

Descartes, *Meditations* VIb  
(AT VII 80-90)

Descartes's argument for the existence of material things in the first half of *Meditations* VI turns on the claim that God has not given me any indication that my ideas of sensible objects are eminently caused by other spirits, but has instead given me an instinctive tendency to suppose that they are caused by objects that resemble those ideas — objects that, as Descartes put it, formally contain everything that is contained objectively in the ideas we get from our senses. Moreover, God has not given me any means of discovering the error of this tendency, should it in fact be erroneous. From this, Descartes concluded that God would be a deceiver were that belief not correct — and hence that the belief would have to be correct. But this is a point that could be applied more generally than just to the case of the instinctive belief in the external existence of sensible objects. If God would be a deceiver for giving me an instinctive but false belief in the existence of sensible objects, and no means of discovering my error, then by the same token God would be a deceiver were he to give me any other instinctive but false belief, and no means of discovering my error. It would seem to follow, therefore, that whenever I find myself instinctively impelled to adopt a certain belief, while at the same time finding that none of my other cognitive faculties contains anything to contradict this instinct, then I ought to be entitled to accept that belief. The second half of *Meditations* VI opens with just such a more generalized observation:

no falsity can be found in my opinions, unless there is also in me a faculty given me by God for the purpose of rectifying this falsity [AT 80]

The remainder of *Meditations* VI is devoted to determining what can be known using this new criterion of truth. It deals with three main topics: what can be known concerning external objects or nature in general, what can be known about our own nature, particularly concerning whether we have bodies and if so how we might be related to them, and why it is that our senses sometimes deceive us. As a final point, Descartes attempted to remove the doubts founded the dreaming argument. However, he concluded with the remark that certainty is not to be expected or sought for in all things. We are apt to be led into errors and must acknowledge the infirmity of our nature.

#### QUESTIONS ON THE READING

1. Why is it that even though Descartes thought he could demonstrate that corporeal things must exist, he still did not think that those things exist exactly as we grasp them by sense? What must be true of them?
2. What things did Descartes think are taught to us by nature and what by a habit of making reckless judgments?
3. What is the proper purpose for which sensations were given to the mind?
4. Did Descartes think that all the motions of our bodies are mechanically caused?
5. What is necessary if the mind is to be affected by the body?
6. Does the brain feel pain?
7. Why is it in fact better that our senses should occasionally deceive us about what is good or bad for us?



8. What needs to be done in order to be sure that our senses are not deceiving us?
9. In what does the difference between dreaming and waking experience consist?

#### NOTES ON THE READING

Having established that external objects must exist, Descartes proceeded to determine what I can know for certain about these objects. He noted that it is commonly assumed that these objects more or less accurately resemble what is found in our ideas. That is, he had assumed:

- that these objects are extended,
- that their extension is modified (shaped, sized, oriented, ordered, and moving) in more or less the way represented by our ideas,
- that however their extension is modified, it is in accord with the principles of geometry,
- that their extension is filled out with those colours and other sensible qualities that are represented in our ideas,
- that where there is an extension that is not filled out with any sensible quality that extension is empty and does not contain any objects.

But do all of these various opinions arise in us instinctively or might some of them result from a habit of making reckless judgments and neglecting to use resources for detecting and correcting errors that God was careful to endow us with?

One way to determine whether a certain type of opinion is based on a natural instinct or a hasty judgment is to consider whether it has ever been shown to be wrong. If we have on occasion discovered the error of a certain type of opinion, then obviously God has given us some capacity to detect and prevent that sort of error, if only by deciding to refrain from making judgments on that basis in the future. Seen from this perspective, it is undeniable that our opinion that external objects have those very shapes, sizes, positions, orders, and motions that our senses represent them as having is based on a hasty judgment and not a natural instinct, and that God has given us the capacity, through either a more mature consideration on the part of the intellect, or a more precise and careful use of the senses themselves, to detect this error. Seemingly round towers seen from a distance prove upon closer inspection to be really square, apparently squat statues viewed from the base of the pedestals on which they are set prove upon inspection from a different angle or upon consulting memories of their appearance before being erected to be quite tall, the sensible image of the Sun represents it as being only about a foot in diameter but this conflicts with what astronomical calculations teach us, and so on.

Much the same point can be made about our opinion that objects possess those very sensible qualities that are represented in our ideas. Our senses themselves reveal the error of this opinion to us, by giving us conflicting information about the same object when viewed from different distances or angles, or under otherwise varying circumstances. The same bucket of water feels warm to a cold hand and cold to a warm hand; everything looks yellow to someone with jaundice; the same object can appear to have very different colours depending on time of day, and surroundings. And if our senses make the same object look different from different distances or angles or in different circumstances, then that is proof that at least one of the ways the senses report the object to be must be incorrect, and that any judgment that an object must have a certain sensible quality simply because it appears to have it is hasty and unjustified.

