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“First, I know that all the things that I clearly and distinctly understand can be made by God such as I understand them. For this reason, my ability clearly and distinctly to understand one thing without another suffices to make me certain that the one thing is different from the other, since they can be separated from each other, at least by God…. For this reason, from the fact that I know that I exist, and that at the same time I judge that obviously nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists entirely in my being a thinking thing.”

In the final section of his *Meditations*, Descartes draws on the conclusions from his prior arguments to attempt to deduce that the mind and body are two separate entities capable of causally interacting with each other. I will analyze an intermediate stage of this argument by reconstructing Descartes’ reasoning, outlined in the above passage, and evaluating its merits. It is important to first acknowledge the implicit premises of Descartes’ argument, which he has developed in earlier sections of the *Meditations.* Namely, Descartes has previously concluded that God exists and is a supremely perfect being; that is, not a deceiver, and has also separately argued that he exists, at least as far as he is a thinking thing. These premises are necessary prerequisites to follow Descartes’ argument in *Meditation VI.*

There are two stages to Descartes’ argument. He first states that if one can clearly and distinctly understand something, it is possible for God to create that thing to be exactly as one understands it. Therefore, it is sufficient for Descartes to conclude that if one can make the clear and distinct judgment that two things are different, then those things are truly different. He argues that this conclusion is valid because any two things that he can understand as separate entities can be separated by God, who would not deceive him. Descartes then applies this notion to his conception of his existence as he has defined it. Because he has a distinct idea of himself as only a thinking thing, Descartes reasons, then his entire existence can be contained in the statement that he is a thinking thing. Though not directly stated in this passage, Descartes’ conclusion that “my essence consists entirely in my being a thinking thing” implies that his mind and body are two separate entities.

The soundness of Descartes’ argument rests on the idea that merely understanding something necessarily implies the possibility for that thing to exist. In other words, Descartes is saying that he can describe the world using *a priori* knowledge, connecting his view of dualism with his view of rationalism. It is difficult to accept that one could conceive of things without experience. This requires the assumption that there is a set of axiomatic concepts that are self-evident to all beings, as if embedded in the fabric of the universe. This is a bold assumption and requires a thorough explanation from Descartes before proceeding.

That Descartes believes that some concepts can originate from his mind without the aid of his body has already been documented in the *Meditations*. However, nowhere does he acknowledge the possible influence his experiences have had on his thought. Though Descartes’ extreme skepticism is admirable, it is impossible that he rejected the entirety of his external knowledge in his process of doubt. This requires that he knows the exact limits of his external knowledge and prohibits the idea that the external world can shape his thought.For example, we are all familiar with the influence of hunger on our decision-making. We become more irrational and devalue things and activities that do not immediately satisfy our needs. Everyone has made a decision when hungry that they ultimately regret, though they may not consciously attribute the source of this decision to their hunger. One would expect that a philosopher studying the mind would address this idea, but Descartes fails to do so.

It can also be asserted that this point in Descartes’ argument is an example of circular reasoning. The things of which Descartes has a clear and distinct understanding can be made by God so that he understands them. But for Descartes to clearly and distinctly understand something, according to his terms, God must have made that thing in such a way that he can understand it. This issue is raised by Thomas Arnauld about Descartes’ argument for the existence of God earlier in the *Meditations.* In Descartes’ reply to Arnauld, he argues that he does not have to continuously acknowledge a clear and distinct understanding of God’s existence, as is believed to be implied in his initial proof. That Descartes commits this infraction in a separate context cannot be explained away as easily as it is in his reply to Arnauld.

In conclusion, this section of Descartes’ argument for dualism (and rationalism, by extension) proposes interesting and revolutionary ideas, but falls flat in the details of its analysis and reasoning. However, one cannot deny the impact that arguments such as this one had on Western philosophical thought at the time. Though various philosophers have evolved Descartes’ ideas to a more defensible state over the centuries, his skeptical approach to metaphysics and epistemology will always leave him with a positive legacy in the history of Western philosophy.

Sources Consulted:

Pryor, Jim. “Descartes' Argument that He is Distinct from His Body.” *UA 1. Central Problems in Philosophy*, [www.jimpryor.net/teaching/courses/intro/notes/meditation6.html](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/courses/intro/notes/meditation6.html).