

Objections to Descartes' Meditation on the Argument for the Existence of God

Rene Descartes, a 17th century French philosopher often regarded as one of the first modern contemplators, wrote the Discourse on Method: Meditations on First Philosophy in order to reconstruct his conception of reality from scratch. The premise of the exercise, which spanned six sections, was to doubt all of which was doubtable and to, if possible, build truth upon that which was beyond doubt. Upon investigation he found a primary truth that he could not doubt, which was that he himself exists purely by the merit that the investigation he himself was undergoing was occurring and that he was aware of the cognition that made it possible. This was the foundation on which he decided “as a general rule that everything I very clearly and distinctly perceive is true.” (Meditation Three, p. 70) Meditation three and four specifically relate to arguments for the existence of God. Descartes finds this idea to be clear and distinct enough to be worthy of continued probing. He also finds it clear and distinct that God should be a perfect and infinite being. As Descartes' context for his argument is dependent upon his own subjective (or as he puts it, objective) view of God, it is difficult or impossible to question the truth of his belief in his *concept* of God. Instead, this paper will object to his idea of perfection and will show that his view of God's causation and his definition of perfection are not compatible.

Descartes' argument for the existence of God begins by asserting that he has an idea of a perfect being, a “supreme deity, eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, and creator of all things other than himself...” (Meditation Three, p. 73) His definition of perfection is consistent with the statement that a property P is a perfection if and only if it would be objectively preferable to possess P rather than not

possess it. He uses this to infer that a being is infinitely perfect if and only if it possesses every perfection to the highest degree. Descartes uses an idea similar to the Great Chain of Being to outline that “what is more perfect (that is, what contains in itself more reality) cannot come into being from what is less perfect.” His view of reality is a hierarchy of being with an infinitely perfect God at the top. As a result, he purports that he himself is “not wholly perfect” and that he would not understand this “unless there were some idea in me of a more perfect being, by comparison with whom I might recognize my defects...” (Meditation Three, p. 76) Because this idea “clearly has more objective reality within it than do those ideas through which finite substances are displayed,” (Meditation Three, p. 73) and nothing perfect (God) can result from something not perfect (himself), his conclusion is that by the very nature of the existence of his clear and distinct concept of God it could not have come from himself at all. Instead, it necessarily indicates that the actual God must exist to support the idea of God.

Descartes' definition of perfection and his idea of an infinitely perfect God are not compatible with his idea that God has created him, his ideas, and his qualities, including his flaws. He supposes that these flaws are in fact deprivations of God's perfections and that the manifestation of these flaws in him are dependent upon the existence of God's perfections.

The mere fact that God created me makes it highly plausible that I have somehow been made in his image and likeness... *The whole force of the argument rests on the fact that I recognize that it would be impossible for me to exist, being of such a nature as I am (namely, having in me the idea of God), unless God did in fact exist.* (Meditation Three, p. 80 – my italics)

According to his philosophy, any flaw or imperfection is simply a perfection of God that has fallen short (ie. evil is essentially a lack of some good.) The statement that a property P is a perfection if and only if it would be objectively preferable to possess P rather than not possess it implies that one of two opposites such as good and evil must be a perfection while the other is not. Descartes would certainly, out of the two opposites, choose good to be the perfection over evil. Therefore, his perfect being is infinitely perfect if and only if it possesses good to the highest degree. Because evil is a lack of some

good, the greater the amount of good that is present, the less the amount of evil must be present. It follows that, according to these definitions, in a being which is the most good there must then be absolutely no evil. This can be expressed mathematically as such:

$$good = \frac{1}{evil}$$

As good approaches 100%, evil must approach zero. As evil approaches 100%, good must also approach zero. At exactly 100% evil, the state contains no goodness. At exactly 100% good, the state contains no evil. Evil is a void of goodness and goodness is void of evil. Yet, a void has no features and therefore can contain no meaning. This theoretical definition seeks to define evil and good exclusively in terms of featureless, meaningless voids. Certainly most people, Descartes included, would believe that both good and evil contain meaning. They are *not* featureless and *not* meaningless. Descartes himself states that something cannot come out of nothing. The only conclusion that follows is that good is not lack of evil and evil is not lack of good. The two qualities are in fact independent from each other. If they are in fact independent, nothing about the state of good implies the state of evil. In no way does this imply that good and evil cease to have *opposing meanings*. They retain opposing meaning but do not have opposing context. Many opposites (in fact, all opposites with meaning) can remain opposites and yet not pose destructive consequences when coexisting in context. Take for example the opposites of charity and greed. A very wealthy man can donate one million dollars to charity for the purpose of having a tax deduction. This action is both charitable and greedy at the same time. There exists within this example a Cartesian perfection (charity) and a Cartesian imperfection (greed) residing together completely not at odds with each other. It should be noted that opposites without meaning can be true inversions of each other. Take for example the ideas empty and full. Something that is empty is by definition not full. But there is no preference within these concepts. Meaning for empty and full is contextual. A stomach full of peaches is preferable to a stomach full of cyanide when life is desired. Therefore, neither full nor empty are perfections or imperfections in and

of themselves. Only opposites with meaning behave without destructive consequences of coexistence because they imply distinction, form, and feature whereas meaningless things do not.

The problem with Descartes' God is that it is a God that derives its meaning from absolute statements. If nothing about the state of goodness implies the state of evil, then God can no longer be described with one statement: God is entirely good. As a result of independence of ideas, two statements must be used: a) God is entirely good b) God is absence of evil. Nothing about good or evil makes this arrangement impossible. It may even be probable. Descartes' God must have good and evil arranged in such a way. Yet the definition of God has lost the clarity and distinctness of the absolute single statement. If Descartes defines God as an infinite perfect being, he will choose good over evil as perfection. The presence of flaws and imperfections in Descartes can no longer be explained away as a lack of good, as a lack of God. Descartes' nature cannot be defined as "God minus" in the hierarchy of being. The flaws, as independent non-perfections are not caused by God, who is entirely composed of perfections. He cannot compare his own nature to his God's nature because he contains things that are not present in God and something cannot arise from nothing. His idea of a perfect, infinite God does not imply clearly and distinctly that a perfect God must exist to support his idea.

The weakest elements of these objections lie in the critique of the Cartesian definitions of opposites such as good and evil. Many people are used to referring to perfection poles such as good and evil, hate and love, and such things as truly inverted opposites and will argue that the concept remains true in the light of this logic. It could be said that the logic employed in this objection to Descartes' perfection is a slight of hand argument that misrepresents moral concepts as more malleable than they are and pigeonholes the ideas into statements that only recognize one element of their properties (ie. evil *is* defined as the deprivation of good but is also something else which cannot be represented in these terms and therefore is not a void, even when represented in this context. The definition is not

exhaustive.) This would imply that the objections pose a sort of false dilemma. Also potentially evident is that if good and evil have opposing meaning but compatible context and 100% good can coexist with 100% evil then you can somehow end up with 200% meaning. It seems unclear as to whether concepts such as good and evil can be quantified this way, leading both the objecting argument and the counterargument into a potential category error.

The objections to Descartes' argument seem to outweigh the responses considered thus far to the objections. The fact that real-world examples of opposites coexisting can be given seems to indicate some truth to the objection that postulates a non-destructive coexistence of meaning in perfection. The idea of 200% meaning falls short in being conclusive in the same way that electrons and protons can coexist as opposite poles in order to maintain the structural integrity and identity of a particular atom, even though one's mass implies nothing of others' (This analogy is not meant to be exhaustive. The true inverse opposite of a proton is an antiproton.) Good and evil can be viewed as parts of a whole structure and, as such, the meaning of a part can be 100% of its whole as a part. The meaning of the whole which the parts compose can be a larger and unrelated 100%. That is the beauty of percentages!

Descartes' idea of perfection and his idea of God might have been clear and distinct in his own mind, but they fail to remain clear and distinct elsewhere. His argument for causation of the idea of God breaks down in the light of God as an infinite and perfect being as he himself contains imperfections which do not exist in God. Descartes' idea of God may still remain true but the resulting conclusions he infers fail to translate conclusively and holes in his philosophy become evident. With all of this in mind, his investigations remain extraordinary accomplishments in the context of 17th century France. His work continues to be a foundation on which many contemporary philosophers build their ideas.

All references to Rene Descartes' meditations are taken from the 1999 4th edition translation by Donald

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