FIFTH MEDITATION – Excerpts from the Objections and Replies

CATERUS

At last I find myself in agreement with the author. He has laid it down as a general rule that 'everything of which I am clearly and distinctly aware is a true entity'. Indeed, to go further: 'whatever I think of is true'. For from our boyhood onwards we have totally outlawed all chimeras and similar 'conceptual entities' [*entia rationis*]. No faculty can be diverted from its proper object. The will, if it moves at all, tends towards the good. Even the senses do not in themselves go astray: sight sees what it sees; the ears hear what they hear; and even if you see fool's gold, there is nothing wrong with your vision. The error arises from your judgement, when you decide that what you see is gold. Hence M. Descartes most properly puts all error down to the judgement and the will.

But now use this rule to make the inference you wanted. 'I am clearly and distinctly aware of an infinite being; hence this is a true entity and something real.' Yet will not someone ask '*Are* you clearly and distinctly aware of an infinite being? What, in that case, is the meaning of that well-worn maxim which is common knowledge: *the infinite qua infinite is unknown*?' When I think of a chiliagon, and construct for myself a confused representation of some figure, I do not distinctly imagine the chiliagon itself, since I do not distinctly see the thousand sides. And if this is so, then the question obviously arises as to how the infinite can be thought of in a distinct as opposed to a confused manner, given that the infinite perfections that make it up cannot be seen clearly 'before the eyes' as it were.

This is perhaps what St Thomas meant when he denied that the proposition 'God exists' is self-evident. He considers an objection to this put by Damascene: 'The knowledge of the existence of God is naturally implanted in all men; hence the existence of God is self-evident.' His reply is that the knowledge that God exists is naturally implanted in us only in a general sense, or 'in a confused manner', as he puts it, that is, in so far as God is the ultimate felicity of man. But this, he says, is not straightforward knowledge of the existence of God, just as to know that someone is coming is not the same as to know Peter, even though it is Peter who is coming. He is in effect saying that God is known under some general conception, as an ultimate end or as the first and most perfect being, or even under the concept of that which includes all things in a confused and general manner; but he is not known in terms of the precise concept of his own proper essence, for in essence God is infinite and so unknown to us. I know that M. Descartes will have a ready answer to this line of questioning. Yet I trust that these objections, which I am putting forward purely for discussion, will remind him of the dictum of Boethius: 'There are certain common conceptions of the mind which are self-evident only to the wise.' Hence, it should be no surprise if those who desire to increase their wisdom ask many questions and spend rather a long time on these topics. For they know that these matters have been laid down as the fundamental basis of the whole subject; and if they are to understand them, intensive scrutiny is required.

Let us then concede that someone does possess a clear and distinct idea of a supreme and utterly perfect being. What is the next step you will take from here? You will say that this infinite being exists, and that his existence is so certain that 'I ought to regard the existence of God as having at least the same level of certainty as I have hitherto attributed to the truths of mathematics. Hence it is just as much of a contradiction to think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking a perfection), as it is to think of a mountain without a valley.' This is the lynchpin of the whole structure; to give in on this point is to be obliged to admit defeat. But since I am taking on an opponent whose strength is greater than my own, I should like to have a preliminary skirmish with him, so that, although I am sure to be beaten in the end, I may at least put off the inevitable for a while.

I know we are basing our argument on reason alone and not on appeals to authority. But to avoid giving the impression that I am wilfully taking issue with such an outstanding thinker as M. Descartes, let me nevertheless begin by asking you to listen to what St Thomas says. He raises the following objection to his own position:

> As soon as we understand the meaning of the word 'God', we immediately grasp that God exists. For the word 'God' means 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'. Now that which exists in reality as well as in the intellect is greater than that which exists in the intellect alone. Hence, since God immediately exists in the intellect as soon as we have understood the word 'God', it follows that he also exists in reality.

This argument may be set out formally as follows. 'God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. But that than which nothing greater can be conceived includes existence. Hence God, in virtue of the very word or concept of "God", contains existence; and hence he cannot lack, or be conceived of as lacking, existence.' But now please tell me if this is not the selfsame argument as that produced by M. Descartes? St Thomas defines God as 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'. M. Descartes calls him 'a supremely perfect being'; but of course nothing greater than this can be conceived. St Thomas's next step is to say 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived includes existence', for otherwise something greater could be conceived, namely a being conceived of as also including existence. Yet surely M. Descartes' next step is identical to this. God, he says, is a supremely perfect being; and a supremely perfect being includes existence, for otherwise it would not be a supremely perfect being. St Thomas's conclusion is that 'since God immediately exists in the intellect as soon as we have understood the word "God", it follows that he also exists in reality'. In other words, since the very concept or essence of 'a being than which nothing greater can be conceived' implies existence, it follows that this very being exists. M. Descartes' conclusion is the same: 'From the very fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God and hence that he really exists.' But now let St Thomas reply both to himself and to M. Descartes. 'Let it be granted', he says,

> that we all understand that the word 'God' means what it is claimed to mean, namely 'that than which nothing greater can be thought of'. However, it does not follow that we all understand that what is signified by this word exists in the real

world. All that follows is that it exists in the apprehension of the intellect. Nor can it be shown that this being really exists unless it is conceded that there really is something such that nothing greater can be thought of; and this premiss is denied by those who maintain that God does not exist.

My own answer to M. Descartes, which is based on this passage, is briefly this. Even if it is granted that a supremely perfect being carries the implication of existence in virtue of its very title, it still does not follow that the existence in question is anything actual in the real world; all that follows is that the concept of existence is inseparably linked to the concept of a supreme being. So you cannot infer that the existence of God is anything actual unless you suppose that the supreme being actually exists; for then it will actually contain all perfections, including the perfection of real existence.

Pardon me, gentlemen: I am now rather tired and propose to have a little fun. The complex 'existing lion' includes both 'lion' and 'existence', and it includes them essentially, for if you take away either element it will not be the same complex. But now, has not God had clear and distinct knowledge of this composite from all eternity? And does not the idea of this composite, as a composite, involve both elements essentially? In other words, does not existence belong to the essence of the composite 'existing lion'? Nevertheless the distinct knowledge of God, the distinct knowledge he has from eternity, does not compel either element in the composite to exist, unless we assume that the composite itself exists (in which case it will contain all its essential perfections including actual existence). Similarly even if I have distinct knowledge of a supreme being, and even if the supremely perfect being includes existence as an essential part of the concept, it still does not follow that the existence in question is anything actual, unless we suppose that the supreme being exists (for in that case it will include actual existence along with all its other perfections). Accordingly we must look elsewhere for a proof that the supremely perfect being exists.

