

Third Meditation

AT 34 p. 24

THIRD MEDITATION

The existence of God¹

I will now shut my eyes, stop my ears, and withdraw all my senses. I will eliminate from my thoughts all images of bodily things, or rather, since this is hardly possible, I will regard all such images as vacuous, false and worthless. I will converse with myself and scrutinize myself more deeply; and in this way I will attempt to achieve, little by little, a more intimate knowledge of myself. I am a thing that thinks: that is, a thing that doubts, affirms, denies, understands a few things, is ignorant of many things, is willing, is unwilling, and also which imagines and has sensory perceptions; for as I have noted before, even though the objects of my sensory experience and imagination may have no existence outside me, nonetheless the modes of thinking which I refer to as cases of sensory perception and imagination, in so far as they are simply modes of thinking, do exist within me - of that I am certain.²

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In this brief list I have gone through everything I truly know, or at least everything I have so far discovered that I know.³ Now I will cast around more carefully to see whether there may be other things within me which I have not yet noticed. I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? 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.

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¹ This Meditation is about...

² This sentence might be a little difficult to understand at first, but slowly re-read a few times and make sure that you follow it. By "the objects of my sensory experience and imagination" Descartes means the things that he experiences or imagines. Also, what does Descartes mean by "mode" in "modes of thinking"? A mode is a *modification* of something. By a "mode" Descartes means *a way that something is*; so the "modes of thinking" are ways of thinking or kinds of thinking. (In 1647 a guy named Louis-Charles d'Albert released a French translation of the Meditations and Descartes approved this translation. There is a point at AT 41 where "a mode of thinking" is mentioned, and in the French translation it says, "...i.e. a manner or way of thinking." The abbreviation "i.e." stands for the Latin phrase *id est*, which means *that is*.)

³ I was going to write a note at the end of the last paragraph summarizing what happened in that paragraph, but here, in this sentence, Descartes does exactly that.

Yet I previously accepted as wholly certain and evident many things which I afterwards realized were doubtful.⁴ What were these? The earth, sky, stars, and everything else that I apprehended with the senses. But what was it about them that I perceived clearly? Just that the ideas, or thoughts, of such things appeared before my mind.⁵ Yet even now I am not denying that these ideas occur within me. But there was something else which I used to assert, and which through habitual belief I thought I perceived clearly, although I did not in fact do so. This was that there were things outside me which were the sources of my ideas and which resembled them in all respects. Here was my mistake; or at any rate, if my judgement was true, it was not thanks to the strength of my perception.⁶

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But what about when I was considering something very simple and straightforward in arithmetic or geometry, for example that two and three added together make five, and so on? Did I not see at least these things clearly enough to affirm their truth? Indeed, the only reason for my later judgement that they were open to doubt was that it occurred to me that perhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident. And whenever my preconceived belief in the supreme power of God comes to mind, I cannot but admit that it would be easy for him, if he so desired, to bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind's eye. Yet when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist; or bring it about that two and three added together are more or less than five, or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction. And since I have no cause to think that there is a deceiving God, and I do not yet even know for sure whether there is a God at all, any reason for doubt which depends simply on this supposition is a very slight and, so to speak, metaphysical one. But in order to remove even this slight reason for doubt, as soon as the opportunity arises 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.⁷

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First, however, considerations of order appear to dictate that I now classify my thoughts into definite kinds, and ask which of them can properly be said to be the bearers of truth and falsity. Some of my thoughts are as

⁴ In the final sentence of the last paragraph Descartes seems to claim that he can trust anything that he clearly and distinctly perceives. But here he says that that can't be right.

⁵ The only thing about these sense experiences that he perceived clearly was that he was having the experiences (not that the things experienced actually existed outside of his mind).

⁶ Alright, in this paragraph Descartes has listed two things that he previously, before beginning the Meditations, was in the habit of believing: (a) that he has ideas of ordinary things in the world, and (b) that those ideas actually come from things in the outside world that are the way that they seem to be. At this stage in the Meditations he can trust that (a) is true, but not that (b) is true.

