14

Descartes, *Meditations* VIa (AT VII 71-80; cf. Discourse IV, AT VI 39-40)

The first half of *Meditations* VI is devoted to demonstrating two things: that bodies must exist in space outside of us, and that the mind is distinct from the body (prior to *Meditations* VI, it has only been argued that we can know that we know our minds better than our bodies, not that the thing in us that thinks cannot possibly be a body). The second of these points is established in the process of establishing the first.

Descartes offered three different arguments to prove that bodies must exist in space outside of us: the first is supposed to establish the *possibility* of the existence of an external world by appeal to what we clearly and distinctly perceive through the intellect; the second to establish its *probability* by appeal to what we picture in imagination, and the third to give us *certainty* of its existence by appeal to what is given to us through the senses. In the process of giving the second of these arguments, Descartes introduced a principle that is central to his reasons for claiming that the mind is distinct from the body, the principle that whatever can be perceived separately can exist separately. This principle is explicitly articulated and applied to establish the distinction of the mind from the body over the course of the third argument. Thus, the third argument ends up both demonstrating the existence of material things and demonstrating that thinking things are radically different from material things.

QUESTIONS ON THE READING

- 1. What sorts of material things can at least possibly exist?
- 2. How does imagination differ from understanding?
- 3. Why is imagination not part of my essence?
- 4. Why is it not without reason that people think that they sense bodies existing in space outside of them rather than sense only their own thoughts?
- 5. What sort of things are taught to us by nature?
- 6. What allowed Descartes to claim that the fact that I experience a pain in a certain part of my body is not enough to prove that that part exists?
- 7. Why should the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing without the other entail that they are really different from one another?
- 8. Explain the nature of the relation that Descartes supposed to hold between himself and his powers of sensing and imagining.
- 9. Why would God be a deceiver if my ideas of extended bodies were not caused by extended bodies?

THE POSSIBILITY PROOF FROM UNDERSTANDING

This brief proof takes up the first half of the first paragraph. Put more formally, and more plainly, Descartes's argument looks like this:

- 1. God can create anything that is not impossible, absurd or contradictory (from the fact that God is all-powerful)
- 2. Nothing that can be clearly and distinctly perceived could be impossible, absurd or contradictory (from *Meditations* IV).



- 3. Therefore, anything that can be clearly and distinctly perceived could be created by God (from 1 and 2)
- 4. My ideas of bodies can be clearly and distinctly perceived, at least insofar as they contain just what is described by mathematics and geometry (i.e., extension, duration, motion and their modes) (from *Meditations* V)

Conclusion: It is at least possible that God could have created extended, enduring, and movable bodies (from 3 and 4).

Note that the fourth premise of this argument limits the kind of bodies that we can know God to have possibly created just to bodies that have the primary and real qualities of size, shape, position, motion, and so on. Sensible qualities like colour and solidity are not mentioned. This is a consequence of the possible material falsity of our ideas of these qualities, discussed in *Meditations* III. If we are going to make claims about what God might possibly have created, we have to be sure that what we have in mind really is something, and not nothing. But insofar as it is an open question whether sensible qualities really are ideas of real, positive things rather than confused perceptions of nothing at all, it remains an open question whether there would be anything for God to create answering to our ideas of sensible qualities. Perhaps God just created minds that confusedly perceive nothing as if it were sensible qualities (or, alternatively, perhaps God just created minds that confusedly perceive the more primary and real qualities of extension and its modes as if they were sensible qualities).

Of course, it might also have been the case that God just created minds that have ideas of the primary and real qualities, without actually making objects that in any way resemble those qualities. But it is at least possible that God might have created something corresponding to these ideas as well, whereas we cannot affirm this concerning sensible qualities.

THE PROBABILITY PROOF FROM IMAGINATION

The second proof is somewhat stronger and establishes a probability rather than a mere possibility of the existence of bodies.

