

Preliminaries to the Meditations

René Descartes

1641

Copyright © Jonathan Bennett 2017. All rights reserved

[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 word ‘demonstration’ and its cognate adjective, verb and adverb are so prominent here that they deserve a note at the outset: in Descartes’s day a demonstration was a rigorous, conclusive, knock-down proof.

First launched: March 2021

**To the very learned and illustrious
Deans and Doctors of the Sacred Faculty of
Theology of Paris**

Gentlemen:

My reason for presenting this work to you is so sound, and when you understand the plan of it your reason for giving it your protection will also be so sound, that I think my best way of commending it to you will be to tell you briefly what I aim to achieve in it.

I have always thought that two topics—namely God and the soul—are prime examples of subjects where demonstrative proofs ought to be given with the aid of philosophy rather than theology. For us who are believers, it is enough to accept on faith that there is a God and that the human soul does not die with the body; but in the case of unbelievers, it seems that there is no religion—and hardly any moral virtue—that they can be persuaded to adopt until these two truths are proved to them by natural reason. And since in this life the rewards of vice are often greater than those of virtue, few people would prefer what is right to what is expedient if they weren't restrained by a fear of God or the expectation of an after-life. *Of course* •we should believe that there is a God because that is what the Holy Scriptures teach, and conversely •we should believe Holy Scriptures because they come from God; because, faith being a gift of God, he who gives us grace to believe other things can also give us grace to believe that he exists. But this argument cannot be put to unbelievers, because they would think it to be (as the logicians say) *circular*.

Moreover, I have noticed that you, gentlemen, and all other theologians assert not only that •the existence of God can be proved by natural reason but also that •Holy Scripture implies that the knowledge of God's existence is clearer than our knowledge of the existence of many created things—so easy to acquire, indeed, that those who don't have it are at fault. This is clear from a passage in the *Book of Wisdom*,¹ chapter 13, where it is said that 'their ignorance is not pardonable, for if their mind has penetrated so far in knowledge of the things of this world, how could they possibly have failed to find, more easily, the sovereign Lord?' And in *Romans*, chapter 1, they are said to be 'without excuse'. And in the same place, in the words 'that which may be known of God is manifest in them', we seem to be told that everything that can be known of God can be shown by reasons that have no other source but our own mind.² That is why I thought it would be quite proper for me to show here by what means this can happen—to show what path has to be followed if we are to acquire the knowledge of God more easily and more certainly than we know the things of this world.

As regards the soul, although

- many people have believed that it is not easy to discover its nature, and
- some have even ventured to say that human reasoning provides persuasive grounds for holding that the soul dies along with the body, and that the opposite view is based on faith alone,

given that the Lateran Council held under Pope Leo X condemned those who take this position and expressly ordered

¹ This book is regarded as canonical by the Roman Catholic church but not by the protestant churches.

² [The switch from 'soul' to 'mind' is in the original. In one place—see page 6 below—Descartes says that he doesn't make a distinction between these; but the present version will play safe by tracking *anima* and *mens* closely.]

Christian philosophers to reply to their arguments and to use all the powers of their intellect to establish the truth, I have not hesitated to undertake that task in this work.

In addition, I know that the only reason why many irreligious people are unwilling to believe that •there is a God and that •the human mind is distinct from the body is that (they say) no-one has yet been able to demonstrate these points. Now, I completely disagree with this; I think that almost all the arguments that great men have put forward on these two questions (when properly understood) are demonstrations, and that it would be almost impossible to discover any new ones. Nevertheless, although the ground seems to be covered, I think there could be no more useful service in philosophy than—once and for all—to conduct a careful search for the best of these arguments, and to set them out so precisely and clearly that from then on everyone will know that they are genuine demonstrative proofs. And finally, because

several significant people have wanted me to do this; people who know that I have developed a method for resolving certain difficulties in the sciences—not indeed a new method (for nothing is older than the truth), but one they have seen me use with some success in other areas,

I thought it my duty to try to do something on this subject of God and the soul.

I have done my very best to include in this treatise everything I have been able to accomplish. Not that I have tried to collect here *all* the different arguments that could be put forward on our topic, because I have never thought this worthwhile except in cases where no single argument is regarded as certain enough. I have only presented the principal and most important arguments in such a way that I now venture to put them forward as very certain and evident