⁷ In this paragraph Descartes reviews some of what he has said in the previous two Meditations. He wants to be able to trust whatever he clearly and distinctly perceives. For instance, he want to believe that $2 + 3 = 5$, which he seems to clearly and distinctly perceive to be true. But so far he can't trust that clear and distinct perception because there might exist a powerful God who is deceiving him. So in order to be able to trust his clear and distinct perceptions Descartes will have to determine if there is a God and if this God is the kind of thing that would deceive him or allow him to be deceived. So that is what he is going to do in this Meditation. But that doesn't start for a few paragraphs.

it were the images of things, and it is only in these cases that the term 'idea' is strictly appropriate - for example, when I think of a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God. Other thoughts have various additional forms: thus when I will, or am afraid, or affirm, or deny, there is always a particular thing which I take as the object of my thought, but my thought includes something more than the likeness of that thing. Some thoughts in this category are called volitions or emotions, while others are called judgements.⁸

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Now as far as ideas are concerned, provided they are considered solely in themselves and I do not refer them to anything else, they cannot strictly speaking be false; for whether it is a goat or a chimera that I am imagining, it is just as true that I imagine the former as the latter. As for the will and the emotions, here too one need not worry about falsity; for even if the things which I may desire are wicked or even non-existent, that does not make it any less true that I desire them. Thus the only remaining thoughts where I must be on my guard against making a mistake are judgements. And the chief and most common mistake which is to be found here consists in my judging that the ideas which are in me resemble, or conform to, things located outside me. Of course, if I considered just the ideas themselves simply as modes of my thought, without referring them to anything else, they could scarcely give me any material for error.⁹

AT 37 p. 26

Among my ideas, some appear to be innate, some to be adventitious, and others to have been invented by me.¹⁰ My understanding of what a thing is, what truth is, and what thought is, seems to derive simply from my own nature. But my hearing a noise, as I do now, or seeing the sun, or feeling the fire, comes from things which are located outside me, or so I have hitherto judged. Lastly, sirens, hippogriffs and the like are my own invention. But perhaps all my ideas may be thought of as adventitious, or they may all be innate, or all made up; for as yet I have not clearly perceived their true origin.

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⁸ Okay, so Descartes has divided his thoughts, broadly, into two types. The first type is called "ideas". The second type doesn't get a name here, but we get a characterization of it and some examples. Make sure you are clear on how Descartes understands these things because it will be necessary for understanding the next few paragraphs. Also, the word "volition" comes from the same root as the word "voluntary". A volition is an act of the will by which something is chosen or decided.

⁹ Here Descartes has said which kinds of thoughts are the kind that can be true or false. Get clear on which types can be true or false, and which types can't. If you are following everything up to this point, then what Descartes says here should be at least somewhat plausible. There are some mental items or activities that just don't seem like the kinds of things that can be true or false. Take one of the examples of a mental action that Descartes mentions: desiring. Say that you desire a piece of chocolate cake. Is that desire true or false? The question doesn't even make sense. A desire can be fulfilled or unfulfilled, but it isn't the kind of thing that can be true or false. A belief, on the other hand, can be true or false.

¹⁰ In the previous two paragraphs Descartes has distinguished between ideas and other kinds of thoughts. Here he is talking just about ideas, and saying that there are three types of ideas, corresponding to the source or origin of those ideas. The word "innate" means inborn; "adventitious" means happening by chance or accident, it also means not native, or coming from outside. In this paragraph Descartes gives examples of ideas that seem to be of each of the three types. But he crucially notes that this is just how it seems.

But the chief question at this point concerns the ideas which I take to be derived from things existing outside me: what is my reason for thinking that they resemble these things?¹¹ Nature has apparently taught me to think this. But in addition I know by experience that these ideas do not depend on my will, and hence that they do not depend simply on me.¹² Frequently I notice them even when I do not want to: now, for example, I feel the heat whether I want to or not, and this is why I think that this sensation or idea of heat comes to me from something other than myself, namely the heat of the fire by which I am sitting. And the most obvious judgement for me to make is that the thing in question transmits to me its own likeness rather than something else.

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I will now see if these arguments are strong enough. When I say 'Nature taught me to think this', all I mean is that a spontaneous impulse leads me to believe it, not that its truth has been revealed to me by some natural light. There is a big difference here. Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light - for example that from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on - cannot in any way be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty both as trustworthy as the natural light and also capable of showing me that such things are not true. But as for my natural impulses, I have often judged in the past that they were pushing me in the wrong direction when it was a question of choosing the good, and I do not see why I should place any greater confidence in them in other matters.¹³

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Then again, although these ideas do not depend on my will, it does not follow that they must come from things located outside me. Just as the impulses which I was speaking of a moment ago seem opposed to my will even though they are within me, so there may be some other faculty not yet fully known to me, which produces these ideas without any assistance from external things; this is, after all, just how I have always thought ideas are produced in me when I am dreaming.¹⁴

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And finally, even if these ideas did come from things other than myself, it would not follow that they must resemble those things. Indeed, I think I have often discovered a great disparity {between an object and its

¹¹ This is the question that will concern Descartes for the next few paragraphs. He is concerned with the ideas that seem to come from outside of him: his idea of, for example, a cat. It seems like he got his idea of a cat from coming into contact with real cats, out in the world. But it might be, instead, that there are no such things as cats and he was born with the idea of a cat or that he made it up. He is certain that he has the idea and he wants to know if it comes from cats out in the world and if those cats are the way that his idea portrays them.

