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Term Paper
Descartes

“Deconstructing Descartes”

In Descartes' trademark argument, he suggests and attempts to prove that the existence of God is not merely an idea formulated in the minds of finite beings, but rather this is impossible and his idea of God, an infinite supremely perfect being, must necessarily come from an outside source, namely God. Before credit is given to Descartes, though he may be well deserving, a more thorough examination of his argument must take place and be confronted on all sides, lest be found weak and wanting.

A formal and objective reality of ideas exists in my mind, or any given mind for that matter. What does this mean, two converging modes of idea? First, the formal reality of ideas suggests that all representations of spatial, and mental things, or substances is equal; that is they all have the same reality in the mind. The objective reality of ideas moves away from this and creates a hierarchal set of realities corresponding to any perceived entity. A simpler break down would be: “I have an idea of something, but I also have an idea of a representation of something in the real world”. This real world entity is the formal reality; what we see, hear, and smell is its formal reality. This method by which Descartes attempts to categorize all things seems a bit shaky. Is there really a difference between two different ideas of the same thing in my mind? This is only one question we must ask ourselves, the other being: does the objective reality of an idea contain as much reality as the formal reality of something? Let us, for the sake of brevity, say that yes, there are two different modes of ideas, the formal and objective reality of ideas, and by doing so, humor Descartes for the time being.

The second question being far more pertinent, gives rise to the idea of cause and effect, or the Principle of Universal Causation and the Principle of Non-inferiority of Causes, i.e., everything must have a cause and everything cause must contain as much reality as its effect. Can it then be said that the formal reality of an object is the cause or effect of the objective reality of an idea of that object? Descartes seems

to think so. In keeping with his theory, something cannot exist in the mind without there being a sufficient cause for this idea; a mental or physical representation must therefore exist outside the mind. This would therefore mean that our objective reality is really subjective, dependent upon what we have seen, and think we perceive in the real world. The theory of two diverging modes of idea coupled with a formal reality of an object is more problematic when scrutinized more closely.

I hold in my hand a crayon. In my mind there is the idea of a crayon, no more significant than anything else, but there is also an idea of what the crayon is in reality. This is a representation, a creation based on perception. I have seen a crayon and therefore know what it is supposed to be and look like. If we melt the crayon, it is no longer titled under the heading "crayon," but simply "wax". Nevertheless, my idea of the reality falls short of the actual reality because it is a perception. It is a combination of perception, thoughts, and expectation of what I think a crayon should and ought to look like. I can therefore argue that our ideas themselves are also influenced, necessarily, by perception. Once that crayon has become wax, I call it by another name, and likewise, if we were to break the even smaller bonds of this wax, separating it into its simplest parts, it would no longer be called wax, but Carbon, Hydrogen, and any other elements that reside in it. Therefore, our ideas are dependent upon a reality, but the reality is not dependent upon our ideas. Our idea of this crayon is molded by what changes it undergoes in reality. It could therefore be argued that our ideas of reality are somewhat more skewed and rely on perception rather than being independent of the senses, after all, is that not what perception is, a combinatory mixing of the senses into something recognizable. If this is the case, there would be no 'true' objective reality in the mind, only subjective. For it to be completely objective, a child would have to have a clear understanding of God, not yet influenced by the beliefs and ideals of others, but this is not the case, nor has it ever been.

In order for the reality of ideas to work, or at least be reasonable, Descartes would then need to separate thoughts from ideas, and most notably the imagination from reasoning. This separation would need to be complete and in no way could one affect the other. For if the imagination or perception played any significant role in our reasoning, it would be impossible to have any idea that could not be called into question, this stemming from Descartes' argument that nothing is certain, by way of illusion, dream, and an evil genius. Descartes' theory on the separation of the imagination and intellect or the mind, divides them into two distinct categories by which neither can cross nor interfere with the other. The imagination is

purely bodily, consisting of mental pictures only and no concepts; whereas the mind is purely mental, containing no images but only concepts. By this definition, it would seem that the imagination is influenced by the senses, since it is concerned with only corporeal things, things with which we have experience or desire to experience. However, the mind separates itself from the senses and acts in accordance with reason. The mind is not creative and when it becomes so, it ceases being solely the mind, but also the imagination. To envision God, or have a clear idea of God is arguably the work of the imagination. I have not seen God, just as I have not seen dragons or fairies, but to dwell on fairies using only the mind is impossible. A representation of an entity must be created in order for us to envision a fairy. Rightfully so, it is the same with God. Descartes suggests that since he has an idea of God, an equal or greater formal reality must be present, author to this idea. However, for our idea to be based on a formal reality of something we have never seen, the imagination would play an intricate role in the construction of said God.

