

**RENE DESCARTES**  
**MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY**

A summary by Torrey Wang

**Meditation One: Concerning those things that can be called into doubt**

Descartes states that he has put off examining the foundations upon which he has built all his false beliefs. But he must now do so, in order to establish firm and lasting truths in the sciences. Examining each of his opinions for falsehood would be tedious; rather, Descartes says that if he can simply show that there's cause for doubt for an opinion, then he can throw that opinion out. This can be facilitated by examining the foundations themselves common to those false/doubtful opinions, and rejecting them.

The senses seem like a good place to start, since they often mislead us. But would it not be insane to reject also such deliverances as that we have hands, eyes, etc.? Probably. But there's a different worry, D says. We have no clear criterion for distinguishing between our waking and sleeping lives. But whatever we dream, D suggests that the constituting elements of them, i.e., *simples*, must surely have a basis in reality. The idea is that simples are that out of which we form complex ideas (e.g., of a unicorn). So if we find the simplest elements in nature, we will have found the most universal, which then must be true.

The mathematical and physical sciences, then, which don't depend on composites, might be considered to be indubitable. Can  $1 + 2$  not be 3? But D suggests that since God can do anything, he doesn't know if he hasn't been inserted into a simulated world, which he dreams but thinks is real. Also, people often make mistakes in the above disciplines. So we can both doubt that God is benevolent and the capacity of our reason to deliver true judgments.

Thus, D resolves to throw out all his previous beliefs, and assume that God is maliciously bent on deceiving him.

**Meditation Two: Concerning the nature of the human mind: that it is known better than the body**

Continuing his search for one solid and immovable point, he asks what is there concerning which he can have not the slightest occasion for doubt? It is that *he* exists. This follows, he argues, from the fact that even if he denies that he has a body, or that the world exists, or that he is not being deceived by a malicious God, there is still an object of those denials: himself. Therefore, he exists every time he conceives it in his mind or thinks "I am, I exist."

What kind of thing is D?-he asks. It seems that, on first thought, he identifies with his body most, and then his "soul," which is responsible for his locomotive, appetitive, and cognitive functions. But while he can suppose his body to not belong to him, he can't suppose *thinking* to not belong to him. Thus, he knows only that he is a thinking thing – one who "doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses."

It is curious, then, D says, that he finds that he still thinks, despite that, he knows more distinctly corporeal things than "this mysterious 'I,'" since the images of corporeal things are formed precisely by thought, and subject to the fallibility of the senses, whereas the 'I' is not imagined. Why is this? D seeks to disabuse us and deny both that our knowledge of corporeal bodies is more distinct than knowledge of ourselves, and that we learn of bodies through sensory impressions. He asks us to imagine the following: a hard piece of wax of certain fragrance, shape, color, and size that, brought close to a fire, begins to melt. After some time, all of those initial properties change. It is now liquid, fragrance-less, larger, etc, and no longer emits a sound when you tap on it. It seems that the nature of the wax is rather its underlying mutability, flexibility, extension, and not the Lockean "secondary qualities" that we sense. Therefore,

since this is the same piece of wax, and neither our senses or imagination “tracks” the “innumerable changes” that the piece of wax undergoes while remaining the same piece of wax, it follows that we perceive the wax through “an inspection on the part of the mind alone.”

From this D says that the senses and imagination only afford confused perception common to animals. But the act of distinguishing the wax itself from its external forms is an act of judgment that results in “more perfect” knowledge, which only human minds can attain. We know ourselves better than bodies because every perception of body makes more manifest the nature of the mind.

### **Meditation Three: Concerning God, that he exists**

D notes that his being certain of his being a thinking thing, which is a “first instance of knowledge,” reveals what is needed for him to be certain of anything: a clear and distinct perception of what is affirmed. But if it could be that something so clear and distinct could be false, he would not be certain of the thing’s truth. Thus, everything he perceives clearly and distinctly is true.

However, D is not completely sold on this principle, since he subsequently expresses that truths, such as  $2 + 3 = 5$ , which he finds clear and distinct, are nevertheless dubitable, since he assumes that there is a malicious God who could have deceived him to have clear and distinct perceptions of false things. He wishes to assuage this worry, and hence he proceeds to prove the existence of God.

Before he starts, he wants to clarify that the ideas that he has that he thinks are caused by external objects cannot be assumed to be derived from external objects that actually cause them. He brings up a potential argument, later happily recycled by Locke as proof of the same, that purports to prove objective reality: we feel, say, heat imposed on us despite our not willing it so. But Descartes argues that this is no different as that we don’t will the ideas that we have in dreams, but nevertheless have them. So, this is no proof that the resultant ideas are caused by real extramental correlates. Now he moves to his proof.

