

## **Mind and Body II**

### **The Essence of Corporeal Nature**

Descartes begins the Fifth Meditation by taking up the question of 'whether any certainty can be achieved regarding material objects' (AT VII 63). Following the advice of the Fourth Meditation, he says that 'before I inquire whether any such things exist outside me, I must consider the ideas of these things, in so far as they exist in my thought, and see which of them are distinct, and which confused.' The existence of material things is not argued for until the Sixth Meditation; the Fifth Meditation concerns their essence, giving 'an account of corporeal nature taken in general' (Synopsis) to set beside the account of intellectual nature given in the Second Meditation.

This account of corporeal nature is mathematical or geometrical; Descartes finds that what is distinct in his idea of material things is extension in space, which can be quantified and described mathematically. In the Fifth Meditation he presents a view of arithmetic and geometry as based on ideas of 'true and immutable natures' about which discoveries can be made (AT VII 64). He takes the fact of these discoveries to show that these natures are 'not invented by me or dependent on my mind.' Nor do they come from the senses:

'It would be beside the point for me to say that...the idea of the triangle may have come to me from external things by means of the sense organs. For I can think up countless other shapes which there can be no suspicion of my ever having encountered through the senses, and yet I can demonstrate various properties of these shapes, just as I can with the triangle' (AT VII 64-5).

In the terminology of the Third Meditation, his ideas of numbers or geometrical shapes are neither invented by him nor adventitious, but are 'true ideas which are innate in me' (AT VII 68). For Descartes, mathematical knowledge can be validated before the existence of material things is established because geometrical and arithmetical ideas are not dependent on sense experience of particular material objects, as the Scholastics claimed, but are placed in our minds by God (hence the discussion of the need for a proof of the non-deceiving creator to validate mathematical demonstrations, AT VII 69-70). As the Synopsis stresses, even the certainty of geometrical demonstrations depends on God.

The discussion of corporeal nature and geometry in the Fifth Meditation complements the passage about the piece of wax in the Second Meditation. While the Second Meditation explains what a purely intellectual conception of a material thing is like (a conception of it as extended), the Fifth Meditation explains how it is possible for a disembodied intellect to attain certainty about matter understood as extension (because a non-deceiving God can stock it with ideas of true mathematical natures). For Descartes, neither the geometrical conception of matter nor the certainty of geometrical truths owes anything to the senses. By the end of the Fifth Meditation, 'The whole of that corporeal nature which is the subject-matter of pure mathematics' is added to God 'and other things whose nature is intellectual' as something of which he can have full and certain knowledge (AT VII 71).

**Refs:** Williams ch. 8, 'Physical Objects'; Wilson ch. 2, 'Knowledge of Self and Bodies', §§4-5; Garber, *Descartes's Metaphysical Physics*, ch. 3, 'Body: Its Existence and Nature'.

### **Intellect and Sensation: The Sixth Meditation**

The Sixth and last Meditation brings together ideas developed in the previous Meditations to complete several tasks: arguing that mind is really distinct from body; proving the existence of material things; distinguishing the faculties of sensation and imagination from the intellect, and distinguishing the roles of sensation and intellect in informing us of the union of mind and body and the existence and properties of material things. In previous Meditations, knowledge of the existence and essence of mind and of God and of the essence of material things is achieved through use of the intellect alone. Sensation and imagination come into play in the Sixth Meditation. The fact that we have a faculty of imagination is used to provide a probable argument for the existence of body (imagination is not essential to mind, and seems to depend on something else, namely body; AT VII 72-3). The fact that we have a faculty for receiving sensory perceptions is used to provide a certain argument for the existence of material things (AT VII 79-80).

### **The Existence of Corporeal Things**

Descartes gives his argument that material things exist after he has argued for the real distinction between mind and body; we can know that mind and body are distinct (by consulting our innate ideas of them) before we know that any bodies exist. Furthermore, knowledge of corporeal things (which involves the senses) is less certain than knowledge of our own minds and of God (which involves the intellect alone). In the Synopsis he says that

‘the great benefit of these arguments [for the existence of material things] is not, in my view, that they prove what they establish...since no sane person has ever seriously doubted these things. The point is that in considering these arguments we come to realise that they are not as solid or as transparent as the arguments which lead us to knowledge of our own minds and of God, so that the latter are the most certain and evident of all possible objects of knowledge for the human intellect’ (AT VII 16).

The First Meditation raised the question of how we know that God has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to us to exist (AT VII 21). Though Descartes’s argument that material things exist invokes the fact that God is not a deceiver, he does not say that we clearly and distinctly perceive that corporeal things exist, and so (because God guarantees the truth of clear and distinct ideas) this must be true. We have a clear and distinct intellectual awareness of the general nature of material things, but not of their existence; so the argument must be more complicated. Descartes’s starting point is that he has a ‘faculty of sensory perception...for receiving and recognising the ideas of sensible objects’ (AT VII 78). These ideas must be produced by something, but they are not produced by him, since their production does not presuppose thought and is not subject to his will; so they must be produced by something distinct from him. He then employs a version of the causal principle he used in arguing for God’s existence in the Third Meditation, arguing that the cause of these ideas must contain, either formally or eminently, the reality found representatively in the ideas themselves. Basically, his thought is that ideas of sensible objects could either be caused by something more perfect than body, such as God, or by body itself. But since God has given him (1) ‘a great propensity to believe that they are produced by corporeal things,’ and (2) ‘no faculty at all for recognising any such [sc. more perfect] source,’ God would be a deceiver if these ideas were not produced by corporeal things. Since God is not a deceiver, ‘corporeal things exist’ (AT VII 80).

