

Descartes's First Argument for the existence of God

I have an idea of God.

The cause of an idea must formally or eminently contain at least as much reality as is objectively contained in (i.e. represented by) the idea.

When I compare my idea of myself with my idea of God I see that I contain less than is objectively contained in that idea, because I doubt and make mistakes whereas the idea is of a being with perfect knowing powers.

I am only aware of these defects because I have an idea of some more perfect state in contrast to which they appear as defects; otherwise, I would simply preen myself on the powers I do have

I could not be the cause of my idea of that more perfect state.

Therefore, some other being must have caused my idea of that more perfect state, and that being must be infinitely perfect.

A parallel argument

I have an idea of body.

The cause of an idea must formally or eminently contain at least as much reality as is objectively contained in the idea.

When I compare what is clearly and distinctly known in my idea of myself with my idea of body I see that this knowledge contains less than is objectively contained in that idea, because I know myself only as a thinking being, not as an extended being.

Therefore, I, considered as purely thinking being, could not be the cause of my idea of body.

Therefore, either I must have a body, or other extended things must exist to cause my idea of body.

Descartes's reasons for rejecting the parallel argument

My idea of body is an idea of something that is extended, enduring, numbered, coloured, etc.

I can get the idea of a thing (substance) from myself.

I can get the idea of endurance from myself.

I can get the idea of numbers from my ideas.

Descartes's reasons for rejecting the parallel argument, cont.'d

My ideas of sensible qualities like heat & cold or bright and dark come in opposed pairs.

One or both of the members of these pairs could be a “materially false” idea that represents nothing as if it were something.

I have to be the cause of my materially false ideas (because *ex hypothesi* they come from nothing outside me and all ideas must have a cause).

Since my ideas of all the sensible qualities are either materially false or are so much like materially false ideas that they can be confused with them, I could be the eminent cause of all of them.

Descartes's reasons for rejecting the parallel argument, cont.'d

Because a thing is something that can exist on its own, whereas a mode is an idea of a specific way a thing is modified, the idea of a thing is more real than the idea of any mode.

The cause of a greater effect can be the (*eminent*) cause of a lesser effect, even if it does not formally contain that effect.

So I could be the eminent cause of my idea of extension.

Objections to the Argument against the existence of body

If I could actually be the cause of my ideas of sensible qualities, then the blind ought to be able to form ideas of colours.

The fact that they can't suggests that the formation of these ideas at least depends on circumstances that are outside of our control.

We must therefore be affected by *something*, even if it may not be exactly like what is represented in our ideas.

And how could that thing cause ideas of colour if it is not coloured somehow?

Objections to the
Argument against the existence of body,
Cont.'d

If I could be the cause of my ideas of extension

— even though I am not myself extended —

merely because I am a substance and extension is a mere mode

then I ought to be able to cause of any mode whatsoever, even though I myself do not possess that mode

But the idea of God is just the idea of the *ens realissimum*, that is, the idea of the being that possesses all the “real” or positive qualities

If I can cause the idea of any one positive quality, whether I possess that quality or not, then I ought to be able to cause all of them, and so be the cause of the idea of God.

Objections to the
Argument against the existence of body,
Cont.'d

The appeal to eminent causality is flatly inconsistent with the supposedly “clear and distinct” intuition that a cause must contain whatever is found in its effect.

However “close” to nothing a sensible quality might be, it is not nothing but something and whatever causes it had better have that quality in itself, or it is coming out of nothing.

And the case is even worse for qualities like extension, which are taken to be “real” and yet represented by ideas that I could cause “eminently” as an unextended substance

To allow for the possibility of eminent causes is tantamount to rejecting the principle that a cause must contain its effect.

Objections to which Descartes had some answer

I could form the idea of an infinitely perfect being simply by contrast with my idea of myself.

Reply

There is no way I could form an idea of a reality or perfection that I lack by looking at myself.

I only give myself ideas of those realities I possess.

So, merely by looking at myself I could get no idea that I am imperfect.

I can only get that idea by comparison with something greater.

So something greater must exist.

Objections to which Descartes had some answer, cont.'d

I could be the eminent cause of my idea of God, the way I am of materially false ideas.

Reply

Materially false ideas are ideas of nothing real, but the idea of God objectively contains an infinity of real qualities.

I can only be the cause of those real qualities I find within myself, not of those I am aware of, yet do not myself possess.

(This reply is inconsistent with his claim that an unextended substance should be able to produce ideas of extension and its modes)

Objections to which Descartes had some answer, cont.'d

The argument appeals to a causal principle and to claims about degrees of reality possessed by different things.

But how do I know that these things are true?

My knowledge can't be based on clear and distinct perception, because we need to prove the existence of God before we can be in a position to trust our clear and distinct perceptions.

To appeal to clear and distinct perceptions to prove the existence of God while appealing to the existence of God to justify clear and distinct perceptions is to argue in a circle.

Reply

It is impossible to doubt clear and distinct perceptions when we are having them.

It is only possible to doubt them afterwards, when we remember having had them, but do not review their evidence and instead think we might be victims of a deceiver.

(this is always a problem with long chains of argument, where you have to remember the earlier premises)

To the extent that the proof of the existence of God can be perceived all at once, it is indubitable and suffices to remove the deceiver objection.

Admittedly, some people might not be bright enough to be able to hold the whole argument in their heads at once

So here is a second way of running the argument that might assist them in more readily intuiting its evidence

Descartes's Second Argument for the existence of God

I exist.

The cause of a greater effect can bring about any lesser effect.

Were I to have caused myself, I would have to have the power to bring a thinking thing (substance) into being out of nothing.

Anything that has the power to carry off such a feat, should surely have the power to give the thinking being it creates some better powers of knowledge than the ones I have

So, were I to have caused myself, I would have been able to make myself immune to deception

But I am not immune to deception, even though I would like to be.

So I can't have caused myself.

This same reasoning applies to any other being powerful enough to have caused me.

- either it caused itself, in which case it should have made itself all perfect and so would be God

- or it needed some other cause.

But there can't be an infinite regress of causes.

So, there must have been a first, self-caused cause (i.e., God).

What if I simply always existed?

What is past no longer exists.

So, the mere passage of time suffices to destroy the universe.

It continues to exist only because it gets recreated from moment to moment.

Consequently, the same force and power is required to sustain something in existence as was required to bring it into existence in the first place.

So, whatever caused me to exist has to continue to cause me to exist.

So, it has to continue to exist.

So, it has to have a cause of its own continued existence.

Since there can't be an infinite regress of causes, there must be some cause that sustains itself in existence and so has the power to give itself all perfections.

What if I was created by a committee of individually imperfect beings working together to produce a more perfect result?

Whatever it was that created me, it created me containing an idea of God

The cause of an idea must contain everything that is found in the object of the idea

Even if all the other perfections were distributed among the members of the committee, there is one that could not be:

the unity of those perfections in a single substance

as that is part of my idea of God, nothing less than God could have produced it.