

# Pascal and Descartes: the existence of God



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In *Meditations: III*, René Descartes presents his belief that with deductive reasoning and critical thinking you can prove that you exist and that God exists. In *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal bases the existence for God on a “gamble” and that there are more benefits from wagering in the belief of God—regardless if there is one or not—than there is to not believe in one at all. However, my concern is not whether there is truly a God. The question that will be asked is: Which philosopher is most convincing for the existence of God?

In my research, I’ve concluded that Descartes’s Causal and Ontological Arguments for God was not effective at convincing me as Pascal’s reasons were. For the sake of context, I will briefly go over both philosophers’ backgrounds, explaining their works, their school of thought on rationality, as well as their arguments for the existence of God starting with Descartes.

Known as “The Father of Modern Philosophy” René Descartes (1596-1660) was a French mathematician and philosopher during the Enlightenment Era of Europe; fond in arithmetic, geometry, music, and other arts (Skirry, “René Descartes”, 1. Life). He wrote his book *Meditations* while in the Netherlands, one of his most famous to date. During this era, it was commonplace for philosophers to rationalize their surroundings and existence of living things by giving the credit to God and the Bible as their source—this was known as “scholasticism” or “Aristotelian-Scholasticism”, a philosophy inspired by the teachings of Aristotle with more Euro-Medieval Christian influence.

Descartes wanted to break away from this tradition of philosophy and instead insisted that we, the people, should be using our own senses to determine whether ourselves and things exist. He disagreed with the scholastic belief of “ tabula rasa”, the idea that everyone is born with a “ clean slate”, and that with their senses alone, they can decipher the existence of things around them, including God.

Descartes’ counterargument was that a person’s senses fail them every time, saying in theory that there is an “ evil demon” or “ evil genius” constantly deceiving our senses, causing us to be ignorant of reality. We can mishear what someone says, or not hear them at all, we forget things regularly, and objects from a distance always appear small until we walk towards it to find its actual size, therefore, we should be doubting our senses if anything.

Descartes was a “ radical skeptic”, a school of thought first presented in *Meditations I* in which one should use reason rather than relying on the senses to find the truth of things and their existence. If one doubts something, they should presume what they are doubting is false, and it is their job to prove said thing as true (Stoothoff, “ Descartes’ Dilemma” 294). He uses a metaphor for this theory, comparing it to taking apples out of a basket and intensely analyzing each apple and making sure it is not rotten so they don’t spoil the bunch, for one bad thought can infect the good thoughts as well (Rose, “ The Cartesian Circle”, 86-87).

In *Meditations II*, Descartes answers his own question for how we can be sure for our own existence: “ Cogito ergo sum”. Translated from Ancient

Latin as: “ I think, therefore I am”, the fact a man is pondering his own existence is proof that he does exist. He affirms this to himself by stating that if he can doubt, then he is a thinking being, if he can think, he exists(Rose, “ The Cartesian Circle”, 87).

Lastly, in *Meditations V*, Descartes uses the rationality he’s used from his previous works in *The Principles of Philosophy* to determine the existence of God. Descartes is of the belief that all things come from something, and these are known as the Causal Adequacy principle. In his previous meditations, he has kept his focus on the material world—which he refers to as “ objective reality”—and using his reason for determining said material’s existence, including his own. Now, Descartes is turning his focus to more than just the physical and wants to find the “ infinite substance” of all things’ material, or as he refers to as “ formal reality”.

For Descartes, the formal reality is on a scale, the Levels of Reality principle, and on that scale are “ substances” defined as things that don’t rely on other things to exist, making it a self-subsisting source. On the lower end of this scale are “ modes” or “ principal attributes” of substances, which rely on a “ finite substance”, which in turn relies on an “ infinite substance”.

A principal attribute is a part of a substance and is a defining property of a substance, it something that makes the substance what it is. A mode is a way of being a part of the principal attribute, such as color, shape, and the mind’s imagination. In the middle level are the finite substances. This would be the “ body” or the physical material of a substance. And at the top level

are the infinite substances. As the name implies, is a substance of infinite attributes, the source of all finite substances and their modes come from.

Using the Levels of Reality principal, Descartes rationalizes the existence of God (Skirry, " René Descartes", 5. God: The Causal Arguments). In this revelation, Descartes says there are three substances for this case: the body (the lower level), mind (center), and God (top level). The body is the mode, it is physical and manifests in objective reality, the mind (not the brain, since the brain is merely a part of the body) is the finite substance which allows him to think and use his rationality. Lastly, there is God, who represents the infinite substance of this reality trinity. Descartes explains that God must be the infinite substance because our world is filled with finite substances, however, the finite substances that make up former reality must come from an infinite substance. René Descartes deduces this infinite substance as God, making him the most real being in existence. If God is the infinite substance of all things real, this puts God on the highest level of the reality

Descartes asserts the Causal Argument in that if a finite substance's effect exists, there must be an infinite substance with the same level of effect. In simpler terms, if there is a heat boiling water, the heat must come of a substance with that amount of heat in it, and that something without enough heat will not boil the water (Skirry, " René Descartes"). He goes to apply this notion to his thoughts, ideas and stating that only God, the infinite substance could possibly be supplementing his head with such ideas.

