

Fifth Meditation

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FIFTH MEDITATION

The essence of material things, and the existence of God considered a second time¹

There are many matters which remain to be investigated concerning the attributes of God and the nature of myself, or my mind; and perhaps I shall take these up at another time. But now that I have seen what to do and what to avoid in order to reach the truth, the most pressing task seems to be to try to escape from the doubts into which I fell a few days ago, and see whether any certainty can be achieved regarding material objects.²

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But before I inquire whether any such things exist outside me, I must consider the ideas of these things, in so far as they exist in my thought, and see which of them are distinct, and which confused.

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Quantity, for example, or 'continuous' quantity as the philosophers commonly call it, is something I distinctly imagine. That is, I distinctly imagine the extension of the quantity (or rather of the thing which is quantified) in length, breadth and depth. I also enumerate various parts of the thing, and to these parts I assign various sizes, shapes, positions and local motions; and to the motions I assign various durations.

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Not only are all these things very well known and transparent to me when regarded in this general way, but in addition there are countless particular features regarding shape, number, motion and so on, which I perceive when I give them my attention. And the truth of these matters is so open and so much in harmony with my nature, that on first discovering them it seems that I am not so much learning something new as remembering

¹ A few things are worth noting here. Descartes thinks that geometrical truths—the kinds of truths that you learn about triangles and quadrilaterals in geometry class—are truths about the basic nature of physical, material objects. So when Descartes mentions that this Meditation is about “the essence of material things”, a large part of what he has in mind is geometry. Also, Descartes’s main goal in this Meditation is to give a second proof of the existence of God, different from the one that he gave in Meditation 3. The proof that he gives here is meant to work just like a geometrical proof. That is why he is talking about geometry at the beginning of the Meditation. (The kind of proof that Descartes gives in this Meditation is called an “Ontological Proof”. The word “ontological” means *having to do with existence*, but don’t worry too much about the name.)

² The important thing here is that Descartes is going to rely on what he has shown in the previous two Meditations. He thinks he has shown “what to do and what to avoid in order to reach the truth”. Specifically, Descartes thinks that if he clearly and distinctly perceives something to be the case, then that thing must be true.

what I knew before; or it seems like noticing for the first time things which were long present within me although I had never turned my mental gaze on them before.³

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But I think the most important consideration at this point is that I find within me countless ideas of things which even though they may not exist anywhere outside me still cannot be called nothing; for although in a sense they can be thought of at will, they are not my invention but have their own true and immutable natures. When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind.⁴ This is clear from the fact that various properties can be demonstrated of the triangle, for example that its three angles equal two right angles, that its greatest side subtends its greatest angle, and the like; and since these properties are ones which I now clearly recognize whether I want to or not, even if I never thought of them at all when I previously imagined the triangle, it follows that they cannot have been invented by me.⁵

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It would be beside the point for me to say that since I have from time to time seen bodies of triangular shape, the idea of the triangle may have come to me from external things by means of the sense organs.⁶ For I can think up countless other shapes which there can be no suspicion of my ever having encountered through the senses, and yet I can demonstrate various properties of these shapes, just as I can with the triangle. All these properties are certainly true, since I am clearly aware of them, and therefore they are something, and not merely nothing; for it is obvious that whatever is true is something; and I have already amply demonstrated that everything of which I am clearly aware is true. And even if I had not demonstrated this, the nature of my mind is such that I cannot but assent to these things, at least so long as I clearly perceive them. I also remember that even before, when I was completely preoccupied with the objects of the senses, I always held that the most certain truths of all were the kind which I recognized clearly in connection with shapes, or numbers or other items relating to arithmetic or geometry, or in general to pure and abstract mathematics.⁷

³ When you first read this paragraph, it might be hard to see what exactly Descartes is saying. Here is a clue: he has in mind facts of geometry, like the fact that all the interior angles of a triangle sum to 180 degrees. Knowing that, re-read the paragraph and see how it makes more sense.

