

Descartes belief in god



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In his groundbreaking work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the French philosopher Rene Descartes lays the groundwork for many philosophical principles by attempting to “establish a bold and lasting knowledge” (171)¹.

The foundations for knowledge Descartes established would go on to influence a plethora of other philosophers and philosophical works. Descartes argues in his meditations first from the point of view of complete skepticism, using skepticism as a tool in order to discover what is real.

Through this method, Descartes explains the existence of man as a “thinking thing,” the capacity for human error, the overall trustworthiness of our senses, the existence of a physical world, the mind and body as separate entities, and the existence of an infinitely perfect God. Descartes uses a variety of premises to help back up his idea of a perfect God.

The main idea concluded from these premises is that man alone could not have come up with the idea of infinite perfection, so the idea of God comes from God himself, thus proving his existence. Although his argument for the existence of God is the least strong of his philosophical arguments, I agree with Descartes because humans alone could not grasp the idea of infinity or an infinitely perfect being.

I intend to examine and defend Descartes' explanation of the existence of God, propose valid counter-arguments and my own answers to those objections.

Descartes uses the entire third and most of the fifth meditations of *Meditations on First Philosophy* to delve into his idea of and explanation of the existence of God. From his point of view of skepticism earlier in the meditations, Descartes examined the possible existence of God as a

supreme “evil demon” bent on deceiving humanity and causing mankind to err. Descartes drifts away from this idea and defines his idea of God as “eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, and the creator of all things” (178).

Descartes then uses several different premises to prove not only that God exists, but also that he displays the traits ascribed to him in Descartes’ idea of God. Descartes first uses a scientific cause-and-effect principle to claim that his clear idea of God is proof of God’s existence. Descartes claims that the “light of nature has revealed that there is at least as much in a complete efficient cause as in its effect” (178).

By using this principle, Descartes claims that since his clear perception of God is a supremely perfect being, and since there is as much reality in his idea of God as in its cause, then God must exist as the only being with as much reality as his idea of God. Since Descartes has just proven God is the pinnacle of complete perfection and “deception always contain(s) imperfection,” then God cannot be an evil deceiver as Descartes earlier hypothesized (183).

Descartes also delves into how the idea of God must come from God himself. Since God cannot be “taken in through senses,” and since Descartes himself didn’t create the idea of God, Descartes claims that the idea of God must be “innate...like my idea of myself” (182). Descartes uses this argument to claim that God “put this idea into me...like a craftsman’s mark on his work” (182).

Descartes now sees himself and mankind created in God’s own image, and since he has proven God is perfect, God wouldn’t have created man specifically deceive them or to give them the capacity to err.

According to this premise, Descartes infers that our senses aren't made to err and will deliver truths when used correctly. Descartes deduces man's ability to err stems from his God-given free will. In his fifth meditation Descartes again tries to explain the existence of God. This time, Descartes uses mathematics to back up his case.

Descartes brings up the example of a triangle. Although he cannot see the triangle physically, Descartes can "demonstrate various propositions about the triangle", such as the fact that "its angles equal two right angles" (186). Although Descartes' triangle is not tangible, he claims that the "truths of arithmetic geometry, or pure mathematics" are "more certain than any others" (186). Descartes knows these mathematic principles are "clearly and distinctly true", the same way he feels about his idea of God.

Thusly, Descartes idea of God is as secure as the principles of Geometry and arithmetic. By ingeniously relating the intangible principles of geometry and the existence of an ethereal God, it is no longer necessary to expect any physical proof of God's existence from Descartes.

There are several potential objections to Descartes' proof of the existence and perfection of God. Descartes' argument for the existence of God relies almost solely on his own distinct perception of God as "eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, and the creator of all things" (178).

This is an idea vast amounts of people do not share. Descartes claims that the idea of God is "self-evident" and "innate" (182, 187) Descartes made these claims at a time in France at a time where church controlled many aspects of life, money, and power.

Descartes is also known to have lived as a life-long Roman Catholic. Is it not possible that his life in a 17th century theocracy and his Christian faith biased him toward the idea of a perfect, infinite God? Perhaps Descartes' idea of God was not "innate" but taught to him by church and other society. Descartes is also vague in attributing God with infinite and complete perfection. Descartes uses only his perception of God as grounds for his belief in God's ultimate perfection.

Descartes never addresses the possibility of an imperfect God. Perhaps Descartes was correct in his claim of the existence of God, but suppose God no longer exists. A Deist might argue that God could have created natural laws to govern his creations of Earth, humanity, space, etc., and then simply disappeared.

Descartes also claims to have a distinct image of an infinitely perfect God, but can humans even grasp the concepts of infinity and perfection? Many of the answers for these objections come from Descartes himself.

Descartes was smart enough to list potential objections to his beliefs and then negate them himself in his meditations. On the issue of Descartes "clear and distinct view of God," one does not have to subscribe to Descartes' idea of God to still be convinced by Descartes that God exists.

The overwhelming majority of the Earth's people believe in a God, the idea of God is pan-cultural and defies geography and time. If this is true, belief in a higher, infinite, perfect being certainly seems innate. Perhaps the religious Descartes was a bit biased towards the existence of God, but wouldn't an atheist be biased against the existence of God?

Even considering this, Descartes dealt with this issue in his first two meditations using the method of skepticism. In the first meditation, Descartes claims he will “ overthrow all my beliefs” in order to establish “ firm and lasting knowledge” (171). Descartes abandoned the belief in an infinitely perfect being in the first meditation, when he speculated about the existence of an “ evil demon” bent on deceit and causing man to err.

Descartes built his vision of God from the ground up from the depths of utter skepticism in the first two dialogues. Considering the issue of perfection, could there even be an imperfect God? If so it would be a different idea entirely. The nature of God, according to the most basic of definitions is an infinitely perfect being. This is the same case with the objection concerning if God once existed, but no longer exists.

Descartes defines existence as “ a perfection” in meditation five; claiming, “ existence is inseparable from (God)” (187). Since existence is “ a perfection,” and God is, by nature, a perfect being, then God still exists. Considering infinity, Descartes himself claims he can only grasp infinity as an “ absence of limits” (180).

However, Descartes goes on to explain that there is far more reality in the infinite than in the finite. Descartes, being finite “ cannot fully comprehend the infinite” but realize it is “ either formally or eminently present in God” (180).

In his Meditations on First Philosophy, Rene Descartes established many philosophical principles that live on today and continue to influence. The most interesting of these arguments is Descartes’ argument for the existence of God. Although Descartes has no physical proof of God’s

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existence, he is very successful and philosophically convincing in his simple but intuitive arguments concerning the existence and nature of God.

Descartes uses his own clear and distinct idea of God to try to prove God's existence. He also equates the idea of God with the principles of Geometry and Arithmetic: extant but intangible. I'm personally not very religious, but I can agree with Descartes that the idea of God is so powerful and fundamentally innate that God must exist.