

Descartes on God and Matter (Meditations 3-5)

I. Review of some key results from Med 1 and 2

A. From *Meditation 1*:

i. Nearly everything is subject to doubt. Until this doubt is removed, any (system of) knowledge lacks adequate justification.

B. From *Meditation 2*:

- i. The meditator discovers something that appears immune to doubt (the cogito)
- ii. The meditator discovers something about her nature or essence: she is a thinking thing (sum res cogitans)
- iii. The meditator discovers something about a faculty of the mind (our intellect)—namely, that through the use of it (alone) we can discover metaphysical truths about essences. (Wax example.)

II. The criterion of clarity and distinctness

The meditator makes a general observation about the cogito:

Surely in this first instance of knowledge, there is nothing but a certain *clear and distinct perception* of what I affirm. . . And thus I now seem able to posit as a general rule that everything I very clearly and distinctly perceive is true. (70).

If clarity and distinctness is a sure sign of truth, then it looks like we have a path out of the skeptical scenarios. We note what we clearly and distinctly perceive, and then reason from that. Descartes does not define ‘clear’ or ‘distinct’ in the *Meditations*, but he does other work. [See below, “Quotes on clarity and distinctness.”] The problem is that we seem to be prone to error both about what we clearly and distinctly perceive and in our reasoning. How do we address this? Descartes suggests:

I should at the first opportunity inquire whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether or not he can be a deceiver. For if I am ignorant of this, it appears that I am never capable of being certain about anything else. (71)

He believes he must prove the existence of “the true God, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and the sciences lie hidden,” (82) as he puts it later in the *Meditations*. Knowledge of God’s existence is seen as the *foundation of*, and *more certain than*, all knowledge other than immediate self-knowledge. The importance of Meditation III is two-fold: firstly in its methodological proposal about clear and distinct ideas, developed in more detail later; and secondly in its conclusion that God exists.

III. The Causal Argument (aka the Trademark Argument¹) for God’s existence

There are two independent arguments for the existence of God are given in the *Meditations*, one in Meditation III, the other in Meditation V.

In Meditation III, we begin by reflecting on the furniture of the mind, whose existence he has proved. I have many ideas, he says, some of which seem to be innate, some adventitious, some invented by me. Can we tell, just by considering the content of our ideas, whether something real corresponds to them? Descartes suggests that sometimes we can.

A. A compressed version of the argument:²

Step 1: There exists in the meditator’s thought an idea of God as “a substance that is infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and that created me along with

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¹ So called because of this line: “To be sure, it is not astonishing that in creating me, God should have endowed me with this idea, so that it would be like the mark of the craftsmen impressed upon his work” (80)

² In the contemporary context, we use the term ‘objective’ in almost the opposite way from Descartes. For us to say that something has objective reality is to say that it exists outside of me, independent of my mind. But for Descartes, something has objective reality if it exists as an object of thought, in my mind. For Descartes, formal reality is what is independent of me. Be sure to be clear when you use these terms which meaning you intend.

everything else that exists, if anything else exists.” (76)

But where could such an idea come from? What could be its cause? I (the meditator) am imperfect and finite. The next step relies on the following principle (sometimes called the ‘*Causal Adequacy Principle*’):

There must be at least as much [reality] in the efficient and total cause as there is in the effect of that same cause (74).

The idea seems to be this: suppose you find a clock in the woods. How did this clock come to exist? There must be some intelligence at least as complex as the clock to have created it. The same would be true if you found a blueprint of the clock. The idea of God is like the blueprint: the idea’s content is infinite and perfect. So there must be something equally infinite and perfect that created it.

Step 2: God exists, and “God, I say, that same being the idea of whom is in me: a being having all those perfections that I cannot comprehend, but can somehow touch with my thought, and a being subject to no defects whatsoever. From these considerations it is quite obviou that he cannot be a deceiver, for it is manifest by the light of nature that all fraud and deception depend on some defect.”(81)

In short: A perfect God must be the cause of my idea of a perfect God.

