Meditations on First Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RENÉ DESCARTES

René Descartes (pronounced *day-cart*) is generally considered the most significant French philosopher of the 1600s and the father of modern philosophy, above all because of the method he develops in *Meditations*. He was born to a prominent Catholic family in the Touraine Province of Western France and received a comprehensive Jesuit education, finished a degree in law, and briefly joined the Dutch army. One night in November 1619, during his military service, he fell asleep by a stove, had a series of vivid dreams, and decided to dedicate the rest of his life to science. This episode also directly inspired his *Meditations*. From 1620 to 1628, Descartes traveled around Europe, studied philosophy and geometry, and befriended a number of prominent intellectuals in Paris. In 1628, he abruptly moved to the Netherlands, a Protestant region where the Catholic Church's Inquisition could not prosecute him for challenging religious doctrine. He studied in a number of Dutch cities, including Franeker, Leiden, Amsterdam, and Deventer, and he moved nearly every year for the rest of his life. Descartes had a relationship with a servant that resulted in a daughter, but she died at a young age, which devastated him. He composed all of his major works in the last 20 years of his life, writing in Latin (for fellow scholars) as well as, unusually, in French (for the general public). Today, he is best remembered for the first two chapters of *Meditations*, which influenced virtually all the philosophers that followed him in their insistence that rational inquiry should be the foundation for science. He also revolutionized the study of mathematics—and especially geometry—by inventing the Cartesian coordinates system. And he made significant contributions to theology based on his optimistic (and controversial) worldview that Catholics and Protestants alike could achieve salvation and go to heaven. Due to the controversial nature of his work during his lifetime, he was occasionally run out of various cities. In 1648, Descartes finally returned to France to publish some of his work, and in 1649, Queen Christina of Sweden invited him to her court to teach her philosophy. However, he caught pneumonia in the frigid Swedish winter and died early the next year—although scholars recently suspected that he may have actually been poisoned.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a rationalist philosopher who thought truth comes from the intellect alone, Descartes consistently made an effort to write his ideas in a way that didn't explicitly link them to any particular social or historical context. Nevertheless, *Meditations* is in many ways a specific product of the 17th century: its method, concerns, and conclusions spoke to Descartes's scholarly and religious peers in a way that will not be immediately clear to readers approaching the text for the first time today. The dominant approach to philosophy in Descartes's era was Scholasticism, a long and varied tradition that combined religious doctrine with the work of Aristotle and enjoyed the backing of the Catholic Church. In Descartes's time, thinkers who challenged the Church's formal doctrine faced severe backlash from the Inquisition. Most famously, just a few years before Descartes published *Meditations*, the Inquisition sentenced Galileo Galilei to life imprisonment for proving that the Earth moves around the Sun and not vice-versa. In fact, Descartes's desire to free himself from the Inquisition largely explains his decision to leave France and spend the second half of his life in the Protestant Netherlands. Yet even though his works challenged Scholastic orthodoxy, earned him frequent accusations of heresy, and were formally banned by the Church in 1663, Descartes always remained a devout Catholic, and this helps account for his emphasis on proving the existence of God and the soul in *Meditations*. Despite his steadfast belief in God, though, Descartes still placed the authority of human reason and science above those of tradition and faith.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

With *Meditations*, Descartes published a set of *Objections and Replies*, in which he responds to letters from other philosophers and theologians who challenged his conclusions through arguments like the famous "Cartesian circle"—Descartes does not know that clear and distinct perceptions are true until after he proves God's existence, so he can't actually prove God's existence. The content of *Meditations* is most closely linked to two of Descartes's other works: the *Discourse on the Method* (1637), a short introduction to his theory of knowledge written four years before the *Meditations*, and the textbook *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), which expands on the arguments of the *Meditations* in a systematic way. His other most influential writings include his primary work on mathematics, the *Geometry* (1937), his study of emotion, *The Passions of the Soul* (1657), and his lengthy correspondence with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia. Descartes's work has influenced virtually all contemporary philosophy, but his writing was particularly central to the rationalism of thinkers like Baruch Spinoza (who is best remembered for the 1677 *Ethics*) and Gottfried Leibniz (an incredibly prolific writer whose 1686 *Discourse on Metaphysics* and 1715 *Monadology* are often studied today). Descartes also influenced the work of Immanuel Kant, whose 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* is generally considered the most

important work in all modern philosophy. German philosopher Edmund Husserl even introduced his own philosophy through a book modeled after Descartes, *Cartesian Meditations* (1931).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Meditations on First Philosophy, in which the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are demonstrated
- **When Written:** 1629–1641
- **Where Written:** The Netherlands
- **When Published:** 1641
- **Literary Period:** Early modern philosophy
- **Genre:** Philosophical essay, soliloquy
- **Setting:** In the Meditator's home, near the fireplace
- **Climax:** The Meditator proves the existence of God and concludes that his clear and distinct perceptions are true.
- **Antagonist:** Uncertain knowledge, muddled perceptions, the evil demon
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Cartesian Confusion. In the popular imagination, Descartes is most frequently known as the philosopher who wrote *Meditations* and declared that "I think, therefore I am." But even though Descartes does make this argument in *Meditations*, this exact phrase actually appears in one of his *other* books, not this one.

Namesake. Descartes's hometown, La Haye en Touraine, was renamed after him in 1802.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, arguably the most influential philosophical text of the 17th century, René Descartes takes the reader on an intellectual journey in order to demonstrate how scholars can build a systematic, scientific understanding of the world through rational deduction. This journey begins when Descartes's narrator, the Meditator, decides to pretend that nothing he perceives is truly what it appears, prompting him to try "start[ing] right again from the foundations" of knowledge. Next, he famously concludes that he can still be certain of one thing: his own existence. Based on this first principle—"I am a thinking thing"—the Meditator deduces that God and the physical world are real. He also concludes that anything he clearly and distinctly understands through the intellect must be true, an idea that has since become the foundation for the modern scientific method. In fact, Descartes was one of the earliest and most influential intellectuals to argue for the sciences to reach the same level of rigor and certainty as mathematics, and his work has left a deep impact on philosophy and science ever since.

Descartes opens the *Meditations* with a letter asking for support from France's leading university, the Sorbonne, and a preface summarizing his arguments. Then, the First Meditation begins with the Meditator pointing out that many of his childhood beliefs have since turned out to be false, and the same might be true of the other ideas he takes for granted now. So he tries to suspend belief in all of them by imagining that he's dreaming, or that an evil demon is controlling his mind and tricking him into thinking that everything he perceives is real.

In the Second Meditation, the Meditator concludes that—even if he can't trust anything he sees, remembers, feels, or imagines—he knows for sure that he's thinking, so he can still be certain of his own existence. Although this hidden, thinking self may seem less real than the things he usually perceives with his senses, it actually strikes closer to the essence of what he really is. The Meditator illustrates this point by imagining a piece of **beeswax**, which may look cold, hard, and solid at first, but becomes warm and malleable when heated. Thus, the wax's outward qualities don't capture the essence of what it is—rather, its essence is simply to be "something extended, flexible, and changeable." In short, reason is a surer guide to the truth than the senses are.

In the Third Meditation, the Meditator offers his first proof for the existence of God. His argument is complex, and it depends on distinguishing between three kinds of essence: infinite substances, finite substances, and particular things. His argument also distinguishes between two kinds of reality: formal reality (existence) and objective reality (accurate representation). In short, he asks where he could have gotten the idea of an infinite substance like God, and he concludes that there's only possible explanation: God gave him the idea, which of course means that God is real. The Meditator also deduces that God is perfect and is his creator, so God wouldn't deceive him about the validity of his perceptions.

In the Fourth Meditation, the Meditator asks why people make judgment errors if their creator is perfect. He concludes that God made the *universe* perfect, but not every *individual* in it. People make errors in judgment because their free will is stronger than their intellect: they have absolute freedom to make choices, but they don't have absolute knowledge about the world. As a result, they frequently (and foolishly) make decisions about things they don't yet understand. The solution, of course, is his own intellectual and scientific approach: to suspend belief in ideas until we can rationally prove them true. And achieving this kind of proof is merely a matter of perceiving things *clearly* and *distinctly* with the intellect.

In the Fifth Meditation, the Meditator presents the basic properties of a **triangle** (like having three sides and three

angles that sum to 180 degrees) as a classic example of clear and distinct rational perception. And by sorting such clear and distinct perceptions from unreliable ones, he concludes that properties like quantity, shape, position, motion, and duration define the essential nature of objects. Then, in the rest of the Fifth Meditation, he goes on to present another argument for God's existence: by definition, "a supremely perfect being" like God would have every kind of perfection—and since existence is a form of perfection, God must exist.

Finally, in the Sixth Meditation, the Meditator returns to the everyday perceptions that he decided to systematically doubt at the beginning of the book. Now that he's certain that his clear and distinct rational perceptions are reliable and that God is no deceiver, he knows that his perceptions of physical things—like his own body—must be proof that such real physical things actually exist. He concludes that his body is distinct from his mind but that it requires the mind's guidance in order to function correctly. And he even admits that there is usually "some truth" in our sense perceptions (like what we see and hear) and sensations (like hunger and pain). These perceptions and sensations sometimes do deceive, but as long as we use the intellect to catch their errors, we can generally trust them. The Meditator ends by rejoicing in his newfound certainty that most of his basic instincts about the world were correct all along.

CHARACTERS

René Descartes – René Descartes was the 17th-century French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist who wrote *Meditations on First Philosophy* to explain how science can be based on a set of purely rational principles. Starting from the principle that his own existence is certain, the book's narrator, the Meditator, offers proofs for the existence of God, the difference between the soul and body, and the reliability of whatever we perceive clearly and distinctively through the intellect.

The Meditator – The Meditator is Descartes's alter ego and the narrator of *Meditations*. At the beginning of the book, the Meditator points out that he used to take many beliefs for granted before realizing that they were not true. He decides to set aside six days of solitary contemplation—corresponding with the book's six chapters—to "demolish everything completely and start right again from the foundations" of knowledge. Over the course of the book, he concludes that his own existence is certain, offers a complex proof for the existence of God, shows that his clear and distinct perceptions are accurate, and concludes that physical objects are real, which means that the body and soul are distinct. While the Meditator's conclusions faithfully reflect Descartes's beliefs, Descartes did not actually form all of them in just six days' meditation. All the same, meticulously planning out the Meditator's thought process allows Descartes to present the ideas in a logical order. Indeed, by presenting years of philosophical research through the Meditator's brief intellectual journey, Descartes gives his readers a lesson in his scientific method and an opportunity to test out his arguments for themselves by stepping into the Meditator's shoes. It's worth noting that the Meditator is never specifically gendered in *Meditations*—this guide uses male pronouns to refer to the Meditator, but any personal pronouns would suffice.

God – One of the central issues in *Meditations* is the existence of God, whom Descartes describes—in line with Catholic doctrine—as the infinite, perfect, eternal, all-knowing, all-powerful being who created humans and the universe. Descartes dedicates Meditation Three and Meditation Five to different arguments for God's existence, and God's benevolence provides the fundamental justification for the Meditator's conclusion that he can place complete trust in his clear and distinct rational perceptions.

The Evil Demon – In a famous thought experiment that philosophers have studied closely for centuries, the Meditator sorts his certain beliefs from his uncertain ones by imagining that an evil demon is controlling his mind and planting all of his perceptions in it. This possibility means that he can't trust any of what he sees, hears, smells, touches, or tastes—and it forces him to seek another foundation for his knowledge about the world (which turns out to be the very fact that he exists).

TERMS

Natural Light – "Natural light" is **Descartes**'s term for the rational ability to understand the highest kind of truth. When we encounter an argument that simply *has* to be true—like that a triangle has three sides—we perceive it through the "natural light," which means that we understand it *clearly* and *distinctly*. The term "natural light" also specifically links this form of insight with divine revelation.

Formal Reality – Formal reality, which contrasts with objective reality, describes something being real in the sense that it *actually exists*. For instance, saying that a book of philosophy has formal reality means that it is a real physical object. The concepts of formal and objective reality are the foundation for **Descartes**'s first argument for the existence of God in the Third Meditation.

Objective Reality – Objective reality, which contrasts with formal reality, describes something that accurately represents reality. For instance, saying that a book of philosophy has objective reality means that its arguments about the nature of the world are correct. The concepts of formal and objective reality are the foundation for **Descartes**'s first argument for the existence of God in the Third Meditation.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

KNOWLEDGE, DOUBT, AND SCIENCE

In the landmark *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the 17th-century French mathematician, scientist, and philosopher René Descartes presents purely rational arguments for the existence of God and the soul. His work, however, is better known for its method than its conclusions. After noticing that his mind is full of unreliable beliefs, Descartes's narrator, the Meditator, decides that the only way to be certain about anything is to begin with the very "foundations" of knowledge itself. So he undertakes a famous thought experiment: he imagines that nothing he perceives is real. Can he know anything for sure? Yes: he is thinking, so he must *exist*. He basically makes the same conclusion Descartes more famously phrased in an earlier book: "I think, therefore I am." Based on this first principle, the Meditator deduces that God also exists, that the mind is distinct from the body, and that his own perceptions really *are* reliable.

