

*Existicorn: An Analysis of Descartes' Proof for the Existence of Material Things*

In his famous work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes attempts to confirm one's ability of make sense of the empirical world by tearing it down and building it back up again through proving the existence of God and then establishing the reliability of exercising sense perception. Throughout the work, he methodically explains the ability to use mental faculties correctly and how one can soundly acquire knowledge about the world. In the third and fifth meditations, Descartes (for the purpose of this paper) proves the existence of God as an omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent being that does not deceive us when we use sense perception. In the sixth and final meditation of the work, Descartes slowly pieces together the material world by asserting his proof for the existence of material things. The final meditations is where his strings of thought about God, the mind, the body, and the world intertwine in order for the world as we know it to coalesce. While the argument for the existence of God is often considered the crux of the work, the proof for the existence of material things is essential to reclaiming the world that Descartes originally called into doubt. In this paper I will explain Descartes' proof for the existence of material things, pose multiple objections to it, and provide responses to said objections through a Cartesian lense.

At this point in the work, Descartes proved that the faculty of sense perception, when used correctly, can gather information about the world. The purpose of the proof of the existence of material things is used to assert that the world which one gathers information about is indeed a real and material one. The proof is composed of eight premises, a conclusion, and a following qualification.

1. Premises drawn from *Meditations on First Philosophy* and Rosenthal's outline of *Proof for the Existence of Material Things*

The first premise of the proof is, “I have a passive faculty (PF) of receiving sensory ideas” [CSM II p.55]. When Descartes says *passive faculty*, he claims that this sense perception occurs constantly and involuntarily. This type of perception is twofold because the perceiver both receives and recognizes the ideas of sensible objects [CSM II p.55]. To clarify, if one were to look at a water bottle, one would simultaneously and passively receive the presence of an object and recognize the fact that it is a water bottle.

Descartes’ second premise states that, “there must be an active faculty (AF) producing my sensory ideas either in me, bodies corresponding to my sensory ideas, God, or an angel” [CSM II p.55]. It is important to note according to Descartes, PF resides only in oneself, while AF could possibly reside in oneself or an entity outside of oneself. Descartes claims that AF can only possibly reside in one of the four different entities: oneself, bodies corresponding to one’s sensory ideas (objects), God, or an angel. At this point in the paper, Descartes will begin to eliminate the possibility of AF residing in any entity that isn’t a corresponding body (object).

Premises three through five all serve to eliminate the possibility of AF residing in oneself. Premise three argues that, “If the AF was in me, it would be in my mind- since that’s all that I am. [Real distinction]” The bracketed term “Real distinction” is critical to this premise since it hasn’t yet been established that the material world exists, and one cannot argue that a faculty could reside in a brain, since it is a material object (despite the fact that Descartes is a dualist, he has not presupposed that the body, while part of oneself, exists). This narrows down the possibility of the entity of oneself to be the mind only.

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Premise four states that, “If the AF was in my mind, I would be aware of it- since I’m aware of everything active in my mind. [Self Transparency]” The notion of self transparency is one of the most contentious parts of the argument and will be revisited later.

Premise five concludes through premises three and four that the mind contains no AF by saying, “I am aware of no AF in me, so it is not in me. [3,4]”

Descartes segues into his next set of premises which will attempt to eliminate the possibility of God or angels being AF. According to premise six, “If the AF was in God or an angel, then God would be a deceiver- since God gave me a great inclination to believe these ideas come from bodies corresponding to my sensory ideas and God gave me no faculty for recognizing that they come from somewhere else.” In this premise, Descartes uses God’s omnibenevolence to problematize the proposition that AF could originate from God or an angel. Descartes shoots himself in the foot by sliding in the assumption that, “God gave me a great inclination to believe these ideas come from bodies corresponding to my sensory ideas...” This assumption is not justified by previous premises nor is it explainable by God’s omnibenevolence, omnipotence, or omniscience. Regardless, Descartes tries to put God’s nature and this idea at odds with each other to make his claim.

Premise seven concludes through premise six that, “God is not a deceiver, so the AF is not in God or an angel. [6]”

Through premises, two, five, and seven, Descartes eliminates three of his four possibilities for the origin of AF. In light of this, he argues via premise eight, “So the AF of producing my sensory ideas must be in bodies corresponding to my sensory ideas. [2,5,7]”

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The proof for the existence of material things lies in statement nine, which concludes, “So bodies corresponding to my sensory ideas exist and cause my sensory ideas. [8]” This ultimately says that sense corresponding bodies are AF and produce the ideas received from PF, then corresponding bodies must exist. It is from this conclusion that Descartes handily proves that the material world and everything in it exists.

He then qualifies that sensory perception of corresponding bodies is only true of primary qualities of objects, and not secondary ones such as heat, color, sound, smell, taste, and hardness. Descartes says, “[Objects] may not all exist in a way that exactly corresponds with my sensory grasp of them, for in many cases my grasp of them is very obscure and confused [CSM II p.55]. However, they all possess properties I can clearly and distinctly understand comprised within subject matter of pure mathematics [CSM II p.55]. This qualification demonstrates Descartes’ knowledge in where his proof can and cannot extend. Despite proving the existence of material things, he is still aware of the fact that he cannot necessarily perceive everything in the same manner (since he thinks that secondary qualities do not share the same mathematical underpinnings).

