

DESCARTES, GOD AND THE EVIL SPIRIT

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In the **Meditations** ¹ Descartes presents two arguments for the existence of God: the argument from representative reality and the ontological argument. The success of these arguments is essential to the overall programme of the **Meditations**. In his attempt to find something of which he can be absolutely certain Descartes supposes

...not that there is a supremely good God... but that there is an evil spirit, who is supremely powerful and intelligent, and does his utmost to deceive me. (p. 65)

Unless the possibility of the evil spirit is ruled out the existence of a benevolent God cannot be appealed to in the reconstruction of a secure view of reality. However, the arguments Descartes offers fail to establish God's existence and the evil spirit's non-existence since exactly analogous arguments can be constructed which support the belief that the evil spirit exists.

The argument from representative reality is as follows:

I

1. Suppose some one of my ideas has so high a degree of representative reality that I am sure that the perfection so represented does not inhere in myself, either in its own proper form or in some higher form; and that therefore I myself cannot be the cause of that idea. From this, I must conclude, it necessarily follows that I am not alone in the world: there is something else — the cause of the idea in question. (**Meditations** p. 82)

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¹ All references to Descartes are to **Descartes: Philosophical Writings**, (translated and edited by E. Anscombe and P. Geach, Nelson, 1954).

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2. I have the idea of God as omnipotent, omniscient omnibenevolent, and the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being has so high a degree of representative reality that it could not originate in myself.

Therefore

3. There exists a being in which the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence inhere.

The structure of the argument is straightforward. It is

1. $p \longrightarrow q$
2. p
- ∴ 3. q

However an argument of the same form can be constructed by deleting 2 and substituting 2'.

- 2' I have the idea of an evil spirit who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent, and the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent being has so high a degree of representative reality that it could not originate in myself.

1 and 2' yield

- 3'. There exists a being in which the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnimalevolence inhere.

What Descartes must do is show that these apparently similar arguments are in some way disanalogous. One way of doing this is to argue that my idea of the evil spirit is somehow parasitic on my idea of God. The detail of the argument would have to show that the idea of omnimalevolence necessarily derives from the idea of omnibenevolence, and hence the second argument from representative reality would be unsound. An argument of Descartes' to this conclusion will be considered presently and rejected.

II

In the **Fifth Meditation** Descartes presents a version of the ontological argument which goes roughly as follows:

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1. I have the idea of the all-perfect being.
2. The all-perfect being would be less than perfect if it did not exist.
- ∴ 3. God exists.

Descartes claims that

... it is not less absurd to think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking a certain perfection), than to think of a hill without a valley. (p. 103)

Our claim is that the all-perfect being may as well be the evil spirit of the **First Meditation**. Obviously Descartes would deny this. But why? He says

By the word "God" I mean a substance that is infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and the Creator of myself and anything else that may exist. (p. 85)

Thus far nothing conflicts with the suggestion that the all-perfect being is omnimalevolent. Descartes' reason for believing the all-perfect being to be omnibenevolent is to be found in the account he offers of malevolence. He comments:

How could I understand my doubting and desiring — that is, my lacking something and not being altogether perfect — if I had no idea of a more perfect being as a standard by which to recognise my own defects. (p. 85)

and

(God) ... must possess all the perfections of which I can attain any notion ... and he must be liable to no defects. From this it is clear enough that he cannot be deceitful; for it is obvious by the light of nature that any fraud or deceit depends upon some defect. (p. 91)

Descartes apparently believes that benevolence is a perfection and that malevolence is a defect in perfection or a lack of benevolence.. And so according to Descartes the idea of malevolence **derives** from the idea of benevolence.

However, Descartes' account of malevolence is inadequate. For whilst a malevolent man may be a man who just fails to act benevolently an individual who is malevolent may **do** something more positive, more than just fail to act benevolently. Thus at least some kinds of malevolence, and hence omnimalevolence, cannot be understood in terms of the lack of benevolence account of malevolence.

Maybe the point of this reply to Descartes is more clearly seen if we consider the suggestion that benevolence is just the lack of malevolence. Does this suggestion adequately characterize benevolence? Surely not, for some kinds of benevolence, and hence omnibenevolence, involve doing some positive good rather than **merely refraining** from doing evil. So while it is plausible that the lack of knowledge may adequately characterize ignorance, and lack of power may adequately characterize weakness, it is not the case that lack of benevolence adequately characterizes malevolence. In both the ontological argument and the argument from representative reality Descartes begs the question in favour of God and against the evil spirit by assuming that the all-perfect being is morally perfect. It may be that the all-perfect being is immorally perfect, and Descartes' refusal to count perfect immorality among possible perfections is totally unsupported.

Our conclusion must be that Descartes' two arguments for God's existence fail. Our tactic of considering whether the premises of such arguments permit of being reasonably tampered with so as to yield the conclusion that a God unworthy of worship exists is not new. It has been exploited by Stephen M. Cahn² against "the best of all possible worlds" argument, and before him, making the same point, by Bertrand Russell.³ That this is possible for every such argument has not been one of our claims. But it's an interesting thought.

² Stephen M. Cahn, "Cacodaemony", *Analysis*, 37.2.

³ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, George (Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1946) p. 571.