A History of Philosophy

33 Descartes' Meditations 2
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Okay, let's come to business, please. This afternoon, we're looking at Descartes' Meditations 3 and 4, which, as you can see, I've entitled Descartes on God and Human Reason. We come out of the second meditation with, really, two conclusions.

One is that I exist, a thinking thing, and the other, which is really a corollary of that, is that as a thinking thing, I have all sorts of ideas, including the idea of God. Now, if that's the case, that we have those two conclusions, we have, really, two possible premises for arguing for anything else, like the existence of God. We have no premises as yet that are assured about the existence of a material world or the ordered purposefulness of nature.

So there's no possibility as yet for cosmological or teleological arguments for the existence of God. All he has to work with is his own existence as a thinking thing and the ideas that he thinks. And yet, he finds that's enough.

He starts by considering the different kinds of ideas that we have. And there are three such kinds of ideas. There are some that he calls innate, though, as we'll see, they're not quite innate in Plato's sense from a previous existence.

They're innate, rather, in the sense that clear and distinct ideas are innate, native to us, arising spontaneously. There are others that are adventitious, and you can get the sense of that from the term advent. They come to you from external causes.

Ideas which, on our part, are involuntary. They're independent of my will, involuntary ideas. They're ideas that are taught to us by nature.

That's another way he puts it. Namely, in the course of experience, we acquire these ideas, apparently because of external causes, adventitious. And then there are other ideas which are factitious, ideas of which I am the cause, and I, in that case, the voluntary ideas, like my idea of a fairy giraffe with butterfly wings, which I put together out of all sorts of other ideas.

You see? So, three kinds of ideas, and, in effect, in this chapter on the existence of God, what he's going to do is to argue that the idea of God is not a factitious one, which I cause. It is rather involuntary. So, it's not factitious.

And, second, he's going to argue that the idea of God is not simply adventitious. In the ordinary sense, it's distinctive because the idea of God has the fullest kind of

objective reality about it. So, the first two of these three starting points for arguing God's existence have to do with the idea of God.

Okay? And the third has to do with his own existence as a thinking thing. So, he's going to make use of both of those conclusions, which arise from meditation, too. Is that clear? Okay.

Now, let me concentrate, then, initially, on what he has to say about the idea of God. Among my various ideas, he says, ideas of animals and all sorts of things, the idea of God seems to be distinctive in certain ways. Now, because he's going to claim that the idea of God has an objective reality about it, okay, it's a very realistic idea, he's got to define what the idea is.

No vague, undefined idea can have that kind of objective reality about it. In fact, he seems to identify clarity and distinctness. Remember that old criterion for an intuitive conception? He seems to identify clarity and distinctness with the objective reality of an idea.

Okay? Now, notice that in using the phrase objective reality, he's talking of a quality of the idea, not what the idea is about, because in a representational theory of knowledge, it's the idea that is the immediate object of thought. We think our ideas and use them to refer to external things. So, it's the idea that has objective reality.

External things must have at least as great a degree of formal reality as the idea has of objective reality, which is another way of saying that the cause of an idea must be at least as great as the effect. Do you catch those parallels? You see, the idea is an effect of something, caused by something. The idea of God has a great degree of objective reality, so clear, so distinct, so distinctive.

So, the cause of the idea must have as great a degree at least of formal reality, that is to say, external reality, in the nature of things. And that way of talking about the formal reality must be as great as the objective reality is simply saying the cause must be at least as great as the effect. And if you wonder, as we did yesterday, where he gets this idea of cause and effect, his response is simply, " Nature teaches us.

And you will find that phrase in this chapter. Nature teaches us that the formal reality must be as great as the objective reality. Now, if nature teaches it to us, then the idea of cause and effect is an adventitious idea.

It's an idea that we learn in the course of experience. An idea that's caused by our experience of external things. That the cause is at least as great as the effect.

It's an adventitious idea. But granted that cause-effect relationship, formal reality, and objective reality relationship, then in that light of nature, certain things begin to follow. Now, if you'll look at the anthology on page 38, we'll pick up the train of thought, and because it's a little bit obscure at first reading, let me pick out the highlights.