Descartes sends the Meditator on this elaborate journey to show how scientists can base their work on absolutely certain principles about the essential nature of reality. If basic philosophical truths are not proven with certainty, Descartes believes, then none of the other sciences can achieve any certainty, either. The Meditator builds these solid roots by determining that his own perceptions are reliable. Specifically, he's talking about *clear* and *distinct* perceptions of the *intellect*—meaning conclusions that follow directly, logically, and undeniably from other established truths. In other words, Descartes is talking about *logical deduction*, the technique that he famously applied to proofs in geometry, and that is now the foundation of the modern scientific method thanks largely to his work. Today, the scientific method is really just a way to turn muddled, uncertain perceptions (hypotheses) into clear, distinct ones by establishing a direct, undeniable relationship between causes and effects. The Meditator proposes a rudimentary version of this when he teaches readers how to use the intellect to refine perceptions—like checking whether the different objects one sees in the world are truly as they seem, and whether one's sensations of pain really mean that the body is being harmed. Thus, through his method of systematic doubt, Descartes speaks to the core of what it is to do science and philosophy: using the intellect to clarify our perceptions of the world until they are clear and distinct enough to count as knowledge.

GOD AND THE WORLD

Descartes dedicates Meditation Three and Meditation Five to proving the existence of God. Contemporary readers might find his reasoning convoluted and his interest in God unusual, given that he emphasizes finding truth through pure rationality. Yet Descartes was a devout Catholic and, in his time, rejecting God's existence was all but unthinkable. Indeed, Descartes's work was actually considered radical because it doubted God's existence *at all*, and because it argued that reason—not faith—should be the foundation for human knowledge.

In the Third Meditation, the Meditator presents a complex proof for God's existence. He argues that the *cause* of any idea must have as much formal reality as the idea has objective reality. In very simplified terms, this effectively means that, if he can imagine something, there must be something real that is similar to the thing he imagined. Yet God is by definition infinite, so if He didn't really exist, there would be nothing else like Him that could give us the idea that He *did* exist. Thus, God must exist, and He must have directly given us the idea of His existence.

The argument in the Fifth Meditation is more straightforward: the Meditator clearly and distinctly sees that "a supremely perfect being" would have every kind of perfect quality, one of which is that this being "always exists." Again, according to the Meditator, the very *idea* of God inherently proves that God must exist. In both cases, the Meditator concludes that God is perfect, infinite, eternal, all-powerful, and all-knowing, and he uses God's existence as the foundation for his conclusion that his clear and distinct perceptions are reliable. Yet this has proven highly controversial: Descartes's critics have frequently pointed out that he uses clear and distinct perceptions to prove that God exists, but then he claims that these same perceptions are only reliable *because* God exists. Regardless, Descartes's arguments are intended to offer not only clear proofs of God's existence, but also undeniable evidence that rationalist philosophy is totally compatible with traditional religious faith.

MIND AND BODY

Besides building up an argument from fundamental philosophical principles to prove the existence of God, Descartes's other stated goal in the *Meditations* is to demonstrate that the human soul (or mind) exists and is distinct from the body. He does this by combining two arguments, one at the beginning of the book and one at the end. At the beginning, when he tries to doubt everything he possibly can, the Meditator argues that he can know one thing for certain: he definitely exists and is definitely thinking. This leads him to the conclusion that his essence is to be "a thinking thing"—a mind or soul. At the end of the book, the Meditator concludes that he can trust his clear and distinct perceptions of

physical objects, which means he can say with certainty that his body is real, too. As he considers senses and sensations like sight, pain, and thirst, he argues that the mind and body are obviously connected, since the mind can control the body and bodily sensations can affect the mind. Descartes even speculates that the body and mind come into contact in a particular region of the brain (the pineal gland). Thus, in the *Meditations*, Descartes makes the case for the kind of mind-body distinction that he is famously associated with today, which is often called the "ghost in the machine"—he argues that humans are made of the fusion between an immaterial soul (a conscious, thinking essence that represents the true self) and a physical body (which is like a machine for the soul to control).

Descartes was by no means the first philosopher to argue that humans are made of a body and a mind, but his version of this dualism has arguably become the most influential—and the most controversial—in Western science and culture over the last several centuries. On the one hand, Descartes's ideas have become an accepted foundation for contemporary math and science, which view themselves as disciplines in which minds study the physical world in the abstract to produce purely rational theories. On the other, contemporary philosophers and cognitive scientists frequently challenge the way Descartes presents the mind as *superior to* the body: he sees the mind as the true source of individual identity and humans' distinctiveness as a species, and he presents the body as little more than a fleshy vessel for the mind to occupy.

INTELLECTUAL DISCIPLINE

René Descartes's philosophical method centers on using logical reasoning to achieve certain, systematic knowledge. As a result, readers might find it strange that he wrote the *Meditations* as a first-person story about a Meditator immersed in thought, rather than a direct philosophical treatise explaining and proving his views. What's more, he covered many of the same ideas in his earlier work *Discourse on the Method* and his later textbook *Principles of Philosophy*, but the *Meditations* actually remains far more popular today. Clearly, its distinctive narrative flair has somehow captured its readers' attention. Indeed, Descartes presented the *Meditations* as a series of essayistic soliloquies in part because he believed this would bring the reader along with his Meditator's logic, step by step, and convince them of his conclusions more thoroughly. But he also did so for another notable reason: he thought that the discipline, sustained attention, and reasoning skills involved in actually doing philosophical inquiry would help his readers, and he wanted to show them how to do it. After all, his Meditator concludes that achieving certain knowledge in everyday life requires systematically assessing one's perceptions with the intellect, in order to make them as clear and distinct as possible. (For instance, rather than simply reacting instinctively to pain, people should try to understand where it's coming from and why.) This is also why Descartes describes the Meditator thinking through each chapter of the book per day, rather than doing it all at once: he wants to show how a sustained, thorough routine of contemplation can help people achieve intellectual progress and digest complex ideas at an accessible pace. In short, then, Descartes uses the Meditator's intellectual journey as a model for showing his readers how they can use the tools of philosophy to become better, more enlightened people.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE WAX

In a famous thought experiment from the Second Meditation, the Meditator uses a piece of wax to represent why the senses cannot truly perceive the essence of things—and why pure reason can. He imagines the wax's sensible qualities—like its color, shape, and texture—but then imagines putting it by the fire so that it softens. Now, instead of being solid and cold, the wax is soft, warm, and easy to mold. It could be manipulated into infinite different shapes. Eventually, after enough heating, it even turns into a liquid. But the whole time, it's always the same wax. This proves that the wax's qualities that humans can perceive with their senses do not accurately capture the wax's true nature. Instead, the senses only give us an "imperfect and confused" perception of the wax's reality, and truly knowing the wax's fundamental essence requires understanding it with the *intellect*. The wax's real nature is to be "a certain extended thing which is flexible and movable."

This thought experiment brings the Meditator to the principle at the core of Descartes's epistemology, or theory of knowledge: true knowledge comes from rational understanding, and the senses only give us imperfect information. In fact, this is similar to how modern scientists might say that an object's true nature depends on its chemical composition, and not on the way it looks in any given state. Of course, this makes sense, since Descartes's rationalist method—in which he argues that all true knowledge begins with rational insight—is the foundation for most science today.

TRIANGLES

In the Fifth Meditation, triangles represent the way that people can achieve certain knowledge about the world through rationality. The Meditator uses triangles as an example to illustrate the difference between the clear and distinct truths of mathematics and the ordinary ideas about the

world that people form in their everyday lives. He points out that it's impossible to doubt the basic principles of a triangle's geometry—like the fact that it has three sides, that its angles sum to 180 degrees, and that its largest angle is opposite its longest side. Such principles still hold true under the evil demon thought experiment, even if none of what the Meditator is perceiving turns out to be real at all. In fact, triangles' basic properties would stay the same even if there were no real triangles anywhere in the world: they're necessary truths of geometry, basic elements of the shape's fundamental nature. For Descartes, true knowledge must be just as clear, distinct, and certain as these basic geometrical principles. This helps explain his lifelong dedication to studying geometry: for him, geometry is the model for how the sciences should operate. They should construct a systematic body of knowledge about the world by building out from basic, rational principles.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Meditations on First Philosophy* published in 2017.

Dedicatory letter Quotes

I think there can be no more useful service to be rendered in philosophy than to conduct a careful search, once and for all, for the best of these arguments, and to set them out so precisely and clearly as to produce for the future a general agreement that they amount to demonstrative proofs.

Related Characters: René Descartes (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4-5

Explanation and Analysis

Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* is dedicated to the Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne, the most significant university in Paris (and France as a whole). He begins with a letter explaining this dedication and asking for the Faculty to support his work. On the surface, Descartes may seem to just be seeking publicity and influence, but actually, his motivations for this dedication are far more complex.

On the one hand, the *Meditations* seriously challenges the church's orthodoxy by arguing that *reason* is the true foundation for all human knowledge. Descartes famously begins his philosophy with the first principle: "I am, I exist." In other words, he arguably puts humans above God, which would have infuriated the Catholic Church. Even though he left France and moved to the Netherlands for the express purpose of avoiding the Church's harsh oversight, Descartes still worried that he could face a violent backlash for publishing these views. The Sorbonne's protection would therefore be valuable. Needless to say, the case of Galileo Galilei—who was imprisoned for life six years before Descartes published this book, all for arguing (correctly) that the Earth revolves around the Sun—was at the forefront of Descartes's mind.

On the other hand, *Meditations* also supports the Church in a crucial way. In it, Descartes offers what he characterizes as an airtight philosophical proof for the existence of God. This is what he's describing in this passage, and it's the basis for his plea to the Sorbonne: his book would do what no philosopher had successfully done before by definitively proving that the church's basic teachings were correct. Thus, Descartes's dedication represents a delicate balancing act—he's both sincerely trying to persuade the Church to promote his ideas and hedging against the dangers of crossing it.

Preface to the Reader Quotes

I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions. Such readers, as I well know, are few and far between.

Related Characters: René Descartes (speaker), The Meditator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In his Preface, Descartes instructs his readers about how to approach *Meditations*. He declares that they must give his arguments the serious consideration they deserve by doing as his Meditator does: confronting the radical possibility that nothing they see is real, suspending their preconceived beliefs, and then rebuilding their worldview by only accepting ideas that they can know with absolute certainty. He doesn't just want his readers to follow his arguments and agree with his conclusions—he wants them to "meditate seriously with" his Meditator. The best way to read his book is extremely slowly, taking ample time after each chapter to fully digest its ideas.

In cruder terms, *Meditations* isn't just a book to be read, but rather a guidebook to an immersive philosophical experience. Needless to say, this makes it quite unusual. But it also makes perfect sense when understood alongside Descartes's broader goals. *Meditations* is less about presenting a specific set of *conclusions* than teaching readers a specific *method* for inquiry. Over the course of the book, Descartes has no intention of changing his readers' preconceived assumptions that God exists and that the body is different from the soul. Instead, he wants to give them a new understanding of *why* these assumptions are true, and the key to this understanding is his method of using systematic doubt and logical deduction to reach certain conclusions. Descartes understandably thinks that the best way for the reader to learn this method is by practicing it along with his Meditator.

Synopsis Quotes

❝ The great benefit of these arguments is not, in my view, that they prove what they establish—namely that there really is a world, and that human beings have bodies and so on—since no sane person has ever seriously doubted these things. The point is that in considering these arguments we come to realize that they are not as solid or as transparent as the arguments which lead us to knowledge of our own minds and of God, so that the latter are the most certain and evident of all possible objects of knowledge for the human intellect. Indeed, this is the one thing that I set myself to prove in these Meditations. And for that reason I will not now go over the various other issues in the book which are dealt with as they come up.

Related Characters: René Descartes (speaker), The Meditator, God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12-13

Explanation and Analysis

Descartes opens with a synopsis that lays out what he aims to do in each of his six chapters (or "Meditations"). This is particularly useful for his readers because it can help them keep track of the bigger picture: it shows them how the Meditator's different arguments fit together and gives them a sense of Descartes's overall goals. As Descartes points out here, it's easy to get lost in the details and mistakenly think that his main goal is to convince his readers that God and the world are real. But he knows that "no sane person has ever seriously doubted these things." His *real* point is that, by examining assumptions like these, we can come to understand the fundamental hierarchy behind our knowledge—meaning how our ideas interrelate. For instance, as Descartes notes here, we can learn that our understanding of our bodies actually depends on our understanding of our minds, which suggests that our minds are more essential to who we are than our bodies.

Understanding these hierarchies of ideas is crucial not only because it can help people clarify their fundamental beliefs, but also because it can provide the foundations for science—which is essentially about building up a complex, accurate model of the world, starting with first principles. For instance, our understanding of complex organisms depends on our understanding of cells, which depends on basic chemistry, which in turn depends on basic physics, and so on. This is why Descartes calls this book not just *Meditations*, but *Meditations on First Philosophy*—his purpose is to show his readers what the *first principles* of philosophy (and, by extension, science) should be.

First Meditation Quotes

❝ Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by 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 everything completely 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.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

These are the Meditator's first words at the very beginning of the First Meditation. In just a few sentences, he explains this book's fundamental purpose: to show how we can test our beliefs and make sure that they're certain. Specifically, he points out that the vast majority of our beliefs are based on assumptions and received wisdom—and we almost never hold these beliefs up to rational scrutiny. So how can we know if the most basic elements of our worldview are even true? The *Meditations* is an answer to this question. The Meditator will try "to demolish everything completely from the foundations"—meaning that he will temporarily suspend all of his normal beliefs—and then spend six days trying to rebuild them by only accepting beliefs that he can be

absolutely certain about. He has to do this just "once in the course of [his] life," and once he does, he will be able to return to his previous beliefs with confidence in their accuracy.

