Objections to the Meditations and Descartes's Replies

René Descartes

[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots·enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis. . . .indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type. The seventh set of objections is long, bad, and omitted. Originally only Hobbes's comments were inter-leaved with Descartes's replies; but that format is adopted here for all six sets, creating a little strain only with the replies to Caterus. Unadorned surnames in this version usually replace something less blunt—'Dominus Cartesius', 'the author', 'my critic', 'the learned theologian' and so on.

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Contents

First Objections (Caterus) and Descartes's replies

Objection

(1) [Caterus—a Dutch theologian—is writing to two friends who had asked him to comment on the *Meditations*.] Since you strongly urged me to examine the writings of Descartes in some detail, my friends, I felt that I couldn't say No. . . . I regard him as having the highest intellect and the utmost modesty. . . . He writes:

> •'I am thinking, therefore I exist; indeed, I am thought itself—I am a mind.'

Granted.

> •'But in virtue of thinking, I have within me ideas of things, and in particular an idea of a supremely perfect and infinite being.'

True again.

> •'However, I am not the cause of this idea, because I don't measure up to its representative reality—·that is, the idea in question *represents* something that has more reality, more perfection, than I *have*·. So something more perfect than myself is its cause, and thus there exists something besides myself, something more perfect than I am. This is someone who is not 'a being' in any ordinary sense, but who simply and without qualification embraces the whole of being within himself, and is as it were the ultimate original cause. . . .'

But here I am forced to stop for a while, to avoid becoming exhausted. My mind ebbs and flows: first I accept, but then I deny; I give my approval, then I withdraw it; I don't like disagreeing with Descartes, but I can't agree with him. My question is this: what sort of cause does an idea need? ·To answer that properly, we need first to answer another question·: what *is* an idea? It is a thing that is thought of, considered as *existing representatively in the intellect*. But what does *that* mean? According to what I was taught, for x to 'exist representatively in the intellect' is simply for some act of the intellect to be shaped up in the manner of x. And this is merely an extraneous label that tells us nothing about x itself. Just as x's 'being seen' is someone's performing an act of vision, so also x's 'being thought of', or having representative being in the intellect, is some mind's having a thought—it is *just* a thought *in that mind*, and stops there. It can occur without any movement or change in x itself, and indeed without there being any such thing as x being represented. So why should I look for a cause of something that isn't actual, something that is simply an empty label, a non-entity?

'Nevertheless,' says our ingenious author, 'in order for a given idea to have such-and-such representative reality, it must surely derive it from some cause.' Not so! It doesn't need any cause, because 'representative reality' is merely a label, not anything actual. A cause passes on a real, actual influence; but something that doesn't actually exist can't be on the receiving end of any actual causal influence! Thus, I do have ideas but I don't have any cause for them, let alone a cause that is greater than I am, indeed infinite.

'But if you don't grant that ideas have a *cause*, you must at least give a *reason* why a given idea contains such-and-such representative reality.' Certainly; I don't usually grudge things to my friends, and am indeed as lavish as possible! I take the same general view about •all ideas that Descartes takes about ·the idea of· •a triangle. He says: 'Even if there aren't any triangles outside my thought, and never were, still

there is a determinate nature or essence or form of *triangle* that is eternal and unchanging.' What we have here is an eternal truth, which doesn't need a cause. ·Any more than you need a cause for such eternal truths as that· a boat is a boat and nothing else, Davus is Davus and not Oedipus. But if you insist on an explanation, the answer lies in the imperfection of our finite intellect: because it doesn't take in, all at once, the totality of everything there is, it divides up the universal good and conceives of it piecemeal—or, as they say, inadequately.

Reply

(1) [Descartes is writing to the same two men to whom Caterus's objections were addressed.] Well, you have called up a mighty opponent to challenge me! His intelligence and learning might well have created great embarrassments for me if he weren't an earnest and kind-hearted theologian who chose to side with God and with me as God's counsel for the defence, rather than fighting in earnest. But though it was extremely kind of him to pretend to be opposing me ·when really he wasn't·, it would wrong of me to go along with this pretence. So I plan to bring into the open his carefully disguised *assistance* to me, rather than answering him as though he were an adversary.

•First he summarizes my main argument for the existence of God, thus helping readers to remember it better. •Then he concedes the claims that he thinks I have demonstrated clearly enough, thereby adding the weight of his own authority to them. •Finally he comes to the matter that generates the chief difficulty, namely ·these two questions·:

> What should we take 'idea' to mean in this context?
> What cause does an idea require?

Now, I wrote that an idea is a thing that is thought of, considered as existing representatively in the intellect. But Caterus, wanting to draw me into explaining this more clearly, pretends to understand it in a quite different way from what I meant. 'For x to exist representatively in the intellect', he says, 'is simply for some act of the intellect to be shaped up in the manner of x. And this is merely an extraneous label that tells us nothing about x itself.' Notice that he refers to 'x itself', as though x were located outside the intellect; and when 'x exists representatively in the intellect' is taken in *this* way, it certainly *is* an extraneous label ·pinned on x; because in *this* sense 'The sun exists representatively in Henri's intellect' says something purely about Henri, implying nothing about the sun. But that isn't at all what I meant·. I was speaking of *the idea*, which is never outside the intellect; and in this sense 'existing representatively' simply means being in the intellect in the way that objects normally *are* there. For example, if someone asks me 'What happens to the sun when it comes to exist representatively in my intellect?', the best answer is that the only thing that happens to it is that it comes to fit an extraneous label—·i.e. comes to answer to the description 'is thought about by so-and-so'·—and this *is* indeed a mere matter of some act of the intellect's being shaped up in the manner of an object. But when I am asked 'What is the idea of the sun?' and I answer that it is

> •the sun considered as existing representatively in the intellect,

no-one will take this to mean

> •the sun itself considered as having an extraneous label pinned to it.

And now 'the sun exists representatively in the intellect' won't mean 'some act of the intellect is shaped up in the manner of the sun'; rather, it will signify the sun's being in the intellect in the way that its objects are normally there. I mean that the idea of the sun is *the sun itself existing in the*

intellect—not of course existing there as a real blazing star, as it exists in the heavens, but existing representatively, i.e. in the way in which objects normally exist in the intellect. This way of existing is of course much less perfect than the way of existing of things that exist outside the intellect; but, as I did explain, that doesn't make it simply *nothing*.

Can God cause God to exist?

Objection

(2) Descartes goes on to say 'The kind of reality involved in something's being represented in the mind by an idea, though it may not be very perfect, certainly *isn't* nothing, and so it can't *come from* nothing.' The word 'nothing' as used here is ambiguous. ·On either way of taking it, Descartes is wrong at this point; but the different readings of 'nothing' make a difference to *why* he is wrong·. **(a)** If 'nothing' means *not an entity that actually exists*, then what's represented in the mind—not being actual—really *is* nothing at all, and therefore *does* come from nothing, i.e. doesn't need any cause. **(b)** But if 'nothing' means *something imaginary*, or what they commonly call a 'being of reason', then ·Descartes is half-right, because on this reading of 'nothing' what is represented in the mind· is not 'nothing' but rather is something real that is clearly conceived. But ·Descartes is still half-wrong, because· since it is merely conceived and is not actual, although it can be conceived it can't in any way be caused.

[This excessively compact and (in the original) unclear paragraph should perhaps be unpacked further. Its basic thrust is this: Descartes says that his idea of a supreme being

> is not nothing, and must be caused by something.

Caterus says that on one reading of 'nothing' the idea in question

> is nothing, and isn't caused by anything;

whereas on the other reading the idea

> isn't nothing, but still doesn't have to be caused by anything.

Now let us continue.] He further explores the suggestion that his idea of a being more perfect than himself is *not* caused by some more perfect being:

> I want to push on with my enquiry, now asking a new question: If the more perfect being didn't exist, could I exist? Well, if God didn't exist, where would I get *my* existence from? It would have to come from myself, or from my parents, or from some other beings ·less perfect than God·. But if I had derived my existence from myself, I wouldn't now doubt or want or lack anything at all; for I would have given myself all the perfections of which I have any idea. So I would be God. . . . But if I derive my existence from something other than myself, then if I trace the series ·of causes· back I will eventually come to a being that gets its existence from itself; and so the argument here becomes the same as the argument based on the supposition that I derive my existence from myself.

Aquinas took exactly the same approach; he called it 'the way ·to God· based on the causality of the efficient cause'. He took the argument from Aristotle, although neither he nor Aristotle was bothered about the causes of ideas. And perhaps they didn't need to be; for can't I take a much shorter and more direct line of argument ·in which causes of ideas don't play any part·? 'I am thinking, therefore I exist; indeed, I am thought itself, I am a mind. But this mind and thought derives its existence either •from itself, or •from something else. If •the latter, then we continue to repeat the question—where does this other being get its existence from? And if •the former, then this mind that gets its existence from itself is God. For anything that gets its existence from itself will have no trouble endowing itself with all ·perfections·.

I beg our author not to hide his meaning from a reader

who, though perhaps less intelligent, is eager to follow. The phrase 'from itself' has two senses. In the first (positive) sense it means *from itself as from a cause*. What gets its existence 'from itself' in *this* sense bestows its own existence on itself; so if by an act of premeditated choice it were to give itself what it whatever it wanted to have, no doubt it would give itself everything, and so it would be God. But in the second (negative) sense 'from itself' simply means *not from anything else*; and I can't remember anyone taking the phrase in any other sense.

But now, if •something gets its existence 'from itself' in the ·second· sense of not getting it from anything else, how can we prove that •this being takes in everything and is infinite? Don't tell me: 'If it derived its existence from itself, it could easily have given itself everything.' For the thing we are now talking about *didn't* get its existence 'from itself' ·in the first sense, i.e.· as a cause; it *didn't* exist prior to itself so as to be able choose in advance what it would come to be. I heard that Suarez argued like this: 'Every limitation comes from some cause; so if something is limited and finite, that's because its cause couldn't or wouldn't make it greater and more perfect; so if something gets its existence from itself and not from an ·external· cause, it will indeed be unlimited and infinite.'

I'm not convinced by this argument, ·in Suarez's form of it or in yours·. What about the case where a thing's limitation arises from the thing's own constitutional make-up, i.e. its essence or form? (Remember that you haven't yet proved this essence to be unlimited; the thing has acquired its existence 'from itself' *only* in the sense that it hasn't acquired it from anything else.) For example, if we suppose that there such a thing as *something that is hot*, it will be hot rather than cold as a result of forces at work in its internal constitution; and this isn't interfered with by the supposition that its being what it is doesn't depend on anything else. ·But· I'm sure that Descartes has plenty of arguments to support a thesis that others may not have presented clearly enough.

Reply

(2) When Caterus says that there's an ambiguity in what I say here, he apparently means to *remind* me of the point I have just made, for fear that I might let it slip my mind. He says first that when something exists in the intellect through an idea, it isn't an actual entity, i.e. it isn't something outside the intellect; and this is true. He says next that 'it isn't something made up, or a so-called being of reason, but something real that is distinctly conceived'; here he concedes everything that I have assumed. But he then adds 'since it is merely conceived and is not actual'—i.e. since it is merely an idea, and not something outside the intellect—'although it can be conceived there's no way it can be caused'. This is to say that it doesn't need a cause of its •existing outside the intellect. This I accept; but it surely *does* need a cause of its •being conceived, and that is the sole point at issue. Suppose for example that someone has in his intellect the idea of a machine of a highly intricate design: there's nothing wrong with asking 'What is the cause of this idea?' And this won't be properly answered by saying that the idea isn't something outside the intellect, and therefore can't be •caused but can merely be •conceived! For the question is asking for *the cause of its being conceived*. Nor will it do to answer that the idea is something •done by the intellect and is therefore •caused by the intellect. For what is at issue is not this, ·i.e. not the cause of the idea considered as mental event·, but rather the cause of the intricacy that is represented in the idea. For the idea of the machine to contain a representation of such great intricacy, it must get it from some cause. Of course there could be various causes of this intricacy:

- •it was caused by the person's seeing a real machine with this design, or
- •the person had an extensive knowledge of mechanics, or
- •he had a very subtle intelligence that enabled him to invent the idea without any previous knowledge.

But notice that all the intricacy that occurs representatively in the idea must necessarily be found, intrinsically (either straightforwardly or in a higher form), in whatever turns out to be it cause.

['In a higher form'—Latin *eminenter*—should be explained. My idea of triangles possesses triangularity *representatively*, and so—according to Descartes—its cause must *intrinsically* have triangularity, which taken •straightforwardly means that the cause must be triangular. But perhaps God caused my idea of triangularity, and we don't want to suppose that God is triangular; so Descartes would say that God possesses triangularity •in a higher form. He sometimes writes as though there were a clean distinction between 'intrinsic' and 'in a higher form', but that wasn't his actual view, and those slips are silently corrected in this version. What he really thought was that there is a clean distinction between 'representatively' and 'intrinsically', and then *within* 'intrinsically' there is a distinction between 'straightforwardly' and 'in a higher form'.]

