

Descartes' proof of the external world¹

Does all our knowledge come from experience, as empiricists claim? Or do we have some knowledge through reason that doesn't depend on experience, as rationalists claim? In this handout, we look at Descartes' argument that our knowledge that a world of physical objects exists in fact rests not on sense experience, but on reasoning. (For more on Descartes and reasoning, see the handout 'Reason, intuition and knowledge'.)

THE STRUCTURE OF DESCARTES' ARGUMENT

In the *Meditations*, Descartes is seeking to find out what he can know as true. To achieve this, he has decided to avoid believing anything that is not 'completely certain and indubitable'. He then argues that he can doubt his senses, his memory and even that he has a body (note that these are all a posteriori claims we would use perception to establish). He supposes that all that he perceives and remembers is an illusion; that he has no body or senses at all; that in believing anything else, he is being deceived by a 'supremely powerful and cunning deceiver', an 'evil demon'. The demon could make it seem that he sees a tree when he doesn't, that he has a body when he doesn't, and so on. One conclusion of these sceptical arguments is that we cannot know from perception that physical objects exist. While we can know that we have sensory experiences, those experiences don't give us the knowledge that their causes are physical objects.

Descartes then argues that he can know that he exists, as something that thinks. He can also reflect on his thoughts and concepts. One of these concepts is that of a physical object. If perception doesn't show that physical objects exist, then in order to prove that they exist, we need to undertake a number of preliminary steps.

1. We need to understand our concept of a physical object - what is it that we think exists?
2. We need to show that this is a coherent concept, not something self-contradictory (like the concept of a round square).
3. We need to show that it is possible that physical objects exist.

With all that in place, we can then argue that

4. Physical objects do, in fact, exist, and we can know this.

We start with (1) and (2).

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 174-81

THE CONCEPT OF A PHYSICAL OBJECT

Descartes discusses the concept of PHYSICAL OBJECT when discussing the nature of his mind in *Meditation II*. He has argued that 'sensing' is just having sensory experiences - whether physical objects are the cause of these experiences is not clear and distinct. This is puzzling, so he considers perceptual experiences further, focusing on the example of perceiving a piece of wax. His question is, 'exactly what is it that I think a piece of wax, as a physical object, is?' (In the argument that follows, 'imagination' is the faculty that deals with images, including those derived from sense experiences.)

- P1. When I melt a piece of wax, it loses all of its original sensory qualities (the particular taste, smell, feel and shape it has).
- P2. Yet I believe it is the same wax.
- C1. Therefore, what I think of as the wax is not its sensory qualities.
- P3. What I think is the wax is what remains through the changes of its sensory qualities.
- P4. This is a body, something that is extended - i.e. has size and shape and takes up space - and changeable, i.e. its sensory and spatial properties can change (p. 7).
- P5. I know that the wax can undergo far more possible changes, including changes in its extension, than I can imagine.
- C2. Therefore, my concept of the wax as extended and changeable does not derive from my imagination (and therefore it does not derive from perceptual experiences).
- C3. Therefore, I comprehend the wax as what it is (as opposed to its sensory qualities) by my mind alone.
- C4. Only this thought of the wax, and not the perceptual experience of it, is clear and distinct.

Descartes finishes by commenting that the wax he comprehends by his understanding is the same wax that is presented by images from the senses. Although we say we 'see' the wax (through vision), in fact we judge (through understanding) that it is present from what we see.

Descartes' question is not about the wax itself, but about his experience, knowledge and concept of it. This is shown by his comment, on p. 8, that '[w]hat I see might not really be the wax; perhaps I don't even have eyes with which to see anything'. He doesn't, in *Meditation II*, know that there are physical objects. But he knows he has experiences of them. And it is this - his concept of what he experiences - that he is exploring.

Descartes turns to the question of whether anything corresponds to our concept of PHYSICAL OBJECT in *Meditation V*. He argued, in *Meditation III*, that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true. His concept of PHYSICAL OBJECT, refined by the wax argument to mean a body that is extended and changeable, is clear and distinct. Therefore, it is a coherent concept and if physical objects exist, then they are indeed extended and changeable.

THE EXISTENCE OF PHYSICAL OBJECTS

Having established the coherence of our concept PHYSICAL OBJECT, in Meditation VI Descartes turns his attention to whether physical objects are possible and exist. His argument that they are possible is straightforward:

- P1. I have a clear and distinct idea of what a physical object is.
- P2. (God exists and is supremely powerful.)
- P3. The only reason for thinking that God cannot make something is that the concept of it is contradictory.
- C1. Therefore, God can make physical objects.
- C2. Therefore, (if God exists) it is possible that physical objects exist.

To prove that physical objects in fact exist, Descartes first considers two arguments that aim to show that the existence of the external world is the best hypothesis to explain our experience. But he is dissatisfied because neither of them gives us certainty, which he thinks is necessary for knowledge.

The first argument is from imagination. Descartes begins by showing that the faculty of imagination is different from the faculty of understanding.

