

Voluntary Action and the Causal Adequacy Principle

ENG Jole

January 27 2017

Abstract

This paper will argue that the Causal Adequacy Principle (abbreviated “CAP” from here on out) presented by René Descartes is false by the existence of voluntary action. The CAP is the basis of Descartes’ Trademark Argument found in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. It argues for the existence of God in order to prevent an infinite regress for causes of ideas, where one idea is caused by another *ad infinitum*. In addition, it intends to secure the use of mental intuitions as a logical tool, since Descartes had previously concluded in *Meditations* that the senses cannot be trusted. According to the CAP, if p causes q , then p must have at least as much reality as q . In this paper I present an objection to the CAP, and argue that the CAP is false because people can have voluntary actions, which indicate some mode of the mind causing an action. Since Descartes holds that modes have less reality than substances, and actions act on substances voluntary actions must be in violation of the CAP. However, voluntary actions still exist regardless, so the CAP must be false. Additionally, I present a similar problem from historical texts which demonstrates why Descartes’ theory of voluntary action hinges upon the CAP.

1 Introduction

tdfjhdfjhgdjytd

This paper will argue that the Causal Adequacy Principle (abbreviated “CAP” from here on out) presented by René Descartes is false by the existence of voluntary action. The CAP is the basis of Descartes’ Trademark Argument found in *Meditations on First Philosophy* that argues for the existence of God in order to prevent an infinite regress for causes of ideas, where one idea is caused by another *ad infinitum*. It also intends to secure the use of mental intuitions as a logical tool, since Descartes had previously concluded in *Meditations* that the senses cannot be trusted. According to the CAP, if p causes q , then p must have at least as much reality as q . The Trademark Argument, in turn, uses the CAP to argue that Descartes’ idea of God is a “trademark” from God Himself,

thus proving His existence. In this paper I present an objection to the CAP. I argue that the CAP is false because people can act voluntarily. Voluntary actions indicate some mode of the mind causing an action. But Descartes holds that modes have less reality than substances, and a choice is a mode of a mind. This means that modes can act on substances in this instance, so voluntary actions must be in violation of the CAP. However, voluntary actions still exist regardless and Descartes himself holds that voluntary actions occur, so the CAP must be false. Additionally, I present a similar problem from historical texts which demonstrates why Descartes' theory of voluntary action hinges upon the CAP.

2 Descartes' Argument

The Third Mediation is a continuation from the first two meditations, with Descartes having concluded previously that the senses can be heavily doubted and only what can be intuited by the mind is to be trusted (Descartes 8). In the Third Mediation, Descartes questions if mental intuitions are strong enough to be seen as true. He quickly concludes that they are indeed strong enough, since he has no reason to think that there is a God who is a deceiver (Descartes 25). However Descartes admits that he hasn't yet proven the existence of God, so cannot in good faith make this conclusion (Descartes 25). Descartes intends the Third Meditation to serve as a logical proof of God's existence.

To begin this Descartes argues for a threefold classification of modes of the mind, or thoughts, as follows: ideas, or images of things; volitions, or choices; and judgements, or comparisons. (Descartes 25). Descartes then categorizes ideas specifically into three categories based on their apparent sources: innate ideas, outside or "adventitious" ideas, and self-produced ideas. He examines his idea of God, and determines that it is neither innate nor self-produced, but instead must come from outside (Descartes 25). Descartes moves on to the reality that things possess, and distinguishes between *formal* reality (or *actual* reality; that is, the reality of a thing's existence) and *objective* reality (or *ideal* reality; that is, the reality of the idea of a thing), and says that it seems like his idea of God (regardless of God's actual existence) must have more objective reality than other thoughts (Descartes 27-28). Descartes then introduces the CAP as an extension of the classical *nihil ex nihilo fit* that accounts for different degrees of reality, writing:

Now it is indeed evident by the light of nature that there must be at least as much [reality] in the efficient and total cause as there is in the effect of that same cause. For whence, I ask, could an effect get its reality, if not from its cause? (Descartes 28)

In essence, Descartes states that if p causes q , then p must have at least as much reality as q , and holds the CAP to be true in both senses of reality that he

distinguished earlier (Descartes 28). Descartes then applies this principle to his idea of God, saying that his idea of God has the maximum amount of objective reality, since it is an idea of an infinite substance, but a low amount of formal reality since it is an idea, and ideas are forms of thoughts, which are modes of the mind and thus have less formal reality than the mind itself (Descartes 28-29). Descartes then goes on to conclude that his idea of God must be caused by something with the same degree of reality as God, and the only thing with as much formal reality as God is God Himself, so thus God must exist, since God has left a “trademark” on his mind in the form of an idea of God (Descartes 34).

3 Issues from the CAP

The CAP presents an interesting implication: if p causes q , and p must have at least as much reality as q , then in accordance to Cartesian tradition thoughts could not cause substances. This extension of the CAP is formalized as follows:

- p1) All actions must have a cause.
- p2) This cause must have at least as much reality as its result.
- p3) Thoughts are modes of the mind.
- p4) Modes have less reality than substances.
- c1) Thoughts cannot cause substances.

