

FOURTH MEDITATION

Truth and falsity

And now, from this contemplation of the true God, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and the sciences lie hidden, I think I can see a way forward to the knowledge of other things.

The previous Meditation, if successful, has established that God exists, and that he is not a deceiver. If God is not a deceiver, then he cannot have created me in such a way that I am inevitably deceived. This provokes a hard question. If God is perfect, and I am his creature, how is it that I ever make mistakes? This is the problem of error, and Descartes' account of error is the most interesting and important aspect of this Meditation. Descartes will want to argue as follows. I am God's creature, so I have an intellect which, *when correctly used*, is reliable. What this means remains to be considered. But we can see already that it provokes a second hard question. 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 am not entitled to trust my intellect. This is the problem of the 'Cartesian Circle', which will be considered more closely in the discussion of Meditation V.

The Problem of Error

If God exists, and created me, and is not a deceiver, then how is it that I ever make mistakes? No-one could deny that we sometimes make mistakes, and Descartes never denies it. The First Meditation, recall, was premised on the fact that we sometimes make mistakes, and this fact was used to generate the global sceptical challenge. We are sometimes deceived (through perception, or dreaming): what reason to we have for thinking we are not always deceived? Even if Descartes, in the end, replies to the sceptical challenge, he is still left with the fact that we sometimes make

mistakes. The problem, as Descartes presents it, is similar to the traditional problem of evil: if God the Creator exists, and is good, then why is his creation partly evil? The traditional answer to this question was that God created us with a free will, and that evil is a result of the misuse of that freedom.

Descartes' solution to the problem of error

Descartes' first response to the problem is one of creaturely humility: God's purposes are impenetrable to us, and if we were less limited in outlook, we might see that our faults 'have a place in the universal scheme of things'. Descartes' second, and most important, response is in his theory of judgement.

Errors are mistaken judgements. When we enquire closely into the nature of judgement, we find that it involves the two faculties of the *intellect* and the *will* (56-58). Both are faculties of the self or soul whose existence is proved in the Second Meditation; and the activities of *perceiving ideas*, and the activities of *willing*, both count broadly as activities of *thinking*, in Descartes' sense.

The activity of the intellect is limited. '[All] the intellect does is to enable me to perceive the ideas which are subjects for possible judgements; and when regarded strictly in this light, it turns out to contain no error'. The intellect does not, on its own, declare certain propositions to be true or false. It simply puts forward and considers ideas or propositions without giving a verdict on those ideas or propositions. The intellect alone does not make judgements. And error is false judgement. Judgements are made when the ideas put forward by the intellect are *affirmed* or *denied* by an act of the will. Affirmation and denial are mental acts, performed not by the intellect but by the will. Error arises when the will affirms ideas that are not clear and distinct, and the will thereby makes a false judgement.

On this picture, the intellect is like a rather disorganized and un-opinionated lawyer, who presents evidence in a somewhat indiscriminate way: some of the ideas presented are clear and distinct; some of the

ideas are unclear and indistinct; there are great gaps in the evidence due to the ignorance of the intellect; and the intellect does not, on its own, bring a verdict on any of the ideas it surveys or proposes. The will is like a judge who considers the evidence put forward so indiscriminately by the intellect, and brings a verdict on it. For example, the intellect may non-committally propose the idea that a triangle has three sides. The will gives its verdict. 'Yes, that idea is a good one. It is clear and distinct. I shall affirm it.' In this way, judgements involve the co-operative activity of intellect and will, but it is the will that (so to speak) makes the decisions. (There are problems with this way of speaking: to decide is to use one's will, but there is something odd about saying that the will decides. We will not address these problems though.)

This is possible because God made me with a *finite* intellect, and an *infinite* will. The second Meditation had concluded that the self is in some way finite: and in this Meditation we learn that it is finite with respect to the intellect. The intellect has limits: limits to its scope (it does not have ideas about everything); and limits to its acuity (not all of its ideas are clear and distinct). The will, on the other hand, is infinite:

It is only the will, or freedom of choice, which I experience within me to be so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp; so much so that it is above all in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear in some way the image and likeness of God. For although God's will is incomparably greater than mine, both in virtue of the knowledge and power that accompany it and make it more firm and efficacious, and also in virtue of its object, in that it ranges over a greater number of items, nevertheless it does not seem any greater than mine when considered as will in the essential and strict sense. This is because the will simply consists in our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid); or rather it consist simply in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our

inclinations are such that we do not feel we are determined by any external force.

