Suyi Liu

Paper 1

History of Modern Philosophy

2/27/17

Essay on Descartes’s *Second Meditation*

On his *First Meditation*, Descartes exemplifies himself as a methodological skeptic by first putting all his opinions in doubt, thus setting a secured foundation for him to build knowledge that is certain and distinct on later. He used the “dream argument” and “evil demon” argument to further suggest that even a simple and ordinary observation should be cast in doubt since we cannot exclude the possibility of being deceived by a powerful evil genius in the worst case.

In the Second Meditation, he claims nothing is easier for him to know than his own mind as his conclusion. What he implies in this meditation is that the only thing that he knows for certain is his existence as merely thinking thing(he for sure exists, and the nature of him is his thought, which cannot be separated from him), and he admits that his mind is known to himself evidently, since even if the wax he sees is not true, or even if he has errors in his judgement, he “cannot perceive it thus without a human mind”[[1]](#footnote-1). And, importantly, knowledge come from intellect, that is, from paying attention closely and inspect through pure judgement instead of through senses or imagination.

In order to reach this claim, Descartes first arrives at the conclusion that he exists. At the very beginning of the meditation, he reinforces the notion from his First Meditation that he keeps skeptical about what he sees and there’s no certainty in all he knows. He will “accomplish this by putting aside everything that admits of the least doubt, as if I had discovered it to be completely false. I will stay on this course until I know something certain”[[2]](#footnote-2) Which means as long as anything is not perfectly certain, he casts it in doubt to prevent falsehood. He then claims he can be absolutely certain that he exists. Specifically, even in the case of evil demon manipulation, “let him do his best at deception; he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something”[[3]](#footnote-3). Since no matter he is deceived or not, he thinks himself as something.

Under this idea of his existence, Descartes further digs into the question of what he actually is. He first speculates that he has a body, capable of, for example, “taking food”, “walking about”, “capable of being bounded by some shape”, or “being perceived by touch, sight hearing taste or smell”[[4]](#footnote-4). However, he bounces back to not knowing at least any measure the nature of his body by reintroducing his “doubt” again. In the case where there exists a “malicious deceiver who deliberately tries to fool him in any way he can”, it is not impossible that he does not have a body at all, and thus sensing and what he ascribed as soul subsequently do not exist. So it follows that only his thought exists for certain. His thought exists as long as he is thinking. And he reflects that he must be careful as digging into the nature of himself since none of the imagination ---- mental images can help him grasp the knowledge of himself. He later uses wax example to conclude that knowledge come from pure judgement instead of senses and imagination, and moreover, nothing is better known than mind, which will all be discussed in my later paragraphs.

His claim paves the way of what he thinks as the real distinction between the non-extendable rational mind and extendable body later in his *Sixth Meditation*. And the idea of understanding through pure judgement also sets the foundation for his discussions in further meditations, which is, the knowledge of the external world depends on inference from his fundamental knowledge.

However, Descartes expects his readers to find his view very implausible because our sensual perception and imagination is what comes first and most easily when we are trying to perceive something. And in Aristotle’s view, knowledge come from senses, so that readers might not get used to this new idea. Descartes explains to this that, indeed, it is the same “I” doubts, and understands, as the “I” who sees light, feels heat, hears noise and imagines. But to him, these sensings are actually nothing other than thinking. So readers may resist to not believe the more obvious “corporeal things”, who has images pictured, but to understand that mysterious mind without images. And he himself also felt that “And yet it would be strange indeed were I to grasp the very things I consider to be doubtful, unknown, and foreign to me more distinctly than what is true, what is known – than, in short, myself”[[5]](#footnote-5), implying that he also finds doubtful things obvious to grasp when trying to understand some body.

Under this consideration, Descartes uses the wax taken recently from the honeycomb as example to convince readers that true understanding of things doesn’t come through senses or imagination, but rather through pure judgements in mind. He first uses senses to perceive the wax as distinctly as possible: It has honey flavor, hard and cold and easy to touch and with a sound if “rap on it with your knuckle”[[6]](#footnote-6). But as he places the wax close to fire, those attributes start to change: it becomes liquid, and becomes hot and soft. However, it is still the same wax. So Descartes concludes here that aspects reached through senses (such as taste, smell, shape, touch) cannot truly represent what the wax actually is. Further, he undermines the means of knowing what the wax truly is through imagination by first speculating that the wax “was a body that a short time ago manifested itself to me in these ways, and now does so in other ways”[[7]](#footnote-7), and his imagination shows him the wax is flexible and mutable, changing from one shape to another, then overthrowing such speculation. He points out that he is incapable of imagining more changes of different sorts or in dimensions of extensions of such wax than the wax can possibly take on. So he then draws the conclusion that he perceives the wax through the mind alone, getting rid of seeing, touching or imagination.

He later on reflects on how prone his mind is to errors. He took observing men crossing the square from looking out of his window as an example. He might still think them to be men, even though those “men” could actually be automata concealed under hats and clothes. Therefore, he indicates that senses and imagination can render confusing meanings. But even if there is still an error in his judgement, nevertheless, he “cannot perceive it without a human mind”[[8]](#footnote-8) because pure judgement helps him to strip “external clothing” of things and offer real knowledge. On the basis of this conclusion, he finally returns to the discussion of what himself is. He talked about three cases: if he judges the existence of wax from the fact of seeing it, it arrives at the conclusion that he exists, from the fact that no matter the wax is true or not, or he doesn’t have eyes at all, he thinks he sees. Same logic applies to the case in which he judges wax’s existence by touching or imagination. After all, he can get wrong of what things are, but it cannot be wrong about what things appears to be to him. So he further affirms that he is distinctly known to himself, and that “there is not a single consideration that can aid in my perception of the wax of any other body that fails to make even more manifest the nature of my mind”[[9]](#footnote-9). All means that helps him perceives the wax leads to the proof that his thinking exists. At this point, he is certain about the existence of his mind, and finally he arrives at the conclusion of his *Second Meditation* that body cannot be perceived through senses or imaginations, but only through pure intellect, and nothing can be perceived more evidently than his mind. [[10]](#footnote-10)

Descartes brings the epistemological questions to the center stage, and sets agenda for modern philosophy. However, through his *Second Meditation* Descartes shows a tendency to infer everything about the external world from his epistemic knowledge. This suggests to us his limitation in the way of understanding what the world is. It is clear that he is certain of the existence of his mind, but he depends too much on the mind as the perfect guide of knowing the world.

Works Cited

1. Roger Ariew, Eric Watkins, Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd Edition, Hackett Publishing Company, *Meditation Two: Concerning the Nature of the Human Mind: That It Is Better Known Than the Body,* 43-47

1. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Descartes’s *Second Meditation, page 46* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Descartes’s *Second Meditation, page 46, bottom left* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Descartes’s *Second Meditation, page 43, bottom right* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Descartes’s *Second Meditation, page 44, bottom left* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Descartes’s *Second Meditation, page 45, top right* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Descartes’s *Second Meditation, page 45, bottom right* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Descartes’s *Second Meditation, page 45, top left* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Descartes’s *Second Meditation, page 46, bottom right* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Descartes’s *Second Meditation, page 47* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Descartes’s *Second Meditation, page 47, last paragraph* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)