Filosofia Unisinos
Unisinos Journal of Philosophy
19(3):213-222, sep/dec 2018
Unisinos – doi: 10.4013/fsu.2018.193.04

The "Non-atheistic-thesis-of-Cartesian-metaphysics"[1]

A "tese-não-ateísta-da-metafísica-cartesiana"

Rodrigo Alfonso González[2]

ABSTRACT

In support of Descartes' epistemology, Lex Newman advances the 'Non-atheistic-knowledge-thesis', i.e., indefeasible knowledge cannot be gained *unless* the existence of God is proved. Here I expound the 'non-atheistic-thesis-of-Cartesian-metaphysics', which, unlike Newman's, refers to how four Cartesian metaphysical conclusions require the existence of God. To test whether such conclusions need divine existence, we may ask what would happen if God did not play any decisive role in the *Meditations*. As I argue, four unpalatable consequences would follow for Cartesian metaphysics, which would ruin Descartes' plan to refute the skeptic and the atheist alike.

Keywords: Cartesian metaphysics, God, the non-atheistic-knowledge-thesis.

RESUMO

Em apoio à epistemologia de Descartes, Lex Newman avança a "tese do conhecimento não-ateu", ou seja, o conhecimento irrevogável não pode ser obtido a menos que a existência de Deus seja provada. Aqui eu exponho a "tese-não-ateísta-da-metafísica- cartesiana", que, ao contrário de Newman, refere-se a como quatro conclusões metafísicas cartesianas requerem a existência de Deus. Para testar se tais conclusões precisam da existência divina, podemos perguntar o que aconteceria se Deus não desempenhasse nenhum papel decisivo nas Meditações. Como argumento, quatro consequências desagradáveis se seguiriam para a metafísica cartesiana, que arruinaria o plano de Descartes de refutar tanto os céticos quanto os ateus.

Palavras-chave: metafísica cartesiana, Deus, a tese do conhecimento não-ateísta.

Introduction

Although Cartesian metaphysics is mostly developed in the *Meditations*, many commentators believe that the role that God plays there is either irrelevant or unnecessary.[3] Against this belief, Lex Newman argues that the success of Descartes' epistemology depends upon the existence of God, a requirement that gives rise to the 'non-atheistic-knowledge-thesis' (Newman, 2016, p. 16). Briefly put, this thesis holds that since Descartes' metaphysical doubt can affect all knowledge claims, even of necessary truths, the existence of God must be proved to counter the threat posed by radical skeptics and atheists (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 36, 25.) Thus, divine existence

[1] I am indebted to Jason Constanzo for the discussion of this article.

[2] Universidad de Chile. Av. Ignacio Carrera Pinto 1025, Ñuñoa, Santiago, RM, Chile. E-mail: rodgonfer@gmail.com

[3] The Cartesian circle is related to this critique. See Descartes (2008, AT VII 125, 89).

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0), which permits reproduction, adaptation, and distribution provided the original author and source are credited.

is required for the foundation of knowledge, that is, for a step beyond the defense of the Archimedean point.

In what follows, I expound a thesis stronger than Lex Newman's, namely, the 'non-atheistic-thesis-of-Cartesian-metaphysics'. In particular, I argue that *four* Cartesian metaphysical conclusions require the existence of God in the *Meditations*. This means that if God did not play a decisive role there, four unpalatable consequences would follow for Descartes' metaphysics, all of which are stated in the following sections. As the first one describes, although the *cogito* could be stated, we would be metaphysically isolated. The second section looks at how metaphysical doubt would make all knowledge claims defeasible. The third addresses how conceivable truths would be unreliable, even if they are perceived as clear and distinct ideas. The fourth section shows how mind and body could not be disjoined, because God can separate what is distinct, but exists closely joined. Incidentally, the latter consequence would also hinder the investigation into the soul and, specifically, whether it is truly immortal.

Metaphysical isolation

In spite of the fact that there has been an important academic debate about Descartes' main goals in the *Meditations*, it seems that the original subtitle, in 1641,[4] is sufficient to grasp what he intends to achieve there, namely, to prove: (i) the existence of God; and (ii) why the soul is immortal. In doing so, the French philosopher aims to give a clear demonstration that neither the skeptics nor the atheists can be right. Since the bedrock of knowledge can be found, not everything can be doubted, and thus certain knowledge is possible. However, as Lex Newman argues, this conclusion depends upon the proof of the existence of God, which is metaphysical knowledge.

