

Meditations on First Philosophy
in which are demonstrated the existence of God and the distinction between
the human soul and body

René Descartes

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth.—In his title for this work, Descartes is following a tradition (started by Aristotle) which uses ‘first philosophy’ as a label for metaphysics.

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Contents

First Meditation	1
Second Meditation	3
Third Meditation	9
Fourth Meditation	17
Fifth Meditation	23
Sixth Meditation	27

Third Meditation: God

[Before we move on, a translation matter should be confronted. It concerns the Latin adjectives

clarus and *distinctus*

the corresponding French adjectives

clair and *distinct*

and the corresponding English adjectives

‘vivid’ and ‘clear’.

Every other translator of this work into English has put

‘clear’ and ‘distinct’

and for a while the present translator in cowardly fashion followed suit. But the usual translation is simply wrong, and we ought to free ourselves from it. The crucial point concerns *clarus* (and everything said about that here is equally true of the French *clair*). The word can mean ‘clear’ in our sense, and when Descartes uses it **outside** the *clarus et distinctus* phrase, it seems usually to be in that sense. But **in** that phrase he uses *clarus* in its other meaning—its more common meaning in Latin—of ‘bright’ or ‘vivid’ or the like, as in *clara lux* = ‘broad daylight’. If in the phrase *clarus et distinctus* Descartes meant *clarus* in its lesser meaning of ‘clear’, then what is there left for ‘distinctus’ to mean? Descartes doesn’t explain these terms here, but in his *Principles of Philosophy* 1:45–6 he does so—in a manner that completely condemns the usual translation. He writes: ‘I call a perception *claram* when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something *clare* when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception *distinctam* if, as well as being *clara*, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that every part of it is *clarum*. . . . The example of pain shows that a perception can be *clara* without being *distincta* but not vice versa. When for example someone feels an intense pain, his perception of it is *clarissima*, but it isn’t always clear, because people often get this perception muddled with an obscure judgment they make about something that they think exists

in the painful spot. . . .’ and so on. Of course he is not saying anything as stupid as that intense pain is always *clear*! His point is that pain is vivid, up-front, not shady or obscure. And for an idea to be *distincta* is for every nook and cranny of it to be vivid; which is not a bad way of saying that it is in our sense ‘clear’.]

I will now shut my eyes, block my ears, cut off all my senses. I will regard all my mental images of bodily things as empty, false and worthless (if I could, I would clear them out of my mind altogether). I will get into conversation with myself, examine myself more deeply, and try in this way gradually to know myself more intimately. I am a thing that thinks, i.e. that doubts, affirms, denies, understands some things, is ignorant of many others, wills, and refuses. This thing also imagines and has sensory perceptions; for, as I remarked before, even if the *objects* of my sensory experience and imagination don’t exist outside me, still sensory perception and imagination themselves, considered simply as *mental* events, certainly do occur in me.

That lists everything that I truly know, or at least everything I have, up to now, discovered that I know. Now I will look more carefully to see whether I have overlooked other facts about myself. *I am certain that I am a thinking thing*. Doesn’t that tell me what it takes for me to be certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a vivid and clear perception of what I am asserting; this wouldn’t be enough to make me certain of its truth if it could ever turn out that something that I perceived so vividly and clearly was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that *whatever I perceive very vividly and clearly is true*.

I previously accepted as perfectly certain and evident many things that I afterwards realized were doubtful—the earth, sky, stars, and everything else that I took in through the senses—but in those cases what I perceived clearly were merely the ideas or thoughts of those things that came into my mind; and I am still not denying that those ideas occur within me. But I used also to believe that my ideas came from things outside that resembled them in all respects. Indeed, I believed this for so long that I wrongly came to think that I perceived it clearly. In fact, it was false; or anyway if it was true it was not thanks to the strength of my perceptions.

But what about when I was considering something simple and straightforward in arithmetic or geometry, for example that two plus three makes five? Didn't I see these things clearly enough to accept them as true? Indeed, the only reason I could find for doubting them was this: Perhaps some God could have made me so as to be deceived even in those matters that seemed most obvious. Whenever I bring to mind my old belief in the supreme power of God, I have to admit that God could, if he wanted to, easily make me go wrong even about things that I think I see perfectly clearly. But when I turn my thought onto the things themselves—the ones I think I perceive clearly—I find them so convincing that I spontaneously exclaim: 'Let him do his best to deceive me! He will never bring it about that I am nothing while I think I am something; or make it true in the future that I have never existed, given that I do now exist; or bring it about that two plus three make more or less than five, or anything else like this in which I see a plain contradiction.' Also, since I have no evidence that there is a deceiving God, and don't even know for sure that there is a God at all, the reason for doubt that depends purely on this supposition of a deceiving God is a very slight and theoretical one. However, I shall want to remove even this slight reason for doubt; so when I get the

opportunity I shall examine whether there is a God, and (if there is) whether he can be a deceiver. If I don't settle this, it seems, then I can never be *quite* certain about anything else.

