

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2006
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Lecture Notes, March 6

I. Some problems with 'God'

Last week, we looked at the ontological arguments from Anselm and Descartes.
We also briefly looked at three problems with the idea 'God'.

- 1) Evil, which seems to conflict with omni-benevolence.
- 2) Error, which seems to conflict with omnipotence.
- 3) Free will, which seems to conflict with omniscience.

Another problem with omni-benevolence is attributed to Leibniz:

- 1) God is omnipotent so he can create the best possible world.
- 2) God is omni-benevolent, so he wants to create the best possible world.
- 3) The world exists.

So, this is the best of all possible worlds.

A corollary:

If this is the best of all possible worlds, then all of the evil in it is necessary.

While Leibniz argued for his conclusion, it seems pretty obvious that there are better possible worlds.
For instance, consider the world in which you have more money.
Or one in which there is no war.

The problems of this section, though, are problems with Descartes's conclusion, not with his argument.
It is important to examine the argument, especially if you have doubts about the conclusion.

II. Objections to the ontological argument

Descartes's ontological argument starts by noting that the concept 'God' is that of a being with all perfections.
Since it is more perfect to exist than not to exist, the concept must include existence.
And if the concept includes existence, the object to which it corresponds must exist.
You can have the concept of a non-existing object just like God, but which does not exist.
But this would not be the concept of God, by definition.

Caterus, a Dutch philosopher, noted that the concept of a necessarily existing lion has existence as part of its essence, but it entails no actual lions.

You can find this in Objections 1, and in a handout I will have for you soon.

Caterus is saying that we must distinguish more carefully between concepts and objects.

Even if the concept contains existence, it is still just a concept.

Similarly, Gaunilo, responding to Anselm, wrote that my idea of the most perfect island does not entail that it exists.

In fact, it may entail that it does not exist, since a non-existing island would be free of imperfections.

Still, the airfare would be pretty steep.

There is a link to Gaunilo's objections to Anselm on the website.

Kant, following Hume, claims that existence is not a property, the way that the perfections are properties.

Existence can not be part of an essence, since it is not a property.

This objection accounts for Caterus' objection.

Kant's support for his assertion, that existence is not a predicate, is thin.

He relies on the belief that logic should make no existence assertions.

In many cases this is true.

But Descartes (and Anselm) might respond that this is an exception to that rule.

We shall put the objections aside, and for the purposes of understanding the remainder of the work, accept that Descartes has established the existence of God.

III. From where does the idea of God come?

Descartes urges that the idea of God is imprinted on him, as a mark of the artist on his work, p 51.

Remember that there are three types of ideas, according to Descartes:

1. Innate
2. Acquired
3. Produced by me

We have freedom to create ideas of the third type any way we wish, so the idea of God can not be produced by me.

And the idea of God can not be acquired, since we have no sensory experience of God.

So, the idea of God must be innate.

IV. Descartes' metaphysics, dualism, and monism

1. God
2. Minds
3. Bodies

In the first sentence of Meditation IV, he says that our quantity of knowledge of these things comes in this order.

We know a lot about God, some about minds, and very little about bodies.