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Descartes, *Meditations* V
(cf., *Discourse* IV, AT VI 36-39)

> when I first discover them, it seems I am not so much learning something new as discovering something I knew beforehand.
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> – Descartes, *Meditations* V

By the end of *Meditations* III, Descartes was satisfied that his errors could not be due to the work of a deceiver, but could only arise from some mistake on his own part. By the end of *Meditations* IV, he was confident he had identified the source of this mistake. God created him with limited understanding, but not defective understanding. Whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive must therefore be correct. But because of the understanding is limited, it does not clearly and distinctly perceive all truths. Error arises when, abusing our power of will, we make judgments in cases where have no clear and distinct perception. The cure for error is to instead use the power of will to refrain from judging in these cases.

The closest Descartes came to giving a definition of clear and distinct perception is in the following passage from his *Principles of philosophy*.

> I call a perception "clear" when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind — just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception "distinct" if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear.
> [*Principles* I 45, as translate in CSM 1: 207-8; AT VIIIa 21-22]

Provisionally, we can say that an idea is *clear* when it is present as a whole, *obscure* when it is present only in part or not easily distinguished from its surroundings (think, analogously of looking at an object that is partially obscured by other objects in front of it, and so is only seen obscurely). An idea is *distinct* when it is possible to form separate ideas of its individual parts or the simple natures that go to make it up, *confused* when the parts are muddled together or the simple natures have not been adequately attended to and distinguished from one another.

A judgment is justified when we can see one idea clearly or distinctly enough to find the other idea contained inside of it or see some larger, containing idea clearly or distinctly enough to find two or more ideas related to one another within the containing idea in the appropriate way.

Fortunately, we do not need to worry about making a higher-order judgment about whether a given judgment satisfies the criteria for being clearly and distinctly perceived — a situation that, were it to arise, would precipitate a vicious regress. This is because when a connection between ideas is as a matter of fact clearly and distinctly perceived, the understanding determines the will, so we are not able to do otherwise than judge accordingly. (Of course, we are still free in this case because we are judging in accord with what we understand to be the case, which is the intellectual analogue of doing what you want to do in the volitional case.) In the absence of clear and distinct perception, on the contrary, we always have the ability to refrain from judging either way. The difference between judging in accord with a clear and distinction on the part of the understanding and judging in accord with a mere natural impulse is therefore made clear by the fact that in the former case we cannot refrain from judging, whereas in the latter we can.

With this account of justified judgment in hand, Descartes turned back to the judgments he had called into doubt in *Meditations* I to see how many of them he could justify. This is a project that he undertook in the reverse order to the order in which those doubts were raised. *Meditations* I had induced doubt over two stages. The dreaming argument had called into question all of Descartes's beliefs about physical things and the sciences describing bodies supposed to exist in space outside of the mind, but it had not been able to cast doubt on those judgments Descartes made about relations between his own ideas. A more powerful (but also more extravagant) ground for doubt, the deceiver argument, had been employed to call his judgments about his ideas into doubt. Having established that there can be no deceiver, Descartes proceeded to consider what might be true in his beliefs about relations between ideas. Only after that did he turn to consider what might be true in his beliefs about physical things. The first of these investigations was undertaken in *Meditations* V, the second in *Meditations* VI.

In addition to rehabilitating the mathematical sciences, *Meditations* V undertakes two further tasks. It presents a further proof for the existence of God. Unlike the *a posteriori* proof of *Meditations* III, which starts from the fact that an idea of God exists in me or that I exist and inquires into the cause of this fact, this proof is an *a priori* proof, like the proofs given in mathematics. Descartes seems to have wanted to make the point that the existence of God can be demonstrated in the same way, and with the same degree of evidence, as any proposition of mathematics. This would answer those atheists who doubted the existence of God but still considered mathematical propositions to be beyond doubt.

The final task of *Meditations* V goes even further. Descartes wanted to claim that not only can the existence of God be proven in the same way as any truth of mathematics, it is more fundamental than any truth of mathematics. This is because a prior proof of the existence of God is a prerequisite for all other certainty, including certainty of the truths of mathematics.