In relation to this proof, Descartes adopts the skeptical method to find the abovementioned bedrock of knowledge. Even though a number of scholars have insisted that there exists what can be dubbed 'Cartesian skepticism' (Williams, 1986, p. 28-49), this idea does not seem right after we thoroughly read the first Meditation and the metaphysical doubt as a method. In fact, the French philosopher is clear when he asserts that he will use the skeptical method to assess whether the foundation of knowledge is possible at all. If no foundation can be found, there would be no certainty and the hyperbolic would not be stopped. As such, the relation between knowledge and certainty is crucial: if we find the Archimedean point (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 24, 16), we will gain certain knowledge at last. But is that feat possible at all?

Finishing the first Meditation in a pessimistic mood, Descartes doubts that certain knowledge claims can be genuine knowledge. If everything is doubtful, even mathematical truths like 2+2=4, then the skeptic may be right and, since the doubt cannot be stopped, we should suspend judgement altogether. However, most skeptics do not consider a hypothesis that makes Cartesian doubt even more radical than their own: God may turn out to be a malicious demon who deceives us about the existence of *everything*. In turn, the ancient skeptics cast doubt upon the reliability of *judgements* or *beliefs*, i.e., whether beliefs or judgements can be compared to other contrary beliefs or judgements. They aim at balanced beliefs (*isosthenia*), which leads to the suspension of judgement (*epoché*) and tranquility (*ataraxia*). In view of the suspension of judgement, Descartes asserts at the end of the first Meditation:

> *I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me […]*
>
> *I am like a prisoner who is enjoying an imaginary freedom while asleep; as he begins to suspect that he is asleep, he dreads being woken up, and goes along with the pleasant illusion as long as he can. In the same way, I happily slide back into my old opinions and dread being shaken out of them, for fear that my peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labor when I wake, and that I shall have to toil not in the light, but amid the inextricable darkness of the problems I have now raised (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 23, 15).*

As a result, Descartes' metaphysics requires that the existence of God be proved; and only then would it follow that we are not prisoners of a dream. In other words, if the proof about the existence of God cannot be given at all, then Descartes will remain a prisoner who is enjoying an imaginary freedom while asleep. Moreover, if the existence of God could not be proved in any sense, we would be metaphysically *isolated*: the world could turn out to be a dream, even though it seems totally real.

In the second Meditation, he achieves what has been called the *cogito*. That is, after doubting the senses, the external world, his own body, the existence of God, and so on, he acknowledges that, in order to doubt, he must be thinking. Besides this conclusion, he holds that if the malicious demon

[4] The original subtitle, of the first edition in 1641, stressed the need to prove the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. The subtitle is this: 'in which are demonstrated the existence of God and the immortality of the soul' (Descartes, 2008, *Meditations*, VII, I). By contrast, the subtitles of the second edition in 1642, and of the French translation in 1647, are slightly different: 'in which are demonstrated the existence of God and the distinction between the human soul and the body' (Descartes, 2008, *Meditations*, VII, I). In any case, all these subtitles are compatible with my arguments about the 'non-atheistic-thesis-of-Cartesian-metaphysics.'

ceaselessly deceives him, he must be something to be deceived. In fact, it is utterly impossible to be deceived if one does not exist at all.

By advancing this two-fold argument, Descartes presents the *cogito ergo sum*, or 'I think, therefore I am.' At last, he has found the bedrock of knowledge, that is, the point at which hyperbolic doubt comes to a close. This additionally shows that the skeptic must be wrong, because an unpredicted conclusion has been drawn, namely, hyperbolic doubt, which is deeply metaphysical, finally leads him to certain knowledge. But what happens with those things that we usually consider more certain than our own existence, like that which we touch or see?

So far, Descartes has shown that he is certain about his own being: he is nothing but *a thinking thing* (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 27-28, 18-19). However, is that enough from a metaphysical viewpoint? Even so, the metaphysical status of the *cogito* leads to the problem that Descartes inevitably faces metaphysical *isolation*, in the sense that he is not certain *about the existence of anything else in the world*. Things like chairs, beds, trees, houses and the like may be part of a dream: the certainty with which we attribute to them may only be an illusion. As the existence of God has not yet been established, another maneuver is necessary: Descartes goes a step further by insisting what a thinking thing finally is. After entertaining the clarity and distinction of the *cogito*, Descartes proceeds to consider whether ideas of extended things are truer than the *cogito*, that is, whether objects whose existence seems to be obvious lead to ideas that have more clarity and distinction than the *cogito*. For this very reason, he analyzes the essence of a piece of wax and how the existence of other individuals is stated (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 30-1, 20-21). In fact, the existence of other individuals, which has not been proved either, may also be part of a dream created by the malicious demon.

