

DESCARTES' THEORY OF IDEAS AND THE EXISTENCE OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that the problem of the existence of the physical world that Descartes faces in his epistemology is not just a methodological problem raised by the so-called 'Evil Demon Hypothesis', as some have argued, but rather it is a real epistemological problem which appears to be a consequence of Descartes' theory of ideas. Descartes' conception of ideas as representative objects in the mind, by not allowing a direct access to, that is, preventing a clear and distinct perception of, the existence of the physical objects, makes the existence of the physical world problematic in the context of the Cartesian philosophy. In the paper, I first examine Descartes' theory of ideas, and then try to show how the problem of the existence of the physical world arises as a result of this theory. In doing this I briefly consider Descartes' 'proof' of the existence of the physical world, which does not seem to be consistent with Descartes' fundamental epistemological assumptions, especially his principle of clear and distinct perception.

ÖZET

Elinizdeki makalede Descartes'ın karşı karşıya kaldığı fiziksel dünyanın varlığı sorununun bazılarının iddia ettiği gibi Descartes'ın 'kötü ruh varsayımı'ndan kaynaklanan salt yöntemsel bir sorun olmadığını bilakis Descartes'ın idealar kuramının bir sonucu olan gerçek bir bilgi sorunu olduğu tezini savundum. Descartes, ideaların zihnimizdeki temsili nesnelere olduğunu iddia eder; bu ise fiziksel nesnelere varlığına doğrudan ulaşmayı yani Descartes'ın deyimiyle onların açık ve seçik bilgisini elde etmeyi imkansız kılarak fiziksel dünyanın varlığını sorunlu hale getirir. Bu makalede önce Descartes'ın idealar kuramını daha sonra ise fiziksel dünyanın varlığı sorununun bu kuramın bir sonucu olduğunu göstermeye çalıştım. Bunu yaparken kısaca Descartes'ın fiziksel dünyanın varlığı argümanına da değindim. Son olarak bu argümanın sonuçlarının Descartes'ın genel epistemolojik varsayımlarıyla uyummadığını belirttim.

Introduction

Rene Descartes may be said to be the first philosopher who raised serious doubts about the existence of the physical world because, although certain ancient philosophers such as the ancient Sceptics raised doubts about the *nature* of the physical world, none of the philosophers before Descartes appears to have doubted the *existence* of the physical world¹. The texts of the ancient philosophers indicate that these philosophers always assumed the existence of the physical world, even when they questioned the nature of this world. Hence Descartes seems to be the first philosopher in the history of Western philosophy who actually advanced skeptical arguments against the existence of the physical world.

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¹ See, for instance, Charles Larmore, "Scepticism", in D. Garber and M. Ayers (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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It must be pointed out, however, that Descartes' philosophical arguments that cast the existence of the physical world into doubt do not in fact reflect his own final view about the existence of the physical world because Descartes, in the final analysis, does not indeed doubt the existence of physical objects. It appears that Descartes puts forward these arguments just for methodological purposes. In the first *Meditation*, Descartes carries out a doubting process, which starts with doubting the reliability of the senses, and culminates with casting the existence of the physical world into doubt. Descartes, after raising doubts about the reliability of sensory knowledge of small and distant objects and, with the 'Dream Hypothesis', of even bigger and closer objects, goes on to assert that it is even 'metaphysically' possible that there may be no physical world at all because of the possibility of the existence of an evil being who, by manipulating our mind, makes our sensory ideas of physical objects possible².

Descartes starts out with the idea that he has certain sensations (sensory ideas) that he believes come from physical objects themselves. But he adds that, though he has a 'natural' belief in the existence of the physical world, he is not absolutely certain of this belief yet because he says that he does not have a clear and distinct perception of the existence of bodies (physical objects). This 'natural' belief about the existence of corporeal objects is cast into doubt by the so-called 'Evil Demon Hypothesis'. As Descartes points out in the first *Meditation*, it is possible that our sensory ideas of the physical objects are "merely illusions of dreams which he [the Evil Demon] has devised to ensnare my judgement."³

Accordingly, in order for Descartes to show that physical objects do exist, he must first eliminate the possibility of the existence of an all-powerful evil being. He attempts to do this by 'proving' that there is an infinite, omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God, as he thinks that the existence of a good God does not allow the existence of such an all-powerful evil being. After proving that he exists as a thinking being (*res cogitans*) by the *cogito* argument, and then allegedly proving that there is a benevolent God, Descartes, in the last (sixth) *Meditation*, tries to give a proof of the existence of the physical world on the basis of his conception of a

² Although it is sometimes claimed that Descartes raised the Dream Hypothesis to cast doubt on the existence of bodies (see, for instance, Lex Newman, "Descartes on Unknown Faculties and Our Knowledge of the External World", in *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 103, No. 3 (July 1994)), the standard view is that the existence of the physical world is not cast into doubt until he raises the 'Evil Demon Hypothesis'. For the standard view see, for instance, E. M. Curley, *Descartes Against the Skeptics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

³ *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (hereafter *PWD*), trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), Vol. II, p. 15.

