

Descartes

MEDITATION V

OF THE ESSENCE OF MATERIAL THINGS; AND, AGAIN, OF GOD; THAT HE EXISTS.

1. SEVERAL other questions remain for consideration respecting the attributes of God and my own nature or mind. I will, however, on some other occasion perhaps resume the investigation of these. Meanwhile, as I have discovered what must be done and what avoided to arrive at the knowledge of truth, what I have chiefly to do is to essay to emerge from the state of doubt in which I have for some time been, and to discover whether anything can be known with certainty regarding material objects.

2. But before considering whether such objects as I conceive exist without me, I must examine their ideas in so far as these are to be found in my consciousness, and discover which of them are distinct and which confused.

3. In the first place, I distinctly imagine that quantity which the philosophers commonly call continuous, or the extension in length, breadth, and depth that is in this quantity, or rather in the object to which it is attributed. Further, I can enumerate in it many diverse parts, and attribute to each of these all sorts of sizes, figures, situations, and local motions; and, in fine, I can assign to each of these motions all degrees of duration.

4. And I not only distinctly know these things when I thus consider them in general; but besides, by a little attention, I discover innumerable particulars respecting figures, numbers, motion, and the like, which are so evidently true, and so accordant with my nature, that when I now discover them I do not so much appear to learn anything new, as to call to remembrance what I before knew, or for the first time to remark what was before in my mind, but to which I had not hitherto directed my attention.

5. And what I here find of most importance is, that I discover in my mind innumerable ideas of certain objects, which cannot be esteemed pure negations, although perhaps they possess no reality beyond my thought, and which are not framed by me though it may be in my power to think, or not to think them, but possess true and immutable natures of their own. As, for example, when I imagine a triangle, although there is not perhaps and never was in any place in the universe apart from my thought one such figure, it remains true nevertheless that this figure possesses a certain determinate nature, form, or essence, which is immutable and eternal, and not framed by me, nor in any degree dependent on my thought; as appears from the circumstance, that diverse properties of the triangle may be demonstrated, viz, that its three angles are equal to two right, that its greatest side is subtended by its greatest angle, and the like, which, whether I will or not, I now clearly discern to belong to it, although before I did

not at all think of them, when, for the first time, I imagined a triangle, and which accordingly cannot be said to have been invented by me.

6. Nor is it a valid objection to allege, that perhaps this idea of a triangle came into my mind by the medium of the senses, through my having seen bodies of a triangular figure; for I am able to form in thought an innumerable variety of figures with regard to which it cannot be supposed that they were ever objects of sense, and I can nevertheless demonstrate diverse properties of their nature no less than of the triangle, all of which are assuredly true since I clearly conceive them: and they are therefore something, and not mere negations; for it is highly evident that all that is true is something, [truth being identical with existence]; and I have already fully shown the truth of the principle, that whatever is clearly and distinctly known is true. And although this had not been demonstrated, yet the nature of my mind is such as to compel me to assert to what I clearly conceive while I so conceive it; and I recollect that even when I still strongly adhered to the objects of sense, I reckoned among the number of the most certain truths those I clearly conceived relating to figures, numbers, and other matters that pertain to arithmetic and geometry, and in general to the pure mathematics.

7. But now if because I can draw from my thought the idea of an object, it follows that all I clearly and distinctly apprehend to pertain to this object, does in truth belong to it, may I not from this derive an argument for the existence of God? It is certain that I no less find the idea of a God in my consciousness, that is the idea of a being supremely perfect, than that of any figure or number whatever: and I know with not less clearness and distinctness that an [actual and] eternal existence pertains to his nature than that all which is demonstrable of any figure or number really belongs to the nature of that figure or number; and, therefore, although all the conclusions of the preceding Meditations were false, the existence of God would pass with me for a truth at least as certain as I ever judged any truth of mathematics to be. [L] [F] 8. Indeed such a doctrine may at first sight appear to contain more sophistry than truth. For, as I have been accustomed in every other matter to distinguish between existence and essence, I easily believe that the existence can be separated from the essence of God, and that thus God may be conceived as not actually existing. But, nevertheless, when I think of it more attentively, it appears that the existence can no more be separated from the essence of God, than the idea of a mountain from that of a valley, or the equality of its three angles to two right angles, from the essence of a [rectilinear] triangle; so that it is not less impossible to conceive a God, that is, a being supremely perfect, to whom existence is wanting, or who is devoid of a certain perfection, than to conceive a mountain without a valley.