Ideas that represent substances (cows, e.g.) contain more “objective reality” within them than those that represent only accidents or modes (colors, e.g.). (By “reality,” Descartes is appealing to the Scholastic notion of perfection – things with greater perfection have more being. Perfection is measured by what kind of a thing something is. Scholastics tended to think of purely material objects as being least perfect, and thus least real, while animals and humans are thought more real, in ascending order, with God at the top.) Likewise, ideas that represent a supreme deity – eternal, infinite, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, creator of all except himself – have more objective reality than do ideas in which finite substances are represented. He then states the following argument:

1. There is at least as much reality in an efficient or total cause as its effect.
2. There must be at least as much formal (intrinsic) or eminent (more formal) reality in the cause of an idea as there is objective reality in an idea.
3. I have an idea of God as being infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and creator of all beings.
4. This idea of God contains more objective reality than any other idea.
5. The cause of this idea of God must have as much formal or eminent reality as there is objective reality in my idea.
6. Only God can have as much formal or eminent reality as there is objective reality in my idea.
7. God is the source of my idea of God.
8. Thus, God exists.

He also gives three other arguments, all supposedly proving from the fact that he exists, and has an idea of God, that God must exist. He does all of these along the line of showing that his continued existence

requires God's conservation (that is, God's willing that one exists at every moment, as God wills the creation of something) and that he himself can't be God. (He gives arguments showing that if he were, he would be able to either (a) give himself every perfection, or (b) have the power to bring it about that he exists in the future, both of which he denies.)

D's last foray in this Meditation is into the origin of his idea of God, since he has shown that it neither comes from himself (since he can't add to or subtract from his idea of God), nor from his senses (since it didn't come to him unexpectedly, as when (apparent) external objects impinge themselves on one's senses). It is God, on whom D depends for his existence, and who is the source of his idea of his perfections, and his lack of defects. D says that this entails his lack of the defect of deception.

#### **Meditation Four: Concerning the true and the false**

Descartes now moves to deduce other truths from those that he has established: that God exists, that D depends on him for his existence at all moments.

From the previous Meditation, God can never deceive D. He says that while deception may seem like "an indication of cleverness or power, the will to deceive undoubtedly attests to maliciousness or weakness. Accordingly, deception is incompatible with God." (This is a very shaky assumption. Even if deception could be shown to be an indication of an imperfection, it doesn't follow that all deception is bad. In fact, it might be permissible under what Leibniz might call, *mutatis mutandis*, "particular" intentions of God, and hence, be allowed to effect some grander plan!)

D wonders then, if God won't deceive, why he has endowed us with judgments that seem given to frequent error. D says that we should not presume to know the ends of things in physics. (He is addressing the anti-Mechanists, who inquire into the natural world by means of Aristotelian "final causes," which in his day had started to wane in popularity in an increasingly deterministic climate.) Also, while it is true that God could have given us infallible judgments, we should not think that this would have been better for the universe. This is the so-called "Greater Good Argument" that has been used by, among others, Augustine and Leibniz.

Whence, then, does error stem? D offers that it is because though our intellect is finite, our will is infinite. Errors in judgment are caused by indifference of the will, which occurs when the will affirms or denies despite there being no (good) reason to do either. A will that is properly inclined by a clear and distinct perception on the part of reason prevents error in judgment.

In concluding, D argues that God doesn't owe us, who have not merited anything, an infinite intellect, which, besides, isn't proper to us. Instead, it is us who ought to thank him for having created us and given us the things that he has. (Same argument Augustine has voiced.)

Also, though God concurs in our actions, he has responsible only for the good in our actions; the bad are a result of negation. We are responsible for our sins, because we can choose to abstain from willing/judging things that we don't understand, and only will/judge things that we perceive clearly and distinctly. In this way, we can be free of error.

#### **Meditation Five: Concerning the essence of material things, and again, concerning God, that he exists**

Now Descartes seeks to return to the subject of whether material things exist, which was pushed aside in the first Meditation. A natural starting point is the ideas that we have of objects. He says that he has

distinct ideas of extension, which he is able to enumerate parts in and to which he is able to ascribe such properties as size, shape, motion, etc. For example, even if there are no external objects, he is able to think of triangles at will, and upon their essences, which are not fabricated. He can demonstrate their properties in his mind. These yield up truths of geometry, arithmetic, pure mathematics, etc., that D says even before he began to concern himself only with objects of the senses, he took to be most certain.

In this, D finds another argument for the existence of God. If it follows from the fact that whatever he perceives clearly and distinctly to belong to an idea of something he brings forth, that it belongs to that thing, then it follows that God exists. This is because he clearly and distinctly perceives existence to belong to his idea of God, whose essence entails all perfections. (Descartes assumes existence to be a perfection.)

Descartes says that having proven that God exists, he can now be confident that all the truths that he had previously thought certain and distinct are really true, since everything depends on God, and he does not deceive. As long as he remembers that he clearly and distinctly perceived once that there is a God, who doesn't deceive, no counterargument can be given that puts doubt on any of his clear and distinct beliefs. But this still leaves out the existence of material objects. Do we perceive them clearly and distinctly, apart from their ideas?

### **Meditation Six: Concerning the existence of material things, and the real distinction between mind and body**

Descartes begins his project of determining whether we can know that external objects exist by distinguishing between the imagination and intellect. Imagination is a faculty that we use for picturing what we're thinking about. We, e.g., might "turn the mind's eyes" to a sort of image of a triangle, instead of purely thinking about it. But when we are thinking of a chiliagon (thousand-sided figure), we obviously don't differentiate it from other polygons with the imagination; the imagination could not produce an image of it. But we can discern the figure of the chiliagon with our *understanding*, just as we can the figure of a triangle (although force of habit might make us think we can't).

