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Descartes: The Epistemological Argument for Mind–Body Distinctness

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Descartes's mind-body dualism is the aspect of his philosophy that has been most often cited and discussed in recent philosophical writing. Yet there has been, it seems to me, surprisingly little serious effort to gain an accurate understanding of his position. In another paper ([6]) I have tried to show that Cartesian dualism, as Descartes himself understood it, differs in both content and motivation from the view sometimes called "Cartesian dualism" in recent discussions of the mind-body problem. The differences derive, especially, from Descartes's conception of the possibilities and limitations of mechanistic physical explanation, and his peculiar contention that "the brain can be no use to pure understanding"—as opposed to the faculties of imagination and sense, which are more dependent on body (see [1]: Vol. VII, 358). It is true, on the other hand, that in trying to establish his dualism, Descartes himself places greatest stress on an argument for the immateriality of mind or self which does not seem to depend on these differences. This argument, which I call the "epistemological argument" for the distinctness of mind from body, is presented in the Sixth Meditation—and, in somewhat different versions, in various other works. Descartes's epistemological argument constitutes the principal bridge between historical Cartesianism and contemporary (i.e. twentieth century) discussions of the mind-body relation. I believe that even this argument, taken by itself, has not been correctly represented or criticized in the recent literature.

The epistemological argument of the Sixth Meditation has its roots in arguments developed in the Second Meditation

concerning knowledge of the self as a thinking thing, and knowledge of body as something “extended, flexible, movable”. Having used the demon hypothesis in the First Meditation to bring into “doubt” the existence of body, Descartes argues in the Second Meditation that this “doubt” does not extend to his own existence (“if he deceives me I exist”). He then considers what attributes can be ascribed with certainty to himself at this stage of his reasoning. He concludes that even certain properties traditionally associated with the soul or vital principle—for example, nutrition—must be presently excluded as part of the doubt of body. There is only one, he finds, that is not called into question on this basis:

To think? Here I find it: thought [it] is; this alone cannot be separated from me I do not now admit anything except what necessarily is true. I am therefore strictly only a thinking thing, that is mind, or soul, or understanding or reason I am however a true and truly existing thing; but what sort of thing? I have answered, a thing which thinks. ([1]: VII, 27.)

This passage may seem to imply that Descartes thinks he has *already established* the conclusion of the epistemological argument: that he is nothing essentially but a thinking thing, and as such is distinct from anything physical: “thought alone cannot be separated from me”. However, he is careful to cancel any such implication in the immediate sequel of the passage:

But possibly it happens that these very [corporeal] things [such as the human body] which I supposed were nothing because they are unknown to me, are in the real state of things [*in rei veritate*] not different from this me which I know. I do not know, I do not dispute about this matter now, I can only give judgment on things that are known to me. ([1]: VII, 27.)

Descartes does not, then, wish to claim on the basis of the Second Meditation reasoning alone that he knows that only thought and nothing corporeal pertains to his nature. On the other hand, he is *not* at this point of the argument restricting himself to an epistemically provisional conclusion like “as far as I now know I am a thinking thing and only a thinking thing”. For instance, he is implicitly claiming to know, not merely that he thinks, but that thought pertains to his nature or essence: it “cannot be separated from me”.¹ Also, he explicitly maintains that reasoning concerning the indubitability of his own exis-

tence (the “*cogito* reasoning”) has brought him to the conclusion that he is a *true and truly existing thing* (*res vera et vere existens*). The importance of this statement should become clear later.

The Second Meditation contains at least one other assertion that is important to the epistemological argument: that Descartes has a *clear and distinct* idea of himself as a thinking thing (apart from any concept of the corporeal). He begins to hint at this point immediately after the statements already cited. And at the end of the Second Meditation, after arguing that his best knowledge of a typical physical object—a piece of wax—is derived from reason rather than sense, he concludes:

What however shall I say of this same mind, or of myself? For so far I do not admit that there is in me anything except mind. What, I ask, [of] I who seem to perceive this wax so distinctly? Do I not then know myself not only such more truly, much more certainly, but even much more distinctly and evidently? ([1]: VII, 33.)

Additionally (as this passage also suggests) Descartes claims in the Second Meditation that he has a distinct conception of body as an extended thing—which conception is separate from that of thought. These claims about distinct perception are important because of Descartes’s very consciously held position that *only* clear and distinct perceptions or conceptions will suffice as the basis for positive affirmations about the nature of a thing (see especially “Notes on a Program” [1]: Vol. VIII-2:337-69 and [2]: 80).

