

Gassendis objection to descartes argument



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Gassendis objections to Descartes ontological argument for the existence of God are based, as many philosophical arguments are, on minor details within the Meditations. The objections for our purposes should be constrained to the first and second Meditations, as it is those that are most concerned with arguing for God's existence. Gassendi's objections are not quite enough to be considered strong enough to refute the argument laid out with care by Descartes. By identifying what the specific objections are and then comparing them to the arguments made by Descartes in terms of reason, blind faith and even simple assumption, we can determine that Descartes' original arguments for the existence of God are stronger than Gassendi's objections to them.

In the first Meditation, Descartes argues that he knows he is alert and thinking because if not, that would prove the existence of a deceiving God and, since God does not deceive (by definition), would not lie to him about being alert and awake. Gassendi's objection to this is that rather than assuming everything he has learned from birth is a suspect, Descartes should assume that everything he has learned from birth is believable and rule out things as they are disproven, not as they are proven, so as not to need to thinking of God as deceiving or to believe in an evil Spirit that deceives man. There are two problems that indicate that Gassendi's argument is more powerful. One is that since Descartes cannot disprove God, he cannot prove him either, and the other is that Gassendi is correct, logically, in choosing to see something/someone who created all life in the best possible light first without automatically believing the worst.

Specifically, Gassendi states that “ wouldn't it have been more in accord with

philosophical openness and the love of truth simply to state the facts candidly and straightforwardly?"

In the second Meditation, Descartes has argued that we should believe nothing until there has been some indication that it is true and exists by God. Without this indication, it may very well not exist whatsoever. He states that " this holds even for the truths of faith: we shouldn't decide to believe them until we have perceived some convincing reason for thinking that they have indeed been revealed by God." Gassendi's objection to this argument for the existence of God, that we would believe nothing if we did not believe it came from God himself, is that he believes he is thinking and alert, that his existence is made up of a Mind (at this point), so therefore he must believe that without having credible proof that God gave him that thinking.

Thomas Aquinas gives us five ways to determine whether there is a God. The fourth way, the gradation of being argument, is paraphrased as follows. In order to call something hotter, one must understand what the hottest thing can possibly be. In the instance of genus of animals, the original of the genus is the " uttermost" or " cause" of all that genus and is therefore the ideal of it. Therefore man must be less than his original creator, or the ideal of the genus, which is assumed to be God, the perfect being, in whose image we are made.

Objections to this argument can vary. One of the more obvious ones is that Darwin and, consequently, hundreds of other scientists have determined that with the " survival of the fittest" and evolutionary theories, the original of a genus is not the ideal. In fact, the original is soon replaced with an

evolutionary improvement and soon dies out because of this competition.

Using Aquinas' reasoning with these facts in mind, the original and creator of the human genus is dead and sub-par, lesser than the man of today rather than the ultimate man. This is, in fact, an anti-God line of reasoning with this added knowledge.

The fifth of these ways is the intelligence, " design" argument. In this argument, to paraphrase, bodies work toward a goal that we do not understand, and most natural things lack knowledge. In the case of an arrow, for instance, the direction of the arrow is being directed by intelligence in the form of the archer. Therefore so too humans are directed to the goal our natural bodies are working toward by a being we call God. Though this argument is one of the more popular arguments for the existence of God, Aquinas has inadvertently made a mistake in his reasoning. He claims that natural beings do not hold knowledge of their own. However, he gives humans intelligence in his example with the arrow - if an archer is intelligent he can direct an arrow to hit a target. Why, then, does the archer not possess the intelligence Aquinas says is given him by God to find his own goal, his own " target," so to speak.

The issue lies in the claim of intelligence. Most natural things do not possess knowledge, including humans. However humans are the intelligence it takes to direct an arrow and simultaneously lacking the intelligence needed to reach the human's " target," which according to Aquinas can only be accomplished by another intelligent being assumed to be God.

The objection that can be raised is that either humans are or are not, as natural beings, intelligent beings. If we are intelligent beings, we can find our own path to our target without the guiding force that is assumed to be God. If we are not intelligent beings, we are not knowledgeable enough to direct an arrow to its target. With either option the argument for design in the five arguments for the existence of God by Aquinas falls apart with little picking at the seams.

In conclusion, Descartes arguments for the existence of God are not better than Gassendi's objections to them, but in fact neither one has good enough arguments to be called strong. Aquinas is hardly different, having dissected two of his five arguments for the existence of God with formidable objections and different lines of reasoning.