The proof can be summarized as follows:

1. I can receive sensory ideas (PF).
2. There must be something producing the ideas (AF).
- 2b. AF must be either me, God or an angel, or corresponding bodies.
3. I am only my mind (Real Distinction)
4. I (my mind) would know if I had AF (through ST).
5. I do not have AF.
6. If God or an angel had AF, God would be a deceiver.
- 6b. (because I’m inclined to believe that AF comes from corresponding bodies).
7. God cannot be a deceiver, so AF is not God nor angel.
8. If AF is not me, or God or an angel, then it must be corresponding bodies.
9. Corresponding bodies must exist.
- \*10. I can only be certain that primary qualities of bodies exist, though.

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While Descartes' conclusions are valid, some of the premises he proposes are problematic. In premise two, Descartes presents four possibilities for AF. Despite the fact that he eliminated three of the four possibilities, Descartes arbitrarily provides an exhaustive number of possibilities for AF. If premise two were an inexhaustible list, Descartes could not proceed in proving the existence of material things. While one cannot introduce a truly inexhaustible list, there are sufficient possibilities to problematize Descartes' method of elimination.

The first objection to premise two is the possibility of the brain or the mind producing what is perceived. If the brain, which hadn't been proven to exist yet, was the architect of all that was being passively perceived with what Descartes calls the mind, then Descartes could not argue that PF or AF exist. In other words, if PF was caused by the brain, Descartes could not use the first premise to make his argument without presupposing the existence of material things.

The second objection to premise two is the famous situation of the "brain in the vat." This is a situation in which nothing exists outside of one's brain, and a machine manipulates one's brain to make them believe that what they perceive is true and corporeal in nature. Descartes might argue that an omnibenevolent God would not allow someone to exist as a brain in a vat, but a machine corporeal in nature that was deceiving someone is still compatible with the Cartesian God's attributes of omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence. The fact that God is a deceiver does not mean that "bad" things can't happen. This also relates to the second part of premise six, which arbitrarily assumes that God made one inclined to believe that AF comes from corresponding bodies.

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Premise four, is also problematic due to the lofty nature of Descartes' claim of self transparency (ST). Descartes, asserts that due to ST, one is aware of everything active in their mind. Being aware of every activity in one's brain simultaneously is implausible, and unconscious activity in its nature would be contradictory to ST. A potential rebuttal from Descartes to this objective could be that activity contradictory to ST could always be attributed to the brain, thus creating criteria for ST that the mind could meet. For example, Descartes suggests that unconscious activity isn't problematic for ST [CSM II p.171-72]. However, the ability to attribute different properties to the mind or the brain makes Descartes' hypothetical argument nebulous and elusive. The essence of the mind (which is normally considered thought) would also be called into question if unconscious or subconscious thoughts were attributed to the brain. In Descartes' reply to Arnaus about this matter, he claims that, "[one is] not aware of every power, only ones being exercised" [CSM II p.171-72]. Under this framework, Descartes' premise could be saved if he proposed that the mind has an arsenal of mental faculties, but he would have to give up ground on his definition of ST. Furthermore, one cannot know that they have a faculty if they have never used it, though Descartes might disagree.

Premise six arbitrarily asserts that one is inclined to believe that ideas come from bodies corresponding to sensory perception, and incorrectly assumes that God is responsible for equipping people with certain faculties. Descartes would likely argue that if the AF was in God, then God would equip someone with a faculty to know it. However, Descartes' "demon deceiver" could still interfere with our PF and our ability to discriminate which sources it comes from, regardless of what the AF resides in. (To clarify, Descartes introduced the idea of a "demon deceiver" in previous meditations to argue that one's senses can never be trusted.) The notion of

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a demon deceiver could be manipulated within Descartes' framework to confound many of his propositions. It seems that he has opened a can of worms by introducing an argument so powerful that one can only be certain of their own existence. Even working from *cogito* to achieve *scientia* can be problematized with a demon deceiver. Regardless, Descartes would likely argue that circumstances that led to a demon deceiver deceiving someone wouldn't occur given the type of God that was proven in previous meditations.

Descartes' proof for the existence of material things is both powerful and ambitious, and his method of eliminating possibilities for the source of AF is effective for drawing his conclusions. He ultimately argues that if one's sense perceptions are true and are proven to come from corresponding bodies then they must exist. Objections to premises two, four, and six were presented, each shedding light on how these premises incorporated foreign ideas and assumptions into the proof to build from. The chief objections to Descartes' proof focused on the ideas of an exhaustive list of sources of perceptions, self transparency, and that God made one inclined to believe that perceptions come from corresponding bodies. These objections capitalized on cartesian dualism and the idea of a "demon deceiver" to effectively problematize the proof. Potential rebuttals to these objections focus on the flexibility provided by a cartesian dualist argument as well as utilizing the nature of God and the mind to account for said objections. While the proof hasn't been dismantled, it is important to further evaluate ideas such as self transparency, deception, and active faculties in order to either solidify or reject it. Until then, Descartes' proof for the existence of material things remains in a philosophical limbo.

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