

# Third Meditation\*

René Descartes

1641

Now I will close my eyes, stop up my ears, and withdraw all my senses. I will even blot out from my thinking all images of corporeal things, or else, since this is hardly possible, I will dismiss them as empty and false images of nothing at all, and by talking only to myself and looking more deeply within, I will attempt, little by little, to acquire a greater knowledge of and more familiarity with myself. I am a thinking thing, in other words, something that doubts, affirms, denies, knows a few things, is ignorant of many things, wills, refuses, and also imagines and feels. For, as I have pointed out earlier, although those things which I sense or imagine outside of myself are perhaps nothing, nevertheless, I am certain that the thought processes I call sense experience and imagination, given that they are only certain modes of thinking, do exist within me.

In these few words, I have reviewed everything I truly know, or at least [everything] that, up to this point, I was aware I knew. Now I will look around more diligently, in case there are perhaps other things in me that I have not yet considered. I am certain that I am a thinking thing. But if that is the case, do I not then also know what is required for me to be certain about something? There is, to be sure, nothing in this first knowledge other than a certain clear and distinct perception of what I am affirming, and obviously this would not be enough for me to be certain about the truth of the matter, if it could ever happen that something I perceived just as clearly and distinctly was false. And so it seems to me that now I can propose the following general rule: all those things I perceive very clearly and very distinctly are true.

However, before now I have accepted as totally certain and evident many things that I have later discovered to be doubtful. What, then, were these things? [They were], of course, the earth, the sky, the stars, and all the other things I used to grasp

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\*Translation by [Ian Johnston](#) (brackets indicate clarifications from the French edition of 1647); notes by [Trevor Pearce](#).

with my senses. But what did I clearly perceive in them? Obviously I was observing in my mind ideas or thoughts of such things. And even now I do not deny that those ideas exist within me. However, there was something else which I held to be true and which, because I was in the habit of believing it, I also thought I perceived clearly, although I really was not perceiving it at all, namely, that certain things existed outside of me from which those ideas proceeded and which were like them in every way. And here was where I went wrong, or if I was judging truthfully, that certainly had nothing to do with the strength of my perception.

What [then was] true? When I was thinking about something very simple and easy in arithmetic or geometry—for example, that two and three added together make five, and things of that sort—was I not recognizing these with sufficient clarity at least to affirm that they were true? Later on, to be sure, I did judge that such things could be doubted, but the only reason I did so was that it crossed my mind that some God could perhaps have placed within me a certain kind of nature, so that I deceived myself even about those things which appeared most obvious. And every time this preconceived opinion about the supreme power of God occurs to me, I cannot but confess that if he wished, it would be easy for him to see to it that I go astray, even in those matters which I think I see as clearly as possible with my mind's eye. But whenever I turn my attention to those very things which I think I perceive with great clarity, I am so completely persuaded by them, that I spontaneously burst out with the following words: Let whoever can deceive me, do so; he will still never succeed in making me nothing, not while I think I am something, or in making it true someday that I never existed, since it is true that I exist now, or perhaps even in making two and three, when added together, more or less than five, or anything like that, in which I clearly recognize a manifest contradiction. And since I have no reason to think that some God exists who is a deceiver and since, up to this point, I do not know enough to state whether there is a God at all, it is clear that the reason for any doubt which rests on this opinion alone is very tenuous and, if I may say so, metaphysical. However, to remove even that doubt, as soon as the occasion presents itself, I ought to examine whether God exists and, if he does, whether he can be a deceiver. For as long as this point remains obscure, it seems to me that I can never be completely certain about anything else.

But now an orderly arrangement would seem to require that I first divide all of my thoughts into certain kinds and look into which of these [kinds], strictly speaking, contain truth or error. Some of my thoughts are, so to speak, images of things, and for these alone the name *idea* is appropriate, for example, when I think of a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God. But other thoughts, in addition to these, possess certain other forms. For example, when I will, when I fear, when I affirm,

and when I deny, I always apprehend something as the object of my thinking, but in my thought I also grasp something more than the representation of that thing. In this [group of thoughts], some are called volitions or feelings, and others judgments.