⁴ This is important. Descartes thinks that even if he has never encountered a genuine triangle, and even if there no actual triangles that exist in the world, still he can have genuine knowledge about triangles. He thinks that he can know things about triangles from their “essence”. The essence of a thing is what that thing must necessarily have in order to be the kind of thing that it is. So part of the essence of a triangle is *having three sides*. Descartes thinks that even if there are no triangles that exist in the world, still triangles have an essence. And he thinks that he can know some real truths about triangles on the basis of knowing the essence of triangles. As a synonym for “essence” Descartes sometimes uses the phrase “true and immutable nature”, as he does in the previous sentence. In the following sentence, he gives some examples of the kinds of things he can know about triangles even without having ever encountered them.

⁵ Crucially, he didn’t just make up this stuff about triangles—these geometrical truths like that a triangle’s “three angles equal two right angles”. The point is that even without experiencing triangles, just from understanding what a triangle is—the essence of triangleness—these truths about triangles can be discovered.

⁶ Here Descartes raises a little objection that he is about to respond to.

⁷ Alright. So Descartes thinks that “everything of which I am clearly aware is true.” And in this last sentence, he gives us some examples of things that he thinks he is clearly aware.

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But if the mere fact that I can produce from my thought the idea of something entails that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it, is not this a possible basis for another argument to prove the existence of God?⁸ Certainly, the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one which I find within me just as surely as the idea of any shape or number. And my understanding that it belongs to his nature that he always exists is no less clear and distinct than is the case when I prove of any shape or number that some property belongs to its nature. Hence, even if it turned out that not everything on which I have meditated in these past days is true, I ought still to regard the existence of God as having at least the same level of certainty as I have hitherto attributed to the truths of mathematics.⁹

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At first sight, however, this is not transparently clear, but has some appearance of being a sophism.¹⁰ Since I have been accustomed to distinguish between existence and essence in everything else, I find it easy to persuade myself that existence can also be separated from the essence of God, and hence that God can be thought of as not existing. But when I concentrate more carefully, it is quite evident that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle, or than the idea of a mountain can be separated from the idea of a valley. Hence it is just as much of a contradiction to think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking a perfection), as it is to think of a mountain without a valley.¹¹

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However, even granted that I cannot think of God except as existing, just as I cannot think of a mountain without a valley, it certainly does not follow from the fact that I think of a mountain with a valley that there is

⁸ Whoa. This is a hugely important sentence. Here Descartes announces his plan for this Meditation. He is going to give another proof for God's existence. But he says specifically how in general this proof is going to go: it is going to proceed in the same way that geometrical proofs proceed. In this sentence he even lays out how those geometrical proofs go (and so how the proof of God's existence is going to go). First, you have the idea of something, say a triangle. Then you clearly and distinctly perceive that something must be true of that thing, like that the interior angles of the triangle must sum to 180 degrees. Because you clearly and distinctly perceived that thing, therefore it must be true. Because you clearly and distinctly perceived that the triangle (because it is a triangle) must have its interior angles summing to 180 degrees, therefore that is really true of the triangle. Go back and reread this sentence a few times until you see that this is what Descartes is describing.

⁹ Well, there is was—a proof of God's existence. Did you catch it? It happened *very* quickly. Don't worry if you didn't Descartes will spend the whole rest of the Meditation elaborating and responding to objections, and that whole process should help make clearer what exactly the proof is. If after a few re-readings of this paragraph you are still not clear on what the proof is, don't worry. Continue on and hopefully things will clear up.

¹⁰ "Sophism" means *a line of argument or reasoning that is fallacious or misleading*. So Descartes is acknowledging that the argument for God's existence that he just presented might seem like a trick.

