

4.4 God and Certainty

4.4.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Third Meditation
- Study Questions:
 1. Do you think Descartes provides a good argument for his "general rule" that he should take as true everything of which he has a clear and distinct perception?
 2. Why does Descartes need to prove the existence of God?
 3. Descartes spends a lot of time discussing the various of ideas we have? What is the point of this discussion? That is to say, how is he going to use the results of this discussion?
 4. What is Descartes' main argument for the existence of God (p.102 – premises are to be found before)? (try to reconstruct the structure of it)
 5. Do you think Descartes' argument for the existence of God is valid? Do you think it is sound?

4.4.2 A criterion of indubitable truth and the necessity to prove that God is truthful

Clear and Distinct Perceptions of the Mind

- Here is Descartes argument for taking "as a general rule that all things that I perceive very clearly and very distinctly perceptions are true":
 1. I am certain that I am a thing which thinks
 2. There is nothing that assures of this proposition is true except a clear and distinct perception of it
 3. Hence, I can be certain of everything that I perceive in the same way, that is, clearly and distinctively
- So, truth takes nothing more than this: a clear and distinct perception. From the *Principle of Philosophy*, I, 45:

- clear: a perception is said to be clear if and only if it is manifest to an attentive mind – clarity is to be contrasted with obscurity

- distinct: a perception is said to be distinct if and only if it contains only one clear thing when considered by an attentive mind – distinction is to be contrasted with confusion

Note that distinct perceptions are a subset of clear distinctions: a perception must be clear in order to be capable of being distinct. The converse does not hold: a perception can be clear but not distinct. For example, my perception of some pain in my body is very clear, but confused (*Principle of Philosophy*, I, 46).

- What truths that were rejected in Meditation I can we hope to get back with the above criterion of truth?

- neither the existence of particular bodies the existence of which I took from sense perception

- nor even the idea that there are external objects (even if not as I see them)

Why are are perceptions of external objects from the senses are not clear and distinct? Because, as Descartes has argued in his analysis of the piece of wax, nothing in what I know of external objects is clear except the ideas in my mind.

- Thanks to the criterion of the clear and distinct perception, Descartes hopes to get the most simple of the rational truths back:

But when I took anything very simple and easy in the sphere of arithmetic and geometry into consideration, e.g. that two and three made five, and other things of the sort, were not these present to my mind so clearly as to enable me to affirm that they were true?

- Why the most simple only? Because our criterion works as the instantaneous intuition of the certitude of a simple proposition. Anything that requires some deductive reasoning does not qualify for a clear and distinct perception (See *Rules*, 3, for the distinction between intuition and deduction).

- But how is that even possible? How come the objection of the Evil Genius would not apply here?

The need for a truthful God

- Look closely at paragraph three: it all depends on where you put your attention:
 - If you look into your self and perceive the mathematical truth, then they are as indubitable as the Cogito
 - If you turn your attention to the objection of the Evil Genius, then they become doubtful
- This means that:
 - we do have found a criterion of truth
 - but certainty lasts only as long as your attention is focused on the rational truth considered
 - considering then the objection of the evil genius, then a "very slight and so to speak metaphysical doubt" remains.

The main point is: evident certainty is reliable just because of the actual presence of its content to the attentive mind.
- So, from the first truth we found, we have derived a criterion of truth: anything else that I perceive in the same way is just as true as the Cogito. This imply that, just as the truth of the Cogito:
 - it will be a subjective certainty;
 - it will last just for so long as I perceive it.
- The conclusion is then: we need to prove that there is no evil Genius. For, up to now, all we have is that we are certain of the rational truths *only for the time of our perception of them*. If we want more than truth that are actually certain, that is, if we want *eternal truth*, then the proof that no evil Genius is deceiving us is required. Note the extreme importance of the notion of attention for Descartes.

I must inquire whether there is a God as soon as the occasion presents itself; and if I find that there is a God, I

must also inquire whether He may be a deceiver; for without a knowledge of these two truths, I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything. (97-98)

4.4.3 Ideas

In order to reject the hypothesis that an all powerful evil genius is constantly deceiving him, Descartes wants to prove that 1. God exists; and 2. He is truthful (Note that this is sufficient to reject the existence of the Evil Genius, but not necessary: it would have been enough to prove that no all powerful god exists for example).

The proof of the existence of God is going to rely on the question of the nature and the origin of our ideas. *Remember that we are stuck in our selves and our subjective minds. In other words, we are stuck with our ideas. The question is whether there is anything in these ideas of ours which allow us to accept anything else that ourselves as existent. It would be nice, for example, if the fact that we have ideas of something implied that that something exist outside ourselves. We have thus to see is what can be the origin of our ideas.*

So, Descartes starts with a classification of our ideas and a discussion of their possible origin(s). As usual, we start with our common beliefs (our prejudices) and apply a rational method of doubt.

