DRST 004: Directed Studies Philosophy
Professor Daniel Ferguson

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Isabel Arroyo

An Odyssey of Theodicy: Descartes' Journey from the Perfection of God to the Error of Man

by Isabel Arroyo '25

Descartes launches his Fourth Meditation with a review of the principles he claims to have demonstrated so far: that the human mind is a "thinking thing" lacking "extension;" that the mind is more distinctly perceived than corporeal things; that he himself is an "incomplete and dependent" being, plagued by doubts about the world; and that there is a being (God) that, unlike him, is independent and complete, and whose existence is substantiated by the very fact that Descartes conceives of him.[1] These premises will be accepted for the purposes of this essay, which will examine the internal soundness of Descartes theodicy[2]—i.e., his account of how humans can err when they were created by an "infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, supremely intelligent, [and] supremely powerful" God (36). Descartes' conclusion—that errors derive from humans' application of free will to matters about which they have not reached certainty with the intellect—is sound, and consistent with his starting premises. It withstands the objection that a perfect God would not have given people intellects that were exceeded by their wills. However, Descartes' component acknowledgement of his own uncertainty about the actions of God gives rise to a new and unaddressed objection to his fundamental claims about God's truthfulness—an objection which threatens to destabilize the certainty of "clear and distinct perception" upon which so much of the *Meditations* depends.

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[1] Cottingham, John, editor. *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy: Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*. 2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, 2017.
[2]Newman, L. (2019, February 15). *Descartes' epistemology*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved February 11, 2022, from https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-epistemology/#FourMediProoCaDRule

God cannot be a deceiver, Descartes asserts, because the "will to deceive" indicates "malice or weakness," and these are imperfections inconsistent with a perfect being (43). Descartes then looks inward and identifies in himself a "faculty of judgment." Because this faculty is "something," he concludes that he necessarily received it from God, the creator of all things (43). Since 1) God is not a deceiver and 2) his faculty of judgment comes from God, Descartes concludes that the faculty of judgment which he has received could not possibly lead him into error. This conclusion gives rise to the obvious objection that Descartes surely does err, because he is human and fallible. Descartes addresses this through an appeal to his own defectiveness—i.e., that while "what is in him" is indeed from God and therefore cannot be flawed, he is rendered error-prone by his limitations, which bring him close to "nothingness or non-being" (43). This account of substance and nothingness in the world—strongly reminiscent of Augustine's argumentation in *On Free Choice of the Will*—may be likened to a hole-riddled sweater made of good yarn: the material of which it is made is without fault, but the physical *lack of* or *limits on* its good substance make it imperfect. What is limited, in this case, is Descartes' intellect—the thing, he asserts, which is responsible for guiding him towards right action. Error arises when he uses his free will (which is not intrinsically bad) to make decisions about matters his intellect has not clearly understood.

Descartes attempts to explain why God would allow such a "privation" in Descartes' own knowledge—in other words, continuing with our earlier analogy of substance, why God, a perfect craftsman, would not craft a perfect creation (a wholly un-holey proverbial sweater; a being whose substance was not only good but also unlimited). Descartes answers these questions—the crux of his theodicy—with a two-fold explanation. 1) "It is no cause for surprise if I do not understand the reasons for some of God's actions" (44). 2) "What would perhaps

rightly appear very imperfect if it existed on its own is quite perfect when its function as a part of the universe is considered" (44). This twofold explanation satisfyingly resolves the theodical inquiry, but calls Descartes' initial assumption of God's truthfulness into question.

Taking Descartes' premises to be true, his first assertion that God cannot be "a deceiver" seems to make sense: if deception is indeed a sign of weakness or malice, it would not comport with the perfect nature of God to deceive Descartes. However, this assessment also seems to suggest that God is judged by a set of moral standards originating outside him. And as Descartes explains while addressing a different point in his *Replies*,

> "God did not will the creation of the world in time because he saw that it would be better this way than if he had created it from eternity; nor did he will that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise…*it is because he willed to create the world in time that it is better this way* [emphasis added] than if he had created it from eternity; and it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise…" (117)

For Descartes, God's actions do not align with rightness but rather define it. One could therefore object that if God did indeed deceive Descartes, his doing so would not be imperfect and therefore inconsistent with Descartes' understanding of him, because whatever God chose to do would be good by the very fact that he did it. Descartes would likely respond that the aversion to and condemnation of dishonesty which we find within ourselves is, like the idea of God, God-instilled, and therefore honesty is truly a characteristic of God. He might also note that dishonesty is closer to nothingness than to substance, and therefore contrary to a reality-based conception of God. Still, the question of whether God deceives is one we will return to shortly, once Descartes has given us cause to examine it further. For now, we accept God's honesty.