But while we cannot be assured that bodies have those shapes, sizes, orders, positions, motions, and sensible qualities we perceive them to have, we can see no reason to doubt that they are extended and located in some way or other in space outside of us. Nothing in our experience



goes to suggest that our ideas of sensible objects might be caused by unextended, locationless spirits existing in some aspatial, purely intelligible world, and we feel an instinctive inclination to suppose that they are rather caused by extended and located objects existing in a surrounding space. Thus, were our ideas of sensible objects in fact caused by spirits, our belief to the contrary would be not only incorrect, but illusory, since we have both an instinctive inclination to fall into the error and no means of detecting it. If God is himself no deceiver and would not tolerate our being deceived by any other spirit without at least affording us the means of detecting the error, then we can be assured that the ideas we receive from sensory experience are caused by bodies that are extended and located somehow in space around us. And insofar as we can be assured that these bodies are extended and located somehow, we can be assured that they have some shape, size, position, order and motion, even if not exactly the ones we perceive them as having. Moreover, insofar as they have some size, shape, position, order, and motion we can be sure that these modifications of their extension conform to the geometrical principles we clearly and distinctly perceive to govern such objects. Triangular objects, if any extended objects actually are triangular, will have internal angles that always equal two right angles, cubes will always have six faces, solids will have no more than four corners that are all equidistant from one another, and so on.

Descartes took this knowledge of “nature in general” to be further extended by the consequences of certain things that we can be taken to know about our own nature. I have a strong natural inclination to suppose that among the extended bodies that my senses reveal to me there is one in particular that I am particularly intimately related to. This body has limbs that I am able to move through my own acts of will, and I am only able to move other bodies through moving it. Moreover, my ideas of sensation reveal other objects to me from a viewing perspective occupied by this body. These experiences naturally incline me to believe that my mind is somehow connected to or perhaps even contained in this body, and while it is indeed possible that I might be a disembodied spirit who is merely dreaming these things, I have no evidence of that. There is nothing that shows that my natural inclination to suppose I have a body is in fact false. So I can infer that God would be a deceiver if I did not have a body, and since God is no deceiver, I must therefore have a body.

Moreover, I do not simply occupy this body the way a captain occupies a ship. The captain is able to make the ship move and sees things from the perspective occupied by the ship, but I am more intimately related to my body than that because the health of my body affects my mind. When something bad happens to my body, I do not simply perceive it the way a captain might perceive that a rock has punched a hole in the ship; I feel it. Similarly, when things happen that benefit my body I feel pleasure. And different states of my body are accompanied by such sensations as hunger, thirst, cramping, fatigue, and so on. What is more, these different sensations are not simply felt by the mind, but accompanied by an instinctive impulse to will certain motions of the body. I cannot feel hunger without wanting to eat, cramping without wanting to move, and so on. All of these experiences lead me to infer that my mind is not simply housed in my body as if the body were a kind of container, but that it is somehow united with it to make what is really one thing.

In saying this, Descartes was not retracting his earlier claim that the mind and the body are really distinct and hence separable from one another. But being separable does not entail actually being separate. Descartes thought that God has chosen to join our minds to bodies, linking these two distinct substances together to form a “substantial union” of the two. We have



no clear or distinct perception of how he managed to do this. But since we have an instinctive belief that we do have bodies that we can move at will and from which we receive our sensations, this belief must be correct.

This helps to explain why God would have made me such that I have ideas of sensation. As a thinking thing, I could exist without a sensory capacity. But if I have a body, to which I am particularly intimately joined, and my mind/body union depends on the health of the body, then it makes sense that I would have sensations of pleasure, pain, hunger, thirst, cramping, and fatigue, and the accompanying desires to will to move my body, since these would inform me that something is happening to my body that is threatening or enhancing its union with my mind, and would direct me what to do to preserve the health of the body and thereby the mind/body union.

Note that Descartes expressed himself very carefully here. He did not talk about what is beneficial or harmful to our continued existence, but merely about what is beneficial or harmful to our continued union with our bodies. To make claims about what is beneficial or harmful to our existence would be to suppose that we, considered just as thinking beings, could possibly die. However, Descartes would probably have denied that we have any justification for supposing that such a thing could happen. Our bodies, insofar as they are extended in space, are divisible and hence may be torn apart and in this sense destroyed. But we have no notion of how a thinking being might be destroyed. All we are in a position to conclude, therefore, is that damage to or destruction of the body might destroy its temporary union with the mind and effect a separation, but not that this would in any way damage the mind.

When I think that my body occupies a space where it is surrounded by other bodies that can contact it and alter it for better or worse, I can see that the sensory capacity that God gave to me must have been intended for a further purpose: to inform me of what objects are in my immediate vicinity so that I can better negotiate the barriers and pitfalls, and better exploit the opportunities that my environment presents to me. For this to happen, however, my senses need to give me practically adequate information about the locations, shapes, and motions of the objects in my vicinity. They might deceive me about small and remote things, that are unlikely to have any influence on the health of my body, but were I not to be able to rely on them to inform me with some degree of accuracy about the locations, shapes, and motions of objects in my immediate vicinity, then God would be a deceiver.