¹² When he says that these ideas "do not depend on my will" he means that he didn't create them and that he doesn't have voluntary control over them. Descartes will use this expression later to mean the same thing.

¹³ Descartes seems to have distinguished knowledge by way of 'natural light' and knowledge by 'natural impulse'. One of them is trustworthy and cannot be doubted. The other, at least at this stage, cannot be trusted.

¹⁴ Descartes is still talking about these ideas that seem to come from the outside world (Descartes has given some examples and I gave the example of the idea of a cat). Descartes has eliminated the possibility that he himself invented them because he doesn't have voluntary control over them. But just because these ideas are not voluntary, that does not imply that they come from objects that resemble them in the outside world.

idea} in many cases. For example, there are two different ideas of the sun which I find within me. One of them, which is acquired as it were from the senses and which is a prime example of an idea which I reckon to come from an external source, makes the sun appear very small. The other idea is based on astronomical reasoning, that is, it is derived from certain notions which are innate in me (or else it is constructed by me in some other way), and this idea shows the sun to be several times larger than the earth. Obviously both these ideas cannot resemble the sun which exists outside me; and reason persuades me that the idea which seems to have emanated most directly from the sun itself has in fact no resemblance to it at all.

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All these considerations are enough to establish that it is not reliable judgement but merely some blind impulse that has made me believe up till now that there exist things distinct from myself which transmit to me ideas or images of themselves through the sense organs or in some other way.¹⁵

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But it now occurs to me that there is another way of investigating whether some of the things of which I possess ideas exist outside me.¹⁶ In so far as the ideas are {considered} simply {as} modes of thought, there is no recognizable inequality among them: they all appear to come from within me in the same fashion. But in so far as different ideas {are considered as images which} represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, the ideas which represent substances to me amount to something more and, so to speak, contain within themselves more objective reality than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents.¹⁸ Again, the idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God, eternal, infinite, {immutable,}

¹⁵ Here Descartes states the (tentative) conclusion of the last few paragraphs. Concerning the ideas that he has of external objects, he hasn't yet found any reason to judge that there actually are any such objects that cause these ideas in him. And, for that matter, he hasn't yet found any reason to judge that the objects, if there are any, are the way his ideas make them seem.

¹⁶ In the previous few paragraphs, Descartes tried and failed to prove that there exist things external to his mind. Here he begins a new strategy for proving that. For the remainder of the meditation, Descartes argues that there is something distinct from him, out in the world: God. This is a difficult section to follow, so you will need to read through it many times. Don't be discouraged if you find it difficult. It really is difficult. But the argument really is in there. If you stick with it, you can figure it out.

¹⁷ What we get in these previous two sentences is very important. Descartes is considering all of the ideas that he has. There is one sense in which all of these ideas are the same: they are all ideas. But there is another sense in which there are important differences among the ideas: they are ideas of *different things*. Consider the difference between the idea of a small hill and the idea of Mount Everest. In respect of being ideas they are the same. They are both ideas. But in respect of their *objects*, the things that they represent, the things that they are ideas of, they are different. Mount Everest is way bigger and cooler than some small hill. Soon Descartes is going to introduce terms for these two aspects of ideas. Be on the lookout for those terms.

¹⁸ Okay, a lot happened in this sentence that will be super important. First, you need to know something about what Descartes means by "substance" and what he means by "modes or accidents". A substance is a thing that has properties, like, to use an example that Descartes will use shortly, a stone. A mode or an accident is a property of that thing, like being green or being tall. It's important for Descartes that a mode relies on a substance for its existence. You can't have greenness without there being some substance that is green, like a green stone. But substances don't rely on modes in that way. Descartes says in a few paragraphs (AT 44) that a substance is "a thing capable of existing independently". So there is a sense in which Descartes thinks that substances are better or more perfect or even, he sometimes says, more real than modes. Also, remember the distinction from the last two sentences between the sense in which all ideas are the same—they are all ideas—and the sense in which ideas can differ—they can be ideas of

omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of all things that exist apart from him, certainly has in it more objective reality than the ideas that represent finite substances.¹⁹

