

Plato's philosophy in *Republic* implies a concept of God; this concept of God is an intangible, impersonal entity that encompasses and is the precondition for all ideas, all reality, all of the "Forms" that Plato discusses in *Republic*. This tacit view of God is not a religious interpretation and thus does not coincide with any standard view of who or what God is. In *Republic*, Plato's point is not to establish an idea of God, but instead to determine what is right, good, just, and true; however, in his journey, Plato has implicitly brought forward a vague, abstract notion of God. God, in the Platonic sense, is the precondition or origin of the Forms or the "timeless, abstract, unchanging objects of the understanding." (Plato 412)

The Forms in Plato's philosophy have extreme significance in determining the Platonic view of God. The Forms discussed by Plato can be described as "the eternal, unchanging, absolute realities" of all existence (479). To illustrate the concept of the Forms, Plato uses the example of belief or opinion as compared to knowledge (*i.e.*, the contrast between *episteme* and *doxa*). For example, a person that enjoys playing sports, but does not understand *enjoyment* in itself, is himself ignorant of what is real. The Form of enjoyment or pleasure is not the subjective version of pleasure or enjoyment for each individual, but instead is enjoyment itself according to Plato. An understanding of the Forms is what Plato considered to be the true component of wisdom, while the knowledge of worldly things was secondary. Thus, from this standpoint, a conception of God is brought out.

The implicit view of God serves the purpose of separating the physical world from the "intelligible world" (509). The physical world according to Plato is composed of matter while the intelligible world is made up of ideas. In the physical world, subjective entities exist under the umbrella of belief and illusion where the mundane aspects of the world such

as objects and images are accounted for. In the intelligible world, on the other hand, only knowledge of the Forms is acceptable and thus only contemplation of the abstract is valid. The tangible and ever-changing nature of the physical world, moreover, cannot be considered as something that should be contemplated precisely because it is not "eternal, unchanging [or] absolute" (510-511). The intelligible, as it has been noted, is the "eternal" world of contemplation and ideas and thus it is labeled by Plato as the Forms. The root of these ideas and Forms must exist, just as the the Forms have subjective realizations in the physical world, the forms have a starting point. Plato's conception of God that can be drawn from *Republic* thus works as the foundation of knowledge. A foundation of knowledge, it follows, cannot be modified because it is the basis of all of the ideas and assumptions based on these ideas. Plato explains:

Any change must be for the worse. For God's goodness is perfect . . . it must also be impossible for a god to wish to change himself. Every god is perfect and as good as possible and remains in his own form without variation for ever. (381)

In other words, God serves as the origin or starting point from which all other aspects of the intelligible world can exist. Likewise, the connection between God and the physical world is simply the ideas that represent and describe the objects and images. For instance, Plato enlists beauty as an example. In the intelligible world, beauty is a form, or the essence of beauty exists while in the mundane world beautiful objects and images exist, that are subjectively beautiful. In other words, a beautiful object or image to one individual may not be so to another individual, and, likewise, beauty in the temporal sense is impermanent and transitory so that it may disappear or not be regarded as an exhibitor of beauty any longer. This as opposed to the

unchanging concept or Form of Beauty (479-480). Between the world of ideas and of matter, God is the initiator of the ideas that are separate entities from the physical world and thus God separates the physical and "intelligible" worlds by acting as a foundation for certain knowledge.

The Platonic view of God can also be considered to have the purpose of totalizing or embodying the all of the Platonic Forms. It has been established that there is the Form of the Good, the Just, the Right, and so on., but the result of all of these forms put together must be addressed. The embodiment of all of the Forms can be said to be God; thus He serves the purpose of a being a manifestation or representation of complete rationality, indeed perfection through its full composition of all rational and certain principles, namely the Forms. Plato himself discusses the theoretical possibility of the perfection of God, in terms of his perfection and the lack of a need to "change or alter himself." (380-381) God, in this case, is not a God in the standard sense of the word, but an idea that inherently encompasses all ideas of the world, and thus the function of this conception is to show the ultimate perfection that all concepts (and therefore objects) are derived from and all concepts lead to.

