

Lesson from *Meditations V*

At least some of what I think of when I have ideas of bodies

their extension and the ways their extension is modified

is something positive and real

and the sciences of extension show that the ideas I put together of modifications of extension contains no contradiction

God can bring about anything positive and real, as long as it contains no contradiction

So it is at least possible that bodies might exist

A Probability Proof

There is reason to think that the existence of at least one material thing, my own body, is not merely possible, but probable:

I have a power of imagination.

This power of imagination leads me to have a special kind of idea of some of the same things that I know through the intellect by means of a different sort of idea

(imagined ideas are more like pictures of things, understood ideas more like the understanding of the definitions of things)

For this reason, imagination is “redundant”

(Understanding is not redundant because it tells me more than imagination)

Consequently, God could have created me without it

As a further consequence, it must be something that is “really distinct” from me, insofar as I am a thinking being, and that is only “accidentally” attached to me

But what is it, exactly, that is “accidentally” attached to me insofar as I have a power of imagination?

Go back to the fact that imagination is the ability to make pictures of things I can just as well understand without the pictures

Pictures take up space

But, as a thinking being I am not extended

This is because I can clearly and distinctly conceive everything that goes into me as a thinking being while still doubting that I have a body

God can bring about anything that I clearly and distinctly perceive

So, even if I in fact have a body, God could have created me without one

This means that I am “really distinct” from any body

as a thinking being, I am not extended

So go back once again to the fact that imagination is the ability to make pictures of things I can just as well understand without the pictures

Pictures take up space

But, as a thinking being I am not extended

The best way to explain why this power exists is to suppose that I am attached to an extended body on which images can be impressed, and that when I imagine I turn to this body and look at something that is present in this body

as opposed to looking within myself

So the existence of at least one extended thing is probable

(it is not certain, because this is a merely conjectural way of accounting for ideas of imagination)

But if it is at least probable that there is one material thing, there may well be others that affect this one for better or worse

A Review of what was previously believed about body on the basis of sensory experience

- i. I have (or even am in totality) an extended and shaped body
- ii. This body is surrounded by other extended and shaped bodies that can affect it for better or worse
- iii. My sensations of pleasure and pain are indications of which bodies are affecting me for better or worse
- iv. I also experience sensations of hunger, thirst, appetites of other sorts, and passions such as fear or anger. These feelings both inform me of disorders in my body and incline me what to do to relieve that disorder
- v. My sensations of hardness, heat, and other tactile qualities, as well as of light, colour, smell, taste, and sound, while sensed as my own personal and immediate ideas, proceed from other bodies that differ from one another in virtue of these different sensations they cause in me
- vi. External objects resemble the sensations they bring about in me
- vii. There are no ideas in my intellect which did not originate from sensory experience

Reasons for these sensory beliefs

Three reasons for belief (v)

- these ideas occur independently of my will
- they have a vivacity that cannot be equalled by the ideas I produce in accord with my will
- I have a strong natural impulse to form this belief

Reasons for (vi)

- I have no other way of conceiving the differences between the bodies that I believe are responsible for my different ideas of sensation
- natural impulse

Reasons for (vii)

- I was able to sense before I developed strong reasoning capacities and so originally got most of my ideas from sense experience
- my own ideas are faint and dull by comparison
- my own ideas seem largely to be built up from copies of those I received in sensation

Reasons for (i) and (ii)

- I see and touch all other bodies from the perspective occupied by one special body
- whereas my other sensations appear to stay in the bodies that cause them, my sensations of pain and pleasure, and my feelings of hunger, thirst, and other appetites stay in this special body
 - heat stays in the fire, pain in me
 - colour stays in the orange, the visual after-image stays in me
 - I can only make my hunger and thirst go away by feeding and watering myself, not by feeding and watering other things

Reasons for (iii) and (iv)

- I can see no connection between the sensations of pleasure and pain, or the appetites and passions, and the activities they prompt me to perform; this is instead a product of the same natural impulse mentioned earlier

Reasons given in earlier Meditations for rejecting these reasons for sensory beliefs

Natural impulses have misled me in the past

this is proven by their teaching me things that are contrary to reason

e.g., that the Sun is a foot across

e.g., that the Sun rotates around the earth

My ideas of sensation could be produced by some faculty in myself that operates independently of my will

Reasons given in earlier Meditations for rejecting these sensory beliefs

They have occasionally deceived me in the past

A particularly notable instance: the phantom limb argument

this teaches that even internal sensations of pleasure and pain may not inform me of the state of a body that I have

The dreaming argument

The defectiveness of my nature (this reason has already been dismissed)

The validity of all of these reasons for rejecting sensory beliefs needs to be reassessed in light of what I have learned about myself and about God

This is not to say that everything I previously believed should be completely granted

(vi) and (vii) will be shown to be largely false

But we are now in a position to demonstrate that they all have some truth to them

Proof of the certainty of the existence of material things

I have ideas of extended things by means of sensation.

These ideas could only have one of three causes:

- myself
- God or other things that contain extension only eminently
- other things that are formally (really) extended

Why I could not be the cause of my ideas of sensation.

I clearly and distinctly perceive myself as a thinking being, but do not perceive in myself any capacity to produce thoughts independently of my will.

So I can think of myself apart from any such imagined capacity.

But if I can think of myself apart from any such capacity then it is possible that God could have created me without any such capacity.

But if God could have created me without a particular feature, that feature could not be part of my essence — part of what makes me what I am. It would have to be a separable “add on”

But why would God add such a feature to me if it serves no purpose?

Why, particularly, given that he has *also* added a further feature, a natural impulse to believe that these sensations are produced by external things?

Reasons given in earlier Meditations for rejecting sensory beliefs

Natural impulses have misled me in the past

My ideas of sensation could be produced by some faculty in myself that operates independently of my will

Reasons given in earlier Meditations for rejecting sensory beliefs

Natural impulses have misled me in the past

But then God has given me some means of discovering my mistake

If they are misleading me about the existence of bodies, then my mistake is incorrigible because I clearly and distinctly perceive that bodies *could* exist

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My ideas of sensation could be produced by some faculty in myself that operates independently of my will

But then I can clearly and distinctly conceive myself without it (naturally, since it is hidden from me)

which means God could have created me without it

since he can produce anything I can clearly and distinctly conceive

On the relation between sense and imagination

Unlike imagination, the power of sense is a power only to receive ideas,

not a power to produce them.

The existence of sensation is therefore an argument for the existence of something else, responsible for producing ideas of sensation.

We have just seen that there is nothing else in me, as I essentially am, that could be that thing.

Why God or some other being that is only eminently extended could not be the cause of my ideas of extension

God did not need to create me with a sensory capacity.

I experience a strong natural impulse to suppose that my ideas of extension are caused by extended things, which God likewise did not need to give me.

Were there no such things, I would have no way of discovering the error of that impulse.

So, even though I am not compelled to judge that sensible things exist, God would be a deceiver for giving me unnecessary things that tempt me to make such a judgment and no means of uncovering the error in it.

God is no deceiver.

So extended things must exist.

Limitations on the argument

Though I can know that extended things must exist, I cannot know that those things are modified in exactly the way they appear to be modified in my ideas.

(Experience proves that in many cases they are not.)

Though extended things are bodies, I am not yet in any position to be certain that there is anything more to these bodies than just extension.

(So far as I know at this point, they are just cut up bits of space.)