

Ankara Üniversitesi Açık Ders Notları

PHI 205 Empiricism and Rationalism

TOPIC 5:

THIRD MEDITATION:

The existence of God:

I will now shut my eyes, block my ears, cut off all my senses. I will regard all my mental images of bodily things as empty, false and worthless (if I could, I would clear them out of my mind altogether). I will get into conversation with myself, examine myself more deeply, and try in this way gradually to know myself more intimately. I am a thing that thinks, i.e., that doubts, affirms, denies, understands some things, is ignorant of many others, wills, and refuses. This thing also imagines and has sensory perceptions; for, as I remarked before, even if the objects of my sensory experience and imagination don't exist outside me, still sensory perception and imagination themselves, considered simply as mental events, certainly do occur in me.

That lists everything that I truly know, or at least everything I have, up to now, discovered that I know. Now I will look more carefully to see whether I have overlooked other facts about myself. I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Doesn't that tell me what it takes for me to be certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this wouldn't be enough to make me certain of its truth if it could ever turn out that something that I perceived so clearly and distinctly was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.

I previously accepted as perfectly certain and evident many things that I afterwards realized were doubtful – the earth, sky, stars, and everything else that I took in through the senses – but in those cases what I perceived clearly were merely the ideas or thoughts of those things that came into my mind; and I am still not denying that those ideas occur within me. But I used also to believe that my ideas came from things outside that resembled them in all respects. Indeed, I believed this for so long that I wrongly came to think that I perceived it clearly. In fact, it was false; or anyway if it was true it was not thanks to the strength of my perceptions.

But what about when I was considering something simple and straightforward in arithmetic or geometry, for example that two plus three makes five? Didn't I see these things clearly enough to accept them as true? Indeed, the only reason I could find for doubting them was this: Perhaps some God could have made me so as to be deceived even in those matters that seemed most obvious. Whenever I bring to mind my old belief in the supreme power of God, I have to admit that God could, if he wanted to, easily make me go wrong even about things that I think I see perfectly clearly. But when I turn my thought onto the things themselves – the ones I think I perceive clearly – I find them so convincing that I spontaneously exclaim: 'Let him do his best to deceive me! He will never bring it about that I am nothing while I think I am something; or make it true in the future that I have never existed, given that I do now exist; or bring it about that two plus three make more or less than five, or anything else like this in which I see a plain contradiction.' Also, since I have no evidence that there is a deceiving God, and don't even know for sure that there is a God at all, the reason for doubt that depends purely on this supposition of a deceiving God is a very slight and theoretical one.

However, I shall want to remove even this slight reason for doubt; so when I get the opportunity I shall examine whether there is a God, and (if there is) whether he can be a deceiver. If I don't settle this, it seems, then I can never be quite certain about anything else.

First, if I am to proceed in an orderly way I should classify my thoughts into definite kinds, and ask which kinds can properly be said to be true or false. Some of my thoughts are, so to speak, images or pictures of things – as when I think of a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God – and strictly speaking these are the only thoughts that should be called 'ideas'.

Other thoughts have more to them than that: for example when I will, or am afraid, or affirm, or deny, my thought represents some particular thing but it also includes something more than merely the likeness of that thing. Some thoughts in this category are called volitions or emotions, while others are called judgments.

When ideas are considered solely in themselves and not taken to be connected to anything else, they can't be false; for whether it is a goat that I am imagining or a chimera, either way it is true that I do imagine it. Nor is there falsity in the will or the emotions; for even if the things I want are wicked or non-existent, it is still true that I want them. All that is left – the only kind of thought where I must watch out for mistakes – are judgments. And the mistake they most commonly involve is to judge that my ideas resemble things outside me. Of course, if I considered the ideas themselves simply as aspects of my thought and not as connected to anything else, they couldn't lead me into error.

Among my ideas, some seem to be innate, some to be caused from the outside, and others to have been invented by me. As I see it, my understanding of what a thing is, what truth is, and what thought is, derives purely from my own nature, which means that it is innate; my hearing a noise or seeing the sun or feeling the fire comes from things outside me; and sirens, hippogriffs and the like are my own invention. But perhaps really all my ideas are caused from the outside, or all are innate, or all are made up; for I still have not clearly perceived their true origin.

But my main question now concerns the ideas that I take to come from things outside me: why do I think they resemble these things? Nature has apparently taught me to think that they do.

But also I know from experience that these ideas don't depend on my will, and thus don't depend simply on me. They often come into my mind without my willing them to: right now, for example, I have a feeling of warmth, whether I want to or not, and that leads me to think that this sensation or idea of heat comes from something other than myself, namely the heat of a fire by which I am sitting. And it seems natural to suppose that what comes to me from that external thing will be like it rather than unlike it.

Now let me see if these arguments are strong enough. When I say 'Nature taught me to think this', all I mean is that I have a spontaneous impulse to believe it, not that I am shown its truth by some natural light. There is a great difference between those. Things that are revealed by the natural light – for example, that if I am doubting then I exist – are not open to any doubt,

because no other faculty that might show them to be false could be as trustworthy as the natural light. My natural impulses, however, have no such privilege: I have often come to think that they had pushed me the wrong way on moral questions, and I don't see any reason to trust them in other things.

