

Descartes

Philosophy



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Adrian Musiuk Josh Keton CORC 1210/ MW8 Topic Descartes eventually proposes that God's necessary existence allows him to be free of doubt with respect to many things. How is God's existence necessary, according to Descartes? How does it yield certainty of some things? What are those things? What things remain uncertain/dubitable? Do you agree that he salvages the foundations of knowledge that he undercut using Method of Doubt?

Descartes's argument regarding the existence of God in the Meditations comes in the framework of his larger philosophical project in which he attempts to establish a basis for the very act of knowing. His method throughout the project is to establish a radical skepticism in which he doubts everything, even his own ability to conceive of himself and the existence of the world (Newman). As he comes in Meditation III to a proof for God, he finds it necessary to argue God into existence in order to move beyond the certainty of knowledge he has established in some very simple facts, including the cogito and simple mathematics. In this brief essay, it will be shown that Descartes proves God's existence as a means of defeating radical skepticism, and his argument for that proof will be considered for its validity and relevance to his overall project.

In order to achieve his objective of proving the knowledge is possible, Descartes dives into an ever-increasing skepticism in which he doubts even the existence of himself and his own ability to imagine the world and his place in it. As part of his method, he imagines a demonic deceiver who works to mislead him at every turn. The deceiver presents him with a challenge that almost cripples his project since the deceiver, when taken to the logical extreme, makes all but his own private thought possible to doubt. He has <https://assignbuster.com/descartes/>

ideas about the world that seem certain, including his own existence and simple mathematics, but he must prove that such ideas have corresponding material realities in the world in order to prove knowledge possible. The use of demon deceiver suggests that the link between ideas and material reality may be dubious.

At the end of the Second Meditation, Descartes establishes the cogito as a form of certainty that he begins to believe will suffice as the first thing that he can actually argue with certainty. He thinks, and in that ability to think, he believes he expresses something too important to be overlooked. By being able to conceive of the notion of thought, he must exist, since to think something (even if it is the act of thinking) is by definition to bring the act of thought into existence. How can he not exist if he himself is thinking? How can something that exists (thought) come from something that does not exist (Descartes)? Descartes believes that the cogito is a powerful step toward defeating radical skepticism (Newman).

Once he establishes the cogito, Descartes begins to consider those things that he is able to conceive of clearly and distinctly (Newman). He believes that through using this filter he is able to overcome most of what the tool of the demon deceiver would inflict on his argument. Chief among the ideas he establishes are such things as simple mathematics equations. Descartes believes that, in being able to conceive of such ideas in a very simple and straightforward fashion, he arrives at a set of ideas that begin to establish the basis for knowledge that will eventually lead back to an argument for the working of the material world.

However, there is still the possibility that the demon deceiver, in the absence of a benevolent God, may be misleading him about material reality.

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Descartes argues that such an extreme possibility is very slight, but it must be dealt with before he can deal with what he calls metaphysical uncertainty. By establishing an argument for the existence of a benevolent God, who would not allow such a deceiver to deceive in that way, Descartes believes that he will undercut radical doubt, and will therefore be able to believe with certainty the link between his thought and material reality are valid (Newman).

Descartes' argument for God, in paraphrased form, is presented within the context of his argument for the nature of ideas that can be conceived clearly and distinctly, as follows:

1. A cause of an idea must have at least as much reality as the idea itself.
2. One can conceive of God as perfect and infinite.
3. Such a conception of God cannot come from the holder of the idea, since no one is perfect or infinite.
4. The conception of God must therefore come from the perfect infinite being itself.
5. Therefore, God must exist.

Descartes' argument is surprising and interesting at many turns. It rests on a foundation about the nature of ideas and ontology. He argues that the definition of God necessarily requires God's existence because the level of reality implied in the definition of God is too much for the holder of such an idea to have made up, without a corresponding actuality reality. A fully omnipotent, omniscient, infinite being cannot be conceived of unless it actually exists. The nature of the material reality of such a being is implied in the nature of the idea itself.

I find Descartes' argument difficult to accept. By arguing the God exists, he
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believes he has saved knowledge from radical skepticism, and therefore such things as the cogito and simple mathematics can therefore begin to be extended to the material world. Ideas, according to his argument, have connection to material reality because the idea of God must have a material causality. However, his definition of God seems self-referential and conditional. By arguing that God exists because the idea of God is too difficult to conceive of unless God actually exists, Descartes seems to suggest that it is impossible to imagine connections between ideas such as metaphor or hyperbole. Do fairies exist because the holder of the idea of a fairy is not in fact a fairy? Descartes uses God to salvage the most basic knowledge from the brinks of despair caused by radical doubt, but in the end, what he does is simply argue for a very tenuous link between ideas, causality, and material reality. His argument seems to lack validity, and therefore his larger project of proving knowledge possibility by the very act of rational thought alone seems interesting, but flawed.

References:

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Newman, Lex, "Descartes Epistemology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Retrieved November 24, 2011, from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/descartes-epistemology/>.