The proof proceeds by remarking on the strange fact that we have such a thing as an imagination at all. The imagination merely serves to allow us to vividly picture some (but not all) of the things we can quite well conceive with our intellects. In other words, it is a redundant function. This sudden talk of a separate faculty of imagination may seem bewildering in light of Descartes's claim, in *Meditations* II, that there is only one cognitive faculty, the understanding, which images and senses as well as understands. But even though Descartes rejected the existence of three distinct faculties, he did think that our understandings grasp two distinctly different kinds of ideas. Some ideas are literally like images or pictures. Others are more like definitions or lists of essential features that a thing must exhibit. Thus, imaging or picturing a triangle is one thing, and judging that a triangle is a plane, closed figure with three angles is quite another. Though both the image and the judgment are thoughts grasped by the understanding, Descartes often said that when the understanding has thoughts of the former kind it has a special kind of thought and should be said to be imaging or sensing, whereas when it has thoughts of the latter kind it understands in the proper sense (see, for instance, AT VII 78).

Descartes illustrated this point with examples of geometrical features. Triangles and pentagons may be imagined as well as understood; that is, we can image or picture them, as well as simply grasp the definition or list the conditions that have to be satisfied for something to be a triangle or pentagon. We are aware by introspection that these two acts, getting an idea that is a



literal image or picture in the mind's eye and judging about the content, are very different acts and involve, as Descartes put it, different "efforts" on the part of the mind.

We are also aware that imagination is redundant — that everything that can be imagined can be understood, but not everything that can be understood can be imagined. A hundred- or thousand-sided figure, though it may be very clearly and distinctly understood in all its aspects, cannot be brought to an image — at least not any image adequate for us to distinguish that figure from a 99- or 999-sided figure, or indeed from a circle. (Any image of such a figure would have to be "confused" in the technical sense of the term, though the idea had of the same figure by the intellect would be "distinct.")

Our imaginations therefore seem to be a kind of appendix to our cognitive powers. We would still be able to think the same things if we lacked them. This led Descartes to claim that our imaginations are separable from us. They must be separable because we would still exist as the same sorts of being with all the same abilities if we were to lose them. So they cannot be part of our essence, that is, part of what makes us what we are. They would seem to reside in something distinct from us, to which we are merely contingently attached.

There is an important principle that is tacitly invoked here, the principle that if one thing is conceivable apart from another (for example, if I as thinking being am conceivable apart from any capacity to imagine), then those two things must be at least logically separate. Even if *in fact* they are always encountered together in experience, the one could *in principle* exist without the other. This is what, in the literature, is called the separability principle:

Separability principle: Whatever things can be conceived separately from one another must be really distinct, and separable in principle from one another.

The separability principle is the inverse of the principle concerning clear and distinct perception operative in *Meditations* IV, where it was claimed that if we clearly and distinctly perceive one idea, and find another contained in it, then we must judge the two are related. Here, if we clearly and distinctly perceive one idea, and do *not* find the other related to it, then we can judge that the two have nothing to do with one another, so that God could create the one apart from one another. Even if they in fact always occur together in our experience, their conjunction is merely accidental or coincidental.

Some examples might help to illustrate this claim. I can think of an apple without having to think of redness. The apple is in this sense separable from redness and could at least in principle exist apart from it, even though in fact a lot of apples might be red. Or, I can think of a city without thinking of it as having a police force. There might be no city without police but it is at least conceivable that there might be one, and so it seems at least possible that such a place might exist. But I cannot conceive of an apple without conceiving of a fruit, or a city that has fewer than two inhabitants. These latter things cannot be conceived separately from one another and Descartes took this as an indication that they might well not be able to exist separately. But be that as it may, we can be sure that if one thing can be conceived without having to think of another, then it must be essentially distinct from the other (in the sense that the form or essence that makes that thing what it is involves nothing that goes into the form or essence that makes the other thing what it is), and so could exist apart from it.

Descartes used this principle to powerful effect in what follows.

To return to the main argument, having speculated that our imagistic ideas could well depend on something distinct from us, to which we are merely contingently attached, Descartes



