

The Place of "The Fifth Meditation" in the Philosophy of Descartes

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Abstract

It strikes me that it is vital to figure out the position of "the fifth meditation" in Descartes' philosophical system because the ontological argument set forth there by him is very convenient for Descartes to prove the existence of God, since in his argument for God's existence he should not use any premise to which refer material world. I can say that Descartes demonstrates the necessary existence of God since without the knowledge of God, no other forms of knowledge could be possible. In other words, in Descartes's philosophy, knowledge is possible because God is necessary. In this paper, it is aimed at analyzing and clarifying this problem so that we can determine the place of the fifth meditation in Descartes' philosophical system.

Key words: meditation, prove, premise, knowledge, possible, necessary.

Özet

"Beşinci Meditasyon"un Descartes Felsefesindeki Yeri

Descartes'ın felsefe sisteminde "Beşinci Meditasyon"un vazgeçilmez bir yerinin olduğunu kavramak kanımca çok önemlidir, çünkü Descartes'ın orada ortaya koyduğu ontolojik kanıt (delil) ya da tanrının varlığı için sunduğu ispat, maddi dünyaya göndermede bulunan herhangi bir öncüle başvurmak zorunda kalınmadan yapılmıştır; bu nedenle de bu kanıt Descartes'ın amacı bakımından çok uygundur. Ona göre, tanrı bilgisi olmadan başka hiçbir bilgi ya da bilgi formu olanaklı değildir. Şu halde, Descartes felsefesinde bilginin olanağı tanrının zorunlu varlığına bağlıdır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, bu problemin çözümlenmesi ve açığa kavuşturulması için Descartes'ın "Beşinci Meditasyon"unun onun felsefe sistemindeki yerinin belirlenmesiyle mümkün olacağını gözler önüne sermektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: meditasyon, ispat, öncül, bilgi, olanaklı, zorunlu.

Introduction

R. Descartes (1596–1650) composed treatises on mathematics, physics and philosophy. Mathematics was his favorite study because of the certainty of its proofs and the evidence of its reasonings. He devised the geometry called 'analytic' or 'coordinate'. Descartes once sounded out that he had a dream in which the marvelous interconnections of the sciences were revealed to him. This moment of luminous certitude was followed by years of meditation on science and philosophy with a view to working out a

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reliable method of reaching true conclusions (Brennan 1967: 446-47). Let us here take advantage of his principle philosophical work the *Meditations on First Philosophy* so as to see his main ideas regarding method mentioned just above. He was aware of the fact that learned men disagreed on every subject. Was it not likely that there were some propositions above dispute? If so, some should find them and build human knowledge on them. Descartes was convinced that he had a sound method for discovering propositions being certain. He would take into consideration all the propositions that it was not out of the question to conceive of and figure out if it was not impossible to doubt them all. He could even question the objective existence of the world of his experience due to the fact that this world might be an illusion or a dream induced in him by a mighty evil genius. Finally Descartes arrived at a proposition of such specificity that he was not possibly able to call it into doubt. That was the proposition "I think, therefore I exist". Descartes says that I know that I exist because I am thinking. Even if there should be some powerful malignant demon cheating on him regarding the whole world, at the very least there exists a Descartes being cheated or deceived (Descartes 1986: 17-8). Descartes goes on to say that as he observed that this truth "I think, therefore I am", was so certain that no ground of doubt could be alleged by the Sceptics capable of shaking it, he drew the conclusion that he might, without doubt, accept it as the first principle of the philosophy of which he was in search (Descartes 1974: 63). Descartes then proceeds to search for other certain propositions. According to Brennan, for Descartes, the judgment 'I exist' has such peculiar *clarity* and *distinctness* that it is not possible to doubt it. Are there any other judgments similarly clear and distinct? Descartes was convinced that the judgment 'a perfect being exists' had the requisite clarity and distinctness and that the proposition expressing it was certain. Descartes puts forward that the truth of the proposition 'God exists' is self-evident. Once one figures out what this proposition means he/she cannot possibly doubt it. Having to his own satisfaction established the certainty of 'God exists', Descartes makes the conclusion that human knowledge is fundamentally reliable, provided that one employs it properly. For God, being good, would not endow us with a faculty inherently deceptive (Brennan 1967: 97). And, in Buchdal's point of view, it is Descartes' contention that the self, as thinking substance, cannot arise out of nothing; recognizing himself as limited he must postulate a cause of its existence (Buchdal 1969: 175). This problem is my starting-point to shed light and set forth so that we can determine the logical place of the God and of the fifth meditation in Descartes' philosophical system.