As to the piece of wax, he examines its main properties, which are seen or touched, such as its color, odor, sweetness, and so on. Even such properties are carefully examined by him; so if the wax were to be heated, the contingent properties, those that the wax may lack and still remain what it is, would disappear or change dramatically. As a consequence, Descartes asserts that what is seen or touched is, like things perceived by the senses, unreliable. Still, it is worth remarking that one property remains, namely, the extension of the piece of wax. Nevertheless, this property is neither seen nor touched; rather, the extension of the piece of wax is *only* examined by the power of the intellect. This is even more clear when it comes to determining the essence of the wax in general. In addition, it is clear that the words deceive us in that they wrongly make us believe that the essence of the wax is what is *seen* or *touched* (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 30, 20).

The words may be deceitful about what the extended objects finally are. In order to prove this, Descartes gives the example of those individuals he sees through the window. The passage is the following:

> *[…] I am amazed at how weak and prone to error my mind is. For although I am thinking about these matters within myself, silently and without speaking, nonetheless the actual words bring me up short, and I am almost tricked by ordinary ways of talking. We say that we see the wax itself, if it is there before us, not that we judge it to be there from its colour or shape; and this might lead me to conclude without more ado that knowledge of the wax comes from what the eye sees, and not from the scrutiny of the mind alone. But then if I look out the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves, just as I say that I see the wax. Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I* ***judge*** *that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 32, 21, emphasis in original).*

Again, what is seen or touched may be deceitful, and so are words: if one only trusts the senses, it may turn out that even if we *see* certain individuals, they may turn out to be automatons with hats and coats. By contrast, the faculty of judgement, which is in our minds, reveals whether they are real individuals rather than mere automatons. Thus, words make us believe that the essence of men, and of all extended objects, is only identified by the senses (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 32, 21), which is utterly wrong: Descartes *judges* that he is in the presence of certain individuals, and this may even show him that he is not in the presence of automatons.

Consequently, the existence of God and other men must be established in Cartesian metaphysics by means of the intellect alone. As I have argued, Descartes would be metaphysically isolated otherwise. For he would be, in virtue of the *cogito*, only a thinking thing that exists in a world with the shadow of things.

Descartes emphasizes this point as follows:

> *If the objective reality of any of my ideas turns out to be so great that I am sure the same reality does not reside in me, either formally or eminently, and hence that I myself cannot be the cause, it will necessarily follow that* ***I am not alone in the world****, but some other thing which is the cause of this idea also exists (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 42, 29, my emphasis).*

In the next section, I show that, if the existence of God remains without an adequate proof, Descartes would additionally face epistemological uncertainty, to wit, he would not be able to gain indefeasible knowledge at all. For this very reason he crafts the causal proof for the existence of God.

Epistemological uncertainty fueled by the metaphysical doubt

The Cartesian criterion of truth is twofold. On the one hand, all doubtful ideas, which are like opinions, can be considered false. But, it is not necessary to show that *all* opinions are doubtful, a process that is technically impossible; rather, it is sufficient to show that the source of opinions is unreliable. The senses are, in this respect, doubtful, because they may lead to false opinions. For example, the point that can be seen from a long distance may turn out to be a building from a closer distance. Thus, a judgement about the point seen on the horizon is simply doubtful, as it is caused by the senses, which are unreliable. On the other hand, Descartes holds that all clear and distinct ideas are necessarily true; in fact, they are real knowledge. For this reason, the hyperbolic doubt must stop at a specific point: if we clearly and distinctly conceive an idea that is not doubtful, we have gained certain knowledge. A passage that synthesizes the second element of the Cartesian criterion of truth is the following:

> *Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay down as a general rule that* ***whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true*** *(Descartes, 2008, AT VII 35, 24, my emphasis).*

With this twofold criterion of truth in mind, Descartes offers the first argument for the existence of God in the third Meditation. This is the so-called "causal" argument, which proves God's existence by a posteriori means.[5] The argument can be summarized as follows:

Assumptions:
(1) Something cannot come from nothing.
(2) There cannot be more reality in the effect than in the cause.
(3) The objective reality of any idea will be adequate to or correspond to the formal reality of the thing of which it is the idea.

Proof:
(1) I have an idea of God (an infinite, eternal, unchanging, etc., substance)
(2) Something must have caused that idea. (ass. 1)
(3) I cannot be the cause of that idea (being finite), nor any other finite thing. (ass. 2)
(4) So then some existent thing equally powerful to this idea must have been the cause of it, for otherwise we obtain an infinite regress. (ass. 3)
(5) But such a thing is God.
(6) Therefore, God exists.

Thus, Descartes argues by a posteriori for the existence of God. If the divinity did not exist, we would have an idea of infinitude and perfection that would have come *ex nihilo*, which is simply impossible given the principle of causality described in (2).

In addition, Descartes provides a second ontological-type proof for the existence of God in the fifth Meditation (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 35, 24) and the *Principles of Philosophy*, which I also summarize in what follows.

