

CARTESIAN IDEA OF GOD AS THE INFINITE

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PUŠKARIĆ, K.: Cartesian Idea of God as the Infinite
FILOZOFIA 67, 2012, No. 4, p. 282

The paper discusses presuppositions of the so-called trademark argument for the existence of God presented by René Descartes (1596 – 1650) in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The author explores the interpretation of Descartes's idea of God as the infinite that provides a response to a difficult philosophical and theological question: How can the human mind obtain a coherent idea of God, whose infinite and transcendent greatness reaches beyond reason? I propose a conceptual distinction to defend the Cartesian thesis, namely, that it is possible to have a clear and distinct idea of the infinite, while consistently sustaining the negative theological element of God as ultimately incomprehensible.

Keywords: Philosophy of religion – God – Idea of infinity

Descartes claimed to be able to perceive the idea of the infinite most clearly and distinctly, though he admitted its ultimate incomprehensibility. My discussion of this apparent contradiction will be centered upon two objections to Descartes, which were put forward by Pierre Gassendi (1592 – 1655) and Bernard Williams (1929 – 2003): 1) that the idea of the infinite is impossible; and 2) that the incomprehensibility of the idea is not compatible with its clearness and distinctness.

I will discuss and defend the coherence of Descartes' conception of God as the actual infinite in contrast with the potential infinite (or the "indefinite").¹ I conclude that clarity is reconcilable with the incomprehensibility of such idea, because to the human mind, the idea of God has an indefinite dimension – a point that I believe ought to be conceded to Descartes's objectors. In order to defend this response and more clearly understand Descartes's position, I intend to draw a distinction in Descartes's account of ideas. For that purpose I shall begin with a few terminological questions.

1. Terminological Distinctions: Material and Objective Ideas of God. Descartes begins his inquiry by stating that he has an idea or concept of God as an infinite and supremely perfect being: "By the term 'God' I understand a substance that is infinite, [eternal,

¹ I am not introducing a question-begging term here. *Actual* is contrasted to *potential* in such a way that the former brackets reality of the object of thought. For example, I can think of someone being potentially bald, or actually bald. However, my thought about someone being actually bald doesn't imply that that person *is* bald.

immutable,] independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and which created both myself and everything else (if anything else there be) which exists” ([1], vol. II, 31).

The first question that needs to be addressed is the following: what does Descartes mean by the term “idea”? He responds the following: “My reply is that there is an ambiguity here in the word ‘idea’. ‘Idea’ can be taken materially, as an operation of the intellect, in which case it cannot be said to be more perfect than me. Alternatively, it can be taken objectively, as the thing represented by that operation; and this thing, even if it is not regarded as existing outside the intellect, can still, in virtue of its essence, be more perfect than myself” ([1], vol. II, 7).

As Descartes suggests, the idea of God can be understood as that *by* which we are aware of the intentional object, i.e. it can figure as a psychological vehicle. For example, we can be aware of a tree by having a thought or perception of it. Both means, thought and perception, figure as psychological vehicles of awarenesses that reach the tree as intentional object. Similarly, the idea of God may refer to a thought, a psychological state. This idea can be called a “material idea” (I shall add to it a specification – *simpliciter*). Such an idea of God as the infinite is taken to be an *act of thinking*, but obviously the act itself is not infinite, neither temporally, in extension, nor in perfection. The psychological episode of thinking involves a certain duration; it belongs to an individual, etc.

Moving on to the second distinction, Descartes shows that the idea of God can also stand for *what* is represented. We may call it the “objective idea” of God (I again add qualification *simpliciter*) – that to which the act of thinking refers – which is neither time- nor subject indexed; it is infinite, at least in thought. Here, however, Descartes’s objective idea *simpliciter* branches into two possible interpretations of the notion of “what is represented”: i) the objective idea can be the content of a thought, or ii) the objective idea can stand for the intentional object of a thought.

To briefly summarize, we have distinguished three kinds of things that fall under the concept of “idea”:

1. the act of thinking (which is not infinite) – the material idea *simpliciter*
2. our conception of the infinite – the objective idea *simpliciter*, as content of a thought.
3. the intentional object of a thought – the objective idea *simpliciter* as the object of a thought.

Let me now continue on the distinction within the objective idea of God *simpliciter* since it is essential for my interpretation of the Cartesian idea of God.