First, if I am to proceed in an orderly way I should classify my thoughts into definite kinds, and ask which kinds can properly be said to be true or false. Some of my thoughts are, so to speak, images or pictures of things—as when I think of a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God— and strictly speaking these are the only thoughts that should be called 'ideas'. Other thoughts have more to them than that: for example when I will, or am afraid, or affirm, or deny, my thought represents some particular thing but it also includes something more than merely the likeness of that thing. Some thoughts in this category are called volitions or emotions, while others are called judgments.

When ideas are considered solely in themselves and not taken to be connected to anything else, they can't be false; for whether it is •a goat that I am imagining or •a chimera, either way it is true *that I do imagine it*. Nor is there falsity in the will or the emotions; for even if the things I want are wicked or non-existent, it is still true *that I want them*. All that is left—the only kind of thought where I must watch out for mistakes—are judgments. And the mistake they most commonly involve is to judge that my ideas resemble things outside me. Of course, if I considered the ideas themselves simply as aspects of my thought and not as connected to anything else, they could hardly lead me into any error.

Among my ideas, some seem to be •innate, some to be •caused from the outside, and others to have been •invented by me. As I see it, •my understanding of what a *thing* is, what *truth* is, and what *thought* is, derives purely from my own nature, •which means that it is innate; •my hearing a noise or seeing the sun or feeling the fire comes from things outside me; and •sirens, hippogriffs and the like are my own

invention. But perhaps really all my ideas are caused from the outside, or all are innate, or all are made up; for I still have not clearly perceived their true origin.

But my main question now concerns the ideas that I take to come from things outside me: why do I think they resemble these things? Nature has apparently taught me to think that they do. But also I know from experience that these ideas don't depend on my will, and thus don't depend simply on me. They often come into my mind without my willing them to: right now, for example, I have a feeling of warmth, whether I want to or not, and that leads me to think that this sensation or idea of heat comes from something other than myself, namely the heat of a fire by which I am sitting. And it seems natural to suppose that what comes to me from that external thing will be like it rather than unlike it.

Now let me see if these arguments are strong enough. When I say 'Nature taught me to think this', all I mean is that •I have a spontaneous impulse to believe it, *not* that •I am shown its truth by some natural light. There is a great difference between those. Things that are revealed by the natural light—for example, that *if I am doubting then I exist*—are not open to any doubt, because no other faculty that might show them to be false could be as trustworthy as the natural light. My natural *impulses*, however, have no such privilege: I have often come to think that they had pushed me the wrong way on moral questions, and I don't see any reason to trust them in other things.

Then again, although these ideas don't depend on my will, it doesn't follow that they must come from things located outside me. Perhaps they come from some faculty of mine other than my will—one that I don't fully know about—which produces these ideas without help from external things; this is, after all, just how I have always thought ideas are

produced in me when I am dreaming. Similarly, the natural impulses that I have been talking about, though they seem opposed to *my will*, come from within *me*; which provides evidence that *I* can cause things that *my will* does not cause.

Finally, even if these ideas *do* come from things other than myself, it doesn't follow that they must resemble those things. Indeed, I think I have often discovered objects to be very unlike my ideas of them. For example, I find within me two different ideas of the sun: •one seems to come from the senses—it is a prime example of an idea that I reckon to have an external source—and it makes the sun appear very small; •the other is based on astronomical reasoning—i.e. it is based on notions that are innate in me (or else it is constructed by me in some other way)—and it shows the sun to be many times larger than the earth. Obviously these ideas cannot both resemble the external sun; and reason convinces me that the idea that seems to have come most directly from the sun itself in fact does not resemble it at all.

These considerations show that it isn't reliable judgment but merely some blind impulse that has led me to think that there exist outside me things that give ideas or images [= 'likenesses'] of themselves through the sense organs or in some other way.

Perhaps, though, there is another way of investigating whether some of the things of which I have ideas really do exist outside me. Considered simply as mental events, my ideas seem to be all on a par: they all appear to come from inside me in the same way. But considered as images representing things other than themselves, it is clear that they differ widely. Undoubtedly, the •ideas that represent substances amount to something more—they contain within themselves more representative reality—than do the •ideas that merely represent modes [= 'qualities']. Again, the •idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God—eternal,

infinite, unchangeable, omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of everything that exists except for himself—certainly has in it more representative reality than the •ideas that represent merely finite substances.

