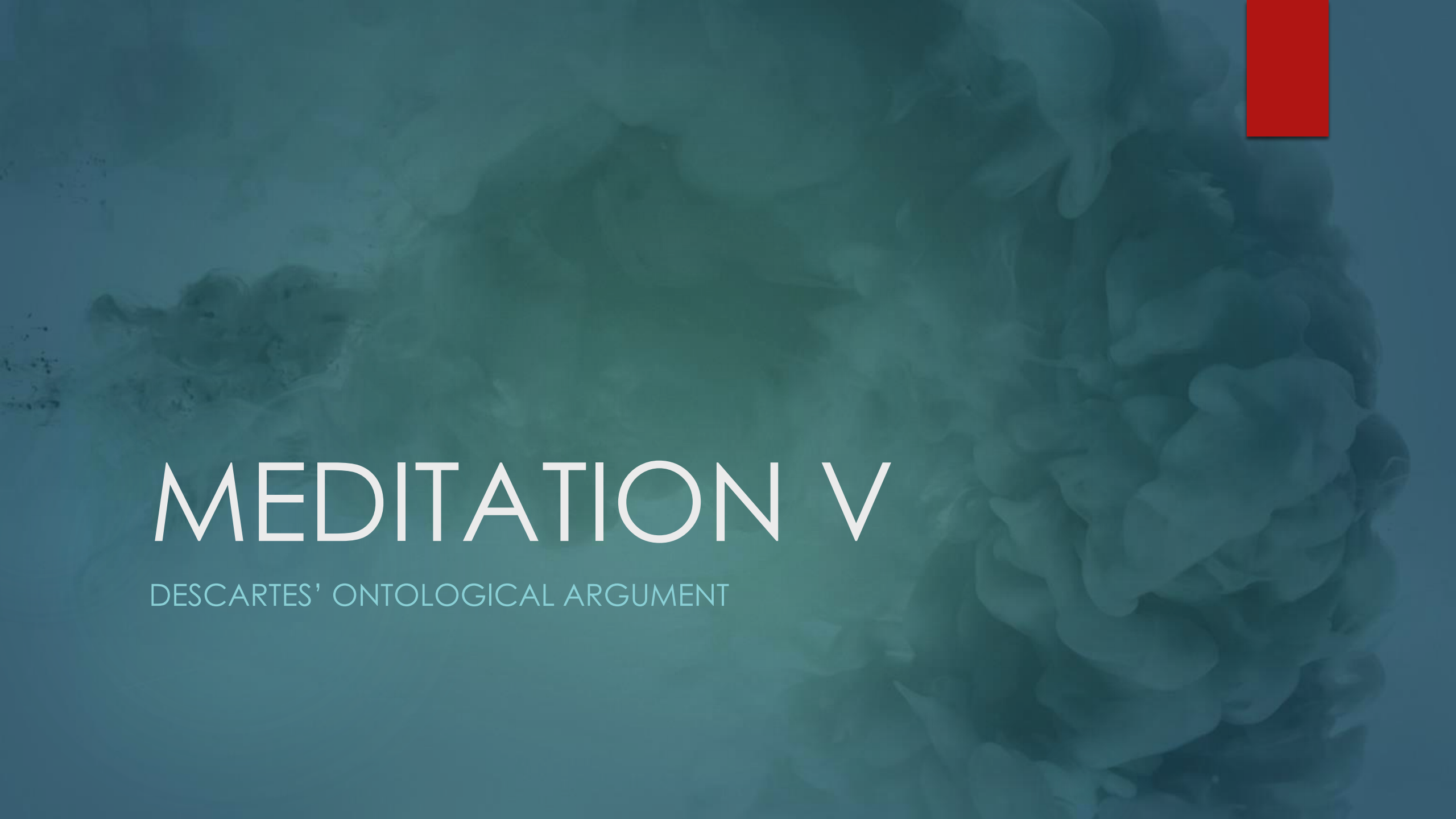




MEDITATION V

DESCARTES' ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Material objects

Now that he knows how to avoid errors (i.e. by withholding judgment in cases where we do not have enough information) Descartes returns to the subject of material objects.

