

Handout 2
Meditation 3: The Proof for God's Existence from Ideas

(1) The Proof.

Assume the following rule: Every clear and distinct intuition is true.

Define the following terms: idea; adventitious idea; invented idea; innate idea; formal reality; eminent reality; objective reality; formal truth of an idea; material truth of an idea; degree of reality; perfection; God.

- (1) Everything existing is the effect of some cause. (Premise, known by C+D intuition)
- (2) There must be at least as much reality in a cause. as there is in its effect. (Premise, known by C+D intuition)
- (3) Every cause has either formal reality or eminent reality. (Premise, known by C+D intuition)
- (4) Every (materially true) idea has objective reality. (Premise, known by C+D intuition)
- (5) There must be at least as much formal or eminent reality in the cause of an idea's objective reality, as there is objective reality in the idea. (Follows from steps (1) to (4))
- (6) I have an idea of a perfect being. (Premise, known by C+D intuition)
- (7) That idea has infinitely intricate objective reality. (Follows from step (6) and the definition of 'perfection')
- (8) The cause of that idea's objective reality must have infinite formal or eminent reality. (Follows from steps (5) to (7))
- (9) I am a finite being. (Premise, known by common sense)
- (10) So I could not have caused the objective reality of the idea of a perfect being. (Follows from steps (8) and (9))
- (11) So something other than myself is the cause of that idea's objective reality. (Follows from step (10))
- (12) And that something-other-than-myself must have infinite formal or eminent reality. (Follows from steps (7) and (11))
- (13) And that something-other-than-myself which has infinite formal or eminent reality is what we call 'God'. So God exists. (Follows from step (12) and the definition of 'God') QED (quod erat demonstrandum, which is latin for "thus it is demonstrated").

Problems with the proof:

(1) Steps (2), (5), (7), and (10) are questionable.

(2) The notorious Cartesian circle:

(a) God (and thus God's existence) is required to certify the rule relating C+D intuitions to the truth;

(b) But C+D intuition is required to guarantee the truth of several of the premises in the above argument, hence it is required to establish God's existence.

(II) Addendum to the Proof from Ideas.

Q: Why does Descartes need this back-up proof, if he has given one already?

A: Suppose that we accept steps (1), (2), and (6) in the Proof from Ideas but still doubt that God exists because we reject one or more of the other steps. Then Descartes thinks that the following proof will convince us.

(1) Everything existing is the effect of some sufficient cause. (Assumed premise, known by C+D intuition)

(2) I exist as a finite mind possessing the idea of a perfect being. (Assumed premise, known by common sense)

(3) How did I come to exist as I am? There are only four possibilities:

(a) I could have caused myself to exist.

(b) My parents could have caused me.

(c) I could have been produced by causes less perfect than God.

(d) I could have been caused by God.

(4) (a) is impossible, since I am a finite being and clearly do not have sufficient power to support my own existence at every moment.

(5) (b) is impossible, since my parents are every bit as finite as I am.

(6) (c) is impossible, since it leads to a vicious regress of causes.

(7) So by elimination, (d) is true. So God exists. (follows from steps (1) to (6)) QED

Hints for critical reflection: (i) Look closely at step (6). (ii) If God exists, and (1) is true, then what caused God?