Now it is obvious by the natural light that the total cause of something must contain at least as much reality as does the effect. For where could the effect get its reality from if not from the cause? And how could the cause give reality to the effect unless it first had that reality itself? Two things follow from this: that something can't arise from nothing, and that what is more perfect—that is, contains in itself more reality—can't arise from what is less perfect. And this is plainly true not only for 'actual' or 'intrinsic' reality (as philosophers call it) but also for the *representative* reality of ideas—that is, the reality that an idea represents. A stone, for example, can begin to exist only if it is produced by something that contains—either straightforwardly or in some higher form—everything that is to be found in the stone; similarly, heat can't be produced in a previously cold object except by something of at least the same order of perfection as heat, and so on. (I don't say simply 'except by something that is hot', because that is not necessary. The thing could be caused to be hot by something that doesn't itself *straightforwardly* contain heat—i.e. that isn't itself *hot*— but contains heat *in a higher form*, that is, something of a higher order of perfection than heat. Thus, for example, although God is obviously not himself *hot*, he can cause something to be hot because he contains heat not straightforwardly but in a higher form.) But it is also true that *the idea of* heat or of a stone can be caused in me only by something that 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 intrinsic reality to my idea, it still can't be less real. An idea need have no intrinsic reality except what

it derives from my thought, of which it is a mode. But any idea that has representative reality must surely come from a cause that contains at least as much *intrinsic* reality as there is *representative* reality in the idea. For if we suppose that an idea contains something that was not in its cause, it must have got this from nothing; yet the kind of reality that is involved in something's being represented in the mind by an idea, though it may not be very perfect, certainly *isn't* nothing, and so it can't *come from* nothing.

It might be thought that since the reality that I am considering in my ideas is merely representative, it might be possessed by its cause only representatively and not intrinsically. That would mean that the cause is itself an idea, because only ideas have representative reality. But that would be wrong. Although one idea may perhaps originate from another, there can't be an infinite regress of such ideas; eventually one must come back to an idea whose cause isn't an idea, and *this* cause must be a kind of archetype [= 'pattern or model, from which copies are made'] containing *intrinsically* all the reality or perfection that the idea contains only *representatively*. So the natural light makes it clear to me that my ideas are like pictures or images that can easily •fall short of the perfection of the things from which they are taken, but which can't •exceed it.

The longer and more carefully I examine all these points, the more vividly and clearly I recognize their truth. But what is my conclusion to be? If I find that

- some idea of mine has so much representative reality that I am sure the same reality doesn't reside in *me*, either straightforwardly or in a higher form, and hence that I myself can't be the cause of the idea,

then, •because everything must have *some* cause•, it will necessarily follow that

- I am not alone in the world: there exists some other thing that is the cause of that idea.

If no such idea is to be found in me, I shall have no argument to show that anything exists apart from myself; for, despite a most careful and wide-ranging survey, this is the only argument I have so far been able to find.

Among my ideas, apart from the one that gives me a representation of myself, which can't present any difficulty in this context, there are ideas that variously represent God, inanimate bodies, angels, animals and finally other men like myself.

As regards my ideas of other men, or animals, or angels, I can easily understand that they could be put together from the ideas I have of myself, of bodies and of God, even if the world contained no men besides me, no animals and no angels.

As to my ideas of bodies, so far as I can see they contain nothing that is so great or excellent that it couldn't have originated in myself. For if I examine them thoroughly, one by one, as I did the idea of the wax yesterday, I realize that the following short list gives everything that I perceive vividly and clearly in them:

- 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;
- 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 qualities that can be known by touch, I think of these in such a confused and

obscure way that I don't even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether my ideas of them are ideas of real things or of non-things. Strictly speaking, only judgments can be true or false; but we can also speak of an idea as 'false' in a certain sense—we call it 'materially false'—if it represents a non-thing as a thing. For example, my ideas of heat and cold have so little clarity and distinctness that they don't enable me to know whether

- cold is merely the absence of heat, or
- heat is merely the absence of cold, or
- heat and cold are both real ·positive· qualities, or
- neither heat nor cold is a real ·positive· quality.

If the right answer is that cold is nothing but the absence of heat, the idea that represents it to me as something real and positive deserves to be called 'false'; and the same goes for other ideas of this kind.

Such ideas obviously don't have to be caused by something other than myself. •If they are false—that is, if they represent non-things—then they are in me only because of a deficiency or lack of perfection in my nature, which is to say that they arise from nothing; I know this by the natural light. •If on the other hand they are true, there is no reason why they shouldn't arise from myself, since they represent such a slight reality that I can't even distinguish it from a non-thing.

