

A History of Philosophy
34 Descartes on God and Nature
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Well, I hope that this afternoon we can wrap up our discussion of Descartes. We've come far enough in Descartes to see that, plainly, he is not an empiricist but a rationalist. There is a priori knowledge independent of experience.

In fact, his classic example of that was his discussion of a piece of wax whose empirical properties are subject to change. But the wax as an object of thought, the concept of the wax, remains. Now, I want to start, therefore, with that notion of a thought object, not a sense object, but a thought object.

Plainly, Descartes is maintaining that we have other kinds of ideas than particular sensory ideas, particular empirical data. We also have concepts. I think he would agree on universal, abstract concepts.

And he wants to maintain that these concepts, these thought objects, have a kind of reality of their own, so that certain things are universally true of certain thought objects. They have an objectivity of their own. And it's in that context that he's able to distinguish in these last two meditations between the essence of material bodies, that is to say, the concept of matter, the essence, which you conceptualize, of matter, and the existence of material bodies that you perceive with your senses.

So his approach to meditation five is in terms of concepts, thought objects, whereas his approach in meditation six is in terms of the perception of sensory objects. And let's keep that distinction clear. If you were at the Dallas Willard lectures a couple of weeks ago, you remember that he made that distinction by rejecting the kind of theory of knowledge that he called sensism, as if the only knowledge we have is knowledge through our senses, which would be obviously an awareness of sensory particulars, empirical data.

And what Willard did instead was to talk of certain objective, real meanings, which have an existence of their own sort, once they become part of the currency of thought, the objectivity of meanings. And this is the sort of thing with which Descartes would heartily agree, because the meaning of a word like matter becomes an objective thing. Matter has a real nature, an essence that we can conceptualize.

And so he's talking in that sense of thought objects that can be universally understood in a common way. There are other examples of the same thing. Go back to Aristotle, his discussion of the laws of logic.

The laws of logic are objective. They have a reality of their own as structures of all thought and all meaningful discourse. You see, the rules of logic are objectively real.

Not in the sense that they're physical, material things, no, though they are true of material things. Boys will be boys is a nice way of putting the law of identity. A rose is a rose.

Yeah, that may be a poetic idiom. It may be a logical truism, but it's objectively true. You see, anything that has the logical form of the laws of thought is bound to be objectively true, necessarily true.

And at least one of the concepts that he deals with in Meditation 5, namely the concept of God, he deals with in terms of the objective reality of the laws of logic. In fact, I think that's true of matter as well. Because what he's trying to show in Meditation 5, with regard to the idea of matter and the idea of God, is that there are certain logically necessary truths which we can know independently of experience about matter and about God.

And I said independently of experience because he's a rationalist, not an empiricist. And his rationalism comes out here again. Logically necessary.

Yeah. Their contradiction is impossible. Now, in order to see that, keep in mind that it's the essence of material bodies.

Keep in mind the distinction that has already emerged, which emerged in Hobbes, and it was evident in the science of the day, between primary and secondary qualities of physical bodies. Where secondary qualities have to do with what's accessible only by virtue of our five senses. Color, smell, and so forth.

Whereas the primary qualities are qualities of material things themselves. They are of the very essence of matter. Now, you know what those primary properties were.

Size, shape, density. Yeah, we call them spatial properties. Because the essence of matter is that it occupies space.

So, the essence of matter is that it has spatial properties. And if we can know any necessary truths about space, logically necessary truths about space, we know logically necessary truths about any possible matter, material body, spatial occupant. Now, what is the science that tells us what is logically necessary about space? Huh? Geometry, precisely.

And so, what he is trying to do is to show that there are logically necessary geometrical truths. And the example he takes is the simple one from plain geometry. He's not dealing with solid geometry in the example, but obviously, he could.

It would be a better example in a way if we're dealing with solidity. You see? But his example is from plain geometry, simply the idea of a triangle. There are certain necessary truths about any possible triangle.

Necessary truths. It is necessarily true that a triangle has three angles. It's necessarily true that the three angles of a triangle, at least in Euclidean geometry, add up to 180 degrees, two right angles.

And so, we can know a priori, independently of any sense observations, granted the concept of matter as the object of our thought, matter of spatial occupancy. We can know certain necessary truths about the essence of matter. Okay? Now, that's straightforward.

