2017

Hermeneutic Reflections on Descartes' Introduction to His Meditations on First Philosophy

David B. Allison
SUNY Stony Brook, nosillad@suffolk.lib.ny.us

David B. Allison

Hermeneutic Reflections on Descartes' Introduction to His *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Abstract: In these extracts reflecting on Descartes' Introduction to *Meditations on First Philosophy* we undertake to read between the Descartes project, reviewing Descartes' own account of his own project. By way of a close and critical reading, the key method of any hermeneutic approach to a philosophical text, the essay seeks to explore, in a parallel to Ranke's ideal of history as it itself actually was [*eigentlich gewesen*], what Descartes 'actually' says. In the end, this articulates Descartes' epistemological project beyond its usual interpretative scheme.

I General Introductory Remarks

In a text written in 1647—"Comments on a Certain Broadsheet"—Descartes makes a reference back to his *Meditations:*

> I wrote that we cannot doubt that our mind exists, because from the very fact that we are doubting, it follows that our mind exists, but for all that, we *can* doubt whether any *bodies exist in the world*. From this I concluded and demonstrated that we clearly perceive the *mind as an existing thing or substance*, even though we have no conception of any *body* whatever and even deny that any bodies exist, and *hence* that the concept of the *mind* does not in itself involve any concept of *body*. (CSM I, p. 301)[1]

Two important things to note here, among others: (l) that *substance* seems to be equated with *existence*, and (2) that *the concept of mind* does not involve any *concept of body.*

We know that Descartes will retrieve the *cogito* from doubt, that *he will be a thinking thing*—a thing which, as he says in Meditation II (Paragraph 8, CSM II, p. 19), "doubts, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels"—what he will term a mind *or* soul *or* understanding *or* reason. Now, each of these terms has an extension as wide as the history of philosophy itself.

1 Citations here follow Descartes in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985 [henceforth CSM].

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110528374-021

Yet what does Descartes return to, time and again? To the term "a *thinking* thing," "a thing which *thinks*." (emphasis added) Later, in *The Principles of Philosophy* (Principle IX, Pt. I, CSM I, p. 195), he defines thought in the following way:

> By the term 'thought,' I understand everything which we are aware of as happening within us, in so far as we have awareness of it. Hence, thinking is to be identified here not merely with understanding, willing, and imagining, but also with sensory awareness [i.e., "feeling": *sentir*—DBA]. For if I say 'I am seeing, or I am walking, therefore I exist', and take this as applying to vision or walking as bodily activities, then the conclusion is not absolutely certain. This is because, as often happens during sleep, it is possible for me to thin*k* I am seeing or walking, though my eyes are closed and I am not moving about; such thoughts might even be possible if I had no body at all. But *if* I take 'seeing' or 'walking' to apply to the action of my thought or feeling i.e., to the awareness which is in me, which makes me seem to be seeing or walking, then the conclusion is quite certain, since it relates to the mind, which alone has the sensation [the feeling: *sentir*—DBA] or thought that it is seeing or walking.

Here, thought seems to be all that which is present to me, all that I am conscious of: "Everything which we are *aware of as happening within us*," he says (emphasis added). The list of terms which defines a thinking thing in Meditation II (CSM II, p. 19) thus seems to require an addition: if each member on that list was a kind of consciousness, then this reading of *The Principles* seems to add another important dimension to the thinking, namely, the addition of self-consciousness. And the difference between the two is precisely the self, the "I," the ego of the *ego cogito*.

Now, what is so striking about this? About the self which thinks? Simply that it will be the origin of modern thought per se. This is Descartes' introduction of the coherent problematic of consciousness—to be taken up by Leibniz and Locke (who will use the exact same terms as Descartes: e.g., this "thinking thing" or "ego" that he speaks of repeatedly in his *Essay*), right through the empiricists, Kant, Hegel, etc., into contemporary thought.

Ego, self, or I, together with *consciousness* and *self-consciousness*. We have already seen in the *Discourse on Method* that Descartes had denied the ancient view of the soul. Here, in the *Meditations*, he will develop his critique, or rather, his proper account of it. The traditional view attributed an organic function to the soul, together with the functions of awareness and thinking. Descartes *separates* these two functions and conceives of the soul as a *function of consciousness*. The thinking self is then made opposed to the extended self; the result is the celebrated Cartesian dualism, mind and machine.

But where, precisely, is the opposition? In some sense, we know that the thought or mind depends on body: for example, in the *Discourse on Method*,

Part 6, Paragraph 2, (CSM I, p. 143), he said, "The mind depends so much on the temperament and disposition of the bodily organs" ... that it is medicine which will make men wiser. Also, there are the frequent affirmations in the *Regulae* that the imagination depends on the body; and, we recall in Meditation II, Paragraph 6, he observed that "one cannot feel without body," etc., etc. In this sense, according to the order of being, mind depends on body (this *ordo essendi*, of course, was the point of Henry More's objection of nullibism). Yet, from the standpoint of consciousness, mind is a truth prior to the truth of the body. In this sense, it is distinct from the body—that is, according to the order of reason or knowledge—the *ordo cognoscendi*. At the same time, and from the standpoint of consciousness, the thinking thing is: he will call it a *substance*, that is: an *existence*. It *ex-ists*, it stands forth to itself in self-consciousness: it is aware of its thoughts immediately.

Why has it been that the consciousness doctrine, perhaps, if anything, remains as the historical legacy from Descartes? Why have the attacks on it been so weak? Perhaps the strongest attack is the kind ventured by Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, and Heidegger—each of whom will claim that consciousness and self-consciousness are *not* all so evident, so clear and distinct, and that consciousness belies its hidden and obscure origins. Yet, in a very special sense, these are precisely Cartesian objections: for *Descartes* of the *Meditations*, the "I," "ego," or "self," that is, the source of consciousness is never exposed as a datum for inspection. What is examined is the *cogito*, or rather, the thinking as such, the thoughts themselves, the *cogitationes*.

But the self who doubts is not examined. It arises, or is constituted *by*, as he will say, "a continual succession of antecedents." On the one hand, as we have seen, the self has its origin in the body-machine, in the mechanical account of its activities, actions, passions, habits, etc.—and more of this is given us in detail in the final work, *The Passions of the Soul*. On the other hand, the self is historical: it is constituted by the acts of consciousness themselves—and in this sense, the Cartesian self somehow achieves itself, creates itself, as a work of resolution. It dictates, for example, a method by means of which it can increase its own wisdom. It resolves to pursue the course of mastery and self-mastery. By art, it frees itself from nature in order to overcome its own limitations, and thus, to conquer nature. And with this stroke, the unity of man with nature becomes broken.

In a traditional way, then, the project of mastery corresponds to psychophysical dualism—it involves two distinct orders: the organic and the cognitive. For the human being, the thinking self exercises mastery over the organic—the individual sets an end for himself and constitutes his own self according to the order he legislates (that is, according to felicity, wisdom, health, sweetness in this life, etc.). Likewise for nature as a whole: the order by which we under-

stand and master nature is—as he says in the *Discourse*—arbitrary. A fictionalized nature results from the model of mathematics. Thus, e.g., Cartesian nature is no longer beneficent, no longer directive, purposive, teleological, no longer eschatological.

To follow out this reading of Cartesian dualism—as a separation of function and as a domination of one function by the other—is also to see the perplexity that ensues for the tradition stemming from Descartes. What does thought do? What is the order of the self? Is the world of body now its object? Its source? Its constituted product?

With the traditional understanding of Cartesian dualism, one half of the dualism is invariably denied or dropped: idealism or materialism ensue. In any case, this is what we shall have to pursue in our reading of the *Meditations*—namely, to examine the agency and the effects of the Cartesian doctrine of consciousness. Already, we anticipate that it shall relate to, or at least in some important ways, it shall connect up with, the broader Cartesian themes of selfhood, mastery, mathematics, physics, Cartesian metaphysics and epistemology.

Our approach to this complex set of issues shall be through a close analysis of the famous Cartesian *doubt* of the First Meditation, and we shall center particularly on the questions of (1) the nature of deception, (2) the possibility of certainty, and (3) the status of God and demon.

II Introduction to the First Meditation: *Dedication* and *Preface*

What are the hermeneutico-phenomenological intentions of the *Meditations?* At the very start, the book's intentions seem to be *apologetic*, that is: they seem to attempt a defense of Christian doctrine. That is what *apologetics* means: a theological discourse, which pleads, or argues, in defense of the Christian faith. The term comes from the Greek: *apo* and *logos*. A speech or discourse *for*, or *about*, or *in favor of*.

So, the intention of the *Meditations* seems to be apologetic: he seems to be defending the faith and he seeks protection from the Sorbonne for this book—which he calls "this just or excellent treatise." Now what are the contents of this just treatise? The contents are his considerations upon what he calls "the two questions" respecting God and the soul. What is the stated purpose of such an apologetic treatise? To persuade infidels of religion and moral virtue. Or, as Mr. Cottingham would have it, to persuade "unbelievers" of religion and moral virtue.

The intended audience of the *Meditations*, then, will be infidels and atheists. Why is this? Because Descartes holds philosophy and theology to be quite dis-

tinct. As he will say in the *Dedication* [—to those most learned and distinguished men, the Dean and Doctors of the sacred Faculty of Theology at Paris], in Paragraph 2 (CSM II, p. 3).

> It is quite enough for us faithful ones to accept by means of faith the fact that the human soul does not perish with the body and that God exists.

Sure, it is quite enough for us—we, of the faith—but *not for them*. As he would say, "we must believe in the existence of God because it is a doctrine of Holy Scripture, and conversely, that we must believe Holy Scripture because it comes from God."

They, however, would accuse us of *circular reasoning:* they would admonish us by saying that we *believe* in God *because* we have *faith* in Holy *Scripture*—we have faith in faith. What we believe in is the cause of our belief.

Thus the adversaries, the infidels and atheists, will determine the mode of discourse, and this will be natural reason, logical argumentation. Now, note that this is curious in that it seems as if the adversary would have to suspend reason, precisely in order to assert belief in God. Also, the very terms infidel and atheist are themselves designations of faith and not reason. It is also interesting in that Descartes makes no mention that his natural reasoning would tend to bolster or corroborate the faith of the already faithful.

