

Descartes: Second Meditation

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Summary

René Descartes (1596–1650)



- French philosopher, mathematician, physicist
- “The first modern philosopher”
- Mathematics: analytic geometry; optics; mechanics
- Studied at La Flèche (Jesuit college); degree in law.
- Met with some leading scientists of his age (e.g., Beeckman); interest in natural science.
- Lived in Holland in his later life.

René Descartes (1596–1650)



Works:

- *Principles of Philosophy*
- *Discourse on Method*, published together with the *Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*
- *The World*
- *Meditations on First Philosophy*
- Letters: he was in correspondence with all the leading intellectuals of seventeenth-century Europe (Beekman, Hobbes, Arnauld, Mersenne, etc.).

The New Sciences

Scientific Revolution



- Sixteenth–seventeenth century: “the age of reason”
- Copernicus (1473–1543), Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), Kepler (1571–1630), Newton (1642–1727).
- New method: empiricism, but also mathematization
- Physics, chemistry, anatomy becoming important

The *Meditations*

- Published in 1641
- Main aim: to provide a philosophical foundation for the new sciences:
 - Justification of the new scientific methods
 - Establishing the certainty of the new sciences
- **First Meditation**: opens with developing skeptical doubts about the possibility of knowledge. Skepticism is used here to establish **something that is infallible**, certain.

Foundationalism

The view according to which everything we know can be built up from some infallible groundwork. The aim of the foundationalist:

- 1 to find this groundwork;
- 2 to show how everything else can be built up from there.

The Second Meditation

Establishing 3 claims:

- 1 I exist.
- 2 I am a thinking thing.
- 3 Mind and body are different, and the mind is better known than the body.

Substance dualism

The position according to which there are two fundamental kinds of entities: the physical (body) and the mental (soul), and they have different kinds of properties (extension, and thinking, respectively).

1. I Exist

“But I have persuaded myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world: no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Is it then the case that I too do not exist? But doubtless I did exist, if I persuaded myself of something. But there is some deceiver or other who is supremely powerful and supremely sly and who is always deliberately deceiving me. Then too there is no doubt that I exist, if he is deceiving me. . . . Thus, after everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement ‘I am, I exist’ is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind.” (p.13)

1. I Exist

- **Background:** radical doubt of the First Meditation: we cannot trust our senses, we might be wrong about the existence of physical objects, we cannot know that our body exists (we might be in a constant dream).
- So let suppose that all I know is in fact false; that I am deceived by an evil demon all the time. **What I can still know: I exist.** This must be true even if I am deceived by an evil demon in everything else.
- In general, it follows from any state of thinking (imagining, sensing, feeling, reasoning) that I exist. — **“Cogito, ergo sum”** (= “I think therefore I am”).

1. I Exist

A few notes about the Cogito:

- Descartes: the 'cogito' is “the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way.” It is indeed indubitable: I simply cannot doubt it (whenever I am doubting, I am also thinking; which means that I must exist — otherwise would not be able to think.)
- The first-person formulation is essential: although I can be certain that *I am* thinking right now, I can never be certain that *you are* (or anyone else is) thinking right now.
- The present-tense formulation is also essential: I can be certain that I am thinking *right now*, but I can never be certain that I *was thinking yesterday* (or will be thinking tomorrow).
- It only works with “thinking” (broadly understood). With anything else, I can never be sure of the antecedent.
- It is not an *argument* strictly speaking; certain by intuition.

2. I am a Thinking Thing (Res Cogitans)

So, what am I?

“I am precisely nothing but a thinking thing; that is, a mind, or intellect, or understanding, or reason—words of whose meanings I was previously ignorant. Yet I am a true thing and I am truly existing; but what kind of thing? I have said it already: a thinking thing.” (p.15)

- I cannot be a body; it might be that my body does not exist.
- I can only be certain of my existence insofar as I am thinking. Thus, I must be a thinking thing (*res cogitans*).
- A thinking thing is something that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, imagines, senses.

3. Mind and Body are Distinct Things

- **“Clear and distinct” conception:** Descartes leaves it undefined; something like a mathematical proof, which forces the mind to accept it.

The Argument for Substance Dualism:

- P_1 Whatever I can imagine (clearly and distinctly conceive) is possible.
- P_2 I can imagine that my soul exists and my body does not.
- C_1 It is possible that my soul exists and my body does not.
- P_3 If a and b are identical, it is not possible that a exists and b does not.
- \therefore Therefore, my soul and my body are not identical.

Summary: Descartes's View

- Classical **substance dualist** view: there are 2 kinds of substances,
 - ① Mental: essentially thinking
 - ② Physical: essentially extended
- The mental and the physical can exist apart from each other
- The argument for the real distinction of the mental and physical rests on the conceivability-possibility principle
- We have more certainty about the existence of the mental than about the existence of the physical