

4.5 God and Error

4.5.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Descartes, Fourth Meditation
- Study Questions:
 1. What is the cause of error for Descartes?
 2. How can Descartes' theory of error be consistent with the idea of God as a all-powerful all-good God?

4.5.2 A clear road to the knowledge of the universe?

- We have argued that:
 - God exists as an all powerful all perfect Being
 - God is the cause of the ideas that I can conceive clearly and distinctly
- As said at the end of the previous meditation, it only remains to say that God is not a deceiver. Here is Descartes' argument for this:
 - God has all the perfections
 - To deceive is a sign of an imperfection
 - Hence God is not a deceiver
- So, we have finally restored the eternal truth of everything that we can conceive clearly and distinctly: God has put the truth in our minds.
- But how come that we can make mistakes then? Should not we have found these beautiful truths in our mind right away when we were kids? How come that we found ourself full of unjustified prejudices at the beginning of the first Meditation?
- This Meditation is thus about this: how can we consistently hold that
 1. God is the all powerful all good cause of our ideas;
 2. We can make errors.

What is at stake: Descartes' theory could be reduced to absurdity!!!

- NOTE: Descartes is going to be extremely cautious here because of the potential reaction of the Church. It is clear that these precautions are not the most important part of Descartes' reasoning. So, we will not pay too much attention to it. That said, if you read closely, you should notice that he never uses the classical arguments directly: he uses them in order to introduce his own, more philosophical, arguments.

4.5.3 Errors as mere defect?

First option: errors are mere defects

- I have not only the idea of the infinite perfection, but also of the negation of it: nothingness. But this is not a positive idea: only the idea of me not being as perfect as God, the idea of my finitude.
Because I am finite, I just do not have all the perfections there are. In short: I am not God.
- My ability to err thence does not come from a "faculty of error" which God would have put in me, but from the fact that I am not all perfect. So, that I can err just comes from the fact that I am not all perfect, not all knowing.
- To complain about it would be similar to complaining about the fact that I do not have wings. But there is nothing wrong with not having wings, it is just that, as a finite creature, I do not have every perfection.

Error is not a mere defect

Main point: This is unsatisfactory: errors are not a mere defect, there are a privation.

- Descartes makes the distinction between:
 1. defect: something I do not have just because it is my nature not to have it (e.g. wings)
 2. privation: something I should have but I do not have

- The fact that I can err is not only a defect, a lack of something which does not pertain to me, it is a privation: a lack of something that I should have.

It is something not to have a faculty (the faculty to fly for example), it is another thing to have a defective faculty (imagine a bird whose abilities to fly would not always work well - say its wings would get jammed)

Descartes maintain that, since we possess the faculty of knowledge, we should have it in a perfect way: either it works perfectly, or God would not have given it to us.

It is an important distinction for the following: the challenge of the 3rd Meditation is to prove that *we are not deprived because we can err*.

- Premise: a perfect creator does a perfect work

It would be contradictory to hold that a perfect creator gave me an imperfect faculty.

- The two following paragraphs contain some very classical arguments from the Church:

1. The ways of God are incomprehensible;
2. You have to look at the big picture: what seems imperfect from our point of view might be more perfect from the point of view of the whole.

- But notice how Descartes uses these arguments: he does not consider them as compelling or satisfactory – for the discussion does not end here – but instead, he concludes from them that *we should never look for final causes in proper scientific method*: this is an attack against the Aristotelian science and a defense of the new scientific method.
- Consistently with the above, the remaining of Descartes' theory of error is the theory of the *mechanics of error*.

4.5.4 The understanding and the will are not cause of error by themselves

Here come the serious arguments. Descartes maintains that errors originate in a “combination of two causes”: understanding and will. Which means that each of them, by themselves, are not causes of error

- Two powers in me:
 1. understanding – power of knowledge
 2. will – power of free choice
- The understanding by itself is not cause of errors:
 - ideas by themselves are true (It will be recalled from the 3rd Meditation that only judgments bring error: ideas, as such, are beyond truth and falsehood)
 - my understanding never deceives me: whatever is clear manifests itself as clear to me, whatever is confused manifests itself as confused to me;
 - my understanding is limited, but not faulty: I may not ideas about every thing in the world, but all the ideas I possess are true.
- The will by itself is not a cause of errors:
 - the will is the most perfect part of myself
 - the will is what makes me similar to God (*Not the understanding, despite what every body thought*) – that is, even if the domain on which and the power with which God can apply his will is much bigger than mine, my will and his remains essentially of the same nature
 - true freedom is *not* mere indifference – indifference is the lowest degree of liberty
 - on the contrary, freedom is increased and stronger whenever my choice is enlightened either by natural knowledge or divine grace

True freedom does not imply arbitrariness.

