Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy VI”

This reading will feature the last meditation (also translated by Jonathan Bennett), which has a two-fold aim. On the one hand, Descartes aims to make good on the promise of the first meditation and finally prove that objects in the external world exist and that we can know things about them with certainty. On the other, he hopes to prove that the mind and the body are completely separate things. The stuff about material objects is the culmination of a line of reasoning that runs from the second meditation through the fifth: Descartes gives some dubious arguments for the existence of God, and argues that anything he can perceive clearly must be correct because God wouldn’t allow him to be so mistaken. For our purposes, those arguments and the stuff about external objects aren’t important. We’re reading this to concentrate on the arguments about the mind.

Because we’re less interested in the the arguments about the external world, the last page or so of the meditation is isn’t relevant to us. So read from the beginning of the meditation on p. 28 through to the end of the first full paragraph on p. 34.

Notes:

- p. 28: Notice Descartes’s claim at the outset that anything he can imagine vividly and clearly can be created by God. This is the basis for his later claims that anything we can vividly and clearly imagine apart must be distinct—that is, numerically non-identical. This later claim is a key premise in the arguments to come. Numerical non-identity is a different from qualitative non-identity, though it’s easy to mix them up. If you take the ace of hearts out of two decks from the same casino, you’ll have two cards that are qualitatively identical because they look exactly the same, but numerically distinct because you have two of them.

- pp. 28-29: has two arguments about understanding and imagination. These aren’t very important for our purposes, but they’re still interesting if you care about the relationship between imagination and understanding.

- p. 29: Notice the three-fold plan here There will be a review of what he used to believe, a review of the reasons he had for doubting those things, and arguments about what he ought to believe now. Bennett will use the parenthetical numerals to help you keep an eye out for where each part begins and ends.

- p. 29: Descartes uses the term “idea” more broadly than we do today. For Descartes, ideas are not just the results of our own thinking and planning, but also the results of basic sensory activities like seeing and hearing.

- pp. 30-31: Under the third heading of his three-fold plan, Descartes gives three arguments about the distinctness of the mind and the body (that’s
The view he's arguing for is called Substance Dualism, according to which the mind and the body are two separate things. Going back to Aristotle, there's an old sense of the word “substance” that just means “thing”—that is, something you could count. Pay special attention to these arguments—do you think they’re any good?

- p. 31: Descartes argued in the fourth meditation that a cause must have at least as much reality as its effect. So when he says that the thing causing his sensory ideas must have all the reality that his ideas have, he means that whatever causes our ideas must be the same substance as the ideas, or it must be the way the ideas represent it as being (so things that cause ideas of red apples must really be red and apple-shaped). Since Descartes thinks ideas aren’t caused by anyone’s mind, the things that cause them can’t be of the same substance, so they must really be as they appear, i.e. external physical objects.

- p. 32: Notice that if Descartes is committed to the claim that God isn’t a deceiver, he needs to explain how it’s possible for us to make mistakes about the external world, as we sometimes do. One explanation that Descartes gives in the fourth meditation is that we go wrong because our free will permits us to judge things incorrectly. But cases like a poison that tastes good to us can’t be explained away by the will, since our senses systematically present it as being good. So Descartes needs to give another explanation for how this is possible without God being a deceiver.

- p. 33: Dropsy is now called Edema, which is a swelling in bodily tissues caused by a fluid imbalance.

- p. 33: Notice that Descartes gives a fourth argument for Dualism here. Notice also that he appears committed to the claim that the mind and the body are able to interact with one another. How might that work on his view?

- p. 34: Remember, you can stop reading at the end of the first full paragraph on the page.

Questions to think about:

1. Do you agree with Descartes that being able to clearly imagine things apart shows by itself that they aren’t identical?

2. If your mind were immaterial, do you think it would still have a location? Do you think it would take up space? Have mass? Volume? Charge?