❝ How could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass. But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.

A brilliant piece of reasoning!

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

After the Meditator decides to "demolish [his beliefs] completely and start again right from the foundations," he starts looking for reasons to doubt everything he can. Here, he touches on a "brilliant" thought experiment: what if he's insane? Madmen sincerely think that their perceptions reflect reality, even when these perceptions are actually completely irrational and misguided. Even though the Meditator firmly believes that he's in sound mind, he can't truly prove it. In fact, he can't really be certain about anything that he sees or feels at all—at least not until he finds a solid reason to trust that his perceptions accurately reflect reality. This thought experiment works perfectly: it enables him to sweep away the vast majority of his beliefs and hone in on the few premises that truly could serve as the foundation for certain knowledge. And from there, he will be able to better understand not just his own thoughts, but also the broader nature of existence.

❝ These are as it were the real colours from which we form all the images of things, whether true or false, that occur in our thought.

This class appears to include corporeal nature in general, and its extension; the shape of extended things; the quantity, or size and number of these things; the place in which they may exist, the time through which they may endure, and so on.

So a reasonable conclusion from this might be that physics, astronomy, medicine, and all other disciplines which depend on the study of composite things, are doubtful; while arithmetic, geometry and other subjects of this kind, which deal only with the simplest and most general things, regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not, contain something certain and indubitable.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

After considering the possibility that he is insane—which would make all of his perceptions unreliable—the Meditator asks what, if anything, a madman could still know. He concludes that, even if all of his perceptions are illusions, the very fact that he has these illusions is proof that some basic things exist. For instance, it would be impossible to imagine the color red if there were no colors at all in the world—so if he imagines something red, then he can be pretty sure that there is such a thing as color, even if the thing he's imagining doesn't exist. He compares colors to the parameters he mentions here—like "corporeal nature in general, and its extension," which just means the existence of matter that forms three-dimensional shapes—because they are also the basic building blocks of all perception, which means they must exist even if our perception is unreliable.

This point is easy to misinterpret, because the Meditator immediately goes on to say that all of the kinds of ideas that he lists here must *also* be subjected to doubt. (He does so through the "malicious demon" thought experiment.) So the Meditator isn't saying, once and for all, that math and geometry are absolutely certain. Instead, he's saying that the truths of math and geometry do not depend on us having reliable perceptions of the world. Thus, math and geometry are more fundamental kinds of knowledge than the other sciences: even madmen who hallucinate everything they see could still reach certain knowledge about math and geometry.

I will suppose therefore that [...] some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things. I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation; and, even if it is not in my power to know any truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), The Evil Demon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

In the First Meditation, the Meditator imagines that he is insane or dreaming, which allows him to reject all of his specific sense perceptions about the world. He suspends his belief in the existence of the things he sees, feels, smells, and so on—but at this stage, he still has enough information to believe in basic mathematical truths, like the properties of different shapes. So he next asks whether these basic truths can be subjected to doubt, too. This leads him to the famous "malicious demon" thought experiment: what if a being far more powerful than him is controlling all of his thoughts and perceptions? Would he still be able to believe in things like colors, shapes, and time, which just minutes ago he thought of as the building blocks of even wild hallucinations? Clearly, no.

This radical, skeptical hypothesis helps the Meditator achieve his goal of clearing away all of his beliefs, so that he can start over from the very beginning (and only assent to conclusions that he can know with absolute certainty). This thought experiment sets the stage for his famous "*I am, I exist*" in the Second Meditation, and it has become a recurring touchstone throughout Western literature and philosophy. Indeed, scholars continue to study it today, often by adapting it to the modern version made famous in the movie *The Matrix*: what if people aren't really human beings at all, but rather brains in vats, hooked up to supercomputers?

Second Meditation Quotes

So serious are the doubts into which I have been thrown as a result of yesterday's meditation that I can neither put them out of my mind nor see any way of resolving them. It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

In the First Meditation, the Meditator entertained a series of skeptical hypotheses—thought experiments that suppose that what seems real actually is not. These hypotheses led him to temporarily set aside virtually all of his old beliefs, on the grounds that he could no longer be absolutely certain that they are true. So far, so good: as he pointed out at the very beginning of the First Meditation, he cannot have certain knowledge about *anything* unless he first discards *everything* that he finds it possible to doubt.

In the Second Meditation, the Meditator starts hunting for this fundamental kernel of certain knowledge that will eventually allow him to achieve certainty about all of his other ideas, too. But first, he points out the psychological turmoil that he has inflicted on himself by systematically doubting his previous beliefs. He feels like he's stuck in "a deep whirlpool" and can't free himself from it. Without his previous beliefs, he has lost his moorings in the world and feels powerless—he cannot think of anything without immediately recognizing that his thought is uncertain (and having to stop believing it for the time being). In addition to showing the reader what it actually feels like to consider the possibility that one's entire life is a lie—after all, Descartes has asked the reader to accompany the Meditator through the process of systematic doubt, so the reader should also feel metaphysically queasy—this passage also speaks to how crucial our basic worldview is in helping us navigate the world. Without *knowing* anything, it's virtually impossible to *do* anything, which underlines how important it is to get our fundamental beliefs right.

So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), René Descartes, The Evil Demon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

The sentence most closely associated with Descartes's philosophy is, "I think, therefore I am" (or, in the original Latin, "cogito ergo sum"). This specific wording appears nowhere in *Meditations*, but the argument does: in fact, "*I am, I exist*" is the basic principle in which the Meditator grounds his entire philosophy. It's the first truth he can know with absolute certainty, the essential foundation for every other conclusion that he reaches throughout the rest of the book.

The logic behind this principle is clear: since the Meditator is thinking, doubting, and so on, he clearly must exist. Even if he is insane or an evil demon is controlling his mind, there can be no doubt about his existence. (That said, many philosophers would beg to differ.) However, the Meditator doesn't actually arrive at "*I exist*" through logical deduction—it's not that he recognizes that he's thinking, considers the consequences of his thinking, and then reaches the conclusion that he exists. Rather, his existence is immediately apparent to him "whenever it is put forward by [him] or conceived in [his] mind." He doesn't have to do any thinking; his existence is just an obvious, unquestionable truth. While this fact may not seem significant at this stage in *Meditations*, it does help Descartes's argument, because it means that he doesn't need to know that the rules of logical deduction are valid simply in order to know that he exists.

> As to the body, however, I had no doubts about it, but thought I knew its nature distinctly. If I had tried to describe the mental conception I had of it, I would have expressed it as follows: by a body I understand whatever has a determinable shape and a definable location and can occupy a space in such a way as to exclude any other body; it can be perceived by touch, sight, hearing, taste or smell, and can be moved in various ways, not by itself but by whatever else comes into contact with it. For, according to my judgement, the power of self-movement, like the power of sensation or of thought, was quite foreign to the nature of a body; indeed, it was a source of wonder to me that certain bodies were found to contain faculties of this kind.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), René Descartes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

After concluding that "*I am, I exist*," the Meditator takes up the next logical question: *what* is he? In the past, before he started meditating, he used to think of himself as human with a body: he assumed that he was an organism with limbs, organs, and so on. Here, he boils down his conception of his body to its most basic form. Having a body really just means being perceptible, movable, made of matter, and located in physical space.

This conception of physical existence might seem irrelevant or simpler than needed, especially since the Meditator is really pointing out that he *doesn't* know his body is real yet. However, it's actually important for two reasons. First, it indicates what kinds of things the Meditator will have to prove to be real in order to justify taking back up his belief in his own body—in other words, before he can conclude that his body exists, the Meditator must show that there are perceptible, movable physical objects located in real multi-dimensional space. Second, this conception of the body points to Descartes's view of which characteristics define the nature of physical things. He offers a bare, schematic, mathematical worldview in which the keys to understanding the universe are measurable quantities like shape, volume, and motion. This implies that basic physics is the most fundamental form of science—and that it's possible to model the whole world as one enormous machine operating according to its principles. While this understanding might be relatively common today, it certainly wasn't in Descartes's time—in fact, Descartes invented the very idea of imagining and dividing up empty space through coordinates.

> Thinking? At last I have discovered it—thought; this alone is inseparable from me. I am, I exist—that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. For it could be that were I totally to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist. At present I am not admitting anything except what is necessarily true. I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason—words whose meaning I have been ignorant of until now. But for all that I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of a thing? As I have just said—a thinking thing.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), René Descartes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22-23

Explanation and Analysis

After concluding that the first principle of his new philosophy must be his certainty about his own existence, the Meditator asks "what kind of a thing" he is. He notes that he usually thinks about himself as a thing with a body, but he recognizes that he still hasn't proven that any physical bodies exist. Instead, as he works out in this passage, all that he *can* really know about himself is that he's *thinking*—after all, thinking is how he became certain about his own existence in the first place. This is how he concludes that his essence is to be "a thinking thing." Thus, the truth is the opposite of what he long assumed: his mind defines his existence, not his body. In fact, humans could lose their bodies and remain human, so long as they retain their minds. This conclusion is arguably the main reason Descartes's work was so revolutionary: he argued that the human mind is the true seat of the self, rather than the body, and he suggested that human reason is self-justifying—it can recognize its own existence and then use that existence as a foundation for understanding everything else in the world.

> But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), René Descartes, God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

The Meditator reaches a conclusion about what kind of thing he is: "a thing that thinks." Even if he doesn't know anything about the external world, he is absolutely sure that he "doubts, understands, affirms," and so on, because this is precisely what he's doing when he philosophizes. Thus, he defines himself first and foremost as a mind, and only secondarily, later on, as a body. Of course, Descartes suggests that this condition applies to all people in general: the mind is the true self, whereas the body is only a physical tool to which that mind attaches itself. In some ways, this is similar to the traditional religious concept of the soul, but in one key respect, it isn't: Descartes says that the soul's characteristic activity is thinking rationally for itself, and not seeking unity with God.

Descartes's characterization of human nature can help us understand why his work is still so influential—and so controversial. On the one hand, the idea that human thought reigns supreme—that it's even more fundamental and certain than the very existence of God or the external world—transformed the world by contributing to a broad shift away from religious tradition. On the other, contemporary philosophers often wonder if Descartes encourages us to unfairly privilege the mind over the body. When we start to view ourselves as rational, immaterial, individual minds that just happen to be attached to material bodies, it's easy to forget how factors like tradition, social interconnection, and physical connections to place are also central to who we are.

> [The wax] has not yet quite lost the taste of the honey; [...] its colour, shape and size are plain to see; it is hard, cold and can be handled without difficulty; if you rap it with your knuckle it makes a sound. In short, it has everything which appears necessary to enable a body to be known as distinctly as possible. But even as I speak, I put the wax by the fire, and look: the residual taste is eliminated, the smell goes away, the colour changes, the shape is lost, the size increases; it becomes liquid and hot; you can hardly touch it, and if you strike it, it no longer makes a sound.
>
> [...]
>
> What exactly is it that I am now imagining? Let us concentrate, take away everything which does not belong to the wax, and see what is left: merely something extended, flexible and changeable.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), René Descartes

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the Second Meditation, Descartes has the Meditator consider a piece of beeswax in order to illustrate

the difference between things' outward appearances and their true essences. At first, in solid form, the beeswax has one shape, size, color, smell, texture, temperature, and so on—but later, when heated up, all of these characteristics change. Yet the beeswax is still the beeswax, just in a different form (in the same way that ice, liquid water, and water vapor are all really the same substance). For the Meditator, this transformation proves that none of those sensory characteristics define what the beeswax truly is. In his terminology, none of those characteristics "belong to the wax" in the fundamental, essential form in which scientists would need to know it. Instead, just like humans' essential nature is to be thinking things, the wax's essential nature is simply to be an "extended, flexible and changeable" thing. And it's essential to understand things' essential nature in order to reach any meaningful scientific knowledge about them. After all, contemporary scientists would no doubt define the beeswax's essence in their own terms: as a mix of certain chemical compounds, which might take different forms at different temperatures.

Third Meditation Quotes

❝ I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), René Descartes, God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28-29

Explanation and Analysis

The fact that the Meditator is thinking proves with certainty that he exists. In turn, wouldn't the fact that he's certain that he exists also prove that he knows what certainty means? He thinks so—after analyzing what, exactly, makes him so certain about his existence, the Meditator concludes that the measure of certainty is *clear and distinct perception*. This term has a very specific meaning. A *perception* is not just the way the *senses* view something—rather, in Descartes's usage, the concept of perception *also* includes *ideas* that we consider through the mind. *Clarity* means that the perception is direct and obvious to his mind's eye; *distinctness* means that it isn't mixed together with other perceptions.

Together, clear and distinct perception effectively refers to something that logically *has* to be true, according to basic deduction. For instance, to have a clear and distinct perception of the fact that a triangle's angles sum to 180 degrees, we must have a proof of this fact that is direct and impossible to deny (clarity), while our ideas about *triangles*, *angles*, and *degrees* need to be obviously separate from all our other ideas about shapes and mathematical concepts (distinctness). Yet the Meditator isn't yet ready to accept this "general rule" on its own merits—rather, he's merely setting it up for use later. Instead, since he still hasn't proven that an all-powerful deceiver isn't controlling his mind, it's possible that his clear and distinct perceptions *aren't* reliable—or that his knowledge of his own existence is certain for some other reason, and his very understanding of clarity and distinctness is an illusion. Thus, to be sure about the reliability of his clear and distinct perceptions, he first needs to prove that God exists (and isn't deceiving him).