And what I have just said about the represented •intricacy belonging to •this idea also applies to the represented •reality belonging to •the idea of God. And where can the corresponding ·actual· reality be found, if not in a really existing God? But Caterus knows all this perfectly well, which is why he agrees that we *can* ask 'Why does this idea contain that represented reality?'. His answer applies to *all* ideas what I wrote about the idea of a triangle: 'Even if there aren't any triangles anywhere, still there is a determinate nature or essence or form of *triangle* that is eternal and unchanging'. And *this*, he says, doesn't need a cause. But he is well aware that that reply isn't good enough; for even if the nature of the triangle is unchanging and eternal, that doesn't rule out the question of why there is an idea of it within us. So he adds : 'If you insist on an explanation, the answer lies in the imperfection of our intellect etc.'. What he means by this, I think, is simply that those who have wanted to differ from me on this issue have no plausible reply to make—·i.e. that the imperfection of *their* intellects is the cause of their insisting on an explanation! That interpretation of Caterus may itself seem implausible, but what else *can* he have meant? He *can't* have meant· to claim that •the imperfection of our intellect is the cause of •our having the idea of God, ·because that· would be as implausible as claiming that •our lack of experience in mechanics is the cause of •our imagining some very intricate machine rather than a less perfect one. That would be flatly wrong. If someone has the idea of a machine, an idea containing every imaginable intricacy of design, then clearly this idea originally came from some cause in which every imaginable intricacy •really did exist, even though the intricacy now •has only representative existence in the idea. By the same line of thought, since we have within us the idea of God, containing ·representatively· every perfection that can be thought of, it *obviously* follows that this idea depends on some cause that ·intrinsically· has all this perfection, namely a really existing God. If the 'God' inference seems more problematic than the 'machine' one, that's because of this pair of facts about ourselves: **(1)** We aren't all equally experienced in mechanics, so not everyone can have an idea of a very intricate machine; ·and when someone *does* have such an idea we find it natural to ask Why? What caused this idea to occur in *his* mind?· **(2)** We all equal in our ability to conceive of the idea of God, and we don't notice it coming into our minds from any external source; and this leads us to suppose that it's just natural for our intellect to have

such an idea. This is correct as far as it goes, but something very important has to be added—something on which all the power and illumination of the argument depends—namely that our intellect, being finite, couldn't *have* this ability to contain the idea of God unless God were its cause. When I went on to inquire 'whether I could exist if God didn't exist', I wasn't trying to produce a second proof ·of God's existence·, but merely wanted to explain the first proof more thoroughly.

At this point my critic's *enormous* kindness to me has put me in an uncomfortable position. He compares my argument with one taken from Aquinas and Aristotle, and seems to be asking why I, after starting on the same road as they do, haven't stayed on it all the way. But I hope he'll let me off from commenting on the work of others, and simply give an account of what I have written myself. ·I have four main things to say·. **(1)** I didn't base my argument on the fact that I observed among perceptible objects an order or succession of efficient causes.

[There is a centuries-old bit of terminology in which '[adjective] cause' stands for different things that could enter into a complete explanation of something. Thus:

- material cause: the stuff the thing is made of (e.g. the silver of a coin)
- formal cause: the pattern or design of the thing (the coin's flatness, circularity, inscriptions, etc.)
- final cause: the thing's purpose (the use of the coin in commerce)
- efficient cause: what made the thing exist (the impact of a die on hot silver).

clearly, 'efficient cause' is what you and I mean by 'cause', though we'll see Descartes stretching it a little.]

I regarded God's existence as much more evident than the existence of anything perceptible through the senses; and in any case I didn't think that such a succession of causes could get me to anything except to a recognition of the limitedness of my intellect. ·The argument is supposed to be: either the causal series has been running for ever, or there was a first cause; the former alternative is impossible; so there must have been a first cause. But· *an infinite chain of causes from eternity, without any first cause*, is ·not something I am entitled to *reject*, it is simply· beyond my grasp. From the fact that

- I can't grasp the thought of an infinite series

it certainly doesn't follow that

- ·the series must be finite, i.e.· there must be a first cause;

just as from the fact that

- I can't grasp the thought of infinitely many divisions in a finite quantity

it doesn't follow that

- there is a final division beyond which any further division is impossible.

All that follows ·in each case· is that my finite intellect can't take in the infinite. That's why I preferred to base my argument on my own existence, which doesn't drag in any chain of causes, and is better known to me than anything else could possibly be. And the question I asked regarding myself was not

What cause originally produced me?

but rather

What is the cause that keeps me in existence now?

In this way I aimed to escape the whole issue of the succession of causes.

(2) In asking what caused *me*, I was asking about myself purely considered as a thinking thing—my body didn't come into it. This is crucial to my line of thought. By going about things in this way, I could more easily •free myself from my preconceived opinions, •attend to the light of nature, •ask myself questions, and •affirm with certainty that there couldn't be anything in me that I wasn't in some way aware of. This is plainly *very* different from •observing that my

father begot me, •judging that my grandfather begot my father, •finding it impossible for me to track down parents of parents. . . to infinity, and thus bringing the inquiry to a close by •*deciding* that there is a first cause!

(3) In asking what caused me, I was asking about myself not merely considered as *a thinking thing* but—principally and most importantly—considered as *someone who has among his other thoughts the •idea of a supremely perfect being*. The whole force of my demonstration depends ·in three different ways· on this one fact. **(a)** This •idea contains the essence of God, at least as far as I can understand it; and according to the laws of true logic we should never ask of anything *whether it is* without first asking *what it is*—·i.e. we shouldn't ask about its existence until we understand its essence·. **(b)** This •idea prompts me to ask whether I derive my existence from myself or from something else, and to recognize my defects. **(c)** This •idea shows me not just that I have a cause but that this cause contains every perfection, and hence that it is God.

(4) I didn't say that nothing could possibly be its own efficient cause. This is obviously true when the term 'efficient' is taken to apply only to causes that are temporally prior to or different from their effects. But in the present context that seems not to be the best way of interpreting 'efficient', ·for two reasons·. **(a)** It makes the question 'Am I the cause of myself?' futile; who needs to be told that *nothing* can be prior to itself or distinct from itself? **(b)** The natural light doesn't demand that we think of an efficient cause as having to be **always** prior in time to its effect. On the contrary! Strictly speaking, x is a cause of y only while it is producing y, which means that an efficient cause is **never** prior to its effect. However, the light of nature *does* ordain that we may always ask, of any existing thing, '*Why* does it exist?'—i.e. 'What was its efficient cause, and if it didn't have one why didn't it need one?' So if I thought that nothing could possibly relate to itself in the way an efficient cause relates to its effect, I certainly would *not* conclude that there was a first cause! On the contrary, if someone postulated a 'first cause' I would ask what *its* cause was, so I would ·go on asking for causes of causes of. . . etc., and· never arrive at a genuine first cause of everything. But I freely admit that there could be something with such great and inexhaustible power that it needed no help from anything else in order to exist, or in order to stay in existence. Such a thing would be, in a way, *its own cause*, and I understand God to be like that. ·God's place in my philosophical system starts with his role as the cause of myself, and the case for this does *not* depend on that stuff about not being able to track causes back in time to infinity·. Even if I had existed from eternity, so that nothing had existed before I did, I couldn't *stay* in existence unless something ·kept me in existence at each moment, which is as though it· created me anew at each moment; and I wouldn't hesitate to call that the 'efficient' cause ·of myself·. Why must there be a cause for my staying in existence? Well, in my view the parts of *time* are separable from each other—·meaning that the existence of one stretch of time doesn't logically necessitate the existence of any others·—and so my existing •now doesn't imply that I'll still exist •in a minute from now. Now apply this line of thinking to God: he has always existed (·which removes *one* possible reason for his needing to be caused by something else·), and he keeps himself in existence (·which removes *the other* possible reason, the one that did apply in the case of myself·). So it seems reasonably appropriate to call God 'the cause of himself'. But don't think that God's keeping himself in existence involves the positive influence of an efficient cause; all it amounts to is that God's essence is such that he must always exist.

Now I am in a position to answer, easily, the point about the ambiguity in the phrase 'from itself', which the learned theologian says ought to be explained. Those who attend only to the literal and strict meaning of 'efficient cause' think that nothing could be the efficient cause of itself. It hasn't occurred to them that there is room for another kind of cause, *analogous to* an efficient cause ·strictly so-called·, so when *they* say that something derives its existence 'from itself' they mean simply that •it has no cause. But if they would look at the facts rather than the words, they would quickly see that their negative sense of 'from itself' comes merely from the limitations of the human intellect and has no basis in reality. For example, if we think that a given body gets its existence 'from itself', meaning merely that it has no cause, what we are saying isn't based positively on any reason, but negatively way from the mere fact that we don't know of any cause ·for the body in question·. To see that this is a limitation in us, consider the following: The parts of time don't depend on one another; so the supposed fact that

> •this body has existed until now 'from itself', i.e. without a cause,

isn't sufficient to make it the case that

> •this body will continue to exist in future,

unless the body has some power which (as it were) re-creates it continuously. But when we see that no such power is to be found in the idea of a body, and immediately conclude that the body doesn't derive its existence from itself, we shall then be taking the phrase 'from itself' in the positive sense. Similarly, when we say that God derives his existence 'from himself', we can understand the phrase in the **negative** sense, in which case we shall merely mean that he has no cause. But if we

> •inquire into the cause of God's existing or staying in existence, then •attend to the immense and incomprehensible power that the idea of God contains, then •recognize that this power is so vast that it is plainly the cause of his continuing existence, and that nothing else can be the cause;

and if because of all this

> •we say that God derives his existence from himself,

then we'll be using 'from himself' not in its negative sense but in a sense that is utterly **positive**. For there *is* this positive sense of the phrase, which is derived from the true nature of things, and it is this sense alone that is employed in my argument. We needn't say that God is the 'efficient cause' of himself, thus starting up verbal disputes. But we can be quite entitled to think that in a certain way God relates to himself as an efficient cause relates to its effect, and hence that he derives his existence from himself in the positive sense. That is because this fact:

> God derives his existence from himself, or has no cause apart from himself,

doesn't come from nothingness—·i.e. isn't merely the negative fact that there is no other cause of God·—but comes from the real immensity of his power. Each of us may ask himself 'Am I being kept in existence "by myself" in *this* sense?' (This is a question concerning *now*; there is no chance of being launched on an infinite regress.) When you find within yourself no power sufficient to keep you in existence throughout one second, you will rightly conclude that you get your existence from something else—indeed, from something that *does* get its existence from itself. ·What is my case for that last clause? In answering that·, I'll add something that I haven't put down in writing before, namely that a cause that is powerful enough to be able to keep in existence •something other than itself must have at least

enough power to keep •itself in existence; and so the cause of our staying in existence can't be merely a secondary cause, ·i.e. a cause that has been caused by something else·.

[At this point a paragraph was inserted in the second edition of the French version of the work, which appeared after Descartes had died. It was probably written by his literary executor Clerselier. It faces the objection: 'Perhaps someone might be keeping himself in existence without being aware of it; not finding a power within yourself isn't the same as finding that you don't have that power.' The reply is that self-preservation of the sort in question would be an act of the mind, and as such would necessarily be revealed to consciousness, which would lead to an awareness also of the power to perform it.]

As for the dictum 'Every limitation comes from some cause' [see page 4], I think that what Suarez meant by this is true but not well expressed, and that it doesn't solve the difficulty ·it was meant to solve·. Strictly speaking, a limitation is merely the negation of any further perfection; a thing that has a limitation comes from a cause, but the limitation—the *negation*—does not. And even if everything that is limited *does* come from a cause, it isn't self-evident that this is so, and needs to be proved from other premises. For, as Caterus points out, a thing can be regarded as limited in various ways; for example, it can have a limitation that is part of its nature, as it belongs to the nature of a triangle that it is limited to three sides. What does seem to me self-evident is that whatever exists gets its existence either *from a cause* or *from itself as from a cause*. We have a good understanding both of *existence* and of the negative *non-existence*; so we can't make sense of any story about something's getting it existence from itself, unless the story includes there being some reason why the thing should exist rather than not exist. [Descartes expresses that in terms not of making sense of a story, but rather of being able to 'feign' or make up something—using a verb that is the Latin source for our word 'fiction'.] So in such a case we should interpret 'from itself' in a causal way, because of the superabundance of power involved—a superabundance that can easily be demonstrated to be possessed by God alone.

2ex [We are about to meet the first of many occurrences of Latin *clara et distincta* or French *claire et distincte*. (The feminine forms are given here because nearly always the subject is a feminine noun, usually *idea* or *idée*. Every previous translator of Descartes has rendered this phrase by 'clear and distinct', a translation that is demonstrably wrong. A better translation is 'vivid and clear' (in that order), which is adopted throughout this version. The crucial point concerns *clara* (and all this holds equally for the French *claire*). The word can mean 'clear' in our sense, and when Descartes uses it **outside** the *clara et distincta* phrase, it very often seems to be in that sense. But **in** that phrase he uses *clara* in its other meaning—its more common meaning in Latin—of 'bright' or 'vivid' or the like, as in *clara lux* = 'broad daylight'. If in the phrase *clara et distincta* Descartes meant *clara* in its lesser meaning of 'clear', then what is there left for 'distincta' to mean? Descartes's one explanation of the two parts this phrase, in his *Principles of Philosophy* 1:45–6, completely condemns the usual translation. He writes:

> I call a perception *claram* when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something *clare* when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception *distinctam* if, as well as being *clara*, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that every part of it is *clara*.... The example of pain shows that a perception can be *clara* without being *distincta* but not vice versa. When for example someone feels an intense pain, his perception of it is *clarissima*, but it isn't always *distincta*, because people often get this perception muddled with an obscure judgment they make about something that they think exists in the painful spot. . . .and so on.

He can't be saying anything as stupid as that intense pain is always *clear*! His point is that pain is vivid, up-front, not shady or obscure. And for an idea to be *distincta* is for every nook and cranny of it to be vivid; which is not a bad way of saying that it is in our sense 'clear'.]

Inferring God's existence from his essence

Objection

(3) At last I find something to agree with! Descartes has laid it down as a general rule that 'everything of which I am vividly and clearly aware is something true'. Indeed, I go further: I hold that whatever I think of is true. For from our boyhood onwards we have totally outlawed all chimeras and similar mental inventions. No faculty can be diverted from its proper object. When the will is exercised, it tends towards the good. Not even the senses are guilty of error: sight sees what it sees; the ears hear what they hear. If you see fool's gold and take it to be the real thing, there's nothing wrong with your •vision—the error arises from your •judgment. So Descartes is quite right to put all error down to the ·faculties of· judgment and will. [This paragraph will introduce the word 'chiliagon'; it means 'thousand-sided figure', and is pronounced *kill*-ee-agon.] But now—·I'm addressing Descartes directly·—use this rule to get the conclusion you wanted: 'I am vividly and clearly aware of an infinite being; so this being is a true entity and something real.' But someone will ask: '*Are* you vividly and clearly aware of an infinite being? If so, what becomes of the well-known well-worn maxim that *all we can know about an infinite thing are aspects of it that don't involve its infinity*—or, ·in more technical language·, *the infinite qua infinite is unknown*? ·There is good reason to think that the maxim is true·. When I am thinking about a chiliagon, and construct for myself a confused representation of some figure ·that I take to be a chiliagon·, I don't clearly imagine the chiliagon itself, since I don't clearly see the thousand sides. And if *this* is so, ·i.e. if I am to be defeated by a mere **thousand**·, then how can I clearly rather than confusedly think of **the infinite**?. . . .