went on to inquire into what such a thing might be. The most characteristic feature of our ideas of imagination is that they are pictures of things. Accordingly, he speculated that perhaps there is something attached to us that is actually extended in space, like a little theatre screen or a canvas on which pictures can be projected or painted. The intellect could then get two different kinds of ideas, one that it receives when it turns to contemplate this canvas or screen and "envisages" what is present on it, and the other when it merely judges about the ideas it finds within itself. In the former case, the pictures on the stage or screen would be the objects that the ideas in the intellect are about (they would supply the objective reality for our ideas of imagination). However, it is important to stress that they would not be those very ideas. The minds ideas, whether they are imagistic ideas of imagination or sense, or whether they are judgments of the understanding, exist only in the mind, which cannot be affirmed to be extended (and will soon be proven to be unextended). The pictures on the extended, physical organ that we might call the corporeal imagination are at best causes of a particular kind of imagistic idea being created in the mind. The intellect would experience these imagistic ideas in a very different way. Rather than "judge" them as something it finds within itself, it would "envisage" them as if they were present before it, and this would account for the peculiar vivacity of imagined ideas as well as for our sense that they are very different from the other ideas formed by the intellect and in a sense the result the operation of a distinct knowing power.

This theory may seem too speculative, and Descartes himself did not presume to claim that we can know for sure that this is what causes the intellect to have imagistic ideas. But he did think the theory is highly probable. The theory is in fact just the theory of the operation of the imagination described by Aristotle in De Anima III and accepted as dogma by theorists of perception and knowledge for centuries. According to that theory, there is actually an organ of the physical body, just like the eyes or ears, but located inside the body somewhere, probably in the brain, that receives imprints or images from external objects. The intellect was supposed to form many or even all of its ideas by "contemplating" the images impressed by the external sense organs on the soft matter of this organ and then subsequently abstracting the universal form from the particular way in which the matter of the sense organ was impressed. The main difference between Descartes's version of the theory and Aristotle's is that Aristotle took the physical organ in the body to itself be the imagination and imagining to just consist in the imprinting of this organ. Descartes, in contrast, takes imagining to be a special act of the mind or intellect, involving getting a unique kind of idea through somehow turning to and contemplating the organ. And, of course, Descartes did not accept that the intellect must get all of its ideas by contemplating images impressed by the senses on the imagination. This supposition would contradict his position on the innate idea of God, and a little further on in *Meditations* VI, he explicitly condemned it.

To return to the argument, if Descartes's account of the operation of imagination were correct, it would imply that at least one extended body must exist, namely the part of our brains that we contemplate when we get ideas of imagination. This is why Descartes said that a consideration of the nature of our imagination establishes at least a probability that bodies might exist.

However, Descartes had to admit that the proof does not establish a certainty of the existence of a corporeal imaging organ. Perhaps other explanations could be found for the difference between ideas of imagination and those of understanding that would not need to invoke these same presuppositions.



THE ACTUALITY PROOF FROM THE NATURAL IMPULSE OF THE SENSES

After pausing to make a rather careful and systematic review of everything established before (something that the fourth rule of his method dictates he do before taking on any big, new task), Descartes turned to his final and most decisive proof for the existence of bodies.

In the process of giving this proof, he uncovered an argument for concluding that the mind must be a radically distinct kind of thing from the body. This discovery helps his proof for the existence of bodies along. It also helps to demonstrate that his mechanistic philosophy does not reduce everything to matter and can provide for the existence of an immortal soul.

The proof for the real distinction of the soul from the body. The argument Descartes proceeded to give for the "real distinction" (i.e., separability in principle) of the soul from the body appeals to the separability principle introduced earlier. He pointed out that I am able to know that I must exist, but despite this fact am still able to doubt that I have a body. In other words, I can conceive of myself very clearly and distinctly as a being that senses, imagines, thinks, wills, desires, affirms, doubts, denies, and feels, and cannot doubt that I exist and do any of these things when I experience myself doing them — but I can doubt that I have eyes, hands, brain, or any sort of physical body. The dreaming argument already sufficed to establish that.

But, Descartes continued, if one thing (for example, the thinking part of a person) may be very clearly and distinctly conceived without having to include another thing (namely, extension) in the conception, then those two things must be essentially distinct. The one (thinking and its modes) must have nothing to do with the other (extension and its modes), so that were the one separated from the other (extension removed from the thinking thing), it could continue to exist on its own. If this were not the case — if separating the thinking part from the extended part were to destroy the thing, then we should not be able to distinctly perceive the thinking part without realizing that some idea of extension must be included in it as part of its essence. A distinct perception of an idea, as noted earlier in connection with *Meditations* V, is one that contains separate ideas of all the parts of that idea. Any necessary connections between two things would have to be revealed by such a perception. So being able to clearly and distinctly conceive of thought and all of its modes (sensing, imagining, believing, doubting, conceiving, willing, desiring, feeling, etc.) while still being able to doubt whether the thinking being is extended, proves that the latter really may be separated from the former.

