

The project of  
*Meditations IV*

To explain how error could occur, consistently with my having been created by an infinitely perfect being

In this way, to determine the causes of error

so as to avoid it in the future.

## An initial account of error

Creating a maximally rich and varied world means creating objects with all the varying degrees of perfection between infinite perfection (=God) and lack of all perfection (=nothing).

As a created thing that falls on the scale between God and nothing, I am only finitely perfect.

My errors are a consequence of what I lack

and so do not arise from anything that God put into me.

## A reason for rejecting the initial account

Judgment arises from understanding + will.

A lack of understanding = ignorance.

A lack of will = indecision.

Ignorance + indecision can only produce a failure to judge.

They cannot produce erroneous judgment.

Error must be a consequence of something God did give to me.

An infinitely perfect artisan would not make a thing that functions imperfectly

My imperfection must therefore be only apparent and not real

It arises from my not considering myself as a part of a larger whole

which is more perfect because it contains me as I am

But our concern is not so much to explain why error is compatible with the existence of God

as to understand the causes of error.

## An analysis of error

Error presumes ignorance of the truth = limited understanding.

But at the same time a willingness to go ahead and judge anyway.

So it results from an imbalance between the power of understanding and the power of will

## A theory of will

Will is a power to affirm or deny a proposition, or to express a preference

not a power to make things come to be in accordance with a proposition or to move the body according to preference

As such it cannot come in degrees, but must be wholly present or wholly absent

It is better to have it than not to have it

(to lack it is to lack the ability to make any decisions whatsoever)

## A theory of will, part 2

Will is a power to express a preference that is not determined by any external cause

(i.e., by anything other than myself)

It can, however, be determined by internal causes.

In particular, the will to judge is determined by a clear and distinct perception on the part of the understanding.

Were my will not determined by my understanding, my will would not be determined by *me*.

It would not be a perfection *in me* if *my* will were some kind of renegade that did not move in accord in with what *I understand* to be the case

## A theory of free will

My will is most free when it is most fully determined by myself

(most notably by my understanding)

It is least free when nothing determines it.

It does not exist when I am determined by something else.



## A second error theory

I am a creature with limited understanding.

(It is probably better that such creatures exist than that the creation be impoverished by a lack of them.)

So there are cases where my understanding does not determine my will.

But because I do have free will,

(also a good thing)

it is possible for me in these cases to go ahead and make a judgment anyway.

This is not a defect in my design but a necessary consequence if creatures such as myself are to exist.

## A solution to the problem of error

Use my free will to refrain from making judgments where there is no clear and distinct perception on the part of the understanding.

### Which matters are those?

The ones where my will is not determined to judge

So, if you can resist judging, you do not clearly and distinctly perceive, and should not judge.

If your judgment is compelled, that very fact indicates that you have a clear and distinct perception.

## The Demon Deceiver is no more

We have accounted for the occurrence of error consistently with the knowledge that we were created by an all-perfect, and so good and benevolent being

Such a being might have made our understanding limited

It might have given us imbalanced faculties, so that the will outstrips the understanding and affirms what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive

It might even have left it up to us both to discover that the proper method at arriving at the truth is to use the power of will to refrain from judging about matters that we do not clearly and distinctly perceive

and to discipline ourselves to abide by this discovery

But it would not have let us fall into error without giving us some means to discover and correct the error, nor would it let any other being do so

But if our understanding were so radically defective that even what we most clearly and distinctly perceive could turn out false,

then there would be no hope for us ever to arrive at the truth

And likewise if there were a powerful being who always tricked us in these matters

So, knowing that an all-good God exists, we can dismiss this ground for doubt and trust that as long as we use the will to only affirm what we clearly and distinctly understand, we will not go wrong

We have ended up in the same situation we were in half way through *Meditations* I:

Distrusting anything that could just have come to us in a dream

and so doubting the existence of an external world and of material things

But accepting such demonstrative sciences as geometry, mathematics, and logic, which do not involve a commitment to the existence of things and only work with clearly and distinctly perceived relations between ideas

## A residual puzzle

Why wouldn't God have rectified the imbalance of my will and my understanding by giving me a disposition to exercise more caution in judgment?

## Descartes's best answer

Being finite, we cannot expect to have insight into all of God's reasons.

Since we can't doubt that God exists and does not want us to be deceived, we must conclude that our cognitive design, however liable to improvement it may seem to us, is in some way conducive to the greater good of the whole.