

## Introduction to Philosophy

### Descartes' Argument for the Existence of Corporeal Bodies, Sixth Meditation

There is in me<sup>1</sup> a passive faculty of sensing.<sup>2</sup>

This passive faculty of sensing would be useless without some other (active) faculty capable of forming and bringing about these ideas.

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Hence, there is an active faculty capable of forming and producing ideas.<sup>3</sup>

There is an active faculty of perception capable of forming and bringing about ideas.

This active faculty presupposes no act of understanding.

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Hence, this active faculty is not in me.<sup>4</sup>

There are only three substances in which this active faculty can be found: (i) in thought, (ii) in God, or (iii) in body *qua* corporeal nature.

This active faculty is not (i) in me.

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Hence, there is (ii) in God or (iii) in corporeal nature an active faculty "containing either formally<sup>5</sup> or eminently all the reality that exists objectively in the ideas produced by that faculty."  
(52)

God is not a deceiver.<sup>6</sup>

All ideas communicated by God (or his chosen agents) would be clear and distinct.

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Hence, the active faculty is not (ii) in God.<sup>7</sup>

There are only three substances in which this active faculty can be found: (i) in thought, (ii) in God, or (iii) in body *qua* corporeal nature.

This active faculty is not (i) in me or (ii) in God.

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Hence, the active faculty is (iii) in corporeal nature.

Any faculty must be found in an existing substance.

The active faculty is in corporeal nature.

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Hence, corporeal nature is an existing substance.<sup>8</sup>

**Source:**

Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Translated from the Latin by Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 52.

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1. In this argument, when Descartes uses the phrase "in me," he means "in me *qua* thinking substance."
2. The first premise is the conclusion of a previous argument, i.e., a demonstrated truth.
3. See Descartes' "wax" example on pp. 21*f* for a fuller description of both a confused and a 'clear and distinct' idea.
4. Descartes is arguing here that "I" do not create the objects of "my" thought. If this active faculty of perception were in me, then all the objects of my thought would be a creation of my mind (or mind, generally). See Leibniz's *Monadology*, §§15-17, for an articulation of such a view.
5. For example, red, blue, or yellow are the material content of the perceptual *form*, "color."
6. The following argument expresses the circularity of Descartes' argument for the existence of God, the so-called "Cartesian circle."  
I have a clear and distinct idea of God.  
God is no deceiver.  
Hence, God exists.  
Notice: God's existence is presumed in the second premise. Since the conclusion merely states what is presumed by the subject of the second premise, the argument demonstrates nothing.
7. Descartes is arguing here that God does not communicate ideas directly into our minds. For such a view, see §§29-33 of George Berkeley's *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, pp. 162*f*. According to Descartes, if God did directly communicate ideas, the all our ideas would be clear and distinct. This follows from the premise that "God is no deceiver." Under this scenario we would never mistakenly infer, for example, that a mannequin is, in reality, a person. Yet we regularly have confused ideas. We do sometimes judge incorrectly (if but only for a moment) that the appearance of a mannequin is, in reality, that of a person. Hence, God could not be directly communicating these ideas to us, since if He did He would be deceiving us in this case.
8. Notice, Descartes in *not* arguing here that "corporeal nature causes us to have sensation(s), hence the active faculty is in corporeal nature." (This sort of argument, otherwise known as the "causal theory of perception," resembles Locke's argument regarding the source of ideas, which he expresses in Book II, Chapter VIII of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, pp. 24*f*. See also Book II, Chapter XXIII, §10-11 of the same, p. 58*f*.) The most serious metaphysical issue in the Cartesian system revolves around the correspondence between mental and material substances. Technically, since mind is (substantially) distinct from matter, material things, i.e., corporeal bodies, cannot be said to be the cause of any idea. Since the mind is immaterial, it would be absurd to argue that it can be affected in any sense by material substance (even though Descartes does so elsewhere, cf. p. 56*f*).