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Descartes' Ontological Proof. An Interpretation and Defense*

Descartes' ontological proof (or ontological argument) remains a mystery. On the one hand Descartes based his reasoning on simple and convincing premises, but on the other he proceeded as though he did not notice that he so quickly and easily resolved such an important and complicated problem as the problem of existence of God. The impression of mystery increases when we turn our attention to the fact that so many important philosophical figures from the past and from recent times strongly criticized Descartes' version of ontological proof by pointing out that in his reasoning (if it was reasoning at all) he had committed a decisive error: the conclusion seems not to follow from the premises. Many of these criticisms were put to Descartes by official objectors to the *Meditations*, but his responses were complicated and not always as clear as they could be.¹

Is it reasonable to assume that so a great thinker as Descartes didn't notice that he had committed an elementary error? Was it possible that he didn't notice an almost obvious error in the reasoning that he planned to become a fundament of his entire philosophical and scientific system? This system not only contributed to the development of modern science, but first of all changed the whole western philosophical thought in an important way. This historical state of affairs, can, I think, motivate the hypothesis that Descartes was in possession of some good response to the objection that he committed an elementary error. In what will follow I will try to reconstruct Descartes' possible reaction to the objection that he was completely wrong in the conviction that he proved the existence of God.

Descartes' version of ontological proof appears mainly in his *Meditations* and can be formulated in the following way.

1. I have an idea of supremely perfect being (the idea of God)
2. Existence is a perfection
3. Therefore, a supremely perfect being (God) exists.

I will begin with the second of Descartes' two premises, i.e. with the assumption that existence is a perfection. As is well known, the most famous objection against this assumption was delivered by I. Kant, who claimed that existence is not a property or a predicate. Kant's example was that there is no intrinsic difference between the concept of a hundred real thalers and the concept of a hundred possible thalers.² According to Kant, when we claim that God exists we are affirming that there is an object to which our concept of God refers, but existence as such adds nothing to the concept of a thing. But is it reasonable to suppose that Descartes was not aware of this rather not particularly sophisticated state of affairs? Did he not notice that in order to ascribe to whatever object whatever perfections one must first in some

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¹ J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch (eds. and trans.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984.

² I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan Education Ltd. 1990, A599/B627.

way get to know that this object exists? It seems to me that Descartes would agree with Kant that existence is not a predicate that refers to some property, but that he would still accept that, when supremely perfect being is concerned, existence is contained in the concept of that being. How is it possible?

I think that Descartes' intentions can be summarized in the following way. In a clear and distinct way we cognitively grasp the concept of supremely perfect being as the concept that we do not construct by an arbitral definition of the word 'God'. In the content of that concept we discover an element of existence, but this does not mean that we assume that 'existence' is some general property among other such properties, the property which could be predicated on whatever content we can think of. Clear and distinct perception of existence as contained in the concept of supremely perfect being can be compared to the perception of a property which makes some object unique. It is a kind of cognitive access to the strongly individuating property, e.g. to something more or less comparable to Duns Scotus' *haecceitas*. In our present cognitive situation we human beings do not have cognitive access to strongly individuating properties which are not predicates. We do not have such access except to the content of the concept of God. If this is so, then 'being a predicate' and 'being an element of a concept' are different things. Descartes was convinced that existence, which in all other cases is not contained in the content of a concept, in the case of God is an element of the concept referring to Him. This fact can be seen as the reason why today there appear interpretations stressing that Descartes' ontological argument is not an argument in the sense of some discourse or reasoning but that here we rather have to do with an 'insight' into the content of some peculiar concept, 'insight' in which we cognitively grasp a property (perfection) that is not a predicate. In this way we intuitively come to know that God exists.³

Even if we accepted that 'being a predicate' and 'being an element of a concept' are different things, the question would remain in what sense is existence a perfection? What did Descartes have in mind when he maintained that existence is a kind of perfection? There are three principal senses of perfection. First, in the narrow axiological sense we talk about moral perfection. This kind of perfection we ascribe to those people who possess the capability of maximum moral sacrifice. Also to this narrow axiological sense of perfection belong our evaluative attitudes towards works of art. In this case we talk about aesthetic perfection. Although this narrow axiological understanding of perfection reflects our human feelings and cognitions of what is positively valuable and what is negatively valuable, this fact does not preclude that in our axiology we can refer to values and antivalues which are objective, i.e. obligatory (or antiobligatory) for all finite subjects capable of evaluation. But when Descartes

