

Descartes, *Meditations* IIIa
(AT VII 34-42)

Meditations III opens with a problem. The discoveries of *Meditations* II about how we know the essence of the wax and about how we come to know our own nature as thinking things appear to imply that we can get to the truth of things by ignoring the confused and obscure ideas the intellect receives when it senses or imagines and focusing just on what it is able to discern when it closely examines notions that it finds within itself, like the notions of itself and its own ideas, including its ideas of numbers and of extension as they exist and are described by the sciences of arithmetic and geometry. However, in *Meditations* I Descartes had declared that the intellect can occasionally mislead us, as it does when we make errors in calculation. And he had gone on to claim that a supremely powerful evil genius might even be able to deceive him about those things that he thinks he grasps most clearly within his own intellect, such as that two plus three is equal to five.

These conflicting results left Descartes in a quandary. Whenever he contemplated facts that he took to be clearly and distinctly perceived through the intellect, such as the fact of his own existence, the fact of the existence of his thoughts, the fact that he is a thinking thing, or the fact that two plus three is equal to five, he was sure that he grasped these facts so clearly and evidently that it was impossible for him to doubt them. But when he ceased contemplating these truths and turned instead to consider the infirmity of his own nature and the possibility of the existence of a demon deceiver, he started to wonder whether he really had seen things so clearly and began to worry that perhaps he had made some mistake somewhere.

Descartes's project was stalled by these considerations. He would have liked to say that whatever I come to know by inspecting the thoughts that I find within myself and simply describing what I very clearly and distinctly perceive those thoughts to contain must be true. That is, he would have liked to identify clear and distinct perception of the content of his own ideas as a source of certain knowledge, and rely on it to continue establishing new truths. The only way he could proceed was by eliminating the worries that some demon could deceive me even about what I seem to most clearly and distinctly perceive, or that, even if there is no such demon, my nature might be so defective that it fails to inform me correctly about what I most clearly and distinctly perceive. Doing this meant establishing that I have been created by a benevolent being, who does not want to deceive me, who gave me reliable knowing powers, and who would not allow me to be systematically deceived by any other creature. This is the project of *Meditations* III.

Over the course of *Meditations* III Descartes offered two arguments for the existence of a benevolent God. Both are causal arguments. A causal argument works by saying that something must exist because, if it did not, something else, that we all know exists, could not have been caused to exist. For instance, you get a postcard from your friend postmarked in Amsterdam and you infer that your friend is in Amsterdam. You draw this inference because the existence of a particular effect, the Amsterdam postmark on a piece of paper written on by your friend, is best explained by supposing that it was caused by your friend mailing the postcard in an Amsterdam post office. This is how Descartes attempts to prove the existence of God. He picks on an effect that obviously exists, and then he argues that the only way to explain how this effect could have come to be is to suppose that God created it.



In the past, people who tried to give causal arguments for the existence of God did so by pointing to the way the world has been designed to sustain life, and arguing that this could only be explained by assuming God caused it. But since the existence of an external world is something that is still open to doubt for Descartes in *Meditations* II, he could not appeal to this argument. At the outset of *Meditations* II he was only certain of his own existence, and of the existence of his own thoughts. He had no choice but to base his causal arguments on these effects. His first and most important causal argument was devoted to trying to prove that God must exist because otherwise a particular idea that he had, the idea of God, could not exist. His second argument attempted to prove that God must exist because otherwise he himself could not exist.

QUESTIONS ON THE READING

1. What made Descartes so sure that nothing we very clearly and distinctly perceive could be false?
2. Is the existence of the earth, sky, and stars clearly and distinctly perceived? If not, why not, if so, in what sense?
3. Are the truths of mathematics clearly and distinctly perceived? If not, why not, if so in what sense?
4. What is the proper definition of the term, “idea?”
5. What is the most frequently occurring error in judgment, in Descartes’s opinion?
6. What is an adventitious idea?
7. Explain Descartes’s distinction between natural impulse and light of nature.
8. Why is it an error to suppose that because I have some ideas that come and go independently of my will, that therefore these ideas must be caused by external objects?
9. Explain Descartes’s distinction between formal and objective reality.
10. Why could an effect not be greater than its cause?
11. Can an idea of an object be more perfect than the object itself?

