

Kimbel Farwell

2/26/10

Sarah Silverman

Descartes's Overall Argument for Mind-Body Distinctness in the *Meditations*

In Descartes' *Meditations*, he attempts to offer through his Six *Meditations*, a philosophical argument asserting that both God and the soul exist. Furthermore, that the arguments he provides are the most certain and evident of all possible objects of knowledge for the human intellect. (Synopsis, 11) In Descartes' First Meditation, he attempts to create an indubitable premise to lay the foundation upon which to build and establish his ideas. He calls everything he perceives to be true, into doubt. He develops this argument through his Three Waves of Doubt. The First Wave addresses the basic principle on which all his former beliefs previously relied: the acceptance that what is mostly true is predominantly acquired through or from one's senses. He proceeds by providing evidence to falsify this assumption by claiming that not everything derived from the senses is true because one's senses can sometimes be deceiving (i.e. in respect to objects which are small or distant). However, he continues by explaining that some beliefs seem impervious to doubt, such as the notion that someone can actually acknowledge being somewhere and doing a particular thing (sitting at a table), in spite of the fact that insane people call even these ideas into question. (First Meditation, 12-13)

Descartes' Second Wave of Doubt addresses the doubt placed on the validity of one's normal perception of particular things, based on the uncertainty of one's ability to discern if they are dreaming or not, and thus be able to truly determine what is real. Yet, Descartes refutes this

falsity based on whether or not one is dreaming, by claiming that even ideas within a dream state are still derived from things that are real and not imaginary. Consequently, one cannot develop an idea of any new or distinct nature that is not already real, or at least comprised of something real (i.e. its color). Therefore, he ascertains that anything dependent upon the study of composite things (i.e. physics, astronomy, or medicine) is subject to question and/or doubt, while those subjects (even if they exist in nature or not) dealing with the simplest and most general things (i.e. arithmetic and geometry) are certain and indubitable whether one is asleep or not. This is due to the fact that it would be impossible to arrive at any suspicions surrounding something's truth, if it is as inherently transparent as a truth (i.e. a square has four sides.) (First Meditation, 13-14)

He continues with the Third Wave of Doubt, which addresses the argument based on the rejection of God's existence, even though Descartes otherwise bases his very existence on an omnipotent God. In accepting this belief, Descartes explains how not one of his former beliefs are exempt from doubt, and therefore, cannot be accepted as truth. In order to demonstrate an argument that would provide justification for anything existing or actually real, based on notions independent of God's existence, Descartes begins by pretending, for arguments sake, that all his former opinions on what he previously accepted to be real are now completely imaginary and false. In order to explain the cause by which people are deceived, Descartes introduces the possible existence of a malicious demon, which would embody all the characteristics associated with his definition of God, in that it would be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent (i.e. all perfect), but it would only use its powers for evil or in effect to deceive people. In doing so, Descartes creates the foundation on which he can assert that all external things people perceive as real would then be distilled down into being just mere delusions. (First Meditation, 15-17)

Descartes' Second Meditation deals with the nature of the human mind and how it is better known than the body. He introduces his Second Meditation, by creating an argument that would enable him to prove that at least one certain and unshakeable truth can be proven. The foundation of his argument is based on his subsequent rejection of all memories in which any validity was formerly derived. Furthermore, he reduces not only his memories, but also the very existence of his senses into question. He does this in order to conclude that even if something, whether it be God or an evil deceiver is putting ideas in his head; he retains that the essence embodied, but not fully understood, when using the term "I," still exists. Thus, Descartes summarizes this idea in the pronouncement, "I am, I exist." (Second Meditation, 17) He claims that it is still necessarily true that whenever this proposition is either put forward by him, or conceived in his mind, regardless of whether he is being deceived by something other than himself, he could still exist. He bases his existence on the fact that he would at least have to amount to something, because there had to be something in the first place, which was capable of being deceived. (Second Meditation, 17-18)

In light of Descartes' apparent accomplishment, in which he argues for the proof his own existence, he still grapples with the fact that at this point even he doesn't have a sufficient understanding of what the term "I," (which he just proved necessarily exists) really means. Descartes first attempts to extract from the vagaries of self realization, which inherently arise when attempting to define the terms "I," "body", and "mind," by providing definitions which effectively separate the terms mind and the body. In doing so, he thus asserts that the mind can exist independent of the body. Insofar as the mind can exist solely by itself, Descartes succeeds in being able to substantiate the claim that thought, which he concludes is not perceived through the senses, is inseparable from himself. Therefore, if his thoughts are inseparable from himself,

in other words defined as a mind, or intelligence, etc., he can then prove that he is real and thus truly exists. Thus, there are two things which he proves are not subject to doubt, thought and existence, which even though connected, are not the same. (Second Meditation, 18-19)