By similar argument, since we can conceive of extension and its modes (size, shape, position, motion, order) without having to conceive of any of the modes of thought, body must be similarly distinct from mind and capable of existing apart from it.

This does not rule out the possibility that I might still be joined to a body. The point of Descartes's argument is just that I am in principle separable from any bodies that I may be joined to. Descartes wanted to go on to claim that I do in fact have a body, but he insisted that I am not so intimately united to my body that I could not be removed from it without being destroyed. What I really am is just the thinking part, which is a sort of detachable module that can, at the will of God, either be connected to a body or removed from it without its own integrity being in any way undermined.

The proof for the existence of bodies. Descartes's final proof for the existence of material things appeals to the fact that I do not just understand the properties of extension or have imagistic ideas of bodies, but also have sensory ideas of bodies. Like my ideas of imagination, my ideas of sensation are pictorial in nature and involve "envisaging" bodies "as if they were



present." But unlike my ideas of imagination they do not occur consequent upon an effort of my will. Instead, when I form them, I experience myself as something passive that is being affected by something else. For, rather than require any effort on my part, the formation of these ideas happens without my wanting it and frequently even contrary to my wishes. This gives me a "natural impulse" to consider these ideas to have been created by something else.

Of course, just because I have no control over my ideas of sense, it does not follow that I do not cause them. All that follows is that whatever it might be in me that causes them is something that occurs independently of my will. This is a point Descartes had already made in *Meditations* III, AT VII 39. But now, in *Meditations* VI, after having proved the existence of God and investigated the causes of error, he began to have second thoughts. Why, he asked, would an allgood God have put something into me that causes ideas of sensation? We cannot think that God had to do this. For, Descartes claimed, I clearly and distinctly understand that it is possible for a thing to think without also having to sense. Accordingly, the separability principle dictates that it ought to have been possible for God to have created me without a capacity to produce ideas of sensation, had he wished to do so. Nor can I think that his doing so would necessarily have made me any worse off. Were there nothing outside of me that corresponds to my ideas of sensation and were all my ideas of sensation merely caused by something in me that invents these ideas independently of my will, then I would not be diminished in the least were I to lack this capacity and not get any ideas of sensation. After all, everything that I can sense, I can just as well understand. Were my sensory capacity to serve no other purpose than to invent fictional ideas that teach me nothing that I could not just as well learn from unassisted understanding, it would be superfluous. Indeed, it would be worse than superfluous, since insofar as it makes my ideas occur independently of my will it tempts me to suppose that the ideas are caused by something outside of me. Admittedly, after what I have learned from *Meditations* IV, I can resist the temptation to make this hasty judgment. But I cannot deny that I feel the temptation to make it anyway, and that before I was instructed by *Meditations* IV I even gave in to it. But just as God is no deceiver, so he is no tempter (which is tantamount to being a deceiver). If I need not have been created with a mental capacity, and it the use of that capacity serves no other purpose than to deceive me, or to tempt me to into deception, then an all-good God would not have given it to me. If I have ideas of sensation, therefore, this cannot be because I myself am producing them. An all-good God would simply not have made me that way. So something else must be producing my ideas of sensation.

What would such a thing be? According to what Descartes had already established in *Meditations* III, it would have to be something that "formally" or "eminently" contains at least as much as is represented in my ideas of sensation. This means that it would either have to be something that itself literally (i.e., "formally") contains all the reality I find in my ideas of sensation, or else something that is able to "eminently" cause all this reality. Recall that Descartes considered our ideas of sensation to consist of shaped and sized pieces of extension that have sensible qualities like colour, solidity, and heat attributed to them (*Meditations* III). Recall further that he maintained that sensible qualities might not be "real," but might be materially false ideas that we ourselves cook up when our senses are not affected by anything real (*Meditations* III). However, extension and its modes (shape, size, number, and motion) definitely are something real with a nature independent of us, as is proven by the fact that we cannot legislate the content of the principles of geometry and arithmetic (*Meditations* V). Recall finally that Descartes maintained that even if, as we have just learned, we ourselves could not be



the cause of our ideas of extension, other unextended spirits, such as angels, demon deceivers or God might nonetheless still be eminent causes of these ideas (*Meditations* III). So at this point it looks as though the cause of our ideas of sensation would either have to be bodies that are themselves actually extended (though not necessarily possessed of any sensible qualities) or else unextended spirits with special powers to "eminently" create ideas of extension in us.

