

## Descartes' Trademark Argument<sup>1</sup>

Descartes provides three arguments for the existence of God, his Trademark argument, a cosmological argument, and an ontological argument. In the Trademark argument, Descartes tries to prove the existence of God from just the idea of GOD as a being that is, among other things, supremely powerful and supremely perfect. He argues that the concept of GOD is innate, like a 'trademark' that our creator has stamped on our minds. (For more on innate concepts, see the handout 'Locke's argument against innate concepts'.)

### THE TRADEMARK ARGUMENT

Descartes begins by identifying three possible sources of any idea:

1. the idea derives from something outside my mind, such as I experience in sense perception;
2. I have invented it;
3. it is innate. (Descartes explains this as 'it derives from my own nature', but he also uses the usual innatist argument that it can't be learned from experience (or invention).)

We cannot in general be certain which of the three types of cause an idea has. Which is the source of the concept GOD?

Before answering that question, Descartes embarks on a long defence of the claim that a cause must have at least as much 'reality' as its effect, and that the cause of an idea must have as much reality as what the idea is an idea *of*. Both the claim and the argument are very puzzling, so we set them aside to explore further below.

For now, here is a common-sense example from Bernard Williams: if we discover a picture of a sophisticated machine, even though it's just a *picture*, we think it must be the product of an advanced society or a highly fertile imagination. It is what it is a picture *of* that makes us think the cause is sophisticated. Where could the 'sophistication' of the machine in the picture come from except a mind that is itself just as sophisticated? The cause must have as much 'reality' as the machine in the picture.

With this in place, Descartes argues:

- P1. I have the concept GOD.
- P2. The concept GOD is a concept of something infinite and perfect.

---

<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 161-8

- P3. As a mind, a thinking substance, I can think up (create) many ideas, including ideas of people and physical objects.
- P4. But I am finite, while the concept GOD is a concept of something infinite.
- C1. Therefore, it is a concept of something with more reality than my own mind.
- P5. The cause of the concept GOD must have as much reality as what the concept is of.
- C2. Therefore, my mind could not have created it.
- P6. The only possible cause is God.
- C3. Therefore, God exists.

Descartes considers and rejects an objection to (P4), namely that I have all the perfections I attribute to God, and so could invent the concept. But given that I am in doubt, I clearly do not have infinite knowledge - I am not infinite, but finite.

How could we have acquired the concept GOD? Descartes has argued that he couldn't have invented it. He then adds that it does not derive from sense experience (it isn't something that arises 'unexpectedly' as do other ideas of sense). So by elimination, the concept GOD must be innate, built into the structure of our minds by God.

### **DEGREES OF REALITY**

Descartes' argument rests on claims (C1) and (P5), but these are difficult and highly controversial. The idea of 'degrees of reality' is strange to us, but was a standard part of medieval metaphysics.

- 1. A 'substance' is defined as something that can exist independently, such as the mind, God and physical objects.
- 2. An 'attribute' is a property of a substance - the attribute of mind is thought, while extension (having spatial dimensions) is an attribute of physical objects.
- 3. A 'mode' is a particular determination of a property. So ideas are modes of the mind - specific ways of thinking. Being specific sizes or shapes are modes of physical objects.

A substance has more reality than an attribute, because a property cannot exist without a substance, and so is dependent on it. There can be no thoughts without a thinker. Modes, therefore, also have less reality than substances. Ideas are modes of the attribute 'thought', which is possessed by thinking substances.

Descartes applies these thoughts to cause and effect. He simply takes it to be a clear and distinct idea that the cause of something must contain at least as much reality as its effect. From this, he derives the claim that something can't come from nothing. But in fact, it is easier for us to understand this the other way around - something can't come from nothing, and so whatever is part of the effect must have originated in the cause. For instance, a stone can only be created by or from something that contains the qualities of the stone (what is needed to make a stone). Or again, something hot can't derive its heat from something cold.

