

Lecture Notes on *Meditation Four*

G. J. Matthey

February 3, 2011

The Synopsis states that there are two results of Meditation Four (M4): a proof “that everything that we clearly and distinctly perceive is true,” and an explanation of “what the nature of falsity consists in” (AT VII 15). The need for these two results is twofold: (1) “to confirm what has gone before,” and (2) “to make intelligible what is to come later” (AT VII 15, CSM II 11). Thus, M4 is a bridge between the earlier and later Meditations. One of the things that has “gone before” is the statement in M3 that “I seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true” (AT VII 35). The Synopsis indicates that this guarded language can be replaced with a knowledge claim, based on a proof.

In the balance of the paragraph of the Synopsis describing M4, Descartes notes that his account of error is not an account of sin, “i.e., the error which is committed in pursuing good and evil.” Instead, it deals “only with the error that occurs in distinguishing truth from falsehood” (AT VII 15, CSM II 11). Finally, we are told that the only target in M3 is “speculative truths which are known solely by means of the natural light,” and not “matters pertaining to faith or the conduct of life” (AT VII 15, CSM II 11). This clause was added after Descartes had considered an objection raised by Arnauld in the Fourth Objections at AT VII 216, CSM II 151-152.

The Meditation begins with a good summary of the arguments of the Second and Third Meditations. Descartes has succeeded in turning his mind away from the senses, which has enabled him to turn it toward purely intellectual objects. He has an idea of his own mind, which is much more distinct than the ideas he have of corporeal things (end of M2). He has an idea of God, which results from the contemplation of his own incompleteness and imperfection (M3). He then concludes that God exists, which he believes is the most evident truth that can be known to the human intellect. Finally, it is known that God is no deceiver, since God is perfect and deception is an imperfection. “The will to deceive is undoubtedly evidence of malice or weakness, and so cannot apply to God” (AT VII 53, CSM II 37). It may seem that the ability to deceive is evidence of power, but this is the wrong conclusion to draw.

Although M4 is entitled “Truth and Falsity,” it really should have borne the title “Error,” for human error is the subject of the rest of the Meditation. Indeed, Descartes does not directly discuss the nature of truth and falsity. In a letter to Mersenne of October 16, 1639, Descartes states that it is useless to try to explain what truth is to someone who does not understand it. “It seems a notion so transcendently clear that nobody can be ignorant of it” (AT II 597, CSMK 139). In the Fifth Replies, Descartes describes falsity as “merely a privation of truth” (AT VII 378, CSM II 260).

In M4, Descartes treats of a number of subjects:

- The nature of error.
- The cause of error.
- How to avoid error.

- How to reconcile human error with the perfection of God.

Descartes begins his account of error by noting that he knows by experience that he has a faculty of judgment. It seems that by “faculty” here, Descartes means simply that he has the ability or capacity to make judgments. As will be seen, judging involves more than one “faculty” of the mind. Since he has proved in M3 that he and all of his attributes have been created by God, it follows that God is the cause of his faculty of judgment. Experience also teaches him that he is “subject to countless errors” (AT VII 54, CSM II 38).

The fact that he is subject to error seems to create a problem for Descartes. Since his faculty of judgment is created by God, and his judgment sometimes goes astray, it might seem that God is in some way responsible for his erroneous ways.

However, since God is no deceiver, God did not endow him with a “faculty for making mistakes,” by which he means “a kind of faculty which would ever enable me to go wrong while using it properly” (AT VII 54, CSM II 37-38). So the goal is to show how it is that I can go wrong even though the faculty of judgment I have must yield true judgments when it is used properly. Compare M1, where Descartes states that although it would seem foreign to God’s goodness “to allow me to be deceived even occasionally,” in fact he is sometimes deceived (AT VII 1, CSM II 14).

The source of error cannot be found in God, so it must be sought in himself. Here Descartes makes an excursion into metaphysics. He notes that he has a “real and positive” idea of God, “or a being who is supremely perfect” (AT VII 54, CSM II 38). At the opposite pole of being, so to speak, he has “what may be described as a negative idea of nothingness, or that which is farthest removed from all perfection” (AT VII 54, CSM II 38).