Do these objects exist outside of our own minds?
If so, what are they like?

The *a priori*



Recall that at the end of Meditation III, the “Great Deceiver” argument is dismissed.



So some of our ideas about material objects are “clear and distinct” and some of them are “confused” (50).



Which ones are “clear and distinct”?



It looks like the *a priori* qualities are such that we could not have invented them– i.e. they have a “determinate nature”.



(Again, recall that Descartes doesn’t actually use the term “*a priori*”!)

Example: A triangle



The *geometrical* qualities of a triangle appear to be independent of our own minds.



For example, the interior sum of the angles of a triangle on a plane is 180 degrees, a triangle cannot have more than one angle greater or equal to 90 degrees, a triangle has three sides, etc.

What about my idea of God?

Does the idea of God have any *a priori* features? If so, I will know them with certainty.

Here, Descartes gives another argument for the existence of God- a version of the *ontological argument*.



St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Gives an ontological argument for the existence of God in the *Proslogion*

A summary of the argument:

- (1) God is the greatest being which can be thought of.
- (2) If the being that you are thinking of in (1) doesn't exist, then there is an even *greater* being to think about, namely a being which has every quality that the being in (1) has, plus existence.
- (3) Therefore, God necessarily exists (from 1 and 2).

Descartes' version of the argument

The idea of God
includes every
perfection.



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graph TD; A[The idea of God includes every perfection.] --> B[Existence is a perfection.]; B --> C[God necessarily exists.];
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The diagram consists of three colored rectangular boxes arranged vertically, connected by downward-pointing arrows. The top box is orange, the middle is yellow, and the bottom is green. A red vertical bar is located in the top right corner of the slide.

Existence is a
perfection.

God necessarily
exists.

Objection 1: The greatest possible island

Guanilo, a Benedictine monk and contemporary of Anselm, wrote an objection to Anselm's argument in which he argued that we could apply the same logic to lots of different things, like the "greatest possible island you can think about must exist."

Descartes considers a similar objection. (52).

In both cases, the reply that this argument only applies to the idea of God, because God is the "greatest possible thing one can think about".

Objection 2: Existence is not a Property

This objection comes from Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

So consider the statement "Santa Claus does not exist."

Does this mean that there are lots of *actual* properties Santa Claus has, like Santa Claus is jolly, lives at the North Pole, brings toys to all the children, etc. but *oh right* there is just the small matter that he fails to have the property of "existence"?

Of course not. Santa Claus* *has no properties whatsoever* because he doesn't exist.

So saying of something that "it exists" isn't really an informative proposition, because it doesn't contain any information.

*So what is the function of **Santa Claus** here? Hmm ... Well, it looks like an "empty name". What, if anything does it refer to then? This is a difficult problem; one possible solution is that it doesn't refer to anything, and the sentence is incomplete (i.e. it doesn't have a subject).

The Cartesian Circle

At the end of Meditation V, it looks like Descartes gets himself into a bit of trouble.

“Now, however, I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver; and I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is true.” (55)

Hey, wait a minute ...

The Cartesian Circle



“Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge about anything else until I became aware of him.” (55)

The story so far

- ▶ “And now it is possible for me to achieve full and certain knowledge of countless matters, both concerning God himself and other things whose nature is intellectual, and also concerning the whole of that corporeal nature which is the subject matter of pure mathematics.” (56)
- ▶ So, we know lots of things about mental substance and ideas. When it comes to material substance, we can know some things at this point, namely all those things having to do with *a priori* characteristics of objects, i.e. (from the French edition): “which belong to corporeal nature in so far as it can serve as the object of geometrical demonstrations which have no concern with whether that object exists.” (56).
- ▶ Can we go any farther than this into the material world? Meditation VI begins: “It remains for me to examine whether material things exist.” (57).