Now, where ideas are concerned, if I consider these only in and of themselves and do not refer them to anything else, they cannot, strictly speaking, be false. For whether I imagine a goat or a chimera, it is no less true that I imagine one than it is that I imagine the other. And we also need have no fear of error in willing or in feeling, for although I can desire something evil or even things which have never existed, that still does not make the fact that I desire them untrue. And thus, all that remains are judgments, in which I must take care not to be deceived. But the most important and most frequent error I can discover in judgments consists of the fact that I judge the ideas within me are similar to or conform to certain things located outside myself. For obviously, if I considered ideas themselves only as certain modes of my thinking, without referring them to anything else, they would hardly furnish me any material for making a mistake.

Of these ideas, some, it seems to me, are innate, others come from outside, and still others I have myself made up. For the fact that I understand what a thing is, what truth is, and what thinking is I seem to possess from no source other than my own nature. But if I now hear a noise, see the sun, or feel heat, I have up to now judged that [these sensations] come from certain things placed outside of me. And, finally, sirens, hippogriffs, and such like are things I myself dream up. But I could also perhaps believe that all [these ideas] come from outside, or else are all innate, or else are all made up, for I have not yet clearly perceived their true origin.

However, the most important point I have to explore here concerns those ideas which I think of as being derived from objects existing outside me: What reason leads me to suppose that these ideas are similar to those objects? It certainly seems that I am taught to think this way by nature. Furthermore, I know by experience that these [ideas] do not depend on my will and therefore not on me myself, for they often present themselves to me even against my will. For example, whether I will it or not, I now feel heat, and thus I believe that the feeling or the idea of heat reaches me from some object apart from me, that is, from [the heat] of the fire I am sitting beside. And nothing is more obvious than my judgment that this object is sending its own likeness into me rather than something else.

I will now see whether these reasons are sufficiently strong. When I say here that I have been taught to think this way by nature, I understand only that I have been carried by a certain spontaneous impulse to believe it, not that some natural light has revealed its truth to me. There is an important difference between these two things. For whatever natural light reveals to me—for example, that from the fact

that I am doubting, it follows that I exist, and things like that—cannot admit of any possible doubt, because there cannot be another faculty [in me] as trustworthy as natural light, one which could teach me that the ideas [derived from natural light] are not true. But where natural impulses are concerned, in the past, when there was an issue of choosing the good thing to do, I often judged that such impulses were pushing me in the direction of something worse, and I do not see why I should place more trust in them in any other matters.

Moreover, although those ideas do not depend on my will, it is not therefore the case that they must come from objects located outside of me. For just as those impulses I have been talking about above are within me and yet seem to be different from my will, so perhaps there is also some other faculty in me, one I do not yet understand sufficiently, which produces those ideas, in the same way they have always appeared to be formed in me up to now while I sleep, without the help of any external objects [which they represent].

Finally, even if these ideas did come from things different from me, it does not therefore follow that they have to be like those things. Quite the contrary, for in numerous cases I seem to have often observed a great difference [between the object and the idea]. So, for example, I find in my mind two different ideas of the sun. One, which is apparently derived from the senses and should certainly be included among what I consider ideas coming from outside, makes the sun appear very small to me. However, the other, which is derived from astronomical reasoning, that is, elicited by certain notions innate in me or else produced by me in some other manner, makes the sun appear many times larger than the earth. Clearly, these two [ideas] cannot both resemble the sun which exists outside of me, and reason convinces [me] that the one which seems to have emanated most immediately from the sun itself is the least like it.

All these points offer me sufficient proof that previously, when I believed that certain things existed apart from me that conveyed ideas or images of themselves, whether by my organs of sense or by some other means, my judgment was not based on anything certain but only on some blind impulse.

However, it crosses my mind that there is still another way of exploring whether certain things of which I have ideas within me exist outside of me. To the extent that those ideas are [considered] merely certain ways of thinking, of course, I do not recognize any inequality among them, and they all appear to proceed from me in the same way. But to the extent that one idea represents one thing, while another idea represents something else, it is clear that they are very different from each other. For undoubtedly those that represent substances to me and contain in themselves more objective reality, so to speak, are something more than those that simply represent

modes or accidents. And, once again, that idea thanks to which I am aware of a supreme God—eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, the Creator of all things that exist outside of him—certainly has more objective reality in it than those ideas through which finite substances are represented.

