

Discussion: Descartes' *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*

Purpose: The purpose of this discussion is to practice charitably interpreting philosophical texts that, on first glance, appear to contain contradictory assertions. The questions below are **open-ended**. That is, although some answers are better than others (in the sense that they are better supported by textual evidence), most of the questions do not have a single correct answer that can unambiguously be inferred from the reading. The questions are also difficult. Give them your best shot.

The Role of Imagination

First, discuss your answers to the first two questions from last night's reading assignment. Then consider the following questions about the role of imagination in the acquisition of knowledge for Descartes. Descartes' third rule is that we "ought to investigate what we can clearly and evidently intuit or deduce with certainty" [Descartes, 1985]. He then distinguishes between intuition and imagination, arguing that the latter is not always a source of "clear" and "evident" judgments.

By 'intuition' I do not mean the fluctuating testimony of the senses or the deceptive judgment of the imagination as it botches things together (368-369).

Descartes concludes his discussion of rule three by claiming, "So far as our powers of understanding are concerned, we should admit no more than these [routes to knowledge, namely, intuition and deduction] and reject all others as suspect and liable to error" (370).

In contrast, in rules twelve and fourteen, Descartes claims that the imagination plays an important role in acquiring knowledge. Rule fourteen, for example, states, "The problem should be re-expressed in terms of the real extension of bodies and should be pictured in our imagination entirely by means of bare figures." Are rules three, twelve, and fourteen contradictory? Are they in tension? If so, why? If not, why not? Here are some further questions that you should answer before reaching a final judgment.

1. Find two examples of propositions that can be known via intuition alone (if possible). Find two examples of propositions that can be

known on the basis of a combined use of intuition and imagination. If you can, find examples of propositions that cannot be known on the basis of intuition alone. Similarly, find an example of a proposition that imagination is useless in helping us know.

2. In your own words, describe what Descartes means by “intuition” and “imagination” respectively. In other words, define these two terms. Provide line numbers and, if appropriate, quotations to support your interpretation.
3. Explain the following quotation at line 441:

if we are to imagine something, and are to make use, not of the pure intellect, but of the intellect aided by images depicted in imagination, then nothing can be ascribed to magnitudes in general which cannot also be ascribed to any species of magnitude.

Additional Questions

1. In his discussion of Rule 4 (around line 373), Descartes claims that there is evidence that thinkers in antiquity had a “method” for investigating the truth of things. What method is he describing and what evidence does he provide of this lost art?
2. At the end of his discussion of Rule 12 (about line 429), Descartes divides the rules into three different groups. In your own words, explain to the best of your ability the distinction between the three groups.

References

Rene Descartes. Rules for direction of the mind. In John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, editors, *The philosophical writings of Descartes*, volume 2. Cambridge University Press Cambridge, 1985.