We might think that the will is not infinite, since there are a great many things we cannot choose to affirm, or do. Perhaps I cannot choose to affirm propositions about different orders of mathematical infinity, because I have no ideas about them. Perhaps I cannot choose to fly to the moon. Aren't these limitations on the will? Descartes would reply no, these are limitations on my intellect, and on my power, but not on my will, the faculty of choosing. Notice the contrast above with God, whose infinite will is conjoined with 'knowledge and power' that make his will more 'efficacious' than ours. God's intellect proposes ideas about everything, and all clear and distinct. That is why he can use his will to choose to affirm true judgements about everything. God is all powerful. That is why he can use his will to choose to act in any way that he intends to. We lack God's intellect and power. But our wills are equally infinite. Our will is not limited in itself: the constraints on choice come not from the will but from limited intellect and power. I can choose to fly to the moon: but, unless I improve my power, by means of rockets and NASA sponsorship, my choice will not be 'efficacious'. That is a limit on the power, not the choosing: or so Descartes would like to argue.

The conjunction of finite intellect with infinite will provides the freedom to err. The intellect does not provide me with ideas that are all clear and distinct, and the will is free to affirm or deny any of them. Error can be avoided if I refrain from affirming ideas that are not clear and distinct. Error, like sin, is a result of man's abuse of his free will. Human error is thus compatible with God's not being a deceiver, just as human sin is compatible with the goodness of God.

Belief and the will

According to Descartes, belief is an idea put forward by the intellect and affirmed by the will. What is striking about this picture is that belief involves the will in just the same way that practical action involves the

will. I may choose to act in a certain way: I may choose to donate to Community Aid Abroad; I may choose to steal a lollipop from a baby. I may choose to act rightly; or I may choose to act wrongly. Similarly, I may choose to believe a certain way: I may choose to believe that 2 plus 3 make 5; I may choose to believe that matter is better known than mind. I may choose to believe rightly; or I may choose to believe wrongly. Belief is here treated as a kind of action. And truth is here treated as a kind of goodness. One of the central questions about Descartes' account is whether this analogy between belief and action holds. Many philosophers deny that belief and action are alike, for reasons having to do with 'direction of fit'. Bernard Williams, for example, says that we cannot simply believe at will in the way we can act at will.

[I]t is not a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I believe something...Why is this? One reason is connected with the characteristic of beliefs that they aim at truth. If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not; moreover, I would know that I could acquire it whether it was true or not. If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a 'belief' irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i.e. as something purporting to represent reality. ('Deciding to Believe', *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1973, 148)

Descartes says we can choose to believe. How? Surely Descartes' own commitment to finding *indubitable* beliefs is a commitment to finding beliefs that I cannot resist. But if I cannot resist these beliefs, in what sense do I 'choose' to affirm them? Examples of beliefs that Descartes has so far argued to be indubitable are the following. 'I think'. 'I exist'. 'The essence of matter is to be extended.' 'I am essentially a thinking thing'. 'God exists.' 'God is not a deceiver.' Whether we find all these propositions to be equally irresistible is not the point. Descartes says they cannot be doubted. But if they cannot be doubted, how do I 'choose' to affirm them? Doesn't choice imply that I could have done otherwise?

Perhaps we could say in Descartes' favour that there are indeed circumstances in which a person can choose to believe. In his Replies to Objections, Descartes says

that sometimes you can believe something just *because you want to believe it*. You can sometimes believe something for reasons that are independent of the *truth* of the belief, or the *evidence* you have for it, or the *clarity* with which you understand it. You can believe something for pragmatic reasons. You believe something, because it is easy, or comfortable, or pleasurable to believe it. Descartes gives two examples. One is a belief that the mind is an extended, or material, thing, a belief which you persist in because it is familiar and comfortable, even though you have no clear understanding of it: '*you simply want to believe it, because you have believed it before, and do not want to change your view*'. Another is a belief that a poisoned but pleasant-smelling apple is nutritious: '*you understand that its smell, colour and so on, are pleasant, but this does not mean that you understand that this particular apple will be beneficial to eat; you judge that it will because you want to believe it*'. Here there are certain advantages of comfort and pleasure to having these (false) beliefs. You believe them not because they are true, or clearly understood: you believe them because you want to. Descartes gives these examples to illustrate that one can indeed will to believe, that the scope of the will is greater than that of the intellect, and that this can lead to error.