According to Descartes, there is one idea of a supremely powerful and intelligent being that stands out among all other ideas. In this one idea "the mind recognizes existence – not merely the possible and contingent existence which belongs to the ideas of all other things which it distinctly perceives, but *utterly and necessary existence*" (Descartes, 2007, AT VIIIA 10, 197, my emphasis). By doing so, Descartes endorses the distinction made by Aquinas in which the a priori proof, which is based upon the notion of clearly perceived substance, requires existence. The a priori proof in the *Meditations* is crucial to grasp the relation between God's perfection and his necessary existence (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 67, 46). Thus, both arguments for the existence of God have a clear metaphysical flavor: a supreme being necessarily exists, and insofar as all truth depends upon the existence of God, there would be no certainty whatsoever if knowledge of him were impossible (Descartes, 2007, AT VIIIA 10, 197).[6]

We may encounter a second obstacle if the existence of God could not be proved. In that case, in addition to metaphysical isolation, one would face epistemological uncertainty, i.e., one would never be certain about the truth of anything, even if clear and distinct ideas were involved. Descartes considers this possibility, especially as to mathematical truths:

> *[...] physics, astronomy, medicine, and all other disciplines which depend on the*

[5] Aquinas distinguishes between demonstrations a priori and those that proceed a posteriori. Whereas the former proceed from the cause to the effect (as the ontological proof), the latter proceed from the effect to the cause (as the cosmological proof, of which Descartes' causal proof is a variation). Here I discuss first the a posteriori proof, that is to say, demonstration from effects that are known to us better to the inference of a cause that is otherwise unknown to us. Following this, I discuss how Descartes proceeds to a second a priori demonstration, namely, from the cause itself. For further discussion see Brecher (1976, p. 418-432).

[6] Of course, Descartes' proofs about the existence of God can be discussed further and in much more detail. Given the present discussion, which aims to show how four unpalatable consequences follow if the existence of God could not be established in the *Meditations*, it seems proper to leave it there.

> *study of composite things, are doubtful; while arithmetic, geometry and other subjects of this kind, which deal with the simplest and most general things, regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not, contain something certain and indubitable. For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides.* ***It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false*** *(Descartes, 2008, AT VII 20, 14, my emphasis).*

This passage *seems* to be decisive as to the debate about mathematical truths, which are simple and general, *even if God did not exist*. Nevertheless, if the existence of God were either denied or not acknowledged in the *Meditations*, and a malicious demon deceived us all the time, we would not be certain about any knowledge claim whatsoever. A context in which the malicious demon deceived us would be highly unreliable. But this idea is inconsistent with a previous remark made by Descartes. Prior to having written the *Meditations*, he holds that all truths are a product of and are dependent upon the existence of God. A letter to Mersenne (15 April 1630) supports this view thus:

> *The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures. Indeed, to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject him to the Styx and the Fates. Please do not hesitate to assert and proclaim everywhere that* ***it is God who has laid down these laws in nature just as a king lays down laws in his kingdom*** *(Descartes, 1997, AT I 145-146, 23, my emphasis).*

This standpoint about mathematical truths and their connection with God, necessity and knowledge slightly changes in the *Meditations*. All necessary truths depend upon God's will, as he creates and maintains all things (Descartes, 1997, AT IV 314, 272). We *discover* mathematical truths, such as the recognition that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles.

In the *Meditations*, the French philosopher also makes truth depend upon divine omnipotence and thus he clearly argues for the existence of innate ideas, which make possible real knowledge. When recognizing the true judgement about the triangle, not through the senses, but with the power of judgement, some wrongly believe that such truths are only products of the human mind. Descartes is very emphatic on this point, when he asserts that it is because God "willed to create the world in time that it is better this way than if he had created it from eternity; and it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that *this is true and cannot be otherwise; and so on in other cases*" (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 432, 291, my emphasis). Necessary truths, then, have been created and depend upon God; we must discover them with the aid of the reason.

To recapitulate, all things which have been created have been created by God, and this includes composite true ideas, as in astronomy, as well as simple true ideas, as in geometry or mathematics. Again, *all truths, and especially the eternal ones that constitute knowledge, depend upon the existence of God*, and this is so when we acknowledge that human being is prone to error and, moreover, in relation to truths which are clearly and distinctly perceived by the intellect (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 70, 48).

