

Descartes on the Perception of the Infinite
by Michael Currie

In *Meditations III*, René Descartes anticipates objections to his proof of God, and so refutes six non-theistic alternate causes of the idea of infinity. The first of these is the combinatorial explanation:

“Nor should I think that I do not perceive the infinite by means of a true idea but only through a negation of the finite, just as I perceive rest and shadows by means of a negation of motion and light. On the contrary, I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than there is in a finite one. Thus the perception of the infinite somehow exists in me prior to the perception of the finite, that is, the perception of God exists prior to the perception of myself” (Part 3, Paragraph 24).

An examination of Descartes’ statement will place it in context, before clarifying and ultimately rejecting his proposed counter-argument – for five reasons, including Descartes’ equivocation on the term “reality”. The pejorative implications of this rejection for his broader project in the *Meditations* – namely, that God does not necessarily exist – will then become clear.

First, it is important to understand the quoted passage in context. Descartes was a rationalist, that is, he believed that truth is revealed through reason. In the first two parts of his six *Meditations*, he uses methodological skepticism to shake his knowledge to its foundation – leaving only that *Cogito Ergo Sum*. He feels that this piece of indubitable knowledge also provides a criterion for other knowledge, viz., that it is clear and distinct. As he is still following the *Meditations I* evil demon hypothesis, however, he can apply

this criterion only if a supremely good God allows him to. Thus, he must prove the existence of God.

He sets about this task by first enumerating the categories of “ideas” – they can be (1) innate, (2) adventitious, or (3) invented. Innate ideas, such as truth, are *a priori* and perceived through “the light of nature”. Adventitious ideas, or those derived from the senses, are suspect under the evil demon hypothesis; invented ideas are clearly false. Descartes feels that infinity and/or perfection – concepts that are treated interchangeably in the *Meditations* as divine properties – do not fit into any category. Descartes assented to the a priori truth of the medieval *Causal Principle of Reality (CPR)*, which states that there must be at least as much reality in the cause as in the effect. Following the *CPR*, the concept of infinity in the mind must have come from an infinite/perfect cause. For Descartes, this cause is God.

In the quoted passage, Descartes rejects the undesirably non-theistic suggestion that the concept of infinity can be understood simply in terms of its opposite, the finite; he does so by claiming that people understand their own imperfection in comparison to some logically prior idea of perfection.

Broadly, the first concern with Descartes’ argumentation is its initial delineation. He relies on an intuitive definition of God – “an infinite and independent substance, intelligent and powerful in the highest degree, who created me along with everything else...” (Part 3, Paragraph 22). Some properties do not seem to have degrees; how is one to make sense of infinity being “true in the highest degree” (Part 3, Paragraph 25)? Just what Descartes means by “infinity” and “perfection” is not well defined, as he relies a

crude medieval paradigm. At best, Descartes does not adhere to the spirit of rationalism; at worst, he is attempting to hide his failed logic behind ambiguous definitions.

The second concern is of Descartes' theory of a prior idea of perfection, which comes from Aquinas. Aquinas felt that in order to understand comparative judgment, one must understand the perfective concept first. This assertion seems empirically false; indeed, the concept of infinity is very hard to grasp relative to earthly concepts. For example, it is difficult to see how anyone could either conceive or imagine the concept of infinity more clearly and distinctly than they could that of an apple. Thus, framed in a world of objects with which we are immediately familiar, it seems implausible that the idea of infinity is "the most true, the most clear, and the most distinct" (Part 3, Paragraph 25).

The third concern is that by claiming that "the perception of God exists prior to the perception of myself", Descartes is undermining his indubitable *Cogito*. Since the supposition that "I am, I exist" is supposed to be the foundation from which he reconstructs the world using rationalism, it is improper to say that God is perceived before the self (Part 2, Paragraph 2). Indeed, as Descartes said earlier, "nothing can be more easily and evidently perceived by me than my mind" (Part 2, Paragraph 16).

Fourthly, Descartes begs the question when he appeals to his "clear" and distinct knowledge that "there is more reality in an infinite substance" (Part 3, Paragraph 24). The validity of the clear and distinct criterion depends on the existence of God; proving God's existence by appealing to this criterion is a famous case of circular argumentation known as the *Cartesian Circle*.

The fifth, final and strongest case against Descartes' counter-argument deals with his loose use of the word "reality". Taken in the medieval sense, "objective reality" is the content of an idea, whereas "formal reality" is the object insofar as it actually exists in its own right. In the quoted passage, if "reality" is taken to be formal, Descartes would prove nothing since the discussion would not relate to the realm of ideas – specifically, the mind's idea of the infinite. If "reality" is taken to be objective, the passage is also unsound since the goal is to prove the existence of an infinite formal cause. Since these possibilities are untenable, Descartes must be using the third; for this, he is guilty of equivocation – he is claiming that there is more formal reality in an infinite substance than there is objective reality in a finite one. The *CPR* is already dubious because of its archaic, meaningless terms – for example, it is unclear whether a cat has more or less reality than a tree. Granting that the *a priori* truth of the *CPR* is supposed, even Descartes' contemporaries agreed that although formal reality is the cause of objective reality, quantitative comparisons cannot be made across their respective categories. Descartes is taking Aquinas' route of building existence into the definition of God, which necessarily inflates the formal ontology to include all ideas, be they real or imagined. This is another famous fallacy known as *Plato's Beard*.

The implications of Descartes' failure for his broader project in the *Meditations* now become clear. Faced with the five problems with Descartes' counter argument, it is apparent that he did not successfully defend his position in the face of a non-theistic explanation for the cause of the idea of infinity. Thus, the existence of God is still questionable. Descartes realizes that "the whole force of the argument rests on the fact that I recognize that it is impossible that I should exist, being of such a nature as I am –

namely, having the idea of God in me – unless God in fact does exist” (Part 3, Paragraph 38). So, with the God’s existence still questionable, the balance of the argument in *Meditations* becomes similarly suspect. His broader project, to justify the world through Rationalism, is no longer tenable. The only idea left untainted by this lapse is the indubitable knowledge that “I think, therefore I am.”

Works Cited

Descartes, René. *Meditations*. Online edition, using the 1901 English translation by John Veitch. Viewed at <http://www.cola.wright.edu/DesCartes/MedE.html> on 17 November 2001.