

## Fourth Meditation

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### AT 52

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#### FOURTH MEDITATION

##### *Truth and falsity*<sup>1</sup>

During these past few days I have accustomed myself to leading my mind away from the senses; and I have taken careful note of the fact that there is very little about corporeal things that is truly perceived, whereas much more is known about the human mind, and still more about God. The result is that I now have no difficulty in turning my mind away from imaginable things and towards things which are objects of the intellect alone and are totally separate from matter. And indeed the idea I have of the human mind, in so far as it is a thinking thing, which is not extended in length, breadth or height and has no other bodily characteristics, is much more distinct than the idea of any corporeal thing.<sup>2</sup> And when I consider the fact that I have doubts, or that I am a thing that is incomplete and dependent, then there arises in me a clear and distinct idea of a being who is independent and complete, that is, an idea of God. And from the mere fact that there is such an idea within me, or that I who possess this idea exist, I clearly infer that God also exists, and that every single moment of my entire existence depends on him. So clear is this conclusion that I am confident that the human intellect cannot know anything that is more evident or more certain. 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.<sup>3</sup>

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### AT 53

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To begin with, I recognize that it is impossible that God should ever deceive me. For in every case of trickery or deception some imperfection is to be found; and although the ability to deceive appears to be an indication of cleverness or power, the will to deceive is undoubtedly evidence of malice or weakness, and so cannot apply to God.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>As Descartes will say at the end of this Meditation, the aim of this Meditation is to discover “the cause of error and falsity” AT 62. Specifically, he is responding to a problem that arises for him. We will see what that problem is very shortly.

<sup>2</sup>This is a pretty good statement of how Descartes understands the mind.

<sup>3</sup>In the second half of this paragraph we get a pretty good recap of the argument for God’s existence from Meditation 3.

<sup>4</sup>In this paragraph Descartes is making a very important claim. Make sure you are clear on exactly what he is saying before going on.

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**AT 53**

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Next, I know by experience that there is in me a faculty of judgement which, like everything else which is in me, I certainly received from God. And since God does not wish to deceive me, he surely did not give me the kind of faculty which would ever enable me to go wrong while using it correctly.<sup>5</sup>

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**AT 54**

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There would be no further doubt on this issue were it not that what I have just said appears to imply that I am incapable of ever going wrong. For if everything that is in me comes from God, and he did not endow me with a faculty for making mistakes, it appears that I can never go wrong. And certainly, so long as I think only of God, and turn my whole attention to him, I can find no cause of error or falsity. But when I turn back to myself, I know by experience that I am prone to countless errors.<sup>6</sup> On looking for the cause of these errors, I find that I possess not only a real and positive idea of God, or a being who is supremely perfect, but also what may be described as a negative idea of nothingness, or of that which is farthest removed from all perfection. I realize that I am, as it were, something intermediate between God and nothingness, or between supreme being and non-being: my nature is such that in so far as I was created by the supreme being, there is nothing in me to enable me to go wrong or lead me astray; but in so far as I participate in nothingness or non-being, that is, in so far as I am not myself the supreme being and am lacking in countless respects, it is no wonder that I make mistakes. I understand, then, that error as such is not something real which depends on God, but merely a defect. Hence my going wrong does not require me to have a faculty specially bestowed on me by God; it simply happens as a result of the fact that the faculty of true judgement which I have from God is in my case not infinite.<sup>7</sup>

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**AT 55**

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<sup>5</sup>This last phrase, “while using it correctly,” is a very important qualification to what Descartes is saying.

<sup>6</sup>Here Descartes has presented a serious problem. He will immediately offer an attempted solution to the problem, but that solution won't be quite good enough and he will spend the entire Meditation laying out his real solution to the problem. So the problem is important to understanding what is going on in the Meditation. Re-read the four sentences that start this paragraph and make sure you get 100% clear on what exactly the problem is.

<sup>7</sup>We now have Descartes's first attempt at a solution.

