Critical Response #1: Descartes’ Meditations I & II

In Meditation I, Descartes explains that he is embarking on a six day project to uncover and acquire knowledge through a methodology of doubt. He plans to dispute everything that he ever thought he knew so that he may hopefully arrive at a fact or belief that he cannot question. This one piece of knowledge will then serve as Descartes’ keystone in reconstructing his knowledge. Once he arrives at this central truth, Descartes can deduce further truths and determine the extent of what he may know. He places total faith in his method, as once something is determined to be true it cannot be doubted and must constitute as knowledge. After introducing his endeavor, he begins to attack the foundations of his current beliefs and considers what the sources of those beliefs may be. Descartes concludes the first Meditation having more questions than answers and is no closer to his goal of reaching an underlying truth.

It is only during the second day that Descartes makes considerable progress towards his objective as he reaches something undoubtable. In the beginning of Mediation II, Descartes ponders whether his thoughts come from an external source or originate from himself. He realizes that he has no way of knowing if there is anything beyond himself. Descartes then wonders if his own existence can be questioned. He determines that even if there is nothing outside of himself there is still himself as he is doubting. This is because for any doubting to happen there has to be something that is doubting in the first place, and since Descartes is doing this doubting he must exist as the doubting thing. Descartes then extends this idea to thinking in general. Since the beginning of the Meditations, Descartes has been doubting, which is a form of thinking, and as a result, cannot doubt that he is thinking. Therefore, as this thinking is occurring it has to come from somewhere, and since Descartes is doing this thinking he must exist as the thinker of the thoughts. Finally, Descartes has reached his foundational truth that because he thinks he exists.

To reach the central truth that he exists because he thinks, Descartes seems to insinuate the general idea that if there is a thing being done there is a doer of the thing so a doing thing must exist. This raises the question of whether thinking is the one thing that guarantees Descartes’ existence as it looks like any activity can ensure existence as there must be something doing the activity. Furthermore, the possibility of existing as a non-thinking thing should be considered because if there is no thinking being done, there must be something that is not doing it.

Additionally, if thinking is central to Descartes’ existence if he is not thinking he must not exist. It is necessary that Descartes define thinking; however, he does not explicitly do so in the Meditations. Descartes equates doubting and thinking, and doubting may be defined as the production of an objection. So, perhaps thinking can be defined the production of everything our minds can create like words, images or feelings. Then, when Descartes is not doing those things he is nonexistent.

Now, is there ever a time when the mind stops producing? It seems to be so because there are a number of tasks one can perform daily, like opening a door, that seem automatic and do not require any thought. Perhaps this automatic response is some kind of subconscious thinking; however, it is unclear whether Descartes includes this kind of thinking as part of his definition of thinking. If subconscious thoughts are included as part of thinking, then maybe these gaps in existence can be filled and thought can guarantee existence.