

FOURTH MEDITATION – Excerpts from the Objections and Replies

MERSENNE, ET AL.

Fourthly, you say that God cannot lie or deceive. Yet there are some schoolmen who say he can. Gabriel, for example, and Ariminensis, among others, think that in the absolute sense God does lie, that is, communicate to men things which are opposed to his intentions and decrees. Thus he unconditionally said to the people of Nineveh, through the prophet, 'Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed.' And he said many other things which certainly did not occur, because he did not mean his words to correspond to his intentions or decrees. Now if God hardened Pharaoh's heart and blinded his eyes, and if he sent upon his prophets the spirit of untruthfulness, how do you conclude that we cannot be deceived by him? Cannot God treat men as a doctor treats the sick, or a father his children? In both these cases there is frequent deception though it is always employed beneficially and with wisdom. For if God were to show us the pure truth, what eye, what mental vision, could endure it?

It is not, however, necessary to suppose that God is a deceiver in order to explain your being deceived about matters which you think you clearly and distinctly know. The cause of this deception could lie in you, though you are wholly unaware of it. Why should it not be in your nature to be subject to constant—or at least very frequent—deception? How can you establish with certainty that you are not deceived, or capable of being deceived, in matters which you think you know clearly and distinctly? Have we not often seen people turn out to have been deceived in matters where they thought their knowledge was as clear as the sunlight? Your principle of clear and distinct knowledge thus requires a clear and distinct explanation, in such a way as to rule out the possibility that anyone of sound mind may be deceived on matters which he thinks he knows clearly and distinctly. Failing this, we do not see that any degree of certainty can possibly be within your reach or that of mankind in general.

Fifthly, if the will never goes astray or falls into sin so long as it is guided by the mind's clear and distinct knowledge, and if it exposes itself to danger by following a conception of the intellect which is wholly lacking in clarity and distinctness, then note what follows from this. A Turk, or any other unbeliever, not only does not sin in refusing to embrace the Christian religion, but what is more, he sins if he does embrace it, since he does not possess clear and distinct knowledge of its truth. Indeed, if this rule of yours is true, then there is almost nothing that the will is going to be allowed to embrace, since there is almost nothing that we know with the clarity and distinctness which you require for that kind of certainty which is beyond any doubt. So you see how, in your desire to champion the truth, you may end up proving too much, and thus overturn the truth rather than build it up.

[Descartes to Mersenne, et al.]

Fourthly, in saying that God does not lie, and is not a deceiver, I think I am in agreement with all metaphysicians and theologians past and future. The points you make against this have no more force than if I had said that God is not

subject to anger or other emotions, and you were to produce as counter-examples passages from Scripture where human feelings are attributed to God. As everyone knows, there are two quite distinct ways of speaking about God. The first is appropriate for ordinary understanding and does contain some truth, albeit truth which is relative to human beings; and it is this way of speaking that is generally employed in Holy Scripture. The second way of speaking comes closer to expressing the naked truth—truth which is not relative to human beings; it is this way of speaking that everyone ought to use when philosophizing, and that I had a special obligation to use in my *Meditations*, since my supposition there was that no other human beings were yet known to me, and moreover I was considering myself not as consisting of mind and body but solely as a mind. It is very clear from this that my remarks in the *Meditations* were concerned not with the verbal expression of lies, but only with malice in the formal sense, the internal malice which is involved in deception.

However, the words of the prophet which you cite—'Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed'—were not even a verbal lie but simply a threat, the fulfilment of which was conditional on a particular eventuality. And when God is said to have 'hardened the heart of Pharaoh', or words to that effect, this should not be taken to mean that he brought this about in a positive sense; he merely hardened Pharaoh's heart in a negative sense, by not bestowing on him the grace which would have brought about his change of heart. Nevertheless, I would not want to criticize those who allow that through the mouths of the prophets God can produce verbal untruths which, like the lies of doctors who deceive their patients in order to cure them, are free of any malicious intent to deceive.

Nevertheless—and this is a more important point—from time to time it does appear that we are really deceived by the natural instinct which God gave us, as in the case of the thirst felt by those who suffer from dropsy. These patients have a positive impulse to drink which derives from the nature God has bestowed on the body in order to preserve it; yet this nature does deceive them because on this occasion the drink will have a harmful effect. Nevertheless, this is not inconsistent with the goodness or veracity of God, and I have explained why in the Sixth Meditation.

In the case of our clearest and most careful judgements, however, this kind of explanation would not be possible, for if such judgements were false they could not be corrected by any clearer judgements or by means of any other natural faculty. In such cases I simply assert that it is impossible for us to be deceived. Since God is the supreme being, he must also be supremely good and true, and it would therefore be a contradiction that anything should be created by him which positively tends towards falsehood. Now everything real which is in us must have been bestowed on us by God (this was proved when his existence was proved); moreover, we have a real faculty for recognizing the truth and distinguishing it from falsehood, as is clear merely from the fact that we have within us ideas of truth and falsehood. Hence this faculty must tend towards the truth, at least when we use it correctly (that is, by assenting only to what we clearly and distinctly perceive, for no other correct method of employing this

faculty can be imagined). For if it did not so tend then, since God gave it to us, he would rightly have to be regarded as a deceiver.

Hence you see that once we have become aware that God exists it is necessary for us to imagine that he is a deceiver if we wish to cast doubt on what we clearly and distinctly perceive. And since it is impossible to imagine that he is a deceiver, whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive must be completely accepted as true and certain.

But since I see that you are still stuck fast in the doubts which I put forward in the First Meditation, and which I thought I had very carefully removed in the succeeding Meditations, I shall now expound for a second time the basis on which it seems to me that all human certainty can be founded.

First of all, as soon as we think that we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously convinced that it is true. Now if this conviction is so firm that it is impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are convinced of, then there are no further questions for us to ask: we have everything that we could reasonably want. What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged 'absolute falsity' bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it? For the supposition which we are making here is of a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty.

But it may be doubted whether any such certainty, or firm and immutable conviction, is in fact to be had.