demonstrations. I will add that these proofs are of such a kind that I don't think the human mind can ever discover better ones. (The vital importance of the cause and the glory of God, to which the entire undertaking is directed, here compel me to speak somewhat more freely about myself than is my custom.) Nevertheless, however certain and evident I regard my arguments as being, I cannot persuade myself that everyone can grasp them. In geometry there are many writings left by Archimedes, Apollonius, Pappus and others that are accepted by everyone as evident and certain because each step in them is easily seen to be true when considered on its own, and each step fits in precisely with what has gone before; yet comparatively few people understand them, because they are somewhat long and demand a very attentive reader. Similarly, although the proofs I employ here are in my view as certain and evident as those of geometry, if not more so, I'm afraid that many people won't be able to grasp them adequately, because **(i)** they are rather long and some depend on others, and especially because **(ii)** they require a mind that is completely free from preconceived opinions and can easily detach itself from involvement with the senses. And the world doesn't contain more people with an aptitude for metaphysics than it does people with an aptitude for geometry! Also, there is this difference between the two. In geometry everyone has been taught to accept that ordinarily a proposition is not put forward in a book unless there's a conclusive demonstration for it; so inexperienced students are less likely to make the mistake of **rejecting something that is true** than they are to accept something that is false (in their desire to appear to understand it). In philosophy, by contrast, the belief is that everything can be argued either way; so not many people pursue the truth, while the great majority pursue reputations as powerful intellects by boldly **attacking the best arguments**.

Hence, whatever the quality of my arguments may be, because they have to do with philosophy I don't expect they will have much effect on people's minds unless you grant me your patronage.¹ The reputation of your Faculty is so firmly fixed in the minds of all, and the name *Sorbonne* has such authority that (since the Sacred Councils²) no institution has carried more weight than yours in matters of faith; while as regards human philosophy, you are thought of as second to none, both for insight and soundness and also for the integrity and wisdom of your pronouncements. So I am sure that your careful attention to this book, if you deigned to give it, would have three results:

- (i) The errors in it would be corrected—for when I remember that I am a human being and, above all, an ignorant one, I do not claim it is free of mistakes.
- (ii) Any passages that are defective or insufficiently developed or in need of further explanation would be supplemented, completed and clarified, either by yourselves or by me after you have alerted me to them.
- (iii) Once the arguments in the book proving that God exists and that the mind is distinct from the body have been made, as I am sure they can be, so clear that they are fit to be regarded as very exact demonstrations, you may be willing to declare as much, and make a public statement to that effect.

If this were done, I don't doubt that all the errors that have ever existed on these two topics would soon be eradicated from the minds of men. For the truth itself will readily bring it about that intelligent and learned men subscribe to your

judgment; and your authority will induce the atheists—who usually have smatterings of knowledge rather than intelligence or learning—to lay aside the spirit of contradiction, and perhaps they will even—knowing that the arguments are regarded as demonstrations by all able people—defend them, so as to avoid seeming not to understand them. And finally, everyone else will confidently go along with so many declarations of assent, so that there will be no-one left in the world who dares to call in question either the existence of God or the real distinctness of the human soul from the human body.

The good that this would do is something that you, with your unique wisdom, can evaluate better than anyone else; and it would be unsuitable for me to go on commending the cause of God and religion to you, who have always been that cause's greatest tower of strength.

Preface from the author to the reader

I briefly touched on the topics of God and the human mind in my *Discourse on the method of rightly conducting reason and seeking the truth in the sciences*, which was published in French in 1637. My purpose there was not to provide a full treatment, but merely to offer a sketch, and to learn from the judgments of my readers how I should handle these topics later on. ^a The issues seemed to me so important that I considered they ought to be dealt with more than once; and ^b the route I follow in explaining them is so untrodden and so far from the usual path that I thought it would not be helpful to give a full account of it in a book written in French

¹ [They did not grant it, though the first edition of the *Meditations* claimed to have 'the approval of the learned doctors'.]

² [Many academics report this as 'except the Sacred Councils', probably all lazily taking this from one influential (mis)translation. The Latin is "post" and the French "après". The reference is presumably to the two sittings of the Council of Trent, which emphasized the importance of theological education.]

that could be read by all and sundry, because then weaker intellects might think they should set out on the same path.¹

In the *Discourse* I asked anyone who found anything worth criticising in what I had written to do me the favour of pointing it out to me. With regard to these questions—concerning God and the human mind—only two objections worth mentioning were put to me. I shall now briefly answer them before embarking on a more detailed explanation of these topics.

(i) From the fact that the human mind, when directed towards itself, does not perceive itself to be anything but a thinking thing, it does not follow that its nature or *essence* consists only in its being a thinking thing, where the word 'only' excludes everything else that could be said to belong to the nature of the soul.

My answer to this objection is that in that passage I didn't mean to make those exclusions in an order corresponding to the actual truth of the matter (which I was not dealing with at that stage) but merely in an order corresponding to my own perception. So the sense of the passage was that I was not aware of anything that I knew belonged to my essence except that I was a thinking thing, i.e. a thing having the faculty of thought. Later on I will show how from the fact that I am aware of nothing else belonging to my essence it follows that nothing else does in fact belong to it.

