

# **Challenging Descartes' Distinction of Intellect and Imagination**

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René Descartes, throughout his *Meditations*, attempts to establish a foundation for certain knowledge. In the process of uncovering which of his beliefs are indubitable, Descartes makes the claim that the intellect is distinct from the imagination. Descartes provides two examples central to proving this claim. In the Second Meditation, through his discussion of a piece of wax, Descartes argues that his perception of material bodies is purely a function of the intellect, rather than that of imagination, introducing a distinction between intellect and imagination. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes introduces the concept of a chiliagon, a 1000 sided object, in order to illustrate the intellect's ability to grasp concepts which the imagination is unable to, furthering the claim that the intellect is distinct from the imagination. In the first six sections of this paper, numbered below, I will analyze Descartes' case for an intellect distinct from our powers of imagination. I will argue that although the intellect does indeed have greater capacity for understanding than that of the imagination, they are not distinct because the intellect is reliant on the imagination throughout the early stages of forming understandings. In the last section, I will address a number of issues which arise when examining Descartes' case for an intellect distinct from imagination.

## **1. The Wax Discussion**

In the Second Meditation, Descartes takes a brief break from his extreme skepticism. He sits next to a fireplace, examining a piece of wax as he holds it in his hands. Descartes, in the search of certain truth, first "consider[s] the things which people most commonly think they understand most distinctly at all; that is, the bodies which we touch and see" (Descartes, 84). He observes the wax's shape, taste, and texture, attempting to grasp its essence through sensory

qualities. However, as he exposes the wax to the heat of the fire the wax begins to melt, and the shape, taste, and texture Descartes had previously observed all change. Descartes realizes that his sensory-based definition is inaccurate in describing the true essence of the wax. Descartes, attempting to discover what he truly understands about the wax, removes all sensory attributes from his description of it, concluding that the wax is “merely something extended, flexible, and changeable” (Descartes, 84). Descartes then acknowledges that this single piece of wax can take up an infinite number of extended, flexed, changed forms. He then acknowledges that while he can imagine, in his mind’s eye, various forms the wax may take, he cannot imagine every possible form the wax may take. This realization leads Descartes to the conclusion that only the intellect, not the senses or imagination, can truly perceive and understand the nature of the wax. Because the intellect can grasp the essence of the wax in its entirety, but imagination cannot, Descartes argues, our intellect is a distinct entity from our imagination.

## **2. An Objection to the Wax Discussion**

Descartes claims that the intellect can understand the essence of the wax in its entirety, while the imagination cannot because it cannot produce every possible form the wax may take. Descartes argues that due to this difference in capacity, the intellect and the imagination must be distinct from one another. I believe that these claims oversimplify the relationship between imagination and intellect. Descartes’ claim that the intellect alone perceives the essence of the wax (its extension, flexibility and changeability), raises the question of how the intellect perceives such abstract concepts without the aid of sensory or imaginative experience. My objection to Descartes' discussion of the wax is that the intellect’s understanding of descriptive concepts such as extension, flexibility and changeability must be grounded in imaginative exercises. When stripping the intellect of any imagistic faculties, the qualities which Descartes

states define the essence of the wax (extended, flexible, changeable) cannot be understood. It is impossible to contemplate, understand, or even discuss descriptive concepts without simply referencing objects which those concepts describe, or referencing other synonymical descriptive concepts. Even if the imagination fails to properly perceive the essence of the wax, the imagination is necessary in understanding and defining extension, flexibility, and changeability. The imaginative faculty, even if not exhaustive in its perception of the wax, aids in forming the concepts of extension, flexibility, and changeability, suggesting that imagination and intellect are not entirely separate faculties, but rather rely on one another to achieve understanding.

### **3. A Response to My Objection on Behalf of Descartes**

Descartes claims that because the intellect can grasp the essence of the wax to a greater extent than the imagination can, the intellect is distinct from the imagination. My objection to this claim, detailed in the previous section, argues that the intellect relies on imagination in order to grasp general descriptive concepts such as those which define the essence of the wax. In response to my objection, a loyal supporter of Descartes could introduce Descartes Theory of Innate Ideas. In this case, our understanding of extension, flexibility, and changeability can indeed be produced without imaginative faculties, because they are all innate ideas, parts of the ‘hardware’ of our mind. If this were the case, the intellect could indeed conjure up a full understanding of the wax on its own, using its own non-imaginative, innate, intellectual understanding of extension, flexibility, and changeability. This scenario would indeed deem the intellect distinct from the imagination.