This extension is relatively straightforward, with the first premise being *nihil ex nihilo fit*, the second premise being the CAP itself, and the third and fourth premises stated in *Meditations*. The conclusion thusly follows.

However, upon contemplation, it seems that thoughts do cause substances after all, in the form of voluntary action. There are three examples of voluntary action that I wish to illustrate, namely what I will call the example from inspiration, the example from design, and the example from motion.

EXAMPLE FROM INSPIRATION

Let us say I am reading a book on philosophy. I read about a specific argument made by a philosopher. As I am reading it, I have an idea about an objection to that argument. I decide to write a paper on the objection. My idea of an objection would have caused be to write that paper. Therefore a thought would have caused a substance.

EXAMPLE FROM DESIGN

Let us say I am an designer for Apple. I have an idea of a new Apple product. I choose to create this Apple product from my idea. This idea caused the creation of that Apple product. Therefore a thought would have caused a substance.

EXAMPLE FROM ACTION

Let us say that I decide that I want to move my arm. I decide to move my arm. This thought then caused my arm to move. Therefore a thought would have caused substances.

If it is true that $c1$ is false, then at least one premise from the CAP extension must be false. The most obvious candidate for expulsion from the extension would be the CAP itself. In both Cartesian metaphysics and the modern conception of physics, it is absolutely acceptable to assert that everything must have a cause, so $p1$ does not seem fit for elimination. $p3$ and $p4$ also are not likely candidates for expulsion; while removing these two premises would also allow for voluntary action, they would leave information to be desired. When $p3$ is eliminated, thoughts then occupy a precarious position in Cartesian metaphysics: if thoughts aren't modes, but modes exist, then what are they? When $p4$ is eliminated, something similar occurs: if modes do not have less reality than substances, but the concepts of formal and objective reality still exist, and some things are modes, then what is the difference between a mode and a substance? When both are eliminated, both of these questions occur. Therefore, $p2$ seems like the most likely candidate for elimination when it appears that thoughts do cause substances.

In addition to this empirical argument for voluntary action, Descartes himself asserts that it occurs, writing in *The Correspondence* that "...the soul moves the body" (Descartes and Elisabeth 66) and distinguishing volitions from other thoughts in his metaphysics (Descartes 25). Thus, it seems like Descartes metaphysics is inconsistent, as illustrated above. Either the CAP or voluntary action must be eliminated, and since voluntary action seems to exist empirically, the CAP looks to be the most plausible candidate. A similar illustration was made by Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia in correspondence to Descartes.

4 Historical Parallels

In letters to Descartes, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia points out an interesting omission by the philosopher: while Descartes explains how things must be caused, he does not explain how, as Elisabeth puts it, "the soul of a human being (it being only a thinking substance) can determine the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary action" (Descartes and Elisabeth 62). Despite the philosopher's lack of explanation, voluntary action obviously does occur, otherwise Elisabeth would have not written Descartes a letter in the first place, and other previous examples. In response to Elisabeth, Descartes says that the mind of a human being can indeed act on the body, but otherwise avoids the question and goes on a lengthy discussion of primitive notions that the mind, body, and mind-body unity possess and a vague metaphor on his notions of heaviness and "primitive notions" as a way to understand how the mind acts on the body (Descartes and Elisabeth 63-66). In reply, Elisabeth essentially asks the same

question again, admitting she did not understand how the heaviness-voluntary action metaphor worked (Descartes and Elisabeth 68). Descartes once again is evasive, writing extensively about notions before accusing the princess of not understanding that the mind and the body are two separate entities (Descartes and Elisabeth 69-71). Elisabeth once again asks Descartes how the soul moves the body, and argues that thoughts can be extended, since “Though extension is not necessary to thought, neither is it at all repugnant to it, and could be suited to some other function of the soul which is no less essential to it” (Descartes and Elisabeth 72). Descartes responds by changing the subject to an unrelated problem of circles, ending the discussion on voluntary action. Elisabeth does not bring the subject up again, but the problem remains: how can Descartes justify both the CAP and voluntary action?

Dardis characterizes four specific problems Descartes faces here, namely: cross-substance causation; contact; method; and conservation (Dardis 31–32).

Under the problem of cross-substance causation, Dardis argues that “any claim that the world divides into fundamentally different realms (for instance, the physical and the mental) has to depend on a clear principle sating the basis for dividing the world. One such principle is causal” (Dardis 33). Thus, Descartes could say that the defining factor of the realm of a substance could be its ability to interact causally with a substance if and only if that substance is part of that same realm. Another way to divide the realms would be through Descartes’ “principle attributes”. Descartes could argue that these attributes represent the division of the realms, and from there argue for a causal principle for these said division, and from there apply this to the notion of realms. In either of these cases, my description of voluntary action would not occur. This would prevent Princess Elisabeth’s objection, and mine as well; however, importantly Descartes does not “endorse either of these principles governing realms and causation” (Dardis 33). Thus, Descartes’ best course of action would be to divide the realms via principal attributes but reject the application of causal principles like those mentioned above. Thus, Descartes allows for cross-substance causation, meaning the only thing preventing thoughts from causing motion in substances is the CAP.

