

# Handout 5: The Third *Meditation*

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy  
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In the Third *Meditation*, Descartes defends the idea that what he calls his “clear and distinct perceptions” can serve as the certain foundations of all his knowledge. Here is the structure of his argument:

- (1) If my clear and distinct perceptions are not true, then God, if he exists, is a deceiver.
- (2) God exists. (Proved by the Causal Argument.)
- (3) If God exists, he is not a deceiver. (Proved by the Deceit A Defect Argument.)
- ∴(4) So, God exists and is not a deceiver. (From 2 and 3)
- ∴(5) So, my clear and distinct perceptions are true. (From 1 and 4)

We’ll call the conclusion — i.e., step (5) — the “Rule of Truth”. If Descartes can prove the Rule of Truth, then he has no reason to doubt his clear and distinct perceptions. Thus, his clear and distinct perceptions can serve as the certain foundations upon which he can build a stable body of knowledge.

In this handout, we’ll discuss clear and distinct perception, Descartes’s concept of substance, his Causal Argument for the existence of God, and the claim that God cannot be a deceiver.

## CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTION

In the Third *Meditation* Descartes introduces the term “clear and distinct perception”. He does not say much about what he means by this phrase. In another book, his *Principles of Philosophy*, he says that perception is “clear” when it is “present and open to the attentive mind”, and “distinct” when it is “so sharply separated from other perceptions that it contains only what is clear”. But this is not especially helpful.

Interpreters have suggested that Descartes has something like the following in mind:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>If you’re interested in pursuing further the question of what Descartes means by “clear and distinct”, see Gewirth, A., (1943) “Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes,” (*Philosophy* 13:17-36); Curley, E., (1986), “Analysis in The *Meditations*: The Quest for Clear and Distinct Ideas” (in A. O. Rorty, ed., *Essays on Descartes’ Meditations*, 153-76; Berkeley: University of California Press); and Patterson, S. (2008), “Clear and Distinct Deception” (in J. Broughton and J. Carriero, eds., *A Companion to Descartes*, 216-234; Malden, MA: Blackwell).

*Clarity.* A perception of  $x$  is clear if and only if it represents whatever is essential to  $x$ 's nature.

*Distinctness.* A perception of  $x$  is distinct if and only if it does not represent as belonging to  $x$  anything that is contrary to  $x$ 's nature.

For example, when Descartes perceives with his mind that the nature of the wax is simply to be extended, that's a clear perception (because it represents extension as being essential to the wax's nature) and a distinct perception (it represents nothing else as belonging to the wax's nature; thus it represents nothing as belonging to the wax that is contrary to the wax's nature).

For our purposes, more important than what Descartes means by "clear and distinct" is what he thinks his clear and distinct perceptions do to him. In the First *Meditation*, the Deceiving God argument gave Descartes reason to doubt almost everything. Here he suggests that the argument gave him reason to doubt even his clear and distinct perceptions:

Whenever this preconceived opinion about the supreme power of God occurs to me, I cannot help but admitting that, were he to wish it, it would be easy for him to cause me to err even in those matters that I think I intuit as clearly as possible with the eyes of the mind (25).

And yet when he has a clear and distinct perception, he cannot help but believe it to be true:

On the other hand, whenever I turn my attention to those very things that I think I perceive with such great clarity, I am so completely persuaded by them that I spontaneously blurt out these words: "let him who can deceive me, so long as I think that I am something, he will never bring it about that I am nothing. Nor will he one day make it true that I never existed, for it is true now that I do exist. Nor will he even bring it about that perhaps two plus three might equal more or less than five, or similar items in which I recognize an obvious contradiction" (25).

Descartes is saying that it's in his nature to be completely persuaded of something so long as he is clearly and distinctly perceiving it. At this point Descartes is officially ignorant about whether God exists and created him. But suppose that God did create Descartes, and yet his clear and distinct perceptions are false. Then God gave him a nature whereby he is completely persuaded that some false things are true; to wit, those things that he clearly and distinctly perceives. Moreover, God made it impossible for Descartes to get rid of these false beliefs. Thus, Descartes claims:

- (i) If my clear and distinct perceptions are false, then God, if he exists, is a deceiver.

Before turning to the next topic, note what kinds of propositions Descartes treats as things he clearly and distinctly perceives. First, there are what we will call *self-evident necessary truths*. This category includes propositions like "If I think I am something, then I am not nothing," "If I exist now, then it will never be true that I never existed," "Two plus three equals five," and "A square has four sides." One important characteristic of the propositions in this group is that their denials are obvious contradictions.

The second category consists of what we will call *truths of consciousness*. These are propositions about one's own current conscious states like "It seems to me that I'm sitting by the fire" and "I have an idea of  $x$ ." Descartes finds himself incapable of doubting such things.

