

Lecture 07: Descartes

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1. The Senses and Appearances

Sensory perceptions of tastes, smells, sounds, heat, cold, light, colors and the like 'do not represent anything located outside our thought' [i.e. lack intentional objects] 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).

1.1. Error and Perceptual Appearances

1. If there are perceptual appearances, then sensory perceptions can misrepresent things.
2. If sensory perceptions can misrepresent things, then they are a source of error.
3. Descartes holds that the intellect is the sole source of error.
4. Therefore Descartes must deny that there are perceptual appearances.

1.2. 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).

1.3. Questions Arising

1. Does reflection on appearances show that sensory perceptions represent?
2. Or do scientific discoveries show that sensory perceptions represent?
3. If so, is Descartes wrong about error?

2. Clear and Distinct

'The only principles which I accept or require in physics are those of geometry and pure mathematics; these principles explain all natural phenomena, and enable us to provide quite certain demonstrations regarding them' (Descartes 1984a, p. 247, AT 2:64)

'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;

'*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)

'The [...] natural light [...] enables me to perceive that I would have given myself all the perfections of which I have an idea, if I had given myself existence' (Fourth Replies).

'the learned often employ distinctions so subtle that they disperse the natural light, and they detect obscurities even in matters which are perfectly clear to peasants' (Descartes 1984a, p. 59)

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.