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In the beginning of the fifth meditation, Descartes starts asking the question of what material things are in essence. When he is discussing about the ideas of corporeal world, he sees another way of proving the existence of God. It is this proof that I aim to illustrate right now. By the time he came to prove the existence of God, he had spoken of quantity, size, figure and so on which are the categories of "extended substance". Furthermore, these ideas are known by him clearly and distinctly through his

* For more about this very discussed proposition cf. Yavuz Kılıç, "Cogito, Ergo Sum Önermesi Üzerine Birkaç Söz", *H.Ü. Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, Aralık 2005.

imagination. Descartes goes on to say that he has so many ideas in him which have immutable and true natures, even though they do not refer to anything in external world. For example, he has an idea of triangle which is immutable and eternal because this idea is not dependent upon his mind. That is to say, a triangle has some characteristics which do not depend on him; for instance, it is the property of a triangle that its three angles equal two right angles and so on. As a result, Descartes' point is this: even if there is no figure in external world, whenever he thinks of a triangle, this triangle is a determinate nature which cannot be separated from it. I think what he is saying is this; a triangle is the object of mathematics which has a shape or other items which Descartes clearly and distinctly perceives (Descartes, 1986: 45).

Having illustrated the mathematical items which he clearly and distinctly perceives, he goes on by saying that "if the mere fact that I can produce from my thought the idea of something entails that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it, is not this a possible basis for another argument to prove the existence of God?" (Descartes, 1986: 45). This is the criterion which Descartes can use as an evident to prove the existence of God. As a matter of fact, according to Descartes, "there are only two ways of proving the existence of God, one through his effects, the other through his very essence or nature" (Williams, 1978: 153)*. It is this second way, through the essence, which has been called Descartes' ontological argument. According to Descartes, the idea of God, which is a supremely perfect being, is as clear and distinct as the idea of any shape. So there cannot be a perfect being which does not contain existence for Descartes. Since existence is a perfection, perhaps the highest perfection, it will be contradictory not to include in it the distinctness of the clear and distinct idea of God. Therefore, existence must necessarily be attributed to the idea of supremely perfect being. In other words, examining the idea he has of a perfect being, he finds that existence is included in this idea; consequently it is certain that God, who is this perfect being, exists.

Descartes here is saying that there is an obvious logical connection between being God and existing, just as there is an obvious logical connection between being a triangle and having three angles that equal 180 degrees. However the idea of God is a special case because the idea of God possesses all perfections and for Descartes one perfection is existence itself. As a result of this, the essence of God necessarily contains existence. As we have seen, for Descartes from the idea of God it follows necessarily that God actually exists.

According to Descartes, at first glance, this argument looks like a sophism; but the reason why this simple argument may appear a sophism is that as a rule, we make a distinction between essence and existence so that we do not see that in the case of God his essence involves his existence. This is one of the three possible objections to his argument which he proposes against himself. To repeat, essence and existence is

*Descartes speaks of the existence of God also in his books *Principles of Philosophy*, Chapter I, particularly the articles 13,14, 18-24, trans. V.R. Miller and R.P. Miller, Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983; and *A Discourse on Method*, Part 4, pp. 62-68, trans. John Veitch, The Rationalists, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, New York: Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc, 1974. Cf. also Talip KABA-DAYI, "Ontological and Cosmological Arguments in Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, *H.Ü. Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, Cilt: 19, Sayı: 1, p. 153-163, Haziran 2002.

inseparable in the case of God because such a supremely perfect being must have all perfections and existence is itself a perfection. In other words, if existence is not a perfection, God could not be a supremely perfect being. For that reason, there is a logically necessary connection between being God and existing (Descartes, 1986: 46).

Another possible objection is this. Descartes cannot think of God without existence, but that does not mean that he can think of God as existing, therefore God exists. Descartes goes on to say that "there is a sophism concealed here. From the fact that I cannot think of a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that a mountain and valley exist anywhere, but simply that a mountain and a valley, whether they exist or not, are mutually inseparable. But from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and hence that he really exists" (Descartes, 1986: 46). What Descartes says is this; it is the necessity of God's existence that determines his thought, and for that reason, he cannot think of God without existence. This is called "*de re* modalities" which necessity comes from the thing itself. On the other hand, according to Descartes, he could conceive of a horse with wings because he is free to think a horse with wings. So in this example of a winged horse, the winged horse is dependent upon Descartes' thought; that is to say, Descartes can think of a horse either with wings or without wings because there is no logically necessary connection between being a horse and being winged. However in the case of God, existence is a particular perfection which cannot be removed from God (Descartes, 1986: 46).