QUESTIONS ON THE READING

1. Which ideas of things are distinct?
2. How is it that Descartes could say that my ideas of geometrical shapes are not made by me, even though I can imagine them on my own, and call them up or make them go away at will?
3. How did Descartes respond to the objection that I may have learned of geometrical shapes from sensory experience of similarly shaped objects, and that the reason why I seem to "remember" these shapes rather than to have produced them himself in my own imagination is that I am really just remembering something I have seen before?
4. Why, according to Descartes, can existence not be separated from the "essence" (i.e., the definition) of God?
5. How did Descartes respond to the objection that I might arbitrarily attach the idea of existence to the idea of God in my imagination, so that from the fact that I choose to make this connection, it in no way follows that the connection must be true and that God must exist?
6. How did Descartes respond to the objection that just because I cannot imagine God without attributing existence to him, it does not follow that God must exist because my thought imposes no necessity on things?
7. Supposing that the existence of God is not yet certain, under what circumstances would it be possible to doubt what one has clearly and distinctly perceived?

8. How is it that all demonstrations in mathematics might be said to rest on a prior demonstration of the existence of God?

NOTES ON THE READING

a. The reality of our ideas of extension and its modes. Descartes opened *Meditations* V by turning to the internal world of his ideas and asking which of them could be considered to be ideas of things that are "real" or positive. In asking this question he was not asking which of our ideas are of things that actually exist. For Descartes, the concepts of reality and actual existence are importantly distinct. Reality has to do with how things are described, that is, with the sorts of characteristics or qualities that are ascribed to things. Actuality has to do with whether things exist. Descartes shared the traditional notion that the qualities that are ascribed to things come in opposed pairs (e.g., bright and dark, hot and cold, light and heavy, moist and dry). One member of each pair is positive or real and the other is privative. Positive qualities are something whereas privative qualities are actually nothing — they arise from the absence of their positive counterparts. Consequently, things are can be more or less "real" depending on how many positive qualities they have. Reality, in this sense, has nothing to do with existence. Things that do not exist, like dragons or unicorns, can nonetheless have positive qualities (e.g., extension and motion). Things that do exist, like ice or earth, have privative qualities (e.g., coldness and darkness), can have privative qualities. There can be less "reality" (fewer positive qualities) possessed by some things that do exist than by other things that do not exist.

Note that as far as our ideas are concerned, existence is not in question. Just as I cannot doubt that I exist, so I cannot doubt that my ideas exist. Indeed, the two are one and the same, since for me to be aware of my existence just is for me to be aware of the thoughts or ideas that are within me.

However, we have already seen in *Meditations* III that the reality of our ideas is in question. Our ideas of sensible qualities are so obscure that we cannot tell for sure whether they are materially false ideas of privations or real ideas of positive qualities.

Descartes's first job in *Meditations* V was to prove that at least some of our ideas are unquestionably of real or positive things. These are our ideas of the extension of things and of the ways this extension can be modified. The idea of extension is the idea of a quantity rather than a quality of things. Specifically, it is the idea of being continuously spread out over three dimensions and being divisible into differently located parts with different sizes and shapes and states of motion or rest. (Number, location, size, shape, and motion are ways in which parts of extension are modified, or "modes" of extension.) These parts are in turn conceived to be capable of being carved up into yet smaller parts. Moreover, the shapes are clearly and distinctly perceived to have certain natures. Triangular shapes, for instance, must have internal angles equal to two right angles. Right angle triangles must have their hypotenuse equal in length to the square root of the sum of the squares of their sides. Figures formed by setting squares at right angles to one another cannot have more than six faces. No more than four points can be each equidistant from the other. There are many propositions like this — all the propositions of geometry. These propositions are known simply by perceiving what is contained in our ideas of different shapes.