It is clear that we do not have this kind of certainty in cases where our perception is even the slightest bit obscure or confused; for such obscurity, whatever its degree, is quite sufficient to make us have doubts in such cases. Again, we do not have the required kind of certainty with regard to matters which we perceive solely by means of the senses, however clear such perception may be. For we have often noted that error can be detected in the senses, as when someone with dropsy feels thirsty or when someone with jaundice sees snow as yellow; for when he sees it as yellow he sees it just as clearly and distinctly as we do when we see it as white. Accordingly, if there is any certainty to be had, the only remaining alternative is that it occurs in the clear perceptions of the intellect and nowhere else.

Now some of these perceptions are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true. The fact that I exist so long as I am thinking, or that what is done cannot be undone, are examples of truths in respect of which we manifestly possess this kind of certainty. For we cannot doubt them unless we think of them; but we cannot think of them without at the same time believing they are true, as was supposed. Hence we cannot doubt them without at the same time believing they are true; that is, we can never doubt them.

It is no objection to this to say that we have often seen people 'turn out to have been deceived in matters where they thought their knowledge was as clear as the sunlight'. For we have never seen, indeed no one could possibly see, this happening to those who have relied solely on the intellect in their quest for clarity in their perceptions; we have seen it happen only to those who tried to derive such clarity from the senses or from some false preconceived opinion.

It is also no objection for someone to make out that such truths might appear false to God or to an angel. For the evident clarity of our perceptions does not allow us to listen to anyone who makes up this kind of story.

There are other truths which are perceived very clearly by our intellect so long as we attend to the arguments on which our knowledge of them depends; and we are therefore incapable of doubting them during this time. But we may forget the arguments in question and later remember simply the conclusions which were deduced from them. The question will now arise as to whether we possess the same firm and immutable conviction concerning these conclusions, when we simply recollect that they were previously deduced from quite evident principles (our ability to call them 'conclusions' presupposes such a recollection). My reply is that the required certainty is indeed possessed by those whose knowledge of God enables them to understand that the intellectual faculty which he gave them cannot but tend towards the truth; but the required certainty is not possessed by others. This point was explained so clearly at the end of the Fifth Meditation that it does not seem necessary to add anything further here.

Fifthly, I am surprised at your denying that the will exposes itself to danger by following a conception of the intellect which is wholly lacking in clarity and distinctness. What can give the will certainty if it follows a perception which is not clear? Every philosopher and theologian—indeed everyone who uses his reason—agrees that the more clearly we understand something before giving our assent to it, the smaller is the risk we run of going wrong; and, by contrast, those who make a judgement when they are ignorant of the grounds on which it is based are the ones who go astray. Whenever we call a conception obscure or confused this is because it contains some element of which we are ignorant.

It follows that your objection concerning the faith which should be embraced has no more force against me than it does against anyone who has ever developed the power of human reason—indeed, it has no force against anyone at all. For although it is said that our faith concerns matters which are obscure, the reasons for embracing the faith are not obscure but on the contrary are clearer than any natural light. We must distinguish between the subject-matter, or the thing itself which we assent to, and the formal reason which induces the will to give its assent: it is only in respect of the reason that transparent clarity is required. As for the subject-matter, no one has ever denied that it may be obscure—indeed obscurity itself. When I judge that obscurity must be removed from our conceptions to enable us to assent to them without any danger of going wrong, this very obscurity is the subject concerning which I form a clear judgement. It should also be noted that the clarity or transparency which can induce our will to give its assent is of two kinds: the first comes from the natural

light, while the second comes from divine grace. Now although it is commonly said that faith concerns matters which are obscure, this refers solely to the thing or subject-matter to which our faith relates; it does not imply that the formal reason which leads us to assent to matters of faith is obscure. On the contrary, this formal reason consists in a certain inner light which comes from God, and when we are supernaturally illumined by it we are confident that what is put forward for us to believe has been revealed by God himself. And it is quite impossible for him to lie; this is more certain than any natural light, and is often even more evident because of the light of grace.

The sin that Turks and other infidels commit by refusing to embrace the Christian religion does not arise from their unwillingness to assent to obscure matters (for obscure they indeed are), but from their resistance to the impulses of divine grace within them, or from the fact that they make themselves unworthy of grace by their other sins. Let us take the case of an infidel who is destitute of all supernatural grace and has no knowledge of the doctrines which we Christians believe to have been revealed by God. If, despite the fact that these doctrines are obscure to him, he is induced to embrace them by fallacious arguments, I make bold to assert that he will not on that account be a true believer, but will instead be committing a sin by not using his reason correctly. And I think that all orthodox theologians have always taken a similar view on this matter. Furthermore, those who read my books will not be able to suppose that I did not recognize this supernatural light, since I expressly stated in the Fourth Meditation, where I was looking into the cause of falsity, that it produces in our inmost thought a disposition to will, without lessening our freedom.

However, I should like you to remember here that, in matters which may be embraced by the will, I made a very careful distinction between the conduct of life and the contemplation of the truth. As far as the conduct of life is concerned, I am very far from thinking that we should assent only to what is clearly perceived. On the contrary, I do not think that we should always wait even for probable truths; from time to time we will have to choose one of many alternatives about which we have no knowledge, and once we have made our choice, so long as no reasons against it can be produced, we must stick to it as firmly as if it had been chosen for transparently clear reasons. I explained this on p. 26 of the *Discourse on the Method*. But when we are dealing solely with the contemplation of the truth, surely no one has ever denied that we should refrain from giving assent to matters which we do not perceive with sufficient distinctness. Now in my *Meditations* I was dealing solely with the contemplation of the truth; the whole enterprise shows this to be the case, as well as my express declaration at the end of the First Meditation where I said that I could not possibly go too far in my distrustful attitude, since the task in hand involved not action but merely the acquisition of knowledge.

HOBBS

On the Fourth Meditation ('Truth and falsity')

TWELFTH OBJECTION

I understand, then, that error as such is not something real but is merely a defect. Hence my going wrong does not require me to have a faculty specially bestowed on me by God.

It is certain that ignorance is merely a defect, so we do not need any positive faculty in order to be ignorant. But the point is not so obvious in the case of error. It seems that stones and inanimate objects are incapable of making mistakes simply because they lack the power of reasoning and imagining. So the obvious inference is that in order to go wrong one needs the power of reasoning, or at least the power of imagining, and these are both positive faculties which have been given to all those, and only to those, who go wrong.