Let us quote the last possible objection and then try to explain it. Descartes says that while it is indeed necessary for me to suppose God exists, once I have made the supposition that he has all perfections (since existence is one of the perfections); nevertheless the original supposition was not necessary. Similarly, the objection would run, 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 (Descartes, 1986: 46).

In my view, What Descartes' point is this: If he thought a certain thing to be true, another thing would certainly follow from it inevitably. Only he does not need to think that thing is true and in the example he takes it is not. He goes on by saying that "now admittedly, it is not necessary that I ever light upon any thought of God; but whenever I do choose to think of the first and the supreme being, and bring forth the idea of God from the treasure house of my mind as it were, it is necessary that I attribute all perfections to him, even if I do not at that time enumerate them or attend to them individually" (Descartes, 1986: 46-47). As far as I figure out, what Descartes says is this: First of all it is not necessary to think of the circle having such properties as to enable all quadrilateral figures to be inscribed in it. Secondly, if we did it, it would be false. On the other hand, in the case of God, while it is true that it is not always necessary to think of the idea of a perfect being, he cannot think of such a being as non-existent. In addition to this, there is no necessity for him to think of the figure in relation to the inscribing of quadrilaterals inside it.

As a result of these three possible objections, Descartes argues that this idea of supremely perfect being is not dependent upon his thought; on the contrary "it is an image of a true and immutable nature" (Descartes, 1986: 47). In order to support his argument, he gives other further considerations to us. According to Descartes, God is the only supremely perfect being whose existence pertains to his essence. Moreover, there is

only one God due to the definition of God that God is eternal, infinite, immutable, omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of all things (Descartes, 1986: 28). Finally according to him, these attributes of God which I illustrated above cannot be taken away from him.

So far, I have tried to illustrate Descartes' ontological proof of the existence of God. As we have seen, conceiving of God as a supremely perfect being, he noted that he possessed a clear idea of such a being within himself. For discovering the nature of God, he had only to discover what was contained in this idea. As a result, he found that the idea of existence was inseparable from God's essence even in thought. Another way in which he expressed this was by asserting that God, who is the supremely perfect being, cannot be thought of except as embodying every perfection. However, for Descartes existence is itself a perfection; so it follows that God cannot even be thought of except as a real being. As we have already seen again, Descartes goes on to say that existence is not contained in the idea of anything else; whatever he might form an idea of, he can always conceive to be non-existent at some time or other, with the sole exception of God. For instance, no absurdity is involved in saying that a winged horse either that it does or that it does not exist. However, in considering God Descartes maintained that one can no more conceive him as non-existent than one can conceive a plain triangle, the angles of which are not equal to the sum of two right angles. As a result, if one affirms that what he is thinking of does not have angles equal to the sum of two right angles, then it follows either that his idea of a triangle is unclear or that he is thinking of something other than a triangle. Similarly, if one affirms that God does not exist, then it follows either that he is not applying the name God to a supremely perfect being or that his idea of God is very unclear in terms of Descartes. Before looking at the objections and replies, I would like to say something about the ontological proof of the existence of God.

Descartes needed a demonstration of God's existence and with it God's trustworthiness or veracity for banishing his own philosophical skepticism and establish the reality of a material world that he had professed to find himself capable of doubting. Hence ontological argument was very suitable to Descartes' purposes for proving the existence of God. It is because Descartes' argument for God's existence should not use any premises which refer to material world since the existence of such a world is still at this stage of meditations in doubt. In addition to this, Descartes thought that the only sure way to metaphysical truth and certainty was through the formation of clear and distinct ideas, which are dependent upon the existence of God and the rational analysis of them.

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Now it is time to look at the *Objections and Replies* which are related to the fifth meditation. In the fifth objections, the objector (Gassendi) claims that Descartes is comparing existence with a property to prove the existence of God. It would be alright if he compared essence with essence or existence with existence, but Descartes is wrong when he compares existence with a property. For example, he should have claimed that omnipotence or omniscience cannot be separated from the essence of God instead of saying that existence cannot be separated from the essence of God. That is to say, the

objector is saying that existence is not a property; so it cannot belong to essence of God. Furthermore, he adds that we cannot talk about existence unless something exists in reality; therefore, we cannot say that this thing is perfect or not perfect without knowing that or this thing exists in reality. According to the objector again, Descartes says that he cannot think of God without existence while he can think of a horse with or without wings. That is to say, without existence God cannot be a complete being in accordance with Descartes. As a result, in the idea of a perfect being all perfections are included as well as existence. However, objector asserts that why can not we think of an idea of a perfect Pegasus, to wit, objector claims that by using the same reasoning which Descartes employed, it is possible to prove the existence of every perfect being, such as a perfect Pegasus or a perfect island (Descartes, 1986: 95-96).