Now, it is surely evident by natural light that there must be at least as much [reality] in the efficient and total cause as there is in the effect of this cause. For from where, I would like to know, can the effect receive its reality if not from its cause? And how can the cause provide this reality to the effect, unless the cause also possesses it? But from this it follows that something cannot be made from nothing and also that what is more perfect, that is, contains more reality in itself, cannot be produced from what is less perfect. This is obviously true not only of those effects whose reality is [what the philosophers call] actual or formal, but also of those ideas in which we consider only [what they call] objective reality. For example, some stone which has not existed yet cannot now begin to exist, unless it is produced by something which has in it, either formally or eminently, everything that goes into the stone, and heat cannot be brought into an object which was not warm previously, except by something which is of an order at least as perfect as heat, and so on with all the other examples.<sup>1</sup> But beyond this, even the idea of heat or of the stone cannot exist within me, unless it is placed in me by some cause containing at least as much reality as I understand to be in the heat or in the stone. For although that cause does not transfer anything of its own reality, either actual or formal, into my idea, one should not therefore assume that [this cause] must be less real. Instead, [we should consider] that the nature of the idea itself is such that it requires from itself no formal reality other than what it derives from my own thinking, of which it is a mode [that is, a way or style of thinking]. But for the idea to possess this objective reality rather than another, it must surely obtain it from some cause in which there is at least as much formal reality as the objective reality contained in the idea itself. For if we assume that something can be discovered in the idea which was not present in its cause, then it must have obtained this from nothing. But no matter how imperfect the mode of being may be by which a thing is objectively present in the understanding through its idea, that mode is certainly not nothing, and therefore [this idea] cannot come from nothing.

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<sup>1</sup>“By [*objective reality of an idea*] I mean the being of the thing which is represented by an idea, in so far as this exists in the idea. . . . For whatever we perceive as being in the objects of our ideas exists objectively in the ideas themselves. . . . Whatever exists in the objects of our ideas in a way which exactly corresponds to our perception of it is said to exist *formally* in those objects. Something is said to exist *eminently* in an object when, although it does not exactly correspond to our perception of it, its greatness is such that it can fill the role of that which does so correspond” (Descartes, *Objections and Replies* [1641], in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* 2: 113–114).

And although the reality which I am considering in my ideas is only objective, I must not imagine that it is not necessary for the same reality to exist formally in the causes of those ideas but that it is sufficient if [the reality] in them is objective, as well. For just as that mode of existing objectively belongs to ideas by their very nature, so the mode of existing formally belongs to the causes of [these] ideas, at least to the first and most important causes, by their nature. And although it may well be possible for one idea to be born from another, still this regress cannot continue on *ad infinitum*, for we must finally come to some first [idea], whose cause is, as it were, the archetype [or original idea], which formally contains the entire reality that exists only objectively in the idea. And thus natural light makes it clear to me that ideas exist within me as certain images that can, in fact, easily fall short of the perfection of the things from which they were derived but that cannot contain anything greater or more perfect than those things do.

And the more time and care I take examining these things, the more clearly and distinctly I recognize their truth. But what am I finally to conclude from them? It is clear that if the objective reality of any of my ideas is so great that I am certain that the same reality is not in me either formally or eminently and that therefore I myself cannot be the cause of that idea, it necessarily follows that I am not alone in the world but that some other thing also exists which is the cause of that idea. But if I do not find any such idea within me, then I will obviously have no argument that confirms for me the existence of anything beyond myself. For I have been searching very diligently and have not been able to find any other argument up to now.

But of these ideas of mine, apart from the one which reveals my own self to me, about which there can be no difficulty, there is another [that represents] God [to me], and there are others which represent corporeal and inanimate things, as well as others representing angels, animals, and finally other men who resemble me.

As far as concerns those ideas which display other human beings or animals or angels, I understand readily enough that I could have put these together from ideas I have of myself, of corporeal things, and of God, even though, apart from me, there might be no people or animals or angels in the world.