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benevolent God and his mental transparency doctrine according to which everything in our mind is by definition transparent to us.

However, as I will try to show below, Descartes faces the problem of the existence of the physical world not because of the methodological arguments that he advances in the first *Meditation*, but because of his representationalist theory of ideas, which, by not allowing a direct intellectual intuition of the existence of physical objects, casts the existence of the physical world into doubt. That is to say, I will argue that the problem of the existence of the physical world in the Cartesian philosophy is not just a pseudo-problem that occurs as a result of the methodical arguments that Descartes puts forward in the first *Meditation*, but rather it is a genuine epistemological problem for Descartes because it is created by his theory of ideas as representative objects in the mind. Descartes' theory of ideas, which is based on the assumption that we can know physical objects only indirectly, that is, by way of ideas, makes the existence of the physical world problematic by denying a direct access to them. Let us first, therefore, consider Descartes' theory of ideas, and then try to show how the problem of the existence of the physical world arises in the Cartesian epistemology as a result of his theory of ideas.

Descartes' Theory of Ideas

Although Descartes does not really provide us with a full-fledged theory of ideas, what he says here and there in his works, especially in the *Meditations*, gives a pretty good indication of what he has in mind concerning the nature of ideas. In this paper I will restrict myself to Descartes' *Meditations* and *Objections and Replies* only because of the fact that most of what he says about ideas, together with his proof of the existence of the physical world, is found in the *Meditations*.

When we look at the *Meditations*, we will see that Descartes uses the term 'idea' in at least two different senses. In the preface to the *Meditations*, when he considers an objection to his proof of the existence of God, Descartes tries to clarify the alleged ambiguity in the term idea as follows: "'Idea' can be taken materially, as an operation of the intellect, in which case it cannot be said to be more perfect than me. Alternatively, it can be taken objectively, as the thing represented by that operation."⁴ As can be seen from this passage and others, Descartes maintains that the term idea is understood in two different senses: as an act of the mind (taken materially), or as an objective reality represented by the idea as an act of the mind (taken objectively). Taken materially, an idea is characterized by Descartes as an act or property of the mind, which amounts to saying that it is the form of any given thought. The formal existence of an idea (as an act of the mind), says Descartes, is

⁴ *PWD*, Vol. II, p. 7.

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nothing more than being a quality or property of the mind. That is to say, ideas as acts of the mind have, on Descartes' account, no formal reality other than that which they acquire from the mind. Hence as formal realities, there is no difference between ideas in the Cartesian epistemology.

However, as Descartes points out in the passage quoted above, an idea can also be understood as an objective reality existing in the mind as a representation of some object. An idea, taken objectively (that is, as an objective representation), is for Descartes something upon which the mind is directed, i.e., a mental object, which by its representative quality represents an object that, if real, exists outside the mind. In his words: "By this [objective reality of an idea] I mean the being of the thing which is represented by an idea, in so far as this exists in the idea."⁵ Descartes here points to the representative character of ideas, which is what is really epistemologically significant in our investigation of the relationship between the existence of the physical world and the Cartesian theory of ideas.

In order to better understand the difference between an idea considered as an act of the mind and an idea considered as an objective representation, consider the following example. The idea of a one-dollar bill and the idea of a five-dollar bill, for instance, taken as acts of the mind, do not differ from each other because they have the same formal reality in the mind. But as far as they represent the objects existing outside the mind, namely the one dollar-bill and the five-dollar bill, they can be distinguished from each other because the objective reality of the idea of one-dollar bill is not the same as that of the idea of the five-dollar bill.

Now, as we have just indicated, it is the representative aspect of the ideas that has epistemological significance in the Cartesian philosophy because it is the objective reality of the ideas that makes one idea distinguishable from another one, hence making knowledge of objects possible. As previously mentioned, while the formal reality of all ideas is the same, their objective representation varies from one idea to the other. The following passage nicely captures the point in question: "But in so far as different ideas represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely. Undoubtedly, the ideas which represent substances to me amount to something more and, so to speak, contain within themselves more objective reality, i.e., participate by representation in a higher degree of being and perfection."⁶ Hence the difference in the objective reality of ideas is not due to their formal aspect but due to their representative character.