[Descartes to Caterus]

The author of the objections here again compares one of my arguments with one of St Thomas', thus as it were forcing me to explain how one argument can have any greater force than the other. I think I can do this without too much unpleasantness. For, first, St Thomas did not use the argument which he then puts forward as an objection to his own position conclusion as I do; and lastly, on this issue I do not differ from the Angelic Doctor in any respect. St Thomas asks whether the existence of God is self-evident as far as we are concerned, that is, whether it is obvious to everyone; and he answers, correctly, that it is not. The argument which he then puts forward as an objection to his own position can be stated as follows. 'Once we have understood the meaning of the word "God", we understand it to mean "that than which nothing greater can be conceived". But to exist in reality as well as in the intellect is greater than to exist in the intellect alone. Therefore, once we have understood the meaning of the word "God" we understand that God exists in reality as well as in the understanding.' In this form the argument is manifestly invalid, for the only conclusion that should have been drawn is: 'Therefore, once we have understood the meaning of the word "God" we understand that what is conveyed is that God exists in reality as well as in the understanding.' Yet because a word conveys something, that thing is not therefore shown to be true. My argument however was as follows: 'That which we clearly and distinctly understand to belong to the true and immutable nature, or essence, or form of something, can truly be asserted of that thing. But once we have made a sufficiently careful investigation of what God is, we clearly and distinctly understand that existence belongs to his true and immutable nature. Hence we can now truly assert of God that he does exist.' Here at least the conclusion does follow from the premisses. But, what is more, the major premiss cannot be denied, because it has already been conceded that whatever we clearly and distinctly understand is true. Hence only the minor premiss remains, and here I confess that there is considerable difficulty. In the first place we are so accustomed to distinguishing existence from essence in the case of all other things that we fail to notice how closely existence belongs to essence in the case of God as compared with that of other things. Next, we do not distinguish what belongs to the true and immutable essence of a thing from what is attributed to it merely by a fiction of the intellect. So, even if we observe clearly enough that existence belongs to the essence of God, we do not draw the conclusion that God exists, because we do not know whether his essence is immutable and true, or merely invented by us.

But to remove the first part of the difficulty we must distinguish between possible and necessary existence. It must be noted that possible existence is contained in the concept or idea of everything that we clearly and distinctly understand; but in no case is necessary existence so contained, except in the case of the idea of God. Those who carefully attend to this difference between the idea of God and every other idea will undoubtedly perceive that even though our understanding of other things always involves understanding them as if they were existing things, it does not follow that they do exist, but merely that they are capable of existing. For our understanding does not show us that it is necessary for actual existence to be conjoined with their other properties. But, from the fact that we understand that actual existence is necessarily and always conjoined with the other attributes of God, it certainly does follow that God exists.

To remove the second part of the difficulty, we must notice a point about ideas which do not contain true and immutable natures but merely ones which are invented and put together by the intellect. Such ideas can always be split up by the same intellect, not simply by an abstraction but by a clear and distinct intellectual operation, so that any ideas which the intellect cannot split up in this way were clearly not put together by the intellect. When, for example, I think of a winged horse or an actually existing lion, or a triangle inscribed in a square, I readily understand that I am also able to think of a horse without wings, or a lion which does not exist, or a triangle apart from a square, and so on; hence these things do not have true and immutable natures. But if I think of a triangle or a square (I will not now include the lion or the horse, since their natures are not transparently clear to us), then whatever I apprehend as being contained in the idea of a triangle—for example that its three angles are equal to two right an-

gles—I can with truth assert of the triangle. And the same applies to the square with respect to whatever I apprehend as being contained in the idea of a square. For even if I can understand what a triangle is if I abstract the fact that its three angles are equal to two right angles, I cannot deny that this property applies to the triangle by a clear and distinct intellectual operation—that is, while at the same time understanding what I mean by my denial. Moreover, if I consider a triangle inscribed in a square, with a view not to attributing to the square properties that belong only to the triangle, or attributing to the triangle properties that belong to the square, but with a view to examining only the properties which arise out of the conjunction of the two, then the nature of this composite will be just as true and immutable as the nature of the triangle alone or the square alone. And hence it will be quite in order to maintain that the square is not less than double the area of the triangle inscribed within it, and to affirm other similar properties that belong to the nature of this composite figure.

But if I were to think that the idea of a supremely perfect body contained existence, on the grounds that it is a greater perfection to exist both in reality and in the intellect than it is to exist in the intellect alone, I could not infer from this that the supremely perfect body exists, but only that it is capable of existing. For I can see quite well that this idea has been put together by my own intellect which has linked together all bodily perfections; and existence does not arise out of the other bodily perfections because it can equally well be affirmed or denied of them. Indeed, when I examine the idea of a body, I perceive that a body has no power to create itself or maintain itself in existence; and I rightly conclude that necessary existence—and it is only necessary existence that is at issue here—no more belongs to the nature of a body, however perfect, than it belongs to the nature of a mountain to be without a valley, or to the nature of a triangle to have angles whose sum is greater than two right angles. But instead of a body, let us now take a thing—whatever this thing turns out to be—which possesses all the perfections which can exist together. If we ask whether existence should be included among these perfections, we will admittedly be in some doubt at first. For our mind, which is finite, normally thinks of these perfections only separately, and hence may not immediately notice the necessity of their being joined together. Yet if we attentively examine whether existence belongs to a supremely powerful being, and what sort of existence it is, we shall be able to perceive clearly and distinctly the following facts. First, possible existence, at the very least, belongs to such a being, just as it belongs to all the other things of which we have a distinct idea, even to those which are put together through a fiction of the intellect. Next, when we attend to the immense power of this being, we shall be unable to think of its existence as possible without also recognizing that it can exist by its own power; and we shall infer from this that this being does really exist and has existed from eternity, since it is quite evident by the natural light that what can exist by its own power always exists. So we shall come to understand that necessary existence is contained in the idea of a supremely powerful being, not by any fiction of the intellect, but because it belongs to the true and immutable nature of such a being that it exists. And we shall also easily perceive that this supremely powerful being cannot but possess within it all the perfections that are contained in the idea of God; and hence these perfections exist in God and are joined together not by any fiction of the intellect but by their very nature.

All this is manifest if we give the matter our careful attention; and it does not differ from anything I have written before, except for the method of explanation adopted. This I have deliberately altered so as to appeal to a variety of different minds. But as I readily admit, it is the kind of argument which may easily be regarded as a sophism by those who do not keep in mind all the elements which make up the proof. For this reason I did have considerable doubts to begin with about whether I should use it; for I feared it might induce those who did not grasp it to have doubts about the rest of my reasoning. But there are only two ways of proving the existence of God, one by means of his effects, and the other by means of his nature or essence; and since I expounded the first method to the best of my ability in the Third Meditation, I thought that I should include the second method later on.

MERSENNE, ET AL.

Thirdly, you are not yet certain of the existence of God, and you say that you are not certain of anything, and cannot know anything clearly and distinctly until you have achieved clear and certain knowledge of the existence of God. It follows from this that you do not yet clearly and distinctly know that you are a thinking thing, since, on your own admission, that knowledge depends on the clear knowledge of an existing God; and this you have not yet proved in the passage where you draw the conclusion that you clearly know what you are.