He describes himself as having a dual nature. On the one hand, he is a creature of God, and *qua* God’s creation, he is incapable of error. But on the other hand, he “participates in nothingness” (AT VII 54, CSM II 38), and this participation in nothingness is what explains his error.

Gassendi in the Fifth Objections says that he will “pass over the impossibility of explaining how we have an idea of nothingness, and what kind of idea it is, and how we participate in nothingness, and so on” (AT VII 308, CSM II 214). It must be admitted that these notions seem quite puzzling. For example, Descartes in M3 describes ideas as thoughts which represent possible objects. “Some of my thoughts are as it were the images of things, and it is only in these cases that the term ‘idea’ is strictly appropriate” (AT VII 37, CSM II 25). But how can there be an image of nothingness?

Descartes in his response reiterates that the idea of nothingness is a “negative idea,” which he regards as an adequate explanation of what it is. He does not explain how an idea can be negative, however. As for participating in non-being, this “simply means that we are not the supreme being and that we lack very many things” (AT VII 374, CSM II 257).

The question of the possibility of an idea of nothing was raised by Burman, who notes its apparent conflict with a passage in M3, which allows that “there can be no ideas which are not as it were of

things” (AT VII 33, CSM II 30). Descartes responds similarly, but with an illustrative example:

That idea [of nothing] is purely negative, and can hardly be called an idea. In this passage, the author is taking the word ‘idea’ in its strict and narrow sense. We do also have ideas of common notions, which are not, strictly speaking, ideas of things. But this is a rather extended use of the word ‘idea.’ (AT V 153, CSMK 338)

Presumably, the extension of the term ‘idea’ beyond even abstract objects such as common notions to the point where it is “purely negative” would be the most extended use of the word possible.

Having established his position in the order of being, Descartes turns to the nature of error. We are told that error “is not something real which depends on God, but merely a defect” (AT VII 54). To err is a defect I have by virtue of my imperfection. Specifically, Descartes for the first time puts his finger on the source of error: “that the faculty of true judgment which I have from God is in my case not infinite” (AT VII 54, CSM II 38). This theme will be developed in more detail later.

We cannot stop at this explanation of error however, because error must also be understood as a privation, or lack of something (knowledge) that I should have in me. I am not merely defective; my defect deprives me of a rightful possession. It seems that God would not have given me a faculty of judgment that is “not perfect in its kind, or which lacks some perfection which it ought to have” (AT VII 55, CSM II 38). Descartes uses a homely analogy to make his point: the more skilled the craftsman, the more perfect his productions should be. As God is the ultimately skilled craftsman, his possessions should be “complete and perfect in all respects” (AT VII 55, CSM II 38). A further problem is that it seems to have been within God’s power to have created him so that he was never mistaken. “Is it then better that I should make mistakes than that I should not do so?” he asks rhetorically. (AT VII 55, CSM II 38).

Two responses are given. The first is that he cannot grasp God’s aims. His own nature is “very weak and limited” while that of God is “immense, incomprehensible and infinite” (AT VII 55, CSM II 39). So many of the causes of God’s action are simply inexplicable to him.

At this point, Descartes without fanfare draws a consequence for physics. Because God’s ends in acting cannot be comprehended, we should not appeal to them in our explanations of natural phenomena. This would banish “final causes” from physics, which in turn would undercut one of the main pillars of Aristotelian physics. For Aristotle, the final cause is one of the four causes (*Physics*, Book II, Chapter 3). Final causes are used to explain the “natural” motions of bodies in Aristotelian physics, a view which Cartesian mechanistic physics rejects.

The second response is that there are two ways to look at the perfection of a created being. A feature of a created being may be an imperfection relative to the being itself, as the ability to err is an imperfection in me. But it may be a perfection “once its function as a part of the universe is considered” (AT VII 55-56, CSM II 39). It may be that even with the imperfection that causes me to err, “I may have a place in the universal scheme of things” (AT VII 56, CSM II 39). This supposes, of course, that there is a created universe outside himself—something he does not yet know, but which is

at least possible.

Having given a preliminary account of how the imperfection of error might be reconciled with the perfection of God, Descartes turns to “the nature of my errors” by looking more closely at himself. What he finds is that error is the result of “two concurrent causes” which are in him.