### **4. The Chiliagon Discussion**

In the Sixth Meditation, to further clarify the distinction between intellect and imagination, Descartes introduces the chiliagon, a polygon composed of 1000 sides. In order to

illustrate his clear understanding of it, Descartes compares a chiliagon to a triangle. Descartes presents his understanding of a chiliagon as a polygon composed of 1000 sides, which he claims is just as clear as his understanding of a triangle as a polygon composed of three sides. Descartes explains that he could create mathematical proofs about the chiliagon in order to deepen his understanding of it, just as he could with the triangle. Descartes then contrasts the chiliagon from the triangle in order to expose the shortcomings of his imagination. Descartes explains that although he can clearly picture a triangle in his mind's eye, he is unable to do the same with a chiliagon. While he can comprehend the existence of the chiliagon intellectually, his imagination fails to produce a vivid representation of it. The same, vague shape appears when attempting to imagine a 1000 sided shape or a 10000 sided shape, Descartes explains. The chiliagon thus serves as proof of the mind's capacity to understand concepts that stretch beyond the imaginative faculty's scope. This leads Descartes to affirm the existence of the intellect distinct from the powers of imagination.

## **5. An Objection to the Chiliagon Discussion**

Descartes argues that because the chiliagon may be clearly understood, but not clearly imagined, the intellect must exist distinctly from the imagination. My objection is that the inability to imagine the chiliagon does not necessarily imply a complete separation of intellect from imagination. Rather, the varying capacities of the intellect and the imagination indicate a scenario where imagination provides the intellect with the basic foundation to build an understanding of the chiliagon. Let us examine Descartes' claims of the intellect's capabilities if the intellect were to be truly stripped of all imaginative faculties. Descartes states that he understands the chiliagon because he knows it is a 1000 sided shape. This would require an understanding of the concept of a side, or more specifically, a line. To understand the general

concept of a line, one must, at minimum, reference the descriptive qualities of length and width. The descriptive qualities of length and width arguably differ from previously discussed descriptive concepts because they are quantifiable. However, even if one is to reference quantifiable units of measure in order to claim a non-imaginative understanding of length and width, the understanding of the descriptive concept of extension is still of necessity. The understanding of the line therefore requires the same imaginative faculty as the understanding of the wax. We could even examine Descartes' claim that writing mathematical proofs about the chiliagon would deepen his understanding of it. Any mathematical proof about the chiliagon would rely upon the same basic building blocks, such as the general concept of a line or an angle (which simply consists of the convergence of two lines). These proofs therefore require the understanding of the concept of the line, and therefore extension, which I have previously shown requires imaginative faculties. Descartes' chiliagon discussion fails to prove an intellect distinct from imagination, because it does not acknowledge the way the imagination helps the intellect form an understanding of the chiliagon.

## **6. A Response to my Objection on Behalf of Descartes**

Descartes claims that because the intellect can grasp the essence of the chiliagon, but the imagination cannot, the intellect is distinct from the imagination. My objection to this claim, detailed in the previous section, states that the intellect relies on the imagination for the foundation of its understanding of the chiliagon. In response to my objection, a loyal supporter of Descartes may reintroduce Descartes' Theory of Innate Ideas. In this case, the loyal supporter will claim that our understandings of quantifiable, descriptive qualities, such as length or width, exist independently of imagination, because these qualities are innate ideas. If this were the case,

the intellect could indeed conjure up a full understanding of the chiliagon on its own, once again proving that the intellect is a distinct entity from the imagination.

## **7. My Final Adjudication / The Problems Inherent to The Intellect/Imagination**

### **Distinction Debate**

In this paper Descartes' claim that there exists an intellect separate from the powers of imagination was not indefinitely proven nor disproven. The process of debating Descartes' claim is ridden with difficulties. I do believe I have provided meaningful objections to the Wax and the chiliagon examples; qualities inherent to physical properties are meaningless without some sort of imaginative process. I therefore believe that our intellect and our imaginations are not distinct, they are intertwined and rely on one another in order to create our understanding of the world around us. A key difficulty in this debate arises when considering Descartes' Theory of Innate Ideas as a response to my objections. In order to be satisfied with this response, I want to know how these innate concepts, such as extension, flexibility, and changeability manifest themselves any differently from imaginative constructs. However, if these ideas are indeed innate, it is impossible to differentiate the process of 'understanding' them intellectually from the process of 'imagining' them imaginatively. This leads us to the fundamental problem with the intellect/imagination distinction debate. We, as human beings, cannot step away from our own cognitive framework, which inherently employs both imagination and intellect. Our understanding of the world is inextricably linked to both faculties, making it difficult to discern the unique contributions of intellect and imagination. Debating Descartes' claim that there exists an intellect separate from the powers of imagination is problematic because we as human beings cannot discern understandings rooted in intellect from understandings rooted in imagination.