What is more, M. Descartes says 'I notice that my errors depend on two concurrent causes, namely on the faculty of knowledge which is in me, and on the faculty of choice or freedom of the will.' This seems to contradict the earlier passage. And it should also be noted that the freedom of the will is assumed without proof, and in opposition to the view of the Calvinists.

Reply

It is true that in order to go wrong we need the faculty of reasoning, or rather of judging (that is, affirming and denying), since error is a defect in this faculty. But it does not follow that this defect is something real, any more than blindness is something real, although the mere fact that stones are incapable of vision does not make us call them blind. I am surprised that I have so far found not one valid argument in these objections. On the question of our freedom, I made no assumptions beyond what we all experience within ourselves. Our freedom is very evident by the natural light. Nor do I understand why this passage is said to contradict the earlier one.

There may indeed be many people who, when they consider the fact that God pre-ordains all things, cannot grasp how this is consistent with our freedom. But if we simply consider ourselves, we will all realize in the light of our own experience that voluntariness and freedom are one and the same thing. This is no place for examining the opinion of other people on this subject.

THIRTEENTH OBJECTION

For example, during these past few days I have been asking whether anything in the world exists, and I have realized that from the very fact of my raising this question it follows quite evidently that I exist. I could not but judge that

something which I understood so clearly was true; but this was not because I was compelled so to judge by any external force, but because a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will, and thus the spontaneity and freedom of my belief was all the greater in proportion to my lack of indifference.

The phrase ‘a great light in the intellect’ is metaphorical, and so has no force in the argument. Moreover, anyone who is free from doubt claims he has such ‘great light’ and has no less strong a propensity of the will to affirm what he has no doubt about than someone who possesses real knowledge. Hence this ‘light’ can explain why someone obstinately defends or holds on to a given opinion, but it cannot explain his knowledge of its truth.

Further, it is not only knowing something to be true that is independent of the will, but also believing it or giving assent to it. If something is proved by valid arguments, or is reported as credible, we believe it whether we want to or not. It is true that affirmation and denial, defending and refuting propositions, are acts of will; but it does not follow that our inner assent depends on the will.

There is thus no valid demonstration of the subsequent conclusion, viz. ‘In this incorrect use of free will may be found the privation which constitutes the essence of error’.

Reply

It is quite irrelevant whether the phrase ‘a great light’ has force in the argument or not; what matters is whether it helps to explain matters—and it does. As everyone knows, a ‘light in the intellect’ means transparent clarity of cognition; and while perhaps not everyone who thinks he possesses this does in fact possess it, this does not prevent its being quite different from a stubborn opinion which is formed in the absence of any evident perception.

As for the claim that we assent to things which we clearly perceive, whether we want to or not, this is like saying that we seek a clearly known good whether we want to or not. The qualification ‘or not’ is inappropriate in such contexts, since it implies that we both will and do not will the same thing.

ARNAULD

POINTS WHICH MAY CAUSE DIFFICULTY TO THEOLOGAINS

[...]

In the case of the Fourth Meditation (‘Truth and Falsity’), I am extremely anxious, for many reasons which would take too long to list, that the author should make two things clear, either in the Meditation itself or in the Synopsis.

The first is that when the author is inquiring into the cause of error, he is dealing above all with the mistakes we commit in distinguishing between the true and the false, and not those that occur in our pursuit of good and evil.

The discussion of the first kind of error is all that is needed for the author’s plan and aim, and the comments he makes there on the cause of error would give rise to the most serious objections if they were stretched out of context to cover the pursuit of good and evil. Hence it seems to me that prudence requires, and the order of exposition to which our author is so devoted demands, that anything which is not relevant and which could give rise to controversy should be omitted. For otherwise the reader may be drawn into pointless quarrels over irrelevancies and be hindered in his perception of what is essential.

The second point I should like our author to stress is that, where he asserts that we should assent only to what we clearly and distinctly know, he is dealing solely with matters concerned with the sciences and intellectual contemplation, and not with matters belonging to faith and the conduct of life, and hence that his strictures apply only to rashly adopted views of the opinionated, and not to the prudent beliefs of the faithful.

As St Augustine wisely points out in *De Utilitate Credendi*, Chapter 15,

There are three things in the soul of man which it is very important to distinguish, even though they are closely related: understanding, belief and opinion.

A person *understands* if he grasps something by means of a reliable reason. He *believes* if he is influenced by weighty authority to accept a truth even though he does not grasp it by means of a reliable reason. And he is guilty of being *opinionated* if he thinks he knows something of which he is ignorant.

To be opinionated is a very grave fault, for two reasons. Firstly, if someone is convinced that he knows the answer already, he will be unable to learn, even when there is something to be learnt. And secondly, hastiness is in itself a mark of a disordered soul.

If we understand something, then we owe it to reason; if we believe something, we owe it to authority; and if we are opinionated about something, this is based on error. This distinction will help us to understand that we are not guilty of being hasty and opinionated when we hold on to our faith in matters which we do not yet grasp.

Those who say that we should believe nothing but what we know are obsessed with avoiding the charge of being opinionated, which it must be admitted is a disgraceful and wretched fault. But we should carefully reflect on the fact that there is a very great difference between, on the one hand, reckoning one knows something and, on the other hand, understanding that one is ignorant about it yet believing it under the influence of some authority. If we reflect on this we will surely avoid the charges of error on the one hand, and inhumanity and arrogance on the other.

A little later, in Chapter 12 Augustine adds ‘I could produce many arguments to show that absolutely nothing in human society will be safe if we decide to

believe only what we can regard as having been clearly perceived.’ These, then, are the views of St Augustine.

M. Descartes, prudent man that he is, will readily judge how important it is to make the distinctions just outlined. For otherwise those many people who in our age are prone to impiety may distort his words in order to subvert the faith.

[Descartes to Arnauld]

REPLY TO THE POINTS WHICH MAY CAUSE DIFFICULTY TO THEOLOGAINS

[...]

