Descartes’ rationalism

Descartes’ *Meditations* provide an extended study in establishing knowledge through rational intuition and deduction. We focus in this handout on three central claims: his arguments for the existence of the self, of God, and of physical objects. We will also consider his elaboration on the idea of rational intuition through his concept of ‘clear and distinct’ ideas.

**DESCARTES ON THE EXISTENCE (AND NATURE) OF SELF (MEDITATION II, PP. 3-6)**

At the end of *Meditation I*, Descartes supposes that he was being deceived by an evil demon. At the start of *Meditation II*, he argues that, even if the evil demon is deceiving him, ‘he will never bring it about that I am nothing while I think I am something’ (p. 4). Why not? He cannot doubt that he exists: if he were to doubt that he exists, that would prove he does exist - as something that thinks. So he knows that he exists. He can’t know that he exists as a body - his sense perception of his body, and of bodies in general, could be no more than a dream. But he cannot doubt that he thinks. The *cogito*, ‘I think’, is Descartes’ first stepping stone to knowledge.

Could he nevertheless be a body, without knowing it? Descartes can’t say, but at least his knowledge of what he is can’t depend on his being a body, since he knows he exists but not whether he has a body. What he is is a thinking thing, ‘a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wants, refuses, and also imagines and senses’ (p. 5). This provides further knowledge of the self. I know which type of thought I am engaging: 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.

The last activity Descartes lists is ‘senses’. But doesn’t sense perception involve having a body? So doesn’t the fact that I sense establish the existence of physical objects? No, because, Descartes notes, I have sensory experiences in my dreams as well, when I am not seeing or hearing at all. ‘Sensing’ is just sensory experiences. Understood like this, independent of their cause, these experiences are nothing more than a form of thinking, and so don’t depend on having a body.

**Do ‘I’ exist?**

What does it mean to say ‘I exist’ or ‘I think’? Descartes claims that ‘I’ am a thinking *thing*. I am the same thing from one thought to another. But can Descartes know this? The evil demon may deceive him: perhaps there is only a *succession of thoughts*, nothing that persists between thoughts which is a single thing.

Descartes’ response, in an appendix to the *Meditations* called ‘Objections and Replies’, is to say that thoughts logically require a thinker. Perhaps it is true that
there can’t be a thought unless something thinks it. But that doesn’t entail that the ‘thinker’ is a subject that persists from one thought to another. As soon as Descartes says that to be a thinker is to doubt, will, imagine, and so on, he assumes we can say these activities belong to the same subject, that he (the same thinker) does all this. But perhaps the evil demon is simply creating a series of false thoughts, among which is the thought that a thinker, a substance, an ‘I’, exists. Descartes’ claims about what he is could be false.

CLEAR AND DISTINCT IDEAS (MEDITATION III, PP. 9-10)

At the start of Meditation III, Descartes reflects on the cogito. He finds that his certainty in it rests on how the idea presents itself to his mind. So he argues (p. 9),

1. ‘In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting.’
2. If clarity and distinctness do not guarantee truth, then I cannot know that I exist.
3. I do know that I exist.
4. Therefore, ‘as a general rule... whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.’

This argument lays the foundations for Descartes’ theory of rational intuition. Descartes has defended the cogito as a claim he knows to be true just by thinking about it. What enables him to know it is that it is an idea that is ‘clear and distinct’.

What does this mean? Descartes doesn’t say in the Meditations, but gives this definition in his Principles of Philosophy (I. 45-46): an idea is clear ‘when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind - just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility.’ An idea is distinct if it is clear and ‘it is so sharply separated from all other ideas that every part of it is clear’. In the Meditations, again drawing on an analogy with vision, Descartes connects clear and distinct ideas to what he calls ‘the natural light’: ‘Things that are revealed by the natural light—for example, that if I am doubting then I exist—are not open to any doubt, because no other faculty that might show them to be false could be as trustworthy as the natural light.’ (p. 11) So, for Descartes, rational intuition is the ‘natural light’, our ability to know that clear and distinct ideas are true.

Our perception of physical objects isn’t, in fact, clear and distinct, though they can seem so (p. 10). On reflection, Descartes sees that what was clear was ‘merely the ideas’, i.e. the sensory experience, but not what causes it. Mathematical claims, such as ‘2 + 3 = 5’, remain clear and distinct, and Descartes cannot doubt them. Or rather, he can only doubt such a claim when he thinks not about the claim, but about the power of God (or an evil demon) to deceive him. So, at the time we consider it, a thought which is clear and distinct we must believe to be true. But in order to be sure, when we are not focusing of it, that the clear and distinct thought really is true, we need to know that we are not being deceived by God (or an evil demon). Descartes’ next task, therefore, is to show that we can know this.
DESCARTES ON THE EXISTENCE (AND NATURE) OF GOD (MEDITATION III, V)

Descartes provides two a priori arguments for the existence of God, his trademark argument and an ontological argument. Both arguments try to prove the existence of God from just the idea of God. Descartes begins by providing an analysis of his idea of God, claiming that it is an idea of a being that is, among other things, supremely powerful and supremely perfect. These claims are intended to be analytic, true in virtue of the concept of God.