We continue moving forward with the idea of God; “I have an idea of God”. But the real statement should be; “I have one idea of God”. Descartes seems to think that by stating that our idea of God is of an all powerful, omnipotent being, necessarily we think and are able to perceive him as being so. “For nothing more perfect than God, or even as perfect as God, can be thought or imagined” (Descartes 78). While this may be true, and by definition it would have to be, otherwise he or she would not be God; who of us can claim they have a distinct idea of the word infinite? He goes on to say “.....the idea that I have of God is the most true, the most clear and distinct” (77) This statement represents what he thinks his idea of God is, something clear and distinct beyond understanding of anything else. However, when I truly think about God and his infinite existence, my mind goes on to whiteness and I can perceive nothing farther than my own existence and inadequate mental capacities. I do not have an idea of God, because I cannot perceive the infinite. I can only perceive things in my own existence, or of a finite nature. There is nothing, thought of as being infinite, that I can dwell on and perceive in a clear and undaunted state of mind. So the statement, “I have an idea of God”, this idea having as much reality as the formal reality of a God, is false, i.e., “no I do not have an idea of God, nor can I even begin to perceive him in his full capacity”. By definition, it is true we can define in words what we think God is, and with conviction, but these are merely words and to have a clear and true distinct mental picture of God, separate from perception and imagination is impossible. It follows that the formal reality of a God, grossly outweighs the objective reality of an idea

of a God. I cannot perceive him; therefore this is not a reasonable ground for the proof of the existence of him. How can we say, by definition, that God is an omnipotent, supremely good being, if we ourselves have no representation of what that really means?

After hearing this argument, Descartes might then say, “whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true”. The word “true” we can take to mean not false, or to take it further, real. This statement however, is dependent upon the existence of a God, one who is not a deceiver and therefore, whatever I perceive clearly cannot be false. This would suggest that God plays a hand-in-hand role in every perception we encounter. We would be solely dependent upon him to perceive anything clearly; furthermore, it does not seem clear to me that Descartes managed to prove his existence beyond reasonable doubt. If this theory were in effect, we would never have to rely on our own judgment again. For if everything I perceive as being clear and distinct is true, coming from God, how can I error? But humans most definitely err, giving rise to the notion that either God is a deceiver, therefore ceasing to be God, or that our perception is independent of God. We are then the authors of our own perception, thus accounting for the error apparent in all our choices, ideas, and perceptions. It is therefore a better argument to say: “To error is to perceive”.

Finally, moving back to the Principle of Universal Causation, and the idea of God, would it not be a safe assumption that if in fact I had a true and clear idea of God, an all powerful infinite being, and that means there can be only one God, that everyone must have the same clear and distinct idea of God? This however is not the case. Descartes had an idea of a Western interpretation of God, whereas a Muslim would have an all together different idea of God, i.e. Allah, just as a Buddhist would as well. If the idea of God residing in us, were based on the formal reality of a God, it would then be a universal idea of God, much like eating and drinking are universally applicable.

After reading over Descartes’ argument several times, there are a few areas that could have been expounded upon and developed even more so, that would more effectively prove the existence of God. If nothing else, they could serve as a hypothesis to be tested in the fires of scrutiny. One particular passage presents itself as being a poignant source of evidence, perhaps easily refuted, but nevertheless, worthy to dwell upon.

“I understand not only that I am something incomplete and dependent upon another, something aspiring indefinitely for greater or better things, but also that the being on whom I depend has in himself all

those greater things—not merely indefinitely and potentially, but infinitely and actually, and thus he is God” (80).

There is an argument that can be taken out of this passage that seems to be an interesting point of discussion, worthy of mention.

1. Everything must have as cause, if only for the fact that nothing that is finite has ever been found, not having a cause.
2. I do not contain within myself, the means of my own existence. As Descartes suggests we are incomplete and dependent upon others.
3. Nothing that is finite contains within itself the means of its own existence.
4. There must be a cause for my existence.
5. This cause must reside outside me, since I do not contain within me, the means to my own existence.
6. This cause cannot be within anything else that is finite, for if they do not contain within themselves the means to their own existence, how can they contain the means to mine. (The Principle of Non-inferiority may be used here).
7. The means to my existence must be from something infinite, since everything that is finite is dependent.
8. God is the only infinite being.
9. My existence must come from God.

This argument comes from Descartes’ passage suggesting that everything is dependent and incomplete. I felt this was an excellent point and attempted to forward an argument, perhaps grounded in reason, which seems to support his idea of dependency and incompleteness.

Descartes’ trademark argument seems a bit unfounded or easily questioned and is, at least to some extent, incomplete. It is arguable that anyone does in fact have a clear idea of God, and that their objective reality of ideas is completely separate from the senses. These are at best, uncertain statements, and perhaps the reason why God is so difficult to prove is because of both his infinite existence, something which we cannot comprehend, and because a certain amount of belief is involved. One thing is for sure, philosophers will attempt to prove him until it is so beyond a shadow of a doubt.