But this is still not entirely satisfactory. For error is not a pure negation, but rather a privation or lack of some knowledge which somehow should be in me.<sup>8</sup> And when I concentrate on the nature of God, it seems impossible that he should have placed in me a faculty which is not perfect of its kind, or which lacks some perfection which it ought to have. The more skilled the craftsman the more perfect the work produced by him; if this is so, how can anything produced by the supreme creator of all things not be complete and perfect in all respects? There is, moreover, no doubt that God could have given me a nature such that I was never mistaken; again, there is no doubt that he always wills what is best. Is it then better that I should make mistakes than that I should not do so?<sup>9</sup>

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AT 55

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As I reflect on these matters more attentively, it occurs to me first of all that it is no cause for surprise if I do not understand the reasons for some of God's actions; and there is no call to doubt his existence if I happen to find that there are other instances where I do not grasp why or how certain things were made by him. For since I now know that my own nature is very weak and limited, whereas the nature of God is immense, incomprehensible and infinite, I also know without more ado that he is capable of countless things whose causes are beyond my knowledge. And for this reason alone I consider the customary search for final causes to be totally useless in physics; there is considerable rashness in thinking myself capable of investigating the {impenetrable} purposes of God.<sup>10</sup>

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AT 55

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It also occurs to me that whenever we are inquiring whether the works of God are perfect, we ought to look at the whole universe, not just at one created thing on its own. For what would perhaps rightly appear very imperfect if it existed on its own is quite perfect when its function as a part of the universe is considered. It is true that, since my decision to doubt everything, it is so far only myself and God whose existence I have been able to know with certainty;

<sup>8</sup>By "privation" Descartes means a lack or absence of something, as he says.

<sup>9</sup>Okay, so in this paragraph Descartes is stressing that the problem raised at the beginning of the last paragraph has not really been solved. It might be helpful for understanding this to get a grasp on what Descartes means by "perfect of its kind". The thought is that perfection is relative to what kind of a thing something is. Perfection for a human might involve intelligence, but perfection for a lion doesn't require intelligence as much, perhaps, as it requires a big mane and being ferocious.

<sup>10</sup>Here we get another attempt at a solution. This is pretty standard solution to problems like this. You may have heard this solution from a theologian before. Descartes won't rely very heavily on this solution.

but after considering the immense power of God, I cannot deny that many other things have been made by him, or at least could have been made, and hence that I may have a place in the universal scheme of things.<sup>11</sup>

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AT 56

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Next, when I look more closely at myself and inquire into the nature of my errors (for these are the only evidence of some imperfection in me), I notice that they depend on two concurrent causes, namely on the faculty of knowledge which is in me, and on the faculty of choice or freedom of the will; that is, they depend on both the intellect and the will simultaneously.<sup>12</sup> Now all that 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 in the proper sense of that term. For although countless things may exist without there being any corresponding ideas in me, it should not, strictly speaking, be said that I am deprived of these ideas, but merely that I lack them, in a negative sense. This is because I cannot produce any reason to prove that God ought to have given me a greater faculty of knowledge than he did; and no matter how skilled I understand a craftsman to be, this does not make me think he ought to have put into every one of his works all the perfections which he is able to put into some of them.<sup>13</sup> Besides, I cannot complain that the will or freedom of choice which I received from God is not sufficiently extensive or perfect, since I know by experience that it is not restricted in any way. Indeed, I think it is very noteworthy that there is nothing else in me which is so perfect and so great that the possibility of a further increase in its perfection or greatness is beyond my understanding.<sup>14</sup> If, for example, I consider the faculty of understanding, I immediately recognize that in my case it is extremely slight and very finite, and I at once form the idea of an understanding which is much greater - indeed supremely great and infinite; and from the very fact that I can form an idea of it, I perceive that it belongs to the nature of God.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, if I examine the faculties of memory or imagination, or any others, I discover that in my case each one of these faculties is weak and limited, while in the

<sup>11</sup>The point of this paragraph is to say that just because it seems like Descartes was created with an imperfect nature, that might not be a problem. After all, Descartes could himself just be an imperfect part in a whole that, when taken altogether, is perfect or perfect enough.

<sup>12</sup>A lot of important stuff happens in this sentence. Descartes is explaining that his mind includes two parts, two faculties. And these two parts combine in order to create errors. "Concurrent" means *happening at the same time*. Descartes will spend the remainder of this paragraph discussing these two faculties of the mind. Here, in this first sentence, Descartes gives a whole bunch of names to these two faculties. So go through the sentence and get clear on which names apply to which faculty. Write down two little lists, one with all the names of one faculty and the other with all the names of the other faculty. Descartes is going to be using all these names interchangeably, so you will really need to have them clear in order to follow.

<sup>13</sup>These last three long sentences say why Descartes thinks that nothing is wrong with the faculty of intellect/knowledge itself.

<sup>14</sup>These last two sentences lay out why there is nothing wrong with the faculty of the will itself.

