

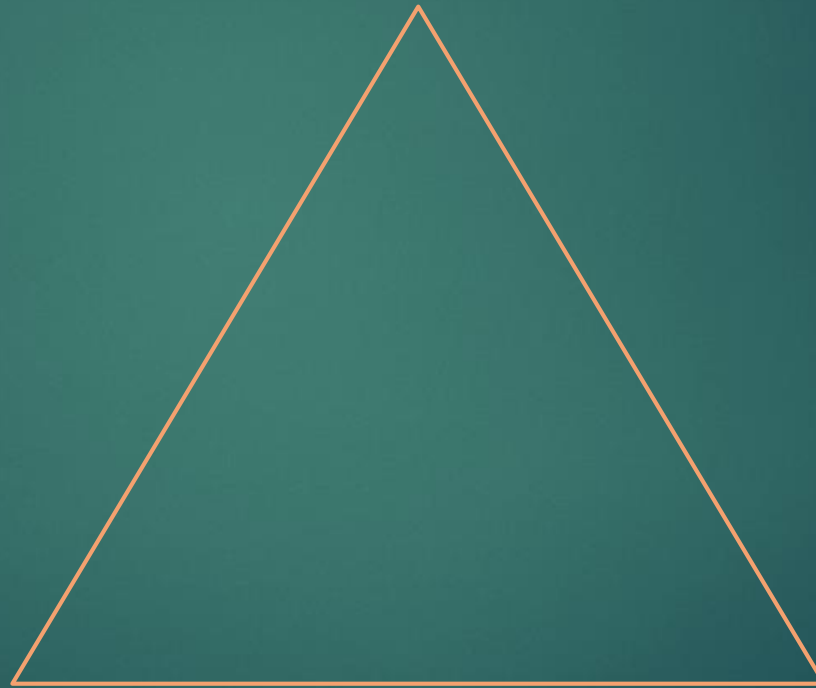


# Meditation VI

DO MATERIAL THINGS EXIST?

# Imagination vs. Understanding

Here is a triangle:



# Imagination

- ▶ Now imagine a triangle.
- ▶ Now, Descartes, says, imagine a 1000-sided polygon (a *chiliagon*).
- ▶ Well, we can't do that. The closest we can come to this is probably imagining a circle:



# Understanding

However, we can *understand* what a 1000-sided polygon is just as well as we can understand what a 3-sided polygon is.

# Understanding

- ▶ So is this *really* a triangle?



- ▶ Well, actually, not really! For one thing, the lines here aren't proper geometric lines, as they have a width. Second, what we are looking at here actually probably has *thousands* of sides because of the way pixels work (and further, these "sides" are discontinuous).
- ▶ In this way, it looks like you can *only* understand a triangle (i.e. "a triangle is a polygon with three sides and three vertices"), you can't really imagine one at all!

# Imagination vs. Understanding



So, for Descartes, understanding is necessary for the mind; imagination is not.



Notice that non-sighted people have a different (but, it turns out, not completely different!) concept of imaging the world around them altogether.



Hmm ... what do we think about this? Can the understanding function without *any* images/perception of the world?

# The Imagination

So the imagination isn't a "necessary constituent of my own existence" (58), and I would be, according to Descartes, fundamentally the same person as I am without it (i.e. a mind that has understanding).

The imagination then, could possibly belong not fundamentally to the mind, but rather to the *body*. Or perhaps it is the body *which makes possible* the ability to imagine/have perceptions.

The perceptive faculty then is turned "out towards the world" whereas the understanding is turned "in toward the mind."

# Material Objects

So, given that the most likely explanation of the perceptive faculty is that the body makes these possible, Descartes at this stage say that "I can make a probable conjecture that the body exists." (58).

