

Lecture 06: Descartes

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1. Error and the Senses

Sensory perceptions of tastes, smells, sounds, heat, cold, light, colors and the like ‘do not represent anything located outside our thought’ These sensory perceptions ‘vary according to the different movements which pass from all parts of our body to the ... brain’ (Descartes 1984a, p. 219, AT VIII:35 cited by Simmons 1999, p. 348)

‘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).

‘[T]he proper purpose of [...] sensory perceptions [...] is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful [...]’ (Descartes 1984b, pp. 57-8)

Distinguish two claims:

1. Sensory perceptions are caused by things.
2. Sensory perceptions represent (or present) things.

Descartes accepts the first of these two claims (‘I do not see how God could be understood to be anything but a deceiver if the ideas were transmitted from a source other than corporeal things’).

Sensory perceptions ‘normally tell us of the benefit or harm that external bodies may do [...], and do not, except occasionally and accidentally, show us what external bodies are like in themselves’ (Descartes 1984a, p. 224, AT VIII: 41 cited by Simmons 1999, p. 350).

External bodies ‘may not exist in a way that exactly corresponds with my sensory grasp of them, for in many cases the grasp of the senses is very obscure and confused. But at least they possess all the properties which I clearly and distinctly understand, that is all those which, viewed in general terms, are comprised within the subject matter of pure mathematics.’

1.1. Descartes’ Three Grades of Sensory Response

‘when I see a stick, it should not be supposed that certain ‘intentional forms’ fly off the stick towards the eye, but simply that rays of light are reflected off the stick and set up certain movements in the optic nerve and, via the optic nerve, in the brain, as I have explained at some length in the Optics.’ This movement in the brain, which is common to us and the brutes, is the **first grade of sensory response**. This leads to the **second grade**, which extends to the mere perception of the colour and light reflected from the stick; it arises from the fact that the mind is so intimately conjoined with the body that it is affected by the movements which occur in it. *Nothing more than*

this should be referred to the sensory faculty, if we wish to distinguish it carefully from the intellect. But suppose that, as a result of being affected by this sensation of colour, I judge that a stick, located outside me, is coloured; and suppose that on the basis of the extension of the colour and its boundaries together with its position in relation to the parts of the brain, I make a rational calculation about the size, shape and distance of the stick: although such reasoning is commonly assigned to the senses (which is why I have here referred it to **the third grade of sensory response**), it is clear that it depends solely on the intellect’ (Descartes 1984b, p. 295, AT VII:437).

2. How to Write an Essay

‘these six meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people’ (Letter to Mersenne)

3. Clear and Distinct

‘I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true’ (Meditation 3)

‘the perception I have of it is a case not of vision or touch or imagination ... but of purely mental scrutiny;

‘whatever is revealed to me by the natural light – for example that from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on – cannot in

any way be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty both as trustworthy as the natural light and also capable of showing me that such things are not true.' (Third Meditation).

'as for my natural impulses, I have often judged in the past that they were pushing me in the wrong direction when it was a question of choosing the good, and I do not see why I should place any greater confidence in them in other matters' (Third Meditation).

'What is meant by a clear perception, and by a distinct perception. I call a perception 'clear' when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind - just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception 'distinct' if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear' (Descartes 1984a, pp. 207–8, AT VIII:21–22)

References

Descartes, R. (1984a). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volume I. Cambridge University Press.

Descartes, R. (1984b). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volume II. Cambridge University Press.

Simmons, A. (1999). Are Cartesian Sensations Representational? *Noûs*, 33(3), 347–369.