Moreover, an atheist is clearly and distinctly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles; but so far is he from supposing the existence of God that he completely denies it. According to the atheist, if God existed there would be a supreme being and a supreme good; that is to say, the infinite would exist. But the infinite in every category of perfection excludes everything else whatsoever—every kind of being and goodness, as well as every kind of non-being and evil. Yet in fact there are many kinds of being and goodness, and many kinds of non-being and evil. We think you should deal with this objection, so that the impious have no arguments left to put forward.

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Sixthly, in your reply to the First Set of Objections, you appear to go astray in one of your arguments, which you put as follows: 'That which we clearly and distinctly understand to belong to the true and immutable nature... of a thing can be truly asserted of that thing. But once we have made a sufficiently careful investigation of what God is, we clearly and distinctly understand that existence belongs to his nature.' The conclusion should have been: 'hence, once we have made a sufficiently careful investigation of what God is, we can with truth affirm that existence belongs to the nature of God'. Now it does not follow from this that God in fact exists, but merely that he would have to exist if his nature is possible, or non-contradictory. In other words, the nature or essence of God cannot

be conceived apart from existence; hence, granted the essence, God really exists. This comes down to an argument which others have stated as follows: 'If there is no contradiction in God's existing, it is certain that he exists; but there is no contradiction in his existing.' The difficulty here is with the minor premiss 'but there is no contradiction in his existing': those who attack the argument either claim to doubt the truth of this premiss, or deny it outright. Moreover, the phrase in your argument 'once we have made a sufficiently clear investigation of what God is' presupposes as true something which not everyone yet accepts; indeed you yourself admit that you apprehend infinite being only in an inadequate way. And clearly the same must be said of every single attribute of God. Whatever is in God is utterly infinite; so who can for a moment apprehend any aspect of God except in what may be called an utterly inadequate manner? How then can you have 'made a sufficiently clear and distinct investigation of what God is'?

[Descartes to Mersenne, et al.]

Thirdly, when I said that we can know nothing for certain until we are aware that God exists, I expressly declared that I was speaking only of knowledge of those conclusions which can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments by means of which we deduced them. Now awareness of first principles is not normally called 'knowledge' [*scientia*] by dialecticians. And when we become aware that we are thinking things, this is a primary notion which is not derived by means of any syllogism. When someone says 'I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist', he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind. This is clear from the fact that if he were deducing it by means of a syllogism, he would have to have had previous knowledge of the major premiss 'Everything which thinks is, or exists'; yet in fact he learns it from experiencing in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing. It is in the nature of our mind to construct general propositions on the basis of our knowledge of particular ones.

The fact that an atheist can be 'clearly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles' is something I do not dispute. But I maintain that this awareness of his is not true knowledge, since no act of awareness that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called knowledge. Now since we are supposing that this individual is an atheist, he cannot be certain that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident (as I fully explained). And although this doubt may not occur to him, it can still crop up if someone else raises the point or if he looks into the matter himself. So he will never be free of this doubt until he acknowledges that God exists.

It does not matter that the atheist may think he has demonstrations to prove that there is no God. For, since these proofs are quite unsound, it will always be possible to point out their flaws to him, and when this happens he will have to abandon his view.

It will be quite easy to make him do this if all he can produce by way of demonstration is the claim that you introduce at this point, namely that the infinite in every category of perfection excludes every other entity whatsoever, etc. First, we may ask how he knows that this exclusion of all other entities belongs to the nature of the infinite. He will have no reasonable reply to make to this, since the term 'infinite' is not generally taken to mean something which excludes the existence of finite things. And, what is more, his knowledge of the nature of the infinite—since he regards it as a nonentity and hence as not having a real nature—must be restricted to what is contained in the mere verbal definition of the term which he has learned from others. Secondly, what would the infinite power of this imaginary infinite amount to, if it could never create anything? Finally, the fact that we notice some power of thought within ourselves makes it easy for us to conceive that some other being may also have such a power, and that it is greater than our own. But even if we suppose that this power is increased to infinity, we do not on that account fear that our own power thereby diminishes. The same holds good for all the other attributes we ascribe to God, including power (provided we remember that any power that we possess is subject to the will of God). And hence God can be understood to be infinite without this in any way excluding the existence of created things.

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Sixthly, in the passage where you criticize the conclusion of a syllogism which I produced, it is you who seem to have made a mistake in the argument. In order to get the conclusion you want, you should have stated the major premiss as follows: 'That which we clearly understand to belong to the nature of something can be truly asserted to belong to its nature'; and if the premiss is put like this, it contains nothing but a understand to belong to the nature of something can truly be affirmed of that thing.' Thus if being an animal belongs to the nature of man, it can be affirmed that man is an animal; and if having three angles equal to two right angles belongs to the nature of a triangle, it can be affirmed that a triangle has three angles equal to two right angles; and if existence belongs to the nature of God, it can be affirmed that God exists, and so on. Now the minor premiss of my argument was: 'yet it belongs to the nature of God that he exists'. And from these two premisses the evident conclusion to be drawn is the one which I drew: 'Therefore it can truly be affirmed of God that he exists.' The correct conclusion is not, as you want to argue: 'Therefore we can with truth affirm that existence belongs to the nature of God.'

Hence, to deploy the objection which you go on to make, you should have denied the major premiss and said instead 'What we clearly understand to belong to the nature of a thing cannot for that reason be affirmed of that thing unless its nature is possible, or non-contradictory.' But please notice how weak this qualification is. If by 'possible' you mean what everyone commonly means, namely 'whatever does not conflict with our human concepts', then it is manifest that the nature of God, as I have described it, is possible in this sense, since I supposed it to contain only what, according to our clear and distinct perceptions, must belong to it; and hence it cannot conflict with our concepts. Alternatively, you may well be imagining some other kind of possibility which relates to the object itself; but unless this matches the first sort of possibility it can never be known by the human intellect, and so it does not so much support a denial of

God's nature and existence as serve to undermine every other item of human knowledge. For as far as our concepts are concerned there is no impossibility in the nature of God; on the contrary, all the attributes which we include in the concept of the divine nature are so interconnected that it seems to us to be self-contradictory that any one of them should not belong to God. Hence, if we deny that the nature of God is possible, we may just as well deny that the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, or that he who is actually thinking exists; and if we do this it will be even more appropriate to deny that anything we acquire by means of the senses is true. The upshot will be that all human knowledge will be destroyed, though for no good reason.

I now turn to the argument which you compare with my own, *viz*. 'If there is no contradiction in God's existing it is certain that he exists; but there is no contradiction in his existing; therefore' etc. Although materially true, this argument is formally a sophism. For in the major premiss the term 'contradiction' applies to the concept of the cause on which the possibility of God's existence depends; in the minor premiss, however, it applies simply to the concept of the divine existence and nature itself. This is clear from the fact that if the major premiss is denied the proof will have to go as follows: 'If God does not yet exist, it is a contradiction that he should exist, since there can be no cause which is sufficient to bring him into existence; but (as was assumed), there is no contradiction in his existing; hence' etc. If on the other hand the minor premiss is denied, the proof will have to be stated thus: 'There is no contradiction in something if there is nothing in its formal concept which implies a contradiction; but there is nothing in the formal concept of the divine existence or nature which implies a contradiction; hence' etc. These two proofs are very different. For it may be, with respect to a given thing, that we understand there to be nothing in the thing itself that precludes the possibility of its existence, while at the same time, from the causal point of view, we understand there to be something that prevents its being brought into existence.

