

To Err Is Human - Or Is It?

An Analysis of Meditation Four from
Meditations on First Philosophy
by Rene Descartes

Rich Lusk
Philosophy 329L
Mourelatos

Rene Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy is a carefully crafted argument for the existence of God and the distinction between the body and soul. Clearly it is the work of a genius and there can be no question that Descartes has earned his place among history's greatest philosophers. Beginning with what has been called "the method of doubt" in Meditation One, Descartes demolishes all the opinions he previously held to be certain. His radical doubt is intended to lead him to an absolutely certain starting point for knowledge, and thus provide a foundation for later scientific work. In Meditation Two, he finds an indubitable truth: his own existence as a thinking being. He formulates his famous "Cogito," which will serve as the Archimedian point on which he will construct his entire worldview. Even if God is an evil deceiver, the "Cogito" is a certain and unshakable truth. Though Descartes is still uncertain as to whether or not there is an external, material world, he knows he exists clearly and distinctly.

In Meditation Three, Descartes takes a crucial leap ahead in his argument. While the "Cogito" may serve as an initial criterion for knowledge, it doesn't go very far. Even the truths of mathematics are still in doubt at this point. However, by reflection on what Descartes calls the "light of nature," he is able to formulate two proofs for the existence of God. The first proof is a form of the cosmological argument: my idea of God as an infinite and perfect being has too much objective reality to be caused by anything other than God himself. Secondly, he offers a form of the *a contingentia mundi* argument, namely, how could I exist if such a being as God did not exist?

In the Fifth Meditation Descartes adds a third proof for God's existence, based on the ontological argument's claim that in the case of God, existence cannot be separated from essence. Finally, in the Sixth Meditation, Descartes goes on to prove the existence of a material world and explains both the distinction and union of mind and body. Thus, he appears in many ways to have achieved his goal.

In light of this rough sketch of the development of Descartes' philosophy, it may seem Meditation Four is not all that essential. However, if Descartes' viewpoint is to be plausible, Meditation Four is a crucial element in his delicately nuanced argument. Descartes entitled this Meditation "Concerning the True and the False" because in it he attempts to account for human error. Because God exists, and because he is not a deceiver (AT 53), it may seem "to follow from this that I am never capable of making a mistake. For if everything that is in me I got from God, and he gave me no faculty for making mistakes, it seems I am incapable of ever erring" (AT 54). But Descartes knows all too well from his own experience that this is not the case: "once I turn my attention back on myself, I nevertheless experience that I am subject to countless errors" (AT 54). If God is not deceiving me, and all my faculties come from him,

what could be the cause of this error? How can Descartes protect God's goodness and still give an adequate explanation of human error?

This problem of human error is a difficult one for all worldviews that include a God who is an infinite creator, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and completely good. Descartes' entire philosophy stands or falls on his specific answer to this dilemma. How can he allow human error without charging God with unrighteousness or losing all certainty in human knowledge? Have the first three Meditations proved too much? Does the Cartesian account of human freedom and error satisfy? In looking at the Fourth Meditation and Descartes' proposed solution to this problem, we will not only examine its place in the overall structure and development of Descartes' thought, but we will also view it in light of the Meditations as a finished product, or a complete philosophical system.

Descartes' explanation of human error shows a mixture of Platonic and medieval Christian influences. The backdrop for his argument is the "great chain of being" notion. Descartes exists as a sort of "middle ground between God and nothingness, or between supreme being and non-being. Thus insofar as I have been created by the supreme being, there is nothing in me by means of which I might be deceived or be led into error; but insofar as I participate in nothingness or non-being, that is, insofar as I am not the supreme being and lack a great many things, it is not surprising that I make mistakes" (AT 54). In other words, Descartes makes mistakes simply because he is finite. His finitude is an inherent defect and is the source of his error. If he were higher up on the scale of being we may assume he would make fewer errors; it is his participation in non-being that holds him back from perfection.

However, this raises another important question: Why couldn't an infinitely powerful God create a finite being with perfect faculties? Descartes admits God *could* have done this, had he so desired (AT 55, 61). Presumably, angels are just such creatures, though Descartes does not include them in the discussion. From this admission we may infer that finitude does *not* necessitate error. Thus, how could God, the "expert craftsman," make something that is not perfect in all respects, despite its lack of being? Descartes simply responds with the claim that, while God could have created him in such a way that he would never err, God chose not to do so. Because God always chooses what is best, it must be better that we do fall into error. God is not to blame for the errors that result from our finitude because God owes us nothing at all; Descartes insists repeatedly that he has no grounds for complaint that God did not make him perfect (AT 56, 60).

Descartes continues his explanation of error by looking at human psychology. Man has two faculties, the intellect, which perceives ideas, and the will, which renders judgment about these ideas.

