

## Descartes' Three Proofs of God's Existence

Intro to Philosophy, Spring 2012

Handout 4

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### I. Beyond the 'cogito'

The end of the second Meditation marks a crescendo of Descartes' general disdain for the senses considered as sources of truth (AT 7.32).<sup>1</sup> Hence, he concludes that he knows for certain only that he is a thinking thing. What else does he know? Recall that Descartes makes a distinction between things which are undoubted, and things which are indubitable (AT 7.36). A belief's being dubitable does not require that a believer is actively harboring a doubt with respect to it, but merely that his claim to knowing it is challengeable *via* Stroud's Principle of Exclusion or Weak Closure. In other words, we need not entertain an actual doubt about a belief for it to be dubitable, and hence for it to be dismissed as a knowledge claim under Descartes' condition of indubitability.

Given Descartes' hyperbolic deference to skeptical doubt, it is understandable why he devotes the third Meditation to proving God's existence. Descartes needs to prove that the traditional Christian God exists in order to be able to meaningfully implement his clearness and distinctness criteria—his *certainty* criterion—of knowledge. That is to say, until he has established the existence of not only a non-deceptive God, but one that is also omnibenevolent, any thing that he can clearly and distinctly perceive, and which he wishes to claim as knowledge, will necessarily be defeated by the Evil Genius hypothesis introduced at the end of the first Meditation. Descartes thus here offers three arguments for God's existence so that he can resist its force, and build upon the two fundamental axioms which he establishes in the second Meditation.

In the spirit of Socratic interrogation, we shall examine Descartes' two arguments for God's existence. First, we take a slight detour into his theory of ideas.

### II. Descartes' theory of ideas

Recall from Handout 1, in which I said the following about the theory of ideas:

“The early modern philosophers (roughly, philosophers in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century continental Europe) all thought that the semantic content of our thoughts is a function of the contents of our ideas. “Semantics” is the study of “meaning,” so in this context, a thought's semantic contents are just what either a linguistic object—a word in a written sentence or a verbalized word in a particular speech utterance—or a sensory object—a visual perception, say—*connotes* to us by way of an idea. “Ideas,” in turn, are mental objects of a sort, which we have when we think about anything. These objects constitute the essential ingredients of all thought.”

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<sup>1</sup> Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 3d ed., trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993). Citations will be given in-text using Adam and Tannery numbers.

Indeed, Descartes uses the term “idea” to refer to what we today think of as images. Like most of his successors in the modern period, Descartes holds a *representationalist* theory of ideas according to which the images that our ideas depict function as the content of our thoughts. As a corollary, he also holds a sort of picture theory of meaning. Thus, he says “ideas are merely modes of thought” (AT 7.40). Today, most philosophers reject this simplistic account of semantics. We have many concepts—roughly, what are denoted by universal terms—that cannot obviously be represented by imagistic ideas, and which are conveyed, instead, by idiosyncratic syntactic devices and grammatical rules. This is a limitation that modern philosophers after Descartes’ period grappled with, in particular, empiricists such as Locke and Hume. One problem that was a cause of much grief for Locke and Hume was how to account for the origins of abstract ideas, e.g., the idea TRIANGLE. It seems that such an idea can represent nothing, if it truly is to stand in for all the different kinds of triangles which are encountered in experience.

Descartes, however, being a “throwback” rationalist, simply co-opts the mystical solution provided by his great influence, Plato. Certain ideas are innate, particularly geometrical ones, such as number, and even those relating to bodies, such as substance, extension, shape, motion, and position.<sup>2</sup> These form the basis of all demonstrative reasoning and explain our perfect ideas of such abstract entities as TRIANGLE. It is from reflecting strictly upon the clear and distinct innate ideas that are already stored in us and deducing properties from them that we perceive necessary truths. These in turn are what allow us to prove things about objects of sensory experience, such as particular triangles, even though they unfailingly transmit only inferior and misleading information to our intellect. This familiar Platonic motif of scolding the crudeness of the senses, and the mind which relies too much on them, is prevalent throughout Descartes’ *Meditations*, of which his ‘wax argument’ in the second Meditation is perhaps its most well-known example. Descartes’ inward reflection upon himself is thus an attempt to deduce truths about the world from ideas which he can unqualifiedly consider clear and distinct.

