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The Effect of God on the Cogito: an Examination of Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy

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The beginning of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* requires the reader, or meditator, to accept two primary assertions before examining the rest of the text. Firstly, that the meditator should doubt all things, especially material things, and secondly, that God is a deceiver. In the First Meditation, Descartes examines why the meditator should have cause to doubt all things. Structurally, this step is important for the meditation because it focuses the meditator and strips away things distinct from their own body; eventually the meditator strips away the body in the Second Meditation, thus leaving only the mind. Here, Descartes claims his Cogito, that from this meditative process, or simply from reason, he finds that at his core he exists as a thinking thing. At this point he claims nothing other than that he is, a symbolic floating mind amidst a sea of uncertainty. Continuing with his meditation structure, he uses the Cogito to build up the world he previously stripped away. One of these elements that he puts into real world is the existence of a non-deceiving God. However, based on how Descartes describes this God, specifically as an infinite being, his arguments actually suggest an invalidation of the Cogito; simply, Descartes idea of God necessitates man to be a part of God, not an independent, thinking thing.

First, I will reconstruct the arguments that Descartes gives. He presents two arguments, one for the existence of God, and the other for Descartes' own relation to that God:

1. That God exists:
 - a. I retain an idea of God, by which I mean something that is infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, and supremely powerful, which also created all things that exist.
 - b. God is an infinite substance whereas I am a finite one.
 - c. Being finite, I can contain objective knowledge of an infinite substance, but I cannot contain formal knowledge of an infinite substance.

- d. Infinite substances have more objective reality than finite substances. Therefore, I must recognize that my knowledge of an infinite substance comes prior to my knowledge of myself, since being more perfect, it is more clear and distinct than my knowledge of myself.
 - e. My perception of God, it being of an infinite substance, must come before my perception of myself.
 - f. This perception cannot arise out of nothing, since something cannot arise from nothing.
 - g. Therefore, God must be the most supreme, most perfect, and thus most clear and distinct of ideas, which proves his existence.
2. That I am lower than God:
- a. While I can say that my knowledge is gradually increasing, I cannot say that I have the potential to become an infinite substance, like God.
 - b. The fact that I have potential to become something more perfect than what I am is in itself proof that I cannot become an infinite substance.
 - c. God, in being an infinite substance, has no potential, because his perfection cannot be augmented; a truly infinite and perfect thing is inherently unchanging.
 - d. I want to attain these perfections because I retain an idea of said perfections from my creation by God.
 - e. It would be incorrect to think that perhaps there are several things that each contain some perfections which gave me existence, since it is the unity and simplicity of God that engenders it with complete perfection.
 - f. Thus, the fact that I exist with these ideas of perfection, and my want to strive toward these perfections, is proof that God exists, and that God created me.

These arguments that Descartes uses rely heavily on the Causal Principle. The way Descartes uses the Causal Principle is such: some of the content of his mind has a certain feature that can only be explained if that feature is caused by and correctly represents something existing outside his mind. This principle underlies his arguments for formal and objective knowledge, which is central to his argument for God.

The Causal Principle becomes problematic because Descartes claims knowledge of this principle comes from the Light of Nature. The intuition-like nature of this faculty, Descartes claims, necessitates that all ideas that come from this faculty are clear and distinct. Because of the Light of Nature, Descartes argument becomes circular. He argues:

1. All claims from the Light of Nature are true/clear and distinct.
2. From this premise, he claims the Causal Principle
3. From the Causal Principle, he claims the existence of God, as shown.
4. He claims that God is a non-deceiving entity, since “trickery or deception are always indicative of some imperfection,” which God is not capable of as an inherently perfect being (Descartes 54).
5. Because God is a non-deceiving entity, Descartes concludes he can trust clear and distinct ideas.

The circularity should seem obvious: Descartes uses the premise that he can trust clear and distinct ideas to arrive at the conclusion that he can trust clear and distinct ideas. In fact, the Light of Nature and God seem to play the exact same role, as guarantors of clear and distinct ideas. The only real distinction between the two that he makes, is that God retains an implied sense of action or purpose, whereas the Light of Nature acts more like a faculty, like reason. However, this distinction is only implied, and even with such a distinction, the Light of Nature

and God seem to function exactly the same in this case. The problem here is that Descartes essentially uses an assumption of God's existence to argue for God's existence.

