Descartes Meditations Essay, Research Paper

Descartes overall objective in the Meditations is to question knowledge. To explore such metaphysical issues as the existence of God and the separation of mind and body, it was important for him to distinguish what we can know as truth. He believed that reason as opposed to experience was the source for discovering what is of absolute certainty. In my explication, I will examine meditation two in order to discover why knowledge was so important to Descartes.

Meditation One

The first meditation acts as a foundation for all those that follow. Here Descartes discerns between mere opinion and strict absolute certainty. To make this consideration he establishes that he must first attack those principles which supported everything I once believed. (quote, paraphrase) He first examines those beliefs that require our senses. He questions, whether our senses are true indicators of what they represent. By inspecting our sometimes firm belief in the reality of dreams, he comes to the conclusion that our senses are prone to error and thereby cannot reliably distinguish between certainty and falsity. To examine those ideas that have objective reality,” Descartes makes the improbable hypothesis of an evil genius, as clever and deceitful as he is powerful, who has directed his entire effort to misleading me ( ). By proposing this solution he is able to suspend his judgment and maintain that all his former beliefs are false. By using doubt as his tool, Descartes is now ready to build his following proofs with certainty.

Meditation Two

Comparing his task to that of Archimedes, Descartes embarks on his journey of truth. Attempting to affirm the idea that God must exist as a fabricator for his ideas, he stumbles on his first validity: the notion that he (Descartes) exists. He ascertains that if he can both persuade himself of something, and likewise be deceived of something, then surely he must exist. This self validating statement is known as the Cogito Argument. Simply put it implies whatever thinks exists. Having established this, Descartes asks himself: What is this I which necessarily exists ? Descartes now begins to explore his inner consciousness to find the essence of his being. He disputes that he is a rational animal for this idea is difficult to understand. He scrutinizes whether perhaps he is a body infused with a soul but this idea is dismissed since he cannot be certain of concepts that are of the material world. Eventually he focuses on the act of thinking and from this he posits: I am a thing that thinks. (20 ) A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses. To prove that perception on the part of the mind is more real than that of the senses Descartes asks us to consider a piece of wax. Fresh from the comb the qualities we attribute to the wax are those derived from the senses. Melted, the qualities that we attribute to the wax are altered and can only be known to the intellect. Descartes demonstrates how the information from the senses gives us only the observable, it is the mind that allows us to understand. The results of the second meditation are considerable, doubt has both proven the certainty of Descartes existence and that his essence is the mind.

Meditation Three

Descartes main objective in the third meditation is to prove the existence of God. Before he can begin he must first explore his concept of ideas. Moreover, he must clarify what constitutes an idea as being clear and distinct. Using his existence as an example he reasons that whatever he perceives very clearly and very distinctly is true. Concerning the beliefs he holds of the sensible world, he comes to the conclusion that these things could have been caused by things outside himself, and the ideas are similar to those things. Up to this point Descartes has held that God could deceive him about the truth of simple matters, such as that 2 + 3=5. To affirm that such objective ideas are safe from doubt, Descartes has to prove that God exists and that he is no deceiver. He finds that doubt carries within it the idea of certainty. From this query he follows with the idea of a perfect being, which by comparison, he is aware of his imperfections. It is Descartes view that such an idea could only have been placed in our minds by a perfect being. His reasoning for this is as follows: At the very least there must be as much in the total efficient cause as there is in the effect of the same cause. () From this declaration he ascertains that a perfect thing exists and by definition the perfect thing is God. He also concludes that God is no deceiver: for it is manifest by the light of nature that all fraud and deception depend on some defect. Content with his claims Descartes is now ready to move ahead with his argument concerning true and false.

Meditation Four

Descartes having proven that God exists must now make some clarifications concerning why God is no deceiver. The main question that needs clarification is this: If God is no deceiver then why do we err? Descartes answers that we are prone to make mistakes because our wills are infinite but our intellect is not. The will gives us the faculties of assertion, denial and suspension of judgment. The intellect allows us to perceive things clearly and distinctly. Like God we have an infinite will, but we are imperfect because are understanding is finite. Descartes concludes that because we are free we are responsible for our errors. It is possible however, that if we use our faculties properly we will not assent false judgments. Confident that God has created us such that if we perceive things clearly and distinctly our reasoning will not be wrong; Descartes is now free to explore the possibilities of material things and the mind body relationship.

