Diálogos, 84 (2004) | pp. 71-76

THE IDEA OF GOD AND DESCARTES' PROOFS OF GOD'S EXISTENCE IN THE THIRD MEDITATION[1]

STANLEY TWEYMAN

I have spent the past thirty-five years studying and interpreting the writings of philosophers. The majority of these thinkers are in the early modern period of philosophy - the period from Descartes to Kant. Throughout this time, I have had meta-concerns about the nature of what I do, although until now, I have not thought about exegesis in a systematic way. In this paper, then, I will attempt to analyze what I do. Although my work is not of uniform quality or difficulty, I will select for discussion one effort at exegesis I have published, which I will treat as representative of whatever talents I possess and contribution I may be able to make. I select for discussion my paper "Truth, No Doubt: Descartes' Proof That What He Perceives Clearly And Distinctly Must Be True".[2]

I am not here concerned to review this paper in its entirety. Rather, I should like to begin by pointing out what led me to deal with this topic in Descartes in the way I did. In the third meditation, Descartes informs us that, although no deception is possible in regard to the clear and distinct apprehension of his existence, he is concerned about other clear and distinct ideas, particularly those in mathematics. Clear and distinct conceptions in mathematics are as psychologically irresistible as is the connection between deception and existence; only in the former, however, is he concerned that a deceiving deity may have so constituted his

---

[1] All references to Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* are taken from the second edition, edited and with Introduction by Stanley Tweyman, Caravan Books, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2002. All references to other writings of Descartes are taken from the Haldane and Ross two-volume edition *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Cambridge, at the University Press, 1970.

[2] *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 19, Number 2, July 1981, pp. 237-258.

mind that he is deceived in regard to all mathematical calculations and theorems. Accordingly, Descartes sets for himself the task of determining whether he was created by God, and if he finds that this is the case, he must also inquire whether God may be a deceiver: without a knowledge of these two truths, he can never be certain of anything, other than his own existence.

As an undergraduate, and later as a graduate student, I was taught that Descartes' knowledge of God was obtained (or 'proved') in the two proofs of God's existence in the third meditation. Two matters preoccupied my teachers and classmates regarding the third meditation: 1) what does Descartes means by the 'objective reality' of an idea and the 'formal reality' of the cause of an idea? and 2) why is Descartes prepared to accept the causal maxim introduced in the third meditation when, in the first two meditations, he attempts to doubt everything which he formerly thought he knew?

A number of matters bothered me about our classroom discussions, and I should add, scholarly publications on Descartes' philosophy. First, Descartes never refers to what he is offering on God in the third meditation as a 'proof', and yet we are referring to his 'proofs' of God's existence. Second, Descartes introduces the hypothesis of a deceiving deity as a means of questioning the truth of mathematics, and yet, the 'proofs' in the third meditation involve a number of calculations centering on objective and formal reality. Third, we are told in numerous passages (see for example, *The Preface to the Principles of Philosophy)* that the *Meditations* contains Descartes' metaphysics, and is, therefore, seeking the first principles of human knowledge, 'amongst which is the explanation of the principal attributes of God." (HRI, 211). If this is the case, I wondered, how can Descartes be offering (deductive) 'proofs' of God's existence in the third meditation? Fourth, in the Replies to the Second Set of Objections, Descartes contrasts the method of geometry - he calls it 'synthesis' - with his method in the *Meditations* - he refers to it as 'analysis' - and indicates that analysis is needed in order to unprejudice the mind, focus our attention on the appropriate ideas, and assist in apprehending the self-evidence of our metaphysical first principles.

The cumulative effect of these four concerns was to convince me that we had been going about our study of the third meditation incorrectly. An interpretation of the discussion of God in this meditation is needed which explains, or is at least compatible with, each of the four concerns enumerated above. It is possible, therefore, to rule out an approach to

studying a philosopher by noting that this approach is incompatible with other things, which the philosopher says.

Is there an equally straightforward approach to showing that one's interpretation of a philosopher is correct? My answer to this question is less straightforward, because it is not, as we shall see, simply a matter of pointing out the appropriate passages which support a particular interpretation.

Descartes' intuitive treatment of God is offered in the last three paragraphs in the third meditation in which he speaks of the idea of God as "innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me", and that God has placed this idea within him "to be like the mark of the workman imprinted on his work; and it is likewise not essential that the mark shall be something different from the work itself" (*Meditations*, 71). In the Reply to Objections V, Descartes attempts to clarify the latter by indicating that his idea of God stands to the idea he has of himself as the technique of a painting stands to the painting of which it is the technique (HR II, 221).

