

Class #4 - Arguments for the Existence of God and Applying the Criterion
Descartes, Meditations Three through Five

I. The Causal Argument for God's Existence

The argument in Meditation Three for the existence of God is, in short, that we have an idea, the idea of God, which has properties which make it such that it can not be created by ourselves alone.

Since I have doubt, I can not be perfect.

I have the idea of perfection.

But, the idea of perfection can not have come from an imperfect source.

That would violate a general principle which prohibits something coming from nothing.

So, the idea of God must come from God.

To look more carefully at the argument, it will help to familiarize yourself with some terms Descartes uses.

The synthetic presentation of the content of the *Meditations* in the Second Replies can be helpful since it contains some explicit definitions.

The objective reality of an idea is a quality that an idea has in regards to that which it represents.

The idea of God has more objective reality than the idea of a person, which has more objective reality than the idea of a mode (or property) of a person.

There are three kinds of objective reality: of modes, of finite substances, and of infinite substances.

In contrast, formal reality is what we ordinarily think of as existence.

The idea of Easter Bunny has the same kind of objective reality as the idea of myself.

Both ideas are of finite substances.

But, I have formal reality, whereas the Easter Bunny does not.

To prove the existence of God, Descartes relies on a general principle which I'll call R.

R There is more reality in the cause of something than in the effect.

From R, we can derive that something can not come from nothing.

R holds for ideas as well as for other objects, like physical ones.

Indeed, at this point in the presentation, R can only hold of ideas since we do not know that there are any other things.

From R, Descartes concludes that there is more reality in the idea of God than in the idea of a person.

There is so much reality in the idea of God that we can not have constructed it ourselves.

The idea of God contains the ideas of all perfections.

But, I am imperfect, and could not have devised the notion of such perfections purely from my ideas.

Although the idea of substance is in me by virtue of the fact that I am a substance, that fact is not sufficient to explain my having the idea of an infinite substance, since I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite... I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than there is in a finite one. Thus the perception of the infinite is somehow prior in me to the perception of the finite... How would I understand that I doubt and that I desire, that is, that I lack something and that I am not wholly perfect, unless there were some idea in me of a more perfect being, by comparison with which I might recognize my defects (AW 51b)?

Descartes urges that the idea of God is imprinted on him, as a mark of the artist on his work, 53b.

Remember that all of my ideas must be innate, acquired, or created by me.

We have freedom to create ideas any way we wish.

But, the idea of God is not variable; it is the idea of infinite perfection.

So the idea of God can not be created by me.

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

So, the idea of God must be innate.

Tlumak (pp 35-6) presents a rigorous version of the causal argument, which I paraphrase here.

- T1. Ideas are like images in that they represent things as having certain characteristics.
- T2. Some of the objects of my ideas are represented as having more formal reality than others (i.e. some ideas have more objective reality than others).
- T3. Whatever exists must have a cause with at least as much formal reality as it has.
- T4. Every idea must have a cause with at least as much formal reality as the idea represents its object has having.
- T5. I have an idea of God as an actually infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, all-knowing all-powerful substance by whom I (and anything else which may exist) have been created.
- T6. I do not have all the perfections which my idea of God represents God as having.
- T7. I am not the cause of my idea of God. (From 4, 5, and 6)
- T8. The cause of my idea of God is some being other than myself who possesses at least as much formal reality as my idea of God represents. (From 4, 5, and 8)
- TC. So, God exists.

I have a couple of small worries about Tlumak's version of the argument.

In his original presentation, Tlumak, following Descartes, distinguishes between efficient, total, first, and principle causes.

Those distinctions are more work than necessary, for our purposes.

I eliminated the different kinds of cause without (I believe) doing harm to the argument.

More substantially, but still without doing harm to the argument, Tlumak says that the general principle T3 is an instantiation of the truth that something can not come from nothing.

In contrast, I think it is a more general principle from which the claim that something can not come from nothing follows.

Tlumak rightly questions the central claim, at T4, that ideas must have causes that are at least as real as the object of that idea.