⁵ *PWD*, Vol. II, p. 113.

⁶ *PWD*, Vol. II, p. 28.

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It must be pointed out, however, that the fact that the Cartesian ideas have representative features does not mean that they must necessarily refer to objects that actually exist outside the mind. For, on the Cartesian epistemology, the objective reality of an idea does not determine whether or not the object represented by that idea actually exists outside the mind. In other words, for Descartes, although an idea, taken objectively, always represents some object, it performs this task regardless of whether or not its object exists outside the mind. If the object, represented by an idea, actually exists outside the mind, then this idea, maintains Descartes, is 'materially true'. By contrast, if an idea misrepresents an object or represents an object that does not exist outside the mind, it is said to be 'materially false'.

According to Descartes while the 'materially true' ideas 'conform to', 'are similar to', the actual objects existing outside the mind, the 'materially false' ideas do not 'conform to' the objects that they represent. As Descartes says, "whatever exists in the objects of our ideas in a way which exactly *corresponds to* our perception of it is said to exist formally in those objects"⁷ (italics mine). It must be pointed out, however, that in the Cartesian epistemology, a 'materially false' idea has the same formal reality as that of a 'materially true' idea because a 'materially false' idea, though it falsely represents an object, is nevertheless an act of the mind with its representational property. My idea of 'Pegasus', for instance, is also an idea in the Cartesian philosophy, albeit a false one, because it represents something.

On the other hand, to say that 'materially true' ideas are 'similar to', or 'conform to', the actual objects that they represent does not mean that these ideas are images or pictures of those objects in a straightforward sense. Although Descartes sometimes says that our ideas are *like* images or pictures, this must not be taken as a claim that our ideas *are* images in the Cartesian philosophy. For example, even though we cannot form an image of God in our mind, we nevertheless have an idea of Him, which, by its representational properties, represents God. Again, to say that my idea of the sun, for instance, represents the object sun in the sky means for Descartes that my idea of the sun, if true, 'resembles' the actual object existing outside my mind in the sense that my idea of the sun has the properties of the sun objectively which the actual sun has formally in the sky.

Representationalism and the Existence of the Physical World

Now given the representative character of Descartes' theory of ideas, it is not difficult to see how the problem of the existence of the physical world arises. As has been indicated before, according to Descartes, the only way to attain knowledge

⁷ *PWD*, Vol. II, p. 114.

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of physical objects is by way of ideas, which amounts to the claim that we do not have a direct access to physical objects, but only ideas of them. Descartes expresses this point explicitly in a letter to Gibieuf: “I am certain that I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of the ideas I have within me; and so I take great care not to relate my judgments immediately to things, and not to attribute to things anything positive which I do not first perceive in the ideas of them.”⁸

To put it differently, on Descartes’ account of ideas, the physical objects are not seen as the ‘immediate objects’ of sensory perception but rather the ‘mediate objects’ of immediate perception of ideas of them. And since our perception of the physical objects is mediated by our ideas of them, we cannot be absolutely sure that our sensory ideas of bodies represent the objects that actually exist outside the mind. That is to say, we cannot be certain that our ideas really conform to bodies, i.e., come from the physical objects, as there is no way to step outside our mind and compare them.

The uncertainty of the belief in the existence of physical objects may also be stated in terms of the Cartesian principle of justification according to which we must not accept anything as true unless we have a clear and distinct perception of it, which is possible only by having an immediate intuition of it. But we have an immediate intuition of our ideas, not of the objects themselves. Therefore the question for Descartes is: how do we really know that physical objects exist if we do not have an immediate perception of them? To rephrase the question, how can we deduce that physical objects actually exist from the mere fact that we have ideas of them? These questions, which make the existence of the physical world doubtful in the Cartesian philosophy, arise as soon as Descartes denies that we perceive physical objects directly.

In the *Meditations* Descartes himself seems to be aware of the problem, as he points out that we do not have a clear and distinct perception of the existence of physical objects. However, Descartes thinks that the problem of the existence of the physical world is just a methodical problem caused by the ‘Evil Demon Hypothesis’, which can be refuted by proving the existence of a good God. That is why he attempts to prove that there is a physical world, i.e., that so-called ‘adventitious ideas’ (sensory ideas) actually come from physical objects that exist outside the mind, on the basis of his belief that there is a benevolent God who cannot deceive us regarding the source of these ideas. But as I have pointed out above, Descartes faces the problem of the existence of the physical world because

⁸ *PWD*, Vol. III, p. 201.