Where the ideas of corporeal things are concerned, I see nothing in them so great that it seems as if it could not have originated within me. For if I inspect these ideas thoroughly and examine them individually in the same way I did yesterday with the idea of the wax, I notice that there are only a very few things I perceive in them clearly and distinctly, for example, magnitude or extension in length, breadth, and depth; shape, which emerges from the limits of that extension; position, which different forms derive from their relation to each other; and motion or a change of location. To these one can add substance, duration, and number. However, with the

other things, like light, colours, sounds, odours, tastes, heat, cold, and other tactile qualities, my thoughts of them involve so much confusion and obscurity, that I still do not know whether they are true or false, in other words, whether the ideas I have of these [qualities] are ideas of things or of non-things. For although I observed a little earlier that falsehood or, strictly speaking, formal falsehood could occur only in judgments, nonetheless there is, in fact, a certain other material falsehood in ideas, when they represent a non-thing as if it were a thing. Thus, for example, ideas which I have of heat and cold are so unclear and indistinct that I am not able to learn from them whether cold is merely a lack of heat, or heat a lack of cold, or whether both of these are real qualities, or whether neither [of them is]. And because there can be no ideas which are not, as it were, ideas of things, if it is indeed true that cold is nothing other than a lack of heat, the idea which represents cold to me as if it were something positive and real will not improperly be called false, and that will also hold for all other ideas [like this].

To such ideas I obviously do not have to assign any author other than myself, for, if they are, in fact, false, that is, if they represent things which do not exist, my natural light informs me that they proceed from nothing, in other words, that they are in me only because there is something lacking in my nature, which is not wholly perfect. If, on the other hand, they are true, given that the reality they present to me is so small that I cannot distinguish the object from something which does not exist, then I do not see why I could not have come up with them myself.

As for those details which are clear and distinct in my ideas of corporeal things, some of them, it seems to me, I surely could have borrowed from the idea of myself, namely, substance, duration, number, and other things like that. For when I think that a stone is a substance, or something equipped to exist on its own and that I, too, am a substance, even though I conceive of myself as a thinking and non-extended thing and of the stone as an extended thing which does not think, so that there is the greatest difference between the two conceptions, they both still seem to fit the category of *substance*. In the same way, when I perceive that I now exist and also remember that I have existed for some time earlier and when I have various thoughts whose number I recognize, I acquire ideas of *duration* and *number*, which I can then transfer to any other things I choose. As for all the other qualities from which I put together my ideas of corporeal things, that is, extension, shape, location, and motion, they are, it is true, not formally contained in me, since I am nothing other than a thinking thing, but because they are merely certain modes of a substance and I, too, am a substance, it seems that they could be contained in me eminently.

And so the only thing remaining is the idea of God. I must consider whether there is anything in this idea for which I myself could not have been the origin. By the name

*God* I understand a certain infinite, [eternal, immutable,] independent, supremely intelligent, and supremely powerful substance by which I myself was created, along with everything else that exists, if, [in fact], anything else does exist. All of these [properties] are clearly [so great] that the more diligently I focus on them, the less it seems that I could have brought them into being by myself alone. And thus, from what I have said earlier, I logically have to conclude that God necessarily exists.

For although the idea of a substance is, indeed, in me by the very fact that I am a substance, that still does not mean [that I possess] the idea of an infinite substance, since I am finite, unless it originates in some other substance which is truly infinite.

And I should not think that my perception of the infinite comes, not from a true idea, but merely from a negation of the finite, in [same] way I perceive rest and darkness by a negation of motion and light. For, on the contrary, I understand clearly that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one and that therefore my perception of the infinite is somehow in me before my perception of the finite, in other words, my perception of God comes before my perception of myself. For how would I know that I am doubting or desiring, or, in other words, that something is lacking in me and that I am not entirely perfect, unless some idea of a perfect being was in me and I recognized my defects by a comparison?

And one cannot claim that this idea of God might well be materially false and thus could have come from nothing, the way I observed a little earlier with the ideas of heat and cold and things like that. Quite the reverse: for [this idea] is extremely clear and distinct and contains more objective reality than any other, and thus no idea will be found which is more inherently true and in which there is less suspicion of falsehood. This idea, I say, of a supremely perfect and infinite being is utterly true, for although it may well be possible to imagine that such a being does not exist, it is still impossible to imagine that the idea of him does not reveal anything real to me, in the way I talked above about the idea of cold. This idea of a perfect Being is also entirely clear and distinct, for whatever I see clearly and distinctly which is real and true and which introduces some perfection is totally contained within [this idea]. The fact that I cannot comprehend the infinite or that there are innumerable other things in God that I do not understand or even perhaps have any way of contacting in my thoughts—all this is irrelevant. For something finite, like myself, cannot comprehend the nature of the infinite, and it is sufficient that I understand this very point and judge that all things which I perceive clearly and which I know convey some perfection, as well as innumerable others perhaps which I know nothing about, are in God, either formally or eminently, so that the idea I have of him is the truest, clearest, and most distinct of all the ideas within me.