AT 40 p. 28

Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much {reality} in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause.²⁰ For where, I ask, could the effect get its reality from, if not from the cause? And how could the cause give it to the effect unless it possessed it? It follows from this both that something cannot arise from nothing, and also that what is more perfect - that is, contains in itself more reality - cannot arise from what is less perfect.²¹ And this is transparently true not only in the case of effects which possess {what the philosophers call} actual or formal reality, but also in the case of ideas, where one is considering only {what they call} objective reality.²² A stone, for example, which previously did not exist, cannot begin to exist unless it is produced by something which contains, either formally or eminently everything to be found in the stone; similarly, heat cannot be produced in an object which was not previously hot, except by something of at least the same order {degree or kind} of perfection as heat, and so on.²³ But it

different things. Well, here Descartes gives a name to that second aspect of ideas, their “objective reality”. That is, the objective reality of an idea depends on the *object* of that idea. Descartes thinks that a substance, perhaps because it can exist on its own, has more reality than a mode. So an idea of a substance, like the idea of a stone, has more objective reality than an idea of a mode, like the idea of greenness. That is the sense in which ideas of substances “amount to something more” than ideas of modes or accidents.

¹⁹ So now Descartes applies this discussion of an idea’s objective reality to the idea of God. God, if he exists, is a substance—a thing that has properties and doesn’t rely on anything else for its existence. But he isn’t just any old substance. He is an infinite substance. So, we might think, God has quite a lot of reality. Well, the idea of God has God as its object. So the idea of God will have quite a lot of objective reality, a lot more objective reality than any idea that has some merely finite substance as its object. At this stage you might be thinking, “Wait, what is all this talk of more or less reality? Something is either real or it isn’t. Reality doesn’t come in degrees.” Well in a few sentences Descartes will say something about this that makes it more plausible. Keep an eye out for that. Also, “immutable” means *unchanging* or *unchangeable*.

²⁰ This sentence is a very important premise in Descartes’s argument. The phrase “efficient and total cause” refers to a type of causation that Aristotle talked about. Aristotle thought that there were four types of cause, but we don’t have to worry about that here. An efficient cause is what we mean today when we talk about a regular old cause. So, for instance, a builder is the cause of a building.

²¹ Did you catch that? Descartes started talking about things having more or less reality by saying that they are more or less “perfect”. And the crucial claim here is that something cannot have as its cause something less perfect or less real than it.

²² A few important things happen here. Remember the two aspects of ideas: the sense in which they are all the same (because they are all ideas) and the sense in which they differ (because they have different objects). Descartes called the later the “objective reality” of ideas. Ideas have different levels of objective reality, depending on what they are ideas of—their objects. But Descartes did not, until now, give us a name for the sense in which all ideas are the same. Here he uses the name that “the philosophers” (whoever they are) use: “actual or formal reality”. So the actual or formal reality of a thing is how much reality it has itself, not dependent on what it might be directed at. So all ideas have the same level of formal reality. Now, previously in this paragraph Descartes claimed that something cannot come from—cannot be caused by—something with less reality. Here Descartes is saying that that is going to apply not just to formal reality, but also to objective reality.

²³ The general thought of this passage is somewhat clear, but what exactly does Descartes mean by “eminently”? The first thing to say is that this is not a very important detail. Indeed, you could skip over this sentence for now and be fine. But here is some explanation of “eminently”. The word “eminently”

is also true that the idea of heat, or of a stone, cannot exist in me unless it is put there by some cause which contains at least as much reality as I conceive to be in the heat or in the stone. For although this cause does not transfer any of its actual or formal reality to my idea, it should not on that account be supposed that it must be less real. The nature of an idea is such that of itself it requires no formal reality except what it derives from my thought, of which it is a mode. But in order for a given idea to contain such and such objective reality, it must surely derive it from some cause which contains at least as much formal reality as there is objective reality in the idea. For if we suppose that an idea contains something which was not in its cause, it must have got this from nothing; yet the mode of being by which a thing exists objectively {or representatively} in the intellect by way of an idea, imperfect though it may be, is certainly not nothing, and so it cannot come from nothing.²⁴

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And although the reality which I am considering in my ideas is merely objective reality, I must not on that account suppose that the same reality need not exist formally in the causes of my ideas, but that it is enough for it to be present in them objectively. For just as the objective mode of being belongs to ideas by *their* very nature, so the formal mode of being belongs to the causes of ideas - or at least the first and most important ones - by their very nature. And although one idea may perhaps originate from another, there cannot be an infinite regress here; eventually one must reach a primary idea, the cause of which will be like an archetype which contains formally {and in fact} all the reality {or perfection} which is present only objectively {or representatively} in the idea. So it is clear to me, by the natural light, that the ideas in me are like {pictures,

means *significantly*, or *very*, or *to a great degree*. But Descartes is using it in a technical sense: if something, call it "A", eminently contains some quality, call it "B", then A does not literally have B, but nonetheless has the potential to create things with B. It's a concept that is often used by theologians when talking about God. God, many of them think, is totally non-physical. He doesn't have a body. So God does not contain physicality in the formal sense. But how then is God able to create physical things if he isn't himself physical? One answer that theologians sometimes give is that God contains physicality *eminently*. In his reply to an objection from Mersenne, Descartes talks about possessing a property eminently with the phrase "in a higher form", like the way a theologian might think that God possesses physicality 'in a higher form'.