NOTES ON THE READING

Descartes’s initial project in *Meditations* III was to inquire into the causes of his ideas. He wanted to find out if all of his ideas might be caused just by himself, or whether some of his ideas must have been caused by something other than himself. He wanted, in particular to find out whether some of his ideas must have been caused by a benevolent God. As a preliminary to undertaking this investigation, he thought it best to first survey his ideas and arrange them into groups or classes. (Recall the second of the methodological rules he had presented in *Discourse* II.) This led him to claim that all of our thoughts fall into three groups: those that are like pictures or images of things (ideas), those that involve a passion or emotion felt with reference to some pictured or imagined object, and those that make some sort of judgment about one or more pictured or imagined objects. The thoughts in the first group are ideas in the “proper” sense, and they are the most fundamental, as thoughts in the second or third group need to have them to build on.

Descartes proceed to ask about the causes of these fundamental ideas. Some of them seem to be innate. We seem to have thought them for as far back as we can remember. So perhaps they were part of our original make-up. Other ideas, ones he called “factitious” (from the Latin “*facio*” meaning “I make”), appear to us to be produced through an effort of our own



imaginations. But there are some ideas that we seem to come upon “by adventure” as it were, that is, that we experience independently of the will. Descartes referred to the ideas in this last class as “adventitious.” He proceeded to ask where our adventitious ideas might come from. Does their existence argue for the presence of a cause distinct from us? If I am hungry I may very much want to have sensations of food, but wanting it will not by itself bring these sensations about. Similarly, if I stub my toe, I may very much want the pain to go away, but the idea will stay with me nonetheless. Does this prove that I must have an empty stomach, or a foot with an actually injured toe in order to have these adventitious ideas?

Descartes thought not. The most that such experiences prove is that we have ideas that occur independently of our wills. But to occur independently of our wills and to occur independently of us are not the same thing. For who is to say that our wills are the only things in us capable of producing ideas? Perhaps there is some other capacity in us that we are as little aware of and have as little control over as we are aware of and can control our digestion, and perhaps this faculty produces our adventitious ideas. This is not far-fetched, if we consider that the ideas we have in dreams, which we consider to be our own creations, nonetheless often occur independently of our wills. In this case, the sense of not being in control is no proof that we are not still the causes.

Descartes took this opportunity to make a passing remark on the nature of our knowledge. He claimed that while there is something in us that leads us to suppose that our adventitious ideas are caused by objects other than ourselves, this thing is not a clear and distinct perception but merely a natural impulse. The difference between the two is important, because both affect us in the same way: they leave us feeling convinced of something. But one of these things, clear and distinct perception, is supposed to be infallible, whereas the other, natural impulse, is supposed to induce us to make judgments that are still open to doubt. We had better be able to tell the difference between the two if we are to avoid taking whatever we are strongly convinced of to be a clear and distinct perception. Unfortunately, what Descartes had to say on this matter is not very satisfying. As he explained it, a clear and distinct perception is based on an evident grasp of the nature of things whereas a natural impulse is “blind.” Rather than arise from a “well founded judgment” (AT VII 40), a natural impulse is the product of an automatic instinct that operates reflexively and without any discernment. The proof of this is that we cannot see any foundation for the claims we are led to make by natural impulse. The impulse carries us beyond what we actually discern when we contemplate the nature of our adventitious ideas and induces us to “blindly” make assertions that we do not in fact perceive to be true. Clear and distinct perception, in contrast, is made in the “light.” There is a “light” that illuminates the nature of the things that we are judging about and this “light” makes it evident that the judgment is correct and provides the judgment with a good foundation. This attempt to explain the distinction does not go beyond appeals to metaphors of light and blindness. It fails to come up with a criterion that we can unerringly apply to determine whether a proposition is suggested by natural impulse or by clear and distinct perception.

