

A Cartesian Modal Argument for Dualism

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Substance dualism has largely been discredited as a viable position in contemporary philosophy of mind, instead being replaced by other dualist variations like property dualism and functionalism (Heil 3). With origins in Plato and Aristotle, the seminal substance dualist position is found in Descartes' *Meditations*. Though multiple different arguments for substance dualism have been extracted from the *Meditations*, I think that Descartes is most convincing when his arguments are interpreted as one cohesive whole. Throughout the course of his writing, Descartes covers many features within the vast landscape of epistemology and metaphysics in addition to philosophy of mind, analyzing notions ranging from clear and distinct perceptions to conceivability and possibility. These notions are considered in the very first meditation and implemented throughout the rest of his works. In this paper, I will offer a reconfiguration of Descartes' argument(s) in order to support the dualist position more broadly (it is not particular to a specific kind of dualism). My argument, though Kripkean in nature, is markedly Cartesian by incorporating the distinctly Cartesian notions of clear and distinct perceptions, essences, and conceivability. In section I, I will present and briefly analyze two of the principal arguments

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for substance dualism as presented in the *Mediations*. In section II, I will define what Descartes means by clear and distinct perceptions of essences. In section III, I will define the Cartesian notion of imagination and conceivability, and make an argument for the linkage between conceivability and possibility. In section IV, these carefully constructed definitions will culminate in a Cartesian modal argument for dualism.

I. Descartes' Arguments For Substance Dualism

Over the course of Descartes' *Meditations VI*, several arguments for the distinction of the mind from the body are presented. The two arguments most often extracted are (1)¹ the Conceivability Argument, and (2)² the Argument from Clear and Distinct Perceptions. Argument (1) can be formulated as follows:

- (P1) It is conceivable that the mind can exist apart from the body.
- (C1) Therefore, it is possible that the mind can exist apart from the body.
- (C2) Therefore, the mind is distinct from the body.

As reconstructed, this argument has only one initial premise followed by two inferences. Interpretations of this argument approach the notion of conceivability from various angles, regarding it as a kind of imagination, perception, or mental apprehension (Adams 222). There is no general philosophical consensus regarding a definition, however. Even Descartes himself does not arrive at any strict definition of what is necessary for conceivability, although there do seem to be some intellectual faculties that can

¹Descartes writes, "So the fact that I can vividly and clearly think of one thing apart from another assures me that the two things are distinct from one another—that is, that they are two . . . so, my mind is distinct from my body" (Descartes, *Meditations* 29).

²"First, I know that if I have a vivid and clear thought of something, God could have created it in a way that exactly corresponds to my thought . . . my mind is me, for the following reason. I know that I exist and that nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing; from this, it follows that my essence consists solely in my being a thinking thing, even though there may be a body that is very closely joined to me. I have a vivid and clear idea of myself as something that thinks and isn't extended and a clear idea of body as something extended that does not think. So, it is certain that my mind is a distinct thing from my body" (Descartes, 29). Also, "There is a great difference between mind and the body. Every body is by its nature divisible, but the mind cannot be divided" (Descartes, *Meditations* 32).

be classified as sufficient (Foti 639). Objections to this argument challenge either the inference from (P1) to (C1) or from (C1) to (C2). Often, these objections rest on the assumption that conceivability is merely “thinking of” or “imagining” and not the kind of rigorous relation to a thing’s essence that Descartes seems to have in mind (Malcolm 320).

Argument (2) is generally considered to be more powerful, and can be formulated as follows:

- (P1) If I have a clear and distinct perception of something, that thing’s actual existence corresponds exactly to my idea.
- (P2) I have a clear and distinct perception of my mind as a thinking, non-extended, indivisible thing.
- (P3) I have a clear and distinct perception of my body as a non-thinking, extended, divisible thing.
- (C1) Therefore, my mind is a thinking, non-extended, indivisible thing, and my body is a non-thinking, extended, divisible thing.
- (C2) Therefore, my mind and my body are two different things.³

This argument relies on the Cartesian conception of clear and distinct perceptions. (P1) has been criticized for being reliant on the existence of God to justify the relationship of a clear and distinct perception to objective reality.⁴ In many ways, arguments from modality have, in contemporary philosophy, replaced arguments like this one that are reliant on the existence of God in order to be able to assert a legitimate correspondence between ideas in the head and the real world (Bennett 640).