Perhaps that's what Aquinas meant when he denied that the proposition 'God exists' is self-evident. He considers Damascene's objection to that: 'The knowledge of God's existence is naturally implanted in all men; so the existence of God is self-evident.' Aquinas replied that what is naturally implanted in us is knowledge that •God exists, with this understood only in a general or 'somewhat confused' manner, as he puts it; it is just the knowledge that •God-i.e.-the-ultimate-felicity-of-man exists. But this, he says, isn't straightforwardly knowledge that •God exists; any more than knowing that •someone is coming isn't the same as knowing ·anything about· •Peter, even though it is Peter who is coming. He says in effect that God is known under some general conception, as

> the ultimate end, or as
> the first and most perfect being,

or even (this being a conception that is confused as well as general) as

> the thing that includes all things;

but he is *not* known through the precise concept of his own essence, for in essence God is *infinite* and so unknown to us. I know that Descartes will have a ready answer to this line of questioning. But I think that these objections, put forward here purely for discussion, may remind him of Boethius's remark that some things 'are self-evident only to the wise'! So Descartes should expect that people who want to become wiser will ask many questions and spend a long time on these topics. . . .

[One of Descartes's standard examples of truths of the form 'There can't be an F without a G' is always translated as 'There can't be a mountain without a valley', which is too obviously false to be what he meant. The Latin provides no escape from it, but Descartes may have been thinking in French, in which *vallée*, as well as meaning 'valley' in our sense, can also used to refer to foothills, the lower slopes of a mountain, or the plain

immediately surrounding the mountain. The translation used here is a compromise: compact and fairly close to what he presumably meant.]

Let us concede, then, that someone does possess a vivid and clear idea of a supreme and utterly perfect being. Where do you go from there? You'll say that this infinite being exists, and that this is so certain that

> I ought to regard the existence of God as being at least as certain as I have taken the truths of mathematics to be. Just as it is self-contradictory to think of *highlands in a world where there are no lowlands*, so it is self-contradictory to think of *God as not existing*—that is, to think of a supremely perfect being as lacking a perfection, namely the perfection of existence.

This is the heart of the matter: if I give in on this point I have to admit ·comprehensive· defeat. ·I shan't give in just yet·. I want to push on against my abler opponent, so as to delay for a while his inevitable victory.

I know we are arguing on the basis of reason alone, not on appeals to authority. But I want to bring in Aquinas here, so that you won't think that in taking issue with such an outstanding thinker as Descartes I am merely flailing around. Aquinas presents the following objection to his own position:

> As soon as we understand the meaning of the word 'God', we immediately grasp that God exists. For the word 'God' means 'something such that nothing greater than it can be conceived'. Now anything that exists •in the intellect *and in reality* and is greater than anything that exists •in the intellect *alone*. Therefore, since the instant I understand the word 'God', God exists in my intellect, it follows that he also exists in reality.

Here is that argument set out formally:

> **(1)** God is something such that nothing greater than it can be conceived. **(2)** Being such that nothing greater can be conceived involves *existing*. **(3)** Therefore, God, in virtue of the very word 'God' or concept of God, contains existence; and so he can't not exist and can't even be conceived as not existing.

Now tell me, please: isn't this the very same argument as Descartes's? **(1a)** Aquinas defines God as 'something such that nothing greater than it can be conceived'. **(1d)** Descartes calls him 'a supremely perfect being'—which is of course something nothing greater than which can be conceived. **(2a)** Aquinas's next step is to say that 'being such that nothing greater can be conceived involves existing', for otherwise something greater *could* be conceived, namely a being conceived of as also including existence. And surely Descartes's next step is identical to this. **(2d)** 'God', he says, 'is a supremely perfect being; and as such he must include existence, because otherwise he wouldn't be supremely perfect'. **(3a)** Aquinas's conclusion is that 'since the instant I understand the word "God", God exists in my intellect, it follows that he also exists in reality'. In other words, because the concept or •essence of *a being such that nothing greater than it can be conceived* implies existence, it follows that this very being •exists. **(3d)** Descartes's conclusion is the same: 'From the very fact that I can't think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God and hence that he really exists.' But now let Aquinas reply both to himself and to Descartes:

> Let it be granted that the word 'God' means to everyone what this argument says it means, namely 'something such that nothing greater than it can be thought of'. But it doesn't follow from this that everyone understands that 'God' signifies something that exists in the real world. All that follows is that everyone understands that 'God' signifies something that exists in the thought of the intellect. To show

> that this being exists in the real world you need the premise that there really *is* something such that nothing greater than it can be thought of; and that premise won't be allowed by ·the very people you are trying to argue against, namely· those who maintain that God doesn't exist.

Putting this, briefly, in my own way: Even if it is granted that a supremely perfect being brings existence with him because of his very title, it still doesn't follow that •the existence in question is anything actual in the real world; all that follows is that •the *concept* of existence is inseparably linked to the *concept* of a supreme being. So you can't infer that the existence of God is something *actual* (unless you help yourself to the premise that the supreme being actually exists, in which case he will *actually* contain all perfections, including the perfection of real existence; ·the only trouble being that *that* form of the 'argument' has the conclusion as one of its premises!·).

Reply

(3) My opponent grants me a principle which, though it doesn't admit of any doubt, is usually not much attended to. ·It is the principle 'Everything that I am vividly and clearly aware of is something true'·. This is so important for rescuing the whole of philosophy from darkness that Caterus, by supporting it with his authority, has greatly helped me in my enterprise.

But then he goes on to confront me with a good question: 'Are you vividly and clearly aware of the infinite?' I did try to meet this objection in advance, but I had better deal with it now more fully—it occurs so spontaneously to everyone! [In what is to come, 'grasped' translates *comprehendi*, which for Descartes implies *getting one's mind around* something; this being more than merely understanding it.] I start by saying that the infinite, *qua* infinite, can't possibly be •grasped. But it can be •understood, because we can vividly and clearly understand x's being such that no limitations could be found in it, which amounts to understanding clearly that x is infinite.

I am here distinguishing the •indefinite from the •infinite. The term 'infinite' strictly applies only to something in which no limits of any kind could be found; and in this sense God alone is infinite. But 'indefinite' is the word I use for answering questions such as

- •How large is imaginary space?
- •How many numbers are there?
- •How far can one go in dividing and subdividing any quantity ·of stuff·?

Each of these is unlimited in *some* respect, so I call them 'indefinite'. I don't call them 'infinite' because they aren't unlimited in *every* respect.

Moreover, I distinguish the •abstract concept of the infinite, i.e. *infinity*, from the •thing that is infinite. Even if we understand infinity to be utterly positive, **our way of understanding infinity** is negative, because it depends on our *not* finding any limitation in the thing. Whereas **our way of understanding the infinite thing itself** is positive, but it isn't adequate, i.e. we don't have a complete grasp of everything in it that could be understood. ·Don't say 'If we don't understand all of it, we don't understand it at all'·. When we look at the ocean, our vision doesn't take it *all* in, and we get no sense of its vastness, but we are still said to 'see the ocean'. ·And this very partial view of the ocean may be the best we can have·. If we backed off enough to have almost the entire ocean in our field of vision all at once, we would be seeing it only in a confused manner. . . . But if we stare at some part of the ocean from close up, then our view can be vivid and clear. . . . Similarly, the human mind can't take in God ·in his entirety·—I join

all the theologians in admitting this. Moreover, God can't be clearly known by those who look at him from a distance, as it were, and try to make their minds take in the whole of him all at once. That is the sense in which Aquinas meant his quoted statement that the knowledge of God is within us in a 'somewhat confused' manner. But if you try to attend to God's individual perfections, aiming not so much to •capture them as to •capitulate to them [the semi-pun exists in the Latin—*capi* and *capere*], using all the strength of your intellect to contemplate them, you'll certainly find that God provides much richer and more manageable material for vivid and clear knowledge than any created thing does.

Aquinas didn't deny this in the passage from which Caterus quoted, as is clear from his saying in his very next section that God's existence can be demonstrated. But when I say that we can have 'vivid and clear knowledge' of God, I mean this as a statement about knowledge of the finite kind that I have just described, knowledge that fits the capacity of our minds. That is the only meaning I needed for my arguments ·in the *Meditations*· to succeed, as you'll quickly see if you recall that I made the point about vivid and clear knowledge of God in only two places. **(a)** Once when the question had arisen as to whether our idea of God contains something real, or only the negation of the real (as the idea of cold contains no more than the negation of heat); and this is a point on which there can be no doubt, ·however high- or low-grade one's knowledge of God is·. **(b)** And again when I asserted that •existence belongs to the •concept of a supremely perfect being just as much as •having-three-sides belongs to the •concept of a triangle; and this point can also be understood without adequate knowledge of God.

Caterus here again compares one of my arguments with one of Aquinas's, virtually forcing me to explain how one argument can have more force than the other. I think I can do this without stirring up trouble, because

> •Aquinas didn't offer the argument as one of his, •'his' argument and mine have different conclusions, and •my position on this matter doesn't differ from his in any respect.

He confronts the question 'Is the existence of God self-evident to us, i.e. obvious to every single one of us?' and he rightly answers No. The argument that he then puts forward, *as an objection to his own position*, can be put like this:

> •Once we have understood the meaning of the word 'God', we understand it to mean something such that nothing greater than it can be conceived. •To exist in reality as well as in the intellect is greater than to exist in the intellect alone. Therefore, •once we have understood the meaning of the word 'God' we understand that God exists in reality as well as in the understanding.

Set out like this, the argument is plainly invalid. Understanding the meaning of the word 'God' enables us to understand *not* that •God exists in reality as well as in the understanding, but rather that that •the word **conveys that** God exists in reality as well as in the understanding. Just because a word *conveys* something, this doesn't show that the thing is true! But my argument was as follows:

> •What we vividly and clearly understand to belong to the true and unchanging nature (i.e. the essence, the form) of a thing can truly be asserted of it. •Once we have investigated carefully enough what God is, we vividly and clearly understand that existence belongs to his true and unchanging nature. Therefore, •we can truly assert of God that he does exist.

Here at least the conclusion follows from the premises! And the first premise can't be denied, because it has already been conceded that whatever we vividly and clearly understand is

true. That leaves only the second premise, and I confess that there's a lot of difficulty about that. ·There are two sources of difficulty·. **(a)** We have become so used to distinguishing existence from essence in the case of everything else that we fail to notice that the essence of God—unlike every other essence—has existence unbreakably attached to it. **(b)** We don't distinguish what belongs to •the true and immutable essence of a thing from what is attributed to it merely on the basis of •something made up by our mind. So even if we see clearly enough that existence belongs to the essence of God, we don't infer that God exists, because we don't know whether his essence is •unchanging and true or merely •invented by us.

(a) To remove the first part of the difficulty we must distinguish possible existence from necessary existence. It must be noted that the concept or •idea of anything that we vividly and clearly understand contains *possible* existence, but it is only the •idea of God that contains *necessary* existence. If you attend carefully to this difference between the idea of God and every other idea, you'll undoubtedly see that even though our understanding of other things always involves thinking of them *as if* they existed, it doesn't follow that they *do* exist but only that they *could*. Our understanding doesn't show us that actual existence *must* be conjoined with their other properties; but from our understanding that actual existence is conjoined, necessarily and always, with God's other attributes, it certainly does follow that God exists.

'Proving' the existence of a lion

Objection

(4) I am now rather tired ·from all this arguing·, and hope you won't mind if I relax a little. The complex *existing lion* includes both *lion* and *existence*, and it includes them essentially, for if you take away either element it won't be the same complex. But tell me now, hasn't God had a vivid and clear grasp of this complex from all eternity? And doesn't the *idea of* this composite. . . .*essentially* involve both elements? In other words, **doesn't existence belong to the essence of the composite existing lion**? And yet God's having from eternity a clear knowledge ·of this complex· doesn't force either element in the complex to exist, unless we assume that the composite itself actually exists (in which case it will contain all its essential perfections including actual existence). What goes for the lion goes for God! Although I have distinct knowledge of a supreme being, and although the supremely perfect being includes existence as an essential part of his concept, it doesn't follow that the existence in question is something actual, unless we *assume* that the supreme being exists (in which case it will include actual existence along with all its other perfections). So we must look elsewhere for a *proof* that the supremely perfect being exists.

Reply

(4) ·I can best answer this by going back to **(b)** the second part of the difficulty I was discussing at the end of my previous Reply·. To overcome that difficulty ·we need a guide to whether a given essence or nature is •true and unchanging or merely •humanly invented, and I now provide one·. Here is a fact about ideas that don't contain •true and immutable natures but merely •ones invented and **assembled** by the intellect: such ideas can always be **split up** by the same intellect—not by mere abstraction, but through a vivid and clear intellectual operation. So any idea that the intellect can't split up in this way clearly wasn't assembled by the intellect ·in the first place·. For example, when I think of

•a winged horse,
•an actually existing lion, or
•a triangle inscribed in a square,

it is easy for me to understand that I can also think of

•a horse without wings,
•a lion that doesn't exist, or
•a triangle that isn't inscribed in a square,

and so on. So these things don't have true and unchanging natures. But if I think of a triangle or a square, then whatever I see to be contained in the idea of a triangle—for example that its three angles are equal to two right angles—I can truthfully assert of the triangle. (And the same holds for anything that I see to be contained in the idea of a square. I have dropped the lion and the horse because their natures aren't transparently clear to us.) I can understand what a triangle is while excluding from my thought its having three angles equal to two right angles; but I can't *deny* that this property applies to the triangle—I mean that I can't deny it by a vivid and clear intellectual operation, i.e. understanding what I mean by my denial. Moreover, if I consider *a triangle inscribed in a square*, not intending to attribute to the square properties of the triangle or vice versa, but only wanting to examine the properties arising out of the conjunction of the two, then the nature of •this composite will be just as true and unchangeable as the nature of •the triangle alone or of •the square alone. So it will be all right for me to affirm that the area of square is at least twice the area of the triangle inscribed in it, and to affirm other similar properties that belong to the nature of this composite figure.

