

Descartes on Knowledge of God

1 Four points for today's class

1.1 Mathematics and deceivers, again

See page 25, AT 36. Is he saying it's impossible to be deceived about math or not?

Perhaps he has in mind a distinction between "clear and distinct perceptions" and more drawn out calculations.

1.2 First proof of God's existence

The idea of God is different than ideas of other things. It alone has to have an *external cause* that *resembles* the idea.

1.3 Second proof of God's existence

Only God has the power to conserve my existence. We'll return to this when we talk about Hume on causation.

1.4 The Image of God

Note how Descartes identifies the true way of knowing something.

Is he justified in saying that a perfect being would not deceive us?

2 Is the proof circular?

"I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists. But we can be

sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists, we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and distinctly is true.¹”

3 Will God insulate us from doubt?

“Cartesianism put the final touches to this [ancient skeptic’s project of urging us to suspend judgment], and now no good philosopher any longer doubts that the skeptics were right to maintain that the qualities of bodies that strike our senses are only appearances. Every one of us can justly say, ‘I feel heat in the presence of fire,’ but not ‘I know that fire is, in itself, such as it appears to me.’ This is the way the ancient Pyrrhonists spoke. Today the new philosophy speaks more positively. Heat, smells, colors, and the like, are not in the objects of our senses. They are modifications of my soul. I know that bodies are not at all as they appear to me. They would have wished to exempt extension and motion, but they could not. For if the objects of our senses appear colored, hot, cold, odoriferous, and yet they are not so, why can they not appear extended and shaped, in rest and in motion, though they are not so? ... The only proof that could be given me of this would be based on the contention that God would be deceiving me if he imprinted in my mind the ideas that I have of bodies without there actually being any. But this proof is very weak; it proves too much. Ever since the beginning of the world, all mankind, except perhaps one out of two hundred millions, has firmly believed that bodies are colored, and this is an error. I ask, does God deceive mankind with regard to colors? If he deceives them about this, what prevents him from doing so with regard to extension? This second deception would not be less innocent, nor less compatible with the nature of a supremely perfect being than the first deception is.²”

¹ Antoine Arnauld, Fourth Set of Objections

² Pierre Bayle, “Pyrrho” in *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1702).