Concerning metaphysical doubt, far-fetched scenarios are also examined by Descartes. Such scenarios include the possibility that mathematics may have been created by a malicious demon, or worse yet, that all human cognitive systems have been distorted to the extent that, even if we conceived clear and distinct ideas, these would turn out to be all false. Descartes remarks that such a metaphysical possibility needs to be ruled out in the following passage:

> *And since I have no cause to think that there is a deceiving god at all, and I do not yet even know for sure whether there is a God at all, any reason for doubt which depends simply on this supposition is a very slight and, so to speak,* ***metaphysical*** *one. But in order to remove even this slight reason for doubt, as soon as the opportunity arises I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this,* ***it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else*** *(Descartes, 2008, AT VII 36, 25, my emphasis).*

This argument, which is *fundamental* to the *Meditations*, should serve as sufficient evidence against the view that the existence of God is irrelevant to Cartesian metaphysics. If God does not exist, the aforementioned metaphysical doubt cannot be ruled out, and even mathematics and geometry may turn out to be unreliable. Lex Newman, who has dubbed this view as the 'Non-atheistic-Knowledge-Thesis,' emphasizes the following passage:

> *The fact that an atheist can be "clearly aware [*clare cognoscere*] that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles" is something I do not dispute. But I maintain that this awareness [*cognitionem*] of his is not true knowledge [*scientiam*], since no act of awareness [*cognitio*] that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called knowledge [*scientia*]. Now since we are supposing that this individual is an atheist, he cannot be certain that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be*

> *very evident (as I fully explained) (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 141, 101).*

Thus, there is a very important difference between being clearly aware of a truth, a state in which the atheist can be, and having *indefeasible* knowledge about a truth. In the same vein, we can be clearly aware of the fact that the sum of two prime numbers does result in a non-prime number, but we would not have indefeasible knowledge about this fact until we entertain a definitive proof. Unlike what goes on with algorithms and their Gödelization (Penrose, 1999), the point here is very simple: awareness of certain truths does not *entail* indefeasible knowledge, and this occurs with God and all mathematical truths. One can be aware of them, but this does not entail that one knows them, because only God guarantees they are true knowledge.

In summary, if the existence of God is not proved, even clear and distinct ideas may turn out to be false. Such a metaphysical possibility, which seems hard to deny, needs to be ruled out, according to the Cartesian agenda. As I have shown here, the existence of God has not only an epistemological consequence, but a metaphysical one. Both are crucial to understand what Descartes' aims to accomplish, namely, the definite refutation of the skeptic and the atheist.

The inexistence of God: no secure conceivability

A number of philosophers hold that substance dualism entails the separation of two substances, which can exist on their own (Searle 2004). Such a view of Descartes' metaphysics, however, is an oversimplification. Indeed, Cartesian dualism relies upon what can be clearly and distinctly conceived; hence, to assess whether two substances are different, and may exist separately, we must examine whether they can be separated by the understanding and, more precisely, by means of conceivability. Using such means, Descartes puts forward what has been called the *modal intuition argument*.

Briefly put, a modal intuition argument is a metaphysical argument according to which, if two things are different, they can exist separately. Moreover, if things are identical, they cannot exist disjointedly. For example, and to put things simply, if state and government are different things, they can exist separately, even excluding each other. Now, it seems that government may exist without a state, and a state may exist without government. As a matter of fact, a tribe is a sort of government that lacks a state, and a state may lack government. Therefore, state and government are two different things, although they may coexist together. Usually, a government requires a state, and a state needs a government. Then, according to a modal intuition argument, if two things are the same thing, they cannot be separated, while if two things are different they can, excluding one another. I will return to this issue again in the next section.

On Descartes' view, God allows us to reason in modal terms, that is, by means of conceivability. Modal reasoning supposes that clear and distinct modal ideas are *necessarily* true. But how is God related to modal reasoning? We have already examined the relation between truths and reasoning in the previous sections: all truths exist because God has established them as such, i.e., because He has created them. *Contra* atheists, truths, like all things, metaphysically depend upon the existence of God. Then, to say, for example, that mathematical truths, which are necessarily true, may exist without God is like thinking that He is akin to Jupiter or Saturn, etc.

God allows us to establish truths which would not exist otherwise. Descartes is very emphatic on this point, especially in relation to modal intuition arguments. In fact, he claims the following about such arguments: "First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it'" (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 78, 54). Although we will return to these words in the next section, it is crucial to emphasize their importance here. Modal truths depend upon the existence of God, because He *allows* the possibility of things to exist, *just as we have conceived them.* Take, for example, this situation: James conceives that bachelors and unmarried persons are identical. If so, there would be no circumstances in which bachelors exist but unmarried persons do not. Likewise, there would be no circumstances in which unmarried persons exist but bachelors do not. Thus, James concludes, it is impossible that bachelors are not unmarried persons, and hence the former are necessarily the latter. Or, put differently, bachelors do not exclude unmarried persons, and vice versa.