Now consider the thought:

> The idea of *a supremely perfect body* contains existence, because it is a greater perfection to exist both in reality and in the intellect than it is to exist in the intellect alone.

The most I can infer from this is that a supremely perfect body *could* exist. I can't infer that it actually does exist, •because I can see quite well that this idea has been assembled by my own intellect, which has linked together all bodily perfections; and •because existence doesn't arise out of the other bodily perfections—it can equally well be affirmed or denied of them. ·Actually, that case for rejecting the inference to the actual existence of a supremely perfect body can be strengthened even further·. The only existence that is at issue here is *necessary existence*, which gives the thing that has it the power to create itself or keep itself in existence; and when I examine the idea of *a body*, I perceive that no body has such a power as that. From this I infer that necessary existence doesn't belong to •the nature of a body—however perfect it may be—any more than •being without lowlands belongs to •the nature of highlands, or •having angles greater than two right angles belongs to •the nature of a triangle! ·And my choice of those examples is my hint that what I'm really saying is that necessary existence is *inconsistent with* the nature of a body·.

Now let us turn from *body* and consider ·the idea of· *a thing*—whatever it turns out to be—that has *all the perfections that can exist together*. Is existence one of these perfections? We will be in some doubt about this at first, because our finite mind is accustomed to thinking of these perfections only separately, so that it may not immediately notice the necessity of their being joined together. But if we address ourselves attentively to the questions

> Does existence belong to a supremely powerful being?
> and ·if it does·, what sort of existence is it?

we'll be able to perceive vividly and clearly the following facts. **(1)** Possible existence, at the very least, belongs to such a being, just as it belongs to everything else of which we have a distinct idea, even if it's an idea put together through a

fiction of the intellect. **(2)** When we attend to the immense power of this ·supremely powerful· being, we shan't be able to think of its existence as possible without also recognizing that the being can exist by its own power; from which we'll infer that it really does exist and has existed from eternity (the natural light makes it obvious that what •can exist by its own power •always exists). **(3)** Necessary existence is contained in the idea of a supremely powerful being, not because of anything made up by the intellect but because it belongs to the true and immutable nature of such a being that it exists.

(4) This supremely powerful being can't not have all the other perfections that are contained in the idea of God, so that these perfections do exist in God and are joined together not by any construction of the intellect but by their very nature. All this is obvious if we give the matter our careful attention; and the only difference between it and what I have written previously is in the manner of explanation, which I have painstakingly altered so as to appeal to a variety of different minds. I freely admit that this is a kind of argument that may easily be regarded as fallacious by people who don't keep in mind all the elements making up the proof. For that reason I hesitated to use it, fearing that it might induce those who didn't grasp it to distrust the rest of my reasoning. But there are only two ways of proving the existence of God, •one through his effects, •the other through his nature or essence; and having put my best efforts into expounding •the first proof in the Third Meditation, I thought I should include •the second proof later on.

Objection

(5) With regard to the essence of the soul, and its distinctness from the body, I have only a little to say. (Our highly gifted author has, I admit, so exhausted me already that I can hardly go on.) He seems to infer that the soul is distinct from the body from the premise that the two can be distinctly conceived apart from each other. On this point I'll get him to fight it out with Scotus, who says that for one object to be clearly conceived as distinct and apart from another, all that's needed is what he calls a •formal and representative distinctness between them (which he says is intermediate between their being •really distinct and their being •only conceptually distinct). The distinctness of God's justice from his mercy is of this kind. For, says Scotus, 'the intrinsic concepts of the two are distinct, independently of what any mind *does*, so that one is not the same as the other. But it would be a bad argument to say: 'Justice and mercy can be conceived apart from one another, therefore they can exist apart'.

But I've gone far beyond the normal limits of a letter. These, gentlemen, are the matters that I thought needed to be raised on this subject, and I leave it to you to judge which are the best points. If you take my side, then Descartes's friendship with you will lead him not to think too badly of me for having contradicted him on a few points. But if you take his side, I'll give up, and admit defeat. In that case you won't pass my comments on to Descartes, and ·I confess that· I'll be only too happy to avoid a second defeat.

Reply

(5) As for the '*formal* distincness' that Caterus introduces on the authority of Scotus, let me say briefly that it doesn't differ from *modal* distinctness; and it applies only to incomplete entities, which I have precisely distinguished from complete entities. All that is needed for this 'formal' or modal way of distinguishing x from y is that x be conceived distinctly and separately from y by an abstraction of the intellect, an abstraction that conceives x inadequately. A •'formal' or

modal distinction doesn't have to involve such a distinct and separate conception of x and of y that we can understand each as an entity in its own right, different from everything else; for that is the hall-mark of •real distinctness. For example, the distinctness of a given body's •motion from its •shape is 'formal': I can thoroughly understand the motion apart from the shape, and the shape apart from the motion, and I can understand either of them in abstraction from the body. But I can't have a *complete* understanding of the motion apart from the thing that moves, or of the shape apart from the thing that has it; and I can't make up a story about motion in something that can't have a shape, or about shape in something that can't move. In the same way, I can't understand justice apart from the person who is just, or mercy apart from the person who is merciful; and I can't entertain as a possibility a just person who is incapable of mercy. In contrast with that, when I •think of a body as merely something having extension, shape and motion, and •deny that it has anything belonging ·also· to the nature of mind, this involves me in a complete understanding of what a body is, i.e. understanding a body to be a complete thing [the 'i.e.' clause added in the French version]. Conversely, I understand the mind to be a complete thing that doubts, understands, wills, and so on, while denying that it has any of the attributes contained in the idea of a body. This would be quite impossible if the mind weren't really distinct from the body. ·That is: it is only because •a body is one thing and a mind is another (i.e. they are *really* distinct, distinct as *things*) that •my thought of a body in all its completeness can exclude any attributes of mind and my thought of a mind in all its completeness can exclude any attributes of body·. . . .

Second Objections (mainly Mersenne) and Descartes's Replies

Objection

You have tackled so successfully the task of defending ·God·, the author of all things, against a new race of giants, and of demonstrating his existence, that decent people can hope that anyone who carefully reads your *Meditations* will acknowledge the existence of an eternal power on whom every single thing depends. Just because of that, we wanted to call to your attention to certain passages and ask you to clarify them, so that if possible there will be nothing left in your work that isn't clearly demonstrated. You have trained your mind by continual meditations for several years, so that what seems dubious and *very* obscure to others is quite clear to you; indeed, you may have a clear mental *intuition* of these matters and perceive them as the primary and principal objects of the natural light, ·i.e. as so utterly obvious that they don't need support or explanation·. We are simply pointing out the issues on which it seems worthwhile to lay on you the task of providing clearer and fuller explanations and demonstrations. . . . When you've provided them, hardly anyone will deny that your arguments do indeed have the force of demonstrations. ·We have seven main things to say·.

(1) You'll remember that you didn't •actually reject the images of all bodies as delusive; all you did was vigorously to adopt the •fiction that you were doing this, so as to reach the conclusion that you were exclusively a thinking thing. We remind you of this lest you should think you could go on to draw the conclusion that you really *are* in fact nothing more than a mind, or thought, or a thinking thing. This concerns only the first two Meditations, in which you clearly show at least that you, a thinking thing, certainly exist. But let us pause a little here. At this point ·in the *Meditations*· you recognize that you are a thinking thing, but you don't know what this thinking thing is. What if it turned out to be a body that *produces* what we call 'thought' through its various motions and interactions? You think you have ruled out *all* bodies, but you may be wrong about that because you didn't exclude yourself, and *you* may be a body. How do you demonstrate that a body can't think? or that thought doesn't consist in bodily motions? It may be that the whole system of your body (which you think you have excluded) or else some of its parts—the parts of the brain, for example—work together to produce the motions that we call 'thoughts'. You say 'I am a thinking thing'; but how do you know that you aren't a bodily motion or a moving body?

Reply

Gentlemen, I read with pleasure your comments on my little book on first philosophy. They show your good will towards me, and your piety towards God and zeal to further his glory. And I rejoice in the fact that you have thought my arguments worth examining *and* that you think I can reply well enough to all your criticisms. **(1)** You warn me to remember that I didn't actually reject the images of all bodies as delusive, but merely adopted the fiction that I was doing this, so as to reach the conclusion that I am a thinking thing; and you said that I shouldn't think it followed from this that I am in fact nothing more than a mind. But I showed that I was well aware of this in the second Meditation, where I wrote:

> But these things that I am supposing to be nothing because they are unknown to me—might they not in fact be identical with the *I* of which I am aware? I don't know; and just now I shan't discuss the matter.

I wanted to warn the reader openly that at that stage I was

not yet •asking whether the mind is distinct from the body, but was merely •examining those of its properties that I can have certain and evident knowledge about. And since I did become aware of many such properties, I can't without qualification admit your claim that I didn't yet 'know what a thinking thing is'. I admit that I didn't yet know whether this thinking thing is identical with the body or with something else; but I don't concede that I had *no* knowledge of it. Has anyone ever known anything so fully that he knew he had nothing more to learn about it? The more attributes of a thing we perceive, the better we are said to know it; for example, we are said to know our close friends better than casual acquaintances. I think I have demonstrated that the mind, considered apart from attributes that are customarily thought of as the body's, is better known (in the above sense of 'know') than is the body when considered apart from the mind. That is all I wanted to establish in the passage in question.

But I see what you are suggesting. You think that •my readers will be surprised that in the course of the first two Meditations (when there are only six altogether!) the only achieved result is the one I have just mentioned right here; and that •this will lead them to think that the work as a whole is extremely thin and not worth publishing. Well, I was *not* short of material; and no-one who intelligently reads the rest of what I have written will have reason to suspect that I was! ·There is a good reason why you don't find a host of topics dealt with in the first two Meditations·: it seemed reasonable to deal separately, in separate Meditations, with topics requiring individual attention and needing to be considered on their own.

Now, the best way to get secure knowledge of reality is first to get used to doubting everything, especially things concerning bodies. I had seen many ancient writings by the platonists and the sceptics on this subject, and didn't fancy re-heating that old cabbage, but I *had to* devote a whole Meditation to it. And I would like my readers not just to whip through it briskly but to spend several **months** (or at least **weeks)** considering the topics dealt with, before proceeding to the other Meditations. This would certainly enable them to get much more benefit from the rest.

Next point: Until now all our ideas relating to the mind have been very confused, and mixed up with the ideas of things that can be perceived by the senses. This is the first and chief reason why we can't get a clear enough understanding of the things that are said about the soul and God. So I thought it would be useful if I were to explain how the mind's properties or qualities are to be distinguished from the body's. 'To understand metaphysical matters, the mind must be pulled away from the senses'—there's nothing new about *that*; plenty of people had said it; but I don't know of anyone who had shown *how* this could be done. My second Meditation presents the right way—I think the *only* way—of achieving this ·withdrawal from the senses·. But it isn't a method that you can master by going through it carefully just once. You need protracted and repeated study if you are to •eradicate a lifetime's habit of confusing things related to the intellect with corporeal things, and •replace it with the opposite habit of distinguishing the two; it will take you at least a few **days** to acquire this. That seems to me the best justification for spending the whole of the second Meditation on this one topic.

You go on to ask how I demonstrate that a body can't think. Well, excuse me, but ·at the second-Meditation stage where we now are· I haven't said anything that would raise this question. I don't deal with it until the sixth Meditation, where I write: 'The fact that I can vividly and clearly think of one thing apart from another assures me that the two things

are distinct' and so on. And a little later on I said:

> Although there's a body that is very closely joined to me, I have a vivid and clear idea of myself as something that thinks and isn't extended, and one of body as something that is extended and doesn't think. So it is certain that I am (that is, my mind is) really distinct from my body and can exist without it.

We can easily add to that: 'Anything that can think is a mind, or is called "a mind"; but since mind and body are distinct things, no body is a mind, so no body can think.'

I don't see what you can deny in that. Do you claim that clearly understanding one thing apart from another isn't enough to show that they are really distinct? In that case, provide a more reliable criterion for distinctness of things—and I'm confident that you can't. What will you say? That two things are really distinct if one can exist apart from the other? But then how do you know that one thing can exist apart from another? You have to able to know this ·first· if it's to serve as the criterion for real distinctness. You may say that you get this knowledge from the senses, because you can see, or touch etc. one of the things when the other isn't present. But the senses are less trustworthy than the intellect: there are many ways for it to happen that a single thing appears in different forms or in different places or in different ways, and so be thought to be two things. And anyway, if you remember my discussion of the wax at the end of the second Meditation you'll realize that strictly speaking bodies aren't perceived by •the senses at all, but only by •the intellect; so all there is to

> •having a sensory perception of one thing apart from another

is merely

> •having an idea of one thing and *understanding* that it isn't an idea of something else.

The only way you can come to understand *this* is by ·intellectually· perceiving one thing apart from another, ·i.e. conceiving one apart from the other·; and that isn't a certain test unless ·in that act of conceiving· the idea of each thing is vivid and clear. ·But that's just what *I* said!· Thus, if that proposed criterion for a real distinction is to be reliable, it must come down to the one that I put forward.

To anyone who claims not to have distinct ideas of mind and body, I can only say: 'Attend carefully to the contents of the second Meditation.' If anyone thinks—as some well may—that parts of the brain co-operate to produce thoughts, ·I say that· there are no positive grounds for this view, which has arisen from two facts ·about the experience of those who hold it·: •they have never had the experience of being without a body, and •they have frequently been obstructed by the body in their ·mental· operations. Similarly, if someone had his legs permanently shackled from infancy, he would think the shackles were part of his body and that he needed them for walking.

