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## Descartes's Second Argument for the Existence of God

In this paper, I will criticize Descartes's first argument for the existence of God, which was derived from an argument by St. Anselm. I will argue that there are two significant problems with the argument. First, it assumes that existence is a property when there are good reasons to believe that it could not be. Second, there is a fatal flaw in the logic of the argument that cannot be ignored. I contend that his argument must fail in the face of these problems.

Descartes sought to slip the Gordian Knot of skepticism by proving the existence of a being that he called God. His primary motivation for proving this was the promise of a solution for what philosophers call the *skeptical problem*. Consider the position we find ourselves in as rational observers of the world. As you sit here, reading the white sheet of paper on which this essay is written, perhaps you feel the grain of the paper and notice the sounds of a nearby conversation. We are accustomed to receiving such information from our sense organs and we almost always assume that the causes of these sensations are objects outside our minds - sheets of paper and our noisy neighbors, for instance. Descartes is concerned with the justification we could give in asserting that we really do know such things about the world around us.

We have all had the experience of dreaming and believing that what we were "seeing" were real objects outside our minds, only to be awoken and discover that they were never there at all. If so, Descartes argues, this suggests that we do not directly perceive the objects of the physical world, but rather that we perceive images and impressions in our own minds. Under normal circumstances, the stimulation of our five senses should bring about an image or experience in our "mind's eye" that we take as an indication that there are such objects or events present in the physical world around us. When we dream, we are aware of sense-impressions in just the same way, though they are not caused by anything outside of our minds. But if this is so, then we have no reliable way of telling when our sense-impressions are caused by physical objects and when they are caused by something else. You might only be dreaming that there is a white sheet of paper before you and a conversation going on

1. Intro. It's always a good idea to start off your paper with a clear introductory paragraph that states explicitly what you will argue.

2. Exposition. In most cases, it is a good idea to give some background information about the views you are discussing so that the reader can see why the points you mention are relevant. In a paper that's only 1500-2000 words long, you probably don't want to spend more than 500 words or so on this. In other words, spend the first 25-35% of your paper on this and get on to your argument.

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nearby. This becomes a much more serious problem when we realize that all of our experiences might be mere dreams or hallucinations and we would never know the difference. This possibility may seem far-fetched, but Descartes's point is that we cannot be *certain* that it is not true. If we cannot be certain of this in any case, then we do not even know that there is a physical world around us. We must be skeptics about the our knowledge of the physical world.

Descartes's solution to this was to argue that there was a supreme being, responsible for the creation of the Universe, who has a nature such that a rational observer would never be arbitrarily deceived. God would make the physical world regular and our perception of the world reliable because it would be contrary to God's nature to do otherwise. God is a perfectly honest being, Descartes would say. To give such a proof, Descartes borrows the conception of God espoused by many medieval philosophers. They said that God was a perfect being in the sense that God had every positive attribute that one might want and had it in the fullest degree possible. For instance, knowledge would be such a positive attribute and so God would have omniscience (perfect knowledge of every fact). Like St. Anselm before him, Descartes thought that existence would be such a positive attribute. It is certainly better to exist than not to exist, for one would much rather be an active being out accomplishing things than not exist and be relegated to the realm of others' imagination. Assuming that existence is a positive attribute every being would want, Descartes offers the following argument:<sup>1</sup>

1. By definition, God is a being who has every positive attribute to its fullest extent.
2. Existence is a positive attribute.
3. Therefore, God has the property of existence (i.e. God exists).

If this argument succeeds, then Descartes has shown that God exists and he has an important part of his solution to the skeptical problem.

The first reason to doubt the soundness of this argument was offered by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. He challenged the idea that we might call existence a property of things.<sup>2</sup> Generally, when we speak of something being a property, it is a feature or an attribute of something that we think something might have or lack. For instance, we can certainly agree that "being red" is a property that some things - like

3. A clear statement of the argument you are addressing. This is essential to the clarity and precision of your arguments, as well. Don't hesitate to write out the premises of an argument as I've done here. This often allows you to state an argument more succinctly as well, leaving you more room for the things you have to say about the argument at hand. (Since this is someone else's argument, think of this as part of the exposition.)

**NOTE:** For the purposes of this illustration, we should assume that the end of this paragraph is the end of the material presented in class lectures, although other avenues may be suggested by the text. Remember the point is to go BEYOND what you have been given.