- The faculty of knowledge (or intellect, understanding).
- The faculty of choice (or freedom of the will).

The distinction between two primary faculties of the soul was a commonplace from medieval philosophy. Mersenne notes that understanding and will are “so tightly conjoined . . . that some have thought that it is only one thing signified by different words” (*The Use of Reason*, 2. “The Understanding and Will”). Others believed that the two are really distinct and could even exist separately if God so willed it. Eustachius a Sancto Paulo states unequivocally that “the will is really and formally distinct from the intellect” (*A Compendium of Philosophy in Four Parts*, Part Two, “Ethics,” Treatise 1, Discourse 1, Question 4).

It is central to Catholic theology that the human soul has free choice. The all-important choices made in life are whether to obey or not to obey the commands of God in any given act. The act of choosing is an exercise of the faculty of will. In fact, the will can be called the faculty of choice. One reason that will is “so tightly conjoined” to intellect is that choice (*arbitrarum*) is the outcome of deliberation, which is an act of the intellect.

Two central questions for the scholastic philosophers concerned why and how humans make the choices they do. Here again, there is an intimate connection between will and intellect. The intellect represents various outcomes as good or evil (or neither). The freedom of the will with respect to good and evil consists, according to Eustachius, in the will’s ability to will or not will a good, or to repudiate or not repudiate an evil (Question 3).

Mersenne gives a similar account: “the will is always free to will or not to will.” He goes on to identify freedom with the will. The will “operates, or ceases to operate, hates or loves, as it wishes,” which is tantamount to freedom.

Now turning back to Descartes, we find a similar identification. Insofar as one chooses intellectually, one is exercising the will freely. Here the choice in question is whether to make a judgment or withhold judgment. The former engenders the risk of error, the latter the risk of failure to discover the truth.

Descartes seems to owe the reader a reason for claiming that we do exercise our wills freely. He wrote to Mersenne on December 1640 that “You were right to say that we are as sure of our free will as of any other primary notion; for this is one of them” (AT III 259, CSMK 161). In Axiom VII of the geometrical presentation in the Second Replies, Descartes claims that to act voluntarily and freely is “the essence of will” (AT VII 166, CSM II 117). In the Third Replies, to Hobbes, Descartes states: “On the question of our freedom, I have made no assumptions beyond what we all experience within

ourselves. Our freedom is very evident by the natural light” (AT VII 191, CSM II 134).

Against Gassendi in the Fifth Replies, he again appeals to experience. He notes that Gassendi himself claims that “we can guard against persisting in error” (AT VII 378, CSM 260). Descartes claims “that this would be quite impossible unless the will had the freedom to direct itself, without the determination of the intellect, toward one side or the other.” Suppose the intellect has already determined the will toward one side (which is Gassendi’s view). Then something must determine the will “when first it begins to guard against persisting in error.” Either the will determines itself or it is determined by the intellect. If the former, then the will is free. But the latter is inexplicable. In effect, the intellect would have to turn against itself, since it was the intellect that first presented falsehood as truth and then it turns around and “purely by chance” presents the truth as truth. But since, according to Descartes, falsity “is merely a privation of truth,” it would be “totally contradictory” to say that the intellect presents falsity in the guise of truth.

Descartes agrees with the scholastic doctrine that we can recognize a good (or a truth) and yet not pursue (or affirm) it, though this is not at all clear from the published texts, where it seems as if when the intellect recognizes a truth through clear and distinct perception (or by the natural light), it will choose to accept it as being true. In M4 itself, Descartes writes, “*I could not but judge* that something which I understood so clearly was true; but this was not because I was compelled so to judge by any external force, but because a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will” (AT VII 58-9, CSM II 41, my emphasis).

In the geometrical demonstrations of the Second Replies, Axiom VII, Descartes writes that “The will of a thinking thing is drawn voluntarily and freely (for this is the essence of will), *but nevertheless inevitably*, towards a clearly known good” (ATM VII 166, CSM II 117, my emphasis). In the Sixth Replies, Descartes states that because man “finds that the nature of all goodness and truth is already determined by God, and his will cannot tend towards anything else, it is evident that *he will embrace* what is good and true all the more willingly . . . in proportion as he sees it more clearly” (ATM VII 432, CSM II 292, my emphasis).

