

**Omnipotent or Obtrusive?
A Discourse on the Role and Existence of God**

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God plays a leading role in the works of René Descartes, this is especially apparent in the Meditations on First Philosophy and the Principles of Philosophy. However, in today's increasingly secular society, a number of Descartes arguments come under close scrutiny as his ideas are closely tied to God and, in some cases, rely entirely on God's existence. For this reason, I feel it prudent to discuss this issue by outlining God's role in the Meditations and the Principles, identifying the faults in Descartes' reasoning regarding the existence of God, and offering alternative ideas as to how Descartes' central arguments could remain intact even with the exclusion of God.

It is essential that we first seek to outline the role God plays in Descartes' works. Essentially, one may break God's role, in terms of knowledge, down into three component parts. God's first role is to be the guarantor for clear and distinct ideas. Secondly, the faculty of memory, more specifically the memory of clear and distinct ideas, derives its truth from God. Finally, the way is paved for the undecieving God to make possible the existence of a world external to our minds. Descartes regards God as necessary for the enacting all of these processes, without God knowledge is not possible.

Clear and distinct ideas are just that, ideas which are clear ("present and accessible to the attentive mind"¹) as well as distinct ("sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear"²). In order to successfully assess and correct our preconceived opinions, we must identify the simple notions and seek out these clear and

¹ Descartes, René. Descartes: Selected Philosophic Writings. 174.

² Descartes. 174-175.

distinct ideas. Assenting to ideas that are not clear and distinct will only lead to error or the stumbling upon the truth and doubting if it is indeed what was being sought.

Clear and distinct ideas are guaranteed by God for the reason given to us by the natural light. This reason relates to the notion of formal reality, in that an effect would have no reality if there were not a cause to supply it. Descartes believes that this notion ports nicely over to the realm of things external to one's thoughts. A clear and distinct idea requires some thing external to impart some objective reality upon the idea. It is this objective reality that allows us to separate what one thinks to be real from what one imagines. If the objective reality is such that the perceiver could not be the cause of it, it would follow that the cause is external to the perceiver, which would allow for the existence of an external world. However, Descartes does not ever conclusively prove that ideas of corporeal things necessarily have enough formal reality to exist externally as the perceiver already contains the attributes of these other things, thus the idea would not be entirely clear and distinct. Although we will discuss the external world later in this discourse, it is important to note that Descartes would have us believe that the idea of God is the only idea that could be exempt from this dilemma. Descartes argues this as God is understood as something infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, omniscient, omnipotent, and so on. These attributes do not reside within an individual as although one may have duration, shape, position, and the like; no one is infinite, eternal, immutable, and the like. Descartes concludes that from this, God necessarily exists. Additionally, God exists as an entity which does not deceive as deception is a sign of weakness and thus, not a perfection, of which God is wholly. Although we do not grasp the nature of God, the idea of God is more clear and distinct than any other idea as it "permeates our thoughts."³ This innate idea of God comes as he is our creator and the author of the idea of God that is within us. It is God that keeps us in

³ Descartes. 166.

existence from one moment to the next as we do not have the power to keep our own self in existence.

Memory, or the existence of knowledge from one moment to the next, is also granted to us by the grace of God. Descartes raised concern that it is often the case when the will automatically assents to ideas that the memory puts forward as having been perceived in the past, even if such a perception is confused or had never actually been perceived. This is even more apparent when one tries to derive whether a perception found its origins in the waking world or in dreams. However, Descartes rectifies this problem by outlining the path by which to ensure that the perceptions of memory are true. Descartes argues that should one compare the idea as gained by all of one's senses, one's intellect, and one's memory without finding any conflicting reports, then this idea is true as God is not a deceiver. This holds as perceptions within dreams are not linked by memory to anything in the waking world, nor necessarily to each other. For instance, in a dream, one may be in a grocery store and then, instantaneously, on a beach without any memory of transporting there linking to the two events. Should one stop to examine the memories of these events and bring them before the intellect, they will lose cohesion and prove themselves to be false. It is this faculty of judgement that allows the items of memory to keep in check. Moreover, it is this faculty of judgement and the ability to carry knowledge forward from one moment to the next, which are gifts from God who instilled them within us upon creation. It is the role of God to ensure that memory can serve us to retain clear and distinct ideas and ensure their lasting truth.

God is also charged with the role of making possible the existence of a world external to our own minds. This is the logical extension from the previous two roles discussed, namely that God is not a deceiver and clear and distinct ideas both present-at-hand and from memory often relate to an external world, thus God would not allow us to believe such ideas if they were not

true. We have clear and distinct ideas relating to extension and the modes of shape, size, density, and the rest which do not relate to the mind, but to something outside of the mind. For this reason, as God would not deceive us, there must be something external to our own minds. However, Descartes does not take this argument much further than this. He does not address individual things, such as trees and rocks but, instead, addresses the idea that there could be extension, nothing more. So, in essence, there is 'stuff' external to us, but it is just that, 'stuff' as we can only have clear and distinct ideas of extension and its modes.