Descartes answers the fifth objections by saying that existence is a perfection; he is not saying that existence is a predicate*. However, whether or not existence is or is not a predicate, necessary existence is certainly an attribute of a perfect being because of God's essence. That is to say, it is impossible for such a being to have all the attributes of a perfect being except the attribute of necessary existence. In a few words, unless necessary existence is an attribute of God, God cannot be a perfect being. So Descartes is talking about the necessary existence to which belongs God, not mere existence. In addition to this, this supremely perfect being preserves himself and everything including a triangle is dependent upon him; therefore we can separate existence and essence in everything except for in God (Descartes, 1986: 97).

Again in the fifth objections, the objector claims that there is no difference between St. Thomas's definition of God and that of Descartes'. It is because where St. Thomas says "that than which nothing greater can be conceived"* Descartes says "a supremely perfect being". Furthermore, according to objector, their conclusions are the same, too. That is to say, both of them made conclusions that their notions of God imply existent, therefore God exist in reality. I think objector's question is this; how can Descartes show us that his argument is different from that of St. Thomas's? Secondly, he goes on to say that Descartes' argument is based on a supposition that supremely perfect being actually exists. He asserts that even if supremely perfect being implies the existence that does not mean that it really exists in reality. However, it shows that existence as a concept is connected to the supremely perfect being as a concept. For supporting his argument, he

* Kant rejects ontological argument by stating that "existence is not a perfection or predicate", for more about it cf. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N.K. Smith, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965, p. 505-507. Cf. also Talip KABADAYI, "Ontolojik Delil Üzerine Anselmus ve Kant", *Felsefe Tartışmaları*, 24. Kitap, Ocak 1999, ss.100-107.

* The objector seems to get the argument wrong, because the so-called expression given by him pertains to st. Anselm, not to st. Thomas. Let me give the reasoning of Anselm for the sake of clarity. As a rule, the ontological argument put forward by st. Anselm can be, in my opinion, worded shortly as follows: Anselm asserts in *Proslogion* that God is figured out to be a being than which nothing greater can be thought. Even the Psalm of the fool denying the existence of God figures out the proposition a being than which a greater cannot be thought when hearing it. Besides, what he figures out is in his mind. Hence, a being than which a greater cannot be thought is in his mind. However, such a being cannot be only in the mind; because if it is in the mind, it can be thought to be also in reality; accordingly, since a being is greater if it is in the mind and in reality than if it is only in the mind, if it existed only in the mind, we could then think of a greater being, which is out of the question. Thus, a being than which a greater cannot be thought is both in the mind and in reality (Anselm 1962: 54).

gives the example of "existing lion". He says that this example contains both lion and existence as a complex thing. So, suppose that we removed either existing or lion from this complex unity, then it is not going to be the same complex. From here, can we not say that existence pertains to the essence of the composite "existing lion"? So, what Descartes makes is a supposition that supremely perfect being contains existence; therefore, it exists in reality. That is to say, there is no difference between the complex "existing lion" and "supremely perfect being exists". As a result, objector says that this proof for the existence of God does not work out (Descartes, 1986: 99).

Descartes replies to his objector by saying that his argument is different from that of St. Thomas's; because St. Thomas is interested if the existence of God is obvious to everyone. On the other hand, Descartes' argument is based on premises which are clear and distinct. So, having carefully investigated what God is, Descartes discovers that existence which is clear and distinct for him pertains to God's true and immutable nature; and he can claim that God exists in reality which is the conclusion coming from the clear and distinct premises. In order to make his argument clear, Descartes says that we need to make a difference between possible and necessary existence. We can see the necessary existence in the case of God while we can observe the possible existence in everything other than God. That is to say, existence, which is in reality, is necessarily and always associated with the other qualities of God; therefore God exists in terms of Descartes (Descartes, 1986: 100). Descartes goes on to say that we have some ideas in us which do not contain true and immutable natures, to wit, either we made them up or intellect put them together. For example, he conceives of a winged horse or an existing lion or a triangle which is inscribed in a square; however at the same time, he thinks of a lion without existing or of a horse without wings or of a triangle without a square because these things, according to Descartes, have no true and immutable natures. That is to say, these things are capable of existing but not necessarily. From here, he argues that if he had used the same argument which St. Thomas employed, he would not have concluded that God exists necessarily; because according to St. Thomas's argument, you can draw a conclusion that God is capable of existing not necessarily exists (Descartes, 1986: 101).