¹¹ Remember the discussion of the essence of triangles from three paragraphs ago? In that case Descartes could prove, on the basis of the essence of triangles, facts about triangles. And he could do that totally independently of the existence (or non-existence) of triangles. But here Descartes is saying that the essence of God is different. In the case of God, existence is part of his essence. Existence is something that God must have in order to be God, just as three-sidedness is something that a triangle must have in order to be a triangle.

any mountain in the world; and similarly, it does not seem to follow from the fact that I think of God as existing that he does exist. For my thought does not impose any necessity on things; and just as I may imagine a winged horse even though no horse has wings, so I may be able to attach existence to God even though no God exists.¹²

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But there is a sophism concealed here. From the fact that I cannot think of a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that a mountain and valley exist anywhere, but simply that a mountain and a valley, whether they exist or not, are mutually inseparable. But from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and hence that he really exists.¹³ It is not that my thought makes it so, or imposes any necessity on any thing; on the contrary, it is the necessity of the thing itself, namely the existence of God, which determines my thinking in this respect. For I am not free to think of God without existence (that is, a supremely perfect being without a supreme perfection) as I am free to imagine a horse with or without wings.¹⁴

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And it must not be objected at this point that while it is indeed necessary for me to suppose God exists, once I have made the supposition that he has all perfections (since existence is one of the perfections), nevertheless the original supposition was not necessary.¹⁵ Similarly, the objection would run, it is not necessary for me to think that all quadrilaterals can be inscribed in a circle; but given this supposition, it will be necessary for me to admit that a rhombus can be inscribed in a circle - which is patently false.¹⁶ Now admittedly, it is not necessary that I ever light upon any thought of God; but whenever I do choose to think of the first and supreme being, and bring forth the idea of God from the treasure house of my mind as it were, it is necessary that I attribute all perfections to him, even if I do not at that time enumerate them or attend to them individually. And this necessity plainly guarantees that, when I later realize that existence is a perfection, I am correct in inferring that the first and supreme being exists.¹⁷ In the same way, it is not necessary for me ever to imagine a triangle; but whenever I do wish to consider a rectilinear figure having just three angles, it is necessary that I attribute to it the properties which license the inference that its three angles equal no more

¹² In this paragraph, Descartes is not saying what he actually thinks. He is presenting a possible objection to the proof that he has given. In the next paragraph he will respond to this objection.

¹³ This sentence is probably the best single-sentence statement of the proof that Descartes gives us in this meditation.

¹⁴ See what he is saying here? Existence is essential to God being God.

¹⁵ Descartes again is developing another possible objection to the proof. The objection continues through the next sentence. (Also, note what we get here in the parentheses. Descartes gives us a little hint as to why he thinks existence is part of God's essence.)

¹⁶ Remember from high school geometry what a quadrilateral is? "Quad" means *four* and "lateral" means *side*. So a quadrilateral is a four-sided figure. Descartes's point here is that you can make a false supposition—like that "all quadrilaterals can be inscribed in a circle"—and then conclude something on the basis of that supposition—like that "a rhombus can be inscribed in a circle". But because the initial supposition was false, whatever is concluded on its basis might be false. Here, remember, Descartes is sketching a potential objection. The objection is that Descartes has made some kind of false supposition. In the following sentences, Descartes responds to this objection.

¹⁷ Notice that here again Descartes has claimed that "existence is a perfection". That is an important part of the proof that he hasn't really made explicit yet. It is required to make the proof work, but it has been left mostly unspoken until now.

than two right angles, even if I do not notice this at the time.¹⁸ By contrast, when I examine what figures can be inscribed in a circle, it is in no way necessary for me to think that this class includes all quadrilaterals. Indeed, I cannot even imagine this, so long as I am willing to admit only what I clearly and distinctly understand.¹⁹ So there is a great difference between this kind of false supposition and the true ideas which are innate in me, of which the first and most important is the idea of God. There are many ways in which I understand that this idea is not something fictitious which is dependent on my thought, but is an image of a true and immutable nature. First of all, there is the fact that, apart from God, there is nothing else of which I am capable of thinking such that existence belongs to its essence. Second, I cannot understand how there could be two or more Gods of this kind; and after supposing that one God exists, I plainly see that it is necessary that he has existed from eternity and will abide for eternity. And finally, I perceive many other attributes of God, none of which I can remove or alter.²⁰

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But whatever method of proof I use, I am always brought back to the fact that it is only what I clearly and distinctly perceive that completely convinces me.²¹ Some of the things I clearly and distinctly perceive are obvious to everyone, while others are discovered only by those who look more closely and investigate more carefully; but once they have been discovered, the latter are judged to be just as certain as the former. In the case of a right-angled triangle, for example, the fact that the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the square on the other two sides is not so readily apparent as the fact that the hypotenuse subtends the largest angle; but once one has seen it, one believes it just as strongly. But as regards God, if I were not overwhelmed by preconceived opinions, and if the images of things perceived by the senses did not besiege my thought on every side, I would certainly acknowledge him sooner and more easily than anything else. For what is more self-evident than the fact that the supreme being exists, or that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists?