Then again, although these ideas don't depend on my will, it doesn't follow that they must come from things located outside me. Perhaps they come from some faculty of mine other than my will – one that I don't fully know about – which produces these ideas without help from external things; this is, after all, just how I have always thought ideas are produced in me when I am dreaming. Similarly, the natural impulses that I have been talking about, though they seem opposed to my will, come from within me; which provides evidence that I can cause things that my will does not cause.

Finally, even if these ideas do come from things other than myself, it doesn't follow that they must resemble those things. Indeed, I think I have often discovered objects to be very unlike my ideas of them. For example, I find within me two different ideas of the sun: one seems to come from the senses – it is a prime example of an idea that I reckon to have an external source – and it makes the sun appear very small; the other is based on astronomical reasoning, and it shows the sun to be several times larger than the earth. Obviously these ideas cannot both resemble the external sun; and reason convinces me that the idea that seems to have come most directly from the sun itself in fact does not resemble it at all.

These considerations show that it isn't reliable judgment but merely some blind impulse that has led me to think that there exist things outside me that give ideas or images of themselves through the sense organs or in some other way.

Perhaps, though, there is another way of investigating whether some of the things of which I have ideas really do exist outside me. Considered simply as mental events, my ideas seem to be all on a par: they all appear to come from inside me in the same way. But considered as images representing things other than themselves, it is clear that they differ widely. Undoubtedly, the ideas that represent substances amount to something more – they contain within themselves more representative reality – than do the ideas that merely represent qualities. Again, the idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God – eternal, infinite, unchangeable, omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of everything that exists except for himself – certainly has in it more representative reality than the ideas that represent merely finite substances.

Now it is obvious by the natural light that the total cause of something must contain at least as much reality as does the effect. For where could the effect get its reality from if not from the cause? And how could the cause give reality to the effect unless it first had that reality itself? Two things follow from this: that something can't arise from nothing, and that what is more perfect – that is, contains in itself more reality – can't arise from what is less perfect. And this is plainly true not only for 'actual' or 'intrinsic' reality (as philosophers call it) but also for the representative reality of ideas – that is, the reality that an idea represents. A stone, for example, can begin to exist only if it is produced by something that contains – either straightforwardly or in some higher form – everything that is to be found in the stone; similarly, heat can't be

produced in a previously cold object except by something of at least the same order of perfection as heat, and so on. (I don't say simply 'except by something that is hot', because that is not necessary. The thing could be caused to be hot by something that doesn't itself straightforwardly contain heat – i.e. that isn't itself hot – but contains heat in a higher form, that is, something of a higher order of perfection than heat. Thus, for example, although God is obviously not himself hot, he can cause something to be hot because he contains heat not straightforwardly but in a higher form.) But it is also true that the idea of heat or of a stone can be caused in me only by something that contains at least as much reality as I conceive to be in the heat or in the stone. For although this cause does not transfer any of its actual or intrinsic reality to my idea, it still can't be less real. An idea need have no intrinsic reality except what it derives from my thought, of which it is a mode. But any idea that has representative reality must surely come from a cause that contains at least as much intrinsic reality as there is representative reality in the idea. For if we suppose that an idea contains something that was not in its cause, it must have got this from nothing; yet the kind of reality that is involved in something's being represented in the mind by an idea, though it may not be very perfect, certainly isn't nothing, and so it can't come from nothing.

It might be thought that since the reality that I am considering in my ideas is merely representative, it might be possessed by its cause only representatively and not intrinsically. That would mean that the cause is itself an idea, because only ideas have representative reality. But that would be wrong. Although one idea may perhaps originate from another, there can't be an infinite regress of such ideas; eventually one must come back to an idea whose cause isn't an idea, and this cause must be a kind of archetype containing intrinsically all the reality or perfection that the idea contains only representatively. So the natural light

makes it clear to me that my ideas are like pictures or images that can easily fall short of the perfection of the things from which they are taken, but which can't exceed it.

The longer and more carefully I examine all these points, the more clearly and distinctly I recognize their truth. But what is my conclusion to be? If I find that some idea of mine has so much representative reality that I am sure the same reality doesn't reside in me, either straightforwardly or in a higher form, and hence that I myself can't be the cause of the idea, then, because everything must have some cause, it will necessarily follow that I am not alone in the world: there exists some other thing that is the cause of that idea.

If no such idea is to be found in me, I shall have no argument to show that anything exists apart from myself; for, despite a most careful and wide-ranging survey, this is the only argument I have so far been able to find.

Among my ideas, apart from the one that gives me a representation of myself, which can't present any difficulty in this context, there are ideas that variously represent God, inanimate bodies, angels, animals and finally other men like myself.

As regards my ideas of other men, or animals, or angels, I can easily understand that they could be put together from the ideas I have of myself, of bodies and of God, even if the world contained no men besides me, no animals and no angels.