### **Teachings of Nature and Knowledge of Material Things**

Descartes immediately qualifies his conclusion that corporeal things exist by saying that ‘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’ (AT VII 80). What is clear and distinct is the general nature of corporeal things as extended (as comprising ‘the subject-matter of pure mathematics’). However, he has ‘a sure hope’ that he can attain truth even in judgements about particular aspects of material things, such as the size and shape of the sun, and in judgements based on the perception of features ‘such as light or sound or pain’ which ‘are less clearly understood’ (AT VII 80). Here Descartes builds on points made in the Third Meditation: that external things cannot be assumed to resemble the sensory ideas they cause in us (AT VII 38-40), and that while we clearly and distinctly perceive what it is for corporeal things to have size, shape and motion (the modes of extension), our understanding of colours, sounds, smells, tastes, heat, cold and other tactile qualities is obscure and confused (AT VII 43). As a result of this obscurity, he claims, we cannot tell whether our ideas of these things are ideas of real qualities or not (AT VII 44).

How are we to work out where the truth lies in these matters? Since God is no deceiver, Descartes concludes that there cannot be any falsity in his opinions ‘which cannot be corrected by some other faculty supplied by God’; and since his nature is bestowed by God, everything that he is taught by nature must contain some truth (AT VII 80). The key to attaining the truth, then, is distinguishing truths taught by nature from false opinions formed through habit. The problem is that both appear natural to us.

Descartes asserts that nature teaches us that we have (and are in fact intermingled with) bodies; and that other bodies exist in the vicinity of our bodies. The question is what else we can truly assert about these other bodies on the basis of our sensory perceptions. Descartes’s answer is that we are correct in inferring that bodies which cause differing sensory perceptions in us differ in themselves, but not that they possess differences corresponding to our sensory perceptions. The judgements that ‘the heat in a body is something

exactly resembling the idea of heat which is in me; or that when a body is white or green, the selfsame whiteness or greenness which I perceive through my senses is present in the body' seem natural to us through habit, but are not genuine teachings of nature (AT VII 82). He claims that 'there is no convincing argument for supposing that there is something in the fire which resembles the [feeling of] heat' (AT VII 83). His rationale for this seems to be that knowledge of the truth about external things seems to belong to the mind alone, not to the combination of mind and body; so our nature as combinations of mind and body 'does not appear to teach us to draw any conclusions from these sensory perceptions about things located outside us without waiting for the intellect to examine the matter' (AT VII 82-3).

It is doubtful whether the reasons Descartes gives actually succeed in establishing which are the genuine teachings of nature and which are not. But his view is clear enough. For Descartes, an accurate assessment of the senses' role in acquiring knowledge of the external world starts from the fact that

'the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part...I misuse them by treating them as reliable touchstones for immediate judgements about the essential nature of the bodies located outside us' (AT VII 83).

Thus Descartes replaces the Scholastic picture of an intellect which is dependent on the senses for its understanding of corporeal things with a picture on which the intellect must use innate understanding of body as pure extension to sift out the truth contained in sensory perceptions.

### **The Intellectual Correction of Sensory Prejudices**

Once the intellect has examined the matter, Descartes believes, we will find that many of our habitual opinions about the bodies that we sense are unjustified, deriving from the assumption that the senses reveal the essence of the world outside us. He begins the Sixth Meditation with a catalogue of such long-standing opinions, such as the supposition that things outside us resemble the sensory ideas they cause in us (as they do on the Scholastic conception of sensation as the reception of the form of the object by the senses), and the Scholastic empiricist belief that there is nothing in the intellect which has not previously been in sensation (AT VII 75-6).

Descartes's discussion of what he should now believe about the things he previously took to be perceived by the senses builds on his critique of the belief that sensation involves the transmission of likenesses or resemblances from material things. In the Third Meditation he argued that this belief was based on blind impulse rather than on reliable judgement. As we have seen, the Sixth Meditation offers a reasoned argument for the claim that sensory perceptions are caused by material things. But Descartes continues to maintain that there are no good reasons to suppose that material things possess qualities resembling the perceptions of colour or warmth that they cause in us. He elaborates in the Sixth Replies, where he says that 'colours, smells, tastes and so on are...merely certain sensations which exist in my thought, and are as different from bodies as pain is different from the shape and motion of the weapon which produces it' (AT VII 440). He adds that 'nothing whatever belongs to the concept of body except the fact that it is something which has length, breadth and depth and is capable of various shapes and motions'; these are all modifications of extension, for Descartes. This is his version of the distinction between what came to be called the primary and secondary qualities (cf. Locke). The Cartesian primary qualities are all modes of extension; the secondary qualities which we experience in bodies, such as colour, heat and heaviness, result from 'the motion of bodies, or its absence, and the configuration and situation of their parts' (AT VII 440). For example, in his *Optics* Descartes explains our perception of different colours as the effect of different textures in the surface of the coloured object (AT VI 92, 130-1) causing a different motion in the optic nerve. So different textures 'correspond' to the colours we perceive, though they do not 'resemble' them. There is no need for 'all those little images flitting through the air, called 'intentional forms', which so exercise the imagination of the philosophers' (AT VI 85). This is a reference to the Scholastic view of sensation, on which colours were real qualities of coloured objects, likenesses of which are transmitted in sensation.

