

What is the goal of the wax argument in Mediations II? Is it a successful argument?

This essay aims to criticise Rene Descartes view on how the rationale is solely responsible for deriving knowledge on the nature of bodies and to criticise his use of the wax argument to support his view. First I will elaborate on the first half of Mediations II where Rene Descartes defines what "I" is and show how this is the foundation for understanding what is being achieved with the wax argument. I will also elaborate intensively on the wax argument itself and what is meant by it and what it set out to achieve. Second I will provide two arguments that show how he wax argument was not successful in achieving its goal. The first argument will show that the rationale cannot be trusted and through Rene Descartes reasoning we thus cannot trust it at all. The second argument I will show that the rationale on its own is not enough to derive knowledge on the nature of bodies.

In the first part of Meditations II Rene Descartes discovers what he considers the be the most distinct thing one can perceive, and that is that he is a thing that thinks. He throws doubt on any idea he has of himself that is derived from his senses. He does this by entertaining the idea that there is an all powerful malicious deceiver that can be deceiving his senses and thus his senses cannot be trusted. He then goes on to attempt to define what this "I" is that thinks. He states that a thing that thinks is "A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions" (AT VII 28; CSM 19). He claims that these actions are independent from any sensory input he gains from the external world, including 'sensory perceptions'. He explains that sensory perceptions can still be felt even if he is not interacting with the external world such as when he is dreaming, thus the action of having sensory perceptions cannot be false, but what those sensory perceptions represent can absolutely be false. The action of having sensory perceptions he defines to be simply thinking. From discovering the new knowledge of what the "I" is, he claims he still has immense difficulty forcing himself to think in these constrained bounds of truth, as his idea of "I" still seems rooted in his imagination of what the body entails physically, and the imagination cannot picture this new "I" he has now discovered. The imagination cannot picture this new "I" because, he states, "for imagining is simply contemplating the shape or image of a corporeal thing." (AT VII 28; CSM 19). Thus he decides to entertain his natural mind (one that does not think in his restrained bounds of truth) by examining an external body that his natural mind believes it has a distinct grasp on and then he questions from whence knowledge of this body is actually derived. By external bodies it is meant a body that exists outside the mind that is perceived by the senses.

The external body he will be examining is a piece of wax. This is where the wax argument arises. He first goes on the list attributes of the piece of wax such as its taste, smell, colour, shape and size, and the sound it makes when it is tapped. All these attributes can be grouped together as sensory qualities of the wax. He specifically includes every sense that can be used to identify the wax. In the natural mind these attributes seem fundamental and necessary to know an external body as distinctly as possible. Now after he holds the was close to a fire, all the sensory qualities he mentioned before have changed beyond recognition. Now the question he poses is how do we still 'know' the wax still remains if all the necessary attributes of the wax that identify it have completely changed? To answer this question he first tries to identify what the wax is without the use of any sensory qualities. He describes the wax as "merely something extended, flexible and changeable" (AT VII 31; CSM 20). By flexible and changeable he explicitly states he does not mean the image that the wax can take on numerous (infinite) forms as that cannot possibly be perceived by the

imagination and thus concludes that it is not the faculty of imagination that gives him the grasp of the wax as flexible and changeable. Extension in this context means the ability of a body to occupy space. The body is extended in space. The same argument holds for extension, as the extension of wax changes if its solid, liquid or any further heat applied to it and the imagination cannot possibly derive all possible ways a wax can be extended in space. Thus he concludes that the nature of the wax is not revealed by his imagination but must be perceived by his mind alone. He claims now after discovering this knowledge, he has a clearer perception of this "I" he previously could not properly grasp. His perception of the wax is now more distinct after he discovered that it is not established by sensory perceptions but by his intellect, he considers that he now knows himself even more distinctly. He explains that if he judges the wax to exist, then he must also exist, regardless of whether the wax actually exists in the external world. By external world it is meant by the world that exists outside the mind and is perceived by the senses. This further proves his point that when he has an experience (which was defined as another form of thinking), he must exist.

Essentially the goal of the wax argument was to guide his mind through the intense restraints of truth he adopted in the first half of the Mediations II. The wax argument also shown that our understanding of bodies does not come from the senses but strictly from the intellect alone. And it also showed that the experience of observing wax and making judgements on it is a self- fulfilling prophecy for his existence.

Now I will provide my argument for why the wax argument was not successful in its goal to prove that our understanding of external bodies does not come from the senses but strictly from the intellect alone.

