

4.6 The Ontological Argument and the Cartesian Circle

4.6.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Descartes, Fifth Meditation
- Study Questions:
 1. How can Descartes' theory of error be consistent with his claim that God could have made us so that we never err?
 2. How does Descartes restore the certainty of mathematical notions?
 3. What is Descartes' argument for the existence of God? What do you think of this argument?

4.6.2 From the criterion of truth to the rational truths

Get the rational truths back

- Direct application of the method we have found in the 4th meditation: what do I conceive clearly and distinctively?
- Descartes here starts the explorations of all these ideas that are clear and distinct in my mind. Given the criterion above, all these ideas are true. By this, Descartes does not mean that they necessarily correspond to anything in the outside world: they are true as ideas.
- Controversial example: Descartes takes the example of the bodies. What do we conceive clearly and distinctly of bodies? Descartes completes here what he began with the piece of wax: the characterization of bodies. Bodies are characterized as having:
 - extension
 - number
 - figure
 - duration

- These are the only properties that I understand fully about bodies. A consequence is that physics, in order to be accurate, should give an account of the physical bodies only in terms of these properties. No appeal to anything else than figure and number in space and time.

The true physics is geometrical and considers matter as reducible to extension. Only this way can physics be scientific for it then deals with necessary essences, and not contingent beings.

Ideas are innate

There are many controversies on the notion of ideas in Descartes: I shall try to give you a rather uncontroversial view.

- Ideas are innate – they are either “in” our understanding, or they are our understanding itself
- Clear reference to Plato.
- But be careful: Descartes’ ideas are not Plato’s forms, for there are good reasons to take it that Descartes’ ideas do not exist independently of the mind.
- One interesting consequence: to grasp the truth of mathematics consists in grasping the evident truth, or certainty, of innate ideas. This talks against any kind of authority: to teach geometry is nothing but to make you aware of, recognize the evidence of, and hence understand the ideas that are already in you mind.
- Even if they do not exist independently of the mind, Descartes’ ideas have a kind of objectivity : they are robust and stable. I cannot do everything I want with them. They have some kind of reality, even if they are, of course, not material
- The mode of existence of ideas in Descartes’ philosophy is really controversial. See the article on Descartes’ ideas in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy for more details if you want.
- The most important point is that we end up with innate ideas, which are objective and eternal truths.

4.6.3 Descartes' ontological argument

- Descartes is going to try to apply the above to the idea of God: just as we can investigate *a priori* the nature and properties of a triangle, we could investigate the nature of properties of God.

In short then: my idea of God contains his existence. Hence God exists.

- Two comparisons:
 - the triangle : I cannot take conceive a triangle without conceiving it such that the sum of its angles equals two right angles;
 - the mountain and the valley: I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley.
- Two objections considered:
 - the mountain and the valley could not exist – the answer is that we did not deduce the existence from the idea but we realized that the idea of God is inseparable from the idea of God
 - it is not necessary to think about God that way – Descartes' answer is to distinguish between :
 - (1) 'it is not necessary to think about God' and,
 - (2) 'it is not necessary, when we think about God, to think about Him that way.

Descartes accepts (1) but rejects (2). You may never think about God – that is, fully turn your attention to the clear and distinct innate idea of God, but if you do, you must conceive him like Descartes says. The reasoning relies on a true idea of God, not on a fictional one.

- Note that this means that the idea of God is a rational truth, just as mathematical notions. This means in turn that we do not need but our reason to understand properly God. No need for any mystic faculty, inspiration or ungrounded faith: reason alone gives the best understanding of God.

As I am sure you already realize, there is a lot of question begging in ontological arguments. That said, we should keep in mind that Descartes does not propose an argument based on an arbitrary definition. Instead, his argument is based on his theory of clear and distinct ideas, the truth of which we

are compelled to accept by nature whenever we turn our full attention to it. In short then, Descartes' argument is a refinement of the classical ontological argument, and certainly works better. It is still problematic though, in particular because it admits the possibility of a necessary existence, something Kant will reject for example.

4.6.4 Ontological arguments: history and assessment

Source: Graham Oppy, "Ontological Arguments", SEP

Main idea

Ontological arguments are purely **a priori argument** – no observation of the world involved.

The main idea is that **the very notion of God implies His existing**. "God", as "God", necessarily exists.

The arguments typically appeal to controversial notions: a priority, necessity...