❝ When I say "Nature taught me to think this," all I mean is that a spontaneous impulse leads me to believe it, not that its truth has been revealed to me by some natural light. There is a big difference here. Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light—for example that from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on—cannot in any way be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty both as trustworthy as the natural light and also capable of showing me that such things are not true. But as for my natural impulses, I have often judged in the past that they were pushing me in the wrong direction when it was a question of choosing the good, and I do not see why I should place any greater confidence in them in other matters.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In the Third Meditation, the Meditator prepares for his proof of God's existence by distinguishing between different kinds of ideas. He states that some ideas come from the imagination, others come from something external to the thinker, and some are innate—meaning that they

come naturally from the thinker's own mind. In this passage, he clarifies that he's talking specifically about "natural" ideas that come from what he calls the "natural light" (or the light of reason). This is distinct from ideas that come to us "naturally," in the sense that we choose to believe in them because of "natural" feelings that we do not fully understand. For instance, many people believe in God simply because they *feel* that God must exist—this belief is rooted in feeling and impulse, not rationality, so it is not truly reliable. Certain belief in God has to come from the natural light, instead.

But what is the natural light? Isn't it strange that Descartes cares so much about precise, rational reasoning, yet puts this totally new, undefined concept at the heart of his proof for God's existence? Many philosophers say *yes*—some think that the natural light is just a synonym for clear and distinct perception, while others argue that it's an effortless, passive way of understanding the truth, as opposed to the active, effortful reasoning necessary to reach clear and distinct perceptions. Most agree that Descartes simply assumed his readers would know what the natural light was. Yet some argue that subtle differences between the natural light and clear and distinct perception actually explain why Descartes avoids arguing in a circle. (According to this view, the natural light alone proves that God exists, and then God's existence proves that clear and distinct perceptions are reliable.) While it's impossible to know exactly what Descartes was thinking, it's helpful to keep all of these different possibilities in mind when analyzing his argument for the existence of God.

> Undoubtedly, the ideas which represent substances to me amount to something more and, so to speak, contain within themselves more objective reality than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents. Again, the idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God, eternal, infinite, immutable [*sic*], omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of all things that exist apart from him, certainly has in it more objective reality than the ideas that represent finite substances.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), God, René Descartes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32-33

Explanation and Analysis

The Meditator uses his trustworthy natural light to present a hierarchy of which substances (kinds of things) are more and less perfect. This can be very difficult to understand, as it relies on both a specialized vocabulary and a set of old philosophical concepts that contemporary readers may not be used to using.

Descartes declares that infinite substances are the most perfect, followed by finite substances, followed by "modes or accidents." *Substances* are essences, or types of things. "Modes" and "accidents" are individual things, as opposed to substances. For instance, a specific dog is a *mode* (or *accident*) of a *substance* that could be called dog-ness (and which refers to all of the traits that make something a dog). Since the idea of *dog-ness* is more fundamental than the idea of any specific dog, Descartes would say that it has more "perfection" or "objective reality." And ideas about finite substances like *dog-ness* (or human nature, the nature of physical objects, and so on) are less perfect (or objectively real) than ideas about *infinite substances*—of which there is only one, God. This may all seem arbitrary and confusing, but it's important to understand because it plays a central role in Descartes's proof for God's existence. Specifically, this proof hinges on the principle that God is more perfect than humans because He is an infinite substance and we are a finite substance.

> It is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much reality [*sic*] in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. For where, I ask, could the effect get its reality from, if not from the cause?

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), René Descartes, God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

The Meditator's first proof for the existence of God depends on this principle, which is really a basic statement about cause and effect: it's impossible for *something* to come from *nothing*. One thing has "as least as much reality" as another if it is, or represents, a more fundamental kind of thing. For Descartes, the realest thing of all would be God, followed by the essence of finite things, followed by specific objects. Thus, it's impossible for a single animal to create the very species to which they belong, or for a human being to create God. In this sense, as philosophy students will likely

recognize, Descartes's view of metaphysics is based on Plato's in a crucial way: he views immaterial substances (which Plato called forms) as the foundation of all existence. For Descartes, as for Plato, *human-ness* is more real (or more perfect) than any individual human. Of course, Descartes wasn't unique in this regard—rather, the Neoplatonist philosophers that influenced him had been making similar arguments for almost 1,500 years.

This basic view of metaphysics is what gives Descartes principles like this one. If fundamental essences are what cause particular things to exist, then this means that the universe only exists because some deeper cause is *making* it so. It's easy to see why this worldview logically leads the Meditator to conclude that God is real: the idea of the universe has to exist before the universe can, and God is the only reasonable explanation for how this is possible. Specifically, the Meditator goes on to argue that the things that cause *ideas* have to be more perfect than those ideas—and so only God could give the Meditator himself the idea that God exists.

> It is clear to me, by the natural light, that the ideas in me are like pictures, or [*sic*] images which can easily fall short of the perfection of the things from which they are taken, but which cannot contain anything greater or more perfect.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), René Descartes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

The Meditator clarifies the relationship between ideas and the real things that cause them by comparing them to pictures. Just as it's impossible to paint a picture of things that don't exist, it's impossible to have an idea of something that doesn't exist. Of course, it's perfectly possible to paint a picture of another picture, and that other picture could even be a copy of yet another—but eventually, there has to be some original object to which they all refer.

Similarly, Descartes *isn't* saying that artists don't *imagine* things: he recognizes that they can create images of things and scenes that don't literally exist. But he believes that nobody can paint anything that would be logically impossible. Perhaps a painter could depict a rainy desert or a man with seven feet and no head, but they can't paint a square circle or an object that is simultaneously colorful and colorless. An artist may combine different real elements to create an image, but each of those elements must still come from something *real*. For instance, an artist could imagine a new, fantastical animal—but only by mixing and matching the kinds of body parts that animals really have.

Thus, reality provides a basic limit on the images that we can have—and, for Descartes, the same is also true of ideas. This is why he ends up taking the Meditator's idea of God as sufficient proof that God really does exist.

> 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 word "God" I understand a substance that is infinite, eternal, immutable [*sic*], independent, supremely intelligent, supremely 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 they could have originated from me alone. So from what has been said it must be concluded that God necessarily exists.
> It is true that I have the idea of substance in me in virtue of the fact that I am a substance; but this would not account for my having the idea of an infinite substance, when I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

The Meditator reaches his final, conclusive argument for God's existence after putting a series of basic principles in place: he exists, he has an idea of an infinite substance called God, infinite substances are more real than finite ones, and ideas can only come from things that have at least as much reality as they do. From these principles, as he explains here, it follows that God must exist.

But philosophers still disagree about exactly *why* the conclusion of God's existence follows from these premises—some think that it's because of clear and distinct perceptions, others because of the natural light, and others still think that these two abilities are the same. Still, God's existence starts to look like the only reasonable explanation for the Meditator's *idea* of an infinite God, which "could not

have originated in" his own limited mind. Put differently, how could a fragile, finite being imagine something infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing, eternal, and unchanging? Of course, the Meditator considers (and rejects) the possibility that he is simply extrapolating from his knowledge about *finite* beings to guess what an infinite being would be like, or that he doesn't really have a clear idea about God at all.

> It is enough that I understand the infinite, and that I judge that all the attributes which I clearly perceive and know to imply some perfection—and perhaps countless others of which I am ignorant—are present in God either formally or eminently. This is enough to make the idea that I have of God the truest and most clear and distinct of all my ideas.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), God, René Descartes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

After using the concepts of formal and objective reality to prove the existence of God, the Meditator reinforces his conclusion by pointing out that his idea of God, an infinite, all-powerful being, is clearer and more distinct than any other idea. This might seem strange, because the Meditator has also argued that people simply cannot grasp what it means to be infinite, so no human mind can ever fully capture how great God is. In fact, Descartes makes a curious distinction between *understanding* God's infiniteness and *grasping* it—he argues that it's possible to *understand that God is infinite* without *grasping everything that goes into this infiniteness*. This would be kind of like understanding what a calculator does without grasping exactly what makes it able to do so. (We can have a clear and distinct perception about all the functions it can perform without necessarily knowing what electrical components inside it make those functions possible.)

But even if we accept that the Meditator can have a clear and distinct idea about a God that vastly exceeds his own power, his argument raises another, more difficult objection: the so-called "Cartesian Circle." Namely, Descartes is using the Meditator's clear and distinct perception of God's existence as evidence that God really exists, but he still hasn't proven that clear and distinct perception is reliable—in fact, he only reaches that conclusion *because* he has already proven God's existence. So his reasoning appears to be circular: reliable clear and distinct perceptions prove the existence of God, but the existence of God proves that clear and distinct perceptions are reliable. This is part of why Descartes's first argument for the existence of God is so controversial to this day. Many critics argue that the Cartesian Circle makes the argument fall apart entirely. But others disagree—for instance, some think that Descartes thinks that all clear and distinct perceptions are *always* certain *in the moment that we are perceiving them*, and that the Meditator's proof of God's existence only enables us to know things because it allows us to reliably believe in clear and distinct perceptions that we have *already had in the past*.

> But before examining this point more carefully and investigating other truths which may be derived from it, I should like to pause here and spend some time in the contemplation of God; to reflect on his attributes, and to gaze with wonder and adoration on the beauty of this immense light, so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it. For just as we believe through faith that the supreme happiness of the next life consists solely in the contemplation of the divine majesty, so experience tells us that this same contemplation, albeit much less perfect, enables us to know the greatest joy of which we are capable in this life.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), God, René Descartes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the Third Meditation, after completing his first proof for the existence of God, the Meditator gives this explanation for why he will take a break from developing new arguments—but not necessarily from meditating—until tomorrow. This may seem like an unusual shift in tone for a book so focused on logical proofs, but actually, it's perfectly consistent with the Meditator's arguments so far. He has repeatedly argued that people cannot sustainably learn new truths unless they consider and reflect on them over time—just like students who cram for a test and then forget everything they learned, philosophers cannot make long-term intellectual progress unless they review their reasoning and conclusions enough times to learn them by heart.

Indeed, the structure of *Meditations* is designed in large part to help Descartes's readers think through his conclusions in

this way: he expects them to read slowly, taking the time to digest and review each chapter before moving on to the next. In this passage, the Meditator takes this idea a step further by specifically linking the need to reflect on his ideas at the end of the day to the value of contemplation—which Western philosophers and theologians have associated with happiness and the good life since antiquity. Indeed, Descartes's Meditator specifically points out that, if humans have an immaterial soul that lives on into the next life, then contemplation is merely a preview of what heaven will be like. Thus, he offers another powerful reason for reasons to value contemplation and reflection: it's also a way for them to grow closer to God.

Fourth Meditation Quotes

I realize that I am [...] something intermediate between God and nothingness, or between supreme being and non-being: my nature is such that in so far as I was created by the supreme being, there is nothing in me to enable me to go wrong or lead me astray; but in so far as I participate in nothingness or non-being, that is, in so far as I am not myself the supreme being and am lacking in countless respects, it is no wonder that I make mistakes. I understand, then, that error as such is not something real which depends on God, but merely a defect. Hence my going wrong does not require me to have a faculty specially bestowed on me by God; it simply happens as a result of the fact that the faculty of true judgement which I have from God is in my case not infinite.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Having proven God's existence in the Third Meditation, the Meditator goes on to explore the nature of truth and error in the Fourth Meditation. Specifically, he asks, if God is benevolent, perfect, and all-powerful, then why do humans—God's creations—make so many mistakes? This is his response: God is not responsible for our errors, because those errors are nothing more than the *lack* of some greater, higher perfection. People do not go wrong because there *is something wrong* with them, but rather because they *lack something right*. All the abilities they have are perfect—they just aren't infinite. One way to illustrate this point is by comparing humans to a different kind of creation, like a ship. There's a difference between a *broken* ship (which can't sail because it doesn't work correctly) and a merely *limited* ship (which functions correctly, but can only go so fast and so far). Humans are like the second ship: there is nothing broken in us; we just have inherent limits, and because of these limits, we do not always succeed.

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

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

After concluding that people can make mistakes because their capacities are limited, the Meditator offers a more detailed theory of what they are actually doing when they err. Specifically, he argues that error occurs when people act on incomplete knowledge—or, in the Meditator's language, when they use their free will to make decisions about "matters which [they] do not understand."

Free will is inherently unlimited because, as the Meditator points out, it's impossible to divide it up. There's no way to have half of a free will. Instead, God has given us a perfect and unlimited free will, which means we can make all sorts of decisions—including decisions about situations that we don't understand. In contrast, the human understanding is perfect but limited: we are capable of having perfect, certain knowledge, but not about everything (or even about very many things at all). Thus, we often wrongly act on bad information, either because we mistakenly believe that information to be certain, because we simply do not care about achieving certainty, or because we have to take action before we get a chance to be certain.

If, however, I simply refrain from making a judgement in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly. If I go for the alternative which is false, then obviously I shall be in error; if I take the other side, then it is by pure chance that I arrive at the truth, and I shall still be at fault since it is clear by the natural light that the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will. In this incorrect use of free will may be found the privation which constitutes the essence of error.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), René Descartes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

After explaining that people make mistakes by using their free will to act on incomplete information, the Meditator outlines how people can use their free will more responsibly. He emphasizes that, while the intellect enables us to know things that we achieve absolute certainty about, the free will still gives us the power to accept or reject premises that are less certain.

