20473104

Midterm Assignment

Phil110A Introduction to Philosophy: Knowledge and Reality

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At the center of Aquinas's Second Way of proving God's existence is the notion of agent causation. Aquinas first approaches this topic by introducing the premise that everything has a series of dependencies. A child wanting to play a game of Ring Around the Rosie is dependent on his or her friends to come together and form a circle to begin. The fact that the child must wait for his or her friends to come form a circle before beginning is a dependency in time. The game's dependence on the existence of the children in a circle is caused by the rules of the game, and is an example of a time-independent dependency. A second important point in Aquinas' argument is that these dependencies cannot be self-causing. Since it is not natural for something to be caused by nothing, Aquinas maintains that everything must be caused by something that existed earlier in the series than itself and that it does not make sense for something to exist before itself. The third essential component of Aquinas's argument is that a series of dependencies cannot be infinite. Aquinas justifies this part of his proof by creating a sub-argument containing the premise that there must be a first cause in order for there to be any following causes. This premise seems to automatically preclude the possibility of there being an infinite series of causes, as an infinite series of causes has no beginning. By immediately eliminating this possibility, he is able to conclude that there must be a finite series of dependencies, the first of which must be God. Not unlike his concept of an infinite series, Aquinas's own reasoning for his third component of this proof has no distinguishable beginning and justifies itself in the form of a circular dependency that is clearly an example of the fallacy of Begging the Question.

As an Empiricist epistemologist, Locke believes that all knowledge is derived from experience. Every quality that a person can experience can be described by Locke as either a primary or secondary quality. Unlike an Idealist, Locke believes that there are mind-independent materials in the world and that these materials can never be understood in the mind as perfectly and completely as they exist in reality. The closest the mind can come to understanding the actual qualities of an object is to create ideas that resemble them in the mind. A primary quality is an idea in the mind that actually reflects a quality that a material possesses, such as its size and shape. Since people are limited by their senses, they can only create a similar idea of this shape in their mind, but it is undoubtedly a reflection of the actual material's shape. A secondary quality is a quality that is produced as a result of an interaction between a combination of the material's primary qualities and a person's senses. The idea of the colour of a red ball is different to a normal person than it is to someone who is colour-blind, or someone wearing sunglasses. No one idea resembles the ball's true colour, as it has no actual colour like it does a shape or size and colour is clearly a secondary quality of the ball. Locke's definition of these qualities makes it difficult to distinguish between appearance and reality. A second object resembles a first if it looks similar to the actual object when compared. Since people are limited by their senses and can only create ideas of a real object, they have no real object to which they can compare the resemblance. Under Locke's epistemology it becomes impossible to know if a person's ideas about any objects are in fact at all reasonable.

Descartes came to the conclusion that from past experience, both his senses and his teachers have been unreliable sources of knowledge. In his approach to epistemology, he creates a model focused on knowledge that can be proven to be true, rather than observed to be true. Descartes reasons that in order to only accept proven knowledge, he must consider everything he already knows to be false and rebuild the foundation of what he knows through means of logical assessment. The most important aspect of Descartes' model is the rationalization that it is only A Priori, intellectual knowledge, that can be trusted to be accurate. Descartes' Rationalism recognizes mathematical and logical proofs as the only way to attain true knowledge about the world. Using one of his most important proofs, the Dream Argument, Descartes proves that all empirical evidence must be dismissed as real knowledge under his Rationalist model. If a person can never be certain of when they are dreaming, then there is always a chance that any observed knowledge could be inaccurate and Descartes must dismiss all knowledge ascertained from a source external to the mind. Another pillar of Descartes' epistemology is the recognition that without a proof that there is no god capable of creating false thoughts in his mind, even his own thoughts could be inaccurate. Even if a force exists to muddle Descartes' thoughts and cause him to believe something false, Descartes knows that the fact that he is believing anything at all is logical proof of his own existence. To think then, according to Descartes' philosophy, is to exist. The only things that Descartes meditations prove to be true is that thoughts must exist, whether those thoughts are right or wrong. It is this careful and thorough reasoning which exemplifies Descartes' commitment to logical thinking and the rationalist approach.

The concept of the “master argument” is presented to Hylas by Philonous in Berkeley's Dialogues as a way to further develop Berkeley's form of Idealism. In his master argument, Berkeley shows how Philonous can prove to Hylas that there is no material object that does not exist in the mind. In a philosophical conundrum that is reminiscient of the modern day Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, Philonous stresses that it is impossible for an object that does not exist as an idea in the mind in the mind to also exist in reality. He forces Hylas to fall into this trap by asking Hylas to imagine an object that is not conceived in any person's mind. Hylas considers the situation of a tree existing in the woods, where no human exists to observe it. The flaw that Philonous shows in Hylas's reasoning is that by coming up with the idea of the tree as a counterexample of Philonous's conjecture, Hylas has consequently pictured the tree in his own mind. Philonous asserts that there is no way that Hylas or any person can imagine an object that has never been imagined in a person's mind, since the mere act of formulating the counterexample results in its immediate disqualification. Hylas easily concedes this point to Philonous with painfully little deliberation and it seems as though that by the end of this discussion Berkeley's argument has been completely validated. While Philonous' points are enough to satisfy the opposing viewpoints of Hylas, it ultimately create more issues than it attempts to solve.

The master argument is successful in that it follows a logical progression that at first glance does not seem to contain any immediate inconsistencies. Its success relies on the fact that Hylas cannot imagine an object that is not conceived in any mind because that would cause it to be conceivable in his own mind. There are several ways to introduce problems with this assessment. By using a tree in the woods as a counterexample to Philonous's argument, Philonous suggests that Hylas has conceived of the tree itself, however, Hylas is merely referencing an unobserved tree as a counterexample of an object that does not exist in the mind and this reference is different than the actual object. If a police detective was to ask a guilty suspect where he was the night of a car theft and the suspect lies that he was “standing at a tree by the train station”, he is referencing a tree in order to show his innocence. There is a clear difference between referencing an object and holding that object in the mind. When the police detective quickly asks the guilty party what colour the tree's bark was, how many branches it had, and numerous other questions, the suspect's alibi falls apart. Every tree has a certain number of branches, but before the suspect can improve his lie, the object he is referencing has never possessed the qualities necessary to make it a tree. Hylas has similarly not reached a contradiction since he has only tried to show that somewhere his reference must point to an actual unimagined object. Secondly, Philonous's master argument does not yet introduce Berkeley's idea of a god who holds all things in his mind, and while there are reasons why this god would not help his argument, that is not a part of the master argument and will not be discussed. Without this god, it becomes impossible for certain imagined ideas to exist. Consider the first person to find an apple on the ground, before viewing the apple tree. It is logically impossible for an apple to exist without having come from an apple tree, but since no-one has ever seen an apple tree, it can not exist and neither can the apple. Berkeley's arguments, while satisfying Hylas, are not substantial enough to prove his conclusion when examined in greater depth.