But even if we conceive of God only in an inadequate or, if you like, 'utterly inadequate' way, this does not prevent its being certain that his nature is possible, or not self-contradictory. Nor does it prevent our being able truly to assert that we have examined his nature with sufficient clarity (that is, with as much clarity as is necessary to know that his nature is possible and also to know that necessary existence belongs to this same divine nature). All self-contradictoriness or impossibility resides solely in our thought, when we make the mistake of joining together mutually inconsistent ideas; it cannot occur in anything which is outside the intellect. For the very fact that something exists outside the intellect manifestly shows that it is not self-contradictory but possible. Self-contradictoriness in our concepts arises merely from their obscurity and confusion: there can be none in the case of clear and distinct concepts. Hence, in the case of the few attributes of God which we do perceive, it is enough that we understand them clearly and distinctly, even though our understanding is in no way adequate. And the fact that, amongst other things, we notice that necessary existence is contained in our concept of God (however inadequate that concept may be) is enough to enable us to assert both that we have examined his nature with sufficient clarity, and that his nature is not self-contradictory.

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Arguments proving the existence of God and the distinction between the soul and the body arranged in geometrical fashion

DEFINITIONS

I. *Thought.* I use this term to include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it. Thus all the operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination and the senses are thoughts. I say 'immediately' so as to exclude the consequences of thoughts; a voluntary movement, for example, originates in a thought but is not itself a thought.

II. *Idea.* I understand this term to mean the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me aware of the thought. Hence, whenever I express something in words, and understand what I am saying, this very fact makes it certain that there is within me an idea of what is signified by the words in question. Thus it is not only the images depicted in the imagination which I call 'ideas'. Indeed, in so far as these images are in the corporeal imagination, that is, are depicted in some part of the brain, I do not call them 'ideas' at all; I call them 'ideas' only in so far as they give form to the mind itself, when it is directed towards that part of the brain.

III. *Objective reality of an idea.* By this I mean the being of the thing which is represented by an idea, in so far as this exists in the idea. In the same way we can talk of 'objective perfection', 'objective intricacy' and so on. For whatever we perceive as being in the objects of our ideas exists objectively in the ideas themselves.

IV. Whatever exists in the objects of our ideas in a way which exactly corresponds to our perception of it is said to exist *formally* in those objects. Something is said to exist *eminently* in an object when, although it does not exactly correspond to our perception of it, its greatness is such that it can fill the role of that which does so correspond.

V. *Substance.* This term applies to every thing in which whatever we perceive immediately resides, as in a subject, or to every thing by means of which whatever we perceive exists. By 'whatever we perceive' is meant any property, quality or attribute of which we have a real idea. The only idea we have of a substance itself, in the strict sense, is that it is the thing in which whatever we perceive (or whatever has objective being in one of our ideas) exists, either formally or eminently. For we know by the natural light that a real attribute cannot belong to nothing.

VI. The substance in which thought immediately resides is called *mind*. I use the term 'mind' rather than 'soul' since the word 'soul' is ambiguous and is often applied to something corporeal.

VII. The substance which is the immediate subject of local extension and of the accidents which presuppose extension, such as shape, position, local motion and so on, is called *body*. Whether what we call mind and body are one and the same substance, or two different substances, is a question which will have to be dealt with later on.

VIII. The substance which we understand to be supremely perfect, and in which we conceive absolutely nothing that implies any defect or limitation in that perfection, is called *God*.

IX. When we say that something is *contained in the nature or concept* of a thing, this is the same as saying that it is true of that thing, or that it can be asserted of that thing.

X. Two substances are said to be *really distinct* when each of them can exist apart from the other.

POSTULATES

The *first* request I make of my readers is that they should realize how feeble are the reasons that have led them to trust their senses up till now, and how uncertain are all the judgements that they have built up on the basis of the senses. I ask them to reflect long and often on this point, till they eventually acquire the habit of no longer placing too much trust in the senses. In my view this is a prerequisite for perceiving the certainty that belongs to metaphysical things.

Secondly, I ask them to reflect on their own mind, and all its attributes. They will find that they cannot be in doubt about these, even though they suppose that everything they have ever acquired from their senses is false. They should continue with this reflection until they have got into the habit of perceiving the mind clearly and of believing that it can be known more easily than any corporeal thing.

Thirdly, I ask them to ponder on those self-evident propositions that they will find within themselves, such as 'The same thing cannot both be and not be at the same time', and 'Nothingness cannot be the efficient cause of anything', and so on. In this way they will be exercising the intellectual vision which nature gave them, in the pure form which it attains when freed from the senses; for sensory appearances generally interfere with it and darken it to a very great extent. And by this means the truth of the following axioms will easily become apparent to them.

Fourthly, I ask them to examine the ideas of those natures which contain a combination of many attributes, such as the nature of a triangle, or of a square, or of any other figure, as well as the nature of mind, the nature of body, and above all the nature of God, or the supremely perfect being. And they should notice that whatever we perceive to be contained in these natures can be truly affirmed of them. For example, the fact that its three angles are equal to two right angles is contained in the nature of a triangle; and divisibility is contained in the nature of body, or of an extended thing (for we cannot conceive of any extended thing which is so small that we cannot divide it, at least in our thought). And because of these facts it can be truly asserted that the three angles of every triangle are equal to two right angles and that every body is divisible.

Fifthly, I ask my readers to spend a great deal of time and effort on contemplating the nature of the supremely perfect being. Above all they should reflect on the fact that the ideas of all other natures contain possible existence, whereas the idea of God contains not only possible but wholly necessary existence. This alone, without a formal argument, will make them realize that God exists; and this will eventually be just as self-evident to them as the fact that the number two is even or that three is odd, and so on. For there are certain truths which some people find self-evident, while others come to understand them only by means of a formal argument.

Sixthly, I ask my readers to ponder on all the examples that I went through in my *Meditations*, both of clear and distinct perception, and of obscure and confused perception, and thereby accustom themselves to distinguishing what is clearly known from what is obscure. This is something that it is easier to learn by examples than by rules, and I think that in the *Meditations* I explained, or at least touched on, all the relevant examples.

Seventhly, and lastly, when they notice that they have never detected any falsity in their clear perceptions, while by contrast they have never, except by accident, found any truth in matters which they grasp only obscurely, I ask them to conclude that it is quite irrational to cast doubt on the clear and distinct perceptions of the pure intellect merely because of preconceived opinions based on the senses, or because of mere hypotheses which contain an element of the unknown. And as a result they will readily accept the following axioms as true and free of doubt. Nevertheless, many of these axioms could have been better explained, and indeed they should have been introduced as theorems rather than as axioms, had I wished to be more precise.

