Descartes: The Epistemological Argument for Mind-Body Distinctness
(Margaret Wilson)

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Detailed Argument

Introduction

- Despite Descartes’ mind-body dualism being the most cited aspect of Descartes’ philosophy in recent philosophical writing, there has been little attempt to acquire an accurate understanding of his position. Wilson had written a paper in 1978 to show that Cartesian Dualism as then understood differed in both content and motivation from the dualism espoused by Descartes himself. Wilson sees two reasons for this: (1) Descartes’ conception of the possibilities & limits of mechanistic physical explanation and (2) his odd contention that the brain is of no use to pure understanding, the body being the main source of the imagination and sense experience. Wilson admits that Descartes, in establishing his dualism, uses, in the Sixth Meditation and elsewhere, an argument for the immateriality of mind - which she names the epistemological argument for the distinctness of mind from body – that doesn’t rely on (1) and (2). Descartes’ epistemological argument constitutes the principal bridge between historical Cartesianism and 20th century discussions of the mind-body problem, though even this argument has not been correctly represented or criticised in recent literature.

- The epistemological argument has its roots in arguments in the Second Meditation concerning (a) knowledge of the self as a thinking thing and (b) knowledge of the body as extended, flexible and movable. Descartes had brought into doubt the existence of the body in the First Meditation, but the evil demon cannot cause him to doubt his own existence because he must exist to be deceived. He then considers what attributes he can with certainty ascribe to himself, and excludes certain aspects of the traditional soul (eg. its nutritive capacity) along with the body. He finds only one attribute indubitable – thought – and concludes that he is strictly-speaking only a thinking thing – mind, understanding, soul or reason – a truly existing thing that thinks.

- This seems to imply that Descartes thinks he has already established the conclusion of the epistemological argument – that, since he is nothing essentially but a thinking thing, that he is distinct from anything physical. However, he immediately dispels this implication by saying that the human body – which he’d assumed to be nothing as it was unknown to him – may in the real state of things not be different from “this me” which he knows.

- Consequently, Descartes makes no claim, on the basis of the Second Meditation alone, that only thoughts and nothing corporeal pertains to his nature. He is not merely making an epistemically provisional claim that, as far as he knows, he is only a thinking thing, but claims that thought pertains to his nature and essence and cannot be separated from him. He also explicitly maintains that the cogito reasoning concerning the indubitability of his own existence makes him conclude that he is a truly existing thing, the significance of which Wilson will reveal later.

- There is one other thought in the Second Meditation that is important for the epistemological argument; namely, that Descartes has a clear and distinct idea of himself as a thinking thing apart from any concept of the corporeal. Having argued that his best knowledge of a piece of wax is derived from reason rather...
than the senses, Descartes concludes that he must know himself at least as distinctly and evidently as the wax, and that he is unwilling to admit anything in himself except mind. He also has a distinct conception of body as extended, a separate conception to that of thought. Descartes’ consciously held position was that he can only make positive affirmations about the nature of things on the basis of clear and distinct conceptions or perceptions, which is why the earlier claims about distinct perceptions are so important.

- Wilson doesn’t try to explain in detail the difference between a mere conception and one that is clear and distinct, but thinks the analogy of a geometrical proof is helpful. After one has examined or constructed the proof, one clearly conceives or perceives that the conclusion, \( T \), is true. Beforehand, one may have been able to conceive that \( T \), that it might be the case that \( T \). However, merely being able to conceive that \( T \) doesn’t preclude a similar mere conception that \( \neg T \). Clearly and distinctly conceiving that \( T \) does, however, preclude a clear and distinct conception that \( \neg T \).

- Wilson states that between the Second and Sixth Meditations, Descartes “validates” his distinct perceptions by providing “proofs” that an omnipotent and benevolent creator wouldn’t allow him to be deceived in what is most evident. From this we see that Descartes isn’t so rash as to believe that whatever he can conceive must be the case, for he thinks it necessary to introduce God to bridge the gap from what he can distinctly perceive to what is the case.