With regard to the vivid and clear elements in my ideas of bodies, 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 isn't extended, and of the stone as a thing that is extended and doesn't think, so that the two conceptions differ enormously; but

they seem to have the classification ‘substance’ in common. Again, I perceive that I now exist, and remember that I have existed •for some time; moreover, I have various thoughts that I can •count; it is in these ways that I acquire the ideas of •duration and •number that I can then transfer to other things. As for all the other elements that make up the ideas of bodies— extension, shape, position and movement—these are not straightforwardly 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 in some higher form. ·That is, I am not myself extended, shaped etc., but because I am a *substance* I am (so to speak) metaphysically one up on these mere *modes*, which implies that I can contain within me whatever it takes to cause the ideas of them·.

So there remains only the idea of God: is there anything in *that* which couldn’t have originated in myself? By the word ‘God’ I understand a substance that is infinite, eternal, unchangeable, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, which created myself and anything else that may exist. The more carefully I concentrate on these attributes, the less possible it seems that *any* of them could have originated from me alone. So this whole discussion implies that God necessarily exists.

It is true that my being a substance explains my having the idea of substance; but it does not explain my having the idea of an *infinite substance*. That must come from some substance that is itself infinite. I am finite.

It might be thought that ·this is wrong, because· my notion of the •infinite is arrived at merely by negating the •finite, just as my conceptions of •rest and •darkness are arrived at by negating •movement and •light. ·That would be a mistake, however·. 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, i.e. God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, i.e. myself. Whenever I know that I doubt something or want something, I understand that I *lack* something and am therefore not wholly perfect. How could I grasp this unless I had an idea of a more perfect being that enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?

Nor can it be said that this idea of God could be ‘materially false’, and thus have come from nothing, as may be the case (I noted this a few moments ago) with the ideas of heat and cold. On the contrary, it is utterly vivid and clear, and contains in itself more representative reality than any other idea; ·that is, it stands for something that is grander, more powerful, more real, than any other idea stands for·; so it is more true—less open to the suspicion of falsehood—than any other idea. This idea of a supremely perfect and infinite being is, I say, true in the highest degree; for although one might imagine that such a being does not exist, it can’t be supposed that the idea of such a being represents something unreal in the way that the idea of cold perhaps does. The idea is, moreover, utterly vivid and clear. It does not matter that I don’t grasp the infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God that I can’t *grasp* and perhaps can’t even *touch* 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 that I clearly perceive and know to imply some perfection—and perhaps countless others of which I am ignorant—are present in God either straightforwardly or in some higher form. This is enough to make the idea that I have of God the truest and most vivid and clear of all my ideas.

·Here is a possible objection to that line of thought·. Perhaps I am greater than I myself understand: perhaps

all the perfections that I attribute to God are ones that I *do* have in some potential form, and they merely haven't yet shown themselves in actuality. My knowledge is gradually increasing, and I see no obstacle to its going on increasing to infinity. I might then be able to use this increased—and eventually infinite—knowledge to acquire all the other perfections of God. In that case, I already have the potentiality for these perfections—why shouldn't this potentiality be enough to enable me to have caused the idea of them—that is, to have caused my idea of God?

But all this [that is, the whole of the preceding paragraph] is impossible for three reasons. •First, though it is true that my knowledge is increasing, and that I have many potentialities that 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, because if I am learning more, that shows that there are things I don't know, and that is an imperfection in me. •What is more, even if my knowledge increases for ever, it will never actually be infinite, since it will never reach the point where it isn't 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, thirdly, strictly speaking *potential* being is nothing; what it takes to cause the representative being of an idea is *actual* being.

If one concentrates carefully, all this is quite evident by the natural light. But when I relax my concentration, and my mental vision is blurred by the images of things I perceive by the senses, I lose sight of the reasons why my idea of *more perfect being* has to come from a being that really is more perfect. So I want to push on with my enquiry, now asking a new question: If the more perfect being didn't exist, could I exist? My hope is that the answer to this will yield a

new proof of the existence of a perfect being—a proof that it will be easier for me to keep in mind even when I relax my concentration.

Well, if God didn't exist, from what would I derive my existence? It would have to come from myself, or from my parents, or from some other beings less perfect than God (a being more perfect than God, or even one as perfect, is unthinkable).

If I had derived my existence from myself, I would not now doubt or want or lack anything at all; for I would have given myself all the perfections of which I have any idea. So I would be God. I mustn't suppose that the items I lack would be harder to get than the ones I now have. On the contrary, it would have been far more difficult for me—a thinking thing or substance—to emerge out of nothing than merely to acquire knowledge of the many things I'm ignorant about, because that would merely be giving the substance certain accidents. If I had derived my existence from myself—the greater achievement—I certainly wouldn't have denied myself the knowledge in question, which is something much easier to acquire, or indeed any of the attributes that I perceive to be contained in the idea of God; for none of them seem any harder to achieve. . . .

