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Descartes' Bodiless God: A Blurry Perception

But before I examine this matter more carefully...I wish to pause here for a while to contemplate God himself, to ponder His attributes, and to consider, admire, and adore the beauty of His immense light...

-René Descartes

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, René Descartes simplifies his perception of God by imagining it as intangible substance rather than a corporeal being with human attributes. Initially, Descartes' God is simply the antithesis of measurable substance. If "finite" substance exists, so must "infinite" substance. In simple terms, infinite substance is to finite substance what night is to day or what yin is to yang, an equal counterpart coexisting in harmony with the other. Correspondingly, whatever traits infinite substance has, humans seem to possess the counter traits, and since this substance is "perfect" according to Descartes, it means that believers are not because they inherit opposing characteristics to their god. Respectively, since "nothing can possibly be added to [God's] perfection" (61), it must follow that humans can always be "added to" because they are inherently imperfect, their knowledge can always be increased further. However, there are other times in *Mediations*, when Descartes' god resumes a more theological form (the form of the Judeo-Christian god) which creates contradictory tension within his theory. This essay will explain how his two ideas of "infinite substance" are incompatible and why Descartes' bodiless God cannot perform the function he requires.

To keep pace with the scientific standards of his time, Descartes felt it important that his belief in God be rooted in factual evidence rather than mere speculation which inspired him to apply updated methods to his belief. However, this task would prove to be challenging because he was attempting to apply an experimental approach to something immeasurable, that being thought. Since the first step was to separate the topic in question (his thoughts in this case) into as many parts as possible (according to Descartes' precepts outlined in his earlier work titled *A Discourse on Method*), he starts by dividing his thoughts into as many categories as possible. He refers to the first category as "ideas", which are "images of things" and claims that these ideas "cannot be false" when they are in and of themselves (55). His second category consists of thoughts which emanate from "ideas" such as ideas about heat or ideas relating to noises and believes that this category contains the least amount of truth because they are thoughts that can be influenced by imagination (55). He calls the third category "judgements", which he says can contain error, and lastly, his thoughts about God, which could potentially contain an element of falsity since they consist of more than the representation of God himself. Descartes' next step is to analyze each part beginning from the simplest to the most complex, so once he has satisfactorily analyzed the first three categories of ideas, he is finally ready to take on his most complicated category of thought, those related to God.

Descartes' argument for the existence of infinite substance begins with his premise that the idea of God "has more objective reality in it than those ideas through which finite substance are represented" (57). His evidence for this claim stems from his observations about the sun, which, unlike his idea of infinite substance, exists "outside of [him]". He says that he has two ideas of the sun, one "derived from the senses and...makes the sun appear very small to [him]" (56), and one "derived from astronomical reasoning [which] makes the sun appear many times

larger than the earth” (56). Since the idea that is most directly derived from the sun itself is the least accurate in his opinion, finite substance is misrepresented by the senses, resulting in a flawed idea of the object in question. This inconsistency leads to Descartes’ assumption that the ideas which cannot be perceived by the senses (including his idea of infinite substance) contain more truth than things he can detect using sense perception (57). However, according to Descartes’ line of reasoning, it is impossible for something (including ideas) to be made from nothing (57) which means that he must root his idea of infinite substance in some form of reality even if it is only a metaphysical* reality. He argues that his ideas about corporeal things must contain at least as much reality as the reality contained in the idea itself (57), therefore, our ideas about corporeal things must emanate from sources that contain at least as much reality as our perception of them. If we apply this reasoning to intangible substance, Descartes’ idea of infinite substance must contain an element of reality as well.

Later in *Meditations* however, Descartes refers to this substance as a “supremely perfect being” (64) whom he “admires” and “adores” which creates perception of infinite substance that seems to contradict his former one. This personification conveys a much more physical idea of infinite substance with human-like attributes and even applies the term “Divine Majesty” to this so-called “perfect” substance which seems to conjure an image of a noble figure with ultimate power and authority rather than a bodiless force. Furthermore, Descartes notes that this infinite substance (which he frequently refers to as “He” or “Him) made him in “His image and likeness” (64) which suggests that his idea of infinite substance may be connected to imagery resembling man. To complicate things even more, Descartes’ infinite substance possesses a will which he says is “incomparably greater in [infinite substance] than in [himself]” (68). And since Descartes

*The term “metaphysical” in this context is referring to reality that is beyond what is detectable to the human senses

asserts that “the power of will consists only in the ability to do or not do something” (68) “to affirm, deny, follow or avoid” (68), it suggests that Descartes’ God is not only infinite substance incapable of err, but also finite substance with intellect. When Descartes analyzes his errors by comparison, he notices that when he seeks out their cause, he pictures a “certain real and positive idea of God” (64) or a “supremely perfect being” in addition to “a certain negative idea of nothingness” (64) and believes that he is something “intermediate” between God and nothingness. And although he does not explain exactly what this “real” idea of God looks like in his mind, infinite substance is transformed into finite substance through his use of the terms “being” and “positive idea” which both suggest a physical aspect.

In his fifth meditation Descartes acknowledges this contradiction and admits that he “cannot separate existence from the essence of God” (74). In other words, it is impossible for him to think about a supremely perfect being while not thinking about existence and says that existence is inseparable from God (74). However, he insists that his idea of God is different from his ideas of other things such as animals because he can imagine an animal with wings, whereas he is unable to add anything or remove anything from his idea of God (75). For Descartes, this is enough to convince him that infinite substance has “a true and immutable nature” (75). In this light, God is both real and unchangeable; an idea that contains more truth for Descartes than most other ones in fact. For the reader however, the “perfect” image of God becomes blurry once again, as Descartes’ idea of “infinite substance” and the image of this idea goes back out of focus.

From a distance, Descartes’ “infinite substance” may appear to be bodiless substance; an idea that cannot be quantified or measured because it originates from a negation of the finite, substance that is basically the opposite of everything humans are. Upon closer inspection

however, it becomes clear that this infinite substance must possess human-like attributes such as intelligence and truthfulness to perform its necessary functions which means that his “infinite substance” must take an at least a partially physical form. Eventually, Descartes’ infinite substance evolves into an image of a higher being with a distinctly manlike form with human attributes, and thus cannot remain bodiless. A “perfect”, all-powerful, non-deceiving being who is the “creator” of everything. In the end, his theory of infinite substance ultimately requires the melding of human attributes to inanimate substance or a belief in a human-like being that we cannot (and will never be able to) detect with our senses. Descartes’ “infinite substance” is, above all, an abstract concept, both physical and non-physical, it is both form and essence.

Works Consulted

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Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, edited by Andrew Bailey. Translated by Ian Johnston. Peterborough, Broadview Press, 2013.