

Descartes on Our Natural Belief in Bodies—and a Response

Normal belief in bodies characterized 8th-9th par. of M3, AT 38.3-39.1

-a belief that there are “things existing outside me” which resemble my [sensory] ideas, and from which those ideas derive 38.3. The thing “is sending its likeness...into me” (38.7). I think this is not just the thought that the outside thing is like what we take it to be like, but that we think of it as being a certain way by means of supposing the thing resembles something we find within us (our idea): Here Descartes is construing our natural thought about bodies as aligning with the Aristotelian/Scholastic theory of perception (see Adams’s description).

-our thinking of the external object seems to go through our thinking of the idea(s) it supposedly produces: we seem to think of it as something which produced these and those ideas, and is in ways like them

-Descartes is out to vindicate belief in the existence of “corporeal objects,” but he is out to jettison that important aspect of ordinary/Aristotelian thought about what these objects are like.

-believed to exist through a “spontaneous impulse” (38.8) / “natural impulse” (39.0): We are “taught by nature” (38.5) that they exist. We do not see by the “light of nature” that they exist (38.8). Descartes writes that these are “very different things” (38.8). We do not C&DP that bodies exist.

-the ideas of bodies come to us in a way that does not depend on our will (38.5). We have “a great inclination to believe that these [sensory] ideas issue from corporeal things” (80.0—here we go to a M6 characterization); however, Descartes thinks one can refrain from believing in the bodies themselves.

Normal belief in bodies – evaluated 9th-12th par. of M3, 26.8-28.1 AT 38.7-40.8

-Natural impulses, unlike what we see by the light of nature, are dubious, and have led Descartes astray in the past (27.1) 39.0

-That my sensations come to me independently of my will doesn’t prove that they come from “things existing outside of me” (27.2) 39.1

-and doesn’t prove that the things that caused them resemble them

-So, we need a proof of “corporeal things”...

(and not just in the way we need a backing argument for our c&dp’s: in the case of corporeal things, we don’t even c&dp that they exist yet)

A Conservative Response: p. 3 of this handout

-“conservative”: will be mysterious for now. But the non-note text should give some idea of what epistemic conservatism amounts to. I consider Reid to be something of the intellectual forbearer of modern epistemic conservatism

-I guess I have no quarrel with Descartes’s characterization of our beliefs in bodies being based on “natural instinct”. My complaint is actually his contrast of that with what he thinks are the better bases for other beliefs

Back to the proof of bodies (last time’s handout), noting the trouble, or at least tension, Descartes finds himself in as he is there defending the propriety of following his natural instinct to believe in corporeal objects. I suppose one way of putting a pointed question to Descartes there is: Why isn’t it enough (to evade the charge of being a deceiver) for God to give you a way by which you might come to see that a false thing you have a strong natural inclination to believe *may well* be false? That is, why not change “is false” to “may well be false” in 2, ROST, and 4 of

the proof? And then shouldn't you deny that modified (4)? I mean, back in Meditation Three, you were strongly urging us to see what a sorry track record your natural impulses have. Why couldn't God giving you a way of discerning that count as God giving you a way to see that the natural impulses you are here urging us to trust (now that a non-deceiving God has been demonstrated) may well be false?

and then a quick hit on:

Clear and Distinct Understanding and the Properties of Bodies

-Immediately after proving the existence of corporeal things, Descartes warns us that they might not be exactly like we ordinarily think they are (AT 80.1)

-Descartes says that corporeal things "contain everything I clearly and distinctly understand" 80.2 – and then goes on to give a good hint as to what kind of properties these are.

-This I think is where Descartes is laying the groundwork for his physics (recall his letter to Mersenne from our first handout)

-What's wrong with "secondary qualities"? Focus on the "understand" part of "clearly and distinctly understand," and look back to the first two paragraphs of M6. Where our translation has "pure intellection" (AT 72.1), better (at least for our purposes) translations have "pure understanding." Secondary qualities aren't "clearly understood" because they aren't "understood" ("intellected"??) at all, but are conceived by means of imagination.

My long note, having it out with Descartes, at long last: n. 30, on the bottoms of pp. 237-238 of my book, *The Appearance of Ignorance*. First, the sentence in the text that the note attaches to is:

My conservatism, at least, runs very deep: The basic conservative story of how epistemic justification is generated for our perceptual beliefs is also the basic story of how we come to be justified in believing the likes of $2 + 3 = 5$. In both cases, we are justified in thinking that things are as they seem to us to be (absent good reason to think otherwise).³⁰

The note itself:

30. Here I take myself to be departing from the deeply anti-conservative attitude I find most emblematically expressed in the (disastrous in its implications) ninth paragraph of the Third Meditation, where Descartes distinguishes between “natural impulses” to belief and being able to intellectually “see” the truth of something by “the natural light.” Descartes is examining his long-standing belief in “things existing outside [him]” (Descartes 1996: 26) or “external objects” (Descartes 1971: 79), and has, in the previous paragraph, given this account of how this belief arose: “Nature has apparently taught me to think this” (1996: 26). Here is how Descartes draws the crucial distinction:

When I say “Nature taught me to think this,” all I mean is that a spontaneous impulse leads me to believe it, not that its truth has been revealed to me by some natural light. There is a big difference here. Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light—for example that from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on—cannot in any way be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty both as trustworthy as the natural light and also capable of showing me that such things are not true. But as for my natural impulses, I have often judged in the past that they were pushing me in the wrong direction when it was a question of choosing the good, and I do not see why I should place any greater confidence in them in other matters. (1996: 26–7)

His beliefs in external objects having fallen on the dark side of this crucial distinction, Descartes refuses to accept them, at least in his Meditations, unless and until they can be verified by things that are not just believed by “some blind impulse” (as he puts it in the twelfth paragraph), but that he can see to be true by the “natural light.” Much is going on here, and I won’t go into it all. But I should note that the “natural” belief that Descartes is speaking of here is not just that there are external (in some suitable sense) objects, but also that they in some seemingly murky and problematic way resemble his “ideas” of them: “But the chief question at this point concerns the ideas which I take to be derived from things existing outside me: what is my reason for thinking they resemble those things? Nature has apparently taught me to think this.” Here, Descartes may well be saddling our “natural belief” with some extra baggage it doesn’t actually carry, though issues of interpretation are tricky—not to mention issues about the actual nature of our relevant thoughts! And (especially for those of us with a history of actual error in matters of math and logic) much needs to be hashed out about how Descartes manages to individuate “faculties” so that believing what one sees to be true by the “natural light” presumably ends up with a pristine track record, as compared with the apparently very sorry record of following mere natural impulses to belief. But at the end of the day, the conservative, like me, thinks that Descartes is just fooling himself here: There is no great difference of the type Descartes thinks he has found. Ultimately, we are just going by how things seem to us. When appearances are in conflict, we give some up in favor of others, often with the aid of explanations of how and when we are apt to go wrong, and if all goes well (as it often enough does) we may in that way come to learn that some types of natural impulses tend to misfire. And on the other side, some of these would-be beliefs we find ourselves impelled toward fit together well with another, and survive and are bolstered by our best attempts to tidy up our view of the world, perhaps to the extent that we might start to think of them as having some altogether different and higher status than something that could just result from our best attempt to best manage appearances. But that way by which we come to “see” things to be true is in reality to arrive at a view of the world that is built on a suitably refined way of following our natural impulses toward belief, not to reach outside of what is indicated by our natural impulses and instead rely on a totally different (and pristinely trustworthy) source, as it seems that Descartes’ “natural light” is supposed to be.