When we understand things by having clear and distinct perceptions about them, the intellect overwhelms the free will, and we cannot take back that understanding, no matter how hard we try. For instance, the Meditator could never use his free will to refuse to believe that he exists, because he knows it through a clear and distinct rational perception. In contrast, when we face uncertain premises, we can freely choose to "either affirm or deny" them. But if we affirm them and they turn out to be true, we didn't really know them—we just happened to be lucky.

Fortunately, there's a simple way to avoid errors in reasoning: don't believe anything that isn't yet certain, which means doubting everything that can be doubted. Of course, this argument provides a justification for the method that lies at the foundation of this book: the systematic doubt that the Meditator introduces in the First Meditation and uses to sweep away all of his uncertain beliefs. Indeed, it suggests that the fundamental purpose of Descartes's scientific thinking is to prevent us from making errors in judgment and action.

Today I have learned not only what precautions to take to avoid ever going wrong, but also what to do to arrive at the truth. For I shall unquestionably reach the truth, if only I give sufficient attention to all the things which I perfectly understand, and separate these from all the other cases where my apprehension is more confused and obscure. And this is just what I shall take good care to do from now on.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), René Descartes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the Fourth Meditation, Descartes summarizes the central lesson in his analysis of truth and error: the best way to avoid serious mistakes is by ensuring that we only act on information that's absolutely certain, and the only way to ensure that our knowledge is absolutely certain is by making sure that we only choose to believe in our clear and distinct perceptions.

Of course, this conclusion sheds new light on Descartes's overall intellectual project in *Meditations*. Namely, it helps explain why he cares so much about refining our knowledge in a disciplined way until it is certain. Descartes's vision of science—as a systematic body of knowledge about the nature of the world—is therefore closely tied to his view of the human intellect as a perfect, but limited, faculty for understanding the world. Science allows us to achieve certain knowledge about more things, and therefore also to make fewer errors when we act on that knowledge.

Fifth Meditation Quotes

But if the mere fact that I can produce from my thought the idea of something entails that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it, is not this a possible basis for another argument to prove the existence of God? Certainly, the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one which I find within me just as surely as the idea of any shape or number. And my understanding that it belongs to his nature that he always exists is no less clear and distinct than is the case when I prove of any shape or number that some property belongs to its nature.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), God, René Descartes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51-52

Explanation and Analysis

In the Fifth Meditation, the Meditator presents a second argument for the existence of God. This proof, often called the "ontological argument," can only work because the Meditator has already shown that his clear and distinct perceptions are true. It's remarkably simple: he has a clear and distinct idea of God, and that idea includes the fact that God must exist. Put differently, existence is part of God's essence; it's impossible to imagine a supreme, perfect being who *doesn't* exist.

The specifics of this argument have been debated for generations—most commonly, philosophers have seriously criticized it, and many have even wondered why Descartes includes it at all. Some argue that Descartes merely wanted to reinforce his readers' faith in God by giving them another reason to believe, while others have suggested that he didn't really believe in this second argument but was merely using it to make a point to the Church. Another more likely possibility is that this argument serves to change the *status* of knowledge about God. In the first argument, God's existence was the conclusion of a longer, rational proof. Now, it's the kind of conclusion that the Meditator and the reader can perceive directly. This difference is similar to the difference between believing that a triangle has three sides based on a complex mathematical proof and believing it based on actually seeing a triangle: both lead us to the same final conclusion, but the second is far quicker, more direct, and more useful to most people.

> For what is more self-evident than the fact that the supreme being exists, or that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists?

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

The Meditator restates the ontological argument for the existence of God in more straightforward, intuitive terms. It's just self-evident to the Meditator that, if a being is perfect, one of its perfections is that it exists. Of course, this point probably isn't obvious at all to modern readers. Why, we may ask, is existence so clearly a kind of perfection? In this way, ironically enough, it underlines the Meditator's points about the dangers of obeying common wisdom (instead of sticking to rigorous rational analysis).

Indeed, the Meditator has already proven God's existence once, so this second argument doesn't seem to add much to his overall picture; moreover, he is meticulous about only including absolutely necessary arguments, so why would he accept this redundancy? In fact, this second proof is only possible because the Meditator knows that his clear and distinct perceptions are true—a point that he could prove only through his *first* argument for the existence of God. If the first proof is necessary for the second proof to stand, we may ask, then why do we need the second proof at all? There are no easy answers to this question, but testing out different possibilities is an excellent way to gain a clearer understanding about the overall structure and goals of *Meditations*.

> Now, however, I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver; and I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true. Accordingly, even if I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to judge that this is true, as long as I remember that I clearly and distinctly perceived it, there are no counter-arguments which can be adduced to make me doubt it, but on the contrary I have true and certain knowledge of it. And I have knowledge not just of this matter, but of all matters which I remember ever having demonstrated, in geometry and so on.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

After describing his second argument for the existence of God, the Meditator makes a subtle but crucial point about the kind of evidence that he needs in order make firm judgments about different conclusions. Throughout *Meditations* so far, he has only taken an idea to be absolutely certain at the moment when he clearly and distinctly perceives it. Since he wasn't sure whether or not he was being deceived, he wasn't able to trust his memory, so he couldn't necessarily believe a conclusion he had proved at

any point earlier in the past. Needless to say, this approach to knowledge would make science all but impossible: if a scientist had to prove basic axioms over and over again to make sure they hadn't changed, they could never conduct any experiments or reach any conclusions at all.

But, as he explains in this passage, the Meditator has now determined that God has made his reason and memory reliable. This means that he *can* know for sure that, if he clearly and distinctly perceived some conclusion yesterday, the same conclusion is still true today. As a result, once he clearly and distinctly perceives an idea *once*, he has enough of a basis to continue believing it for the foreseeable future. This provides a much sounder basis for science because it means that scholars can gradually build a base of reliable knowledge about the world, without worrying that it will all unpredictably come crashing down.

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

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55-56

Explanation and Analysis

After he offers his second proof for God's existence, the Meditator takes stock of the conclusions he has reached so far and declares that God is the keystone of all human knowledge: nothing else can truly be known about the world without first knowing that God exists. This is because God guarantees the reliability of all other perceptions: the Meditator can only trust his judgment, his memory, and (to a lesser extent) his senses because he has proven that God would not deceive him.

Yet, while this passage does describe the Meditator's thought process more or less accurately, it's not quite complete. The Meditator doesn't rely on the existence of God for absolutely *all* of his conclusions: namely, he did know about his *own* existence (and the nature of his thoughts) before ever proving that God exists and isn't a deceiver. This may seem like a minor point to modern readers, but in Descartes's time, it was very significant, because it demonstrates that he replaced God with humankind at the pinnacle of knowledge. Otherwise, the rest of Descartes's philosophical system does still rely on God's existence, without which it would be impossible to be certain about anything at all.

Sixth Meditation Quotes

❝ The difference between this mode of thinking and pure understanding may simply be this: when the mind understands, it in some way turns towards itself and inspects one of the ideas which are within it; but when it imagines, it turns towards the body and looks at something in the body which conforms to an idea understood by the mind or perceived by the senses.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In the Sixth Meditation, the Meditator's goal is to demonstrate the existence of the physical world—including his own body. He begins by pointing out that, since he is capable of imagination, he has good reason to suspect that there's something in the universe besides himself and God. It might seem counterintuitive that he talks about his *imagination* instead of his *sense perceptions*. But he hasn't even proven that he has any senses yet, while he *is* certain that he can *imagine* things that don't exist. So it's safer for him to focus on the imagination, all on the supposition that he could not possibly imagine physical things if there were no physical things in existence.

In this passage, the Meditator clarifies this supposition by emphasizing how *understanding* is different from *imagination*. Understanding is a relationship between the mind and ideas that are already within it, so it says nothing about whether there is an external world. But imagination requires "turn[ing] towards" physical objects in order to visualize them or simulate having sense perceptions of them. For instance, we could *understand* basic facts about a shape by calculating those facts mathematically, without ever *imagining* that shape. (The Meditator uses a 1,000-sided chiliagon as an example.) Indeed, mathematicians today routinely work with concepts that are *unimaginable*, in the strict sense that they are impossible to visualize. As soon as we imagine something, the

Meditator argues, we are supposing that external objects probably exist.

I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God. [...] It is true that I may have [...] a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), God, René Descartes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61-62

Explanation and Analysis

The Meditator has established that his clear and distinct perceptions are reliable. Based on this conclusion, he deduces that the mind and the body are real and distinct from one another. Earlier in the book, he began his argument by declaring that all he could be certain about is his own existence as a "thinking thing"—or a mind. At that point, he still doubted the existence of his body, so he was able to imagine his mind existing on its own, without a body attached to it. This means that the two concepts are inherently distinct—even if, as a matter of practical fact, we only ever experience them as connected to one another (or, in Descartes's parlance, "very closely joined").

This conception of the mind and body is now arguably Descartes's greatest legacy, with the possible exception of his method of systematic doubt. For Descartes, as for many modern scientists and philosophers, humans have both minds and bodies, but the *true* self is the *mind*. The body is merely a vessel that the mind occupies during some period of its existence. While the body may *belong* to the person who occupies it, it's not truly *part* of that person, because human identity depends on the mind alone. Of course, since the immaterial mind is really no different than the eternal soul, Descartes's view fits cleanly into the official doctrine of the Catholic Church, too.

Indeed, there is no doubt that everything that I am taught by nature contains some truth. For if nature is considered in its general aspect, then I understand by the term nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God. And by my own nature in particular I understand nothing other than the totality of things bestowed on me by God.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Having established that his body is real, the Meditator next asks how reliable his senses are and what he is actually perceiving through them. He points out that the external world is part of God's creation, which means that—just like humans themselves—it must be perfect. Indeed, when humans perceive the outside world through their senses, this really just means that one part of God's creation is looking at another part. And the Meditator has already proven that God is not a deceiver.

Yet this doesn't necessarily mean that humans' perceptions are always perfect. It's possible to see something perfect through blurry eyes, and the Meditator has already shown that people's senses are highly limited. Thus, we can often *think* we see things that aren't really there—even though, if we looked closer and thought harder before speaking, we *would* be able to see the truth. As a result, the Meditator arrives at a balanced conclusion: on the one hand, our perceptions should point us in the direction of truth, because the outside world is perfect; but, on the other, we should remember the limits of the senses, rather than mistaking their perceptions for absolute truth.

In these cases and many others I see that I have been in the habit of misusing the order of nature. For the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part; and to this extent they are sufficiently clear and distinct. But I misuse them by treating them as reliable touchstones for immediate judgements about the essential nature of the bodies located outside us; yet this is an area where they provide only very obscure information.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65-66

Explanation and Analysis

After establishing that his body exists, the Meditator tries to lay out some basic principles about how the body works and what his sense perceptions mean. He makes a subtle but powerful argument: sense perceptions aren't supposed to give us specific, reliable information about the external world. Rather, they're supposed to merely send a signal to the mind so that the mind can further investigate whatever's in question. While it's tempting to think of vision as a typical example of sense perception, the Meditator suggests that a better starting point would be the feeling of pain. Pain doesn't reveal exactly what is going on—instead, it tells the mind that *something* is happening and that *some* action should be taken to remedy the situation. People have to rationally investigate what the pain signal means in order to truly understand what is going on.

For Descartes, all sense perceptions are like pain. We're simply "misusing the order of nature" when we mistake them for clear knowledge (or for "reliable touchstones for immediate judgements about the essential nature of the bodies located outside us"). We should therefore treat sense perceptions as raw data and use rationality to figure out what they mean—which is, not coincidentally, the core of the scientific method.

> My final observation is that any given movement occurring in the part of the brain that immediately affects the mind produces just one corresponding sensation; and hence the best system that could be devised is that it should produce the one sensation which, of all possible sensations, is most especially and most frequently conducive to the preservation of the healthy man. And experience shows that the sensations which nature has given us are all of this kind; and so there is absolutely nothing to be found in them that does not bear witness to the power and goodness of God.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), God, René Descartes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

The Meditator argues that the brain enables the body to connect to the mind. Crucially, he doesn't think that the brain *is* the mind—rather, he views it as part of the body, but specifically the part that communicates what's happening in the rest of the body and the surrounding environment *to* the mind. (To get even more specific, Descartes thinks that all of this connection happens in one small part of the brain: the pineal gland.) When the brain moves in a specific way, the Meditator suggests, the mind perceives a specific, corresponding sensation. It can be helpful to think of this view as supposing that there is a specific button in the brain for pain, another for pleasure, and so on. (In some ways, this is consistent with modern neuroscience, which identifies the parts of the brain that correspond to different feelings.)

Based on his theory that the brain communicates sensations to the mind, the Meditator proposes that the seemingly perfect design of the human mind-body connection is evidence enough for the existence of God. He argues that a perfectly-designed human body would send the brain the kind of signals that keep it alive and well—like pain when facing a threat, pleasure when doing something that promotes survival, and so on. Of course, while modern scientists would explain this phenomenon in terms of evolution, for Descartes, the right explanation is clearly God. Since this does seem to be the case, Descartes concludes that God has made people's bodies reliable, if limited, tools for sending the right signals to their minds.

> Accordingly, I should not have any further fears about the falsity of what my senses tell me every day; on the contrary, the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable. This applies especially to the principal reason for doubt, namely my inability to distinguish between being asleep and being awake. [...] But since the pressure of things to be done does not always allow us to stop and make such a meticulous check, it must be admitted that in this human life we are often liable to make mistakes about particular things, and we must acknowledge the weakness of our nature.