Other examples of believing something because you want to, are given by cases of self-deception. The woman who wants to believe that her husband is faithful, can perhaps choose to believe it: she believes that he is faithful because she wants to, not because she has evidence that he is. It is useful to believe it, whether or not it is true. Or perhaps (as imagined earlier) she can at least choose to believe that she believes it, even if deep down she doesn't. How we are to understand cases of self-deception though is a difficult question, about which philosophers are still not agreed.

Later in this course we will consider some other cases of deciding to believe. One is '*Pascal's Wager*', named after the French philosopher who described it and (perhaps) acted by it. If I think there is a *chance* that there is a God who condemns atheists to hell, I can prudently choose to believe in God. I might reason like this. If there is a God, and I don't believe in him, I

will go to hell. If there is a God and I do believe in him, I won't go to hell. If there isn't a God, and I don't believe in him, I won't go to hell. If there isn't a God and I do believe in him, I won't go to hell either. The worst case scenario is the first. Not believing in God is riskier than believing in God. If I believe in God, I'm fine no matter what. So I should believe in God. Notice that this argument says: believe 'God exists', because that would be useful. It does not say: believe 'God exists' because that would be true, or there is good evidence for thinking it true. The argument offers a pragmatic reason, not a theoretical one. Now, I can't just believe it at the drop of a hat, faced with a pragmatic reason of this kind. I must take things more slowly. I gradually adopt the practices of people who do believe in God, first as a kind of pretence. I gradually find that I have achieved the necessary belief, and thereby saved myself from the risk of hell. (Is self-deception involved in Pascal's Wager? Is the wagerer like the woman in the last example, believing something because it is useful or comfortable, not because it is true?)

Another kind of case is presented by self-fulfilling beliefs. Suppose I am standing by the bank of a stream, and I want to leap across. The gap looks too big to jump. But perhaps I can do it. I don't have any evidence either way. It looks just on the limit. 'You can do it!' I tell myself. I make myself believe I can do it. I decide to believe I can do it. And I can do it! Deciding to believe gives me the confidence to make the leap. My belief makes itself true.⁶ Of course there are limits here on what you could decide to believe, in cases like these. One meter, yes, perhaps; five meters, no.

It seems that you cannot believe something in the teeth of overwhelming evidence against it. The clearest cases where you seem to be able to believe something because you want to are cases where the evidence does not compel you either way. When belief is not compelled by evidence or argument, there is sometimes scope for choice. We can sometimes believe what we want to

⁶This example is from William James, 'The Will to Believe', in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, (Longman's, Green and Co. 1891).

believe, with sometimes good, sometimes sorry consequences. For an example of the latter, take this report about the burning of a town in Kashmir, in which 1500 houses and a sacred shrine were destroyed.

[W]ho to believe...? The militants say Indian troops are responsible for the fires. The government says they were started by the rebels....Either way, it is highly unlikely that any credible report will ever emerge, leaving ordinary people to *believe whichever side they want* and deepening the already significant divide between the Muslims of India's only Muslim-majority state and almost everybody else in the Hindu-dominated India. Reconciliation seems as far away as ever. (Moore and Anderson, *Guardian Weekly*, 11 June 1995)

Implications for Descartes' account of judgement

What implications would it have for Descartes' theory, if the cases where we are able to choose to believe are cases where evidence or argument does not compel us firmly in one direction or the other? The clearest cases seem to involve a certain kind of irrationality: believing something in teeth of some evidence against it (the self-deceived wife), or believing something in the absence of evidence for it. The clearest cases of willed beliefs are examples of bad beliefs: beliefs that are bad by Descartes' own lights. Descartes has argued that we should believe only what we have compelling reason to believe: we should believe only what is perceived by the intellect to be clear and distinct. We should resist believing anything that is not 'clear and distinct'. So the freely chosen beliefs of these examples are not good beliefs.