I think I must have read this meditation time and time again before I caught some of this in it. At the bottom of the first column on page 38, he defines the idea of God. The idea by which I conceive a God.

Sovereign, eternal, infinite, immutable, all-knowing, all-powerful, the creator of all things that are out of himself, outside of himself. Now, that's quite a well-defined conception of a theistic being, you see. Eternal, infinite, immortal, sovereign, all-knowing, all-powerful, creator of all things outside of himself.

This, I say, has certainly in it more objective reality than those ideas by which finite substances are represented. The major distinction is the conception of a being infinite in regard to those attributes. And it's manifest by the natural light, light of nature, that there must be as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect.

For whence can the effect draw its reality if not from its cause? So forth. Then, in the bottom of 39, he sums up this immediate line of thought to sum up what conclusion shall I draw from it all. It's this.

If the objective reality or the perfection of any one of my ideas is such as clearly to convince me that this same reality exists in me neither formally nor eminently, and if, as follows from this, I myself cannot be the cause of it, then it's a necessary consequence that I'm not alone in the world. That solipsism that we were talking about last time, that solipsism, I and only I exist, is false. There is beside myself some other being who exists as the cause of that idea of a perfect being.

Well, among my ideas, besides that which represents myself, respecting which there can be here no difficulty, we've already settled that, there is one that represents God. And he zeroes in again on the concept of God. So, all right, there, thus far, what he's doing is setting up the logical apparatus that he's going to use.

The notion of objective reality as against formal reality, the cause-effect relationship indicating where he's going to go with it. Well, halfway down page 40, second column, well, the middle paragraph on page 40, second column, he comes to the idea of God, defines again, by the name God, I understand a substance, infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, all-knowing, all-powerful, by which I, myself, and every other thing that exists, if any such there be, were created. Okay, essentially the same definition.

But these properties are so great, excellent, that the more attentively I consider them, the less I feel persuaded that the idea I have of them owes its origin to myself alone. Now, he's saying here, you see, that the idea of God that I have is involuntary. I'm not the cause of it.

It's absolutely necessary to conclude, therefore, that God exists. For though the idea of substance is in my mind, owing to this, that I, myself, am a substance, I shouldn't have the idea of an infinite substance, since I'm a finite being, unless that idea of an infinite substance were given me by some substance in reality infinite. You see, the cause must be at least as great as the effect.

Okay, and he goes on, the first complete paragraph on 41, to talk of the idea as very clear and distinct. The beginning of the next paragraph is the idea of a being supremely perfect and infinite in the highest degree true. Towards the bottom of 41's second column, God is actually infinite, so that nothing could be added to his perfection.

Perfect in all regards. And he's asking how he, himself, then he asks on 42, how he, himself, as a finite creature, could even exist. How come that I, a finite creature, can think of an infinite being? How is that possible if there's no God? So, for me to be able to think of that, then there must be a God to cause me to exist and to be able to think of that.

So that he pulls in these three notions. One, that the idea of God has the fullest degree of objective reality, clarity, and distinctness. It's the idea of an infinite being.

He pulls in the recognition that the idea of God is involuntary on a human being's part. Couldn't have caused it myself. And then thirdly, the existence of the thinking thing itself.

The mind needs explanation. And his conclusion, therefore, emerges at the bottom of the second column of 43. Well, bottom of the second column.

He's just eliminated his parents as the cause. So that the paragraph that ends halfway down the second column of 43, it's necessary to conclude from this that I am and possess the idea of being absolutely perfect, of God, that his existence is most clearly demonstrated. I've not drawn it, he goes on, from the senses.

That is to say, it's not adventitious. It's not a pure production or fiction of my mind. It's not factitious.

Consequently, there remains the alternative that it is innate, in the same way as the idea of myself is innate. In truth, it's not to be wondered at that God, in my creation,

implanted this idea in me that it might serve, as it were, the mark of the workman impressed on his work. Not always necessary that the mark should be different from the work itself, but considering only that God is my creator, it's highly probable that he's, in some way, fashioned me after his own image and likeness, and that I perceive this likeness in which is contained the idea of God, by the same faculty that I apprehend myself.

Yes, in apprehending myself as a finite thinking thing, you see, I find an image of the infinite thinking thing. God. The effect bears witness to the cause.