The next point concerns the fact that in the Fourth Meditation I dealt only ‘with the mistakes we commit in distinguishing between the true and the false and not those that occur in our pursuit of good and evil’, and that when I asserted that ‘we should assent only to what we clearly know’ this was always subject to the exception of ‘matters which belong to faith and the conduct of life’. Now this is something that the entire context of my book makes clear; moreover I have explained the point quite explicitly in my reply to the Second Objections, under the heading *Fifthly*, and I have also given advance warning of it in the Synopsis. I say this in order to show how much I respect M. Arnauld’s judgement and how much I welcome his advice.

GASSENDI

On the Fourth Meditation: ‘Truth and falsity’

1. In the Fourth Meditation you begin by going over the results which you consider you have demonstrated in the previous Meditations—results which, you presume, have opened the way for further progress. To avoid delay here, I shall not keep insisting that you should have provided a firmer demonstration of these results; I shall simply ask you to remember what has been conceded and what not, so that the discussion may avoid being dragged into the realm of preconceived opinion.

Next you reason that it is impossible that God should deceive you; and in order to make excuses for the deceptive and error-prone faculty which God gave you, you suggest that the fault lies in nothingness, which you say you have some idea of, and which you say you participate in, since you take yourself to be something intermediate between nothingness and God. This is a splendid argument! I will pass over the impossibility of explaining how we have an idea of nothingness, and what kind of idea it is, and how we participate in nothingness, and so on. I will simply point out that this distinction does not obviate the fact that God could have given man a faculty of judgement that was immune from

error. Without giving him a faculty of infinite scope, he could have given him the kind of faculty which would never lead him to assent to falsehood, so that he would clearly perceive anything he did know, and would avoid making any definite assertion on one side or the other in cases where he was ignorant.

When you discuss this objection you state that it is no cause for surprise if you do not understand the reason for some of God’s actions. This is correct, but it is still surprising that you should have a true idea which represents God as omniscient, omnipotent and wholly good, and yet that you should nonetheless observe that some of his works are not wholly perfect. For given that he could have made things more perfect but did not do so, this seems to show that he must have lacked either the knowledge or the power or the will to do so. He was certainly imperfect if, despite having the knowledge and the power, he lacked the will and preferred imperfection to perfection.

Your rejection of the employment of final causes in physics might have been correct in a different context, but since you are dealing with God, there is obviously a danger that you may be abandoning the principal argument for establishing by the natural light the wisdom, providence and power of God, and indeed his existence. Leaving aside the entire world, the heavens and its other main parts, how or where will you be able to get any better evidence for the existence of such a God than from the function of the various parts in plants, animals, man and yourself (or your body), seeing that you bear the likeness of God? We know that certain great thinkers have been led by a study of anatomy not just to achieve a knowledge of God but also to sing thankful hymns to him for having organized all the parts and harmonized their functions in such a way as to deserve the highest praise for his care and providence.

You will say that it is the physical causes of this organization and arrangement which we should investigate, and that it is foolish to have recourse to purposes rather than to active causes or materials. But no mortal can possibly understand or explain the active principle that produces the observed form and arrangement of the valves which serve as the openings to the vessels in the chambers of the heart. Nor can we understand the source from which this active principle acquires the material from which the valves are fashioned, or how it makes them operate, or what organic structure it employs, or how it makes use of them, or what it requires to ensure that they are of the correct hardness, consistency, fit, flexibility, size, shape and position. Since, I say, no physicist is able to discern and explain these and similar structures, why should he not at least admire their superb functioning and the ineffable Providence which has so appositely designed the valves for this function? Why should the physicist not be praised if he then sees that we must necessarily acknowledge some first cause which arranged these and all other things with such supreme wisdom and in such precise conformity with his purposes?

You say that it is rash to investigate the purposes of God. But while this may be true if you are thinking of the purposes which God himself wished to remain hidden or ordered us not to investigate, it surely does not apply to the purposes which he left on public display, as it were, and which can be discovered without

much effort—purposes which are in any case of such a kind as to lead us to bestow great praise on God as their author.

You may say that the idea of God which is in each of us suffices to give us true and authentic knowledge of God and his purposes, without any reference to the purposes of things or anything else. But not everyone is in your happy position of having such a perfect idea from birth and seeing it before him with such clarity. And since there are some to whom God has not granted such clear vision, you should not begrudge their being able to come to know and glorify the craftsman by an inspection of his works. I need hardly stress that this does not prevent our being allowed to make use of the idea of God, since this too appears to be entirely derived from our knowledge of things in the world; indeed were you to admit the truth, you would say that you owed a considerable amount, if not everything, to this kind of knowledge. For I ask you, what progress do you think you would have made if, since being implanted in the body, you had remained within it with your eyes closed and your ears stopped and, in short, with no external senses to enable you to perceive this universe of objects or anything outside you? Would you not have been absorbed in private meditation, eternally turning thoughts over and over? Answer in all honesty and tell me what idea of God and yourself you think you would have acquired under such circumstances.

2. The solution which you go on to offer is that a created thing which appears imperfect should be considered not as a whole, but as a part of the universe, and from this point of view it will be perfect. This is an admirable distinction; but here we are dealing with the imperfection of a part not as a part, or in comparison with the complete whole, but as something complete in itself which performs its special function. And even if you relate this to the universe, we are still faced with the problem of whether the universe would not really have been more perfect if all its parts had been perfect than it is now when many of its parts are imperfect. Thus a republic whose citizens are all good will be more perfect than one in which most or some of the citizens are bad.

So when you go on to say later on that the universe will be in some sense more perfect if some of its parts are subject to error than it would be if they were all alike, this is like saying that a republic has, in a sense, more perfection if some of its citizens are bad than it would have if they were all good. Hence, just as it seems that a good ruler ought to prefer it if all his citizens are good, so it seems that the author of the universe ought to have ordained that all the parts of the universe should be created such as to be immune from error. You could say that the perfection of the parts which are immune from error appears greater by contrast with those which are liable to error; but they are not intrinsically more perfect. In the same way, the virtue of good men does in a sense shine out more by contrast with those who are vicious, but it is not for that reason intrinsically more shining. Hence, just as we should not want some of the citizens to be bad merely so as to make the good citizens stand out more brightly, so it seems that it should never have been allowed that some parts of the universe should be subject to error just so that those which were immune from error should shine more brightly.