AXIOMS OR COMMON NOTIONS

I. Concerning every existing thing it is possible to ask what is the cause of its existence. This question may even be asked concerning God, not because he needs any cause in order to exist, but because the immensity of his nature is the cause or reason why he needs no cause in order to exist.

II. There is no relation of dependence between the present time and the immediately preceding time, and hence no less a cause is required to preserve something than is required to create it in the first place

III. It is impossible that *nothing*, a non-existing thing, should be the cause of the existence of anything, or of any actual perfection in anything.

IV. Whatever reality or perfection there is in a thing is present either formally or eminently in its first and adequate cause.

V. It follows from this that the objective reality of our ideas needs a cause which contains this reality not merely objectively but formally or eminently. It should be noted that this axiom is one which we must necessarily accept, since on it depends our knowledge of all things, whether they are perceivable through the senses or not. How do we know, for example, that the sky exists? Because we see it? But this 'seeing' does not affect the mind except in so far as it is an idea—I mean an idea which resides in the mind itself, not an image depicted in the corporeal imagination. Now the only reason why we can use this idea as a basis for the judgement that the sky exists is that every idea must have a really existing cause of its objective reality; and in this case we judge that the cause is the sky itself. And we make similar judgements in other cases.

VI. There are various degrees of reality or being: a substance has more reality than an accident or a mode; an infinite substance has more reality than a finite substance. Hence there is more objective reality in the idea of a substance than in the idea of an accident; and there is more objective reality in the idea of an infinite substance than in the idea of a finite substance.

VII. The will of a thinking thing is drawn voluntarily and freely (for this is the essence of will), but nevertheless inevitably, towards a clearly known good. Hence, if it knows of perfections which it lacks, it will straightaway give itself these perfections, if they are in its power.

VIII. Whatever can bring about a greater or more difficult thing can also bring about a lesser thing.

IX. It is a greater thing to create or preserve a substance than to create or preserve the attributes or properties of that substance. However, it is not a greater thing to create something than to preserve it, as has already been said.

X. Existence is contained in the idea or concept of every single thing, since we cannot conceive of anything except as existing. Possible or contingent existence is contained in the concept of a limited thing, whereas necessary and perfect existence is contained in the concept of a supremely perfect being.

PROPOSITION I

The existence of God can be known merely by considering his nature

Demonstration

To say that something is contained in the nature or concept of a thing is the same as saying that it is true of that thing (Def. IX). But necessary existence is contained in the concept of God (Axiom X). Therefore it may be truly affirmed of God that necessary existence belongs to him, or that he exists.

This is the syllogism which I employed above in replying to the sixth point in your Objections. And its conclusion can be grasped as self-evident by those who are free of preconceived opinions, as I said above, in the Fifth Postulate. But since it is not easy to arrive at such clear mental vision, we shall now endeavour to establish the same result by other methods.

[…]

HOBBES

On the Fifth Meditation ('The essence of material things')

FOURTEENTH OBJECTION

> When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind. This is clear from the fact that various properties can be demonstrated of the triangle.

If the triangle does not exist anywhere, I do not understand how it has a nature. For what is nowhere is not anything, and so does not have any being or nature. A triangle in the mind arises from a triangle we have seen, or else it is constructed out of things we have seen. But once we use the label 'triangle' to apply to the thing which we think gave rise to the idea of a triangle, then the name remains even if the triangle itself is destroyed. Similarly, once we have conceived in our thought that all the angles of a triangle add up to two right angles, and we bestow on the triangle this second label 'having its angles equal to two right angles', then the label would remain even if no angles existed in the world. And thus eternal truth will belong to the proposition 'a triangle is that which has its three angles equal to two right angles'. But the nature of a triangle will not be eternal, for it might be that every single triangle ceased to exist.

Similarly, the proposition 'Man is an animal' will be eternally true because the names are eternal; but when the human race ceases to be, there will be no human nature any more.

It is clear from this that essence, in so far as it is distinct from existence, is nothing more than a linking of terms by means of the verb 'is'. And hence essence without existence is a mental fiction. It seems that essence is to existence as the mental image of a man is to a man; or the essence of Socrates is to the existence of Socrates as the proposition 'Socrates is a man' is to the proposition 'Socrates is, or exists'. Now when Socrates does not exist, the proposition 'Socrates is a man' signifies merely a linking of terms; and 'is' or 'to be' carries the image of the unity of a thing to which two terms are applied.

Reply

The distinction between essence and existence is known to everyone. And this talk about eternal names, as opposed to concepts or ideas of eternal truths, has already been amply refuted.

ARNAULD

CONCERNING GOD

[…]

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 evidently is true.

[Descartes to Arnauld]

REPLY TO PART TWO, CONCERNING GOD

[…]

Lastly, as to the fact that I was not guilty of circularity when I said that the only reason we have for being sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true is the fact that God exists, but that we are sure that God exists only because we perceive this clearly: I have already given an adequate explanation of this point in my reply to the Second Objections, under the headings *Thirdly* and *Fourthly*, where I made a distinction between what we in fact perceive clearly and what we remember having perceived clearly on a previous occasion. To begin with, we are sure that God exists because we attend to the arguments which prove this; but subsequently it is enough for us to remember that we perceived something clearly in order for us to be certain that it is true. This would not be sufficient if we did not know that God exists and is not a deceiver.

CONVERSATION WITH BURMAN, 16 APRIL 1648

'I was not guilty of circularity when I said that the only reason we have for being sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true is the fact that God exists, but that we are sure that God exists only because we perceive this clearly.'

[Burman] It seems there is a circle. For in the Third Meditation the author uses axioms to prove the existence of God, even though he is not yet certain of not being deceived about these.

[Descartes] He does use such axioms in the proof, but he knows that he is not deceived with regard to them, since he is actually paying attention to them. And for as long as he does pay attention to them, he is certain that he is not being deceived, and he is compelled to give his assent to them.

[Burman] But our mind can think of only one thing at a time, whereas the proof in question is a fairly long one involving several axioms. Then again, every thought occurs instantaneously, and there are many thoughts which come to mind in the proof. So one will not be able to keep the attention on all the axioms, since any one thought will get in the way of another.

[Descartes] Firstly, it is just not true that the mind can think of only one thing at a time. It is true that it cannot think of a large number of things at the same time, but it can still think of more than one thing. For example, I am now aware and have the thought that I am talking and that I am eating; and both these thoughts occur at the same time. Then, secondly, it is false that thought occurs instantaneously; for all my acts take up time, and I can be said to be continuing and carrying on with the same thought during a period of time.

[Burman] But on that showing, our thought will be extended and divisible.