Section I

- These preliminaries over with, Wilson turns to the epistemological argument itself. Descartes starts the Sixth Meditation by observing that whatever Descartes can clearly and distinctly perceive, God is capable of bringing about, and seems to assert that the only impediment to God’s activity is Descartes’ inability to perceive distinctly\(^1\). Since previous meditations had held the objects of pure mathematics to be distinctly conceivable, Descartes has the first job of his principle to be the demonstration of the possible existence of physical things conceived of in this way\(^2\). The second application is the epistemological argument. Wilson quotes Descartes, but then, in lieu of a detailed analysis, codifies the argument as seems most natural to her.

- By comparison, with Wilson, here’s my own narrative précis of what Descartes said. (a) I know that anything I clearly and distinctly understand can be brought about like this by God. (b) Such things can be placed apart by God. Because of (a) and (b), (c) it is sufficient for me to clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another for me to be certain that they differ. (d) It doesn’t matter by which power such a separation as (b) is done for me to be certain of (c). (e) I conclude that I am a thinking thing because (i) I know that I exist and (ii) I notice nothing else to pertain to my essence other than that I’m a thinking thing. (f) It is clear that I can exist apart from my body and am really distinct from it (even though I will later argue that I certainly have a body to which I am very closely conjoined) for two reasons (\( \alpha \) I have a clear and distinct idea of myself as only a

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\(^1\) This is my malicious reading of Descartes! No doubt what he means is that even God cannot bring about what is incoherent of self-contradictory.

\(^2\) Note that Descartes has pure mathematics dealing with matters of real existence.
thinking thing, and not extended and (β) I have a clear and distinct idea of body as only extended, and not thinking.

- Here’s Wilson’s more precise analysis:
  1. If A can exist apart from B, and vice versa, then A & B are really distinct.
  2. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly understand can be brought about by God just as I understand it.
  3. If I can clearly and distinctly understand A apart from B, and vice versa, then God can separate A from B.
  4. If God can separate A from B, then A and B can exist apart, and, by (1), are really distinct.
  5. What it means to be able to clearly understand A apart from B and vice versa is that there should be some attribute \( \Phi \) of A and \( \Psi \) of B, such that I can clearly and distinctly understand that \( \Phi \) belongs to the nature of A, and \( \Psi \) to that of B, yet I can clearly and distinctly conceive of A in the absence of \( \Psi \), and B in the absence of \( \Phi \).
  6. The above is satisfied if we substitute myself for A, body for B, thought for \( \Phi \) and extension for \( \Psi \).
  7. Hence, from (5), (6), (3) and (4), I am really distinct from body and can exist without it.

- Wilson asks what’s wrong with the argument as interpreted above, firstly rejecting some ineffective objections to Descartes’ position on the distinctness on mind.

- Firstly, Descartes mind-body dualism is sometimes taken to rest at least partly on the “argument from doubt”, which is universally agreed to be fallacious. The argument goes something like (a) A and B are only the same if everything true of the one is true of the other. (b) I can doubt that I have a body (A) but not doubt that I have a mind (B). (c) Hence, A and B differ in respect of having their existence doubtful. (d) So, my mind is distinct from all body.

- Whatever the problems with this argument, Wilson doesn’t focus on is because it is not Descartes’, whose inability to doubt his own existence while doubting his body’s existence is not captured by this piece of unsound reasoning.

- A second objection is that all Descartes’ argument shows is that mind and body could possibly have been distinct, had God chosen to make them so, rather than that they are in fact distinct – but this fundamentally misses Descartes’ point, for Descartes holds that two things are distinct if it is possible for them to exist separately. Actual distinctness does not entail actual separateness.

- A third common objection is that Descartes’ argument rests on the unfortunate fact that if one is sufficiently ignorant, one can conceive almost anything. Being able to conceive that \( p \) doesn’t even entail the possibility of \( p \); at best all that follows is that one hasn’t yet found \( p \) to involve a contradiction. Obviously, Descartes rejects this argument because he’s not claiming mere conceivability but clear and distinct conceivability, and this distinction cannot be ignored without radically misunderstanding Descartes’ position.

- Wilson admits that the distinction between mere and clear and distinct perceptions raises the question of how one recognises a clear and distinct perception, but rather than addressing this question, turns to one of more direct relevance to the epistemological argument.