The arguments also typically appeal to controversial notions as their main premise: the idea of God as perfect being, greatest being...:

Of course, the premises of ontological arguments often do not deal directly with perfect beings, beings than which no greater can be conceived, etc.; rather, they deal with descriptions of, or ideas of, or concepts of, or the possibility of the existence of, these things. However, the basic point remains: **ontological arguments require the use of vocabulary which non-theists should certainly find problematic when it is used in ontologically committing contexts** (i.e not inside the scope of prophylactic operators such as "according to the story" or "by the lights of theists" or "by the definition" which can be taken to afford protection against unwanted commitments). (Oppy, my emphasis)

History

Saint Anselm of Canterbury (11th century): God:= *a being than which no greater can be conceived* must exist, otherwise something greater exists.

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Descartes: God:= *a supremely perfect being* cannot lack existence.

Leibniz add to Decartes's argument, that the idea of all perfections co-existing together in a single being – the idea is coherent.

Best Criticism: I. Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason* – existence is not a “predicate” (more later...)

20th: still vivid discussion:

On the one hand, Kurt Gödel, Charles Hartshorne, Norman Malcom, Alvin Plantinga – modal ontological argument.

On the other hand: Lewis.

Taxonomy

According to the taxonomy of Oppy (1995), there are seven major kinds of ontological arguments, viz:

- 1. definitional ontological arguments**
- 2. conceptual (or hyperintensional) ontological arguments**
- 3. modal ontological arguments**

From Oppy:

“ [...] Examples of each follow. These are mostly toy examples. But they serve to highlight the deficiencies which more complex examples also share.

1. God is a being which has every perfection. (This is true as a matter of definition.) Existence is a perfection. Hence God exists.

2. I conceive of a being than which no greater can be conceived. If a being than which no greater can be conceived does not exist, then I can conceive of a being greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived namely, a being than which no greater can be conceived that exists. I cannot conceive of a being greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived. Hence, a being than which no greater can be conceived exists.

3. It is possible that that God exists. God is not a contingent being, i.e., either it is not possible that God exists, or it is necessary that God exists. Hence, it is necessary that God exists. Hence, God exists. (See Malcolm (1960), Hartshorne (1965), and Plantinga (1974) for closely related arguments.)”

(I took out a few of the kinds of arguments distinguished by Oppy for simplicity)

4.6.5 Objections to the ontological argument

Ontological arguments are not persuasive

... even if they have fascinated philosophers for centuries...

Problems are:

- sometimes: invalid
- pretty much all the time: premises that only theists would accept – unsound

From Oppy again:

(1) Definitional arguments: - Ontologically committing vocabulary is introduced solely via a definition.

- Question begging: The inference from ‘By definition, God is an existent being’ to ‘God exists’ is patently invalid; while the inference to By definition, God exists is valid, but uninteresting. In the example given earlier, the premises licence the claim that, as a matter of definition, God possesses the perfection of existence. But, as just noted, there is no valid inference from this claim to the further claim that God exists.

(2) Conceptual arguments: Ontologically committing vocabulary is introduced solely within the scope of hyperintensional operators (e.g. believes that, conceives of, etc.).

Often, these operators have two readings,

1. one of which can cancel ontological commitment,
2. and the other of which cannot.

- On the reading which can give cancelation (as in the most likely reading of John believes in Santa Claus), the inference to a conclusion in which the ontological commitment is not canceled will be invalid.

- On the reading which cannot cancel ontological commitment (as in that reading of John thinks about God which can only be true if there is a God to think about), the premises are question-begging: they incur ontological commitments which non-theists reject.

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In our sample argument, the claim, that I conceive of an existent being than which no greater being can be conceived, admits of the two kinds of readings just distinguished. On the one hand, on the reading which gives cancelation, the inference to the conclusion that there is a being than which no greater can be conceived is plainly invalid. On the other hand, on the reading in which there is no cancelation, it is clear that this claim is one which no reasonable, etc. non-theist will accept: if you doubt that there is a being than which no greater can be conceived, then, of course, you doubt whether you can have thoughts about such a being.

Modal arguments: Arguments with premises which concern modal claims about God, i.e., claims about the possibility or necessity of God's attributes and existence.

Suppose that we agree to think about possibility and necessity in terms of possible worlds: a claim is possibly true just in case it is true in at least one possible world; a claim is necessarily true just in case it is true in every possible world; and a claim is contingent just in case it is true in some possible worlds and false in others.