Meditation Five

In the fifth meditation the essence of material things is considered. Before he begins with material considerations however, Descartes feels it necessary to offer another proof for the existence of God. Since Descartes has just demonstrated that we gain understanding through ideas, he is able to continue with an ontological argument proving that God necessarily exists. The claim that is the glue to this argument is that a supremely perfect being must necessarily exist. If this is not the case the being in question does not meet the criterion for perfection. God without existence is like a triangle without 3 sides or a mountain without a valley. (paraphrase) A supremely perfect being would lack some perfection. That taken care of, he turns his attention to material issues, namely the body. First Descartes separates sensation as being separate from his imagination because he does not have any control over it. Doubt takes over at this point and Descartes must again face the same problem he did in meditation one: the unreliability of the senses due to dreams or hallucinations. To counter this Descartes concludes that our knowledge of material things is based on our knowledge of God. He asserts that God has created him with such a strong belief in the existence of material things that they must not be false because God is not deceptive. By using God as his proof for the material world, Descartes has left himself in a precarious situation. Were it to be found that God does not exist the rest of his assertions would subsequently crumble. Nevertheless, Descartes is satisfied with the progress that he has made and is now ready to prove the existence of material things.

Meditation Six

There remains but one question as we draw near the end of the meditations, whether material things exist. To prove the existence of the material objects Descartes draws on his previous meditations to find the answer. He believes that material things can exist, if they are the object of mathematics. We can prove the existence of these objects because we can understand them with our intellect. There remains a question regarding our imagination. Descarte reasons that it is not essential. The understanding is greater than the imagination. Descartes assumes to have a body based on what his senses perceive. He begins to explore this notion that he had previously dismissed to doubt. He inquires whether his senses give him reason for bodies to exist. He comes to the conclusion that they do because God has given us a great inclination to believe that these ideas proceeded from corporeal things. ( ) This proof progresses into the nature of how mind and body co-exist. Descartes beliefs are as follows: It is from nature that we distinguish other bodies and their interpretation. We are inclined by nature towards things that benefit us. This is for our own self- preservation. Descartes makes the distinction between mind and body. He states that the mind is a thinking, unextended thing, while the body is a physical extended thing. The mind is indivisible whereas the body can be divided. It is the minds task to differentiate the part of the body affiliated with a certain sensation. God has endowed us with these natural inclinations to allow us self preservation.

Descartes now dispels his dream hypothesis because he realizes that wakefulness is the interaction of both mind and body. He leaves us with the message that we must acknowledge the infirmity of our nature. ( )

Explication

It is Descartes hope in Meditation two that he is able to find his first certainty. By use of the Cogito argument Descartes does just that. Having proven his existance he turns his attention toward the essence of his nature. As the title of the second meditation suggests, he proves that are essence is of the mind and thus more known to us than the body.

The Cogito argument as it looks in the Meditations runs like this:

“Thus, after everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement “I am, I exist” is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind.” (P.18)

Descartes Second Meditation is an attempt to find a truth that he can accept with certainty. In order to accomplish this, Descartes has established that his postulate must be open to strict scrutiny as to expel all doubt to its validity. By the third paragraph of the meditation he has discovered such a certainty, the claim that I think, therefore I exist. What he is trying to say with this statement is that every time he thinks something in his mind, he has proof that he exists. It is not possible to think without also existing. This proof, known as the Cogito, is Descartes first progression towards his goal of perfect knowledge. For this reason it is important that we examine this proof so that we can have a better understanding of its meaning.

To evaluate the Cogito argument, we must first understand it clearly. There are four key statements in meditation two that lead Descartes to the certainty that he exists. Herewith is a summation of Descartes argument:

1) Am I so tied to the body and to the senses that I cannot exist without them?