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3 I ought to try to determine what’s wrong with the argument, or at least what’s wrong with this argument that isn’t wrong with Descartes’ epistemological argument!
Section II

- The author of the first set of Objections ("Caterus") puts his finger on an important problem for Descartes in reasoning from the fact that A and B are distinctly and separately conceivable to the conclusion that they can exist apart. Caterus refers Descartes to Duns Scotus’ argument that, only a formal distinction, rather than a real distinction, is required for things to be conceived distinctly and separately from one another. He gives the example that justice and mercy are separate concepts that can be conceived of independently, yet that doesn’t imply that God’s justice can exist in separation from his mercy.

- This argument is important because Descartes himself holds that “simple natures” such as extension, figure and motion can each be clearly and distinctly conceived in itself, yet denies that they are really distinct because figure cannot exist without extended body, and so forth. In this doctrine of simple natures, Descartes is squarely opposed to the principle that what can be clearly and distinctly conceived separately can exist separately.

- Descartes’ response is that we must distinguish between complete and incomplete beings. He claims that a formal distinction doesn’t differ from a modal one, and applies only to incomplete beings. For things to exist separately, they need to be entities in themselves (entia per se), and a real distinction is required for this. He had, he says, accurately distinguished complete from incomplete beings. While we can, by intellectual abstraction, distinctly conceive of one of these incomplete beings separately from the other, this is from a thing inadequately conceived and is insufficiently distinct and separate for us to understand them as entities in themselves.

- Descartes gives his own example. The distinction between the motion and figure of the same body is a formal one. While I can understand the figure apart from the motion, and vice versa, each abstracted from the body, yet I cannot understand motion completely apart from the thing whose motion it is, nor in a thing with no figure (and vice versa for figure).

- Descartes contrasts his and Caterus’ examples of incomplete beings with the mind-body case. He claims that he can understand body as a complete thing by merely thinking of its extension, figure, mobility and so on, quite apart from anything pertaining to a mind. Similarly, he can understand the mind as a complete thing that doubts, understands, wills and suchlike, while denying it anything contained in the idea of body.

- The gist of this is that Descartes can conceive body and mind not only distinctly, but as complete things while simultaneously denying of each what belongs to the other. Justice and motion, however, while they can be understood distinctly in separation cannot be understood as complete beings.

- While Wilson isn’t aware of the passage where Descartes claims to have accurately distinguished complete from incomplete beings, she recognises that Descartes doesn’t at any rate explicitly include this distinction as he ought to in the epistemological argument. In order to be able to conclude that A and B are really distinct, one has to be able to understand A clearly and distinctly and as a complete being, apart from B. Also (5) has to be extended to so that not only is Descartes saying that the concept of himself as a thinking thing comprises no notion of extension, but that also in thinking of himself as a thinking thing he clearly and distinctly conceives of himself as a complete being.
Section III

• Arnauld, in the Fourth Objections, misunderstandes Descartes as claiming, in his response to Caterus, that to have “complete knowledge” sufficient for the epistemological argument to go through, I need exhaustive knowledge of myself as a thinking thing. He observes that nothing in the Meditations bears on this question, other than the argument in the Second Meditation that one can be certain of one’s existence as a thinking thing while denying the existence of the body. He concludes that nothing has been shown to the effect that the conception of himself apart from body is sufficiently complete and adequate as to assure him that he is not in error in excluding body from his essence.

• Arnauld says that Descartes cannot conclude that extension doesn’t belong to his essence merely because he notices nothing else essential to his nature other than thought. Maybe he perceives only part of his essence in conceiving of himself as a thinking thing. Arnauld adduces the case of the man who clearly and distinctly conceives of a triangle as right-angled, yet is in ignorance of Pythagoras’ theorem. Because of his incomplete knowledge of the triangle, he is able to deny that the sum of the squares on the sides equals that on the hypotenuse. Consequently, he might claim that since the clear and distinct idea of a right-angled triangle doesn’t include the notion of Pythagorean proportions, that God might have made some other relation between the sides to have appertained. Since this conclusion is false, and uses the same pattern of argument as the epistemological argument, this argument must be invalid.