I won’t try to elucidate in any detail the distinction between clear and distinct conception and “mere” conception. The distinction can, however, be partly brought out by the example of a geometrical proof. Call the conclusion of a given proof *T*. *After* one has examined (or constructed) the proof, one *distinctly* conceives or perceives that *T*. *Before* one has examined (or constructed) the proof one will, very likely, have been able to conceive that *T*: that is, one will have been in the state of thinking that it might be the case that *T*. Being able (merely) to conceive that *T* does not in any way preclude also being able (merely) to conceive that not-*T*. Clearly and distinctly conceiving that *T*, on the other hand, does preclude being able clearly and distinctly to conceive that not-*T*.

Between the Second and Sixth Meditations Descartes

“validates” his distinct perceptions by setting forth “proofs” of the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent creator who would not permit him to be deceived in what is most evident. Descartes is, then, so far from concluding rashly from what he can conceive to what is the case, that he even finds it necessary to present God as a bridge from what he can *distinctly* conceive to what is the case.

I

We may now turn to the epistemological argument itself. The Sixth Meditation begins with the observation that God is capable of bringing about or making the case whatever I am capable of clearly and distinctly perceiving: “. . . And I never judged that anything could not be brought about by him, except for the reason that it was impossible for me to perceive it distinctly” ([1]: VII, 71). The first application of this principle is to establish the possible existence of “physical things conceived as the object of pure mathematics”—since previous Meditations have held these to be distinctly conceivable. The second application is in the epistemological argument.

. . . Because I know that all that I clearly and distinctly understand can be brought about by God as I understand it, it is enough that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another [*unam rem absque altera*], for me to be certain that one is different from another, because they can be placed apart [*seorsim poni*] at least by God; and it doesn’t matter by which power this is done, in order for us to judge them to be different; and thus, from this very fact, that I know I exist, and that meanwhile I notice nothing else to pertain to my nature or essence, except this alone that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists in this one [thing] that I am a thinking thing. And although probably (or rather, as I will afterward say, certainly) I have a body, which is very closely conjoined to me, because nevertheless on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am only a thinking thing, not extended, and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as it is only an extended thing, not thinking, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist apart from it. ([1]: VII, 78.)

In lieu of detailed analysis of this passage—for which there is no space here—I will merely propose a provisional reading of Descartes’s argument which seems to me natural:

- (1) If A can exist apart from B , and vice versa, A is really distinct from B , and B from A .
- (2) Whatever I can clearly and distinctly understand can be brought about by God (as I understand it).
- (3) If I can clearly and distinctly understand A apart from B , and B apart from A , then God can bring it about that A and B are apart (separate).
- (4) If God can bring it about that A and B are apart, then A and B can exist apart (and hence, by (1), are distinct).
- (5) I am able clearly and distinctly to understand A apart from B , and B apart from A , if there are attributes Φ and Ψ , such that I clearly and distinctly understand that Φ belongs to the nature of A , and Ψ belongs to the nature of B , and I have a clear and distinct conception of A which doesn't include Ψ , and a clear and distinct conception of B which doesn't include Φ .
- (6) Where A is myself, and B is body, thought and extension satisfy the above conditions on Φ and Ψ , respectively.
- (7) Hence, by (5), (6), (3), and (4), I am really distinct from body (and can exist apart from it).

What, if anything, is wrong with this argument? Let me first mention some commonly-heard objections to Descartes's position on the distinctness of mind that are not in fact effective against it.²

Sometimes Descartes's mind-body dualism is taken to rest on (or partly on) the so-called "argument from doubt"—which is universally recognized to be fallacious. The argument from doubt is supposed to go something like this:

My mind (or self) is distinct from all body. For something true of all body (that I can doubt it exists) is not true of myself (mind). But A and B are the same only if everything true of the one is true of the other.

We need not dwell here on the problems with this argument, for (I trust) it is perfectly obvious that the argument we have

quoted from the Sixth Meditation is not a version of it. Whatever may be the connection in Descartes's mind between his inability to doubt his own existence while doubting the existence of body, it is not successfully captured by this unsound reasoning.

According to another objection, Descartes's argument can show at best that mind and body are possibly or potentially distinct (would be distinct if God should choose to separate them)—not that they *are* distinct. This objection fundamentally misses Descartes's point. Descartes holds that “two” things *are* really distinct if it is *possible* for them to exist in separation. On this view actual *distinctness* does not entail actual *separateness*.