And he deals with it at some length here. Actually, what he is saying is that the science of physics, in certain regards, can be done as not an empirical science, but an a priori science. And indeed, if you are thinking of branches of physics that were dominant in his day, like optics, that optics can be done a priori simply by figuring out angles of refraction and so forth, which optometrists do to this day? Yes.

Don't try to go into optometry if you don't like geometry. So then, the essence of matter comes out. And, of course, the science of his day was Newtonian, at least it was going to be Newtonian.

It was in the process of becoming that, because Newton was not yet. God says, later on, let Newton be. It all becomes light.

Not yet. But that is the kind of physics that he's dealing with. He has, in other words, a mechanistic view of material bodies, including the operation of human bodies.

Matter, causal forces that produce changes in human bodies. Now, in meditation five, he seems to spend, however, relatively less time on the essence of matter than he does on the idea of God. But the concept of God is another concept.

God is not an object of sense observation. But the concept of God is something which is thought, not as a generalization from sense observations, but thought in the abstract, in that sense. And in meditation three, we've seen he's already been dealing with the concept of God, the concept of God as a perfect being.

Now, here in meditation five, his interest is in the concept of God again, but in the question of God's existence. Now, you might say, why that? If he's talking about the essence of material bodies, why swing over to talking about existence? And assuming you've been following all through the Middle Ages, you can see immediately that the medieval conception of God is of one whose essence is to exist. So then, if it is the

case that God is one for whom his essence is indeed his existence, his essence is to exist; he is the very essence of existence.

Not just the existence of another form, another essence, but the very essence of existence. Then, there is a parallel between the necessary truths about material bodies that we know in geometry and the necessary truth of God's existence. Existence is to the concept of God as adding up to two right angles is the concept of the three angles of a triangle.

Granted, the concept of a triangle is a necessary truth. The contradiction would be self-contradictory. And granted the concept of God, the contradiction of his existence would be self-contradictory.

Now, you see, that's what he's after. And so, what he develops in this fifth meditation is an ontological argument for the existence of God, an idea, an argument just from the idea. Now, look, if you will, then, at page 51, page 51, where he puts it this way, very top of the first column, when I think of it more attentively, it appears that the existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the idea of a mountain from that of a valley or the equality of three angles to two right angles from the essence of a triangle, so that it's not less impossible to conceive a God, that is, a being supremely perfect to whom existence is a wanting, or is who is devoid of a certain perfection, than to conceive a mountain without a valley.

That latter is impossible. So is the conception of a God, a perfect being who does not exist. Now, you catch echoes of Anselm, you see.

Anselm, with his view that God is the highest of all beings, therefore exists. But there's an interesting point that he makes here in the second column of 51. It must be alleged as an objection, nor must it be alleged as an objection, that it's necessary to admit that God exists after having supposed him to possess all perfections, since existence is one of them.

But my original supposition was not necessary. No, that doesn't follow. The objection just doesn't hold.

His point is that existence is not just one more perfection. It is the very essence of the divine being. And if his essence is to exist, then God would not be God otherwise.

And so accordingly, the idea of a perfect being. Now, the logical form of the argument, I think, is pretty plain. He's arguing that either God exists or God does not exist.

That is to say, either A or non-A. He argues that non-A is a self-contradictory position, therefore false. So A is necessarily true.

The self-contradiction is in saying that one whose essence is to exist can not exist. You cannot conceive of a non-existent being whose essence is to exist. If you conceive the essence, he necessarily exists.

Well, that caps off what Descartes wants to do concerning the relationship of God to human thought, so that he has this final paragraph in Meditation 5. Yes. I clearly see the certitude and truth of all science, that's all theoretical thought, depends on the knowledge alone of the true God. Inasmuch as before I knew him, I could have no perfect knowledge of any other thing.

But now that I know him, I possess the means of acquiring perfect knowledge as well relative to God as to other intellectual objects as to corporeal nature, insofar as it's the object of pure mathematics. The existence of God, a perfect being who would not deceive, gives confidence in necessary truths, in logically necessary truths. So what is logically necessary, not only about God, but about material bodies, could be accepted without doubt.

And that's Meditation 5. Comments? Yeah. Yeah, Kristen. Is it a logical argument? Well, you could say that, I mean, I could say the words that the writings are the angles, but that's 150 degrees.

