

A Study on Descartes' Ontological Argument

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Abstract

Ontological Argument can be dated back to the Middle Ages, when Scholasticism flourished and some scholastic philosophers made great efforts to support their belief with human reason, especially by proving the existence of God. Among these philosophers, St. Anselm was recorded as the first to put forward the Ontological Argument. From then on Ontological Argument has witnessed fierce controversy. Descartes is distinguished by his proof of the existence of God in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. He formulated his arguments in Meditation III and Meditation V. However, Ontological Argument and Descartes' defense are not ultimately successful, which are refuted because Descartes cannot derive the existence of God from its existence and he cannot ensure the supreme being is God.

Keywords

Ontological Argument, Descartes, Kant.

1. Definition of Ontological Argument

The typical version of Ontological Argument is seen in *Proslogion*. St. Anselm notices that people could always distinguish what is better from others or always have an expectation that something could have been better. Therefore, there must be a conception of "that than which a greater cannot be thought", which is exactly the definition of God. Then, St. Anselm argued that the greatest being exists in understanding as well as in reality. Otherwise, it isn't the greatest. The thoughts can be formulated as follows:

- (1) God is "that than which a greater cannot be thought";
- (2) God exists in human's understanding;
- (3) Suppose God exists in our understanding but not in reality;
- (4) We can imagine there is a being existing in understanding but also in reality as God'
- (5) God' which exists in understanding and reality is greater than God which just exist in understanding
- (6) (5) contradicts (1)
- (7) (3) can't exist
- (8) God exists in understanding and in reality [1]

Therefore, St. Anselm asserts he successfully derives the existence of God from the definition that God is "that than which a greater cannot be thought". From then on the method of argument is recorded as Ontological Argument in the history of philosophy.

2. Argument in Third Meditation of Meditations on First Philosophy

Similar to the foregoing argument, Cartesian argument for the existence of God was mentioned in *Third Meditation*.

In the first two Meditations, Descartes establishes universal doubt, by putting his senses and all the knowledge aside. Then, he gets one thing for sure: he is a thinking thing with ideas and modes of thinking. However, the outside world still means nothing to him, although whether

the outside world exists or not is still an unanswered question. In other words, Descartes has reached subjective but not objective validity, which obviously can't satisfy Descartes - the ambitious philosopher who wants to lay a solid foundation for human knowledge[2]. Therefore, Descartes puts forward his argument for the existence of God in Third Meditation.

First of all, two kinds of realities are introduced: one is "objective reality"; the other is "formal reality":

the 'formal' reality of anything is its own intrinsic reality, while the 'objective' reality of an idea is a function of its representational content. [3, p. 28]

In other words, "formal reality" is connected with the existence in real world, while "objective reality" refers to existence in understanding. And then, Descartes claims: "There must be at least as much<reality> in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause." Based on his discussion, we can get the following 3 principles:

- (1) The "objective reality" of an idea as the effect is not greater than the "objective reality" of the idea as its cause;
- (2) The "formal reality" of a substance as effect is not greater than the "formal reality" of a substance as the cause;
- (3) The "formal reality" of a substance is not less than the "objective reality" of its idea[2, p. 28-31]

All in all, Descartes is asserted that the effect could only be derived from its cause with at least all the reality the effect has. Otherwise, there must be something emerging from nothing, which is obviously ridiculous.

What is more, Descartes believes he does have a clear and distinct idea of God in his understanding:

eternal, infinite, <immutable,>omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of all things that exist apart from him. [3, p. 31]

Descartes also describes God as being with all the perfections or first and supreme being, and all of these descriptions purports Descartes' idea is similar to St. Anselm', in his understanding, God is "that than which a greater cannot be thought". According to the foregoing discussion, there should be two possibilities:

- (1) The idea is derived from another idea with more or the same reality. Focusing on the idea of God, as mentioned before, we could find that all the adjective used to describe God is at the superlative degree with the ultimate meanings. According to St. Anselm's argument, if the idea of God were derived from another idea, the idea as the cause should be the idea of a being greater than the greatest being, and it is impossible. It cannot be derived from another idea with the same reality neither. If it were, then Descartes would have two undifferentiated ideas and we couldn't distinguish one from another and would have no reason to say there are two ideas but not one.
- (2) The idea is from a substance outside of him. According to the principles about "objective reality" and "formal reality", the "formal reality" of the substance as the cause should be not less than the "objective reality" of the idea as the effect, otherwise some elements of the idea would come from nothing. Considering the idea of God, if the idea did be derived from a being outside of him, then the being would be the greatest being.