<sup>15</sup>There is something that you need to know to understand what is going on here. As Descartes uses the term, the "understanding" is either the same as or part of the faculty of intellect. Descartes doesn't really seem to be consistent about whether understanding is the same as the intellect or whether it is part of the intellect. But here is the thing: it doesn't matter. The important point here is that Descartes is pointing out that unlike the will, the intellect/understanding is limited.

case of God it is immeasurable.<sup>16</sup> 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 consists 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. 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 - either because I clearly understand that reasons of truth and goodness point that way, or because of a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thoughts - the freer is my choice. Neither divine grace nor natural knowledge ever diminishes freedom; on the contrary, they increase and strengthen it. But the indifference I feel when there is no reason pushing me in one direction rather than another is the lowest grade of freedom; it is evidence not of any perfection of freedom, but rather of a defect in knowledge or a kind of negation. For if I always saw clearly what was true and good, I should never have to deliberate about the right judgement or choice; in that case, although I should be wholly free, it would be impossible for me ever to be in a state of indifference.<sup>17</sup>

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**AT 58**

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From these considerations I perceive that the power of willing which I received from God is not, when considered in itself, the cause of my mistakes; for it is both extremely ample and also perfect of its kind. Nor is my power of understanding to blame; for since my understanding comes from God, everything that I understand I undoubtedly understand correctly, and any error here is impossible.<sup>18</sup> So what then is the

<sup>16</sup>Memory and imagination are pretty clearly parts of the faculty of knowledge/intellect, according to Descartes. So here he is claiming that these parts of the intellect are limited. This makes sense since part of what Descartes is trying to say here is that the intellect is limited.

<sup>17</sup>To be "indifferent" towards something means not having any particular interest regarding how it turns out—not caring about it one way or another.

<sup>18</sup>This sentence gives a pretty good summary of what Descartes claimed in the previous paragraph.

source of my mistakes? It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand.<sup>19</sup> Since the will is indifferent in such cases, it easily turns aside from what is true and good, and this is the source of my error and sin.

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**AT 58**

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For example, during these past few days I have been asking whether anything in the world exists, and I have realized that from the very fact of my raising this question it follows quite evidently that I exist. I could not but judge that something which I understood so clearly was true; but this was not because I was compelled so to judge by any external force, but because a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will, and thus the spontaneity and freedom of my belief was all the greater in proportion to my lack of indifference. But now, besides the knowledge that I exist, in so far as I am a thinking thing, an idea of corporeal nature comes into my mind; and I happen to be in doubt as to whether the thinking nature which is in me, or rather which I am, is distinct from this corporeal nature or identical with it. I am making the further supposition that my intellect has not yet come upon any persuasive reason in favour of one alternative rather than the other. This obviously implies that I am indifferent as to whether I should assert or deny either alternative, or indeed refrain from making any judgement on the matter.<sup>20</sup>

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**AT 59**

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What is more, this indifference does not merely apply to cases where the intellect is wholly ignorant, but extends in general to every case where the intellect does not have sufficiently clear knowledge at the time when the will deliberates. For although probable conjectures may pull me in one direction, the mere knowledge that they are simply conjectures, and not certain and indubitable reasons, is itself quite enough to push my assent the other way. My experience in the last few days confirms this: the mere fact that I found that all my previous beliefs were in some sense

<sup>19</sup>This is important. Remember the problem from earlier (introduced on AT 54). Well, Descartes has been developing different solutions to that problem. And finally, right here, in this sentence, we get his statement of his solution to the problem.

<sup>20</sup>In this paragraph, Descartes gives an example of some matter on which the available evidence is not enough to justify his believing one way of another. The example is whether he should believe that he (his mind) is identical to his body.

open to doubt was enough to turn my absolutely confident belief in their truth into the supposition that they were wholly false.

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**AT 59**

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If, however, I simply refrain from making a judgement in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly.<sup>21</sup> If I go for the alternative which is false, then obviously I shall be in error; if I take the other side, then it is by pure chance that I arrive at the truth, and I shall still be at fault since it is clear by the natural light that the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will. In this incorrect use of free will may be found the privation which constitutes the essence of error. The privation, I say, lies in the operation of the will in so far as it proceeds from me, but not in the faculty of will which I received from God, nor even in its operation, in so far as it depends on him.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup>This is important.

<sup>22</sup>So when Descartes makes an error, it is his fault, and not God's.

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**AT 60**

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And I have no cause for complaint on the grounds that the power of understanding or the natural light which God gave me is no greater than it is; for it is in the nature of a finite intellect to lack understanding of many things, and it is in the nature of a created intellect to be finite. Indeed, I have reason to give thanks to him who has never owed me anything for the great bounty that he has shown me, rather than thinking myself deprived or robbed of any gifts he did not bestow.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Descartes says that he can't legitimately complain that his understanding and natural light are not greater than they are.