All of this points out Descartes' extreme separation of faith and reason. For St. Thomas, it was not unreasonable to give our assent to truths of faith, precisely because these truths of faith are said to be beyond reason, i.e., they are held to be higher than reason. Thus, he—St. Thomas—claims the utility of reason in the service of faith. Or, in short, that *philosophy* is ultimately *dependent on*—ancillary to—*theology*. But there is absolutely none of this for Descartes. Indeed, from his "Comments on a Certain Broadsheet," he would say as much (CSM I, p. 301).

> For, since we were born men before we became Christians, we cannot believe that anyone would seriously embrace opinions which he thinks contrary to that right reason which constitutes being a man, simply in order to cling to the faith which makes him a Christian.[2]

As to the explicit separation of faith and reason in the *Meditations*, we already note the following remark in Paragraph 6, CSM II, p. 8, of the *Preface to the Reader*—and this is just below the middle of Paragraph 6—"Those who do not bother to grasp the proper order of my reasons and the connection between them, but merely try to carp at individual sentences, as is the fashion, will not get much

2 From CSM I, p. 301.

benefit from reading this book." Such readers must, he says, "deliver themselves from every source of prejudice." Moreover, in Paragraph 6 of the *Dedication*, CSM II, p. 6, he says "The reasons by which he proves that God exists, and that the human soul differs from the body"—should "be treated as very exact demonstrations." Or, in Paragraph 4 of the *Dedication* (CSM II, p. 4): all the proofs of God and the soul, of which he will select certain ones are put forward "precisely and clearly" as "demonstrative proofs." Or, again, in Paragraph 5 of the *Dedication* (CSM II, p. 4), they "are as certain and evident as the proofs of geometry" ... "and no proposition is put forward in a book without there being a conclusive demonstration available."

It seems clear, then, that the *mode of discourse* will be *right reason*, and that the *criteria for evaluating his arguments* will be the deductive certainty required by *logic* or geometrical *proof*.

The means for evaluating what are, after all, articles of faith in this case, thus seems to be reason. This is a claim, we remember, from the Fourth *Discourse on Method*, Paragraph 8, CSM I, p. 131: "For after all, whether we are awake or asleep, we ought never to let ourselves be convinced except by the evidence of our reason." He will *repeat* this kind of claim in the last words of his very next book, *The Principles of Philosophy*, where he says, "I would not wish anyone to believe anything except what he is convinced of by evident and irrefutable reasoning."[3]

So much then, for the apologetic intention. Within the *Dedication* to those most learned and distinguished men of the Sorbonne, and within the *Preface to the Reader*, the apologetic intention seems to be well-stated. The same criteria seem to be affirmed elsewhere.

Yet, there are some troubling problems with the apologetic intention: Indeed, I think we can specify seven points of difficulty concerning this apologetic intention:

1) We see little indication of reason's confirming the faith of the faithful.
2) Thus, reason appears to be in conflict with faith, and this is opposed to the traditional teaching of, e. g., St. Thomas.
3) Descartes shall be writing according to *the most ancient method*, i. e., according to the task of seeking "truth"—as he says in Paragraph 4, CSM II, p. 4, of the *Dedication*. But, in this case, what is oldest or most ancient is of course *pagan*, quite *unchristian*.
4) Another troubling issue is that the subject matter of the apologetic intention is remarkably vague:

3 Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, CSM II, p. 291 (Part IV, princ.207

a) Paragraph 2 of the *Dedication*, e.g., speaks of "The two questions respecting God and the soul."
b) Again, in Paragraph 2: "That the human soul *does not die* with the body and that God exists."
c) Paragraph 4: "That God exists and that the human soul is *distinct* from the body."
d) Paragraph 6: "That God exists and that the human soul *differs* from the body."
e) Again, Paragraph 6: "The existence of God and the *real and true distinction* between the human soul and the body."

Note that the first formulation is referred to as "the two questions"—Cottingham has "topics"—and that the last is referred to as "these beliefs" (and this is in the footnote 1, CSM II, p. 6). Thus, what we find here is really several quite distinct formulations of the subject matter, all lumped together as "the two questions."

5) These "two questions," rather sloppily articulated in the *Dedication*, are held up to us in the first paragraph of the *Preface to the Reader*—yet there, he claims to have already discussed them in an earlier book, one he wrote four years before the *Meditations*, namely, in his *Discourse on Method*. Interestingly, he mentions that he wrote the earlier *Discourse on Method*—not in Latin, but in French. Why? He says he wrote it for the benefit of weak minds, who couldn't read Latin. Now in a situation like this, when an author who very rarely quotes himself does so in such a striking manner, it is usually worthwhile to track down that reference. If we track it down, we find that it occurs in the fifth part of the *Discourse on Method*, Paragraph 12, CSM I, p. 141, and it says the following:

> Next to the error of those who deny God, which I think I have already sufficiently refuted, there is none which is more effectual in leading weak minds from the straight path of virtue, than to imagine that the soul of the brute (i.e., of animals) is of the same nature as our own, and that in consequence, after this life we have nothing to fear or to hope for, any more than the flies and ants.

So, there, in the *Discourse on Method*, it seems that weak minds fear to think of themselves just as perishable in their being as flies and ants. Here, in Paragraph 6 of the *Dedication*, he appeals to the Dean and Doctors of the Sacred Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne to defend precisely these so-called proofs—of God and soul. Why should they defend them? Because, Descartes reminds them, "It is for you to judge the advantage that would come from establishing these beliefs firmly, since you see the disorders which come from their being doubted." Or, in

Paragraph 2 of the *Dedication*, he says, "Few people would prefer the right to what is useful, if they did not fear God or have the expectation of an afterlife."

What is a bit odd about this, of course, is that we have seen just how importantly Descartes himself sees utility, usefulness—from the *Regulae* right through the *Passions of the Soul*. In fact reason itself is important precisely because it is useful in the service of the passions, the emotions, the human sensibility. Indeed the doctrine of mastery over nature was framed to enable us to live well and to enjoy the fruits of this life. That the tree of philosophy, with its branches of medicine, mechanics, and morals, was grown for its fruits. That the art of scientific method gives the knowledge of all that can be known by man. In fact, in Paragraph 4 of the *Dedication* Descartes even says "I have cultivated a method for the resolution of difficulties of every kind in the sciences."—no small claim. Few people, indeed, would prefer the right to the useful, were they not restrained by the fear of God or the expectation of an after-life.

6) Not only is the apologetic subject matter somewhat vague, and that it seems to contradict Descartes' own major teaching of utility, of mastery, in the *Discourse on Method*, but there are still further reasons for lessening its stated importance. After his repeated insistence that the mode of discourse would be right reason, he sums up his account in Paragraph 5 of the *Dedication*, on the bottom of CSM II, p. 4:

> The present treatise contains everything that I have been able to accomplish in this area. Not that I have attempted to collect here all the different arguments that could be put forward to serve as proofs of the subject, for this does not seem worthwhile except in cases where no single argument is regarded as certain. What I have done is to take merely the principal and most important arguments [note the plural] and develop them in such a way that I would now venture to put them forward as very certain and evident demonstrations. I will add that these proofs are of such a kind that I reckon they leave no room for the possibility that the human mind will ever discover any better ones.

Thus it doesn't seem necessary to give more than one proof of God unless no single proof was certain. And what does Descartes himself do in the *Meditations?* He gives three proofs. What does he say about the proofs? None could be better. Also, all that he could accomplish in these matters is contained in this treatise.

On to point 7:

7) What does Descartes demand, what does he require, of his audience? Not only that they follow right reason and really treat these proofs as veritable demonstrations, but also—and he says this in Paragraph 5 of the *Dedication*—also that the reader (1) be free of prejudice, (2) that the reader detach himself from the senses.

Yet this first requirement ironically describes the learned and distinguished Dean and Doctors of the Sacred Faculty of Theology. That is, ironically, it points out precisely those people who are the most prejudiced—those people who, in fact, tolerate circular reasoning out of faith, out of their own pre-existing belief, their pre-judgments or prejudices.

But, furthermore, the second requirement follows from the first. Belief in the teaching of the senses, that is, the ordinary belief in what we learn through our own sense experience, is also a prejudice. And why is that? Because, ultimately, it gives us a false understanding of nature. Sense experience does not teach us about a mathematically conceived nature; sense experience does not give us scientific nature—rather, sense experience gives us a lot of hard, soft, sweet, sour, pleasant, light and bright, drippy, yucky, loud and smelly nature. As Descartes himself would say in a later work, *The Principles of Philosophy*, "The first and principal cause of error stem from the prejudices of childhood"[4]—and the error consists simply in believing the testimony of the five senses, and by grasping the world, or nature, in terms of these sense qualities, instead of understanding it according to magnitude, figure, quantity, and movement—i. e., according to what he takes to be the "simple natures," or the "analytical" simples, or, what will later be called the doctrine of primary qualities.

The sense qualities are subjectively experienced, on the one hand, while, on the other, mathematical magnitude, is objectively conceived and quantifiable. The former concerns the *qualitative* aspect of our *experience* of things, the latter the *quantitative* aspect, the *objective nature of things themselves*. The former is *secondary* to the latter, at least in terms of *scientific* understanding. Sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch may vary from person to person, and the experiences *we* have will thus vary among us, as will the judgments based upon these varying tastes, and experiences. But three-dimensional space-time, which envelops every object, and in terms of which every object can be mathematically defined, doesn't. The geometrically conceived figure is the same for everyone: it can be precisely defined, measured, duplicated by anyone, anywhere, verified and judged valid in terms of mathematical rules—even if you don't have a taste for mathematics. And every object, no matter how tasty, smelly, or pleasing it may be to you—or may not be to someone else—every object, any object, can be expressed mathematically, by the sciences of physics, mechanics, and dynamics. And that is useful.

All the same, for the apologetic intention, these two requirements demanded of the reader (namely, to be free from prejudice, to be detached from the senses),

4 *The Principles of Philosophy*, Part I, princ. 71, CSM I, pp. 218 – 219.

these could be understood in another way. They could concern the prejudices of infidels and atheists. Atheists, for example, have the prejudice that there is no immaterial, and hence, immortal soul, which will go to heaven—and in this respect they are materialists. They, like flies and ants, will doubtless suffer corruption upon death—at least this is what they believe, as materialists. Hence they treat certain other tenets of Christian doctrine with some suspicion as well (miracles, grace, beatitude, heaven, angels, etc.). As for the infidels, certainly Averroes—following Aristotle—they also denied any compelling reasons for personal immortality, since the soul is held to be the form of the body. And this, among other things, accounts for the violence of the attacks against the Averroist heresy—for example, Petrarch's *Contra Averroistes*, or even his *De Ignorantia*—where he claimed that the Averroists were impious and pestiferous fools, worthy only of censorious rebuke. Also, and to push this a bit, the political wars of the Ottoman Turks were ravaging the Europe of the Holy Roman Empire. For them, of course, the Christians were the infidels.

