

History of Philosophy

34 Descartes on God and Nature

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Abstract:

This lecture provides an overview of **René Descartes' rationalist philosophy**, focusing specifically on his transition from the essence of ideas to the reality of the physical world. The author explains how Descartes identifies **logically necessary truths**—such as those found in geometry—to bridge the gap between abstract thought and the existence of **God and matter**. By examining the **ontological argument**, the text illustrates why Descartes believed a perfect being must exist by its very nature, serving as a guarantor for the reliability of human reason. The discussion further addresses the **mind-body problem**, describing how Descartes viewed the soul and physical form as distinct substances that interact within the human frame. Finally, the source evaluates the challenges of this **dualism**, including the difficulties of explaining sensory error and the functional unity of a person.

Briefing Document:

Briefing: Descartes on God, Nature, and the Mind-Body Problem

Executive Summary

The provided source context offers a detailed analysis of René Descartes' philosophical transition from abstract rationalism to the affirmation of the material world, as presented in his fifth and sixth Meditations. The central thesis identifies Descartes as a staunch rationalist who prioritizes "thought objects"—concepts known a priori—over sensory data.

The analysis outlines three critical pillars of Cartesian thought:

1. **The Ontological Argument:** In Meditation Five, Descartes argues that existence is inseparable from the essence of God, much like the properties of a triangle are inseparable from the concept of a triangle.

2. **The Proof of the Material World:** In Meditation Six, Descartes moves from the logical possibility of matter to its actual existence by arguing that involuntary sensations must be caused by a physical body, as a non-deceptive God would not provide such vivid experiences without a basis in reality.
3. **Substance Dualism:** Descartes establishes a fundamental distinction between the mind (a thinking thing) and the body (an extended thing), ultimately proposing an interactionist model centered on the pineal gland.

The briefing concludes with the historical challenges posed by Descartes' dualism, including the problem of explaining the functional unity of the self and the various alternative theories—such as occasionalism and pre-established harmony—that emerged to resolve these tensions.

I. The Rationalist Foundation: Thought Objects and Essences

Descartes distinguishes himself as a rationalist by asserting that certain knowledge is independent of sensory experience. He emphasizes "thought objects" (concepts) over "sense objects" (empirical data).

- **Objective Realities:** Concepts like matter or the laws of logic possess an objectivity and reality of their own. They are universal and can be understood in a common way, regardless of individual sensory perception.
- **Essence vs. Existence:** Descartes separates the "essence" of a thing (what it is conceptualized to be) from its "existence" (its presence in the physical world).
 - **Meditation Five** focuses on the essences of material bodies and God.
 - **Meditation Six** addresses the existence of those bodies.
- **A Priori Physics:** Descartes suggests that branches of physics, such as optics, can be treated as a priori sciences. Because the essence of matter is spatial occupancy (primary qualities like size and shape), truths about matter can be derived through geometry, which provides logically necessary truths independent of experience.

II. Meditation Five: The Ontological Argument for God

Descartes posits that the knowledge of God is the necessary foundation for all theoretical science and certitude.

The Logic of Necessary Existence

Descartes argues that for God, essence and existence are inseparable. He uses a geometric analogy:

- Just as it is a necessary truth that the angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees, it is a necessary truth that a supremely perfect being possesses the perfection of existence.
- **Self-Contradiction:** To conceive of a non-existent God is as logically impossible as conceiving of a mountain without a valley.

The Role of God in Knowledge

Descartes concludes that the certitude of all science depends on knowing the true God.

- Because God is perfect and not a deceiver, the human mind can have confidence in logically necessary truths.
 - Once God's existence is established, the mind can acquire "perfect knowledge" of both intellectual objects (mathematics) and corporeal nature.
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III. Meditation Six: The Existence of Material Bodies

In the final Meditation, Descartes evaluates how we can move from the conceptual possibility of matter to the certainty of its existence. He distinguishes between three states of consciousness:

State of Consciousness	Definition/Function	Degree of Proof
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Conception	Abstract thought objects (e.g., the concept of a triangle).	Shows matter is logically possible ; there is no contradiction in its existence.
Imagination	The capacity to voluntarily formulate mental images with external/spatial references.	Provides psychological persuasion , but constitutes no formal proof.
Sensation	Involuntary bodily feelings (pleasure, pain, tickles) with specific spatial locations.	Provides a justified judgment for the existence of the body.

The Argument for the Body

Descartes argues that sensations are "adventitious" (caused by something external) and involuntary. He reasons:

1. Sensations are not produced by the mind's choice.
2. If God produced these sensations directly without a body existing, He would be a deceiver.
3. Therefore, a physical body must exist and act as the cause of these sensations.