Descartes writes to Mesland on May 2, 1644: “For it seems to me certain that a great light in the intellect is followed by a great inclination in the will; so that if we see very clearly that a thing is good for us, it is very difficult—and, *on my view, impossible*, as long as one continues in the same thought—to stop the course of our desire” (AT IV 115-116, CSMK 233, my emphasis). Yet he subsequently writes on February 9, 1645 to Mesland, “when a very evident reason moves us in one direction, although morally speaking we can hardly move in the contrary direction, absolutely speaking we can” (AT IV 173, CSMK 245). We can hold back “from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing” (AT IV 173, CSMK 245).

It is in this sense that the will is what some would call “indifferent” with respect to its acts. The will has a “positive faculty of determining oneself to one or other of two contraries, that is to say, to pursue or avoid, to affirm or deny.” This kind of “indifference” applies to all our actions, before they are undertaken. Once the act of will has taken place, one is no longer indifferent in this sense, “for what is done cannot remain undone as long as it is being done” (AT IV 174-5, CSMK 246). We cannot

determine ourselves not to be doing at the same time what we are doing at that time.

In the *Compendium*, Eustachius points to an argument by Thomas Aquinas in favor of the freedom of choice: that Man “acts from judgments of reason that are free, or in no way determined to one result (*Summa Theologica* Ia, question 83, article 1); this because of the indifference of reason with respect to contingent matters or particular objects of action” (*A Compendium of Philosophy in Four Parts*, Second Part, Treatise 1, Discourse 1, Question 4). Descartes does not deny that if one wills in the face of indifference, the act of the will is free, since all acts of the will are free (because they are indifferent in the sense that we can determine ourselves one way or the other.) But he claims in M4 that “the indifference I feel when there is no reason pushing me in one direction rather than another is the lowest grade of freedom” (AT VII 58, CSM II 40). Again to Mesland, February 9, 1645, “the lowest degree of freedom is that by which we determine ourselves to things to which we are indifferent” (AT IV 173, CSMK 245). Here, Descartes means by ‘indifference’ “that state of the will when it is not impelled in one way or another by any perception of truth or goodness” (ibid.).

He can point to the indifference he himself finds at this point in the *Meditations*. Regarding the question of whether he (a thinking thing) is identical or distinct from corporeal nature, he has not yet found “any persuasive reason in favor of one alternative rather than the other” (AT VII 59, CSM II 41). Even if one side is more probable than the other, the fact that it is known that “they are simply conjectures, and not certain and indubitable reasons, is itself quite enough to push my assent the other way” (AT VII 59, CSM II 41).

There are two ways to understand this claim. The lowly status of acting from indifference of reasons is explained in M4 in that indifference is a form of ignorance—a defect in knowledge, and therefore a negation. What is negative is always “lower” than what is positive.”

A second reason can be found in the February, 1645 letter to Mesland. There, Descartes explains that he understands two senses of “greater freedom” as meaning “a greater facility in determining oneself or . . . a greater use of the positive power we have for following the worse although we see the better” and “cases which are called ἀδιάφορα or indifferent” (AT IV 174, CSMK 245). In cases where there is indifference, where the reasons in favor are counterbalanced by the reasons against, it is hardest to determine what to do. The more the balance is tipped toward one side, the easier it is to choose that side. In the limiting case, all the reasons are favorable and none unfavorable, as with clear and distinct perception. Then we are the freest of all, in this sense. “It was in this sense that I wrote that I moved towards something all the more freely when there were more reasons driving me towards it; for it is certain that in that case our will moves itself with greater facility and force” (AT IV 175, CSMK 246).

A word should be said about the second sense of freedom, exerting greater force in following the worse although we see the better. Suppose that the arguments *contra* are much stronger than the arguments *pro*, yet I take the contrary side. Here I am exercising more freedom than in the case of indifference, since I have to use more force than I would if the matter were one of indifference. So the force in the first case (*pro* over *contra*) is based on the ease of determination, while the force in the second case (*contra* over *pro*) is due to a greater exertion of the power of the will.