Now all this leads us to the second intention of the *Meditations*, which is perhaps best expressed in the very first paragraph of the First Meditation:

> Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and but the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish all the opinions I had formerly received and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.

Hardly a *suspicion* of this concern with the sciences in the *Dedication*.

Curieux.

In the *Preface to the Reader*, this second intention—the theoretical or scientific intention—is barely discernible. In Paragraph 6 of his *Preface to the Reader*, Descartes had remarked that he will tackle the questions concerning "God and the human soul, and this time I am also going to deal with the foundations of first philosophy in its entirety."

What should be noted here, however, is that these "two questions" of God and the soul are traditionally supposed to be among the very contents of metaphysics, i.e., of first philosophy—so, how do we explain this? This seeming redundancy? Perhaps the previous sentence directs us to the more obvious theoretical intention Descartes might have in mind. There, at the end of the previous paragraph, Paragraph 5 of the *Preface*, CSM II, on p. 8, he says "our minds must be regarded as finite and limited things, while God is infinite and beyond our comprehension." With this statement, the mind seems curiously identified with what could be defined as figure—that is, it might be seen to an-

ticipate a doctrine of mathematics, which would exclude comprehension of anything without finitude and limit. In this sense, God would be incomprehensible indeed. Again, there is ample cause for suspicion when God is said to be incomprehensible. How, for example, would one have an idea of God or about God? How could one reasonably or rationally prove the existence of anything, which is literally incomprehensible?

I think what Descartes is attempting to do here is to make the *attentive reader* more aware of his theoretical intentions—thus suggesting to the attentive reader that the apologetic concerns are not really what the book is principally about. In other words, it seems that Descartes is really trying to separate physics from metaphysics, precisely in order to make the strong distinction between our scientific knowledge of bodies and the incomprehensibility of traditional metaphysical accounts of God and the immortal soul. Then, as now, the very term "metaphysical" had a secondary meaning: vague, abstract, speculative, and useless, with not too much sense of reality. Let the attentive reader stick with the claims for ascertaining certainty in the sciences, and let the Jesuits and the weak-minded hot-foot it after immortality. This suspicion seems to be confirmed in his Synopsis of the Second Meditation, on the top of CSM II, p. 10, where he says,

> But I have not pursued this topic any further in this book, first because these arguments are enough to show clearly enough that the decay of the body does not imply the destruction of the soul, and are hence enough to give mortals the hope of an after-life, and secondly because the premises which lead to the conclusion that the soul is immortal depend on an account of the whole of physics.

Now, I think that it is a reasonable suspicion that one *is not likely to deduce the immortality of the immaterial soul from physics*. What one might assert, however, is that the soul or mind is not extended, as are the bodies of physics. In this sense, physics may be said to exclude any scientific knowledge of the soul. Or of God, for that matter. If Descartes can say that all he needs for a complete elaboration of the sciences—of physics, mechanics, and dynamics—is mathematics, then God could simply be postulated as "infinite." Indeed, as a mathematician, infinity could easily be asserted in a formula: X+1, or X to the power of n. What to keep in mind, however, and this is extremely important for our reading, is that Descartes will often speak of the nature of mind, the nature of God, the nature of bodies, as well as about the existence of mind, the existence of God, and the existence of bodies. He will often speak both of the nature and the existence of something as well as about the nature or the existence of something. The nature of a centaur is a flying horse, fancifully depicted in Greek mythology. The existence of a centaur is not likely to be verified, however. The nature of a perfectly

regular, equiangular triangle is well known to any high school freshman. Unfortunately, they do not exist in reality.

III Meditation One

With the stated theoretical intention of establishing a firm foundation of the sciences in mind, how does the First Meditation begin? Well, in a by now familiar way: it begins by resolution—he must act to overcome his own irresolution. In the beginning, then, is will, practice, resolution—and the theoretical intention will be effected by this will, just as in the *Discourse on Method*, where he resolved to form a method.

The first instance of will or resolution immediately follows: he wills to *doubt*. Yet, what controls this doubt? What directs it? Why, in fact, doubt at all? There must be some reason for doubting—some *ratio dubitandi*. And this means that doubt is determined, orchestrated, by some principle.

But in the same breath he says that if there is the slightest doubt concerning his former opinions, this justifies his doubting them all, the whole sum of his former opinions. Again, curious. What is the reason for this? None. The celebrated hyperbolic doubt thus does not follow from any reason or principle. Doubt is therefore not argued, and the hyperbolic doubt is not an argument. What is it, then? Quite simply, hyperbole—that is, exaggeration. He presents it as if it were a conclusion, but this hyperbolic doubt—which equates the teensie-weensiest bit of doubt with falsity—is a preposterous, that is, hyperbolic, conclusion. Thus, the rejection of the merely or possibly dubious facts or opinions is not an argued position at all. Rather, it has been willed, it has been resolved. The question we have to ask of Descartes, then, is why? Why start here? Why this seemingly arbitrary starting point, which, unlike ordinary doubt, or unlike argued doubt, simply excludes the dubitable, much less the likely, and even more curiously, the probable. "99 and 44/100 % pure" is fine for Ivory soap, but seemingly not for Descartes.

In a way, we see how far Descartes also excludes the entire tradition of philosophy by this move. Even the ancient pagans, such as Plato and Aristotle, vested trust (i. e., *pistis*) in the objects of the senses—even to the point of using them as the basis for attaining higher knowledge.

Now, at this point, some half-way through Paragraph 2 of the First Meditation, CSM II, on p. 12, Descartes *narrows* this hyperbolic doubt, and he renders it finite:

> For the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. And to do this I will not need to run through them all individually, which would be an endless task. Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles upon which all my former opinions rested.

By doubting the old foundations hyperbolically, he can ascertain the certainty of new foundations. On the basis of a destructive work, he is enabled to find new, veridical foundations.

Thus, he doubts the senses. The reason now, for doubting the senses, is that they are sometimes deceptive. But—and this is a very big but—in what appears to be quite contrary to hyperbolic doubt, Descartes doesn't doubt all the senses. He only doubts the external senses, that is, he only doubts external sense perception. The problem is, however, that the external senses depend on the internal senses. That is, our images of the external world depend on our internal mental states, our own imagination, our particular temperaments, our passions. Thus, the first example he gives in Paragraph 4 is that of madness: those people who think they are made of glass, or who think they have heads made of earthenware or pumpkins—these people are mad! Me too, perhaps!

The second example of external dependency on the internal mental state, which is given in Paragraph 5, is that of dreaming. How do I discern external reality in my dreams? Thus, the real problem here is the status of images. In other words, to what extent do images distort external reality? The continued use of the dream, of dreaming, is a metaphor for the imagination. The first *hyperbolical conclusion* then, is that—of all things—*I am dreaming!* The whole analysis of Cartesian doubt will find its core in this problem: namely, the way we take the external upon the internal. Again, a memorable passage from *The Principles of Philosophy*, Part I, Principle 71, (CSM I, p. 218):

> It is here that the first and main cause of all our errors may be recognized. In our early childhood the mind was so closely tied to the body that it had no leisure for any thoughts except those by means of which it had sensory awareness of what was happening to the body [i.e., it had sensations]. It did not refer these thoughts to anything outside itself, but merely felt pain when something harmful was happening to the body and felt pleasure when something beneficial occurred. And when nothing very beneficial or harmful was happening to the body, the mind had various sensations [or, feelings] corresponding to the different areas where, and ways in which, the body was being stimulated, namely, what we call the sensations of tastes, smells, sounds, heat, cold, light, colors and so on —sensations which do not represent anything located outside our thought, but which vary according to the different movements which pass from all parts of our body to the part of the brain to which our mind is closely joined and united.

The error we make as children. This is to say that, traditionally, to be real is to be a particular thing—precisely Aristotle's mistake in beginning his philosophy with the sensible particulars, the *tode ti*. All our mistakes of sensation stem from this. Consequently, we do not know the nature of things: of body, extension, figure, proportion, number, etc.

Thus, we see the problem of dreams. Initially, our images depend on our temperaments. In this way, the external images become transformed by our internal sensibility, i.e., by our own various feelings and sensations. Therefore, we must somehow get outside the passions, outside the temperaments or personal sensibility, etc., in order to understand this error. The problem is effectively what has since become termed *the error of the natural attitude*. Or, to put this in still somewhat different terms, we must somehow overcome the *anthropomorphic* attitude.

The critique of traditional belief, or the critique of the traditional sciences, cannot, therefore, be based on the senses alone. Thus, the senses themselves must be criticized by something else—namely, by Cartesian science. But the problematic status of the *image*, of the *dream*, out of which one extracts *the mathematicals*, the analytical simples of Cartesian mathematics and physics, this is itself never really resolved. Cartesian dualism, therefore, is more rightly understood to be a form of *epistemological dualism*, i.e., the subject-object split, rather than the much more conventionally heralded psycho-physical dualism, i.e., the mind-body split.

IV Meditation Three: God

For purposes of method, the theses about mind and body remain metaphysically neutral in Meditation II. Both of these are argued for on the order of knowledge. Thus, I know that mind or soul, etc., is a thinking thing. Its nature—at least, so far as it is known by me—is to think. Likewise with body: so far as I know its nature, body is extension. Both claims, as we showed above, regarding the nature of mind and about the nature of body, are basically *epistemological* claims. That is, they are claims about what I can know of their respective natures. How is the conception of body as magnitude connected with the reality of really existent extended bodies? How is this connection made? It is simply asserted. Thus, 13 lines down on CSM II, p. 21, in Paragraph 12 of Meditation II, he had claimed:

> But what is this wax which can only be conceived by the understanding or the mind? it is of course the same wax which I see, which I touch, which I imagine, in short, the same wax that I knew from the start.

The assertion, then, amounts to the claim that what I know is similar to what I see, and that it exists. This is an assertion and it remains to be proven. In Meditation III, however, he will claim God as the guarantor for this knowledge. Hence, the *necessity for proving the existence of God*.