You say that you have no right to complain that the role God wished you to undertake in the world is not the principal one or the most perfect of all. But this does not eliminate the question of why God was not satisfied with giving you a role to play which was the least perfect of a set of perfect roles, without actually giving you an imperfect role. A ruler cannot be blamed for not appointing all the citizens to the highest offices but keeping some in lower, and others in the lowest, positions; but he would be criticized if he not only assigned some to the lowest offices but also assigned some to positively base roles.

You say that you cannot produce any reason to prove that God ought to have given you a greater faculty of knowledge than he did; and no matter how skilled you understand a craftsman to be, this does not make you think that he ought to have put into every one of his works all the perfections which he is able to put into some of them. But the objection which I have just raised still stands. The difficulty, you see, is not so much why God did not give you a greater faculty of knowledge, but why he gave you a faculty subject to error. The question is not why the supreme craftsman did not want to bestow all the perfections on all his works, but why he wished to bestow imperfections on some of them.

You say that although you have no power to avoid error through having a clear perception of things, you can still avoid it by firmly resolving to adhere to the rule of not assenting to anything which you do not clearly perceive. But although you can always keep this rule carefully in mind, is it not still an imperfection not to perceive clearly matters which you need to decide upon, and hence to be perpetually liable to the risk of error?

You say that error resides in the mental operation itself in so far as it proceeds from you and is a kind of privation, but not in the faculty God gave you, nor in its operation in so far as it depends on him. But although the error does not immediately reside in the faculty God gave you, it does indirectly attach to it, since it was created with the kind of imperfection which makes error possible. Admittedly, as you say, you have no cause for complaint against God who, despite owing you nothing, bestowed on you the good gifts which you should thank him for. But there is still cause to wonder why he did not bestow more perfect gifts on you, given that he had the knowledge and the power and was not malevolent.

You go on to say that you have no cause to complain that God's concurrence is involved in your acts when you go wrong. For in so far as these acts depend on God, they are all true and good; and your ability to perform them means that there is, in a sense, more perfection in you than would be the case if you lacked this ability. You continue: 'As for the privation involved—which is all that the essential definition of falsity and wrong consists in—this does not in any way require the concurrence of God, since it is not a thing and should not be referred to him.' But although this is a subtle distinction it is not quite enough to resolve the problem. For even if God does not concur in the privation in which the falsity and error of the act consists, he nonetheless concurs in the act itself; and if he did not concur in it, it would not be a privation. In any case, he is the author of that power in you which is subject to deception and error; and hence he is the

author of a power which is, so to speak, ineffective. Thus the defect in the act should not, it seems, be referred so much to the power which is ineffective as to the author who made it ineffective and did not choose to make it effective, or more effective, though he was able to do so. It is certainly no fault in a workman if he does not trouble to make an enormous key to open a tiny box; but it is a fault if, in making the key small, he gives it a shape which makes it difficult or impossible to open the box. Similarly, God is admittedly not to be blamed for giving puny man a faculty of judging that is too small to cope with everything, or even with most things or the most important things; but this still leaves room to wonder why he gave man a faculty which is uncertain, confused and inadequate even for the few matters which he did want us to decide upon.

3. You next ask what is the cause of error or falsity in you. First of all, I do not question your basis for saying the intellect is simply the faculty of being aware of ideas, or of apprehending things simply and without any affirmation or negation; nor do I dispute your calling the will or freedom of choice a faculty whose function is to affirm or deny, to give or withhold assent. My only question concerns why, on your account, our will or freedom of choice is not restricted by any limits, whereas the intellect is restricted. In fact it seems that these two faculties have an equally broad scope; certainly the scope of the intellect is at the very least no narrower than that of the will, since the will never aims at anything which the intellect has not already perceived.

I said that the scope of the intellect was 'at the very least no narrower'; in fact its scope seems to be even wider than that of the will. For the will or choice or judgement, and hence our selection or pursuit or avoidance of something, never occurs unless we have previously apprehended that thing, and unless the idea of that thing has been previously perceived and set before us by the intellect. What is more, there are many things which we understand only obscurely, so that no judgement or pursuit or avoidance occurs in respect of them. Also, the faculty of judgement is often undecided, and if there are reasons of equal weight on either side, or no reasons at all, no judgement follows; but the intellect still continues to apprehend the matters on which no judgement has been passed.

You say that you can always understand the possibility of your faculties being increased more and more, including the intellectual faculty itself, of which you can form an infinite idea. But this itself shows that the intellect is not any more limited than the will, since it can extend itself even to an infinite object. You say that you recognize your will to be equal to that of God—not, indeed, in respect of its extent, but essentially. But surely the same could be said of the intellect too, since you have defined the essential notion of the intellect in just the same way as you have defined that of the will. In short, will you please tell us if the will can extend to anything that escapes the intellect? It seems, then, that error does not arise, as you allege, from the fact that the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect and the will extends itself to judge of matters which the intellect does not perceive. The scope of both faculties is equal, and error arises instead from the fact that the perception of the intellect is faulty and the judgement of the will is faulty.

Hence there is no basis for your extending the will beyond the bounds of the intellect, since the will never makes judgements about things which the intellect does not perceive, and it makes faulty judgements only because the intellect has faulty perceptions.

When you talk about the argument you constructed concerning the existence of things, and compare the case of your own existence, you proceed correctly as far as the judgement of your own existence is concerned, but your assumption appears to be incorrect in so far as it concerns other things. For what you claim, or rather pretend, is not something you are really in doubt about: you emphatically judge that something apart from you and distinct from you exists, for you already have a prior understanding of something apart from you and distinct from you. When you suppose that you have not yet come upon any persuasive reason in favour of one alternative rather than the other, this is indeed a possible supposition. But you ought simultaneously to suppose that in that case no judgement will follow, and that your will will always be indifferent and will not decide to make a definite judgement until the intellect comes upon some plausible argument which favours one side more than the other.