Another way of viewing Plato's conception of God is to see God on a completely abstract plane as a level of attainment of wisdom or understanding; the ensuing role would again be to set a standard by which all other abstract ideas are determined. This would be to treat the concept of God as the final stage in the quest for true knowledge. As it has been said, the knowledge of all Forms or "contemplat[ion of] fixed and immutable realities, a realm where there is no injustice but all is reason and order, and which is the model" for the actions. Thus God is this final model, on which the entire mechanism and core of abstract ideas of the "intelligible world"

and following this, the physical world of "objects" and "images" is based (509). In this case, the function of the conception of God is to encompass the meaning of full understanding of all of the forms. An understanding of God is equivalent to a knowledge of genuine truth or "goodness." It is comparable to a type of "enlightenment" (to use the Eastern meaning of the word) in that it is a state of total cognizance of the good, the right, the just, etc. Thus, this level of attainment or God, has as its function to provide a manifestation of the entirety of reality. Fundamentally, under this conception of God, a complete comprehension and perception of actuality in terms of the Forms becomes the purpose of the conception of God.

The Platonic understanding of God can be described as the fundamental basis and foundation for all of certain knowledge. Plato's Forms culminating into a complete whole is his concept of God, whether God is regarded as a divider of physical and mental, embodiment of all Forms, or the highest level of understanding and wisdom. Everything in the realm of ideas has as its source this embodiment of all Forms (God); likewise all such ideas lead to this greater, comprehensive "Form" that *is* God. It is important to recognize that Plato conception of God is extremely abstract, thus failing to give God any personal attributes, for He is neither a thing nor a person, rather an inconceivable entity or state of knowledge that cannot be described in the material terms of the mundane human world.

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One cannot completely reflect upon the notion of God without also considering religion, and no religion has had such a profound impact in the Western world as Christianity. Religion can be considered as a type of philosophy, and like other philosophies, religion can only posit about

the existence of a God. Yet the ideas about God in religion are as important, or perhaps more important, as in other philosophies. Even though different philosophies and religions have different concepts of the basic nature of God is essentially the same in all religions. God is the "supreme, utmost in goodness, mightiest and all-powerful, most merciful and most just."

(Confessions 23) If these traits are almost universally agreed upon as being characteristic of God, then why do we need so many different philosophies and religions? This is a basic problem that a religion like Christianity faces in gaining a following. To gain support, religions bundle themselves tightly with the idea of God and use the concept of the omnipotent God to their own advantage. This creates the impression that the idea of God is inseparable from the religion, when in fact, one could believe in God without believing in a specific religion such as Christianity.

St. Augustine asks, "What, then, is the God I worship?" (Confessions 23) This question shows a central difference between God's role in religion as compared with other philosophies. As can be seen from the quote, the Christian God is an object of worship, and not merely a concept put forth by other philosophies. Therefore, the first thing that Christianity does is to give the basic concept of God additional features and to bring it to the center of attention. Introducing the concept of God into this system of beliefs opens a whole new realm of possibilities. The existence of God is given a practical purpose, with God as the source of many of the ideas and ideals of Christianity. From God comes a system of ethics. In the everyday life of humans, God plays an important role by setting the commandments and laws that must be followed. The Bible, the word of God for the Christian religion, holds the answers to many ethical and normative questions such as the distinction between good and evil, and what one should do and what one

should not do. For example, God, through Jesus, puts forth the commandment that "you love one another", and so love becomes a critical tenet of the religion (John 13:34). An important role of God is as a supreme judge of justice: "The true underlying justice which judges, not according to convention, but according to the truly equitable law of Almighty God" (Confessions 63). Since God is the source of all religious laws and ethics, God serves a very practical purpose in the Christian religion.

Besides the practicality of God to set rules and laws, God also serves to answer more interesting questions. Unlike other philosophies, Christianity takes truth from God rather than searching for truth using God as a tool, as "no one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven." (John 3:27) While other philosophies depend on reason, Christianity puts little emphasis on the power of reason, and instead puts it on faith in God: "We are too weak to discover the truth by reason alone and for this reason need the authority of the sacred books." (Confessions 117) So Christianity is more of a passive philosophy, in regard to God, in that it takes from God, rather than explicitly uses him. Augustine needed God to solve his problems, to "lift the veil and resolve the problems which perplexed [him]." (Confessions 98) Problems such as the origin of life and our place in the world can be solved with the concept of God as "the supreme Good, the Creator and Ruler of the universe." (Confessions 40) As stated in Genesis, God created the world and humans in the image of Himself. Thus, from the originally simple idea of a powerful God, Christianity has added the tools necessary to explain some fundamental questions about the way we are and about the way we should be. With these additions, Christianity becomes more practical with the idea of God as the creator, ruler, and judge that sets ethical laws.

