Descartes 4: The Fifth Meditation

Recap: last time we found that Descartes in the 3rd Meditation set out to provide so grounds for thinking that God exists, grounds that would answer the charge that the invocation of God earlier in the 1st Meditation was a mere reference to a possible hypothesis. The arguments that he gave in the 3rd Meditation revolved essentially around causal considerations and so were forms of what we generally call the “cosmological” argument for the existence of God. The 4th Meditation, which we will not specifically discuss, is devoted to further considerations about the nature of truth, another topic that was discussed in the 3rd Meditation where we learned that the types of thoughts that are capable of being true or false are judgments, not images. The discussion in the 4th Meditation concerns some technical aspects of what Descartes understands by “judgment” but the key point to emphasize as emerging from its discussion is the methodological rule that we shall reach the truth if only we give sufficient attention to the things which we perfectly understand and separate these things from whose where we are confused or where there are elements of our thoughts that are obscure.

The Fifth Meditation opens with a reminder that he has now grasped what has to be attended to in order to reach the truth and he considers now two questions, one concerning the essence of material things and another a further reason for thinking that God exists. The understanding of material things is carried out here by considering the elements of our thoughts.
concerning them which are distinct and separating these elements from those which are obscure. The basic element of my thought concerning material things that Descartes takes to be distinct is that everything material has a quantity of length, breadth and depth. This point is then linked to the analysis that material things have parts and that we understand these parts as having sizes, shapes and position and as having motions which take up various durations.

These distinct thoughts concerning material things are general truths that are distinguished by Descartes from specific truths. The latter concern the ways in which different material things are manifested or different ways that they appear to me. This analysis of my ideas of material things is one which does not yet commit me to the view that the material things in question actually exist externally to me in the way in which they appear to me to be. However whilst I do not yet have a clear reason for thinking this to be the case what I can say about the distinct ideas I possess concerning material things is that these ideas are “not nothing” even though they may not correctly describe anything that exists. What Descartes means by this claim is that the distinct ideas I possess of material things are not invented by me even should it be the case that nothing like what they describe were to exist. In order to illustrate this point he moves away now from considering material things in general in order to attend to certain specific qualities of certain things and the things in question that he considers are geometrical objects. Hence Descartes considers a triangle and says of it that
even should there be no such object in existence there would still be a determinable nature that would belong to the triangle. This is as much as to say that the triangle has an *essence* regardless of whether or not it has an *existence*.

That the triangle has such an essence can be seen in the fact that various truths undoubtedly appertain to it. That three angles equal two right angles for example will also be something we can clearly see to be the case even if there are no such things as angles. Since this is so the truths we can assert of the bodies that we conceive of as triangular are truths due to their distinct nature alone, not due to some dependence on anything sensory or merely given to us in possibly deceptive appearances. To the suggestion that we may have seen such things as triangles and in fact be basing our statements implicitly on these acts of perception Descartes replies that in any case geometry throws up several objects that we not only have not seen but would never come across by means of sensory inputs and yet the truths concerning them are reached by the same methods as those concerning triangles. So if the mind clearly perceives certain things, then the very fact of this clear mental perception is itself a criterion of the truth of what is thus perceived. Since such clear mental perception evidently attaches to geometrical truths then the assumption that I had before embarking on the path of doubt that these truths were more certain than others is correct.

Having reached this point Descartes next considers whether the fact that my thought produces the idea of something that is clear and distinct
such that we can see that the properties thus produced must belong to the object to which we have connected them can also be used to give another argument for the existence of God. The idea of God thus has to be examined as we have just been examining the nature of material bodies. In examining the idea of God we have to work out what belongs to this idea on the basis of our clear and distinct perception just as we did with regard to geometrical objects as a specific example of material bodies. What Descartes begins by suggesting here is that it is a clear and distinct mental perception of the idea of God that part of his nature is to exist and that this mental perception is on the same level of certainty as his conviction of the truths of mathematics.

