

DESCARTES, THE TRUTH PRINCIPLE, THE TRADEMARK ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD & THE PROBLEM OF EPISTEMIC ERROR

It only remains for me to examine how I received this idea from God. For I did not acquire it from the senses; it has never come to me unexpectedly, as usually happens with the ideas of things that are perceivable by the senses, when these things present themselves to the external sense organs – or seem to do so. And it was not invented by me either; for I am plainly unable either to take away anything from it or to add anything to it. The only remaining alternative is that it is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me.

— Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*

I recognize that it is impossible that God should ever deceive me. For in every case of trickery or deception some imperfection is to be found; and although the ability to deceive appears to be an indication of cleverness or power, the will to deceive is undoubtedly evidence of malice or weakness, and so cannot apply to God.... So what then is the source my [epistemic errors]? It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand. Since the will is indifferent in such cases, it easily turns aside from what is true and good, and this is the source of my error and [epistemic] sin.

— Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*

THE BIG IDEAS TO MASTER

- The truth principle
- Rational faith vs. fideism
- Natural theology
- Rational theism
- The ontological argument
- The trademark argument
- Formal vs. objective reality
- The causal adequacy principle
- The Cartesian circle
- The problem of epistemic error

Descartes' Truth Principle

At the end of the Second Meditation, Descartes takes stock of what he knows even in a state of skeptical doubt. He alleges that he knows three things: that he thinks, he exists and he is essentially a thinking thing. As we have said, this is his "Archimedean point" from which the new science will be built. Yet, is this a promising foundation for developing a whole new science? Even Descartes recognizes that the answer seems to be 'no'. Consider what Descartes says in a discussion he has with a fictitious interlocutor:

You seem to me like an acrobat who always lands on his feet, so constantly do you go back to your "first principle." But if you go on in this way, your progress will be slow and limited. How are we always to find truths such that we can be as firmly convinced of them as we are of our own existence? (*The Search for Truth* [AT X 526]).

As we can see from this quote, even Descartes has grave worries about the possibility of building a whole new perfect science on the basis of his first principle. (Recall that this new science is supposed to be one that is built on a foundation that has the result that makes "it impossible for us to have any further doubts about what we subsequently discover to be true" ("Synopsis of the following six Meditations," AT VII 12). So, how does he hope to resolve this worry? He asks the following question: *what is the ground of my certainty with respect to the cogito and sum res cogitans?* His answer: they cannot be false given that their being true is *clear and distinct*. That is, he takes it that *the cogito* and *sum res cogitans* have the properties of being clear and distinct, and this makes it such that they cannot be false. And if they cannot be false, then they are certain and indubitable. Accordingly, Descartes wonders if it may be that **any** proposition being clear and distinct is sufficient for its being certain and indubitable. In other words, he wonders whether the following principle is true:

TP: For any proposition p , if S perceives that p clearly and distinctly, then S is certain that p is true.

Call TP, *the truth principle*. If (TP) is true, then it will allow him to build the whole new science (both in terms of the set of properly basic beliefs and the set of properly non-basic beliefs).

Of course, this raises a number of important queries: *Is there any good reason for believing that (TP) is true? What could in principle guarantee that (TP) is true?* According to Descartes, the only epistemic warrant he can have for believing that (TP) is true is to show that RATIONALTHEISM is true, namely, that

RATIONALTHEISM. God exists.

Why? **According to Descartes, God is the great guarantor of (TP).** This, argues Descartes, is because if God exists, then there is an omnibenevolent, omnipotent and omniscient being (a greatest conceivable being). As such, Descartes takes it to be certain and indubitable that that being wouldn't allow him—or anyone for that matter—to be *radically* deceived (say, by an evil genius). Does God exist? This is Descartes' question.

Descartes' Third Meditation Argument for the Existence of God

Descartes offers two theistic proofs, i.e., arguments for the existence of God, in his *Meditations*. In the Third Meditation, he offers his famous Trademark Argument; in the Fifth Meditation, he offers his ontological argument. In order to understand the Trademark Argument, however, we need to understand a couple important ideas: the formal-objective reality distinction, and the causal adequacy principle.

On two kinds of reality

According to Descartes, we must distinguish between two kinds of reality: formal reality and objective reality. What is the difference? It is this:

- *Formal reality* (hereafter FReality): the FReality of an entity *e* is the degree or measure of reality that *e* has according to *e*'s category on the great chain of being if *e* actually exists.
- *Objective reality* (hereafter OReality): the OReality of an entity *e* is the degree or measure of reality that the idea *i* represents *e* as according to *e*'s category on the great chain of being.