The cause of our idea of God

Objection

(2) From the idea of a supreme being that you find in your mind, and that you say couldn't possibly have been produced by you, you *bravely* infer that there must exist a supreme being who alone can be the origin of this idea. However, we can find simply within ourselves a sufficient basis for our ability to form the idea in question, even if the supreme being didn't exist or we didn't know that he exists and never thought about his existing. For surely ·each of us can think as follows·:

> I can see that just because I *think* I have some degree of perfection, and hence that others also have a similar

> degree of perfection. This gives me the basis for thinking of any number of degrees, and piling up higher and higher degrees of perfection up to infinity. Even if there were only one degree of heat or light, I could always have the thought of further degrees, continuing the process of addition up to infinity. Using the same line of thought, surely I can take a given degree of *being*—the one I perceive myself to have—and add to that any degree you like, thus constructing the idea of *perfect being* from all the degrees that can be added on.

But (you say) an effect can't have a degree of perfection or reality that wasn't previously had by the cause. Yet we see that flies and other animals, and also plants, are produced from sun and rain and earth, which don't have life. Now life (·which animals etc. have·) is nobler than any merely bodily level of existence (·which is all that the sun etc. have·); so it *does* happen that an effect gets from its cause some reality which nevertheless isn't present in the cause. Anyway, the idea of a perfect being is merely a thought-entity, which is not nobler than your own mind which is thinking—·because no state of a substance, or event in the life of a substance, is nobler than the substance itself·. And how do you know that the idea would have come to you if instead of growing up among educated people you had spent your entire life alone in a desert? You derived this idea from thoughts you had in earlier meditations, from books, or from discussion with friends and so on, and not simply from your mind *or from an existing supreme being*. So you need to provide a clearer proof that you couldn't have this idea if a supreme being didn't exist; and when you have provided that, we'll all surrender! But there's good evidence that the idea *does* come from previously held notions, for example the fact that the natives of Canada—the Hurons and other primitive peoples—have no awareness of any idea of this sort, ·presumably because their intellectual past doesn't provide the materials for such an idea·. Now, *you* could have formed your idea of a supreme being on the basis of your work in physics; the idea you could get from *that* would refer only to this corporeal world, which includes every kind of perfection that you can conceive. In that case, the most you could infer is the existence of an utterly perfect *corporeal* being—unless you add something further that lifts us up to an incorporeal or spiritual plane. We may add that you can form the idea of an angel by the same method as the idea of a supremely perfect being; but this idea isn't produced in you by an angel, although the angel is more perfect than you. The fact is that you *don't* have the idea of God, just as you don't have the idea of an infinite number or an infinite line (and even if you can have the •idea, the •number is still impossible). Furthermore, the idea of *a single simple perfection that includes all others* arises merely from an operation of the reasoning intellect. . . .

Reply

(2) When you say that we can find simply within ourselves a sufficient basis for forming the idea of God, you don't depart at all from my own view. I said explicitly at the end of the third Meditation that 'this idea ·of God· is innate in me'—in other words, it comes to me from no other source than myself. I concede also that we could form this idea 'even if we didn't know that the supreme being exists', but *not* that we could form it 'even if the supreme being didn't exist'. On the contrary, I pointed out that the whole thrust of my argument lies in the fact that it is only because I was created by God that I have the power of forming this idea.

'Your remarks about flies, plants etc. don't show that an effect can have a degree of perfection that wasn't previously

present in the cause. Animals don't have reason, so it's certain that any perfection they have is also possessed by inanimate bodies. [This •reflects Descartes's view that an animal is merely a complex machine, and that its *life* is just the machine's special kind of complexity of structure and operation. We immediately see, though, that he doesn't •rely on this view here.] And if animals *do* have some perfection not shared by inanimate things, they must certainly have received it from elsewhere, in which case the sun, the rain and the earth are not adequate causes of animals. If you •don't find any cause of a fly's existence that has all the degrees of perfection possessed by the fly, and if also you •aren't sure whether the causes of the fly's existence include anything that you haven't yet found, *still* it would be quite irrational to be led by this to doubt ·the thesis about perfections of effects and of causes·—something that the very light of nature makes obvious, as I'll explain at length below.

Anyway, your point about flies is a point about material things; so it couldn't occur to those who •follow my Meditations and, wanting to philosophize in an orderly manner, •direct their thought away from the things that are perceivable by the senses.

As for your calling our idea of God a 'thought-entity', this hasn't any force against me. If you take a 'thought-entity' to be something that doesn't exist, then it isn't true that our idea of God is a thought-entity. Or it's true only in the sense in which *every* operation of the intellect is a 'thought-entity', i.e. an entity that originates in thought; and indeed this entire universe can be said to be an entity originating in God's thought, i.e. an entity created by a single act of the divine mind. Moreover I have already emphasized several times that I'm dealing merely with the *representative* perfection or reality of an idea; and this, just as much as the representative intricacy in the idea of a very ingenious machine, requires a cause that contains in reality whatever is contained merely representatively in the idea.

I don't see how I can make it any clearer that this idea couldn't be present to my mind unless a supreme being existed. I can only say that it depends on you: if you attend carefully to what I have written you should be able to free yourself from preconceived opinions that are eclipsing your natural light, and to accustom yourself to believing in the basic principles [*primis notionibus*, literally = 'in the primary notions'], which are as evident and true as anything can be, in preference to •opinions that are obscure and false, though fixed in the mind by long habit.

(a) *There is nothing in an effect that wasn't previously present in the cause, either straightforwardly or in a higher form* [see note on page 5]—that basic principle is as clear as any that we have. It is just the same as the plain man's **(b)** *Nothing comes from nothing*; for if we allow something in the effect that wasn't previously present in the cause, we'll also have to admit that this something was produced by nothing. ·That is, if we deny **(a)** we'll be denying **(b)**. So you might say that our acceptance of **(b)** compels us to accept **(a)**. But the real, basic order is the reverse of that: **(a)** is what compels us to accept **(b)**·. The reason why *nothing* can't be the cause of a thing is simply that such a cause wouldn't contain the same features as are found in the effect. *All the reality or perfection that is present in an idea merely •representatively must—either straightforwardly or in a higher form—be •intrinsically present in its cause*; that is a basic principle too. It's the only basis for everything we have ever believed about the existence of things located outside our mind. The only thing that could have led us to suspect that such things exist was the simple fact that ideas of them reach our mind by means of the senses; ·and our beliefs about •what things outside the mind are like must have been

inferred somehow from •what our ideas of them are like·.

If you give the matter your careful attention, and spend time meditating with me, you'll clearly see that we have an idea of a supremely powerful and perfect being, and that the reality represented in this idea isn't one that we ourselves have, whether straightforwardly or in a higher form. I can't force this truth on someone who is bored and inattentive; to get it you have to exercise your own powers of thought.

From all this it follows *very* clearly that God exists. But for the benefit of those in whom the natural light is so dim that they don't see that it is a basic principle that every perfection that is •representatively present in an idea must •really—·i.e. intrinsically·—exist in some cause of the idea, I provided an even more straightforward demonstration of God's existence, based on the fact that the mind that *has* this idea of God can't have caused itself to exist. I don't see what more is required to get you to 'surrender' ·as you promised·!

There's no force in your suggestion that my idea of God might have come not from God but from thoughts I had in earlier meditations, from books, or from discussion with friends and so on. Suppose I *did* get the idea from someone else, then let me ask him where *he* got it from—'from yourself or from some other source?'—and then the argument carries on as before, applied this time to him rather than to me. The conclusion will always be the same, namely that the *original* source of the idea is God.

As for your suggestion that my idea of God could have come from my work in physics: that strikes me as being as implausible as saying 'We can't *hear* anything, but we can learn about sounds by seeing colours'! Indeed, it would be easier to come up with a story about how colours resemble sounds than one about how bodies resemble God! As for your request that I 'add something further that lifts us up to an incorporeal or spiritual plane', the best I can do is to refer you back to my second Meditation, hoping that you'll see that it is at least good for something. I don't think I have ever put more effort into anything than I did into the long account that give there—one designed precisely for this purpose ·of 'lifting us up to a spiritual plane·'. If that failed to achieve its purpose, it would be futile for me to try to achieve it here in a sentence or two.

It doesn't matter that in the second Meditation I dealt only with the *human* mind; for I don't mind telling you that our idea of •the divine intellect—to take just one of God's attributes—differs from our idea of •our own intellect only in the way that the idea of an infinite number differs from the idea of the number 2 or 4. And the same holds for each individual attribute of God of which we recognize some trace in ourselves.

But there is something else: we understand God as having an absolute immensity = simplicity = unity, ·a single great attribute· which includes all his other attributes. There are no analogues of *that* in us or anything else; ·it is God's alone; and so any evidence of· this uniquely divine attribute is, as I once said, 'like the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work'. We have certain attributes which (because of our limited intellects) we attribute to God separately, one by one, because that is how we perceive them in ourselves; but our grasp of God's simplicity = unity enables us to see that no one of those attributes belongs unambiguously to us and to God. [Descartes probably doesn't mean that (say) the truths 'A man has intellect' and 'God has intellect' mean different things by 'intellect' or by 'has'; he seems to mean just that those two sentences express truths that are radically different in kind.] Moreover, there are many indefinite [see page 12] particulars of which we have an idea, such as unlimited (or infinite) knowledge and power, and infinite number and length and so on; and we recognize that

some of these (such as knowledge and power) are contained straightforwardly in the idea of God, whereas others (such as number and length) are contained in that idea only in a higher form ·and not straightforwardly·. We surely wouldn't see things in that way if our idea of God were merely a figment of our minds.

If the idea *were* a mere figment, it wouldn't always be conceived by everyone in the same manner. It is very striking that metaphysicians unanimously agree in their descriptions of the attributes of God (at least the ones that can be known by unaided human reason). You'll find that philosophers [here = 'philosophers and scientists'] disagree much more about the nature of physical or sense-perceptible things. . . .

If you'll just attend to the nature of •*supremely perfect being*, you can't possibly go wrong when trying to conceive correctly the idea of God. Some people mix other attributes in with •that one, which leads them into contradictions: they construct a chimerical idea of God, and then go on to say—reasonably enough!—that the God represented by *that* idea doesn't exist. So when you talk of an 'utterly perfect corporeal being', if you mean *absolutely* perfect, so that you are talking about a being in which all perfections are found, you are uttering a contradiction. The very nature of a body implies many imperfections, such as its being divisible into parts—with *this* part being a different thing from *that* one; for it is self-evident that being undivided is a greater perfection than being divided. And if you mean 'as perfect as a body can be', ·you aren't contradicting yourself but· you aren't talking about God.

As for your further point that, although we are less perfect than angels, our idea of an angel doesn't have to be produced in us by an angel: I entirely agree. As I said in the third Meditation, that idea can be assembled out of our ideas of God and of man. So that point does no harm to my position.

Some people deny that they have an idea of God, but ·in this denial· they are substituting some idol or the like. [This is a pun. Descartes's point, as you'll see in a moment, concerns the replacing of *the idea of God* by some kind of *mental image of God*. But his choice of words hints at a background thought of replacing *God* as an object of worship by a *physical image* such as the golden calf of Moses' Israelites.] So, although they reject the name, they concede the reality—·or at any rate they aren't saying anything that denies the reality. When they say 'I don't have an idea of God', all they mean is that their imaginations don't contain an *image* of God; their having a genuine *idea* of God is a topic on which they are silent·. I don't regard the idea of God as the same kind of thing as the images of material things that we depict in our imagination; rather, it is what we perceive with our conceiving or judging or reasoning intellect. [Descartes is echoing an old tradition, which divided intellectual activities into three kinds, exemplified by these: •conceiving *man* (or having the thought of what it is to be a man), •judging that *all men are mortal*, and •reasoning that *Because all men are mortal it follows that Socrates is mortal*.] Now, in my thought—in my intellect—I can come upon some perfection or other that is above me. For example, I take in that when I count I can't reach a largest number, and so I recognize that the process of counting involves something that exceeds my powers. What follows from this? Not that an infinite number exists (but not that it is a contradictory notion, as you say!). Rather, it follows that

> this power I have of conceiving that there is a thinkable number which is larger than any number that I can ever think of

is something that I have received not from myself but from some other more perfect being.

. . . .Now, what is this more-perfect-than-myself being? Is it a really existing number, the infinite number that I couldn't get to the end of? Or is it something else? To answer

this, we have to take into account not merely •the power to give me the idea in question but also •all the other attributes that could be possessed by a being that gave me that idea. And when we do take that into account, we shall find that it can only be God. Finally, when they say that God 'cannot be thought of', they mean that we can't have a thought in which we adequately grasp God; they aren't denying that we can have the sort of thought we *do* have—it's inadequate but is quite enough to give us the knowledge that God exists. . . .

Two challenges concerning basic certainty

Objection

(3) You aren't yet certain that God exists, and you say that you can't be certain of anything—can't know anything 'vividly and clearly'—without first getting clear and certain knowledge of God's existence. It follows that you don't yet vividly and clearly know *that you are a thinking thing*. At the point ·in your argument· where you conclude that you clearly know what you are, ·namely a thinking thing·, you haven't yet proved that God exists; but you admit that having clear knowledge ·of anything· requires having clear knowledge of an existing God.

Furthermore, ·this admission of yours seems to be obviously wrong·. An atheist is vividly and clearly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles; but he is so far from supposing the existence of God that he completely denies it. His view goes like this:

> If God existed, there *would* be a supreme being and a supreme good; which means that the infinite would exist. But in each category of perfection •the infinite excludes •everything else whatsoever—every ·other· kind of being and goodness, as well as every kind of non-being and evil. But there are many kinds of being and goodness, and many kinds of non-being and evil; ·so the notion of something that excludes them *all* is incoherent, which implies that God couldn't possibly exist·.

We think you should deal with this objection, so that irreligious people are left with nowhere to hide

Reply

(3) When I said that we can't know anything for certain until we are aware that God exists, I said *explicitly* that I was speaking only of knowledge of conclusions that we remember without having in mind the reasoning that led us to them. Now, the dialecticians [= 'specialists in applied logic'] don't usually call awareness of first principles 'knowledge'. And when we take in •that we are thinking things, •this is a basic principle that isn't arrived at through any syllogism. When someone says 'I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist', he isn't inferring •existence from •thought by means of a syllogism; rather, a simple intuition of his mind shows it to him as self-evident. If he had been inferring it through a syllogism, ·it would have been this:

> Everything that thinks is, or exists;
> I think; therefore
> I am, or exist.