To return to the main thread of argument, while Descartes scuttled any attempt to argue from our adventitious ideas to the existence of a cause outside of ourselves, he was not entirely comfortable with this result. While the bare fact that some ideas are adventitious was not by itself enough to persuade him that he might not still be their cause, there is something else about these ideas — and indeed about most of his ideas — that still gave him pause. This is that they appear to be of or about things that go well beyond anything we are able to find in ourselves



insofar as we consider ourselves to be merely thinking things. How, he wondered, could we ourselves be the cause of ideas that have a content that is nothing like what we can find to be contained in ourselves insofar as we are nothing other than thinking beings?

By way of further explaining this concern, Descartes appealed to a point made just a few paragraphs earlier: that our ideas are like pictures or images of things. It must be stressed that this is merely a simile and is not to be taken literally. Sensations of smells, tastes, sounds, hot and cold, and hardness and softness were all ideas for Descartes, but they are obviously not pictures in any literal sense. The point that Descartes was trying to make by saying that ideas are like pictures is that, like pictures, they are of or about something. A picture of Caesar *is* something — if it is an oil painting, it consists of coloured oils smeared on canvas — but it is also *of* something — an ancient Roman general. We say, colloquially, that Caesar is in the picture insofar as the picture is of Caesar, but this is not literally true. Caesar is in his grave in Italy (or what is left of him is), and all that is literally in the picture is coloured oil on canvas. In the medieval tradition in which Descartes was educated the metaphorical notion of Caesar's being “in” the picture was explained by saying that Caesar is “in” the picture as the object that the painter intended the picture to represent. In other words, Caesar is in the picture, not literally, but intentionally or objectively (that is, as an intentional object). Descartes meant to draw our attention to the fact that much the same thing can be said about ideas. An idea of an apple, for example, is an idea of something that is red and cool and solid. But the idea is not itself red or cool or solid. These simple natures are in the idea intentionally or objectively rather than literally. They are the objects the idea is intended to represent, not properties of the idea itself.

Descartes conveyed this notion by remarking that over and above their “formal reality,” as things of a certain kind, namely ideas, our ideas picture or represent something else, and this represented object is their “objective reality.” Contemporary usage has made Descartes's point less perspicacious than it was in the 17th century. Today, when we speak of something as being “objective” we often mean to say that it has some sort of perceiver-independent or mind-independent status. But this is not at all what Descartes had in mind when he used the expression “objective reality.” For Descartes, objective reality is the reality that is represented by an idea — the object the idea is intended to represent. Rather than referring to what exists outside of the mind, it refers to what is “in” our ideas in the special, intentional sense. Whether this “reality” also exists in external objects outside of the idea is another question and is certainly not something Descartes wanted to imply when he used the phrase, “objective reality.”

Descartes proceeded to ask what could be the cause, not just of our ideas considered just as mental states inhering in our minds, but of the particular kinds of content the ideas have. What could be the cause of their objective reality?

This is a question we still ask today. We think that some ideas are crude and simple and that anyone could think of them. Ideas of simple natures like different shades of colour or different degrees of heat or cold are like that. But other ideas seem, because of their complexity or beauty, to contain something grand that calls for a special explanation. We are amazed, for example, at how Mozart could have composed his pieces or Einstein formulated the theory of relativity. Yet in doing these things, Mozart and Einstein were at bottom doing nothing different than all of us do all the time: they were simply having ideas. But because the content of those ideas so much exceeds what the rest of us feel capable of producing, we wonder whether they



must not have had some special cause, and we develop theories of genius or genetic endowment or cultural and environmental circumstances to explain their occurrence.

Descartes asked the same question. He observed a rich variety of ideas in himself: ideas of simple natures, of animals, minerals, and vegetables, of other human beings, of angels and God — even ideas of ideas. What accounts for the content of these ideas?

There is a certain view of causality that lies behind this question. Descartes claimed that when a thing comes to be, it must acquire whatever it contains from somewhere. A blade of grass, for example, must acquire everything it contains from somewhere — from the seed it grew out of, but also from the surrounding earth, air, water, and sunlight. The sum of things it acquires its properties from just is the “efficient and total cause” of that thing. That efficient and total cause must either have the properties exhibited by the effect already in it, or must contain something greater than those properties, from which they could be extracted. As Descartes put it, “there must be at least as much in the efficient and total cause as there is in the effect of that same cause” (AT VII 40).