Each of these arguments are valuable for different reasons: argument (1) for its reliance on modality, and argument (2) for its reliance on identity and clear and distinct perceptions. For the sake of devoting more time to my own construction of a Cartesian modal argument, I will suffice it

³Modern sketches of this argument include Leibniz’s identity principle in order to support (C2): the mind and the body do not share the same properties, and thus cannot be the same thing.

⁴Descartes argues that the existence of God as a non-deceiver corroborates the object of the clear and distinct perception as corresponding perfectly to an objective reality.

to say that Descartes' arguments have been largely discounted as viable proofs for the dualist position. My hope for the rest of this paper is to motivate a novel examination of the merits of what Descartes has to offer the contemporary perspective of mind-body dualism.

II. Clarity, Distinctness, and Essences

Descartes, throughout his *Meditations*, fails to define key terminology—in particular, what it means to have a “clear” and “distinct” perception of a thing's existence. These qualities are meant to refer to a specific kind of awareness of a thing's actual existence. In this section, I will offer precise definitions of these terms in hopes of elucidating and strengthening the arguments they appear in.

Descartes elaborates on what it means to have a clear and distinct perception in his *Principles of Philosophy*. Clarity describes the presentness and accessibility of a thing to the mind's awareness. Like sight as a physical perception, it just appears ‘there’. In the same section, Descartes defines distinctness as the attribute of a perception that is already clear and which is separated from other perceptions such that “it contains within itself only what is clear” (Descartes, *Principles* 11). Take, for example, the experience of pain (an example Descartes himself uses). Pain is always a clear perception—it is impossible to be in pain without awareness of it. However, it is possible for pain to be an amalgamation of perceptions in which actual the state of the body is subject to unconscious assumptions that distort what is present in the mind. For instance, the well-documented phantom limb syndrome introduces a situation in which a clear perception of pain gets mixed up with another perception of a limb, which is not physically present. In such a situation, the perception of the limb is an unclear judgment of the locality of the pain being experienced. This would be a clear but non-distinct perception. Distinctness is a quality that is both a strict subset of perceptions that are clear and remain clear once all other perceptions are removed from consideration.

Objectors to clear and distinct perceptions presume that like sense perception, knowledge of what is clear and distinct is predicated on the correspondence between the perception itself and some external reality. However, it has been argued that what Descartes actually has in mind is drastically different from sensory perception; rather, clear and distinct perceptions are direct apprehensions that rely on the intellect and which perceive not merely ideas, but essences (Humer 493). In *Meditation V*, Descartes, considering the true nature of things, writes, “nothing without

which is a thing can still exist is comprised in its essence” (Descartes, *Meditations* 25). We can perhaps, then, define essence in the following way:

Essence: The essence of a thing Φ is a property x such that x is out of necessity *de re* a property of Φ ; Φ cannot exist without x ; in every possible world x is a property of Φ .

Notably, however, even though to be an essence x must be a necessary property of Φ , it is not the case that all the necessary properties of Φ belong to its essence. In other words, x as a necessary property of Φ is necessary but not sufficient to be considered an essence. There are other y properties that, although necessary for Φ to exist, are dependent on property x . For example, Descartes considers extension to be the essence of matter. Other properties attributed to matter such as length, breadth, and depth presuppose extension. These properties are modes of extension that are instantiated in a way such that without extension, they would not be possible (Schiffer 37)⁵. We can include this addendum in a second definition of essence: essence*.

Essence:* The essence of a thing Φ is a property x such that x is out of necessity *de re* a property of Φ ; Φ cannot exist without x ; in every possible world x is a property of Φ . In addition, any other property y of thing Φ must be an instantiated mode of x such that without x , y would not exist.

Ultimately, Descartes argues, what can be clearly and distinctly perceived are the essences* of things. Any usage of the word “essence” from now on will refer to essence*.

III. Imagination, Conceivability, and (Metaphysical) Possibility

We now move on to other terms implemented in Descartes’ *Meditations*, namely those which compose his conceivability argument.

Before analyzing the notion of conceivability (which will be the key notion of the modal argument), it is important to make the distinction between another faculty of the intellect which can often be conflated with

⁵He divides properties of a substance into three kinds: essence, modes of essence, and transcendental attributes, which are attributes that can only be perceived by the instantiation of a substance’s essence in various modes.

conceivability: imagination. Descartes frequently invokes imagination, which he defines as a power of the intellect to, “contemplate the shape or image of a bodily thing” (Descartes, *Principles* 5). He restricts imagination to the ability to think of something by means of the kinds of properties we attribute to the objects of our senses, such as shape, color, volume, etc. To imagine something is to (re)combine these properties such that, to the mind, the thing is represented as an image.