While the faculty of understanding is quite limited (especially in comparison to God's faculty of understanding), the faculty of willing is unlimited (and thus formally as great as God's faculty of willing). Neither the intellect, taken by itself, nor the will, taken by itself, can be the cause of error. What then is the source of error? Since the will outruns the intellect, it extends beyond what can be understood, and thus is easily turned away from the true and the good. It is the interrelation of understanding and will that results in error - which Descartes here refers to as deception and sin (AT 58).

Yet another question is raised at this point: Why doesn't the will refrain from making a judgment until it is better informed? Descartes says this would be "using my freedom properly" (AT 60) and proposes this as a way of avoiding error (AT 61). If this rule is followed, "I would acquire a certain habit of not erring" (AT 62). However, because the intellect is finite and cannot examine everything, the will's freedom is not always used well. Due to the will's indifference in matters that are not fully understood, it has a tendency to drift into error. Ultimately, however, there is greater perfection in the universe because "some of its parts are not immune to error" (AT 61).

Descartes' answer to the problem of human error shows much creativity, especially within the "chain of being" framework. However, Descartes seems to have left open the door to many objections that he simply does not answer in the Fourth Meditation. I have three criticisms in particular I would like to raise.

First we must examine Descartes' theodicy to see if it is really adequate. Does Descartes get his God off the hook? Descartes says that God chose to create beings that erred because this was apparently the best of all possible worlds. God always does what is best and "somehow" (AT 61) human imperfection contributes to the overall perfection of the universe. But there is simply no explanation given as to why this is the case. Descartes humbly acknowledges he has "no right to complain that the part God has wished me to play is not the principal and most perfect one of all" (AT 61). Granted, this still doesn't satisfy - why couldn't even a minor role in God's cosmic drama be played flawlessly? He still must answer how human mistakes contribute to the perfection of the universe. Descartes could simply say this is a mystery God has not revealed in the light of nature. But the problem is only intensified when one remembers that Descartes admits (in AT 55, 61) God could have easily made a finite creature that was error-free! It is hard to see how, within the Cartesian system, God is not directly responsible for man's faults. Also, he seems to contradict himself, claiming in some places that man's finitude implies error, while elsewhere conceding a finite yet errorless being is at least a hypothetical possibility.

The Cartesian theodicy is also flawed with respect to its explanation of human faculties. God made man in such a way that his understanding and will are terribly mismatched. How could such an imbalanced creature be the work of the supreme and perfect creator? While neither the intellect nor the faculty of free choice are to blame for error considered in themselves, when they are simultaneously considered, man is inherently prone to err. But it is God who put together this unhappy marriage of limited understanding and infinitely free choice, with no apparent reason! True, Descartes claims that “I have no cause for complaint on the grounds that God has given me a will that has a wider scope than my intellect” (AT 60). He justifies this by considering the will separately from the intellect, in which case it is an ample faculty. But my objection is not aimed at the way God created the intellect or the will independently examined; it is the way God has joined them together that causes the difficulty. If man as man (i.e., as created) is inherently flawed so that he inescapably makes mistakes, it is hard to see how God is free of guilt. Consider the analogous case of an automobile manufacturer - if the car breaks down before it is driven off the lot, the maker bears full responsibility. But if the buyer misuses and abuses the car, he is to blame when it breaks down. Descartes’ attempted theodicy leaves us wondering if the error in view is God’s or man’s.

My second objection is also related to Descartes’ view of human psychology. We have already examined how man’s faculties of understanding and willing are disproportionate. But I also find it problematic that Descartes locates the “image and likeness of God” (AT 57) in himself only in the will. Why isn’t the understanding included in this image and likeness? After all, even though God’s intellect is infinitely greater, man’s intellect does appear to bear some resemblance to God’s. Descartes goes so far as to claim that when he understands something rightly, it is impossible for him to be deceived (AT 58). Apparently, his intellect functions infallibly, at least within its limited range of understanding. On the other hand the Cartesian will may not be as much like God’s as it appears. Descartes does allow that God’s will is greater insofar as it is linked to greater knowledge and power, and stretches over a greater number of things. But he also says that, because willing is simply a matter of judgment, of affirming and denying, of pursuing and shunning, his will is as free as God’s. But if man’s will so closely mirrors the divine will, how can it be the case that it “easily turns away from the true and the good,” thus leading man into deception and sin (AT 58)? It is inadequate to say the will makes an uninformed choice if it is after the likeness of God’s own will; this is something the divine will would never do (assuming it was even possible). Descartes has simply not explained how or why his will makes poor choices when “there is no reason moving me more in one direction than another” (AT 58). Why doesn’t this infinitely free,

God-like will simply abstain from rendering judgments? Descartes makes this a rule to prevent error, but never gives an account as to why the will chooses, even when the good and true are not perceived by the intellect. Descartes says explicitly the intellect is defective because of its finitude; but perhaps his will is flawed as well, in spite of its infinitude. The privation of knowledge alone is insufficient to explain the misuse of freedom. In the end, error remains a mystery.