It doesn't make the statement true. Right, right. So, couldn't you say the same thing about God? You can come up with a definition, but that isn't.

But you see, the geometry doesn't work at 150 degrees. Right, but you can still make that statement. Oh yeah, but he's not talking about a statement, is he? Isn't he talking about a concept, the concept of a triangle? Now, analyze the concept of a triangle geometrically, which means logically.

You see? So there's a logical necessity about a triangle that it be a triangle. And a triangle whose angles only add up to 150 degrees wouldn't be a triangle. You see? What you would have in that case would not be something like that, but something like, well, I'm not quite sure what.

I wanted to put it like that, but something or other wouldn't work. But no, I guess it would have to be, let's see, something like that. They never meet.

I didn't draw those quite parallel, but they would never meet or something like that. So no, that geometry wouldn't work. You see, just the reasoning as to the nature of a triangle wouldn't allow that.

If you start with the concept of a triangle in three-dimensional space, that's where you come out. Now, could you develop a non-Euclidean geometry in which 150 degrees? I don't know. I hesitate there.

I defer to any math majors. I think what you'd be doing would be redefining degrees. If you follow what Kristen is saying, I mean, someone could hold the concept of a triangle that was incorrect.

No, they wouldn't be holding a concept of a triangle. They would be supposing something that is false about triangles. Well then, how does Descartes know that he's not? Good question, and that's where I thought you were going, Kristen.

Maybe you were. All right. Now, supposing you say that about God, namely, that the essence of God, God is one whose essence is to be good, beautiful, powerful, but not a necessary being, not a logically necessary being.

Supposing you say that, what would Descartes respond? That's not God. You see, that's not God. Why not? Well, you see, this may be where Descartes' dependency on the medieval philosophical scheme is something he never escaped.

Why does the one who is perfectly good have to be a necessary existence? And in the medieval context, it's because at the top of the hierarchy of being, you have the greatest degree of being. And so, by definition, the perfectly good is the necessary existent, you see. Now, in which case Descartes' argument is an argument that's system-dependent, if his concept of God is part of that medieval conceptual scheme, yeah, so that it wouldn't follow of necessity.

Not in this meditation. I don't think he's dealing with cause-effect issues here. His cause-effect argument for the existence of God is in meditation three.

Oh, yeah. Well, if what you're saying is that this is a different argument from the meditation three one, very definitely, yes. The third meditation is a cause-effect argument.

This is not. Yeah, I prefer Anselm's because I can see more clearly, in terms of the hierarchy of being, how the argument could be claimed to work in that particular philosophical framework. Yet, there's something about Descartes that is a much simpler thing, you see.

If he can make it stick that this concept of a necessary thing, you see, is there. The objection to it today perhaps highlights the problem. You find the contemporary objection that the existence of God is not logically necessary.

Now, it's argued that God is ontologically necessary, that is to say that, granted that God exists, he can not exist, you see. Granted, God exists; his existence is a necessary existence. It's not contingent on anything, you see.

But to say that it's logically necessary that God exists, that's tougher. And so some would argue that what he's doing is confusing two kinds of necessity. Logical necessity, ontological necessity.

He starts with a concept of God as ontologically necessary. Granted, he exists; it's a necessary existence, you'll see. And slides unwittingly into taking that to mean his very essence is to exist, a logical necessity.

Okay, let's move on to chapter six, meditation six. How do you feel about theistic arguments that don't work? Some of you may know the name of Bernard Ramm, an evangelical theologian who wrote quite extensively in apologetics and so forth a few years ago. Conversation with him one time, I remember he said, you know, the problem with theistic arguments may not be that there aren't any really good ones.

Maybe we just haven't thought of them yet. After all, what did people do before Anselm and Descartes thought of these arguments? You see, arguments, after all, are things that people think up. That's what you're learning to do in philosophy, to think of arguments, you see.

Keep in mind that belief is not riding on the validity with which a conclusion of a syllogism follows from its premises. Belief is a much more holistic thing than that, much more rooted in the exigencies of life and thought than just on one particular argument or a set of two or three arguments. Keep in mind as well that the scripture never implies that you can prove the existence of God or that you need to.

