

"the cogito" essay



' The nature of the human mind, and how it is known better than the body'¹ is the basis for Descartes argument " The Cogito" in his second of his Meditations. This argument stems from Descartes being left in the grips of doubt at the end Meditation One, where he calls all knowledge into question and that he cannot be certain of anything. Hence he begins Meditation two searching for an ' Archimedean point', a point of which he can be certain without any doubt of, to bring the basis of all knowledge back to a place of certainty. Descartes, in exploring the relationship between the mind and the body, suggests that the mind is better known than the body. The implications of this are far reaching and lead me to question, if one exists, does that mean the other must also? I believe that we can be certain that the mind exists, irrespective to whether the body exists also. Using Descartes' reasoning from Meditation two, his malicious demon hypothesis states that anything we think, or take from sensory perception, can be called into doubt as a malicious demon could be producing these thoughts and images without a need for us to truly perceive them.

Descartes uses this to argue that therefore: " In this case I too undoubtedly exist, if he deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing as long as I think that I am something" (p. 17). Descartes seems to suggest that the mind must exist as I cannot be deceived without having a mind to be deceived, and that only thinking beings can be deceived; therefore as I think, I exist. We cannot question the fact that we think, for it is reasonable to assume that everyone thinks, although we are only ever certain of our own minds. We cannot tell whether others are real or just illusionary. From this basis I can state that the mind is

well known, I cannot doubt its existence, for to doubt I need to think, therefore I exist.

In exploring the certainty of the mind, Descartes examines a piece of wax and considers how its physical presence relates to the mind's ability to perceive all around it. He defines that not only the senses are used in examining the wax, but there is a point "purely of mental scrutiny" (p. 21) where he perceives the wax solely by his mind alone. This example appears to be flawed as it does not provide evidence of the mind's worth against the body.

It demonstrates an uncertainty in how we perceive our environment. For how can he perceive the wax purely by this "mental scrutiny" if he has never taken any previous sensory perceptions of it? For anything examined or imagined by the mind alone is taken from these sensory experiences; even a unicorn which does not exist in the external world is still taken from our experience of horses and horns, just combined together in a unique way. There is then reliance upon the body in which to formulate the perceptions of the mind; as we can not be certain of the body, how can we be certain of the mind. The relationship between the two is so entwined that to disregard one is perhaps to disregard the other.

Descartes takes this problem and tackles it by reasoning that even if we have no certainty of what our sensory perceptions are, the idea of the wax is still there. For no matter if they are false, the idea of the wax is a perception of the mind, and in this perception it is further proof that we are thinking, therefore we have evidence of ourselves as thinking beings. In comparison to

this, the sensory experience of the physical world are ever changing: "Evidently none of the features of which I arrived at by means of the senses; for whatever came under taste, smell, sight, touch or hearing has now altered - yet the wax still remains"(p. 20). We can use our senses to help us perceive the world, but those senses alone are inadequate; it is only through the mind that a true understanding can be had.

So it is the mental scrutiny, a certainty beyond the senses that allows me to know that the wax is there. Where the body has failed us, the mind has held firm. If I am certain that the mind exists, then does that mean that the body must also? As all my perceptions taken through the body are sensory, and these can be deceived by a malicious demon, what proof do I have that the body exists? For everything I experience could merely be illusion, and even if this gives me a foundation to think, all I can prove is that I have a mind. In regards to the wax argument, when Descartes places the wax by the fire all the sensory perceptions of it change as this throws of certainty of the body into doubt. Yet, although this perception of the wax has changed the wax is still there and our bodily senses cannot explain the differences, it is our intellect alone that identifies it still as wax. In this sense it is only our mind that can explain the changes through interpreting our senses.

This links our mind to the body, as we cannot have these different perceptions without a body to sense them. Even though these senses are changing and in doubt, we are still using the body to experience this. This irrefutably links the mind and body, both equally dependent on each other to experience the world. Although I am certain that I have a mind, there is still the doubt that the mind is mine and what this "I" in "I exist" actually is.

Descartes speaks of the mind and thought but never specifically states what the concept of "I" is: "I do not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this 'I' is, that now necessarily exists". Georg Lichtenberg used this to attack Descartes' Meditation in this way for, as the demon proves that there must be thought, this could just mean that "there is thinking going on" 2.

Yet, one way in which Descartes can be interpreted is to assume that the mind cannot be separate from 'I', as he is not trying to prove "I" in an individual existence, but as "I" and the mind as one whole thing. This further validates his claim that the mind is better known than the body. Even though it is reasonable to agree with Descartes assertion that the mind is better known than the body, it is clear that an element of doubt remains. Russell highlights this in his book "Problems of Philosophy": "It is of course possible that all or any of our beliefs may be mistaken, and therefore all ought to be held with at least some slight element of doubt.

But we cannot have reason to reject a belief except on the ground of some other belief. " 3 Hence how can we reject the solution to having a body when we have very limited beliefs of anything else? There is a no more agreeable solution to me than Descartes', when considering how well we know ourselves in the face of doubt. As to overcome Scepticism we must find certainty within our own thoughts, and to allow this to become the Archimedean point that cannot be doubted. As Descartes takes his Meditations forward, he uses "clear and distinct perception" to confirm the existence of God.

This "clear and distinct perception" is taken from his certainty of the mind, but it is here where some of his arguments begin to fail. For although I can easily agree with his reasoning for the existence of my own mind, he then uses this method to clarify other perceptions of which I do not agree with. While we can know the mind with more certainty than the body, it is not a secure enough platform from which to know other areas of existence, as the contents of the mind can still be called into doubt. The uncertain nature of reality is something that plagues Descartes throughout his meditations; that he attempts to secure certainty within the mind is perhaps not surprising. Whether I am as comfortable with this solution as Descartes is, is questionable. For although I have undoubtedly been convinced of the existence of the mind, I have no proof of the existence of the body except that it is recognised by the mind.

Such a fragile basis for philosophical debate cannot be accepted so we must strive for something with greater certainty. If we are to look at Descartes and his method of doubt then we are always open to the possibility of error.