



MEDITATION IV

THE SOURCE OF
OUR ERRORS

REVIEW



So far, Descartes thinks he has established that he exists, that he is a thinking thing (i.e. an immaterial mind), that God must exist (Meditation III), and that God isn't a deceiver.



Given that he's established something outside of his own mind, Descartes now "can see a way forward to knowledge of other things" (42).



PROBLEM: WHY DO WE MAKE ERRORS THEN?

Recall that the entire project of Descartes is motivated by attempting to find a certain foundation for science after it turned out that Aristotelianism was so badly wrong.

If God isn't a deceiver, how is it possible that people had an incorrect view of something as basic as the relationship of the Sun and the Earth for hundreds of years?


Recall also that Aristotelianism agrees with our everyday "common sense" observations— a rock falls "down" when we drop it, fire "rises," etc.

THE FACULTY OF JUDGEMENT

A “judgment” here is roughly a *decision* about the truth or falsity of some statement or proposition.



Since this power comes from God according to Descartes, and because God isn't a deceiver “he surely did not give me the kind of faculty which would ever enable me to go wrong while using it correctly.” (43)



THE FACULTY OF THE INTELLECT

The “intellect” here is roughly equivalent to our minds in general, that is, our general capacity to think.

As have already seen, includes our perceptions. That is, our perceptions (of say a rock or a tree) are activities of *thought* or the intellect.

THE INTELLECT ITSELF IS NOT THE SOURCE OF ERRORS

“All that the intellect does is to enable me to perceive the ideas which are subjects for possible judgments” (45)

In the French edition, Descartes added: “All that the intellect does is to enable me to perceive, without affirming or denying anything, the ideas which are subjects for possible judgments”

PERCEPTIONS “IN THEMSELVES”



Notice that perceptions *as perceptions* cannot be true or false. They are just what they are.



If I'm having a perception of tree, then I'm having a perception. The perception might not *correspond* to an actual tree out there, it might be that I am dreaming, etc. but strictly speaking the perception itself is neither true nor false, it just is a perception.



SO, IT MUST BE OUR FACULTY OF JUDGEMENT IS FAULTY

No, says Descartes— we can make decisions about things just fine.

“From these considerations I perceive that the power of willing which I received from God is not, when considered in itself, the cause of my mistakes. For it is both extremely ample and also perfect of its kind ...” (46)

SO WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF OUR ERRORS



The intellect works fine, and judgement works fine, so why do we make mistakes and get things wrong about the world?



“So what then is the source of my mistakes? It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do understand.” (46)

LIMITING THE SCOPE OF JUDGEMENTS

So we *can* make decisions about the truth or falsity of propositions without having *enough information*. Here's where we make mistakes.

Consider for example, the following proposition-

“The number of stars in the universe right now is odd.”

Now, notice, first of all, we *understand* this proposition just fine. Second, you *could* decide that this was true or false, say, suppose you believed some whacky theory about astrology or something. But clearly you *shouldn't* decide about the truth of this proposition.

WITHHOLDING JUDGEMENTS

We ought then refrain from making judgements about the truth or falsity of propositions “in cases where the intellect is wholly ignorant” and also in “every case where the intellect does not have *sufficiently clear knowledge* at the time the will deliberates.” (47)

“If, however, I simply refrain from making a judgement in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly.” (47)

THE NEW FOUNDATION OF SCIENCE

Aristotelianism proceeded from certainty to certainty (except, Aristotle says, in matters which are imprecise, like ethics!).

As we suggested, this was the problem for the Catholic Church with the Copernican Revolution—it wasn't so much that they weren't open to science, it was that Aristotle *could not be wrong*. This was simply *impossible*.

But clearly, science had made Aristotelian science make commitments to ideas about the world that it shouldn't have.

THE NEW FOUNDATION FOR SCIENCE- DOUBT



Today, science works differently. While in popular imagination it might be that we view scientists as telling us the “fundamental truths of the world” they themselves might view things differently (or at least they ought to!)



Our scientific theories are our “best explanations” of the data. This doesn’t mean that we think they couldn’t be wrong. In fact, the more we discover, the more we figure out how little we actually know.

WHAT CAN WE KNOW?

So it looks like we might be able to know with confidence things about the *a priori*— say math, logic, etc.

What about *a posteriori* matters? Descartes still has to establish that there are material objects that are the source of our ideas about them (trees, rocks, etc.) we'll get back to this.

But suppose that we can establish that there are material objects out there. How *much* can we say about the world that we observe with certainty? When it comes to the “fundamental nature” of material stuff (i.e. physics!) our new way of proceeding will be to realize that we just aren't certain, and therefore our theories function not as Aristotelian truths, but rather as our best working theories.