Here is a thought that might seem to undercut that argument. Perhaps I have always existed as I do now. Then wouldn't it follow that there need be no cause for my existence? No, it does *not* follow. For a life-span can be divided into countless parts, each completely independent of the others, so that from my existing at one time it doesn't follow that I exist at later times, unless some cause keeps me in existence—one might say that it *creates me afresh* at each moment. Anyone who thinks hard about the nature of time will understand that what it takes to •bring a thing into existence is also needed to •keep it in existence at each mo-

ment of its duration. So there's no *real* distinction between •preservation and •creation—only a *conceptual* one—and this is something that the natural light makes evident.

So I have to ask myself whether I have the power to bring it about that I, who now exist, will still exist a minute from now. For since I am nothing but a thinking thing—or anyway that is the only part of me that I am now concerned with—if I had such a power I would undoubtedly be aware of it. But I experience no such power, and this shows me quite clearly that I depend for my continued existence on some being other than myself.

Perhaps this being is not God, though. Perhaps I was produced by causes less perfect than God, such as my parents. No; for as I have said before, it is quite clear that there must be at least as much reality or perfection in the cause as in the effect. And therefore, given that I am a thinking thing and have within me some idea of God, the cause of me—whatever it is—must itself be a thinking thing and must have the idea of all the perfections that I attribute to God. What is the cause of this cause of me? If it is the cause of its own existence, then *it is God*; for if it has the power of existing through its own strength, then undoubtedly it also has the power of actually possessing all the perfections of which it has an idea—that is, all the perfections that I conceive to be in God. If on the other hand it gets its existence from another cause, then the question arises all over again regarding this further cause: Does *it* get its existence from itself or from another cause? Eventually we must reach the ultimate cause, and this will be God.

It is clear enough that this sequence of causes of causes can't run back to infinity, especially since I am dealing with the cause that not only produced me in the past but also preserves me at the present moment.

One might think this:

Several partial causes contributed to my creation; I received the idea of one of the perfections that I attribute to God from one cause, and the idea of another from another. Each perfection is to be found somewhere in the universe, but no one thing has them all.

That can't be right, because God's *simplicity*—that is, the unity or inseparability of all his attributes—is one of the most important of the perfections that I understand him to have. The idea of his perfections as united in a single substance couldn't have been placed in me by any cause that didn't also provide me with the ideas of the perfections themselves; for no cause could have made me understand that the perfections are united without at the same time showing me what they are.

Lastly, as regards my parents, even if everything I have ever believed about them is true, it is certainly not they who *keep* me in existence. Insofar as I am a thinking thing, indeed, they did not even *make* me; they merely brought about an arrangement of matter that I have always regarded as containing me (that is, containing my mind, for that is all I now take myself to be). So my parents can't be the cause-of-me that I am enquiring about.

Given the failure of every other candidacy for the role of *cause of me and of my idea of a most perfect being*, I infer that the only successful candidacy is God's. Thus, I conclude that the mere fact that I exist and have within me an idea of a most perfect being—that is, God—provides a clear proof that God does indeed exist.

It remains for me only to ask *how* I received this idea from God. I didn't get it from the senses: it has never come to me unexpectedly, as do most of the ideas that occur when I seem to see and touch and hear things. And it's not something

that I invented, either; for clearly I can't take anything away from it or to add anything to it. When an idea is sheerly invented, the inventor is free to fiddle with it—add a bit here, subtract a bit there—whereas my idea of God is a natural unit that doesn't invite or even permit such interference. The only remaining alternative is that my idea of God is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me.

It is no surprise that God in creating me should have placed this idea in me, to serve as a mark of the craftsman stamped on his work. The mark need not be anything distinct from the work itself. But the mere fact that God created me makes it very believable that I am somehow made in his image and likeness, and that I perceive that likeness in the same way that I perceive myself. That is, when I turn my mind's eye upon myself, I understand that I am a thing that •is incomplete and •dependent on something else, and that •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 but infinitely, not just potentially but actually—and hence

that he is God. The core of the argument is this: I couldn't exist with the nature that I have—that is, containing within me the idea of God—if God didn't really exist. By 'God' I mean the very being the idea of whom is within me—the one that has no defects and has all those perfections that I can't *grasp* but can somehow *touch* with my thought. This shows clearly that it is not possible for him to be a deceiver, since the natural light makes it clear that all fraud and deception depend on some defect.

But before examining this point more carefully and investigating other truths that may be derived from it, I want to pause here and spend some time contemplating 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 in contemplating the divine majesty, so experience tells us that this same contemplation, though much less perfect, provides the greatest joy we can have in •this life.