²⁴ The main upshot of this paragraph (and the next paragraph as well, which is meant to further argue for and stress this point) is this: the source or cause of an idea must have as much formal reality as the idea has objective reality. If you do not know what that means, then it will be impossible to understand Descartes's main argument in this Meditation. Take our examples of ideas from earlier: the idea of greenness and the idea of a stone. Greenness is a mode, and therefore it relies on something else for its existence. So let's say that it has a lower level of formal reality. A stone, on the other hand, is a substance that, as Descartes will say soon "is a thing capable of existing independently" (AT 44). So let's say that it has a higher level of regular old formal reality. Now the *ideas* of greenness and the stone are ideas. They are ideas *of something*. They have objects. So they have objective reality; that is, the level of reality that their objects have in the regular old formal sense. So the idea of greenness will have a lower level of objective reality and the idea of a stone will have a higher level of objective reality. So now we can ask, what can be the cause of these ideas? For instance, the idea of greenness, can it be caused by the greenness itself or by a stone itself? The answer is that it can be caused by either. It, the idea, has a lower level of objective reality, so it can be caused by either greenness or a stone. What about the idea of a stone? It can be caused by a stone. But it cannot be caused by greenness because greenness has a lower level of formal reality and that is not enough to cause the idea of a stone which has a higher level of objective reality. Descartes is claiming that an idea of something can only come from things with as much or more reality as the thing that it is an idea of.

or} images which can easily fall short of the perfection of the things from which they are taken, but which cannot contain anything greater or more perfect.²⁵

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The longer and more carefully I examine all these points, the more clearly and distinctly I recognize their truth. But what is my conclusion to be? If the objective reality of any of my ideas turns out to be so great that I am sure the same reality does not reside in me, either formally or eminently, and hence that I myself cannot be its cause, it will necessarily follow that I am not alone in the world, but that some other thing which is the cause of this idea also exists. But if no such idea is to be found in me, I shall have no argument to convince me of the existence of anything apart from myself. For despite a most careful and comprehensive survey, this is the only argument I have so far been able to find.²⁶

AT 42 p. 29

Among my ideas, apart from the idea which gives me a representation of myself, which cannot present any difficulty in this context, there are ideas which variously represent God, corporeal and inanimate things, angels, animals and finally other men like myself.²⁷

AT 43 p. 29

As far as concerns the ideas which represent other men, or animals, or angels, I have no difficulty in understanding that they could be put together from the ideas I have of myself, of corporeal things and of God, even if the world contained no men besides me, no animals and no angels.

AT 43 p. 29

As to my ideas of corporeal things, I can see nothing in them which is so great {or excellent} as to make it seem impossible that it originated in myself.²⁸ For if I scrutinize them thoroughly and examine them one by one, in the way in which I examined the idea of the wax yesterday, I notice that the things which I perceive clearly and distinctly in them are very few in number. The list comprises size, or extension in length, breadth and depth; shape, which is a function of the boundaries of this extension; position, which is a relation between various items possessing shape; and motion, or change in position; to these may be added substance, duration and number. But as for all the rest, including light and colours, sounds, smells, tastes, heat and cold and the other tactile qualities, I think of these only in a very confused and obscure way, to the extent that I do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas I have of them are ideas of real things

²⁵ So now Descartes has concluded something important about his ideas. He now knows something about where they must come from. The condition is that they must come from something with enough reality or perfection. How much reality? As much formal reality as the ideas have objective reality.

²⁶ Whoa. This is big. So far, at this point in the meditations, Descartes only knows that he exists and that he is a thinking thing. He only has access to his own ideas and perceptions. He doesn't know for certain that anything exists outside his mind. But here Descartes has laid out a strategy for demonstrating that there is something that exists outside his mind, something to show he is "not alone in the world." The strategy involves what he has claimed about the nature of ideas. What is the strategy?

²⁷ The word "inanimate" means *non-living*. Here Descartes is listing some of his ideas. He is in search of an idea (or some ideas) with so much objective reality that he himself could not have been the source of it. Then he will have found proof that something other than him exists.

