

Descartes on Perception and Knowledge of the Self

An Explication by Nia McCabe

In this essay, I will contextualize, outline, and explain Descartes' conclusion: "I now know that even bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of imagination but by the intellect alone, and that this perception derives not from their being touched or seen, but from their being understood" (Meditations II, p.9). I will begin by providing a brief summary of key topics in the first Meditation, such as the foundation of knowledge and the process of radical doubt, in order to contextualize this conclusion. I will then outline Descartes' argument, wherein he arrives at the Cogito and goes through the process of abstraction to clearly and distinctly perceive a piece of wax. Finally, I will elaborate on the resolution of the wax argument as it relates to Descartes' knowledge of the self, and explain its overall significance to the conclusion of the second Meditation.

I will begin by outlining the broader context of the Meditations in order to show what Descartes hopes to achieve. The first Meditation begins with Descartes expressing concern over his foundation of knowledge. Descartes realizes the opinions he holds to be true about the world have been founded either from his own sensory experience, or through listening to the teachings of others (Meditations I, p.1). He finds this to be extremely problematic for a variety of reasons; firstly because children are often told falsehoods, and those falsehoods are the foundation upon which all other knowledge we acquire is built on. Secondly, sensory experience is unreliable, we sometimes hear our name being called when there is nobody around, or feel a tap on our shoulder when nothing has touched it. Because there is such a thing as false sensory experiences, Descartes believes we cannot be sure of anything we have ever perceived through the senses. He thereby deems his knowledge corrupt, and realizes he must demolish the foundations of his beliefs in order to rebuild them on metaphysical and

epistemological truths (Meditations I, p.1). To demolish these foundations as efficiently as possible, he casts radically broad doubt. He reflects on how dreams can be so convincing that we sometimes mistake them for reality, so we therefore cannot ever deny the possibility that we are dreaming (Meditations I, p.2). However, there still remains truths he cannot seem to doubt, such as the fact that in our dreams a triangle is still a three sided shape, and the colours that create our dreamscapes are the same colours we find in our wakeful states (Meditations I, p.2). Since these cannot realistically be doubted under this model, Descartes accepts the possibility of an evil demon who is using his power to deceive him into believing he has a body of flesh and blood, that there is a sky above him, that there are colours, shapes, and external things, when in reality these are only illusions (Meditations I, p.3-4). With this doubt established, Descartes has let go of every belief he has ever had, and completes the first Meditation in a sceptical abyss.

In the second Meditation, Descartes searches for a truth to grab hold of. He monologues, first contemplating if God is putting thoughts into his mind, then pondering if he is the origin of his own thoughts. Either way, he thinks, even without senses or a body, there must be a thing in which the thoughts are occurring; “am not I, at least, something?” (Meditations II, p.4). This hypothesis is the beginning of the Cogito which importantly survives the evil demon doubt, as even if Descartes was being deceived by an infinite being, there must have been something for the demon to deceive (Meditations II, p.5). Further, Descartes finds he is a rational, willing, thinking thing, which also has sensory perceptions (Meditations II, p.6). Recall that Descartes is operating under the assumption that he could be asleep at any time, as our dream states can be indistinguishable from our waking states. He still experiences sensory perception, just as we are able to experience falsely in our dreams. This leads to Descartes’ revelation that sensory perception is nothing more than thinking.

Descartes theorizes that most people will assume sensory perception alone allows us to understand external bodies, and that intellect has little to do with our ability to make these distinctions. To counter this assumption and demonstrate his hypothesis that bodies are instead perceived by the intellect, Descartes examines a piece of wax. He lists what some might assume are its distinguishing features: the wax has a floral scent, it is hard and cold, it has a certain size and shape, and makes a noise when hit (Meditations II, p.7). Under the lens of sensory perception, these are the features that define this piece of wax. That is, until the wax is placed next to a fire. The wax becomes hot, its colour and shape change, it has a different scent, and no longer makes a noise when struck (Meditations II, p.9). All the sensory features which are meant to identify this wax no longer exist in the wax, yet the wax remains. Therefore, the wax must be understood beyond physical traits. Descartes begins the process of abstraction, where he removes all the physical qualities of the wax to see what remains, and finds the wax to be a flexible extension. Descartes knows the wax can inhabit countless forms and shapes, and because the sheer amount of forms the wax can appear as is countless and inconceivable, Descartes accepts that his own imagination could not have given him the concept of flexibility or extension (Meditations II, p.9). Thus, the wax and its extension are perceived rather than imagined, and are not understood through sensory experience, but by intellect. The perception of the wax he now has after undergoing the process of abstraction is more clear and distinct than it ever was when understood through sensory perception.

To elaborate on this resolution, Descartes believes perceiving the wax this way allows us to have a deeper and more thorough understanding of its nature than we would have based on sensory perception. Further, Descartes' findings about the wax translate to every other external body we perceive (Meditations II, p.9). Thus, we can gain a greater understanding of

any body by stripping away its physical features and seeing clearly the flexible extension it is at bottom. This discovery has important metaphysical value and is key for the conclusion, as Descartes' ability to judge the wax affirms his own existence. In this conclusion he is perceiving the wax so clearly and distinctly that it is impossible that he himself is not something, but even in cases of simple sensory perception or imagination alone, the conclusion that he exists still applies. To restate Descartes' conclusion, he has found that we do not stringently perceive bodies through sensory experience, and we could not possibly have imagined them on our own due to their extensive flexibility. Instead, we perceive bodies through our intellectual judgement, and we can gain a greater understanding of these bodies, and in turn a greater understanding of ourselves, by abstracting them until they are clearly and distinctly perceived.

My aim in this essay was to provide context for the second Meditation, outline the argument Descartes centers the second Meditation on, and elaborate on his conclusion that bodies are perceived by the intellect alone rather than sensory experience or the imagination, and that this intellectual perception derives from the bodies being understood. I began by recounting important details from the first Meditation which provide context for Descartes' overall goal of obtaining true beliefs through a process of radical doubt. I then gave a detailed explanation of the second Meditation, wherein Descartes arrives at the hypothesis that he is a thinking thing, and demonstrates the plausibility of this hypothesis by scrutinizing a piece of wax until he is able to clearly and distinctly perceive it. I first elaborated on Descartes' conclusion by discussing how abstraction can be used to understand any external body clearly and distinctly, before explaining the overall significance of the conclusion as an affirmation of Descartes' existence, which gives him profound knowledge of the self.