In sum, when we look at Descartes, in fact, he tries to prove God's existence from a mere definition of the word "God". That is to say, existence is thought of as part of the definition of a supremely perfect being. Since God is the supremely perfect being and it has all perfections and existence is a perfection; therefore God exists. So Descartes proves the existence of God without using any contingent premise. In other words, Descartes claims that just as the idea of triangle necessarily includes among the defining attributes of having its three internal angles equal to two right angles, so the idea of a supremely perfect being necessarily includes the attributes of existence. As a result, we can no more think of a supremely perfect which lacks existence than of a triangle which lacks three sides without contradiction. However, as we know from the fact that for being a triangle a figure must have three sides, it does not follow that there actually are any triangles, as in the case of the concept of a supremely perfect being. He explains this difficulty by saying that the essence of a triangle does not include the attribute of existence that of supremely perfect being does. Therefore, in that special case, we are authorized to conclude existence from a concept. That is to say, according to Descartes

the only possible explanation of the non-existence of God would be a contradiction or incoherence in our concept of God.

It appears to me that, for Descartes existence may not be a property of God, but "necessary existence" is. It is because necessary existence is a property ascribable to God in virtue of the fact that the assertion that God exists is a necessary truth. So Descartes is not talking about ordinary existence, but necessary existence. I can add that Descartes clearly seems to hold both that God's existence is a necessary truth and that existence is a part of the essence of God. Hence, as I said earlier, Descartes is talking about necessary existence as a perfection. When we look at the meaning of God, we notice that it is incompatible with this meaning that God's existence should depend upon anything. For that reason his existence is necessary and whether we believe in him or not, we must accept that supremely perfect being cannot be thought of as being brought into existence by anything or as depending for his continued existence on anything.

According to Descartes, as we have seen, the essence of God must be real because it is an essence inseparable from his continuous consciousness or experience of reality. Descartes makes a statement that it is the notion of the infinite precedes that of the finite. So, Descartes' ontological argument has focused on this logical precedence. Descartes here deals with a particular idea, the idea of God not that of anything else. That is, it is not the existence of anything in general, but an idea with a special character. As a matter of fact, for Descartes, necessary existence is certainly an attribute of a supremely perfect being. It is because of Descartes' definition of a perfect being that it is not possible for such a being to have all the attributes of a perfect being except the attribute of necessary existence. That is to say, unless necessary existence is an attribute of a thing, that thing cannot be a perfect being. In addition to this, for Descartes since the idea of God is the very ground of our existence, it is more than an idea. So, if it had not existed, we would have had only vague and uncertain opinions. Accordingly, Descartes says that God is the source of his existence.

In fact what Descartes claims is that what Descartes apprehends when he apprehends God is not the idea of God merely, but is God. Therefore, God is actually apprehended as existing, otherwise he could not be apprehended. Moreover, from Descartes' point of view, it would be absurd to think that Descartes existed, but that God, who conserves Descartes existence, does not exist. That is to say, the conserver's existence, namely, God's existence is the only real existence. As a result of this, not only our existence, but also our knowledge of something is dependent upon God. For example, Descartes can rely on his idea of a triangle to be always the same and he can rely on all the truths he finds within himself to be always the same; besides he can trust his memory due to the existence of God.

In conclusion, I think that according to Descartes, the question whether God exists or not is not a question you can decide; because it is not only decided for you by the very nature of your knowledge of God but also this idea is innate in human beings. Descartes discovers not simply that God exists but that it is impossible to think God as non-existent; and the impossibility consists in this that to think God as non-existent would imply to think his own non-existence which is impossible. It is because in that case Descartes cannot say that "I think; therefore I exist"; and again Descartes cannot say that "I think; therefore I exist" if existence is not a perfection or a predicate. It is vital to understand the position of the ontological argument in Descartes' philosophical system

because the ontological argument is very convenient for Descartes to prove the existence of God since in his argument for God's existence he should not use any premise which refer material world. Like I stated earlier, the idea of a perfect being is not only innate but has a peculiar nature that if anything is removed from it; it cannot be the idea of a perfect being in accordance with Descartes, who held that it is not possible that an innate idea does not exist. As far as we are told, if an idea is innate, it must be necessarily true and exist; otherwise it cannot have been an innate idea.

In the final analysis, it can be argued that Descartes demonstrates the necessary existence of God because the existence of God is very crucial and important in Descartes' philosophy since without the knowledge of God, no other forms of knowledge could be possible.

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