[Descartes] Not at all. Thought will indeed be extended and divisible with respect to its duration, since its duration can be divided into parts. But it is not extended and divisible with respect to its nature, since its nature remains unextended. It is just the same with God: we can divide his duration into an infinite number of parts, even though God himself is not therefore divisible… Accordingly, since our thought is able to grasp more than one item in this way, and since it does not occur instantaneously, it is clear that we are able to grasp the proof of God's existence in its entirety. As long as we are engaged in this process, we are certain that we are not being deceived, and every difficulty is thus removed.

GASSENDI

On the Fifth Meditation ('The essence of material things, and the existence of God considered a second time')

1. In the Fifth Meditation you say first of all that you distinctly imagine quantity (that is, extension in length, breadth and depth) and also number, shape, position, motion and duration. From among all these ideas, which you say you have, you select shape, and from all the shapes you select a triangle, which you discuss as follows:

> Even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature which is not invented by me or dependent on my mind. This is clear from the fact that various properties can be demonstrated of the triangle, for example that its three angles equal two right angles and that its greatest side subtends its greatest angle, and so on. And since these properties are ones which I now clearly recognize, whether I want to or not,

even if I never thought of them at all when I first imagined the triangle, it follows that they cannot have been invented by me.

This is all you have to say about the essence of material things, for the few comments you add next are part of the same argument. But I do not want to stop and raise objections here; I will only suggest that it seems very hard to propose that there is any 'immutable and eternal nature' apart from almighty God.

You will say that all that you are proposing is the scholastic point that the natures or essences of things are eternal, and that eternally true propositions can be asserted of them. But this is just as hard to accept; and in any case it is impossible to grasp how there can be a human nature if no human being exists, or how we can say a rose is a flower when not even one rose exists.

The schoolmen say that talking of the essence of things is one thing and talking of their existence is another, and that although things do not exist from eternity their essences are eternal. But in that case, since the most important element in things is their essence, does God do anything very impressive when he produces their existence? Is he doing any more than a tailor does when he tries a suit of clothes on someone? How can people defend the thesis that the essence of man, which is in Plato, say, is eternal and independent of God? Is this supposed to be because it is universal? But everything to be found in Plato is particular. It is true that after seeing the nature of Plato and of Socrates, and similar natures of other men, the intellect habitually abstracts from them some common concept in respect of which they all agree, and which can then be regarded as the universal nature or essence of man, in so far as it is understood to apply to every man. But it is surely inexplicable that there should have been a universal nature before Plato and the others existed, and before the intellect performed the abstraction.

You will say that the proposition 'Man is an animal' is true even if no man exists, and hence that it is eternally true. But it seems not to be true except in the sense that whenever a man exists he will be an animal. Admittedly there does seem to be a distinction between the two propositions 'Man is' and 'Man is an animal', in that existence is more expressly signified by the former and essence by the latter. But nevertheless the former does not rule out essence, nor does the latter rule out existence; on the contrary, when we say 'Man is' we mean *man the animal*, and when we say 'Man is an animal' we mean *man while he exists*. But what is more, since the proposition 'Man is an animal' has no greater necessity than the proposition 'Plato is a man', it follows that even the latter proposition will have eternal truth, and the individual essence of Plato will be just as independent of God as the universal essence of man; and the same follows in similar cases which it would be tiresome to pursue. I must add, however, that although man is said to be of such a nature that he cannot exist without being an animal, we should not therefore imagine that such a nature is something which exists anywhere outside the intellect. All that is meant is that if anything is a man, it must resemble other things to which we apply the same label, 'man', in virtue of their mutual similarity. This similarity, I maintain, belongs to the individual natures, and it is from this that the intellect takes its cue in forming the concept, or idea, or form of a common nature to which everything that will count as a man must conform.

Thus I maintain that the same thing applies to your triangle and its nature. The triangle is a kind of mental rule which you use to find out whether something deserves to be called a triangle. But we should not therefore say that such a triangle is something real, or that it is a true nature distinct from the intellect. For it is the intellect alone which, after seeing material triangles, has formed this nature and made it a common nature, as we have explained in the case of the nature of man.

It follows that we should not suppose that the properties demonstrated of material triangles belong to them because they derive them from the ideal triangle. Rather, they themselves possess these properties in their own right, and it is the ideal triangle which does not possess them except in so far as the intellect, after inspecting the material triangles, has attributed such properties to it, only to give them back to the material triangles again in the course of the demonstration. In the same way, the properties of human nature are not in Plato and Socrates in the sense that Plato and Socrates have received them from the universal nature; rather, the universal nature has the properties only because the intellect gave them to it after observing them in Plato, Socrates and others; and it will give them back to those individuals again when it is called on to produce the appropriate arguments.

We know that the intellect, after seeing Plato and Socrates and others, all of whom are rational, constructed the universal proposition 'Every man is rational.' And subsequently, when it wishes to prove that Plato is rational, it uses the universal proposition as a premiss in a syllogism. And yet, O Mind, you claim that you have the idea of a triangle and would have had it even if you had never seen bodies with a triangular shape, just as you have the idea of many other figures which have never impinged on your senses.

But as I was saying earlier, if you had up till now been deprived of all your sensory functions, so that you had never either seen or touched the various surfaces or extremities of bodies, do you think you would have been able to acquire or form within yourself the idea of a triangle or other figure? You say that you have many ideas in you which never came into your mind via the senses. But of course it is easy for you to have these ideas, since you fashioned them from ideas which did come to you via the senses, and you formed them into various other ideas, in the ways explained above.

I should also have said something here about the false nature of a triangle which is supposed to consist of lines which lack breadth, to contain an area which has no depth, and to terminate in three points which have no dimensions at all; but this would have taken me too far off the subject.

2. You next attempt to demonstrate the existence of God, and the thrust of your argument is contained in the following passage:

When I concentrate, it is quite evident that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles

can be separated from the essence of a triangle, or than the idea of a mountain can be separated from the idea of a valley. Hence it is just as much of a contradiction to think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking a perfection) as it is to think of a mountain without a valley.

But we must note here that the kind of comparison you make is not wholly fair.

It is quite all right for you to compare essence with essence, but instead of going on to compare existence with existence or a property with a property, you compare existence with a property. It seems that you should have said that omnipotence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle. Or, at any rate, you should have said that the existence of God can no more be separated from his essence than the existence of a triangle can be separated from its essence. If you had done this, both your comparisons would have been satisfactory, and I would have granted you not only the first one but the second one as well. But you would not for all that have established that God necessarily exists, since a triangle does not necessarily exist either, even though its essence and existence cannot in actual fact be separated. Real separation is impossible no matter how much the mind may separate them or think of them apart from each other—as indeed it can even in the case of God's essence and existence.

Next we must note that you place existence among the divine perfections, but do not place it among the perfections of a triangle or mountain, though it could be said that in its own way it is just as much a perfection of each of these things. In fact, however, existence is not a perfection either in God or in anything else; it is that without which no perfections can be present.