Fourth Meditation: Truth and falsity

In these past few days I have become used to keeping my mind away from the senses; and I have become strongly aware that very little is truly known about bodies, whereas much more is known about the human mind and still more about God. So now I find it easy to turn my mind away from

objects of the senses and the imagination, towards objects of the intellect alone; these are quite separate from matter, whereas the objects of sense and imagination are mostly made of matter. Indeed, none of my ideas of corporeal [= 'bodily'] things is as distinct as my idea of the human mind,

considered purely as a thinking thing with no size or shape or other bodily characteristics. Now, when I consider the fact that I have doubts—which means that I am *incomplete and dependent*—that leads to my having a vivid and clear idea of a being who is *independent and complete*, that is, an idea of God. And from the mere fact that •I exist and have such an idea, I infer that •God exists and that every moment of my existence depends on him. This follows clearly; I am sure, indeed, that the human intellect can't know anything that is more evident or more certain. And now that I can take into account the true God, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge lie hidden, I think I can see a way through to knowledge of other things in the universe.

To begin with, I see that it is impossible that God should ever deceive me. Only someone who has something wrong with him will engage in trickery or deception. That someone is *able* to deceive others may be a sign of his skill or power, but his *wanting* to deceive them is a sign of his malice or weakness; and those are not to be found in God.

Next, I know from experience that I have a faculty of judgment; and this, like everything else I have, was given to me by God. Since God doesn't want to deceive me, I am sure that he didn't give me a faculty of judgment that would lead me into error while I was using it correctly.

That would settle the matter, except for one difficulty: what I have just said seems to imply that I can never be in error. If everything that is in me comes from God, and he didn't equip me with a capacity for making mistakes, doesn't it follow that I can never go wrong in my beliefs? Well, I know by experience that I am greatly given to errors; but when I focus on God to the exclusion of everything else, I find in him no cause of error or falsity. In looking for the cause of my errors, I am helped by this thought: as well as having a real and positive idea of *God* (a being who is supremely

perfect), I also have what you might call a negative idea of *nothingness* (that which is furthest from all perfection). I realize that I am somewhere in between God and nothingness, or between supreme being and non-being. Now, the positive reality that I have been given by the supreme being contains nothing that could lead me astray in my beliefs. I make mistakes, not surprisingly, because my nature involves nothingness or non-being—that is, because I am not myself the supreme being, and lack countless perfections. So error is not something real that depends on God, but is merely •something negative, a lack•, a defect. There is, therefore, nothing positively error-producing in the faculty of judgment that God gave me. When I go wrong I do so because the faculty of true judgment that I have from God is in my case not free of all limitations, •that is, because it partly involves nothingness•.

That is still not quite right. For error isn't a mere negation. •Pebbles and glaciers lack knowledge, and in them that lack is a mere negation—the absence of something that there is no reason for them to possess. I have lacks of that kind too, mere negations such my lack of the ability to fly, or to multiply two 30-digit prime numbers in my head. But my tendency to error isn't like that•. Rather, it is a *privation*, that is, a lack of some knowledge that I *should* have, •which means that I still have a problem about how it relates to God•. When I think hard about God, it seems impossible that he should have given me a faculty that lacks some perfection that it *should* have. The more skilled the craftsman, the more perfect the thing that he makes; so one would expect something made by the supreme creator to be complete and perfect in every way. It is clear, furthermore, that God *could* have made me in such a way that I was never mistaken; and there is no doubt that he always chooses to do what is best. Does this show that my making mistakes is better than my

not doing so?

Thinking harder about this, three helpful thoughts come to me. Two concern our knowledge of God's reasons generally; the third is specifically about human error. (1) I realize that it is no cause for surprise if I don't always understand why God acts as he does. I may well find other things he has done whose reasons elude me; and that is no reason to doubt his existence. I am now aware that my nature is very weak and limited, whereas God's nature is immense, incomprehensible and infinite; so *of course* he can do countless things whose reasons I can't know. That alone is reason enough to give up, as totally useless, the attempt that physicists make to understand the world in terms of what things are *for*, that is, in terms of God's purposes. Only a very rash man would think he could discover what God's impenetrable purposes are.

(2) In estimating whether God's works are perfect, we should look at the universe as a whole, not at created things one by one. Something that might seem very imperfect if it existed on its own has a function in relation to the rest of the universe, and may be perfect when seen in that light. My decision to doubt everything has left me sure of the existence of only two things, God and myself; but when I think about God's immense power I have to admit that he did or *could* have made many things in addition to myself, so that there *may* be a universal scheme of things in which I have a place. If that is so, then judgments about what is perfect or imperfect in me should be made on the basis not just of my intrinsic nature but also of my role or function in the universe as a whole.