## DESCARTES ON SUBSTANCE

The notion of a *substance* plays a key role in Descartes's Causal Argument for the existence of God. A substance, in the sense in which Descartes uses the term, is an independently existing thing. (Note that this is quite different from the more common English use of the term "substance" to mean "stuff" or "material".) For Aristotle and subsequent scholastic philosophers, the primary examples of substances were individual organisms: e.g., a horse, an oak tree, a human being.

Contrasted with substances are *attributes*, *accidents*, or *modes* (we can regard all three of those terms as interchangeable for now, though we'll draw a distinction among them in a moment). Put roughly, substances are *things*; accidents, attributes, and modes are *properties* of things, or *ways* things are. Unlike substances, accidents (and attributes and modes) are not independently existing; their existence depends entirely upon the substance to which they belong.

For example, consider the state of affairs described by (A):

(A) Geoff is drowsy.

Geoff is the substance involved in state of affairs (A), and *drowsiness* or *being drowsy* is the accident (or attribute or mode) involved in (A). Drowsiness can't exist on its own; its existence depends entirely on the existence of substances. Geoff, on the other hand, exists on his own; there is no substance whose non-existence makes Geoff's existence impossible.

Descartes distinguishes between two kinds of substances. Most substances are *finite*. This means that they are not *completely* independent; their existence depends upon some other substance. An *infinite* substance is completely independent of all other things; its existence depends upon nothing but itself. For Descartes, there is only one infinite substance: God.

As Descartes uses these terms, *modes* or *accidents* are ordinary properties like being drowsy, being heavy, thinking about Rome, feeling resentful, and so on. Each substance also has what he calls a *primary attribute*. The primary attribute of a substance is its most fundamental way of being. For Descartes there are only two primary attributes: *extension* and *thought*. A substance's modes or accidents all presuppose its primary attribute. For example, being rectangular presupposes extension, while thinking about Rome presupposes thought.

## DESCARTES'S CAUSAL ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

The Third *Meditation* contains a novel argument for the existence of God:

- (1) I have an idea of God; that is, an idea of a being with infinite reality.
- (2) If I have an idea of something with a certain amount reality, then that idea is caused to exist by something with at least that much reality.
- ∴(3) So, my idea of God is caused by something with infinite reality. (From 1 and 2)
- (4) If X is caused to exist by Y, then Y exists.
- ∴(5) So, God – that is, a being with infinite reality – exists. (From 3 and 4).

Premises (3) and (5) are logical consequences of the other premises. We'll simply accept (4). The interesting premises of the argument are (1) and (2). We'll tackle premise (2) first.

Descartes says that "it is indeed evident by the light of nature that there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as there is in the effect of that same cause" (AW 49b). We will call this the Causal Principle (CP):

*CP.* If X is the total cause of Y's existence, then X has at least as much reality as Y.

The key idea behind CP is that "something cannot come into being out of nothing" (AW 49b). If X is the total cause of Y but Y has more reality than X, then Y got some extra reality out of thin air; i.e., something (Y's extra reality) came into being out of nothing. So, since something can't come from nothing, if X is the total cause of Y, X must have at least as much reality as Y.

But the Causal Principle can't motivate premise (2) of Descartes's argument by itself. That's because ideas are merely modes of thinking substance. Since substances exist independently but modes exist only dependently, the former have "more reality" than the latter. So even an idea of a being with infinite reality is less real than any substance. As far as the Causal Principle goes, then, any idea can be caused to exist by a finite thinking substance. ("...[T]he very nature of an idea is such that of itself it needs no formal reality other than what it borrows from my thought, of which it is a mode" (0).)

So Descartes distinguishes between what he calls *formal* and *objective* reality. Something's formal reality is how much reality it has insofar as it actually exists. An idea has less formal reality than a finite substance, which has less formal reality than an infinite substance. But ideas also have "objective" reality. The objective reality of an idea is equivalent to the formal reality of whatever it is an idea of. For example, the objective reality of the idea of a horse is equivalent to the formal reality of a horse. The objective reality of the idea of Descartes is equivalent to the formal reality of Descartes. And the objective reality of the idea of God is equivalent to the formal reality of God.

Descartes now claims that an idea's cause must have at least as much *formal* reality as the idea has *objective* reality ("But that a particular idea contains this as opposed to that objective reality is surely owing to some cause in which there is at least as much formal reality as there is objective reality contained in the idea" (28).) This is what we'll call the Causal Principle for Ideas (CPI):

*CPI.* If X is the total cause of an idea of Y, then X has as much reality as Y; i.e., the formal reality of X is at least as great as the objective reality of the idea of Y.

The motivation behind CPI is similar to that behind CP; indeed, Descartes seems to regard CPI as simply following from CP. If an idea had more objective reality than its cause had formal reality, Descartes thinks that "the idea [would] get [...] something from nothing" (28). And since you can't get something from nothing, he thinks that an idea can't have more objective reality than its cause has formal reality.

