

Josh Bradley Mtg 41

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Much of modern philosophy since the period of the scholastics is indebted to the great minds of Renee Descartes and John Locke. The Cartesian school of thought owes its existence primarily to Descartes, who spent considerable time meditating over the notions of innate ideas and the existence of God. Locke on the other hand felt that Descartes notions were fundamentally flawed to some extent by his use of innate ideas as well as his desire to assume the existence of God. This paper will critically analyze the arguments presented by these two notable philosophers and contrast their positions against each other.

Descartes outlines that his primary goals in his *Meditation on the First Philosophy* are to prove the existence of God and the nature of material substance. The reason that prompts him to do so is that he recognizes the tautology that arises from arguing God's existence from the bible. For when one takes the teachings of the bible as being God's word, and believing in God because that it is written in the bible, the argument is circular and is unable to bring our knowledge any further to the nature of God. To begin this process however, Descartes needs to first determine what exactly he is. It is his discovery that he is simply a thing that is capable of thought.

From the knowledge that he is but a thinking thing, Descartes feels that the only way he can have an idea of God is if God implanted the idea within him. His reasoning follow the rule of sufficient cause, which states that, for all things that have existence, their cause must have also contained at least as much existence to produce them. So the

idea that he has innately in his mind of God could only come from God for there is nothing that could exist which is greater, or even as great in all perfections, than the idea of God that he possesses. His first argument for the existence of God is structured as follows. He has an idea of an infinitely perfect substance (that is God). That idea must have a cause, as nothing comes from nothing. The cause must have at least as much formal reality as the idea he has. He could not be the cause of the idea for he is not an infinitely perfect substance. So the cause of the idea is from an infinitely perfect substance, therefore God exists as the source of this idea.

Though Descartes argument is cogent it relies on the principle that the idea of God is innate. Locke feels that there is no such thing as an innate idea, for a number of reasons. Once he is able to prove there is no such thing as innateness then Descartes argument loses its entire foundation. In Locke's work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* his goal is to define the limit of human knowledge, as he puts it "Knowing the extent of our capacities will hinder us from curiosity, skepticism, and idleness." (pg. 271, #6). Clearly he feels that Descartes' meditations were unnecessary and provided little advancement in the understanding.

For Locke there can be no such thing as an innate idea for if there were such a thing then there would be universal accent amongst people. Since if an idea were truly innate then it would have been in the mind from the very beginning of a person's life and they would have to be aware of it as such. Further more it cannot be said that the use of reason allows one to discover innate ideas for then all ideas that involve reason would equally have to be considered innate. He states that "If therefore children and idiots have souls, have minds, with those impressions upon them, they must unavoidably perceive

them, and necessarily know and assent to these truths. Since they do not, it is evident that there are no such impressions.” (pg. 273, #5). His method to refute the idea of innateness comes as a series of small arguments. Firstly if there are innate ideas then there must be universal consent, but there is no universal consent. This is a modus tollens argument and is perfectly cogent. Secondly if there are innate ideas then there are imbued in people since childhood, but children have no such ideas. Again he provides a cogent modus tollens argument to strengthen his claims. Lastly he argues that if an idea is known through reasoning or perception then it is not an innate idea, but all ideas are the known either through reasoning or through perception, therefore no ideas are innate. This is a cogent modus ponens argument.

Certainly in light of these arguments one has to affirm that Locke is correct and the concept of innateness does not seem to apply any idea in the mind. Therefore, according to Locke, one cannot have an innate idea of God. Without innateness Locke has refuted one argument that Descartes proposes about human knowledge of God’s existence. However Descartes had also construed another argument as proof that God must exist in his third meditation. As Descartes is aware that he exists, then in accords with his casual principal, his existence also must have a cause. He then examines thus, “From what source, then, do I derive my existence? Why, from myself, or from my parents, or from whatever other things there are that are less perfect than God. For nothing more perfect than God, or even as perfect as God, can be thought or imagined.” (pg. 39, 3rd P). He then looks to find if any of these alternatives were possible, else the ultimate cause of his existence would have to be derived from God.

The possibility that he is the cause of his existence is refuted for if that was the case he would have given himself all perfections. He also realizes that he is not responsible for his continued existence and thus it is from some source other than himself that he has derived his existence. But it is not possible that this comes from his parents for it would lead to an infinite regression, as they got it from their parents and from their parents... which is absurd. It is also deemed that it is equally impossible for him to be derived from some being of lesser power than God for a being of lesser power would not be able to create his idea of God. Thus he concludes that God is real for God would be the only possible source of his own existence and of his idea of God's ultimate perfection.