Related Characters: The Meditator (speaker), René Descartes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70-71

Explanation and Analysis

Descartes's *Meditations* ends with the Meditator reaffirming his newfound certainty in the reality of the exterior world, encouraging readers to be careful about

what they choose to believe in, and admitting that it's impossible to ever be completely certain about such choices because of "the weakness of our [human] nature." Of course, he's just summarizing Descartes's primary message: we must be aware of the different levels of certainty and doubt that correspond to our different beliefs, and if we want to know anything about the world scientifically, we must hold ourselves to a very high standard. By analyzing the fundamental principles of our thought in a "meticulous check," we can confirm that our everyday observations are relatively accurate. But in our everyday lives, we should still be careful to test and refine our observations as much as possible. Indeed, this is why science is so important: it enables us to compensate for "the weakness of our nature."

Thus, at the end of the book, the Meditator once again believes in all of their ordinary perceptions, but with an added level of certainty. Descartes has given his readers the most definitive proof he can for believing that the reality they think they inhabit is, in fact, real. This is an important point: many students wrongly assume that Descartes genuinely only believed in the existence of immaterial minds, and not in the reality of the external world. This view is understandable, but incorrect. Descartes's Meditator only doubts (or suspends belief in) the existence of material things—he never truly argues that the world *doesn't* exist, just that we *can't be sure* that it *does*. In turn, as the book's author, Descartes only sent the Meditator through this intellectual crucible in order to show how we *can* prove that the world exists.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

DEDICATORY LETTER TO THE SORBONNE

Descartes dedicates the *Meditations* to the Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne, France's leading university. But he also asks the Faculty to endorse his work. He argues that, while faith and scripture are enough to make Christians like him accept the existence of God and the immortal soul, atheists will only believe in them if they have philosophical proof. After carefully searching for the best possible version of this proof, Descartes is publishing his findings in this book. He warns that some readers might not understand his complex arguments, while others will attack him because they care more about getting attention than discovering the truth. But if the Faculty agrees to publicly support Descartes's work, it will send a powerful message. Descartes believes that, with the Faculty's backing, his work could convince all of humanity to accept Christianity's basic truths.

Readers may be surprised to learn that Descartes begins Meditations *by asking for approval from theologians who were basically representatives of the Catholic Church. After all, he is famous for his belief that rationality is humankind's best tool for understanding the world, an argument that helped spur the Enlightenment and significantly curb the church's power in Europe. Yet he actually viewed rationality as a way to prove God's existence with certainty and ultimately* reinforce *religious faith. As he points out in this letter, atheists refuse to believe in God on faith, so rational arguments for God's existence are the only way to win them over. Moreover, it was incredibly dangerous to challenge the church's official beliefs in the 17th century—but this is exactly what Descartes's work did. Even though he lived in the Netherlands, where the church's power was very limited, he was seriously worried about ending up like Galileo (who was imprisoned for daring to argue that the Earth revolved around the Sun). But the Sorbonne's approval would have protected Descartes from such a fate. Unfortunately, he never got it.*

PREFACE TO THE READER

Descartes explains that he summarized his conclusions about God and the soul in the earlier work *Discourse on the Method*. In these *Meditations*, he will answer the critics who have questioned his views: he will explain why the human soul has no essence besides "being a thinking thing" and why, if he can think of a God more perfect than himself, that God must exist. He dismisses atheists' criticisms as irrelevant, as they underestimate God's infiniteness and overestimate humans' power. Next, he warns readers not to read this book unless they're "able and willing to seriously meditate with [him]." Readers must follow reason alone, rather than their senses or their preconceived opinions. Finally, before criticizing Descartes's arguments, they should read the *Objections and Replies* that he published along with the *Meditations*.

Descartes uses this preface to explain his overall goals in Meditations *and to contextualize the book within the broader sweep of his life's work. This context is important because it can help readers distinguish between Descartes and his narrator (whom we call "The Meditator" in this guide). Descartes has purposely made the Meditator naïve: the Meditator appears to be thinking up his arguments for the first time. This is a rhetorical technique intended to help readers identify with the Meditator, since the readers themselves are perhaps also encountering these ideas for the first time. In turn, it's a bit easier to consider the book's ideas more objectively. But readers must not assume that Descartes is as naïve as his Meditator. Descartes has spent years developing his ideas, testing them against objections, and figuring out the most logical and persuasive way to present them to his audience. Just as a mathematician might offer a formal proof of a concept accompanied by a commentary explaining why the proof is structured the way it is, Descartes presents* Meditations *as a proof and his* Objections and Replies *as a commentary.*

SYNOPSIS OF THE FOLLOWING SIX MEDITATIONS

In the First Meditation, Descartes will argue that, in order to achieve certain knowledge about the world, people should start by doubting everything they possibly can. In the Second Meditation, he will show that the one thing nobody can doubt is the existence of their own minds. In the Third Meditation, he will explain his proof for God's existence, while in the Fourth Meditation, he will demonstrate that "everything that we clearly and distinctly perceive is true." In the Fifth Meditation, he will give a second argument to prove that God exists. Finally, in the Sixth Meditation, he will show that the mind is immortal and separate from the body, then explain how we can know that the physical world exists.

This synopsis gives the reader a brief snapshot of Descartes's broader argumentative strategy in the Meditations. *Since he covers such different ideas in each chapter, it would be easy to lose track of how they all interrelate—and to forget that Descartes has carefully structured them to provide an airtight case for his conclusions. However, while Descartes describes his work's primary goal as proving the existence of God and the soul, students today are more likely reading him to learn about the unique methodology that he lays out in the First and Second Meditations, since this methodology is the foundation for the general approach most commonly used in science, mathematics, and philosophy today.*

FIRST MEDITATION

Descartes's narrator (the Meditator) notes that, as a child, he absorbed lots of ideas that later turned out to be false. He decides that, if he wants to reach any sure scientific knowledge about the world, he must "demolish everything completely and start right again from the foundations." So he has set some time and space aside to do so in these *Meditations*.

Descartes's Meditator points out that most of what people believe is based on received wisdom, not rigorous rational analysis, and he proposes "start[ing] right again from the foundations" of knowledge as an alternative. The First Meditation is arguably the most influential passage in all of Descartes's writing because it lays out a clear solution to the fundamental question at the heart of his life's work: how can people be certain about anything? Descartes cares about this problem because it speaks to the fundamental relationship between science and knowledge. In the 17th century, religious faith was generally accepted as the best source of knowledge about the world. But Descartes thought that science was a better alternative, in part because he thought science would definitively prove the basic truths of religion. He also wanted to show that people could achieve absolutely certain knowledge about the natural world around them by analyzing it scientifically. In other words, he proposed that humans should use the scientific method *to understand the world. This proposal revolutionized Western science and philosophy forever.*

First, the Meditator will refuse to believe any idea he can't be completely certain of—meaning anything that he finds it possible to doubt. All his opinions are ultimately based on what he has perceived through his senses. The senses sometimes deceive him, but not about obvious perceptions, like the fact that he's holding a sheet of paper and sitting next to a fire. That is—unless he's mad or dreaming. After all, madmen don't know that their perceptions are false. Neither does the Meditator know when he's dreaming.

The Meditator wants to start with a certain first principle because he knows that all of science is connected: the basic principles of philosophy are the foundation of physics, which is the foundation for sciences like astronomy, chemistry, and biology, which can in turn explain the basic rules of human psychology and social life. Thus, none of these sciences can be truly reliable unless their philosophical foundation is certain. Doubt and certainty are complementary concepts: by definition, nothing that can be doubted is certain, and something is certain if there is no doubt about it being true. This basic principle of logic leads the Meditator to a foolproof method for identifying what kinds of knowledge are and aren't certain: if he can logically imagine that something is false, then it isn't certain. This is how he discards his senses: he argues that, since it's conceivable that he could be dreaming, he can't be totally sure that anything he sees, feels, hears, smells, or tastes is real—and so none of these senses can serve as the foundation for his certain science.

Thus, the Meditator can't be sure that he's really awake at all. Nor can he know that his hands and body are even real. But painters imagine things that don't exist by manipulating shapes that do. Maybe the Meditator's hands and body don't exist, but at the very least, they would be the *kind* of things that do exist. So there must be physical objects with shapes. Numbers, places, and time must also all be real. This suggests that sciences dealing with these basic elements, like math and geometry, can definitely achieve scientific certainty.

This passage is an interesting tangent to the Meditator's main argument, but it's easy to misinterpret. The Meditator's argument about imagination doesn't *mean that, just because he thinks he has hands, there must be hands somewhere in the world—after all, people could easily think they see unicorns, but they still wouldn't exist. Instead, he's saying that, because he thinks he has hands and a body, there must be* some kind of three-dimensional object *somewhere in the world. He also isn't saying that this knowledge is certain—at least not yet. Rather, he's just saying that it will be more certain than any other kind of knowledge,* if *he can prove it to be true. With this argument, Descartes is establishing a basic hierarchy for the sciences: math and geometry are the most fundamental, and by implication, physics comes next.*

Yet the Meditator also believes in an all-powerful God; couldn't God make it so that even basic math concepts—like the fact that a square has four sides—are actually illusions? In fact, couldn't the very idea of God be an illusion, too? So in his search for certain truths, the Meditator must abandon the beliefs he had previously taken for granted. To make this easier, it's helpful to imagine that it's a "malicious demon" (and not God) who's deceiving him into thinking that everything he observes actually exists—when it really doesn't.

The Meditator tests his belief that he can know mathematical principles for certain by coming up with these even more radical thought experiments. The "malicious demon" hypothesis has deeply influenced philosophers for centuries—it's the foundation for the "brain in a vat" thought experiment commonly used today, as well as for popular stories like the movie The Matrix. *Again, the Meditator isn't seriously arguing that squares don't have four sides or that God doesn't exist. Rather, he's looking for any reason he can find to distrust these basic truths, and then he suspends belief in them in order to find a more certain foundation for his knowledge.*

SECOND MEDITATION

After the First Meditation, the Meditator feels totally confused, as though he has "fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool" and can't tell which way is up and which is down. If he can't trust anything he sees or remembers, can he really know anything for sure? Yes: he can know that *he* is real: that "*I am, I exist.*"

The "deep whirlpool" is a metaphor for the confusion and uncertainty that people fall into when they entertain radical doubt (the possibility that nothing is real). But this doubt is necessary in order to give science a certain, rational foundation. The Meditator finds this foundation in the very fact that he exists. He knows that he's thinking; he cannot possibly doubt his own existence. This argument is more commonly quoted in the phrasing Descartes used in his other writing: "I think, therefore I am."

But what *kind* of thing is the Meditator? He used to think of himself as a human being with a body and a soul. Yet he has decided to assume that an evil demon is tricking him, so he can't accept that his body really exists. He also can't accept some of his assumptions about the soul—like that it's capable of movement or perception. But he *must* accept that his soul is *thinking*. So all the Meditator can know for certain is that he's "a thinking thing." To be more specific, he is "a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions."

Now that he has cleared away all of his previous beliefs, the Meditator starts building them back up, starting from the first principle that he definitely exists. Still, his goal is to be completely sure about all of his conclusions, so he continues to systematically doubt them. This is why he isn't ready to believe in his body yet—he still hasn't proven the existence of what he sees and feels. Instead, he sticks to the direct logical consequence of his first principle: if he knows that he's thinking, then not only does he definitely exist, but he's also definitely the kind of thing that thinks. The same line of reasoning applies to doubt, understanding, affirmation, and so on. This is significant: Descartes defines human beings primarily in terms of the mind, *or* rationality. *This conception of human nature wasn't entirely original, but it has deeply influenced philosophy for centuries.*

The Meditator finds it bizarre that things he perceives by the (untrustworthy) senses seem so much realer than this thinking self that, according to reason, is all he can absolutely know to be real. To explore this intuition, he decides to let his imagination run wild for some time and then use doubt to rein it back in.

The Meditator has already concluded that the imagination is not trustworthy, so this passage signals a shift in tone. Of course, Descartes has included this shift for good reason: even though the Meditator's thoughts appear to be spontaneous, Descartes has actually spent years carefully planning them out. Namely, the rest of the Second Meditation will use an example to illustrate the difference between rationality and the senses.

The Meditator considers **a piece of beeswax**: it appears to have a shape, smell, color, and size, but when put next to a fire, it starts to melt, and all of these qualities change. So its *essence* has nothing to do with these qualities—rather, its essence is simply to be "something extended, flexible, and changeable."

The beeswax illustrates how the senses deceive us about the true nature of things. Namely, the senses show us the way an object appears at a particular moment in time, but understanding its inner nature requires analyzing it with the intellect. Just as scientists today would define a substance like the wax through its chemical composition—rather than its color, smell, and texture—Descartes defines it by the fact that it can change forms and has a three-dimensional shape (or is "extended").

Moreover, nobody could *imagine* or *perceive* all the specific shapes **the wax** could take or ways it could change. Rather, it's only possible to fully understand its essence through *reason*. So the senses give an "imperfect and confused" impression of the wax's nature, while reason gives a "clear and distinct" one. Similarly, when the Meditator sees men crossing through a square, he really just *sees* coats and hats, and then he uses *reason* to conclude that there are men under them.

