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How does Descartes' philosophy presented in *Discourse on Method* relate to his divine beliefs expressed in the same work?

Although it might be argued that religion and philosophy should be treated independently of each other rather than combined together, there is no lack of works in which religion and divine beliefs have been applied to philosophy theories. In certain times and places, it is assumed that failing to apply religion to the philosophy advocated for could have serious consequences. With regards to old texts written by authors that are no longer alive, we will probably never find out whether they actually were serious about the connections made between religion and philosophy, or if connecting the both was a way to save themselves from the potential consequences of contradicting religion and divine beliefs. What we, on the other hand, can do is to examine the relationship between religion and philosophy in texts combining the both in order to gain a better understanding, and based on that decide whether we believe that the authors were serious about the application of religion they made to their philosophies or not. In this essay, I have chosen to examine how religion and philosophy interact in the work *Discourse on Method* written by René Descartes. My choice is based on the struggle to understand how Descartes, while claiming that even our own existence is dubitable, (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 25) can argue for the existence of God in line with his philosophy that suggests such an extreme doubting method. As will be demonstrated in this essay, Descartes applies his divine beliefs to his philosophy by connecting them both through the soul, which gives human beings the ability to reason, and by emphasizing the claim that God has endowed us with our ability to reason and to think. (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 21)

In the search for truth, Descartes decides to approach the challenge from the contrary side and thus establishes a method of rejecting everything he could have the least doubt about as absolutely false. In the process of dismissing everything that is dubitable as false in order to discover if something that cannot be doubted would be left, Descartes suggests that if there is something left that cannot be dismissed for being dubitable, it can be considered fully true. Seeking the truth this way, Descartes discovers that practically everything can be doubted and thus cannot be considered true. However, eventually he comes to the realization that the fact that he is doubting about practically everything is something that he cannot doubt. Realizing this, he establishes the famous expression "I think, therefore I am, 'or exist' ", which becomes the core principle of his philosophy. (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 24) Here, it becomes clear that human beings' ability to think, doubt and reason plays a central part in Descartes' philosophy. His whole method of seeking of the truth is based on our ability to distinguish what is dubitable from what is not dubitable, and in the end the outcome of it is that the only thing we can be sure about is that we are doubting. Descartes is doubting to the extent that he even doubts the existence of his own body and considers the possibility of himself being "a 'thing or'

substance whose whole essence or nature is only to think". (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 25) He suggests that if he does not think, there would be no reason at all to be sure of his own existence, which is observed in the following quote: "On the other hand, if I had ceased to think (...), I would have had no reason to believe that I existed (...)" (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 25) This extreme method of doubting absolutely everything but one's own ability to doubt and think - and in the case of ceased thinking even claim that there is no reason to believe that one exists - does not seem to leave room for many other claims to be made successfully according to Descartes' point of view. Reflecting on this, one cannot help but wondering how Descartes manages to support divine beliefs while advocating for this doubtful philosophy. How can he argue for something as complex as the existence of God - something that is not in any concrete way demonstrable, while not even being willing to argue for the existence of his own body - something that he can touch and see concretely?

Descartes' reaches the point where he starts discussing what he claims to be the proof that God exists by reflecting further on his doubting. The fact that he is doubting leads him to realizing that he is not fully perfect, since he means that it is more perfect to *know* than to *doubt*. However, by noticing the ability to imagine something more perfect than himself, he starts reflecting on why he is able to imagine the concept of *know*, while his own abilities are limited to doubting. (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 25) The emphasis he places on the mind and reasoning became evident already with the establishment of the expression "I think, therefore I am" and the assertion of it to be the "first principle of the philosophy he was seeking". (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 24) However, it is now shown how Descartes expands the the concept and importance of reasoning by considering it powerful enough to make him aware of the existence of something that he does not possess within himself and is not aware of in any other way than through his own thinking. By concluding that one's ability to doubt confirms one's existence, Descartes implied that thinking has the power to prove the existence of something within oneself, but by suggesting that our ability to think about something validates the existence of it, he implies even more - namely, that thinking has the power to prove the existence of something even outside oneself.

