

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

René Descartes

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

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Fifth Meditation: The essence of material things, and the existence of God considered a second time

There are many enquiries still to be made about God's attributes, and many about my own nature (that is, the nature of my mind). I may take these up at some time; but right now I have a more pressing task. Now that I have seen how to reach the truth—what to do and what to avoid—I must try to escape from the doubts that beset me a few days ago, and see whether anything can be known for certain about material objects.

Before enquiring into whether there are any such things, I should consider the *ideas* of them in my thought, in order to see which of those ideas are distinct and which confused.

I distinctly imagine *quantity*—that is, the length, breadth and depth of the quantity, or rather of the thing that is quantified. I also enumerate the thing's parts, to which I attribute various sizes, shapes, positions and movements; and to the movements I attribute various durations, that is, I say how long each movement lasts.

Size, shape, position and so on are well known and transparent to me as *general kinds* of phenomenon, but there are also countless *particular* facts involving them that I perceive when I attend to them. The truths about all these matters are so open to me, and so much in harmony with my nature, that when I first discover any of them it feels less like •learning something new than like •remembering something I had known before, or •noticing for the first time something that was already in my mind without my having turned my mental gaze onto it.

The most important point is that I find in myself countless ideas of things that can't be called *nothing*, even if they don't exist anywhere outside me. For although I am free to think

of these ideas or not, as I choose, *I didn't invent them*: they have their own true and immutable natures, which are not under my control. Even if there are not and never were any triangles outside my thought, still, when I imagine a triangle I am constrained in how I do this, because there is a determinate nature or essence or form of *triangle* that is eternal, unchanging, and independent of my mind. Consider the things that I can prove about the triangle—that its three angles equal two right angles, that its longest side is opposite its greatest angle, and so on. I now clearly recognize these properties of the triangle, whether I want to or not, even if I didn't give them a thought when the triangle first came into my mind. So they can't have been invented by me.

It does not help to point out that I have sometimes seen triangular bodies, so that the idea of the triangle might have come to me from them through my sense organs. I can prove truths about the properties not only of triangles but of countless other shapes that I know I have never encountered through the senses. These properties must be *something*, not pure nothing: whatever is true is something; and these properties are true because I am clearly aware of them. (I have already proved that everything of which I am clearly aware is true; and even if I hadn't proved it, my mind is so constituted that I *have to* assent to these •geometrical• propositions as long as I perceive them.) I remember, too, that even back in the times when the objects of the senses held my attention, I regarded the clearly apprehended propositions of pure mathematics—including arithmetic and geometry—as the most certain of all.

The preceding two paragraphs lead to this conclusion: The mere fact that I find in my thought an idea of something *x*, and vividly and clearly perceive *x* to have a certain property, it follows that *x* really does have that property. Can I not turn this to account in a second argument to prove the existence of God? The idea of God (that is, of a supremely perfect being) is certainly one that I find within me, just as I find the ideas of shapes and numbers; and I understand from this idea that it belongs to God's nature that *he always exists*. This understanding is just as vivid and clear as what is involved in mathematical proofs of the properties of shapes and numbers. So even if I have sometimes gone wrong in my meditations in these past days, I ought still to regard the existence of God as being at least as certain as I have taken the truths of mathematics to be.

At first sight, this looks like a trick. Where things other than God are involved, I have been accustomed to distinguish a thing's existence from its essence. The question 'What is the *essence* of triangles (or flames or sparrows)?' asks what it takes for something to qualify as a triangle (or flame or sparrow). Answering this still leaves open the *existence* question, which asks whether there are any triangles (or flames or sparrows). I can easily believe that in the case of God, also, existence can be separated from essence, letting us answer the *essence* question about God while leaving the *existence* question open, so that God can be thought of as not existing. But on more careful reflection it becomes quite evident that, just as having-internal-angles-equal-to-180° can't be separated from the idea or essence of a triangle, and as the idea of highlands can't be separated from the idea of lowlands, so existence can't be separated from the essence of God. Just as it is self-contradictory to think of *highlands in a world where there are no lowlands*, so it is self-contradictory to think of *God as not existing*—that is, to

think of a supremely perfect being as lacking a perfection, namely the perfection of existence. [What Descartes wrote is usually translated as 'mountains in a world where there are no valleys', but that is *obviously* not self-contradictory. The Latin provides no escape from this, but Descartes may have been thinking in French, in which *vallée* can mean 'valley' in our sense but can be used to refer to foothills, the lower slopes of a mountain, or the plain immediately surrounding the mountain. So 'highlands'/'lowlands' has been adopted as a compromise: compact and fairly close to what he presumably meant.]

Here is a possible objection to the preceding two paragraphs:

I can't think of God except as existing, just as I can't think of a river without banks. From the latter fact, though, it certainly doesn't follow that there are any rivers in the world; so why should it follow from the former fact that God exists? How things are in reality is not settled by my thought; and just as I can imagine a winged horse even though no horse has wings, so I can attach existence to God in my thought even if no God exists.

This involves false reasoning. From the fact that I can't think of a river without banks, it does not follow that a river with banks exists anywhere, but simply that *river* and *banks*—whether or not there are any in reality—are inseparable. On the other hand, from the fact that I can't think of God except as existing it follows that *God* and *existence* are inseparable, which is to say that God really exists. My thought doesn't make it so; it doesn't create necessities. The influence runs the opposite way: the necessity of the thing constrains how I can think, depriving me of the freedom to think of God without existence (that is, a supremely perfect being without a supreme perfection), like my freedom to imagine a horse with or without wings.