Gottlob Frege’s (1848 – 1925) example from *Sense and Reference* illustrates the distinction I want to emphasize in Descartes’s account of ideas. The example goes as follows. One can think about Venus as the last star visible in the morning, or as the first star visible in the evening. There are two thoughts, or two ways of thinking, but the intentional object of the two thoughts is the same. One way to account for the ambiguous “what is thought of” is to distinguish *aspects* or the content of a thought, “the last star visible in the

morning” and “the first star visible in the evening,” from their intentional object, which is the same: Venus. Such thought-identity through intentional object-identity is possible by virtue of the distinction between the content and intentional object. If “what one thinks” or “what is represented” conflates content with object (given that the content of thoughts differs in case of “the morning star” and “the evening star”), it would follow that one has thoughts about distinct objects, which is not plausible.

Frege’s example highlights the need for Descartes’s theory of ideas to account for the distinction between content and intentional object. Thus, I propose to clarify the ambiguity associated with the concept of “what is represented” or “what is thought of,” by distinguishing the *manner* or *aspect* by which one thinks (intentional content), and *what* one thinks (intentional object) within the objective idea *simpliciter*. The objective idea *simpliciter* (O), what one thinks, has a material (O_m) and objective component (O_o) which correspond to its content and intentional object. The material idea O_m does not involve the act of thinking as material idea *simpliciter* (M), but it rather involves the *aspect* under which we are thinking about an intentional object.

Although Descartes, to my knowledge, never explicitly makes this distinction, I believe that his theory of ideas requires it. It offers a sufficiently nuanced framework for Descartes’s conception of God. My aim is to reconcile the apparent paradox associated with the idea of God, while conceding to Descartes’s objectors what ought to be conceded.

Finally, one more clarification should be added to my account of the intentional object. I take that whenever I think of God or of a unicorn, there is something I think about. The sense of “real” that is attributed to the intentional object should be understood in the following way. For example, the intentional object of a unicorn is *real in the mind* insofar it figures as the object of someone’s thought. However, this sense of intentional reality should be distinguished from mind-independent reality, the sense in which horses, chairs, neural states, etc. are real. We can talk about the unicorn being white and being beautiful without assuming its existence. Speaking about the infinity of God is similar. Instead of “infinity” or “the infinite” I will sometimes use a more clear, non-question-begging term *infinite-beinghood*² in order to emphasize “bracketing” mind-independent reality of the object of thought, and concentrate on the nature of the infinite.

Let me now pass to a more perplexing question: what does Descartes precisely mean by “infinite”? What is the content of such an idea? What do we think when we think about the infinite? I will answer these questions by presenting a detailed discussion of the idea of God as the infinite, which was held between Descartes and his objectors.

2. Cartesian Infinite. Descartes distinguishes two concepts that may be labeled by a single concept “infinity”. To Johannus Catusus (1590 – 1655) he writes: “Now I make a distinction here between the *indefinite* and the *infinite*. I apply the term ‘infinite’, in the

² This concept that I take from Thomas Vinci ([2], 94) does not imply extra-mental reality of the infinite. It refers to the nature of the infinite.

strict sense, only to that in which no limits of any kind can be found; and in this sense God alone is infinite. But in cases like extension of imaginary space, or the set of number, or the divisibility of the parts of a quantity, there is merely some respect in which I do not recognize a limit; so here I use the term ‘indefinite’ rather than ‘infinite’, because these items are not limitless in every respect” ([1], vol. II, 81).

Both concepts share something in common – they are described in terms of “limitlessness”. Yet there are three important criteria by which Descartes distinguishes them. “Indefinite” refers to the divisibility of matter, the extension of the world, and numerical series. But the infinity of God cannot be spelled out in terms of magnitude, spacio-temporal quantity, or mathematical concepts of infinity. God is greater than the world, not in extension (*ratione extensione*) but in perfection (*ratione perfectionis*). According to Margaret Wilson ([2], 342 – 343), this is a metaphysical criterion that shapes the Cartesian understanding of God as limitless in perfections.

Another metaphysical criterion that distinguishes “indefinite” and “infinite” Wilson ([2], 342) makes by reference to “limitless in some respect” and “limitless in all respects”. “Indefinite” applies only to some features of a thing, but not all of them. For example, an apple is infinitely divisible, and yet finite with respect to size. On the other hand, infinity is limitless in all respects. For Descartes, properly speaking, only God is infinite in this sense. Coupled with the first metaphysical criterion, stating that God is infinite in perfections, Descartes obtains the concept of God as limitless in all perfections.