The claim is that if I have an idea of a rock, there must be a cause of that idea with at least as much reality (i.e. the ability to create) that rock.

The cause of my idea of the rock need not be the immediate source of my idea; I can just look at the rock.

But, it must be the first cause of my idea of the rock.

II. Problems for God

The proof of the existence of God raises some obvious conceptual difficulties. Among them are:

- G1 Evil, which seems to conflict with omni-benevolence
- G2 Error, which seems to conflict with omnipotence
- G3 Free will, which seems to conflict with omniscience

The problems of evil and error are sometimes run together on the assumption that evil is moral error. Another problem with omni-benevolence, which we will discuss when we get to Leibniz, is that it seems to entail that this is the best of all possible worlds. Such problems, though, are problems with Descartes's conclusion, not with his argument. We will return to them through the first half of the course.

III. Getting Rid of the Deceiver, and Avoiding Error

We have finished our discussion of the Third Meditation, and are beginning the Fourth. We have reasons to suspend judgment concerning our beliefs: the three doubts. We have a criterion for restoring some of our beliefs: clear and distinct perception. We have a criterion for continuing to doubt others: reliance on the Resemblance Hypothesis.

To proceed, we need to know that the criterion will not lead us astray. At the beginning of Meditation Four, Descartes argues that the goodness of God secures the criterion. A perfect God is all good, but the deceiver is not. So, the argument is pretty simple: the goodness of an all-perfect good will overwhelm any worries about a deceiver, 54b.

- GG GG1. Deception is a defect.
- GG2. God has no defects.
- GG3. So God is no deceiver.
- GG4. God created and preserves me.
- GGC. So, I am not deceived by God.

Unfortunately, as Descartes notes, this argument appears to be too strong. If my creator and preserver can not, by her goodness, deceive me, it is a puzzle how I can ever err. This puzzle is sometimes known as Descartes's problem of error.

- PE PE1. God exists and is perfectly good.
- PE2. God creates and preserves me.
- PE3. My faculty of judgment therefore comes from God.
- PEC. So, my judgments never err.

Since I do err, there must be a problem with PE. Perhaps God is really the deceiver after all!

Since PEC is false, either one of the premises of PE must be false, or the conclusion does not follow from the premises.

Whatever solution Descartes discovers must not contradict the prior claims in GG.
Thus, Descartes is committed to all three premises PE1 - PE3.
His solution is to deny that PE is valid.
That is, he claims that PEC does not follow from the premises of PE.

To explain how we can err, Descartes presents what is known as a two-faculty theory of the mind, 55b-58a
Our minds have faculties both of will and of understanding.
Our power of willing is infinite.
Descartes's account of will is called libertarian; we are perfectly free to choose.
In contrast, our power of understanding is finite.
We only understand a limited range of truths.

We err when we apply our will (and judge) beyond what we understand.
If we affirm a belief about which we lack clear and distinct understanding, we will make a mistake.
If, for example, I assert that lemons are yellow, I will err.
Consequently, we can avoid error by not judging in the absence of clear and distinct understanding.

Descartes account of error presumes that if I clearly and distinctly understand that P then I know that P.
Remember, clarity and distinctness, as a criterion, is ensured by the presence of God.
The goodness of God ensures that there is no deceiver, no systematic deception.
It ensures that there will be a way to discover any mistakes I make.
There would be no way to discover that there is a demon deceiver making me believe most strongly, say, the theorems of mathematics when they are in fact false.
So there can't be a demon deceiver.
But there are ways to recognize small errors of which I am the source, through misuse of my will.
If I am careful not to judge hastily, I can be sure to never judge falsely.

Descartes's account of error thus allows small mistakes, but prevents systematic misunderstanding.
I can be wrong about minor particular claims, but not about profound ones, like the existence of a physical world.
Now, we shall begin to reclaim that world.

IV. Applying the Criterion

Let's look back at the three-tiered classification of beliefs I derived from the First Meditation.