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Although it needed close attention for me to perceive this, I am now just as certain of it as I am of everything else which appears most certain. And what is more, I see that the certainty of all other things depends on this, so that without it nothing can ever be perfectly known.

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Admittedly my nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true. But my nature is also such that I cannot fix my mental vision continually on the same thing, so as to keep perceiving it clearly; and often the memory of a previously made judgement may come

¹⁸ Descartes is sticking with the triangle analogy. His proof of God's existence is supposed to work in the same way a geometrical proof about some property of a triangle works.

¹⁹ Did you notice that there is a typo in this sentence? This is a real typo in John Cottingham's famous translation of *The Meditations*. In order to understand any dense philosophical writing, you are going to need to read it very slowly and very carefully. If you are reading it carefully enough, then you should catch all the typographical errors.

²⁰ Okay, so there are a few other things that Descartes thinks follow from the essence of God.

²¹ Alright, in this paragraph we are getting a little discussion (some of which is review of what Descartes has said already) about clear and distinct perceptions.

back, when I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to make it.²² And so other arguments can now occur to me which might easily undermine my opinion, if I were unaware of God; and I should thus never have true and certain knowledge about anything, but only shifting and changeable opinions. For example, when I consider the nature of a triangle, it appears most evident to me, steeped as I am in the principles of geometry, that its three angles are equal to two right angles; and so long as I attend to the proof, I cannot but believe this to be true. But as soon as I turn my mind's eye away from the proof, then in spite of still remembering that I perceived it very clearly, I can easily fall into doubt about its truth, if I am unaware of God. For I can convince myself that I have a natural disposition to go wrong from time to time in matters which I think I perceive as evidently as can be. This will seem even more likely when I remember that there have been frequent cases where I have regarded things as true and certain, but have later been led by other arguments to judge them to be false.

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Now, however, I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver; and I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true.²³ Accordingly, even if I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to judge that this is true, as long as I remember that I clearly and distinctly perceived it, there are no counter-arguments which can be adduced to make me doubt it, but on the contrary I have true and certain knowledge of it. And I have knowledge not just of this matter, but of all matters which I remember ever having demonstrated, in geometry and so on.²⁴ For what objections can now be raised?²⁵ That the way I am made makes me prone to frequent error? But I now know that I am incapable of error in those cases where my understanding is transparently clear. Or can it be objected that I have in the past regarded as true and certain many things which I afterwards recognized to be false? But none of these were things which I clearly and distinctly perceived: I was ignorant of this rule for establishing the truth, and believed these things for other reasons which I later discovered to be less reliable. So what is left to say? Can one raise the objection I put to myself a while ago, that I may be dreaming, or that everything which I am now thinking has as little truth as what comes to the mind of one who is asleep? Yet even this does not change anything. For even though I might be dreaming, if there is anything which is evident to my intellect, then it is wholly true.

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Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge about anything else until I became aware of him. And now it is possible for me to achieve full and certain knowledge of countless matters, both concerning God himself and other things whose nature is intellectual, and also concerning the whole of that corporeal nature which is the subject-matter of pure mathematics.²⁶

²² In this paragraph Descartes points out a kind of problem that he has. He sometimes proves things, and later he remembers the conclusion of the proof, but forgets the proofs or arguments that justified that conclusion. But, in the next paragraph, he is going to say why he thinks he can still nonetheless trust that these conclusions are true.

²³ This is important. There is a reason Descartes keeps saying it over and over again.

²⁴ This is his solution to the problem laid out in the last paragraph.

²⁵ So now Descartes is going to raise some potential objections to the solution that he just offered.

²⁶ He is talking about geometry.