Descartes made an odd remark concerning these judgments. He said that when I first discover them it seems I am not so much learning something new as recalling something I knew beforehand. The claim is reminiscent of Plato's assertion (e.g. in the *Meno*) that mathematical

truths are recollected from an experience had before birth when the soul, freed from the body, was able to perceive ideal geometrical shapes with the eyes of the mind alone. But despite a degree of affinity between Plato's views and Descartes's, Descartes likely had a different point in mind. When I remember something there is a sense in which it is up to me: I can choose which of my memories to remember and when to remember it. But there is also a sense in which remembering is not up to me: I cannot change the content of my memories, but can only remember things that actually happened to me in the past. Other things can be imagined, but not remembered. Descartes's point was similar, though not identical. While I can imagine ideas of this or that geometrical shape at will, and make them come or go, or exchange them for others, any particular shape I choose to imagine is imagined under constraints that are beyond my control, much as the content of my memories is beyond my control. There are properties of geometrical shapes that I cannot alter. A triangle must have its longest side opposite its largest angle, must have at least two acute angles, and must have internal angles that are equal to two right angles. A cube must have six faces. Given four equidistant points, there cannot be anywhere where a fifth point could be placed that is equidistant from each of the other four. Some of these features may be features that I have never used my understanding to clearly and distinctly perceive, but when I do once perceive them, even for the first time, I do not have the feeling that I have put them into the triangle, but instead think that the feature was present, unnoticed, in all the triangles I thought of in the past. This is another sense in which I seem to be "remembering" rather than perceiving these features.

Of course, this raises a question: might I really be remembering? That is, might I originally have obtained my ideas of extension and shapes by sensing extended and shaped objects, so that the reason why these ideas appear a certain way to me now is just that I am remembering them as they originally were? Descartes rejected this possibility on the ground that we are able to imagine geometrical shapes we are sure we have never seen before, but these shapes, too, have certain essential features that we cannot alter.

These reflections led Descartes to conclude that, despite the fact that there may be no extended things existing outside of us, our ideas of these things have a real and unchangeable nature that is independent of us. While I can make my ideas of triangles come and go, I cannot make an idea of a right angle triangle with a hypotenuse that is greater or lesser in length than the square root of the sum of the squares of the lengths of its sides. This feature of triangles is not up to me to determine and beyond my control to alter. Consequently, the Pythagorean theorem, which expresses this feature, states something real and true and not merely something fanciful. And the same may be said of all the other propositions of geometry and arithmetic. But nothingness or a privation of reality cannot constrain my thought to take on a certain form. Only something real can do that. Thus, our ideas of extension and its modes must be ideas of something that is positive and real. They cannot be materially false ideas of nothing or of a privation of reality.

Again, this is not to say that extended things must exist. Though the ideas of extension are of a quality that is positive and real, it remains a question whether there is anything that possesses this positive quality. We can, however, affirm that extended things are at least possible. Since extension is a real quality, the existence of extended things would be an existence of something real and not of nothing at all. However, it is only in *Meditations* VI that considerations are brought forward to establish that extended things are more than merely possible.

b. The ontological argument for the existence of God. At this point, Descartes paused to observe that there is one case where inspection of the content of his ideas can establish the actual existence of an object corresponding to that idea. This is the case of the idea of God. Our idea of God is the idea of a supremely perfect being. But, according to Descartes, existence adds to the perfection of a thing. This is proven by the fact that, if you were offered a choice between having ten actually existing dollars and ten imaginary dollars, you would choose the actually existing ones. Your preference for the actually existing ones proves that existence adds to the perfection of a thing. Consequently, were God to lack existence, God would be less than supremely perfect, which is contrary to what the idea of God tells us. We must conclude, therefore, that our idea of God is the idea of an existing thing. Existence is as inseparable from our idea of God as having internal angles equal to two right angles is from our idea of a triangle, and is demonstrable in the same way: by clearly and distinctly perceiving what is contained in the idea. Were God not to exist, our idea of God would be false (since it represents God as existing), and we know that nothing that we clearly and distinctly perceive could turn out to be false.

Descartes proceeded to raise and answer three objections to this argument. The first is that, as he put it, questions concerning the existence of a thing are distinct from questions concerning its "essence" or definition. We can define an idea as we will — or as we clearly and distinctly perceive it to be — but it still remains a question whether anything exists that corresponds to the idea as thus defined. When defining a thing we list the real features or qualities that it has to possess in order to be that sort of thing. But — as has been said all along — existence is not a real feature or quality. Saying that something exists does not add to the reality of the thing being defined or make it a different kind of thing, as if an existing dragon were a different species of thing from a non-existing dragon, the way a rational animal is a different species from an irrational animal. When we say that something exists we are merely adding the information that there is an object in the world that corresponds to the idea; we are not listing any real quality of the idea itself. As Immanuel Kant was later to put it, ten existing dollars does not contain one penny more than ten possible dollars. If we prefer the one to the other, it is not because the one is greater or more perfect in any way, but only because we know that the one has a partner in the external world as well as being a mere idea in the mind.

