

THIRD MEDITATION

The existence of God

So far Descartes' sceptical arguments have threatened all knowledge but the knowledge of self provided in the *cogito*. But instead of turning now to the question of how knowledge of material things may be possible, the thinker turns in the Third Meditation to a question about God. 'I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else'. He believes he must prove the existence of 'the true God, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and the sciences lie hidden', 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 this Meditation 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.

Clear and Distinct Ideas

Descartes reflects on the arguments of the Second Meditation, and asks: what is it about the argument which made me so certain about it? He says that it is the clarity and distinctness of his perception of it.

I am certain that I am a thinking thing....In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.

If clarity and distinctness are a sure sign of truth, then we have the beginnings of a path out of the sceptical morass. Not only do I know of my own existence, and essential nature. Guided by the principle

of clear and distinct ideas, I can keep to the path of truth by assenting only to those ideas that are clear and distinct. Strictly speaking it is judgments, rather than ideas, that can be true or false. If I were to consider ideas merely as what they are, namely modes of my thought, 'they could scarcely give me any material for error'. However, my chief error consists in 'judging that the ideas which are in me resemble, or conform to, things located outside me'. My main source of error is a hasty judgement that some idea corresponds to, resembles, some reality outside me. Then I make judgements that are false. The principle about clear and distinct ideas can help me to avoid these errors. Here we have a hint of things to come: Descartes' theory of error and judgment, which is the proper topic of Meditation IV.

God

Two independent arguments for the existence of God are given in the Meditations, one in Meditation III, the other in Meditation V. The latter will be addressed in due course. The argument in the Third Meditation is interesting, but it makes use of certain Scholastic metaphysical concepts and principles. This presents the reader with two kinds of problem. (1) The concepts and principles are a little unfamiliar and archaic. However, some are interesting and important, and with a little effort can be grasped by a modern reader. (2) It is not obvious that Descartes is entitled to these metaphysical assumptions. Isn't he supposed to be doubting everything but the indubitable? Some readers may find the principles used by Descartes rather easy to doubt. The argument in the Third Meditation is known as the 'Trademark Argument', since the thinker's idea of God is described as if it were a trademark that the creator has left in his creature:

it is no surprise that God, in creating me, should have placed this idea in me to be, as it were, the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work.

The Trademark Argument for God's existence

The thinking begins 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. Ideas can be considered in terms of their 'formal reality' (as mental states), or their 'objective reality' (as representational content). Here is an analogy: a newspaper photograph of a yeti may be considered in terms of its 'formal reality' (a real ink-patterned piece of paper), or its 'objective reality' (a representation of a yeti). The question may then be raised: does the yeti depicted in the photograph really exist? In Descartes' terminology, that is the question: does the yeti have 'formal reality', in addition to the 'objective reality' it has as an 'object' of a photograph? Descartes' distinction is still important, although the labels philosophers use nowadays are not the same. Philosophers now might say: does the yeti exist? Or is the yeti a merely intentional object?

[Digression: a warning about terminology] Nowadays the usage of the word 'objective' is almost the opposite of Descartes' usage: to say that something exists 'objectively' in the modern sense, is (more or less) to say that it exists 'formally', in Descartes' sense. If, nowadays, we were to say, 'the yeti exists objectively', we would mean simply that it exists. We would mean that it exists, as a real animal, and not as the merely intentional object of people's hallucinations and nightmares and photographic forgeries. This terminological change can cause confusion: and in your own work, you should make it clear whether you follow Descartes' usage, or the modern one, if you ever use these words. [End of Digression]

The thinker applies this distinction to the case of God. Among my various ideas is an idea of God, which represents God as being eternal, infinite, omnipotent. God thus has 'objective' reality, which means that he exists as the 'object' of my idea. The thinker raises a question: does God have formal reality in addition to the objective reality he has as 'object' of my idea? In

other words, does the God of which I have an idea exist independently of my idea? The idea or concept of God describes, so to speak, the essence of God: it is the idea of

a substance that is infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and which created both myself and everything else (if anything else there be) that exists.

We can know the essence of God, just as we could know the essence of material things (the wax), just by reflecting on our concepts. We can know the essence of God: but does God exist? We know that God has 'objective' reality, as the object of my concept or idea: but does God have formal reality as well?

Yes, according to the Trademark argument. God exists. God has formal reality, in addition to merely 'objective' reality. That will be the conclusion. What is the argument? The thinker focuses on a question about causality. What is the cause of this idea I have of God? According to the thinker, it is self-evident that, as a general principle, 'there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause'. This is described by Cottingham as the Causal Adequacy Principle. If we find a clock, the cause of that clock must be at least as complex as the clock. The same is true if we find a mere blueprint of a clock. The cause must have as much reality as the clock represented by the blueprint. Now apply the Causal Adequacy Principle to the idea of God: the idea of God has an infinitely high degree of objective reality. Its cause cannot be myself: for I am imperfect, finite, deceived. The only possible cause is God himself. God, 'in creating me [has] placed this idea in me to be...the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work'.

The thinker concludes that God exists. Moreover, since the concept of God is the concept of an infinitely perfect being, the thinker reaches a conclusion which will prove to be vital for the progress of the next Meditations: God exists, and *is not a deceiver*.

By 'God' I mean...the possessor of all the perfections...who is subject to no defects whatsoever. It is clear enough from this that he cannot be a

deceiver, since it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend on some defect.

Some questions to consider about Meditation III

(1) How well does Descartes support his apparent premise that every thinker has an idea of God, innate within us? Notice that this was denied even at the time of the publication of the Meditations, by Hobbes, who flatly contradicted Descartes: 'there is no idea of God in us', he said.

(2) How plausible is Descartes' use of the concept of 'objective reality'? One of Descartes' critics, Caterus, complained that this was not a kind of reality at all. Far from having an infinite degree of reality, the idea of God—considered as something distinct from a property of one's mind—has no reality at all. 'Why should I look for the cause of something which is not actual, and which is simply an empty label, a non-entity?'

(3) How plausible is the Causal Adequacy Principle? The philosopher Mersenne objected to it as follows:

You say...that an effect cannot possess any degree of reality or perfection that was not previously present in the cause. But we see that flies and other animals, and also plants, are produced from sun and rain and earth, which lack life.

Mersenne here produces some candidate counter-examples to the Causal Adequacy Principle: the possibility of spontaneously generated animals and plants. It was believed at the time, and until much later, that some organisms (e.g. flies) could be spontaneously generated (e.g. from mud, and rotting material). Descartes replies that animals and plants are not really more perfect than sun and rain and earth; but that if they were, those inanimate causes would not be sufficient to produce them. You might be tempted to agree with Descartes, against Mersenne. You might be tempted to reply that in addition to these raw materials of sun and rain and earth, something more is indeed required. Plant seeds, and insect eggs, are required to produce these 'more

perfect' beings: showing that in these cases the causes (parent organisms) do indeed have as much reality as the effects (their offspring). It is true that Mersenne's assumption about the possibility of spontaneous generation was refuted much later (by Louis Pasteur), but it would be a mistake to conclude that Descartes is right. There is a sense in which most modern readers still agree with Mersenne. According to the theory of evolution, less 'perfect' beings ('sun and rain and earth') can indeed be the causes, given enough time, of more 'perfect' beings (plants, animals, and ourselves). Mersenne's counter-examples are good ones, interpreted the right way. In so far as science today endorses the theory of evolution, it agrees with Mersenne's objection, and rejects the Causal Adequacy Principle which seemed so evident to Descartes.