

## **Descartes on the essential natures of mind and body**

### **THE NATURE OF MIND**

In Meditation II, after his argument that he is a thinking thing, Descartes lists the type of activities that a 'thinking thing' engages in, providing us with a more detailed description of the nature of the mind: 'a thing that doubts, perceives, affirms, denies, wills, does not will, that imagines also, and which feels' (107) (Descartes adds love and hate in Meditation III).

But doesn't this connect mind and body? Surely sense perception requires a body, and I cannot doubt that I have sensory experiences, whether or not they are veridical. But, Descartes notes, I have sensory experiences in my dreams as well, when I am not in fact seeing or hearing at all. So all I can be certain of is the experience, not that the experience is caused by sensing. Understood like this, independent of their cause, these experiences are nothing other than a form of thinking (107), and so don't depend on having a body. So he puts forward a type of sense-data theory – what is immediately available to the mind is perceptual experience, irrespective of whatever lies 'beyond' that experience in the external world: 'it is very certain that it seems to me that I see light, hear a noise and feel heat; and this is properly what in me is called perceiving, and this, taken in this precise sense, is nothing other than thinking' (107).

Further knowledge of the mind comes from realizing that every thought we have about physical objects illustrates something about the mind. In Descartes' famous example of the wax, he talks a little about the nature of body, but he is also exploring what we can know about the body, and how this knowledge can show us more about the nature of mind.

### **THE WAX EXAMPLE**

Descartes' discussion goes like this:

1. when I melt a piece of wax, it loses all of its original sensory qualities (the particular taste, smell, feel, and shape it has); yet I believe it is the same wax. So what I think of as the wax is not its sensory qualities.
2. So when I think of the wax, I am thinking of something that is extended, i.e. takes up space, and changeable, i.e. its sensory and spatial properties can change.
3. I also think that the possible changes it can go through outstrip what I can imagine; I can't imagine all the changes I know the wax can undergo. So it's not through my imagination that I have my conception of the wax. Rather, and somewhat surprisingly, I 'perceive' (comprehend) the wax through my understanding.
4. The wax I think of this way and the wax I detect through my senses is the same wax.
5. Although we say we 'see' the wax (through vision), in fact we judge (through understanding) that it is present from what we see.

The argument is about our knowledge of physical objects, rather than the real nature or existence of physical objects. The title of the meditation is 'Of the nature of the human mind; and that it is easier to know than the body'. Descartes' claims about the nature of body actually come in Meditation V, and his proof that they exist in Meditation VI.

Descartes' question is not 'what is the wax?', but 'what is our idea of the wax?'. So in (1), Descartes is not attempting to assert the identity conditions of the piece of wax, he is noticing that our conception of 'the wax' doesn't appear to depend on its particular sensory qualities. So what is our conception? That the wax is something that endures through such changes (it is changeable), but also that it is extended (takes up space). If this is our conception of the wax, then it is not a conception derived from our senses or imagination, but an intellectual conception of it, and as such, given by our understanding.

So, Descartes argues, at first, our idea of the wax is of something defined by its sensory properties. But this is muddled. When we realize that we comprehend the wax through understanding, as something extended and changeable, our comprehension of the wax has become clear and distinct. To find out what can be known, Descartes pursues his method of forming a clear and distinct idea of the object of knowledge. The best idea we can form of physical objects is that they are extended and changeable. We also realize that talk of 'seeing the wax' is misleading. We judge or infer the presence of physical objects from our sensory experiences.

Descartes puts these conclusions to use in two ways:

## **1. The nature of body**

In Meditation V, Descartes does ask the question 'what is the nature of physical bodies?'. Although Descartes has shown what our idea of physical objects is in the wax argument, we may have got an entirely wrong-headed conception of them, for we don't know that our clear and distinct conception of them corresponds to anything real or even possible. But in Meditation V, he claims that we can know that clear and distinct ideas are true. He has argued, in the wax example, that we can clearly and distinctly conceive of physical objects as extended and changeable, but not as having particularly sensory properties. He therefore concludes that physical objects, if they exist, are essentially extended and changeable.

## **2. More on the nature of mind**

Descartes argues that the example of the wax helps us understand the mind in three ways. First, every thought about the wax confirms the existence of the mind. Second, thinking about how we know the wax helps separate the different faculties of sensory perceptual experience, imagination and the understanding. So we gain a clearer and more distinct idea of what happens in the mind, we understand the different 'modes of thought' (113). Finally, because we comprehend the wax through understanding, rather than by sensory perception, although it seemed that bodies were known better than the mind, in fact they are not. Nothing could seem more obvious and certain than the beliefs we have about what we experience through our senses. But it turns out that we use the understanding to comprehend bodies. We use the understanding to comprehend our minds as well, but this is much clearer and more easy than in the case of comprehending bodies. So we know the mind better than the body.

