

## **Descartes' Conceivability Argument for Dualism**

**Abstract** This paper examines Descartes conceivability argument for dualism and the reasons why it is or is not sufficient for establishing dualism. I first examine the conceivability argument by describing important context and stating its premises in plain language. I then offer a negative thesis of my own account. In doing so I will craft a rigorous argument which points out what is fallible in Descartes account, specifically the section that justifies (P3). I appeal to Priest's writing on Descartes to elucidate this point about the falsehood of the premises that justify (P3). I end by explaining how Descartes' conceivability argument fails to establish dualism. Finally, I give an overview of the potential pros and cons of accepting dualism, and the pros and cons of rejecting dualism. Thereafter, the paper concludes with the expectation of having convinced the reader of the validity of its account of the conceivability argument.

**Keywords** Dualism Priest Descartes Metaphysical

### **1 Introduction**

The conceivability argument is put forward by Rene Descartes in Meditation 6 of his book titled "*Meditations on first Philosophy*". It is in this philosophical project of Descartes' Meditations, that we receive the conceivability argument in its authentic form. It is important to note that this argument is explicit in its purpose. Descartes is meditating on the reasons he has developed in order to justify belief in God. Further, the topic of the conceivability argument is an argument I perceive as Descartes explaining a basic metaphysical outlook. What is at stake in the

conceivability argument is the existence of the soul or the mind. It is not clear what the difference between these terms is, given that Descartes uses them somewhat interchangeably as terms that reference the notion of “I”. That's why I believe this to be a metaphysical outlook Descartes is interested in establishing in the conceivability argument. Descartes wants his conclusion to be infallible and true universally. However, I will argue that he fails to establish a sound argument, meaning one that is sufficient for dualism. If one interrogates (P3) they will find it to be untrue based on the rationale I will put forward in the argument section of this paper.

I will now state the 6 premises and conclusion of the conceivability argument in plain language. They are as follows: (P1) A property is essential to X just in case one cannot conceive of X without it, (P2) I can conceive of the mind without the body. Thus (P3) my body is not essential to me (follows from 1, 2), (P4) I cannot conceive of myself without my mind. Thus (P5) my mind is essential to me (follows from 1, 4). Thus (C) the mind and the body are distinct (follows from 3, 5) Here, I have laid out the structure of Descartes conceivability argument in the most basic form.

## **2 Getting to know the conceivability argument**

I want to add a couple of important remarks about the methodological principles of this argument, because I believe it will be valuable to the reader. While the focus of this paper is not on Descartes' methodology, it is necessary to develop a basic understanding of this methodology. Descartes has embarked on his project of establishing the foundation of all of his knowledge by doubting the existence of the physical world to the greatest extent possible. I understand the basic project of Descartes method as an attempt to derive what it means when we ask, “what is the mind capable of conceiving”. The cogito ergo sum is the principle that best illustrates

Descartes outlook on the rationale of this question. So given this context of Descartes' radical doubt methodology, premise (P3) no longer seems obviously false to the common sense thinker. Now I want to make it elicit to the reader that Descartes has created an argument that is logically sound. Descartes makes no mistakes with his logical structure. If each premise is true, then the following conclusion is sound.

So then, would it follow that one has no choice other than to accept the conclusion (C) of the conceivability argument? No. I offer a negative account of the truth of (P3) that explains how Descartes is unable to prove that his body is not essential to him, and thus that the whole of the conceivability argument is significantly weakened. I can explain that this is false, if (P2) is false, then (P3) is false. I will first explain the type of outlook motivating my own negative account. When Descartes makes the claim that the body is not essential, in order for one to agree with this outlook, one is owed an explanation of why one's body doesn't necessarily exist. It is normal that one goes about one's life only with one set of senses and one develops thinking with the senses one has at one's disposal. However, I should note that Descartes was aware of this objection and admitted it in the sixth mediation the intimate link between the soul and the brain "Although the soul is joined to the whole body, there is yet in the body a certain part in which it seems to exercise its functions more specifically than in all the others. . . I seem to find evidence that the part of the body in which the soul exercises its functions immediately is. . . solely the innermost part of the brain, namely, a certain very small gland." (Meditations, p..294) . This claim works in favor of (P2) because it shows Descartes to be thinking that there is a necessary physical connection between the soul and the material brain, but the soul is only interacting with the brain in order to produce certain functions. My problem with this view of Descartes is that I see it as

making a tempting mistake by claiming that a soul can be both physical and nonphysical. It would exit into an immaterial realm after one dies.

### **3 Priest's account: what it has to say about the fallibility of (P2)**

The first thing Priest notes about Descartes' conceivability argument that has implications for the truth of (P3) is the following statement; "In that case he would exist, and exist as the sort of being he is, without thinking, so thinking would not be his essential attribute." (Priest, pg. 19). What I understand Priest to be elucidating here is an important distinction about what constitutes the type of being Descartes is claiming to be as a result of this argument. The distinction is that we can conceive of Descartes body existing and having its usual functions, walking, talking, eating, breathing but without a thinking being: see cases such as Alzheimer's, dementia, cognitive retardation, and severe brain damage. According to Priest, Descartes has a higher order belief that he is a thinking thing, so if he were to no longer be thinking he makes the further claim that he would no longer be present in his body. This is a tempting mistake on my account, and I believe Priest would agree. This is a mistake because it fails to consider how identity is perceived by others in the common sense understanding. For example, people who know people with cognitive damage as a result of blood loss to the brain who interact with them still refer to the person as that same person they were prior to said damage occurring. The body is still there and able to carry on with a degree of functionality, but the person is no longer capable of the brain states required to conceive of themselves thinking of themselves. The implications this has on (P2) are the following: the example shows that one can conceive of an identity that remains without the mind necessarily thinking, therefore the claim that the mind can be conceived outside the body is not necessarily true.

