

Essay Outline: Descartes' Wax Example

Topic: Present, explain, and evaluate Descartes' Wax Example, presented in his Second Meditation.

Before you begin, read pp. 137 – 139 (rationalism & empiricism) and 144 – 145 (wax example) in the textbook.

Outline:

- A. The purpose of the wax example is to attack empiricism and defend rationalism.
 1. Explain the difference between synthetic and analytic propositions.
 2. Explain the difference between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge.
 3. Explain the difference between rationalism and empiricism.
- B. Present and explain the wax example.
 1. Describe Descartes' two observations of the wax.
 2. Explain what conclusion Descartes draws from these observations.
 3. Explain that Descartes regards this conclusion as a synthetic proposition known *a priori*.
 4. Explain why this supports rationalism and disproves empiricism.
- C. Evaluate Descartes' argument
 1. Empiricists claim that Descartes' conclusion involves much more experience than the two observations of the wax. Therefore, the conclusion is known *a posteriori*.
 2. Thus, this case is not a problem for empiricism and does not support rationalism.