(3) My errors are the only evidence I have that I am imperfect. When I look more closely into these errors of mine, I discover that they have two co-operating causes—my faculty of knowledge and my faculty of choice or freedom of

the will. My errors, that is, depend on both (a) my intellect and (b) my will. Let us consider these separately. (a) The intellect doesn't affirm or deny anything; its role is only to present me with ideas regarding which I can make judgments; so strictly speaking it doesn't involve any error at all. There may be many existing things of which my intellect gives me no ideas, but it isn't strictly correct to say that I am *deprived* of such ideas, as it would be if my nature somehow entitled me to have them. I can give no reason why God *ought* to have given me more ideas than he did. Just because I understand someone to be a skilled craftsman, I don't infer that he *ought* to have put into each of his works all the perfections he can give to some of them. So all I can say is that there are some ideas that I don't have; this is a purely negative fact about me like the fact that I can't fly; it doesn't mean that there is anything wrong with my nature. (b) I can't complain that God gave me a will or freedom of choice that isn't extensive or perfect enough, since I know by experience that will is entirely without limits. My will is so perfect and so great that I can't conceive of its becoming even greater and more perfect; it is a striking fact that this is true of my will and not of any other aspect of my nature. I can easily see that my faculty of understanding is finite, to put it mildly; and I immediately conceive of a much greater understanding—indeed, of a supremely great and infinite one; and the fact that I can form such an idea shows me that God actually has such an understanding. Similarly, if I examine memory and imagination and the rest, I discover that in my case these faculties are weak and limited, while in God they are immeasurable. It is only the will, or freedom of choice, which I experience as so great that I can't make sense of the idea of its being even greater: indeed, my thought of myself as being somehow like God depends primarily upon my will. God's will is incomparably

greater than mine in two respects: •it is accompanied by, and made firm and effective by, much more knowledge and power than I have; and •it has far more objects than my will does—that is, God makes more choices and decisions than I do. But these comparisons—having to do with •the amount of knowledge that *accompanies* and *helps* the will, or with •the number of states of affairs to which it is *applied*—do not concern the will in itself, but rather its relations to other things. When the will is considered ·not relationally, but· strictly *in itself*, God’s will does not seem any greater than mine. The will is simply one’s ability to do or not do something—to accept or reject a proposition, to pursue a goal or avoid something. More accurately: the ·freedom of the· will consists in the fact that when the intellect presents us with a candidate for acceptance or denial, or for pursuit or avoidance, we have no sense that we are pushed one way or the other by any external force. I can be *free* without being *inclined both ways*. Indeed, the more strongly I incline in one direction the more free my choice is—if my inclination comes from •natural knowledge (that is, from my seeing clearly that reasons of truth and goodness point that way) or from •divine grace (that is, from some mental disposition that God has given me). Freedom is never lessened—indeed it is increased and strengthened—by •natural knowledge and •divine grace. When no reason inclines me in one direction rather than another, I have a feeling of indifference—that is, of its not mattering which way I go—and that is the poorest kind of freedom. What it displays is freedom, considered not as a perfection but rather as a lack of knowledge—a kind of negation. If I always saw clearly what was true and good, I should never have to spend time thinking about what to believe or do; and then I would be wholly free although I was never in a state of indifference.

So the power of willing that God has given me, being extremely broad in its scope and also perfect of its kind, is not the cause of my mistakes. Nor is my power of understanding to blame: God gave it to me, so there can be no error in its activities; when I understand something I undoubtedly understand it correctly. Well, then, where do my mistakes come from? Their source is the fact that *my will has a wider scope than my intellect has*, ·so that I am free to form beliefs on topics that I don’t understand·. Instead of ·behaving as I ought to, namely by· restricting my will to the territory that my understanding covers, ·that is, suspending judgment when I am not intellectually in control·, I let my will run loose, applying it to matters that I don’t understand. In such cases there is nothing to stop the will from veering this way or that, so it easily turns away from what is true and good. That is the source of my error and sin.

Here is an example ·of how (1) the will’s behaviour when there *is* true understanding contrasts with (2) its behaviour when there *isn’t*·. (1) A while ago I asked whether anything in the world exists, and I came to realize that the fact of my raising this question shows quite clearly that *I* exist. I understood this so vividly that I couldn’t help judging that it was true. This was not the ‘couldn’t help’ that comes from being compelled by some external force. What happened was just this: *a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will*. I was not in a state of indifference, ·feeling that I could as well go one way as the other·; but this lack of indifference was a measure of how spontaneous and free my belief was. ·It would have indicated *unfreedom* only if it had come from the compulsion of something external, rather than coming from within myself·. (2) As well as knowing that I exist, at least as *a thinking thing*, I have in my mind an idea of *corporeal nature*; and I am not sure whether my thinking nature—which makes me what I am—is

the same as this corporeal nature or different from it. I take it that my intellect has not yet found any convincing reason for either answer; so I am indifferent with regard to this question—nothing pushes or pulls me towards one answer or the other, or indeed towards giving any answer.

