

Does descartes manage to defeat scepticism

Philosophy



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Descartes believes he has defeated scepticism by acknowledging the idea that there clearly and distinctly exists a being that is 'independent and complete'¹- God. He finds it necessary to demonstrate the existence of God in order to seek knowledge of things other than the assertion 'I am thinking, therefore I am'.

Descartes highlights that there is a contradiction in saying that God is a deceiver because that would imply that God is malicious. Furthermore Descartes says that within him is 'a faculty of judgement'² of which he is certain has come from God. Thus for Descartes God would not give him a faculty that would make him capable of error. Despite these observations Descartes acknowledges that we are capable of error. The latter seems inconsistent with the previous statements.

Since God is not the source of human error Descartes works on finding an alternative explanation. Descartes says as humans are not supreme beings they are prone to making mistakes. Thus human error is not due to God but due to the fact that they are defects. In other words God has not given me a faculty that makes me go wrong, it is just that my 'faculty of judgement' is finite unlike God's.

However it is incomprehensible that a perfect creator does not create something which is perfect. If God has the power to make me error free why does he choose not to? Descartes answer lies in the idea that it is beyond human understanding to understand God's reasons for such things. Just because we, as finite beings, do not have a sufficient understanding of God's reasons, it is not a good enough reason to doubt God's existence.

By offering a mere qualification of God's nature here Descartes could be accused of not recognising the full extent of the problem of the mutual existence of God and error. Descartes should at least offer some type of explanation for why humans are characterised by error, yet there exists an omnipotent and good God. For this he turns to the idea of the freedom of the will.

The intellect allows us to perceive ideas which are not erroneous unless we make a judgement about it. However we can make a judgement about things which we clearly and distinctly perceive because for Descartes these are marks of truth. Since the will is unrestricted, that is when making a judgment about what we have perceived 'we do not feel we are determined by any external force'³, it is infinite. Due to its unrestricted nature the will is free to make judgment about things which we do not perceive clearly. When we make judgments about things for which we may not have a clear perception we fall into error. The will, which we misuse because we are imperfect, is the tool with which we make such judgments about perceptions of the intellect. Thus this, the will, is the cause of human error.

It appears that Descartes is proposing that having the freedom of will is a good thing because it allows us to work towards truth. However this begs the question that God could have created humans as beings with the will to never go wrong - that is God could have created us as perfect beings. Descartes can deal with this by saying that 'it is the nature of a finite intellect that its scope should not extend to everything'. ⁴ If we knew everything, that is never make an error, because we were a mirror image of God we would be robots and human life would be meaningless.

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Although it was possible for God to have made me errorless whilst at the same time giving me my freedom and therefore making me more perfect he did not. Descartes explains this again in a similar way by saying that the role God wanted me to play in the universe was not a perfect one. However it seems that Descartes fails to provide an adequate explanation for such a line of reasoning. Although it must be recognised that Descartes could quite easily dismiss the point raised by saying humans, as finite beings, cannot understand God's reasons for giving humans an imperfect role in the world as he did earlier in the Forth Meditation.

Furthermore, the voluntary nature of man is in some sense a perfection in itself. For if there was no autonomy how could one take credit for anything? On these grounds Descartes believes we should thank God not accuse him of robbing us 'of any gifts he did not bestow'. 5 Therefore it is apparent that not only does Descartes believe that we cannot provide a reason as to why God did not make us error free but also who are we to say that the freedom of will given to us is not perfect?

I cannot avoid error when I make a judgement on what I do not clearly and distinctly perceive. In their eagerness to know the truth humans sometimes commit themselves to doing precisely this because they have been conditioned to. This approach is wrong according to Descartes. I can only avoid error by 'withholding judgement'⁶ on that which I do not clearly and distinctly perceive. However I do I know that that which the intellect can perceives in not erroneous? The answer lies in the idea that that which is God given would not be impaired because God is no deceiver.

It is pointed out in the Third Set of Objections that Descartes assumes we have freedom of the will without providing us with a reason for its existence. Descartes replies that 'our freedom is very evident by the natural light'. 7 Our initial reaction is that this reply is not sufficiently explanatory.