Descartes: God, Rule of Truth, Bodies, and the Real Distinction

Background: ✔ Problem of Evil, ✔ Free Will Defense, Arguments for God’s existence
- Descartes’s sincerity on religious matters

Descartes’s M3 Causal Proof of God’s Existence par’s 14-15, 22-27 (pp. 28.1-29.1, 30.8-32.5)
- Degrees of Reality – independence and perfection
- Formal Reality and Objective Reality (28.3)
- CPI: Any idea must have a cause that has at least as much formal reality as the idea has
  objective reality (at & around 28.5)
- The Proof 30.8-32.5
- Why the Proof doesn’t work in other cases (why you can’t generally prove that things exist
  merely from the fact that you have ideas of them)

From God to the Rule of Truth (M4)
- God a non-deceiver 36.3
- The basic argument
  1. God (exists & is not a deceiver
  2. If my c&d p’s were false, God would be a deceiver
     So, 3. My c&d p’s are true
- Key to 2: The Problem of Error (36.7) and the Problem of Evil – the problem of error as the
  problem of epistemic evil
- The Free Will Defense (37.9-39.6)
- The Rule of Truth 41.9-42.0

Normal belief in bodies characterized 8th-9th par. of M3, 26.6-27.1
- A belief that there are “things existing outside me” which resemble my [sensory] ideas, and
  from which those ideas derive 26.7. The thing “is sending its likeness…into me” (26.8). I
  think this is not just the thought that the outside thing is like what we take it to be like, but
  that we think of it as being a certain way by means of supposing the thing resembles
  something we find within us (our idea): Here Descartes is construing our natural thought
  about bodies as aligning with the Aristotelian/Scholastic theory of perception (see Adams’s
  description).
- Descartes is out to vindicate belief in the existence of “corporeal objects,” but he is out to
  jettison that important aspect of ordinary/Aristotelian thought about what these objects are
  like.
- Believed to exist through a “spontaneous impulse” (26.8) / “natural impulse” (27.0): We are
  “taught by nature” (26.7) that they exist. We do not see by the “light of nature” that they
  exist (26.9). Descartes writes that these are “very different things” (26.9). We do not C&DP
  that bodies exist.
- The ideas of bodies come to us in a way that does not depend on our will (26.7). We have “a
  great inclination to believe that these [sensory] ideas issue from corporeal things” (52.7—
  here we go to a M6 characterization); however, Descartes thinks one can refrain from
  believing in the bodies themselves.
Normal belief in bodies – evaluated ⁹th-¹²th par. of M3, 26.8-28.1
-Natural impulses, unlike what we see by the light of nature, are dubious, and have led Descartes astray in the past (27.1)
- A word of protest from an epistemic “conservative”: fn. 30, on pp. 46-47 of: https://campuspress.yale.edu/keithderose/files/2015/12/AI-new-Chap7-2fkucjp.pdf
- That my sensations come to me independently of my will doesn’t prove that they come from “things existing outside of me” (27.2)
- and doesn’t prove that the things that caused them resemble them
- So, we need a proof of “corporeal things”…

Proof of the Existence of “Corporeal Things” ¹⁰ par. of M6
- The heart of the argument is at 52.7-.8. It is driven by what I like to call the “Rule of Some Truth” (this name comes from 53.2, in the ¹¹th par). The argument for RoST seems to be:
  1. God (exists &) is not a deceiver (already argued for)
  2. If I have a great natural inclination to believe that p, but p is false and I have no faculty by which to learn that p is false, then God is a deceiver (key premise)
  \[ \therefore \text{RoST: If I have a great natural inclination to believe that p, and I have no faculty by which I might learn that p is false, then p is true.} \]
- It’s clear what premises need to be added to the above principle to yield the desired argument:
  3. I have a great natural inclination to believe that some of my ideas are caused by external bodies (premise)
  4. I have no faculty by which I might learn that it is false that some of my ideas are caused by external bodies (premise)
  \[ \therefore \text{5. Some of my ideas are caused by external bodies (from RoST,3,4)} \]
  \[ \therefore \text{6. External bodies exist (from 5)} \]
- I believe this argument is supposed to be applicable to some cases of particular perceptual judgments, as well as to the general issue of the existence of a corporeal world
- But, among other problems, it requires the very dubious (at least it seems it should be dubious, by Descartes’s standards) negative claim that one has no way of finding out one is wrong, if one is wrong. Indeed, none of the premises of this “proof” (2, 3, nor 4) seem to me to be at all certain, much less certain enough for Descartes’s purposes.
- Here the quip from Hume seems to me very much called for, and should be applied to the various premises of this “proof,” comparing them to conclusion: “To have recourse to the veracity of the Supreme Being, in order to prove the veracity of our senses, is surely making a very unexpected circuit.” –Hume, Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, sect. 12, 4th-to-last par. of Part I
- A good exercise (but in calling it an “exercise,” I don’t mean to imply that there’s a clearly correct answer, or that it’s easy): Try running this argument on the aspect of ordinary thought that Descartes wants to reject (that wrt secondary qualities, objects resemble our ideas of them). Here, Descartes wants the argument to fail. But how does it fail? Is it the analogue of (3), or (4), that goes false, according to Descartes, and why? What distinguishes the cases so that God’s goodness verifies ordinary thought about corporeal objects existing, but not about what these objects are like?