²⁸ Descartes here discusses his ideas of corporeal things. They don't themselves seem to represent such a high degree of reality that they could not simply have come from him. Nor do they seem to be made up of components that must have come from anything external to him.

or of non-things. For although, as I have noted before, falsity in the strict sense, or formal falsity, can occur only in judgements, there is another kind of falsity, material falsity, which occurs in ideas, when they represent non-things as things.²⁹ For example, the ideas which I have of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that they do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the absence of heat or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither is. And since there can be no ideas which are not as it were of things, if it is true that cold is nothing but the absence of heat, the idea which represents it to me as something real and positive deserves to be called false; and the same goes for other ideas of this kind.

AT 44 p. 30

Such ideas obviously do not require me to posit a source distinct from myself.³⁰ For on the one hand, if they are false, that is, represent non-things, I know by the natural light that they arise from nothing - that is, they are in me only because of a deficiency and lack of perfection in my nature. If on the other hand they are true, then since the reality which they represent is so extremely slight that I cannot even distinguish it from a non-thing, I do not see why they cannot originate from myself.

AT 44 p. 30

With regard to the clear and distinct elements in my ideas of corporeal things, it appears that I could have borrowed some of these from my idea of myself, namely substance, duration, number and anything else of this kind. For example, I think that a stone is a substance, or is a thing capable of existing independently, and I also think that I am a substance. Admittedly I conceive of myself as a thing that thinks and is not extended, whereas I conceive of the stone as a thing that is extended and does not think, so that the two conceptions differ enormously; but they seem to agree with respect to the classification 'substance'. Again, I perceive that I now exist, and remember that I have existed for some time; moreover, I have various thoughts which I can count; it is in these ways that I acquire the ideas of duration and number which I can then transfer to other things. As for all the other elements which make up the ideas of corporeal things, namely extension, shape, position and movement, these are not formally contained in me, since I am nothing but a thinking thing; but since they are merely modes of a substance, and I am a substance, it seems possible that they are contained in me eminently.

AT 45 p. 31

So there remains only the idea of God; and I must consider whether there is anything in the idea which could not have originated in myself. By the word 'God' I understand 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. All these attributes are such that, the more carefully I concentrate on them, the less possible it seems that they could have originated from me alone. So from what has been said it must be concluded that God necessarily exists.³¹

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²⁹ Here Descartes is referring to what he said about ideas and judgments back on AT 37 and he is introducing a new term as well.

³⁰ These ideas give him no evidence of anything existing outside of his own mind.

³¹ That's it. Descartes thinks he has found it. It is the idea that he could not himself be the source of: his idea of God.

It is true that I have the idea of substance in me in virtue of the fact that I am a substance; but this would not account for my having the idea of an infinite substance, when I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite.³²

AT 45 p. 31

And I must not think that, just as my conceptions of rest and darkness are arrived at by negating movement and light, so my perception of the infinite is arrived at not by means of a true idea but merely by negating the finite. On the contrary, I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself. For how could I understand that I doubted or desired - that is, lacked something - and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?³³

AT 46 p. 31

Nor can it be said that this idea of God is perhaps materially false and so could have come from nothing, which is what I observed just a moment ago in the case of the ideas of heat and cold, and so on. On the contrary, it is utterly clear and distinct, and contains in itself more objective reality than any other idea; hence there is no idea which is in itself truer or less liable to be suspected of falsehood. This idea of a supremely perfect and infinite being is, I say, true in the highest degree; for although perhaps one may imagine that such a being does not exist, it cannot be supposed that the idea of such a being represents something unreal, as I said with regard to the idea of cold. The idea is, moreover, utterly clear and distinct; for whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive as being real and true, and implying any perfection, is wholly contained in it. It does not matter that I do not grasp the infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God which I cannot in any way grasp, and perhaps cannot even reach in my thought; for it is in the nature of the infinite not to be grasped by a finite being like myself. It is enough that I understand the infinite, and that I judge that all the attributes which I clearly perceive and know to imply some perfection - and perhaps countless others of which I am ignorant - are present in God either formally or eminently. This is enough to make the idea that I have of God the truest and most clear and distinct of all my ideas.³⁴

AT 46 p. 32

But perhaps I am something greater than I myself understand, and all the perfections which I attribute to God are somehow in me potentially, though not yet emerging or actualized.³⁵ For I am now experiencing a

³² We now have all the tools to see what Descartes's argument for God's existence is. (Descartes will spend the remainder of the Meditation responding to some potential objections or worries. But by now we have all of the essential components of the argument). The idea of God has too high of a level of objective reality in order for Descartes or anything else other than God himself to have created it. But the idea of God does exist. So God himself must exist to be the cause of that idea.