The second important objection elucidated by Priest that I believe to be useful in showing the falsehoods laden in the conceivability argument, is the objection that points out Descartes truth standards in the conceivability argument, namely if we can imagine it to be true It is true. Priest emphasizes the reality that there is an obvious distinction between what we can imagine to be true and what is actually true. This is relevant to (P2) because it shows that the central reason it is false is that the standard of truth present in the method that Descartes adopted is imaginary. In other words, just because we can imagine our minds being radically distinct from our bodies, it doesn't follow that they actually are radically distinct from our bodies. Having said that, it is important to remember what Descartes' argument does well when we allow our imaginations to be the only thing we can use to understand reality like he does in the Mediations. (P2) is a tempting rationale to justify dualism. This is because the truth of (P2) would be unarguable and since (P1) is true the argument is valid. (P3) would be guaranteed.

#### **4 Explaining why dualism is not sufficiently established**

In one sense, Descartes has established dualism. He has established dualism in the metaphysical or imaginative context. Having said that, it is obvious that there is a further burden of proof that we are owed if we are to believe Descartes that is based on evidence in the physical sciences and that to explain shows the soul is a relevant part of the brain and capable of existing on its own distinct from the body. When we take this perspective and apply the standard of truth onto (P2) of the conceivability argument, we also find that dualism does not necessarily follow from that argument because we can doubt its truth using the aforementioned rationale of doubting the truth of (P2) and the reasons Priest elucidates.

#### **Pros and Cons**

In this section, I will aim to unbiasedly elucidate the positive aspects, and the negative aspects of both the positive account of the conceivability argument and the negative account I have offered of that argument. The value that I hope to provide by doing so, is to make the reader think about the foundational implications that are at stake when we are arguing about dualism. Dualists and Non-Dualists disagree about essential aspects of an individual's perception of reality. There are a broad range of subjects that will be perceived differently depending on one's position on dualism, subjects such as the philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, and more basically how we view the world generally as people. I will begin by discussing the pros and cons of my negative account of the conceivability argument. The first positive implication that I would put forward that comes as a result the negative account I offer about dualism and stating that it is not true: It challenges you to think harder about your belief in a higher power, you can still hold faith that there exists a higher power without contradicting the notion that dualism is false. I find this to be a positive because it is scientifically oriented, without rejecting religion or metaphysical belief entirely. Next I offer a second pro to my negative account, it is capable of including contemporary neuroscientific explanations in its account of the mind-body connection. A negative or con of the account that I put forward is that it is a basic account, meaning it makes a simple point about a single premise of one of the many arguments for dualism that Descartes puts forward to establish dualism. The account I offer also does not allow for the conception of a particular God to be real, it only allows for an ambiguous concept of a higher power, that isn't particular to one religion. Some Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu people would most likely reject or find my account to be relevant because it doesn't permit the unique definitions of each religions dualism to be true. Now I will put forward positive reasons for accepting dualism. One of the positive implications of accepting dualism is that it allows for one to think of oneself as an

eternal being that is not chained down to a material body for eternity. This is positive because one can gain a sense of hope and wonder about their purpose and place in the cosmos, also they will imagine what they could experience in the afterlife once their short time on earth comes to an end. Another positive of accepting dualism is that depending on one's geographic location it can be beneficial to one's social life. For example, if one were raised a Roman Catholic, were born in a Roman Catholic hospital and then went to Catholic schools, it would be socially controversial to reject the notion of an afterlife openly. A negative aspect with accepting dualism I want to note, is that there is not enough evidence to prove Descartes' claim that the soul is in a part of the brain, the claim is not true or at least not proved by contemporary neuroscience. I perceive this to be a negative because it tends to lead dualists to become less interested in scientific explanations in general.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I stated Descartes' conceivability argument in plain language. I made some brief statements about the method of Descartes. Next, I brought forward my negative account of the conceivability argument, attacking (P2). After explaining my rationale, I referenced the writing of Priest, relating it to my negative account and further elucidating the conceivability argument. Even though there are differences between what Priest and I say about (P2) his work helps to aid what type of work I am doing. Thereafter, I explained how the rationale for my account of the conceivability argument implies that dualism is not sufficiently established. Finally, I brought forward positive and negative aspects of accepting or rejecting my account or Descartes' dualist account. This concludes my paper on the conceivability argument.

## **Keywords**

Dualism=def. the view that mental phenomena are non-physical, or that the mind and body are distinct and separable

Priest= author

Descartes= author of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* Famous French philosopher, mathematician, and teacher.

Metaphysical= concerned with explaining the features of reality that exist beyond the physical world and our immediate senses. Metaphysics, therefore, uses logic based on the meaning of human terms, rather than on a logic tied to human sense perception of the objective world.

## **Sources:**

<https://iep.utm.edu/dualism/#SH3c>

Priest, Descartes

*Meditations on First Philosophy, Rene Descartes*

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