However, there still lies the possibility that the idea is not from a single being but from several different beings. For example, the attribute of being eternal is from God while the attribute of

being infinite stems from another great being. Descartes refutes that the unity is also an attribute of God, and any element of the idea God fails to provide is a symbol of the imperfection or a lack of perfection, which implies there could be a being greater than God.

To sum up, Descartes excludes other possibilities and draws the conclusion that the only possible cause of the idea of God as effect is the greatest being existing in real world or as a substance. Pay closer attention to the argument of Descartes, we can find that Descartes generally made use of the same strategy or logic as St. Anselm used: First, Descartes did establish an order of greatness with the principles related to objective and formal reality. Second, referring to the definition of God and the adjectives describing ultimate meanings, God as a substance stands at the top of the chain of reality, which is followed by the idea of God. In other words, God exists necessarily or the idea of God comes from nowhere. Therefore, Descartes enriched and complicated St. Anselm's argument to a large extent. Descartes' argument still shares the basic and typical idea of Ontological Argument.

3. Argument in Fifth Meditation

Descartes establishes a delicate proof in Third Meditation. However, the definition of God is in people's understanding which is a totally different field from the real world. Descartes still faces the challenge that how to justify the deduction from the idea in human being's understanding to the existence in real world.

He replies to the challenge in Fifth Meditation. Descartes introduces the possible refutation towards his argument in Third meditation:

It does not seem to follow from the fact that I think of God as existing that he does exist. For my thought does not impose any necessity on things; and just as I may imagine a winged horse even though no horse has wings, so I may be able to attach existence to God even though no God exists. [3, p. 46]

Namely, Descartes notices that no matter in either St. Anselm's or his argument lies a problem: the conclusion that God exists comes from the generalization which put the attribute of existence into the definition of God. With the same logic used in their arguments, the opponents could easily establish their refutation. If the attribute of existence is put into the definition of something else, we could also infer its existence from the definition. Descartes admits this problem and exemplifies it:

It is not necessary for me to think that all quadrilaterals can be inscribed in a circle; but given this supposition, it will be necessary for me to admit that a rhombus can be inscribed in a circle – which is patently false. [3, p. 46]

Descartes admits, the definition or essence of God which plays a really important role in the argument has already contained the attribute of existence before the argument starts. Therefore, ontological argument which derives the existence of God from its definition does have the suspicion that it actually imposes the necessity on God through the definition or presupposition. The method of argument would lead to ridiculous conclusion if used towards other things.

To reply to this suspicion, Descartes discusses about the different relations between essence and existence in different situations:

(1) For some things, the essence and existence are not tightly connected, in other words, their essence doesn't contain their existence. Therefore, we cannot derive existence of them by

referring to what they are, but their existence is conceivable and possible according to their essence. To exemplify it, Descartes illustrate that it does not follow the fact that we cannot think of a mountain without a valley that there must be a mountain in the world. That a mountain has to have a valley is at least part of the essence of mountain, where we cannot find any self-contradiction but also necessary existence. Therefore, we could possibly find that whether a mountain exists or not relying on our sensations and experience.

(2) For other things, the existence is necessarily separated from their essence, in other words, we can derive the impossibility of the existence of them from their essence. Take the non-square rhombus which is inscribed in a circle mentioned in Fifth Meditation as an example. Its existence is impossible, which can be proved as follow:

- a. The definition of a rhombus being inscribed in a circle is that all the vertexes of the rhombus is on the circle
- b. Suppose there is a non-square rhombus is inscribed in a circle
- c. The four vertexes (respectively marked as A, B, C, D) are on the circle, and the line segment AC and BD intersect at the point O
- d. According to the attributes of rhombus, AC bisects BD vertically
- e. According to the attributes of circle, point O is also the center of the circle
- f. $OA = OC$ and $OB = OD$
- g. A, B, C, D are on the circle, so $OA = OB = OC = OD$
- h. Rhombus ABCD is a square
- i. h contradicts b
- j. The supposition is not established, there cannot be a non-square rhombus inscribed in a circle

Referring to the argument, we could easily find the self-contradiction in the definition of a non-square rhombus inscribed in a circle. Therefore, the essence denies its existence and we can infer from the essence that its existence is impossible.

(3) For one thing and the only thing, God, the situation is unique. Descartes claims that in his perception he is clearly and distinctly aware that the existence and essence of God are inseparable.

Admittedly, supposing that all quadrilaterals can be inscribed in a circle, then rhombus can be inscribed in a circle, which can lead to a ridiculous conclusion. we could easily refute the argument by cancelling the supposition. According to the same logic, the opponents could cancel the supposition that God has all the perfections to refute Ontological Arguments.