³³ In this paragraph Descartes responds to the possibility that he only acquired his idea of infinity or an infinite substance by negating his idea of finitude. What is Descartes's response?

³⁴ In this paragraph Descartes responds to the worry that he does not have a clear or full enough grasp on the idea of God for him to conclude anything's existence from it. Descartes's response involves distinguishing between merely knowing something and fully grasping it. In a letter to Mersenne on May 26th, 1630, Descartes said, "to grasp something is to embrace it in one's thoughts; to know something, it suffices to touch it with one's thought." How exactly does Descartes use this to respond to the worry?

³⁵ Okay, Descartes considers another way that his idea of God might not prove that something other than him exists.

gradual increase in my knowledge, and I see nothing to prevent its increasing more and more to infinity. Further, I see no reason why I should not be able to use this increased knowledge to acquire all the other perfections of God. And finally, if the potentiality for these perfections is already within me, why should not this be enough to generate the idea of such perfections?

AT 47 p. 32

But all this is impossible. First, though it is true that there is a gradual increase in my knowledge, and that I have many potentialities which are not yet actual, this is all quite irrelevant to the idea of God, which contains absolutely nothing that is potential; indeed, this gradual increase in knowledge is itself the surest sign of imperfection. What is more, even if my knowledge always increases more and more, I recognize that it will never actually be infinite, since it will never reach the point where it is not capable of a further increase; God, on the other hand, I take to be actually infinite, so that nothing can be added to his perfection. And finally, I perceive that the objective being of an idea cannot be produced merely by potential being, which strictly speaking is nothing, but only by actual or formal being.³⁶

AT 47 p. 32

If one concentrates carefully, all this is quite evident by the natural light. But when I relax my concentration, and my mental vision is blinded by the images of things perceived by the senses, it is not so easy for me to remember why the idea of a being more perfect than myself must necessarily proceed from some being which is in reality more perfect. I should therefore like to go further and inquire whether I myself, who have this idea, could exist if no such being existed.³⁷

AT 48 p. 33

From whom, in that case, would I derive my existence? From myself presumably, or from my parents, or from some other beings less perfect than God; for nothing more perfect than God, or even as perfect, can be thought of or imagined.

AT 48 p. 33

Yet if I derived my existence from myself, then I should neither doubt nor want, nor lack anything at all; for I should have given myself all the perfections of which I have any idea, and thus I should myself be God. I must not suppose that the items I lack would be more difficult to acquire than those I now have. On the contrary, it is clear that, since I am a thinking thing or substance, it would have been far more difficult for me to emerge out of nothing than merely to acquire knowledge of the many things of which I am ignorant - such knowledge being merely an accident of that substance. And if I had derived my existence from myself, which is a greater achievement, I should certainly not have denied myself the knowledge in question, which is something much easier to acquire, or indeed any of the attributes which I perceive to be contained in the idea of God; for none of them seem any harder to achieve. And if any of them were harder to achieve, they would certainly appear so to me, if I had indeed got all my other attributes from myself, since I should experience a limitation of my power in this respect.

AT 48 p. 33

³⁶ Alright. So again Descartes has attempted to respond to a possible objection to or problem with his argument for God's existence.

³⁷ We get a repetition of the central move in the argument.

I do not escape the force of these arguments by supposing that I have always existed as I do now, as if it followed from this that there was no need to look for any author of my existence.³⁸ For a lifespan can be divided into countless parts, each completely independent of the others, so that it does not follow from the fact that I existed a little while ago that I must exist now, unless there is some cause which as it were creates me afresh at this moment - that is, which preserves me. For it is quite clear to anyone who attentively considers the nature of time that the same power and action are needed to preserve anything at each individual moment of its duration as would be required to create that thing anew if it were not yet in existence. Hence the distinction between preservation and creation is only a conceptual one, and this is one of the things that are evident by the natural light.