9. But though, in truth, I cannot conceive a God unless as existing, any more than I can a mountain without a valley, yet, just as it does not follow that there is any mountain in the world merely because I conceive a mountain with a valley, so likewise, though I conceive God as existing, it does not seem to follow on that account that God exists; for my thought imposes no necessity on things; and as I may imagine a winged horse, though there be none such, so I could perhaps attribute existence to God, though no God existed.

10. But the cases are not analogous, and a fallacy lurks under the semblance of this objection: for because I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that there is any mountain or valley in existence, but simply that the mountain or valley, whether they do or do not exist, are inseparable from each other; whereas, on the other hand, because I cannot conceive God unless as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from him, and therefore that he really exists: not that this is brought about by my thought, or that it imposes any necessity on things, but, on the contrary, the necessity which lies in the thing itself, that is, the necessity of the existence of God, determines me to think in this way: for it is not in my power to conceive a God without existence, that is, a being supremely perfect, and yet devoid of an absolute perfection, as I am free to imagine a horse with or without wings.[L] [F] 11. Nor must it be alleged here as an objection, that it is in truth necessary to admit that God exists, after having supposed him to possess all perfections, since existence is one of them, but that my original supposition was not necessary; just as it is not necessary to think that all quadrilateral figures can be inscribed in the circle, since, if I supposed this, I should be constrained to admit that the rhombus, being a figure of four sides, can be therein inscribed, which, however, is manifestly false. This objection is, I say, incompetent; for although it may not be necessary that I shall at any time entertain the notion of Deity, yet each time I happen to think of a first and sovereign being, and to draw, so to speak, the idea of him from the storehouse of the mind, I am necessitated to attribute to him all kinds of perfections, though I may not then enumerate them all, nor think of each of them in particular. And this necessity is sufficient, as soon as I discover that existence is a perfection, to cause me to infer the existence of this first and sovereign being; just as it is not necessary that I should ever imagine any triangle, but whenever I am desirous of considering a rectilinear figure composed of only three angles, it is absolutely necessary to attribute those properties to it from which it is correctly inferred that its three angles are not greater than two right angles, although perhaps I may not then advert to this relation in particular. But when I consider what figures are capable of being inscribed in the circle, it is by no means necessary to hold that all quadrilateral figures are of this number; on the contrary, I cannot even imagine such to be the case, so long as I shall be unwilling to accept in thought aught that I do not clearly and distinctly conceive; and consequently there is a vast difference between false suppositions, as is the one in question, and the true ideas that were born with me, the first and chief of which is the idea of God. For indeed I discern on many grounds that this idea is not factitious depending simply on my thought, but that it is the representation of a true and immutable nature: in the first place because I can conceive no other being, except God, to whose essence existence [necessarily] pertains; in the second, because it is impossible to conceive two or more gods of this kind; and it being supposed that one such God exists, I clearly see that he must have existed from all eternity, and will exist to all eternity; and finally, because I apprehend many other properties in God, none of which I can either diminish or change.

12. But, indeed, whatever mode of probation I in the end adopt, it always returns to this, that it is only the things I clearly and distinctly conceive which have the power of completely

persuading me. And although, of the objects I conceive in this manner, some, indeed, are obvious to every one, while others are only discovered after close and careful investigation; nevertheless after they are once discovered, the latter are not esteemed less certain than the former. Thus, for example, to take the case of a right-angled triangle, although it is not so manifest at first that the square of the base is equal to the squares of the other two sides, as that the base is opposite to the greatest angle; nevertheless, after it is once apprehended, we are as firmly persuaded of the truth of the former as of the latter. And, with respect to God if I were not pre-occupied by prejudices, and my thought beset on all sides by the continual presence of the images of sensible objects, I should know nothing sooner or more easily than the fact of his being. For is there any truth more clear than the existence of a Supreme Being, or of God, seeing it is to his essence alone that [necessary and eternal] existence pertains?