³ "He [Descartes] should be able to dismiss most objections in one neat trick by insisting on the non-logical nature of the demonstration. This is especially true of objection that the ontological argument begs the question. If God's existence is ultimately self-evident and known by simple intuition of the mind, then there are no questions to be begged" (L. Nolan, *Descartes' Ontological Argument*, w: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed.. E.N. Zalta, [http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/Descartes' Ontological Argument/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/Descartes'_Ontological_Argument/), 2011). Responding to the difficulty raised by B. Leftow [*The Ontological Argument*, w: W.J. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford OUP 2005, p. 82], that even if existence were an element contained in the concept of God, this fact should be demonstrated independently from ontological proof, I. Ziemiński stresses that this objection is not a decisive one, because the impossibility of showing independently from ontological proof that existence is an element of the concept of God points out to the fact that in the case of Descartes' argument we do not have to do with any formal reasoning, but we only explicate our intuition concerning the essence of God. In effect we get the sentence 'God exists' and this sentence should be treated as obvious, in the same way as we accept as obvious the sentence 'Something exists'. The falsity of that sentence is excluded *a priori*. From this follows that Descartes does not beg the question but explicates the content of the concept of God which is unique and necessarily has a real referent (I. Ziemiński, *Argumenty za istnieniem Boga*, [Arguments for the Existence of God in: S.T. Kołodziejczyk (ed.), *Przewodnik po metafizyce* [A Companion to Metaphysics], Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM 2011, p. 562).

maintained that existence is a perfection, he was not referring to perfection in this narrow axiological sense.

In the second sense we interpret ‘perfection’ as a maximal realization of potentialities that belong to some object but this object does not need to be susceptible to any moral or aesthetic assessment. In every-day life it very often happens that we are talking about objects or things more or less perfect, which depends on how we assess the degree of realization of their potentialities. ‘Perfection’ as the maximal realization of potentialities belonging to some object I propose here to call perfection in the formal sense. We apply this formal sense of perfection to empirical things, for example a perfect sword, but also to the objects which - at least at first glance - do not seem to be empirical things. An idea of a triangle is perfect in the formal sense of ‘perfect’ but an idea of a triangle is not an empirical thing. None of the real triangles ever exactly realizes all requirements which ideally are realized in the idea itself. According to Plato the degree of realization of potentialities is the measure of goodness for every object or thing and from this Plato concluded that the idea of the Good is the highest idea at all. Plato’s understanding of what is good and of what is perfect became universally accepted in Western philosophy and culture.

Formal and narrowly axiological interpretations of what is perfect overlap. On the one hand what for us human beings is morally positive we measure by the degree of realization of moral sacrifice. On the other hand, the degree of realization of some property or properties very often requires axiological evaluation in the broader sense of ‘axiological’. In some circumstances a sharper sword is better than the sword that is less sharp and then we talk about practical or utilitarian values.

When Descartes claimed that existence is a kind of perfection he was neither referring to the narrowly axiological sense of perfection nor to the broader sense of this term but he meant the third sense of perfection which I propose here to call metaphysical. Perfection in this metaphysical sense means existence itself, i.e. existence taken against the background of possible total nonexistence or against the background of ‘absolute nothingness’. Not only Kant’s real thalars but also his possible thalars, i.e. possible as only thought by some thinking subject, or possible in the sense of being ‘objectively possible’ - all these ‘things’ already exist, which means that they are different from radical nonexistence or from an ‘absolute nothingness’. If nothing existed at all, if nothing was thought by any subject capable of thinking, if nothing was even ‘objectively possible’, and if in this situation something began to exist, then it would appear to be some perfection. Even purely possible existence, i.e. existence not realized in some medium or dimension of realization is perfection in this metaphysical sense of perfection, because even pure possibilities exist somehow and as such they must be different from ‘absolute nothingness’. This shows that ‘existence’ can be taken to be a perfection, although ‘existence’ is not a general property contained in the concept of a thing - except of the concept of a ‘supremely perfect being’. In this unique case ‘existence’ not being a predicate is nevertheless a property, i.e. a strongly individuating property.

Now I would like to reformulate Descartes’ version of ontological proof as follows:

1. I have an idea of supremely perfect being (the idea of God)
2. Existence, i.e. existence as contrasted with ‘absolute nothingness’, is a perfection
3. Therefore, a supremely perfect being (God) exists.