• Descartes rightly takes Arnauld’s main point to be that Descartes hadn’t demonstrated that, from the mere fact that he knows nothing other than thought to belong to his essence, it follows that nothing else truly does belong to it. His response is that he’s proved that God can do all that he clearly and distinctly knows to be possible. Consequently, even though at this stage of the Meditations he’s willing to concede there’s much in him existing unnoticed, since what he does notice is sufficient alone for him to exist, he’s sure that God could have created him without these presently unnoticed attributes. Hence, these other attributes can be judged not to belong to his essence since no property that a thing can exist without is comprised in its essence. He also points out that, in responding to Caterus, he did not mean exhaustive knowledge by complete knowledge. He meant sufficient knowledge of a thing to know it is complete, with sufficient attributes for him to recognise it as a substance. Hence, he concludes that he has sufficiently shown in the Second Meditation⁴ that mind can be conceived sufficiently clearly and distinctly for it to be considered a complete thing in the absence of any attributes whereby we recognise body as a substance, and vice versa for body. He rejects Arnauld’s example of the triangle because it makes no use of Descartes’ notion of “complete knowledge” as originally intended.

• Wilson expands Arnauld’s objection by saying that he thinks that, for all Descartes knows, some attribute like extension might be implicated in his essence along with that of thought, and the only way for Descartes to eliminate the possibility is to establish that he knows all the properties of the self. Wilson, however, says that Descartes’ argument is that since he knows that the attribute of thought is alone sufficient for him to subsist, he therefore knows that no other

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⁴ This location is important – see later.
attribute can be necessary. His very claim that thought and extension are different, and each sufficient to determine a complete thing, is itself the denial of the possibility of any hidden necessary dependence of a thinking thing on the attribute of extension. Hence, “complete knowledge” in Descartes’ sense is sufficient for the epistemological argument to go through.

- This gives us a clearer understanding of the relation between the Second Meditation and the Sixth, as Descartes made explicit above in his response to Arnauld. The cogito reasoning and what immediately follows is intended to show just that mind can be perceived clearly and distinctly – sufficiently for it to be considered a complete thing, separate from any attribute whereby we recognise body as a substance. Wilson thinks this explains why, in the Second Meditation, Descartes refers to himself as a thinking thing, and not just as conceiving himself as thinking. Wilson thinks the role of the epistemological argument in the Sixth Meditation is merely to establish that the perception of the mind argued for in the Second Meditation – that it can be clearly and distinctly perceived as a complete thing in virtue of the property of thought alone – is sufficient for the conclusion that the mind really is a distinct thing. Wilson concludes that what’s really required in addition to the conclusions of the Sixth Meditation is that clear and distinct perceptions are a reliable guide to reality.

- In the light of Caterus’ and Arnauld’s objections, Wilson suggests the following “tweaked” version of the epistemological argument is what Descartes intended:

1. If A can exist apart from B, and vice versa, then A & B are really distinct.
2. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly understand can be brought about by God just as I understand it.
3. If I can clearly and distinctly understand A apart from B, and vice versa, then God can separate A from B.
4. If God can separate A from B, then A and B can exist apart, and, by (1), are really distinct.
5. What it means to be able to clearly understand A apart from B and vice versa is that there should be some attribute Φ of A and Ψ of B, such that I can clearly and distinctly understand that Φ belongs to the nature of A, and Ψ to that of B, and that Φ ≠ Ψ, yet I can clearly and distinctly conceive of A as a complete thing in the absence of Ψ, and B in the absence of Φ.
6. The above is satisfied if we substitute myself for A, body for B, thought for Φ and extension for Ψ.
7. Hence, from (5), (6), (3) and (4), I am really distinct from body and can exist without it.

- Are there residual problems? Wilson thinks that, at the least, the argument is no better than the distinction between clear and distinct perception and mere perception, which, despite her attempts at clarification, she distrusts radically – though doubts whether recent essentialists intuitions are on any better ground. She does think the argument stronger and better thought out than is generally recognised – in particular Descartes’ reply to Arnauld.

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5 The only differences from the first version seem to be the changes to (5) in bold.