The basis of the idea by Rene Descartes that knowledge cannot come from the senses is established in Meditations I. He claims "whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once" (AT VII 18; CSM 12). What is meant by this statement is that our senses can deceive us. For example, a very cold body of water we can perceive as extremely hot when touched, triggering a reflex thus flinching away. Upon inspection and once understood that the water is not hot, we can freely put our hand in the water without triggering any reflex. He claims that if we cannot trust all our senses, we shouldn't trust any. I would argue, by using his own logic, that our rationale can deceive us and thus we should not have complete trust in our rationale either. I will use the example of illusions to explain why we cannot trust the rationale.

According to Descartes the senses simply perceive stimulus, and it is the rationale that makes judgements on what is observed through the senses. An example he brings forth is the two types of perceptions one can have of the sun (AT VII 39; CSM 27). The idea of the sun that derives strictly from the senses would have someone believe the sun is very small. But it is through reasoning that allows someone to come to the idea that the sun is actually very large and very far away which is what makes it appear small. Descartes idea is that the senses provide no input about the nature of things and only the rationale can be trusted to do such a thing (this was explored further previously in the wax argument). Then by this logic, illusions are not the fault of the senses but actually the fault of the rationale. What is meant by an illusion is not cases such as seeing a mirage in the desert, as the rationale does, in that case, correctly interpret the sensory input from the senses. What is meant by illusions are certain patterns that are drawn in ways as to seem like they are moving, or pictures shaded in such a way that the brain perceives colours that are not there, specifically. In these cases the senses accurately perceive the external stimulus, but it is the intellect or the rationale that 'sees' what is not there. The reason for why it must be the rationale that is being

deceived is because for Rene Descartes only the rationale can determine the nature of things. Thus if the mind determines the illusion is moving, when in the external world it is not and the senses which can only observe what is in the external world, and which cannot be impacted by the rational (as things observed through the senses are adventitious), observed this illusion, then the conclusion must be that the rationale can be deceived. An adventitious idea to Rene Descartes is a sensory-perception that cannot be controlled and seems to originate from the external world¹. If then the rationale can be deceived, according to Descartes, we cannot be certain of anything the rationale deems. Thus his idea that the nature of the wax from the wax argument can only come from the rationale because the rationale cannot be deceived like the senses does not hold up to this line of reasoning.

I will now provide my second argument for why the rationale cannot be the only method for deriving knowledge and why the wax argument does not prove that it does. The wax argument states that because all the sensory qualities of the wax can change beyond recognition upon heating and the fact that somehow it is still recognizable as wax is a solid argument for why we do not actually rely on our senses for knowledge, but it is rather our intellect that detects the nature of the substance. Here Rene Descartes has made a leap in logic and does not consider how the rationale will consider the wax in those two states if it were perceived for the first time in isolated instances. For example, if someone were to observe solid wax for the first time and inspect it fully as to have distinct ideas of all the sensory qualities like Rene Descartes had done, then in a completely isolated instance, some time in the future, he observed the same wax but then only as a liquid, would this person still be able to conclude it is the same wax? The answer is no, because in that case the only source of information is the senses and if every sensory quality of the wax has changed then it cannot be concluded that it is still the same wax. What is crucial for the rationale to be able to make judgements is a continuous sensory experience of the change in wax. What is meant by a continuous sensory experience is for example, the continuous observation of solid wax melting into liquid wax. If this specific continuous observation is made by the senses then the rationale is able to conclude that the wax is still the same regardless if all the sensory qualities have changed. If this continuous observation does not occur, such as the solid and liquid wax being observed in isolated instances, it is impossible for the rationale to conclude it is the same piece of wax. This line of reasoning shows that the rationale does not work independently from the senses in deriving knowledge and also shows that the wax argument in this case did not achieve its goal.

In conclusion, the goal of the wax argument, that was focused on in this essay, is to show that our understanding of the nature of certain bodies does not come from the senses but strictly from the intellect alone, and the reason for why we cannot rely on the senses is because they can deceive us and we cannot completely trust those that can deceive. My first argument in this essay provides reasoning for why our rationale is also capable of deceit through the use of illusion as an example and through Rene Descartes own reasoning we should thus not trust our rationale either and thus we could not derive any knowledge of the nature of bodies at all. My second argument provided reasoning for why the rationale cannot be solely responsible for understanding the nature of a body using the wax argument as an example. It was found through reasoning that the rationale needs a continuous sensory experience to be able to derive knowledge on the nature of a body. Through both these arguments I have shown that the wax argument does not hold up through all lines of reasoning and thus was not successful in achieving its goal.

References

1. Smith, Kurt, "Descartes' Theory of Ideas", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),
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