

# Free essay on Descartes proves his own existence

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1. In his Second Meditation, Descartes argues that he knows (with absolute certainty) that he exists. Can he know this statement given his high standards for knowledge? Begin by clearly and thoroughly explaining Descartes' argument for this claim. Next determine if his argument succeeds by considering a possible challenge and explaining whether or not Descartes can adequately address this challenge.

In the Second Meditation, Rene Descartes considers perhaps God, the body and the whole physical universe were dreams or hallucinations, or that his thoughts and perceptions were being manipulated by some evil being. Ultimately, though, he decides that he cannot sincerely doubt his own thoughts and comes to the famous conclusion of Cogito ergo sum—I think therefore I am (Descartes 33). This particularly proposition seems all but impossible to refute, at least for a sane person (Descartes 35). From there, he immediately reached the theological conclusion that God also exists and that his own ideas must be true because God is not evil and would not condemn humans to exist in some kind of false reality. He had no empirical evidence to make such an assertion, but at the time no book could have been published that openly denied the existence of God and the immortal soul, or claimed that God was deceptive and evil. Indeed, Descartes would have quickly found his life in danger had he oriented any such heretical ideas in the 17th Century, so God and the soul were simply givens (Descartes 36). Descartes then goes on to consider the nature of the physical universe, and how he knew that physical qualities are subject to change, but maintained that some type of basic underlying all forms of matter. This substance remained the same no matter how much the accidental or contingent

qualities changed. For example, a piece of wax that he discusses in Meditation Two, freshly taken from the honeycomb still had a honey flavor, as well as a scent, color, shape and size, hardness and coldness, some tactile quality, and so on. When brought close to the fire, though, all these qualities changed, including flavor, flower scent, color, original shape, size, coldness as the substance became hot and liquid. Descartes wondered whether this material was still the same wax and if so, what constituted its identity, substance and essential quality (Descartes 38).

There simply does not seem to be a logical or rational way around the basic argument of Descartes, that as long as he is thinking about something then he must exist in some form. Even if his thoughts and perceptions are wrong, even if he is being deceived, he is still thinking about the possible deception. Therefore, he must exist no matter what. Even if his thoughts and perceptions are completely insane or delusional, even if he has been drugged or hypnotized, he still exists just the same. To put the case conversely, there is no logical or rational way that someone can say ' I think, therefore I do not exist.' Perhaps someone could argue how he could know whether there is an ' I ' as opposed to just some random thoughts, but that seems like a very weak argument, since if thoughts exists than someone or something must be thinking them. He may not know what the nature of this ' I ' is, but it is just tendentious to deny its existence of something.

In a police state like that portrayed by George Orwell in 1984, where Mr. O'Brien tortures Winston Smith until his thoughts, memory and personality are systematically wiped out Winston might rightfully begin to doubt his own existence. O'Brien was not satisfied with Winston simply agreeing to say

anything to avoid the pain, but to really believe that  $2+2=5$ , or that he was holding up two, six or ten fingers instead of four. He wanted Winston to have no internal doubts at all but believe absolutely and without question that whatever they told him was true (Orwell 1989). Of course, that is an exceptional situation of extreme coercion and duress, through the use of drugs, hypnosis, brainwashing or other more advanced methods, which may eliminate all individual thoughts, ideas and personalities. Descartes would have been familiar with the Inquisition, and repressive church and state authorities, which were the norm in the 17th Century. He knew that Galileo had been threatened with torture and burning at the stake until he recanted his 'heresies' and in fact he did so. Even in circumstances as extreme as this, however, with threats, coercion or brainwashing, Descartes still would not have been able to deny his own existence. His thoughts might be damaged, altered or manipulated, but he still would have existed in some form.

Descartes asserts that all humans had both a body and mind (soul), and that the mind was eternal while the body was subject to physical and material laws. Thus the universe was divided between the mind and matter, and the physical world could be explained by mathematical and scientific laws.

Hobbes, Locke and other political and philosophical theorists of the 17th Century were also influenced by the new scientific thought of Descartes, Galileo and William Harvey to one degree or another, and had to incorporate them into philosophy. Descartes did not intend to disprove the existence of God, the soul, matter and physical bodies. Just the opposite, as he says in his title he was searching for the right methods that would yield clear and distinct proof for the existence of God, minds and bodies. He took it as a

matter of faith that God and the soul really existed and that the Bible was true, but went on to state that he could prove this through science and natural reason. Like Galileo and William Harvey, at the dawn of what would later be called the Scientific Revolution, he was breaking with the older concepts of nature and physics based on the science of Aristotle and moving in the direction of what would eventually be described as the modern scientific method. His doubt and skepticism has a clear and distinct purpose in his analytic philosophy, as he breaks down every common belief and assumption, subjecting them to merciless skepticism, until he arrives at what he considers to be the core of absolute truth that cannot be doubted—the existence of his own minds and thoughts. From there he goes on to create a new synthesis by offering proof that God exists, and then that matter, bodies and the physical universe also exist. After that, he goes on to describe the nature of that physical reality, although he should be granted considerable leeway in this area given the severe limitations of 17th Century science and technology.

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## **WORKS CITED**

Descartes, Rene. *Meditations*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968.

Orwell, George, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1989.