Descartes’ rationalism

Rationalists claim that we have a priori knowledge of synthetic propositions, i.e. knowledge of matters of fact that does not depend upon sense experience. They argue that there are two key ways in which we gain such knowledge:

1. we know certain truths innately, e.g. as part of our rational nature; and/or
2. we have a form of rational ‘intuition’ or ‘insight’ which enables us to grasp certain truths intellectually.

Descartes is a rationalist in both these ways. Many rationalists add that the synthetic a priori knowledge we gain through reason or innately cannot be arrived at in any other way. They may also argue that it is superior, for example by being more certain, to the knowledge or beliefs we gain through the senses. Descartes agrees with this, too.

RATIONAL INTUITION

Descartes’ theory of clear and distinct ideas is his account of rational ‘intuition’. At the heart of the idea of rational intuition is the view that you can discover the truth of a claim just by thinking about it. The first claim Descartes defends this way is the cogito. He arrives at the cogito by pure reasoning, and we are supposed to recognise that it is true just by considering it.

Descartes then goes on to argue that he, as a mind, can exist without having a body. It is therefore possible for minds to exist without bodies. This is a second claim Descartes believes he can establish by a priori reasoning.

How do we know about bodies, physical objects? First, how do we know what physical objects are, i.e. what are we talking about? We might say we discover their nature through sense experience. But in the wax argument, Descartes argues that sense experience gives us only a confused idea of physical objects. In fact, we discover what physical objects are by analysing our concept of a physical object. In this way, and not through the senses, we discover that the essential nature of a physical object is to be ‘extended’, i.e. to exist in space, with a size, shape and location.

Knowing the external world exists

Second, how do we know whether bodies – do physical objects – exist? They cause our experiences, we reply. But using the method of doubt, Descartes first argues that we don’t know what causes our experiences – it could be a demon. So Descartes must work to once again secure our knowledge of the external world. The argument spans the whole of the Meditations, and takes in arguments about the understanding and the senses, the existence of God, the doctrine of clear and distinct ideas, and human nature.

In the handout on ‘The essential natures of mind and body’, we discussed Descartes’ wax example. On its own, this doesn’t show that physical objects really are extended. But in Meditation V, Descartes asserts the principle that we can know that what we can clearly
and distinctly conceive is true. So physical objects really are extended, if they exist at all. In Meditation VI, Descartes argues that they do exist, and he seeks to establish that we can and do have knowledge of the physical world, including of course, our own bodies.

He first considers whether we can know bodies exist from our imagination. Unlike operations of the intellect, imagination uses images that it has apparently derived from the senses or created for itself, and it requires effort. Both of these features could be explained if we have bodies. So we ‘probably’ have bodies, but this is hardly a proof.

He turns, then, to consider perception. We have experiences which appear, very forcefully, to be experiences of a world external to our minds, whether they are experiences of our own body or of other bodies. These experiences produce ideas without our ‘contribution’, i.e. they are involuntary. Among our perceptual experiences are sensations and feelings. We notice that we perceive we have bodies, and that our bodies can be affected in many beneficial and harmful ways, which we experience through our bodily appetites, feelings and emotions. Our faculties of feeling and sensation would seem to be dependent on our having bodies. But, again, this is not a proof.

So Descartes considers the matter from another angle. These experiences are involuntary, and if they were caused by our own minds, they would be voluntary. Because we know our own minds, we would know if they were voluntary. So they are not caused by ourselves. They must therefore have some cause which is sufficient to cause them. The options are: a real external world or God. If the cause was God, this would mean that God was a deceiver because He would have created us with a very strong tendency to believe something false. But we know that God is not a deceiver. So there must really be an external world.

So what can we know about the external world, having demonstrated that it exists? Descartes argues that God has set us up to learn from nature. Nature teaches us through sensation that we have bodies, and through perception that there are other bodies. This can’t simply be the abstract truth that a physical world exists. It must the stronger claim that, in many of our experiences, we are actually confronted with physical objects. Our senses, then, will not be set up so that, with careful employment and the search for clarity and distinctness, they would systematically lead to error. This doesn’t mean that any particular belief based on our senses is certain – we can still make mistakes. But unless perceptual experience was generally reliable, when we do what we can to avoid error, it would be difficult for Descartes to defend that we can trust what we learn from nature.