Note that although Descartes is an innatist and a rationalist, he assigns an ineliminable role to observation and experiment in science; see Part VI of the *Discourse*, where he appeals for aid in gathering experimental observations (AT VII 65). Although we have a clear understanding of the geometrical nature of matter, that doesn't tell us which particular existing mechanisms or configurations of matter are responsible for which effects. To discover this, we need to make empirical observations.

**Refs:** Williams ch. 8, ch. 9, Wilson pp. 200-4.

Gary Hatfield, 'The senses and the fleshless eye,' and Daniel Garber, 'Semel in vita: the scientific background to Descartes' *Meditations*', both in Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*.

### **Sensation, Imagination and Mind-Body Union**

Descartes claims that he finds in himself 'faculties for certain special modes of thinking, namely imagination and sensory perception' (AT VII 78). He can clearly and distinctly understand himself as a complete thing (a mind or intellect) without these faculties, though they cannot be understood to exist except in an intellectual substance (AT VII 78). At the start of the Sixth Meditation, he argues that since his power of imagining is not a necessary constituent of his mind, his possession of it seems to depend on something distinct, such as a body. And he can understand how imagination could come about as the result of mind contemplating a body to which it is joined (AT VII 73). His later argument from sensation to mind-body union might be interpreted along similar lines (see Rozemond 1996, pp. 181-2). He states that 'sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, and so on' teach him that he has a body, and 'that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit' (AT VII 81). How do these sensations teach him this? He claims that if he were not joined with the body to form a unit (one thing, *unum quid*), he would perceive damage to the body by the pure intellect, 'just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken' (AT VII 81). Instead, he has sensations of pain which are 'nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind and body' (ibid.). Given his earlier claim that sensation is not essential to the nature of a mind, and the difference he points to between pure intellection and sensation, his thought might be: my possession of sensations such as pain depends on something distinct from mind, such as a body, and could come about through the intermingling of mind and body.

This may be part of the story. But sensations of pain, hunger etc. involve something that imagination does not; such sensations are conducive to the preservation of the mind-body unit, in that they teach us when the body is damaged, when it needs food, etc., *and* they motivate us to avoid things which damage the body and to provide the body with the food it needs. Presumably mere intellectual perceptions of damage would not have the same effect.

Evidently Descartes believes that the character of our sensations of pain etc. shows that we are more intimately related to our bodies than we would be if we were merely souls making use of bodies (known as the Platonic view; see his exchange with Arnauld, AT VII 203, 228). But how is this joining or intermingling to be understood within Descartes's metaphysical framework?

One issue which this question raises is the ontological status of the mind-body unit. Cottingham (*Descartes*, ch. 5) suggests that Descartes in fact operates with three categories—mind, body, and sensation—quoting passages where Descartes speaks of animals having feelings such as joy and fear. However, he stops short of claiming that Descartes recognises three substances. Descartes describes the person formed by the union of mind and body as a composite rather than a substance (e.g. *Comments*, AT VIII B 351). And it is hard to see how it could constitute a substance, since it depends for its existence on two other substances and is therefore not a substance according to Descartes's definition at *Principles* I.51 (see Rozemond 1996, ch. 5 for further discussion).

Another issue raised by the question is how the interaction of mind and body is to be understood. Descartes's correspondence with Princess Elizabeth contains his fullest discussion of how mind acts on body. He writes that we have a 'primitive notion' of the union of the soul and body, 'on which depends our notion of the soul's power to move the body, and the body's power to act on the soul and cause its sensations and passions' (CSMK 218). He says this union is 'known very clearly by the senses,' though 'only obscurely' by the intellect (CSMK 227). He thinks we cannot form 'a very distinct conception of both the distinction between the soul and body and their union', for to do so we have to conceive of them as distinct and as united (CSMK 227). In emotion and sensation, we experience the body's effects on the soul; in voluntary action (including acts of imagination), we experience the soul's effect on the body. But how it can be possible for an immaterial mind, not located in space, to move or be moved by a physical object? Princess Elizabeth pressed this in her correspondence with Descartes; his answer seems to be that we experience this, but cannot understand it (21 May 1643, CSMK 218ff; 28 June 1643, CSMK 226 ff).

**Refs:** C.A.J. Coady, 'Descartes's Other Myth,' *Proc. Arist. Soc.* 1982-3.  
Marleen Rozemond, *Descartes's Dualism* (Harvard, 1996), chs. 5 and 6.