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René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* serve as his effort to "set out the very thoughts which have enabled [him ...] to arrive at a certain and evident knowledge of the truth."¹ In the Third Meditation, Descartes attempts to provide two proofs for the existence of God. The first is based upon his idea of God, and the second on his own preservation. I provide a detailed summary of the latter proof in section I. In section II, I argue that though this proof may *prima facie* appear acceptable, a closer reading reveals that the proof employs fallacious reasoning. In section III, I review what is presented in the preceding sections.

I. Descartes' Proof from Preservation

This section summarizes Descartes' second proof for the existence of God. Descartes' argument in this proof is based upon his own preservation; that is, the consideration of whether he could exist if God did not exist.² Descartes arrives at his conclusion via a process of elimination: he proposes four potential causes of his existence, then jettisons all but one. Descartes' argumentation results in the conclusion that God must have caused his existence.

The first potential cause Descartes considers is himself; that is, he considers the possibility of having "derived [his] existence from [him]self."³ Descartes believes this is blatantly impossible. If he had caused himself, he would "neither doubt nor want, nor lack anything at all"⁴; rather, he would "have given [himself] all the perfections of which [he has] any idea, and thus [he] should [himself] be God."⁵ As a thinking thing or substance, Descartes asserts that it would be "more difficult to emerge out of nothing than merely to acquire

¹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8.

² Descartes, 33.

³ Descartes, 33.

⁴ Descartes, 33.

⁵ Descartes, 33.

knowledge of the many things of which [he is] ignorant.”⁶ Consequently, he would deny himself neither said knowledge nor “any of the attributes which [he perceives] to be contained in the idea of God.”⁷ Thus, if he caused himself, he would not have had imperfections; but because he *does* have these imperfections (such as doubts), Descartes reasons that he could not have caused himself.

In order to establish a principle crucial to the arguments that follow, Descartes next introduces an objection. He notes that one could object to his argument by supposing that he has “always existed as [he] do[es] now, as if it followed from this that there was no need to look for any author of [his] existence.”⁸ Descartes rejects this statement because “a lifespan can be divided into countless parts [...] so that it does not follow from the fact that I existed a little while ago that I must exist now, unless there is some cause which as it were creates me afresh at this moment—that is, which preserves me.”⁹ In other words, there must be the same “power and action” in preserving something as there is in creating it anew.¹⁰ Therefore, Descartes states, the “distinction between preservation and creation is only a conceptual one.”¹¹ This appears to implicate the notion that a being with the power to create and preserve could only be a perfect being.

Descartes then establishes another idea necessary in his remaining arguments. He questions whether he has the ability to assure his own future existence. Given that he is only a thinking thing, he claims that he would be cognizant of the power to preserve his own existence if he had such power. However, he *does not* experience said power, and thus “this very fact

⁶ Descartes, 33.

⁷ Descartes, 33.

⁸ Descartes, 33.

⁹ Descartes, 33.

¹⁰ Descartes, 33.

¹¹ Descartes, 33.

makes [him] recognize most clearly that [he depends] on some being distinct from [himself].”¹²

The combination of this conclusion with the other principle Descartes ascertained will be used in the elimination of the remaining potential causes for his existence.

Descartes’ second and third potential causes are his parents and other beings less perfect than God, respectively. He argues that the problem of infinite regress would arise if they did, in fact, cause his existence. Since that which produces him must be a thinking thing, it seems that his parents, as thinking things, *could* have caused his existence. However, Descartes states, “one may again inquire whether it [this cause] derives its existence from itself or from another cause.”¹³ If his parents caused their own existence, then they are God. If his parents, however, did not derive their existence from themselves, then this inquiry will be reproduced until “eventually the ultimate caused is reached, and this will be God.”¹⁴ The same is true for other beings less perfect than God. Therefore, Descartes concludes, neither his parents nor other beings less perfect than God could have caused his existence.

Descartes addresses the objection that a number of partial causes could have contributed to his creation or that his idea of God’s perfections was truly a combination of many perfections found in the universe (and not in a single being). Descartes responds, however, that “the unity, the simplicity, or the inseparability of all the attributes of God is one of the most important of the perfections which [he understands] him to have.”¹⁵ Furthermore, he states, this idea of unity could not be implanted by some partial cause that did not also provide him with the ideas of the other perfections, since “no cause could have made me understand the interconnection and inseparability of the perfections without at the same time making me recognize what they

¹² Descartes, 34.

¹³ Descartes, 34.

¹⁴ Descartes, 34.

¹⁵ Descartes, 34.

were.”¹⁶ Thus, neither his idea of God nor his existence could be caused by a number of imperfect entities.

Therefore, since the three other possibilities of his existence have been dismissed, Descartes concludes that God must be the cause of his existence (and, accordingly, his idea of God). In his own words: “it must be concluded that the mere fact that [he exists] and have within [him] an idea of the most perfect being, that is, God, provides a very clear proof that God indeed exists.”¹⁷

In summary, Descartes’ second proof for the existence of God reaches its conclusion by a process of elimination. He presents four potential causes for his existence: himself, his parents, other beings less perfect than God, and God. His argumentation results in the elimination of the first three possibilities; as a result, he concludes that God must have caused his existence. This, accordingly, proves that God Himself exists.