Finally, Descartes concludes his Second Meditation by focusing on the idea of one's body, not in the sense of arguing its physical existence, but its conceptual existence. He formulates his argument based on what is essentially associated with the nature of the body, and what the body requires in order to exist. Descartes introduces the wax example in order to exemplify that when judging the body, just as in the case of the wax, our judgments are based on the nature of the wax, which are susceptible to being misled. This is because the wax, and or body, can change its form in numerous ways. Furthermore, common characteristics usually associated with the perception of the properties of a certain substance, such as wax (i.e. its unique shape, color, texture, and scent), are in fact actually subject to change. This is demonstrated in the case of wax, in that it loses all those characteristics when it is introduced to heat. Descartes concludes that in order to conceive of the true nature of wax, it is necessary to take away everything which does not belong to the inherent makeup of the wax, which would leave something that is merely extended, flexible, and changeable in more ways than one can ever imagine. Hence, the perception and nature of the wax is by no means dependent on one's imagination, touch, or vision, but based off one's pure mental scrutiny perceived by the mind alone. Yet, even though one claims to see the wax, according to Descartes they are only judging the substance to be wax based solely on the faculty of judgment, which exists only in the mind. So, even though one's judgment of the wax may still contain errors, the perception of the wax is now contingent on the human mind, because one cannot rely on the senses and imagination to be good guides, even when addressing the nature of the body. If the ability to achieve a greater

awareness of wax is best obtained through one's intellect, as opposed to one's senses or faculty of imagination, it would seemingly follow that the same methods would be true, if not more applicable, when trying to achieve a better perception of the nature of one's own mind. Thus, the mind is better known than the body, in that every judgment made about a body only reveals more about the nature of the mind, because the reversal is not true. Therefore, he can conceive of himself as a thinking thing and his body as an extension. In other words, Descartes claims that he has a clear and distinct idea of the body insofar as he conceives the body as being essentially extended and as not essentially thinking. (Second Meditation, 20-23)

In Descartes' Third Meditation, he attempts to justify that he can form a clear and distinct conception of his self and body as existing apart from one another, by also proving the existence of God. He supports this claim by using his previous assertion that he exists as a thinking being based on the fact that his modes of thinking (whether it be his sensory perception or imagination) exist within him. Descartes continues by classifying his ideas into three distinct types, those that seem to be innate, adventitious, or purely created by him. Descartes further develops his perception of ideas by stating that he believes there must be at least as much reality in the object and in the cause of the idea as there is in the idea itself. In other words, if I have an idea of something in my mind, the object or cause of that idea has to have at least as much reality as the idea in my head. Thus, Descartes says that no corporeal sensible object that he can think exists could possibly have more reality than him. In regard to objects that exist individual to him, he claims there's enough reality in Him to have invented all of them. Descartes then clarifies the kind of thing represented by his idea of God, a being that is absolutely unlimited, infinite, perfectly benevolent, and his creator. Subsequently, due to this definition of God, Descartes concludes that he could not have invented God, based on the fact that he could not have gotten

the idea, because God's degree of reality (i.e. perfection) surpasses his own. Moreover, Descartes claims that only a being containing these specific properties (one so perfect) could have caused this idea to present in him innately, consequently proving for Descartes the conclusion that God exists. In addition, he claims that because his cognitive faculties must then be on the whole reliable, due to the fact that God created them, his ability to form the conception of himself and body as existing apart from one another proves its validity. (Third Meditation, 24-36)

The Fourth Meditation follows in many aspects from the third, but extends it to encompass that whatever he clearly and distinctly conceives of is really possible, based on the notion that God could bring it about. He thus moves from an idea that is purely mental, to an argument based on one that is real, in which he substantiates the notion that if God so chose to make something a certain way, he could. Descartes asserts that one's will is limitless due to the fact that one can will (choose, decide, try) anything, and that any hindrance to one's ability to execute their own will is only because the deficiency of one's body or understanding. As long as one restrains their will to judge only of those matters they clearly and distinctly understand, they cannot err. This assertion is further validated with what is called the Rule of Truth. The Rule of Truth first asserts that God is not a deceiver, and therefore anything you conceive of as being clear and distinct, is true. In other words, one will never error or go wrong in life insofar as they acknowledge that all their beliefs are based on what they clearly and distinctly believe, because God is not a deceiver and thus would never trick you. What I clearly and distinctly conceive of as possible is really possible. (Fourth Meditation, 37-43)

In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes attempts to justify the claim that if it is really possible for A to exist apart from B and vice versa, then A and B are really distinct. He first begins his justification by admitting that even if he still don't know whether there are any corporeal things,

for instance even if there is no corporeal triangle, he claims there is still a determinate nature or essence or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal and not which could not have been invented by him. Descartes explains that because he can clearly and distinctly perceive the facts of arithmetic and geometry, the ideas of these natures must then be innate. Therefore, even though he could have acquired the ideas from his senses, the facts, which he can prove about them to be certain, justify the rejection of any remaining doubts. Descartes then reaffirms God's existence again with the Ontological Argument (an a priori proof based on the concept that God is a being in which no greater is possible and so must exist) (Fifth Meditation, 44-49)

Lastly, the Sixth Meditation attempts to prove that the existence of material things, and the real distinction between mind and body. First, Descartes distinguishes the intellect from the imagination, and that the mind is really distinct from the body in so far as it is simply a thinking non-extended thing. Even though the mind is distinct from the body, Descartes asserts that the mind is so closely joined to the body that they in effect create a unit. This is because even though the "I"/mind can be distinctly understood without faculties of certain special modes of thinking (imagination and sensory perception), one cannot understand these faculties independent of the mind. Thus, the difference is based on the disparities between the modes of a thing and the thing itself. Descartes then justifies how to avoid all the errors, which can come from the senses, and bases the justification for the existence of material things on God's role as guarantor that all cognitive faculties are fundamentally accurate. (Sixth Meditation, 50-62)

