

Introduction

In his third meditation, Descartes attempts to prove God's existence by arguing that our idea of God is innate, like a “trademark” that the Creator stamped on our minds. In this essay, I argue that Descartes fails to prove that God exists, so the trademark argument, as it is often called, is unsound. This is because our idea of perfection does not have the representational content necessary to claim it is equatable to God. It does not have the representational content necessary to exceed our formal reality, meaning it is self-caused. I begin by clarifying the terms Descartes uses and summarizing his argument. Afterward, I address several well-known objections that do not succeed in defeating his argument. I devote the majority of my essay to arguing that our idea of God does not have enough objective reality to have more formal reality than we have, so it is viable to say that we are the cause of our idea of God.

The Trademark Argument

In order to understand the trademark argument, it is necessary to be familiar with the terms Descartes uses. First, Descartes makes a distinction between formal reality and objective reality. Formal reality is the independence that a thing has from other things, whereas objective reality is an idea's representational content. The idea of “tree,” for example, and the idea of “rock” have the same amount of formal reality insofar as they are both ideas but the content of the idea of “tree” differs from the content of the idea of “rock.”

Descartes distinguishes also between different levels of formal reality. There are three points on his scale of being that have varying degrees of formal reality: infinite substance, finite substance, and modes. Modes have the least amount of formal reality because they are a particular determination of a property. For example, an idea is a mode of the mind because it inheres in the mind's existence. This means that an idea cannot occur without the mind, so it is dependent on the mind to exist. In contrast, the mind, as a substance, does not inhere in anything for its existence. It does not rely on anything to exist except for itself. It follows that the mind has more formal reality than an idea insofar as it relies on less to sustain its existence. However, the mind is finite insofar as it comes into existence, qua life, goes out of existence, qua death, and Descartes will say relies on God as the sustainer of its existence. The mind is limited, whereas an infinite substance is not limited by anything. An infinite substance is the sustainer of its own existence, meaning it relies on nothing but itself to exist. Since it has the highest level of independence from other substances, it has the most formal reality.

The objective reality an idea has is proportional to its formal reality. To return to the point above, the idea of God and the idea of a rock are similar insofar as they are both ideas, but one represents a rock whereas the other represents an infinite substance. Because the idea of God represents more than what the idea of a rock represents, the idea of God has more formal reality than the idea of a rock. Likewise, since the idea of God has the most formal reality in what it represents, it is also the most objectively real.

The last thing to characterize is Descartes' causal principle. He claims that “there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect.” The efficient cause of X is the primary thing that brings it into existence, while the total cause of X includes its shape, matter, and purpose.¹ A NASA computer engineer, for example, is the total and efficient cause of a NASA supercomputer. The point of Descartes's causal principle is that there cannot be more formal reality in an effect than in a cause.² If I happened upon a blueprint for a NASA supercomputer, I would know with certainty that I, as a philosophy major, could not be the total

¹ See Williams 125 for a more comprehensive explanation of this claim.

² An instantiation of the self-evident truth that something can't come from nothing. See Tlumak, 33

or efficient cause of the blueprint. I know I am not the creator of the blueprint because I don't have the knowledge required to create it. In Descartes's terms, this is because there is nothing in me that could create something that contains the objective reality of the blueprint. I simply lack the sophisticated concepts that describe the representational content necessary to build a supercomputer. This line of reasoning leads Descartes to conclude that "what is more perfect cannot derive from what is less perfect."³ Just as it is evident that I cannot be the cause of the supercomputer, it is evident that something that is perfect has more formal reality than something that is less perfect. Therefore, the less perfect thing cannot be the cause of the greater perfection. I grant, however, that Descartes is correct to claim that an effect cannot have more formal reality than a cause.