A third common criticism of Descartes's treatment of the distinctness of mind derives from the claim that, under sufficient conditions of ignorance, one can conceive almost anything. Thus, the fact that we can conceive that p does not entail that p is even possible: all that follows (at best) is that we have not yet noticed any contradiction in p . But, as our previous discussion indicates, Descartes would turn this objection aside by pointing out that his argument is not based on mere conceivability, but on clear and distinct conceivability. One cannot ignore this crucial distinction without radically misunderstanding his position.

I do not wish to claim that the appeal to the distinction between clear and distinct perception and mere perception raises no problems of its own. It raises, of course, the important question of how one recognizes clear and distinct perceptions. I will not attempt to evaluate this problem here. Instead I will turn to a criticism of Descartes's use of the notion of distinct perception in the epistemological argument that is, unquestionably, more directly relevant than the objections mentioned above.

II

The author of the first set of *Objections* to the *Meditations*, whose name was Caterus, found fault with Descartes's attempt to reason from the fact that A and B are distinctly and separately conceived to the conclusion that A and B can exist apart. He writes:

Here I match the learned man against Scotus, who says that for it to be the case that one [thing] is conceived distinctly and separately

from another, a distinction of the sort called formal and objective—intermediate between a real [distinction] and one of reason—is sufficient. And thus he distinguishes God’s justice from His mercy; for, he says, they have concepts [*rationes*] formally diverse before all operation of the understanding, thus that even then the one is not the other; and nevertheless it does not follow: justice can be conceived separately from mercy, therefore can also exist separately. ([1]: VII, 100.)

Caterus here does not exactly follow Descartes’s “clear and distinct conception” terminology; nevertheless he has put his finger on a problem that Descartes must come to terms with. For Descartes himself holds that such “simple natures” as extension, figure, and motion can each be clearly and distinctly conceived in itself; yet at the same time they are *not* really distinct; figure cannot exist apart from extended body, and so forth. (See especially *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Rules xii and xiv, in [1]: X, 410ff.) In his doctrine of simple natures Descartes appears to be squarely committed to the negation of the principle that what can be clearly and distinctly conceived in separation can *exist separately*.

Descartes replies to Caterus by stressing a distinction between *complete* and *incomplete* beings.

As to the matter of formal distinction . . . I briefly say that it does not differ from a modal one, and extends only to incomplete beings, which I have accurately distinguished from complete [beings], for which [distinction] it indeed suffices that one [being] is conceived distinctly and separately from another by intellectual abstraction from a thing inadequately conceived, not however so distinctly and separately that we understand one or the other [being] as if an entity in itself [*ens per se*] and distinct from all others. But for the latter to be the case a real distinction is always required. ([1]: VII, 120.)

Descartes goes on to give precisely the sort of example we would expect, in view of the doctrine of simple natures. Thus, he says,

The distinction between the motion and the figure of the same body is a formal one; and I can quite well understand the motion apart from the figure, and the figure apart from the motion; and I abstract both from the body: but nevertheless I cannot understand motion completely apart from a thing in which the motion is, nor the figure apart from a thing in which the figure is, nor motion in a thing in which figure cannot be, or figure in a thing incapable of motion. (*Ibid.*)

The same point, Descartes says, applies to the example brought forward by Caterus. With these cases Descartes contrasts the mind-body case:

But I completely understand what body is [French version: that is to say I conceive of a body as a complete thing] merely by thinking that it is extended, figured, mobile, etc., and denying of it all those things which pertain to the nature of the mind; and vice versa I understand the mind to be a complete thing, that doubts, understands, wills, and so forth, although I deny that any of those things contained in the idea of body are in it.

The gist of this passage seems to be that we can conceive body and mind not only *distinctly*, but *as complete things*, while denying of each whatever pertains to the nature of the other. Justice and motion, on the other hand, while perhaps capable of being understood distinctly “in separation”, are not thereby capable of being understood “completely”—i.e., as complete beings.

I do not know what passage or passages Descartes may have in mind when he says he has “accurately distinguished” complete from incomplete beings. Certainly this distinction does not seem to be made explicit in the *Meditations*.³ Further, we have seen that the argument as Descartes states it begins with the unrestricted claim that: “It is enough that I understand one thing clearly and distinctly apart from another, to know that one is different from another, for they can be placed apart, at least by God . . .”. This statement must now be rephrased. In order to be able to conclude that *A* is different from *B* in the relevant way—i.e., *really* distinct—one must be able to conceive *A* clearly and distinctly and *completely* (as a complete being) apart from *B*. Also, we can now see that Descartes’s further statement in the argument, that he has a clear and distinct conception of himself in so far as he is “only a thinking thing, not extended”, must be given a different reading than that reflected in premiss (5), above. He must be saying *both* that the concept of himself as a thinking thing comprises no notion of extension, *and* that in thus conceiving himself as a thinking thing he clearly and distinctly conceives of himself as a complete being.