Knowledge of Other Minds

Descartes proposes an **argument by analogy** to prove other minds exist. By observing that other bodies exhibit behavioral manifestations (like "yelping" when injured) analogous to his own, he infers that those bodies are coupled with mental states similar to his own.

IV. The Problem of Error and Judgment

Descartes must reconcile the existence of a non-deceptive God with the reality of sensory illusions and human error.

- **Physiological Malfunction:** Errors (like hallucinations) can occur due to the complex nature of the body. If one part of the bodily mechanism malfunctions, it may transmit untrustworthy signals.

- **Will vs. Intellect:** Error is not a flaw in God’s design but a result of human judgment.
 - The **Intellect** perceives ideas.
 - The **Will** affirms or denies those ideas.
 - **Source of Error:** Error occurs when the Will makes a judgment on a perception that is not "clear and distinct"—effectively outstripping the Intellect's current evidence.
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V. Substance Dualism and the Mind-Body Problem

Descartes defines the soul (mind) and the body as two essentially different and substantively independent entities.

Defining the Two Substances

- **Mind/Soul:** A "thinking thing" that is immaterial and capable of surviving the death of the body.
- **Body:** A "spatially extended thing" that operates via mechanistic forces.

Causal Interactionism

Despite their different essences, Descartes argues the mind and body influence one another. He identifies the **pineal gland** as the point of interaction.

- **Mechanism:** He describes "animal spirits" circulating through "canals" in the body. These spirits influence the pineal gland, which in turn produces changes in consciousness and brain states.
 - **Critique:** This explanation is historically viewed as a "classic goof" because a gland is a physical entity and does not bridge the gap between the material and the immaterial. It fails to account for the "functional unity" of the self—the feeling of being a "psychosomatic unity" rather than a mind merely "having" a body.
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VI. Historical Successors and Alternatives

Descartes' dualism created a "mind-body problem" that subsequent philosophers sought to resolve:

- **Occasionalism (Gerlincx):** The view that God is the only true cause. Mental states are merely the "occasion" for God to produce a bodily change, and vice versa.
- **Double Aspect Theory (Spinoza):** The mental and the physical are not two different substances but two attributes of one single underlying substance.
- **Pre-established Harmony (Leibniz):** The mind and body were pre-programmed by God to function in perfect synchronization, like two clocks set to the same time, without actually influencing each other.
- **Modern Brain Dependency:** Contemporary arguments against Cartesian dualism emphasize the deep interdependence of mental states and brain function, suggesting a "separable" rather than an "already separate" soul.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Descartes on God and Nature

This study guide provides a comprehensive review of Arthur Holmes' analysis of René Descartes' philosophy concerning the existence of God, the nature of matter, and the relationship between mind and body. The material focuses specifically on the transitions between *Meditation Five* and *Meditation Six*.

Part I: Short Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. How does Descartes use the example of a piece of wax to support his rationalist position?

2. What is the primary distinction Descartes makes between the "essence" and the "existence" of material bodies?
 3. Why does Descartes characterize geometry as an *a priori* science of physics?
 4. According to Meditation Five, why is the existence of God considered a logically necessary truth?
 5. How does the concept of God provide a foundation for the "certitude and truth of all science"?
 6. What are the three distinct states of consciousness Descartes identifies in Meditation Six?
 7. Why is the "imagination" insufficient to prove the existence of the material world?
 8. How does Descartes use the "perfection of God" to justify the belief in his own physical body?
 9. By what logic does Descartes infer the existence of "other minds"?
 10. According to the text, what is the "residual question" regarding the mind-body relationship that Descartes' successors struggled to solve?
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Part II: Answer Key

1. **The Wax Example:** Descartes observes that while the empirical properties of wax change when melted, the concept of the wax as an object of thought remains constant. This demonstrates that we possess universal, abstract concepts—or "thought objects"—that are known through the intellect rather than the senses.
2. **Essence vs. Existence:** In Meditation Five, Descartes argues that the "essence" of matter (its spatial properties) can be understood through conceptualization independently of its actual existence. Meditation Six then addresses "existence" by shifting focus to the perception of sensory objects and whether these conceptualized bodies actually exist in the world.