- P1. The imagination uses images, e.g. imagining a triangle. But the understanding does not. We cannot imagine a chiliagon, a two-dimensional figure with 1,000 sides. But we can work mathematically with it, e.g. working out its internal angles.
- P2. Imagining takes more effort than understanding.
- C1. Therefore, imagination and understanding are different.
- P3. Imagination is not essential to me, while understanding is. I cannot be me (a thinking thing) without understanding, but I can be me without imagination.
- P4. The best explanation for all these differences is that imagination depends upon having a body. (Imagination draws its ideas from the body, which makes its ideas sensory images and difficult to work with, and makes imagination not essential to a thinking thing. Being purely mental, understanding draws its ideas from itself, making them non-imagistic and easy to work with, and understanding is essential to a thinking thing.)
- C2. Therefore, it is probable that the body (a physical object) exists.

It is, however, only probable, so the argument doesn't give us knowledge of the existence of physical objects.

Descartes' second argument is from perception. It is natural to think that we know that physical objects exist because we perceive them. Our perceptions are both involuntary and 'much more lively and vivid' than imagination or memory. One explanation is that they are caused by physical objects that exist independent of our minds. But Descartes reminds us of his sceptical arguments: perception does not give us knowledge of the causes of our perceptual experiences. The mere fact that perceptual experiences are vivid and involuntary isn't enough to show that they are caused by mind-independent physical objects.

It does, however, provide the starting point for his next argument. I have added in missing premises in brackets, some of which Descartes assumes because he has argued for them previously.

- P1. I have involuntary perceptual experiences of physical objects.
- P2. (These experiences are caused by some substance.)
- P3. If the cause of my perceptual experiences is my own mind, my perceptual experiences are voluntary.
- P4. Because I know my mind, I would know if my perceptual experiences are voluntary.
- C1. Therefore, because I know that my perceptual experiences are involuntary, I know that the cause of my perceptual experiences is not my own mind.
- C2. Therefore, the cause must be some substance outside me - either God or physical objects.
- P5. If the cause is God, then God has created me with a very strong tendency to have a false belief (that physical objects exist) that I cannot correct.
- P6. If God has created me with such a tendency, then God is a deceiver.
- P7. (God is perfect by definition.)
- C3. (Therefore,) God is not a deceiver.
- C4. (Therefore, God did not create me with a tendency to have false beliefs that I cannot correct.)
- C5. (Therefore, if God exists, I do not have such a tendency.)
- C6. Therefore, if God exists, the cause of my perceptual experiences of physical objects is the existence of physical objects.
- P8. (God exists.)
- C7. Therefore, there is an external world of physical objects that causes our perceptual experiences.

This argument is one of the best examples of the use of rational intuition and deduction. It is surprising to think that we cannot know from sense experience that physical objects exist. It is even more surprising to be told that we can nevertheless know that physical objects exist using a priori reasoning.

EMPIRICIST RESPONSES TO DESCARTES' PROOF OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD

Descartes' argument for the existence of physical objects depends on his arguments for the existence of God. If these fail, then he hasn't shown that physical objects exist. For discussion of objections to his arguments for God's existence, see the handouts 'Descartes' Trademark argument', 'Descartes' cosmological argument' and 'Descartes' ontological argument'.

In (P2), Descartes assumes that his perceptions have a cause. If this is because he thinks that everything has a cause, then Hume argues in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, that this is not something we can know. The claims 'everything has a cause' and 'something cannot come out of nothing' are not analytically true. 'Some things do not have a cause' is not a *contradiction in terms* like 'Some bachelors are married' is. Of course, from our experience, we have good reason to think that everything has a cause, but this is still only a contingent truth; it may be false. We cannot show that it holds without exception. So it is possible that our

perceptual experiences of physical objects have no cause. This is not to argue that 'for all we know', there is no cause of our perceptual experiences. Rather, Hume's argument claims that we cannot know a priori that they have a cause. It is no contradiction (though it is very strange!) to suppose that they are uncaused.

If we don't know a priori that there are physical objects that cause our experiences of them, how do we know that they exist? Bertrand Russell provides an inductive argument for the claim that the existence of physical objects is the best explanation of our perceptual experience.

- P1. Either physical objects exist and cause my sense-data or physical objects do not exist nor cause my sense-data.
- P2. I can't prove either claim is true or false.
- C1. Therefore, I have to treat them as hypotheses. (A hypothesis is a proposal that needs to be confirmed or rejected by reasoning or experience.)
- P3. The hypothesis that physical objects exist and cause my sense-data is better.
- C2. Therefore, physical objects exist and cause my sense-data.

What is Russell's argument for (P3)? One way to test a hypothesis is to see whether it explains why my experience is the way it is. If I see a cat first in a corner of the room and then later on the sofa, then if the cat is a physical object, it travelled from the corner to the sofa when I wasn't looking. If there is no cat apart from what I see in my sense-data, then the cat does not exist when I don't see it. It springs into existence first in the corner, and then later on the sofa. Nothing connects my two perceptions. But that's incredibly puzzling - indeed, it is no explanation at all of why my sense-data are the way they are! So the hypothesis that there is a physical object, the cat, that causes what I see is the best explanation of my sense-data.

As we have seen, Descartes rejects such arguments as unsatisfactory as the conclusion lacks certainty. But perhaps inductive arguments are as good as we can get, as no deduction of the existence of physical objects is possible. (George Berkeley argues that the very concept of a mind-independent physical object is incoherent. See the handout 'Idealism' for his argument.)