Even this reformulation leaves us with the famous principal objection that Descartes made an unjustified move from the mental world of concepts to the real (or actual) existence of a supremely perfect being. Critics have very often pointed out that from his reasoning it only follows that the concept of existence is inseparably connected to the concept of a supreme perfect being. If such logical inferences were justified, we could apply ontological ar-

guments to perfect islands, ideal lions etc., i.e. to all kinds of contingent things. We would only need to build existence into the concept of a perfect island or into the concept of an ideal lion, and from that then we could infer that a perfect island or an ideal lion exist.⁴ This objection in my opinion involves two interrelated confusions. The first one concerns the relation between words and meanings and the second one is connected with three kinds of meanings with which human mind is able to operate. Here I think about the meanings referring to artifacts, the meanings referring to empirical things and the meanings for which the best examples come from elementary mathematics and logic.

The meanings which refer to artifacts can be freely changed. The meaning which we associate with the English word ‘table’ can be defined as referring to the things which are made of wood or to the things which are made of wood and of ice etc. We can assume that the word ‘table’ refers only to the things which are used to write on them or to refer to the things which are used not only for writing but also for eating etc.

The meanings we use to refer to empirical things found in this world can also be changed, but not in an arbitrary way. We change some elements of these meanings as a result of new observations, experiments and investigations (scientific or ‘folk investigations’). In the meaning of the English word ‘water’ is contained the fact that water is a colorless, odourless substance, which is found in rivers and lakes, but this meaning also contains a scientific element: water is H₂O. Nevertheless future scientific investigations can provide us with reasons to think that water has other chemical composition than H₂O. The meanings by which we refer to empirical things are not arbitrary but they are ‘open’ to changes, open to future observations, experiments, investigations. This can be taken as the reason why it does not make sense to talk about a perfect lion. We human beings are not in a position to clearly and distinctively grasp the nature of a lion. In other words, the elements contained in this concept are not accessible to us in the same way as we apprehend the idea of a triangle. We are not able to do this, because the nature of a lion is open to future investigations.

It is totally different state of affairs in the realm of meanings belonging to the elementary mathematics and logic. We can clearly and distinctively grasp the elements contained in these meanings. By grasping these meanings, we also become aware that we only discover them. All elements contained in them are not made by any arbitrary definition, but they are discovered as necessary. We cannot define the meaning of the English word ‘triangle’ in such a way that it will refer to objects made of wood, used in kitchens or define it as referring to objects which are carnivorous, which sometimes roar etc. We also strongly believe that no

⁴ N. Everitt claims that we can freely form some word, for example ‘shunicorn’, and then define it as a being in the case of which existence belongs to its essence. From this we can then infer that ‘shunicorn exists’: “if a made-up word like ‘God’ can refer to something with true and immutable nature, why cannot the same be true of a made-up word like ‘shunicorn’?” (N. Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God*, London and New York: Routledge 2004, p. 39). J.H. Sobel interprets Descartes’ ontological proof in the following way: „Any superemely perfect being exists’ and stresses that this sentence is necessary but at the same time lacks an existential character. It is grounded in a ‘stipulative defintion’ (J.H. Sobel, *Logic and Theism. Arguments For and Against Beliefs in God*, Cambridge: CUP 2004, p. 37). In the same way ontological proof is interpreted by G. Oppy, who Descartes’ reasoning describes as belonging the class of ‘definitional ontological arguments’. According to Oppy the structure of this class of ontological arguments is characterized by the following reasoning: „God is a being which has every perfection. (This is true as a matter of definition). Existence is a perfection. Hence God exists.” Oppy thinks that “The inference from ‘By definition, God is existent being’, to ‘God exists’ is patently invalid” (G. Oppy, *Ontological Arguments*, in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, red. E.N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/Ontological_Arguments/, 2007; cf. also G. Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, Cambridge: CUP 1995, pp. 20-24. Even D.A. Dombrowski, who supports Ch. Hartshorne’s version of ontological argument, has written: “in the *Meditationes* Descartes speaks as if existence, in contrast to non-existence, is a predicate or quality such that to lack it is to fall short of perfection. He thereby appears vulnerable to Kant’s critique of the ontological argument” (D.A. Dombrowski, *Rethinking the Ontological Argument. A Neoclassical Theistic Response*, Cambridge: CUP 2006, p. 20).

future investigations will be able to change the elements contained in the meaning which we associate with the English word ‘triangle’. The meanings or ideas of this third kind Descartes interpreted as innate and his reason for doing so were characteristics of our human experience of them: we only encounter these meanings by using the memory of our mind and we encounter them as having an obvious trait of necessity.