But why should we accept the claim that an idea with more objective reality than its cause has formal reality would thereby get something from nothing? One clue comes from what Descartes says in the first set of *Objections And Replies* to the *Meditations* (not in our book):

[T]he idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect – not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e. in the way in

which objects normally are in the intellect (Second Replies, *The Philosophical Writings Of Descartes*, vol. II, 75).

So the idea of the sun simply *is* the sun, existing in the intellect instead of in the heavens. The sun's *degree* of reality is thus the same in both its objective and formal existence. If the idea of the sun had been caused by something with less formal reality than the sun, it would have gotten something – i.e., some reality in the intellect – from nothing. Hence, whatever caused the idea of the sun must have as much reality as the sun has formally in the heavens.

This line of thought is not really persuasive, though; as Descartes goes on to say, “[T]his mode of being [i.e., existing in the intellect] is of course much less perfect than that possessed by things which exist outside the intellect” (*ibid.*, 75). So existing in the intellect is “much less perfect” than existing in reality. Then would it really be an instance of something coming from nothing for the idea of the sun to have been caused by something with less formal reality than the sun? The reality possessed by the sun as it exists in the intellect is less than the reality of the sun existing in the heavens (or so it would seem if the former kind of existence is “much less perfect” way than the latter). So why couldn't the idea of the sun have been caused by something with less reality than the sun? It is not clear how Descartes would answer this question.

Here is another way that CPI might be made plausible. At some places Descartes suggests that things with more reality are not only more independent than things with less reality, but are also more intricate or complex. Now suppose that you have an idea of something – a clock, say. For Descartes having an idea of something is not a matter of having a mental image of it, but *understanding* it. If you have an idea of a clock, for example, you *understand* the clock, at least to some degree — what it does, how it works, who made it, etc. But clocks are highly complicated and intricate objects. How could you have come to have that idea? It seems that whatever gave you that understanding must have been as complicated and intricate as what the idea represents; i.e., the cause of that idea must have had just as much reality as a clock. You couldn't have gotten the idea of something so complicated and intricate as a clock just by looking at a marble or a pile of sand. (Perhaps you made the idea up yourself, but then you would have been the cause of your idea of a clock, and you have just as much reality as a clock.)

CPI is equivalent to premise (2) of the Causal Argument. But then if we grant premise (1), we must conclude that Descartes's idea of God was caused by a being with infinite reality. For CPI dictates that the *idea* of a being with infinite formal reality must have been caused by a being with infinite formal reality. And Descartes has stipulated that his idea of God is the idea of “a certain substance that is infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, and supremely powerful, and that created me along with everything else that exists—if anything else exists” (30). Thus the idea of God is just the idea of a being with infinite reality. So God must be the cause of Descartes's idea of God. Given that Descartes has the idea of God, and granting premise (4), we have a proof of God's existence.

Descartes considers a possible objection. He imagines someone claiming that Descartes himself is the cause of his idea of God “through a negation of the finite” (31). The suggestion is that Descartes has the idea of something with a finite degree of reality (e.g., something with finite intelligence, finite power, and so on), and by combining this idea with the idea of negation—the idea that something is *lacking* in some way—he would arrive at the idea of a being with a degree of reality that is *not* limited. If this is how Descartes arrived at the idea of God, then it could have been caused by a finite substance (i.e., by Descartes himself) and not by an infinite substance.

Descartes rejects this suggestion because, he says, in order to have an idea of something's being finite, he must *first* have an idea of something's being infinite: "For how would I understand that I doubt and that I desire, that is, that I lack something and that I am not wholly perfect, unless there were some idea in me of a more perfect being, by comparison with which I might recognize my defects?" (31).

*Important:* One might think that a similar argument could be used to prove the existence of anything of which I have an idea. But this is incorrect. Suppose that I have the idea of a unicorn. The CPI says that my idea of a unicorn must have been caused by something with at least as much formal reality as a unicorn. But lots of substances have as much formal reality as a unicorn: a horse, me, God. So all CPI lets me conclude from the fact that I have an idea of a unicorn is that a substance with at least as much reality as a unicorn exists, not that a unicorn exists.

#### THE 'DECEIT A DEFECT' ARGUMENT

All that remains is for Descartes to show that God could not be a deceiver:

- (1) If God is a deceiver, then he has some defect.
- (2) God has no defects.

∴(3) So, God is not a deceiver.

Descartes's reason for believing (2) is that God is a being with infinite reality. If God had a defect, his reality would be limited in some way. But given that his reality is infinite, it is not limited in any way. Thus, God has no defects.

But why should Descartes think (1)? I think Descartes's assumption is that if God were a deceiver, then to that extent he would be less than perfectly good. And to be less than perfectly good is to have a defect. Yet why should we grant the assumption that being deceitful would make God less than perfectly good? Granted, it is often bad to deceive. But this is not always the case, is it? Is it ever good to deceive someone? It seems so; one can imagine cases where we deceive someone for his or her own good. If it's sometimes good to deceive someone, then the case for (1) is seriously undermined.

We'll come back to the idea of God's being a deceiver in the Fourth *Meditation*.