

Handout #5: Meditations 5 & 6

Meditation 5

Descartes has two principal goals: (1) Prove the Existence of God (again), and (2) prove that from the method specified in Meditation 4, we are justified about the material essence of objects.

First, Descartes begins by examining the notion of *continuity* or the idea of a *continuous spatially-extended body*. He writes,

I do indeed distinctly imagine the quantity that philosophers commonly call “continuous,” that is, the extension of this quantity, or rather of the thing quantified in length, breadth, and depth. I enumerate the various parts in it. I ascribe to these parts any sizes, shapes, positions, and local movements whatever; to these movements I ascribe any durations whatever (AT VIII, 63).

According to Descartes, one essence of material things that is known distinctly are geometrical shapes understood quantitatively. That is, according to Descartes, although triangles, cubes, and other shapes may not exist, their essential properties are *independent of our will*. The proof of this is found in the fact that various properties can be demonstrated as belonging to geometrical figures. For example, the fact that the three interior angles of a Euclidean triangle are equal to two right angles is not something dependent upon the mind but an objective property of the triangle as a continuous (geometrical) figure.

Second, Descartes claims that from a consideration about the *essence* of material bodies, we cannot infer that these bodies exist. However, this is not the case with God. In considering God’s essence, what does Descartes argue?

Meditation 6

For our purposes, the goal of Meditation 6 is to prove that some material objects exist.

Descartes considers two different possible reasons for why material objects exist. The first is that since the faculty of imagination is distinct from the faculty of the intellect, it might be necessary to suppose that material objects exist (in order to explain the difference between the two). How does Descartes distinguish between the *intellect* (or understanding) and the *imagination*? The example Descartes uses is a classic, so make sure you explain it (see AT VII, 72).

Descartes ultimately claims that a distinction between the intellect and the imagination is not sufficient to determine that material objects exist. From the above distinction, Descartes claims that the existence of the corporeal object is “only a probability” and “even though I may examine everything carefully, nevertheless I do not yet see how the distinct idea of corporeal nature that I find in my imagination can enable me to develop an argument which necessarily concludes that some body exists” (AT VII, 73). So, at least from a consideration of the *imaginative faculty*, Descartes does not claim that our beliefs about the existence of material objects are infallible.

Second, Descartes argues that material bodies exist because of the following argument:

1	We have the power to sense spatial objects.
2	This is source of these objects is not from the understanding since (i) the production of sensations is produced against our will and because (ii) sensations are spatial and spatiality is not a part of the essence of a thinking thing (AT VII, 79)
3	Therefore, sensations are either produced by God or by existing material objects.

Why does Descartes think that God does not produce sensations in our minds?