So when I make myself the object of reflection, I not only find that I am an incomplete and dependent being, who unceasingly aspires after something better and greater, I'm assured, likewise, that he on whom I am dependent possesses all the goods that I aspire after, and he is thus God. The whole force of the argument consists in this, that I perceive I couldn't possibly be of such a nature as I am, and yet have in my mind the idea of God, if God didn't in reality exist. This same God, whose idea is in my mind, being with all these lofty perfections, of which the mind may have a slight conception, without, however, being able to fully comprehend them, who is wholly superior to all defect.

So it sufficiently manifests that he cannot be a deceiver since it's a dictate of the natural light that all fraud and deception spring from some defect. And his conclusion, therefore, is not simply that God exists, his creator, and therefore the cause of the idea of God, but that the God who exists is a perfect being who does not deceive, could not be a deceiver. And in that last phrase, he's added a further assertion on which the fourth meditation is going to depend.

It's going to depend on that because of the hypothesis that is part of the initial skeptical considerations in meditation one, that maybe God is deceiving us, or there is some malign being deceiving us, you see. So if God is our creator, we need to be pretty sure that God isn't deceiving us in creating us the way he created us. But if God is completely perfect in all regards, he wouldn't deceive.

So our created faculties are not deceptive. And the line of thought in meditation four develops that theme in dealing with the problem of error. Well, okay, stand back from the argument for the existence of God and look at it for a moment.

I suppose the simplest way to label it is that it is a cause-effect argument for the existence of God. A cause-effect argument. I said it's not a cosmological argument.

It doesn't begin from the cosmos, the physical cosmos. It's not a teleological argument that begins from the ordered design of the cosmos, like Thomas Aquinas did. But it's still a cause-effect argument.

The effect is the existence of a mind and its idea of God. Idea from that. Argument from that.

It's not an ontological argument, which proceeded in the case of Anselm by trying to analyze the idea of God and show that it would be a logical self-contradiction to deny the existence of God. That is not what is involved here. But Descartes does, in Meditation 5, develop an ontological argument.

Okay? But not yet. So don't confuse the ontological argument of Meditation 5 with the causal argument of Meditation 3. Get the difference? Well, if you ask yourself why he would leave the ontological argument until Meditation 5, why not treat the whole kid and caboodle in one fell swoop in Meditation 3? The answer is that he doesn't have sufficient logical premises. That he's trying to do it in this deductive, systematic fashion.

Because in order to do an ontological argument, he has to be confident that what human reason judges to be logically necessary is logically necessary. Not causally necessary, but logically necessary. So if you're going to look at the internal logic of the concept of God in forming an ontological argument, you've got to have confidence in the laws that govern human reason.

And that is what awaits in Meditation 4. So he can't do the ontological until he has done Meditation 4. Comment? Question? Did you follow the line of thought, or do you want to rerun on it? Yeah. A good question. Because the metaphor of light and enlightenment, yeah, the metaphor of light and enlightenment is something we've been running into from Plato onwards.

You see. In the Christian tradition, I think it starts most clearly with Augustine, where the enlightenment is the light of the divine logos enlightening the human mind to see the rationes, those eternal truths, thoughts. However, that notion of the logos that enlightens the mind seems to go in two different directions in medieval times.

One, obviously, is in the Augustinian tradition, which, as I mentioned, comes out in people like Bonaventure who talk of the logos enlightening the mind rather than going with Aristotelian epistemology. Remember? On the other hand, while Aquinas picks up on Augustine's logos doctrine in terms of the exemplarism of Augustine, archetypal ideas in the mind of God, Aquinas doesn't speak of the divine logos enlightening the human mind, but speaks instead of the light of reason. The light of reason.

The light, if you like, of natural reason. Now, the difference is subtle because Augustine's notion of enlightenment is not just of enlightening the minds of believers the way in theology this comes out, but it's the John chapter one notion that the logos enlightens everyone who comes into the world. In other words, a general

human knowledge of universals is possible because of the light the logos sheds in the human mind.

He's not talking about simply enlightening the mind with regard to what scripture teaches. So it's an enlightenment of the mind's natural capacities. Well, here in Aquinas, you see, it is the natural capacity that sheds the light.