Now, James would be totally wrong if what we conceive as metaphysically possible and necessary were not reliable judgements. Indeed, James relies upon the following line of reasoning: conceivability is a guide to metaphysical possibility and necessity. The debate about this issue has been very popular in contemporary philosophy, as many thought experiments in metaphysics, ethics, philosophy of language, political philosophy, philosophy of mathematics, and philosophy of mind rely on situations which describe imagined scenarios which are not contradictory (Szabó Gendler, 2000, p. 34). Obviously, contradictions are impossible, so they cannot lead to any knowledge whatsoever.

There seems to be a consensus that Descartes himself inaugurated the debate about the relation between conceivability and possibility in the early modern period. In the first place, he refers to the impossibility of contradictions in the following terms:

> *All self-contradictoriness or impossibility resides solely in our thought, when we make the mistake of joining together mutually inconsistent ideas; it cannot occur in anything outside the intellect. For the very fact that something exists outside the intellect manifestly shows that it is not self-con-*

> *tradictory, but possible (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 152, 108).*

It is worth remarking that God is related to this argument again. In fact, God's almighty powers allow material things to exist:

> *It remains for me to examine whether material things exist. And at least I now know they are capable of existing, in so far as they are the subject-matter of pure mathematics, since I perceive them clearly and distinctly. For there is no doubt that God is capable of creating everything that I am capable of perceiving in this manner;* ***and I have never judged that something could not be made by him except on the grounds that there would be a contradiction in my perceiving it distinctly*** *(Descartes, 2008, AT VII 72, 50, my emphasis).*

As we know that contradictions cannot be perceived distinctly, it follows that God allows them to exist *only in our intellect.* Here God allows those contradictions to exist, but *only* as mistakes that need be corrected by reason. Accordingly, and as stated above, we cannot clearly and distinctly perceive contradictions, since they are imperfections to be corrected.

Note that, in Descartes's view, what can be conceived by the understanding cannot be imagined. For him, imagination and conceivability via understanding are utterly different, since only the latter helps us pin down, for example, complicated geometrical figures. He refers to the difference between imagination and conceivability as follows:

> *If I want to think of a chiliagon, although I understand that it is a figure consisting of a thousand sides just as well as I understand a triangle to be a three-sized figure, I do not in that same way imagine the thousand sides or see them as if they were present before me […] I may construct in my mind a confused representation of some figure; but it is clear that this is not a chiliagon. For it differs in no way from the representation I should form if I were thinking of a myriagon, or any figure with very many sides (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 72, 50).*

As Szabó Gendler and Hawthorne (2002, p. 17) point out, the difference between intellect and imagination is even sharper when it comes to knowing the soul. In the second Meditation, Descartes writes as follows:

> *It would […] be a case of fictitious invention if I used my imagination to establish that I was something or other; for imagining is simply contemplating the shape or image of a corporeal thing […] thus […] none of the things that imagination enables me to grasp is at all relevant to this knowledge of myself which I possess (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 28, 19).*

As stated above, when analyzing what the soul is, only understanding and intellect are helpful; this is usually so with reasoning about metaphysical truths. This ability to grasp such truths requires that the soul perceives what the soul is in terms of intellectual acts, a point that reminds us that the mind is a *primitive* notion, that is, a notion which cannot be described in terms of any other unfamiliar notion.

It seems clear that Descartes endorses a strategy according to which conceivability provides us with a guide to what is and is not possible. The divine powers seem to be crucial, as the following passage shows: "I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it'" (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 78, 54). These words are repeated elsewhere in the following manner: "The rule 'whatever we can conceive of can exist' is my own, it is true only so long as we are dealing with a conception which is clear and distinct, a conception which embraces the possibility of the thing in question, since God can bring about whatever we clearly perceive to be possible" (Descartes, 2007, AT VIIIB 352, 299).

But here the important point for the present discussion is this: if the existence of God were not proved in the *Meditations*, we would not be able to state the difference between things that we clearly and distinctly conceive and those that we *think* we clearly and distinctly conceive. This would blur the line between reliable and unreliable conception, especially in regards to modal reasoning. For instance, if God did not exist, then we could conclude that bachelors are unmarried persons.

Still more, the inexistence of God may bring about other major problems in metaphysics. According to Descartes, as modal reasoning is closely related to metaphysics, there would not exist a way to assess whether or not metaphysical truths must be necessarily true. Moreover, this would affect contradictoriness and self-contradictoriness, because both are in the end dependent upon introspective identifiability, which in turn requires the aid of God. Szabó Gendler and Hawthorne emphasize how Descartes aims to avoid this problem thus:

> *[…] Descartes has a theological answer available. While acknowledging that 'in the case of our clearest and most careful judgements […] if such judgements were false they could not be corrected by any clear judgements or by means of any other faculty' […] (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 143) nonetheless maintains that we have reason to be sanguine. For, Descartes contends, it is incoherent to suppose that God would allow us to be deceived under such circumstances, since it would be contradictory to suppose 'anything should be created by him which*

> *positively tends towards falsehood' (Descartes, 2008, AT VII, 144). […] for those of us unwilling to appeal to divine benevolence, the problem is not so easily escaped (Szabó Gendler and Hawthorne, 2002, p. 20).*

The problem of modal reasoning is, likewise, closely related to Descartes' dualism. This view appeals to modal intuition arguments, which can flesh out how the mind and the body can be separated and exclude one another.