Let us look first at the organization of the Third Meditation. It can be divided into six parts:

1) CSM II, p. 24, Paragraph 1.
2) CSM II, p. 24, Paragraph 2.
3) CSM II, p. 24–25, Paragraphs 3 & 4.
4) *First* method of investigating ideas: CSM II, pp. 25–27, Paragraphs 5–12.
5) *Second* method of investigating ideas: *first proof* of God; CSM II, pp. 27–32, Paragraphs 13–26.
6) Divisibility of time; *second* proof of God; CSM II, pp. 32–36, Paragraphs 27–39.

Briefly stated:

Part I. *What* do I know? That I am a thinking thing.

Part II. *How* do I know this is *true?* Because it is clear and distinct. Truth is defined as clarity and distinctness.

Part III. The *referential character* of *images* is *not* clear and distinct. What *is* clear and distinct is only the fact *that* something is *present to consciousness*. Also, the truths of the cogito, mathematics, and the principle of noncontradiction are clear and distinct. *But, an omnipotent God* could *deceive* us even about *these* truths. Thus, truth gets reformulated, and is said to be clarity and distinctness, together with the knowledge that if there is a God, he is not a deceiver.

Part IV. Method one. Returning to what I know. No ideas give me the knowledge that what appears to be is, much less, that my ideas are similar to real things. The first method thus results in a *failure* to get *beyond* the image.

Part V. Hence, method two—what he calls "another way." There are ideas in my mind for which I can't be the adequate cause. Thus, God must be the adequate cause.

Once I prove God exists, I can prove that the *body* exists and the *world* exists. All the same, one might admit that this is somewhat of an odd progression, in that without the knowledge of God's existence, I couldn't know that the body exists. By this same train of reasoning, it would seem that an atheist would not know that he or she even had a body—and atheist or infidel would not know that he or she was a living, breathing, walking thing.

Part VI. We are presented with the *second proof* of God, by way of the *divisibility of time and recurrent creation*.

Now, we had good reason, in reading the Sorbonne Dedication letter and the *Preface to the Reader*, to be somewhat skeptical about Descartes' apologetic claims. Yet, here, God reappears in force as a guarantor of truth. It seems possible, then, that there might be a convergence of the theoretical and the apologetical claims. But, we must ask, is this a real convergence or is it only apparent?

Let us initially pose the "G" question. Does Descartes really *need* God? His preliminary considerations in Meditations I and II showed that the nature of body was extension, and, in Meditation II, that the mind is only a thinking thing. Also, there, we saw that there was no need for sensible or intelligible forms. After the mathematicals are asserted, Descartes finds this very sphere of truth to be the basis of the cogito. And, on this basis, he can doubt the world. Thus, Cartesian science proceeds to doubt the images, knowing full well that it can correct them. It remains problematic, then, in what respect Descartes really requires God. It *seems* that the whole of Meditation III labors, through God, to establish the existence of the objects *of* Cartesian science. *If* God exists, then the *world* exists.

Notice that the Third Meditation begins with the same characterization of the thinking thing that we found in Meditation II, i.e., the characterization of the *cogito* in terms of its activity. Thus, in Paragraph 1, of the Third Meditation, 6 lines down, on CSM II, p. 24 of the Cottingham edition, he says,

> I am a thing that thinks: that is, a thing that doubts, affirms, denies, understands a few things, is ignorant of many things, that loves, hates, is willing, is unwilling, and also, which imagines and feels.

These are activities, then, or modes of thought—modes, modifications, or, quite simply, ways, of thinking—as he says, that "certainly reside and are met with in me." But, by Paragraph 5, a significant shift occurs, and the activity of the mind is dropped: now, he only speaks of its contents. This will be the basis of discussing the mind for the rest of Meditation III. Of course, in speaking of the mind's activity, we would have to ask about its ontological or metaphysical status—other than merely in terms of its contents. Thus, *the whole question of the I, the me, the ego or self, of the ego cogito, is once again passed over.* Now, why should this be? Because it may be the bodily source of our knowledge about bodies. Through our bodies, we could know both about the existence and about the nature of body in general. In any case, the omission of the self or what is not known about the mind, leaves us back on the plane of *images*—and, Paragraph 1 tells us that he will explicitly exclude their referential status. Yet, what is an image, if not of something?

> I will now shut my eyes, stop my ears, and withdraw all my senses. I will eliminate from my thoughts all images of bodily things, or rather, since this is hardly possible, I will regard all such images as vacuous, false, and worthless.

Therefore, when Descartes defines *truth* in Paragraph 2, as *clarity and distinctness*, we are presented with a concept of truth that is bizarre indeed. Conventionally, the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition holds truth to be an *adequation*, i.e., a correspondence, or a conformity between the mind and the thing: *veritas est adequatio intellectus ad rem*. But, now, for Descartes, if I have any content present to my mind, it is held to be true. Thus, the image *per se* is true, even though it gives us no evidence of anything at all beyond itself.

Whether or not it refers to things, I don't know. Hence, there cannot be a correspondence with things. This view will ultimately be developed through the empiricists' account of "impressions"—they will drop the use of the term 'image,' and will speak about *impressions* as the contents of consciousness. Thus, both Descartes and the empiricists seem to deny the intentionality of images, of thought contents. This intentional aspect had formerly been a characteristic understanding of images, at least since Plato, where the image or icon—*eikon*—derived from the capacity to make an image of something, or to recognize images as being images of something else in turn: *eikasia*.

Now, if this negative characterization of the image enables Descartes to provisionally sidestep the correspondence notion of truth, it also has an ostensibly positive side. It entails the thinking thing as the basis of the particular image. The thinking thing is prior to and more general than what I am thinking. Any candidate for truth, then, will be held up and judged by the cogito. Truth, then, is psychological: the image will have to be present to the cogito with clarity and distinctness. Now, this psychological presence to the cogito entails another psychological dimension, namely, that there be degrees of clarity and distinctness—and this bears on the degrees of priority in our own knowledge.

We already saw this with the wax example: what is most prior to our order of knowledge is most clear and distinct—this is *extension*, and it is more clear and more distinct than figure, for example, or flexibility, mutability. This priority of knowledge is also a logical priority. It is contradictory to say that figure does not presuppose extension, but the reverse doesn't hold. Psychologically, one could say that figure was less clear and distinct than extension, for extension is an absolutely simple concept, and it doesn't have the duality that figure has —it does not presuppos*e* anything else.

So, clarity and distinctness thus have three functions:

1) psychological
2) logical [functions]

3) methodological

1) Psychologically, something, let us call it "X," is indubitably present.
   a) forcibly present equals clear
   b) different from something else equals distinct
2) Logically, "X" is indubitable—and here, "indubitably" present means not self-contradictory.
3) Methodologically, "X" is prior to "Y" in our order of knowledge.

Again, the kind of truth we are given by these criteria, is interideational, i.e., it is a truth that takes place among or between ideas themselves. It is not one of correspondence or reference. Thus, figure might be indubitably present, and if I conceive of a triangle without self-contradiction, I satisfy a logical demand. But, if I understand this triangle as extension, then I grasp something more clearly and distinctly than figure. But, I still don't address any reference of the image to existence, however.

So, positively, then, the traditional notion of truth as correspondence is challenged on the basis of a *prior* truth, the truth about ourselves as thinking things, which claims an absolute priority for the order of knowledge. So, generally speaking, our images are clear and distinct so long as we don't try to interpret them, i.e., to assign them a reference. And this, of course, raises the principal issue of the Third Meditation: the status of the world as the cause of images, and the existence of God to guarantee the referential truth of these images. Thus, continuing in Paragraph 3, the top line CSM II, on p. 25 of Cottingham,

But there was something else which I used to assert, and which through habitual belief I thought I perceived clearly, although I did not in truth do so. This was that there were things outside me.

And to this, he adds at the beginning of Paragraph 4,

> But what about when I was considering something very simple and straightforward in arithmetic or geometry, for example, that two and three added together make five, and so on? Did I not see at least these things clearly enough to affirm their truth?

(It should be noted that this second case could well be an instance of clarity and distinctness, because the example of mathematics is drawn from the cogito, the very basis for clarity and distinctness.)

Nonetheless, an omnipotent God could suspend both kinds of claim: he can suspend existential and analytical truths. Why? 1) Because, since God is omnipotent, he is free to will anything at any time. Thus, he could will that $2 + 3 = 17$, or, he could make justice mean anything. In fact, this characterization of God by

Descartes will be strongly objected to by Leibniz. Let me quote from a letter, likely written to Malebranche, in June of 1679:

> I am told that Descartes established so well the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. I fear that we are deceived by such beautiful words. For the God or perfect being of Descartes is not a God such as one imagines, and as one would wish, that is to say, just and wise, doing all things for the good of the creatures so far as is possible, but rather, he is something approaching the God of Spinoza, that is to say, the principle of things, and a certain sovereign *power* called primitive Nature, which puts all in action, and does all that can be done; which has no will nor understanding, since, according to Descartes, he does not have the good for the object of his will, nor the true for the object of his understanding. *For he did not wish that his God act according to some end,* and it is for that reason that he excluded from philosophy the quest for *final causes*, under this clever pretext that we are not capable of knowing the purposes of God. Leibniz, (1923–), p. 775.

Thus, a more theologically proper account would be the following: an omnipotent being can do this, he could will that 2 + 3 = 17, i.e., he could do anything, provided you only consider his power. But this power is held to be qualified by his goodness—they are traditionally held to be coextensive in God. We see Leibniz' objection, then, in that the Cartesian God appears as a simple power. He doesn't seem to be qualified in any way—but, in the *Meditations*, Descartes at least says God could deceive, but he won't, because "he is said to be good." Whether or not this kind of God will be proven—Leibniz thinks not—will remain to be seen.

In any case, here we see the motivation for Descartes to prove God's existence. God could make clarity and distinctness false! All the same, Descartes has to employ the principle of noncontradiction—the very foundation of logic—if he is to demonstrate anything logically. Is this a circularity? I have to use logic to prove that God would guarantee the validity of logic? That which I prove guarantees the means by which I prove it. Or, that I have to use the principle of noncontradiction to prove God syllogistically: only then, only by virtue of the logical conclusion, do I have the right to affirm the validity of my logical principles of proof.