Descartes looks inward and finds that he has the capacity to make intellectual determinations about various questions. Considering that we have accepted the *cogito* as one of the premises for this theodical analysis, we may accept too that Descartes, in existing as a

thinking thing reflecting on the world around him, does indeed have a "faculty of judgment." If we accept that God is the creator of all things (a clear operating assumption for this Meditation, and expressed in the earlier quote from the *Objections*), and that a "faculty of judgment," though immaterial, is still a "thing," Descartes is secure in asserting that this faculty comes from God.

Descartes' progression from 'God is no deceiver' to 'the faculty which God gave me must reliably enable me to find the truth' might be objected to on the grounds that the former is a negative formulation and the latter a positive non sequitur. By analogy, if someone asked me for directions and I did not lie to them, this lack of dishonesty does not include my also giving them an accurate map to their destination. While this objection may have been valid if God gave humans no means to discover the truth, Descartes' possession of some faculty of judgment that does come from God means that a fundamental flaw in that faculty would indeed be tantamount to God lying—more analogous to my actually *giving* a lost person a faulty map—which is contrary to the honest nature of the being.

With the understanding that his faculty of judgment comes from God, Descartes appeals to his own "real and positive idea of God" and "negative idea of nothingness" (43). These ideas and associations do follow logically from his conception of God as a definitionally perfect creator of all things. By extension, his own imperfections' origin in something other than created substance, i.e. nothingness, is also sound. There is nothing wrong with Descartes, in other words, except that he is limited in certain ways, just as the holey sweater is imperfect not in its material but where it lacks material. That said, the co-existence of "limitation"—and the nothingness beyond the bounds of substance that it necessitates—in a philosophical universe with a God described as omnipresent, perfect, and real—is troubling (and beyond the scope of this paper).

Descartes' explanation for human error, which appeals to the disparity between the scope of the will and the scope of the intellect, is sound—the intellect is humanity's God-instilled roadmap for determining truth, which cannot be wrong in its substance unless God is a deceiver. The will, however, is unlimited, and we err when we "misuse" it to make judgments about "matters which [we] do not fully understand"—when we drive the proverbial car without the proverbial map (48). It remains to be explained why our wills have been created such that they may freely exceed our intellects, and Descartes rises to this challenge with his twofold formulation: that God's reasons are beyond him, and that sometimes things that appear imperfect are really part of a larger-scale "perfection." One might consider the cannibalistic mating rituals of praying mantises—brutal and apparently destructive in themselves, they result in nourishment for the next generation, which sustains the species. Descartes is honest: he does not know why a God capable of creating perfection instead created humans with this will-intellect disparity that permits them to introduce sin into the world, but his understanding of the nature of God allows him to assume that God had good reason to do so.

However, this resolution to the question of human error raises another problem: acknowledging our lack of understanding of God's actions casts doubt on the question of whether God ever deceives. Descartes' assertion that all deception is rooted in malice or weakness lies uneasily alongside his conviction that God has good reason to allow humans to err—it would not seem far-fetched for someone to assert that any admission of sin into the world must also be rooted in "malice" or "weakness." If God has unknowable reasons for creating humans imperfectly, perhaps he has reasons for deceiving people; for example, he may feasibly have created triangles such that their three angles do *not* add to two right angles, and then still made it that every human developed a faulty and absurd notion that they *do* add in this way. By

admitting that God may act unexpectedly, Descartes throws open the door to the possibility that God might deceive us for his own (presumably good) ends. This undermines the certainty that Descartes ascribed to the "intellect" by virtue of its having been created by God to augment human understanding. Going further, this challenges the entire validity of "clear and distinct perception," which relies on the perpetual truthfulness of God. The possibility of a lying God restores us to the state of dark doubt introduced with the Evil Demon in Meditation 1. Thus, while Descartes does give a sound explanation for the coexistence of divine perfection and human error, his acknowledgement of uncertainty about God's actions that arises in the process is unexpectedly but drastically destabilizing to any triumph over skepticism he was attempting.