Under the problems of contact and method, Dardis first gives a possible explanation to Descartes’ heaviness metaphor, stating that:

Gravity appears to work without any contact between the heavy thing and the earth. Scholastic physics explained gravity as a matter of the heavy object possessing a “real quality” of heaviness... The real quality makes the heavy body strive to reach the earth, even though no contact is moving it. Descartes in effect says to Elisabeth that the Scholastics were wrong to apply this primitive notion to the case of gravity, but they were right that there is such a primitive notion and that it does permit action without contact. (Dardis 33–

34)

The problem for Descartes, then, is that he simply asserts that causation does work without contact, without further explanation. However, Dardis says that this is not a reason to reject mind-body causation, since there are instances in modern physics, such as gravity, where we acknowledge that something happens, but are unaware of specifically how it happens. We are unsure if gravity works with contact as well, yet we do not reject it. Dardis draws parallels to brute facts, facts that are the basis for understanding other facts, and says that in this example Descartes' assertion of causation without contact and without explanation is a brute fact for Cartesian metaphysics. This again affirms Descartes' commitment to voluntary action, and does little to shore up the inconsistency he faces. Nevertheless, Dardis thinks that there is still two high level empirical objections to be made (Dardis 34).

Under the problem of conservation, Dardis reasserts Descartes' commitment to the law of conservation of motion, and says, therefore, by extension, Descartes would be committed to the law of conservation of momentum. However, because of its definition, minds cannot have momentum. Dardis argues that Descartes instead, could "have insisted that the whole story about the movement of bodies requires the concept of 'momentum+', not just momentum. This would be a quantity that has two components, one the momentum we are familiar with and the other related to minds" (Dardis 35). In ordinary physical interaction, the component of momentum+ that involves minds is zero, but during mind-body interaction the component is not zero. Descartes could have then incorporated this concept of momentum+ into a larger physics that takes jurisdiction over both mental and physical events. But Descartes does not do this, nor has anyone else since introduced anything similar to momentum+, meaning that Descartes must rely on the CAP to prevent thoughts from causing substances.

Dardis then revisits the problem introduced by Princess Elisabeth. In *The Correspondence*, Elisabeth's main concern is how diseases or illnesses can cause the loss of rationality in the brain, and how emotions such as passion can decay rationality as well. This is an issue for Descartes since "if the soul were a self-contained distinct substance from the body, with only a single channel of communication with the body, it is mysterious how passions, and diseases of the body, could alter the operation of the soul in such complex and graduated ways" (Dardis 35). Dardis identifies two possible solutions from Descartes: (A) this is simply how it works, and is a brute fact; God made it this way for personal wellbeing; and (B) "thought, rationality, and consciousness have a systematic, complex, graduated, and consistent dependence on the operations of the body" (Dardis 35). Dardis writes that (B) seems to be in line with the framework of thinking in Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*, the process of systematic decomposition of complex mechanisms of the body into simpler constituent parts, much like modern cognitive science does with the mind.

Overall, Descartes' evasion of the subject is rather puzzling, but ultimately allows for my objection against the Trademark Argument and the CAP. As Elisabeth points out, it does seem like people can choose to do various actions, and Descartes admits this in both the letters and in *Meditations*, saying in regards to volitions in the Third Mediation that he can choose evil things or things that are non-existent, but regardless of the actual object, this choice is still true (Descartes 26). Descartes does not mention physical action as some special case in *Meditations* or *The Correspondence* either. Therefore, it would seem that Descartes simply does not account for voluntary action in any meaningful way other than simply saying it occurs, and his attempts to explain it when directly asked about it are lackluster at best. Dardis' commentary additionally demonstrate Descartes' reliance on the CAP to prevent thoughts causing substance: Descartes does not disallow cross-substance causation, allowing the mind to cause a bodily substance; Descartes' assertion of mind-body interaction, while disappointing, cannot be discarded just for that reason, so he still faces the aforementioned problems; and Descartes does not introduce a momentum-based framework, which would provide an adequate yet non-contradictory explanation of voluntary action.

5 Conclusion

Descartes argues that if p causes q and p must have more formal reality than q . In correspondence to Elisabeth of Bohemia the princess points out that Descartes does not mention voluntary action and how the mind affects the body. Descartes brushes this off and mentions extensions as the source of motion. Dardis points out that Descartes fails to discard cross-substance causation or provide a non-contradictory framework for voluntary action, and his assertion of voluntary action cannot be rejected merely because it is disappointing. I argue that since voluntary action exists, it must come from a mode of the mind, which means that, since modes have less reality than substances, it is not the case that if p causes q then p must have more formal reality than q . This means that the Trademark Argument does not hold, and that we cannot prove God through a causal link.

References

Dardis, Anthony. *Mental Causation: The Mind-Body Problem*. Columbia University Press, 2008.

Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Hackett Publishing Company, 1993.

Descartes, René and Elisabeth. *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes (The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe)*. University of Chicago Press, 2007.