In the *Principia* Descartes further introduces what Wilson ([2], 344) calls the ‘epistemological criterion’, which is of particular interest: “We call these things indefinite rather than infinite in order to reserve for God alone the name of infinite, first because in Him alone we observe no limitation whatever, and because we are quite certain that He can have none; second because, in regard to other things, we do not in the same way positively understand them to be in every respect unlimited, but merely negatively admit that their limits, if they exist, cannot be discovered by us” ([1], vol. II, 202).

Descartes emphasized that he *positively understands* that God has no limits, whereas in the indefinite he admits that he *cannot conceive* limits. The problem is how to clearly understand this distinction; why is the inconceivability of limits in the indefinite not able to offer us a positive understanding (at least) of what is impossible about the indefinite?

Some critics of Descartes rejected the epistemological criterion altogether, arguing that the concept of God is at best an indefinite concept, and thereby reduced the infinite to some kind of indefinite. Pierre Gassendi, for example, presents an objection of this sort: “You insist that your perception of the infinite is arrived at by means of ‘a true idea’. But if it were a true idea, it would represent the infinite as it is, and you would hence perceive its principal feature – the one we are dealing with here – namely its infinity. But in fact your thought always stops at something finite, and you call it ‘infinite’ only because you do not perceive what is beyond the reach of your perception; hence it is quite right to say that you perceive the infinite by a negation of the finite” ([1], vol. II, 206).

At least part of the defense of the epistemological criterion, and the beginning of an answer to Gassendi’s objection may be found in stressing a further distinction between

the “infinite” and “indefinite” in terms of “actual infinity” and “potential infinity”.

“Indefinite” adequately corresponds to “potential infinity”. For example, when you try to imagine an infinite series of numbers, you imagine that the process of adding numbers can continue *ad infinitum*. As Descartes says in the *Third Meditation* ([1], vol. II, 24 – 36), imagining that starts from a finite state constantly increases, so that it never falls within full intellectual grasp. Potential infinity is essentially *compound*; it has parts, and it is *incomplete* (or open-ended) by definition. Descartes, on the other hand, emphasized the *actuality* of God’s infinity ([1], vol. II. 32, 35). The idea of God as the idea of infinity is actual in the following sense; it is *complete* – all perfections are contained in the idea of God in such a way that no further addition of perfection is conceivable. Descartes clarifies how such an idea is not essentially altered by discovering new perfections of God: “Once the idea of the true God has been conceived, although we may detect additional perfections in him which we had not yet noticed, this doesn’t mean that we have augmented the idea of God; we have simply made it more distinct and explicit, since, so long as we suppose that the original idea was a true one, it must have contained all these perfections. Similarly, the idea of a triangle is not augmented when we notice various properties in the triangle which we were previously ignorant” ([1] vol. II, 256).

Descartes distinguishes between having a conception and making that conception explicit by inductive thinking. His point seems to be that one cannot become aware of a new perfection that was not already contained in the idea of God. One does not augment the idea, as one’s thinking moves inductively from one perfection to another. They are all “there” already; one can only *discover* perfections that were already implicit in the idea of God.

The distinction between potential and actual infinity might help us to understand Descartes’s epistemological criterion – that the idea of God is positively understood – because the idea is clearly and distinctly perceived as complete, while the indefinite is by definition open-ended, and may be understood in a mere negative sense by reference to what it fails to grasp. In understanding the indefinite we understand that we can always *add more*, while in the infinite we can always *discover more*.

Someone might object here that the proposed distinction only helps us to more clearly articulate Gassendi’s initial question: how can our finite mind even conceive or grasp the actual infinite in its completeness? It does not seem to suffice to actually conceive of the infinite without being aware of it *as such*, without being aware of what it is. For example, someone who knows very little about electronics can see an iPod without being aware of it *as being an iPod*. This is the sense in which one has grasp of the thing itself, a *de re* grasp. When someone who is familiar with iPods sees one, he has a *de dicto* awareness of the thing under a concept “iPod” – *as being an iPod*. What is needed for Descartes’s argument is conception the infinite *as infinite*; the meditator has to have *de dicto* (rather than *de re*) grasp. Yet the possibility of having such conception undermined by the inability to grasp vastness of God. In the *Third Meditation* in fact, Descartes clearly admitted that he could not grasp the infinite: “It does not matter that I do not grasp the

infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God which I cannot in any way grasp, and perhaps cannot even reach in my thought; for it is in the nature of the infinite not to be grasped by a finite being like myself. It is enough that I understand the infinite..." ([1], vol. II, 32).

