

SIXTH MEDITATION

The existence of material things, and the real distinction between mind and body

It is only in this final Meditation that Descartes at last puts to rest the sceptical doubt about the material world that he had raised in the First Meditation. By the end of Meditation V, Descartes has partly rebuilt the edifice of knowledge, if the arguments succeed. There is knowledge of the self, its existence and essence; knowledge of God, his essence and existence; and knowledge of matter, in so far as its essence is described by the intellectual science of geometry. What remains to be established is knowledge of the existence of matter.

The thinker begins by reflecting on the knowledge he has acquired of the essence of matter. The fact that I have a clear and distinct conception of matter as the subject matter of pure mathematics tells me that matter is at least capable of existing: there is no contradiction in the idea of matter. He then considers the fact that he is able to imagine things of all kinds, including material things. My faculty of imagination seems to be not purely a faculty of myself as thinking thing, but 'an application of the cognitive faculty to a body which is intimately present to it, and which therefore also exists'.

Imagining something is different to conceiving it in the intellect. Try to imagine a figure with six sides, a hexagon. Can you do it? Most people are able to form a mental image of a six-sided figure. A different question: How many angles does a hexagon have? Some people may answer this simple question by simply reporting directly from their concept of a hexagon. Others may consult their mental image, and count the angles on the imagined shape. Now try to imagine a chiliagon, a figure with a thousand sides. Can you do it? Perhaps you think you can: a shape with lots of tiny sides. Well, now imagine a shape just like a chiliagon with one less side. Is it any different? Probably not. The imagination doesn't have a fine enough resolution to provide a determinate image of a chiliagon.

Nevertheless, there is still the *concept* of a chiliagon, provided by the intellect: and from the concept we could deduce all kinds of geometrical truths, if we wanted to. This example is given by Descartes to illustrate his point that the imagination is something different to the intellect.

Descartes thinks that the fact that our ability to imagine things is somehow explained by the association of the mind with a body that is intimately connected to it. However, the argument is not very clear, and Descartes himself takes it to be inconclusive.

The next step is to remind the reader of the passage from the naivety of common sense to the deepest scepticism, and the reader is reminded of the arguments of the First Meditation, and indeed of the conclusions of subsequent Meditations. This long section of the final Meditation is very useful in helping to grasp Descartes' own understanding of his project of methodological doubt and his progress so far.

After this long explanation, the reader is suddenly confronted with an argument that is presented with a compression that is quite astonishing, given its importance, and this is an argument for a thesis for which Descartes is very famous: the real distinction between mind and body.

The argument for dualism

First, have a look at the conclusion of this argument. 'I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it'. The thinking self, whose existence was proved in the Second Meditation, is wholly distinct from the body. It is a thinking thing, a substance, which can exist without the body, the extended substance, with which it happens to be contingently associated. Descartes is not offering an argument for the immortality of the soul, but he does say in his Synopsis that his argument paves the way for that conclusion. The conclusion that the mind is wholly distinct from the body is of enormous significance to the philosophy of mind, both in Descartes' own time, and since.

The argument proceeds something like this. If I can clearly and distinctly understand A apart from B, and

vice versa, then A and B are metaphysically distinct, and could exist apart. I can clearly and distinctly understand my mind apart from my body: my mind, but not my body, is essentially a thinking thing. And I can clearly and distinctly understand my body apart from my mind: my body, but not my mind, is essentially an extended non-thinking thing. Therefore my mind and body are metaphysically distinct and could exist apart.

The first premise does not capture quite what Descartes actually says, which is:

... the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God.

But the mention of God can be taken as a metaphor about possibility, which could be agreed to even by an atheist, which is why the principle was rendered in a more neutral way above. If I can clearly and distinctly understand A apart from B, and vice versa, then A and B are metaphysically distinct, and could exist apart. Notice that this is a classic example of a rationalist principle. The reasoning moves from facts about the intelligibility of certain concepts to facts about the metaphysics of the world. It moves straightforwardly from facts about concepts to facts about the world. Remember that this kind of move was just what annoyed Gassendi about Descartes' Ontological Argument for God (the concept of God implies the concept of existence, therefore God exists).

This should be distinguished from an alternative, and poor, interpretation of this argument, known as the Argument from Doubt. I can doubt that my body exists. I cannot doubt that my mind exists. Therefore my mind and my body are not identical. Descartes is certainly committed to the premises of this argument: but that does not mean he thinks that they support the conclusion. On this interpretation, the argument looks very weak. Consider analogous arguments, made in contexts involving ignorance. I can doubt that Clark Kent can fly. I cannot doubt that Superman can fly. Therefore Superman is not Clark Kent. Perhaps the relation of mind to body is like the relation of Superman to Clark Kent, namely the relation of *identity*.

Clark is Superman, but we don't know it. The mind is the body, but we don't know it. (Notice that in criticizing the argument this way, we are not showing exactly what is wrong with Descartes' argument. We are using the argumentative strategy of *reductio ad absurdum*: the strategy of showing that a proposition, or an argument, has absurd consequences. It is often much easier to show that an argument has absurd consequences, than to show exactly where it goes wrong.)