The implications for Descartes' theory are mixed. Descartes says that his theory about belief and the will can perform two tasks: it can account for error, and it can account for the nature of judgement in general. The first claim is plausible, in part. When we believe something for pragmatic reasons, because we want to believe it, because it is comfortable or pleasant or useful to believe it, we can indeed be led into error, just as Descartes says. Error *can* arise from deciding to

believe. Error can arise from the misuse of the will. But it is not likely that *all* errors arise this way. (Can you think of some that do not?) And as for the second claim, it is not plausible that Descartes' theory can account for the nature of judgement in general.

Belief, in general, does not seem to be under the control of the will. It would be nice to believe that the sun is shining, that there are no nuclear weapons, that I have a million dollars in the bank. It would be nice if I could just decide to believe it. It can be nice to have false beliefs. Sometimes I can manage to believe things, just because it would be nice to believe them. Usually, though, I can't. Bad beliefs cannot just be chosen. On Descartes' account of judgement, it is hard to see why not. Good beliefs are not just chosen either. Beliefs that are irresistible, indubitable, are the best beliefs (on Descartes' criteria), and at the same time the least open to choice. Do I decide to believe that I exist? Do I decide to believe I am thinking? Do I decide to believe that 2 plus 3 make 5? I cannot help believing them. The best beliefs are the least subject to the will.

Descartes does address this issue. He says,

In order to be free, there is no need for me to be inclined both ways; on the contrary, the more I incline in one direction...because I clearly understand that reasons of truth and goodness point that way...the freer is my choice.

Recall that Descartes says the will is involved both in action and belief. Wrong action (sin) is like wrong belief (error). I (and not God) am responsible for both, and both involve a misuse of the will. Descartes wants to draw a very close analogy between believing and acting, and it emerges clearly in the passage just quoted. He is talking about freedom in general, as it applies to both action and belief. He says, when I am very strongly inclined in one direction to believe or to act, because I clearly understand that *reasons of truth* (in the case of belief) *and goodness* (in the case of action) point that way, I am free. Notice the assimilation: 'reasons of truth and goodness'. I perceive that some action is good, and I decide to do it. I perceive that some proposition is true, so I

decide to believe it. This is a plausible description of action. Because Descartes thinks belief is very much like action, he sees it as a plausible description of belief as well.

Some questions to consider about Meditation IV

(1) Can you find a way of making sense of Descartes' claim that the will is infinite?

(2) Can you think of any cases where a person cannot help believing something false? If so, this would be an apparent counter-example to Descartes' claim that error is always something I can in principle avoid. Would that show that error is not entirely the responsibility of the individual misuse of the will—that God is responsible for it?

(3) Can you think of cases other than those given above, where it is plausible to say that someone decides to believe? How rational are those cases?

(4) How plausible is Descartes' analogy between belief and action? If I perceive that some action is good (e.g. donating to a charity), I can decide to do it. I can also decide not to do it, and thereby fail to do something good, or (worse) do something bad. If I perceive that some proposition is true (e.g. 2 plus 3 make 5) do I similarly decide to believe it? Surely not. Once I perceive that it is true, I instantly believe it. There is a gap between perceiving that some action is good, and doing it. There is no gap between perceiving that some proposition is true, and believing it.

Some philosophers have denied that there is a gap between perceiving that some action is good, and doing it. Plato, for example, thought that if you perceive some action to be good, and fail to do it, that shows that you have not *fully* perceived that it is good. It shows that you are still *ignorant*, in some way. You will come across this influential view if you study Plato, and if you study moral philosophy. If this view were correct, then action and belief would be analogous, as Descartes claims. There would be no gap between

perceiving an action to be good and doing it; or between perceiving a proposition to be true, and believing it. There would still be unresolved questions about the role of freedom here, however.

Perhaps we should conclude that Descartes' theory of judgement is enormously interesting and ingenious, but that its most plausible application is for some irrational beliefs, not for beliefs in general—and not, in particular, for the beliefs that are most central to his project, namely beliefs that are rational, compelling, and indubitable.