Classification of ideas

- Restriction of the notion of ideas to representations, by contrast to volitions, affections and judgments
- Error: only in judgments. Ideas, volitions and affections are always true by themselves. It is only when I make a judgment that I can err. The “principal error” is to judge that my ideas are mirroring external objects.
- Three kinds of ideas:

Innate – give the understanding of a simple truth and, or so I believe, are coming from my own nature;

Adventitious – are about and, or so I believe, are coming from the external objects;

Fictitious – are about imaginary things and, or so I believe, are coming from my imagination.

I have no proof that adventitious ideas are reliable images of external objects

Both innate ideas and imaginary ideas seem to come from myself: the most common hypothesis is that **adventitious ideas find their origin in external object**. This is, of course, the hypothesis that Descartes is going to destroy first. Here is how:

- Let see first what our justifications are for our prejudice:
I believe that adventitious ideas are images of external objects because:
 1. it seems natural to believe so – note that you do not have to teach it to kids!
 2. adventitious ideas do not depend on my will;
 3. it seems obvious that the effect of external objects are similar to these external objects
- Descartes argues against 1, 2 and 3 in the three paragraphs that follow:
 1. spontaneous inclination is not natural light but impulses which I know can make me err – for example, it might be good for you to be scared if you hear a big noise without any apparent origin, but such survival kit is no where near a criterion for knowing that something dangerous is around;
 2. I could possess an unknow faculty which does not depend on my will and produces the ideas of external objects. From the fact that they do not depend on my will it does not follow that they originate in external objects: simple counter examples are the ideas that come from the natural impulses (fear, joy etc.): they do not depend on my will, but they could originate in myself only.
 3. I have many examples of ideas that do not resemble their objects. For instance, the idea I have of the sun from the sense is different from what I know the sun is (by my understanding of science).

Thus, this is not thanks to the adventitious ideas that we are going to escape our solitary certainty of our own existence as a mind.

Reality and causes of ideas

- Distinction: material, formal, and objective reality of ideas
 1. Material reality of ideas:

Ideas are all the same as modes of thought. Their material reality, what they are made of is just “thought”.
 2. Formal reality of ideas:

Ideas differ as for what they represent: an idea of a dog has not the same form as an idea of a man. The formal reality of an idea correspond to its content, or its object.
 3. Objective reality of ideas: the reality of their object
 - Claim: the more real are the object of an idea, the more “real” is the idea itself
 - Example: the idea of a substance (a body) has more objective reality that the idea of a accident (its color)

In what sense? The objective reality of an idea is its reality as a representation of an object.
 4. Extreme example: the idea of God is the highest degree of objective reality

- Causal Principle: “there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect” – causal principle – appeal to natural light
 - Corollary: nothing more perfect can proceed from the less perfect
 - Conclusion: application of the causal principle to ideas: not only the actual stone must have a cause which has at least as much perfection as the stone, but also the idea of the stone in me must have a cause which has at least as much perfection as the stone.
 - Consequence: It will be sufficient for me to find an idea which has more objective reality than I have formal reality to be certain that something else than me exists. In other words, all I have to do in

order to prove that I am not the only thing existing is to find an idea which content has something I do not have myself. For according to the above, I cannot be the cause of such idea.

The main point in the foregoing analysis is that Descartes applies the causal principle to the objective reality of ideas. Various ideas differ in so far as they represent various things. These various represented things are not nothing. They exist in some sense. So, the principle of causality applies here as anywhere else: the reality of the objects represented in our ideas must have causes, and such causes must be powerful enough to produce these ideas.

4.4.4 God is the cause of my idea of God

God only can be the cause of my idea of God

- Catalog of my ideas:
 1. idea of God
 2. corporeal and inanimate things
 3. angels, animals or men
- Of which of these can I be the cause?
 1. I can be the cause of my ideas of angels, animal or men, by composition;
 2. I can be the cause of my ideas of corporeal things – of both the unclear and the clear and distinct parts of these ideas;
 3. In passing: notion of material falsity: ideas are not formally false (as such, they are just what they are, neither true or false), but they can be materially false, that is, they can represent as existent something which is not;
 4. It remains only the idea of God.
- The idea of God:

By the name God I understand substance that is infinite [eternal, immutable], independent, all-knowing, all powerful, and by which I myself and everything else, if anything else does exist, have been created.