"To this I added that since I knew some perfections which I did not possess, I was not the only being in existence (...) and that it followed of necessity that there was someone else more perfect upon whom I depended and from whom I had acquired all that I possessed." (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 26) From this quote, it is understood that Descartes suggests that the ability to imagine something of a quality that is more perfect than one's own not only validates the existence of it, but also implies a dependency on this being that is more perfect than oneself. In accordance with this, he claims the existence of God: "Thus the only hypothesis left was that this idea was put in my mind by a nature that was really more perfect than I was, which had all the perfections that I could imagine, and which was, in a word, God." (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 24) Descartes' argument for the existence of God demonstrates that it is the reasoning aspect that connects his divine belief to his philosophy; his philosophy is based on the principle that our ability to think and to doubt is what proves our existence, and he also suggests that the same leads to the proof of that God exists. It could be assumed that according

to Descartes, if we would not be able to think and to imagine, we would not be able to realize that since we doubt we are not perfect, and consequently we would in that case not have the possibility to become aware of God's existence either. The following quote demonstrates the crucial importance of thinking and reasoning ability in order to become aware of the existence of God, in the opinion of Descartes: "What makes many people feel that it is difficult to know of the existence of God, or even the nature of their own souls, is that they never withdraw their minds from their senses and consider things higher than corporeal objects." (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 28)

Descartes clearly emphasizes the ability to think and imagine in order to discover the existence of God. By contrast, he seems to disparage the senses and corporeal objects, which relates to my inquiry regarding his unwillingness to argue for the existence of our own body, even though we can confirm the existence of it in concrete ways such as touching it, seeing it, etc. Descartes claims that "intelligent nature is distinct from corporeal nature" (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 27), and this distinction is very important in his argument for the existence of God. When separating intelligent and corporeal natures, it is obvious that Descartes considers God an intelligent nature rather than a corporeal nature. Without separating these natures and taking an intelligent nature for what it is, it is not possible to demonstrate the existence of God, which Descartes explains as follows: "It seems to me that those who wish to use imagery to understand these matters are doing precisely the same thing that they would be doing if they tried to use their eyes to hear sounds or smell odors." (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 28) It is here understood that imagery, as in making a visible representation of something, does not have the ability to demonstrate something that is of intelligent nature. For instance, we cannot use imagery to perceive the existence of our thoughts or doubts, and even less to demonstrate the existence of God, since Descartes considers God a perfect being whose existence is proved by our doubting and reasoning. Having this in mind, it can be understood that Descartes disparages senses and corporeal objects in order to consider the existence of God - senses and corporeal objects are simply not of intelligent nature and thus cannot be used to demonstrate the existence of something of intelligent nature. Furthermore, Descartes claims that our senses are not reliable in order to show the truth: "There is even this difference: that the sense of sight gives us no less certainty of the truth of objects than do those of smell and hearing, while neither our imagery nor our senses could assure us of anything without the cooperation of our understanding and reason." (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 28) Considering the fact that Descartes claims that senses cannot be used to understand matters of intelligent nature, it can be assumed that the matters of intelligent nature are what he considers to be true, since he means that our senses do not give us enough certainty of the truth of objects. By claiming that the cooperation of our understanding and reason is necessary in order to assure us of anything, he further fortifies his theory about matters of intelligent nature being true - or at least able to lead us to the truth. Doubting leads us to understanding the existence of God if we do not try to understand it by visually imagining him, but by using our intelligent nature that is put in us by God himself. "For as God has given each one of us some ability to distinguish the true from the false (...)" (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 21) This quote clearly demonstrates that the ability referred to, to distinguish the true from the false, has to be our ability to think and reason, and

since it has the ability to distinguish the true from the false it will also lead us to the truth. The truth can be assumed to be represented by knowing, and even though ability to think and to doubt is not reaching the level of knowing, it can be thought of as a fragment of knowing and thus a fragment of truth - and probably according to Descartes the highest extent of truth we can have within ourselves, since he considers it the only thing to be left when we have rejected everything that can be doubted. Nothing else within a human being is, as per Descartes, trustworthy enough to tell us something we should believe about reality, as is demonstrated in the following quote: "For in truth, whether we are asleep or awake, we should never allow ourselves to be convinced except on the evidence of our reason." (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 30)