Question: How does the meditator establish the truth of the *Causal Adequacy Principle*?

Note that the reasoning of the argument also assumes that the meditator (and we along with her) finds within herself not only an idea of God, but an idea with a very specific content.

Question: Do we have such an innate idea? If we do, does it have that content?

IV. Two Problems

Problem of Error: If my faculties (intellectual, etc .) all come from God and God is not a deceiver, whence come my errors?

The Cartesian Circle: If I can know that my intellect is reliable only *after* establishing God’s existence, then how can I establish God’s existence in the first place? I need to trust my intellect to prove God’s existence, yet without knowledge of God’s existence, I’m not entitled to trust my intellect.

A. Error

Errors depend on the simultaneous concurrence of two causes: the faculty of knowing that is in me and the faculty of choosing. . . the intellect and will” (83-4).

The problem, as Descartes presents it, is parallel to the problem of evil: if God the creator is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good, how could there be evil in the world? A world with free will is better than a world without it and evil is the result of human freedom, not God.

On Descartes’ view, the will and the intellect differ in scope; as a result, through use of the will we can make judgments about matters that are beyond the proper scope of our intellect; in these cases, we risk error. “But if I hold off from making a judgment when I do not perceive what is true with sufficient clarity and distinctness, it is clear that I am acting properly and am not committing an error” (86).

B. Cartesian Circle (more next time)

V. Second argument for God’s existence: the Ontological Argument

i) I have within myself an idea of a perfect God.

ii) Existence is a perfection.

Alternatively: ii*) “From the fact that I cannot think of God “except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and hence that he really exists.”

iii) So God exists.

The basic idea behind ontological arguments for God’s existence is that (necessary) existence is part of God’s essence. We can gain knowledge of God’s essence by reason, so likewise his existence.

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Quotes on clarity and distinctness

From the *Meditations*:

I am certain that I am a thinking thing. But do I not therefore also know what is required for me to be certain of anything? Surely in this first instance of knowledge, there is nothing but a certain clear and distinct perception of what I affirm. Yet this would hardly be enough to render me certain of the truth of a thing, if it could ever happen that something I perceived so clearly and distinctly were false. And thus I now seem able to posit as a general rule that everything I very clearly and distinctly perceive is true. p. 539, c. 2.

This leaves ‘clear’ and ‘distinct’ undefined. In his *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes offers the following:

A perception which can serve as the basis for a certain and indubitable judgement needs to be not merely clear but also distinct. I call a perception ‘clear’ when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind — just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception ‘distinct’ is, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear.³

Descartes goes on to use the example of pain to illustrate the distinction between clarity and distinctness:

For example, when someone feels an intense pain, the perception he has of it is indeed very clear, but is not always distinct. For people commonly confuse this perception with an obscure judgement they make concerning the nature of something which they think exists in the painful spot and which they suppose to resemble the sensation of pain; but in fact it is the sensation alone which they perceive clearly. Hence a perception can be clear without being distinct, but not distinct without being clear.⁴

The accessibility of clear and distinct perceptions may also require that we first undergo a process of doubt of the sort modeled in Meditation 1. The author of the *Fifth Objections* (Gassendi) asks Descartes: “what possible skill or method will permit us to discover that our understanding is so clear and distinct as to be true and to make it impossible that we should be mistaken?”⁵ In response, Descartes writes:

I maintain that I carefully provided such a method in the appropriate place, where I first eliminated all preconceived opinions and afterwards listed all my principal ideas, distinguishing those which were clear from those which were obscure or confused.⁶

Question: Are you satisfied? Do we have adequate grounds for accepting the criterion of clarity and distinctness?

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³ Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch, eds. and trans., *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Cambridge: 1988, pp. 174–175, emphasis added.

⁴ Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch, p. 175.

⁵ Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch, p. 221.

⁶ Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch, p. 250.

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