This helps explain what seems to be an anomaly in the doctrine of freedom in M4. It seems paradoxical to claim that the more inclined I am to do something, the more freely I do it. But if “more freely” means “operating with greater facility,” then there seems to be nothing problematic in the view. Moreover, as stated above, no matter how strongly we are inclined to act on the basis of reasons, it is always open to us to resist acting on them.

A further topic, which only emerges in the Objections and Replies, has to do with God’s freedom. In the Sixth Objections, it is claimed that by making indifference (in the sense of being ignorant of the good and true) not belong to the perfection of the will, “you are destroying God’s freedom, since you are removing from his will the indifference as to whether he shall create this world rather than another world or no world at all” (ATM VII 416-17, CSM 281). That God from eternity is so indifferent is “an article of faith.” Yet God perceives everything with perfect clarity, so perfect clarity does not remove indifference. Since “the essences of things are, like numbers, indivisible and immutable,” and humans and God have the same essence, if clear and distinct perception removes indifference in humans, it removes it in God as well.

Descartes’s response is based on the notion that the will is determined by the good. In human beings, this is the case, and when we see the good, we are not indifferent. But God does not perceive the good as something independent of his will: rather, by willing, God brings the good into being, “for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so” (AT VII 432, CSM II 291). For example, the creation of the world in time rather than eternity, or the equality of the angles of a triangle to two right angles, are good because God willed them.

Therefore, “the indifference which belongs to human freedom is very different from that which belongs to divine freedom” (AT VII 433, CSM 292). Further, the claim that God and humans have the same essence is false, and while indifference belongs to the essence of God, it does not belong to humans, who are freer the less indifferent they are.

The view that God’s power is such that there are no limits on God’s will was expressed very early, in letters to Mersenne in 1630, where he claimed that God is the author of “eternal” mathematical truths, which “have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures (April 15, 1630, AT I 143, CSMK 23). In his next letter, Descartes asserts that God “is the author of the essence of created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths” (May 27, 1630, AT I 152, CSMK 25).

Mesland found it difficult to conceive of “how God would have been acting freely and indifferently if he had made it false that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories could not be true together” (Letter of May 2, 1644, AT IV 118, CSMK 235). Note that one of the examples is the “law of non-contradiction,” which many logicians take to be the fundamental principle of logic.

Descartes responds first by noting the infinite power of God, which can make possible what by God’s actual decree is impossible, and vice-versa. God created humans with finite minds which can

comprehend possibility only on the basis of what God actually made possible. So, God was not determined to make the law of non-contradiction true, and could have made it false. And we should not try to comprehend how he might have done so, “since our nature is incapable of doing so” (AT IV 118, CSMK 235). The fact that God has willed various truths necessary does not imply that he necessarily willed them to be so.

Descartes addresses a contradiction brought forward by Mesland, that “God might have brought it about that his creatures were independent of him” (AT IV 119, CSM 235). He replies that we humans cannot put such a proposition before our minds without its being evidently impossible. This means that we should simply not put such propositions before our minds. Further, we should not “conceive of any precedence or priority between his intellect and will,” as would be the case if God’s will must conform to what is known by God’s intellect. “There is in him only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure” (AT IV 119, CSMK 235). Descartes ends by quoting Augustine: “They are so because thou see’st them to be so,” which Descartes understands as following from the fact that “in God *seeing* and *willing* are the same thing” (AT IV 119, CSMK 235). It should be noted that Spinoza would later deny that there is any distinction will and intellect in any being (*Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 49, Corollary).

Now we return to the narrative of M4. The function of the intellect is “to enable me to perceive the ideas which are subjects of possible judgments” (AT VII 56, CSM II 39). As was noted in M3, there is no (formal) error in the having of ideas, but “the only remaining thoughts where I must be on my guard against making a mistake are judgments” (AT VII 37, CSM II 26).

It is granted that the intellect is not perfect, because it lacks ideas of “countless things” that may exist without there being corresponding ideas of them. But this is not a deprivation of something he should have; it is merely a lack. There is no reason to think that God should have placed these ideas in him, and we should not expect the craftsman to put all his perfections into every one of his works that he can put into some of them.