Finally, there are problems related to Descartes' conception of error itself. He never explains what kind of error he has in view. In the Synopsis, he asks the reader to

bear in mind that in the Meditation there is no discussion whatsoever of sin, that is, the error committed in the pursuit of good and evil, but only the error that occurs in discriminating between what is true and what is false. Nor is there an examination of those matters pertaining to the faith or to the conduct of life, but merely of speculative truths known exclusively by means of the light of nature. (AT 15)

However, I am not convinced that Descartes follows through on these qualification in the Fourth Meditation. There are at least three reasons for my doubt:

- ❑ First, he gives no explanation as to why his account of human error in Meditation Four would not apply to other matters beyond mere “speculative truths,” such as good and bad conduct. Also, in light of what Descartes proves about God and the nature of man in the six Meditations taken together, what different kinds of explanation of these other types of error could he offer? The parameters and constraints on how he could deal with error in human conduct have already been set.
- ❑ Secondly, it seems Descartes makes a very superficial separation here in AT 15. Is not the true good, and vice versa? Is not the false evil, and vice versa? If so how can Descartes discuss only the true and false, to the exclusion of good and evil? Would not Descartes have to grant that we *ought* to conduct our lives in such a way that we accept the “speculative truths” the light of nature teaches? Is this not the “good” thing to do? Would it not be “sinful” to do otherwise? If Descartes would answer these questions in the affirmative (and I think he must) then he has simply given us a false dichotomy. These categories overlap.
- ❑ Third, Descartes actually hints in the Fourth Meditation that his explanation of error applies to what is “good” as well as to “conduct of life.” In AT 58, he speaks of choosing the true *and the good* if only he could see them clearly with his intellect. He goes on to say that when his will chooses outside the boundaries of his understanding, he is not only deceived (presumably about the true) but also sins (presumably by choosing what is evil).

Its only speculation, but perhaps Descartes included the disclaimers about Meditation Four in the Synopsis simply to keep the church off his back. In any case, he appears to have in mind all kinds of error in the Fourth Meditation - all matters in which we can be deceived or sin - including speculative truths from the light of nature as well as good and bad conduct. In Descartes' view, humans err, or sin, because of finitude, or lack of being. Again, the word "sin" would seem to imply there is an ethical dimension to error (especially in light of Descartes' semi-Christian background), but Descartes insists over and over that error is simply a metaphysical issue. The question is, can such an approach provide a satisfying explanation of our mistakes? Perhaps an example will help: Suppose someone drives his car through an intersection with a green light, but gets sideswiped by a drunk driver who runs a red light. We normally would not say the driver who had the green light was in error because, as far as he was able to know, the intersection was safe. We do not expect human drivers to be omniscient or to know what all other drivers are doing. Thus, the sober driver was not in error, even though the disaster could have been avoided if he was not finite, but possessed infinite knowledge. This case demonstrates that our use of the word "error" appears to be almost precisely the opposite of Descartes' use of the term. In cases where a human could *not* have known better because of his limitedness, we do *not* ascribe error to him; and yet for Descartes, the *only* time man seems to be capable of erring is when he could not have possibly known better.

But there may be an even deeper problem with the Cartesian model of error. Descartes explains we fall into error only when we lack understanding. In other words, we never err, or sin, against better knowledge, but only in ignorance. If our minds perceive "what is true and good" (AT 58), we choose it without fail. But how realistic is this? Would not virtually everyone be compelled to admit that at least once in his life he has done something wrong or evil (i.e., committed an error) when he knew better? When we do so, we often feel a sense of shame later because we *knew* we were acting wrongly when we made the error. Our finitude might explain some mistakes we make, but it cannot explain errors we commit when we should and do know better. In other words, it is not adequate in every single case to trace human error back to ignorance or to a will that outstrips the intellect. In the above example, the drunk driver 'erred' or 'sinned' precisely because he should have known better than to drive drunk and run a red light. We hold him responsible for such actions and we do not let him get away with claiming that his error was due to finitude or to a will that was uninformed. In the end, it seems Descartes' account of error is quite superficial and simply does not square with the facts of our experience. Besides, it seems there is much internal tension in his account. He says he takes full responsibility for his imperfections (AT 61), and yet it is God who made him an inherently error prone being. At other times, he seems to

blame his finitude for error, but how can an infinitely free being not be fully responsible for his choices? If indeed Descartes cannot separate errors about speculative truths derived from the light of nature from errors in other matters, his explanation of error does not seem very adequate.

In conclusion, the Fourth Meditation appears to be a weak link in Descartes' philosophy. Without a satisfying explanation of human error that protects God's benevolence, his entire worldview unravels. It seems to me that despite Descartes' intellectual brilliance and philosophical skill, his argument has gaping holes. He ends the Fourth Meditation with a note of triumph and confidence, saying, "as often as I restrain my will when I make judgments, so that it extends only to those matters that the intellect clearly and distinctly discloses to it, it plainly cannot happen that I err" (AT 62). But if Descartes is in error with respect to error, perhaps his criteria of certainty are not so certain.