Descartes 5: The Sixth Meditation

This week we are turning to Descartes’ Sixth Meditation, which discusses two principal topics, the nature of material things and the relationship between mind and body. We noted in the discussion of the Fifth Meditation some reasons for thinking that the truths of mathematics were, despite the doubts of the First Meditation, more certain truths concerning bodies than any others. Hence, on this basis we might be tempted to think that such things as bodies exist though we have, as yet, been given no conclusive reasons for thinking that they do. Certainly, however, given the proofs of the existence of God we have gone through in both the Third and the Fifth Meditations, we should now accept that God exists and there is, at least, no problem in thinking that God would be capable of creating such things as bodies. There are two reasons why we would think this certainly possible given the previous arguments for the existence of God. On the grounds of the argument from the Third Meditation we have concluded that God is what is most real, hence since bodies would be less real than God, God would be capable of creating them. Similarly, on the basis of the argument of the Fifth Mediation, we have concluded that God is the most necessary being, so bodies would be things less necessary than God and hence God would be capable of creating them.

Descartes now turns to a description of cognition in order to arrive at how it is that my mind is capable of arriving at the view that there are bodies. In doing so, Descartes describes the difference between two distinct
elements of the mind: the imagination and the understanding. Imagination involves setting figures before my mind in addition to purely conceiving of them. Whilst imagination adds to the thoughts of things some picture or representation of them it is not clearly a necessary part of my mind. Imagination seems to depend on something beyond me whilst understanding belongs to my inmost notion of myself. In understanding something I simply turn over thoughts in my mind whilst in imagining I turn towards bodies and their qualities.

If we look at the data of sense there is added to the fact of the appearances of things that I am not in control of the receipt of their impressions. I cannot decide when or where to see or hear the things I see or hear. This is clearly one of the sources of my belief that things that appear to be beyond me really are beyond me in the way they appear to be. We can add to this the fact that the use of the senses comes earlier to us in time in our existence than the use of reason which leads us to naturally suppose that ideas depend on the data of the senses and this gives another reason why we tend to believe the data of the senses. However, more important than either of these reasons as a view that I have that there exist such things as bodies is the attachment I have to my own body. I cannot be separated from it and when things are done to it (such as someone or something coming into contact with it) I immediately feel sensations of pleasure and/or pain. This last point is connected by Descartes to what he terms the “teachings of nature” such as the pangs of hunger I feel where a particular sensation leads
me apparently automatically to make certain kinds of judgment such as needing to sustain myself by means of food.

However, to these points all of which help to explain my belief in the existence of bodies and not least to my belief in the existence of my own body Descartes adds some points that remind us again of the problems with sensory data. We have had many occasions of perceptual confusion where objects appeared to us from a certain distance to have a shape which, when approached more closely, they did not have and similarly people can suffer pain when there is no limb to which it belongs (phantom limb). The First Meditation also added to these reasons for doubting sensory knowledge other factors such as the problem concerning dreaming, a problem which we were reminded of again in the Third Meditation even affects the evidence of independence of bodies since bodies appear to us to be independent of us when we encounter them in dreams and yet they are not independent of us in such a case but rather dependent on us.

After having looked at these problems Descartes now invokes again the existence of God pointing out that if I can conceive two things as clearly and distinctly separate from each other this is a reason in itself why they are likely to be distinct from each other since if I can conceive them as distinct then God would have the power to make them so. Hence if I can conceive of myself as essentially being a thinking thing then since in thought I can separate my mind from my body and come to see that my essential nature seems to reside in thought then it is conceivable that God could lead me to exist purely mentally without attaching a body to me. The thinking thing
that I can conceive myself to me has no properties in itself that are part of bodies but is rather entirely distinguishable from bodies.

These considerations give a basis for thinking of mind as something distinct in principle from body. However the nature of body itself and my reasons for believing in it still need clarification. In addition to the capacity to think (which we can identify with understanding) we do also have the capacity to receive sensory impressions (which we can relate to the imagination). Since the impressions in question are generally produced without my will being involved the presence of them before me suggests that I am dependent on something that is beyond me. This will either be the supposed bodies themselves, or God, or something else that is intelligible rather than sensible. But since we have established that God is not a deceiver he would not give me the impression that the bodies were the cause of my impressions unless this was true. However we might wonder at this point why we should believe that the effect accurately portrays the cause given, as Descartes has told us earlier, that even if the idea of the thing comes from the thing this does not prove that it gives us the correct notion of the thing. (Example of the sun). In response to this problem Descartes points to the way my nature assures me of the fact that I have a body through the sensations of hunger and thirst we have already mentioned. When we attend to the nature of our connection with our own bodies we are forced to the conclusion that we do not merely inhabit them but are closely intermingled with them which is why it is not merely our body that feels pain but we that do so. This suggests that there is a “real union” between our
mind and our body. This element of our awareness also points us to the
existence of other bodies than our own as these other bodies are the source
of the pains and pleasures of our own.