It says very simply that the creation bears witness, the heavens declare the glory of God, nature bears witness, but leaves a great deal hinging on our openness to that witness. The idea that you could prove the existence of God with some logically knocked down drag-out proof would imply that everybody who doesn't believe is either incapable of following a logical argument, therefore stupid, or else so utterly willful, you see. And I don't buy that.

I don't think that's the case. I don't think it's that easy. Okay, let's move on to meditation six.

And here he finally gets to the existence of material bodies. And this, strange though it may have seemed at the outset, is where he finally comes to grips with the question as to whether he has a body. He's been stoking the stove in that stove-heated room all this time, not logically sure whether he has a body that needs to be kept warm.

Now, in coming at this, he again has to start with our states of consciousness, if you like, our ideas. And he distinguishes three kinds of conscious state in order to develop his argument. He distinguishes conception from imagination and sensation.

And I think this is crucial. On page 53, conception, 54, imagination, 55, sensation. Now, we've already said enough about conception that you know what he means by that.

Having thought objects about which certain things are necessarily true, as with mathematical objects like triangles or an object of thought like the essence of God. Now, all that the conception of a material body does, the conception of a material body with those spatial properties that he sees are essential to material bodies, the very nature of the concept requires that. But all that conception of a material body with spatial properties shows is that there is nothing logically contradictory about the concept of a material body such that it's at least logically possible that material bodies can exist.

There is no logical contradiction to the existence of a material body. And so if there's no logical objection, then we can say, yes, it's logically possible, but that's all. You can't prove the existence of a material body simply from the abstract idea of matter.

Well, in addition to conception, which gives us, if you like, in his sense, some innate idea of matter, there is imagination, which gives us some factitious ideas about bodies. Imagination is the capacity to imagine in one's mind, to imagine a blue cat or a fairy giraffe with butterfly wings, the capacity to imagine things, yes, images of real things even, like the image that I might bring to my mind voluntarily of my boyhood home, something of that sort. Now, in these, there is a mental activity involved.

These are not always, but often, voluntary in the sense that we deliberately formulate some image. And moreover, in imagination, there is something of an external reference involved. Yes, I'm thinking of that house up the hill, so on and so on and so forth, an external reference, a spatial reference.

But even so, all that imagination does is to provide some sort of persuasion. The imaginative idea is persuasive. It has some psychological influence.

But there is still no proof for the existence of the things that I imagine. But when he turns to sensation, that's a different matter. He's thinking of sensations, not simply in the notion of an isolated sense datum of blueness, but more of sensation in the ordinary common sense use of the term.

When somebody literally tickles you, and you say, ah, that's quite a sensation. You see, where a physical sensation includes bodily feelings, perhaps pleasure and pain,

and certainly a spatial location. If you've got a pain in your toe, you know it's in your toe and which one.

So that these sensations you see then are adventitious. That is to say, they're caused, they come to you, they're caused by something. And they tend to be involuntary sensations.

So the question he then asks is about the cause of such clear, distinct, lively, physical sensations that I experience. His point is that in these kinds of sensations, I feel my own body, you see. I feel my own body.

Yes, I feel the pain in my toe, not just a toe, my toe. It's my pain in my toe. It's not something, just an idea, an abstraction from any particular location.

And so from this, there arises naturally, there arises naturally, it's a natural judgment that we make. We are taught by nature, okay. Nature teaches us that's its language.

Nature teaches us by virtue of those sensations about the existence of our own bodies. Any reason this way? These sensations are not caused by me; they're involuntary. My mind doesn't choose to have them.

They couldn't be caused by God, because if they were, he would be deceiving me, and God, being perfect, does not deceive me by the way he has constructed me. So it couldn't be caused by God. The only other alternative is that I must indeed have a body, which is causing those sense experiences.

So the existence of my body. Proof? Well, in the sense of a strict logical proof, no, but a justified judgment, yes, granted that God is a perfect being who doesn't give me deceptive senses. Yes.

So the existence of my material body. But then you ask, well, what about the rest of the material world? How about that? And there, of course, it's simply a cause-effect argument. Because if things are happening to my body, such that I experience physical sensations, then there must be something to cause those things to happen to my body, and you get a causal argument.