At this stage of interpretation of Descartes’ version of ontological proof someone could object that we also are in a position to change meanings expressed even by elementary mathematical sentences as was the case with the non-Euclidian geometries. In the course of development of mathematical sciences it turned out that the sum of angles in a triangle does not have to be equal to the sum of two right angles. ‘A Triangle’ in one geometrical system means and refers to something different than ‘a triangle’ in another geometrical system, because the meaning of ‘space’ was changed. Is it possible to make a similar change to the meaning contained in the expression ‘supremely perfect being’? Is it possible to give some new interpretation to the elements contained in the expression ‘supremely perfect being’? As I can see it, it is not possible, because if someone wanted to say that a supremely perfect being must not be omnipotent, or that it must not be omniscient, he would not be referring to the supremely perfect being (God) at all. This is the reason why existence of God must be seen as more certain than even the most certain logical and mathematical truths.

Now Descartes’ version of ontological proof can be formulated once more:

1. I have an idea of supremely perfect being (the idea of God), i.e. I encounter the meaning that I am not in a position to define in an arbitrary way,
2. Existence, i.e. existence as contrasted with ‘absolute nothingness’, is a perfection
3. Therefore, a supremely perfect being (God) exists.

Now it will not be especially difficult to find an adequate response to the objection that in the case of Descartes’ version of ontological proof we have to do with an illicit leap from what is mental to the extramental reality or actuality. In the same way as we have to think that from the idea of a triangle cannot be separated the fact that its angles equal two right angles, we also must think that from the idea of a supremely perfect being cannot be separated its existence (or its necessary existence). If we accept truths expressed by elementary mathematical sentences, we also have to accept this elementary metaphysical truth that the idea of a supremely perfect being contains its existence. Nevertheless, someone could still object that from the acceptance of the mathematical truth about the sum of angles in a triangle does not follow that triangles exist. But is there any sense in the supposition that in the possibly nonexistent triangles their angles equal two right angles? Would it be reasonable to suppose that we must only think in this way but that in reality we do not know anything about triangles and their properties? It seems to me that we can only entertain such a possibility but we will not believe that it is possible.⁵

⁵ P. van Inwagen (*Ontological Arguments*, in: Ch. Taliaferro, P. Draper, Ph.L. Quinn (eds.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, Second Edition, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2010, p. 360) assumes that Descartes’ argument establishes that the idea of a perfect being which does not exist is an inconsistent idea (just as the idea of a body that has no shape is an inconsistent idea). According to Inwagen “from this it does not follow that a perfect being exists. That it does not follow is easy to see, for the idea of an X that does not exist is an inconsistent idea, no matter what X may be. The idea of a nonexistent unicorn, for example, is an inconsistent idea, for nothing could possibly be a non-existent unicorn. But that fact does not entail that there are unicorns, and neither does the fact that ‘non-existent perfect being’ is an inconsistent idea entail that there is perfect being”. But it seems as though Inwagen did not notice that the starting point of Descartes’ reasoning was not a negative state of affairs. It was not a negative supposition that the idea of a non-existent perfect being is an inconsistent idea but a positive one, namely the fact that existence is a perfection, although, as I tried to show, it is not a predicate. From this positive state of affairs Descartes inferred that perfect being exists. Inwagen seems also to confuse things which

Does it make any sense to expect something more from the Descartes' version of an ontological proof? Is it not enough that it is true that to the idea of a supremely perfect being belongs its existence? Here we must not lose from our sight the fact that a supremely perfect being (God) is not real, when by 'real' we wanted to understand something which is located in spatio-temporal framework. Supremely perfect being is also not actual, if by 'actual' we meant 'realized in some medium of realization' or 'exemplified in some dimension of exemplification'. In the case of triangles we can imagine that all sentences referring to them are true, but that nevertheless it is still possible that there are no real or actual triangles. Can we accordingly imagine that it is true that to the idea of a supremely perfect being belongs its existence but that nevertheless God is not realized or not exemplified or that He is not actual? But the supremely perfect being (God) exists absolutely, and if the sentence concerning the relation between His nature and His existence is true then this truth cannot be separated from the fact of His absolute existence.

can exist only in the mind but not in reality with the strange suggestion that in extramental realm there could exist non-existent things, for example nonexistent unicorns. Traditional scholastic distinction between 'essence' and 'existence' did not contain any suggestion that in extramental reality there could be non-existent things or objects. The philosophical distinction between essence and existence expresses a common-sense belief that in our minds we can have many objects which do not exist in reality.