III

In the Fourth Objection, Antoine Arnauld picks up on

Descartes's remarks to Caterus about the need for "complete knowledge" as a basis for the mind-body distinctness argument. Arnauld reads this as an acknowledgement that the argument will go through only if our knowledge of ourselves as thinking things is, demonstrably, complete in the sense of being exhaustive. He further observes that nothing in the *Meditations* seem to bear at all on this problem except the argument in the Second Meditation that one can be certain of one's own existence as a thinking thing while doubting or denying the existence of body. But, he concludes,

... all I can see to follow from this, is that a certain notion of myself can be obtained apart from [the] notion of body. But it is not yet quite clear to me that this notion is complete and adequate, so that I am certain that I am not in error when I exclude body from my essence. ([1]: VII, 201.)

According to Arnauld, then, Descartes is not entitled to conclude that extension does not belong to his essence, merely from the observation that he clearly and distinctly perceives that thought is essential to him while he "notice[s] nothing else to pertain to [his] nature". For perhaps in perceiving himself as a thinking thing, he is perceiving, so to speak, only *part* of his essence. Arnauld is in effect taking issue, specifically, with the following statement from the epistemological argument—which signals the transition from the conclusions of the Second Meditation to those of the Sixth: "From this very fact, that I know I exist, and that meanwhile I notice nothing else to pertain to my nature or essence, except this alone that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists in this one [thing] that I am a thinking thing". Here Arnauld adduces the case of a man who clearly and distinctly conceives that a given triangle is right-angled, yet lacks a perception of the proportion of sides to hypotenuse. Because his knowledge of the triangle is in this respect incomplete, the man is able to doubt, and even deny, that the sum of squares on the sides is equal to the square on the hypotenuse. According to Arnauld, this man would be in a position to reason, in a way parallel to Descartes, that since the clear and distinct idea of a right triangle does not include the notion of Pythagorean proportion, God can make a right triangle with some other proportion among the squares. This conclusion, however, is false.^{3.5} So the epistemological argument must be invalid.

Arnauld has misunderstood Descartes's use of the distinction between complete and incomplete knowledge in his reply to Catusus. However, as Descartes seems to recognize, clearing up this misunderstanding is not all that is necessary in order to answer Arnauld.

Descartes rightly takes Arnauld's main question to be: "Where did I begin to demonstrate how it follows from the fact that I know nothing else to belong to my essence . . . except that I am a thinking being, it follows that nothing else does truly belong to it?" ([1]: VII, 219.) And he answers:

Surely where I have proved that God exists . . . who can do all that I clearly and distinctly know to be possible.

For although much exists in me which I do not yet [at this stage of the *Meditations*] notice . . . yet *since that which I do notice is enough for me to subsist with this alone*, I am certain that I could have been created by God without other [attributes] which I do not notice. (*Ibid.*, emphasis added.)

Hence, these other attributes may be judged not to belong to my essence since "none of those [properties] without which a thing can exist is comprised in its essence". (There is a suspicion of 'could-can' sloppiness in the Latin, which I won't try to evaluate here.) Descartes further explains that when he spoke, in the First Replies, of the need for "complete knowledge", he did *not* mean exhaustive knowledge of the subject—as Arnauld seems to have assumed. Rather, he meant "knowledge of a thing sufficient to know it is complete", i.e. "endowed with those forms or attributes, which are sufficient that from them I recognize that it is a substance." He concludes:

. . . Mind can be perceived clearly and distinctly, or sufficiently so for it to be considered a complete thing, without any of those forms or attributes by which we recognize that body is a substance, *as I think I have sufficiently shown in the Second Meditation*; and body is understood distinctly and as a complete thing without those which pertain to mind. ([1]: VII, 223; emphasis added.)

He goes on to observe that Arnauld's triangle example is not effective against him, since it "differs from the case at hand" in making no use of the notion of "complete knowledge" in the sense that Descartes originally intended.

Arnauld's basic objection was that for all Descartes knows, some other attribute, such as extension, might be necessarily

implicated in his essence together with the known attribute of thought; the only way of eliminating this possibility is to establish that one knows *all* the properties of the self. Descartes's position, however, is just that *since* he recognizes that thought is sufficient "for me to subsist with it alone", he *thereby* knows no other attribute is necessary. To claim that thought and extension are different, and that either is sufficient to determine a complete or true *thing*, is already to deny the possibility of some "hidden" necessary dependence of a thinking thing on the attribute of extension. Thus a "complete knowledge" in Descartes's originally intended sense is sufficient for the epistemological argument to go through.