II. Critique

In this section, I critique Descartes’ proof of God by his own preservation. I have four main points of critique: first, Descartes assumes without argument that humans would craft themselves as perfect beings if they had the opportunity to do so; second, he fails to address the possibility that there are other perfect beings besides God; third, he employs circular reasoning by assuming that we have an idea of God; and, fourth, he fails to consider whether self-derivation is of a different nature than being the cause of one’s self.

Before I present my critique of Descartes’ proof through preservation, I would like to note a minor observation. If this proof is correct, then Descartes will have proven that God exists, and creates and preserves the existence of human beings. Descartes argues that imperfect

¹⁶ Descartes, 34.

¹⁷ Descartes, 35.

beings can neither cause nor preserve other people, and likewise for themselves. As a result, something or someone else *must* serve as the cause. Since we have this idea of a perfect God, and we could not conjure up such an idea on our own, Descartes believes that our creation and preservation are accomplished by God. Thus, with this proof, I believe Descartes is attempting to establish God's omnipotence—not simply His existence—and to extend the powerlessness of imperfect beings.

One problem with Descartes' reasoning, I believe, is that he assumes we would create ourselves as perfect beings if we had the power to do so. Though this is rational and consistent with one's own self-interest, Descartes does not adequately establish that we would, in fact, make ourselves perfect. He attempts to prove this by referring to his belief that we are thinking things; but, I believe, the problem still arises. Not only does Descartes fail to confront the possibility that we would not do that which he considers rational, but he also does not demonstrate that we would have the capacity to understand and desire perfection *before* becoming such.

A second issue Descartes does not confront in his second proof for the existence of God is whether there are any other perfect beings besides God. This seems possible. However, is part of being a perfect being, being God? Descartes already established that God was a perfect being, but for the purposes of his argument did not confront the essence of a perfect being. It seems entirely possible that, in some way, a perfect being could exist without being God; however, the manner in which Descartes configured his argument did not allow for this (that is, Descartes would not be acting in his own self-interest if he were to confront this, since it would result in him deviating from giving God power and existence).

A third problem with Descartes' argument is as follows: the proof is quite clearly based upon the fact that we ourselves have an idea of God. For example, in a reply to an objection of his argument, he states that "the whole force of [his] proof depends on this one fact [that we have an idea of God]."¹⁸ Descartes avoids the potential logical controversies arising from this by appealing to the first proof for the existence of God. In this first proof, Descartes argues that our idea of God is, in a way, implanted in us by God; as a result, He must exist. It seems that Descartes, in his second proof, is presupposing his first proof for the existence of God—in essence, he is largely basing his argumentation (indirectly) on his belief that God exists in order to prove God exists. I believe that this is a clear flaw in Descartes' reasoning.

Fourth, as addressed in the objections to the Third Meditations, deriving existence from one's self has two meanings: first, being the cause of one's self; and second, not deriving one's self from another.¹⁹ Further consideration of these distinct meanings exposes a weakness in Descartes' reasoning: it is evident that it is possible to create one's self as perfect and infinite with the first definition, but it is not necessarily possible with the second. Descartes, in his response to this objection, states that this second definition was only a result of the imperfections of the human intellect; in other words, the definition was a literal translation, not a correct one.²⁰ It seems, however, that Descartes is simply *avoiding* the possibility of deriving one's existence from "not another" by giving this answer. If he directly confronted this possibility, he would have to consider his entire proof: this second definition is concerned with negative derivation, but Descartes' whole argument only addresses positive derivations (from one's parents, self,

¹⁸ Descartes, 88.

¹⁹ Descartes, 86-7.

²⁰ Descartes, 88.

God, etc.). Certainly, attempting to deal with a different (yet relevant) issue may prevent Descartes from reaching his desired conclusion.

III. Conclusion

In the first part of this paper, I summarized Descartes' second proof for the existence of God. Descartes, essentially, proves that he could not have an idea of God if He did not exist; derivation from imperfect beings is impossible. This idea of God, as he argues in the first part of the Third Meditation, proves that God exists: He implants the idea of Him in his head. In the second part of this paper, I addressed four central weaknesses in this proof: first, Descartes fails to establish that we would, in fact, create ourselves as perfect beings if we had the ability to do so; second, he does not confront the possibility that there could be any perfect beings other than God; third, he assumes that we have an idea of God in this second proof, resulting in circular reasoning (in the first proof, he demonstrates that the fact that we have an idea of God proves that there is a God); and, fourth, he does not address the possibility that self-derivation is simply negative derivation—rather, this second proof only discusses positive derivations. I believe these four weaknesses in Descartes' reasoning hinder the persuasiveness of it. Regardless of whether his conclusion is correct, I do not find Descartes' second proof for the existence of God convincing.

Bibliography

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