And for this· he would need already to have known the first premise 'Everything that thinks is, or exists'; but what actually happens is that he learns it by experiencing in his own case that it isn't possible to think without existing. Constructing general propositions on the basis of our knowledge of particular ones is something that we just naturally do.

[In the next paragraph Descartes distinguishes *cognitio* from *scientia*. The right English word for *scientia* is 'knowledge', with this understood in a full-strength way; often enough *cognitio* can be translated the same

way, but not of course where they are being contrasted. No English word works exactly like *cognitio* (or its French equivalent *connaissance*). A *cognitio* might be called 'an item of knowledge' (we can't say 'a knowledge'), but when *cognitio* is being contrasted with *scientia*, 'item of *knowledge*' is too strong. This note is meant to explain the use of the clumsy phrase 'cognitive possession'—something one *has* that is in the general area of knowledge/information/belief/etc.]

I don't deny that an atheist can be 'clearly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles'. But this cognitive possession of his isn't true knowledge, I maintain, because no cognitive possession that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called 'knowledge'; and this applies to our atheist, because—as I have shown well enough—he can't be certain that he isn't being deceived about things that seem to him very evident. This ·ground for· doubt may not occur to him, but it can crop up if he thinks about it or someone else raises the point. So he will never be free of this doubt—·and thus won't have true *knowledge*·—until he accepts that God exists.

The atheist may think he has demonstrations to prove that there is no God, but that doesn't matter. His proofs will be quite unsound; we'll always be able to show him flaws in them; and when this happens he'll have to abandon his view.

It won't be hard for us to do this if his only 'demonstration' is the one that you offer him, with the premise that 'in each category of perfection the infinite excludes everything else whatsoever'. ·This is vulnerable at three points·. **(a)** We can ask him: 'How do you know that this exclusion of all other entities belongs to the nature of the infinite?' He will have no reasonable reply to make to this. He can't try to answer in terms of *the nature of the infinite*, because he regards the infinite as a nonentity, and therefore as not having a nature. So he will have to answer in terms of the meaning of the word 'infinite', a meaning that he has learned from others. ·And if he does in that way argue from the meaning of 'infinite', he is lost, because· the term 'infinite' is *not* generally taken to mean something that excludes the existence of finite things. **(b)** We can ask him: 'What would the infinite power of this imaginary infinite amount to, if it could never create anything? ·And he will be stuck for an answer·. **(c)** And we can point out that his premise is *false*: Our awareness of having some power of thought in ourselves makes it easy for us to conceive that some other being may also have a power of thought, and a power greater than ours; and we can carry this thought right up to conceiving of this other being's power as infinite, without that making us fear that this would involve some lessening of our own power. The same holds good for everything that we ascribe to God, including the power to create other things; so we can think of God as in every way infinite while still leaving room for the existence of created things. (In all this we must bear in mind that any power of ours is subject to the will of God.)

Can God lie?

Objection

(4) You say that God cannot lie or deceive. Yet some schoolmen say he can. . . . They think that in the strict sense God *does* lie, i.e. communicate to men things that are opposed to his intentions and decrees. For example, he unconditionally said to the people of Nineveh, through the prophet, 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed'. And he said many other things that certainly didn't turn out as he had said, because he didn't *want* his words to correspond to his intentions or decrees. Now if God hardened Pharaoh's heart and blinded his eyes, and if he sent upon his prophets the

spirit of untruthfulness, how do you conclude that we can't be deceived by him? Can't God treat men as a doctor treats the sick, or a father his children? In both these cases there is often deception, though it is always employed wisely and beneficially. ·Indeed, doesn't God *have* to do this?· If God showed us the pure truth, what eye, what mental vision, could endure it?

In any case, to explain your being deceived about matters that you think you vividly and clearly know it wouldn't be necessary to suppose that *God* is a deceiver, because the cause of the deception could lie in *you*, without your having the least knowledge of it. Why couldn't it be in your nature to be very often and perhaps always deceived? How can you establish with certainty that you •can't be, or even that you •aren't, deceived in matters that you think you know vividly and clearly? Haven't we often seen people turn out to be wrong in matters where they thought their knowledge was as bright as sunlight? Your principle of vivid and clear knowledge thus requires a vivid and clear explanation! One that will rule out the possibility that anyone of sound mind might be deceived on matters that he thinks he knows vividly and clearly. Otherwise we can't see that any degree of certainty can possibly be within your reach or that of mankind in general.

Reply

(4) In saying that God doesn't lie and isn't a deceiver, I think I have all metaphysicians and theologians—past and future—on my side. What you say against this is on a par with •attacking the thesis that God is not given to anger or other emotions by •offering as counter-examples passages from Scripture where human feelings are attributed to God. ·I'm surprised at your trying this·. *Everyone* knows that there are two distinct ways of speaking about God. One of them

> •is generally employed in the Bible; it fits how the plain man feels about things, and does contain some truth, though only truth relative to human beings.

For example, one might say 'God was angry' meaning that God's conduct might strike the average not very thoughtful human being as an expression of anger. And the other way of speaking

> •comes closer to expressing the naked truth—truth that isn't relative to human beings.

The second of these ways of speaking is the one we should all use when philosophizing. In my *Meditations* I had a special obligation to speak in that way, because in that context I wasn't entitled to bring in anything that was 'relative to human beings': I was supposing that no other human beings were yet known to me, and was considering myself only as a mind rather than a mind and body. This shows clearly that what I said in the *Meditations* ·about God's not being a deceiver· was concerned not with the verbal expression of lies but rather with. . . .the internal malice that deception involves.

And anyway the words of the prophet that you cite—'Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed'—weren't even a verbal •lie, but simply a •threat, the outcome of which depended on a certain condition. And when we are told that God 'hardened the heart of Pharaoh', or some such, this shouldn't be taken to mean that he •positively brought this about; rather, he contributed •negatively to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart by *not* conferring on him the grace that would have brought about a change of heart in him. Still, I have no quarrel with those who say that God can ·and does·, through the mouths of the prophets, produce verbal untruths; these untruths are free of any malicious intent to deceive—like the lies of physicians who deceive their patients

in order to cure them.

Nevertheless—and this is a more important point—sometimes we do seem to be really deceived by a natural instinct that God gave us. Someone suffering from dropsy has a positive impulse to drink, caused by the nature God has given to the body; the nature was designed to *preserve* the body, yet on this occasion the drink will *harm* it. But in my sixth Meditation I have explained why this is not inconsistent with the goodness or truthfulness of God.

But this kind of explanation wouldn't work with our •clearest and most careful judgments; for if any of *them* were false, we would have no way of correcting them—no •clearer judgments, and no other natural faculty ·that could do the job·. I deal with this by flatly denying that any such judgments could be false. Here is the reasoning that leads me to this conclusion: The fact that we have ideas of truth and falsehood shows that

> **(a)** we have a *real* faculty for recognizing truth and distinguishing it from falsehood.

(I emphasize 'real' because it's important that this faculty is a positive property that we have, not a mere negation.) Now, when I proved God's existence I proved that

> **(b)** anything *real* in us must have been given to us by God.

And since he is the supreme being,

> **(c)** God must be supremely good and true,

from which it follows that

> **(d)** the notion of his creating anything that positively tends towards falsehood is self-contradictory.

From **(a)** and **(b)** it follows that

> **(e)** our faculty for distinguishing truth from falsehood was given to us by God.

And from **(d)** and **(e)** it follows that this faculty of ours must tend towards the truth, at least when we use it correctly; for if it didn't, then God (who gave it to us) *would* be a deceiver. By using it 'correctly' I mean 'assenting only to things that we vividly and clearly perceive'; we can't even *invent a story* about any other correct use of this faculty. So you see that once we are aware that God exists, we have to tell ourselves that he is a deceiver if we want to cast doubt on what we vividly and clearly perceive. And we *can't* tell ourselves this; so it follows that whatever we vividly and clearly perceive must be completely accepted as true and certain.

As for doubts that I advanced in the first Meditation, I thought I had rather precisely removed them in the later Meditations; but I see that you are still stuck fast in them, so I shall now expound *again* the basis on which it seems to me that all human certainty can be founded. First of all, as soon as we think we correctly perceive something, we're spontaneously convinced that it is true. Now if this conviction is so firm that it is impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are convinced of, then there are no further questions for us to ask: we have everything that we could reasonably want. What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, i.e. that it is, absolutely speaking, false? What do we care about this 'absolute falsity', since we don't believe in it or have even the smallest suspicion of it? For the sort of case that is in question here is one involving a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty.

But *can* we have any such certainty, any such firm and unshakable conviction?

Well, we clearly *don't* have this kind of certainty when our perception is even slightly obscure or confused; for *any* obscurity is quite sufficient to cause doubts in us. And we don't have such certainty about anything—however clear

·and distinct·—that is based on our use of our senses. For we have often observed that the senses are subject to error, as when someone with dropsy feels thirsty and when someone with jaundice sees snow as yellow—which he does just as •vividly and clearly as we do when we see it as white. Accordingly, if there is any certainty to be had—and it can't be from anything •obscure or anything depending on the •senses—the only remaining alternative is that it occurs in the •brightly lit perceptions of the •intellect, and nowhere else. [Here and below, 'bright" etc. translates a reference to something's being *clare* perceived by the intellect. See note on page 9.]

Some of these perceptions are so transparently open to our gaze and so simple that we can't ever think of them without believing them to be true. Regarding these:

•While I think I exist,

•What has been done can't be undone,

and their like, we manifestly have this kind of certainty. For we can't doubt them unless we think of them; and we can't think of them without believing they are true (as I have just said); from which it follows that we can't doubt them without at the same time believing them to be true; which is to say that we can never doubt them.

You say that we have often seen people 'turn out to be wrong in matters where they thought their knowledge was as bright as sunlight', but that is no good as an objection to what I am saying. We have *not* often seen—indeed, we have *never* seen and *couldn't possibly* see—this happening to those who have sought brightness in their perceptions solely in the intellect. It happens only to those who have tried to get it from the senses or from some false preconceived opinion.

It is also no objection for someone to make out that such as these might appear false to God or to an angel. For the *evidentness* of our perceptions won't let us listen to anyone who makes up this kind of story.

There are other things that •our intellect perceives very clearly while we are attending to the reasons on which our knowledge of them depends—things that •we therefore can't doubt while we are attending etc. But we may come to forget those reasons while still holding onto the conclusions that we derived from them; and *then* the question arises:

> When we simply recollect that P was previously inferred from quite evident principles, ·but have forgotten how the inference went or what the principles were·, do we still have the same firm and unshakable conviction concerning P ·that we had while we were attending to the inference and its premises·?

My answer is '·Yes for some people, No for others·'. The certainty in question is indeed possessed by people whose knowledge of God enables them to grasp that the intellectual faculty that God gave them tends towards the truth; but it isn't possessed by anyone else. I explained this so clearly at the end of the fifth Meditation that I don't think I need to say any more about it here.

Objection

(5) If the will •never strays or sins as long as it is guided by the mind's vivid and clear knowledge, and if it •exposes itself to danger by following a conception of the intellect that is not at all vivid or clear, then note what follows from this. A Turk or other unbeliever doesn't sin in refusing to accept the Christian religion, and *would* sin if he *did* accept it, because he doesn't have vivid and clear knowledge of its truth. Indeed, if your rule is true, then the will is going to be allowed to accept almost *nothing*, because there's almost nothing that we know with the vividness and clarity you demand for the kind of certainty that is beyond any doubt. So you see how, in your desire to champion the truth, you may have proved

too much and wrecked rather than building.

Reply

(5) You deny that the will exposes itself to danger when it follows a conception of the intellect that isn't at all vivid or clear. That surprises me. What can give the will certainty if it follows a perception that isn't clear? Every philosopher and theologian—indeed everyone who *thinks*—agrees that the more clearly we understand something before assenting to it, the smaller is our risk of going wrong; and that those who do go astray are the ones who make a judgment while they are ignorant of the grounds on which it is based. ·Why have I brought *ignorance* into the story? Because· whenever we call a conception 'obscure' or 'confused', that's because it contains some element of which we are ignorant. [As a follow-up to the long note on page 9, note that 'obscure and confused' (in that order) are a perfect contrast to 'vivid and clear' (in that order).]

So your objection concerning the faith that should be embraced has no more force against me than against anyone who has ever developed the power of human reason—really it has no force against *anyone*. Our faith is said to concern obscure matters, but there's nothing obscure about the reasons for embracing the faith; on the contrary they are brighter than any natural light. We must distinguish •the subject-matter, i.e. *what* we assent to, from •the formal reason that moves the will to give its assent: all that we have to be shiningly clear about is the reason. No-one has ever denied that the subject-matter—the *content* of our faith—can be obscure, indeed can be obscurity itself! In my judgment that

> Obscurity must be removed from our conceptions, so that we can assent to them without any danger of going wrong,

I'm forming a vivid judgment *about this obscurity*. There are two kinds of brightness or transparency that can move our will to assent to something: one comes from •the natural light, the other •from divine grace. Although our faith is commonly said to concern obscure matters, this refers only to the content or subject-matter of our faith; it doesn't imply that there's any obscurity in the formal reason for our assenting to matters of faith. Quite the contrary: this formal reason consists in a certain inner light that God supernaturally beams into us, making us confident that what we are asked to believe has been revealed by God himself. And it's quite impossible that he should lie; so this is •more certain than any natural light, and is often even •more evident because of the light of grace.

When Turks and other infidels refuse to embrace the Christian religion, their sinfulness doesn't come from their unwillingness to accept obscure doctrines (and they certainly *are* obscure!), but from •their resisting the impulses of divine grace within them, or from •their having by their other sins made themselves unworthy of grace in the first place. Consider an infidel who is untouched by supernatural grace and knows nothing of the things that we Christians think God has revealed to us: if he is induced by fallacious arguments to accept them—obscure as they are to him—I'm willing to say boldly that this doesn't make him a true believer; it only means that he is committing a sin by not using his reason correctly. I don't think that any orthodox theologian would have disagreed with me on this. No-one who reads what I write can think that I didn't recognize this supernatural light, because in the fourth Meditation, where I was looking into the cause of falsity, I said explicitly that the supernatural light produces in our innermost thought a disposition to will, without lessening our freedom.

