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Descartes: His Not So Clear and Distinct Idea of God

Kirstin Nystrom

In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes needs to prove the existence of God in order to get out of skepticism. Given his understanding and definition of God, if God exists then it is impossible that God could deceive him. Thus, in order to show that he is not deceived and that, as a rule, he can trust all of his clear and distinct ideas at all times, it is necessary that Descartes prove the existence of God. Previous to his discussion of God, Descartes proved that he can wholly trust that which he clearly and distinctly perceives when he is clearly and distinctly perceiving it. Therefore, Descartes then argues for the existence of God from that which he can wholly trust: that is, his clear and distinct idea of God.

Descartes begins his attempt at proving the existence of God in the "Third Meditation" of *Meditations on First Philosophy*. He has two main arguments to prove the existence of God. Both arguments rest on the same premise: that he (Descartes) has a clear and distinct idea of God. He confidently asserts: "The idea that I have of God [is] the truest and most clear and distinct of all my ideas" (Cottingham et al. 1984, 32). Descartes even goes so far as to say it is impossible to deny having this clear and distinct idea of God. To those who denied having this idea, Descartes' reply was:

one need not know that one has this idea in order to have it. To have an idea of God, one is not obliged to conceive of God, for this idea might simply be an innate capacity to conceive Him. Furthermore, if a person denies having an idea of God, Descartes can reply that, if the person understands the words he is using to make this denial, then he does have an idea of God (Thomson, 26).

Descartes also offers an argument for the clear and distinct idea of God. In the "Fourth Meditation," he writes:

...when I consider the fact that I have doubts, or that I am a thing that is incomplete and dependent, then there arises in me a clear and distinct idea of a being who is independent and complete, that is, an idea of God (Cottingham et al. 1984, 37).

Although Descartes offers such a proof for the clear and distinct idea of God, it is clear that he does not find his assertion of this idea to be dubious or controversial in any way. He does not give strong underlying arguments for this assumption and, therefore, this idea of God that he insists is undeniable becomes problematic.

Descartes asserts that our having a clear and distinct idea of God is completely undeniable. It is first important to understand what a "clear and distinct" idea is, then what a clear and distinct idea of God is and whether it is possible for anyone to possess such an idea. In *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes offers his definition of a "clear and distinct idea." He takes the word 'idea' to refer to a perception or "whatever is immediately perceived by the mind" (Cottingham et al. 1988, 181). He writes:

I call a perception 'clear' when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind--just as we say we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception 'distinct' if, as well as being clear, *it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions* that it contains within itself only what is clear (Cottingham et al. 1988, 174-5).

Upon first examination, it seems that for those who have ideas of God, these ideas vary much and often lack clarity. This would definitely conflict with Descartes definition of "distinct." If many people have different ideas of God, then there is some reason their ideas are merely contingent. Often, one's individual perception of what is good etc... interferes with one's idea of God. Therefore, it is clear that these ideas are not distinct (not sharply separated from all other perceptions), according to Descartes' criteria.

Descartes describes his own idea of God as an idea of "a substance that is infinite eternal, immutable, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and which created both myself and everything else" (Cottingham et al. 1984, 31).

His description of his clear and distinct idea of God is controversial in that it tests the limits of what our mind can indeed clearly and distinctly perceive. Descartes says that we are finite, imperfect beings, so it would seem impossible that our imperfect, finite mind could conceive of something infinite. In objection to Descartes' assertion of such an idea of God, one of Descartes' contemporaries, Gassendi, wrote:

... the human intellect is not capable of conceiving of infinity, and hence it neither has nor can contemplate any idea representing an infinite thing. Hence if someone calls something 'infinite' he attributes to a thing which he does not grasp a label which he does not understand (Cottingham et al. 1984, 200).

In his reply, Descartes wrote:

My point is that, on the contrary, if I can grasp something, it would be a total contradiction for that which I grasp to be infinite. For the idea of the infinite, if it is to be a true idea, cannot be grasped at all, since the impossibility of being grasped is contained in the formal definition of the infinite. Nonetheless, it is evident that the idea which we have of the infinite does not merely represent one part of it, but really does represent the infinite in its entirety. The manner of representation, however, is the manner appropriate to a human idea; undoubtedly God, or some other intelligent nature more perfect than a human mind, could have a much more perfect, i.e. more accurate and distinct idea (Cottingham et al. 1984, 253-4).

