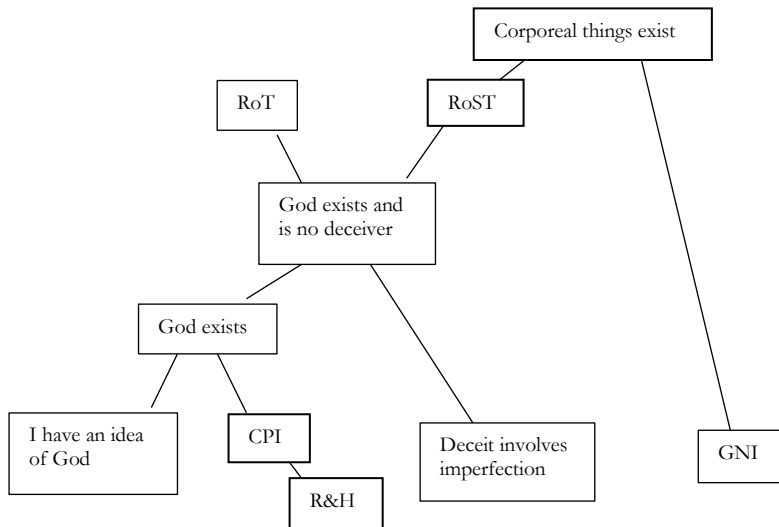


## Descartes: “Proof of an External World,” of God, of the Rule of Truth, and of the Real Distinction between Mind and Body: What are the Meditations All About?



### “Proof of an External World”: Lecture to the British Academy by the Cambridge philosopher, G.E. Moore, published in the Proceedings of the B.A., 1938

-opens with a quotation from Kant *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which the great critical philosopher expresses disappointment about the inability of philosophy to produce any proof of an external world (here as Moore quoted Kant, using the Norman Kemp Smith translation of the CPR, with Moore’s elipses):

It still remains a scandal to philosophy . . . that the existence of things outside of us . . . must be accepted merely on *faith*, and that, if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof.

-Moore centrally seeks “to discuss the question what sort of proof, if any, can be given” of an external world. He casts aspersions on the proof Kant goes on to offer, but then famously (or infamously, depending on whom you talk to) offers his own

-But what, more exactly, is philosophy seeking to prove here? Moore remarks:

But what is the point in question? I think it must be owned that the expression ‘things outside of us’ is rather an odd expression, and an expression the meaning of which is certainly not perfectly clear. It would have sounded less odd if, instead of ‘things outside of us’ I had said ‘external things’, and perhaps also the meaning of this expression would have seemed to be clearer; and I think we make the meaning of ‘external things’ clearer still if we explain that this phrase has been regularly used by philosophers as short for ‘things external to our minds’. The fact is that there has been a long philosophical tradition, in accordance with which the three expressions ‘external things’, ‘things external to us’, and ‘things external to our minds’ have been used as equivalent to one another, and have, each of them, been used as if they needed no explanation. The origin of this usage I do not know. It occurs already in Descartes; and since he uses the expressions as if they needed no explanation, they had presumably been used with the same meaning before.

-much of Moore’s lecture is then devoted to clarifying the kind of mind-independence at issue in this historically important use of “external.”

-wrt Descartes's use of the term, Moore is referencing such passages as this one, toward the end of the First Meditation: "I will regard the heavens, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all **external** things as nothing but the bedeviling hoaxes of my dreams" (AT 22.9). There Descartes is doubting that there are external things.

-But what will count as a "proof" of such external things? The proof Moore offers seems to (or at least seems to me to) intentionally flout the standards of Descartes or Kant:

It seems to me that, so far from its being true, as Kant declares to be his opinion, that there is only one possible proof of the existence of things outside of us, namely the one which he has given, I can now give a large number of different proofs, each of which is a perfectly rigorous proof; and that at many other times I have been in a position to give many others. I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'Here is one hand', and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'and here is another'. And if, by doing this, I have proved ipso facto the existence of external things, you will all see that I can also do it now in numbers of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples.

But did I prove just now that two human hands were then in existence? I do want to insist that I did; that the proof which I gave was a perfectly rigorous one; and that it is perhaps impossible to give a better or more rigorous proof of anything whatever. Of course, it would not have been a proof unless three conditions were satisfied; namely (1) unless the premiss which I adduced as proof of the conclusion was different from the conclusion I adduced it to prove; (2) unless the premiss which I adduced was something which I knew to be the case, and not merely something which I believed but which was by no means certain, or something which, though in fact true, I did not know to be so; and (3) unless the conclusion did really follow from the premiss. But all these three conditions were in fact satisfied by my proof.

-What are the standards of Descartes and Kant, which Moore seems to be flouting? Here is the Kant scholar, Paul Guyer:

Kant clearly conceived of the problem of knowledge in terms of methodological solipsism. That is, like thinkers from Descartes to Hume, he supposed that an answer to skepticism must lie in what reflection on his own thoughts can reveal to the individual thinker even on the supposition that nothing but his own consciousness exists. -Guyer, review of *Identität Und Objektivität: Eine Untersuchung Über Kants Transzendente Deduktion*, by Dieter Henrich, *Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979): 151-67.

-and Guyer makes it clear that the reason the great early moderns so limited their starting points was to avoid "begging the question" against skepticism.

-This fits in well with our identification of Descartes's starting points as being limited to self-evident metaphysically necessary truths and evident truths about his (one's) own states of consciousness, with the latter being the only contingent truths Descartes felt he could use without deeper argument.