Like Plato, however, Descartes is not content with merely having found the proximate cause of his modest intellectual success. Having introduced skeptical doubt into his project, he must also find out what the *ultimate* source of his clear and distinct ideas are, so that he can be sure his ideas are trustworthy, that clearness and distinctness are appropriate criteria for truth. In Meditation Three, he considers some of the ideas he has, and recognizes that he has certain ideas which, being of a different kind of “objective reality,” could not have come from within himself, or from within himself alone. He identifies his idea of God as the most salient example, and after importing a few assumptions, quickly proves God’s existence. Let’s check them out.

### III. Descartes’ three proofs of God’s existence

Descartes introduces three proofs of God’s existence in his *Meditations*, two of which are contained in the third Meditation. The catalyst of his argument is his untested claim that “there must

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<sup>2</sup> Descartes, *op. cit.*, AT 7.64. Says Descartes: “Not only are [sizes, shapes, positions, and local movements whatever] manifestly known and transparent to me, viewed thus in a general way, but also, when I focus my attention on them, I perceive countless particulars concerning shapes, number, movement, and the like. Their truth is so open and so much in accord with my nature that, when I first discover them, it seem I am not so much learning something new as recalling something I knew beforehand.” A hint of this view of Descartes’ is found as early as in the second Meditation, at AT 7.30.

be at least as much [reality] in the efficient and total cause as there is in the effect of that same cause,” which Descartes bases his premise that everything must have a cause on. This assumption, called by some the “great chain of being” principle, is an artifact from the ancient philosopher Plotinus, and was presupposed as a fundamental tenet in almost all Neoplatonic scholastic thought. It clearly pervades Descartes’ proofs, as will be evident from scanning the arguments below.

### Descartes’ Three Proofs of God’s Existence

#### *Cosmological-ontological argument (COA)*

1. Everything must have a cause.
2. The fact that my idea of God represents an infinitely perfect being must have a cause which is infinitely perfect. (Ass.)
3. I am not infinitely perfect.

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**C0.** Therefore, I could not have an idea representing an infinitely perfect being if there were no such being outside of me.

4. I have an idea of God which represents him as an infinitely perfect being.
5. I could not have such an idea, if there were no infinitely perfect being outside of me. **(C0)**

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**C1.** Therefore, an infinitely perfect being, i.e., God, exists outside of me.

#### *Conservation of existence argument (CEA)*

6. I exist as something which has an idea of God. (Ass.)
7. Everything that exists has a cause which brought it into existence and preserves its existence. (1)
8. If I could preserve my own existence from this moment to the next, to an infinite duration, I would know that I can. (Ass.)
9. I don’t know that I can.
10. Therefore, I am not the cause of my own existence and preservation.
11. Any being which is the cause of my existence and which preserves me must be the cause of my idea of God.
12. The only thing which is capable of causing and preserving me, a thing which has an idea of God, is God.

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**C2.** Therefore, God exists.

#### *Existence is a perfection argument (EPA)*

13. My conception of God is the conception of a being that possesses all perfections.
14. Existence is a perfection.
15. Therefore, I cannot conceive of God as not existing.

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**C3.** Therefore, God exists.

The keen reader will see that Descartes’ proof of God’s existence essentially models the form of his proof of his own existence. I have an idea of myself; therefore, I exist. For God, it is: I have an idea of God; therefore, he exists. Both rely on a variation on the idea that there must be a subject in which a predicate inheres. So, as self-ascribing the predicate “is thinking” requires a subject that actually manifests that attribute, analogously, the idea GOD requires a subject that

actually manifests all the attributes inherent in the idea. (Though, take note: these are special cases of this argument form. It happens to be an argument that comes out as valid only when certain subject and predicate terms are substituted in, such as in the above.)

#### **IV. Discussion**

1. How does Descartes argue for premises 1 (AT 7.41), 3 (AT 7.48), and 4 (AT 7.45-8)? Which premises do you have doubts about? Do you agree with Hume that it is not logically necessary that every event or object has a cause? Which argument do you find more plausible, **COA** or **CEA**? Do you detect a vicious circularity anywhere in either proof of God's existence?
2. What current accepted scientific theory casts doubt on the great chain of being principle?
3. Take a look at **EPA**. It comes from the fifth Meditation, but is implicitly presupposed in both **COA** and **CEA**. Is premise 14 plausible? Why or why not?
4. Is Descartes cheating to assume that our idea of omnibenevolence in God, supposing that we do have an idea of God that includes the idea of omnibenevolence, could not have been caused by an omnipotent and omniscient, but nevertheless duplicitous God?