Descartes offers two arguments, both a priori, for the existence of God – one is the Trademark argument and the other is the ontological argument. Since he believes he has demonstrated that God exists, he concludes that we know the external world of physical objects exists. Not because sense experience shows us that it does, but through a priori intuition and reasoning.

**KNOWING ABOUT THE EXTERNAL WORLD**

This does not, however, mean that that world is just as perception represents it. First, Descartes does not claim that the external world is as we commonly think it is. His argument has established that the physical world exists and is an extended world. But the
wax argument established that extension and changeability is all that is of the essence of the physical world. Descartes' representative realist theory of perception argues that all other properties, of colour, smell, heat, and so on, aren't actually properties of physical objects at all, at least not considered on their own. Rather, 'all I have reason to believe is that there is something in [the external body] which excites in me these feelings' (161). We shouldn’t think that the ‘something’ is itself colour, smell, and so on. The external world is a world of geometry, as physical objects only have spatial properties (e.g. size, shape, motion).

It is on the basis of its spatial properties that we judge, as in the wax example, that some physical object is in fact present. But we must accept that our particular perceptions of the world are often confused. God’s assurance doesn’t mean we are always able to avoid error: ‘because the necessities of action often oblige us to make a decision before we have had the leisure to examine things carefully, it must be admitted that the life of man is very often subject to error in particular cases’ (168-9). Furthermore, even with caution and recourse to clear and distinct ideas, we can still make mistakes since our nature is fallible. Poor conditions of perception, such as bad light, confused thinking, prejudice, and other factors means that we can make mistakes; this does not make God a deceiver, because these are mistakes we must take responsibility for.

**INNATE IDEAS**

In the arguments regarding physical objects and God, Descartes takes the concepts, or ideas, of PHYSICAL OBJECT and GOD for granted. (When referring to a concept, I put the word in capital letters.) Where do these concepts come from? In his Trademark argument for the existence of God, he says there are three possible sources for a concept: that we have invented it (it is ‘fictitious’), that it derives from something outside the mind (it is ‘adventitious’), or that it is innate. By ‘innate’, he doesn't mean we have it from the birth in the sense that a baby can think using this concept. It would be very strange in babies could think about God but didn’t yet have a concept of power or reality or love! Innate ideas are ideas that the mind has certain capacities to use, and which can't be explained by our experience.

To defend his claim that these ideas (of GOD and PHYSICAL OBJECT) are innate, Descartes needs to show that they cannot be explained by sense experience. And this is what his arguments try to do. Sense experience cannot tell us the essential nature of physical objects; it is an idea that we must use the intellect to analyse. How did it come to be part of the intellect? It is innate. Likewise with GOD.

**ASSESSING DESCARTES’ RATIONALISM**

As we have seen, there are many objections to Descartes’ arguments. But what do such objections show about Descartes’ rationalism? Is his method of doing philosophy wrong? Descartes has done his best find what he thinks, using reasoning, is certain. His arguments are supposed to be deductive, and his premises established by rational intuition. But philosophers have still been able to point out unjustified assumptions and inferences. If intuition and deductive reasoning do not give us knowledge, then his rationalism is in trouble.

Before we become sceptical about intuition and reasoning, we should ask this: how have philosophers come up with objections to Descartes? It certainly isn’t by using sense
experience! So the objections themselves use the same kind of reasoning as Descartes. Only better reasoning, we hope. The objections cannot be objections to the way Descartes reasoned, only objections to the conclusions he drew.

But this is too generous, we can argue. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with using deductive reasoning; and we can use it to show that Descartes’ arguments are faulty. But that doesn’t mean we should also accept that there is such a thing as rational intuition or that Descartes’ theory of clear and distinct ideas is correct. Someone like Hume would argue that we can only perceive the truth of a claim just by thinking about it when that claim is analytic. Our ability to tell that it is truth is not about insight; it is simply because the claim is made true by the meanings of the words it contains.

On this view, one reason Descartes’ arguments fail is because many of his ‘clear and distinct’ ideas are not analytic, but contain some hidden assumption, and so can be challenged. The certainty Descartes is after can only be found in analytic truths, not through rational intuition.

This can all be debated. Do Descartes’ arguments fail or can he meet the objections? We will have to see. Is he wrong about rational insight? Can we not use a priori reason to discover the truth of (some) synthetic propositions, or is a priori reason limited to analytic truths? Are there any innate ideas?