Descartes's response to this objection was to dig in his heels and insist that existence nonetheless adds to the perfection of a thing. We only think it does not because in most (and perhaps all) other cases existence is not part of the essence of the thing. This has made us accustomed to think that existence is not a perfection. But we discover the error of this customary impulse when we consider the idea of an all perfect being, since in that case a clear and distinct perception on the part of the understanding compels the will to assert that, since existence is a perfection, a supremely perfect being must exist.

A second objection is that our thoughts impose no necessity on things. So simply because we conceive of a certain idea, it does not follow that anything must exist corresponding to that idea. As one of the objectors to an earlier version of Descartes's argument put it, I can conceive of a supremely perfect island. But it does not follow that any island has to exist.

Descartes's response to this objection was to admit that our thought imposes no necessity on things, and that simply because we *do* conceive of something as being a certain way, it does not follow that anything must exist that actually is that way. But, he proceeded to observe, in the case of the idea of a supremely perfect being I *must* conceive of existence as one of the attributes

of the being. This is not something that is up to my choice, just is it is not up to my choice to conceive of a triangle that has internal angles that sum to anything other than two right angles. In both of these cases, far from it being the case that my thought imposes a necessity on things, the nature of the things imposes a necessity on my thought, which compels my idea to take on a certain form.

The counterexample of the supremely perfect island does not work because that conception is self-contradictory. To be an island is to be surrounded by water, which means being only finitely extended. That already means being less than supremely perfect. An island is also just a clump of earth, lacking powers of vegetation, growth, nutrition, reproduction, self-movement, sensation, reasoning, memory, etc. So there are a great many ways in which an island is imperfect. That makes the idea of a supremely perfect island maximally confused — self-contradictory. If we modify the example by adding perfections to the idea of the island, it stops being an idea of an island and becomes the idea of God. It is only when we consider the idea of a being that is *supremely* perfect (and there can only be one such being) that we find a reason to assert existence. In all other cases, where the thing we conceive is thought to lack some perfection or other, a further reason would have to be given why that being should not also lack the perfection of existence.

A final objection is that the idea of a supremely perfect being might be like the idea of a supremely perfect island — it might be an obscure or incoherent idea to which nothing can correspond. Existence only follows from the idea of God because we have verbally included something in the idea (supreme perfection) that necessarily entails existence. But we need not and perhaps ought not to have defined the idea that way. Similarly, were we to define a four sided figure as a figure that can be inscribed in a circle, it would necessarily follow from the definition that a rhombus must be a figure that can be inscribed in a circle. But that is wrong, which goes to show that the idea was obscure and incorrectly formed.

Descartes's response to this objection was to remark that when I form an obscure or incoherent idea, I am not constrained to form the idea in any particular way. But while it is up to me to think of a supremely perfect being or not, when I do think of this idea, I am constrained to conceive of it as an idea of something that exists. Similarly, while it is up to me to think of a triangle or not, when I do think of this idea, I am constrained to conceive of it as an idea of something that has internal angles equal to two right angles. In the case of the four sided figures, I am so far from being constrained to conceive them as all being such that they can be inscribed in a circle that I am on the contrary constrained to conceive counterexamples to that claim, and so clearly and distinctly conceive that it must be false.

