

Descartes's wax has properties that can be perceived by his senses, such as color, shape and size. However, these properties of the wax can be changed and we judge it to be the same wax. Such properties are not **essential**. Descartes proposes that flexibility, extension, and the ability to change shape are properties that are essential to the wax. If any of these properties were not present or were altered, it would fail to be the same piece of wax.

Descartes claims that we cannot know the wax through our senses. This is because whatever we can know through our senses can be altered. In other words, if a property cannot be altered, it cannot be known by the senses. Moreover, anything that can be altered does not belong to the wax. Since the essence of the wax is the set of properties that cannot be altered, the wax cannot be known through the senses.

Descartes claims that we cannot know the wax through our imagination. Imagination, as a faculty, is not capable of running through an immeasurable number of changes. Thus, we can know only a measurable number of states of the wax from our imagination. Yet, we know that the wax can be "extended in more ways than can be encompassed in our imagination" (Descartes, 31). Thus, even though imagination can help me know *any* state of the wax, it cannot give me knowledge of *every* state of the wax.

If there was a state S of the wax that is not contained in the set of every state of the wax I know, I would not know whether it has extension in state S. To be extended is to have extension in every state. Thus, I wouldn't know that the wax is extended. This is why I need to know *every* state of the wax to know that it extended. It follows that we cannot know the wax through our imagination.

Descartes's argument about the wax can be summarized as:

- 1) The essence of the wax is that it is flexible, changeable, and extended
- 2) Such properties cannot be known by the senses nor the imagination [as we just argued]
- 3) It follows that the wax is known by the mind

The demon allows Descartes to doubt the objects of his senses, and so he can doubt whether what he sees in front of him is "really the wax" (Descartes, 33). However, the demon does not allow him to doubt his own existence, nor the idea that he's a thinking thing. By defining the mind as a thing that thinks, his mind's existence is indubitable within the scope of the demon doubt. Moreover, the claim that he can know things by the mind is also indubitable within the scope of the demon doubt. This is because he *knows* that he exists, which is knowledge from the mind that is indubitable. While the demon can help him doubt that his judgment of the wax is error-free (i.e. his judgment can still contain errors), the perception of the wax still "requires a human mind" (Descartes, 32). Thus, Descartes's argument that the wax is perceived by the mind rather than the senses or the imagination is not altered by the demon doubt.

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References

1. Descartes, René 1748. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Eric Steinberg. Hackett
- 2.
- 3.