This argument also relies on the use of Descartes innate idea of God, as that is ultimately the reason he denies the alternative of his existence being derived from a being of lesser power than God. As it has been previously shown, Locke has refuted the possibility of ideas being innate in the human mind. If there are no such innate ideas then one is left to wonder how we can account for our idea of God as the Supreme Being. Locke does provide the reader with an empirical accounting of God in chapter X of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. He states that even without the use of an innate idea we can the idea of God for we still have the use of the faculties of sense, perception, and reason. He begins with the proposition, "To show therefore, that we are capable of *knowing*, i.e., *being certain that there is a God*, and how we may come to this certainty, I think we need go no further than ourselves and that undoubted knowledge we have of our own existence." (pg 358, #1). This is similar to Descartes affirming that he

exists for his is a thinking thing, though this is an intuitive knowledge and not an innate idea.

With this intuitive knowledge that a man knows his own existence, Locke then affirms, “He knows also that nothing cannot produce a being, therefore something eternal.” (pg 358, #3). This appears to be grounded on the same principal of causality that Descartes uses in his meditations. Continuing with this line of reason he states that an eternal being must be the most powerful and likewise the most knowing, for as we are aware of some limited sense of power and knowledge, they had to have arisen from something which contained at least as much of those qualities and not less. Locke then states, “Thus from the consideration of ourselves and what we infallibly find in our own constitutions, our reason leads us to the knowledge of this certain and evident truth that there is an eternal, most powerful, and most knowing being, which, whether anyone will please to call God, it matters not.” (pg 359, #6).

This argument from Locke appears to borrow heavily from the ideas which Descartes present in his meditations, however it does not make use of any innate ideas of God, rather it shows how one can account for the idea God using mans intuitive knowledge of himself and the use of reason. Though Locke has shown a method by which one may achieve the idea of an ultimately supreme being, it is unlikely that Descartes would have accepted this as it relies upon the uses of the faculties of sense and reason. The perception that one gets from the senses are often misleading and so this lead Descartes to doubt anything that is not clearly and distinctly perceived. In his sixth meditation, which is entitled *Concerning the Existence of Material Things, and the Real*

Distinction between the Mind and Body, Descartes looks to find if he can produce and argument for the existence of corporeal things.

He begins his argument by stating that, “I know that all the things that I clearly and distinctly understand can be made by God such as I understand them.” (pg 50, 3rd P). He is also aware that for him to have a distinct idea it must be separable from other ideas. He also has a clear and distinct idea of himself as a thinking thing as well as the idea of bodies, which are not thinking things. So from this he can conclude that the mind and the body are distinct things that can exist independent of one another. However he also has a passive faculty of sensing that allows him to know the ideas of sensible things. Since it would be repugnant to God’s perfection for him to be a deceiver, it must be the case that the ideas that he gains from his faculty of sensing actually originate in bodies external to him. Thus he has proved that corporeal things must exist external to his body, which he perceives.

The method by which Locke is able to account for material substance is in stark contrast to that of Descartes. For Locke all knowledge that we have is acquired through the senses or through the mental process of reflection. When a person is born their mind is totally blank, and can be likened to a clean slate or the *tabula rasa*, since Locke has shown there can be no innate ideas. He states that only from experience can we gain knowledge of things. From our experiences we are able to form various sorts of simple ideas that Locke feels are the foundation for our more complex ideas, such as the idea of substance. However, in chapter XXIII of Locke’s essay, he points out that we have no clear idea of substance in general for, “...we cannot conceive how they should subsist alone, nor one in another, we suppose them existing in and supported by some common

subject; *this support we denote by the name substance*, though it is certain we have no clear or distinct *idea* of that *thing* we suppose a support.” (pg 313, #4).

From this obscure notion of substance Locke divides it into three ideas of substance. These are our ideas of God, spirits, and bodies. The ideas of God and spirits are immaterial and unextended, but the idea of spirit is finite and still owes its existence to God. Material things, which can be perceived by the senses, then fall into the category of bodies, which are extended and divisible. So in this way Locke presents his argument for how can have knowledge of material substances. If we experience sense perception then we have simple ideas. If we have simple ideas, then we create complex ideas of their relation to each other. If we create complex ideas of their relation to each other, then we use reason to suppose material substances exist. We do have sense perceptions; therefore we have every right to say material substances exist. This is a cogent hypothetical syllogism that uses empirical sensations to prove the existence of material things.

Though both of these philosophers have addressed similar issues, they represent two opposing schools of thought. Descartes’ rationalism and methodological skepticism lead him ultimately to the same basic conclusions as Locke’s empirical views of the world. Regardless of which path one prefers to follow it seems that there is good reason to believe that there is a greater force, which is not only capable, but also totally responsible for the creation of the universe. Be as that may, it seems that it would be in vain to attempt to learn anything more of its nature as it is wholly beyond the realm of human understanding.