Perception and the existence of material things

The thinker now turns his attention to a mode of thinking which was threatened by the early sceptical arguments he has reviewed, namely, sensory perception. Perception yields ideas which seem to be ideas of existing material things. Perception provides the hope for discovering not just the essence of matter, but its existence. The argument is couched in the scholastic terminology of active and passive faculties. This terminology is awkward, but not unclear: for 'passive faculty' read 'something that is able to be affected'; for 'active faculty', read 'something that is able to affect'; the terminology can then be discarded without much harm.

The argument focuses on the question: what is the cause of my ideas of material things? and then proceeds something like this. I have ideas of material things. These ideas must have a cause at least as real as the ideas themselves. (This is the Principle of Causal Adequacy familiar from the Third Meditation.) These ideas must be caused by either myself, God, or material things. They cannot be caused by myself: for they 'are produced without my co-operation and often even against my will'. They cannot be caused by God: for then God would be a deceiver. The ideas must therefore be caused by material things. Therefore material things exist.

Descartes focuses his attention once more on the sceptical hypothesis that these ideas of material things could be caused by dreams. Given the importance he assigned the argument in the First Meditation, and given its relevance to the plausibility of the preceding argument, Descartes deals with the problem rather

briefly. He gives the common sense answer to the dreaming hypothesis: waking life has a *coherence* that dreaming lacks, so that when I am awake I can indeed know that I am awake. The hypothesis that I am always dreaming is refuted by the knowledge that God would not permit me to be systematically deceived.

Primary and Secondary Qualities: Revenge of the Demon?

The meditative progress of the Meditations has come full circle. The thinker began as a naive believer in the existence of familiar material things: a bright fire, a snug dressing gown, crisp white sheets of paper. Recalling his pre-reflective period, Descartes says he had sensations of bodies,

sensations of their hardness and heat, and of the other tactile qualities ... I had sensations of light, colours, smells, tastes and sounds, the variety of which enabled me to distinguish the sky, the earth, the seas, and all other bodies.

All belief in familiar material things has been suspended for the course of the first five meditations. In the Sixth and final Meditation, knowledge is at last restored. Some things have changed, to be sure. In particular, the meditator has reached a certain conclusion about the hierarchy of knowledge:

the arguments which lead us to knowledge of our minds and of God...are the most certain and evident of all possible objects of knowledge for the human intellect.

However the beliefs 'that there really is a world, and that human beings have bodies', beliefs which Descartes admits 'no sane person has ever seriously doubted'—these beliefs, surely, are restored to their former selves.

Not quite. The thinker has indeed argued for the existence of the material world, but the conclusion to that argument was qualified. Although material things exist,

they may not all exist in a way that exactly corresponds with my sensory grasp of them, for in many cases the grasp of the senses is very obscure and confused. But at least they possess all the properties which I clearly and distinctly understand, that is, all

those which, viewed in general terms, are comprised within the subject-matter of pure mathematics.

Long before this Meditation VI, we have encountered Descartes' opinion about the essence of material things. The argument about the wax in Meditation II showed that the essence of matter was to be extended. The argument of the Fourth Meditation made the same point, and added that this essential nature was perfectly described by the science of geometry. The properties belonging to corporeal things are purely mathematical or geometrical: extension, shape, size, motion. It is time now to spell out some implications of this.

Colour, taste, heat are not properties of corporeal things, but rather effects produced in us by things that are not themselves colored, hot, etc—in the same way that pain is clearly an effect on us rather than a property of things. There is nothing in material things that *resembles* colour, bitterness, sweetness, heat, pain. The material things that cause the various perceptions 'possess differences corresponding to them, though...not resembling them'. All the vivid sensations encountered by his naive self, sensations of their hardness and heat, of light, colours, smells, tastes and sounds—the blue of the sky, the rich smell of the earth, the tang of the sea—these sensed qualities resemble nothing in the world. The material world whose existence he has triumphantly proven is a world devoid of the sensory qualities of colour, taste, smell, and sound. It is a world whose qualities are not qualitative, but quantitative: extension, and its modes of shape and size and motion.

This distinction is now known as the distinction between primary and secondary qualities.⁷ What is Descartes' reason for holding the distinction? It seems to have two sources, one from philosophy, one from science. The philosophical motive is already evident. It is the rationalist requirement that properties of things are given by what we can clearly and distinctly conceive. The essence of matter will be those properties that we can clearly and distinctly conceive. We can

⁷For its most famous exposition, see John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II. viii. (1689).

clearly and distinctly conceive extension and its modes: we have a mathematical theory of space. We have no equivalent for the sensory properties.