At this point Descartes appealed to a further set of considerations. I have, he claimed, a strong natural inclination to suppose that my ideas of sensation are caused by objects that are at least something like the objects those ideas depict. Moreover, were this propensity wrong, I do not see how I could ever discover my error. The fact that sensible qualities occur in opposed pairs might alert me to the possibility that one or both members of each pair might be a "materially false" idea of nothing, but I can find no evidence that suggests that my ideas of extension proceed from nothing. Consequently, Descartes maintained, were the cause of my ideas of sensible things not extended, God would be a deceiver, either for giving me ideas of sense that do not refer to anything that actually exists when I could perfectly well exist without those ideas, or for giving me an incorrigible propensity to believe that my ideas of sense proceed from extended things when they are in fact caused by other spirits whose efforts to deceive me God would be assisting. Since God is no deceiver, we can infer that neither of these things is the case. Our ideas of sensation are not caused either by God himself or by other spirits. It remains that they are caused by objects that are literally extended.

This argument has proceeded at some length, but its main points may be quite briefly summarized.

- 1. I have an incorrigible natural inclination to suppose that my ideas of sensation are not caused by me, and an incorrigible natural inclination to suppose that they are caused by something that formally (i.e. actually) contains at least as much as I clearly and distinctly perceive to be a real feature of those ideas.
 - 2. God did not have to give me either of these inclinations.
- 3. Therefore, God would be a deceiver were my ideas of sensation not caused by something outside of me that formally contains at least as much as I clearly and distinctly perceive to be a real feature of those ideas.
 - 4. God is no deceiver.
- 5. Therefore, the cause of my ideas of sensation must formally contain at least as much as I clearly and distinctly perceive to be a real feature of those ideas.
 - 6. I clearly and distinctly perceive extension to be a real feature of my ideas of sensation.
 - 7. Therefore, extended objects (i.e. material things) must exist.

Note that this argument only allows us to infer that the bodies that cause our ideas of bodies must formally contain all the *reality* that is represented in our ideas of bodies. This allows us to infer that the cause of our ideas of bodies must be something that is extended, since extension is represented in our ideas of bodies, and, as *Meditations* V has shown, our ideas of extension contain something true and real. However we cannot legitimately infer that the cause of our ideas must be extended in exactly the same way that our ideas are extended. Just as any geometrical shape could be thought to be contained on a blank piece of paper, so any extended thing could contain any shape whatsoever, and so be the formal cause of that shape. Moreover, the argument does not allow us to infer that the cause of our ideas of extension must have any sensible qualities. For, as the discussion of material falsity in *Meditations* III demonstrates, questions can be raised about whether the sensible qualities that are contained in our ideas of bodies refer to



anything true or real, and the argument only allows us to infer that the cause must formally contain all the reality that is represented in our ideas.

Of course, this is not to deny that bodies might on occasion be extended in just the ways they are represented as being in our ideas, or even that bodies may have colours and other sensible qualities. Descartes's point was just that the argument is not strong enough to allow us to infer these further conclusions.

ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

- 1. Is Descartes entitled to affirm the separability principle? That is, from the fact that I can clearly and distinctly perceive one thing without another, does it have to follow that the one thing must be capable of existing apart from one another?
- 2. Has Descartes made a convincing case for the claim that minds could exist apart from bodies and that thought and feeling do not have to involve any operation of an extended thing?
- 3. According to Descartes, I can be sure that external objects exist because I find in myself a strong inclination to suppose that my ideas of sense are caused by such objects, and God would be a deceiver for giving me such an inclination were there no such objects in existence. But, by the same token, I find in myself a strong inclination to suppose that bodies possess colour and other sensible qualities. Yet Descartes appears not to have wanted to conclude that external objects must therefore be coloured and possessed of the other sensible qualities. How can this be? Is Descartes's position on the demonstrability of the existence of extended objects but the undemonstrability of the existence of coloured objects consistent? If so, say why. If not, say why not.