Keeping his terms at hand, the following is a brief outline of Descartes' argument: Descartes rightly claims that by virtue of the fact that I can doubt, I have an idea of imperfection. This is because doubt reflects incomplete knowledge, which is an imperfect version of complete knowledge. To have an idea of imperfection *is to simultaneously* have an idea of perfection. This idea of perfection, he says, is synonymous with God. He adds that God must "be actually infinite so that nothing can be added to his perfection."⁴ Since nothing can come from nothing, what caused this idea to exist? Descartes argues that I cannot be the cause of my idea of God because I lack the attributes of perfection (i.e. omniscience, omnipotence, and so forth) contained within my idea of God. God has more formal reality than I have and the source of my idea of God must have at least as much formal reality as the idea has objective reality. And God is the only thing that meets this standard, so he must be the cause of the idea.

Below is the argument put in the premise-conclusion format:

1. I have an idea of perfection.
 - a. I have an idea of imperfection
 - i. I can doubt
 - ii. Doubt is imperfect knowledge
2. To have an idea of perfection is to have an idea of God
 - a. Contained within my idea of perfection is infinite knowledge.
 - b. Infinite knowledge is equivalent to God.
3. My idea of God must have a cause.
 - a. Nothing comes from nothing.
4. If my idea of God has the same formal reality as God, then only God could have caused it.
 - a. An effect cannot exceed the formal reality contained in its cause.
5. My idea of God has the same formal reality as God.
 - a. Contained within my idea of God is the objective reality in attributes of perfection (omnipotence, omnipresence, and so forth).
6. Therefore, God could have been the only cause of this idea implying he exists.

Failed Objections to the Trademark Argument

In this section, I address several objections to the trademark argument that do not go far enough. Explaining what they are and why they fail will help me illuminate the nature of my objection.

The first notable objection is raised by Pierre Gassendi who argues that we cannot conceive of infinity. Gassendi claims that, at best, we can only know *a part* of the infinite. This is

³ Descartes. Mediation II Pg 22 line 41

⁴ Descartes. Mediation III Pg 26 line 47

problematic because Descartes' argument hinges on our ability to have an idea of infinite substance. In his response Descartes grants that we cannot comprehend infinity, but defends his argument by claiming it is not necessary to comprehend infinity, only to understand it. Our innate conception of the infinite is more relevantly similar to a beginner at geometry's understanding of a triangle: "Just as it suffices to understand a figure bounded by three lines in order to have an idea of a whole triangle. So it is sufficient to understand a thing bounded by no limits in order to have a true and complete idea of the whole of the infinite"⁵. Therefore, Gassendi's objection fails to prove that the concept of God is not innate.

I mention this objection so as to distinguish it from the objection I make. My claim is not that we cannot conceive of the infinite, but that our conception of the infinite is not enough to argue that God is the total and efficient cause of the idea.

The second notable objection to Descartes's argument is that we arrive at the notion of the infinite by negating our idea of the finite. This is problematic because if our idea of the infinite is a negation of the finite, then its objective reality would be contained in our idea of what is finite. This means that our idea of the infinite would not have the same objective reality that Descartes claims it has. Descartes responds to this objection by claiming that our idea of infinitude presupposes the idea of finitude. This response is forceful, and the objection is worth mentioning so that I can emphasize that it is not my objection: that we are the cause of the idea of God. I will not argue that we come to our idea of God by means of negation.

David Hume makes a contentious objection to Descartes's argument by attacking the causal principle: *ex nihilo nihil fit*.⁶ Meaning that 'nothing comes from nothing'. That principle is the foundation for Descartes's claim that something perfect cannot be caused by something not perfect: an instantiation of the axiomatic claim. I can grant that Hume's objection is valid, but he sacrifices too much. Attacking the causal principle is contentious and unnecessary in bringing down Descartes's argument. Additionally, Descartes's application of the causal principle seems to be an exception to Hume's objection. By this, I mean that Descartes claims something with less formal reality cannot cause something with greater formal reality. Hume's objection does not directly respond to this application of the causal principle, but regardless of whether it does my objection is still preferable.

