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Descartes – Meditations on First Philosophy Introduction

Descartes’s Meditations on First Philosophy explores his journey to destroy all of his preconceived notions of reality, in order to help him truly understand the world and his place in it. He starts by removing any possible stimulus that could be called into doubt, and keeps removing things which could be called into doubt, until he finds he is only left with his own mind. He concludes that his mind, with its thoughts and reasoning, makes up who “he” is, and nothing else can define him as a being, including his body and his physical brain. As he words it, “…what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and which also imagines and senses.” Along this trail of thought, he then goes to try and understand how he could possibly prove that other objects, and even the entire world around him, exist, and this brings him to one of the most important parts of his argument in his second meditation, entitled: “Concerning the Nature of the Human Mind: That the Mind is More Known Than the Body.”

Descartes defines objects, animals, and people as “bodies” for the sake of this example. He defines a body as “…suitable for being bounded by some shape, for being enclosed in some place, and thus for filling up space, so that it excludes every other body from that space [and] for being perceived by touch, sight, hearing, taste, or smell.” Essentially, Descartes’s definition of the word body describes any object or being that takes up space – in other words, exists in space. Proving the existence of an object is another matter to Descartes, however. During this meditation he operates under the premise that his senses could be betraying him; lying to him about what really is in front of him. The example he uses is a piece of wax, recently taken from a honeycomb. He quantifies it in as many ways as he can, using his senses. He notes its sweet smell, its solid feel, the sound it makes when tapped, and its appearance. Noting all of that, he then melts the wax. Suddenly, it no longer smells sweet, is a pile of liquid, no longer makes sound when tapped, and looks completely different. Despite this, the puddle before him is still wax. Knowing this, he concludes that the senses alone are not what help us define “bodies.” Instead, our intellect and its conclusions based on our senses help us determine the existence of other bodies, and this process also helps us affirm our own existence. This, I believe, is Descartes’s general idea.

I believe I understand the basics behind the reasoning for his meditations. He believed that his preconceived notions were getting in the way of objective reasoning and thought, and sought to destroy his past biases and create a new logical basis for his understanding of reality. However, I don’t fully understand some of his conclusions, particularly regarding the existence of other bodies. He admits that his senses could be lying to him, but still uses their input in his reasoning that an object exists. He likens senses to a cord, saying that in a cord ABCD, A would move in the direction of D even if only B or C were pulled. This means that the senses can be fooled, but in general they are correct. I believe he then asserts that using a combination of several senses and his own intellect, he can confirm the existence of other bodies, and by proxy, himself. However, I have to ask, if all of his senses were in fact lying to him, wouldn’t he be lying to himself about the existence of that body, and wouldn’t his reasoning be wrong? I’m not sure how this would affect his reasoning, but it gave me pause for thought. Overall, Descartes’s meditations offer a fascinating approach toward proving the existence of our conscious minds and of the world around us, and I look forward to discussing them more in depth, if only so I can attain a more complete understanding of his arguments.