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Descartes, *Meditations* IV

[T]here is no reason to marvel at the fact that God should bring about certain things the reasons of which I do not understand. Nor is his existence therefore to be doubted because I happen to experience other things of which I fail to grasp why and how he made them.

– Descartes
Meditations IV

Descartes believed that, by the close of *Meditations* III the existence of God had been established beyond any possible doubt. Since God is infinitely perfect, whereas deception is a product of weakness and wickedness, it follows that God would not deceive me. Since God's perfections involve benevolence and power, it also follows that he would not allow any other being to deceive me. If I get things wrong — as undoubtedly I do — then it cannot be because I have been deceived by God or some other being. It must rather be because I have made some sort of mistake. Error is not to be attributed to trickery or deception, but to my own improper use of my faculties. The principal job of *Meditations* IV is to uncover what I do to bring myself to err, and so come up with recommendations for avoiding those mistakes in the future.

In the process of doing this job, *Meditations* IV also goes some way to explain why God would have made me capable of falling into error. But it only goes some way, not all the way. Descartes did not consider the fact that I make mistakes to be in any way a challenge to the belief in God. He took it to be obvious that I do make mistakes, but also beyond doubt that God exists. From these two facts he drew the conclusion that God must have good reasons for making me capable of falling into error. He tried to understand those reasons well enough to be able to ascertain and avoid the causes of error. But he did not consider it important to provide a full vindication of God's practice in making me capable of error. The meditation accordingly concludes by leaving God's full motives for making me as I am something of a mystery.

QUESTIONS ON THE READING

Note: *In the second sentence of Meditations IV Descartes made a reference to directing his thought away from things that can be imagined. It would have been more accurate to translate him as talking about directing his thought away from things that can be imaged or pictured, including the things shown to us by our senses.*

1. What did Descartes first propose as an answer to the question of what causes me to be deceived and led into error?
2. Why is this explanation for error “not yet satisfactory?”
3. What sorts of causes are utterly useless in physics? Why?
4. What must we be careful to take into account when ascertaining the degree of perfection of a thing?
5. On what does error depend?
6. What is the proper function of the intellect?
7. In what sense is the intellect imperfect?
8. Why can we not fault God for creating us with this kind of imperfection in our intellects?
9. In what does the will solely consist?
10. What is the lowest grade of freedom of the will and how does it differ from more perfect grades?



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11. What is the cause of error?
12. How are errors to be avoided?
13. God could have made me more cautious, so that my caution would restrain me from ever willing to affirm something I do not clearly and distinctly understand. But he didn't. Can he be faulted for that? Why or why not?

NOTES ON THE READING

Descartes opened *Meditations* IV by recalling a classic solution to the problem of evil, that proposed by Augustine of Hippo. Augustine maintained that evil is not a real, positive thing that is created by God, but merely the privation of good. Human moral evil, for example, is not the product of a bad character implanted in certain people by God, but rather results from ignorance and weakness. Neither ignorance nor weakness is created by God. God only creates wisdom and strength. But because God only puts finite amounts of wisdom and strength into his creatures, the amount by which their wisdom and strength falls short of perfection appears to us as a quantity of ignorance and weakness. The appearance is merely an appearance, however. Ignorance and weakness are not something but nothing, or rather, a lack or deficiency in things.

This solution applies broadly. Augustine declared that all that God created is good and that all evil is merely the appearance that results from the fact that God only created a finite amount of good. We have no right to blame God for doing this, because God was under no obligation to create anything at all, much less everything that he appears to have created. Accordingly, we ought to praise God for being so gracious as to create as much as he did rather than complain that he did not do more.

Descartes briefly wondered whether this blunt solution to the problem of evil might also answer his question about the cause of error. God is not restricted to creating only totally perfect beings. Were that the case, the universe could contain only one thing: God himself (if we accept the standard view that it is part of God's perfection that there be only one of him). Supposing that God has decided to add to the bounty of the universe by creating a variety of different beings that differ from one another in possessing all the different degrees and kinds of reality or perfection that can be supposed to exist between God himself (=total perfection) and utter nothingness (=lack of any real or perfect quality whatsoever), then it is not improper that we should have been given only limited knowing powers. On the contrary, some beings must have been created with our specific set of limitations — and we are those beings. For us, the only alternative is not to have been created at all.