13. And although the right conception of this truth has cost me much close thinking, nevertheless at present I feel not only as assured of it as of what I deem most certain, but I remark further that the certitude of all other truths is so absolutely dependent on it that without this knowledge it is impossible ever to know anything perfectly.

14. For although I am of such a nature as to be unable, while I possess a very clear and distinct apprehension of a matter, to resist the conviction of its truth, yet because my constitution is also such as to incapacitate me from keeping my mind continually fixed on the same object, and as I frequently recollect a past judgment without at the same time being able to recall the grounds of it, it may happen meanwhile that other reasons are presented to me which would readily cause me to change my opinion, if I did not know that God existed; and thus I should possess no true and certain knowledge, but merely vague and vacillating opinions. Thus, for example, when I consider the nature of the [rectilinear] triangle, it most clearly appears to me, who have been instructed in the principles of geometry, that its three angles are equal to two right angles, and I find it impossible to believe otherwise, while I apply my mind to the demonstration; but as soon as I cease from attending to the process of proof, although I still remember that I had a clear comprehension of it, yet I may readily come to doubt of the truth demonstrated, if I do not know that there is a God: for I may persuade myself that I have been so constituted by nature as to be sometimes deceived, even in matters which I think I apprehend with the greatest evidence and certitude, especially when I recollect that I frequently considered many things to be true and certain which other reasons afterward constrained me to reckon as wholly false.

15. But after I have discovered that God exists, seeing I also at the same time observed that all things depend on him, and that he is no deceiver, and thence inferred that all which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true: although I no longer attend to the grounds of a judgment, no opposite reason can be alleged sufficient to lead me to doubt of its truth, provided only I remember that I once possessed a clear and distinct comprehension of it. My knowledge of it thus becomes true and certain. And this same knowledge extends likewise to whatever I remember to have formerly demonstrated, as the truths of geometry and the like: for what can be alleged against them to lead me to doubt of them? Will it be that my nature is such that I

may be frequently deceived? But I already know that I cannot be deceived in judgments of the grounds of which I possess a clear knowledge. Will it be that I formerly deemed things to be true and certain which I afterward discovered to be false? But I had no clear and distinct knowledge of any of those things, and, being as yet ignorant of the rule by which I am assured of the truth of a judgment, I was led to give my assent to them on grounds which I afterward discovered were less strong than at the time I imagined them to be. What further objection, then, is there? Will it be said that perhaps I am dreaming (an objection I lately myself raised), or that all the thoughts of which I am now conscious have no more truth than the reveries of my dreams? But although, in truth, I should be dreaming, the rule still holds that all which is clearly presented to my intellect is indisputably true.

16. And thus I very clearly see that the certitude and truth of all science depends on the knowledge alone of the true God, insomuch that, before I knew him, I could have no perfect knowledge of any other thing. And now that I know him, I possess the means of acquiring a perfect knowledge respecting innumerable matters, as well relative to God himself and other intellectual objects as to corporeal nature, in so far as it is the object of pure mathematics [which do not consider whether it exists or not].

MEDITATIO V

DE ESSENTIA RERUM MATERIALIUM; ET ITERUM DE DEO, QUOD EXISTAT.

[5.01] /63/ Multa mihi supersunt de Dei attributis, multa de mei ipsius siue mentis meae natura inuestiganda; sed illa forte alias resumam, iamque nihil magis urgere uidetur (postquam animaduerti quid cauendum atque agendum sit ad affequentiam ueritatem), quam ut ex dubiis, in quae superioribus diebus incidi, coner emergere, uideamque an aliquid certi de rebus materialibus haberi possit.

[5.02] Et quidem, priusquam inquiram an aliquae tales res extra me existant, considerare debeo illarum ideas, quatenus sunt in mea cogitatione, et uidere quaenam ex iis sint distinctae, quaenam confusae.

[5.03] Nempe distincte imaginor quantitatem, quam uulgo Philosophi appellant continuam, siue eius quantitatis aut potius rei quantae extensionem in longum, latum et profundum; numero in ea uarias partes; quaslibet istis partibus magnitudines, figuras, situs, et motus locales, motibusque istis quaslibet durationes assigno.