The problem that has to be addressed here however is that we normally consider the essence of something to be distinct from its existence. Due to the fact that this is our normal habit we easily extend it to our consideration of the idea of God and so think that we can consider the object of this idea as something that either does not or need not exist. At this point Descartes has recourse to the point made in the 4th Meditation that we should give sufficient attention to the things we perfectly understand and separate them from what appears to us to be doubtful if we are to reach the truth. So he concentrates more carefully on the idea of God and states that it is “evident” that existence can no more be separated from its essence than the fact that three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle. Another connection mentioned is that just as we cannot separate the idea of a mountain from that of a valley so we cannot
separate the essence of God from his existence. In mentioning this second comparison Descartes clarifies the nature of his claim here. The reason we cannot separate the essence of God from his existence, it is now claimed, is because the idea of God is the idea of a supremely perfect being and if we were to separate this idea from existence then we would be separating it from a perfection.

At this point however Descartes considers a possible objection to the argument that has been given (the argument is the “ontological argument”). This objection is that whilst it be right to say that I cannot think God except as existing just as I cannot think of a mountain without a valley that this comparison also reveals a problem. The problem would be that whilst the idea of a mountain is necessarily connected to that of a valley that this connection is itself not sufficient to show us that any such things as mountains or valleys exist. Likewise whilst the idea of God may be connected to the idea of existence in some necessary way it still does not follow that just because of this that God exists. The objection also mentions that we seem capable of having imaginary ideas such as horses that have wings without these ideas leading us to think that the objects of them must exist.

To this objection Descartes replies that with imaginary ideas we can freely separate the elements that we have joined together. So we can easily imagine a horse with or without wings but we cannot so easily conceive of God except as existing. To the objection that this seems to depend on the
view that my thought has made something necessary Descartes denies this, drawing here implicitly on the analogy with geometrical qualities.

Regardless of whether there were any such things as triangles we noted that the nature of them is to have certain qualities with it following from this I did not invent the qualities in question. Similarly if the idea of God is an idea whose essence includes existence then this is also not something I have invented, it is rather part of the thing itself and my thought here is simply being led by the nature of the thing in the same way as it is when I consider the properties of geometrical objects.

The next objection that Descartes considers is that the necessity that has been alleged between the essence of the idea of God and his existence is merely a hypothetical one. This objection effectively says that if we suppose that there is a perfect being then, existence being one of the perfections, we must concede that this being exists. However, we need not suppose that there is such a being in fact at all, it was just a hypothesis. Descartes’ reply to this objection is more complicated. Whilst he initially simply restates his point saying that whilst I need never consider this idea at all but that once I do I have to conceive of it in the way he suggests, this response is the same as the one to the previous objection. It still does not add anything to his claims to date when he again makes the analogy between his claims about this idea of God and his understanding of the nature of the idea of the triangle. What he does add next however that is new is that the ideas of the triangle and of God are alike in being “true ideas which are innate in me”.

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The character of these ideas, by contrast to the ones that I could have invented, is precisely that one characteristic of them leads naturally to the next so that in accepting one truth concerning them I am necessarily led to a set of others (with the claims about God thus emerging as similar to the claims concerning the science of numbers and shapes).

Descartes’ argument in the 5th Meditation is thus different from that in the 3rd. Whilst in the 3rd Meditation he attended to the relationship between substance and attributes in order to reach a view concerning degrees of reality which was subsequently connected to a set of considerations concerning causes, in the 5th Meditation he attends instead to a strict analysis of the nature of our idea of God. The argument has an important characteristic which is that the analysis of this idea is intended to lead us to the conviction that the object that the idea describes must, as part of its essence, be such as to exist. The key point to bear in mind here is that whilst any idea of anything that we might consider includes the notion that it could exist, hence that its existence is possible, the idea of God is presented here as different in that its existence is not meant to be understood as merely possible but as actually necessary. This is what is distinctive about the object of the idea of God. The question that you need to consider then, and in a sense this is philosophically the nub of the issue with regard to the existence of God is whether it is the case that there is or could be an object that is like the idea that Descartes is asking us to consider. But this is not to consider whether it is possible that such a being could exist but rather
whether there is something whose existence is in no way a question of possibility but who if it is, is as it is because it has to be and fundamentally “is” at all because it must be.