Ideas are more complicated. As modes of thought, the 'intrinsic reality' of all ideas is the same, and less than the reality of my mind, which is a substance. But ideas also represent something, e.g. an object, a size, a tune, a mind, God. Some of these things - object, mind, God - are substances; others - a size, a tune - are modes. The degree of reality of the thing that the thought is about determines the idea's 'representative reality'. Just as we need to be able to explain where the heat in something hot comes from, so we need to be able to explain the representative reality of an idea. Just as heat comes from something hot, so an idea with a certain representative reality must come from something with at least as much intrinsic reality. So ideas of substance can only be caused by substances; ideas of modes can be caused by either modes or substances.

We can now apply this to the concept GOD. As a concept, it is a mode of thought, and so it seems my mind - a substance - could cause it, just as my mind causes many other ideas. But the special features of what GOD is a concept *of*, namely something infinite and perfect, mean that it has a representative reality *greater* than the intrinsic reality of my mind. If I invented the concept, GOD would contain things - infinity and perfection - that are not in its cause, because I am imperfect and finite. But this is impossible - there must be as much reality in the cause as in the effect. So only God, being perfect and infinite, could create a concept of something perfect and infinite.

## **EMPIRICIST RESPONSES TO THE TRADEMARK ARGUMENT**

Empiricists will reject Descartes' Trademark argument as it claims both that the idea of GOD is innate, and that we can prove the existence of God using rational intuition and deduction. We noted above that claims (C1) and (P5) are particularly problematic, and it is these claims that empiricist objections focus upon.

### Is the concept of GOD innate?

David Hume rejects the claim that the concept GOD cannot be created by our minds. We can form this concept by starting from ideas of finitude: 'The idea of God - meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being - comes from extending beyond all limits the qualities of goodness and wisdom that we find in our own minds.' In 'extending beyond all limits' the ideas of finite goodness and wisdom we have from experience, we create an abstract negation of what is finite. Thus, we create ideas of what is NOT-FINITE (INFINITE) and NOT-IMPERFECT (PERFECT).

However, Descartes considers and rejects just this proposal. The idea of imperfection or lack depends upon an idea of perfection; we can't recognise that we are imperfect *unless* we have an idea of perfection with which to compare ourselves.

This argument seems to work in other cases, e.g. REAL and REALITY. It is intuitively plausible that our concept REAL is not an abstraction from NOT-UNREAL - how could we first have experiences of what is unreal on which UNREAL is based? Our experiences are fundamentally of what is real, so REAL is the primary concept. But this is not as clearly true for the cases of PERFECTION and INFINITY - we could first experience limits and then create a new concept UNLIMITED and then use this

concept to create the concepts PERFECTION and INFINITY.

Furthermore, PERFECTION and INFINITY - if they mean more than 'not imperfect' and 'not finite' - are arguably challenging and unclear concepts. What is it, exactly, to think not merely of the *absence of limits*, but of something for which there could be no limits? Yet Descartes claims that we have a very powerful - clear and distinct - positive idea of God as perfect and infinite, and not some hazy notion of something indefinitely great. Yet he also accepts that, as a finite mind, he cannot 'grasp' this thought, but he merely 'understands' it. With this admission, his claim that the concept of GOD is both clear and distinct and involves a positive conception of God's infinity and perfection is unpersuasive.

#### Knowledge of causes

Descartes assumes that all ideas have a cause. But Hume argues in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, that this is not something we can know.

The claims 'everything has a cause' and 'something cannot come out of nothing' are not analytically true. 'Some things do not have a cause' is not a *contradiction in terms* like 'Some bachelors are married' is. Of course, from our experience, we have good reason to think that everything has a cause, but this is still only a contingent truth; it may be false. We cannot show that it holds without exception.

Second, if we can't know that it is impossible for something to come out of nothing, then we can't know, either, that a cause must contain at least as much 'reality' as its effect. What causes what is something we must discover from experience; we cannot know it by a priori reason.