Descartes goes on to say in his Ontological Argument (ontology is the philosophy of metaphysics) that existence is perfect, because it is better to

exist than to not exist, and if existence itself is perfect than there must be a perfect substance producing this perfect existence, and that perfect substance is God. Since God is a perfect being, God would not deceive Descartes, instead, giving him reason and rationality to defeat the evil demon's tricks of skepticism. (Skirry, "René Descartes").

Now that Descartes way of thinking has been clarified, I will now try to present counter arguments for his claims. I will go into detail as to why they are not convincing enough, and I will point out fallacies where they lie within his claims.

In response to the Body-Mind Dualism argument, I believe this to be untrue. It is impossible for any sentient creature to think if they have no brain or something equivalent to a brain, which Descartes says is merely a part of the body (the mode). Also, a traumatic brain injury has been proven to damage people's minds and thoughts. This can sometimes result in amnesia or any loss of memory prior to the accident and can even drastically change a person's personality (Campbell, "Why My Sister's Personality Changed Since Her Traumatic Brain Injury?"). In fairness, scientists during this period were not as informed on neurology as our modern doctors, but this proven fact of brain damage in our time does debunk the Body-Mind Dualism presented in Descartes' work.

Second, the Cogito Ergo Sum argument is faulty when applied to Descartes' own setup for the theory. The saying goes "I think, therefore I am", that in order to produce thoughts, there must be a thinker. However, what if that "evil demon" Descartes mentioned is just playing another trick on him? What

if this evil genius is just making Descartes believe he is producing his own thoughts and words? How can he tell that he not merely dreaming that he is a thinking thing that is creating his thoughts? By that point, the evil demon (or genius) hasn't been defeated with reason.

Third, I find it hard to believe that there are different levels of reality. How is it possible that something can be " more real" than another thing simply because it is an infinite or finite substance? Reality is not on a scale or a spectrum, it exists in dualities such as life and death. You can not be " somewhat dead" and so you cannot " somewhat exist".

Last, this leads to the Causal and Ontological Arguments for God, since Descartes' prior arguments all lead to this very topic. This is the Circular Reasoning fallacy, or in Descartes' case, the Cartesian Circle. This comes from the fact that the conclusion is drawn from the very premise of his argument, God is the answer to all the doubts Descartes has been pondering about this entire time. Here is an example:

Q: How does Descartes know God is perfect and benevolent?

A: Because He blessed me with thinking abilities and reason.

Q: How do you know your thinking is certain?

A: Because God, who is perfect and benevolent, is granting me certainty.

Finally, I will now move onto Blaise Pascal's argument for the existence of God. Blaise Pascal was a 15<sup>th</sup> -century French philosopher contemporary alongside René Descartes. Like Descartes, Pascal was a mathematician,

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physicist, and Christian. Pascal was what is called a pragmatist. Pragmatism is the school of thought that most situations can be solved by simple solutions, and Pascal's explanation for why we should believe in God is much shorter than the explanation Descartes offered.

In the *Pensées*, Pascal presents his famous "Wager" argument for why one should believe in God. If you put for faith in God's existence and it turns out that he is real, you will benefit for eternity in the afterlife. If God turns out to not be real but you believe in him, then while it is a loss, you would be better off placing your bets on the faith anyways because religions give people purpose (Cargile, "Pascal's Wager", 250-251).

On the other hand, there is a factor if you don't believe in God. If you don't believe in God and he does exist, there will only be eternal damnation for your soul in the afterlife. However, if you do not believe in God and he doesn't exist, then you will not benefit any more than you would not believing (Cargile, "Pascal's Wager").

In summary, Pascal describes that being religious means you have everything to gain and nothing to lose, whereas if you don't believe you have everything to lose and nothing to gain (Cargile, "Pascal's Wager"). However, this theory has flaws in it, which I will explain in my counterarguments.

First, Pascal does not include the many other religions of the world but trains his focus on the Western religion of Christianity. Around the world, there is religion both ancient and new that consists of thousands of gods to place your faith in. This can be proven with these simple questions below:



So which god does Pascal want us to worship? Does this only apply to Christianity or the other Abrahamic faiths like Islam and Judaism? If someone is Christian and believes God exist, what if they're wrong and the Greco-Roman pantheon turns out to be the true gods of the world? Will their souls be cast into Hades for not pleasing the gods? And If someone is atheist will they suffer in the afterlife because they've chosen to not pick a faith or because they're not worshipping the right god? The lack of clarity as to which god to place your faith leaves much room for error with this argument.

Pascal also makes the mistake of telling the reader that religion costs little to nothing but your faith. This too is wrong, for all religions have customs that can be mandatory. In Judaism, you must be on a Kosher diet and not work on the Sabbath. In Christianity, you must go to church every Sunday or at least every First Sunday, pay tithes, and in some cases even abstinence. In Islam, you must be on a halal diet, stay away from alcohol, and pray five times a day. And these customs are just the Abrahamic Faiths.

And last, Pascal's Wager, when you take into consideration other religions, creates a False Dichotomy or the Black and White fallacy. This argument also relies on fear in persuading people to believe in God, for if you don't believe, you're eternally damned to Hell.

I've concluded that Pascal's Wager is much more effective at persuading me in the existence of God than Descartes' Causal Arguments have. Pascal took the more pragmatic approach and instead of using reason to persuade, he instead gives a metaphor for gambling and telling us the odds of our outcome if we do or do not have faith. While the Wager has issues, it is

reasonable. The religious may not win the bet without costs or sacrifice, but the reward is so high that it is beneficial in the end.

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