

Descartes' method in meditations on first philosophy



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In order to investigate the intricacies of Descartes' method, we must first come to an understanding of what Descartes is hoping to accomplish by use of it, and the true immediacy with which he writes. The objectives he introduces, namely to prove that "the human soul does not die with the body, and that God exists" (3), are not wants for Descartes, but absolute necessity. For Descartes, the world without God is an unregulated breeding ground of happy vice and endless convenience at the cost of morality; a world in which truth has no value and nothing can be certain; where he can deny his daughter right to the moment of her untimely death without consequence; where his only reason for continuing to live is to carve out the path of escape from this treachery for all damned or lost others. The ideal of his philosophy and the purpose of his methodical project then becomes to uncover what is certain - what is free from all error, from all sources of doubt or the temptation to doubt - and to find God within that certainty.

In the First Meditation it is established that he will accomplish this through radical doubt, in which all sources of potential error are suspended so that he must assume everything is a lie (or a liar) before he can prove certain things to be true, through a process of demonstrative thinking and geometrical proofs. He must leave no stone unturned, so to speak. In this line of thinking, even God is introduced as a potential deceiver, where, in Descartes' darkness of mind, the radical love of God melds into chaotic deceit for deceit's sake. Descartes writes: "How do I know that [God] has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now? ... How do I know that God has not brought it

about that I too go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square...?" (18). Is it necessary for this content to be included in the First Meditation for several reasons. Besides establishing exactly how his project is going to be conducted for the next five sections, the content of the First Meditation sets the tone for the following. Although at the end of this section, he does acknowledge that God is "supremely good and the force of truth" (19), his initial instinct to question the good and honest nature of God introduces Descartes' relationship to God as one lacking reverence, which is especially important for us to understand going into Meditations 2 and 3. The general tone of Descartes' project is introduced in the beginning of the section, when he writes: "I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start right again..." (15). For all the anguish it would cost to "demolish" one's entire life and start over, Descartes approaches it in a way that seems unusually clinical, as if he is resigned to this necessary evil that he has assigned to himself. It is in this manner that Descartes appears to take on a sacrificial role, not unlike the Messianic mission, which, again, will be further developed in the following couple Meditations. If mental illness for Descartes is not being able to identify oneself as a thinking thing and only believing in what one sees (Bova), then the moments in his project before the Second Meditation, where he will identify such things, are for now his final moments of solidarity with society in any regard; before the curative thoughts are documented, he is as ill as all the deceived and deceiving world. This is the calm before the storm of self-inflicted isolation.

In the Second Meditation, Descartes discovers that the only thing which he cannot doubt about himself is the fact that he is doubting, that he has convinced himself of something and is, thereby, a thinking and existing thing, where thought and existence are totally confluent in that (at least pertaining to mankind) they arise together and are inseparable from conception. As previously mentioned, this discovery officially designates Descartes' narrative as a reliable one, having removed it from the possibility of mental illness according to his own standards. The placement of the content of the Second Meditation directly before that of the Third Meditation is necessary because the Second Meditation indirectly begs a question that the Third Meditation answers, namely - if Descartes has proved in existence in that he is a thinking thing, what is it that allows him to be a thinking thing in the first place?

The Third Meditation is subtitled "The existence of God", and, accordingly, deals with all that God is and must be in order for mankind to have access to truth and the idea of perfection. In this section, Descartes establishes that God does exist based on the fact that he, as a thinking thing, can conceive of God, and the perfection that God is. He writes: "... it must be concluded that the mere fact that I exist and have within me an idea of a most perfect being, that is, God, provides a very clear proof that God indeed exists" (40). Because God is infinite, and infinitely conservative of God's existence, and, in God's perfection, embodies a perpetual unadulterated truth, the conservation of God's existence allows us to have continuous access to the truth. The placement of the Third Meditation is vital to our understanding of subsequent Meditations, first and foremost because it solidifies the idea of

God as the one perfect thing - that which contains all perfections and allows us to set ourselves as imperfect by contrast. This is vitally important to the process of the Fourth Meditation, which dotes on whether or not God could be a source of potential deception. Secondly, the thoughts in this section of the text establish that which can exist wholly on its own (i. e. God and the mind, which can conceive of ideas about God) as sources of truth, allowing us to better understand the binary differences between truth and falsity that Descartes outlines in the Fourth Meditation. The notion of the mind being able to separate from the body also suggests a lack of captivity (from the confines of the extremely finite body), which would fulfill the requirement of having "freedom of choice" to conceive of "clear and distinct ideas" as is introduced in the Fourth Meditation. It is also important for the ideas in this section of the text to have come after the first and second sections, because only after Descartes' clear demonstration of a lack of reverence toward God, combined with his thoughts in this section, can we begin to see Descartes' ultimate connection with God; he wants to mirror him, and is going through the motions of God as a being that cannot deceive, who is (re)constructing the universe. Descartes writes in this section: "But perhaps I am something greater than I myself understand, and all the perfections which I attribute to God are somehow in me potentially, though not yet emerging or actualized" (41). Perhaps, beyond that Descartes' method of uncovering absolute certainty is to radically doubt, as has already been established, it is beginning to become apparent that Descartes' method of uncovering absolute certainty is to become God; or at least god-like; at least mirror the experience of God and the attributable perfections to the best of his ability.

