

Philosophy



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In Descartes' fifth Meditation, the philosopher attempts to rebuild the foundation he deconstructed in the previous chapters through a systematic process of doubt. Part of the foundation Descartes wishes to rebuild is the existence of God, which too came under doubt. He offers an argument for the existence of God that relies on the notion that (1) existence is perfection and (2) existence is dependent on god. However, this ontological argument in favor of the existence of God is flawed in a number of ways. Descartes believes that god is an independent, perfect entity. He is separate from the mere idea of God, in the sense that all reality is contained with Him. On this idea of perfection, there is a hierarchy of perfection that begins with the purely subjective and ending with the ultimate reality, which Descartes equates with God. Descartes believes people experience an idea of the most perfect being and that existence is more perfect than existence in thought alone. Using both of these premises, Descartes concludes that the most perfect being (that is, God) exists in reality, not merely in thought. The argument is intuitively appealing, since people tend to see existence as more perfect than nonexistent. Despite this intuition, however, an entity cannot possess a characteristic (such as "being perfect") unless that entity already exists. Accordingly, those things that do not exist cannot retain the property of perfect or imperfection. Existence serves as a precondition of perfection, not as something that occurs simultaneous to it. Descartes thinks that it is impossible to conceive of a most perfect being that does not have the characteristic of existence. Nevertheless, people, in fact, have the idea of this most perfect being. Descartes argument begs the question by basing all of existence on God and then using the premise that existence in reality is more perfect than existence in thought alone. If one accepts Descartes'

premises for the sake of argument, then one is trapped into accepting the conclusion that God exists. In Descartes' sixth Meditation, the philosopher finds the causes of his sensory perceptions and from this, justifies the existence of his body. He does not believe that these perceptions come from himself, since he is not aware of creating these feelings. Therefore, Descartes argues that sensory perceptions emerge from an outside cause. God, who is not a deceiver, is not likely to make him believe that his body is producing these perceptions when it is actually not involved. On this basis, he believes that bodies must resemble what they seem to be. That is, the perception that a certain part of one's body is itchy, Descartes reasons that this must be the case. What this reasoning produces, or upholds, is the idea that the mind is completely distinct from the body. Knowing that sensory experience is based solely in the mind, and the causes of those perceptions are in the body, the question becomes how those two elements causally interact. This mind-body problem treats the mind as an entity trapped within a body, without a causal connection to the outside world but the sensory experience. Although the argument that Descartes gives in favor of this mind-body division is appealing, it is counterintuitive to anyone who has full control of his or her body. Not only is the argument counterintuitive, it also represents a conceptual error. Instead of mind states and body states being completely different, as Descartes believes, those two conditions simply represent different ways to discuss a single human experience. While Descartes seems to believe that his mind perceives his body, Descartes is actually committing the error of dividing his language into two nonexistent categories. Using the mind (perceptions of the mind) to explain the body is essentially the same as using the body (descriptions of the brain) to explain

the mind. This conceptual confusion produces the mistake that the mind and body are separate things, while in reality they are concepts fundamentally reflecting the same individual human being. Bibliography Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Ed. Karl Ameriks and Desmond M. Clarke. Trans. John Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.