

Descartes`s and berkeley`s arguments for the existence of god



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Mind, body and God have always caused the major philosophical debates. Philosophers worked out various theories about their connection and combinations of them. This paper`s aim is to study the arguments of Descartes and Berkeley about God existence. We are going to stop at the main proofs, their consequences and the main problems connected to these arguments. Descartes studied the issues of God in his third meditation; the previous meditations were however based on his statement that in order to live he had to think.

For Descartes his existence was evident and thus he drew a conclusion that all the things, that he was able to see, were all true. The arguments of Descartes started from the splitting of the “ thought” into four parts: ideas (concepts), volitions (choices), emotions (desires), and judgments (beliefs) (Bonk, 54). Each of them he analyzed in order to define the one that could cause the mistake. He came to the conclusion that there can not be a mistake in an idea. The mistake could be in the judgment about this idea, stating whether it is correct or not.

This meant that the idea itself and the belief that this idea was correct were two different things. Volitions and emotions according to Descartes did not include any mistakes either. Everything in this world can be however treated relatively, meaning, that we can not be absolutely sure, that all the things that we see, are true and those, we can not see, are false. Just one simple example: we do not see the electricity or intuition, but we know that they are true, they exist. We can see optical illusions in the desert, but this doesn`t mean, that the things we see there are real and exist there.

Descartes talked about two types of the sources, where the ideas come from: inside – thus innate or outside- those, that are additional. Another important rule was closely related to the idea – “ objective reality cannot exist without formal reality” (Atherton, 391), this means that there should be always the cause for the idea. Descartes considered himself to be imperfect as long as he was under influence of doubts. Using his previous rules, he concluded that this idea also ought to have a cause. Descartes stated that God would possessed the ideas that comprised perfections.

God, according to Descartes was “ infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and which created myself and everything else” (Henze, 150). If God is infinite and Descartes a finite being, than the more perfect idea of infiniteness cannot grow from the less perfect idea of finiteness, and this proved, that this idea didn’t originate from Descartes only. Thus, philosopher concluded that the God exists. The idea of Descartes, that if we are thinking about our existence then it is proved that we exist seems to be correct, but the conclusions he made are quite vague.

The argument, that the existence of God should be based on clarity, with which we interpret the idea of God, seems to reach a deadlock as on the other hand our clarity of the idea of God depends a lot on the existence of God. Also, what is important, from the very beginning of Descartes’ meditation we know that he considered himself to be imperfect, and then it is not logical, that he is able to make judgments about what is perfect and what is not. Berkeley also tried to avoid skepticism and he accepted the “ cogito” of Descartes.

However he didn't agree with the two notions of properties worked out by Descartes. Descartes suggested, that there were two types of properties for each substance: primary – shape, position and so on, secondary – sensory characteristics, for example colors. Berkeley in his turn concluded, that all the perceptions he got were all secondary, based on this he couldn't agree with presence of physical world as substance. The only substance, which really existed according to Berkeley, was the mind.

“ Now, why may we not as well argue that figure and extension are not patterns or resemblances of qualities existing in Matter; because to the same eye at different stations, or eyes of a different texture at the same station, they appear various, and cannot therefore be the images of anything settled and determinate without the mind? ” (Burnyeat, 32). But Berkeley argued, that God was needed as a cause for regular and orderly ideas of him. He didn't consider matter as a cause of ideas and this let him not to stop at the problem of connection between mind and body.

What is common about the arguments of Descartes and Berkeley, is that they built their arguments about God existence through presenting God as the cause of the ideas. The difference lies in the fact that Berkeley regarded God as the unique cause for all ideas. There is a problem here as if God is only one and he is the source of all ideas this means, that all people should have the same ideas, as they are probably all in the same situation with the same conditions.

Berkeley stated that “ being is to be perceived”, but he never said that as soon as you can not perceive the sensible thing it will disappear. According

to him all the sensible things were collected together in the mind of God constantly and in case he can not perceive them they do not exist. He made God a Divine Mind, storing all the sensible things and being the source for the ideas. In the perceptual relativism of Berkeley could be found a serious drawback, namely the existence only of the things that can be perceived.

He himself never stated that he could perceive God. He said that he had no idea about God and other spirits. This means that he insisted on denying the physical world, which could be actually perceived and at the same time concluded that God exists even without perceiving it. Overall, both Berkeley and Descartes studied the existence of God and tried to find proofs based on the ideas and perception, thus on the basis of mind work. Their arguments have rational points, but still finally both of them failed to produce absolutely indisputable arguments for God`s existence.

Maybe this is due to the fact, that religion was always based on pure faith and never had the task to provide proofs and material confirmations for its supporters. Probably also the fact, that God existence was and still is one of the most controversial issues for philosophers and scientists, hindered their success. To some certain extend the ideas of both philosophers could be accepted, but none of them as the final proof that God really exists. People nowadays as well as it was most luckily hundreds of year ago prefer to trust the things they choose themselves and see their own arguments and proofs in the events of their lives.