Descartes needs to show not only that God exists, but also that God wouldn’t deceive us (nor allow an evil demon to deceive us).

1. God exists.
2. By definition, God is supremely perfect.
3. ‘The natural light makes it clear that all fraud and deception depend on some defect.’ (p. 17)
4. (By definition, something that is supremely perfect can have no defects.)
5. Therefore, it is not possible for God to deceive us.

By this, Descartes does not mean that we cannot make mistakes! He means that God ‘has given me the ability to correct any falsity there may be in my opinions’ (p. 30). We are assured that once we have done all we can to avoid error, and form beliefs on the basis of clear and distinct ideas, then we will not go wrong. But we are not assured of anything more than this.

Descartes doesn’t spell it out, but God’s existence is enough to rule out deception by an evil demon as well.

1. God is supremely powerful.
2. If God is supremely powerful, then an evil demon could only deceive us if God allowed it.
3. If an evil demon is deceiving me, then I have no way of correcting my false opinions.
4. If I have no way of correcting my false opinions, then God is a deceiver.
5. Therefore, if God permits an evil demon to deceive me, then God is a deceiver.
6. God is not a deceiver.
7. Therefore, God will not permit an evil demon to deceive me.

But can we know what God will or won’t do or allow? Descartes allows that we cannot know God’s purposes (p. 19), but we don’t need to. If we have no way of correcting our false beliefs, this would frustrate what we are, viz. rational minds seeking the truth using clear and distinct ideas. We don’t need to know what God’s purposes are in order to know that this would amount to God being a deceiver, which is contradictory to being supremely perfect.

At the very end of the Meditations, Descartes also uses God’s not being a deceiver to solve the objection that he may be dreaming. He accepts that we can tell the different between dreaming and being awake, because memory connects up perceptions coherently, but not dreams; and because we can confirm our perceptions using different senses (p. 34). This response is only available now (and
not in *Meditation I*) because God is not a deceiver. Without that, we couldn’t rely on memory in this way.

**DESCARTES ON THE EXISTENCE OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD (MEDITATION VI)**

If perception doesn’t show that physical objects exist, e.g. if we don’t perceive physical objects immediately, then in order to prove they exist, we need to undertake a number of preliminary steps.

1. We need to understand our *concept* of a physical object – what is it that we are think exists?
2. We need to show that this is a *coherent* concept, not something self-contradictory (like the concept of a round square).
3. We need to show that it is *possible* that physical objects exist.

With all that in place, we can make then argue that

4. Physical objects do, in fact, exist, and we can know this.

Descartes’ argument for (3) is this:

1. I have a clear and distinct of what a physical object is.
2. (God exists and is supremely powerful.)
3. The only reason for thinking that God cannot make something is that the concept of it is contradictory.
4. Therefore, God can make physical objects.
5. Therefore, it is possible that physical objects exists.

To prove (4), Descartes first considers two arguments that aim to show that the existence of the external world is the best hypothesis. But he is dissatisfied that neither of them give us certainty, which he thinks is necessary for knowledge.

The first argument is from imagination (p. 27). He begins by showing that the faculty of imagination is different from the faculty of understanding.

1. The imagination uses images, e.g. imagining a triangle. But the understanding does not. When working mathematically with a chiliagon – a two-dimensional figure with 1000 sides - we cannot imagine the figure.
2. Imagining takes more effort than understanding.
3. Therefore, imagination and understanding are different.
4. Imagination is not essential to me, while understanding is. I cannot be me (a thinking thing) without understanding, but I can be me without imagination.
5. The best explanation for all these differences is that imagination depends upon having a body. Imagination draws its ideas from the body, making its ideas sensory images and difficult to work with, and making imagination not essential to a thinking thing. Being purely mental, understanding draws its ideas from itself, making them non-imagistic and easy to work with, and is essential to a thinking thing.
6. Therefore, it is probable that the body exists.
It is, however, only probable, so doesn’t give us knowledge of the existence of physical objects.

The second argument is from perception (p. 28). It is natural to think that we know that physical objects exist because we perceive them. Our perceptions are both involuntary and ‘much more lively and vivid’ than imagination or memory. One explanation is that they are caused by physical objects that exist independent of our minds. But Descartes reminds us that the mere fact that perceptual experiences are vivid and involuntary isn’t enough to show that they are caused by mind-independent physical objects.