3. **Geometry as A Priori Physics:** Descartes views the essence of matter as "spatial occupancy," characterized by primary qualities like size and shape. Since geometry is the science that determines the logically necessary truths of space, physics can be practiced *a priori* by calculating these spatial relationships without relying on empirical data.
4. **Logical Necessity of God:** Descartes proposes an ontological argument where God's essence is existence itself. Just as the concept of a triangle necessitates that its angles add up to 180 degrees, the concept of a supremely perfect being necessitates existence; to conceive of a non-existent perfect being is a self-contradiction.
5. **Foundation of Certitude:** Descartes asserts that all perfect knowledge depends on knowing God, a perfect being who would not deceive. This divine guarantee gives the philosopher confidence that logically necessary truths—both regarding mathematics and the material world—are certain and beyond doubt.
6. **States of Consciousness:** Descartes distinguishes between conception (abstract thought objects), imagination (mental images of things with external spatial references), and sensation (vivid, involuntary bodily feelings). Each state offers a different level of evidence regarding the possibility or reality of material things.
7. **Insufficiency of Imagination:** While imagination provides a "persuasive" psychological influence and suggests an external spatial reference, it does not provide a proof. One can voluntarily imagine things that do not exist, meaning the faculty of imagination cannot confirm the actual existence of the objects it visualizes.
8. **Divine Non-Deception:** Descartes argues that his sensations are "adventitious" (caused from the outside) and involuntary. Since God is perfect and not a deceiver, He would not have constructed human nature to feel these sensations as coming from a body if no such body existed.
9. **Inference of Other Minds:** Descartes uses an "argument by analogy," noting a correlation between his own mental states and his bodily movements. When he observes other bodies exhibiting behaviors analogous to his own

(such as yelping after a stubbed toe), he infers they possess similar internal mental states.

10. **The Mind-Body Problem:** The residual problem is "causal interaction"—how two essentially different substances (a thinking, immaterial mind and a spatial, material body) can influence one another. While Descartes suggested they interact in the pineal gland, critics argue this fails to explain the "functional unity" of the human person.

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the themes discussed in the source text to develop detailed responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Rationalist Framework:** Discuss how Descartes' rejection of "sensism" (the belief that all knowledge comes from the senses) shapes his approach to the "thought object." Explain how this leads to his conclusion that physics and geometry are inextricably linked.
2. **The Ontological Argument:** Analyze Descartes' version of the ontological argument in Meditation Five. Contrast his focus on "logical necessity" with the text's mention of "ontological necessity," and explain why some contemporary critics find his slide between these two concepts problematic.
3. **The Proof of the Material World:** Detail the step-by-step process Descartes uses in Meditation Six to move from his own "states of consciousness" to the conclusion that a material world exists. Pay particular attention to his distinction between voluntary and involuntary ideas.
4. **The Problem of Error:** Explore how Descartes accounts for sensory illusions and hallucinations if God is not a deceiver. Analyze the roles of the "malfunctioning body," the "intellect," and the "will" in the formation of erroneous judgments.
5. **Critiques and Alternatives to Dualism:** Examine the difficulties presented by Cartesian interactionism. Briefly explain the alternative theories mentioned in the text—Occasionalism, Double Aspect Theory, and Pre-

established Harmony—and how they attempt to resolve the mind-body dilemma.

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Adventitious Ideas	Ideas that are "caused" and come to the mind involuntarily from the outside, such as physical sensations.
A Priori	Knowledge that is independent of experience, derived through reason and logical necessity.
Animal Spirits	A 17th-century physiological concept describing fluids or forces that circulate through "canals" in the body and glands to produce movement and sensation.
Dualism	The philosophical view that reality consists of two essentially different substances; in Descartes' case, the "thinking thing" (mind) and the "extended thing" (body).
Essence	The fundamental nature or defining properties of a thing (e.g., spatial occupancy for matter, or existence for God).
Factitious Ideas	Ideas that are formulated voluntarily by the mind, such as those created by the imagination.
Occasionalism	The theory (attributed to Gerlincx) that God is the sole causal agent, using mental or physical changes merely as "occasions" to produce effects in the other substance.
Ontological Argument	An argument for the existence of God based solely on the analysis of the concept or "idea" of God as a perfect being.
Pineal Gland	The specific location in the brain where Descartes hypothesized the causal interaction between the mind and the body takes place.

Primary Qualities	Essential properties of material bodies that are objectively real and measurable, such as size, shape, and density.
Rationalism	The philosophical school holding that reason, rather than sensory experience, is the primary source of knowledge.
Secondary Qualities	Properties accessible only through the five senses, such as color and smell, which are not considered part of the "essence" of matter.
Thought Object	A concept or universal meaning that has an objectivity and reality of its own within the "currency of thought."