After some consideration Descartes decided that, while quite correct as a way of accounting for some kinds of evil, this Augustinian reply is inadequate to explain the cause of mistaken judgment. If God makes us limited by denying us knowledge of certain things, that merely makes us ignorant. It does not make us mistaken. For us to make mistakes our cognitive faculties can't just fail to function. They have to function improperly, either because of some imbalance that God put into them, or because of something that ought to have been there that he did not include in them.

Descartes proceeded to reiterate that this is no reason for doubting the existence of God. We are not asking how mistakes on our part are compatible with the perfection of God because we have any doubt about God's existence, but rather because we want to understand what causes our mistakes so that we can avoid them in the future. But the task is a daunting one. While we can be assured that God must have had some good reason for making us as we are, we are finite



beings who probably cannot understand all the purposes that God had in mind in creating things. (This is why, Descartes paused to observe, it is useless to inquire about the “nature,” “ends,” or “purposes” of things when doing physics. We do not know enough about the mind of God to know those things.) One reason why we might have been made liable to make mistakes is that this constitution is somehow more conducive to the perfection of the whole universe of which we are a part. But if that is so, then our situation is truly hopeless. Because we don’t know anything about what exists in the world about us (and aren’t in a position to learn before we discover the causes of error), we can’t begin to conjecture about how we fit in with that world so as to make it more perfect, and so can’t uncover the causes of error.

But there is another, more promising reason why we might have been made liable to make mistakes. This is that this constitution is somehow more conducive to the perfection of the little universe that consists just of ourselves and the collection of our ideas and abilities. We can at least know ourselves and investigate them.

Descartes therefore determined to look within himself for the causes of error. In accord with the second rule of his method, he proceeded by breaking his problem down into its most simple parts. His problem concerns the existence false or mistaken judgment. The power of judgment must therefore be broken down into its component parts before proceeding any further.

Descartes reflected that all judgments consist of the affirmation or denial of a relation between two or more ideas. The judgment that all bodies are extended, consists of certain ideas, the ideas body and extension. But in addition to these ideas we make an assertion concerning the existence of a relation or connection between the objects of these ideas. We say that the one inheres in the other as its property. Similarly, the judgment that the sun melts wax but hardens clay consists of a number of ideas: the sun, wax, clay, hardness, and softness. But in addition to these ideas we make an assertion concerning the existence of a certain relation or connection between the objects of these ideas. We say that the third comes to inhere in the second as an effect of the first. All our judgments are like this. They include the perception of two or more ideas and the affirmation of a relation of identity or containment or inherence or causality or some other such thing that is taken to connect the objects of the ideas with one another. The ideas are perceived by the understanding or the intellect (these are synonymous terms for Descartes). But the understanding does not judge. It just inspects each of the ideas on their own and, as it were, sees what they contain. The affirmation of a connection or relation between the ideas is an activity and, like all activities, belongs to the will.

Descartes proceeded to consider each of these two capacities. He decided that neither of them, considered on its own, is at all defective. The understanding is limited. We do not grasp all the ideas that there are to be grasped (as is evident to us when we try to solve a problem and cannot see our way through to the solution), and those that we do grasp are not all clearly and distinctly perceived, but rather are often perceived with varying degrees of confusion or even obscurity. But though the understanding is limited it is not defective. While it does not perceive all ideas with equal clarity and distinctness, it never represents a clearly and distinctly perceived idea as if it were confused or obscure, or an obscurely and confusedly perceived idea as if it were clear and distinct. The understanding perceives as much of the idea as it can, and if it perceives obscurely and confusedly then that just means that the idea looks obscure and confused and not clear and distinct, whereas if it perceives clearly and distinctly then that is what it sees. So the understanding always shows us exactly what it perceives and there is no defect in its operation.