It does, however, provide the starting point for his next argument (p. 30). I have added in missing premises in brackets, some of which Descartes assumes because he has argued for them previously.

1. I have involuntary perceptual experiences of physical objects.
2. (These experiences are caused by some substance.)
3. If the cause of my perceptual experiences is my own mind, my perceptual experiences are voluntary.
4. Because I know my mind, I would know if my perceptual experiences are voluntary.
5. Therefore, because I know that my perceptual experiences are involuntary, I know that the cause of my perceptual experiences is not my own mind.
6. Therefore, the cause must be some substance outside me – either God or physical objects.
7. If the cause is God, then God has created me with a very strong tendency to have a false belief (that physical objects exist) that I cannot correct.
8. If God has created me with such a tendency, then God is a deceiver.
9. (God is perfect by definition.)
10. (Therefore,) God is not a deceiver.
11. (Therefore, God did not create me with a tendency to have false beliefs that I cannot correct.)
12. (Therefore, if God exists, I do not have such a tendency.)
13. Therefore, if God exists, the cause of my perceptual experiences of physical objects are physical objects.
14. (God exists.)
15. Therefore, there is an external world of physical objects that causes our perceptual experiences.

This argument is one of the best examples of the use of rational intuition and deduction. It is surprising to think that we cannot know from sense experience that physical objects exist. It is even more surprising to be told that we can nevertheless know that physical objects exist using a priori reasoning.

**DOES DESCARTES KNOW WHAT HE CLAIMS TO KNOW?**

If Descartes’ deductions of the existence of himself, God and physical objects fail, then he hasn’t shown that we have knowledge through a priori reasoning.
An empiricist might grant that Descartes can know that he exists, but it does not count as synthetic a priori knowledge. The reason is because it derives from our experience of ourselves. Thus I know I exist because I experience myself, not because of anything about ‘clear and distinct’ ideas being certainly true.

Objections to Descartes’ arguments for the existence of God are discussed in the handouts on ‘Descartes’ trademark argument’ and ‘Descartes’ ontological argument’.

Descartes’ argument for the existence of physical objects depends on his arguments for the existence of God. If these fail, then he hasn’t shown that physical objects exist.

The Cartesian circle

It is worth evaluating Descartes’ use of clear and distinct ideas, as this is his account of rational intuition itself. An objection called ‘the Cartesian circle’ argues Descartes cannot establish that clear and distinct ideas guarantee truth.

In Meditation III (p. 10), Descartes says that he is certain of his clear and distinct ideas when he considers them. But when he turns away from the idea itself to consider the power of God to deceive him, he can doubt that it (or any clear and distinct idea) is certain. Now, when trying to prove the existence of God, Descartes relies on what he can clearly and distinctly perceive, because this is the only way he can know anything. But given his own admission, it seems that Descartes needs to prove that God exists before he can claim to know what he clearly and distinctly perceives. It seems that he says

1. I am certain that God exists only because I am certain of whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive; and yet
2. I am certain of whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive only because I am certain that God exists.

But this is circular. Descartes cannot rely on clear and distinct ideas before proving God exists, but he cannot prove that God exists without relying on clear and distinct ideas. So he is stuck – he cannot take clear and distinct ideas to guarantee truth.

But perhaps the objection misinterprets Descartes. I can be certain of what I clearly and distinctly perceive without knowing that God exists, but only at the time that I focus on that specific thought. In other words, while I am clearly and distinctly perceiving some particular proposition, then I can be certain of that proposition. But when I turn my attention away from it, I no longer perceive it clearly and distinctly, I only remember that I did so. And this is no guarantee of truth. However, once he has shown that God exists, Descartes claims, he can know the general principle that whatever is clear and distinct is true. He doesn’t need to focus on a particular clear and distinct idea to know it is true; he can know it is true by knowing that it is clear and distinct.

But is Descartes entitled to claim that he can be certain of what he clearly and distinctly perceives, even at the time he perceives it, while it is still possible that
he is being deceived by God (or an evil demon)? He can respond that God (or the
demon) cannot bring about anything ‘in which I see a plain contradiction’ (p. 10),
and to deny a clear and distinct idea (e.g. to say that 2 + 3 does not equal 5) is a
contradiction.

The best interpretation of this is that clear and distinct ideas are necessarily true,
at least at the time when one thinks them. Empiricists can then argue that they
are necessarily true either because they are analytically true or because thinking
them, e.g. ‘I think’, is what makes them true. There is still no rational intuition of
synthetic a priori claims.