

Paper 1: Question A

Often referred to as the “Cartesian Circle,” Descartes presents a very problematic argument about the existence of God. He presupposes the truth of the premise of clear and distinct perception in order to prove the existence of God. Then once he proves the existence of God, he uses it to prove the validity of the clear and distinct perception premise; that whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive must be true. In the excerpt on page 105 of Descartes’ *Meditations*, he provides the missing explanation of the logic behind the idea that anything that someone clearly and distinctly perceives is true.

The first premise that Descartes provides is that there exist some things that we can never think of without believing they are true. Descartes refers to these things as those that we clearly and distinctly perceive. When we do try to imagine that these things are false, it simply does not make sense. Descartes gives two examples of this: 1) I exist so long as I am thinking and 2) what is done cannot be undone. We can try to imagine these premises being false, however when we get into details about how they could be false we quickly lose our way. As a result, Descartes concludes that every time we recall these ideas into our minds, we believe that they are true.

The next premise that Descartes provides is that we cannot doubt an idea without simultaneously thinking of it. He does not go into much detail about this argument, because it is very much an obvious point to make. In order to decide that we do not agree with something, we must first recall it into our mind; we cannot simply disagree with something without first thinking of the idea. Although this idea is seemingly very obvious, it is nonetheless an important premise for his later conclusion.

Descartes then draws from these two premises the conclusion that any time we doubt something that we clearly and distinctly perceive, we at the same time believe that it is true. According to the second premise, in order to doubt an idea, we first bring that idea into our heads. However, according to the first premise, we are instantaneously convinced of the truth of the premise when we bring the idea into our head because we clearly and distinctly perceive it. So when we doubt any of these ideas, we also believe the ideas at the same time.

A third premise that Descartes uses is that it is impossible to both doubt something and believe it to be true at the same time. These are mutually exclusive states of mind; it is a logical impossibility to both doubt and believe something to be true simultaneously. Overall this premise is very obvious, but it is required for Descartes' argument to be complete.

Using this third premise and the first conclusion, Descartes draws his final conclusion: we can never doubt what we clearly and distinctly perceive. The three premises together lead us to a logical impossibility, one element of the premises must be logically impossible. To further his argument, he decided that the impossible element is the act of doubting the things which we clearly and distinctly perceive. Doubting these ideas leads us to an impossible state of both belief and doubt, so it we simply cannot doubt them.

The reason why this excerpt fits in with the main purpose of the Meditations is that it finally gives a clear definition of clear and distinct perception. Throughout the Meditations, Descartes builds up the argument that if we can clearly and distinct perceive something, we can know that it is true. However, he does not go into many details about what it means to clearly and distinctly perceive something. But he finally defines it as that which is "so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to

be true” (1). This is a very clear definition that would have been useful earlier on in the Meditations.

In addition, Descartes’ response to the objector gives us another proof of the clear and distinct perception argument. As we have already established in class, the argument is flawed on many different levels. But Descartes still remains absolutely convinced of the validity of the clear and distinct perception argument, so he attempts to advance another separate explanation for it. In it, Descartes provides us with a clear and thought-out argument about why it is impossible to doubt that which we clearly and distinctly perceive.

Although Descartes argument about clear and distinct perception has its problems, this excerpt helps the reader understand the concept more. As we discussed in class, Descartes never completely explains why he is not creating what has been referred to as the “Cartesian Circle.” But this did not stop him from advocating it as a way for us to definitively know that God exists. Descartes was very sure that the argument of clear and distinct perception was powerful and this excerpt lets us inside of his head on the idea. As much as his argument for clear and distinct perception has aligned, one cannot argue that he did not put any thought into it.

Works Cited

1. Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, rev. ed., trans. and ed. John Cottingham (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 105s.