Since the wax could be molded into countless different shapes, no *amount of information from the senses could ever enable someone to fully understand its essence. This proves that sensory and intellectual perception are two entirely different abilities. (In contrast to modern usage, Descartes calls both* perceptions.*) The concept of "clear and distinct" perceptions is also absolutely central to Descartes's philosophy: it implies a kind of understanding so immediate and well-defined that thinkers truly cannot bring themselves to doubt it.*

Thus, reason perceives the world in a more perfect way than the senses do. And when the Meditator understands something like **the wax**, he knows that it's *him* doing the understanding, so he once again proves that he exists as a thinking thing. All of his rational perceptions therefore contribute to his knowledge of his own nature, and in fact, through rationality he can achieve more perfect knowledge about his own mind than about anything else.

Descartes has used the wax as a thought experiment to show why true knowledge about the universe must come from rationality, not the senses. In addition to supporting Descartes's conclusion that humans' true essence lies in their minds (and not their bodies), this also explains the importance he puts on knowledge and certainty. Specifically, if humans are essentially just thinking minds, then the highest kind of perfection they can reach is perfect knowledge—meaning that their ideas about the world correspond to its external reality. In other words, for Descartes, science and philosophy are the greatest activities humankind is capable of doing.

THIRD MEDITATION

The Meditator resolves to stop trusting his senses and imagination. Instead, using reason alone, he will ask what else he can deduce from the knowledge that he is a thinking thing. First, the Meditator is *certain* that he's a thinking thing only because he has "a clear and distinct perception" of the fact. This suggests that all clear and distinct perceptions are true. Yet the Meditator has already pointed out that God could deceive him about such perceptions, so first, it's important to figure out whether God exists (and whether God can deceive people).

The meditator continues piecing back together his worldview, making sure only to accept beliefs that he can be absolutely certain about. His analysis here foreshadows the end of the Fourth Meditation, in which he concludes that the existence of God does *make all clear and distinct perceptions true, but it also raises serious questions about his logic—including the objection often called the "Cartesian Circle." If Descartes can't trust his clear and distinct perceptions until he knows that God exists, this objection goes, then he would have to prove God's existence without using clear and distinct perceptions as evidence. But he already seems to be using them, which would make his argument circular—after all, this is how he concluded that he's "a thinking thing" in the first place.*

The Meditator argues that he can't doubt the existence of his own ideas and emotions—even when they're wrong, they're still definitely *there*. Some ideas are innate, whereas others come from the imagination, and others still, like the idea of heat, come from external sources besides the thinker's mind. Yet many ideas of this last type just come from "natural impulses" (feelings and instincts), which are untrustworthy. In contrast, the natural light of reason *does* yield perfect certainty.

The Meditator distinguishes among these different sources of ideas because, later in his proof for the existence of God, he has to determine where his idea of God comes from. Here, he emphasizes that ideas that come from feelings, instincts, or the imagination cannot be certain. But he doesn't yet explore innate ideas, nor ideas that originate in external sources besides *feelings or instincts. The "natural light" is a new, often confusing term, the meaning of which scholars are still debating today. For all intents and purposes, it is similar to the concept of clear and distinct perception: when we understand something clearly and distinctly, we're seeing it through the natural light. Readers can imagine this by thinking of a principle that just naturally* has *to be true (like that a square has four sides). Yet this definition of the natural light appears to raise the Cartesian Circle problem, which is why scholars continue to debate its intricacies.*

Something is objectively real if it *represents reality*, but formally real if it *actually exists*. The idea of God—who is an infinite substance—has more objective reality than ideas about finite substances (the essences of things). In turn, these ideas about finite substances have more objective reality than ideas of particular things.

The Meditator's hierarchy of different substances is essentially a complex way of saying that, if God exists, then He is infinite and the nature of the whole universe is contained within Him. In Descartes's time, most philosophers would have been familiar with the difference between objective and formal reality, but these terms are likely to confuse readers today, particularly because they actually mean the opposite of what they initially sound like. To take an example, a map's formal reality is that it's a physical object made of paper, while its objective reality is the territory it represents. To prove that God exists, Descartes applies this distinction to ideas. *Ideas have formal reality because they exist, as ideas, in someone's mind. But they have objective reality because they are ideas* about *something—even if the thing they represent doesn't actually exist.*

The natural light indicates that causes always have "at least as much reality" as their effects, since it's impossible for something to come from nothing. An idea's formal reality comes from the formal reality of the mind that created it: an idea exists because it came from someone's mind (which also exists). But an idea's objective reality, or its ability to represent reality, *cannot* come from the mind's objective reality (which is to be a thinking thing). For instance, the mind alone can't produce the idea of a stone. Instead, the true cause of this idea must be something with the *formal* reality of a stone—meaning an actual stone.

The "at least as much reality" principle effectively means that everything comes from something greater than itself. Just as a large object can't fit inside a much smaller object, a large concept can't fit inside a smaller concept. For instance, the idea of a foot cannot contain the idea of a whole human body—we cannot know everything about the human body just based on a perfect understanding of the foot. This principle is a key part of the Meditator's argument about God, but it's also a basic principle of logical deduction: for a proof to be valid, the axioms at the beginning of it must implicitly contain its conclusion within them.

The Meditator concludes that the original cause of any idea must have at least as much formal reality as the idea has objective reality. It's true that one idea can cause another, but there has to be an *original* cause with formal reality. In other words, ideas are like pictures (or even pictures of other pictures). They can never be more perfect than the original thing they represent. This means that, if any of the Meditator's ideas have more objective reality than the Meditator has formal reality—meaning he can think of something more perfect than himself—then something with that greater level of perfection must really exist.

The basic idea here is that the kinds of things that actually exist determine the kinds of ideas *we can have; it's impossible to think of a thing that has absolutely nothing to do with reality. The Meditator isn't denying that we can imagine fictional things—instead, he's saying that reality provides the* building blocks *for our ideas, and we cannot have an idea with more parts than we have building blocks. Even the wildest fantasies are just new combinations of things that already exist: for instance, one-legged tie-dye unicorns don't exist, but the idea of them is made up of ideas about elements that* do *exist, like legs, colors, horns, and so on. In contrast, it is truly impossible to imagine a color that does not exist (and is not just a combination of other colors that* do*). This is why the meditator concludes that the cause(s) of an idea must be more* perfect *than the idea itself. In this context,* perfection *means that it belongs to a deeper level in the taxonomy that Descartes has laid out: an infinite substance is more perfect than a finite substance, which is more perfect than a specific object.*

The Meditator starts looking for an idea more perfect than himself. Ideas about things like hot and cold, colors, and sounds aren't clear or distinct—it's impossible to know if they really exist at all, and if they do, they could come from the Meditator's mind because they have a very low grade of perfection. Meanwhile, ideas about size, shape, and movement could also come from the Meditator's mind—even if the mind is immaterial, it can count and recognize the passage of time, which means it can independently conceive of three-dimensional space and objects located within it that move or change over time.

The Meditator merges his analysis of levels of perfection with his taxonomy of the levels of science. Ideas based on sensory perceptions (like ideas of temperature, color, sound, size, and motion) are untrustworthy and imperfect because they tell us about particular things in particular forms, and not about those things' essences. All the building blocks for these perceptions are already contained within the human mind (which appears to have sense perceptions, even if these perceptions aren't actually real). Of course, this implies that simply collecting observations about these kinds of characteristics is a less perfect kind of science than trying to understand the fundamental essence of things—which is the purpose of Descartes's philosophy.

Yet the idea of God—the all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal, infinite substance that created everything—is more perfect than the Meditator's mind. So it could only come from one source: God. As a finite substance, the Meditator's mind could never imagine an infinite substance unless it actually existed. Just imagining the opposite of a finite substance wouldn't be enough—rather, infinite substance is altogether different. In fact, the idea of God has the most objective reality of any idea—even if minds like the Meditator's can never fully comprehend what it means to be infinite, the idea of God's infiniteness is so striking that it's easily the most clear and distinct idea in existence. Finally, the Meditator can never become infinite, which further proves that he could not have come up with the idea of God on his own.

The Meditator concludes that God exists based on his principle that an idea cannot be caused by something with less perfection than it has. This means that finite substances (like the human mind) cannot create ideas of infinite substances (like God) all on their own. Put differently, since everything that humans can ever encounter in the world is finite, they couldn't understand infinity unless something truly infinite gave them that idea. To take an analogy, people could never develop a perfect idea of what a zebra is if the only information they were ever given was the shape of its tail—either they would need to perceive the whole zebra (which has the formal *reality of being a zebra), or someone would have to teach them what a zebra is (or present them with an idea with the* objective *reality of representing a zebra).*

Next, the Meditator asks whether he could exist without God. If he created himself, he would have chosen to make himself perfect. He could not have simply always existed, because preserving something's existence requires just as much power as creating it in the first place—and if the Meditator had that power, he would know it by now. His parents also don't have this power. A being less perfect than God could not have created the Meditator, because this could not explain why he has an idea of God. And because unity is part of perfection, multiple beings that each represent a different part of perfection could not have worked together to create the idea of perfection in the Meditator.

Having shown that God exists, the Meditator now argues that God is his own creator. Something has to have created him and kept him alive, and God clearly seems like the best candidate. Through this argument, Descartes completes a rational case for the basic principles of Catholic doctrine. This is a crucial point: Descartes believed that his philosophy was entirely compatible with the church's teachings—in fact, he thought that he offered the church a way to definitively prove its doctrines to outsiders. In this sense, like the generations of Scholastic thinkers who preceded him, Descartes saw no conflict between faith and reason—rather, he thought that science would vindicate religion by proving that faith in God is justified.

Finally, the Meditator asks where his idea of God came from. He concludes that he couldn't imagine it or receive it through the senses, so it must be innate. This makes sense: like an artisan marking his work, God would logically plant the idea of His existence in the beings He created. To summarize his argument, the Meditator states that he could not have the idea of God if God didn't exist. And God "cannot be a deceiver" since God is perfect, and deception is a kind of imperfection. Before his next meditation, the Meditator takes some time to contemplate the beauty, power, and wonder of God.

The Meditator reaches several other important conclusions about the nature of God. His point about God being a "deceiver" is crucial because it speaks to the thought experiment he presented at the beginning of the book, in which his perceptions were really illusions planted in his mind by God or an evil demon. Now that he knows that God is perfect and would not deceive him, he can say with certainty that this thought experiment is not really true—which means that his perceptions really are *trustworthy, as he will explain in the next Meditation. Finally, the Meditator's comment about taking time for contemplation might seem like nothing more than a transition, but it also speaks volumes about Descartes's method and view of philosophy. Specifically, Descartes thought that truly knowing something requires not just reaching a conclusion about it once but also reflecting on that conclusion until it's like second nature. This is similar to the difference between learning an idea once in class and actually studying it in enough depth to understand and retain it over the long term. Because he saw time as the crucial ingredient for learning, Descartes intended for his readers to approach this book slowly, reading a chapter at a time, just like his Meditator.*

FOURTH MEDITATION

After three days of meditation, the Meditator knows with absolute certainty that he's a thinking thing and that God exists. Since God cannot be a deceiver and God gave the Meditator his sense of judgment, that sense of judgment must be reliable. Of course, the Meditator makes errors because he is imperfect. His judgment is reliable, but it's limited. Yet why would God make his judgment imperfect? While people can't always understand God's purposes, it does seem that creating a perfect *world* would require creating lots of imperfect *individuals* and giving each their own special place in the universe.

The Meditator recaps the conclusions he has reached so far and elaborates on a point he raised at the very end of the last chapter: God is perfect, so He would not deceive people, which means that the evil demon thought experiment is definitely not true. Human perception (which, for Descartes, is the same as judgment) is reliable. However, while God's perfection means that human perception is reliable in general, *it doesn't necessarily mean that* everything *people perceive is accurate. In other words, humans are* capable *of accurate judgment, but they still make mistakes; God has given us a perfect tool, but we sometimes misuse it. This speaks to why it's so important to learn to use our judgment correctly.*

The Meditator notices that he makes judgment errors due to a combination of his lack of knowledge and his free will. But the intellect isn't unreliable: it's just limited. Meanwhile, free will actually proves that God is great: it's the only perfect human faculty, because we have absolute choice about whether to do things. In contrast, our understanding, memory, and imagination are limited. Knowing God enables us to freely choose what is good, whereas if we are indifferent and indecisive, we have not properly used our God-given abilities and are not truly free. The Meditator concludes that humans err because "the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect"—they use their free will in situations they don't yet understand.

Descartes uses the Meditator's argument about the will and the intellect to further clarify how humanity's apparent imperfection is compatible with God's perfection. His point depends on the implicit difference between something being defective *and its being* limited. *For example, a ship could be* defective, *if it simply can't sail, but it could also just be* limited*—perhaps it works the way it's supposed to, but it just can't go very fast. In this sense, humans are like a small ship: our faculties are* perfect *but highly* limited. *If humans misuse our abilities—which would be like steering the ship badly—then it's our fault, not God's. In short, humans are* capable *of perfect judgment (the kind of certain knowledge that Descartes hopes to achieve in this book). We just aren't particularly good at* using *our abilities correctly.*

This analysis explains how the Meditator has built his philosophy: he has resolved not to accept or reject ideas until he has enough knowledge to be sure about their truth. If he simply guessed what to believe without truly building understanding, then he would be misusing his free will. Rather than complaining, the Meditator is thankful for the intellect he has. He understands that God could not have given him part of a free will. He takes responsibility for his errors, rather than blaming God. And he recognizes that God could have made him more perfect, but this doesn't mean the *world* would have been more perfect.