Thus, D argues, imagination is not essential to our mind. Understanding is. He conjectures that perhaps the imaginative faculty belongs to something distinct from his mind, a body maybe. Still, though, existence doesn't belong to the idea of "corporeal nature" like it does w/r/t God's essence.

To decide on the matter, D will look at his previous reasons for believing the things that he did on account of his senses, why he later began to doubt them, and what he now must believe about them.

First, he sensed that he had hands, feet, etc. Further, he judged what was beneficial and what was harmful, what opportune, what inopportune, by means of his sensation of pleasure and pain. He also sensed colors, odors, etc., on whose basis he distinguished, say, sky from seas. Ideas bombarded him constantly, in other words. Why then did he think there were external bodies? Because the ideas they presented were more vivid, more explicit than he could muster through meditation, nor could he not sense them when they were present, or imagine them when they were not. W/r/t to his having a body, he sensed, by nature's teaching, that his body was his, since his will to eat, e.g., was always connected to hunger in his stomach. Also, his moods shifted in accordance with the particularity of his sensations.

But 4 experiences caused him to doubt his senses. First, towers could seem round from afar that were square closeup. Second, he heard of the "phantom pain" commonly afflicting people. Third, the content of his dreams are indiscernible from that of his waking life. Fourth, it is possible that he could have been endowed with seriously inept faculties.

But these suspicions have been allayed by his newfound knowledge of himself: from his clear and distinct conception of the extendedness but non-rationality of his body and the rationality but non-extendedness of his mind, he knows that they are distinct substances.

Further, he has special modes of thinking, the understanding and sensing, which cannot exist without the understanding, but not vice versa. Also, other faculties, like locomotion and taking on various shapes, cannot be understood apart from a substance in which they inhere. In addition, the passive faculty of receiving and knowing the ideas of sensible things does not presuppose the understanding; yet they are produced without the mind's cooperation and against its will. D rejects some possible explanations of this dichotomy: he argues that (1) it can't be God who is feeding us these ideas, or (2) some other intermediary creature that contains their objective reality eminently. This is because we are so disposed to believe that these ideas spring from corporeal things that God would be a deceiver if it were arranged otherwise. From this, it is clear that if these faculties exist, then there must be corporeal bodies, i.e., extended substances that aren't endowed with understanding, and which is the source of the formal reality of all that is found objectively in our ideas.

Also, because God is not a deceiver, what nature teaches us is probably true. So, our bodies are tightly joined with our minds, so much so that they constitute one thing. Nature also teaches us that there are other bodies around us. D clarifies that by "nature" he means only what pertains to our composite minds and bodies, and so what we are allowed to infer on the basis of sense appearances. For example, we are not allowed to conclude that the star is as large as a flame that we hold in a torch unless we have conducted an intellectual inquiry into the matter, or that there is something like the heat that we feel in the fire (Scholastic final cause jab) from which it emanates. In other words, we should not use our senses as representing anything more than the ideas they produce in us, much less that they reveal their extramental correlates' essences.

What about cases where it seems that nature really deceives? E.g., the man with dropsy should not thirst for drink, since drinking would exacerbate his illness. But nature inclines him to drink. Doesn't this suggest that the man has been outfitted with a corrupt nature? D, flashing another sign of his mechanistic predilections, explains that when we use "nature" in this sense, we merely apply a designation that is extrinsic to the man, which we derive by comparison to a healthy man. But it is no less natural (i.e., in accordance with the laws of nature) that a body that is suffering from dropsy inclines to drink when experiencing dryness of throat as a body that is healthy inclines to drink when experiencing the same sensation. So there is no real evil with respect to the body.

But what if we talk about the body as a *composite*: that is, mind and body? Then it does seem that the nature is corrupt, since it harms the composite. D argues that actually, our bodies are organized in a most beneficial manner. Several effects might produce the same motion in our brain, which warns our mind of some immediate danger, e.g., a pin in the sole of one's foot. This, according to D, is ideal considering the way our bodies are designed, b/c since pains originating from intermediate sections of the nerves, corresponding to, say, the thigh, shin, etc., traveling from the foot to the brain aren't often the ones "most conducive to the maintenance of a healthy man," even though they all share the same motion. So though the economical arrangement sometimes causes man to feel a pain in a different location than it really is, it does more good than harm.

The same consideration, D says, applies to the man with dropsy. Since dryness of the throat is a normal sign of a healthy body needing drink, "it is far better that it should deceive on that occasion than that it should always be deceptive when the body is in good health."

From these considerations, and previous ones established in the preceding Meditations, D. says that we can trust our senses' reports. "Hyperbolic doubts" such as the dream indiscernibility thesis should be

rejected. There is a clear criterion for deciding between waking and sleeping. Dreams are incoherent, waking life not. Our waking lives are connected. Further, we have the testimony of our memory and intellect to corroborate the reports of our senses.