(ii) From the fact that I have within me an idea of a thing more perfect than myself it does not follow that the idea itself is more perfect than me, still less that what is represented by the idea exists.

My answer is that there is an ambiguity here in the word 'idea'. 'Idea' can be taken **a** materially, as an operation of the intellect, which cannot be said to be more perfect than me; or it can be taken **b** objectively, as the thing represented by that operation; and this thing, even if it is not regarded as existing outside the intellect, can still be more perfect than myself in virtue of its essence.² How from the mere fact that there is within me an idea of something more perfect than me does it follow that this thing really exists? I shall fully answer this below.

[This paragraph expands the original a little, in the interests of clarity.] I have also looked at two fairly lengthy writings against me, but they did not attack my reasoning on these matters as much as my conclusions, employing arguments lifted from the standard sources of the atheists. I don't present answers to these arguments, for a two-part reason: **(i)** Such arguments can carry no weight with those who *do* understand my reasoning; and **(ii)** as for those who *don't*, the judgement of many people is so silly and weak that they accept an opinion the first time they encounter it, however false and irrational it may be, and stick to it even if they subsequently hear a true and well-grounded refutation of it; so I might contribute to their becoming atheists if I state the atheistic arguments, which I would have to do if I were to respond to them. I will only make the general point that all the objections commonly tossed around by atheists to attack the existence of God depend either on •attributing human feelings to God or on •arrogantly claiming such power and wisdom for our own minds that we can set out to grasp

¹ [Just to make sure that it's clear: Descartes is explaining **a** why he is returning to a topic he has already treated, and **b** why after visiting it once in French he now returns to it in Latin.]

² [In this passage, think of 'objectively' (Latin *objective*) as meaning 'representatively'. The contrast is between **a** an idea considered simply as a psychological event and **b** an idea considered as an idea *of* something.]

and set limits to what God can or should do. So, provided we remember that our minds must be regarded as finite, while God is infinite and beyond our comprehension, such objections will not cause us any difficulty.

But now that I have taken an initial sample of people's opinions, I am revisiting the questions about God and the human mind, and also dealing with the foundations of First Philosophy [= 'metaphysics'] in its entirety. I don't expect any popular approval, or indeed many readers; indeed, I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions—and I know there are not many of those. Those who don't take the trouble to grasp the proper order of my arguments and the connection between them, but focus on carping at individual sentences, as is the fashion, will not get much benefit from reading this book. They may well find an opportunity to quibble in many places, but it will not be easy for them to produce objections that are telling or worth replying to.

I don't promise **a** to satisfy my other readers straightaway on all points, and **b** I don't think so highly of myself that I believe I can foresee all the difficulties that anyone may find. **a** So first of all in the *Meditations* I will set out the very thoughts that have led me to what I think is certain and evident knowledge of the truth, so that I can find out whether I can convince others by the same arguments that have convinced me. **b** Then I will reply to the objections of various men of outstanding intellect and scholarship to whom these *Meditations* were sent for examination before being published. For their objections were so many and so

varied that I venture to hope that it will be hard for anyone else to think of any point—at least of any importance—that these critics have not touched on. I therefore ask my readers not to pass judgement on the *Meditations* until they have read through all these objections and my replies to them.

Synopsis of the following six Meditations

In the **first** I present the reasons why we can be in doubt about all things, especially material things, so long as we have no foundations for the sciences except the ones we have had up to now. Although the usefulness of such extensive doubt is not apparent at first sight, it does bring enormous benefit by •freeing us from all our preconceived opinions, •providing an easy path along which to lead the mind away from the senses, and •bringing it about that from now on we won't be able to have any further doubts about anything we find to be true.

In the **second**, the mind—using its own freedom—supposes the non-existence of all the things about whose existence there can be even the slightest doubt, and becomes aware that it is impossible that *it* should not itself exist at this time. This is also of the greatest usefulness, since it makes it easy for the mind to distinguish what belongs to itself, i.e. to intellectual nature, from what belongs to the body. But since some people may expect arguments for the immortality of the soul in this place, I think they should be warned here that I have tried not to put down anything that I could not precisely demonstrate. Hence the only order I could follow was the one geometers usually employ,¹ namely to set out all the premises on which a desired proposition depends, before drawing any conclusions about it. Now the

¹ [Although Descartes is about to explain why he doesn't use 'geometrical' reasoning in the *Meditations*, he does—a bit grudgingly—show how he thinks such reasoning would go, in his replies to the Second Objections (starting at page 34 in the version on the website from which the present text came).]