2) But certainly I should exist, if I were to persuade myself of something.

3) Then there is no doubt that I exist, if he (evil demon) deceives me.

4) I am, I exist or in other words I think, therefore I am.

These claims respectively suggest, that by denying, persuading, and being deceived; a certain faculty of thought is being used. By thinking, one can be certain that he exists.

Though the argument may seem simple and straightforward, upon closer inspection this is not the case. There seems to be some questions concerning the Cogito s interpretation, the most important being: What is the first certainty that Descartes uncovers? What perspective does he use to rationalize this certainty?, and how does he back it up? By examining the inferential, intuitional and epistemic interpretations, we can discover which interpretation of the Cogito was meant by Descartes in Meditation two.

At first it seems obvious that Descartes had meant for the Cogito to be an inferential argument. Of the key propositions in the Meditations all seem to have the commonality of thinking as their first premise. Similarly the second premise and the conclusion seem to follow the same pattern. The second premise posits the notion: Whatever thinks exists; followed by the conclusion: therefore, I exist.

To know something by inference, is to discover something based on previous knowledge. In Descartes case, he has come to know a metaphysical certainty, existence, based on a prior metaphysical certainty, thinking. The soundness of this reasoning is good because know matter what we do it is impossible to deny that we think. It seems simple enough, until we consider that Descartes seems to emphasize that his first absolute certainty is existence. Using the criteria for inference then, it is impossible that I exist is the first certainty. This is a weak argument for in order for this inference to work; Descartes would have to make revisions to meditation two. However, since he feels so strongly of this first certainty, I am not convinced that Descartes had meant for this interpretation.

The intuitional interpretation of the Cogito, maintains that it is metaphysically certain because Descartes has intuited it. Descartes idea of intuition is likened to a flash of insight. It can be seen to be true, the same way we know that that 2+3=5. He simply knows he exists based on a direct understanding. With this interpretation, cleary the proposition I exist is the first certainty. The problem of this argument is that the idea of intuition is too subjective an interpretation to prove that he exists. There is no way to replicate this procedure and obtain the same conclusion as Descartes. The evidence for this interpretation is not strong enough to render it to be the one Descartes intended.

The evidence for the epistemic interpretation of the Cogito is good. I feel that this is the most reasonable interpretation because it seems to be in character with the whole of the meditations. Descartes reasoning behind his metaphysical certainty is that he simply has no reason to doubt it. Previous to the second meditation, Descartes had used doubt as his tool; in doing so he felt it necessary to suspend all judgment. Here he is able to scrutinize all the major arguments of meditation two and come to the conclusion that he has no reason to doubt that I exist. It could be conceded that Descartes did not explore enough sources of doubt. This objection seems inconsequential considering the scope of the problems from the other interpretations.

Having established his existence, Descartes finds that his essence is the mind. He places a major importance on the intellect. In further meditations it is the mind, through understanding, that leads us to various conclusions. Near the end of Meditation two, Descartes demonstrates how the ideas of the mind are more attune to finding knowledge than are senses are. The point that he makes here is that only through the mind can we understand the essential qualities of the wax. Melted a piece of wax exhibits qualities such as extension and mutability. These are concepts that are only clear to the intellect. The main point that Descartes was trying to get across by using this wax experiment is, that if he can understand the wax better with his mind, then it certainly follows that he should know himself better through the same faculty.

The Meditations has given me a better understanding of philosophical issues. I have learned to suspend judgment so that I may use my intellect to understand things. Descartes presentation of the mind body problem has given me a new topic to explore. Is it the mind that rules the body or the body that rules the mind. Where does one begin, and the other end? By using some of Descartes methods I have attempted to see his arguments, and tried to come to my own conclusions. The mere fact that Descartes found so many certainties in the Meditations is surprising. It is not always easy to find a hypothesis that stands up to doubt. The Meditations have taught me to be open minded, and to acknowledge that sometimes we make mistakes. However, if we take caution and use reason carefully we are capable of finding certainty.

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