

Free essay on Descartes understanding of the body

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Arguably the most controversial philosopher Descartes' works have raised different points of view among modern philosophers. His most prominent work – Meditations of First Philosophy endeavors to explain the existence of the human being. He endeavors to explain the difference between body and mind through various skeptical arguments. In the first and second meditations, Descartes is seen to be troubled in understanding who he is and whether or not he exists. The philosopher casts doubt on various perceptions that he has had to believe in the past, which actually turned out to be false (Descartes et al 1996, pp. 34). The first and the second meditations come to a conclusion about the separate existence of the body and the mind. Additionally, the philosopher explains that the mind or the intellect is more certain than the body. This essay seeks to explain that Descartes understanding of the body is misleading.

In his first philosophy, Rene Descartes expresses doubt on the real existence of the human body. He expresses the possibility that life is actually a dream, and that in real sense, we do not exist. Before embarking on clearly understanding the body, Descartes expresses a feeling of deep confusion and indecision. For instance, Descartes say “ I am conscious that I exist, and I who know that I exist inquire into what I am” (Descartes et al 1996, pp. 22). The confusion, is further deepened by the fact that, Descartes is thinking, therefore, there must be that “ I” that doubts.

Descartes explains that when people are asleep, they dream. In their dreams, people make the normal movements such as running. Descartes, therefore argues that we could just be dreaming, thinking that we are awake. Essentially, Descartes argues that the body cannot help people

distinguish dreams from reality (Descartes & Cottingham 1986, pp. 56). What Descartes implies is that life may be just but a dream because what the body does in dreams is the same as what it does when awake.

Descartes dismisses his past opinions and perceptions, including the ones about his body and his reflection. Some of the things he considered factual about the body are subjected to serious scrutiny (Descartes and Cottingham 1986, pp. 67). As a starting point, Rene Descartes vows not just to criticize what he believes blindly but to criticize the principles on which all his former beliefs are based. His mystification is manifested by his words “ But what, then, am I? A thinking thing, it has been said. But what is a thinking thing? It is a thing that doubts . . .”(Descartes and Cottingham 1986, pp. 78). This quote shows Descartes’ continuous questioning of the self. Such questioning seems endless as one question leads to another and so on.

According to Descartes, the body is a medium of perceiving what is either true or false (Descartes et al 1996, pp. 43). In his first meditation, he argues that the only things that were certain were those that could be perceived by the body through such senses as touching, seeing and so on. Despite this acknowledgement, Descartes points out that associating certainty with the body can be misleading. In explaining such misleading nature, he uses the example of sight. He explains that when things are far, the eyes perceive them as small and blurred. However when they are near, they are big and clear.

In explaining the complex nature of the body and the mind, Descartes argues that the mind cannot be easily understood. He gives the example of an insane person. The philosopher argues that mad people see things that

normal people cannot see. For instance, they can see themselves as kings or monarchs. On the contrary, a normal person will see them as mad still. This disqualifies Descartes understanding of the body because impliedly, he is in agreement that the body does not reflect the state of mind.

Descartes critically describes the mind as a component of the entire body and as the heart of perception. Through the heart we can know reality and the same heart can be deceptive. In his argument, he says that man is created by the Supreme Being but as he analyzes the possibilities he considers true about creation, he argues that the Supreme Being could have created man in deception of existence. For example, Descartes talks about believing that an addition of three to five gives five. He asserts that this could be a deception in the human mind and he speculates that probably it is the nature of creation that could lead to the mind perceiving things in such a way (Daniel 2006, pp. 48). Critically analyzing Descartes' understanding of the body, there is no accuracy because, right from his approach – the one of assuming everything does not exist – there is too much vagueness. As a matter of fact, Descartes has the facts right about the body. For instance, about dreams and touch, he is remarkably accurate. However, his presumptions do not hold water. Descartes say “ I am, I exist.” This should be enough to eliminate all the unnecessary doubt about the body (Descartes et al 1996, pp. 53).

Works Cited

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