The inexistence of God entails the inseparability of mind and body

There are several myths about Descartes' dualism. One of them, and perhaps the most common, is the view that dualism implies that mind and body are two *disjoined* substances. As stated above, this is a mistake, since mind and body are closely joined and, as it were, intermingled. More importantly, they cannot be separated, save in our intellect and, most importantly, by God. After putting forward the modal intuition argument, which I will analyze thoroughly below, Descartes insists that mind and body are closely joined thus:

> *Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that* ***I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it****, so that* ***I and the body form a unit****. If this were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but* ***would perceive the damage purely by the intellect****, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken […] For these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from* ***the union*** *and, as it were,* ***intermingling of the mind with the body*** *(Descartes, 2008, AT VII 81, 56, my emphasis).*

The argument offered by Descartes here is a dis-analogy: if the body and the mind were totally disjoined, they would be like that of the sailor and the ship. Mind and body, *despite being two distinct substances that exclude each other*, are closely conjoined. In fact, two things can be different but closely joined. Think of the following example: a tape and a surface. In this situation there are two closely joined objects, even though they can be separated. The point around which some scholars have wrongly focused is Descartes' emphasis upon the modal intuition argument.

This argument has two crucial sides, namely, a modal and a metaphysical one. A connection between these two sides is the following: modal reasoning, which is backed up by God's will, can establish metaphysical truths about identical or different substances. Again, it is worth discussing the role God plays in this argument. In my opinion, it is very clear that the *omnipotent divine powers of God* are crucial to the adequate development of the argument. Concerning this point, he writes the following:

> *First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God. The question of what power is required to bring about such a separation does not affect the judgement that the two things are distinct […]*
>
> *But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand, I have a distinct idea of the body, in so far as it is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 78).*

Note that no contradiction between the pilot and the ship dis-analogy and the modal intuition argument exists. As explained, the latter argument assumes that mind and body are distinct, as they can be separated by the intellect. But, *in reality*, they are closely conjoined and, as such, intermingled.

Now, the French philosopher also holds that the *power required to bring about that separation does not matter.* Undoubtedly, this assumption and the existence of God are intertwined because we cannot *understand* God, although we may conclude that He necessarily exists. In fact, Descartes explicitly refers to the problem that arises from not distinguishing between *understanding* and *conceiving* God. The existence of God can be conceived by making the argument described above. In turn, we lack the power to *fully* understanding divinity.

That argument about the existence of God rests on a clear and distinct idea, namely, God's infinitude and perfection. Descartes stresses this when remarking that the existence of the divinity cannot be separated from the idea of God. Therefore, it is contradictory to think of a perfect being, a supremely perfect being, that does not exist; if God did not exist, he would simply lack perfection. This would be as contradictory as thinking of a mountain without a valley, or a triangle without three sides (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 66, 46). As this cannot be the case, a perfect being must therefore exist (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 119, 85).

Stating that God can be conceived but not fully understood, Descartes writes the following passage in 1630, which predates the *Meditations*:

> *[…] because it is possible to know that God is infinite and all powerful although our soul, being finite, cannot grasp or conceive him. In the same way we can touch a mountain with our hands, but we cannot put our arms around it as we could put them around a tree or something else not too large for them (Descartes, 1997, AT I 152, 25).*

Descartes elaborates more on this view after 1641. In fact, he claims that there are two different things: conceiving God as a perfectly existing being is one thing, whereas understanding what perfection and infinitude mean is another thing.

In other words, for Descartes, God is the truest and clearest of all deas; this clarity and distinction is prior to mathematical truths, which we have already examined, and even to the *cogito* (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 46, 31). Given these thoughts, it is evident that God creates not only mathematical truths, but also *all those* that can be perceived clearly and distinctly by the intellect. But, if the existence of God is denied or not acknowledged, would there be any hindrance to Descartes' dualism?

Even though it would be possible to separate mind and body by means of the intellect, it would be unclear whether such a disassociation would be possible *without the existence of God*. For, again, the almighty God can make A and B be separated, even if they are closely conjoined. That is the case of mind and body, which are closely conjoined (this clarifies why the powers involved in separating A and B do not matter). Thus, if God did not exist, it would remain utterly unclear whether a possibility conceived by the intellect, namely, mind and body excluding each other, could be the case.