Not the light on the natural capacities, but the natural capacities shed the light. At least, that's the way it sounds in Aquinas, but when you get to Descartes, I think it's explicitly that way. The light of reason.

The natural light of reason. The light of nature, you see. And it's that notion which underlies the 18th century enlightenment.

God said, let Newton be, and all was light. Where'd the light come from? Newton's scientific reasoning. So I think that's a good question.

It makes a distinction between the Augustinian tradition and the Cartesian tradition. Yeah, yeah. So that even in the depth of doubt, the mind is not in darkness, but oh, I see, even in the depth of doubt, I must exist.

There's light in the darkness. You know, why does he use the visual metaphor of a clear and distinct idea? You see. Well, there has to be some light in the mind for it to be clear and distinct.

It seems that, somehow, maybe I'm not understanding it properly, if our knowledge of God is dependent upon our ability to think these ideas, then it seems that the idea of God is subjective to our ability to think. Well, yes, but so what? I mean, can anybody have an idea of God if they don't think about ideas? That's why dogs don't have ideas of God. They don't think about ideas.

They have sense images, perhaps, but not abstract ideas. Is the idea of God just subjective? Yes, and that's precisely what Marx and Freud and so forth say. But the point is that an idea exists in the mind.

The question is not whether the idea exists in the mind. That's a tautology. The question is whether it's true, whether there's anything in reality corresponding to the idea in the mind.

So it's not really proof of God's existence. It's a proof, really, for the existence of God. No, no, the idea of God is something that's given.

He said, I have this idea. The question is, where did I get it? You see? He eliminates the fact that it could be a fiction of his own imagination, which means he'd be saying no to Freud. This is not the projection of my Oedipus complex.

You see? It's not something I've made up. He says it's not adventitious. It's not something that's been caused by various other factors in my experience.

So in that sense, it's not like the idea of some physical body that I've seen. No, it seems it must be innate. An innate idea is so clear, so distinct.

You see? This idea of an infinite being is something so great. What sort of cause does this have? Well, the cause must be at least as great as the effect. It must be the very kind of being that I had the idea of.

Now, maybe you think the argument is too easy, and there's something wrong with it. I think there is. I think there is.

I think you can point out the problem, at least at the level of symptom, quite readily. Namely, that while he has an idea of an infinite and perfect being, he doesn't have a perfect idea of an infinite and perfect being. So the idea is not the greatest possible idea.

So the cause doesn't have to be that way either. You see, that's the symptom of it. You might ask, well, why then does he miss that point? And I think the point is that he doesn't have enough understanding of the factors involved in the development of human ideas, including the idea of infinity.

You see? And why that? Well, I think because there is a tradition coming out of the ancients and the Middle Ages, that the concept of infinity is unthinkable. It's something that the human mind can't grasp: the concept of infinity. Yet here I have the conception of an infinite being.

In more recent mathematics, yes, there have been attempts to conceptualize the notion of infinity and how it develops. The simplest way to explain how one gets the concept of infinity is simply to say, well, you've got an idea of a big thing, and you think extrapolating and extrapolating and extrapolating a little bit more, if you please. And go on, you know, all the way.

And what you get is the concept of infinity. So you can explain the concept of infinity. No, but I think that in terms of his epistemology, the underlying problem is that this criterion, this intuitive criterion for truth, clarity, and distinctness, just isn't that reliable.

I have a friend who used to say that the only response that's needed to someone who says this idea is perfectly clear and distinct is, well, I'm afraid it isn't to me. Or else, well, just wait until I finish with you. You see.

There's clarity and distinctness, which is a matter of degree, and we may think we have something down perfectly clear on a paper we've written or a test we've written, and then when it comes back, we realize we don't have it clear. You know, illustration from experience. So I think that's where the problem is.

But you can see what he's doing, and the thing that I'm trying to stress most in Descartes at this juncture is his method. The limitations of this foundationalist method are what we're discovering as the line of thought unravels. David? Well, he needs a premise about the trustworthiness of human reason.

That is to say, the trustworthiness of human reason in following the laws of logic which are trustworthy. Yeah. That's what he needs.

Okay, and immediately you latch onto a major objection.