Descartes’ Trademark argument

In the ‘Trademark argument’, Descartes tries to prove that God exists just from the fact that we have an idea of God. This idea is like the ‘trademark’ our creator has stamped on our minds.

Descartes says that every idea must have a cause, and argues that ideas can have any of three sources: they can be ‘adventitious’ (caused by something external to the mind), fictitious (caused by the mind), or innate. Innate ideas are not ones we think from birth, but ones that the mind has certain capacities to use, and which can’t be explained by our experience. But what is the cause of innate ideas?

We cannot in general be certain which of the three types of cause an idea has. However, Descartes argues that a cause must have at least as much ‘reality’ than its effect. The philosopher Bernard Williams gives a commonsense example: if we discover a picture of a sophisticated machine, we automatically think it must have been the product of an advanced society or a highly fertile imagination, even though it’s just a picture (Descartes, pp. 138–9). If we actually found the machine, working as it should, this would be even more impressive – the machine has ‘more reality’ as a working machine than as a drawing.

DEGREES OF REALITY

The idea of ‘degrees of reality’ is foreign to us, but a standard part of medieval metaphysics. A ‘substance’ is defined as something that can exist independently. An ‘accident’ is a property of a substance. And a ‘mode’ is a particular determination of a property, e.g. the substance is a book, the accident is ‘colour’, and ‘red’ is the mode. A substance has more reality than an accident, because a property cannot exist without a substance, and so is dependent on it. A mode has less reality than an accident. Furthermore, a substance that is in some way dependent on another substance has less reality than it, e.g. an incomplete substance such as a hand has less reality than a whole human body.

Different types of thought are modes of the property ‘thought’, itself an accident of ‘minds’, which are thinking substances. Particular ideas are instances of these modes. As ideas, they all have the same degree of reality (the same ‘formal’ reality). But the objects of the ideas, what the idea is about, have varying degrees of reality. I can have ideas about a physical thing (a substance) or about the colour red (a mode). Whatever my idea is about, the idea is still an idea, and so an instance of a mode. But because they are about different things, ideas have different ‘objective’ realities. The objective reality of an idea is not the same as the formal reality the object would have if it actually existed; but it is correlated with it.

Descartes claims that the cause of an idea must have as much reality as the object of the idea, what that idea is about.
As thinking substances, we have considerable reality, and hence many ideas could be the products of our minds. But the idea of God is different, Descartes argues. The object of the idea of God is God, which has the greatest degree of reality, more reality than minds do, for the idea of God is the idea of a substance that depends on nothing else to exist. Our minds could not, therefore, have created it. This is a puzzling claim – the idea of God is still simply an idea, which is a mode, whereas I am a substance. But the special features of the idea of God, viz. the idea of something perfect and infinite, Descartes argues, place the reality of its cause far in excess of me, for I am imperfect and finite (this is clear, because I am in a state of doubt). Indeed, the only possible cause is God, because only God has enough reality to create the idea of God. So God must exist.

A VARIATION
Descartes also presents a variation of the argument, which claims not just that God caused the idea of God, but God caused me. I, who have this idea of God, can’t exist unless God does, because if I created myself, I could give myself every perfection. This is because to create substance requires more power than creating properties – hence causing myself (a substance) involves more power than creating perfections (which would be properties). But I can’t give myself every perfection, so I could not have caused myself. Again, if I created myself, I could also have given myself the idea of God, but, as argued above, I can’t do this either.

Of course, we might think, I was created by my parents. But if only my parents were involved in explaining my creation, then they must have sufficient power to cause the idea of God in my mind. But they have no more power than I do. We could continue back to their parents, and so on. Descartes allows that there could be an infinite series of creatures, each causing the other. But, he objects, this won’t be able to cause the idea of God. So since I have the idea of God, God created me.

OBJECTIONS
One objection Descartes responds to immediately. As imperfect and finite, I could be the cause of an idea of something that is ‘not finite’ and ‘not imperfect’. Could I not come up with the idea of God by simply thinking away all limitations? But this negative conception of infinity and perfection is not the idea of God, Descartes claims, which requires a positive conception of these properties – not the absence of limits, but something for which there could be no limits.

Because of this insistence that our ideas of the infinity and perfection of God are not negative ideas, Descartes is claiming that we have a very powerful – clear and distinct – idea of God, and not some hazy notion of something indefinitely great. But this requirement conflicts with Descartes’ own claim that as finite minds, we cannot form a clear idea of God’s infinity. So he wants to say the idea of God is not clear, but it is clearly and distinctly positive rather than negative? This sounds like a contradiction, since an idea is not distinct unless it is clearly separated from other ideas, and it contains nothing other than what is clear. Yet Descartes must insist that the idea of God is positive; if we do only have a negative idea of God, because we are finite, then it becomes possible that we are the cause of that idea.
Second, the argument relies on the notion of ‘degrees of reality’, and the claim that a cause must have more reality than its effect. This is all outmoded. Indeed, we owe its rejection to Descartes’ development of the mechanical view of nature.

Third, Descartes supposes that every idea must have a cause. Hume argued that we don’t know this. It is not an analytic truth; so it is logically possible that some ideas have no causes. If the idea of God has no cause, Descartes’ argument collapses.