And it is by that means that he proposes how we can argue for the existence not just of other bodies than our own, but of other minds than our own. Because if we find ourselves in this situation, that in my mind, I am aware of the correlation of my bodily states to my mental states, then by some sort of analogy, I can see that there is going to be a correlation between somebody else's bodily states, which I observe, and their mental states, which I don't observe. So it's an argument by analogy.

You see, I have bodily sensations of my own, but my bodily sensations are in some cases caused by other bodies, the behavioral manifestations of which are analogous to my own. So, where I know the kinds of mental states that correspond to my bodily states, I can then infer the kinds of mental states that would correspond to other people's bodily states. So that if I stub my toe and it hurts, then I can anticipate that if I see somebody else stubbing their toe and yelping the way I yelped, that it hurts, and I'm having some knowledge of other people's mental states.

So you get his proposal for an analogical inference, argument by analogy, to the existence of other minds. And incidentally, what Descartes started there was followed throughout the 18th century and into the 20th century throughout the English and continental traditions. This was, until the 19th century, the standard way of arguing for the existence of other minds.

And it's not until the late 19th, early 20th century that you get some notion developing of some more direct awareness of other people's consciousness. So the language of people like Martin Buber about an I-Thou relationship, you see, is an attempt to say, no, it's not just an analogical inference through this sort of Cartesian process, but something much more intimate by virtue of such emotional states as empathy or sympathy, which is literally feeling with, you see, a shared consciousness. Or empathy, yes, feeling in somebody else's moccasins, a shared feeling, some sense of that.

Okay, so this is the route he goes. Three other things arising from this that he takes up. One is the problem of error.

After all, he has talked of sensations that can be taken as veridical, but aren't there also sensory illusions? Aren't they also physiologically called hallucinations and so forth? How are we going to account for that? And if God is perfect such that the sensing capacities that he has given us do not deceive, how come we are deceived? You can say it's back to that old question from meditation four, but now addressed to sense perception rather than to abstract thought, that wasn't the way it was back then. Well, a couple of factors that he throws in that you could almost predict. One is that our bodies are made up of many different parts, such that some malfunctioning due to illness or whatever of one part may cause sensations that do not tell us the truth directly.

And he would account for hallucinations in that sort of way. The other thing that he throws in is that the will and the intellect are both involved. There is nothing deceptive about having a whole string of sensations, sensations one, two, three, four, of which, say, sensation four may prove to be untrustworthy.

Now, the error only consists in our making a judgment that involves the reliability of sensation four. So, the act of judgment involves intellect in taking stock of the

sensations and will in affirming the judgment. And we err, and then you know the story, when we allow the will to make judgments beyond the extent to which the intellect is satisfied about the sensations.

They must be clear and distinct. So, it's basically the same kind of argument as you had in meditation four. All right, error.

The second residual question is the big one, about the mind-body relationship. Because what Descartes has given to us so far is the existence of a body, which is a spatially extended thing, and the existence of a mind or soul, which is a thinking thing. That is to say, they are two essentially different things.

Essentially, we mean they have different essences. They have no essential properties in common. They're essentially different things.

Somehow or other, conjoined. How does that work? Now, I think it's fair to say that Descartes intended it this way, because you remember in the preface he says he's setting out to prove the existence of the soul. If you like, he's trying to prove the existence of the kind of soul that is a substantive thing of an immaterial sort, and therefore can survive death.

It's capable of independent existence. And so he wants the soul to be a functionally separate thing. An essentially different thing, and a functionally separate thing.

And he's got what he wanted. But the problem that engenders, obviously, is how these two are related. And Descartes' view is that both mind and body function as causes producing effects on the other. So certain mental acts can cause bodily changes, such as they did just now when you started scribbling that down.

And by the same token, certain bodily changes can produce mental states and sensations. So there is a causal interaction. Causal interaction.

Well, that sounds nice, and certainly there seems to be evidence that what's going on in the mind influences what the body does and vice versa. Yeah, but how does it happen if these are two essentially different and substantively independent entities? How can they causally interact? And what Descartes comes up with in his work on the passions, and then develops in correspondence with people, is that the interaction takes place in the pineal gland, which is apparently back there somewhere. And in that day of dissections, trying to explore the body and its mechanisms, they couldn't see what function it had.

And in addition, while there seem to be two other kinds of glands, there's only one of these, which seems to indicate that it's intended to unify something. And so they lit on this. Descartes did, at least.