Descartes conceded that the human intellect could not grasp the infinite, but on the other hand, he affirmed his *understanding* of the idea of God. How does one reconcile these two contentions? Descartes seems pulled in two incompatible directions: not being able to grasp infinity as the object of his thought, and yet being able to grasp enough, clearly and distinctly, to ground an argument for the existence of God. In a letter to Marin Mersenne from 1630 Descartes paradoxically claimed that "we cannot comprehend the greatness of God although we know it" ([1] vol. I, 23). Williams, not very much impressed by Descartes's mystical expression, presents the tension in Descartes view in the form of a destructive dilemma: "On the one hand he has to claim (as he does) that he has a perfectly 'clear and distinct' idea of God as an actual infinite being combining infinite perfections in a real unity; if he does not claim this, he will be open to the objections that he does not really conceive of God as actually infinite, and so forth, and may merely have put together a hazy notion of some being indefinitely great. On the other hand, both his religious faith and the exigencies of his argument require that he cannot really conceive of God's infinity, since this must be inaccessible to a mind which is, as the argument itself insists, finite" ([4], 129).

Descartes is thus pressed by two difficult questions: first, how can the idea of God *as* infinite be clearly and distinctly perceived at all; and second, how is that compatible with not being able to grasp the infinite?

The answer to this puzzle lies in the *Fifth Set of Replies* ([1], vol. II, 264) where Descartes makes an important distinction between "understanding" and "grasping" or "comprehending" by "having a full conception". He argued that we may understand infinity without having a full conception of it. Having a full conception would presumably require knowing all about infinity, but that is clearly impossible by its definition ([1], vol. II, 253), as Descartes admits. Nevertheless, understanding is less demanding than having a full conception (or grasp). Descartes presented a tactile analogy to illustrate his view; instead of putting your arms around a tree and embracing it, you can merely touch it ([1] vol. II, 274). In both cases, you have touched a tree. Similarly, instead of embracing (grasping) the infinite, human mind can touch (understand) the infinite clearly and distinctly. In the *First Set of Replies* Descartes gives a visual analogy: "When we look at the sea, our vision does not encompass its entirety, nor do we measure out its enormous vastness; but we are still said to 'see' it. In fact if we look from a distance so that our vision almost covers the entire sea at one time, we see it only in a confused manner, just as we have a confused picture of a chiliagon when we take in all its sides at once. But if we fix our gaze on some part of the sea at close quarters, then our view can be clear and distinct, just as our picture of a chiliagon can be, if it is confined to one or two of the sides. In the same way, God cannot be taken in by the human mind, and I admit this, along with all theologians" ([1], vol. II, 81).

Is this answer plausible at all? “It is”, Gassendi would say, “as much as the tip of my hair is enough to make an authentic idea of Gassendi”. Understanding a *part* of the infinite is not understanding the infinite itself.³ But if this point is right – if understanding or having a clear and distinct idea requires a full grasp of the thing – then what do we understand? William Alston points out the following: “I don’t have to perceive the whole X in order to perceive it. I rarely, *if ever*, perceive the whole of any physical object I see; but if I see enough of X under the right conditions, I am properly credited with seeing X” ([5], 60).

Thus, we can reformulate Gassendi’s question in the following way: what are the “right conditions” for understanding the infinite?

Descartes never gave an analytically rigorous answer consisting of a list of sufficient and necessary conditions that would satisfy Alston’s requirement, instead he responded with a mathematical analogy: “...we do not doubt that a novice at geometry has an idea of a whole triangle when he understands that it is a figure bounded by three lines, even though geometers are capable of knowing and recognizing in this idea many more properties belonging to the same triangle, of which the novice is ignorant. Just as it suffices for the possession of an idea of the whole triangle to understand that it is a figure contained within three lines, so it suffices for the possession of a true and *complete idea* of the infinite in its entirety if we understand that it is a thing which is bounded by no limits” [My emphasis] ([1], vol. II, 254).