[5.04] Nec tantum illa, sic in genere spectata, mihi plane nota et perspecta sunt, sed praetera etiam particularia innumera de figuris, de numero, de motu, et similibus, attendendo percipio, quorum ueritas adeo aperta /64/ est et naturae meae consentanea, ut, dum illa primum detego, non tam uidear aliquid noui addiscere, quam eorum quae iam ante sciebam reminisci, siue ad ea primum aduertere, quae dudum quidem in me erant, licet non prius in illa obtutum mentis conuertissem.

[5.05] Quodque hic maxime considerandum puto, inuenio apud me innumeras ideas quarumdam rerum, quae, etiam si extra me fortasse nullibi existant, non tamen dici possunt nihil esse; et quamuis a me quodammodo ad arbitrium cogitentur, non tamen a me finguntur, sed suas habent ueras et immutabiles naturas. Ut cum, exempli causa, triangulum imaginor, etsi fortasse talis figura nullibi gentium extra cogitationem meam existat, nec unquam extiterit, est tamen profecto determinata quaedam eius natura, siue essentia, siue forma, immutabilis et aeterna, quae a me non efficta est, nec a mente mea dependet; ut patet ex eo quod demonstrari possint uariae proprietates de isto triangulo, nempe quod eius tres anguli sint aequales duobus rectis, quod maximo eius angulo maximum latus subtendatur, et similes, quas uelim nolim clare nunc agnosco, etiamsi de iis nullo modo antea cogitauerim, cum triangulum imaginatus sum, nec proinde a me fuerint effictae.

[5.06] Neque ad rem attinet, si dicam mihi forte a rebus externis per organa sensuum istam trianguli ideam aduenisse, quia nempe corpora triangularem figuram habentia interdum uidi; possum enim alias innumeras figuras excogitare, de quibus nulla suspicio esse potest quod mihi

unquam per sensus illapsae sint, et tamen /65/ uarias de iis, non minus quam de triangulo, proprietates demonstrare. Quae sane omnes sunt uerae, quandoquidem a me clare cognoscuntur, ideoque aliquid sunt, non merum nihil: patet enim illud omne quod uerum est esse aliquid; et iam fuse demonstraui illa omnia quae clare cognosco esse uera. Atque quamuis id non demonstrassem, ea certe est natura mentis meae ut nihilominus non possem iis non assentiri, saltem quamdiu ea clare percipio; meminique me semper, etiam ante hoc tempus, cum sensuum obiectis quam maxime inhaererem, eiusmodi ueritates, quae nempe defiguris, aut numeris, aliisque ad Arithmeticae uel Geometriae uel in genere ad puram atque abstractam Mathesim pertinentibus, euidenter agnoscebam, pro omnium certissimis habuisse.

[5.07] Iam uero si ex eo solo, quod alicuius rei ideam possim ex cogitatione mea depromere, sequitur ea omnia, quae ad illam rem pertinere clare est distincte percipio, reuera ad illam pertinere, nunquid inde haberi etiam potest argumentum, quo Dei existentia probetur? Certe eius ideam, nempe entis summe perfecti, non minus apud me inuenio, quam ideam cuiusuis figurae aut numeri; nec minus clare et distincte intelligo ad eius naturam pertinere ut semper existat, quam id quod de aliqua figura aut numero demonstro ad eius figurare aut numeri naturam etiam pertinere; ac proinde, quamuis non omnia, quae superioribus hisce diebus meditatus sum, uera essent, in eodem ad minimum certitudinis gradu esse deberet apud me Dei existentia, /66/ in quo fuerunt hactenus Mathematicae ueritates.

[5.08] Quanquam sane hoc prima fronte non est omnino perspicuum, sed quandam sophisticam speciem resert. Cum enim affectus sim in omnibus aliis rebus existentiam ab essentia distinguere, facile mihi persuadeo illam etiam ab essentia Dei seiungi posse, atque ita Deum ut non existentem cogitari. Sed tamen diligentius attendenti fit manifestum, non magis posse existentiam ab essentia Dei separari, quam ab essentia trianguli magnitudinem trium eius angulorum aequalium duobus rectis, siue ad ideae montis ideam uallis: adeo ut non magis repugnet cogitare Deum (hoc est ens summe perfectum) cui desit existentia (hoc est cui desit aliqua perfectio), quam cogitare montem cui desit uallis.