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**AT 60**

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Nor do I have any cause for complaint on the grounds that God gave me a will which extends more widely than my intellect. For since the will consists simply of one thing which is, as it were, indivisible, it seems that its nature rules out the possibility of anything being taken away from it. And surely, the more widely my

will extends, then the greater thanks I owe to him who gave it to me.<sup>24</sup>

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**AT 60**

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Finally, I must not complain that the forming of those acts of will or judgements in which I go wrong happens with God's concurrence. For in so far as these acts depend on God, they are wholly true and good; and my ability to perform them means that there is in a sense more perfection in me than would be the case if I lacked this ability. As for the privation involved - which is all that the essential definition of falsity and wrong consists in - this does not in any way require the concurrence of God, since it is not a thing; indeed, when it is referred to God as its cause, it should be called not a privation but simply a negation. For it is surely no imperfection in God that he has given me the freedom to assent or not to assent in those cases where he did not endow my intellect with a clear and distinct perception; but it is undoubtedly an imperfection in me to misuse that freedom and make judgements about matters which I do not fully understand. I can see, however, that God could easily have brought it about that without losing my freedom, and despite the limitations in my knowledge, I should nonetheless never make a mistake. He could, for example, have endowed my intellect with a clear and distinct perception of everything about which I was ever likely to deliberate; or he could simply have impressed it unforgettably on my memory that I should never make a judgement about anything which I did not clearly and distinctly understand. Had God made me this way, then I can easily understand that, considered as a totality,<sup>†3</sup> I would have been more perfect than I am now.<sup>25</sup> But I cannot therefore deny that there may in some way be more perfection in the universe as a whole because some of its parts are not immune from error, while others are immune, than there would be if all the parts were exactly alike. And I have no right to complain that the role God wished me to undertake in the world is not the principal one or the most perfect of all.<sup>26</sup>

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**AT 61**

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<sup>24</sup>And here he says why he can't legitimately complain that his will is capable of extending further than his understanding.

<sup>25</sup>Despite all of the things Descartes has said in response to the main problem that this Meditation attempts to solve, still there seems to be a difficulty, which Descartes has laid out in the last few sentences.

<sup>26</sup>Descartes's response here harkens back to something he pointed out earlier (on AT 55-56). It might be that in the context of the whole universe, Descartes plays the part of a less than perfect thing, and he can't complain that he was assigned that role.



What is more, even if I have no power to avoid error in the first way just mentioned, which requires a clear perception of everything I have to deliberate on, I can avoid error in the second way, which depends merely on my remembering to withhold judgement on any occasion when the truth of the matter is not clear. Admittedly, I am aware of a certain weakness in me, in that I am unable to keep my attention fixed on one and the same item of knowledge at all times; but by attentive and repeated meditation I am nevertheless able to make myself remember it as often as the need arises, and thus get into the habit of avoiding error.

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**AT 62**

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It is here that man's greatest and most important perfection is to be found, and I therefore think that today's meditation, involving an investigation into the cause of error and falsity, has been very profitable. The cause of error must surely be the one I have explained; for if, whenever I have to make a judgement, I restrain my will so that it extends to what the intellect clearly and distinctly reveals, and no further, then it is quite impossible for me to go wrong.<sup>27</sup> This is because every clear and distinct perception is undoubtedly something, and hence cannot come from nothing, but must necessarily have God for its author. Its author, I say, is God, who is supremely perfect, and who cannot be a deceiver on pain of contradiction; hence the perception is undoubtedly true. So today I have learned not only what precautions to take to avoid ever going wrong, but also what to do to arrive at the truth. For I shall unquestionably reach the truth, if only I give sufficient attention to all the things which I perfectly understand, and separate these from all the other cases where my apprehension is more confused and obscure. And this is just what I shall take good care to do from now on.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup>This is very important. Descartes thinks that God would not deceive him about those things that he clearly and distinctly perceives. Of course, as he has explained throughout this Meditation, he is still capable of error, but only when he allows his will to extend beyond matters clearly and distinctly perceived. And when he does that, the error is his fault, not God's. So his plan is to constrain what he believes to only those things that he clearly and distinctly perceives. But, you might ask, if Descartes cannot trust what he is inclined to believe about ordinary things, because those might be cases where his will is extending beyond its appropriate limits, then why can Descartes trust even those things that he clearly and distinctly perceives? He is about to give his answer to that question.

<sup>28</sup>Alright. We have a plan going forward.