Of course, when it comes to what the body might perceive, we discovered that we must proceed with caution, but:

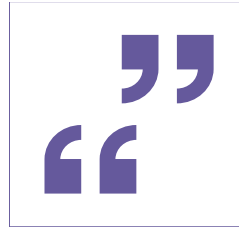
"when I am beginning to achieve a better knowledge of myself and the author of my being, although I do not think I should heedlessly accept everything I seem to have acquired from the senses, neither do I think that everything should be called into doubt." (61)



# Material Objects, cont.



We return to the question of the sources of ideas.



What are the sources of our ideas about material objects? We said before (Mediation III) that we could have made them up ourselves, or that they could come from God directly (i.e. God just puts the ideas of material objects in our minds).



However:

“God has given me no faculty at all for recognizing any such source for these ideas; on the contrary, he has given me a great propensity to believe that they are produced by corporeal things. It follows that corporeal things exist.” (63).

# Material Objects, cont.

- ▶ So material objects themselves must be the source of my ideas about material objects. *But ...*
- ▶ “They may not all exist in a way that exactly corresponds with my sensory grasp of them, for in many cases the grasp of the senses is very obscure and confused.” (63)
- ▶ So we *cannot* take our sense data at “face value”. For example, the world described by science (i.e. the universe is mostly “empty space”!) *looks very different* than our common sense reality.

# The New Science

- ▶ It looks like it is difficult or impossible to be *certain* about anything that relies on sense data (i.e. any studied by empirical science) except those matters that involve “the subject-matter of pure mathematics.”
- ▶ For example, we might never be completely certain what gravity is exactly, but we can be certain about things like “9.8 meters\* per second per second.”
- ▶ Descartes himself holds out hope, however that we can perhaps “attain the truth even in these matters,” although there is a “high degree of doubt and uncertainty” (63).

\* Small problem- terms like “meters” are defined by reference to empirical observations.  
Uh oh!

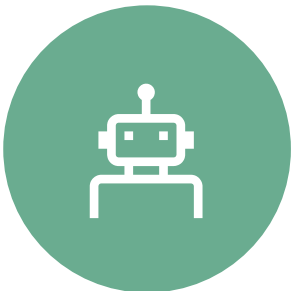
# Mind and Body



Descartes not only has a *substance dualism*, but he is a dualist about mind and body– these are separate things.



However, Descartes does *not* have the view that the body is just a “shell” for the soul.



We know this because sensations like pain, thirst, etc. are *felt* and not just understood (i.e. it is not like we are flying an airplane and the “low fuel” light comes on when we are hungry!)



Our bodies sometimes give us incorrect information, however, even though the mind and body is so closely “intertwined.” This can be put down to the nature of the body itself (our nervous system can be damaged, for example).

# The Dream Argument is Dismissed

- ▶ “Accordingly, I should not have any further fears about the falsity of what my senses tell me every day; on the contrary, the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable ... I now notice there is a vast difference between [being awake and dreaming], in that dreams are never linked by memory with all the other actions of life as waking experiences are.” (70).
- ▶ So, we can be sure, if we are carefully, that the senses are generally reliable—but we must in certain cases carefully check our sense data, and we also cannot go *beyond* what the senses tell us.
- ▶ Furthermore, since we don't always have time to “stop and make such a meticulous check is must be admitted that in this human life we are often liable to make mistakes about particular things, and we must acknowledge the weakness of our nature.” (71).

# The Meditations: There and Back Again



So we've arrived at the end of the Meditations.



Descartes has gone on a journey, starting from taking the senses as the foundation of all ideas, and eventually, after much work, getting back to accepting that material objects exist and that the senses are generally reliable.



Along the way, Descartes retreated into his own mind to find something he could be certain of, what he is fundamentally (a thinking mind), what he can be certain of, how he can be sure that there is something else outside of his own mind, how to proceed in making judgments about the world outside his mind, and finally that there must indeed be material objects.



But ... what is Descartes only succeeded in convincing us to retreat back into the mind, but then gets stuck there? Then what? This sets up perhaps the fundamental problem for modern philosophy: what is the relationship between our minds, where we experience the world, and the world itself?