### **Proofs/Arguments for God's Existence:**

-I will count Descartes as offering two arguments for God's existence in the Meditations, a Causal Proof in M3, and an Ontological argument in M5. We will focus on the former (& that's the one represented on our chart).

-Background: Ontological, Cosmological, and Teleological/Design Arguments, and why the latter two types are not suited to Descartes's purposes, perhaps because of their starting points, but in any case because of their conclusions: Descartes needs a perfect being

### **Descartes's M3 Causal Proof of God's Existence: AT 40.8-42.5, 45.3-47.8**

(One can count these as two different but related causal arguments, one for God as the cause of Descartes's idea of God, and the other for God as the cause of Descartes's own existence as a thinking thing possessed of an idea of God. I am collapsing these down to one argument, which is for God as the cause of Descartes's idea.)

-Degrees of Reality – independence and perfection

-Formal Reality and Objective Reality (AT 41.1)

-CPI: Any idea must have a cause that has at least as much formal reality as the idea has objective reality (at & around AT 41.3)

Derived from the Ro

-some of the guts of the proof: AT 45.3-46.1

-Why the Proof doesn't work in other cases (why you can't generally prove that things exist merely from the fact that you have ideas of them)

### **From God to the Rule of Truth (M4)**

-God a non-deceiver AT 53.8

-The basic argument

1. God (exists &) is not a deceiver

2. If my c&d p's were false, God would be a deceiver

So, 3. My c&d p's are true (RoT)

-Key to 2: The Problem of Error (AT 54.2) and the Problem of Evil – the problem of error as the problem of epistemic evil

-The Free Will Defense: see AT 56.3-58.8

-By assenting only to what one C&DPs, one avoids the source of human error, which is the will "extending" assent beyond what it clearly understands (AT 58.7)

-C&DPs as assent-compelling: I'm not sure whether Descartes intends to be making this argumentative move around AT 57.0: claiming that the FWD can't apply to C&DPs because with respect to them, we are not free to withhold assent

-The Rule of Truth AT 62.6

### **Proof of the Existence of "Corporeal Things" mainly in the 10<sup>th</sup> par. of M6**

-The heart of the argument is at AT 79.8-80.2. It is driven by what I call the "Rule of Some Truth" (this name comes from AT 80.6, in the 11th par). The argument for RoST seems to be:

1. God (exists &) is not a deceiver (already argued for)

2. If I have a great natural inclination to believe that p, but p is false and I have no faculty by which to learn that p is false, then God is a deceiver (key premise)

∴ RoST: If I have a great natural inclination to believe that p, and I have no faculty by which I might learn that p is false, then p is true. (from 1,2)

-It's clear what premises need to be added to the above principle to yield the desired argument:

3. I have a great natural inclination to believe that some of my ideas are caused by external bodies (premise)

4. I have no faculty by which I might learn that it is false that some of my ideas are caused by external bodies (premise)

∴ 5. Some of my ideas are caused by external bodies (from RoST,3,4)

∴ 6. External bodies exist (from 5)

-I believe this argument is supposed to be applicable to some cases of particular perceptual judgments, as well as to the general issue of the existence of an external world

-But, among other problems, it requires the very dubious (at least it seems it should be dubious, by Descartes's standards) negative claim that one has no way of finding out one is wrong, if one

is wrong. Indeed, none of the premises of this “proof” (2, 3, nor 4—none of which made our chart) seem to me to be at all certain, much less certain enough for Descartes’s purposes.

-A good exercise (but in calling it an “exercise,” I don’t mean to imply that there’s a clearly correct answer, or that it’s easy): Try running this argument on the aspect of ordinary thought that Descartes wants to reject (so, e.g., that wrt secondary qualities, objects resemble our ideas of them). Here, Descartes wants the argument to fail, since he doesn’t think bodies are really like what we’re naturally inclined to take them to be like. But how does it fail? Is it the analogue of (3), or (4), that goes false, according to Descartes, and why? What distinguishes the cases so that God’s goodness verifies ordinary thought about corporeal objects existing, but not about what these objects are like, wrt their apparent secondary qualities?

### **Clear and Distinct Understanding and the Properties of Bodies**

-Immediately after proving the existence of corporeal things, Descartes warns us that they might not be exactly like we ordinarily think they are (AT 80.1)

-Descartes says that corporeal things “contain everything I clearly and distinctly understand” 80.2 – and then goes on to give a good hint as to what kind of properties these are.

-This I think is where Descartes is laying the groundwork for his physics (recall his letter to Mersenne from our first handout)

-What’s wrong with “secondary qualities”? I suggest focusing on the “understand” part of “clearly and distinctly understand,” and look back to the first two paragraphs of M6. Where our translation has “pure intellection” (AT 72.1), better (at least for our purposes) translations have “pure understanding.” Secondary qualities aren’t “clearly understood” because they aren’t “understood” (“intellected”??) at all, but are conceived by means of imagination.

### **The Real Distinction between Mind and Body**      M6par9 AT 78

It is m-conceivable that my mind should exist without my body

∴ It is m-possible that my mind should exist without my body

∴ God can make it be the case that my mind exists without my body

∴ My mind can exist without my body (the important half of the “real distinction”)

-m-possibility and God’s omnipotence

-“can” vs. m-possibility

-the hope for immortality and the Meditations

You should not find it strange, either, that I do not prove in my second Meditation that the soul is really distinct from the body, but merely show how to conceive it without the body. This is because I do not yet have, at that point, the premises needed for the conclusion. You find it later on, in the sixth Meditation. –Letter to Mersenne, 24 December, 1640