

# Descartes version of the ontological argument philosophy essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In Descartes Fifth Meditation he once again attempts to convince the readers of the existence of God, or some other supreme being via use of clear and distinct logic. First and foremost we need to examine why Descartes wants to prove God's existence so urgently. Taking into consideration the era which Descartes lived in - that of 17th century Europe, it would seem quite obvious that his belief in God was formed through exposure to religious indoctrination from an early age and he would not, or rather could not entertain the thought that the universe could exist without a creator - indeed the idea has only within the last century truly been given any credence. So it could therefore be argued that his attempts to prove God's existence could be to reinforce his own faith and to confirm that life has had some form of purpose and direction. In Descartes first meditation he deduces that the only thing that can be certain is that he himself exists, " I think, therefore I am." [1] In order to establish the universe as having some grounding in reality and having existence itself, Descartes needs God - an omnipotent and omni benevolent being to have created it, and being omni benevolent it would be against the nature of God to deceive him. Therefore we have basis to believe that the world and all its objects and inhabitants do in fact, exist.

It is necessary to first differentiate between a priori and a posteriori knowledge in order to fully understand how Descartes is able to make any assertions concerning such an abstract concept. The two terms concern how we come about conclusions, a posteriori literally means posterior to, and it means that our argument or rationale is based on experience and empiricism - that is to say we have either first hand evidence or some other proof that supports our position. A priori is the opposite, being independent of any

empirical study, thus it remains in question how it is possible for the arguer to be able to make any statements that we are to believe to be true - as Galen Strawson criticises " You can see that it is true just lying on your couch. You don't have to get up off your couch and go outside and examine the way things are in the physical world. You don't have to do any science." [2] In relation to the argument though, it is based entirely on a priori knowledge, and from that point alone it can be brought into contention. Hume addresses this point in his " Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion" where he claims " There is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments a priori. Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no being, whose existence is demonstrable." [3] Essentially, this means that we are able to conceive the idea of a being not existing with no contradiction, so therefore we can have the concept of God not existing without causing any contradictions and thus we have demonstrated that either the argument is certainly not sound, or that the universe is not dependant on God. So if God does exist he is rather inconsequential to our lives - which leads us to the question, why should we acknowledge or care about his undetectable actions?

The argument itself is as thus: God, in accordance with our concept of him, has all perfections. Existence is a perfection, so therefore God must exist. Firstly, there is a fundamental flaw in his argument purely from a

grammatical standpoint - that being, are we talking about the concept of "God", or actually God himself? If we take it to mean God as an actual being, then the argument falls into Descartes' own clear and distinct logic Cartesian circle, - this is that we cannot know anything for certain until we can be sure of God's existence, and he uses clear and distinct perception in order to form an argument for God's existence - which you would not be able to justify clearly and distinctly because we are still uncertain of God's existence.

However if we are to believe he is referring to the concept of "God" then we come to an entirely obvious conclusion that does not reach any concrete proof in favour of the argument. Descartes' concept of "God" is of a being with all perfections, therefore this conceptual being would have existence, as that is another perfection. So in the end we come to the conclusion that if this conceptual being was inseparable from existence as part of its own essence, then it will exist, - or put simply - if it exists, it exists.

Gaunilo provides a parody of the ontological argument concerning a perfect island, which illustrates the fallacious aspect of the argument. Essentially Gaunilo states that he has a concept of a perfect island, which has entirely desirable properties with no flaws - one of the properties it would have is existence, as it is a truly perfect island and would not be so if it did not exist - so it must therefore exist somewhere.[4] Unfortunately Gaunilo's parody does not actually address the ontological argument directly, and so does not inform us how or where Descartes went wrong. It is what is known as an 'overload objection'[5], it attempts only to show that the argument is not sound when a comparable object is put in the position of the original - and it is quite clear that something is not right, as we know that such an island

does not exist, or more aptly could not exist. However Gaunilo's island has been criticised as well. Paul J Glenn, states that the comparison is not valid because God is infinite in all virtues that can be ascribed to him, where as an island is limited in the fact that it is only an island, " Nothing greater can be conceived ... island analogy only has limited application." [6] I happen to agree with Paul J Glenn on this point, the idea of trying to use something in place of a God in the argument simply does not work, as it is the very essence of God that he is infinite and immortal as we humans understand him, or at least the concept of him - so centring the argument on something definitively mortal will clearly show that the argument can only 'work' concerning a deity of some form.

The second premise of the argument is the main target for most criticisms. Immanuel Kant states that it is a mere tautology, as if you include an idea in the description of an object then stating it again is rather pointless. [7] The second premise does not actually give us any more insight into the nature of God nor does it truly help advance the point that Descartes is trying to prove to us. A particularly poignant criticism concerning its second premise that, " Existence is a perfection" begs the question - is existence truly a perfection? Or is it simply an inherent truth for all objects? It would make sense to say that existence is a perfection due to the fact that, as far as we know, it is decidedly preferable to non-existence - though that is another matter entirely. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily accurate. Immanuel Kant refutes the argument thoroughly through the assertion that existence is not a property that can be attributed to an object as a perfection, as the very idea of ascribing some object with some attribute already supposes that the

object exists in the first place.[8] Therefore, it would be illogical to say God has perfect existence, as that would be obvious from the very fact that he would exist anyway. Thus we must come to the conclusion that existence cannot be a perfection, but rather an unquestionable actuality for any object we can perceive, as there is no way they can not exist and still be comprehensible to a human mind in an intrinsic form. Existence as a perfection also flagged concerns for the argument from my nihilistic standing. Surely the idea of existence being perfection is subjective? It would seem that it is only stated to be perfect as humans have not or can not comprehend non-existence wholly, which would be the state of neither perfection nor imperfection - as how could a non-existence thing have imperfections if it does not exist in order to attain any in the first place? Nor could it have any perfections by the same token.

I would have to conclude that upon first look the argument does seem like it has some merits, despite there being some natural instincts telling me that there is something wrong with it, as it never convinced me of God's existence. However it is not until you examine and analyse the argument in it's entirety that you can assess it's flaws. There is no question that the main problem arises from the idea of valuing existence as a perfection, though this is still a point that is yet to be proved - it does not make sense as it just ends up being a simple tautology. It is not a descriptive trait of a being, it is more a statement of truth - either the being is or it is not, and since we are concerning a being in the first place, it must be.