We may now obtain a clearer understanding of the intended relation between the Second Meditation and the Sixth—indeed Descartes seems finally to make this relation explicit in the important passage I have quoted from the reply to Arnauld. The *cogito* reasoning and its immediate sequel are intended to establish, precisely, that "mind can be perceived clearly and distinctly, or sufficiently so for it to be considered a complete thing, without any of those forms or attributes, from which we recognize that body is a substance . . .". I think this explains, for example, Descartes's insertion into the Second Meditation of the statement that he knows he is a true and truly existing *thing*, merely in conceiving himself as *thinking*. The role of the epistemological argument in the Sixth Meditation is merely to establish that the perception of the mind argued for in the Second Meditation (clearly and distinctly perceived as a complete thing in virtue of having the property of thought) is sufficient ground for the conclusion that the mind is *really* a distinct thing. What is primarily needed, besides the conclusions of the Second Meditation, is the validation of clear and distinct perceptions as reliable guides to reality.⁴

Discussion of the objections of Caterus and Arnauld has shown the need for some changes in the analysis of the epistemological argument offered above. I suggest, finally, the following reading:

- (1) If *A* can exist apart from *B*, and vice versa, *A* is really distinct from *B*, and *B* from *A*.
- (2) Whatever I clearly and distinctly understand can be brought about by God as I understand it.

- (3) If I clearly and distinctly understand the possibility that *A* exists apart from *B*, and *B* apart from *A*, then God can bring it about that *A* and *B* *do* exist in separation.
- (4) If God can bring it about that *A* and *B* exist in separation, then *A* and *B* can exist apart and hence, by (1) they are distinct.
- (5) I can clearly and distinctly understand the possibility of *A* and *B* existing apart from each other, if: there are attributes Φ and Ψ , such that I clearly and distinctly understand that Φ belongs to the nature of *A*, and that Ψ belongs to the nature of *B*, and that $\Phi \neq \Psi$, and I clearly and distinctly understand that something can be a complete thing if it has Φ even if it lacks Ψ (or has Ψ and lacks Φ).
- (6) Where *A* is myself and *B* is body, thought and extension satisfy the conditions on Φ and Ψ respectively.
- (7) Hence, I am really distinct from body and can exist without it.

How good (or bad) is the epistemological argument when interpreted in the way that (as I maintain) Descartes intended it? Well—to mention only one problem—it is at the very best no better than the distinction between clear and distinct perception and “mere” perception. And while I have made some attempt to clarify this distinction, I must admit to distrusting it very radically. (Though I do not know whether recent essentialists’ appeals to intuition are on any better ground.) On the other hand, the argument seems to me stronger and much more carefully thought-out than Descartes’s critics—contemporary or recent—have generally recognized. In particular, Descartes’s reply to Arnauld is so direct and apposite that there can be, I think, no justification for repeating and endorsing Arnauld’s objection without giving serious, systematic consideration to the reply.^{5,6}

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NOTES

¹Descartes does not seem to offer justification for the transition from "I think" to "Thought belongs to my nature or essence".

²Versions of the first objection considered here are found in [3], [4], and [5], and of the third in [3] and [5]. These objections have also been discussed by Michael Hooker in unpublished writings. The second objection is one that I have often heard in discussion, though I do not know of any source in the recent Descartes literature.

³Although in the Fourth Meditation ([1], VII, p. 78, line 8 from bottom) he does speak of understanding himself distinctly as a "whole" without the faculties of imagination and sense.

³⁻⁵Descartes's doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths is not brought up in this context.

⁴I think these observations also help one understand Descartes's notorious tendency, in works other than the *Meditations*, to pass without visible transition from "*cogito ergo sum*" to "*sum res cogitans*".

⁵Here I mean to take issue with, for example, Kenny's treatment in [3], pp. 91ff. In [7] I, too, implied it was questionable whether Descartes's reply to Arnauld is at all cogent—a suggestion that I now wish to retract.

⁶I am indebted to Michael Hooker, Robert Sleight, and James F. Ross for very valuable criticisms of an earlier, longer version of this essay. I'm uncomfortably aware of not having yet been able to take account of all of their suggestions.

ABSTRACT OF COMMENTS

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The argument in the Sixth Meditation that mind and body are distinct substances and can exist apart from one another is not a garden variety demonstration. It is not an argument that proceeds from clear and uncontroversial premises. It is, rather, the outline of a highly contentious and brilliantly original theory about the nature of the human mind, the human body, their substantial unity, and their metaphysical independence of one another.