For surely, what does not exist has no perfections or imperfections, and what does exist and has several perfections does not have existence as one of its individual perfections; rather, its existence is that in virtue of which both the thing itself and its perfections are existent, and that without which we cannot say that the thing possesses the perfections or that the perfections are possessed by it. Hence we do not say that existence 'exists in a thing' in the way perfections do; and if a thing lacks existence, we do not say it is imperfect, or deprived of a perfection, but say instead that it is nothing at all.

Thus, just as when you listed the perfections of the triangle you did not include existence or conclude that the triangle existed, so when you listed the perfections of God you should not have included existence among them so as to reach the conclusion that God exists, unless you wanted to beg the question.

You say that existence is distinct from essence in the case of all other things, but not in the case of God. But how, may I ask, are we to distinguish the essence of Plato from his existence, except merely in our thought? Suppose that Plato no longer exists: where now is his essence? Surely in the case of God the distinction between essence and existence is of just this kind: the distinction occurs in our thought.

You then raise an objection against your argument: it does not follow from the fact that you think of a mountain with a valley, or a winged horse, that a mountain or a horse with wings exists; and similarly from the fact that you think of God as existing it does not follow that he exists. You argue that a sophism is concealed here. But it can hardly have been very difficult to expose the sophism which you yourself constructed—especially since you did so by asserting that it is a manifest contradiction that an existing God should not exist, while omitting to point out that the same applies in the case of a man or a horse. But if you had taken the mountain and its valley, or the horse and its wings, as comparable to God and his knowledge (or his power or other attributes), then the objection would still have stood, and you would have had to try to explain how it is possible for us to think of a sloping mountain or a winged horse without thinking of them as existing, yet impossible to think of a wise and powerful God without thinking of him as existing.

You say that you are not free to think of God without existence (that is, a supremely perfect being without a supreme perfection) as you are free to imagine a horse with or without wings. The only comment to be added to this is as follows. You are free to think of a horse not having wings without thinking of the existence which would, according to you, be a perfection in the horse if it were present; but, in the same way, you are free to think of God as having knowledge and power and other perfections without thinking of him as having the existence which would complete his perfection, if he had it. Just as the horse which is thought of as having the perfection of wings is not therefore deemed to have the existence which is, according to you, a principal perfection, so the fact that God is thought of as having knowledge and other perfections does not therefore imply that he has existence. This remains to be proved. And although you say that both existence and all the other perfections are included in the idea of a supremely perfect being, here you simply assert what should be proved, and assume the conclusion as a premiss.

Otherwise I could say that the idea of a perfect Pegasus contains not just the perfection of his having wings but also the perfection of existence. For just as God is thought of as perfect in every kind of perfection, so Pegasus is thought of as perfect in his own kind. It seems that there is no point that you can raise in this connection which, if we preserve the analogy, will not apply to Pegasus if it applies to God, and vice versa. You say that in thinking of a triangle it is not necessary to think that it has three angles equal to two right angles, though this is nonetheless true, as appears afterwards when you give the matter your attention; and similarly, although it is possible to think of the other perfections of God without thinking of his existence, it is nonetheless true that he exists, as becomes clear when you attend to the fact that existence is a perfection. You surely see the point that can be made here: just as we afterwards recognize that the triangle has this property because it is proved by a demonstration, so, if we are to recognize that existence belongs to God, this must be proved by a demonstration. Otherwise I shall easily be able to establish that anything has any property at all.

You say that your attributing all perfections to God is not like your thinking that all quadrilateral figures can be inscribed in a circle; for the latter assumption is mistaken, since you afterwards find that a rhombus cannot be inscribed in a circle, but the former supposition is not mistaken since you afterwards find that

existence belongs to God. Your two suppositions, however, seem exactly alike; or if not, you must show that whereas it is a contradiction for a rhombus to be inscribed in a circle, it is not a contradiction for God to exist. I will pass over your other assertions which are either unexplained or unproved or else established by arguments already discussed. These include the statements that, apart from God, there is nothing else of which you are capable of thinking such that existence belongs to its essence; that it is unintelligible that there should be two or more Gods of this kind; that such a God has existed from eternity and will abide for eternity; and, finally, that you perceive many other attributes in God, none of which can be removed or altered. These assertions should be looked at more closely and investigated more carefully if their truth is to be uncovered and they are to be regarded as certain, etc.

3. Finally, you say that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on your knowledge of the true God, so that without such knowledge no true certainty or knowledge is attainable. You illustrate this point as follows:

> When I consider the nature of a triangle, it appears most evident to me, steeped as I am in the principles of geometry, that its three angles are equal to two right angles; and so long as I attend to the proof, I cannot but believe this to be true. But as soon as I turn my mind's eye away from the proof, then, in spite of remembering that I perceived it very clearly, I can easily fall into doubt about its truth, if I am without knowledge of God. For I could convince myself that I have a natural disposition to go wrong from time to time in matters which I think I perceive as evidently as can be. This will seem even more likely when I remember that there have been cases where I have regarded things as true and certain, but have later been led by other arguments to judge them to be false. Now, however, I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him and that he is no deceiver; and I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true. Accordingly, even if I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to judge that this is true, as long as I remember that I clearly and distinctly perceived it, there are no counter-arguments which can be adduced to make me doubt it, but on the contrary I have true and certain knowledge of it. And I have knowledge not just of this matter, but of all other matters which I remember ever having demonstrated, in geometry and so on.

Here, Sir, I accept that you are speaking seriously; and there is nothing I can say except that I do not think you will find it easy to make anyone believe that before you established the above conclusion about God you were less certain of these geometrical proofs than you were afterwards. These proofs certainly seem to be so evident and certain that they compel our assent all by themselves, and once they have been perceived they do not allow the intellect to remain in further doubt. So, indeed, when faced with these proofs, the mind may very well tell the evil demon to go hang himself, just as you yourself emphatically asserted that you could not possibly be deceived about the proposition or inference 'I am thinking, hence I exist', even though you had not yet arrived at knowledge of God. Of course it is quite true—as true as anything can be—that God exists, is the author of all things, and is not a deceiver; but these truths seem less evident than the geometrical proofs, as is shown by the fact that many people dispute the existence of God, the creation of the world, and so on, whereas no one impugns the demonstrations of geometry. In view of this, is there anyone whom you will convince that the geometrical proofs depend for their evidence and certainty on the proofs concerning God? Surely no one imagines that such atheists as Diagoras or Theodorus cannot be made completely certain of these geometrical proofs. And how often do you find a believer who, if he is asked why he is certain that the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the squares on the other sides, will answer: 'Because I know that God exists and cannot deceive, and that he is the source of this geometrical truth and of all other things'? Will he not answer instead 'Because I know it and am convinced of it by an indubitable demonstration'? And how much more likely is it that Pythagoras, Plato, Archimedes and Euclid and the other mathematicians will answer this way? For none of them seems to have thought about God in order to make himself completely certain of his demonstrations! But since you are assuring us only of your own views and not those of others, and since your position is in any case a pious one, there is really no reason why I should dispute what you say.