It seems strange that Descartes should have suddenly detoured to offer yet another argument, his third, for the existence of God. One consideration that may have motivated him to return to this topic is that his proofs of God's existence in *Meditations* III are proofs of a quite different sort from the one he offered here. The *Meditations* III proofs are what can be called *a posteriori* proofs or proofs "after the fact." In an *a posteriori* proof, the conclusion is established only after the fact of the existence of some other thing has first been established. Thus, in *Meditations* III, Descartes first needed to establish the existence of an idea of an infinitely perfect being, or the existence of himself as a thinking thing, before he could prove that God must exist. The *Meditations* V proof, in contrast, like all the proofs in geometry, is an *a priori* proof or a proof "in advance of the facts." In an *a priori* proof one does not first need to establish that anything else exists. One proceeds merely by analyzing or defining or, as

Descartes would have preferred to put it, clearly and distinctly perceiving what is contained in the idea of a thing, and the analysis alone reveals the truth one is seeking. This is of course the method of proof that *Meditations* IV recommends as the way to uncover the truth, and Descartes may have been concerned to prove that such an important proposition as that of the existence of God can itself by proven by the method, and not merely by *a posteriori* means. He may also have wanted to insinuate that whatever doubts might be raised concerning his arguments for the existence of God in *Meditations* III, anyone who is willing to accept proofs in geometry ought by the same token to accept this proof, which is based the same kind of analysis of ideas.

c. The rehabilitation of the mathematical sciences. Indeed, Descartes took the proof of God's existence to not only be as certain as any other proof in geometry or mathematics, but to be foundational for all of those proofs. We might think that, if we know that the ideas of extension and its modes are real and true, then whatever we can clearly and distinctly perceive about those ideas, as codified in the mathematical sciences, would constitute an independent body of absolutely certain truths. But Descartes claimed that the proof of God's existence underwrites our certainty of all other demonstrative proofs in the mathematical sciences, so that were this important point not established in advance our certainty would be limited and incomplete.

To justify this claim, Descartes observed that the certainty produced by clear and distinct perception is transitory. It exists only for as long as the understanding is actually engaged in contemplating the particular ideas involved in the judgment in question. Under those conditions the understanding determines the will and we must judge accordingly. But when the understanding turns to contemplate other things, the will is no longer determined. In the absence of a continued determination of the will, and in the absence of a proof of the existence of God, doubts can creep in. We can note that we have made mistakes in calculation in the past and worry that we might just have made another one. Or we can worry that an evil genius might be deceiving us. Admittedly, these worries can be removed by returning to clearly and distinctly perceive the relation between the ideas involved in the judgment, which will produce an irresistible conviction, given that the understanding determines the will. However, this puts us in a difficult situation. The only way to preserve certainty is to constantly return to old proofs and contemplate them again, and the instant we turn to something else, doubt returns. Consequently, we end up being able to be certain of only a very few things: as many as we can manage to clearly and distinctly perceive at once. Worse, anything that can only be known by means of a long proof, requiring many steps or an appeal back to results established earlier, ends up being indemonstrable. No complex proposition is provable.

Descartes maintained that the proof of the existence of God removes us from this predicament. Once we have clearly and distinctly perceived that God exists, and have understood how far error on our part is compatible with God's nature, we appreciate that God would not permit us to be mistaken about what we clearly and distinctly perceive, and would not allow any other being to trick us into thinking that we clearly and distinctly perceive something when we do not in fact do so. God may allow other beings to tempt us into error, but never about things that are clearly and distinctly perceived. And we ourselves may occasionally make errors in calculation, but as long as we are careful to frequently check our proofs we can trust that we will uncover the mistake. According to Descartes, this removes our doubts and allows us to be certain of the conclusions of demonstrations, even when we are not currently engaged in

clearly and distinctly perceiving them. All we need to do is remember that we clearly and distinctly perceived these matters in the past.

We might wonder about the efficacy of this solution. My certainty about some truth that I do not now clearly and distinctly perceive, such as that 786 x 13 = 10,218, is only as good as my memory that I did previously clearly and distinctly perceive this conclusion. But remembering that one has clearly and distinctly perceived something is not the same thing as clearly and distinctly perceiving it. Such memories can be mistaken. Indeed, we might speculate that when we make mistakes in simple sums, such as supposing that 7+5=13, this is always because we misremember what we clearly and distinctly perceived to be the case at some time in the past. Were Descartes to take things so far as to say that the goodness of God would never allow my memory to mislead me about what I have clearly and distinctly perceived he would be making a claim that is hard to accept, because I now remember that my memory has deceived me about arithmetical sums. If I am wrong about that, then my memory is *now* deceiving me. If I am not wrong, then it has indeed deceived me in the past. Either way it seems that my memory is untrustworthy.