Will, on the other hand, is perfect in the sense of being perfectly extensive, since it is known by experience “that it is not restricted in any way” (AT VII 56-57, CSM II 39). It is beyond Descartes’s imagination that anything could be more perfect. He can form the idea of an understanding that is much greater than his “extremely slight and finite” intellect, and in fact he can form an idea of an intellect that is “supremely great and infinite.” This is the nature of God. The same goes for the faculties of memory or imagination: the nature of God is that they be supremely great and infinite.

Only “the will or freedom of choice” is experienced within himself to be such that he cannot grasp a greater faculty, and indeed this is the faculty in which he most resembles God. God’s will is, to be sure, “more firm and efficacious” because of God’s wisdom and power, and so it “ranges over a greater number of items” (AT VII 57, CSM II 40). But when we are in a position to affirm and deny, etc., it is open to us whether to do so.

There follows a discussion of the “indifference” Descartes feels when he is not pushed one way or another because his reasons are not compelling. This has already been covered above.

Because of the extent and perfection of the will, it is not will which by itself is the basis of error. The understanding cannot be the source of error, since it is produced by God, and “everything that I understand I undoubtedly understand correctly, and any error here is impossible” (AT VII 58, CSM II 40).

This claim is somewhat puzzling, since we commonly think that we misunderstand various things. It seems that the understanding provides him with ideas which are the possible subjects of judgments. Descartes had claimed earlier that there is no falsehood in ideas *per se*, but only a presentation of an object. Any “incorrectness” would be due to a faulty judgment. But it would seem that a judgment would be either predicative, where the subject is said to have some attribute, or existential, where the object presented in the idea is taken to exist. And it would also seem that only the understanding could provide the propositional content of a judgment. An act of will would only affirm or deny the truth of a given proposition. And yet it also seems as if we affirm false propositions, which are apparently supplied by the understanding.

It may be that ‘understand’ is used as a “success” term here, as in ‘really understand.’ Then one would have to account for what is going on when we apparently understand but fail to do so. Perhaps the explanation is that Descartes has in mind the understanding operating in such a way that it is completely untainted by any contribution by the sense and imagination. When he (really) understands something, the only thing involved is the “natural light.”

Error results from the finitude of the intellect and infinitude of the will. The will is capable of affirming what is not presented clearly and distinctly by the understanding, because its scope exceeds that of the understanding. When the will extends to what is not clearly understood, “it easily turns aside from what is true and good, and this is the source of my error and sin” (AT VII 58, CSM II 40-41), because the will itself is indifferent in these cases, since it is not compelled by overwhelming evidence, as in the case of his existence following from his raising the question of his existence. Once doubts are raised, the will can become indifferent. Higher-order knowledge that one is reasoning probably or conjecturally can be enough to allow him to restrain his will, as occurred in M1.

The will is not indifferent with respect to what is presented by the intellect insofar as the intellect puts something forward in a compelling way, or clearly and distinctly, or through a “great light,” so that reason makes it easy for his will to assent. This is the only way that the will is shaken from its indifference. This fact is confirmed by his ability to turn doubts about the existence of various things “into the supposition that they were wholly false” (AT VII 59, CSM II 41).

If I refrain from assenting to what is not clearly and distinctly perceived, “it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error” (AT VII 59, CSM II 41). If, on the other hand, I affirm or deny such a thing, “then I am not using my free will correctly” (AT VII 59, CSM II 41). The reasoning for this conclusion is by cases. If what is presented by the intellect is false, I will be in error, but if it is true, “it is by pure chance that I arrive at the truth, and I shall still be at fault since it is clear by the natural light that the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will” (AT VII 60, CSM II 41).

It has been claimed already that error is a privation, which is to say that when I err I am lacking something that I should have. I should be free of error, but insofar as I am not, it is my doing, and not that of the faculty of will or its operation, “insofar as it depends on God” (AT VII 60, CSM II 41). So the “should” is hypothetical. Only if I have misused my faculties am I lacking in what I should have.

It might be thought that God is depriving me of what I ought to have because God created me with an understanding (or natural light) which is finite. But it is the nature of a created intellect to be finite, and the nature of a finite intellect to be limited in its scope. I should be giving thanks to God rather than blaming him for depriving me of something I should have.