My Objection

In this section, I argue that my idea of God is not complex enough to have more objective reality than I have formal reality. If so, then it is fully possible that my idea of God comes simply from me. Below is a brief outline of my objections:

1. If our idea of God does not have the objective reality contained in God, then it does not exceed our formal reality.
 - a. To exceed our formal reality, the idea of God must have all of the representational content contained within God.
2. If our idea of God does not exceed our formal reality, then it is self-caused.
 - a. An effect can have as much formal reality as its cause.
3. Our idea of God cannot have the representational content contained in God.
 - a. The representational content contained in God is infinite.
 - b. We are finite.
4. Therefore, the idea of God does not exceed our formal reality, implying it is self-caused.

⁵ AT VII, 365-368: HR II 216-218

⁶ See Kenny (138) for a full explanation of this objection.

First, I grant Descartes' claim that a cause must have as much formal reality as an effect. This claim is an instantiation of the axiomatic principle that nothing can come from nothing, a principle that has proven difficult to contest. Because of this, it is better to approach Descartes' argument with a more creative objection - by taking it apart using his own terms. What if I wanted to reject a point mentioned above-namely, that as a philosophy major, I lack the knowledge required to make a blueprint for a NASA supercomputer - but what if I were to take this insult to heart? Suppose that in order to prove that philosophy major, qua philosophy major, is in fact capable, I locked myself in my room and vowed never to come out until I successfully drew the blueprint for a NASA supercomputer! To make my case, I would have to philosophize my way to a successful blueprint: it would not work for me to fall back on computer science.. Imagine that after years of strenuous effort, I finally presented what I regarded as a NASA supercomputer. If I succeeded, then I would be a cause that had less formal reality than its effect, something which Descartes causal principle implies is impossible. This is because I would have created something with more formal reality than the representational content contained within me. While it seems improbable, many would agree that it would be *possible* for me to successfully produce blueprints for the NASA supercomputer. However, are these people not severely mistaken? Wouldn't it be the case that my blueprint does not contain the same amount of objective reality as a real blueprint? One blueprint represents a supercomputer whereas the other represents an imitation of a blueprint. My blueprint may look like a real blueprint, but it is impossible for it to contain the concepts of a real blueprint without first me acquiring the knowledge to create such a blueprint. I place emphasis on the fact that not only is it improbable that I could recreate such a blueprint, but it is metaphysically *impossible*. In order to create a blueprint of a NASA supercomputer, I would have to have all the relevant concepts (computer science, math...etc) in my mind. In other words, I would need the objective reality containing a supercomputer to create the blueprint for one. Otherwise, it would only *appear* as if I had created a blueprint for a NASA supercomputer. I could not create a supercomputer by accident or change. This distinction will become relevant shortly.

Descartes' argument hinges on the claim that my idea of God must not have come from me because it has more objective reality than I have formal reality. However, he doesn't address the possibility that my idea of perfection does not have the representational content necessary to justify it exceeding my formal reality. In his response to Gassendi, Descartes makes the claim that infinity can be conceived as something that is bounded by no limits. Doesn't that claim reflect a simplistic understanding of infinity, one that minimizes the attributes Descartes previously ascribed to the infinite? If this were the case, then our idea of perfection would not have the objective reality necessary to claim it is the equivalent of God. It would seem that to have a complete idea of infinity- an idea whose objective reality exceeds my formal reality- I need a comprehensive understanding of the relevant aspects of infinity. To say infinity is boundless is analogous to saying that a NASA supercomputer is a "magic calculation box". Both my idea of the computer and my idea of perfection are similar insofar as they claim to represent more than what is contained in their objective reality. Compared to the idea of infinity Descartes claims is necessary to exceed our formal reality, this idea of infinity is relatively simple. In order for it to exceed my formal reality, it would be necessary for it to contain the representational content that exists in God, which is impossible because our minds are finite. The idea of the infinite that Descartes defends is analogous to claiming that a picture of a computer is a NASA supercomputer. If my innate idea of perfection were like a computer engineer's idea of the NASA

supercomputer, then Descartes might have an argument. However, it appears that our idea of God is more relevantly similar to my idea of the NASA supercomputer. To place a necessary emphasis on how silly it would be to claim that an understanding of infinity as “boundless” would exceed my formal reality, I’ve drawn my blueprint for a NASA supercomputer:



