Ashley Helfinstein

Professor Joy Laine

Philosophy 100

26 September 2016

Cogito Ergo Sum

René Descartes was a prominent philosopher and mathematician in the 1600’s. His work in both fields was influential both in his own time, and in modern day. Descartes was a practicing Catholic, who believed strongly in God, but also felt he could reconcile science with religion. This belief was revolutionary for the time period. Descartes influenced modern western philosophy with his use of skepticism and systematic doubt for the philosophical method. In addition, his ideas of mind-body dualism and his “cogito ergo sum” argument are still discussed by modern philosophers. These arguments respond to some of the basic epistemological questions of philosophy. What are we? What is knowledge? How do you know what you know? These meta questions are incredibly difficult to answer, but Descartes’ efforts gave a useful starting point for modern philosophers.

Descartes performed and wrote meditations about knowledge and beliefs. After years of holding certain assumptions, he decided to search through all of the knowledge he had for logical fallacies, and reject anything that had the slightest possibility for doubt. He waited until he was old enough to have many assumptions about the world, and he had the time and means to logically run through his beliefs using the method of systematic doubt. This was his first meditation, in which he concluded that he could not be confident in any of his previous beliefs. He followed this with several more meditations on the subject, which led him to the idea that the only thing he could be sure of was that he was a “thinking thing” (Descartes 5). This is the basis of his “cogito ergo sum” argument, or “I think therefore I am.” While there are some questionable parts of Descartes’ argument, the main idea of “cogito ergo sum” is sound.

Descartes starts the first meditation by breaking his beliefs into basic core principles, upon which his other beliefs rest. He claims that if he doubts any part of the core principles, he can doubt all knowledge which is based on it. Descartes primarily focuses on the knowledge from the senses, which he had generally believed. However, his senses deceived him on various occasions, such as in optical illusions or dreams. Thus, he decides that he cannot trust the senses, and discusses the idea that his physical body may not exist. He then proceeds to doubt all that he previously asserted. He argues that since God deceives him sometimes, he may deceive him at all times. He later changes from the idea of a deceitful God to an evil demon that tricks him about all of his sensory inputs, because God is fundamentally good (Descartes 3). Therefore, he concludes that, due to the evil demon, he cannot be sure that he has a physical body, or that the world around him truly exists. This is the basis for his “cogito ergo sum” argument, which he presents more fully in the next meditation.

In Descartes’ second meditation, he begins with the idea that nothing is certain, and tries to build something from there. He argues that he might believe that he is nothing, and does not exist, because he does not have a body. However, if he convinced himself that he had no body, then clearly he must have existed as something. Descartes claims that even if he is constantly deceived, he must exist in order to be deceived. He says, “he will never bring it about that I am nothing while I think I am something...I am, I exist, must be true whenever I assert it or think it” (Descartes 4). This is the Cogito argument. The series of systematic doubts questions the existence of the world, because all sensory information could be false. Something is not necessarily real simply because a person senses something, because Descartes’ depiction of an evil demon, or a variety of other possibilities, could cause error in those senses. It follows that the entire way people experience the world is in doubt. The logical conclusion is, the only thing that must be true is that “I” exist as something. Descartes continues in his meditation to attempt to explain what “I” is, and what properties can be attributed to it. However, in some form, “I” exists, as something that thinks, doubts, feels, appears to sense (Descartes 5). “I” cannot claim to have a body, but the mind does exist. He could not be having this experience, and this argument with himself, if some form of himself did not exist.

Descartes has been criticized for his meditations, particularly once he reaches his idea of mind-body dualism in the following meditations. For this meditation, people have argued that Descartes reached the wrong conclusion from the fact that he experienced thoughts and feelings. Professor Joy Laine explained their argument, that this simply proves that there is a thought, not a thinker. It is true that something must exist, but the “I” may not be a being that has thoughts, but rather a thought. While this argument is valid, “cogito ergo sum” still holds true. “I” still exists in some form of thinking, even if “I” is a single thought in a single fleeting moment. In addition, Descartes describes “existing” as thinking in his meditations. Therefore, the logic of “cogito ergo sum” can be seen as circular. “I am thinking therefore I am thinking” (Laine). Even in this case, the fact of the existence seems to hold true. This may demonstrate that thinking, or existence, is not defined well enough, but whatever it is, its reality is legitimate.

Descartes did not completely satisfactorily answer his questions with this argument. However, the way he presented it, and the ideas and questions it brought up were extremely valid, useful tools to build modern philosophy. His ideas sparked further exploration. Descartes’ Cogito argument is an important way to understand and question the fact of human existence, and one’s own beliefs about the world.

Works Cited

Descartes, René. "Meditations on First Philosophy in Which Are Demonstrated the Existence of God and the Distinction between the Human Soul and Body." Earlymoderntexts.com, adapted by Jonathan Bennett, July. 2004, http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1641\_1.pdf. Accessed 12 Sept. 2016.

Laine, Joy. “Descartes Meditations I II and VI.” Introduction to Philosophy: Bodies, Minds and Selves class, Macalester College, 19 Sept. 2016, Lecture.