

## The predicament of *Meditations* III

My own existence and the existence of my thoughts are known by a certain clear and distinct perception.

They are also beyond doubt.

So whatever I very clearly and distinctly perceive must be true.

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### An initial problem

But doesn't the dreaming argument tell me that my ideas may be all illusory?

Not really.

It only tells me that my ideas may not be images or copies of anything that exists outside of me or independently of appearing in me

But it cannot lead to doubt the existence of my ideas as they are in me

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### An more serious problem

But insofar as I am certain of my ideas, I must be certain of their nature

e.g., insofar as I clearly and distinctly perceive five points, I must clearly and distinctly perceive a group of two points and an group of three points

Yet I've worried that a supremely powerful being might deceive me every time I think this

Or that I may be so defectively constituted that I get this sum wrong every time I go to think it

Clear and distinct perception can only provide temporary certainty and freedom from doubt.

As long as we clearly and distinctly perceive something, we cannot doubt it

But when we stop doing that, and think about the power of God, we can

To get beyond that, we need to see if we can remove the “tenuous and metaphysical” doubt arising from the possibility we might be deceived about matters we remember having clearly and distinctly perceived in the past

One way to do this would be by proving the existence of a being who would not have made us so we would be so deceived, or permit others to do so.

## An initial project:

Survey what we already know to see if there is anything in it from which we might learn of the existence of something else.

## Types of thoughts

Ideas, including ideas of sense & imagination

Passions, desires, aversions and volitions

Judgments

Only judgments can be true or false.

They are made up of ideas.

## Types of ideas

- Innate
- Encountered in the course of experience
- Made up in imagination

A “natural impulse” leads us to judge that our experiential ideas are caused by objects outside of us that resemble those ideas.

But we do not clearly and distinctly perceive the truth of this judgment

we only perceive our own ideas, not their causes, so we are conscious, when we reflect, that we have no evidence for our impulsive belief

and the dreaming argument gives us reason to doubt it

## A second classification of ideas

Ideas are like pictures of images of things.

There are two things to a picture:

- coloured oils and canvas
- the object it represents

When we ask what causes a picture, we can ask where the coloured oils and the canvas came from.

But we can also ask where the idea for the object it represents came from.

Though all ideas are identical in the “formal” features that make them up (their “coloured oils and canvas” are the stuff of the mind, produced by me)

They are not identical in the objects they represent.



Some ideas represent grander, more real and perfect objects than others.

God

Angels

Human beings

Animals

Plants

Lifeless bodies

Attributes

(extension, power of thought)

Modes of attributes

(shape, size, judgment, will)

Nothing

We can ask what caused an idea

The answer is always, “me”

But we can also ask what caused an idea to be of the object it is of.

Here it is not so clear that the answer is always, “me”

Because we have to wonder whether I could produce the thought of any object whatsoever

## Descartes' Causal Principles

(These principles are supposed to be clearly and distinctly perceived)

Something cannot come from nothing

So an object can only come from some cause “adequate” to produce it

that is, a cause that already “contains” everything found in the object in some way

An object can only get its real or positive qualities from its “total and efficient” cause.

A cause can only give a real or positive quality to its effect by transmission or infection.

## Two types of containment

Formal containment: the cause contains the very things found in the effect

Eminent containment: the cause contains something greater than, though not identical to, the very things found in the effect.

## Descartes's causal principles as applied to ideas

The cause of an idea must be adequate to cause not just the being of the idea considered as an idea,

but also to explain how the idea comes to represent the object that it represents.

Consequently

the ultimate cause of an idea must contain, either formally or eminently, everything that is present objectively in the idea.

e.g., the cause of an idea of heat must contain heat either formally or eminently

e.g., the cause of an idea of a stone must contain extension and solidity (of which the specific shape and hardness of the stone are modes) either formally or eminently.

## Descartes's project

Prove that only God could cause the idea of God.

## Problems

Are these causal principles really clearly and distinctly perceived?

Or are they the kind of principles an evil genius could trick us into believing?

Is the account of a “ladder of being” involving degrees of reality separating God from angels, human beings, etc. clearly and distinctly perceived?

Is the notion of eminent causality consistent with the causal principles?

e.g., if God is a spirit, and so unextended, could God be supposed to be a cause of bodies, consistently with the claim that a cause must contain what is found in its effect

— or is admitting eminent causality in this case tantamount to admitting that causes need not contain what is found in their effects?