

It is to cure this inclination to rely on the senses that Descartes considers the bit of wax. Read that passage once more (pp. 325–326). All the sensible qualities by means of which we recognize the wax can change. But we still judge that it is the same wax. What does that mean?

The distinction between *ordinary perception* and *judgment* is crucial for Descartes. It is illustrated by the hats and coats we see through the window. We say that we *see* men passing, but this is inaccurate, for they may be just robots dressed like men. What is actually happening in ordinary perception is that our intellect is drawing an *inference* on the basis of certain *data* (supplied by the senses) and issuing a *judgment*. Judging is an activity of the mind—indeed, as we'll see in *Meditation IV*, of the will.

Perceiving, then, is not a purely passive registration by the senses. Implicit in all perception is judgment, or *giving assent*. In *ordinary perception*, these judgments are apt to be obscure, confused, and just plain wrong. But fortunately they can be corrected by the application of ideas that are clear and distinct. (These points will be crucial in *Meditation IV*, where Descartes explains how it is possible for us to err.)

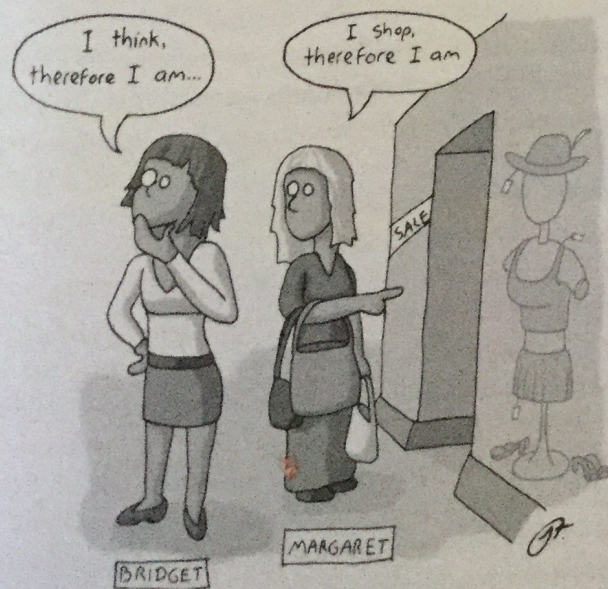
With respect to the bit of wax, the moral is that it is “grasped, not by the senses or the power of having mental images, but by the understanding

alone.” When based wholly on sense, our perception is “imperfect and confused.” When directed, however, to “the things of which the wax consists” (the mathematically determinable simples of extension, figure, and motion), knowledge of the wax can be *clear and distinct*.

Now we can understand why Descartes introduces the wax example. If even here knowledge cannot be found in sensation, but only in a “purely mental inspection,” then we should have less difficulty remembering that knowledge of *what we are* must also be approached in this way. Our tendency to think of ourselves as what we can *sense* of ourselves—these hands, this head, these eyes—is considerably undermined. Indeed, I must know myself “much more truly and certainly” even than the wax.

And there follows a remarkable conclusion: “I can’t grasp anything more easily or plainly than my mind.” (What would Freud have said to that?)

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- Q13. What qualities, then, belong to the wax essentially? (Look again at the basic principles of Descartes’ physics on pp. 315–316.)
- Q14. Why is our imagination incapable of grasping these qualities of the wax? By what faculty do we grasp it?
- Q15. How does the wax example help to cure our habitual inclination to trust the senses?
- Q16. How does our language tend to mislead us?
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Both inferences seem to be correct. What reason is there to prefer Bridget's formulation?

Meditation III: On God's Existence

I will now close my eyes, plug my ears, and withdraw all my senses. I will rid my thoughts of the images of physical objects—or, since that's beyond me, I'll write those images off as empty illusions. Talking with myself and looking more deeply into myself, I'll try gradually to come to know myself better. I am a thinking thing—a thing that doubts, affirms, denies, understands a few things, is ignorant of many things, wills, and refuses. I also sense and have mental images. For, as I've noted, even though the things of which I have sensations or mental images may not exist outside me, I'm certain that the modifications of thought called sensations and mental images exist in me insofar as they are just modifications of thought.