Now that God's role has been outlined, let us discuss God as the greatest problem with the Meditations and the Principles. Simply put, for God being the greatest of all clear and distinct ideas, it seems incredibly odd that so many concerns could be raised on the topic. One would think that an idea made out to be so clear and distinct that all other clear and distinct ideas follow from it would be a somewhat less controversial or, better yet, absolutely unquestionable. However, I would argue that this is not the case whatsoever as the idea of God has many accusations against that it could serve to severely corrode Descartes' arguments rather than act to solidify them. Therefore, let us put forth these five concerns, discuss their implications, and make judgment at their conclusion.

1. Issues Regarding the Natural Light & the Principle of Efficient Cause

Descartes is rather quick to leap to the necessity of the existence of God external from one's thoughts. This argument is founded solely on the seemingly arbitrary assignment of reality to one thing or another. One must accept that, in fact, God has more objective reality (perfection can also be used here) than a lemon tart. One must also agree that this lemon tart has more objective reality than a chimera. Strangely, only one of these items, being God, the lemon tart, and the chimera, can actually be experienced. It is not God; it is the lemon tart. Although human beings are not infinite, eternal, and the like, we have definitions tethered to these words

that allow for their understanding. What proof is there that God is not simply a chimera with fanciful words attached to it? I would argue that there is very little, if any. Descartes himself argues that something cannot arise from nothing. The idea of a lemon tart indeed may come from experiencing the objective reality of a lemon tart. God, on the other hand, arguably comes from nothing using this concept. This theory of objective reality and the assignment of what has more reality than any other thing seems to be lacking any sort of concrete proofs. Moreover, should this Principle of Efficient Cause be conclusively proven to be in error, the necessity of God would require an entirely new rationale.

2. Issues Regarding God as a Clear and Distinct Idea

The famous Cartesian Circle derives its existence from this argument: God is a clear and distinct idea; one must have a clear and distinct idea of God in order to have clear and distinct ideas.

From this spawns the accusations against Descartes for circular argument. How can one have a clear and distinct idea of God if it is God who allows for one to have a clear and distinct idea in the first place? This issue has been tackled by numerous original objectors to the *Meditations* as well as modern philosophers, such as Louis Loeb⁴ and Willis Doney⁵, but no concrete answer as to whether or not this argument is truly circular has been provided. However, even the chance that the argument, which is central to the entire foundation, may be circular is enough to call Descartes' entire theory of knowledge into question. I feel that this error comes as a result of unilaterally assigning existence to God without providing adequate proof for this existence.

3. Issues Regarding Existence as a Perfection

Descartes' argument is that because the idea of God contains all possible perfections (including the perfection of existence) and is a clear and distinct idea, then it follows that God exists.

⁴ Issues relating the Cartesian Circle were discussed in the article, "Was Descartes Sincere in his Appeal to the Natural Light?" which also focused on numerous other erroneous aspects of Descartes' *Meditations*.

⁵ "The Cartesian Circle" also identified this problem, but offered that the true circular argument was elsewhere in Descartes' *Meditations*, in the section referring to affirmation of memory.

However, there are numerous flaws in this argument. One of which is the presupposition that existence is a perfection. To illustrate this idea, let me put forward this argument: Simplicity is a perfection; this is the reason that we seek those things which are most basic on which to found our studies of the universe (i.e. simple notions). Building upon these simplicities allows us to understand complexities (i.e. advanced mathematical demonstrations). To understand the greatest of complexities is perfection. However, simplicities and complexities are opposite of each other, yet both could be considered to be perfections. Following this, the notion of existence is very simple and very complex, depending on the method of thought used to examine it. It is simple in the way that it is just being, but it is complex in way that one may define being and subsequently define those things of which the definition is comprised, ad infinitum. The same statements can be made for non-being. It is for this reason that the very notion of perfections, especially as it concerns existence, is neither clear nor distinct. How then, can existence be seen as a perfection rather than non-being? How can these perfections be seen as clear and distinct ideas? If perfections are not clear and distinct ideas, how could God be comprised of them? These are questions that cannot be answered by Descartes' circular reasoning, as if God ceases to be a clear and distinct idea, then it follows that there can be no clear and distinct ideas.

4. Issues Regarding God as Innate within the Mind

I also find it alarming when Descartes refers to God as eternal. My reasoning is that the Judeo-Christian God to which he refers is really only a few millennia old, replacing the multi-deity systems of the past ages. It is indeed strange how the ancient Greeks and Romans lacked this innate knowledge of their great creator. Even more odd is how with such progress in science, philosophy, education, and the like, a great number of people in today's day and age seem to also lack this innate knowledge, instead revering themselves or some other deity as the source

of all knowledge. I would argue that such a vast number of peoples, both past and present, could not be accused of being wrong and ignoring something that Descartes argues is an inborn intuition. Instead, I would argue that the idea of God is learned and that the long list of perfections associated with this entity are communicated to people during their childhood when rational thought remains in its infancy, making God a preconceived opinion rather than a necessary and universal truth.