But please remember that in the context of questions about how one can legitimately use the will, I distinguished

very carefully the •conduct of life from the •contemplation of the truth. When it's a matter of getting on with our lives, I am very far from thinking that we should assent only to what is clearly perceived. In fact I don't think that we should always wait even for probability; sometimes we have to choose one alternatives out of many, knowing nothing about them; and once we have made our choice, so long as no reasons can be brought against it, we must stick to it as firmly as if it had been chosen for brilliantly clear reasons. I explained this in *Discourse on the Method* [early in Part 3]. But when our concern is solely with the contemplation of the truth, surely no-one has ever denied that we should withhold our assent from anything that we don't perceive clearly enough. Now in the *Meditations* my sole topic was the contemplation of the truth. You can see this in my way of going about the whole thing, and also in my explicit declaration, at the end of the first Meditation, that I couldn't possibly go too far in my distrustful attitude, since *what was at stake was not action but only the acquisition of knowledge*.

Two more objections

Objection

(6) In your reply to the First Objections [page 13], you seem to go astray in one of your inferences, namely this:

> •What we vividly and clearly understand to belong to the true and unchanging nature of a thing can truly be asserted of it. •Once we have investigated carefully enough what God is, we vividly and clearly understand that existence belongs to his nature. Therefore,. . .

And the conclusion you reached was

> Therefore,•we can truly assert of God that he does exist,

but it *ought to* have been:

> Therefore, •we can truly assert that existence belongs to the nature of God.

It doesn't follow from this that God in fact exists, but merely that if his nature is possible, or non-contradictory, he must exist. In other words, the nature or essence of God can't be conceived apart from existence; hence, if the essence exists then God exists. This comes down to an argument that others have put like this:

> •If there is no contradiction in God's existing, it is certain that he exists;
> •There is no contradiction in his existing;
> •∴Therefore. . . etc.∴

The second premise brings trouble: opponents of the argument either •claim to doubt the truth of this premise or •deny it outright. Moreover, the clause in your argument 'Once we have investigated carefully enough what God is. . . ' presupposes as true something that not everyone accepts; indeed you admit that you apprehend infinite being only in an inadequate way; and obviously you would have to say the same regarding every single attribute of God. Whatever is in God is utterly infinite; so who can for a moment apprehend any aspect of God except in an extremely 'inadequate' manner? So how can you have investigated vividly and clearly enough what God is?

Reply

(6) In criticising the conclusion of a syllogism of mine, *you* made a mistake in the argument. To get the conclusion you want, you should have stated the first premise as follows:

> •What we clearly understand to belong to the nature of something can be truly asserted to belong to its nature;

and *that* premise is nothing but a useless tautology. But my

first premise was this:

> •What we clearly understand to belong to the nature of something can truly be affirmed of that thing.

Thus if *being an animal* belongs to the nature of *man*, it can be affirmed that man is an animal; and if *having three angles equal to two right angles* belongs to the nature of a *triangle*, it can be affirmed that a triangle has three angles equal to two right angles; and if *existence* belongs to the nature of *God*, it can be affirmed that God exists, and so on. Now the second premise of my argument was:

> •It belongs to the nature of God that he exists.

And from these two premises the evident conclusion to be drawn is the one I drew:

> Therefore •it can truly be affirmed of God that he exists.

The correct conclusion is *not*, as you maintain, 'Therefore we can truly assert that existence belongs to the nature of God'. As a basis for the objection that you go on to make, you should have replaced the first premise by

> •What we clearly understand to belong to the nature of a thing cannot for that reason be affirmed of that thing *unless its nature is possible, or non-contradictory.*

Notice how weak this qualification is. •If 'possible' is taken to mean what everyone commonly *does* mean by it—namely 'whatever doesn't conflict with our human concepts'—then *obviously* the nature of God as I have described it is possible, because I supposed it to contain only things that according to our vivid and clear perceptions *must* belong to it; so it can't *conflict* with our concepts! Alternatively, you may be inventing some other kind of possibility that relates to •the object itself ·rather than to •our concepts·; but this can never be known by the human intellect unless it matches the first sort of possibility, ·in which case God's nature has this invented kind of possibility as well as the normal kind. If you try to avoid this result by supposing that the in-the-object kind of possibility that you have invented can part company with the normal relative-to-our-concepts kind·, that won't so much support a denial of the possibility of God's nature and existence as serve to undermine every other item of human knowledge. As far as our concepts are concerned, there is no impossibility in the nature of God; on the contrary, all the attributes that we include in the concept of God's nature are so interconnected that it seems to us to be self-contradictory that any one of them should *not* belong to God. So if we deny that the nature of God is possible—·meaning that it is impossible according to your in-the-object kind of possibility·—we may just as well deny that the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, or that he who is actually thinking exists; and if we do this, we'll be even better placed to deny that anything we acquire through the senses is true. The upshot will be that all human knowledge will be destroyed, though for no good reason.

As for the argument that you compare with mine—namely

> **(1)** If there is no contradiction in God's existing, it is certain that he exists;
> **(2)** There is no contradiction in his existing;
> Therefore . . . etc.

—although this is materially true, it is formally invalid. For **(1)** has to mean:

> **(1*)** If there is no contradiction in the concept of **the cause on which the possibility of God's existence depends**, it is certain that he exists,

whereas **(2)** says that

> **(2*)** There is no contradiction in the concept of **the nature and existence of God**.

. . . .These are very different. For it may be, with respect to a given thing, that we understand there to be nothing in the thing itself that makes it impossible for it to **exist**, we

also understand, from the causal point of view, that there is something that prevents its being **brought into existence**.

·As for your next point·: even if we conceive of God only in an inadequate—or, if you like, 'utterly inadequate'—way, this doesn't rule out its being *certain* that his nature is possible or not self-contradictory. And it doesn't prevent us from examining his nature with sufficient clarity (i.e. enough clarity to know that •his nature is possible and that •necessary existence belongs to this divine nature). Self-contradictoriness or impossibility resides solely in our thought, when we wrongly join together mutually inconsistent ideas; it can't occur in anything outside the intellect. If something exists outside the intellect, then *obviously* it is possible and not self-contradictory. Self-contradictoriness in our concepts arises merely from their obscurity and confusion; it can't occur in vivid and clear concepts. Thus, in the case of the few attributes of God that we do perceive, it is enough that we understand them vividly and clearly, even if not adequately. And when we take in that our admittedly inadequate concept of God contains *necessary existence*, we are entitled to say both that •we have examined his nature with sufficient clarity, and that •his nature is not self-contradictory.

Objection

(7) You don't say a word about the immortality of the human mind. You should have taken special care to prove and demonstrate this, to counter the people (who aren't themselves worthy of immortality!) who utterly deny and dislike it. You can't infer that the mind cannot collapse or die from the premise that it is distinct from the body. (Not that you have given a good proof of that premise, as we pointed out in (1) above; ·but let that pass·.) What if its nature gave it the same life-span as the body, God having endowed it with just enough strength and existence to ensure that it came to an end with the death of the body?

These, Sir, are the points we wanted you to clarify, so as to enable everyone to derive the utmost benefit from reading your Meditations, which are argued with great subtlety and are also, in our opinion, true. For just that reason it would be worthwhile if you, after resolving our difficulties, were to set out the entire argument in geometrical fashion, starting from a set of definitions, postulates and axioms. You are highly experienced in employing this method, and it would enable you to fill the mind of each reader so that he could see everything at a single glance, as it were, and be permeated with awareness of God.

Reply

(7) I explained in the Synopsis of my *Meditations* why I wrote nothing about the immortality of the soul. And I *have* adequately proved that the soul is distinct from every body. But there remains your point that the soul's distinctness from the body doesn't imply that it is immortal, because God may have given it a nature such that it goes out of existence at just the moment when the body dies. I admit that I can't refute this. I don't undertake to use the power of *human* reason to settle matters that depend on the free will of *God*. Our natural knowledge tells us that the mind is distinct from the body, and that it is a substance. But. . . .the final death of a human body depends solely on things' coming apart or changing their shape; and we have no arguments, and no experience, suggesting that the death or annihilation of a substance like the mind results from such a trivial cause as a change in shape; for shape is simply a mode [= 'non-essential property'], and what's more it is a mode not of the mind but of the body, which is a different thing from the mind. Indeed, we don't have arguments or experience suggesting that *any*

substance can go out of existence. And this entitles us to conclude that the mind, so far as it can be known by natural philosophy, is immortal.

But if it's a question about the absolute power of God—'Might God have decreed that human souls are to cease to exist precisely when the bodies he has joined to them are destroyed?'—then only God can answer that. And since he has revealed to us that this *won't* occur, there is no room left for even the slightest room for doubt on this point.

It remains for me to thank you for the helpful and frank way in which you have brought to my notice not only points that have struck you, but also ones that might be raised by atheists and other hostile critics. In the objections that you raise I can't see anything that I haven't already answered, or ruled out in advance, in the *Meditations*. As to the points about the flies generated by the sun, the natives of Canada, the inhabitants of Nineveh, the Turks and so on, the objections you raise can't occur to anyone who •follows the road I have pointed out and •lays aside for a time whatever he has acquired from the senses, so as to attend to dictates of pure and uncorrupted reason. Hence I thought that I had already adequately ruled out such objections in advance. But despite this, I think that these objections of yours will be a big help to me in my enterprise. For I expect that hardly any of my readers will be prepared to give such careful attention to everything I have written that they'll remember all the contents by the time they reach the end. Those who don't remember everything may easily fall prey to certain doubts; and they will subsequently see that their doubts have been dealt with in these replies of mine, or failing that, these replies will at least give them the opportunity to examine the truth more deeply.

Methods of presenting results

I now turn to your suggestion that I set out my arguments in geometrical fashion, so that readers could perceive them 'at a single glance, as it were'. It is worth explaining here how far I have already followed this method, and how far I think it should be followed in future. I distinguish two things that are involved in the geometrical manner of writing—the •order of demonstration and the •method of presentation. [Descartes speaks of the order and method of *demonstratio*—the same word for each. But that word sometimes did mean 'presentation', and it seems clear that that's what it means when Descartes writes about 'method'.]

The **order** consists simply in this: what is put forward at any stage in the demonstration must be known without *any* help from anything that comes later. I tried to follow this order very precisely in my *Meditations*, which is why I dealt with the mind's distinctness from the body only at the end, in the sixth Meditation, rather than in the second. It is also the reason why I deliberately omitted many things that would have required me to explain an even larger number of things.

The **method** of presentation divides into two varieties: the first proceeds by •analysis and the second by •synthesis. [The next two paragraphs use 'analysis' and 'synthesis' in senses that were current in Descartes's time but have since died. They don't stand for *methods of discovery*, but for *methods of presenting something that has been discovered*. A procedure that is 'analytic' in Descartes's sense starts with *what the investigator started with*, and then follows his route from that first discovery through to others; whereas a 'synthetic' procedure starts with *the most basic truths* about the matter in hand, and then deductively arrives at others on the basis of them.]

Analysis shows how the thing was methodically arrived at. . . ., so that if the reader is willing to follow it and attend sufficiently to everything in it, he will make the thing his own

and will understand it as completely as if he had discovered it for himself. ·That is an obvious advantage of the analytic procedure, but it also has a drawback, namely that· it has no way of compelling belief in an argumentative or inattentive reader; for if he fails to attend to the smallest points, even, he won't see the necessity of the conclusion. And there are many such small points—important truths that are often scarcely mentioned in analytic presentations because they are transparently clear to anyone who *does* attend to them.

Synthesis, on the other hand, moves in the opposite direction. . . . It *demonstrates* [= 'rigorously proves'] the conclusion clearly, using a long series of definitions, postulates, axioms, theorems and problems, so that if anyone denies a conclusion reached at any step in the argument, it can be immediately shown to be contained in what has gone before, so that even the stubbornest or most quarrelsome reader is compelled to give his assent. Still, this method is less satisfying than the method of analysis, and it doesn't engage the minds of those who are eager to learn, since it doesn't show how the thing in question was discovered.

The ancient geometers usually followed the synthetic procedure in their writings—·think for example of the axioms and postulates that kick off Euclid's *Elements*·. This wasn't because they were ignorant of analysis, I think, but because they valued it so highly that they kept it to themselves like a sacred mystery.

Analysis is the true method—the best method—of instruction, and it's the one I followed in my *Meditations*. As for synthesis, which is of course what you're asking me to use here, it can be very suitable to use in geometry as a follow-up to analysis, but it can't so conveniently be applied to these metaphysical subjects. •On the one hand: the basic principles from which geometrical demonstrations start are readily accepted by anyone, because they agree with what our senses tell us. Hence there is no difficulty there, except in the proper deduction of the consequences; and even less attentive people can do *that*, provided they remember what has gone before; and that isn't much of a proviso, because the analytic procedure breaks propositions down into their smallest elements, to enable them to be easily recited so that the student recalls them whether he wants to or not.

•On the other hand, nothing in metaphysics causes as much effort as getting vivid and clear perceptions of the basic principles. In themselves they are as evident as, or even more evident than, the basic principles that geometers study; but they conflict with many sense-based opinions that have become ingrained in us down through the years, so that they—the basic principles of metaphysics—won't be fully known except by people who really concentrate and meditate and withdraw their minds from corporeal things as far as they can. Indeed, if the basic principles of metaphysics were put forward out of any context, they could easily be denied by those who like to contradict just for the sake of it.

That's why I wrote 'meditations' rather than 'disputations' (a favourite with philosophers) or 'theorems and problems' (which the geometers like). I wanted to make it clear that I would have no dealings with anyone who wasn't willing to join me in meditating and attending closely. Someone who is all set to attack the truth will, for just that reason, be less suited to perceive it: when confronted with convincing arguments that support the truth, he won't attend to them properly because he'll be busy looking for counter-arguments.

