

Meditation III, cont.

Review: What are the Sources of our Ideas?



So far, we've only established that we have an immaterial mind, and that we have ideas.



Where do these ideas come from? If we can establish that the origin of these ideas is from outside of our minds, then we will be certain that something other than our own minds exist.



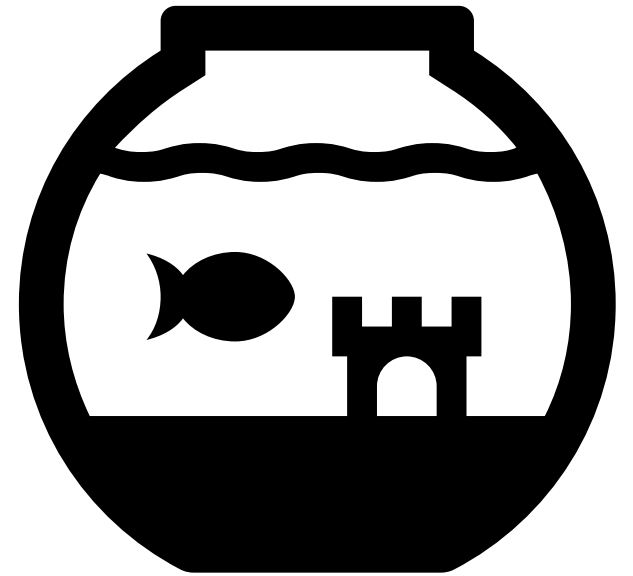
With respect to objects we see (books, trees, etc.) our common sense view is that our perceptions/ideas must come from material objects (i.e. actual books, trees, etc.) that themselves resemble our ideas.



However, this common sense view turns out to be a "blind impulse" rather than something we are certain about.

Solipsism

- ▶ A potential danger lurking here is *solipsism*, the view that only one's own mind and its ideas exist as nothing else is verifiable.
- ▶ “So the solipsist can at least invent an imaginary friend and have pretend debates about solipsism.” - Roy Sorenson (2001, 129).



Examining our ideas

- ▶ Descartes continues his examination of his ideas to see if he can find an idea that has to have come from outside his own mind.

Objective vs. Formal Reality

- ▶ To understand what Descartes is saying here it may be helpful to first ignore what you may have heard about “subjective” vs. “objective” reality.
- ▶ First of all, this supposed distinction isn’t very helpful (as it might cover over some problems, metaphysical or otherwise).
- ▶ Second, Descartes is going to use the term “objective reality” probably more in the sense that some people commonly use the term “subjective reality.”

“Formal reality”

Formal reality roughly means “actual reality.” That is, the reality a thing possess by nature of what it is.

Formal reality comes in degrees:

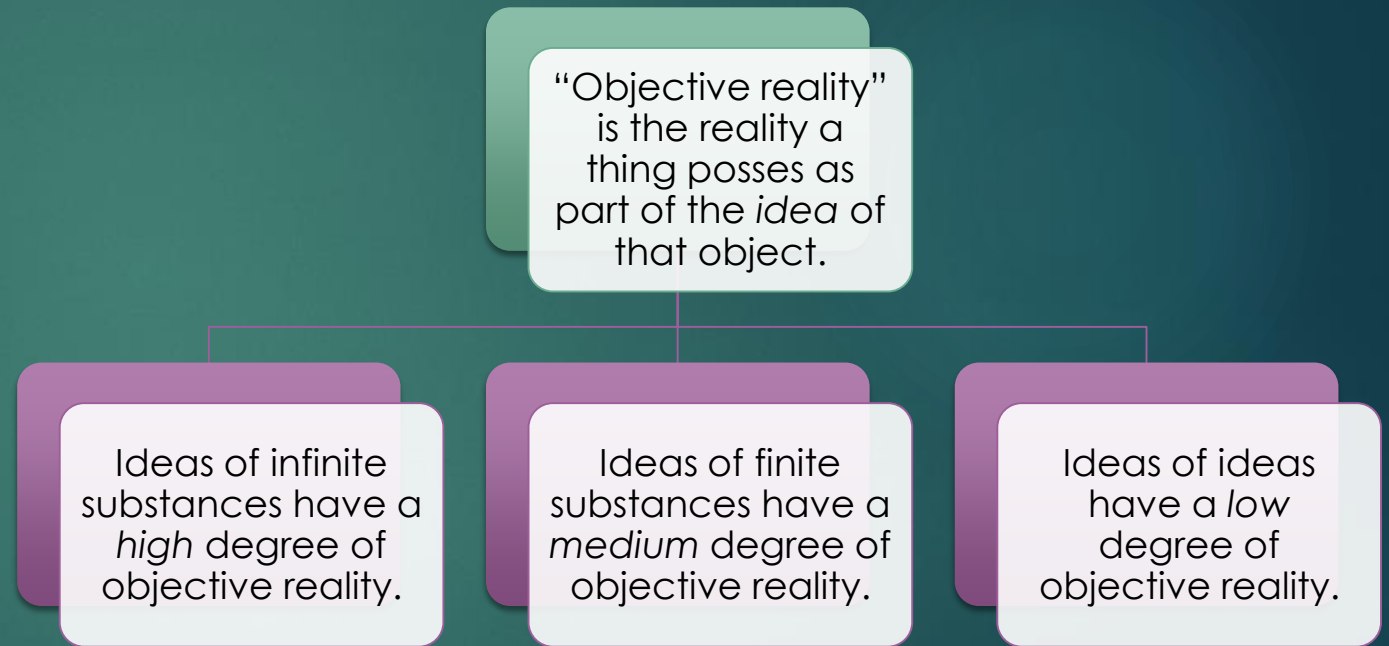
Infinite substances have a *high* degree of formal reality