In this passage, Descartes uses the Meditator's reasoning to connect his theory of human judgment to the rational method he develops in the Meditations. *Specifically, the Meditator argues that the best way to rein in his free will and avoid error is by limiting himself to only believing in ideas that he's perfectly certain about. This is the precise goal of his method of systematic doubt: by choosing to suspend belief in anything that can be doubted, he ensures that he limits himself to certain ideas. And in doing so, he prevents himself from stepping beyond the bounds of his limited intellect. Put differently, Descartes argues that logical deduction is the only way for people to use their intellect responsibly and truly respect God's plan for the world.*

Lastly, as it's impossible to obtain perfect knowledge about everything, the best way to avoid errors is by withholding one's assent from anything that one's intellect doesn't clearly and distinctly perceive. Since clear and distinct perceptions are something rather than nothing, they must come from God, and since God is no deceiver, they must always be true.

Descartes now explicitly connects the principle that humans should use the intellect carefully to the concept of clear and distinct perceptions. In short, the clarity and distinctness of our perceptions is a measure of whether we are using the intellect responsibly: once we refine our perceptions to the point that they are clear and distinct, they represent certain truths, so it's appropriate to believe in them. But believing in these perceptions before *they are clear and distinct is an error. Of course, the purpose of philosophy—and the scientific method that Descartes lays out in this book—is to help people form clear and distinct perceptions of this sort.*

FIFTH MEDITATION

The Meditator explains that the next pressing issue is to figure out whether he can prove the existence of physical objects. He notes that his ideas about such objects—like quantity, shape, position, motion, and duration—are clear and distinct. So are math and geometry concepts, like the properties of a **triangle**. (And these ideas would still be clear and distinct even if there weren't any triangles in the real world.)

The Meditator's most important metaphysical work is done: he has already established that God exists, that his own judgment is reliable, and that his clear and distinct perceptions are true. These conclusions provide the essential foundations for scientific knowledge. Now, he starts building this body of knowledge back up. He starts with the ideas that, in the First Meditation, he determined to be most certain of all: the basic principles of math, physics, and geometry.

In fact, this line of thinking leads the Meditator to another proof for God's existence. The idea of "a supremely perfect being" is just as clear and distinct as that of a **triangle**. One property of such a being is that "he always exists." Thus, God's existence is as certain as the basic principles of math. Just like mountains and valleys, God and His existence are "mutually inseparable." While it's possible that there could just be no mountains in the world, it isn't possible to imagine a being who is supremely perfect but doesn't exist.

This proof for the existence of God, often called the "ontological argument," is far simpler than the argument from the Third Meditation. A version of this argument dates back centuries, to the work of St. Anselm in the 11th century. Scholars have debated the relationship between these two proofs for centuries: some argue that they are merely redundant, while others argue that each proof serves a different function. However, most contemporary philosophers reject both.

Another objection is that it's wrong to suppose that God is perfect in the first place. But this is inherent to the idea of God. Moreover, since nothing else has existence as part of its essence, there couldn't be multiple supremely perfect Gods, and the Meditator clearly and distinctly perceives many other attributes of God, like the fact that He exists eternally. In fact, God's existence is the most self-evident of all ideas.

The Meditator argues that perfect existence is just an inherent part of what God is, but most philosophers disagree. The most famous objection to Descartes's ontological proof is Kant's claim that "existence is not a real predicate," meaning that existence is not the kind of quality that can be part of something's essence. If we imagine a real ball and then imagine an imaginary one, we are really just imagining the same ball twice—the question of whether the ball exists has nothing to do with any of its inherent traits.

God's existence is also the foundation of all other certain knowledge. The Meditator notes that sometimes he reaches clear and distinct conclusions through proofs, but then forgets the proofs and starts doubting the conclusions later on. But now that he knows for sure that God exists and isn't a deceiver (which makes all clear and distinct perceptions true), he can continue to believe in his conclusions even after he forgets the proofs. In the past, much of his knowledge was unreliable, but now that he has proven God's existence, the Meditator can "achieve full and certain knowledge" about God and mathematics for the first time.

The Meditator returns to the question of what God's existence means for human knowledge and science. Before this point, he could only have certain knowledge in the moment when he had a clear and distinct perception of some conclusion—for instance, he could only know that a triangle's angles sum to 180 degrees when he was actually thinking about the proof. But this poses a problem for science: how can we derive more complex truths from these basic principles if we have to go back over the proofs for the principles every time? Wouldn't we have to stop believing in those proofs as soon as we stop thinking about them? And if so, wouldn't they cease to be clear and distinct? This is why Descartes talks about God's reliability giving us "full and certain knowledge." Because God doesn't deceive us, Descartes suggests, we can know that something we clearly and distinctly perceived (or proved to be true) yesterday is still true today. Thus, we can trust our past conclusions without having to repeat the whole process that led us to them.

SIXTH MEDITATION

The Meditator's final task is to show that physical objects really exist. So far, his clear and distinct perceptions about God and the imagination suggest that they probably do. But to prove this for sure, the Meditator starts by explaining how imagination is different from pure understanding. If he thinks of a **triangle**, he imagines a three-sided figure with his mind's eye. But if he thinks of a chiliagon (a thousand-sided polygon), he doesn't *imagine* what it would look like—even though he can *understand* its geometrical properties. While understanding is part of humans' essence, the imagination isn't. Imagination depends on some outside influence. Specifically, understanding involves the mind turning inwards to explore ideas, while imagination involves the mind looking outward to consider unreal physical objects.

Descartes's fundamental goal in the Meditations is to lay a perfectly reliable, absolutely certain intellectual foundation for science. Thus, his work will not be complete until he can tell scholars what kind of methodology they can use to understand the world around them. In order to do so, he first needs to establish whether people can trust their senses, and whether the things we think we perceive really do exist. He starts with the imagination because it's entirely in his mind, so he can be absolutely sure that it exists, but it also clearly points to the existence of things that aren't *entirely in the mind.*

Imagination is based on the combination of memory and sense-perception, so analyzing the reliability of the senses is a good place to start. Once upon a time, the Meditator perceived that he had body parts, like limbs and a head, which interacted with other physical objects and felt sensations like pleasure, hunger, and sadness. The body could touch, see, smell, taste, and hear, which allowed it to perceive things like the sky and the ocean—but not thoughts. It also had many strong, involuntary sensations that appeared to come from external objects. The Meditator figured that physical objects resembled his ideas of them, and that sensations like pain and thirst were natural responses to different situations.

In the Second Meditation, the Meditator established that the senses give us an inferior kind of understanding compared to the intellect. Yet this doesn't mean the senses are irrelevant to true scientific knowledge—on the contrary, they're actually the only way that scholars and scientists can collect information about the external world so that they can later analyze this information through rationality. Moreover, the Meditator also makes a key distinction here: he is absolutely certain that he has sense perceptions*—he cannot possibly doubt that he seems to see, feel, and hear things—but this does not yet mean that the things he perceives* are actually real.

But later in life, the Meditator started to doubt his senses. For instance, he noticed that buildings and statues sometimes looked different from a distance than they did up close. He learned that sometimes amputees still feel pain in the limbs they have lost. At the beginning of these *Meditations*, he determined that he could not yet prove that he wasn't dreaming, or that even his clearest perceptions weren't erroneous.

The Meditator sets up two different levels of skepticism about the senses. On one level, he may be dreaming, in which case none *of his sense perceptions are trustworthy. He already has the tools to overcome this kind of skepticism: he already knows that God would not deceive him. But on another level, even if he* isn't *dreaming and the external world* is *totally real, the Meditator still knows that the senses deceive him. Even in perfect conditions, they aren't reliable enough to lead to certain knowledge. This presents a different challenge: can scientists ever refine the senses' murky perceptions enough to make them clear and distinct?*

But now, knowledge of God has taught the Meditator to trust in his clear and distinct perceptions. For instance, if he clearly and distinctly perceives two things to be different, then they are. He clearly and distinctly perceives that his essence is to be "a thinking, non-extended thing," while he has "an extended, non-thinking" body. Thus, he is certain that his mind and body are separate, and that he (the mind) could exist without the body, imagination, and senses. In contrast, imagination and sense-perception can't exist without the mind: the Meditator needs guidance from his mind to organize his ideas and perceptions.

The Meditator proves that his body must exist by deducing it from an axiom that he has already proven: his clear and distinct perceptions are reliable. Thus, the Meditator reaches a dualist *conclusion about human nature: people are the combination of a nonphysical mind with a physical body. But the body and mind are not equal—rather, the mind thinks and controls the body. Effectively, then, the mind is where people's real essence lies, and the body is just a tool for the mind to use. This model of human nature—often referred to as the "ghost in the machine"— is famously associated with Descartes.*

Yet the human imagination produces ideas and the human senses produce perceptions *involuntarily*. So what creates them? Either external substances, the Meditator answers, or God. But it can't be God, because if God made these ideas and perceptions falsely appear to come from physical objects, then He would be a deceiver (and the Meditator already knows that He isn't). So the Meditator concludes that physical objects exist. They might not be exactly like how we perceive them, but they're real.

While the Meditator is certain that his body takes up physical space, this doesn't necessarily mean that all of the other *things he perceives exist within this same physical space, too. Rather, he has to prove this separately—as he does in this section. His proof for the existence of physical objects is similar to (but far simpler than) his first proof for the existence of God. Namely, just as he can imagine God only because something with God's characteristics actually exists, he can only have the impression that there are physical objects because they're actually there.*

Objects surely have basic mathematical properties like size, shape, and motion. And since God created nature and isn't a deceiver, it's likely that human perception about other, more complex properties in objects (like color and sound) also "contains some truth." Natural sensations like thirst, hunger, and pain suggest that the body has certain needs, and the mind is "very closely joined" to it. Yet other perceptions are clearly unreliable, like the assumption that "space in which nothing is occurring to stimulate my senses must be empty." So reaching certainty about our perceptions requires putting them up to scrutiny by the intellect.

Having proven that objects are real and our perceptions reflect reality to at least some extent, the Meditator is now ready to lay out basic principles for science. But his ability to do so will depend on whether he manages to sort reliable perceptions (which can form the foundation for scientific knowledge) from unreliable ones (which cannot). This is why he distinguishes between mathematical properties like size, shape, and motion (which are measurable and reliable) and unreliable perceptions, like the assumption that space that appears *empty to us* actually is *empty. Science must be founded on the first kind and steer clear of the second.*

Assuming that perceptions are completely accurate is really "misusing the order of nature." Perceptions' purpose is to send the mind general signals about what is good and bad for the individual, but not to provide reliable information about physical objects' "essential nature." Perceptual mistakes simply show that humans aren't omniscient. For instance, when people get sick and eat or drink things that make their sickness *worse*, this just shows that the natural machinery of their bodies is out of order.

The Meditator uses these examples to illustrate that there's a significant gap between the way things appear *to us and the way they actually* are. *This point is significant to Descartes because it's the foundation for the scientific method: science is just a way for humans to rationally test the things that we perceive and determine what their "essential nature" really is. In other words, science helps us turn unreliable perceptions into certain knowledge.*

Next, the Meditator asks how God prevents humanity from deceiving itself. He offers a few observations. First, all physical things can be divided, while the mind never can be. Thus, a person's mind could be joined to only part of their body—for instance, they could lose limbs but remain the same person. Second, the brain appears to be the only part of the body that has any contact with the mind: it sends signals to the mind about what the body perceives. Third, the different parts of the body are connected and move in consistent ways. For example, foot pain passes through many different nerves to reach the brain, and by stimulating these nerves, we could imitate the feeling of foot pain.

These specific comments about the body might seem out of place in relation to the rest of the Meditations. *But actually, they're just the next logical step: they're the most clear and distinct observations available to the Meditator about the nature of the human body and the external world. Thus, for Descartes, these principles would be the foundation for a scientific understanding of humankind. Of course, they also reflect the state of medical science in Descartes's era. For instance, he knew that the brain is central to controlling the body and that the nerves transmit sensation from the body to the brain.*

Fourth, the Meditator says, each movement in the brain produces a corresponding feeling in the mind, and all such natural feelings contribute "to the preservation of the healthy man." For instance, pain signals to the mind that it should act to eliminate the problem causing the pain. The Meditator concludes that the senses sometimes do deceive—especially when the body is sick and can't signal sensations to the mind properly. But usually, the senses are truthful, and memory and the intellect can help catch their errors. Thus, the Meditator will generally trust his senses and move on from "the exaggerated doubts of the last few days."

The Meditator's claims about the relationship between movements in the brain and feelings in the mind demonstrates Descartes's specific view of the mind-body connection. Unlike most modern neuroscientists, he doesn't think that the mind is physically located in the brain—rather, he thinks of the brain as something like the mind's user interface. He thinks that the mind and body are totally separate, but the brain is the organ in the body that is designed to communicate with the mind. Meanwhile, his claims about the senses point to what he views as the best approach to science: namely, that scholars should use rationality to test and prove the impressions they receive from their senses. This is exactly what scientists do today—they collect data by observing a phenomenon and then logically analyze that data to reach conclusions about it.

Finally, the Meditator concludes that he can also dismiss his doubt about being asleep. His memory is linking his meditations every day to the day before, and he doesn't see anything vanishing into thin air, as tends to happen in dreams. He knows that he can trust his memory, intellect, and (for the most part) his senses. He's confident that God isn't deceiving him, but he recognizes that humans often make mistakes—and should try their best to avoid them.

At the very end of the Meditations, *Descartes's Meditator comes full circle. He returns to believing that he's a real person, living in the real world, with senses that give him accurate information about that world. Of course, there's one crucial difference: he's now absolutely certain about all of it, because he has gone through the intellectual exercise of identifying and justifying his presuppositions.*

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