first and most important prerequisite for knowledge of the immortality of the soul is (1) for us to form a concept of the soul that is as clear as possible and is also quite distinct from every concept of body; which is what has been done here. A further requirement is (2) for us to know that everything that we vividly and clearly¹ understand is true in a way corresponding exactly to our understanding of it; which could not be proved before the fourth *Meditation*. In addition we need (3) to have a distinct concept of corporeal nature, which is developed partly here in the second *·Meditation·* and partly in the fifth and sixth. What should be concluded from all this is that all the things that we vividly and clearly conceive of as different substances (as we do in the case of mind and body) are in fact substances that are really distinct one from the other; and this conclusion is drawn in the sixth. This conclusion is confirmed in the sixth by the fact that we cannot conceive a body except as being divisible, whereas we cannot conceive a mind except as being indivisible. For we cannot conceive of half of a mind, while we can always conceive of half of a body, however small; and this leads us to recognise that the natures of mind and body are not only different but in a way opposite. But I haven't pursued this topic any further in this book, first because these arguments are enough to show that the decay of the body does not imply the destruction of the mind, and are hence enough to give mortals the hope of an after-life, and secondly because the premises from which the immortality of the mind can be inferred depend on an account of the whole of physics. *·This is required for two reasons·*. First, we need to know that absolutely all substances, or things that owe their existence

to being created by God, are by their nature incorruptible and cannot ever cease to exist unless they are reduced to nothingness by God's withdrawing his consent to their existence. Secondly, we need to recognise that *body*, taken in the general sense, is a substance that also never perishes. But *a human body*, considered as separate from other bodies, is constituted simply by a certain configuration of organs and other accidents [= 'non-essential qualities'] of that sort; whereas the human mind is not made up of any accidents in this way, but is a pure substance. For even if all the accidents of a mind are changed, so that there are changes in what it understands, wills, senses, and so on, that does not make it a different mind; whereas a human body becomes a different body merely through a change in the shape of some of its parts. From which it follows that while the body can very easily perish, the mind [Added in French version: 'or the soul, for I make no distinction between them'] is immortal by its very nature.²

In the **third Meditation** I have explained fully enough (it seems to me) my principal argument for proving the existence of God. However, wanting to draw my readers' souls away from the senses as far as possible, I didn't want there to use any comparison taken from bodily things; so it may be that many obscurities remain, though I hope they will be completely removed in my replies to the objections. One of them concerns how our idea of a supremely perfect being possesses so much objective [= 'representative'] reality that it can come only from a cause that is supremely perfect; which is illustrated there—specifically, the first set of replies—by a comparison with an engineer's idea of a very perfect machine. Just as the objective intricacy of the idea must have some

¹ [Latin *clare et distincte*. See the opening of the Third Meditation on this website for an explanation of why the customary translation 'clearly and distinctly' is demonstrably wrong, though 'clear' and 'distinct' are all right for the two words when they occur not linked by 'and'.]

² [This argument does not appear in the *Meditations* themselves.]

cause, namely the scientific knowledge of the engineer or of someone else he got it from, so our idea of God must have God himself as its cause. [Got *what?* It could be either the idea or the knowledge.]

In the **fourth** it is proved that everything that we vividly and clearly perceive is true, and the nature of falsity is explained—things that need to be known •to confirm what has gone before and •to make intelligible what comes later. (But here it should be noted in passing that I do not deal with sin, i.e. the error committed in pursuing good and evil, but only with the error that occurs in distinguishing true from false. And there is no discussion of matters relating to **a** faith or **b** the conduct of life, but simply of **b** speculative [= 'non-moral'] truths and **a** ones that are known solely through the natural light.)¹

In the **fifth**, besides an account of corporeal nature taken in general, there is a new argument demonstrating the existence of God. These may involve several difficulties, but they are resolved later in the replies to the objections. Finally I explain what makes it true that the certainty even of

geometrical demonstrations depends on knowledge of God.

Lastly, in the **sixth** •the intellect is distinguished from the imagination; •the criteria for this distinction are explained; •the mind is proved to be really distinct from the body, but is shown, notwithstanding, to be so closely joined to it that they make up a kind of unit; •the errors that commonly come from the senses are surveyed; •ways of avoiding them are expounded; and lastly •all the arguments for the existence of material things are presented. I don't see this ·last exercise· as useful •because those arguments imply that there really is a world, and that men have bodies and so on (no sane person has ever seriously doubted these things), but •because in considering these arguments we come to realise that they are not as solid or as transparent as the ones that lead us to knowledge of our minds and of God, so that the latter arguments are the most certain and evident ones that can come from the human intellect. Indeed, this is the one thing that I set myself to prove in these *Meditations*. And for that reason I will not survey here the various other issues that are dealt with in the book as they come up.

¹ [Descartes added this passage after reading the fourth set of objections. He put it in brackets to mark it as an addition.]