

History of Philosophy

33 Descartes' Meditations 2

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Abstract:

This text features a lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes regarding **René Descartes' Meditations**, specifically focusing on the philosopher's transition from self-certainty to proving the existence of **God**. Holmes explains that Descartes categorizes ideas into three types: **innate**, **adventitious**, and **factitious**, ultimately arguing that the concept of an infinite being must be innate. The central argument relies on a **cause-effect relationship**, asserting that a finite human mind could not produce the "objective reality" of a perfect, infinite God. By establishing God as a **perfect creator** who is not a deceiver, Descartes creates a foundation to trust human reason and the external world. The lecture concludes by noting that this causal proof is a necessary precursor to the **ontological argument** presented later in the Meditations.

Briefing Document:

Analysis of Descartes' Meditations: On God and Human Reason

Executive Summary

This document synthesizes the philosophical transitions between René Descartes' *Meditation 2* and *Meditation 3*, as analyzed by Dr. Arthur Holmes. Having established the existence of the self as a "thinking thing" (*cogito*), Descartes moves to overcome solipsism by proving the existence of an external reality—specifically, God.

The core of this transition relies on a causal argument: the idea of an infinite, perfect God possesses a degree of "objective reality" that a finite, imperfect human mind could not produce. By classifying ideas into innate, adventitious, and factitious categories, Descartes concludes that the idea of God is an innate "mark of the

workman" impressed upon the human soul. This conclusion is vital because it establishes God as a perfect, non-deceitful being, thereby validating the reliability of human reason and paving the way for further metaphysical deductions.

Foundations of the Inquiry

Following *Meditation 2*, Descartes is limited to two assured premises. He lacks any evidence regarding the material world or the purposeful order of nature, which precludes the use of cosmological or teleological arguments for God's existence.

The Two Initial Premises:

1. **The Self Exists:** The individual is confirmed as a "thinking thing."
 2. **The Presence of Ideas:** As a thinking thing, the individual possesses various ideas, including the specific idea of a supreme being (God).
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Taxonomy of Human Ideas

To determine the origin of the idea of God, Descartes categorizes all ideas into three distinct types based on their perceived source:

Category	Description	Examples
Innate	Native to the mind; arising spontaneously as clear and distinct conceptions.	The idea of the self; the idea of God.
Adventitious	Derived from external causes; these are involuntary and "taught by nature" through experience.	Sensory perceptions of external objects.
Factitious	Voluntary constructions created by the mind; the self is the sole cause.	Fanciful inventions like a "fairy giraffe with butterfly wings."

The Causal Argument for God's Existence

Descartes' primary argument in *Meditation 3* is a cause-effect proof based on the "objective reality" of the idea of God.

1. Objective vs. Formal Reality

- **Objective Reality:** Refers to the reality or quality of an idea as an object of thought. In Descartes' representational theory, we think ideas, and those ideas refer to external things.
- **Formal Reality:** Refers to the actual, external reality of a thing in the nature of the world.

2. The Causal Principle

Descartes asserts that "nature teaches us" that a cause must be at least as great as its effect. Therefore, the **formal reality** of a cause must be equal to or greater than the **objective reality** of the idea it produces.

3. The Definition of God

Descartes defines God as a substance that is:

- Sovereign and Eternal
- Infinite and Immutable
- All-knowing and All-powerful
- The Creator of all things outside of Himself

4. Logical Deduction

Descartes argues that as a finite substance, he could not be the cause of an idea representing an infinite substance.

- The idea of God is not **factitious** because the self lacks the perfection to invent it.
 - The idea is not **adventitious** because it is not derived from the senses.
 - Therefore, the idea must be **innate**. It is the "mark of the workman impressed on his work," placed there by God at the moment of creation.
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Implications of a Perfect Being

The proof of God's existence serves a dual purpose: it ends solipsism and establishes a foundation for the reliability of human reason.

- **The Rejection of Deception:** Descartes concludes that a supremely perfect being cannot be a deceiver. Deception is a "defect," and God, by definition, is wholly superior to all defects.
- **Validation of Faculties:** Since God created human faculties and is not a deceiver, those faculties—when used correctly—are not deceptive. This realization is necessary to move into *Meditation 4*, which addresses the problem of human error and the laws of logic.

Critical Observations and Methodological Limitations

Dr. Holmes identifies several points of contention regarding Descartes' foundationalist method and his specific arguments:

The Problem of the Ontological Argument

Descartes delays his "ontological argument" (the analysis of the concept of God to prove existence via logical necessity) until *Meditation 5*. He cannot perform it in *Meditation 3* because he has not yet established that human reason and the laws of logic are trustworthy. He must first prove a non-deceitful God exists before he can trust the logical necessity his mind perceives.

Critiques of the Causal Argument

- **Subjectivity of "Clarity and Distinctness":** Descartes relies on the clarity and distinctness of an idea as a criterion for truth. However, this is subjective; what is clear to one person may be obscure to another.
- **The Concept of Infinity:** Descartes assumes the idea of infinity must be implanted by an infinite being. Critics suggest that the human mind can arrive at the concept of infinity through the extrapolation of finite things (e.g., imagining a large thing and continuing to add to it).
- **Incomplete Ideas:** While Descartes has an idea of an infinite being, he does not have a *perfect* idea of that being. If the idea itself is not "the greatest

possible idea," the cause (God) does not strictly need to be the greatest possible being to produce it.