Anyone who comes across this drawing might be thoroughly impressed with my artistic ability, but they would be widely regarded as foolish if they argued it contains the same objective reality as an actual NASA supercomputer. Similarly, the same individual would be regarded as equally foolish if they were to claim their idea of God as ‘boundless’ is grounds to argue it exceeds their formal reality. This is because observing that something is a supercomputer is different than understanding what a supercomputer is. Similarly, to observe that something is infinite, insofar as it is boundless, is different than understanding what infinity is. To have a true idea of the supercomputer, I must have all the representational content contained in the supercomputer. To have a true idea of God, I must have the representational content contained in the idea of God. Which is impossible because I am finite whereas he is infinite. To reiterate, if my idea of God is more relevantly similar to my idea of the supercomputer, then it is metaphysically impossible for the idea to have a more formal reality than I do. Furthermore, it is necessarily the case that our simple understanding of what infinity is *cannot* possibly exceed our formal reality because our finite minds conceived of it. Since my idea of God is not as complex enough to exceed my formal reality, then it follows that the first and principal cause of the idea is more likely to be me. That means that our idea of perfection is not synonymous with what Descartes describes as “God” (an infinite, ethereal substance). As a meditator, I’ve deduced that I am imperfect and thus have an innate idea of imperfection. However, drawing the connection between God and my trivial idea of perfection is belittling what the idea of God is meant to represent. All Descartes has done is proven that I have an innate idea of imperfection by virtue of my incomplete knowledge, he has not gone far enough to defend the claim that I am not the cause of my idea of perfection. In that way, the idea of God is not innate but created by my independent substance.

Objections to my Objection

One might object by claiming that I am not the cause of my idea of God. They would likely argue that I could have arrived at the idea of God from external sources. For instance, an empiricist would argue that we arrive at our idea of infinity by “extending” our observed concepts indefinitely. However, I do not need to address whether that is the case to tear down Descartes' argument. It certainly might be the case that the cause of my idea of God comes from meditating on my senses, but that's irrelevant to taking down the major force of my objection.

The move I need to make is to prove that my idea of God does not have a more formal reality than I do, meaning that it's *possible* that I am the cause of the idea. I have adequately defended that position.

A more forceful objection would be to claim that if I were the efficient and total cause of my idea of perfection I would have given myself various qualities of perfection. By this, they would claim that I cannot be the cause of my idea of perfection because as a cause, I would have made myself perfect. To respond to this objection, I will reiterate my point. In the same way that my drawing of a supercomputer is not a representation of what a supercomputer truly is, the inherent idea of perfection contained within us is not a true representation of perfection. This does not mean that I am the creator and sustainer of my existence, but that my idea of God does not prove that he is the creator and sustainer of my existence. Someone who objects to my argument by claiming that if I had the same qualities as my idea of perfection, then I would have made myself perfect, does not understand that my objections do not conclude that I am the creator of my substance. It only concludes that I am the creator of my idea of perfection.

Conclusion

Descartes makes a commendable argument for the existence of God. Connecting the idea that perfection presupposes an idea of imperfection to the causal principle is extremely clever and philosophically robust. However, while simultaneously admitting that our minds are finite, Descartes claims that we can have an idea of infinity that is complex enough to contain more objective reality than we have in our formal substance. Upon further examination, this proves to be inadequate in understanding what the idea of infinity is meant to represent. In our limited understanding, our idea of infinity cannot be equated with the objective reality contained in what the idea of God represents.

Even though Descartes fails to prove that the idea of God is innate, it does not stand to reason that God does not exist. I am only opposed to the notion that the idea of God is innate, and that proves his existence. Additionally, it should not be confused with the claim that we can know nothing about God's nature. Unfortunately for Descartes though, this knowledge can only be known as *a posteriori*. There seems to be a lot we can deduce regarding the nature of divinity, however, it is apparent that our idea of divinity is bound to be more similar to my idea of the supercomputer than to what a computer engineer imagines when he thinks of a supercomputer.