Here is a further possible objection to this line of thought:

Admittedly, once I have supposed that all perfections belong to God, I must suppose that he exists, because existence is one of the perfections. But what entitles me to suppose God to have all perfections? Similarly, if I suppose that all quadrilaterals can be inscribed in a circle, I have to conclude that a rhombus can be inscribed in a circle; but that is plainly false, which shows that the original supposition was wrong.

I agree that I don't have to think about God at all; but whenever I do choose to think of him, bringing the idea of *the first and supreme being* out of my mind's store, I must attribute all perfections to him, even if I don't attend to them individually straight away. This necessity in my thought guarantees that, when I later realize that existence is a perfection, I am right to conclude then that the first and supreme being exists. Similarly, I don't ever have to imagine a triangle; but whenever I do wish to consider a figure with straight sides and three angles, I must attribute to it properties from which it follows that its three angles equal no more than 180°, even if I don't notice this at the time. When on the other hand I examine what figures can be inscribed in a circle, I am not compelled to think that this class includes all quadrilaterals. Indeed, I cannot—while thinking vividly and clearly—even pretend that all quadrilaterals can be inscribed in a circle. This kind of false pretence is vastly different from the true ideas that are innate in me, of which the first and chief is the idea of God. This idea isn't a fiction, a creature of my thought, but rather an image of a true and unchanging nature; and I have several indications that this is so. God is the only thing I can think of whose existence necessarily belongs to its essence. I can't make sense of there being two or more Gods of this kind; and after supposing that

one God exists, I plainly see that it is necessary that he has existed from eternity and will stay in existence for eternity. I perceive many other attributes of God, none of which I can remove or alter.

Whatever method of proof I use, though, I am always brought back to the fact that nothing completely convinces me except what I vividly and clearly perceive. Some things that I vividly and clearly perceive are obvious to everyone; others can be learned only through more careful investigation, but once they are discovered they are judged to be just as certain as the obvious ones. (Compare these two truths about right-angled triangles: 'The square on the hypotenuse equals the sum of the squares on the other two sides' and 'The hypotenuse is opposite the largest angle'. The former is less obvious than the latter; but once one has seen it, one believes it just as strongly.) Truths about God are not in the immediately obvious class, but they ought to be. If I were not swamped by preconceived opinions, and if my thoughts were not hemmed in and pushed around by images of things perceived by the senses, I would acknowledge God sooner and more easily than anything else. The supreme being exists; God, the only being whose essence includes existence, exists; what is more self-evident than that?

Although I came to see this only through careful thought, I am now just as certain of it as I am of anything at all. Not only that, but I see that all other certainties depend on this one, so that without it I can't know anything for sure. The next two paragraphs explain why this is so.

While I am perceiving something vividly and clearly, I can't help believing it to be true. That is a fact about my nature. Here is another: I can't fix my mind's eye continually on the same thing, so as to keep perceiving it clearly; so that sometimes the arguments that led me to a certain conclusion slip out of my focus of attention, though I remember the

conclusion itself. That threatens me with the following state of affairs, from which I am protected only by being aware of the existence of God:

In a case where I am not attending to the arguments that led me to a conclusion, my confidence in the conclusion might be undermined by arguments going the other way. When I think hard about triangles, for instance, it seems quite obvious to me—steeped as I am in the principles of geometry—that a triangle's three angles are equal to 180° ; and while I am attending to the proof of this I can't help believing it. But as soon as I turn my mind's eye away from the proof, then in spite of still remembering *that* I perceived it very clearly ·but without now getting it clear in my mind again·, I can easily doubt its truth. So nothing is ever finally established and settled—I can have no true and certain knowledge, but only shifting and changeable opinions. For I can convince myself that I am naturally liable to go wrong sometimes in matters that I think I perceive as evidently as can be. This seems even more likely when I remember that I have often regarded as certainly true some propositions that other arguments have later led me to think false.

That is what my situation would be if I were not aware of the existence of God.

But now I have seen that God exists, and have understood that everything else depends on him and that he is not a deceiver; from which I have inferred that *everything that I vividly and clearly perceive must be true*. So even when I am no longer attending to the arguments that led me to

accept this (·i.e. the proposition about triangles·), as long as I remember that I vividly and clearly perceived it no counter-arguments can make me doubt it. It is something that I know for certain ·and in an unshakable way· to be true. That applies not only to this one proposition but to anything that I remember ever having proved in geometry and the like. Why should I call these matters into doubt? •Because I am so built as to be prone to frequent error? No: I now know that when I have something in mind in a transparently clear way I cannot be in error about it. •Because I have in the past regarded as certainly true many things that I afterwards recognized to be false? No: the things that I later came to doubt had not been vividly and clearly perceived in the first place: I had come to accept them for reasons that I later found to be unreliable, because I hadn't yet discovered this rule for establishing the truth. •Because I may be dreaming, so that my present thoughts have as little truth as those of a person who is asleep? I put this objection to myself a while ago. It doesn't change anything, because if something is evident to my intellect, even when I am dreaming, then it is true.

Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends strictly on my awareness of the true God. So much so that until I became aware of him I couldn't perfectly know anything. Now I can achieve full and certain knowledge of countless matters, both concerning God himself and other things whose nature is intellectual, and also concerning the whole of the corporeal nature that is the subject-matter of pure mathematics.