- Class I: Beliefs about the sensory nature of specific physical objects, or the existence of distant or ill-perceived objects
- Class II: Beliefs about the existence and nature of specific physical objects, and the physical world generally
- Class III: Beliefs about universals, like color, and shape, the building blocks of physical objects; and about space and time
Beliefs about arithmetic and geometry
Beliefs about logical and semantic truths

The possibility of a deceiver eliminated our Class III beliefs.
Having eliminated the deceiver, we can reclaim them, or at least the ones we perceive most clearly and distinctly.

Descartes reclaims mathematical truths in Meditation Five, 58b-59a.

These objects are known by proof and are not sensory.

They are what we now call *a priori*.

Descartes calls them innate.

Sensory information is still in doubt since the dream argument lingers even with the defeat of the deceiver.

The problems of the resemblance hypothesis have not been resolved, but mathematical knowledge is not impugned even in dreams.

Consequently, Descartes reclaims the mathematical properties of objects (e.g. length, shape, and anything describable using mathematics).

This reclamation leads to Descartes' second argument for the existence of God, 59b.

This argument, which becomes known later as the ontological argument, derives from a similar argument made by Anselm in the eleventh century CE.

V. Anselm's Ontological Argument

Descartes's ontological argument is quick.

It might be useful to look at an earlier version of the argument in the work of Anselm.

There are various consistent characterizations of 'God'.

Descartes alludes to many of them.

Whatever necessarily exists

All perfections, including omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence

Creator and preserver

Anselm uses a different characterization: 'something greater than which can not be thought'.

These are definitions of a term, or a word, but not an object.

There is no presupposition in this characterization that such a thing exists.

Or, so it seems.

Anselm's ontological argument for God's existence (see [selections](#)):

AO AO1. I can think of 'God'

AO2. If 'God' were just an idea, or term, then I could conceive of something greater than 'God' (i.e. an existing God).

AO3. But 'God' is that than which nothing greater can be conceived

AO4. So 'God' can not be just an idea

AOC. So, God exists.

Anselm further argues that one can not even conceive of God not to exist.

This latter argument is not present in the *Meditations*, and need not concern us.

VI. Descartes's Ontological Argument

Descartes's version of the ontological argument is simpler than Anselm's.

Anselm argues that the object which corresponds to the concept 'something greater than which can not be

thought' must exist.

For, if we thought that the object which corresponded to that concept did not exist, then it would not be the object which corresponded to that concept.

There would be something greater, i.e. the object which does exist.

So, we give the name 'God' to that best possible object.

Descartes's version of the ontological argument does not depend on our ability to conceive.

He merely notes that existence is part of the essence of the concept of 'God'.

This conceptual containment is similar to the way that having angles whose measures add up to 180 degrees is part of the essence of the concept of a triangle.

Or, as Descartes notes, like the concept of a mountain necessarily entails a valley.

The essence of an object is all the properties that necessarily belong to that object.

They are the necessary and sufficient conditions for being that object, or one of that type.

Something that has all these properties is one.

Something that lacks any of these properties is not one.

A chair's essence (approximately) is to be an item of furniture for sitting, with a back, made of durable material.

The essence of being a bachelor is being an unmarried man.

A human person is essentially a body and a mind.

The essence of God is the three omnis, and existence.

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 'God', by definition.

VII. Objections to the Ontological Argument

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

You can find Caterus's objection and Descartes's reply in the collection of Objections and Replies I have prepared on the website; Caterus was the first objector.

Some of us will look more closely at this objection next Thursday, in Class #6.

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.

Gassendi, in the Fifth Objections, argues that existence is not a perfection.

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

If existence is not a property, then the ontological argument is unsound.

Some of us may look at Gassendi's objection in Class #6 too.

Kant, later, pursues Gassendi's suggestion.
We will examine Kant's response at the end of the term.

VIII. Beyond the Self

In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes applies his rule to reclaim knowledge of the self, and in particular knowledge of our (libertarian) freedom.

In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes reclaims his Class III beliefs, in particular mathematical beliefs. What remains is our knowledge of the external world, knowledge which seems to depend, in some way, on our senses.