A possible answer to this objection (though not one that Descartes himself offered in *Meditations* V) would appeal to the fourth rule of the method of *Discourse* II. Recall that rule four stipulates that we must make frequent reviews of our work. Remembering having performed a proof is not enough. We need to go back and perform the proof repeatedly. This could conceivably involve writing parts of the proof down and then reviewing those notes, considering them as a list of what steps we performed in what order. If, after repeated runs through the proof, we remain unable to discover any error, then we can recall (or prove once again) that God would not allow us to be deceived about any matter without having given us some capacity to discover our error. But beyond reviewing a proof over and over again, and using notes and other aids to our memory, there is nothing more we can do to assure ourselves of the correctness of a proof. So were we to still be convinced after frequent reviews of the proof, we can be assured that we would have done all we could to uncover a mistake in calculation or an error in remembering earlier steps, and we could think that the goodness of God would guarantee that the proof must be correct. (For an attempt to defend Descartes along these lines see John Cottingham, *Descartes* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1986], 71-72.)

But I do not see that this attempt to defend Descartes really gets around the objection that Descartes placed too much weight on the reliability of memory. Even if I make frequent reviews of my work, I still need to remember that I did so, and even if I take down notes, I need to remember that those notes are mine. I could merely dream that I performed the proof over and over again when in fact I did no such thing, and if I am now dreaming when I look at my notes, those notes may not actually record a previous effort at doing the proof.

There is another way of understanding Descartes's attempt to justify permanent certainty in the results of a demonstration. On this interpretation the problem Descartes was addressing was not the problem of how I can *now* be certain of matters I only clearly and distinctly perceived in the past. It was the subtly different problem of how, supposing that I did clearly and distinctly perceive something in the past, I can now be certain that that perception was true. This problem arises because now my understanding is not determining my will. That fact allows me to think of things like demon deceivers and my own past history of mistakes and so doubt that I got things right even granting that I did in fact have a clear and distinct perception at the time. It is this doubt that the proof of the existence of God removes. The proof of the existence of God

allows me to be assured that *if* my memory is informing me correctly and I did in fact have a clear and distinct perception in the past, then what I perceived must be true.

To sum up, I have presented two alternative interpretations of Descartes's attempt to justify permanent certainty of the results of demonstrations:

1. The false memory interpretation: When I am not clearly and distinctly perceiving something, I need to rely on my memory to assure me that I did clearly and distinctly perceive it. The proof of the existence of God assures me that these memories would not be mistaken, particularly if they include memories of repeated proof-checking and note-taking.

2. The hypothetical assurance interpretation: When I am not clearly and distinctly perceiving something, I can think of two reasons for doubting it to be true, even granting that I did in fact clearly and distinctly perceive that thing (the demon deceiver and my history of mistaken calculations). My certitude of the existence of God assures me that neither of those reasons is valid and so puts me in a position to that *if* I did in fact have a clear and distinct perception at the time, that perception could not be mistaken.

The main problem with the false memory interpretation is that it can't answer doubts arising from higher-order applications of appeals to false memory (memories of having had false memories) or the dreaming argument (dreaming that I remember or took notes). But there are also problems with the hypothetical assurance interpretation: One is that it does not address the problem of being able to doubt a conclusion when not clearly and distinctly perceiving it. The other is that in many places Descartes's text seems to suggest that the proof of the existence of God allows me to extend certainty from what I clearly and distinctly perceive to what I merely remember having clearly and distinctly perceived.

An answer to the second of these problems is that, even if correct, it means that the hypothetical assurance interpretation ought to be put forward as a position on what Descartes ought to have said, because what he did say (supposing that the false memory interpretation is correct) is simply unsupportable. But giving that answer requires having to say something to say about the first problem. The thing to say is suggested by the last sentence of the *Meditations*: "But because the need to get things done does not always permit us the leisure for such a careful inquiry, we must confess that the life of man is apt to commit errors regarding particular things, and we must acknowledge the infirmity of our nature."