Descartes proceeded to apply this general causal principle to the specific case of ideas. He claimed that just as, in general, everything that comes to be must have some cause that contains at least as much as is to be found in the thing that comes to be, so every idea must have some cause. Ideas are, after all, also things that come to be. Moreover, this cause must not just be adequate to account for the coming to be of the idea considered formally as an idea; it must also be adequate to account for how the idea has come to have the content that it does, that is, to depict or represent the object that it represents. To do that, the cause of the idea must actually or literally contain at least as much as is represented by the idea. Descartes put this point by saying that the cause of the idea must *formally* contain at least as much as is to be found objectively in the idea. The cause could not just *objectively* contain the qualities that the idea contains objectively, since to be objectively in a thing means that the thing is an image or picture of sorts. If the qualities that are pictured by the idea are themselves only pictured by the object that causes the idea, then that merely pushes the question back. If the cause itself is just a picture or image, then there must be some more remote cause that it is copying, picturing, or imaging. Ultimately, there must be some cause that actually or literally (that is, “formally”) contains the properties that are being represented.

Armed with this principle, Descartes proceeded over the immediately ensuing parts of *Meditations* III to survey his different ideas and inquire whether at least some of them must have been caused by objects other than himself.

COMMENTARY

We might wonder whether Descartes was entitled to rely on the principles that everything that comes to be must have a cause, and that a cause must contain at least as much as is to be found in its effect. Many of the cause-effect relations we witness regularly, such as a striking match bursting into flame, a loud sound producing an avalanche, a shaken coke can spraying when opened, or a flick of a switch lighting up a building, at least appear to be cases where the effects are nothing like or contain much more than their causes. In these cases, something does seem to come out of nothing. Descartes tried to answer these worries by stipulating that the “total” cause must contain as much as the effect — for example, the cause of the avalanche would have to be considered to be not just the sound, but the precarious position of the snow on the mountainside — but it is not clear that this really helps. After the doubt of *Meditations* I, the



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total cause that I am aware of in the case of a lighting match is just a collection of simple natures, collected together in more complex and compound ideas. The effect is another such collection. Look at it as one will, the effect contains simple natures, such as heat and bright light, that are simply not to be found anywhere in the total set of circumstances that go to characterize the cause.

This objection would be greatly mitigated if the corpuscularian or mechanical philosophy of Galileo, Hobbes, Boyle, and Descartes himself were correct. After all, what chiefly poses the counterexamples to Descartes's causal principles are cases where sensible qualities like colour and heat suddenly emerge in circumstances where they were previously totally absent, as in the case of striking a match in the Antarctic night. Such examples are answered by the mechanical philosophy, which claims that light and colours and heat and cold are not things that actually exist other than objectively in our ideas. There is nothing in the outside world that resembles them, though there is something that causes them: namely motion. And new motion is never created out of nothing, even in something like fire (think, for example, of Hobbes's account of fire as emerging when small particles that were violently bouncing and vibrating in cells inside of certain bodies suddenly manage to break free). It only ever arises as a result of collision with previously moving parts. So *if* the mechanical philosophy were correct, then Descartes's position on causality would be less contrary to the evidence than it appears. Of course, the truth of the mechanical philosophy would need to be established, and were Descartes to invoke the truth of the mechanical philosophy to underwrite his hypothesis about the nature of causality, he would be making an illegitimate appeal to something that, by his own account, is uncertain.

In *Meditations* III Descartes preferred to rest his position just on the Parmenidean intuition that something cannot come from nothing, and hence that what is more perfect or has more reality cannot come from what is less perfect, since then the excess reality in the effect would have had to come out of nothing. (An interesting consequence of this intuition is that if heat and light do come out of cold and darkness, then they simply cannot be more perfect or more real. We will see in the next chapter that Descartes had a novel argument to justify this thought.)

But there is a more radical question we might ask: Why should we suppose that whatever comes into being has to be caused by something? Why could things not simply pop into existence? To reply that this would be impossible because then the effect would have been produced by some dark, featureless entity we call "nothing," and such an entity cannot act or do anything, nor can it contain anything that it could contribute to an effect, is to beg the question. The question is: "Why does an effect need to be produced by anything else at all (including a thing called "nothing")? Why could it not simply pop into existence?" To answer this question by saying "because then it would not be produced by anything (i.e., it would be produced by "nothing")" is not to give an answer at all, but simply to repeat the very thing that needs to be proven.