[5.09] Verumtamen, ne possim quidem cogitare Deum nisi existentem, ut neque montem sine ualle, at certe, ut neque ex eo quod cogitem montem cum ualle, ideo sequitur aliquem montem in mundo esse, ita neque ex eo quod cogitem Deum ut existentem, ideo sequi uideatur Deum existere: nullam enim necessitatem cogitatio mea rebus imponit: et quemadmodum imaginari licet eum alatum, etsi nullus eum habeat alas, ita forte Deo existentiam possum affingere, quamuis nullus Deus existat.

[5.10] Immo sophisma hic latet; neque enim, ex eo quod non possim cogitare montem nisi cum ualle, sequitur alicubi montem et uallem existere, sed tantum montem /67/ et uallem, siue existant, siue non existant, a se mutuo seiungi non posse. Atqui ex eo quod non possim cogitare Deum nisi existentem, sequitur existentiam a Deo esse inseparabilem, ac proinde illum reuera existere; non quod mea cogitatio hoc efficiat, siue aliquam necessitatem ulli rei imponat, sed contra quia ipsius rei, nempe existentiae Dei, necessitas me determinat ad hoc cogitandum:

neque enim mihi liberum est Deum absque existentia (hoc est ens summe perfectum absque summa perfectione) cogitare, ut liberum est eum uel cum aliis uel sine aliis imaginari.

[5.11] Neque etiam hic dici debet, necesse quidem esse ut ponam Deum existentem, postquam posui illum habere omnes perfectiones, quandoquidem existentia una est ex illis, sed priorem positionem necessariam non fuisse; ut neque necesse est me putare figuras omnes quadrilateras circulo inscribi, sed posito quod hoc putem, necesse erit me fateri rhombum circulo inscribi, quod aperte tamen est falsum. Nam, quamuis non necesse sit ut incidam unquam in ullam de Deo cogitationem, quoties tamen de ente primo et summo libet cogitare, atque eius ideam tanquam ex mentis meae thesauro depromere, necesse est ut illi omnes perfectiones attribuam, etsi nec omnes tunc enumerem, nec ad singulas attendam: quae necessitas plane sufficit ut postea, cum animaduerto existentiam esse perfectionem, recte concludam ens primum et summum existere: quemadmodum non est necesse me ullum triangulum unquam imaginari, sed quoties uolo figuram rectilineam tres tantum angulos habentem considerare, necesse est ut illi ea tribuam, ex quibus recte infertur eius tres angulos non maiores esse duobus rectis, etiamsi hoc ipsum tunc non aduertam. Cum uero examino quatenus figurae circulo inscribantur, nullo modo necesse est ut putem omnes quadrilateras ex eo numero esse; immo etiam id ipsum nequidem fingere possum, quamdiu nihil uolo admittere nisi quod clare et distincte intelligo. Ac proinde magna differentia est inter eiusmodi falsas positiones, et ideas ueras mihi ingenitas, quarum prima et praecipua est idea Dei. Nam sane multis modis intelligo illam non esse quid fictitium a cogitatione mea dependens, sed imaginem uerae et immutabilis naturae: ut, primo, quia nulla alia res potest a me excogitari, ad cuius essentiam existentia pertineat, praeter solum Deum; deinde, quia non possum duos aut plures eiusmodi Deos intelligere, et quia, posito quod iam unus existat, plane uideam esse necessarium ut et ante ab aeterno extiterit, et in aeternum sit mansurus; ac denique, quod multa alia in Deo percipiam, quorum nihil a me detrahi potest nec mutari.