- none of these characteristics could be proceeding from me alone
- Conclusion: “we must conclude that God necessarily exists”

Objections and Answers

- Objection 1: I produce the idea of the infinite as a negation of the finite
Answer: restates his argument about the reality of ideas
- Objection 2: the idea of God is materially false (it does not represent anything), so that it can be produced out of nothing
Answer: no materially false ideas are clear and distinct, but the idea of God is clear and distinct
- Objection 3: the idea of god is not clear and distinct, for I cannot comprehend the infinite
Answer: it is enough to conceive God as possessing all perfections to have a clear and distinct idea
- Objection 4: I am perfectible: I could be more perfect than I think and have *potentially* all the perfections that I conceive being actually in God
Answer: my potential perfections are not the perfections I conceive in God
 1. that my perfections increase is already a proof of my imperfection
 2. from the fact that my perfections can indefinitely increase, it does not follow that they can ever be actually infinite
 3. re-formulation of the causal principle for the objective reality of an idea: cannot be caused by potential reality in the cause

4.4.5 God is cause of my existence

Descartes' cosmological argument

From whom if not from God could I derive my existence?

- Candidates:
 1. myself
 2. my parents or something less perfect than God
- Myself: for otherwise I could not conceive that I am imperfect
- I have always existed: it takes as much power to be brought into existence as it does to remain existent at every instant

The existence of God only assures that I keep existing through time
- Something less perfect than God: regression to infinite: need for an ultimate cause
- Several causes together, each of which possesses some of the perfections that I conceive together in God: no for I have the idea of the unity of these perfections
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Cosmological arguments: Main idea

Reference: Bruce Reichenbach, "Cosmological argument", Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

The main idea of cosmological arguments is to answer the typical metaphysical question: **Why is there something rather than nothing?**

These arguments stem from humans's **wonder about the very existence of the universe**. Contrast this with the wonder about the world's order, as in the design argument.

- The **main assumption** underlying such wonder is that **the world's existence is not necessary**: it is **contingent**. Things can be or not be. Nothing exists necessarily in our universe.

- **A second assumption** for most of these arguments, is that **change is ruled by causality**. In simple words, things change because of the cause of the change. If we apply this principle to the passage from "not be" to "be", or the "coming to be", then, anything that comes to be come to be from a cause.

Thus:

1. The world is contingent – it does not exist necessarily
2. Causal Principle: every contingent being has a cause of its being.

Cosmological arguments: History

The cosmological arguments have a long history. Descartes is by no means original here. And he is not the last one to use it either !

Aristotle: unmoved mover necessary to explain constant movement of the universe

Islamic tradition: "Aquinas" argument (Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274) formulates it later): impossibility of an essentially ordered infinite regress: the world must have a **first cause**

kālam argument: temporal impossibility of infinite regress (the world must have had a **beginning**)

Enlightenment: Leibniz and Clarke: add to this the Principle of Sufficient Reason (The world have a **sufficient cause**). For example in Leibniz:

32. [Our reasonings are grounded upon the principle] of sufficient reason, in virtue of which we hold that there can be no fact real or existing, no statement true, unless there be a sufficient reason, why it should be so and not otherwise, although these reasons usually cannot be known by us. (Theod. 44, 196.)

Monadology, 32

Criticism by Hume and Kant in the 18th century – mainly because these arguments are based on an illegitimate use of reason, that is, a use of reason beyond the secured realm of experience.

Still a matter of controversy in the 20th century.

Notice that Aquinas and Descartes - Leibniz arguments are *logical* arguments, while the kalam argument is *temporal*.

Cosmological arguments: Structure

Reichenbach's sketch of the argument:

1. **From experience:** A contingent being exists (a contingent being is such that if it exists, it can not-exist)
2. **Causal Principle:** (Principle of Causation or Principle of Sufficient Reason): This contingent being has a cause or explanation of its existence.
3. The cause or explanation of its existence is something other than the contingent being itself.
4. **Principle of Excluded Middle:** What causes or explains the existence of this contingent being must either be solely other contingent beings or include a non-contingent (necessary) being.
5. **Contingent beings alone cannot cause or explain the existence of a contingent being.**
6. Therefore, what causes or explains the existence of this contingent being must include a non-contingent (necessary) being.
7. Therefore, a necessary being (a being which, if it exists, cannot not exist) exists.

Possible "beings" to fill in Premise 1:

- things in motion (Aristotle)
- caused events (Aquinas)
- contingent existing things (Aquinas)
- whole series of effects (Duns Scotus: this is Demea's)

The key to failure or success of the argument: Premise 5. Premise 5 states what counts as a good explanation or cause for contingent being. If the requirement is strengthened to a requirement of a sufficient reason, and if the contingent being we are talking about is the universe, then the cause must be:

- **outside** the contingent universe, and distinct from any part of the universe.
- **supernatural** (no natural cause is satisfactory) – intentional for example

Cosmological arguments are subjects to many criticisms. We will read Hume's criticism against the causal principle in particular. What do you think of it?

4.4.6 The idea of God is innate

It will be recalled that we have distinguished three possible origins for our ideas: innate, adventitious, or fiction. Now the idea of God is:

- not adventitious: it never presents itself to me unexpectedly
- not a fiction: I cannot do whatever I want with it
- so it must be innate – mark of the author in me

It remains to see whether God is a deceiver or not. Given that He is all perfect, that should not be possible, but we might need further argument.