A great deal of emphasis is often placed on the claim that Descartes was an arch-foundationalist, who sought to rest all knowledge on a basis of absolute certainty. As a matter of fact (and as will be seen in more detail when we turn to Cartesian science) this picture is seriously mistaken. Descartes's *Meditations* were meditations on *first* philosophy. ("First philosophy" is another name for metaphysics or the science that precedes physics.) The quest for certainty was a quest that Descartes only for a limited time and for a limited reason. He wanted to be sure of the most general principles. But, having established general principles, he was content to be less than certain about specifics and particular things. Indeed, on certain matters he was convinced that certainty is impossible and that we will never be able to do more than make conjectures. On the reading I would favour, Descartes would not have been distressed by the possibility that we might not be certain of the result of any complex demonstration because it would involve a reliance on memory of what has been clearly and distinctly perceived in the past. His response to such a situation would have been to say that in such cases we simply do our best and hope we get it right. We do not need to be absolutely certain that we have not been deceived. The fallible certainty that comes from having reviewed the proof a number of times

over is good enough. It is sufficient that we be absolutely certain just of the most fundamental things, such as that we could not be systematically deceived or mistaken about even the simplest and most fundamental things, such as the existence of God and the reality of extension.

ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. Do a comparative study of the employment of the notions of clarity/obscurity and distinctness/confusion by philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries (in addition to Descartes, important figures to consider include Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, and Leibniz, as well as the authors of seventeenth century logic textbooks that discuss these notions). Attempt to identify any significant divergences in the way these notions are understood. Look also at accounts of immediate or intuitive knowledge as they appear in the works of these authors and attempt to ascertain any connection there might be between the notion of clear and distinct perception and the notion of intuitive knowledge. Is it the case, for example, that clear and distinct perception simply consists in seeing one idea analytically contained inside of another and that it is this direct perception of containment that constitutes intuitive knowledge?
2. Assess the adequacy of Descartes's attempt to defend his ontological argument for the existence of God against the objections he himself raises to that argument. Consider whether there are any other, more serious objections he fails to consider and then consider whether he could also answer those objections.
3. Based on a survey of Descartes's remarks in the *Meditations, Replies to objections to the Meditations, Principles of philosophy* Part I, and in his correspondence, try to determine exactly what his position was on why we need to be assured of the existence of God in order to know other things, and what those other things are. Do I need to be assured of the existence of God before I can know any of the things I clearly and distinctly perceive, including my own existence, or just some of these things? Or is it rather the case that I need to be assured of the existence of God before Ie can be assured of the conclusion of a demonstration, but not of the truth of those things that I clearly and distinctly perceive without the assistance of a demonstration? Or is it just the case that Ie only need to be assured of the existence of God before I can be assured of the conclusions of demonstrations I am not now contemplating, but only remember having performed and clearly and distinctly perceived?
4. How serious is the following objection: At the close of *Meditations* V, Descartes claimed that a proof of the existence of God puts us in a position to rely on the memory of having clearly and distinctly perceived or demonstrated a truth. But, unlike clear and distinct perception, which is an act of the understanding that can arguably be considered to be infallible, remembering is an act of memory, and we know from experience that our memories are unreliable and can often perceive us. Moreover, the argument of *Meditations* IV does nothing to establish the reliability of memory (it only establishes the reliability of clear and distinct perception). Since we have good reason to doubt the reliability of memory, we still cannot rely on the truth of demonstrations that we only remember having performed, Descartes's proof of the existence of God notwithstanding. Could Descartes have replied to this objection? If so, how? If not, might he still have been able to go on to say everything he did in *Meditations* VI or would his other conclusions be put in jeopardy?

5. Does anything that Descartes had to say in *Meditations* V help to answer the objection that there is a circularity in his demonstration of the existence of God in *Meditations* III?
6. How does the *Meditations* V argument for the existence of God differ from the *Meditations* III argument? Why is the *Meditations* V argument necessary? Might it just as well have been given in *Meditations* III or is there something about the *Meditations* V argument that makes it dependent on the results of *Meditations* IV? Is the *Meditations* III argument any less dependent on the conclusions of *Meditations* IV than the *Meditations* V argument?