Perhaps this can be stated in a somewhat different way. I need a guarantee that God wouldn't suspend the truths of reason—i.e., at the limit, the law of noncontradiction"? How do I do this? I assume that he will guarantee it. So, we could say:

a) The whole question of proof is logically circular. That is, I have to presuppose that which I attempt to prove.
b) It is not circular. Many commentators have claimed this, theologians in particular.

c) We could say, with Leibniz, that the whole question of proof, here, is simply one grand charade. At best, Descartes' God would be like Spinoza's God of nature.

The explicit proof of God begins with the second method—namely, to look at the "objective reality," that is, the content of my ideas. By representation, some ideas are said to have more reality than other ideas! But, is this a plausible way of approaching ideas? Do ideas themselves admit of degrees of reality? Is the idea of an angel any more or less real than the idea of the devil, or the idea of a recreational vehicle, or the very idea of Marshall Spector's new Fall wardrobe?

As for ideas of substances, we have a very smelly red herring introduced here. Because, Descartes knows nothing about substances—he only knows that the nature of body is extension and that he's a thinking thing. Suddenly, substance intrudes into the equation. If this seems to be an unlikely way of approaching God, let us see how he begins, with the first way or the first method of investigating ideas.

There are two ways, then, one that apparently fails and one that allegedly succeeds. In Paragraph 5, CSM II, on p. 25 of Cottingham, 4 lines from the bottom of the page, Descartes gives us a classification of thoughts that are immediately present to us:

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

So, in Paragraph 5, then, Descartes offers us three types of thoughts, and these differ according to their *content*.

a) Images (ideas, properly speaking)
b) Thoughts accompanied by volitions or affections (image + concept)
c) Thoughts accompanied by judgments (images + concept)

Now, Descartes should be able to substitute the term "image" for "thought" in categories "b" and "c," but he doesn't. Why not? Because it would be hard to classify the *cogito* as an image, even as he seems to strain here by calling the idea of God an image.

But he goes on to a further classification of ideas in Paragraph 7, CSM II, on p. 26 of Cottingham:

> Among my ideas, some appear to be innate, some to be adventitious, i.e., foreign to me and coming from outside, and others have been made and invented by me. My understanding of what a thing is, what truth is, and what thought is, seems to derive simply from my own nature.

Thus, three kinds of ideas:

1) innate ideas
2) adventitious ideas
3) ideas made by me—that is, presumably, images made out of other, prior images, or ideas formed by abstraction

Now, while this definition is indeed wide, he gives an even more extensive one in his reply to Hobbes's *Objections*, the third set (CSM II, p. 127):

> Here my critic [Hobbes] wants the term 'idea' to be taken to refer simply to the images of material things which are depicted in the corporeal imagination. And if this is granted, it is easy for him to prove that there can be no proper idea of an angel or of God. But I make it quite clear in several places throughout the book, and in this passage in particular, that I am taking the word 'idea' to refer to whatever is immediately perceived by the mind. For example, when I want something, or am afraid of something, I simultaneously perceive that I want or am afraid; and this is why I count volition and fear among my ideas.

Descartes' definition of idea here, is so enormously broad as to be coextensive with thought. Indeed, he will say as much on p. 113 of CSM II, where he gives a set of definitions, following his replies to the Second Set of Objections. He says, "Idea. I understand this term to mean the form of any given thought." And, "Thought. I use this term to include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it."

The list in Paragraph **7,** CSM II, on p. 26, then, is a reclassification of ideas or thoughts with regard to their *origin*. First of all, then, according to this second classification by origin, what is an innate idea? It is nothing inscribed in us like a truth of conscience. Rather, it is a mode of thought, a way we think, and by which we can have the ability to recognize the truth of such things as the law of noncontradiction, figure, number, time, and the mathematicals. Let me give some references and citations on the sense he gives for *innate ideas*—that is, ideas which are born within me. He will often refer to these as "eternal truths."

1) Paragraph 3, Rule Four, of the *Regulae* (CSM I, p. 17):
   The human mind has within it a sort of spark of the divine, in which the first seeds of useful ways of thinking are sown, seeds which, however neglected and stifled by studies which impede them, often bear fruit of their own ac-

cord. This is our experience in the simplest of sciences, arithmetic, and geometry.

2) Paragraph 5 Rule Four, of the *Regulae* (CSM I, p. 18):
I am convinced that certain primary seeds of truth naturally implanted in human minds thrived vigorously in that unsophisticated and innocent age [of the Greek mathematicians] ... [which] enabled them to grasp true ideas in philosophy and mathematics.

3) Third Meditation, Paragraph 19, CSM II, p. 29:
As to my ideas of corporeal things, I can see nothing in them which is so great or excellent as to make it seem impossible that it originated in myself. For if I scrutinize them thoroughly and examine them one by one ... I notice that the things which I perceive clearly and distinctly in them are very few in number. This list comprises magnitude, or extension in length, breadth and depth; figure, which is formed by the boundaries of this extension; situation, which is a relation between various items possessing figure; and motion, or change in situation; to these may be added substance, duration and number.

4) *The Principles of Philosophy*, Part One, Principle 13 (CSM I, p. 197):
The mind, then, knowing itself, but still in doubt about all other things, looks around in all directions in order to extend its knowledge further. First of all, it finds within itself ideas of many things: and so long as it merely contemplates these ideas and does not affirm or deny the existence outside itself of anything resembling them, it cannot be mistaken. Next, it finds certain common notions from which it constructs various proofs; and, for as long as it attends to them, it is completely convinced of their truth. For example, the mind has within itself ideas of numbers and shapes, and it also has such common notions as: If you add equals to equals the results will be equal; from these it is easy to demonstrate that the three angles of a triangle equal two right angles, and so on.

5) *Principles*, Part One, Principle 49 (CSM I, p. 209):
when we recognize that it is impossible for anything to come from nothing, the proposition Nothing comes from nothing is regarded not as a really existing thing, or even as a mode of a thing, but as an eternal truth which resides within our mind. Such truths are termed common notions or axioms. The following are examples of this class: It is impossible for the same thing to be and to not be at the same time; What is done cannot be undone: He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks: and countless others. It would not be easy to draw up a list of all of them; but nonetheless, we cannot fail to know them when the occasion for thinking about them arises.

6) *Principles* One, 55 (CSM I, p. 211):
We shall also have a very distinct understanding of duration, order, and

number, provided we do not mistakenly tack on to them any concept of substance. Instead we should regard the duration of a thing simply as a mode under which we conceive the thing in so far as it continues to exist. And similarly we should not regard order or number as anything separate from the things which are ordered and numbered, but should think of them simply as modes under which *we consider* the things in question.

7) *Principles* One, 57, 58 (CSM I, p. 212):
When time is distinguished from duration taken in the general sense and called the measure of movement, it is simply a mode of thought .... In the same way, number, when it is considered simply in the abstract or in general, and not in any created things, is merely a mode of thinking; and the same applies to all the general ideas, which in the Schools are understood by the name of universals.

8) *Principles* One, 75 (CSM I, p. 221):
We have within us knowledge of many propositions which are eternally true, such as "nothing comes from nothing." We shall also find that we have knowledge both of a corporeal or extended nature which is divisible, moveable, and so on ... When we contrast all this knowledge with the confused thoughts we had before, we will acquire the habit of forming clear and distinct concepts of all the things that can be known.

The *adventitious* idea. This is the image pure and simple. He gives several examples of adventitious ideas in Paragraph 7, "my hearing a noise, as I do now, or seeing the sun, or feeling the fire, comes from things which are located outside me, or so I have hitherto judged."

Those ideas made by me, again, seem to be presented as a mixing or associating, or abstracting of ideas. He gives as examples, the ideas of "sirens, hippogryphs, and the like."

Now, where do we get the idea of body as extension? Seemingly by the third way, for we saw in Meditation II that Descartes stripped sensible qualities off the wax by abstraction—a procedure he had earlier explained in *The Regulae*, Rules XII and XIV, which then permits an intuition by the mind. In any case, he's silent about it here—perhaps because he had to suppose the existence of the wax in Meditation II.

Thus the question arises, at first negatively: How do I get *from* the contents of consciousness, from ideas or images in my mind, *to* the world? If I simply remain on the level of a self-present idea, I don't risk falsity. Thus, in Paragraph 6, CSM II, p. 26, he will remark:

> And the chief and most common mistake which is to be found here consists in my judging that the ideas which are in me resemble, or conform to, things located outside me. Of course, if I considered just the ideas themselves simply as modes of my thought [or: ways of thinking] without referring them to anything else from the outside, they could scarcely give me any material for error.

Thus the move begins: if my judgments concern the references of images, then what can I learn from images about the world, i.e., what can I know about real bodies? Does the image accurately represent the nature of the thing? And here it doesn't seem to be so much a question of existence, at least not from the start. Nonetheless, methods 1 & 2 will raise this as a problem: which is more important for our judgments about ideas?—essence or existence? In any case, both essence and existence are in question. His first formulation about the referential status of images will concern the nature of things, in Paragraph 8, CSM II, on p. 26:

> But the chief question at this point concerns the ideas which I take to be derived from things existing outside me: what are my reasons for thinking that they resemble these things?

Why do I judge that my ideas resemble or, are similar to, objects outside me? Why? Well, he says, *Nature teaches me!* That's just the way I'm made. Here the argument is limited to the simple image, to *adventitious* ideas alone. Yet he objects to this "teaching of nature" because it is not based on indubitable principles. It is only a natural impulse or inclination that makes him think the image is similar to external things, and not the natural *light*, i.e., not the *principles of reason.* Natural inclination or impulse makes errors: it can't distinguish, oftentimes, between virtue and vice, and it oftentimes inclines me to evil, rather than to the good, as he remarks at some length in Paragraph 9.

What Descartes wants to say is that simple images can't give us the real nature of bodies, or of the existing world. Nonetheless, my natural inclination leads me to believe that they do—and thus it has to fail. But why doesn't Descartes explain how it fails? Because then he'd have to expose the presupposition that there are bodies, that bodies exist! Otherwise, we couldn't very well make mistakes about them. So, in any case, I'm not taught the similarity thesis by natural reason. The principles of natural reason are indubitable. Inclination is not indubitable, so it has to be the cause of error. Thus, reason or understanding is preserved at the expense of natural inclination. Incidentally, this is the faculty, which, for St. Thomas Aquinas, leads us to the Good! In his *Treatise on Law*, Art. 2, sec. 93, he remarks, "We have a natural inclination to the Good." "Natural inclination is, for man, to preserve his own being." Hobbes and Spinoza could

likewise furnish analogous references. And, for Aquinas, reason would be the guide to the Good.