The will is indifferent not only when the intellect is wholly ignorant but also when it doesn't have clear enough knowledge at the time when the will is trying to reach a decision. A probable conjecture may pull me one way; but when I realize that it *is* a mere conjecture and not a certain and indubitable reason, that in itself will push me the other way. My experience in the last few days confirms this: the mere fact that I found all my previous beliefs to be somewhat open to doubt was enough to switch me from confidently believing them to supposing them to be wholly false.

If when I don't perceive the truth vividly and clearly enough I simply *suspend judgment*, it's clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. It is a misuse of my free will to have an opinion in such cases: if I choose the wrong side I shall be in error; and even if I choose the right side, I shall be at fault because I'll have come to the truth by *sheer chance* and not through *a perception of my intellect*. The latter, as the natural light shows me clearly, should be what influences my will when I affirm things. I have said that error is essentially a *privation*—a lack of something that I should have—and now I know what this privation consists in. It doesn't lie in •the will that God has given me, or even in •the mode of operation that God has built into it; rather it consists in •my misuse of my will. •Specifically, it consists in •my lack of restraint in the exercise of my will, when I form opinions on matters that I don't clearly understand.

I can't complain that God did not give me a greater power of understanding than he did: created intellects are naturally finite, and so they naturally lack understanding of many

things. God has never owed me anything, so I should thank him for his great generosity to me, rather than feeling cheated because he did not give me everything.

Nor can I reasonably complain that God gave me a will that extends more widely than my intellect. The will is a single unitary thing; its nature is such, it seems, that there could be no way of taking away *parts* of it. Anyway, should not the great extent of my will be a cause for further thanks to him who gave it to me?

Finally, I must not complain that God consents to the acts of will in which I go wrong. What there is in these acts that comes from God is wholly true and good; and it is a perfection in me that I *can* perform them. Falsity and error are essentially a privation; and this privation isn't something to which God consents, because it isn't a thing at all. Indeed, when it is considered in relation to God as its cause, it isn't really a privation but rather a mere negation. •That is, it is a mere fact about something that is not the case; it does not involve the notion that it *ought* to be the case. I ought to restrain my will when I don't understand, but it isn't true that God ought to have forced such restraint on me. •God has given me the freedom to assent or not assent in cases where he did not give me clear understanding; he is surely not to blame for that. But I am to blame for misusing that freedom by coming to conclusions on matters that I don't fully understand. Of course God easily could have arranged things so that, while keeping all my freedom and still being limited in what I understand, I never made a mistake. He could do this either by •giving me a vivid and clear understanding of everything that I was ever likely to think about; or by •forcing me always to remember that I ought not to form opinions on matters I don't vividly and clearly understand. I can see that if God had made me this way, I would—considered just in myself, as if nothing else

existed—have been more perfect than I actually am. But the universe as a whole may have some perfection that requires that some parts of it be capable of error while others are not, so that it would be a worse universe if all its parts were exactly alike ·in being immune from error·. I am not entitled to complain about God's giving me a lower role in his scheme of things ·by selecting me as one of the creatures that isn't protected from error·.

What is more, even if I have no power to avoid error by •having a vivid perception of everything I have to think about, I can avoid it simply by •remembering to withhold judgment on anything that isn't clear to me. I admit to having the weakness that I can't keep my attention fixed on a single item of knowledge (·such as the no-judgment-when-clarity-of-perception-is-lacking rule·); but by attentive and repeated meditation I can get myself to remember it as often as the need arises, and thus to get into the habit of avoiding error.

This is where man's greatest and most important perfec-

tion is to be found; so today's meditation, with its enquiry into the cause of error, has been very profitable. I must be right in my explanation of the cause of error. If I restrain my will so that I form opinions only on what the intellect vividly and clearly reveals, I cannot possibly go wrong. Here is why. Every vivid and clear perception is undoubtedly something real and positive; so it can't come from nothing, and must come from God. He is supremely perfect; it would be downright contradictory to suppose that he is a deceiver. So the vivid and clear perception must be true. So today I have learned not only how to avoid error but also how to arrive at the truth. It is beyond question that I *shall* reach the truth if I think hard enough about •the things that I perfectly understand, keeping them separate from •all the other matters in which my thoughts are more confused and obscure. That is what I shall be really careful to do from now on.