What is the cause, therefore, of the fact that I seem to be deceived by
the senses when these senses are part of the ordered system of things created
by God? Sensory perceptions inform me in a broad way about what will be
beneficial or harmful for my body. But such perceptions are not themselves
reliable touchstones for the existence of things except when combined with
the mental activity of judgment. It is judgment that has to be used to
describe whether sensory impressions are correct in any given instance or
not and hence it is not really the sensory impressions as such that are
mistaken but my mental relation to them which may simply involve my
failing to think about what would be reliable in any given sensory
impression.

This argument may however seem insufficient in relation to cases
where the sensory impression I am given is that something is beneficial to
me when it wouldn’t be so. An example would be a pleasant tasting poison.
However, the reason why I am deceived in this case, is that my knowledge
is not all encompassing so I am not aware of the poison contained within the
pleasant tasting food. Or, take the example of dropsy, where a sickness
produces a dryness in my throat so that I long to drink when drinking would
in fact make me more sick. In this instance it appears that nature produces in
me a longing to do the reverse of what would be good for me. How does
God allow this to take place if he is the author of an ordered system?
In replying to this objection Descartes says more about the difference between mind and body. Whilst body is something that can be divided into parts, mind is not, it is, rather, indivisible. Parts of the body can be taken away without the mind being affected in its operation by this. Next the mind is not affected by all parts of the body equally but mainly by the brain. Parts of the body can be affected in the same manner by distinct impressions operating on them and coming from different parts of the nerves and fibres. Whilst the reason why a particular sensation is felt in a particular part of the body can have innumerable causes the signal to the brain that has relation to the mental state is that which is produced by the most likely physical cause that operates in the majority of cases. Since the complexity of the physical interplay is best regulated by a mechanism likely to produce the most plausible impression in the mind of what has occurred in the body the best set of physical arrangements is all the same likely to produce mistaken impressions in some cases, mistakes however which still are based on my own judgment in relation to the well regulated machinery created by God.

The result of this explanation is to help to resolve the sceptical doubts about the nature of the senses. The senses themselves do not deceive me; my judgments concerning them are what are false. My senses report the correct state of affairs more often than not as they follow a regulated pattern set by God. With regard to the difference between sleeping and waking there are many good criteria for distinguishing between them, criteria which are usually right even if wrong in a given instance. The key way in which
Descartes now suggests we can and do distinguish sleeping from waking is that in the case of waking experience the elements of it are all connected together by means of memory whilst this does not occur in sleep between the variant experiences I call dreams. Not only is there continuity between waking experience of a type denied to sleeping experience but also, given the axiom of God’s truthfulness, I have no reason to dismiss this as a reason for thinking that the waking world is so distinct from the sleeping one. Furthermore, the senses are capable of being checked and guided by the intellect and memory. The intellect, with its capacity for perceiving clear and distinct ideas, enables a correct relation to the senses to be formed. This is solidified by the data of memory.

Thus Descartes attempts to resolve his doubts in order: firstly he removes the doubt concerning the evil demon by demonstrating the existence of God. The existence of God guarantees in its turn that my doubts concerning mathematical qualities must be false as the only reason I had for doubting the operation of my intellect with regard to them concerned the evil demon. Next I am able to resolve my doubt concerning dreaming by demonstrating that the coherence of experience is guaranteed by the cooperation of my memory, my senses and my intellect. The only doubt that is not removed entirely concerns the reliability of the senses. It remains important to Descartes that the evidence of the senses should be subordinate to that of the intellect as by means of this subordination he is able to show the need for the concepts of pure understanding to correct and improve on the data of imagination. By this means he assures us of the need for science
as science also overcomes the data of the senses in favour of deductions from set-out demonstrations (remember here the case of the sun, an important contemporary example for Descartes).

There are hence three questions that emerge from this weeks lecture:

1) has Descartes successfully resolved his sceptical doubts? 2) has Descartes got good reasons for his assertion that mind and body are distinct from each other? 3) does Descartes successfully address the problem of misleading data from the senses given his assumption that God is truthful?