After all, the only way he can truly be free from doubt is if he is in the
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position of being the full and sole author of the meaning of his actions; however this role belongs conventionally to God.

After having kept the matter hanging in the balance for so long from the first exercise, Descartes in the Fourth Meditation finally determines that God is not a deceiver. Now that God's perfect existence has been proven by the thoughts in the previous section, Descartes can come to the conclusion that it would be impossible for God to have deceptive tendencies, on the basis that "... in every case of trickery or deception some imperfection is to be found", for example, " the will to deceive is undoubtedly evidence of malice or weakness" (43). Since God is perfect, the weakness of morality and spirit that would be required of someone in order to be a deceiver cannot be attributed to God. Furthermore, Descartes establishes in this section what is certainly true and what is a potential source of error, or, more broadly, a falsity, through the use of binary opposites (in which something is defined by its exclusion from the other thing) and an understanding of the causes of error as the extension of our will to understanding something past that which we can understand by nature. That said, he grants that truth can be found in God and God's perfect will, in the mind, and, by extension, in what is internal and infinite, as well as in the imperfect human will when it is understanding. Therein, falsity can be found in humanity and human imperfection, in the body, and, by extension, in what is external and finite, as well as in the imperfect human will when it is in excess of understanding. Finally, this section more or less introduces the concept of clear and distinct ideas. These denote a freedom of choice to either affirm or deny what is comfortably understood (not an over-extension of the will). Descartes explains that when

conceiving of one of these ideas, his mental freedom will guide him confidently down one path of either affirmation or denial, in relation to either his own natural understanding or intervention by a divine force. He says that he is not, however, confined by these interventions, as they “ increase and strengthen” his freedom (46). A reprisal of the previous section is evident here as, once again, there appear to be developments in Descartes' use of identification with God in uncovering the truth, as he pursues total freedom of mind in order to have ideas about what is certain and not. As far as why this section of the text should be placed before the Fifth Meditation, the judgements Descartes draws on what makes an idea clear and distinct allows for him to re-demonstrate the existence of God through their use. We now know that clear and distinct ideas represent a will that is closer to that of God because of the mental freedom that is required in order to conceive of them, so the demonstrations Descartes makes about the existence of God after having introduced these ideas are more godly and therein more true. Also in the Fourth Meditation, as previously noted, humanity has been designated a falsity in light of God's inherent truth. This as well as the earlier understanding that there is weakness in the will to deceive, can help us to understand why Descartes thinks it necessary in the Fifth Meditation to accept the weakness of human nature.

In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes asks us to accept the weakness of our nature as human beings. Despite having broken down everything in a process of agonizingly discovering what could possibly be true and free from error, Descartes writes in this section: “... I can convince myself that I have a natural disposition to go wrong from time to time in matters which I think I

perceive as evidently as can be" (55). Whereas before he more or less grouped both under the broad brush category of 'falsities', Descartes acknowledges here that there is a difference between allowing oneself to be deceived and making errors in judgement, such as taking a stance only to become swayed to a different stance by a convincing argument (55). It seems here that he believes the occasional lapse in judgement is inescapable. Descartes then goes on to affirm, once again, the existence of a God, however this time through the lens of "clear and distinct" thought. Since God is perfect and contains all perfections within himself, and existence is a perfection (we can deduce from the designation in the Fourth Meditation of the 'infinite', which exists ambiguously more, to the category of certainty, and the 'finite', which exists ambiguously less, to the category of falsity, that the more something exists the more perfect it is), then God must exist. The placement of these ideas immediately before those that appear in the sixth and final section of the project is clearly necessary in that this section's establishment of God's perfection and existence allows for the potential existence of external things to be explored in the Sixth Meditation.

So, since God is perfect, and, in God's perfection, is not capable of deceiving, and we are continuously able to sense things that are external to us it is the natural conclusion that external things do exist. This discovery by Descartes in the Sixth and final Meditation completes his task of restructuring his world, as he has brought into existence once again both the internal and the external. It is also in this discovery, as well as his conceptions of mind-body dualism, wherein his mind can be free from the body and function of its own accord, that Descartes is able to point to the immortality of the soul.

Because he can successfully mimic God's obligations to (re)create or to determine existence, and because he can exist without his finite body, Descartes can then identify himself with immortality, and, by extension, perfection, truth, and God.