As to my ideas of bodies, so far as I can see they contain nothing that is so great or excellent that it couldn't have originated in myself. For if I examine them thoroughly, one by one, as I did the idea of the wax yesterday, I realize that the following short list gives everything that I perceive clearly and distinctly in them: size, or extension in length, breadth and depth; shape, which is a function of the boundaries of this extension; position, which is a relation between various items possessing shape; motion, or change in position.

To these may be added substance, duration and number.

But as for all the rest, including light and colours, sounds, smells, tastes, heat and cold and the other qualities that can be known by touch, I think of these in such a confused and obscure way that I don't even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether my ideas of them are ideas of real things or of non-things. Strictly speaking, only judgments can be true or false; but we can also speak of an idea as 'false' in a certain sense – we call it 'materially false' – if it represents a non-thing as a thing. For example, my ideas of heat and cold have so little clarity and distinctness that they don't enable me to know whether cold is merely the absence of heat, or heat is merely the absence of cold, or heat and cold are both real positive qualities, or neither heat nor cold is a real positive quality.

If the right answer is that cold is nothing but the absence of heat, the idea that represents it to me as something real and positive deserves to be called 'false'; and the same goes for other ideas of this kind.

Such ideas obviously don't have to be caused by something other than myself. If they are false – that is, if they represent non-things – then they are in me only because of a deficiency or lack of perfection in my nature, which is to say that they arise from nothing; I know this by the natural light. If on the other hand they are true, there is no reason why they shouldn't arise from myself, since they represent such a slight reality that I can't even distinguish it from a non-thing.

With regard to the clear and distinct elements in my ideas of bodies, it appears that I could have borrowed some of these from my idea of myself, namely substance, duration, number and anything else of this kind. For example, I think that a stone is a substance, or is a thing capable of existing independently, and I also think that I am a substance. Admittedly I conceive of myself as a thing that thinks and isn't extended, and of the stone as a thing that is extended and doesn't think, so that the two conceptions differ enormously; but they seem to have the classification 'substance' in common. Again, I perceive that I now exist, and remember that I have existed for some time; moreover, I have various thoughts that I can count; it is in these ways that I acquire the ideas of duration and number that I can then transfer to other things. As for all the other elements that make up the ideas of bodies – extension, shape, position and movement – these are not straightforwardly contained in me, since I am nothing but a thinking thing; but since they are merely modes of a substance, and I am a substance, it seems possible that they are contained in me in some higher form. That is, I am not myself extended, shaped etc., but because I am a substance I am (so to speak) metaphysically one up on these mere modes, which implies that I can contain within me whatever it takes to cause the ideas of them.

So there remains only the idea of God: is there anything in that which couldn't have originated in myself? By the word 'God' I understand a substance that is infinite, eternal, unchangeable, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, which created myself and anything else that may exist. The more carefully I concentrate on these attributes, the less possible it seems that any of them could have originated from me alone. So this whole discussion implies that God necessarily exists.

It is true that my being a substance explains my having the idea of substance; but it does not explain my having the idea of an infinite substance. That must come from some substance that is itself infinite. I am finite.

It might be thought that this is wrong, because my notion of the infinite is arrived at merely by negating the finite, just as my conceptions of rest and darkness are arrived at by negating movement and light. That would be a mistake, however. I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, i.e. God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, i.e. myself. Whenever I know that I doubt something or want something, I understand that I lack something and am therefore not wholly perfect. How could I grasp this unless I had an idea of a perfect being, which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison? Nor can it be said that this idea of God could be 'materially false', and thus have come from nothing, as may be the case (I noted this a few moments ago) with the ideas of heat and cold. On the contrary, it is utterly clear and distinct, and contains in itself more representative reality than any other idea; that is, it stands for something that is grander, more powerful, more real, than any other idea stands for; so it is more true – less open to the suspicion of falsehood – than any other idea. This idea

of a supremely perfect and infinite being is, I say, true in the highest degree; for although one might imagine that such a being does not exist, it can't be supposed that the idea of such a being represents something unreal in the way that the idea of cold perhaps does. The idea is, moreover, utterly clear and distinct. It does not matter that I don't grasp the infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God that I can't grasp and perhaps can't even touch in my thought; for it is in the nature of the infinite not to be grasped by a finite being like myself. It is enough that I understand the infinite, and that I judge that all the attributes that I clearly perceive and know to imply some perfection – and perhaps countless others of which I am ignorant – are present in God either straightforwardly or in some higher form. This is enough to make the idea that I have of God the truest and most clear and distinct of all my ideas.

Here is a possible objection to that line of thought. Perhaps I am greater than I myself understand: perhaps all the perfections that I attribute to God are ones that I do have in some potential form, and they merely haven't yet shown themselves in actuality. My knowledge is gradually increasing, and I see no obstacle to its going on increasing to infinity. I might then be able to use this increased and eventually infinite knowledge to acquire all the other perfections of God. In that case, I already have the potentiality for these perfections – why shouldn't this potentiality be enough to enable me to have caused the idea of them that is, to have caused my idea of God? But all this is impossible for three reasons.