Study Guide:

A Study Guide to Descartes' Meditations 3 and 4: God and Human Reason

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of the philosophical arguments presented by René Descartes in his third and fourth Meditations, as analyzed by Dr. Arthur Holmes. It focuses on Descartes' transition from the certainty of the self to the existence of a perfect, non-deceiving God.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. **What two foundational conclusions does Descartes reach at the end of the second Meditation?** Descartes concludes first that he exists as a "thinking thing" and second that, as a thinking thing, he possesses various ideas. One of the most significant of these ideas is the concept of God, which serves as a primary premise for his subsequent arguments.
2. **How does Descartes define "adventitious" ideas compared to "factitious" ideas?** Adventitious ideas are involuntary and arise from external causes or nature, appearing to come to the mind independent of the will through experience. In contrast, factitious ideas are voluntary fictions created by the thinker, such as the composite idea of a "fairy giraffe with butterfly wings."
3. **What is the distinction between "innate" ideas in Descartes' view versus Plato's view?** For Descartes, innate ideas are not derived from a previous existence as Plato suggested, but are native to the human mind and arise

spontaneously. These ideas are characterized by being "clear and distinct," serving as intuitive conceptions inherent to human reason.

4. **Explain the relationship between "objective reality" and "formal reality."** Objective reality refers to the quality or degree of perfection within an idea itself, while formal reality refers to the actual, external existence of a thing in the nature of things. Descartes argues that the "formal reality" of a cause must be at least as great as the "objective reality" of the effect (the idea).
5. **Why does Descartes believe he cannot be the cause of his own idea of God?** Descartes argues that as a finite substance, he lacks the "formal reality" necessary to produce the idea of an infinite substance. Because the idea of God contains a high degree of objective reality—representing an infinite, eternal, and all-powerful being—it must have been caused by a being that actually possesses those perfections.
6. **How does the "natural light" or "light of nature" function in Descartes' logic?** The natural light is the light of reason that reveals self-evident truths, such as the principle that a cause must be at least as great as its effect. It represents the inherent capacity of human reason to perceive clear and distinct truths without relying on sensory experience.
7. **What is the "mark of the workman" metaphor used in Meditation 3?** Descartes suggests that the idea of God is "implanted" in the human mind by God during creation, serving as a signature or "mark of the workman impressed on his work." This implies that the human capacity to conceive of a perfect being is a direct result of being fashioned in God's image.
8. **Why does Descartes postpone the ontological argument until Meditation 5?** He delays the ontological argument because it requires a prior demonstration that the laws of logic and human reason are entirely trustworthy. He must first establish in Meditation 4 that God is not a deceiver and that clear and distinct logical judgments are necessarily true.
9. **How does Descartes argue that God is not a deceiver?** Descartes asserts that fraud and deception are the results of some defect or lack of power.

Since God is defined as a supremely perfect being who is wholly superior to all defects, it follows by the "natural light" that God cannot be a deceiver.

10. What is the main criticism mentioned regarding Descartes’

understanding of the concept of infinity? The text suggests that Descartes may have overlooked that while one can have an idea of an infinite being, that idea itself is not necessarily "perfect" or "infinite." Furthermore, modern perspectives suggest the concept of infinity can be reached through the extrapolation of finite ideas rather than requiring an infinite cause.

Part II: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the following prompts to develop deeper analytical essays. (No answers provided).

1. **The Taxonomy of Ideas:** Discuss Descartes’ three classifications of ideas—innate, adventitious, and factitious. Explain why the classification of the idea of God as "innate" is essential to his overall project in the *Meditations*.
 2. **The Causal Principle:** Analyze Descartes’ application of the cause-effect relationship to the realm of ideas. Does the argument that "formal reality must be as great as objective reality" successfully bridge the gap between the mind and the external world?
 3. **From Solipsism to Theism:** Explain how Descartes uses the existence of God to escape the threat of solipsism. How does the presence of an idea with "objective reality" prove that the thinker is "not alone in the world"?
 4. **The Role of the Non-Deceiving God:** Examine the philosophical necessity of a non-deceiving God for Descartes’ epistemology. How does this conclusion resolve the skeptical doubts introduced in the first Meditation regarding a "malign being"?
 5. **The Evolution of "Enlightenment":** Compare the Cartesian "natural light of reason" with the Augustinian and Thomistic traditions of divine enlightenment. How does Descartes’ shift toward the "light of nature" prefigure the 18th-century Enlightenment?
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Part III: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Adventitious Ideas	Ideas that come from external causes or nature and are involuntary to the thinker (e.g., sensory perceptions).
Causal Argument	A proof for God's existence based on the principle that the cause of an idea must have as much reality as the idea itself represents.
Clear and Distinct	The Cartesian criterion for truth; an intuitive conception that is so self-evident it cannot be doubted.
Cosmological Argument	An argument for God's existence that begins from the existence of the physical universe (a premise Descartes cannot yet use in Meditation 3).
Factitious Ideas	Voluntary ideas that are invented or constructed by the mind, such as fictions or imaginary creatures.
Formal Reality	The actual, external reality or existence of a thing in the world.
Innate Ideas	Ideas that are native to the mind and arise spontaneously; they are not learned from experience or created by the imagination.
Natural Light (Light of Reason)	The inherent capacity of human reason to perceive truths clearly and distinctly; the internal "enlightenment" of natural capacities.
Objective Reality	The degree of perfection or reality contained within an idea as an object of thought.
Ontological Argument	An argument for God's existence based on the internal logic and definition of the concept of God (postponed by Descartes to Meditation 5).

Solipsism	The skeptical position that "I and only I exist," which Descartes attempts to disprove by establishing a cause for his idea of God.
Thinking Thing (Res Cogitans)	The self-identified essence of the individual as established in Meditation 2; a being that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, and has ideas.