Cartesian physics, however, doesn't recognize the good, or incarnations of goodness, in the mathematical manifold. Also, for Cartesian physics and cosmology, the universe is in a sense homogeneous—it consists of extended bodies in an homogeneously extended space. There is no "great chain of being" here that would ascend from brute, formless matter, through informed matter, to pure forms, intelligible species, hosts of angels, and then on to the God who is pure act, *actus essendi*. Thus, for *Thomistic* physics, the created world points to God by degrees of goodness and by degrees of being or reality. Thus, the God of St. Thomas is at once *ens perfectissimum* and *ens realissimum*, as well as *ens omnipotens*.

In any case, the "teaching of nature," the "natural inclination," is dropped in Paragraph 9. On the one hand, Descartes wants to get outside of consciousness. The image must have its referent in the real world. If it doesn't, then the whole of Cartesian science is a rude sham for the groundlings. The problem is that I believe my image *corresponds to* reality. But do I have a scientifically justifiable basis for this assertion? No! This is why Descartes, bless his heart, will go through an apoplectic hocus-pocus in Meditation III to try and get a justifiable basis for it. Step one will exhaust images. Step two, what he calls "another way," i.e., a "second way," in Paragraph 13, will, ostensibly, get Descartes beyond his mind—but, all the same, this step occurs in an extraordinary fashion. Using illegitimate scholastic language, in the second way, he'll account for his knowledge of substance by claiming that, as a thinking thing, he may be the super-eminent cause of the objective content of his idea of extended substance. Got it? But still, realize that he hasn't gotten beyond the mind. Thus, he'll say that there is only one idea of which he can't account for his being the super-eminent cause, namely, God. So the ostensible move out of his mind doesn't occur until Paragraph 22, the top of CSM II, p. 31 in Cottingham. Thus, there is a God. God wouldn't deceive us. God, then, who is not a deceiver, guarantees our belief in the real existence of things, and that the nature of really existing things is to be extended. At a stroke, a *proof for the existence of the world*—and this satisfies the *scientific* intention—and a proof of the *existence of God*, which satisfies the *apologetic* intention. The great five cent synthesis! So, now, let us deal with this purported move. We return to the start of Paragraph 10, CSM II, on p. 27:

> And as for the other reason, since these ideas do not depend on my will, it does not follow that they must come from things located outside me. Just as the impulses which I was speaking of a moment ago seem opposed to my will, even though they are within me, so there may be some other faculty not yet fully known to me, which produces these ideas

> without any assistance from external things; this is, after all, just how I have always thought ideas are produced in me when I am dreaming.

Now, this mysterious faculty, which might produce these ideas, let us call it the "X" faculty, this might be the imagination, since it is said to produce images in me when I'm asleep. Much as we saw in the First Meditation. So here, again, we can find an answer to the question, "when does the thinking thing exist?" Only when I think—but if I think when I'm asleep, i. e., dreaming, then there is more to the thinking thing than awake, conscious thinking. But, all the same, this "X" faculty can't simply produce images in their entirety. As we saw, from Meditation One, Paragraph 6, it can make medleys and constructs out of a previously given content. Thus, *imagination* itself still presupposes a source of content—namely, the *adventitious* idea. Thus, we can't even explain the content of dreams without ultimately referring to extended bodies.

At this point in the Meditations, Descartes still doesn't know the thinking thing is incorporeal. Also, the status of this "X" faculty is something other than a function of the thinking thing as thinking. He says he doesn't know what it is. So, there must be the assumption that the "X" faculty is corporeal—what originates by it, then, doesn't originate from me, insofar as I know myself to be a thinking thing. I don't even know if I'm incorporeal. Suppose, then, that the thinking thing *is* corporeal. Then, either there are two sources of what is present to thought, or they are indistinguishable. So, there is reason to think they are separate—the operative assumption here, being that the thinking thing isn't corporeal!

So, finally, we get to the crucial Paragraph 11, CSM II, on p. 27: "And finally, even if these ideas did come from things other than myself, it would not follow that they must resemble those things.

There is a two-sided inquiry here: that which resembles and that which is resembled. Continuing, "Indeed, I think I have often discovered a great difference between an object and its idea in many cases."

Thus, two theses are asserted here. Descartes wants to prove:

A) Either my ideas do not come from objects outside me, or, that I do not know that objects exist outside me.
B) My ideas do not resemble objects outside me.

If A and B are true, then there is no knowledge of bodies outside of us. The first method or way tries to establish A and B. Therefore, no objects can justifiably be said to exist. Method two then tries to prove that God does exist.

What is the *relation* between these two theses? If thesis A is true—if my ideas do not come from objects outside me—then the question of *resemblance* doesn't

arise. That is, if A is true, then B is true. Which is to say, I can make no claim about resemblance. But, if thesis A is false, thesis B may still be true. So, the stronger case would be to try to prove A first, and then let it entail B: if there is no existence, then there can't very well be any resemblance. Why not? Quite simply, because there is nothing to compare!

But if we look at these two theses the other way around, then the case must fail! If B is true, i.e., if my ideas do not resemble objects outside me—then A must be false. Why? Because in order to compare my idea with its referent, I must presuppose its referent! Whether or not they resemble objects, the very claim of resemblance entails the existence of that which is to be compared. I'm comparing two things: how can I compare them if they don't exist?

Thesis A goes to the root of the matter, and thesis B does not. So, what does ol' Renatus Cartesius do? He attempts to prove thesis B—a very odd procedure indeed, if he expects us to think that thesis B entails thesis A. If he proved A, then B would indeed follow. To be even more audacious, Descartes uses as his example to prove thesis B, the case of the sun!

In arguing thesis B, Descartes presents two candidates for a resembling idea, that is, in Paragraph 11, CSM II, on p. 27 of Cottingham:

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

There are two ideas given, then:

1) The *scientific idea* of the sun. This is elicited from certain innate ideas or it is formed by me in some manner.
2) An idea of the sun which results from the *image*, that is, an idea of the sun which is an *adventitious* idea.

Now, the two ideas can't resemble the same sun, and all reasoning tells me that the adventitious image is most dissimilar—which admission, of course, presupposes the existing sun, just in order to bear comparison! Or, on the other hand, the scientific idea is also dissimilar to the sun—which also presupposes the existence of the sun. The same would hold even if the adventitious idea proved to

be more similar—but then, by definition, the world—i.e., the really existing sun—would be necessary.

What is curious about the two sun argument, as it is formulated, is that it is *e*xtremely weak. In fact, it must presuppose the existence of bodies. This is the conclusion that must be drawn from Paragraph 11. But Descartes doesn't draw this conclusion. In fact, he remains entirely silent about this. Rather, Descartes will say, in Paragraph 12, that it's blind impulse which makes him believe. And this raises the whole question of existence once more. Hence, the necessity for a second way.

To repeat this once again, the problem Descartes is faced with is the status of images. Of course, he argues from a representative theory of ideas. Berkeley and Hume will argue from a non-representative theory, where image will be replaced by the term 'impression.'

The image is a problem, for Descartes claims to know the sun by scientific reasoning—and in this sense, he can rectify the image. But without knowing that the sun exists, the elaborate scientific account seems to be a rather dubious construct. Much the same problem occurs here as it did with the *wax example* in the Second Meditation. Granted that I know the *nature* of bodies, i.e., that they are *extended*, how can I start from extension and arrive at wax and not a pumpkin? So here, too, if I start with extension, how do I get the sun and not wax? What we see here is that the scientific account must *presuppose* something that *it cannot prove*. Thus, the science is itself dubious! And if it is dubious, can it give us an adequate account of the world?

Let us briefly restate the *real problem* of the Third Meditation. How can we get *outside* the sphere of consciousness? The *first method* for investigating ideas takes us up to Paragraph 12. There, Descartes analyzed the *representational status of images* from the standpoint of interiority: How do I know that my ideas are (1) *caused by* external objects, and (2) that they resemble external objects? Well, natural inclination or blind impulse tells me. But, natural inclination is dubitable. It often inclines me towards evil and vice. Natural *reason*, which is indubitable, doesn't tell *me* that my ideas are caused by, or that they resemble, external objects. The belief that they do come from without and that they *resemble* external things does not seem to depend on my will, or on myself, as a thinking thing. Well, what, then? *Perhaps* there is an "X" faculty that belongs to me, yet which is unknown—which, we saw, left open the possibility that he is more than a thinking thing. It is possible that the "X faculty" is the imagination. In this case, he would also have to be bodily, and receive sensory impressions from figurate bodies at the outset.

Now, this line of reasoning seems the most plausible way of explaining Paragraph 10, CSM II, on p. 27. Nonetheless, Descartes quickly drops all talk of the "X

faculty" and of the *existential* causal source of these images, these adventitious ideas, and he suggests, in Paragraph 11, that even if the images do come from without, there is no reason that the interior image should faithfully represent the nature of the exterior object. Thus, he centers on the weaker, yet more complex resemblance thesis, when he raises the question of the two suns. That is, I have two ideas of the sun, one derived from the senses, the other from astronomical reasonings—and these ideas are either innate, or formed by me. The former idea, derived from our senses, represents the sun to be extremely small; the latter idea, derived from astronomical reasonings, represents the sun as extremely large. Reason tells me both can't be similar to the sun and that the scientific idea is more similar.

The weakness of the argument is transparent: neither the scientific idea nor the adventitious idea could even be compared with the sun, unless one supposed the sun to exist. The *resemblance* thesis thus *presupposes* the *existence* thesis.

But what complicates this whole first method of investigating ideas is the fact that Descartes cannot claim the existence thesis! He has no *warrant* for it. Thus, the existence thesis is characterized in *negative* terms: i. e., external objects can't be assumed; they must be proven. From the standpoint of interiority, I do not know that objects exist outside me. In other words, according to what I do know, so far as I do know, my ideas do not come from objects without: I cannot assert that they do. Thus, to assert that one kind of *idea* or image more *closely resembles* a real *object* than another, is to make an *illicit inference*. It's *because* the inference is illicit that Descartes has to go on to the second way, the second method of investigating ideas, beginning in Paragraph 13, CSM II, on p. 27 of Cottingham.