It might also be thought that God is responsible for my errors because God has given me a will with unlimited scope—a scope which is much wider than that of the intellect. There are two responses to this objection. (1) The nature of the will is to be a unitary thing that is indivisible. Take away any of the will's ability to choose, and it ceases to be will. It is apparently impossible, then for the scope of the will to be restricted. (2) I should in fact be grateful to God for having given me a faculty of this scope, and in fact grateful without limits because my will is without limits.

The last grounds for complaint might be that God concurs with my errant acts of will when I judge on the basis of what is not clearly and distinctly presented by the understanding. Descartes claims that “in so far as these acts depend on God, they are wholly true and good” (AT VII 60, CSM II 42). Apparently the reason for this claim is that I would be less perfect if I did not have the means to make them. Also, it follows from the nature of God that what God does is “wholly true and good.”

Next, Descartes finally cashes in on his metaphysical description of error as being a privation, or the result of my participation in nothingness. From the standpoint of myself, my error is a privation. But “when it is referred to God as its cause,” it is not a privation but a negation, in the scholastic sense of that term. (AT VII 61, CSM II 42). Because a negation is not a thing, it does not require God's concurrence. So the error I make is a non-thing and is not created or sustained by God. God has only given me something real, my freedom, which is what I misuse when I err.

On the other hand, Descartes admits that God could “easily” have created him so as not to err. This could have come about in one of two ways. (1) that his understanding always presented him with clear and distinct perceptions “of everything about which I was ever likely to deliberate” (AT VII 61, CSM II 42). (2) that his memory would remind him always not to assent to what he does not perceive clearly and distinctly.

If he had been made in either of these two ways, then “as a totality,” he would have been more perfect, but, again, the universe as a whole might not have been as perfect as it is. It may be that I have a role in the perfection of the whole, “And I have no right to complain that the role God wished me to undertake in the world is not the principal one or even the most perfect of all” (AT VII 61, CSM II 43). This is a reprise of his holistic argument at AT VII 55-6, CSM II 39.

Even if I cannot avoid error in way (1), I can still avoid it by a version of way (2). That is, even if my

memory was not such that it was “impressed . . . unforgettably” with the admonition not to believe what is not clearly and distinctly perceived, he can still impress it on himself, so to speak. Moreover (and this is a separate point), while I cannot “keep my attention fixed on one and the same item of knowledge at all times, I can by meditation get myself into the habit of remembering the items of knowledge I have reached, so that I can “make myself remember it as often as the need arises” (AT II 62, CSM II 43). This will keep Descartes from error.

The meditation is concluded with a paragraph which invites a certain kind of deep criticism. After stating that “man's greatest and most important perfection is to be found” in “the habit of avoiding error” (AT II 62, CSM II 43), Descartes re-states his formula for avoiding error: to restrain his will such that it does not exceed his clear and distinct perceptions. “Then it is quite impossible for me to go wrong” (AT VII 62, CSM II 43). This is a much stronger claim than the one made in M3, where Descartes states that “I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true” (AT VII 35, CSM II 24).

An impossibility claim requires a strong argument. Here is a relatively detailed reconstruction of the argument Descartes offers. This reconstruction follows the version of the argument found in the Second Replies, AT VII 143-144, CSM II 102-103.

1. Suppose that I go wrong in making a judgment J that something is true based on a clear and distinct perception P. [Assumption]
2. The only means for correcting a judgment is by recognizing that the perception on which it is based is not clear and distinct. [M3]
3. So, if I go wrong in making a judgment J that something is true based on a clear and distinct perception P, then I have no means for correcting J. [1,2]
4. So, I have no means of correcting J. [1,3]
5. If I have no means for correcting a judgment that something is true based on a clear and distinct perception of it, then the judgment is incorrigibly deceptive. [Common Notion]
6. So, J is incorrigibly defective. [4,5]
7. If a perception is clear and distinct, then it exists. [Common Notion]
8. So P exists. [1, 7]
9. Any clear and distinct perception in me is created by God. [M3]
10. So, P is created by God. [8,9]
11. So God has created in me a perception that is the basis of an incorrigibly defective judgment. [1,6,7]
12. If God has created in me a perception that is the basis of an an incorrigibly deceptive perception, then God is a deceiver. [Common Notion]
13. So, God is a deceiver. [11,12]
14. So, if I go wrong in making a judgment that something is true based on a clear and distinct perception of it, then God is a deceiver. [1-13, Conditional Proof]
15. God is perfect. [Common Notion]
16. Deception is a defect. [Common Notion]
17. It is not possible for a perfect being to have a defect. [Common Notion]
18. It is not possible for a a perfect being to be a deceiver. [16,17]

