for example, that the soul exists & that we can be conscious of the separate existence of things, the senses, & also some truths about reality (e.g., I think, that I exist; sphere has a single surface)

D. The End of Doubt (VII: 89-90):

(1) The senses are generally to be trusted since they belong to a standardized signaling system; (2) Where a message is unclear or misleading, another sense can be brought to the aid of first (touch, for ex. can rationalize the observation).

Memory must be fairly reliable, for I know that God has not made me a seriously defective epistem. project, (4) my intellect, when it doesn’t jump to conclusions concerning what it doesn’t perceive clearly distinctly, is an admirable & trustworthy instrument.