

Descartes and the nature of doubting argumentative essay

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



Descartes argues that perception of the world around us relies more on the mind than that of the body. The body or moreover the senses collect sensory information like touch, taste, sight, smell and then this information is relayed to the mind. The mind then collates this information and turns it into something we can understand. So when we look upon something with our eyes, our eyes are in fact tools used by the mind to form a proper understanding under mental inspection of the object. I really like the theory of doubting what is you've come to believe, testing one's own beliefs is something I think everyone should do if what you believe in isn't real then it shouldn't be believed.

Descartes seems to conveniently justify his belief in god rather shakily as opposed to giving voice to the obvious doubt he poses in a god's existence. It almost seems like he disproves god's existence and then just fudges the results to prove the opposite. Descartes uses the example of a piece of wax to illustrate the point that we know our minds better than we know our bodies or the bodies that surround us. The wax appears to us first as a solid, it smells of flowers and may have a certain taste or feel but we also know it to take on the form of a liquid. Although we see it as a solid before us we know it can also be something completely different to all of the senses. The origin of this information is our minds as our sensory information tells us that one or the other is true but our minds using understanding of transitional states know both is possible and that objects can take on different shapes and properties. On the other hand if we were to believe our senses alone and be without doubt we would have to believe that once the wax had changed from a solid to a liquid they were two separate substances

and not the same substance in a different state.

“[P]erception is neither a seeing, nor a touching, nor an imagining. [R]ather it is an inspection on the part of the mind alone” (Section 31).

Senses alone cannot derive the machinations of the physical world because they can be deceived; Descartes knows this because on occasion they have been deceived so by that example if they can be deceived once they can likely be deceived again. He comes to the conclusion that the mind is the only thing we can be certain of. Because of this argument if we can doubt even our own senses we can doubt almost all the information collected by them.

Our obvious initial assumptions are that our senses, which we rely on deliver accurate information about the world around us are accurate but now that we understand that even they can deceive we must assume that they cannot be an accurate and reliable source for which to judge the physical world, so we need another. Descartes argument in meditation one, which is his doubting of all that he knew up to this point. He understands a lot of his knowledge is derived from his senses and information passed down and both those sources can be called into question.

So he starts by attacking the foundations of his knowledge so that he can begin a fresh and try to discern one factor which he knows without a doubt to be true from which he can build new beliefs on. So in his first meditation is he questions the validity of the beliefs he held up to that point. Effectively stripping himself of this ingrained knowledge that we hold to be true but have no basis in fact, his basic perspective is ‘ that which can be doubted, must be called into doubt’ from this perspective he tries to answer questions

around the existence of god.

What he's asking is basically; 'Is what I believe a product of god or truth or does it come from false extraneous elements'. He wants to know if he believes in god because god is real or if simply he was raised to believe in god because he was 'told' god was real when all evidence points to him/her/it not existing at all. So he starts by attacking the foundations of his knowledge so that he can begin a fresh and try to discern one factor which he knows without a doubt to be true from which he can build new beliefs on. So in his first meditation is he questions the validity of the beliefs he held up to that point.

The reason for this is simple; Descartes wanted to find something that it was impossible not to be true, something that was core and irrefutable, his method of doubting was one of isolating that belief that he knew to be true and then breaking it down and analyzing all its elements and pick out what about it put that truth above doubt. He hoped that from this one truth he could build a new set of absolutely true beliefs on a foundation that left absolutely no room for doubt. He realised then that the only thing he knew absolutely for certain was that "I am, I exist" (Section 25) from this he is certain he exists in some capacity because he is thinking and feeling and is self aware but he is yet to establish what exactly he is. He goes on to elaborate that because he is thinking he must be a thing that thinks; a thinking thing. When Descartes talks about thinking he's speaking broadly about the soul and the mind as sort of being one and the same, the mind is the spiritual component of the entity. That is a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, has a will of its own, refuses, has an

imagination and senses.

Upon breaking this down Descartes begins to realize that all these elements also exist in dreams and it is very difficult for him to create a clear distinction between dreams and reality because they share the same elements and often you have a dream that seems real but then is justified as a dream by the act of waking. In theory as I am sitting at my computer now typing if I were to then black out and wake up in my bed I would have to attribute what I am doing now to a dream. Descartes eventually concedes that in retrospective we can indeed tell dreams from reality by waking. A devil or an evil genius that may have the powers of god and may want us to believe we are real people when in fact we could just be concepts or brains floating in vats, he can deceive our minds into believing false claims such as two plus two equals five and we have no means to disprove that as we are blinded by this devil. He can make us believe wax is solid and then changes into a liquid.

The only argument Descartes poses against the idea of the devil tricking us is that for a loving god to exist this has to be false because a loving god who created us in his image would not want us to be deceived because by definition this god is good and if something is all knowing and powerful and good this being would never allow something evil to make us believe something that is in fact false. What he's referring to is obviously more or less believing core principles like two plus two equals four because we've already established that our senses deceive us but that is just common error not a conscious deception.

It's not a foundational deception which affects all other judgments about the

world because we can easily prove that what our senses are experiencing are correct or not. On the other hand for something to make us believe that two plus two is five is something we cannot prove one way or another because we won't actually know we're being deceived, there's no way of knowing that we're not actually brains in vats other than trusting in a loving god. Still doubting in scientific terms is the only way really in finding the truth. In theory if everyone were to be more critical and doubt everything and try to find the truth behind the truths, perhaps the world would be a better clearer place or it could be worse, who knows?

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