Finite substances have *medium* degree of formal reality

Ideas are “modifications” of substances, and therefore have a *low* degree of formal reality

With respect to formal reality, it doesn't matter what the idea is of. Only focusing on the idea *as an idea*, it is “less real” than the thing which has or poseses the idea.

“Objective reality”



“There must be at least as much reality in the cause as in the effect”

- ▶ “So it is clear to me, by the natural light, that the ideas in me are like images which can easily fall short of the perfection of the things from which they are taken, but which cannot contain anything greater or more perfect” (34).
- ▶ As a finite substance (i.e. a finite mind), therefore, I could be the source of ideas of other finite substances, or of ideas of ideas.

The Idea of God

“So there remains only the idea of God; and I must consider whether there is anything in the idea which could not have originated in myself.”

This idea, for Descartes, is of an *infinite substance*.

Therefore, it couldn't have come from Descartes' own mind, which is a finite substance.

So where is the only possible place it could have come from?

Descartes argues that it is “utterly clear and distinct” that the only possible source of this idea is an actually exist infinite substance, i.e. God.

The “Dependency argument”

- ▶ Furthermore, Descartes argues (at 39), that as a finite substance, he cannot keep himself in existence.
- ▶ If his own existence depended on his continued thought, he obviously doesn't think about himself all the time, and therefore he would go out of existence when he no longer had the idea of his own finite substance.
- ▶ As a finite substance, therefore, he is dependent on an *infinite* substance for his own existence.

Where did this idea of God come from?

Descartes argues that his idea of God must have come from God, but how did he acquire this idea?



This idea is *innate*, “the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work” (41).

The “Great Deceiver” argument is resolved

- ▶ “The whole force of the argument lies in this: I recognize that it would be impossible for me to exist with the kind of nature I have— that is, having within me the idea of God— were it not the case that God really existed. By ‘God’ I mean the very being the idea of whom is within me, that is, the possessor of all of the perfections which I cannot grasp, but can somehow reach in my thought, which is subject to no defects whatsoever. It is clear from this that he cannot be a deceiver, since it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend on some defect.” (41).
- ▶ With this argument out of the way, the *a priori* is restored, as we can now trust the “the natural light” regarding math, logic, etc.— these perceptions are clear and distinct.
- ▶ However, our perception of material substance *isn't* clear and distinct, so we'll have to wait and see what (if anything) we can do about that.

Objection: We have no such idea of an infinite substance

- ▶ Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) objects in the fifth objections: “The human intellect is not capable of conceiving infinity, and hence it neither has nor can contemplate any idea representing an infinite thing.” (100, CSM 200)
- ▶ Descartes says, in his reply, that we do have an idea of the infinite, however it is “suited to the scale of our intellect,” i.e. it is not a “fully adequate conception.” (100, CSM 252).

Do we have an idea of the infinite?



Consider an infinite number, for example \aleph_0 (which is the cardinality of all of the natural numbers.)

Do I really have an *idea* of what \aleph_0 is?

I don't think so— I think I have an idea of a description of a procedure that generates a particular set, i.e.

$\{0, 1, 2 \dots\}$

But do I *really* have an idea that corresponds with the “cardinality of the following set: $\{0, 1, 2 \dots\}$ ”?