In his reply to Gassendi, Descartes begs the question and says that we can only comprehend God in as much as our human mind or understanding allows. Certainly that seems true, however, Descartes should be less inspired to hold such a strong opinion concerning that which he, admittedly, cannot fully grasp. According to Descartes' definition, an idea is distinct "if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated that it contains within itself only what is clear" (Cottingham et al. 1988, 181). With this definition, it is not possible to have "degrees of distinctness," for what is more clear than clear? So, if some other being more perfect than a human could have a *more distinct* idea, how, then, can Descartes assert that *his* idea of God is indeed distinct? Descartes' idea of God contains an idea of the infinite, however, Descartes has shown that he cannot fully comprehend the infinite and, therefore, cannot fully comprehend God. Certainly, that seems accurate, however, Descartes can not, at the same time, assert that his idea of God is clear and distinct. It is evident that Descartes becomes more lenient with his criteria for a clear and distinct idea when a clear and distinct idea of God is in question. In the Second Set of Replies, Descartes admits that our understanding of God is in no way adequate, but "in the case of

the few attributes of God which we do perceive, it is enough that we understand them clearly and distinctly" (Cottingham et al. 1984, 108). It is evident, however, that even of those attributes of God that we do perceive, for example, infinite nature, we do not perceive these clearly and distinctly. So, according to Descartes' above statement, it can be concluded that we can not have a clear and distinct idea of God.

Disregarding the previous argument and granting that there *is* a clear and distinct idea of God, it is important to account for discrepancies in people's different ideas. As Gassendi clearly stated:

Whatever may be the case regarding mathematical matters, when it comes to the other questions which we are now dealing with, why, may I ask, do people have so many different opinions about them? Everyone thinks that he clearly and distinctly perceives the truth which he champions (Cottingham et al. 1984, 194).

Even if there is such a clear and distinct idea, how can Descartes argue that no one can deny having such an idea? This idea of God seems only to be conceived by those who have been taught (within a culture or a family) to have and believe such an idea. So, one does not just have this idea, but rather it is "inserted" into one's mind. Gassendi explored this possibility in his objection to Descartes. He wrote:

As for what you said about the idea of God, since you are not yet sure whether God exists, how, may I ask, do you know that God is represented by the idea you have of him as 'supreme eternal, infinite, omnipotent and the creator of all things'? Do you not take this from your previously conceived knowledge of God, that is, from having heard these attributes ascribed to him? If you had not previously heard anything of this sort, would you still describe God in this way? (Cottingham et al. 1984, 199)

Although this objection points out the problems involved with culture and teaching, it is not a strong enough argument against the innate, clear and distinct idea of God. Regardless of over how many years and from how many generations such an idea of God has been passed down, there still is the question of how the persons who originally possessed the idea of God obtained such an idea. This objection, however, does attempt to get at a description of the process

of culture and learning about God. Descartes disregarded the insight of this objection and only attacked it on the grounds that there still persisted the question of how the first "teachers" got their idea. Descartes replied:

Would you please explain where the first men who originally told us of these attributes got the self same idea of God? If they got it from themselves, why cannot we also derive it from ourselves? If they got it from divine revelation, then God exists (Cottingham et al. 1984, 251-2).

Descartes' reply does not account for different conceptions of God (or lack thereof) across cultures. This reply still allows for variations across cultures and, therefore, either many different "clear and distinct ideas of God" or no clear and distinct idea whatsoever.

It is important to note that, in the above reply, Descartes leaves room for the possibility of deriving our idea of God from ourselves. This reply could be interpreted as, in fact, denying such a thing as a clear and distinct idea of God. It seems that if we are indeed capable of deriving our idea of God from ourselves that this would account for discrepancies in ideas of God and even for those who lack a clear and distinct idea of God. If this idea of God were created by us it would seem impossible for there to be such a clear and distinct idea unless Descartes were to take a relativist position, which he does not take. Often, it seems not that we are created in God's image, but rather, we create God in our image. In this same vein, Gassendi wrote:

Although every supreme perfection is attributed to God, it seems that such perfections are all taken from things which we admired in ourselves, such as longevity, power, knowledge, goodness, blessedness and so on. By amplifying these things as much as we can, we assert that God is eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, supremely good, supremely blessed and so on... [And as such], the idea [of God] in question is compounded and augmented from the ideas of these finite things in the manner just described... So can we really congratulate ourselves if, after seeing the perfections of man, we form an idea which we maintain is the idea of God and is genuinely representative of him? (Cottingham et al. 1984, 200)

Descartes, regardless of what he wrote in his previous reply to Gassendi, argues that it is impossible that our idea of God is created by our own

mind. Just as we can not fully comprehend or grasp the infinite, neither can our finite, imperfect minds cause the idea of a finite perfect substance. This argument, however, is not strong enough to rule out any possibility of our creating the idea of God. The problem lies in words and definitions. God is only deemed perfect and finite because we define God as such. This is almost an arbitrary definition and it is only supported because the majority have agreed on it. In the non-Western world and even within certain subcultures, however, the majority would hold a much different opinion. There are two main problems with this majority-rule definition of God. First, as I already stated, it seems to be an arbitrary definition, simply consisting of those words upon which we place the utmost value. Second, as previously argued, with this definition are contained the concepts of "perfection" and "infinity," concepts of which we have an incomplete understanding.

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes uses his clear and distinct idea of God as the starting point from which to argue for the existence of God. Descartes offers a few brief proofs for this idea, however, he disregards the complexity of his assertion and insists this controversial idea is undeniable. There are several problems with this "clear and distinct" idea of God. It is both ethnocentric and egocentric. Also, it does not appear possible for anyone to possess such an idea. Our minds can not conceive of a clear and distinct idea of God.

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