Before we pursue this other way, what motivates the collapse of the first way, the first method of investigating ideas?

1) The *inference* from similarity to existence is *illicit*. Illicit, that is to say, presuppositional. It moves from the order of thought to the order of being, without being able to justify this move. The move is, therefore, an assertion.
2) Now, what this means, then, for Cartesian *science*, is that *there is no guarantee of its object*. Cartesian science has to *posit* its object.
3) Thus, while the internal mathematicals, the principle of noncontradiction, etc., are *true*, according to the criteria of clarity and distinctness, raised in Paragraph 2, CSM II, on p. 24 of Cottingham, they are *non-existential*. Truth, in this case, is only *interideational*. It does *not correspond* to anything *outside* the realm of ideas. This is why, in Paragraph 4, CSM II, p. 25, Descartes supplements the definition of truth as clarity and distinctness with the additional statement, that if there is an omnipotent God, he must not

be a deceiver. That is, a good God wouldn't deceive me by suspending existential and analytical claims. To bring in the world and his own body, Descartes needs God as a guarantor.

All of which leads to the apparent convergence of the theoretical and apologetic intentions. Thus, the failure of the first method is necessitated by the required proof of God.

At which point, the question of Descartes' theological or apologetical sincerity arises. By eliminating sensible forms, intelligible forms, pure forms, intelligible species, etc., in Meditation Two—we don't seem to need a God as most real, as *ens realissimum*. By eliminating natural inclination, we eliminate the conventional faculty of recognizing *goodness* in the world and in ourselves. Thus, God as the source of goodness and as the highest good—the *ens perfectissimum*—also seems unlikely.

If a God remains, he is simply power, unqualified by goodness. Also, we have seen the charge of circularity arise. To prove God deductively, I must suppose the principle of non-contradiction. The conclusion must follow from the premises. Thus, I have to prove that there exists in fact a God—beyond my own ideas of one—a God who would intervene to guarantee *the means by which* I prove his own existence. Then, and only then, can I claim there is a world, or that I have a body. Now, either this is circular, or it is not circular, or, as Leibniz claimed, the whole affair is simply one grand charade.

Finally, what is gotten by God? A satisfactory resolution of the apologetic intention. Also a justifiable claim—*if* the argument does prove that God exists and that he would not deceive us—that the world exists: that, in short, Cartesian science would have a justifiably certain field of application.

Yet, we already saw, in the First Meditation, that Descartes had to presuppose the world in order to account for the contents of ideas: the imagination only makes arrangements and medleys of colors. We have to have a source of color from without. Also, in Meditation Two, with the wax example, we had to suppose the wax really existed in order to claim that its nature was extension: because, (a) we had to abstract away its sensible qualities, and (b), because it was claimed to be the same wax that we formerly saw, felt, smelled, and always believed in.

In conclusion, then, *existence is* a problem for Descartes. Either he has to simply presuppose that there is in fact a world, and that people indeed possess bodies—or, he has to deduce the external existence of God: and then, from God, the existence of the world. He has to do all this from the internal cogito, and without supposing that there is a world.

So, the "second way," or the "other way," in Paragraph 13, CSM II, on p. 27: "But *it* now occurs to me that there is another way of investigating whether some of the things of which I possess ideas within me exist outside of me." Now, this second way, or method, begins by discussing degrees of being within the idea. The representative idea of one thing may itself have a greater reality or being than the representative ide*a* of something else. This is what Descartes alleges. Paragraph 13, CSM II, p. 28 of Cottingham, line 3:

> Undoubtedly, the **ideas** which represent substances to me amount to something more and, so to speak [*pour ainsi dire*], contain within themselves more objective reality, i.e., participate by representation in a higher degree of being or perfection, than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents.

Of course, a representative idea can't represent something other than itself, unless there is something other than itself to represent. That is, there is something representing, namely, the idea, and something represented. Thus, the content of idea "A" participates in a higher degree of being than the content of idea "B," only on the condition that what idea "A" represents, itself has a higher degree of reality than what is represented by idea "B." There must be a really existing "A" outside the mind. Yet, for Descartes, the whole argument concerning degrees of objective reality is attempted without any reference outside the mind. In short, does it make any sense to talk about degrees of representing reality without referring to that which is represented? Descartes wants to get outside the mind, but he starts out by contradicting himself—to prove his getting outside the mind, he has already presupposed that external referent!

Moreover, and what is curious, Descartes doesn't tell us what substance is, either. He proceeds to borrow the scholastic notion of objective reality, which is based on really existing external being, i.e., which presupposes the world, and he then combines it with his own notion that nothing exists outside the mind—i.e., that we have no knowledge of extra-mental reality—and he then moves in grand contradictory sweeps up to the deity.

In Paragraph 14, he will claim the following:

1) *That* there must be as much *reality* in the cause as in the effect.
2) *That* the effect *derives its reality* from its cause.
3) *That* what is *more perfect* cannot be derived from the *less perfect*.

BUT, all these are scholastic notions, and Descartes lets us know this by the ad hominem reference, further down, CSM II, on p. 28: "And this is transparently true, not only in the case of effects which possess what the philosophers call ac-

tual or formal reality, but also in the case of ideas, where one is considering only what they call objective reality."

So, the assumptions of the second argument concerning ideas are the following:

1) An idea has objective reality. That is, it has a represented content, and it is claimed to have degrees thereof (Paragraph 13, CSM II, p. 28).
2) The efficient and total cause must have as much reality as the effect. This is specified in Paragraph 14, CSM II, p. 28, to include
   a) formal cause (a cause is of the same kind or the same form as the effect),
   b) eminent cause (a cause that is of a higher kind or form than the effect)—he says he knows about efficient and total cause by the natural light—also, he claims that ideas and their content (the objective reality) must have adequate causes; the eminent cause, then, is not only an idea.
3) Thus, the cause of objective reality in the idea, i.e., the specific content, must be a thing (and not merely an idea) with at least as much reality in it, as the content of the idea represents!

These are the premises on which the argument is built. Yet, Descartes has offered no premise, no argument, for speaking about degrees of reality. Much less, he explicitly attributes the crucial notions of objective and formal reality to the tradition.

The extraordinary feature of the argument results precisely from his failure to discuss degrees of reality and different forms of reality. For what is being compared in the argument is my mind and its ideas: i.e., the ideas I find in my mind. What strikes us as being extraordinary in the comparison is the possibility that an idea can be more real than a thing. Let's look at this jocular Platonism CSM II, on p. 29, the second line from the beginning of Paragraph 16:

> But what is my conclusion to be? If the objective reality of any one of my ideas turns out to be so great that I clearly recognize the same reality does not reside in me, either formally or eminently, and hence that I myself cannot be its cause, it will necessarily follow that I am not alone in the world, but that some other thing which is the cause of this idea exists.

The argument is a simple modus ponens: P) Q. P therefore Q. *If* I cannot be the formal or eminent cause of the objective reality of an idea (i.e., P), *then* some being other than me is the case (Q). Implicitly, this being exists. Yet, this argument holds for *any one of my ideas*. Here he doesn't speak of his idea of a stone or of heat. He gives no examples. Why not? Because he really wants to take the argument further. He wants to show, on the one hand, that *if nothing else,* if there is nothing *other than* himself, then *he* is the cause of his *ideas*.

Therefore, *he, as thinking substance, can be*. Thus, he wants to show that *he can* be the cause of his *ideas* of the world, because he, too, is *substance*. This enables him to take the final step, namely, that there's only one idea that he can't be the cause of, namely, God. Thereby, he tries to pass over the world until after he can prove the existence of God.

The next stage, then, is to consider whether or not we *can* be the adequate cause of our thoughts about the world, about corporeal reality. After all, we don't know anything about what exists outside the mind.

What ideas, then, are the *candidates* for my knowledge about corporeal bodies, in Paragraph 19, toward the bottom CSM II, of p. 29?

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

Magnitude or extension in length, breadth, or depth; figure; situation; motion; substance; duration; number; light; colors; sounds; scents; tastes; heat; cold; tactile qualities. In short, Descartes seemingly has originated a whole panoply of *ideas* about body!

Then, Descartes turns against the image. Images are confused, he says, they contain a certain "material falsity," they may be chimeras, they may thus represent things which may not even exist!

At which point, in Paragraph 21, CSM II, on pp. 30 – 31, he restates the list, now diminished, of what can be held as clear and distinct. But now, he has replaced ideas as images with ideas as concepts. This will permit knowledge of extension, the extension thesis, to arise, without making it seem to depend on images. He once again gives the list of ideas, and he now inquires as to their source. First, the new list, in Paragraph 21:

> With regard to the clear and distinct ideas I have of corporeal things, it appears that I could have borrowed some of these from my idea of myself, namely, substance, duration, number, and anything else of this kind … As for all the other qualities which make up the ideas of corporeal things, namely extension, figure, situation, and movement, these are not formally

> contained in me, since I am only a thinking thing; but since they are merely modes of a substance, and as it were, the garments under which corporeal substance appears to us, and I am a substance, it seems that they might.

What clear and distinct ideas we have then, about body, are the following:

Substance; extension duration; figure; number; situation; motion. Now, the addition of quantity or magnitude would make it equivalent to the list in Meditation One, Paragraph 7, CSM II, on p. 14. Number, here, however, would give us quantity, and number or figure could give us magnitude—whether numerical or geometrical.

Yet what warrant does Descartes have for including substance in this list? In the list of Paragraph 7, of the First Meditation, he had specified "corporeal nature and its extension." Nonetheless, the explicit term 'substance' seems to intrude here: in fact, he doesn't tell us at all *what it is*. On CSM II, p. 10, in the Synopsis, he had briefly mentioned it, saying, "Body, taken in the general sense, is a substance." But this mention appears to be little more than the Aristotelian statement that our knowledge of substance begins with particular things. What little he mentions of substance here, CSM II, on p. 30, Paragraph 21, doesn't amount to very much, either. If we say that substance is self-subsistence, as with the stone, Descartes fails to tell us what that is!

> For example, I think that a stone is a substance, or is a thing capable of existing independently, and I also think that I am a substance. Admittedly, I conceive of myself as a thing that thinks and is not extended.

So, let us tentatively drop substance from the list. It is not explained, and therefore, it doesn't add anything to our understanding.