But perhaps I am something more than I myself understand, and all those per-



fections which I attribute to God are potentially in me somehow, even though they are not yet evident and are not manifesting themselves in action. For I already know by experience that my knowledge is gradually increasing, and I do not see anything which could prevent it from increasing more and more to infinity. Nor do I even know of any reasons why, with my knowledge augmented in this way, I could not, with its help, acquire all the other perfections of God or, finally, why, if the power [to acquire] those perfections is already in me, it would not be sufficient to produce the idea of those perfections.

And yet none of these things is possible. For, in the first place, although it is true that my knowledge is gradually increasing and that there are potentially many things within me which have not yet been realized, still none of these is relevant to the idea of God, in which, of course, nothing at all exists potentially. For the very fact that my knowledge is increasing little by little is the most certain argument for its imperfection. Beyond that, even if my knowledge is always growing more and more, nonetheless, that does not convince me that it will ever be truly infinite, since it can never reach a stage where it is not capable of increasing any further. But I judge that God is actually infinite, so that nothing can possibly be added to his perfection. And lastly, I perceive that the objective existence of an idea cannot be produced from a being that is merely potential, which, strictly speaking, is nothing, but only from something which actually or formally exists.

Obviously there is nothing in all these thoughts that is not evident to the natural light in anyone who reflects carefully [on the matter]. But when I pay less attention and when images of sensible things obscure the vision in my mind, I do not so readily remember why the idea of a being more perfect than myself must necessarily proceed from some entity that is truly more perfect than me. Therefore, I would like to enquire further whether I, who possess this idea [of God], could exist if such a being did not exist.

If that were the case, then from whom would I derive my existence? Clearly from myself or from my parents or from some other source less perfect than God. For we cannot think of or imagine anything more perfect than God or even anything equally perfect.

However, if I originated from myself, then I would not doubt or hope, and I would lack nothing at all, for I would have given myself all the perfections of which I have any idea within me, and thus I myself would be God. I must not assume that those things which I lack could well be more difficult to acquire than those now within me. On the contrary, it clearly would have been much more difficult for me—that is, a thinking thing or substance—to emerge from nothing than to acquire a knowledge of the many things about which I am ignorant, for knowing such things is merely an

accident of that thinking substance. And surely if I had obtained from myself that greater perfection [of being the author of my own existence], then I could hardly have denied myself the perfections which are easier to acquire, or, indeed, any of those I perceive contained in the idea of God, since, it seems to me, none of them is more difficult to produce. But if there were some perfections more difficult to acquire, they would certainly appear more difficult to me, too, if, indeed, everything else I possessed was derived from myself, because from them I would learn by experience that my power was limited.

And I will not escape the force of these arguments by assuming that I might perhaps have always been the way I am now, as if it followed from that assumption that I would not have to seek out any author for my own existence. For since the entire period of my life can be divided into innumerable parts, each individual one of which is in no way dependent on the others, therefore, just because I existed a little while ago, it does not follow that I must exist now, unless at this very moment some cause is, at it were, creating me once again, in other words, preserving me. For it is clear to anyone who directs attention to the nature of time that, in order for the existence of anything at all to be preserved in each particular moment it lasts, that thing surely needs the same force and action which would be necessary to create it anew, assuming it did not yet exist. Thus, one of the things natural light reveals is that preservation and creation are different only in the ways we think of them.

Consequently, I now ought to ask myself whether I have any power which enables me to bring it about that I, who am now existing, will also exist a little later on, for since I am nothing other than a thinking thing—or at least since my precise concern at the moment is only with that part of me which is a thinking thing—if such a power is in me, I would undoubtedly be conscious of it. But I experience nothing [of that sort], and from this fact alone I recognize with the utmost clarity that I depend upon some being different from myself.

