

FIFTH MEDITATION

The essence of material things, and the existence of God considered a second time

We have seen that Descartes carefully distinguishes questions about a thing's existence from questions about its essence, and answers these questions separately. With respect to the 'I' of the Second Meditation, Descartes argued, first, that the self exists; and second, that its essence is to be a thinking thing. With respect to the wax, in the Second Meditation, Descartes argued that essence of matter (of which the wax is an example) is simply to be extended and changeable. With regard to God, in the Third Meditation, Descartes argued first that the essence of God is of a being who is supremely perfect, infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, powerful, and so forth. The idea of God captures the essential nature of God. Descartes then argued that God exists, by arguing that the idea of God that captures this essence must have God himself as its cause.

In the Fifth Meditation Descartes returns again to the topics of matter, and God. Notice the title: 'The essence of material things, and the existence of God considered a second time'. As in the Second Meditation, Descartes considers the essence of matter, without yet addressing the question of whether material things exist. As in the Third Meditation, Descartes considers both the essence and existence of God, but with a new twist. Descartes argues that the essence of God cannot be known without knowing that God exists: God is a being whose essence implies his existence. This is the Ontological Argument for God's existence.

The essence of matter

Descartes promises in the title that he will tell us the essence of material things. He asks 'whether any certainty can be achieved regarding material objects', and the certainties he proceeds to discover in this Meditation concern geometry. He has a distinct idea of

continuous quantity: something extended in space that can be measured in length, breadth, depth. He can clearly imagine 'various sizes, shapes, positions and local motions'. All of these ideas of extension are amenable to mathematical treatment. Various properties can be deduced from the concepts of these various shapes.

Various properties can be demonstrated of the triangle, for example that its three angles equal two right angles, that its greatest side subtends its greatest angle.

Descartes concludes that one can indeed achieve a kind of certainty with regard to material things. Mathematics and geometry provide certainties that pass the test of clarity and distinctness. Descartes endorses his early pre-reflective belief in the certainties of mathematics:

The most certain truths of all were the kind which I recognized clearly in connection with shapes, or numbers or other items relating to arithmetic or geometry, or in general to pure and abstract mathematics.

What has Descartes promised? Certainties regarding material objects. What has he delivered? Certainties regarding geometry, and abstract mathematics. He believes he has delivered exactly what he has promised, since *geometry describes the essence of matter*. The essence of matter is to be extended, as we know from the wax passage in Meditation II. Geometry describes all the truths about extension. Geometry is the science of space. Matter and space are one and the same, on Descartes' theory of matter.

Notice that there is nothing *from the senses* in this description of matter's essence. It is wholly abstract, wholly intellectualized. There is no talk of colour, or smell, or resistance, no talk of gravitational or magnetic force. Where will these fit in, on a purely geometrical conception of matter? The answer is, they won't. Descartes' conception of the essence of matter provides a graphic illustration of his rationalism: the properties of matter are the properties that extended substance can be *proved* to possess.

The Ontological Argument

These reflections about the truths derivable from mathematical concepts lead Descartes to consider again the concept of God, and to ask what truths may be derivable from that concept. The concept of God is the concept of 'a supremely perfect being'. The essence of God includes every possible perfection. Existence itself is a perfection. A being that exists is more perfect than a being that does not exist. So the essence of God implies his existence.

From the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and hence that he really exists.

This proof of God's existence does not depend on any claims about causality: it does not depend, for example, on the Principle of Causal Adequacy described in the Third Meditation. God's existence is deduced from his essence as directly as the properties of a triangle are deduced from its essence:

it is quite evident that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle.

For most things, we must distinguish between the existence and the essence of the thing. But since God is the supremely perfect being, and since existence is a perfection, God's existence belongs to his essence. That, briefly stated, is the Ontological Argument; we shall be attending to St. Anselm's version of it in more detail later on.

The Cartesian Circle

Descartes concludes the Fifth Meditation by saying:

I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge about anything else until I became aware of him. And now it is possible for me to achieve full and

certain knowledge of countless matters, both concerning God himself and other things whose nature is intellectual, and also concerning the whole of that corporeal nature which is the subject-matter of pure mathematics.

This is a puzzling passage. The idea seems to be that it is only because I know that God is not a deceiver that I can trust the clarity and distinctness of the ideas presented by my intellect. Knowledge of *everything* depends on knowledge of God. This raises the famous problem of the Cartesian Circle, and there are two aspects to the problem.

The first is that knowledge of the existence and essence of the self, the essence of matter, the essence of God, all depend on knowledge of a non-deceiving God. If that is so, how was thinker entitled to reach conclusions about these topics prior to knowledge of a non-deceiving God? This aspect of the problem was put by Mersenne:

[Y]ou say that you are not certain of anything, and cannot know anything clearly and distinctly until you have achieved clear and certain knowledge of the existence of God. It follows from this that you do not yet clearly and distinctly know that you are a thinking thing, since, on your own admission, that knowledge depends on the clear knowledge of an existing God; and this you have not yet proved in the passage where you draw the conclusion that you clearly know what you are.

The second aspect of the problem is that knowledge of God *itself* depends on knowledge of God. This aspect of the problem is put by Arnauld:

I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists.

But we can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists, we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and evidently is true.

Some questions to consider about Meditation V

(1) What, if anything, is missing in Descartes' conception of the essence of matter? The denial of sensory properties to matter, implicit in Meditation V, anticipates a thesis in Meditation IV about primary and secondary qualities (Locke's label for the distinction).

(2) What, if anything, is wrong with the Ontological Argument, as Descartes presents it? One of his critics, Gassendi, took objection to the idea that existence is a perfection. He said it is not a perfection, but rather it is 'that without which no perfections can be present'. Gassendi is willing to grant, for the sake of argument, that the concept of a supremely perfect being 'carries the implication of existence in virtue of its very title', but he insists that this is a relation between concepts which implies nothing 'actual in the real world'. He jokes that the concept of an 'existing lion' essentially implies existence: but that does not mean there is an existing lion. Similarly the concept of an existing God essentially implies existence: but that does not mean that God exists.