Objections raised against the Fifth Meditation

[Descartes to Gassendi]

1. Here, after quoting one or two of my comments, you say that this is 'all I have to say' about the topic under discussion. This obliges me to point out that you have not paid sufficient attention to the way in which what I wrote all fits together. I think this interconnection is such that, for any given point, all the preceding remarks and most of those that follow contribute to the proof of what is asserted. Hence you cannot give a fair account of what I have to say on any topic unless you go into everything I wrote about all the other related issues.

You say that you think it is 'very hard' to propose that there is anything immutable and eternal apart from God. You would be right to think this if I was talking about existing things, or if I was proposing something as immutable in the sense that its immutability was independent of God. But just as the poets suppose that the Fates were originally established by Jupiter, but that after they were established he bound himself to abide by them, so I do not think that the essences of things, and the mathematical truths which we can know concerning them, are independent of God. Nevertheless I do think that they are immutable and eternal, since the will and decree of God willed and decreed that they should be so. Whether you think this is hard or easy to accept, it is enough for me that it is true.

The points you go on to make against the universals of the dialecticians do not touch me, since my understanding of universals is not the same as theirs. But as for the essences we know clearly and distinctly, such as the essence of a triangle or of any other geometrical figure, I can easily make you admit that the ideas of them which we have are not taken from particular instances. For you say here that they are false, presumably because they do not accord with your previously held view of the nature of things.

You say later on that the 'subject-matter of pure mathematics, including the point, the line, the surface, and the indivisible figures which are composed of these elements and yet remain indivisible, cannot exist in reality'. It follows from this that no triangle, and not one of the properties which are understood to belong to its essence or to that of any other geometrical figure, has ever existed, and hence that these essences have not been derived from any existing things. And yet you say, they are false. This is your view, and you presumably hold it because you suppose the nature of things to be such that these essences do not accord with it. But unless you are maintaining that the whole of geometry is also false, you cannot deny that many truths can be demonstrated of these essences; and since they are always the same, it is right to call them immutable and eternal. The fact that they may not accord with your suppositions about the nature of things, or with the atomic conception of reality invented by Democritus and Epicurus, is merely an extraneous feature which changes nothing; in spite of this they undoubtedly conform to the true nature of things established by God. Not that there are in the world substances which have length but no breadth, or breadth but no depth; it is rather that the geometrical figures are considered not as substances but as boundaries within which a substance is contained.

I do not, incidentally, concede that the ideas of these figures ever came into our mind via the senses, as everyone commonly believes. For although the world could undoubtedly contain figures such as those the geometers study, I nonetheless maintain that there are no such figures in our environment except perhaps ones so small that they cannot in any way impinge on our senses. Geometrical figures are composed for the most part of straight lines; yet no part of a line that was really straight could ever affect our senses, since when we examine through a magnifying glass those lines which appear most straight we find they are quite irregular and always form wavy curves. Hence, when in our childhood we first happened to see a triangular figure drawn on paper, it cannot have been this figure that showed us how we should conceive of the true triangle studied by geometers, since the true triangle is contained in the figure only in the way in which a statue of Mercury is contained in a rough block of wood. But since the idea of the true triangle was already in us, and could be conceived by our mind more easily than the more composite figure of the triangle drawn on paper, when we saw the composite figure we did not apprehend the figure we saw, but rather the true triangle. It is just the same as when we look at a piece of paper on which some lines have been drawn in ink to represent a man's face: the idea that this produces in us is not so much the idea of these lines as the idea of a man. Yet this would certainly not happen unless the human face were already known to us from some other source, and we were more accustomed to think of the face than the lines drawn in ink; indeed, we are often unable to distinguish the lines from one another when they are moved a short distance away from us. Thus we could not recognize the geometrical triangle from the diagram on the paper unless our mind already possessed the idea of it from some other source.

2. Here I do not see what sort of thing you want existence to be, nor why it cannot be said to be a property just like omnipotence—provided, of course, that we take the word 'property' to stand for any attribute, or for whatever can be predicated of a thing; and this is exactly how it should be taken in this context. Moreover, in the case of God necessary existence is in fact a property in the strictest sense of the term, since it applies to him alone and forms a part of his essence as it does of no other thing. Hence the existence of a triangle should not be compared with the existence of God, since the relation between existence and essence is manifestly quite different in the case of God from what it is in the case of the triangle.

To list existence among the properties which belong to the nature of God is no more 'begging the question' than listing among the properties of a triangle the fact that its angles are equal to two right angles.

Again, it is not true to say that in the case of God, just as in the case of a triangle, existence and essence can be thought of apart from one another; for God is his own existence, but this is not true of the triangle. I do not, however, deny that possible existence is a perfection in the idea of a triangle, just as necessary existence is a perfection in the idea of God; for this fact makes the idea of a triangle superior to the ideas of chimeras, which cannot possibly be supposed to have existence. Thus at no point have you weakened the force of my argument in the slightest, and you remain trapped by the sophism which you say I could have exposed so easily.

The next points you raise are ones which I have already adequately answered elsewhere. And you are quite mistaken when you say that the demonstration of God's existence is not like the demonstration that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles. The reasoning is the same in both cases, except that the demonstration which establishes God's existence is much simpler and clearer than the corresponding demonstration about the triangle. I shall pass over your remaining points because, in saying that I explain nothing you yourself explain and prove nothing—except that you are incapable of proving anything.

3. To set against the point you make here about Diagoras, Theodorus, Pythagoras and others, I cite the case of the sceptics who did have doubts about these very geometrical demonstrations. And I insist that they could not have done so had they known the true nature of God. Moreover one thing is not proved to be better known than another just because a greater number of people think it is true; what shows it to be better known is simply that those who know the true nature of both things see that it is prior in the order of knowledge and more evident and more certain.

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 *fourth* difficulty concerns the kind of knowledge possessed by an atheist. When the atheist asserts 'If equals are taken from equals the remainders will be equal' or 'The three angles of a rectilinear triangle are equal to two right angles' and numerous similar propositions, he maintains his knowledge is very certain and indeed—on your own criterion—utterly evident. For he cannot think of these propositions without believing them to be wholly certain. He maintains that this is so true that even if God does not exist and is not even possible (as he believes), he is just as certain of these truths as if God really existed. Moreover he maintains that no reason for doubt can be presented to him which could shake him in the slightest or make him at all uncertain. What reason can you produce? That God, if he exists, may deceive him? The atheist will reply that he cannot be deceived about these truths even by a God who exercises all his omnipotence to this end.

[Descartes to Mersenne, et al.]

AUTHOR'S REPLIES TO THE SIXTH SET OF OBJECTIONS

[...]

4. As for the kind of knowledge possessed by the atheist, it is easy to demonstrate that it is not immutable and certain. As I have stated previously, the less power the atheist attributes to the author of his being, the more reason he will have to suspect that his nature may be so imperfect as to allow him to be deceived even in matters which seem utterly evident to him. And he will never be able to be free of this doubt until he recognizes that he has been created by a true God who cannot be a deceiver.