You go on to say that this indifference extends to cases where you do not have sufficiently clear knowledge; for although probable conjectures may pull you in one direction, the mere knowledge that they are conjectures may push your assent the other way. But this seems quite untrue. For if your conjectures are pulling you in one direction, the knowledge that they are merely conjectures may indeed make your judgement come down on that side, albeit with some reluctance and hesitation; but it can never make your judgement come down on the other side unless other conjectures occur subsequently to you which are not just equally probable but more probable.

You add that your point is confirmed by your experience of the last few days, when you supposed that opinions you believed to be absolutely true were false. But remember that I have not allowed you to make this supposition. You cannot really have felt or been convinced that you had never seen the sun or the earth or men and so on, or that you had never heard sounds or walked or eaten or written or spoken or performed similar activities involving the use of your body and its organs.

Finally, the essence of error does not seem to consist in the incorrect use of free will, as you allege, so much as in the disparity between our judgement and the thing which is the object of our judgement. And it seems that error arises when our intellectual apprehension of the thing does not correspond with the way the thing really is. Hence the blame does not seem to lie with the will for not judging correctly, so much as with the intellect for not displaying the object correctly. The dependence of the will on the intellect seems to be as follows. If the intellect perceives something clearly, or seems to do so, the will in that case will make a judgement that is approved and settled, irrespective of whether it is in fact true, or merely thought to be true. But when the intellect's perception is obscure, then the will in this case will make a judgement that is doubtful and tentative, but which will, nonetheless, be regarded for the time being as truer

than its opposite, irrespective of whether it really accords with the truth of the matter or not. This means that we do not have the power so much to guard against error as to guard against persisting in error; and if we want to use our judgement correctly, we should not so much restrain our will as apply our intellect to develop clearer awareness, which the judgement will always then follow.

4. You then conclude by exaggerating the beneficial results which you can derive from this Meditation, and you lay down a rule for arriving at the truth. You say that you will reach the truth if only you give sufficient attention to all the things which you perfectly understand, and separate these from all the other cases where your apprehension is more confused and obscure.

This is certainly true, but it is the kind of truth that could have been understood without any reference to the foregoing Meditation; and hence the Meditation seems to have been wholly superfluous. But please note, distinguished Sir, that the difficulty does not seem to be about whether we must clearly and distinctly understand something if we are to avoid error, but about what possible skill or method will permit us to discover that our understanding is so clear and distinct as to be true and to make it impossible that we should be mistaken. As I objected at the beginning, we are often deceived even though we think we know something as clearly and distinctly as anything can possibly be known. You also raised this objection against yourself, but we are still waiting for the aforementioned skill or method, and it should be your principal task to work on this problem.

Objections raised against the Fourth Meditation

[Descartes to Gassendi]

1. I did explain quite adequately what sort of idea of nothingness we have, and how we participate in non-being: the idea of nothingness I called a 'negative idea', and I said that 'participating in non-being' simply means that we are not the supreme being and that we lack very many things. But you are always looking for flaws where none exist.

When you say that I 'observe that some of God's works are not wholly perfect', you are plainly inventing something I neither wrote nor thought. I simply said that if certain things are considered not from the point of view of the part they play in the world but as separate wholes, then they can appear to be imperfect.

The points you make to defend the notion of a final cause should be applied to efficient causation. The function of the various parts of plants and animals etc. makes it appropriate to admire God as their efficient cause—to recognize and glorify the craftsman through examining his works; but we cannot guess from this what purpose God had in creating any given thing. In ethics, then, where we may often legitimately employ conjectures, it may admittedly be pious on occasion to try to guess what purpose God may have had in mind in his direction of the universe; but in physics, where everything must be backed up by the

strongest arguments, such conjectures are futile. We cannot pretend that some of God's purposes are more out in the open than others; all are equally hidden in the inscrutable abyss of his wisdom. Nor should you pretend that none of us mortals is incapable of understanding other kinds of cause; they are all much easier to discover than God's purposes, and the kinds of cause which you put forward as typical of the difficulties involved are in fact ones that many people consider they do know about.

Finally you ask me what sort of idea my mind would have had of God and of itself if, ever since being implanted in the body, it had remained within it, with the eyes closed and with none of the senses functioning. Since your question is asked in such an open and frank manner, I shall give you a straightforward and honest reply. I do not doubt that the mind—provided we suppose that in thinking it received not just no assistance from the body but also that it received no interference from it—would have had exactly the same ideas of God and itself that it now has, with the sole difference that they would have been much purer and clearer. The senses often impede the mind in many of its operations, and in no case do they help in the perception of ideas. The only thing that prevents all of us noticing equally well that we have these ideas is that we are too occupied with perceiving the images of corporeal things.

2. Throughout this section you assume incorrectly that our being liable to error is a positive imperfection, when in fact it is simply (especially with respect to God) the negation of greater perfection among created things. Moreover, your comparison between the citizens of a republic and the parts of the universe is not quite accurate: the bad character of the citizens is, in relation to the republic, something positive, but this does not apply to man's liability to error, or his lack of all perfections, when this is taken in relation to the good of the universe. A better comparison to make might be the comparison between someone who wanted the whole of the human body to be covered with eyes so as to look more beautiful (there being no part of the body more beautiful than the eye), and someone who thinks that there ought not to have been any creatures in the world who were liable to error (i.e. not wholly perfect).

Your supposition that God has assigned us base roles and has given us imperfections, and so on, is plainly false. It is also quite false that God gave man a faculty which is 'uncertain, confused and inadequate even for the few matters which he did want us to decide upon'.

3. You here ask me to say briefly whether the will can extend to anything that escapes the intellect: The answer is that this occurs whenever we happen to go wrong. Thus when you judge that the mind is a kind of rarefied body, you can understand that the mind is itself, i.e. a thinking thing, and that a rarefied body is an extended thing; but the proposition that it is one and the same thing that thinks and is extended is one which you certainly do not understand. You simply want to believe it, because you have believed it before and do not want to change your view. It is the same when you judge that an apple, which may in fact be poisoned, is nutritious: you understand that its smell, colour and so on, are pleasant, but this does not mean that you understand that this particular apple

will be beneficial to eat; you judge that it will because you want to believe it. So, while I do admit that when we direct our will towards something, we always have some sort of understanding of some aspect of it, I deny that our understanding and our will are of equal scope. In the case of any given object, there may be many things about it that we desire but very few things of which we have knowledge. And when we make a bad judgement, it is not that we exercise our will in a bad fashion, but that the object of our will is bad. Again, we never understand anything in a bad fashion; when we are said to 'understand in a bad fashion', all that happens is that we judge that our understanding is more extensive than it in fact is.