Having considered the understanding, Descartes turned to the will and noted that not only is it not defective, but it is not even limited. This may seem questionable, especially to those who have not been able to get their way recently. But when Descartes spoke about the power of the will all he had in mind is the power to make assertions and denials and to express desire and aversion, not the power to make what you assert true or what you deny false or what you desire real or what you fear unreal. Introspection appears to indicate that this expressive power is not constrained by any external factors. A prisoner shut up in a small cell, fed bread and water, and forced under threat of torture to recite prayers may not be able to move freely or eat a fine meal or express atheistic sentiments, but no external factors can prevent the prisoner from willing to be free, desiring a good meal, or judging that there is no God.

However, though Descartes maintained that our wills are not determined by any external force, he immediately proceeded to add that they can be determined by various internal factors, including reason and Grace. Indeed, he went so far as to maintain that under certain circumstances the understanding can exercise an absolute compulsion over the will in matters of assertion and denial, and can compel it to judge a certain way. This is the case when we understand ideas so thoroughly that we see the connection between them. In the case of the judgment that all bodies are extended, for instance, a clear and distinct perception of the idea of body reveals that the idea of extension is already contained in the idea of body as one of its component parts. Again, in the case of the judgment that two plus three is equal to five, a clear and distinct perception of the idea of any two and any three things reveals that the two groups taken together make five things. In these cases, Descartes supposed, what the understanding so clearly and distinctly perceives leaves no room for the will to judge otherwise, but compels the will to judge accordingly and assert that the relation of inherence connects extension with body, and that the relation of equality connects five with two collected together with three. It is only in cases where the understanding does not clearly and distinctly perceive a connection between ideas that the will has the power to either affirm or deny or refrain from making any judgment whatsoever on the matter.

But though in these cases the understanding determines the will and judgment, Descartes still maintained that the will is free. Indeed, he went so far as to insist that in these cases it is free in the highest sense. This sounds paradoxical but the paradox is merely apparent. What makes my will free, as Descartes saw it, is that it is not constrained by any *external* force. But my understanding is not an external force. It is part of me (indeed, the noblest part of me and what I most truly am). I am one thinking being, not a bundle of many different thinking beings. I, one and the same being, both understand and will. And if I understand a certain thing, and my will moves in accord with my understanding, that is an indication of my freedom. After all, were I to understand something, and were my will not to respond accordingly, it is then that we would think that something is wrong and that I do not have control over my own will.

We can contrast cases where our wills are determined either by our understanding or by some other internal factor, such as passion, natural impulse, or Grace, with cases where our wills are not determined at all because nothing in us inclines us in any particular way and we are totally indifferent to the choice put before us (think of the case of someone being asked to pick a card from a deck). In Descartes's view, cases of the latter sort are a result of one or the other of two things: ignorance or impotence. When we feel indifferent about a choice, it is because we do not know what the full consequences will be or because we think that whatever we choose, it will not change anything. Choices made in such circumstances are still free, but Descartes



considered them to be lesser expressions of freedom because they do not realize any wants we have or any decisions we have made. Because there is nothing in us guiding the choice, it is as if the choice is not really due to us, even though we are the ones that are making it. This is why, even though it may at first seem paradoxical, choices that are determined by something in us, like our understanding, are truly free whereas choices that are not determined by anything in us are not really ours and so express a lower form of freedom.

Having completed this analysis of the faculties involved in judgment, Descartes was finally in a position to offer a theory of the nature and causes of error in judgment. He attributed error to the imbalance that exists between the will and the understanding. The understanding, being finite, is not able to clearly and distinctly perceive everything that there is to all of its ideas and hence cannot determine all of the relations that hold between its ideas. Consequently it is not able to determine judgment in all cases. But since the will is unlimited, it retains the power of affirmation and denial even in the absence of a clear and distinct perception on the part of the understanding. Consequently, rather than refrain from judging on the grounds that the evidence is incomplete, it can run ahead of what is clearly and distinctly perceived and make a judgment without due consideration. It is in these cases, Descartes claimed, that we are led into error.

