J.M.J.

Assessing the Philosophy of Descartes: An Analysis of Two Approaches
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Both MacIntyre¹ as well as Allen and Springsted² describe and analyze the thought and philosophy of René Descartes. MacIntyre’s approach to Descartes differed from Allen and Springsted’s approach. Both describe the Cartesian method, but MacIntyre and Allen and Springsted characterize Descartes’ motivation and ultimate goal slightly differently. McIntyre describes Descartes’ arguments for the existence of God and offers a critique of those arguments, which is quite different from the approach of Allen and Springsted. In addition, Allen and Springsted embrace Descartes’ conception of the mind and body, whereas MacIntyre shows how it is problematic. Overall, MacIntyre viewed Descartes’ philosophy with a more critical eye, whereas Allen and Springsted were more positive and embracing of Descartes’ philosophy.

The Cartesian Method

The Cartesian method is meant to work from a simple, self-evident truth to other evident truths, with each subsequent truth flowing from and building on the previously discovered truth.³ Put another way, Descartes’ “ideal of philosophy was that of an organically connected system of scientifically established truths, that is to say, of truths so ordered that the mind passes from fundamental self-evident truths to other evident truths implied by the former.”⁴ Descartes intended to establish – from the ground up – what is true; and therefore establish a structured and

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orderly body knowledge.\textsuperscript{5} That is, Descartes intended to establish a framework for knowledge that would continue to be filled in using his method.\textsuperscript{6} The foundational starting point for Descartes was the application of methodical doubt.\textsuperscript{7} That is, “he thought it was necessary to doubt all that could be doubted and to treat provisionally as false all that could be doubted”,\textsuperscript{8} until “he finds that which cannot be doubted.”\textsuperscript{9} This methodic doubt includes doubting our sense experience;\textsuperscript{10} in other words, it includes doubting the veracity of our observations.\textsuperscript{11} Descartes’ aim is to find the most basic proposition that cannot be doubted, and then deductively working from that proposition he will discover other true propositions.

The Cartesian method involved a reductionist approach of breaking complex “propositions” or “knowledge” down into “their simplest elements or element.”\textsuperscript{12} Then from those “simple propositions” we are to work back up towards those complex propositions;\textsuperscript{13} in the style of Descartes’ language, “to ascend to the knowledge of all the others.”\textsuperscript{14} Through his method, Descartes arrives at his foundational basic proposition that cannot be doubted: “I think,

\textsuperscript{5} Copleston, \textit{A History of Philosophy: Volume IV}, 78–80, 95–96 (“he was determined to start again from the beginning . . . without trusting to the authority of any previous philosophy. . . . He did not take it for granted that all the propositions enunciated by previous philosophers were false. . . . At the same time, they should be rediscovered, in the sense that their truth should be proved in an orderly way by proceeding systematically from basic and indubitable to derived propositions. . . . His primary aim was . . . to produce a certain and well-ordered philosophy”).
\textsuperscript{6} Copleston, \textit{A History of Philosophy: Volume IV}, 82 (“he also believed that the use of the appropriate method would enable the philosopher to discover hitherto unknown truths”).
\textsuperscript{7} Allen and Springsted, \textit{Philosophy for Understanding Theology}, 130.
\textsuperscript{8} Copleston, \textit{A History of Philosophy: Volume IV}, 95.
\textsuperscript{9} Allen and Springsted, \textit{Philosophy for Understanding Theology}, 130.
\textsuperscript{10} Allen and Springsted, \textit{Philosophy for Understanding Theology}, 132.
\textsuperscript{11} MacIntyre, \textit{God, Philosophies, Universities}, 115.
\textsuperscript{12} Copleston, \textit{A History of Philosophy: Volume IV}, 86.
\textsuperscript{13} Copleston, \textit{A History of Philosophy: Volume IV}, 86–87.
therefore I am” (*Cogito ergo sum*).\(^{15}\) As MacIntyre explains, “For, if I doubt, the one thing that I cannot doubt is that I am doubting. And, since to doubt is to think, if I doubt, I am thinking. And, since I cannot think, unless I exist, if I think, I am.”\(^{16}\) For Descartes, the proposition “I think, therefore I am” then subsequently leads to the evident and certain proposition that God exists.\(^{17}\) The recognition of the truth that God exists then leads Descartes to the truth of the proposition that we can trust our sense experience.\(^{18}\)

**Descartes’ Motivation and Ultimate Goal**

MacIntyre describes Descartes’ motivation as being focused on addressing skepticism, whereas Allen and Springsted describe Descartes’ motivation as being focused on certainty. These two different characterizations are not mutually exclusive and are certainly compatible, and can be just simply two different ways of describing the same thing. However, the difference in their description of his motivation is at its heart a difference in emphasis.