19. So, it is not possible that God is a deceiver. [15,18]
20. So, it is not possible for me to go wrong in making a judgment that something is true based on a clear and distinct perception of it. [14,19]

The justifications given for the substantive premises are of two kinds. What Descartes might have called “common notions” involve either mere recognition of connections between concepts (what Kant would call “analytic” judgments). The premises from M3 are based on the “light of nature” and involve substantive claims, such as that God creates any clear and distinct perception that is in me.

Step 2 is key to the argument. It is based on what Descartes claims in M3 about the light of nature at AT VII 38-39, CSM II 27: “Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light . . . cannot in any way be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty both as trustworthy as the natural light and also capable of showing me that such things are not true.” While this claim is explicitly about the natural light, it is equivalent to a statement about clear and distinct perceptions. In the Reply to Hobbes’s Thirteenth Objection (AT VII 192, CSM II 135), Descartes states that, “As everyone knows, a ‘light in the intellect’ means transparent clarity of cognition.” Here we take it that the “natural” light is the “great light in the intellect” that is followed by “a great inclination of the will” in the passage from M4 under attack by Hobbes. “For example, during the past few days I have been asking whether anything in the world exists, and I have realized from the very fact of my raising this question it follows quite evidently that I exist. I could not but judge that something which I understood so clearly is true” (AT VII 58, CSM II 41). This is the same example that Descartes uses in describing the natural light in the M3 passage just cited: “that from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist.”

There are two related claims by Descartes that might seem to undermine this argument. One is that in the passage from the Second Replies where it is given, Descartes seems to admit the possibility that “the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so it is, absolutely speaking, false” (AT VII 145, CSM II 103). He dismisses this suggestion, stating that “the evident clarity of our perceptions does not allow us to listen to anyone who makes up this kind of story” (AT VII 146, CSM II 104). But if Descartes really holds that it is impossible that our clear and distinct perceptions be false, he needs to find a way to show that this story describes what is impossible or involves a contradiction.

A second question concerns the claim that a perfect God could not engage in deception. As he puts it in the Second Replies, “Since God is the supreme being, he must also be supremely good and true, and it would therefore be a contradiction that anything should be created by him which positively tends towards falsehood” (AT VII 144, CSM II 103). It might be argued that despite the fact that God is “supremely good and true,” God could give us an intellectual faculty that positively tends towards falsehood, if to do so would serve the perfection of the universe as a whole. Descartes had claimed in M3 that “it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend on some defect” (AT VII 52, CSM II 35). But it is not clear that our being created so as to be error-prone despite our best efforts is a case of “fraud” or “deception,” and even if it is, this need not be due to a defect in God. God may have a perfectly good reason to hold us back from the truth, for all we know. Once an argument from ignorance is unleashed, it can be difficult to keep it from being too widely applied.

This argument is also controversial because it relies on a claim that God exists (and is the source of clear and distinct ideas), as stated in steps 9 and 10. Yet Descartes seems to hold that his knowledge of the existence of God depends solely on certain clear and distinct perceptions that he has. But in the proof of God's existence, Descartes uses the clarity and distinctness of certain perceptions (or appeals to the light of nature, which is equivalent) as the basis for his acceptance of the premises of his argument. Why is he entitled to do so, if he does not know that clear and distinct ideas are true until after he has proved that God exists? This portends the Cartesian circle, but we will not discuss it until we look at a companion passage at the end of M5.

[Note on citations. Citations from Descartes are given first with the volume and page from the Adam and Tannery edition of Descartes's works (*Œuvres*), which are given in the margins of the Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch translations, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. The citation 'CSM' with volume and page numbers are to that work. 'CSMK' to the third volume, which lists Anthony Kenny as a co-editor. Citations from Eustachius a Sancto Paulo and Mersenne are taken from *Descartes' Meditations: Background and Source Materials*, edited by Ariew, Cottingham and Sorell.]