In any case, both I and the stone have duration and number. They seem to apply both to me and to the stone. In this sense, I can be the formal cause of these concepts. Thus, he says, "I remember that ... I have various thoughts which I can count; it is in these ways that I acquire the ideas of duration and number, which I can transfer to other things." so what remains of my clear and distinct concepts of bodies? Can I be the cause of them? Again, referring to the list he gives in Paragraph 21, on CSM II, pp. 30 – 31, he states that he "could have borrowed some of these ideas from my idea of my self," and he concludes that these ideas "might be contained in me eminently." So, these concepts could be caused by me. They might be. Might be, or could be, is a rather weak way to conclude an argument, however. After all, they might not be caused by me. But why might? I might be the eminent cause of them. If I am a substance and rock, too, is a substance, it might be that the thinking thing is more excellent, more real, more perfect than a rock, a stone. But, has he even suggested

what excellence is? Or reality, for that matter, much less perfection? No, quite simply.

The whole argument stands on eminent causation and degrees of reality, precisely those terms he slipped into the previous account in Paragraphs 14 – 16: precisely those terms he attributes to the scholastics and for which he offers no justification whatsoever. Apologetically, this is fine, for no self-respecting Thomist would object. But is Descartes a Thomist? Do these terms belong to the vocabulary of Cartesian mathematical physics? Hardly.

Is the thinking thing (or, let's say, mental substance) *more real* than a stone (i.e., a particular extended substance)? is it more *real* than the side of a mountain? Or more *real* than the combined realms of Brittany and Aquitaine? Or of France? The earth? Is it more real, more excellent, more perfect than the universe? *Ad absurdam*, buddy!

At which point, Descartes turns the argument to God, precisely by departing from the imperfection of his own mind. Out of the whole world, which might point to God, by virtue of its order, reason, coherency, excellence, goodness, etc., Descartes chooses one tiny chunk, his mind; and of that, one idea—which arises precisely from the imperfection of his mind.

All of this should make us somewhat suspicious, at the very least. The way to understand the argument, it seems, is otherwise than its rather weak, apparent character.

This last step of the argument, which relies on the scholastic doctrine of eminent causes, is the serious one. Since the thinking thing is not known to be body, and since we don't know what substance is, and since he offers no justification for degrees of reality, then the thinking cannot be known to be the cause of the remaining list of clear and distinct ideas about real bodies. That is, we don't know the mind to be the cause, the source of the ideas of extension; figure; situation; motion insofar as their content belongs peculiarly to real, existing bodies.

If we drop the unjustified premises of the argument, then, we are forced to conclude that bodies exist, and that bodies are the cause of my ideas about bodies. Therefore the world exists! Therefore the proof for the existence of God is superfluous. At least he doesn't need to prove God's existence to account for the world. What Descartes would have to do here, and what, of course, he fails to do, is to prove that he is the formal and efficient cause of the extension of the stone.

We remember the structure of the argument in Meditation One, Paragraph 6, CSM II, p. 13, before the onset of God and the demon. I examine the contents of consciousness, or, of the idea. I can't account for it unless objects outside me exist. While it is true that I'm a thinking thing, when I examine what is found

within my thought, I'm forced to admit that its content is ultimately caused by bodies outside my thought.

The same regression takes place in the case of the wax example in the Second Meditation. I can't conceive or mentally intuit, grasp, the extension of the wax unless I presuppose that the wax really exists. Thus, the existence of the wax wasn't doubted. On the contrary, it was required, in order to know that its nature was to be extended. In fact, he even goes so far as to refer the reader back to the wax example on the bottom line of CSM II, p. 29. When we follow that reference—"I examined the idea of wax yesterday (Paragraph 19, CSM II, p. 29)"—when we follow that reference out, and read, back on CSM II, p. 21, Paragraph 12, of Meditation Two, his remark is the following:

> But what is this *wax which can only be conceived by the understanding or the mind? It is of course the same wax which I see, which I touch, which I imagine, in short the same wax that I knew it to be from the start.*

When we track back the reference, then, we realize that the wax has to exist for the analysis to be carried out in the first place. No existing wax, no *sameness* to the cases made in the example.

The presuppositionality of the world was also seen in the case of the two suns. In order to compare an image (whether scientific or adventitious) with the sun, I must perforce suppose that the sun exists and that it is extended.

Well, back to the big "G" question. What is the case with the first argument for God? Paragraph 22, on CSM II, p. 31, tells us.

> So, there remains only the idea of God; and I must consider whether there is anything in the idea which could not have originated in myself. By the name 'God' I understand a substance that is infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, all-knowing, all-powerful, and which created both myself and everything else (if anything else there be) that exists. All these attributes are such that, the more carefully I concentrate on them, the less possible it seems that the idea I have of them could have originated from me alone. So from what has been said it must be concluded that God necessarily exists.

What seems different about the idea of God, here, is that it's defined as a multiplicity—a multiplicity of divine attributes. Now, is this idea of a multiplicity itself clear and distinct? That is, can I hold infinity, eternality, immutability, independence, omniscience, omnipotence, and the notion by which I and everything else has been created. ... can I hold all this together as a unified idea and claim that it is clear and distinct? Most unlikely, good people! But what about the compatibility of these attributes? Moreover, what about God's goodness—without goodness, it seems as if Descartes can simply sidestep the whole question of theodicy. If

God isn't good, it doesn't seem too much of a problem to reconcile the traditional attributes of omnipotence and benevolence, for there is nothing to reconcile.

Recall, again, that a similar list of attributes was given CSM II, on p. 28, Paragraph 13: eternality, infinity, immutability, omniscience, creator of all things. But, once again, no goodness. As we have already seen, this failure to discuss the compatibility of these attributes, much less to reconcile these several concepts with God's goodness, results in a very peculiar God. One that at best seems co-extensive with power alone. If these attributes here, in Paragraph 22, or in Paragraph 13, or even in the *Fourth Discourse on Method*, Paragraph 4, is just a list, just a heap of attributes, then Descartes is extraordinarily careless—in which case, is this meant to be a serious proof? Indeed, in Paragraph 22, CSM II, on p. 31, he is careful to say, not by the idea of God, but by the name of God, I understand a substance that possesses these attributes.

The proof itself duplicates the previous step in the argument, and it depends on the unfounded concepts of substance, degrees of reality, and eminent causation.

Yet, in Paragraph 24, CSM II, on p. 31—*toujours* Cottingham—Descartes does claim to have a single notion, or idea, of God—one which—is *clear and distinct*. To be precise, he says in Paragraph 24, that he has a notion of the infinite—"That is, God." This is simply asserted as an identity. Then he refers to the notion of God in the next paragraph, Paragraph 25, as "This idea of God," which is then stated as being clear and distinct. But how can a finite being have an idea of the infinite? Seems remarkable, no? If we look ahead a bit, however, to the Fourth Meditation, Paragraph 8, towards the bottom of CSM II, p. 39, we discover how we can find the infinite within us! More precisely, Descartes finds within himself the infinite faculty of will: (this is 7 lines up from the bottom of CSM II, p. 31)

> 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 by any limits. 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. If, for example, I consider the faculty of comprehension, I immediately recognize that in my case it is extremely slight and extremely limited, and I at once form the idea of an other faculty 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 .... 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.

Now, a few lines further on, an interesting definition of the will emerges: "The will simply consists in our ability to do or not to do something; that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid."

In any case, Descartes begins his *second proof of God* in Paragraph 29, on the top of CSM II, p. 33: "From whom would I derive my existence?" From myself? My parents? From a source less powerful than God? If not any of these, then I must suppose God. Of course, if I were the author of my own being, I should doubt nothing, and I should desire nothing. I'd give myself every perfection. That is, I would have done a much better job of it! The same problem would hold with regard to his parents. Also, this would lead to an infinite regress—way back past Lucy and the Olduvai Gorge! As for a source less than Divine, how, then, could Descartes obtain the ideas of the divine perfections, not to speak of their unity?

Thus, Descartes states his second argument for God, based on the divisibility of time, in Paragraph 31, just below the middle of page 33 in Cottingham:

> I do not escape the force of these arguments by supposing that I have always existed as I do now, as if it followed from this that there was no need to look for any author of my existence. For a lifespan can be divided into countless parts, each completely independent of the others, so that it does not follow from the fact that I existed a little while ago that I must exist now, unless there is some cause which, as it were, creates me afresh at this moment—that is, which *preserves* me.

In short:

> – All *duration* of my life is infinitely divisible into parts (apparently, into moments of time).
> – All the parts of *time* are independent of one another.
>
> ---
>
> – Therefore: there must be a conserving cause for my existence.

The problem with the proof, of course, consists in the transition from the parts of tim*e* to the assertion that the being of things, in time, is likewise fragmented. (Remember in Paragraph 21, CSM II, on p. 31, where he said "I acquired the ideas of duration and number which I can then transfer to other things." Also, in *The Principles of Philosophy*, Part I, Principle 57 (CSM I, p. 212), where, he said, "When time is distinguished from duration, taken in the general sense, and called the measure of movement, it is simply a mode of thought.") These references should awaken our caution.

Now, here, Descartes seems to claim that beings are contingent upon moments of time. Does a thing depend, in the present, on its previous moment?

—which no longer is? Is this at all plausible? In any case, there is no reason to suspect that the possible independence of moments of time—which is a function of thought—in any way involves the being which is to be found within that time.

Of course, what is in question here, is the continued being of one thing, the thinking thing—but we don't even know whether it is bodily or immaterial! What its being even is remains a complete mystery to us at this point! For example, in Meditation Four, Paragraph 10, CSM II, on p. 41, he says:

> 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 by which I am what I am, is different 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 favor or one alternative rather than the other.

Moreover, the very nature of the thinking thing itself is still up in the air. In Paragraph 32, on the bottom line of CSM II, p. 33, for instance, he says, "For since I am nothing but a thinking thing—or at least since I am now concerned only and precisely with that part of me which is a thinking thing ...."

Well, we are once again forced to ask if Descartes' proof is to be taken seriously. Is this a serious method of inquiry? When he questions the source of his own being, he neither knows what he is, or even, what kind of being he has! How, then, could he even tell that he *is* or *is not?*

C'mon, René, "Is you is, or is you ain't?" You putting' me on!

References

Descartes, René (1953) *Méditations*. In: *Œuvres et Lettres*, Paris: Gallimard. pp. 257f.

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm (1923–) *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe,* Series II, Volume 1, 2nd ed., Berlin: Akademie Verlag. pp. 775.