

God: Descartes and Leibniz

1. Descartes's Causal Argument (Third Meditation)

Hobbes: “Moreover, M. Descartes should consider afresh what ‘more reality’ means. Does reality admit of more or less? Or does he think one thing can be more of a thing than another?” (*Third Objections*, AT VII 185 CSM II 130)

Descartes: “I have made it quite clear how reality admits of more or less. A substance is more of a thing than a mode; if there are real qualities or incomplete substances, they are things to a greater extent than modes, but to a lesser extent than complete substances; and, finally, if there is an infinite and independent substance, it is more of a thing than a finite and dependent substance. All this is completely self-evident.” (*ibid.*)

Ideas have a kind of double reality. (1) As such, ideas are *modes*, and thus have a formal reality as modal beings (see Handout 4). (2) Ideas ‘inherit’ the degree of reality from the thing they represent, and which *causes* the idea to have its content; an idea has that perfection *objectively*, which the thing that it represents has formally.

The Causal Adequacy Principle. “Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much reality [perfection] in the efficient and total cause [of an effect] as in the effect of that cause” (*Med.* III ¶14; cf. Reading [2], Ax. IV and V).

Argument. “If the objective reality of any of my ideas turns out to be so great that I am sure the same reality does not reside [formally] in me, and hence I myself cannot be its cause, it will necessarily follow that I am not alone in the world, but that some other thing which is the cause of this idea also exists” (*Med.* III ¶16). (1) The meditator has an idea of God. This idea has infinite objective reality, which represents actual (formal) infinite reality. (2) According to the *Causal Adequacy Principle*, the infinite objective reality depends on, or must be caused by, infinite formal reality. (3) Therefore, since only God has infinite formal reality, God exists (cf. Reading [2], Prop. II; see also *Principles of Philosophy*, I §§17–8).

2. Descartes's Ontological Argument (Fifth Meditation)

Argument. (1) We have an innate idea of God. According to this idea, God has all possible perfections (properties). What we clearly and distinctly perceive of God is true of God. (2) Existence is a perfection (property). It is impossible coherently to conceive of God as not existing, i.e. as lacking a perfection. Merely considering God *is* considering God as existing (cf. Reading [2], Ax. X). (3) Hence, God necessarily exists (cf. Reading [2], Prop. I; see also *Principles* I §14).

Descartes does not regard this ‘proof’ as a formal argument, but rather as an immediate cognitive grasp of a self-evident truth: the meditator cannot help but understand God’s necessary existence. This demonstration is thus available only to those who master CDP.

The Cartesian Circle. Arnauld: “I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists. But we can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists, we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and distinctly is true.” (*Fourth Objections*, AT VII 214 CSM II 150)

This is a dilemma: (a) We can rely on CDP to prove God’s existence, *but then* there is no need for God to validate CDP as true. (b) We need God to guarantee the truth of CDP, *but then* this guarantee is not attainable, for we cannot rely on CDP to prove God’s existence.

3. Leibniz: Ultimate Reasons and Best of Possible Worlds

Cosmological Argument. This world $W@$ is one among many possible worlds. So, why $W@$? PSR: there must be a reason/cause of $W@$. This reason (*ratio*) is not contained in $W@$ itself, it is ‘extramundane’, *viz.* God. God is the only entity whose reason for its existence lies in its own essence/nature (cf. *Monadology* §§44–5).

Creation and Selection. God chose to create ‘the most perfect world, that is, the one which is at the same time the simplest in hypotheses and the richest in phenomena’ (*Discourse on Metaphysics* §6). God realises $W@$ because of its overall harmonious balance: the best possible world has the simplest possible (divine) laws and the maximally possible variety. This is a trade-off. A simple law is maximally universal and maximally efficient (broad explanatory scope). Hence $W@$ is optimally perfect. But $W@$ is not a ‘free’ choice: God could not have willed to do another world. God is determined (‘inclined but not necessitated’) to realise $W@$. (Indifference is ignorance and thus an imperfection.)

Contrast to Descartes. Leibniz’s God is *maximally rational*: PSR applies to God too. God’s creation is never *ad hoc* or unreasonable, but compelled by divine wisdom. Descartes’s God is *maximally voluntarist*: the divine will is absolute and unbound. God could have chosen different laws, even contradictory ones. Everything depends on the divine will.

Theodicy. The presence of evil in $W@$ is a consequence of its creation and the fact that $W@ \neq$ God. This is explained by PSR and Leibniz’s Law: there is a reason why God is numerically distinct from $W@$. If there were no evil, there would be no difference between God and $W@$. For Leibniz, *this* is Spinoza’s mistake.

Leibniz’s Law. Qualitative sameness entails numerical sameness: “no two substances are entirely alike, and differ only in number” (*Discourse* §9), hence there could be no *two* indiscernible things: if they are indiscernible, ‘they’ are *one* thing. So, for two things to be distinct (or *two*) one must have an intrinsic property that the other lacks: a numerical difference entails a qualitative difference (the ‘distinctness of discernibles’). God is perfect; $W@$ is not (quite).

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