I believe this problem, which extends into the main problem of the text, lies in an incompatibility between Descartes' Cogito and his idea of God. In describing his idea of God, Descartes says, "I understand by the name 'God' a certain substance that is infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, and supremely powerful, and that created me along with everything else that exists – if anything else exists" (51). Of course, Descartes firmly believes in his own existence, at least as a mind. However, I believe that describing God as an infinite being causes some problems. Firstly, Descartes affirms that he "clearly understand[s] that there is more reality in an infinite substance than there is in a finite one" (51). Since degrees of reality correspond to how clear and distinct something is, Descartes here says that he has a more clear and distinct idea of God than he does of himself. This means that the Cogito, which Descartes claimed as his fundamental principle in Meditation Two is less clear and distinct than the existence of God. Arguing for a fundamental concept that will then become dependent upon a more fundamental principle seems faulty. By its very nature, a fundamental principle should not become subsumed by a later argument. While Descartes might argue that this fault lies simply in structure, I believe the problem points toward larger issues of circularity as in the previously examined argument.

The second problem I have with the idea of an infinite God comes from, I believe, an unviability of Descartes own existence given this argument. Descartes says of God that "the unity, the simplicity, that is, the inseparability of all those features that are in God is one of the chief perfections that I understand to be in him" (53). The word 'inseparability' is key here; God cannot exist in fractured parts, but must exist as a singular whole. It seems equally illogical to claim, given Descartes' description, that God can exist separate from everything else, as if he were a single continent surrounded by water or disparate lands. If God were to exist in the world

as an inseparable being, God must be the world. Any kind of distinction between God and anything else would seem to be an imperfection. Of course, Descartes would most likely argue that God must be separate from these other things, since they are imperfect and God cannot contain imperfections. I must wonder then, how did these imperfect things come to exist? Descartes has shown that something cannot arise from nothing, and that a trait in the effect must be present in the cause. So, if all things come from God, who is a perfect cause, how do the imperfections arise in the effect? Any kind of example from the observable world could not stand in place for this, since no observable thing is as perfect as God.

Perhaps Descartes would argue that God is merely an infinite incorporeal substance, and thus his infinite existence does not have an effect on the corporeal world given Descartes' idea of substance dualism. This dualism means that Descartes believes there to be two substances in the world, one corporeal and the other incorporeal. The body is corporeal and the mind incorporeal. Descartes also makes the distinction that "a body, in its very nature, is always divisible. On the other hand, the mind is utterly indivisible" (67). Already, there seems to be a similarity between God and the mind, since both must exist singularly. So even if Descartes were to argue that God is an infinite, incorporeal substance, this does not seem to erase the problems previously arrived at. Descartes does not give any kind of description of a plane where these incorporeal things exist. In fact, the very nature of the incorporeal seems to disavow any such description; but the infinite nature of God still must factor into this argument. If God is infinite, singular, and incorporeal, and our minds are singular and incorporeal how can they exist at the same time? If God and our minds cannot exist part and parcel, how can our minds not merely be extensions of God, seeing as they would occupy the same space? Ultimately, I believe that Descartes arguments lead to this conclusion, that the mind which Descartes describes can only be an extension of God, as he describes it.

How exactly Descartes would react to this observation, I cannot say for sure. Given his Cogito, he would possibly disregard the argument completely, citing that he clearly and distinctly perceives his own individuality. For instance, Descartes does claim that “nature [...] teaches that I am present to my body not merely in the way a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am most tightly joined and [...] commingled with it, so much so that I and the body constitute one single thing” (65). However, Descartes’ insistence on substance dualism might hint that he would accept, or at least consider, my argument. The interaction between the mind and body that Descartes describes seems arbitrary; it hardly seems that the two intermingle at all. Descartes describes how sensations move through the nerves of the body, culminating in the brain, but the only way the sensation is transmitted to the mind is through God. After describing how sensations travel through the body, Descartes says, “experience shows that all the sensations bestowed on us by nature are like this. Hence there is absolutely nothing to be found in them that does not bear witness to God’s power and goodness” (67). While Descartes holds onto the idea of individuation from God, he argues that all our sensations can only be transmitted to our minds via the will of God. The lines between endowing existence and comingling existence seem to blur with this argument.

In Thomas Hobbes’ replies to Descartes’ *Meditations*, he continually brings up contention toward whether or not the idea of God has been proven. While that question can be doubted, I do not think that Descartes’ arguments give it any less credibility. However, I do believe that his arguments give less credibility to the existence of individuals if God does in fact exist. Descartes’ description of God, as an infinite, omnipotent, omnipresent, and perfect being is not out of the ordinary in theology or philosophy. But when put in the context of Descartes arguments, it seems that if such a God did exist, all other extent things would have to simply be a part of that God, not separated from God, as an infinite, incorporeal substance cannot be

separated from itself, but comingled or representative of a larger whole. Because of his arguments for the existence and preeminence of God, I believe that Descartes invalidates his own Cogito, his own admission of existence.

Works Cited

Descartes, Rene. "Meditations on First Philosophy." *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*. Ed. Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins. Second ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009. 35-68. Print.