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PHILO 1100 Take Home Exam

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Prompt A

Rene Descartes, a prominent philosopher of the 17th century, embarks on a profound philosophical exploration in his work, “Meditations on First Philosophy”. His goal is to establish an unshakable foundation for knowledge and certainty—a foundation that would withstand the scrutiny of doubt and skepticism. Descartes believes that certainty is the hallmark of genuine knowledge, and he employs a methodological approach to achieve this goal.

To forge this path to certainty, Descartes uses the method of doubt to find unquestionable beliefs or truths. He questions the reliability of all his beliefs and the sources of knowledge he relies on, including the senses, memories, and even the external world itself. He believes that anything that can be doubted or questioned should be dismissed as uncertain. This radical doubt serves as a methodological tool that removes all preconceived notions and beliefs, leaving only unquestionable truth as the basis of knowledge.

Within this method of doubt, Descartes explores the dichotomy between ideas in our inner minds and things in the external world. He posits that ideas are mental representations that reside exclusively within the mind, encompassing thoughts, mental images, and concepts. These thoughts are immediate and certain to the thinking itself and this inner mental realm is the undisputed realm of knowledge. However, for things in the external world, Descartes argues that although we can have ideas about external things, we cannot be sure that these external things exist as we perceive them to exist, that is, the existence of external objects is uncertain.

In addition, Descartes recognizes our natural inclination to believe in the existence of external objects. Our sensory experiences and perceptions of the external world appear vivid and direct. In everyday life, we seem to interact with and be affected by those external objects, and these experiences are deeply rooted in our cognitive and perceptual processes. This natural belief in the external world eventually becomes an integral part of our common sense.

Through the above thinking, Descartes concludes that, although he can doubt everything, including the existence of the outside world and even his own body, he cannot doubt himself as a thinking being. The very act of doubt and thought, according to Descartes, serves as undeniable evidence of his existence. Through the rigorous application of doubt, he eventually comes to the famous conclusion “I think, therefore I am”. This phrase implies that while everything else may be doubted, the act of doubt itself is undeniable proof of a being as a thinking being. This proposition is the basis on which Descartes builds the rest of his system.

Descartes further develops the concept of God: he argues that the idea of God is inherent in the human mind, and therefore does not derive from sensory experience or external sources but is an innate concept that is part of our intellectual nature. This means that the idea of God is the idea of a perfect and infinite being. In other words, when we think of God, we imagine a being with the highest degree of perfection. This perfect and infinite existence represents the existence of God as a non-deceiver. Descartes therefore uses the existence of God as a guarantee of the reliability of clear and definite ideas.

In conclusion, Rene Descartes’ “Meditations on First Philosophy” presents a systematic exploration of knowledge and certainty through applying the method of doubt.

Prompt B

The problem of evil has long been a topic of philosophical debate, seeking to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering with the notion of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God. It challenges conventional beliefs by constructing a logical argument that questions whether a loving and omnipotent God can coexist with the presence of evil.

The logical argument is often formulated in the following way: suppose there exists an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God in this world. Since God is omnipotent, then God will have the power to eliminate all evil; since God is omnibenevolent, then God will have the desire to eliminate all evil; and since God is omniscient, then God will know the existence of all evil. Then according to those definitions, we can assume if there exists an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God, then evil does not exist, because God will not allow any evil in the world. However, evil exists in the world and we can find a great number of examples, which seems to contradict the description of God. Therefore, our assumption is incorrect which means there does not exist an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God.

In response to the problem of evil, philosophers have proposed various explanations, one of which is the free will defense. This defense endeavors to harmonize the existence of evil with the existence of a benevolent God by emphasizing the significance of human free will.

The free will defense asserts that, for God, human free will is not only valuable but also necessary. To ensure that this free will is genuine, humans must have the capacity to make morally incorrect choices. Consequently, the free will defense suggests that evil and suffering result from human decisions rather than being directly caused by God. God permits these choices to preserve the intrinsic value of human free will.

It is important to clarify that the free will defense does not directly prove the existence of God. Instead, it argues that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God and the existence of evil can coexist, effectively countering the problem of evil.