Descartes takes care to distinguish this from the faculty of conceiving, which does not require attention to specific imagery. Conceiving is a conceptual or propositional representation of a thing that lacks the qualitative dimensions of imagination. For example, to imagine a triangle is to produce an image of a specific three sided figure in the mind; to conceive of a triangle is to represent it as a concept—to grasp the three-sidedness that all triangles have in common. For Descartes, conceiving seems to be aligned with a kind of clear and distinct perception (Humer 501). While clear and distinct perceptions seem to be sufficient for conceivability, they do not seem to be necessary. There are other kinds of conceivability that do not require clear and distinct perceptions. For the purposes of my argument, however, I will define conceivability in the following way:

Cartesian Conceivability: To conceive of thing Φ , it is sufficient to have a clear and distinct perception of Φ .

Although conceivability is definable within the context of Descartes’ philosophy, the relationship between conceivability and possibility remains obscure. Since Descartes, the link between conceivability and possibility has received a great deal of philosophical attention. I will be referring to David Chalmers to describe the potential linkage because his position is in many ways just an elaboration of Descartes’ (Chalmers 200). Chalmers expands on Descartes’ notion of imagination, which he labels *perceptual imagination*. Chalmers notes that imagination differs from merely ‘entertaining’ or ‘supposing’ in that it has an objectual character; that is, it has an attitude towards a mental object. In addition to perceptual imagination, he posits *modal imagination*, which is not grounded in imagery. Rather, modal imagination goes beyond perceptual experience but shares its objectual character. It is an intuition of a world or situation (a configuration of objects and properties within a world) in which possibility is actualized and verified. Chalmers defines verification as when “reflection on the situation reveals it as a situation in which S.” This exceeds merely entertaining a description of a world. Instead, modally imagining a possible world involves having some sort of relation to a description of

that world where one utilizes various conceptual resources or apparatus in their imagining. For example, it is difficult to modally imagine a world in which I exist on a 2-D plane because I have no intuitive relation to such a condition. However, I can readily modally imagine a world in which Hitler won World War II, even without the use of imagery, because I have a conception (from a historical perspective) of the battles that he could have won on his way to victory.

Chalmers condenses this broad notion of imagination (which, more generally, is constituted by objectual character) to a strict definition of possibility, which he isolates as a “coherent modal imagination.” He notes that such a definition is strikingly similar to what Descartes seems to refer to when he writes of the ability to conceive. From his discussion, I believe we can define possibility in the following way:

Possibility (Metaphysical): For P to be possible, one must be able to take an intuition of a concept or configuration of P and modally imagine a world in which P is verified.

For example, I can take the intuition that Hitler won World War II and modally imagine a world in which Hitler defeated the Soviet Union and was the first country to invent the atomic bomb, thus holding off the Allies’ advance. These circumstances verify my intuition, albeit only in terms of metaphysical possibility.

The connection between this conception of possibility and Cartesian conceivability is that of rigid designation (Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*). Aligning the essence of the mind and body with a thinking thing and an extended thing allows for them to be rigid designators in which reference to the essence of the mind and body always identifies the same thing (a thinking thing and an extended thing, respectively) in every possible world. Any reference to the essence of the mind will pick out the thinking thing and any reference to the essence of the body will pick out the extended thing. By acting as rigid designators, any attempt we make to modally imagine the nature of the mind and the body in other possible worlds will always be constrained by the necessity of their essences. There is not any world in which the essence of the mind is, for example, mere sense perception, or in which the essence of the body is mere skin and bones. These things would not be minds or bodies.

These rigid designators can be utilized to modally imagine a possible world in which the essence of the mind exists and the body’s does not, and vice versa. For example, there is a possible world in which my essence as a thinking thing exists without my bodily essence of extension and

a possible world in which the essence of extension exists (i.e., there are bodies) without the essence of mind as a thinking thing (i.e., philosophical zombies). Conceiving is thus connected to possibility because my clear and distinct perception of essences, marked as rigid designators, allows me to modally imagine a world in which one exists without the other.

IV. The Cartesian Modal Argument for Dualism

With these careful definitions in place, we can move on to the Cartesian modal argument.

(P1) I can conceive of my mind as separate from my body.