When Descartes discovers the necessary connection between thought and existence in the second meditation, he finds that he can trust that this connection is true, because in this case, both thought and existence are self-referential, that is, it is *my* thought and *my* existence to which I am attending, and not a copy or representation of my thought and my existence. Therefore, in this case, there is no concern as to whether what I am thinking corresponds to what I am thinking about. Now, in telling us that the idea of God is contained in the idea he has of himself and that this idea is like the mark of the workman imprinted on his work, Descartes is clearly attempting to avoid the problem of correspondence once again. That is, if all that I find in the idea of the self is self-evident (or transparent), and if I find that the idea of God is necessarily contained in the idea of the self in a non-copy manner,[3] then, Descartes would have us believe, I must accept that I was created by God.

But this account has a serious difficulty. Consider the following illustration. A clever art counterfeiter masters the technique employed by Apelles and produces a counterfeit painting, which deceives the art world. The fact that the technique of the artist is *in* the painting, and not simply represented in the painting, does not prevent the forgery from

---

[3] As the technique of a painting is contained *in* the painting.

occurring. Similarly, Descartes discovers what he regards as God's mark imprinted on the idea of the self: why should he trust what he finds? It cannot be because he has 'proved' that the objective reality of the idea of God could only have come from God (who possesses formally what the idea of God possesses objectively), given his doubts about mathematical calculations. The idea of God purports to provide knowledge of the *cause* of Descartes' existence; in apprehending the idea of God, Descartes accepts that he was created by a supremely perfect Being. However, since the perfect Being is not apprehended in this idea (as thought is apprehended in the idea of thought), Descartes once again faces the problem which he raised in regard to intuited necessary connections in mathematics, namely, what guarantee does he have that, because he must think ideas in a certain way, the relata must stand to each other as he find he must think that they do.

The proofs of God's existence are themselves based on calculations and, therefore, are dubitable in the way mathematics is dubitable; hence, they cannot be of assistance here. And since the intuition of the idea of God is rendered suspect in that this intuition claims to provide causal knowledge of this idea - and of the self possessing this idea - it follows that Descartes has no assurance that the idea of God which he possesses comes from God. He has no way of disproving that the idea of God which he has, and which is inseparably connected with the awareness he has of himself, was not given to him by the evil genius. Accordingly, he also cannot accept as reliable the repugnancy he intuits between the idea of a supremely perfect being and deception. A deceiving genius might have so constituted him that he cannot but think that God is the cause of his existence and that the cause of his existence cannot be a deceiver. The self's existence is indubitable and true (for the reasons discussed earlier), but claims to know the cause of the self and its non-deceiving nature through the idea of God can be subjected to doubt. Further, since Descartes' demonstration in the fourth meditation of the truth of the principle concerning clarity and distinctness depends upon a knowledge of God as his creator and as not being a deceiver, it follows, from the considerations put forth above, that he has also been unsuccessful in establishing the truth of this principle.

What interests me about my treatment of the idea of God as Descartes discusses it at the end of the third meditation is this: my interpretation is based on a number of passages in Descartes' writings (both in the *Meditations* and other works), and (I trust) helps us to understand

the role served by the 'proofs' of God's existence in the third meditation[4] and the nature of the intuition through which Descartes claims to obtain his knowledge of God. However, once I arrived at the point where I developed the critical material presented in the last few paragraphs, my confidence in my interpretation was affected. That is, I hold, and cannot rid myself of the view, that if I can generate an interpretation of a thinker such as Descartes, and if I am then able to generate a criticism of the philosopher in virtue of other things that s/he says, then my reaction invariably is that I have failed to understand the philosopher. For, surely, (my dialogue with myself continues), had Descartes ever actually entertained my interpretation of what he says about the idea of God, he, too, would have formed the critical comments I have developed here. As a result, he, too, would have seen that, given the manner in which he proceeds, the enterprise could not successfully go beyond the second meditation, and the necessary connections that he discovers in this meditation.

I recognize, of course, that my response can be regarded as idiosyncratic - that this is how I happen to respond. It does not necessarily represent how others respond, or how others ought to respond, or even (it seems) how I ought to respond. Nevertheless, this meta-effort has taught me that whenever I do textual exegesis, there is a concern which any interpretation I put forth must satisfy: it must not be possible to find an internal criticism of the interpretation of the thinker being developed. That someone, somewhere, has shown or will show errors in Descartes' philosophy bothers me not at all, and would normally not cause me to alter my view of the accuracy or correctness of my interpretation. But when Descartes urges that, prior to knowing that God exists as his creator, only those intuitions of necessary connections can be accepted as true where the relata are self-referential, he has established a criterion of truth to which all such necessary connections must be subjected. My concern with my interpretation of Descartes' treatment of the intuition through which God is known through the idea of the self is based entirely on this criterion.

---

[4] This point is developed fully in "Truth, No Doubt: Descartes' Proof ..."

I could take the opposite view, holding that Descartes did not see the inconsistency in the text that my study has revealed. However, my inclination is to hold that Descartes has a full and proper grasp of the material he presented, and if an inconsistency were present in the text, he would have altered his philosophy accordingly.

York University