Further demonstration of our ability to think and to reason as a link between Descartes' divine beliefs and his philosophy can be seen when considering the effect of the soul. Just as the natures that are divided between intelligent natures and corporeal natures, Descartes means that human beings also are divided in two parts: a material part, which is the body, and the mind - the soul. These two parts are claimed to be entirely distinct from each other, with the soul being "easier to know" than the body. In line with his philosophy emphasizing the importance and independence of thinking and reason, Descartes suggests that even without the body, the soul "would not cease to be all that is now is." (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 25) The soul is the rational part of us and it is demonstrated in our bodies by thinking. Examining the functions a body without soul would have, Descartes concludes that such body could have "everything that can exist without thinking; everything except that which is contributed by the soul: that part of us distinct from the body whose essence (...) is only to think." (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 35) It is shown that Descartes considers the soul and our mind something that could be considered a fusion, since they seem to have the same purpose within us in his opinion: to give us the ability to reason and think. As demonstrated previously in this essay, Descartes means that due to the ability to imagine something more perfect than doubting, the ability to doubt and to reason must be derived from a perfect being which he claims to be God. Thus, since the soul is what makes us able to reason, this is what connects Descartes' divine beliefs to his philosophy. Something that further emphasizes the divine aspect of the soul is the fact that Descartes suggests that it is immortal: "(...) our soul is by nature entirely independent of the body, and consequently does not have to die with it. Therefore, as long as we see no [other] causes which might destroy it, we are naturally led to conclude that it is immortal." (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 44) Yet immortality does not necessarily mean that something is divine. A stone can also be assumed to be "immortal" since it does not really die, although it might be affected by erosion. And the fact that the stone is "immortal" does not imply its divinity. However, the difference when considering the example of the stone and the example of the soul is that Descartes considers the soul to stay in existence, stay alive, even after that the body within which it has been operating dies. The soul can be assumed to be divine in Descartes' opinion in the sense that it keeps existing on its own even though the body dies, and, as mentioned previously, for the reason that our thinking and reasoning, which is closely connected to our soul and can even be considered together to be a fusion, is derived from God.

As I have demonstrated, Descartes' consistently connects the divine beliefs he expresses to his philosophy through our ability to reason and think. The core principle of Descartes' philosophy, i.e. that our doubting confirms our existence, expressed as "I think, therefore I am", is what leads to what Descartes claims to be the proof of the existence of God. He also conforms to this as he applies his philosophy to the explanation of our bodies, by establishing a concept of body and soul as separated natures. Due to the distinction between intelligent natures and corporeal natures, God cannot be proved through corporeal natures such as senses, but only by intelligent natures. Our soul is the connection to the truth, since it, by providing us thinking ability, gives us the reason to distinguish the false from the true. The ultimate truth is God, who is considered a perfect being that has put the reason and thinking ability in our bodies. Therefore, our thinking is more trustworthy than our senses, since it is derived from God, the perfect being.

Whether Descartes' was serious or not about the religious beliefs he expresses in this work cannot be proved. However, the arguments he makes for the existence of God do certainly conform to his philosophy and he does keep consistency in connecting philosophy and divine beliefs through the soul and the claim that our ability to think and to reason comes from the soul, which God has given us. I would personally not accept his philosophy as my principles and conclude that I can assume that God exists for the fact that I am thinking - mostly because I trust my senses and what Descartes calls corporeal nature more than I should for it to fit the way of reaching the understanding of God according to Descartes. As for me, I could for instance start forming a philosophy similar to Descartes', but claiming that sight is what proves existence and truth rather than doubting. Then I could say that I am only sure about the fact that I can see, but when I notice that my sight is not perfect, I might refer to something such as the sun as the ultimate perfectness of sight for its bright light. Consequently, I would consider the sun to be divine and conclude that my ability to see is derived from the sun, and that if you do not use the sight, you cannot understand the existence of divinity. However, Descartes' philosophy that he establishes from the beginning is already based on doubting, which is why his arguments for the existence of God holds with his philosophy. He makes a clear connection between the thinking and reasoning ability as the only indubitable thing, and the understanding of the existence of God as a consequence of this, whereupon he through the text sticks to a combined claim for both of them connected to each other through the soul and reason.