

The role of god in rene descartes meditations



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In this essay I am going to argue that God plays a significant role in René Descartes' Meditations, as he argues for God's existence using different arguments, however I find him to be incorrect in his conclusions, and I find he is not entitled to appeal to God's existence in this way, and all of his arguments are either fallacious or unsound. In his meditations discuss his thoughts concerning the human mind & body, true & false, the essence and existence of material things and the real distinction between mind and body.

As I previously said, God plays a significant role to Descartes' Meditations, including the proof of God's existence. Descartes goes through numerous proofs of God's existence through-out his Meditations, starting in Meditation 3 and continuing onto the end. This is the first role God plays in Descartes system as it is like a building block, an essential part of the structure of the system, as he uses the idea of God (specifically a non-deceiving God) to prove conclusions and dispel any other doubts he may have. He dispels the evil-demon doubt through the proof that a benevolent God exists. He also uses God within the clear and distinct perception proof.

In Meditation three Descartes states that there are three types of ideas: innate, factitious or adventitious. Innate ideas are ideas built into our minds from birth, factitious ideas are invented ideas we have produced from our imagination and adventitious ideas are from experience in the outside world. Descartes argues that God cannot be a factitious or adventitious idea and the idea of God must be built into our minds from birth:

I did not derive it from the senses, nor did it ever arrive unexpectedly as the ideas of sensible things usually do when external objects impinge, or seem

to impinge, on the sense organs. Nor was it fabricated by me, for it is clear that I can neither add to it nor subtract from it. Thus it follows that it is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me.... This is the 'artisan's trademark imprinted on his work'. (Med 3, p42-43)

Along with these three types of ideas, you have varieties of idea: substances (persisting particulars), and modes and accidents (properties of substances). Substances can be either finite or infinite substances. Here is his first argument for the existence of God, his causal argument. Here he implies that whatever is possessed by an effect must have been given it to by its cause. For example, a rock cannot be produced by anything with less formal reality (such as a property like a colour), or a pot of water is heated up until it boils, it must have been subjected to heat from some cause that had at least as much heat. Moreover, something that does not have as much heat would not be able to cause the water to boil, because it doesn't have the necessary reality to bring about the effect – something cannot give what it does not have.

Now, it is evident by the natural light of reason that there must be as much reality in an efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. For I ask: where could the effect get its reality from, apart from its cause?

Something which is more perfect – in other words, that which contains more reality in itself – cannot be made from that which is less perfect. (Med 3, P35)

Descartes second argumentative question concerning God was 'could one exist in the absence of God?' By the third meditation the meditator has established he exists, and therefore this existence must have a cause. The

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only possible cause for existence has to be one of the following: from himself, having always been in existence, his parents, something less perfect than God or God. Firstly the cause cannot be from oneself, as he would have been created perfect; assuming to have been in existence always also does not help as what keeps him in existence? As a dependent being, there is a need to be sustained by another. It cannot be from parents, as this would lead to an infinite regress (who caused and maintains there existence?), and it cannot be caused by a being less perfect than God as the idea of perfection that exists cannot have originated from an imperfect being, therefore God is the cause, and God exists.

Descartes discussed the ontological argument for God's existence. The meditator states that the idea of God, the essence, has a necessary connection to the idea of existence. Take an example the connection between mountains and valleys; if there were no mountains, there wouldn't be any valleys, and all land would be flat. Descartes claimed it is impossible for us to conceive of existence without conceiving there is a God, just as it is impossible for us to conceive a valley without a mountain.

As previously stated, the proofs of God's existence played an essential role in Descartes system, as he had established that he was created by an all-powerful, non-deceiving God, Descartes could then place a great deal of trust in his cognitive abilities. Meditation Six gives a clear example of this in its discussion of the mind and of the body.

In Meditation Three, Descartes idea of clear and distinct

The key part to Descartes system however is the Clear and Distinct Rule: ' Everything that I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.' To prove that what we see clearly and distinctly to be true is essential to establish a foundation to build upon. He proves both that God exists through the use of Clear and Distinct perceptions, and he proves that clear and distinct perceptions are true because of the existence of God. This argument can be represented in the following structure:

P1) If God exists, then he is no deceiver

P2) If God is no deceiver, then all I clearly & distinctly perceive will be true

P3) God exists

C1) All I clearly & distinctly perceive is true

P1) All I clearly & distinctly perceive is true

P2) I clearly & distinctly perceive the idea of God

P3) The idea of God is true

C1) God exists

These two arguments create the ' Cartesian Circle,' from which the conclusion of one argument exists as a premise in the other, and vice versa. He begs the question here, assuming the conclusion he is arguing for in both arguments.

Throughout the Meditations God play an important role for Descartes and his system, however I do not believe he is entitled to appeal to God's existence in this way.

All of Descartes arguments for the existence of God- the ontological argument, causal argument, and the trademark argument are not convincing alone. The use of God in his defining of clear and distinct perceptions also falls short. At the time of publication, there were many objections raised to some of his meditative conclusions and, understandably at the time to disprove or argue against the existence of God would be considered heresy by the Catholic Church, however the proofs for the existence of God Descartes argues I find unsound.

Firstly the ontological argument for the existence of God is a priori proof, which is independent of experience, and states that if we can imagine a perfect being he must exist. God could not be perfect without existence as existence is stated as a property of perfection. So therefore a perfect being/God must exist. This argument commits a bare assertion fallacy. It does not give any backup premise to prove what it is stating and it relies on us just believing what it is saying. You cannot define or imagine a thing into existence.

The ontological argument states that if we can imagine a perfect being he must exist, however it generalizes that all people will have the same the idea of a perfect being/God, however as different cultures have different ideas of God, even people within one culture will have different ideas of perfection and different ideas of a perfect God. Therefore either the complete plethora

of Perfect Gods is true and exists, or Descartes' argument is unsound. We also cannot guarantee that our human perception of perfection is, in fact 'perfect.' Our own conceptions of perfection are through our subjective experience; therefore the ideas of perfection are an expansion of own thoughts and collective ideas.

The causal argument for the existence of God appears in Meditation Three. It states that everything must have a cause, and it is impossible to continue backwards to infinity with causes (infinite regress), therefore there must have been an original first cause, one which wasn't conditioned by a previous cause, and such a cause is God. The causal argument is flawed in that if you allow one thing to exist without a cause, you contradict your own premise. To say then that the idea of an all-perfect God must come from an all-perfect cause can be argued against. We can take the idea of 'goodness', intelligence, and kindness and amplify it, similarly to how we reach the idea of mathematical infinity. The concept of spontaneous generation also argues against the causal principle, where we can imagine the idea of life emerging from a non-living and non-sentient basis.

The trademark argument states that the idea of God is innate, and built into us from birth, as that is God leaving his 'trademark' on us. I strongly disagree with this argument. The idea of God is not innate, it is indirectly an adventitious idea, and idea through experience. This experience however is provided through teaching and influence. The idea of God for all beings, at the time of Descartes specifically, were brought up religious and instilled with the idea of God. This is again reflected on the fact that there are different Gods from different cultures and civilizations. The Romans, the

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Greeks, the Vikings etc., all had different distinct Gods, the ideas of which were instilled to them again through teachings and influence.