Some theists hold that God is a necessarily existent being, i.e., that God exists in every possible world. Non-theists do not accept the claim that God exists in the actual world. Plainly enough, non-theists and necessitarian theists disagree about the layout of logical space, i.e., the space of possible worlds.

The sample argument consists, in effect, of two premises: one which says that God exists in at least one possible world; and one which says that God exists in all possible worlds if God exists in any. It is perfectly obvious that no non-theist can accept this pair of premises. Of course, a non-theist can allow if they wish that there are possible worlds in which there are contingent Gods. However, it is quite clear that no rational, reflective, etc. non-theist will accept the pair of premises in the sample argument.

Parodies... for fun

Again from Oppy:

- (1) By definition, God is a non-existent being who has every (other) perfection. Hence God does not exist.
- (2) I conceive of a being than which no greater can be conceived except that it only ever creates N universes. If such a being does not exist, then we can conceive of a greater being namely, one exactly like it which does exist. But I cannot conceive of a being which is greater in this way. Hence, a being than which no greater can be conceived except that it only ever creates N universes exists.
- (3) It is possible that God does not exist. God is not a contingent being, i.e., either it is not possible that God exists, or it is necessary that God exists. Hence it is not possible that God exists. Hence God does not exist.

And a recent one:

There are some very nice parodic discussions of Ontological Arguments in the literature. A particularly pretty one is due to Raymond Smullyan, in *5000 BC and Other Philosophical Fantasies*, in which the argument is attributed to "the unknown Dutch theologian van Dollard". A relatively recent addition to the genre is described in Grey (2000), though the date of its construction is uncertain. It is the work of Douglas Gasking, one time Professor of Philosophy at the University of Melbourne (with emendations by William Grey and Denis Robinson):

1. The creation of the world is the most marvellous achievement imaginable.
2. The merit of an achievement is the product of (a) its intrinsic quality, and (b) the ability of its creator.
3. The greater the disability or handicap of the creator, the more impressive the achievement.
4. The most formidable handicap for a creator would be non-existence.
5. Therefore, if we suppose that the universe is the product of an existent creator, we can conceive a greater being namely, one who created everything while not existing.

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6. An existing God, therefore, would not be a being than which a greater cannot be conceived, because an even more formidable and incredible creator would be a God which did not exist.
7. (Hence) God does not exist.

4.6.6 The Cartesian Circle

At the end of the 5th Meditation, Descartes “closes the circle”: thanks to the existence of God, we are now sure that our clear and distinct ideas are eternal truths. This in turn proved that a true and well founded science about rational truths is possible – which was the main aim of the whole Meditations.

Beware of the so-called “Cartesian circle”.

- A quick reading could make you think that Descartes’ account, from the third to the fifth Meditation, is circular, and viciously circular:
 1. the existence of a truthful God relies on the truth of clear and distinct ideas
 2. the truth of clear and distinct ideas relies on the existence of a truthful God
- There might be difficulties and controversies on how to make sense of these two claims, but if there is something which is *not* controversial in the literature, it is that the construal above is *not* adequate to characterize Descartes’ argumentation.
- The two claims above form a vicious circle only if the “truth of clear and distinct ideas” is construed in the same way in both. This is, of course, what Descartes does not.
- In particular, the ontological argument is not what closes the reasoning about clear and distinct ideas: it is a consequence of it. The argument which guarantees the eternal truth of the clear and distinct ideas is the argument in the Third Meditation (the cosmological argument).
- What is the point of the ontological argument then? Descartes really believes that he is deploying the essence of God, as he would not for the essence of the triangle. The point is not so much to prove the existence of God than to achieve the best knowledge of Him.

- Back to the so-called circle, there are various interpretations, here is the one I favor:
 1. the existence of a truthful God relies on the truth of clear and distinct ideas, which are certain because evident whenever I conceive them with my full attention
 2. the eternal truth of clear and distinct ideas relies on the existence of a truthful God
- This interpretation takes it that clear and distinct ideas are subject to the evil genius argument, but only when my full attention is not on the clear and distinct ideas. However, whenever my full attention is devoted to them, then I am compelled by my nature to accept them.
- On the other hand, only the existence of a truthful God gives me the *eternal truth* of my clear and distinct ideas: the atheist could find the truth of geometry, but could not construct a full bodied well grounded science, for he would have to rely on his memory for this. Only the believer is assured of the eternal truth of mathematics.