AT 49 p. 33

I must therefore now ask myself whether I possess some power enabling me to bring it about that I who now exist will still exist a little while from now. For since I am nothing but a thinking thing - or at least since I am now concerned only and precisely with that part of me which is a thinking thing - if there were such a power in me, I should undoubtedly be aware of it. But I experience no such power, and this very fact makes me recognize most clearly that I depend on some being distinct from myself.³⁹

AT 49 p. 34

But perhaps this being is not God, and perhaps I was produced either by my parents or by other causes less perfect than God.⁴⁰ No; for as I have said before, it is quite clear that there must be at least as much in the cause as in the effect.⁴¹ And therefore whatever kind of cause is eventually proposed, since I am a thinking thing and have within me some idea of God, it must be admitted that what caused me is itself a thinking thing and possesses the idea of all the perfections which I attribute to God.⁴² In respect of this cause one may again inquire whether it derives its existence from itself or from another cause. If from itself, then it is clear from what has been said that it is itself God, since if it has the power of existing through its own might, then undoubtedly it also has the power of actually possessing all the perfections of which it has an idea - that is, all the perfections which I conceive to be in God. If, on the other hand, it derives its existence from another cause, then the same question may be repeated concerning this further cause, namely whether it derives its existence from itself or from another cause, until eventually the ultimate cause is reached, and this will be God.⁴³

AT 50 p. 34

It is clear enough that an infinite regress is impossible here, especially since I am dealing not just with the cause that produced me in the past, but also and most importantly with the cause that preserves me at the present moment.

³⁸ Here Descartes is going to respond to the objection that perhaps he (and his ideas, including his idea of God) have always existed and therefore nothing needs to be posited to explain what caused them or where they came from.

³⁹ Descartes does not himself have the power to create himself and sustain his own existence.

⁴⁰ Another potential problem.

⁴¹ Descartes's response.

⁴² A reformulation of his central claim.

⁴³ He has not proved that God must be the immediate cause of his idea (and Descartes himself), but God must be at the beginning of the causal chain.

AT 50 p. 34

Nor can it be supposed that several partial causes contributed to my creation, or that I received the idea of one of the perfections which I attribute to God from one cause and the idea of another from another - the supposition here being that all the perfections are to be found somewhere in the universe but not joined together in a single being, God.⁴⁴ On the contrary, the unity, the simplicity, or the inseparability of all the attributes of God is one of the most important of the perfections which I understand him to have. And surely the idea of the unity of all his perfections could not have been placed in me by any cause which did not also provide me with the ideas of the other perfections; for no cause could have made me understand the interconnection and inseparability of the perfections without at the same time making me recognize what they were.

AT 50 p. 35

Lastly, as regards my parents, even if everything I have ever believed about them is true, it is certainly not they who preserve me; and in so far as I am a thinking thing, they did not even make me; they merely placed certain dispositions in the matter which I have always regarded as containing me, or rather my mind, for that is all I now take myself to be. So there can be no difficulty regarding my parents in this context. Altogether then, it must be concluded that the mere fact that I exist and have within me an idea of a most perfect being, that is, God, provides a very clear proof that God indeed exists.⁴⁵

AT 51 p. 35

It only remains for me to examine how I received this idea from God. For I did not acquire it from the senses; it has never come to me unexpectedly, as usually happens with the ideas of things that are perceivable by the senses, when these things present themselves to the external sense organs - or seem to do so. And it was not invented by me either; for I am plainly unable either to take away anything from it or to add anything to it. The only remaining alternative is that it is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me.⁴⁶

AT 51 p. 35

And indeed 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 - not that the mark need be anything distinct from the work itself. But the mere fact that God created me is a very strong basis for believing that I am somehow made in his image and likeness, and that I perceive that likeness, which includes the idea of God, by the same faculty which enables me to perceive myself. That is, when I turn my mind's eye upon myself, I understand that I am a thing which is incomplete and dependent on another and which aspires without limit to ever greater and better things; but I also understand at the same time that he on whom I depend has within him all those greater things, not just indefinitely and potentially but actually and infinitely, and hence that he is God. The whole force of the argument lies in this: I recognize that it would be impossible for me to exist with the kind of nature I have - that is, having within me the idea of God - were it not the case that God really existed.⁴⁷ By 'God' I mean the very being the idea of whom is within me, that is, the possessor of all the perfections which

⁴⁴ Response to yet another possible objection.

⁴⁵ This sentence is a good statement of the outline of the whole proof.

⁴⁶ Here Descartes asks how it is that his idea originated from God. He goes through the list from AT 37-8 of types of ideas (or ways that ideas can be acquired) and proceeds by process of elimination.

⁴⁷ Another good statement of his proof.

I cannot grasp, but can somehow reach in my thought, 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.⁴⁸

AT 52 p. 35

But before examining this point more carefully and investigating other truths which may be derived from it, I should like to pause here and spend some time in the contemplation of God; to reflect on his attributes, and to gaze with wonder and adoration on the beauty of this immense light, so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it. For just as we believe through faith that the supreme happiness of the next life consists solely in the contemplation of the divine majesty, so experience tells us that this same contemplation, albeit much less perfect, enables us to know the greatest joy of which we are capable in this life.

⁴⁸ This appears to be the additional claim that God is not a deceiver.