Descartes's next task was to determine whether this theory of the causes of error is consistent with the fact that we have been created by a supremely perfect being. He had three observations to make on this question. To begin with, he noted that it is not incompatible with God's goodness that our understandings should be finite as long as those few things they are able to do are things they are able to do correctly. Artisans are under no obligation to put everything they can possibly create into each of their artefacts, as long as the lack does not impede the intended function of the artefact. This remark has an important implication. It means that if our understandings clearly and distinctly perceive a certain relation between ideas, then that perception must be correct, and any judgment affirming it could not be in error. Otherwise, our understanding would not just be limited in its operations, which is compatible with the goodness of God, but defective in those operations, which is not compatible with the goodness of God and so impossible, given what we have learned about God. Second, Descartes noted that it is not incompatible with God's goodness that our wills be perfectly free. The notion of a partial will really makes no sense. To say that the will is constrained in any way is to say that it we do not have a will, but are determined. So when creating us God really just had a choice between giving us no free will or an infinite free will, and we can hardly complain that we do not approve of the choice he made. Taken in conjunction, these two observations entail that the imbalance between the will and the understanding is consistent with the perfection of our creator. Given that God determined to create beings with finite understandings, it is still better that those beings should have some free will than none at all. And since there can be no partial attributions where the will is concerned, this means that finite beings with imbalanced will and understanding are better than finite beings with no will at all.

But it is still possible to wonder why an all perfect creator, concerned that its creations would not fall into error, should not have made us more cautious and careful, so that we would not be disposed to make hasty judgments. This question motivated Descartes's third observation: that whatever else God might have failed to do, he did not leave us entirely at loose ends, but made us so that it would be at least possible for us to avoid error by simply using our freedom of will to discipline ourselves to not let ourselves make judgments about matters that we do not clearly and distinctly perceive. After all, since our understanding is not defective, but



merely limited, we cannot go wrong if we simply limit ourselves to affirming what limited things it teaches us and do not attempt to go beyond those bounds. So God has provided us with a remedy for the imbalanced state of our understanding and our will.

Admittedly, God did not exactly implant an irresistible inclination to employ this remedy in us, but instead left it up to us to discover the proper method for obtaining truth and discipline ourselves to follow it. But then it must be that he had some noble purpose in leaving these things up to us to discover and apply. It may be that his decision to do this is somehow conducive to the greater perfection of the world as a whole.

Had God not created us with just limited understanding, but with a defective understanding that clearly and distinctly perceives things that are not true, then we would not only make mistakes, but we would have no means of discovering, correcting, or avoiding our errors. That would be inconsistent with the perfection of God. Consequently, whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive to be true, and are accordingly compelled to judge to be true, must in fact be true.

With this theory of the causes of error in place, Descartes was in a position to make a recommendation about how to avoid error in the future. Since error arises when the will runs ahead of the understanding and produces a judgment in the absence of being compelled to do so by a clear and distinct perception, we need merely turn the power of will to refrain from making any such judgments. We ought, in other words, to restrict ourselves to only making judgments about those matters that are clearly and distinctly perceived.

Nor need we worry about which matters those are. Since a clear and distinct perception on the part of the understanding determines the will, clear and distinct perceptions can be identified by the fact that they leave no room for the will to judge any other way. In effect, we have arrived back at the point we departed from in *Meditations* I, where Descartes resolved to deny anything in which he could find the least grounds for doubt, however extravagant. Here, at the close of *Meditations* IV, Descartes is still saying that if it is possible for you to doubt something, you should refrain from assenting to it. Only now this recommendation has been elevated from a methodological precept, governing the course of this particular inquiry, to a criterion of all truth.

ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

Compare Descartes's position on the freedom of the will, as presented in *Meditations* IV with Hobbes's, as presented in *Human nature* XII, and determine which is more plausible and which provides a more thorough and adequate account of the phenomena of the will. Note that Hobbes authored the third set of comments on Descartes *Meditations* (like Arnauld, mentioned in the previous chapter, Hobbes was one of the individuals whose comments were solicited by Mersenne and were bound in with the complete editions of the *Meditations*). In his twelfth objection, Hobbes charged that Descartes had merely assumed the freedom of the will without proof and that his position is not obviously true, as it is denied by many, notably Calvinists (i.e., those who believe in predestination and the possibility of doing good only through Grace). Assess the adequacy of Descartes's reply to Hobbes on this matter.