4. The first objection. This is where you point out the part of the argument that you think makes the best case for your view. Though I call it an "objection" here, it could also be a positive point in favor of your view. If you agree with the view you are discussing and there is some point that supports the view, this would be the ideal place to mention it.

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fire trucks and apples - have and other things lack. But existence is not like this. An object cannot lack the property of existence, for then it would not exist and could not have any properties at all. We might say that things that do not exist, like a round square or a unicorn, have the property of non-existence, but it seems far more reasonable to simply say that there are no such objects and so there is no reason to say that they have any properties at all. It also seems dangerous to say that existence is a property because it allows us to include that property in our concepts of things, and thereby simply define them into existence. If we changed the definitions accordingly, we could use an argument like this to prove the existence of Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny as well!

In response to this criticism, Descartes might argue that he was interested in attributing a different sort of property to God. We might call this property 'necessary existence'. This would be a property that only a unique, all-powerful being could have and anything else in the world would lack. A being like you or me certainly would not have this property, for the world could have gone on quite happily without any one of us. It is not yet clear why we should think that any being actually does have this unusual property. Presumably, establishing that would require an argument showing that the rest of the universe could exist only if God did, perhaps because God was the creator or cause of the entire universe. This might circumvent Kant's objection, though it is only a promise of an argument at this stage. Let us grant Descartes this idea of a property of necessary existence for the time being, for there are other reasons to be suspicious of this argument.

There is a very important ambiguity in the argument even if we allow Descartes to add the property of necessary existence. Premise (1) in the argument above is an appeal to a definition. This is what philosophers call a *conditional* claim or an *implication*. It is saying something to the effect of, 'For all the things in the world, if something is God, then it has the following properties...' We use such claims all the time. However, to make a claim like this is very different from asserting that something actually falls under that definition. This is why we can say 'By definition, a unicorn has a horn on top of its head' with impunity. We are not saying that there are any unicorns out there in the world, just that if something *were* a unicorn, it *would* have a horn on its head. The problem is that the conclusion is not supposed to be a conditional statement. It actually asserts that there is a thing with that property. We certainly would not accept the following argument:

5. The response. Part of making your own views more compelling is allowing the case for the other side of the argument to be as strong as possible. Making the other side of an argument into a "strawman" will only make it appear to the reader that you don't understand what's at stake or don't want to admit that you're wrong.

6. The other objection. This is the last stage of a paper. In it, you can respond to a point made by the other side of the argument, or else introduce some really powerful reason to believe the argument you are making.

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1. By definition, if something is a unicorn, then it has all the Unicorn-properties.
2. A horn in the head is a unicorn property.
3. Therefore, there is a unicorn in the real world that has a horn in its head.

At most, the last premise should say that *if* something is a unicorn, *then* it has a horn in its head. We have not shown that there are any unicorns, only that the definition implies certain things about any unicorns that do happen to exist. By the same token, Descartes's argument cannot imply that there is a God who has existence, but only that anything that *was* God *would* have existence. This is a much less interesting conclusion.

We could allow Descartes to make his argument a valid one in one other way. We could change it to read:

1. There is a being who has all the positive attributes to the fullest extent.
2. Necessary existence is a positive attribute.
3. Therefore, there is a being who has necessary existence.

Of course, this argument is not nearly so interesting because we assume God's existence in the first premise, which was the very thing that we were trying to prove all along. Someone who did not already believe in God's existence would never grant us such a premise, so the argument is woefully anemic. Adding the property of necessary existence does nothing to affect this argument, since it is the logic of the argument that is flawed. Descartes has not recognized the difference between asserting that something would have a property and asserting that there is something that does have that property.

Again, letting the other side get its word in is always a good idea...

...even if their last word doesn' t work so well.

WORD COUNT: 1586

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## NOTES

1. This argument is paraphrased from Descartes's writings in the *Meditations*, particularly Meditation 5. (Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Indianapolis: Hackett Press, ©1993.)
2. I took this point from a summary of the argument offered in Chapter 4 of Peter Van Inwagen's *Metaphysics* (San Francisco: Westview Press, ©1994).
3. My paper has benefited greatly from discussions with my classmates, particularly John Coltrane and Charles Mingus.

Remember to give me the entire book citation the first time you mention it. An alternative citation style has you make parenthetical reference to the author, year of publication and page number (e.g. (*Van Inwagen* (1994, pg. 175))) followed by a complete bibliography for all your sources at the end of the paper. Ask for advice and suggestions if you are unsure about how to cite works.

I do not think less of papers where you confer with other students, though you MUST mention them in a footnote like this.