Clear and Distinct Understanding and the Properties of Bodies
- Immediately after proving the existence of corporeal things, Descartes warns us that they might not be exactly like we ordinarily think they are (52.8)
- Descartes says that corporeal things “contain everything I clearly and distinctly understand” 52.9 – and then goes on to give a good hint as to what kind of properties these are.
-This I think is where Descartes is laying the groundwork for his physics (recall his letter to Mersenne from our first handout)

-What’s wrong with “secondary qualities”? Focus on the “understand” part of “clearly and distinctly understand,” and look back to the first two paragraphs of M6. Where our translation has “pure intellation” (47.9), better (at least for our purposes) translations have “pure understanding.” Secondary qualities aren’t “clearly understood” because they aren’t “understood” (“intelledted”??) at all, but are conceived by means of imagination.

-Going beyond what’s in the Meditations, what is behind Descartes’s “Secondary Quality Anti-Realism”? I suppose it’s his mechanism (Adams, p. xiv.4) together with something like what we might call a Principle of the Causal Relevance of Perceptible Qualities.

**Proof of the Real Distinction between Mind and Body** 9th par. of M6 (pp. 51.6-.9)

-Brief riff on the subtitle of the Meditations?

-Brief riff on omnipotence, mild and wild?

-Clear and distinct understanding is taken to show (some sort of) possibility. (I’m regimenting Descartes’s terminology a bit here.) The existence of an omnipotent being means that everything that’s possible (in that relevant sense) really can be made true.

- Similar to the proof of the the possibility of “material things” at the very start of M6 (47.7) – though D isn’t careful to use ‘understand’ there

-This proof is clarified in the Replies to Objections (see below):
  
  Whatever I can c&du can be the case
  
  I can c&du myself as existing without my body [& vice versa]
  
  So, I can exist without my body [& vice versa]

-I suppose for the purpose of characterizing the nature of the mind, as opposed to providing as much hope for surviving the demise of our bodies as Descartes can get us here, the real work is done in Meditation Two, where Descartes seeks to build up the kind of conception of himself as a thinking thing without a body that serves as a proof of the “metaphysical” (we might call it) possibility of his so existing. The proof of “the real distinction” in M6, then, is supposed to take us from that mere metaphysical possibility to some “real” possibility (some “heavy ‘can’ ”) of post mortem survival?

**Descartes on the Relation between Mind and Body**

-interactionist dualist. A bit about how perception works is at & around 56.9-58.2;

-mind ➔ brain causation seems to consist in voluntary actions: 55.7

-The “union” of mind and body and Descartes’s sincerity

From the end of the Replies to the 2nd set of Objections:

**Def. X**: Two substances are said to be really distinct when each of them can exist apart from the other

**Proposition IV**: There is a real distinction between the mind and the body

**Demonstration**: God can bring about whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive in a way exactly corresponding to our perception of it (preceeding Corollary). But we clearly perceive the mind, that is, a thinking substance, apart from the body, that is, apart from extended substance (Second Postulate). And conversely we can clearly perceive the body apart from the mind (as everyone readily admits). Therefore, the mind can, at least through the power of God, exist without the body; and similarly the body can exist apart from the mind.