5. Issues Regarding God as Eternal, Omniscient, and Willing (and the Will of Human Beings)

Another concern is a matter of continuity of thought in regards to God as an eternal and omniscient being. In the Meditations, the issue of God's will was brought up in discussion regarding the will of human beings. However, I would question how God could be eternal, omniscient, and have a will, as having a will allows one to act freely and being an all-knowing being would require God to have knowledge of the desire to act, the act itself, and the resulting consequence of the action. However, if God were to have knowledge of the consequence of the action before the action took place, it would then not be a matter of will, but would be a necessary action in order for such knowledge to exist. It is this problem that brings into question the ability for God to exist as an active and willing being which is addressed in the Principles. Strangely, although human beings have a self-evident free will, Descartes argues that it is also true that everything was preordained by God. To defend against inevitable opposition to this obviously contradictory statement, he points out that it is extremely difficult to try to reconcile the two opposing side. He also reminds us that God is infinite and we are finite and that we cannot grasp how such a power of God could be played out. Sadly, I feel that this counterargument regarding God's perfection, namely being infinite, does not hold well, especially when it seeks to defend three of God's perfections that are being called into question.

In Descartes' tradition of meditation and deep analysis, I would offer that the existence of God and his role in Descartes' theory of knowledge are worthy of being cast into doubt and, better yet, assumed to be false until some concrete proof can be given to rescue them from this doubt. Descartes' account of God relies heavily on the willingness of the people in his time period to blindly accept various aspects of his argument or else risk persecution at the hands of the church. In today's philosophy, such assumptions do not hold and lend themselves to counterarguments such as those aforementioned. However, in order for good philosophy and true knowledge to be discovered, it must weather the test of time and remain unscathed. I would argue that Descartes' proofs regarding the existence of God and his role in the grand theory of knowledge fail this task.

However, as both the Meditations and the Principles are great works of philosophy, I would venture to salvage their core arguments, but without using the false premise of God. Therefore, let us investigate how we can save clear and distinct ideas, memory, and the possibility for an external world.

First of all, clear and distinct ideas are easy to separate from God, as God was thought to be as a clear and distinct idea, just as extension is thought to be a clear and distinct idea. Therefore, it could be argued that God is not required to affirm clear and distinct ideas if God was thought to be one. For this reason, let us remove God from the process of discovering clear and distinct ideas and simply attend to the definition that Descartes provides in the Principles, that these ideas are those which are "present and accessible to the attentive mind"⁶ as well as "sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear."⁷ Through the applied use of the intellect and the will and using these definitions as clear

⁶ Descartes. 174.

⁷ Descartes. 174-175.

guidelines, I am confident that clear and distinct ideas can be discovered and confirmed without assistance from a higher authority.

Memory can also find a secular home by not providing for God's affirmation. The ideas held by memory are the same as ideas actively being perceived, but also include a temporal component. For this reason, ideas from memory can be judged just as well as any other idea from which we seek simple notions and search for clarity and distinctness. However, with ideas from memory, one must be that much more vigilant in the analysis as there is also the danger that the idea from memory has degraded over time and may not be entirely true. For this reason, ideas from memory which seem incomplete or fictitious, including those mentioned as originating in dreams, should not be used in coming making judgments. Instead, the will and the intellect should seek out different ideas or suspend judgment until the idea in question fully perceived and comprehended, allowing judgment regarding truth to be properly made on these clear and distinct ideas. In essence, the affirmation of memory does not require God, but requires that much more attention to be paid to its assessment.

The existence of an external world, although applied to God as one of God's roles, was never really applied to Descartes' view of reality. However, I feel that the existence of an external world provides the subject-matter of our ideas and forms our reality, not vice-versa. In this regard, I would offer that experience should be granted its due attention as through experience one gains the perceptions of reality on which judgment is passed. Granted, Descartes would not agree with this line of reasoning as it places some reliance on the sense organs, but in response to his arguments, I would put forth that although the sense organs may be deceived, that is why the intellect and the will act to bring forth ideas for judgment. Using my powers of reason, I can understand that the tower in the distance is not small, but instead that it is indeed large yet far away. However, it is by experiencing the image of the tower that I have any idea relating to it in

the first place on which to pass judgment. Finally, the only entity in the universe who has the ability to experience the external world as me and make decisions regarding my experience in the external world as me – is me. For this reason, by experiencing the external world, I am the only one in the universe who could have my experiences, my thoughts, my clear and distinct ideas, and my memories about the external world – not God.

Although these ideas are borrowed from phenomenology and some other sources which came well after Descartes' time, I offer them as possible solutions to retrofit his works to better synchronize with today's secular philosophy. I do not, by any means, tout these as being the grand solution to the many problems outlined in this discourse, but put them forth in an effort to start discussion. The Mediations and the Principles were both works that were ahead of their time, yet time has caught up and surpassed them. Now we must take into account Descartes' time and take into account the cultural norms and mainstream way of thinking during his period. However, at the same time, it is important to discuss how his philosophy applies to our theory of knowledge and what can be done to bring it in line with the various other theories that are under constant debate. This is a starting point, but there is still much work to be done.

References

Descartes, René. Descartes: Selected Philosophic Writings. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.