At this point you may want to object:

> When we *know* that a given proposition is true, we certainly shouldn't look for arguments against it; but while we are still in doubt about its truth, it is right for us evaluate all the arguments for and against, so as to find out which are the stronger. It isn't reasonable

> for you •to expect your arguments to be accepted as correct before they have been looked at hard, and •to prohibit consideration of any counter-arguments.

That would be a valid objection if the arguments that I ask my readers to attend to without fighting back were of a kind that might divert the reader's attention from other arguments that had at least some chance of containing more truth than mine do. But ·that isn't how things stand·. My exposition includes the highest level of doubt about everything: I am strongly recommending that each item should be scrutinized with the utmost care, so that absolutely nothing is accepted until it has been so vividly and clearly perceived that we can't help assenting to it. The only opinions I want to steer my readers' minds away from are ones that they have never properly examined—ones they have acquired not through firm reasoning but only from the senses. I don't think that anyone who focuses his attention on my propositions can possibly think he is running a greater risk of error than he would have if he attended instead to other propositions that are somehow opposed to mine and that reveal only darkness (i.e. the preconceived opinions of the senses).

So I am entitled to require careful attention from my readers. Of the possible ways of presenting my results, I chose the one—·namely •analysis·—that would do the best job of getting readers to attend. I'm sure they will get more benefit from this than they will realize. When the •synthetic method of presentation is used, many people think that they have learned more than they really have. I would add that I think I can fairly give the back of my hand to the worthless verdict given on my work by those who stick to their preconceived opinions and refuse to meditate with me. But even those who do concentrate, and earnestly pursue the truth, will find it hard to take in my *Meditations* •as a whole, while also taking in the •individual parts that make it up. But both the •overall and the •detailed scrutiny are needed if the reader is to get the full benefit from my work. So I'll tack on a short exposition in the synthetic style, which I hope will help my readers a little. But I ask them to bear in mind that I'm not aiming to include in this as much material as I put in the *Meditations*. If I *did*, I would have to go on much longer than I did there. Also, even the items that I do include won't be explained precisely—because I want it to be brief, and also because I don't want anyone to think that what follows is adequate on its own. Anyone who thinks this may give less careful attention to the *Meditations* themselves; yet I'm convinced that the *Meditations* will yield by far the greater benefit.

A 'geometrical' argument for God's existence and the soul's distinctness from the body

Definitions:

D1. **Thought**. I use this term to cover everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it. Thus all the operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination and the senses are *thoughts*. I say '*immediately* aware' so as to exclude the consequences of thoughts; my voluntarily snapping my fingers originates in a thought, but isn't itself a thought.

D2. **Idea**. I use this term to refer to the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me aware of the thought. When I express something in words and understand what I am saying, there must be within me an *idea* of what is signified by the words in question. So 'ideas' aren't restricted to images depicted in the imagination. Indeed, in so far as these images are in the corporeal imagination [= 'the imagination that is a part of the body'], i.e. are depicted in some

part of the brain, I don't call them 'ideas' at all. I call them 'ideas' only in so far as they make a difference to the mind itself when it is directed towards that part of the brain.

D3. **Representative reality** of an idea. By this I mean the being of the thing that the idea represents, in so far as this exists in the idea. In the same way we can talk of 'representative perfection', 'representative intricacy' and so on. For whatever we perceive as being in •the objects of our ideas exists representatively in •the ideas themselves.

D4. Whatever exists in an object of one of our ideas in a way that exactly matches our perception of it is said to exist **intrinsically** in the object. And an object is said to contain something **in a higher form** [Latin *eminenter*, see note on page 5 above] when, although it doesn't exactly match our perception of it, its greatness is such that it can fill the role of something that *does* match our perception.

D5. **Substance**. When we perceive—have a real idea of—some property, quality or attribute, any thing that this perceived item is immediately *in* (as in a subject), any thing by means of which this item exists, is a *substance*. Our only idea of substance itself, strictly understood, is the idea of

> that in which x exists, either straightforwardly or in a higher form,

where x is anything that we perceive, anything that has representative being in one of our ideas. ·We are entitled to be sure that any such item that we perceive is in *something*, in some thing, in some subject·, because we know by the natural light that *nothing* can't have a real attribute.

D6. The substance in which thought immediately resides is called **mind**. I use that term rather than 'soul' because the word 'soul' is ambiguous and is often applied to something corporeal.

D7. The substance that is the immediate subject of spatial extendedness, and of the qualities that presuppose extendedness (shape, position, movement, and so on), is called **body**. Whether what we call 'mind' and 'body' are one substance or two is a question to be dealt with later on.

D8. The substance that we understand as supremely perfect, and in which we conceive *nothing* that implies any defect or limitation in that perfection, is called **God**.

D9. When we say that something is **contained in the nature or concept** of a thing, that's the same as saying that it is true of—or can be asserted of—that thing.

D10. Two substances are said to be **really distinct** when each can exist apart from the other.

[A 'synthetic' presentation might at this point set down some **postulates**—unargued propositions with something like the status of axioms. Descartes is about to present seven *postulata*, which is Latin for 'postulates', but he means it in a different sense—in fact its dominant sense—namely as meaning 'requests'. In his demonstration of Proposition 4, he treats something in Request 2 as a premise in the argument, as though it were a 'postulate' in our sense. That's one of several bits of evidence that Descartes is not very serious about this supposedly 'geometrical' presentation.]

Requests ·to the reader·

1. Please realize how feeble the reasons are that have led you to trust your senses until now, and how uncertain the judgments are that you have built up on the basis of the senses. Reflect long and often on this point, until at last you get the habit of no longer placing too much trust in the senses. You will need to do this, I think, if you are to perceive the certainty of metaphysical things—·i.e. of metaphysical truths·.

2. Please reflect on your own mind and all its attributes. You'll find that you can't be in doubt about these, even if you are supposing that everything you have ever acquired through your senses is false. Continue with this reflection until you get the habit of •perceiving the mind clearly and of •believing that it can be known more easily than any corporeal thing.

3. Ponder on the self-evident propositions that you'll find within yourself—ones like 'The same thing can't both exist and not exist at the same time', and 'Nothingness can't be the efficient cause of anything', and so on. This will have you exercising the intellectual vision that nature gave you, in the pure form that it takes on when freed from the senses; for sensory appearances generally interfere with it and greatly darken it. This will enable you to see easily the truth of the axioms that are to follow.

4. Examine the ideas of the natures that contain a combination of many attributes, such as the nature of a triangle or a square or any other figure, as well as the nature of mind, the nature of body, and above all the nature of God = the supremely perfect being. Keep in mind that whatever you perceive to be contained in these natures can be truly affirmed of them. For example, the nature of a triangle includes its having three angles that are equal to two right angles; the nature of a body or an extended thing contains divisibility (for we can't conceive of any extended thing that is so small that we can't divide it, at least in our thought). That is why it can be truly asserted that the three angles of every triangle are equal to two right angles, and that every body is divisible.

5. Please put a lot of time and effort into contemplating the nature of the supremely perfect being. Above all, reflect on the fact that the ideas of all other natures contain •possible existence, whereas the idea of God contains not only possible but wholly •necessary existence. This alone, without a formal argument, will tell you that God exists; and this will come to be just as self-evident to you as the fact that 2 is even and 3 is odd. There are truths that some people find self-evident while others come to understand them only through argument.

6. Ponder all the examples that I went through in my *Meditations*, both of vivid and clear perception and of obscure and confused perception. That will enable you to distinguish ·for yourself· what is clearly known from what is obscure. It is easier to learn this through examples than to learn it by rules, and I think that in the *Meditations* I explained, or at least touched on, all the relevant examples.

7. When you notice that you have never detected any falsity in your clear perceptions, and have never—except by accident—found any truth in what is obscure to you, please conclude that it is quite irrational to cast doubt on the vivid and clear perceptions of the pure intellect merely because of •preconceived opinions based on the senses or •mere hypotheses that are partly leaps in the dark. That will get you to readily accept the following axioms as true and unquestionable. Some of these axioms could have been better explained, and indeed should have been introduced as theorems rather than as axioms, if I had wanted to be more precise.

Axioms or common notions

A1. Nothing exists concerning which one can't ask 'Because of what cause does it exist?' This question can even be asked about God, not because he needs any cause in order to exist, but because the immensity of his nature is the cause or reason why he *doesn't* need any cause in order to exist.

A2. The present doesn't depend on the immediate past, and therefore a thing's *staying in existence* needs a cause just as much as does its *starting to exist* in the first place.
A3. No thing, and no actual perfection in any thing, can possibly be caused by nothing, ·which is· a non-existing thing.
A4. Whatever reality or perfection there is in a thing is present, either straightforwardly or in a higher form, in its first and adequate cause.
A5. It follows from axiom 4 that the representative reality of our ideas needs a cause that contains this reality, not merely representatively but intrinsically—whether straightforwardly or in a higher form. If you aren't sure that this is true, bear in mind that we *must* accept this axiom because our knowledge of all things—sense-perceptible and otherwise—depends on it. How do we know that the sky exists? Because we see it? But this 'seeing' doesn't affect the mind except by giving it an idea—I mean a sheerly mental idea, not an image depicted in the corporeal imagination. Well, why can we use this idea as a basis for judging that the sky exists? It is because every idea must have a really existing cause of its representative reality; and in this case we judge that the cause is the sky itself. And we make similar judgments in other cases.
A6. There are various degrees of reality or being: a substance has more reality than a quality; an infinite substance has more reality than a finite one. So there is more representative reality in the idea of a substance than in the idea of a quality, and more representative reality in the idea of an infinite substance than in the idea of a finite substance.
A7. The will of a thinking thing is drawn voluntarily and freely (for this is the essence of will), but still inevitably, towards a clearly known good. Hence, if it knows of perfections that it lacks, it will proceed at once to give itself these perfections if it can.
A8. Whatever can bring about a greater or more difficult thing can also bring about a lesser thing.
A9. It is a greater thing to create or preserve a substance than to create or preserve the attributes or properties of that substance. But it isn't a greater thing to create something than to preserve it, as I have already said ·in Axiom 2·.
A10. Existence is contained in the idea or concept of each thing, because we can't conceive of anything except as existing. Possible or contingent existence is contained in the concept of a limited thing, whereas necessary and perfect existence is contained in the concept of a supremely perfect being.

Proposition 1: **The existence of God can be known just by considering his nature.**
Demonstration: Saying that something is contained in the nature or concept of a thing is the same as saying that it is true of that thing (D9). And necessary existence is contained in the concept of God (A10). Therefore it can be truly affirmed of God that necessary existence belongs to him, or that he exists.

This is the syllogism that I employed [on page 31 above] in replying to your Objection (6). Its conclusion can be seen to be self-evident by anyone who is free of preconceived opinions, as I said in my Request 5 above. But since it isn't easy to arrive at such clarity of mind, I'll now try to establish the same result in ·two· other ways.

Proposition 2: **The existence of God can be demonstrated a posteriori from the mere fact that we have within us an idea of him.**
Demonstration: The representative reality of any of our ideas has to have a cause that contains the very same reality, not merely representatively but ·intrinsically·, whether straightforwardly or in a higher form (A5). But we have an idea of God

(D2 and D7), and its representative reality isn't contained in *us* either straightforwardly or in a higher form (A6); and indeed it can't be contained in any being except God himself (D8). Therefore this idea of God, which is in us, must have God as its cause; and hence God exists (A3).

Proposition 3: **God's existence can also be demonstrated from the fact that we, who have the idea of him, exist.**
Demonstration: If I had the power to keep myself in existence, I would have even more power to give myself the perfections that I lack (A8 and A9); for these perfections are merely attributes of a substance, whereas I am a substance. But if I had the power to give myself those perfections, I would already have them (A7); so I *don't* have the power to keep myself in existence.

Now, I couldn't exist unless I was kept in existence either by myself (if I have that power) or by some other being who has it (A1 and A2). But I *do* exist, and (as has just been proved) I *don't* have the power to keep myself in existence. Therefore I am preserved by some other being.

Moreover, he who keeps me in existence has within himself, either straightforwardly or in a higher form, everything that is in me (A4). But I have within me the perception of many of the perfections I lack, as well as an idea of God (D2 and D8). Therefore he who keeps me in existence has a perception of those same perfections.

Finally, this being can't have a perception of any perfections that he lacks, i.e. that he doesn't have within himself either straightforwardly or in a higher form (A7). For since he has the power to keep me in existence (as I have already said), he has even more power to give himself those perfections if he lacked them (A8 and A9). And he has a perception of all the perfections that I know I lack and that I conceive to be capable of existing only in God, as has just been proved. Therefore he has those perfections within himself, either straightforwardly or in a higher form; and hence he is God.

Corollary: **God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them. And he can bring about everything that we clearly perceive, in a way exactly corresponding to our perception of it.**
Demonstration: All this clearly follows from the preceding proposition. For in that proposition I proved that God exists from the premise that there must exist someone who possesses, either straightforwardly or in a higher form, all the perfections of which we have any idea. Well, we have the idea of a power so great that he who has it—and he alone—created the heavens and the earth and can produce everything that I understand to be possible. Therefore in proving God's existence I have also proved these other propositions about him.

[To call x and y 'really distinct' is to say that they are distinct *things*; *realiter* = 'really' comes from *res* = 'thing'.]

Proposition 4: **Mind and body are really distinct.**
Demonstration: God can bring about everything that we clearly perceive, in a way exactly corresponding to our perception of it (Corollary to P4). We clearly perceive the mind, i.e. a thinking substance, apart from the body, i.e. apart from an extended substance (Postulate [or Request!] 2). And conversely no-one denies that we can clearly perceive the body apart from the mind. Therefore the mind can, at least through the power of God, exist without the body; and similarly the body can exist apart from the mind.

Now if substance x can exist apart from substance y, then x is really distinct from y (D10) But the mind and the body are substances (D5–7) which can exist apart from each other (as has just been proved). Therefore mind and body are really distinct.

Why do I speak of mind and body being separated *through the power of God*? Not because any such extraordinary power is needed to separate them, but because the preceding arguments have dealt solely with God, so there was nothing else I could use to make the separation. ·Bringing in God doesn't weaken the result·: our knowledge that x is really distinct from y isn't affected by the nature of the power that separates them.