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his conception of ideas as representative objects, by not allowing a direct perception or intuition of bodies themselves, makes the existence of the physical world problematic in the Cartesian philosophy. Now let us look briefly at Descartes' alleged proof of the existence of the physical world.

In the last *Meditation* Descartes, attempting to prove the existence of the physical world, starts out by trying to show that it is at least possible that bodies exist on the basis of the assumption that we have a clear and distinct perception of their *nature* (not of their *existence*, which is what needs to be proved here), and that God can create what is clearly and distinctly perceived by us. He adds that the fact that imagination depends upon the existence of a corporeal substance makes it at least probable for bodies to exist because imagination, according to Descartes, forms images which result from the union of mind and body. After supposedly showing that it is at least possible that bodies exist, Descartes goes on to prove that they really exist.

As we have previously indicated, Descartes maintains that we know through experience that we have sensory ideas (sensations), which seem to be caused by bodies. After reflecting on the source of his sensory ideas he concludes that there are four possible candidates for the cause of his sensory ideas: himself, God, some immaterial creature, or the bodies themselves. Descartes tries to eliminate the first alternative, i.e., himself, by asserting that the sensory ideas do not require an intellectual act on his part, and that they are produced in him whether he wants or not. As he points out in the *Sixth Meditation*, my having sensory perception "presupposes no intellectual act on my part, and the ideas in question are produced without my cooperation and often even against my will."⁹ According to Descartes, the sensory ideas cannot be caused by a hidden faculty which may exist in me either, simply because I am aware of everything in my mind. According to this Cartesian 'mental transparency doctrine', it is not possible to have something in our mind without being aware of it because a mental phenomenon in the Cartesian philosophy is by its very nature something that we are aware of. So he concludes that it must be something other than himself that produces these ideas, something or some substance "which contains either formally or eminently all the reality which exists objectively in the ideas produced by this faculty."¹⁰

After eliminating himself as a possible candidate, Descartes reflects on the other possible candidates for the cause of our sensory ideas. He tries to eliminate the other two alternatives, namely God or some other created immaterial creature, on

⁹ *PWD*, Vol. II, p. 55.

¹⁰ *PWD*, Vol. II, p. 55.

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the basis of one of his earlier 'proofs' that God is not a deceiver. Descartes claims that if there is a God and He is not a deceiver, then our sensory ideas cannot be caused by Him either directly or indirectly through any other immaterial creature because Descartes maintains that God can certainly create what he clearly and distinctly perceive, and that he has a clear and distinct perception of the *nature* of physical objects. That is to say, according to Descartes, if I had a clear and distinct perception of the nature of bodies and believed that my ideas of bodies come from bodies, then God, since He is not a deceiver, created the physical world. In his words: "But since God is not a deceiver, it is quite clear that He does not transmit the ideas to me either directly or from himself, or indirectly, via some creature which contains the objective reality of ideas not formally but only eminently. For God has given me no faculty at all for recognizing any such source for these ideas; on the contrary, he has given me a great propensity to believe that they are produced by corporeal things."¹¹ Hence, Descartes concludes, if God is not a deceiver, then these ideas must come from a corporeal substance: "It follows that corporeal things exist."¹²

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the problem of the existence of the physical world that Descartes faces in his philosophy is not a pseudo-problem that arises from the skeptical arguments in the first *Meditation*, as some have argued, but rather a real epistemological problem that results from Descartes' conception of ideas as immediate objects of perception. Descartes' claim that we can have only mental representations of physical objects, not an immediate intuition, that is, a clear and distinct perception, of them, makes the existence of the physical world problematic by placing a veil (ideas) between the mind and physical objects, which cannot be removed without the help of a benevolent God.

Descartes himself is aware of this point, and attempts to provide an independent proof of the existence of the physical world. However, his alleged proof does not actually cohere with his criterion of epistemological justification. Given the principle of justification of knowledge-claims in the Cartesian philosophy, i.e., the principle of clear and distinct perception, his proof of the existence of the physical world appears to be problematic because it obviously does not rely on a clear and distinct perception in the Cartesian sense. And the reason why we cannot have a clear and distinct perception of the existence of physical objects in the Cartesian philosophy is because the existence of bodies is not necessarily involved in, i.e., is

¹¹ *PWD*, Vol. II, p. 55.

¹² *PWD*, Vol. II, p. 55.

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not an essential part of, our perception of bodies. And this is exactly why he attempted to give an independent proof of the existence of the physical world.

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