

Descartes and the Evil Daemon

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René Descartes, in his doubtful meditations, questions whether or not he is the victim of an elaborate deception. To escape this fear, he presents two types of arguments in attempt to prove the existence of God, which he then uses to rationally eliminate the possibility of this doubt. However, both arguments fail to provide proof that God exists due to lack of support for their premises, and so Descartes is unsuccessful in his solution to the problem of the evil daemon.

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, René Descartes presents his systematic stages of doubt, in which he doubts the things he believes in order to discover his most basic, undeniable knowledge. During this process of doubt, Descartes questions whether or not his senses are trustworthy, whether or not he is insane, and whether or not he is dreaming. He also supposes that he may be the victim of a clever and total deception by an evil daemon, or, in other translations, an evil genius. He describes such a being as “supremely powerful and clever, [one] who has directed his entire effort at deceiving me” (Descartes 29). He assumes that everything that he believes which comes to him from his senses, including the testimony of others, is in fact a deception from this evil daemon.

Descartes attempts to solve the problem of the evil daemon by discovering that God exists, and that God necessarily has certain characteristics that guarantee that his existence would

forbid such persistent deception. Descartes argues that it may be rationally determined that God exists, and that God is truthful – not a deceiver – and as such, would not allow Descartes, or anyone, to be so totally deceived. Above all else, this argument depends on a proof of God's existence, as God's existence is used as a premise for this and other arguments that Descartes makes. It is in providing proof that this premise is true that Descartes fails.

The first argument for the existence of God is his causal argument, or trademark argument. Descartes declares that he has an idea of God, and that this idea must have a cause. Descartes defines his idea of God as an idea of “a certain substance that is infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, and supremely powerful” (Descartes 38). He considers that he may have conjured the idea of God from some combination of things he knows or believes about the world, either by combining or amplifying elements within it, or simply “through a negation of the finite” (Descartes 38). To the former, Descartes says that he, as a finite substance, cannot explain “having the idea of an infinite substance [...] unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite” (Descartes 38). To the latter, he says that the infinite has more reality than the finite, and that, therefore, his perception of the infinite precedes that of the finite, that he could not doubt his own perfection “unless there were some idea in [himself] of a more perfect being” (Descartes 38). The idea of God, therefore, must have a cause outside of Descartes, and that cause must be a being that must exist, and have as much reality as the idea has. Since the idea is of an infinite being, then its cause must also be infinite. Therefore, God exists. David Hume provides an adequate refutation of this argument by explaining how the idea of the infinite can easily arise in a finite being. The idea of God arises “from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom” (Hume 11). Just as one may conceive of anything else that is not the case by causes in the world, one may

conceive of God by causes in the world.

Descartes also presents an ontological argument for the existence of God, one that was first described by Anselm of Canterbury. This argument defines God as “that than which no greater can be thought” (Anselm 7). Anselm says that it is greater to exist than not to exist, thus God must exist, for “it is possible to think that something can exist that cannot be thought not to exist, and such a being is greater than one that can be thought not to exist” (Anselm 8). Therefore, God must, by definition, exist in reality. Descartes also defines God as an infinitely perfect being, and since existence is a perfection, God must exist. He explains that “existence can no more be separated from God's essence than its having three angles equal to two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle” (Descartes 46).

The ontological argument may be interpreted in multiple ways. For instance, one may assume that the argument means that God is the greatest conceivable thing, meaning that God is greater than all other things, in which the term thing refers to any ontological object, or at least any conceivable candidate for an ontology. Gaunilo of Marmoutiers argues that we may use the logic of the ontological argument to prove the existence of any other perfect entity within a set. He supposes that there exists a perfect island, one greater than any other island. Such an island would seem to necessarily exist, for the same reasons that the greatest ontological object would necessarily exist. We may formalize the claim that “God is the greatest of all conceivable things”, if we let g be God and Gxy be “ x is greater than y ”, as $\forall x(x \neq g \rightarrow Ggx)$ or, if we also let Tx be “ x is a thing”, $\forall x((x \neq g \wedge Tx) \rightarrow Ggx)$. On this account, Gaunilo's retort to Anselm presents a convincing reply, since the ontological argument could prove the existence of any perfect thing in a set. If we let p be the perfect member of a set, S , and Sx be “ x is a member of S ”, then the form is identical: $(\forall x((x \neq p \wedge Sx) \rightarrow Gpx))$. If the ontological argument is to be

accepted, then Gaunilo's perfect island exists, by necessity, as the perfect example of the set of all islands, just as God would exist as the perfect ontological entity. It seems to be the case, both intuitively and through lack of evidence, that not all sets have a perfect member, one that contains all of the perfections that apply to that set.

One, however, may assume that the absoluteness of God makes God a special, singular case in which the ontological argument makes sense. If we reject the idea that God must be considered to be a member of any set, even the set of ontological arguments, then we may decide to evaluate the argument as a whole. One may, more plausibly, say that the argument makes no sense for limited sets. The set of islands, for example, may be viewed as a subset of the larger set of ontological objects, or candidates for an ontology, which itself contains all other sets. Thus, the set of ontological arguments may be viewed as the only set to which the idea of infinite perfection may be applied. If this is the case, then we must examine the overall nature of the argument.