This is paradoxical: Descartes maintains that to be leaning toward one option out of two because of what you know makes you more free

than to choose outside of any other consideration. For him, that your choice depends on your understanding does not diminish your freedom. By contrast, it is when you are indifferent, that is, when you have no rational reason to lean over one choice instead of the other, that you are not free: because then the slightest external circumstance will decide for yourself.

We are the most free whenever we truly want to follow a knowledgeable decision.

We could think that the evidence is a constraint on our freedom. But it is not: we always have the choice to not do what we know should be done. True freedom is thus to choose whatever we know is best.

- Conclusion: being perfect and making me God-like, the will is not cause of error

- Conclusion: Neither the will nor the understanding are by themselves causes of error.

4.5.5 We err whenever we apply our will beyond our understanding

- Descartes' main claim: Errors arise from a misuse of our will, that is, our using our will to choose – to affirm or to deny – outside the limited bounds of our understanding.
 1. Our understanding is limited in its domain: we do not possess ideas about everything
 2. Our will is unlimited in its domain: we can choose to assent or to reject anything, however knowledgeable we are in the matter. No bounds.
 3. Whenever you find yourself to choose – to assent or to deny – outside the domain of your understanding, you are likely to fall into error.
 4. More precisely, whenever you find yourself in a state of indifference, you are likely to make the wrong choice

- So, we have a map of human's mind and the possibility of error:
 1. It is sufficient for me to consider only clear and distinct ideas in order to never risk to fall into error
 2. NOTE that 1 is not NECESSARY because there are other ways for me to find the truth than clear and distinct conception
 3. It is necessary and sufficient for me to use my power to assent and deny over other things than what I conceive very clearly and distinctly to be at risk of fall into error

4.5.6 God is not responsible for our errors

- Descartes concludes from the above that my imperfection – my ability to err – does not depend on God:
 1. I cannot complain about a finite understanding

It is just part of my nature that my understanding has a limited domain. That said, within its legitimate domain of application, my understanding works perfectly
 2. I cannot complain about my will

That it is infinite is a perfection. Plus it is essential to the will: there is no way the will can be diminished or made bigger: it is one and one single thing.
 3. My imperfection, i.e. my ability to err, is not coming from God, who gave two perfect faculty, each perfectly working in their domains.
- He considers then an objection: God could have made me more perfect than I am in giving me the means to avoid mistakes (implement a rule in my mind: do not use your will outside the domain of your understanding for example)

His answer : a diverse word is more perfect than a word in which all the creature are the same

Does this stand?

Not so much as stated above of course: something with imperfect parts is not more perfect than the same thing with all his parts perfect.

- One way to understand:
 - If God has limited my freedom, then I would have lost my highest perfection
 - Freedom goes in one piece: you cannot take parts of it without taking it out altogether
 - I am more perfect if I get the chance to choose the right thing to do than if I was doing it just by my nature.

In that sense, my infinite freedom, even if it may cause me to err, allows me to be responsible of my perfection – arguably a higher perfection than natural perfection of animals who do just what their nature dictates to do.

4.5.7 A definite method to true knowledge

- From the above, Descartes can deduce the “method”, literally the “road”, to certain knowledge:

Nor have I only learned today what I should avoid in order that I may not err, but also how I should act in order to arrive at a knowledge of the truth; for without doubt I shall arrive at this end if I devote my attention sufficiently to those things which I perfectly understand; and if I separate from these that which I only understand confusedly and with obscurity.

- Note that all depends on our will : we have to “firmly adhere to the resolution never to give judgment on matters whose truth is not clearly known to me”
- The main point is thus: I have now the means to discover all the truth that are within the reach of my understanding.