You next deny certain propositions about the indifference of the will. But although these propositions are self-evident, I am not prepared to set about proving them here. These are the sorts of things that each of us ought to know by experience in his own case, rather than having to be convinced of them by rational argument; and you, O Flesh, do not seem to attend to the actions the mind performs within itself. You may be unfree, if you wish; but I am certainly very pleased with my freedom since I experience it within myself. What is more, you have produced no arguments to attack it but merely bald denials. I affirm what I have experienced and what anyone else can experience for himself, whereas your denial seems merely to be based on your own apparent failure to have the appropriate experience; so my own view is probably entitled to receive more widespread acceptance.

Your own words, however, establish that you have in fact had the experience of freedom. You deny that we can guard against making mistakes because you refuse to allow that the will can be directed to anything which is not determined by the intellect; but you admit at the same time that we can guard against persisting in error. Now this would be quite impossible unless the will had the freedom to direct itself, without the determination of the intellect, towards one side or the other; and this you have just denied. If the intellect has already determined the will to put forward some false judgement, then what is it, may I ask, that determines the will when first it begins to guard against persisting in error? If it is determined by itself, then it can after all be directed towards an object which the intellect does not impel it towards—which you denied, and which is the sole point in dispute. If on the other hand it is determined by the intellect, then it is not the will that is guarding against error; all that occurs is that, just as it was previously directed towards a falsehood set before it by the intellect, now it happens, purely by chance, to turn towards the truth, because the intellect presents the truth to it. I would also like to know what is your conception of the nature of falsity, and how you think it can be an object of the intellect. My own view is this. Since I understand falsity to be merely a privation of the truth, I am convinced that there would be a total contradiction involved in the intellect's apprehending falsity under the guise of truth; but this would have to be the case if the intellect were ever to determine the will to embrace what is false.

4. As for the beneficial results to be derived from these *Meditations*, I did clearly point out, in the short Preface which I think you have read, that those

who do not bother to grasp the proper order of my arguments and the connection between them, but merely try to quarrel with individual passages, will not get much benefit from the book. As for the method enabling us to distinguish between the things that we really perceive clearly and those that we merely think we perceive clearly, I believe, as I have already said, that I have been reasonably careful to supply such a method; but I have little confidence that those who spend so little effort on getting rid of their preconceived opinions that they complain that I have not dealt with them in a 'simple and brief statement' will arrive at a clear perception of it.

MERSENNE, ET AL., AGAIN

After a very careful reading of your *Meditations* and of your replies to the objections so far raised, we find there are still some difficulties remaining, which it is only fair to ask you to remove.

[...]

The *fifth* difficulty arises from this point, and it is based on your uncompromising assertion that no deception is to be found in God. Now very many theologians believe that the damned, both angels and men, are continually deceived by the idea of a tormenting fire which God has implanted in them; thus they most firmly believe, and think they see and perceive very clearly, that they are really being tormented by the fire, even though there is no such fire. May not God, then, deceive us with similar ideas, and continually delude us by sending such semblances or ideas into our souls? Thus we might think we clearly saw, and perceived with each of our senses, things which in fact have no existence outside us: there might be no heaven or earth, and we might have no arms or feet or eyes etc. God can do this without any wrong or injustice, since he is the supreme Lord of all things and has the absolute power to deal with his creatures as he wishes, especially when his actions may serve to humble the pride of men and punish them for their sins, either because of original sin or because of other causes which are hidden from us. All this seems to be confirmed by those passages in Scripture which establish that we can know nothing. Paul, for example, says in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 8, verse 2: 'If any man think that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.' Again, in Ecclesiastes, Chapter 8, verse 17 we find: 'Then I understood that of all the works of God a man can find no reason for those that are done under the sun; and the more he labours to seek it, the less shall he find it; nay, though a wise man say that he knoweth it, yet shall he be unable to find it out.' The whole book makes it clear that the 'wise man' says what he does because of carefully considered reasons, not hastily or thoughtlessly; this is exceptionally clear when the issue of the mind, which you maintain is immortal, is discussed. For Chapter 3, verse 19 says that the death of man 'is as the death of beasts'. In case you should reply that this refers only to the body, the preacher adds that 'a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast'. And speaking explicitly of the spirit of man he says that there is no one who knows 'whether it goeth upward' (i.e. whether it is immortal), or whether, with the spirits of the beasts, it 'goeth downward' (i.e.

perishes). You cannot claim that these are words put into the mouth of an unbeliever; if so, the writer would have had to have drawn our attention to this and refuted these assertions. Nor can you claim that you do not have to reply to these points because Scripture is the province of the theologians. For since you are a Christian, it behoves you to be ready to reply to every objection that can be raised against the faith and deal with it to the best of your powers—especially when it goes against a position you wish to establish.

The *sixth* difficulty arises in connection with the indifference that belongs to our judgement, or liberty. This indifference, you claim, does not belong to the perfection of the will but has to do merely with its imperfection; thus, according to you, indifference is removed whenever the mind clearly perceives what it should believe or do or refrain from doing. But do you not see that by adopting this position you are destroying God's freedom, since you are removing from his will the indifference as to whether he shall create this world rather than another world or no world at all? Yet it is an article of faith that God was from eternity indifferent as to whether he should create one world, or innumerable worlds, or none at all. But who doubts that God has always perceived with the clearest vision what he should do or refrain from doing? Thus, a very clear vision and perception of things does not remove indifference of choice; and if indifference cannot be a proper part of human freedom, neither will it find a place in divine freedom, since the essences of things are, like numbers, indivisible and immutable. Therefore indifference is involved in God's freedom of choice no less than it is in the case of human freedom of choice.

[Descartes to Mersenne, et al.]

AUTHOR'S REPLIES TO THE SIXTH SET OF
OBJECTIONS

[...]