But perhaps that being is not God, and I have been produced by my parents or by some other causes less perfect than God. But [that is impossible]. As I have already said before, it is clear that there must be at least as much [reality] in the cause as in the effect and that thus, since I am a thinking thing and have a certain idea of God within me, whatever I finally designate as my own cause, I must concede that it is also a thinking substance containing the idea of all the perfections I attribute to God. It is possible once again to ask whether that cause originates from itself or from something else. If it comes from itself, then, given what I have said, it is obvious that the cause itself is God. For clearly, if it derives its power of existing from itself, it also undoubtedly has the power of actually possessing all the perfections whose idea it contains within itself, that is, all those that I think of as existing in God.

But if it is produced from some other cause, then I ask once again in the same way whether this cause comes from itself or from some other cause, until I finally reach a final cause, which will be God.

For it is clear enough that this questioning cannot produce an infinite regress, particularly because the issue I am dealing with here is a matter not only of the cause which once produced me but also—and most importantly—of the cause which preserves me at the present time.

And I cannot assume that perhaps a number of partial causes came together to produce me and that from one of them I received the idea of one of the perfections I attribute to God and from another the idea of another perfection, so that all those perfections are indeed found somewhere in the universe, but they are not all joined together in a single being who is God. Quite the contrary, [for] the unity and simplicity—or the inseparability of all those things present in God—is one of the principal perfections which I recognize in him. And surely the idea of this unity of all his perfections could not have been placed in me by any cause from which I did not acquire ideas of the other perfections as well, for no single cause could have made it possible for me to understand that those perfections were joined together and inseparable, unless at the same time it enabled me to recognize what those perfections were.

And finally, as far as my parents are concerned, even if everything I have ever believed about them is true, it is still perfectly clear that they are not the ones who preserve me and that, to the extent that I am a thinking thing, there is no way they could have even made me. Instead they merely produced certain arrangements in the material substance which, as I have judged the matter, contains me—that is, contains my mind, for that is all I assume I am at the moment. And thus in this discussion there can be no difficulties with my parents. Given all this, however, from the mere fact that I exist and that the idea of a supremely perfect being, or God, is within me I must conclude that I have provided an extremely clear proof that God does, indeed, exist.

All that is left now is to examine how I have received that idea from God. For I have not derived it from the senses, and it has never come to me unexpectedly, as habitually occurs with the ideas of things I perceive with the senses, when those ideas of external substances impinge, or seem to impinge, on my sense organs. Nor is it something I just made up, for I am completely unable to remove anything from it or add anything to it. Thus, all that remains is that the idea is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is also innate in me.

And obviously it is not strange that God, when he created me, placed that idea within me, so that it would be, as it were, the mark of the master craftsman impressed

in his own work, not that it is at all necessary for this mark to be different from the work itself. But from this one fact that God created me it is highly credible that he made me in some way in his image and likeness and that I perceive this likeness, which contains the idea of God, by the same faculty with which I perceive myself. In other words, when I turn my mind's eye onto myself, I not only understand that I am an incomplete thing, dependent on something else, and one that aspires [constantly] to greater and better things without limit, but at the same time I also realize that the one I depend on contains within himself all those greater things [to which I aspire], not merely indefinitely and potentially, but actually and infinitely, and thus that he is God. The entire force of my argument rests on the fact that I recognize I could not possibly exist with the sort of nature I possess, namely, having the idea of God within me, unless God truly existed as well—that God, I say, whose idea is in me, in other words, one having all those perfections which I do not understand but which I am somehow capable of contacting in my thoughts, and who is entirely free of any defect. These reasons are enough to show that he cannot be a deceiver, for natural light clearly demonstrates that every fraud and deception depends upon some defect.

But before I examine this matter more carefully and at the same time look into other truths I could derive from it, I wish to pause here for a while to contemplate God himself, to ponder his attributes, and to consider, admire, and adore the beauty of his immense light, to the extent that the eyes of my darkened intellect can bear it. For just as we believe through faith that the supreme happiness of our life hereafter consists only in this contemplation of the Divine Majesty, so we know from experience that the same [contemplation] now, though far less perfect, is the greatest joy we are capable of in this life.