

Wax Example and The Argument from Change

According to *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction*, the wax discussion in Descartes' Second Meditation is an illustration of the 'Argument from Change' (Dicker, 51). This argument and Descartes' wax example support the 'Substance Theory'—"a thing is composed of various properties plus an underlying substance to which these properties belong"—as the correct answer to the enquiry regarding the 'true nature' of a thing; the answer to the question, "What is a thing?" (Dicker, 51)

The Argument from Change is developed as follows:

Premise 1: "We can distinguish between (a) all of a thing's determinate [absolute] properties changing without the thing's ceasing to exist and (b) a thing's ceasing to exist."

Premise 2: "We can distinguish between (a) and (b) only if a thing is composed, in addition to its properties, of a permanent, underlying substance."

Conclusion: "A thing is composed, in addition to its properties, of a permanent, underlying substance."
(Dicker, 52)

Though, the Argument from Change is plausible, what I am sceptical about is the validity of Descartes' wax example as an illustration of the said argument. If 'candle' was used instead of 'wax', then the candle ceased to exist¹ (as far as our understanding of what a candle is) when the fire 'consumed' it. It is as though it transformed into another 'thing' and in some way, ceased to exist for we would not consider it as a 'candle' that we can normally light. We can agree that the word '*candle*'² is some kind of determinate property of wax that belongs to (a) because the wax seemed to lose the property of '*candle*' without ceasing to exist. Since we accepted that '*candle*' is a determinate property of some kind, we can say that the thing referred to as a 'candle' has a determinate property called '*candle*' that can be distinguished as (b) because the thing we used to call a 'candle' is not the candle we normally know due to the loss of the determinate property called '*candle*' when it was consumed by the fire. However, the words 'candle' and 'wax' refer to

¹ The attached meanings to the word 'candle' seem not to apply to the fully consumed candle and thus, it is proper to say that it is no longer a candle (i.e. it ceased to exist). This phenomenon is due to the complexities and ambiguities of language which is the foundation of my argument against the wax example of Descartes. Through language, we tend to create new meanings, and in extension, new things. A further discussion of language is needed. However, due to length constraints, it will not be fulfilled here.

² The italicized *candle* refers to the determinate property while the non-italicized candle refers to the thing.

the same object that Descartes is observing or thinking of. Thus we cannot distinguish if the determinate property called ‘*candle*’ belongs to (a) or (b) of the thing Descartes is observing. In other words, we arrive at a contradicting situation wherein the determinate property called ‘*candle*’ can be classified as both (a) and (b) for the same physical object. Therefore, the wax example violates premise 1.

Since premise 1 is violated, we cannot conclude yet, on the basis that we can distinguish between the two sets of determinate properties, that a thing is composed of a permanent, underlying substance. Some would say that I am committing the fallacy of Denying the Antecedent. However, I would just like to make it clear that it is not my goal to prove that there is no underlying substance. What I am doing here is to argue that since the first premise is invalid, the second premise is or is not true, and therefore, one cannot make an outright conclusion. In my personal opinion the essence (as opposed to just thinking of the structure) of the fallacy of denying the antecedent is that the ‘Q’ is true beforehand (antecedent). If people base the existence of ‘Q’ on an argument that is flawed, one is denying this early observation—which is definitely absurd. However, if one would like to prove that ‘Q’ exists, then if one’s premises are invalid, then the whole argument is inconclusive, but not necessarily false (because we did not disprove it and if we did, we are committing the said fallacy)³. Thus if we base the wax example as an illustration of the Argument from Change, then it would be inconclusive.

This problem arose when we allowed the use of the word ‘*candle*’ to refer to the object. The words ‘*candle*’ and ‘*wax*’ can be used to refer to the same object however our mind tends to process these words as separate objects⁴. If we consider these words as separate objects, then the wax example upholds the Argument from Change because there would be no overlapping of

³ For example, when a person desires to prove that the floor is wet based on the premise that when it rains, the floor would be wet—and suppose that it did not rain—one has to show first that the floor is really wet before he can say that the conclusion that the floor is wet is definitely true. As long as he does not show that the floor is in fact wet regardless of the reason why it is wet, there is still a possibility that the floor is not wet (and I am not denying the antecedent because there is no antecedent in the first place).

⁴ To illustrate this, suppose we have two objects, A and B. A is a candle as we normally know and use it, while B is the consumed candle. If we were to ask someone what A is, he will undoubtedly tell us it is a candle (assuming his knowledge of ‘*candle*’ is the same as ours). However, when asked what B is, he would most probably say that it is *just wax* (suppose he was not present while we ‘burned’ this candle). To him, A and B are different objects (concretely, A is a ‘subset’ of B and thus follows that B is not necessarily A)

determinate properties (as oppose to what we saw when we allowed these words to refer to the same object). Nonetheless, it is still a fact that we refer to the same physical object.

As a last note, in the wax example, Descartes implies that it is through the mind, not through the senses or imagination, that we can know what a thing is. However, our minds seem to use language as a tool to interpret and articulate things, and thus problems concerning language occur. Also, we cannot simply deny the fact that our perception of things (that can be considered the 'workings' of the mind) are affected by our senses. Definitely, a blind person would have a different imprint in his mind of one thing compared to a person that could see. If Descartes doubts his senses, then it is proper to carry over that doubt to his mind. In the wax example, it is as though the mind works independently from the senses. This is another flaw in the wax example. This point and the abovementioned argument relating to language make the wax example a 'bad' illustration of the Argument from Change (in which Descartes implies that the mind is the one who understands the substance of things).

Bibliography

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