The ontological argument may be expressed as a modal argument, as has been done by Charles Hartshorne, Alvin Plantinga and Kurt Gödel. Using the example given by Hartshorne, as it most closely resembles Descartes' line of reasoning, we may present the argument as follows. God is that thing which is infinitely perfect (Px). We may then interpret the premise of both Descartes and Anselm, which says that God cannot be conceived of as nonexistent to mean that God is not contingent, or in other words, that perfection either necessarily exists or is impossible ($\exists xPx \rightarrow \Box \exists xPx$), and that perfection is not impossible ($\neg \Box \neg \exists xPx$). Hartshorne presents a valid argument of the provability of the existence of perfection from those premises, or $[(\exists xPx \rightarrow \Box \exists xPx), \neg \Box \neg \exists xPx \vdash \exists xPx]$. However, this argument depends on Becker's postulate of modal logic, which states that any modal state of a proposition is necessary, so $(\Box P \rightarrow \Box \Box P)$. This

assertion therefore means that the first premise can be applied to anything, and that the ontological argument may prove that anything that is possible must exist. This may again assert Gaunilo's point, since if we accept this argument we must also accept that the perfect island, or perfect anything, also follow from it – or that determinism is true, since anything possible exists and therefore exists necessarily, and anything that does not come to exist is impossible.

This possible consequence aside, we are given the premise that perfection, or God's existence, is not impossible. Descartes affirms this by saying that he clearly and distinctly perceives of God in his mind, ensuring the idea of God is logically consistent. However, this is debatable. Descartes admits that God's omnipotence and perfection place God beyond the scope of human understanding, and that in God's own realm, God is not bound by logic. He admits that his own “nature is very weak and limited, whereas the nature of God is immense, incomprehensible and infinite” (Descartes 42). How one can truly, clearly, and distinctly conceive of such a being, however, is not answered. Descartes' response to this requires that one accepts the basic definition of God as a clear and distinct idea, even if one does not understand all aspects of God. However, one may easily discover contrary ideas with the same apparent level of clarity.

Descartes claims that since his faculty of understanding comes from God, whatever he understands he “doubtless understand[s] rightly, and it is impossible for [him] to be deceived by this” (Descartes 43). However, the same logic would dictate that anyone's understanding would be similarly empowered. One may clearly and distinctly have understanding of a world in which God does not exist, as many do, including the present author. This clear and distinct idea directly opposes that of Descartes, ensuring that they cannot both be true. The Cartesian response must be that one of these ideas must not truly be as clear and distinct as its thinker believes, that one does

not truly understand a world without God. If such a response claims that one does not have full understanding of the origin, mechanics or possibility of such a world, then it is incompatible with the previous claim that one can have a clear and distinct idea of God. If the claim is simply that this supposedly clear idea is in error, and that the alternative is, perhaps luckily, perceived to be true, then there is no method for determining which ideas are truly clear and distinct. As a result, one cannot be certain that any of Descartes' reasoning which uses God, or clear and distinct ideas themselves, as a premise is reliable.

This account may also undermine Descartes' response to the accusation that he is guilty of circular reasoning, a potential fallacy that has been named the Cartesian Circle. The Cartesian Circle objection to Descartes claims that Descartes may be committing a “vicious circle, when he says that we have no other basis on which to establish that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true, than that God exists” (“Objections and Replies” 73). Descartes responds with the claim that in this instance, there is a distinction between the clear and distinct idea to which we attend, and our memory of it. The clarity of the proof of God comes when one is “attending to the arguments that prove this; but later on, it is enough for [one] to recall [...] having clearly perceived something in order to be certain that it is true” (“Objections and Replies” 79). However, Descartes does not seem to be overcoming the challenges of the claims that his clear and distinct idea of God may not be clear and distinct, and that his understanding, which, he can only say, comes from God, may be mistaken or incomplete when it contradicts the apparently contrary understanding of another.

This is not an exhaustive account of the flaws and fallacies in Descartes' reasoning, but in general it has been shown that reason alone may be used to demonstrate the possibility, rather than actuality, of anything. If the contrary is to be believed, then the consequences of the ontological

argument, that anything logically possible must necessarily exist, must be taken seriously. In order to deal with this problem, we must investigate this apparent assertion of modal logic, which is not within the scope of this paper.

Returning to the evil daemon problem, Descartes uses his supposed proof of God in his solutions to the problem. Descartes states that God, as a perfect being, must be benevolent in order to be perfect. Descartes declares that God could not be the deceiver, or allow such total deception, “for trickery or deception are always indicative of some imperfection” (Descartes 41). God would have no reason to deceive us unless he were less than perfect, but since God is, at this point, described as a perfect being, then he must not be a deceiver. Even if Descartes' arguments here are taken as valid, they cannot be considered sound given the failures of his supposed proofs of God.

Another challenge to Descartes' supposed escape from his doubt comes from the position of John Locke. According to Locke, people learn how to use reason through experience. This returns us quite immediately to the evil deceiver problem, and the other doubts Descartes begins his *Meditations* with. If one's reason is the product of experience, and one's reason is the source of one's trust of experience, then one cannot trust either. If empiricists such as Locke are correct, that reason itself begins from experience, then there is an even greater Cartesian Circle that stems from Descartes' ignorance to that fact about human understanding. If Descartes wishes to deny this, then he must prove that the very faculty of reason comes *a priori*, without experience, and without God, which may not be possible.

The failure of both Descartes' trademark argument and ontological argument for the existence of God result in his inability to solve the evil deceiver problem. He attempts to solve the problem by proving the existence of a perfect, benevolent God which would be incompatible

with the existence of such a deceiver, but is unable to do so because his premises are either doubtful or obviously false. As a result, Descartes is left with the scepticism of his stages of doubt, with nothing but the Cogito and no good reason to declare his project a success.

Works Cited

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