The scientific motive is different. It is not spelled out in the *Meditations*, but it is one that can be shared by rationalist and empiricist philosophers alike. It is a way of thinking about the world which came with the scientific revolution, in which Descartes himself was a participant. It says: the genuine properties of matter are the properties ascribed to matter by science. Physics, in the time of Descartes, was only in its infancy, but already a revolution had begun. It began to seem to them that so much more can be explained when one views matter as simply extended stuff in motion. It becomes possible to think of the material world in a unified way. The behaviour of things is not explained by idiosyncratic substantial forms that have nothing to do with each other (fire aims upward, earth aims downward), but by universal laws governing all matter in motion, whether fire or earth. The genuine properties of things are not the idiosyncratic sensory properties that have nothing to do with each other (fire is warm, fire is red): again there is the one reality responsible for both sensations, namely matter in motion. The motion of parts is too small for us to detect as motion. We see the motion as colour. We feel the motion as heat. The behaviour of all the bodies in the world, including our own sensory organs, can be explained in the one unified science. Physics has changed in its details since the time of Descartes, but the central point is still the same. The world as physics describes it is not the world as it is sensed.

The demon hypothesis of the First Meditation implied that things might be very different to how they appear. Descartes' Sixth Meditation says that things are, yet again, very different to how they appear. To be sure, the physical world matches our perception of it, in so far as our perception is of extension, shape, size, motion. But the naïf of the First Meditation will never return to his comfortable common sense world of the blue skies, the dark earth, the tang of the ocean. The world to which he is reinstated is a world devoid of sensory properties, of colour and taste and smell. His banishment from the familiar world of the senses is not,

this time, at the hands of the malicious demon, but at the hands of the well-meaning hero: the rationalist philosopher, and scientist, Descartes himself—through which the demon wreaks his vicarious revenge.

Some questions to consider about Meditation VI

(1) Descartes argues that the mind and body are metaphysically distinct, and could exist apart. How plausible is the principle on which the argument rests? The principle, recall, is this. If I can clearly and distinctly understand A apart from B, and vice versa, then A and B are metaphysically distinct, and could exist apart. What is it to 'understand A apart from B'? Perhaps it is to be able to grasp the concept of A without needing to think of B. If you are not sure whether the principle is correct, test it by seeing if you can find a counter-example. To find a counter-example you would need to find an A and a B, such that you can clearly and distinctly understand A apart from B, and vice versa, and yet A and B are not metaphysically distinct, cannot exist apart.

Among the Greek philosophers were the harmony theorists, disciples of Pythagoras, who said that a human being is like a musical instrument, a lyre, a kind of guitar. They said that the harmony of the lyre is a very beautiful and complex thing, but it depends for its existence on a certain arrangement of wood and strings. They said that the soul is like the harmony of the lyre. The soul is a very beautiful and complex thing, but it depends for its existence on a body. Their view, the harmony theory, contradicts Descartes' conclusion about the metaphysical distinctness of mind and body. Modern day theories of the mind tend to have more in common with this ancient theory of the soul than with Descartes' dualism.

Can you imagine how these philosophers might respond to Descartes' argument? They might think that a musical instrument, a lyre or guitar, provided just the sort of counterexample we were looking for. They might begin with some conceptual analysis. What is a guitar, essentially? A guitar is essentially something that is capable of making music, when played. If you couldn't

play music on it, it wouldn't be a guitar. What is a piece of wood, essentially? A piece of wood is essentially something that came from a tree. If it didn't come from a tree, it wouldn't be a piece of wood.

Now apply Descartes' argument to their example. If I can clearly and distinctly understand A apart from B, and vice versa, then A and B are metaphysically distinct, and could exist apart. I can clearly and distinctly understand the concept of a guitar: a guitar is essentially something that is capable of making music, when played. I can clearly and distinctly understand the concept of a piece of wood. It is essentially something that came from a tree. I can grasp the concept of a guitar without thinking of a piece of wood. I can grasp the concept of a piece of wood without thinking of a guitar. Conclusion: the guitar and the piece of wood are metaphysically distinct, and could exist apart.

The conclusion is false. The guitar and the piece of wood are not metaphysically distinct. They cannot exist apart. The guitar is the wood. When the wood is smashed, the guitar is smashed. There is no chance that the guitar will leave the wood, and float away to guitar heaven. The end of the wood is the end of the guitar.

What implications does this have for Descartes' argument? When we find that an argument yields a conclusion that is false, we know that at least one of the premises are false. The premise about the concepts of guitar and wood seem reasonable. We can conclude that the culprit is Descartes' principle that conceptual distinctness implies metaphysical distinctness. The guitar and the wood are conceptually distinct: but they are not metaphysically distinct. We have found in the harmony theory a counter-example to Descartes' principle. This does not prove that a human being is like a musical instrument. It does not prove that harmony theory is correct. It does not prove that Descartes' dualism is false. What it shows is that Descartes' argument does not support his conclusion. It is an open question whether some other argument will. (You will find the harmony theory discussed, and criticized, by Plato in his dialogue *The Phaedo*.)

(2) What implications does the primary/secondary quality doctrine have for Descartes' proposed solution to the problem of error? If the doctrine is true, then it seems we are in serious error if we mistake secondary qualities for primary. Descartes has a response to this. He repeats that the senses themselves are not responsible for error, but rather a habit of making ill-considered judgments, which we can refrain from making. And he concedes that certain illusions (e.g. of the amputee) are the inevitable result of our mixed nature as 'combination of mind and body'. He insists that the senses as they are fulfill their practical function very well, of helping one to avoid harm. How adequate do you find that response?

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