Christianity adds another dimension to God, making people want to accept the religion and to be "borne anew [to] see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3) They use people's fear of God and fear of His punishment to spread the religion, as shown by Abraham on Mount Moriah, when he is willing to sacrifice his only son for God, and an angel says, "Now I know that you fear God." (Gen. 22:12) Even though the original concept of an omnipotent God did not involve the concept of fear, once Christianity introduced the idea that one should fear God, it gave another incentive to become a Christian. Besides fear, the religion also uses hope, the hope of eternal peace, that is promised to Christians: "Stand with him and you shall not fall; rest in him and peace shall be yours." (Confessions 81) Jesus stated that "whoever believes in him may have eternal life." (John 3:15) The eternal life that is promised is an idea not within the concept of God itself, but rather only created within the religion. Augustine calls God the "food of the soul," and Christianity relies on this, on a hunger of the soul (Confessions 55).

Another aspect that Christianity brings to the religion is the church. Augustine relates the story of Victorinus who professed to be a Christian, and yet did not go to church. Victorinus would ask "Is it then the walls of the church that make the Christian?" (Confessions 160) The answer to this question is certainly yes. No one believed that Victorinus was a Christian, even though he had read the Bible and believed in everything that a Christian should believe in. So from an abstract concept of God, Christianity brings in all of its ideas. The ideas of God form the foundation supporting the entire church.

God serves as a tool to support Christianity. No one believes in Christianity and does not believe in God. Augustine for the early part of

his life could not accept God, based on the philosophical problems of the existence of evil and of the materialness of God. This led Augustine to look to the Manicheans and their philosophy. Once Augustine was able to reconcile the idea of God and evil in his own mind, his conversion to Christianity became easy. Religion thus gets its support from God. This method goes in the opposite direction of other philosophers, who develop their philosophies first, and then bring in God's role to their system of philosophy.

It is not necessarily true that God plays a larger role in religion. In Descartes, for example, without the idea of God, Descartes could never have brought himself out of the "abyss of ignorance." However, the emphasis is different between such philosophies and Christianity. Kant sees that it is necessary for humans to have the idea of a God, in order for them to follow a moral system. Christianity sees God as important for our very existence. Without God, perhaps Descartes would have been left in ignorance, never being able to know that things he saw clearly were true. Christianity cannot even picture the idea of a place without God.

Christianity, then, is very dependent on God, but the religion also uses the concept of God in many ways. The idea of God can be seen to have an intrinsic value. Without an idea of God, many philosophies and religions would have no support. God is used to solve many philosophical problems. Christianity uses God to solve the problem of why we are here and where we go after we die. Descartes uses God to get to solid metaphysical foundations. Plato uses God as an example of the perfection that he envisioned. But besides solving problems, God is used in other ways. Christianity transforms and builds upon the simple idea of a God to form it into a religion. A lot fewer people would accept Christianity if all it contained were the idea of a

omnipotent, omniscient, and omni-benevolent God. Christianity adds on top of this basic idea some practical doctrines of ethics and brings in the emotions of fear and hope, all based on God. The church is then the structure surrounding the entire religion. It is a direct and powerful use of a simple concept.

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In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, René Descartes bases many of his most important arguments on the existence of God. While Descartes was known to be a devout Catholic, he does not introduce a distinct theology in *Meditations*, but rather defines God as the concept of an omnipotent and omniscient being that serves as a constant and reliable force in a world of confusion and uncertainty. Descartes generally relies upon the existence of such a God for all of his *a priori* proofs and uses God as an overly-simple solution to all of the potential problems with his philosophical explanations. This dependence on an all-powerful being for knowledge and understanding is representative of man's dependence on God for spirituality; however, Descartes' concept of God in *Meditations* does not introduce the element of institutionalized religion and spirituality typically associated with cultural denotations of God. Descartes also makes it clear that because human understanding is finite, there is no way we can understand an infinitely-knowing God. Descartes uses the notion of God to prove the existence of the human mind and extended bodies, and to explain human error. For the discussion of these topics he takes the existence of such a God for granted, but this assumption does not go without justification, as Descartes gives his famous cosmological and ontological proofs in the Third and Fifth Meditations respectively.

While Descartes does not prove the existence of God until after he has discussed and assumed the existence of such a Deity to develop other proofs, it is interesting to consider his arguments with a sound understanding of his proof of the existence of God. Descartes gives two fundamental proofs for the existence of God, each fairly simple in terms of argument, but neither entirely straightforward in terms of their implications. Descartes first proof is the so-called "Cosmological Proof," given in the Third Meditation. After his ascent from the "Socratic position," or intellectual abyss, Descartes has come to the conclusion that indeed he exists, that he is a mind with ideas which he knows clearly and distinctly, and that these things he knows clearly and distinctly are true. He explains that one such thing he knows is that ideas cannot be caused by things with less reality than they represent. That is to say, the notion of God could not have been caused by observations of things such as angels, human souls and bodies, and the "lower." One such idea he has is that there is a God; this idea of God can therefore be caused by nothing less than the actual being of God. He then goes further to say that such a God will not fool him about things if he is careful, which he later elaborates on when discussing human error. Essentially the Cosmological Proof says that God could not be an illusion because people would not have any concept of God without His existence.