To reply to this refutation, Descartes makes an analogy between God and triangle. Descartes claims that once he thinks of God, as he always does, he clearly and distinctly perceives that God has all perfections which is exactly the essence or definition of God. Similarly, Descartes clearly and distinctly perceives that "its three angles equal no more than two right angles" once Descartes think of a triangle by deducing directly from its essence, he can clear. Since that God is all-good or has all the perfections is His essence, thinking of God without it would lead to contradiction. Therefore, it is not legitimate to think of God without the supposition that God has all the perfections just as we cannot think of a triangle with denying its three angles equals to two right angles.

Additionally, according to the discussion of St. Anselm, existence is one of God's perfections. Therefore, the existence of God could be directly inferred from His essence. existence as an attribute for God plays the same role as that "its three angles equal no more than two right angles" for a triangle, which are contained in their essence respectively. While thinking of God without its existence can lead to contradiction.

Above all, Descartes establishes a new version of argument of the existence of God through the discussion about essence and existence, still strongly relying on the definition of God, which makes it not fundamentally different from the version in *Third Meditation*.

4. Criticism of Descartes' argument

Through his two arguments mentioned above, Descartes provides strong support to Ontological Argument, which cannot cease the criticism from opponents. The most famous and powerful criticism is from the great philosopher Immanuel Kant in his masterpiece Critique of Pure Reason especially in the part Impossibility of Ontological Proof.

Generally, the core of the debate between the supporters and opponents of Ontological Argument is that whether we can deduce the existence of anything from its essence or conceivability or not. Both Descartes and Kant agree that even though we still need to use our sensation to examine the objective world to see whether it exists or not even though there is no self-contradiction in the conceptions of most of things, while they disagree on God, the unique being.

First, Kant makes it clear that "exist" or "being" is not a predicate, which means if we say the object of a conception exists, we are not adding anything more to the conception; otherwise what truly exists is not the object but another object with something more. Namely, we add supposition that something exists to its conception, we actually add nothing, because, just as Kant claims:

It(being)is merely the positing of a thing or of certain determinations in themselves.
In the logical use it is merely the copula of a judgement. [4, p. 567]

In other words, being just has the function of linking subject with its predicate but not adding anything new to the conception. Finally, Kant makes a general comment on Ontological Argument as "Thus whatever and however much our concept of an object may contain, we have to go out beyond it in order to provide it with existence." Kant believes that we cannot prove the existence of anything in the real world while limited in our subjective world and making some reasoning based on the conception. To examine whether something exists or not, we have to rely on our sensation and experience. If we cannot find any empirical facts to support its existence, we do have no reason to exclude its possibility of existence but also no reason to state it does exist. As for God, the supreme being, the situation is complicated, because we can never see, smell, feel, hear, taste and in generally sense anything about Him. Therefore, whether He exists in the real world or not, just as Kant says, the existence of God "is a presupposition that we cannot justify through anything".

Besides the foregoing discussion, Ontological Argument is faced with another unsolvable problem: it is not universal, which means it is just valid to some extent. First, the argument relies on the definition of God, but for many people especially the atheists, they don't have any conception of God in their understanding let alone clear and distinct perception. Therefore, the method of argument has no effectiveness for them. Second, let's acknowledge the effectiveness of the Ontological Argument for now. What we admit is just that the argument successfully proves the existence of the first and supreme being, but not the existence of God or Jehovah. Suppose that in another possible world, St. Anselm and Descartes are not catholic but Muslim or Buddhist, then they put forward their Ontological Argument for the existence not of God but of Allah and Buddha. Imagine the debate between St. Anselm and Descartes in the real world and possible world. We would see that there is no foundation to judge who is right. Because, just as Kant claims, the argument can never ask for any help from experience. Radically, relying

on the definition in people's understanding or spiritual world, the most private place, even the supporters of Ontological Argument cannot know what each other is proving.

Therefore, even though the argument works out, we can just say that the existence of a supreme being is proved but not necessarily the existence of God. Descartes may accept it, because he just needs a supreme being to ensure the existence of an outside world and frees his philosophy from an individual subjective world. But for St. Anselm, a clergy, the conclusion may be unacceptable.

5. Conclusion

Based on the foregoing discussion we can draw a conclusion that although Descartes makes great effort and provides elaborate discussion about God, the ontological way which utilizes the definition of God to prove the existence of God is not ultimately successful. He cannot justify the inference from the essence of God to its existence and he cannot prove that the supreme being he want to defense is God. Actually, no proof of the existence of God has been successfully established, while Christianity has great influence in Christian world. The fact inspires us to reconsider the relation between belief and reason.

References

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