Here we meet the notion of ‘completeness’ that applies to the *idea*, which does not imply full or complete *knowledge* of what is contained in the idea. So what does “completeness” mean here? The following passage provides a good answer: “Nonetheless, it is evident that the idea which we have of the infinite does not merely represent one part of it, but really does represent the infinite in its entirety” ([1] vol. II, 254).

Descartes was ready to assert that we have a representation of *entire* infinity, not only a part of it. But, there is an important qualification added: “The manner of representation, however, is the manner appropriate to a human idea; and undoubtedly God, or some other intelligent nature more perfect than a human mind, could have a much more perfect, i.e. more accurate and distinct, idea” ([1] vol. II, 253).

The manner of representation of the infinite is appropriate to our human condition, i.e., to our cognitive and conceptual abilities which are finite and imperfect. Nevertheless, the representation is complete. We can have a complete idea of God’s infinity by having a representation of the entire infinite, although such idea will not give us a complete knowledge or grasp of God. And it need not. Our understanding of the infinite need not extend infinitely. As Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) ([6], 54) nicely pointed out, knowledge of the infinite need not be infinite knowledge itself in order to perceive something as it is. Consequently, let me formulate Descartes’s answer to Williams as follows: knowledge comes in degrees, and small amount of knowledge can still be clear and dis-

³ Gassendi’s objection and the visual analogy are limited however. Although sensory objects have parts, so that whenever we see a sensory object X, we see a part of it. But the special analogy fails to hold in the case of infinity, i.e. *actual* infinity that has no parts.

tinct. A clear and distinct idea (or understanding) *that* God is limitless in all perfections is a true and complete idea of the infinite God. Descartes can coherently maintain the view that God cannot be grasped by the intellect, although we can have a clear and distinct idea, or understanding of God who is limitless in all perfections, whatever they may be. What is sufficient is that the idea (rather than knowledge) be complete, clear and distinct.

So far, I have defended the view that Descartes can meet Gassendi's challenge: 1) the idea of God as the actual infinite is possible insofar as the idea of God (O_o) is present to the mind in its completeness. That is why I find putting emphasis on the concept of God as the actual infinite illuminating. I also hold that Descartes has a coherent answer to Williams: 2) Descartes criterion of truth – the clearness and distinctness of an idea – can be reconciled with an impossibility of grasping all of God's perfections. However, some truth has to be conceded to Gassendi – the idea of the infinity of God has an indefinite dimension vis-à-vis the human mind, which Descartes himself conceded in *The Fifth Set of Replies* ([1] vol. II, 254).

Now, bearing in mind the distinction that I make between the material and objective idea (O_o and O_m), I can further clarify Descartes's position in the following way. What we are thinking about, O_o is complete; the intentional object of the idea has all perfections and nothing can be added nor taken away from it to make it "more" infinite. But our *way* of understanding, which I associate with O_m – the manner appropriate to human minds – is imperfect with respect to inconceivable and innumerable perfections of God that reach beyond our imagination. Descartes clearly acknowledges "dual nature" of our idea of the infinite-beinghood: "In the case of infinity, even if we understand it to be positive in the highest degree, nevertheless our *way of understanding* it is negative, because it depends on our not noticing any limitation in the thing" [My emphasis] ([1], vol. II, 81).

I believe that this passage confirms that there is an indefinite (somewhat negative) dimension of the idea of God as the infinite that can be attributed to the material idea O_m , but what we understand is something positive and the most perfect idea of the infinite – O_o .

3. Conclusion. In this paper I proposed a conceptual distinction that has explanatory force in accounting for the question of how a human mind may have a clear and distinct idea of God, who is infinitely great and incomprehensible. The answer is ultimately this: we have an imperfect and finite, yet complete idea representing the entire infinite-beinghood of God. Our way of understanding, however, *that* God has all perfections in simplicity and unity is neither perfect, infinite, nor simple. We understand the infinite and perfect *via* finite and imperfect ideas. In order to account for Descartes's positive and negative element that pertains to the idea of God, namely the epistemological distinction pertaining to the idea of the infinite, I proposed to make a distinction within the objective idea of God *simpliciter*, between *how* (O_m) and *what* (O_o) is represented. Descartes's position interpreted with such an additional element to his theory of ideas offers a coherent answer to one of the most profound and recurrent questions about the possibility of knowing God, who is traditionally regarded as both transcendent, yet intelligible.

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