This is a good example of a troubling issue alluded to earlier: the difficulty of distinguishing between clear and distinct perceptions, on the one hand, and natural impulses on the other. Descartes would have maintained that the principle that a cause must contain at least as much as is to be found in its effect is clearly and distinctly perceived. But is it, or is it merely the product of a natural impulse?

Descartes's causal principle gives voice to what was in his day a traditional and blindly accepted view of the nature of causality. We might call this view the containment model. According to it a cause is not simply a signal event that often or necessarily happens before an



effect occurs; it is something that actively produces its effect. It produces the effect, moreover, by either drawing together some of its own content and excreting this content as its effect, much as a woman gives birth to a child, or by impressing or imposing or infecting the raw material that already exists in the effect with its content, much as a signet ring impresses its form on the sealing wax, a fire imposes its heat on the surrounding stones, or a diseased person infects others with their disease. This is not the only way to understand causality, as will be seen later in connection with Hume.

Ironically, Descartes himself immediately proceeded to say something that challenges this supposedly certain principle and so poses further problems for his argument.

Eminent causality. Descartes's causal principle has an untoward implication. God is supposed to have created the world. But the world is composed of extended bodies. If the cause of an effect is supposed to contain at least much reality as is found in the effect, then it would appear to follow that God must also be extended. But extension is not one of the attributes traditionally ascribed to the Christian God, who is rather supposed to be purely spiritual.

Descartes was not the only Christian philosopher who had to confront this theological difficulty. Any Christian philosopher who shared Descartes's views on causality — and that included virtually all the philosophers of the medieval period — had the same problem. The containment model of causality appears to contradict Christian theology. According to the containment model, if God created extended bodies, God must contain extension. According to Christian theology, God cannot be extended.

Rather than reject the one or the other of these doctrines, Descartes and his medieval predecessors tried to have things both ways by claiming that, though God does not contain extension, he does contain things that are more perfect than extension. Extension was supposed to flow from these more perfect qualities without contradicting the principle that the cause must contain at least as much as is to be found in its effect. But it is not clear that this notion can be invoked without giving up the containment model of causality. If a supposedly more eminent or perfect or real being can produce something it does not itself contain, then, however mean or ignoble that result may be when compared to what is actually present in the more eminent or perfect or real being, it is still something that is not present in the more eminent or perfect or real being. It must therefore have come to be out of nothing, in violation of the containment model. In the final analysis, the notion of eminent causality is nothing more than what Bacon would have called an Idol of the Theatre: a piece of jargon used to paper over the existence of a fundamental theoretical inconsistency.

ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. Descartes's discussion of the formal and objective reality of ideas raises issues of what ideas are and how they refer to objects. These issues came to be hotly debated in the ensuing years (and have been discussed ever since). The two chief protagonists in the subsequent debate were Descartes's younger contemporary and one-time critic, Antoine Arnauld (left, one of the leaders of the Jansenist movement in 17th century French Catholicism), and the Oratorian priest, Nicholas Malebranche (right), who developed a Neo-Cartesian philosophy of his own. The chief point in dispute between Malebranche and Arnauld was whether ideas are objects of apprehension (the view of Malebranche), or acts



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whereby objects are apprehended (the view of Arnauld). The Malebranche/Arnauld dispute has been the subject of extensive scholarly study, but two early papers on the topic are classics that should be read by any student of 17th century philosophy: Robert McRae, "'Idea' as a Philosophical Term in the 17th Century," *Journal of the history of ideas* 26 (1965): 175-184, and John Yolton, "Ideas and Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy," *Journal of the history of philosophy* 13 (1975): 145-166. Study these two papers and report on the main results of each.

2. Does Descartes have a principled way of distinguishing between what is known by the "light of nature" and what is known by "natural impulse"?
3. Consider whether Descartes is in any position to claim to be certain of either of the causal principles he invokes in *Meditations* III. Try to come up with the best argument you can to defend his position and the best argument you can to reject it. Determine which argument is the strongest.