[5.12] Sed uero, quaecumque tandem utar probandi ratione, semper eo res redit, ut ea me sola plane persuadeant, quae clare et distincte percipio. Et quidem ex iis quae ita percipio, etsi nonnulla unicuique obuia sint, alia uero nonnisi ab iis qui proprius inspiciunt et diligenter inuestigant deteguntur, postquam tamen detecta sunt, haec non minus certa quam illa existimantur. Ut quamuis non tam facile appareat in triangulo rectangulo ⁶⁹ quadratum basis aequale esse quadratis laterum, quam istam basim maximo eius angulo subtendi, non tamen minus creditur, postquam semel est perspectum. Quod autem ad Deum attinet, certe nisi praeiudiciis obruerer, et rerum sensibilium imagines cogitationem meam omni ex parte obsiderent, nihil illo prius aut facilius agnoscerem; nam quid ex se est apertius, quam summum ens esse, siue Deum, ad cuius solius essentiam existentia pertinet, existere?

[5.13] Atque, quamuis mihi intenta consideratione opus fuerit ad hoc ipsum percipiendum, nunc tamen non modo de eo aequo certus sum ac de omni alio quod certissimum uidetur se praeter etiam animaduerto caeterarum rerum certitudinem ab hoc ipso ita pendere, ut absque eo nihil unquam perfecte sciri possit.

[5.14] Etsi enim eius sim naturae ut, quamdiu aliquid ualde clare et distincte percipio, non possim non credere uerum esse, quia tamen eius etiam sum naturae ut non possim obtutum mentis in eandem rem semper defigere ad illam clare percipiendam, recurratque saepe memoria iudicii ante facti, cum non amplius attendo ad rationes propter quas tale quid iudicauit, rationes aliae afferri possunt quae me, si Deum ignorarem, facile ab opinione deiicerent, atque ita de nulla unquam re ueram et certam scientiam, sed uagas tantum et mutabiles opiniones, haberem. Sic, exempli causa, cum naturam trianguli considero, euidetissime quidem mihi, utpote Geometriae principiis imbuto, apparet eius tres angulos aequales esse duobus rectis, nec possum non credere id uerum esse, quamdiu ad /70/ eius demonstrationem attendo; sed statim atque mentis aciem ab illa deflexi, quantumuis adhuc recorder me illam clarissime perspexisse, facile tamen potest accidere ut dubitem an sit uera, si quidem Deum ignorem. Possum enim mihi persuadere me talem a natura factum esse, ut interdum in iis fallar quae me puto quam euidetissime percipere, cum praesertim meminerim me saepe multa pro ueris et certis habuisse, quae postmodum, aliis rationibus adductus, falsa esse iudicauit.

[5.15] Postquam uero percepi Deum esse, quia simul etiam intellexi caetera omnia ab eo pendere, illumque non esse fallacem; atque inde collegi illa omnia, quae clare et distincte percipio, necessario esse uera; etiamsi non attendam amplius ad rationes propter quas istud uerum esse iudicauit, modo tantum recorder me clare et distincte perspexisse, nulla ratio contraria afferri potest, quae me ad dubitandum impellat, sed ueram et certam de hoc habeo scientiam. Neque de hoc tantum, sed et de reliquis omnibus quae memini me aliquando demonstrasse, ut de Geometricis et similibus. Quid enim nunc mihi opponetur? Mene talem factum esse ut saepe fallar? At iam scio me in iis, quae perspicue intelligo, falli non posse. Mene multa alias pro ueris et certis habuisse, quae postea falsa esse deprehendi? Atqui nulla ex iis clare et distincte perceperam, sed huius regulae ueritatis ignarus ob alias causas forte credideram, quas postea minus firmas esse detexi. Quid ergo dicetur? Anne (ut nuper mihi obiiciebam) me forte somniare, siue illa omnia, quae iam cogito, non magis uera esse quam ea quae dormienti occurrunt? Immo etiam hoc nihil mutat; nam certe, /71/ quamuis somniarem, si quid intellectui meo sit euidens, illud omnino est uerum.

[5.16] Atque ita plane uideo omnis scientiae certitudinem et ueritatem ab une ueri Dei cognitione pendere, adeo ut, priusquam illum nossem, nihil de ulla alia re perfecte scire potuerim. Iam uero innumera, tum de ipso Deo aliisque rebus intellectualibus, tum etiam de omni illa natura corporea, quae est purae Matheseos obiectum, mihi plane nota et certa esse possunt.