On the basis of introspection alone, Descartes feels able to confirm the different modes of consciousness that the mind is capable of. (Modes of thought should not be thought of as 'parts' of the mind.) He doesn't consider the possibility that I might be mistaken about my mode of thought – I can't mistakenly think that I'm imagining when I'm conceiving, can't think I'm doubting when I'm willing and so on, at least when what I am thinking about is immediately available to consciousness.

### Hume on extension

As an empiricist, Hume challenges Descartes' argument that our knowledge of physical objects as extended comes from understanding, not the senses. He argues that our only chance of forming an idea of extension is by abstraction from particular sensory experiences. We have no conception of extension that is neither visible, and therefore derived from sight, nor tangible, and therefore derived from touch.

Descartes explicitly rejects this claim. In the wax example, he argues that his conception of the wax as extended is not given by the imagination, because he can understand the possibilities of extension outstrip my imagination. The idea of extension outstrips what the senses can provide. But his claim that our concept of extension therefore derives from the understanding instead does not mean extension is neither visible nor tangible: the wax conceived by the understanding is the same wax that is perceived through the senses. However, it is certainly debatable whether Descartes is right that our concept of extension is not derived from the senses, formed through abstraction.

## **INTELLECT AND IMAGINATION AND THEIR RESPECTIVE ROLES**

### The distinction between intellect and imagination

In both the wax example and at the beginning of Meditation VI, Descartes distinguishes imagination from the intellect.

First, imagination works with images that are derived from sensing. By 'imagining', Descartes means creating images before one's 'mind's eye' (or if you imagine a sound, your 'mind's ear' and so on). The wax example is meant to show that the intellect does not work in the same way – I understand the wax can have indefinitely many shapes, but I cannot run through all these shapes in my imagination (109). So my understanding of the wax, my idea of what the wax is, isn't derived from my imagination. The intellect grasps what something is without depending on images. For instance, I can have ideas of very complex objects, like a chiliagon – a mathematical figure with 1,000 sides – without being able to form images of them. And I can understand that this figure is different from a figure with 10,000 sides (a myriagon).

Second, this also brings to our attention that imagining requires effort (try imagining a figure with just 20 sides, let alone 1,000!).

Finally, Descartes argues that while the intellect is essential to what I am, imagination is not. In Meditation VI, he says we may say that when I turn my attention to my intellect, my mind turns towards itself and its ideas; when I think about my imagination, my mind turns towards my body and ideas derived from the senses.

### Imagination and dualism

Because imagination uses images derived from the senses, in Meditation II Descartes considers imagination along with sense perception as a possible objection to his

argument that the mind can exist without the body. But, as we saw above, he concludes that just having these images is a form of thought, and doesn't depend on the body. In Meditation VI, he goes further and says that he can conceive of himself as existing 'whole and entire' (157) without imagination or sense perception.

This is not to say that imagination and sense perception are not parts of the mind. They are; it is just that, unlike the intellect, they are not essential to the mind. Instead, Descartes argues that they result from the fusion of mind and body (discussed in the next section). The facts that the imagination, unlike the intellect, uses images that it has apparently derived from the senses, and the fact it requires effort, could both be explained if we have bodies, and the imagination is in some way dependent on the body.

## **THE DIFFERENT NATURES OF MIND AND BODY**

Descartes' insight into how minds and bodies are different still poses questions for philosophers today. Thoughts, in all of Descartes' varieties, are always 'about' or refer to something. For example, if I believe Paris is the capital of France, my belief is about Paris. Every desire is a desire for something, e.g. chocolate. Every decision is a decision to do something. The 'something' in each case is represented in the thought, and this representation is essential to the thought. But the states of physical things, such as chairs or trees, are never 'about' anything, they never represent something (unless we use them in this way). Physical states, such as an arrangement of certain molecules, just exist without reference to anything else. The states of your brain are just chemical states, like the states of a chair. How could they ever be about anything? So how could beliefs, desires, and so on be states of your brain?

Consciousness poses a similar problem. Visual perceptions look a certain way, you experience colour and shape; emotions feel a certain way, as do bodily sensations. There's nothing in what we know about the chemistry of the brain that would indicate these properties exist.