5. The assertion that it is self-contradictory that men should be deceived by God is clearly demonstrated from the fact that the form of deception is non-being, towards which the supreme being cannot tend. On this point all theologians are agreed, and the entire certainty of the Christian faith depends on it. For why should we believe what God has revealed to us if we thought that we were from time to time deceived by him? And although the theologians commonly say that the damned are tormented by the fires of hell, they do not therefore believe that they are 'deceived by the false idea of a tormenting fire which God has implanted in them'; rather they think that the damned are tormented by a real fire, since 'just as the incorporeal spirit of a living man is naturally confined within the body, so after death it can easily be confined in corporeal fire, through the power of God', etc. See the Master of the Sentences [Peter Lombard's *Sentences*], Book IV Distinction 44.

As for the passages cited from Scripture, I do not regard it as my job to comment on them, except when they seem to be in conflict with an opinion that is peculiar to me. For when the Scriptures are invoked against opinions which are common to all Christians, such as the opinions attacked here (e.g. that something can be known and that human souls are not like those of animals), I should

be afraid of being accused of arrogance if I did not choose to be content with the replies already discovered by others, rather than thinking up new answers of my own. For I have never become involved in theological studies except in so far as they contributed to my private instruction, nor am I conscious of having so much divine grace within me that I feel a vocation for such sacred studies. So I hereby declare that in future I will refuse to comment on questions of this kind; but I will make an exception just this once, to avoid giving anyone an excuse to think that I am keeping silent because I cannot give an adequate explanation of the passages cited.

First, then, I maintain that the passage from St Paul 1 Corinthians, Chapter 8, verse 2, should be understood to refer only to knowledge which is not conjoined with love, i.e. to the knowledge possessed by atheists; for if anyone knows God as he should, he cannot fail to adore him or to have love. This is proved by the words that come just before those cited, 'Knowledge puffeth up, but love edifieth', and also by the words which immediately follow: 'If anyone loveth God, the same (i.e. God) is known by him.' Thus the apostle does not mean that we cannot possess any knowledge, for he admits that those who love God know him, i.e. have knowledge of him. He merely says that those who do not have love, and hence do not have sufficient knowledge of God, do not know things as they ought to know them, even though they may think they have some knowledge in other matters; for we must begin with knowledge of God, and our knowledge of all other things must then be subordinated to this single initial piece of knowledge, as I explained in my *Meditations*. Thus this very passage which is invoked against me so openly confirms my own opinion on the subject that I do not think that those who disagree with me can possibly give a correct explanation of it. If anyone maintains that the phrase 'the same' refers not to God but to the man who is known and approved of God, then a passage from another apostle, namely St John, in the First Epistle, Chapter 2, wholly supports my interpretation. Verse 2 reads as follows: 'And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.' Again, Chapter 4, verse 7 reads: 'Everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God.'

The same reasoning applies to the passages cited from Ecclesiastes. It should be noted that in this book Solomon is not adopting the role of an unbeliever but speaking in his own right, as a sinner who had previously turned away from God and is now repenting. He says that while he merely employed human wisdom and did not refer it to God, he was unable to find anything that was wholly satisfying, or which did not contain vanity. Because of this he warns us in various passages that we should turn to God, and he makes this explicit in Chapter 11, verse 9: 'Know thou that for all these things God will bring thee to judgement'; the message is continued in what follows up to the end of the book. More specifically, in Chapter 8, verse 17, the words 'then I understood that of all the works of God man can find no reason for those that are done under the sun' are to be taken to refer not to any man, but to the man described in the preceding verse: 'There is a man that neither by day or night taketh sleep with his eyes.' It is as if the prophet wanted to warn us here that those who are too assiduous in their studies are not suited to the pursuit of truth; and those who know me will certainly find it hard to suppose that this saying applies to me. But we should pay special attention to the phrase 'those things that are done under the sun'. This

phrase frequently recurs in the book, and always refers to natural things, leaving out their subordination to God; this is because God is above all things, and hence is not included in those which are *under* the sun. Thus the true sense of the passage cited is that man cannot achieve correct knowledge of natural things so long as he does not know God, which is just what I too have asserted. Finally, in Chapter 3, verse 19, the statements ‘The death of man is as the death of the beasts’ and ‘Man hath no pre-eminence above a beast’ are obviously intended to apply only to the body; for the passage mentions only things which belong to the body. Immediately afterwards we find a separate comment about the soul: ‘Who knoweth if the spirit of the sons of Adam goeth upward and if the spirit of the beasts goeth downward?’ In other words, who knows whether human souls are destined to enjoy celestial bliss, so long as man relies on human reasoning and does not turn to God? Now I have certainly tried to prove by natural reason that the human soul is not corporeal, but I grant that only faith can enable us to know whether it will ascend above.

6. As for the freedom of the will, the way in which it exists in God is quite different from the way in which it exists in us. It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. I am not speaking here of temporal priority: I mean that there is not even any priority of order, or nature, or of ‘rationally determined reason’ as they call it, such that God’s idea of the good impelled him to choose one thing rather than another. For example, God did not will the creation of the world in time because he saw that it would be better this way than if he had created it from eternity; nor did he will that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise, and so on. On the contrary, it is because he willed to create the world in time that it is better this way than if he had created it from eternity; and it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise; and so on in other cases. There is no problem in the fact that the merit of the saints may be said to be the cause of their obtaining eternal life; for it is not the cause of this reward in the sense that it determines God to will anything, but is merely the cause of an effect of which God willed from eternity that it should be the cause. Thus the supreme indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence. But as for man, since he finds that the nature of all goodness and truth is already determined by God, and his will cannot tend towards anything else, it is evident that he will embrace what is good and true all the more willingly, and hence more freely, in proportion as he sees it more clearly. He is never indifferent except when he does not know which of the two alternatives is the better or truer, or at least when he does not see this clearly enough to rule out any possibility of doubt. Hence the indifference which belongs to human freedom is very different from that which belongs to divine freedom. The fact that the essences of things are said to be indivisible is not relevant here. For, firstly, no essence can belong univocally to both God and his creatures; and, secondly, indifference does not belong to the essence of human

freedom, since not only are we free when ignorance of what is right makes us indifferent, but we are also free—indeed at our freest—when a clear perception impels us to pursue some object.