MacIntyre stated that Descartes’ “philosophical project became that of constructing a framework within which skepticism could be both stated and refuted.”\(^{19}\) MacIntyre goes on to evaluate whether Descartes was successful in refuting skepticism. In contrast, Allen and Springsted open their treatment of Descartes “by a look at Descartes’ search for certainty.”\(^{20}\) Allen and Springsted also characterize the “driving force” of modern philosophy overall as being

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\(^{15}\) MacIntyre, *God, Philosophies, Universities*, 115.

\(^{16}\) MacIntyre, *God, Philosophies, Universities*, 115.

\(^{17}\) MacIntyre, *God, Philosophies, Universities*, 116.

\(^{18}\) MacIntyre, *God, Philosophies, Universities*, 116.

\(^{19}\) MacIntyre, *God, Philosophies, Universities*, 114.

“the search for certainty and the grounds for certainty.”

Unlike MacIntyre, Allen and Springsted do not evaluate the effectiveness of the Cartesian method against skepticism (and neither do they critically evaluate whether Descartes successfully established with “certainty” his propositions). Instead, Allen and Springsted emphasize how Descartes’ search for certainty led to his conception of the mind and body, and how Descartes’ thought paved the way for, and are connected with, subsequent modern philosophers (e.g., Spinoza).

**Arguments for the Existence of God**

MacIntyre critically analyzes whether Descartes’ philosophy successfully refuted skepticism by examining Descartes’ arguments for the existence of God. As MacIntyre pointed out, “were these arguments [for the existence of God] of Descartes sound, his further contentions might have been compelling. . . . Everything turns on the arguments for the existence of God.”

Ultimately, MacIntyre concluded that “those arguments fail.”

Descartes had shown through his proposition “I think, therefore I am” that his mind existed. Using his mind, he then reasoned that understanding the idea of God necessitates that God “must exist outside the mind.” This is Descartes’ first argument for the existence of God. MacIntyre uses the analogy of a triangle to describe this argument: just as a proper understanding of a triangle necessarily entails that it has three angles that must add up to 180 degrees, a proper understanding of God necessarily entails that he must exist. Descartes’s second argument for

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the existence of God is that our idea of a perfect and infinite God is “such that its presence in the mind could only have been caused by just such a being.”

With regard to the first argument, MacIntyre points out that Descartes is making an unjustified leap from what we can conceive in our mind to what truly exists outside of our mind. Just because we can conceive of something does not mean that it exists outside of our mind. As MacIntyre pointed out, when we properly conceive of a triangle, we understand that all three angles must necessarily add up to 180 degrees, but that does not mean that any triangles necessarily exist outside of our mind. In other words, if a triangle did exist, it would be necessary for its angles to add up to 180 degrees, but that does not prove that a triangle in fact does exist outside of our mind. Similarly, when we conceive of God and understand that if He were to exist “then he exists necessarily”, that does not entail that God does in fact necessarily exist. If God does exist, it entails that He is a necessary being, but it does not prove that He in fact exists. With regard to the second argument, MacIntyre finds that it is “too unclear what Descartes means” and concludes that the argument is not compelling.

Descartes’ philosophy relies upon his arguments for God’s existence proving with certainty that God exists. For Descartes, these arguments establish the foundation for being able to use and rely upon sense experience. Put another way, these arguments establish the

29 MacIntyre, *God, Philosophies, Universities*, 117.
30 MacIntyre, *God, Philosophies, Universities*, 117.
existence of bodies – that bodies, which we perceive through our sense experience, truly do exist outside of our minds.\textsuperscript{33}

In contrast to MacIntyre, Allen and Springsted barely touch on Descartes’ arguments for the existence of God. Allen and Springsted simply state that “by further analysis of the idea of himself, he arrives at a knowledge of the existence of God, using some novel proofs that include an independent discovery of an ontological proof similar to Anselm’s.” They then simply move on, stating that “when the existence of God is demonstrated . . . . We may have confidence in our sense experiences, for God, who is good, would not deceive us . . .”\textsuperscript{34} Allen and Springsted simply accept Descartes arguments, and moreover they do so without including any critique or analysis.

