

# Lecture 05: Descartes

s.butterfill @warwick.ac.uk

What is it to be led away from the senses?

## 1. Wax

‘even bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of the imagination but by the intellect alone’ (Meditation 2)

‘I can grasp that the wax is capable of countless changes, yet I am unable to run through this immeasurable number of changes in my imagination... The nature of this piece of wax is in no way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone’ (Meditation 2).

‘Something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind’ (Meditation 2).

Argument sketch:

1. Sensory perceptions of the wax change.
2. The essential nature of the wax does not.
3. Therefore the senses cannot inform us about its essential nature.

‘The Stoics claimed that each of us has many cognitive impressions, typically sense impressions

of a particular sort, and that these cognitive impressions are in one way or another the basis for everything that we can know. A cognitive impression is one that “[1] arises from what is and [2] is stamped and impressed exactly in accordance with what is, [3] of such a kind as could not arise from what is not.” (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians* 7.248 (1997, 132–33) cited by Broughton 2003, p. 72).

## 2. Error

‘I know by experience that I am prone to countless errors’ (Descartes 1984, p. 38; AT VII: 54)

‘my errors ... are the only evidence of some imperfection in me’ (Descartes 1984, p. 39; AT VII: 56)

‘So what then is the source of my mistakes? It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand’ (Descartes 1984, p. 40; AT VII: 58)

*The intellect* is the faculty of representation. *The will* is what affirms or denies something represented. *Judgement* occurs when the intellect represents something which the will affirms (or denies).

‘If [...] I simply refrain from making a judgement in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear

that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly’ (Descartes 1984, p. 41; AT VII: 59–60)

‘I can avoid error [...] merely [...] by remembering to withhold judgement on any occasion when the truth of the matter is not clear.’ (Descartes 1984, p. 43; AT VII: 62)

‘today I have learned not only what precautions to take to avoid ever going wrong, but also what to do to arrive at the truth. For I shall unquestionably reach the truth, if only I give sufficient attention to all the things which I perfectly understand, and separate these from all the other cases where my apprehension is more confused and obscure’ (Descartes 1984, p. 43; AT VII: 62)

## 3. Error and The Wax

The claim that bodies are ‘not strictly perceived by the senses’ plays an essential role in Descartes account of error. Since the senses do not strictly perceive bodies, they cannot be the cause of errors about bodies.

## References

- Broughton, J. (2003). *Descartes’s method of doubt*. Princeton University Press.
- Descartes, R. (1984). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volume II. Cambridge University Press.