$C[\neg(x=y)]$

From my definition of conceivability, it is sufficient for me to conceive of my mind and body if I have a clear and distinct perception of them. In addition, to have a clear and distinct perception of something is to clearly and distinctly perceive its essence*. For Descartes, the essence* of my mind is a “thinking thing.” Indeed, Descartes’ *Meditations* lead him to the conclusion that, if nothing else, I can be sure that I am a thinking thing. According to essence*, without this property of being a thinking thing, my mind would not exist. It is out of necessity *de re* that this property belongs to my mind. All other properties of my mind, like volition, imagination, and reason seem to owe dependence to this thinking thing. Likewise, Descartes argues that the essence of my body is extension. Without this property, my body would not exist. It is out of necessity *de re* that my body is extended. All other properties of my body, like volume and depth, depend on extension.

I also have clear and distinct perceptions of both of these essences. According to Descartes’ own definition of clear and distinct, I can clearly and distinctly perceive my mind as a thinking thing and my body as an extended thing. Can I, however, clearly and distinctly perceive (conceive) my mind separate from my body? To be separate in this sense refers to separability from the faculty of conceivability and not from the faculty of imagination.⁶ It is difficult to represent, through the usage of imagery, a disembodied mind. In fact, such a representation is contradictory due

⁶For example, I cannot imagine a chiliagon as separate from a 999-sided figure. I can, however, conceive of a chiliagon as separate from a 999-sided figure in accordance with their essences.

to the essence of the mind not having any physical qualia. Instead, I can conceive that my mind is a separate thing from my body because I can clearly and distinctly perceive myself as a thinking thing without clearly and distinctly perceiving my body. The essence of the mind and the essence of the body are two separate properties, and to clearly and distinctly perceive these essences is sufficient to conceive of them.

This premise is represented logically as $C[\neg(x=y)]$ where C represents the operator of conceivability and $\neg(x=y)$ represents the notion that it is not the case that the mind (x) is clearly and distinctly perceived as one essence* that is equal to the essence* of the body (y).

- (P2) If I can conceive of my mind as separate from my body, then it is metaphysically possible that my mind is separate from my body.

$$C[\neg(x=y)] \rightarrow \neg\Diamond(x=y)$$

The essences of mind and body serve as rigid designators so that in every possible world, reference to them always picks out the thinking thing and the extended thing, respectively. In accordance with my definition of possibility, I can modally imagine a world in which my mind as a thinking thing and my body as an extended thing are separate, where my essence as a thinking thing still exists even when the essence of my body as an extended thing does not, and vice versa. Thus, my ability to conceive of (that is, clearly and distinctly and perceive) the essence of my mind and body leads to it being metaphysically possible for one to exist without the other. Therefore, it is metaphysically possible that my mind is in actuality separate from my body.

- (P3) If it is metaphysically possible that my mind is separate from my body, then my mind is a separate thing from my body.

$$\Diamond\neg(x=y) \rightarrow \neg(x=y)$$

This premise is the most problematic of the argument. It is difficult to rationalize the jump from possibility to actuality, although the identity statements allow us to employ Kripke's argument for the necessity of identity in order to provide logical justification (Kripke, *Identity and Necessity*). This premise can be reached logically in the following way:

- (1) $x=y$ *Assume x and
y are rigid designators*

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|--------------|---|--------------------|
| (4) | $x=y$ | <i>Assump.</i> |
| (5) | $(F)[(x=y) \rightarrow (F(x)=F(y))]$ | <i>L.L.</i> |
| (6) | $\Box(x=x)$ | <i>Nec. of Id.</i> |
| (7) | $\Box(x=y)$ | <i>4,6 L.L.</i> |
| (8) | $(x=y) \rightarrow \Box(x=y)$ | <i>4-7, CP</i> |
| (9) | $\Diamond\neg(x=y)$ | <i>Assump.</i> |
| (10) | $\neg\Box(x=y)$ | <i>Sub.</i> |
| (11) | $\Diamond\neg(x=y) \rightarrow \neg\Box(x=y)$ | <i>9-10, CP</i> |
| (12) | $\neg\Box(x=y) \rightarrow \neg(x=y)$ | <i>8, CN</i> |
| (13) | $\Diamond\neg(x=y) \rightarrow \neg(x=y)$ | <i>11,12 Tran.</i> |
| \therefore | $\neg(x=y)$ | <i>3,13 MP</i> |

V. Conclusion

Since Descartes, substance dualism has gone through many rounds of revision and modification in order to better comply with advances in the modern scientific understanding of the mind. Though this argument does not necessarily espouse strict substance dualism (thus avoiding the powerful objections levied by Elizabeth, Princess of Bohemia) its conclusion does entail some kind of distinct division between the mind and body. Though a similar argument has been offered previously by Saul Kripke, this argument is distinctly Cartesian in its utilization of many of Descartes metaphysical and epistemological notions (Jacquette 294).

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