Contemporary philosophers of mind have taken the latter uncertainty about the separation of mind and body seriously. Unlike Descartes' dualism, contemporary materialists claim that most conceivability arguments, which have a Cartesian inspiration, fail to show whether mind and body can be separated beyond the realm of mere conceivability. In fact, most contemporary materialists hold that modal arguments cannot establish whether mind and body are *separable*, so to say, *in reality* (Hill, 2002). Thus, if God did not exist, there would be more reasons to doubt the soundness of Cartesian dualism.

It ought to be noted that this uncertainty would also hinder the investigation into whether the soul is immortal. As to the accusation that perhaps God may have given the soul a nature which involves its mortality, Descartes argues the following:

> *[...] since it could still be claimed that God gave it such nature that its duration comes to an end simultaneously with the end of the body's life. Here I admit that I cannot refute what you say. For I do not take it upon myself to try to use the power of human reason to settle any of those matters which depend on the free will of God […] Indeed, we do not even have any convincing evidence or precedent to suggest that any substance can perish. And this entitles us to conclude that the mind, in so far as it can be known by natural philosophy, is immortal (Descartes, 2008, AT VII 153, 108).*

According to Descartes, *only* God's absolute powers can make the soul cease to exist. This naturally follows from the fact that, as God can separate substances which are closely joined, he can also destroy them. Again, it seems that Descartes targets both the atheist and the skeptic here. According to the French philosopher, they have to provide an argument that proves that substances can be destroyed and, amongst those substances, the very soul. Given the *cogito*, neither human life is a mystery nor the nature of the soul.

Conclusion

As analyzed, Lex Newman's non-atheistic-knowledge-thesis aims to support Descartes' epistemology, i.e., as to how knowledge is founded beyond skeptical doubt. But an important point to be debated is still missing, namely, that if the existence of God is not proved in the *Meditations*, both Descartes' epistemology *and* his metaphysics may turn out to be undermined. For not only would knowledge be defeasible; in addition, we would risk being: (i) Metaphysically isolated; (ii) subject to metaphysical uncertainty; (iii) wrong about conceivability arguments; and (iv) mistaken about dualism and the immortality of the soul. These unpalatable consequences would ruin Descartes' refutation of the atheists and the skeptics, which is one of the aims of Cartesian metaphysics. This, at least, is declared within the first subtitle to the *Meditations*.

On the other hand, many scholars may argue that, if God did not exist, other decisive negative consequences would follow for Cartesian metaphysics. For example, we would be unable to prove the existence of material things in the sixth Meditation. This is true; nevertheless, the inability to draw the four metaphysical conclusions seems to be sufficient to ruin Descartes' metaphysics, which aims to refute the skeptic and the atheist alike. Concerning this point, it is worth pointing out that Descartes shows a *continuum* in his metaphysical arguments; for this reason, his concern to prove the existence of God is not new to the *Meditations*. Rather, it originates in the 1630s with Descartes' claim that all eternal truths have been established by God, including those that are necessary, as in the case of mathematics. Interestingly, this view on the nature of truth anticipates how many Cartesian metaphysical arguments, which attempt to refute both the skeptics and the atheists, are necessarily dependent upon the supreme powers of God. Such Cartesian arguments are indeed, like all arguments, truth preserving. It seems, then, that the inexistence of God would prevent us from discovering truth in that very respect.

References

BRECHER, B. 1976. Descartes' Causal Argument for the Existence of God. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **7**(3):418-432. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00140930

DESCARTES, R. 1997. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: The Correspondence*. Translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, A. Kenny. New York, Cambridge University Press, 412 p.

DESCARTES, R. 2007. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Vol I*. Translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch. New York, Cambridge University Press, 418 p.

DESCARTES, R. 2008. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Vol II*. Translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch. New York, Cambridge University Press, 428 p.

HILL, C. 2002. Imaginability, Conceivability, Possibility and the Mind Body Problem. *In:* D. CHALMERS (ed.), *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 334-341.

NEWMAN, L. 2016. Descartes' Epistemology.' *In:* E.N. ZALTA (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/descartes-epistemology/. Accessed on: 11/30/2018.

PENROSE, R. 1999. *The Emperor´s New Mind*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 602 p.

SEARLE, J. 2004. *Mind: A Brief Introduction*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 224 p.

SZABÓ GENDLER, T. 2000. *Thought Experiment: On the Powers and Limits of Imaginary Cases*. London, Routledge, 258 p.

SZABÓ GENDLER, T.; HAWTHORNE, J. 2002. *Conceivability and Possibility*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 507 p.

WILLIAMS, M. 1986. Descartes and the Metaphysics of Doubt. *In:* J. COTTINGHAM (ed.), *Descartes*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 28-49.

Submitted on May 24, 2018

Accepted on September 24, 2018