\textbf{Mind-Body Connection}

Descartes moves from the existence of God to the realization that we can trust our sense experience, which then leads to his conception of the mind-body connection. Descartes’ analysis of the “correspondence between sense experience and physical objects” brings him to the conclusion that “we are \textit{essentially} mind, even though we also have bodies.”\textsuperscript{35} This proposition is also related to another important Cartesian principle: there are “three basic ontological realities”, and these are “minds, extension [i.e., matter], and God.”\textsuperscript{36} Descartes envisioned the “mind and matter as distinct substances with polar opposite properties.”\textsuperscript{37} Allen and Springsted seem to embrace the Cartesian mind-body conception. This is shown by their lack of critique of

\textsuperscript{33} MacIntyre, \textit{God, Philosophies, Universities}, 116–117.
\textsuperscript{34} Allen and Springsted, \textit{Philosophy for Understanding Theology}, 133.
\textsuperscript{35} Allen and Springsted, \textit{Philosophy for Understanding Theology}, 133.
\textsuperscript{36} Allen and Springsted, \textit{Philosophy for Understanding Theology}, 133.
\textsuperscript{37} Allen and Springsted, \textit{Philosophy for Understanding Theology}, 136.
the Cartesian concept, and by the fact that they use seemingly approving language to describe Descartes’s approach and conclusions. For example, they state, “thus by freeing us from sense experience . . . Descartes is able to establish that we are essentially mind.”

They go on to explain, “if we rely on sense experience, we will never realize that we are essentially mind.” However, they do note how Descartes mind-body conception differs from that of Spinoza, and how it does raise problems, such as “how an immaterial mind can affect its body.”

In contrast, rather then embracing the Cartesian mind-body conception, MacIntyre explicitly shows why such a conception is problematic. MacIntyre zeroes in on the issue mentioned by Allen and Springsted: if Descartes is correct in his conception of the mind and body, MacIntyre asks, “how can the immaterial interact with the material?” MacIntyre determined that the problem with Descartes’ mind-body conception is “that it makes it impossible to understand the unity of the human being.” Descartes abandoned St. Thomas Aquinas’ conception of the body and soul as a composite, and instead conceives the mind and body as completely separate. By doing so, Descartes seems to open a chasm between the mind and body with regard to our ability to understand the mind-body connection. As MacIntyre stated, “If Descartes . . . [is] right in understanding mind and body . . . we seem to have reached

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38 Allen and Springsted, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 133 (emphasis in the original).
42 MacIntyre, *God, Philosophies, Universities*, 125.
43 MacIntyre, *God, Philosophies, Universities*, 128.
44 MacIntyre, *God, Philosophies, Universities*, 128.
45 Thomas Aquinas, *A Shorter Summa*, ed. Peter Kreeft (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1993), I, q. 75, a. 6–7; I, q. 76, a. 5; (pp. 99–105) (e.g., “the soul by the nature of its essence can be united to the body, so that, properly speaking, not the soul alone, but the composite is the species.” Emphasis in the original).
one of the limits of human understanding.” Under Descartes’ approach, all we can know is that they interact; we cannot understand how they interact.

**Conclusion**

Overall, MacIntyre’s approach to Descartes’ philosophy is more critical, whereas Allen and Springsted portray Descartes’ philosophy in a positive light and seem to adopt a more embracing approach towards the Cartesian concepts. The advantage of the Allen and Springsted approach is that they are able to articulate Descartes’s philosophy without spending much time or space on its merits or drawbacks, which enables them to clearly set out the Cartesian concepts in a straightforward manner. In addition, their approach seems more focused on explaining how modern philosophy developed and the connections between the philosophers. For example, Allen and Springsted showed how Descartes’s thought influenced Spinoza, and then how Spinoza and Leibniz were related, and so on. In addition to linking Descartes with Spinoza, they also drew out how the Cartesian approach influenced other later thinkers. The drawback to the approach adopted by Allen and Springsted is that it fails to uncover the weaknesses of Descartes’ philosophy – weaknesses that MacIntyre showed have important implications.

Likewise, the disadvantage of MacIntyre’s approach to Descartes is that he does not show the connection between Descartes and modern philosophers (with the exception of Pascal and Arnauld), nor does he show the unfolding of modern philosophy (which is one of the strengths of the Allen and Springsted approach). MacIntyre does show himself to be highly concerned

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46 MacIntyre, *God, Philosophies, Universities*, 125.
with right thinking, and endeavors to not just describe Descartes’ thought but to test whether it is useful and whether it points us towards the truth. MacIntyre not only describes and summarizes the Cartesian approach; he also analyzes it and points out its limits and weaknesses. The benefit of MacIntyre’s approach is that it is aimed at not only expanding our knowledge, but also at developing our understanding of God and furthering us down the path of true understanding.
References