The Ontological Proof is another such *a priori* proof for the existence of God. This argument is based on the two premises that God is perfect (which is entirely definitional) and that existence is perfect, so therefore God exists. This proof is perhaps the weaker of the two, for it has been met with much criticism from people like Kant and Hume who argued that existence is not in itself a perfection, even that existence itself is not even a property.

Descartes uses the existence of God as a basis for a number of philosophical arguments in *Meditations*. One such example is found in the Sixth Meditation, where Descartes establishes the existence of extended bodies, including the human body, using his concept of a non-deceiving God as a starting point. Descartes bases the actual existence of physical objects on a principle of causation. He considers the possible explanations for physical objects to be God, angels, and the physical objects themselves; he concludes that physical objects do exist because the other two possibilities must be ruled out, as God is not a deceiver. He also explains that "true knowledge of external things seems to belong to the mind alone." (48) In addition, Descartes explains that the properties that we can clearly ascribe to a body must actually be characteristic of that object, again, because God is not a deceiver.

Another element of Descartes' *Meditations* that involves God is Descartes' epistemology. This epistemology is particularly noteworthy in considering Descartes' conception of a God because it outlines the relationship between God, man, and the external world. Extended bodies, or objects of the material world, are accurately resembled in the mind via material causation in which light is reflected off of the object, captured by the eye, and interpreted by the brain. However, for a true understanding of the physical world, God must serve as an intermediary. The resemblance achieved through material causation could be deceiving, as in the case of illusions. For true understanding, it is necessary to consider an exchange of knowledge between God and the mind, for an all-knowing God is perfectly aware of the true nature of the physical world; thus, God can serve in a sense as the mind's eye.

Descartes conception of God is also evinced in his discussion of the cause of human error. This topic, like Descartes' epistemology, demonstrates the interaction or relationship between man and God. In *Meditations IV*, Descartes arrives upon the problem that humans do err even in the presence of God, asking, "How can the supreme creator of all things have made something that isn't absolutely perfect?" (28) By the end of *Meditations IV*, he has resolved this problem by proposing the solution that error is a result of man not focusing completely on God and using free will in areas in which he has no understanding. In his process of examining the possibility of human error, Descartes first establishes the concept that error is a deficiency of God (recalling St. Augustine's proposal). He states, "In itself, error is a lack, rather than a real thing dependent on God." (28) He also notes that error is dependent on two causes, namely understanding and will (the ability to choose freely), however he argues that error cannot simply arise from poor understanding, and thus requires poorly used free will (again borrowing from Augustine). (29) After consideration of the influence of will and understanding, Descartes concludes that the source of his errors, is "that, while my will has a broader scope than my understanding, I don't keep it within the same bounds, but extend it to that which I don't understand." (31) Essentially this statement means that error lies in using one's will in areas that he has no understanding, and thus it is poor choice that leads to error.

Thus, Descartes states that in order to avoid error, "I [must] think only of God and devote all my attention to Him...When I turn my attention back to myself...I can make innumerable errors." (28) Descartes has solved his problem of human error in the presence of a perfect and non-deceptive God by coming to the conclusion that error comes as a result of poorly used free will and focusing too much on oneself rather than God. Descartes

suggestion that people need to give attention and consideration to God in order to live lives free of fault gives some suggestion of the concept of faith in *Meditations*, though this idea is merely hinted at and is not essentially an integral part of Descartes' concept of God.

While René Descartes does not develop any concept of religion in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and only vaguely touches upon faith and the relationship between man and God, a conception of God is essential to the entirety of Descartes' philosophy. For Descartes, God serves as an all-knowing, all-powerful entity. Descartes begins his inquiries making it clear that human beings have finite and limited knowledge of truth and the physical world. Behind this veil of ignorance lies an infinitely-knowing God that represents an ideal for the philosopher-scientist Descartes. God is the opposite of the supreme deceiver considered to prove the existence of the human mind. Descartes offers both a cosmological proof and an ontological proof for God's existence; while objections can be raised to these arguments, what is more important is the nature or kind of a God that is defined by such logic. God is essential for Descartes' epistemology, for eliminating the problem of extended bodies, and as a standard from which one can understand the origin of human error.