How does it function, though? Because a gland is part of the body. And so it still hasn't told us anything. Well, what he does is to picture the human body as containing certain canals through which the animal spirits, as they call it, go on their way.

Now, this is obviously the physiology of the 16th and 17th century, these animal spirits. Remember, the circulation of the blood was not discovered until the 17th century. Harvey, incidentally, was a neighbor of mine.

I grew up in the town of Dover in southeast England. His home was in Folkestone, seven miles away. A statue of him on the seafront in Folkestone.

And the high school in Folkestone, which was our constant competitor athletically, was the Harvey School, named after him. Harvey Grammar School. Grammar School in England is a secondary school.

Presumably, they don't teach grammar anywhere else but Harvey Grammar School. 17th century, you see. And in Descartes' day, they were thinking, not in terms of the circulation of the blood, but of the circulation of animal spirits, which go their way through the glands.

And he thought of the gland as sort of suspended into this channel through which the animal spirits go, so that the animal spirits, that is to say, bodily processes, influence the gland, which somehow or other, being kept connected to the brain, produces brain changes and consciousness changes. And that was the best he could do. So you get that mind-body interaction.

Well, the story of Descartes' pineal gland is usually treated as one of those classic goofs, because it doesn't explain it at all. And it's that which is really the major problem with that. That added to the obvious fact that while there is causal interaction between what goes on in the mind and what goes on in the body, somehow or other, we are a functional unity.

This mind-body causal interaction approach does not seem to explain the essential unity of the self. You see, it doesn't seem right to say, I'm a mind that has a body. You see, I'm more of a psychosomatic unity.

And it's that unity that is missing in Descartes. And consequently, Descartes' successors are constantly worried about this mind-body problem. What are we going to do about it? What alternatives are there? You see, well, there was one alternative that developed largely as a result of certain Calvinists, a man by the name of Gerlincx, G-E-U-L-I-N-C-X, developed a theory known as occasionalism, which

essentially said that the cause of the corresponding behaviors of mind and body is God.

My thoughts are just the occasion on which God makes a change in my body. And the changes in my body are just the occasion on which God causes a change in my mental states. Occasionalism.

Now, underlying that is a view that was somewhat current in those days. You still sometimes hear nowadays that to say God is almighty is to say God has all the might there is. Nobody else has any.

And so all of the causal power which is exerted by any creature is not really exerted by that creature, but by God, you see. And so if God is the causal agent for every single thing that occurs all the time, then occasionalism is the view that's required. Other things that happen are just occasions for the causal power of God.

Well, that view just hasn't gained that much of a following. After all, even theologians like Calvin are pretty explicit that there are secondary causes as well as the primary cause, God. And as Thomas Aquinas put it, God is the cause of the whole causal order.

You see, God, the ultimate cause, the causal order, the immediate cause. And so occasionalism is an option that simply hasn't been taken that seriously. When we get to Spinoza next, we'll see that he develops a double aspect theory.

That is to say, ideas and, uh, physical changes are simply two aspects of one and the same underlying substance. So the mental or the physical are two attributes of one and the same thing. One underlying reality is functioning in two different ways.

When we get to Leibniz, we'll see he suggests that the two have been pre-programmed by the creator to function in perfect harmony, pre-established harmony all the way through. Like two clocks wound up and set going at the same time. And so it doesn't require a cause, external, but when I want to raise my hand, I'm pre-programmed.

My body is so that up comes my hand, you see. Leibniz, we'll be seeing Leibniz the week after next. But frankly, what are the alternatives? You see, once you set up the problem with two entities that are capable of independent existence and functioning and have no essential quality in common, you see, understandably in the, in, in the current period, uh, the, the biggest argument that's used against those kinds of dualism is in terms of the brain dependency of all of our mental states, you see.

Much closer into relationship of some sort. And so nowadays, the alternatives tend to focus on brain dependency. And, if a dualism is desired, as it still is argued for by a

number of philosophers, then it needs to be a dualism in which there is more of an interdependence, more with a separable soul than an already separate soul.

One that's capable of separate existence after death, but separable. But we'll see more of that as time goes on. Now, one, uh, one final note.

Oh, final note. Well, looks like half a minute isn't long enough for that. Shame.

All right, we'll have to pick up on the final note next time. Descartes on the passions, and thence on ethics.