What does this mean? Think of FReality as the reality-with-capital-R kind (what we have been calling 'Reality'); think of OReality as the reality-with-lower-case-r kind (what we have been calling 'reality'). Another words, FReality is how things actually are (whether anyone knows it or not); OReality is how things are represented in the mind. Even so, notice that both conceptions of reality involve an appeal to something called 'the great chain of being'. What is this "chain of being?"

On the Causal Adequacy Principle

Given Descartes' commitment to the distinction between FReality and OReality, he is committed to the following principle regarding the ability of a thing to be sufficient or adequate for causing (i.e., producing) some idea to exist:

CAP: x is the cause of an idea *i* only if x has at least as much FReality as *i* has OReality.

(An alternate formulation of CAP: The OReality of an idea of x cannot be caused by a thing with the less FReality than the idea of x .) He's committed to CAP given that he is committed to the basic metaphysical principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* (literally: out of nothing nothing comes / alternatively: something cannot come from nothing).

Descartes' Trademark Argument (for the existence of God)

(1) I have an idea of God.

- (2) My idea of God has the OReality of an infinitely perfect substance (*alternatively*: my idea represents a thing that is infinitely perfect).
- (3) I have the FReality of a finite (imperfect) substance.
- (4) All finite substances have less FReality than infinite substances.
- (5) The OReality of an idea can be caused only by a thing with the same or a greater degree of FReality.

Hence,

- (6) I cannot be the cause of my idea of God.
- (7) Only a thing with the FReality infinite perfect substance can be the cause of my idea of God.
- (8) God has the FReality infinite perfect substance.

So,

- (9) God is the cause of my idea.
- (10) If x is the cause of y , then x exists.

Therefore,

- (11) God exists.

Is the Trademark Argument sound? If so, then he believes he's demonstrated that RATIONALTHEISM is certainly and indubitably true. And if that's the case, then as I noted earlier, he takes himself to have found his great guarantor for TP. Even so, there is a serious worry with Descartes' Trademark Argument. That problem, which was raised by one of his very dear friends and intellectual colleague, Antoine Arnauld, is called *the Cartesian Circle*.

Taking stock of Descartes' post-TP anti-skeptical situation

Let's assume that Descartes can avoid the Cartesian Circle. What would this tell us about his ability to finally solve his worries with broad knowledge skepticism? With (TP) in place, Descartes is just about in a place in which he can proceed to build the whole of the new science that he has promised and do so quite comfortably. This is because he has found both (i) a foundation that is solid and immune skeptical attack, and (ii) a truth-preserving guide to go beyond the foundation. So, we might think of Descartes as reasoning as follows:

- (A) For any proposition p , if S perceives p clearly and distinctly, then S is certain that p (is true).
- (B) If a person S is certain that p (is true), then S knows that p .
- (C) If a person S knows that p (is true), then S knows that not- SCP , i.e., knows that SCP is false.
- (D) I perceive a whole host of propositions clearly and distinctly (e.g., I have a body, there is a material world, etc.).

Therefore,

- (E) I know that I am neither dreaming nor being deceived by an evil genius about a whole host of propositions (e.g., I have a body, there is a material world, etc.).

Descartes' Fourth Mediation worry: the problem of epistemic error

Despite Descartes feeling pleased with his proof of RATIONALTHEISM, and thus, finding his great guarantor of (TP), he's still worried about what we'll call *the problem of epistemic error*. What is that problem? It's the problem of us having false beliefs. Why is this a purported problem? Because if God exists and TP is true, then it seems that there is no room for us having any false beliefs *whatsoever*. For Descartes thinks of having a false belief as a kind of sin, a kind of evil. But these are not moral sins; they are epistemic sins. (Recall that a

sin is simply an act that transgresses against how things ought to be; and since our epistemic faculties are directed at having true beliefs—that's why God created them in the first place according to Descartes—then we ought not have any false beliefs.) In this way, the problem of epistemic error is very much a kind of problem of evil. And the problem of evil is the primary argument against any form of theism. So, if he is to save his new science from being derailed by a problem of evil, he must solve it. This is the goal of the Fourth Mediation.¹

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