I can make a similar claim about the sensible qualities that objects appear to have. It might be objected that, if bodies do not possess any sensible qualities, but God has nonetheless made us so that we receive ideas of these qualities in sensation, then God is a deceiver. For, if extended things can possibly exist without having any sensible qualities in them, then God should certainly have been able to make us so that, when we receive ideas of these bodies through our senses, we would just receive ideas of shapes, sizes, positions, orders and motions. For God to further cause us to fill these figures out with materially false ideas of sensible qualities when he could easily have refrained from doing so would be to inject an unnecessary inducement to make mistaken judgments into us, and even if God might have given us some means of avoiding the mistake, it hardly seems consistent with a divine nature that he should have tempted us to make mistakes for no good reason.

Since God must have had some purpose in giving us the ideas of sensible qualities, they must signify *something* in external objects. Different sensible qualities must advise us that the objects that appear to possess those qualities are really different from one another. But,



according to Descartes, we should not assume that these differences are anything like what appears to us as a difference in quality. Descartes's preferred supposition was that the bodies we see around us are made up of many, shaped and moving parts. Since these parts are too many and too small for our senses to accurately identify and enumerate, God made us so that certain general types of textures and configurations of small parts would induce us to experience characteristic sensible qualities (see Descartes's *Rules for the direction of the mind*, Rule XII, AT X 413 for some speculations specifically along these lines).

We might wonder about this. Descartes maintained that we can be assured that bodies have some sort of extension, even if it is not exactly modified in the way we sense it to be modified. But then, by parity of example, why could we not be assured that they have some sort of colour, temperature, taste, odour, etc., even if not exactly the colour, temperature, taste, odour, etc., that we perceive them to have? His best answer to this worry was given in Articles 4 and 11 of Part II of his *Principles of philosophy*. There he remarked that, whereas we have no reason to believe that the bodies that cause our sensible ideas are not extended, we do have reason to believe that at least some bodies are transparent and have no colour, some permeable and have no solidity, some odourless or tasteless. Our experience itself therefore informs us that there is no sensible quality that bodies must possess.

This is not to say that bodies could not possibly have sensible qualities. Descartes's position is just that we have no good reason, based either on a clear and distinct perception or on an incorrigible natural instinct, to judge that they do. The most that we are warranted in assuming is that differences in sensible qualities arise from some sort of difference in the external objects causing our ideas of those qualities.

Descartes's position on empty space follows as a direct consequence of this position on sensible qualities. Because we cannot be assured that bodies must have any sensible qualities, we also cannot be assured that, simply because we do not experience any sensible qualities in a given space, there are in fact no bodies contained in that space.

## SENSORY ILLUSION

This position on what we can know of nature in general and our nature in particular poses a problem. Descartes took it that we can rely on our sensations of pleasure, pain, hunger, thirst, and so on to inform us of what is beneficial or harmful to our mind/body union. But some things that are in fact harmful to the body are pleasurable rather than painful, and some things that are beneficial are painful rather than pleasurable. Furthermore, sometimes our sensations of hunger or thirst are misdirected. Descartes instanced the pleasure at eating food that has been poisoned, and the sensation of thirst felt by a person with dropsy — a sensation that, if satisfied, would actually worsen the body's condition. Should we then conclude that taking sensations of pain to be indicative of something damaging to the body or its union with the mind would be a hasty and ill-considered judgment, and that we should not take these sensations to be indicative of anything more than some alteration in our bodies, but not necessarily a bad one? This is hardly tenable. There is a particular urgency to our obtaining knowledge of the state of our own bodies. We cannot afford to indulge in doubts about, say, whether we really need to move away from the fire or not. But given the particular urgency of this matter, it is particularly disturbing that God should not have given us reliable sensations of pleasure and pain. How is this fact to be reconciled with his goodness?



Descartes had two replies to offer to this problem. The first, less interesting one is to observe that in some of these cases the error arises merely because our senses are not discriminating enough to give us pleasant or painful sensations of everything that can potentially affect us (in, say, the poisoned food). This is simply a further appeal to the point that God is under no obligation to make our cognitive capacities infinitely powerful. However, this reply does not explain all the problem cases, and to deal with the rest Descartes developed a theory of the physiology of sensation, directed to proving that there is no way God could have created beings like us — thinking beings that have been joined to a body to make up a substantial union with it — without creating the potential for this sort of illusion.

The body, Descartes observed, is an extended thing, and as such is divisible into a number of parts, indeed into infinitely many parts. But the mind is not divisible into parts. It might carry out different activities, such as willing or understanding or sensing, but it is not divisible into a willing part that is set outside of the understanding part, or a sensing part that is set outside of the other two (the sensing function might be a redundant one that the mind need not perform, but it is not an external part that could be cut off with a scalpel). Moreover, experiments with amputations would seem to indicate that the mind is not in communication with each and every one of the body's parts (I find myself to be as completely and wholly contained in what is left of my body after the loss of a limb or an eye as I was previously in the whole; none of my mind seems to have been cut off with the amputated part). Insofar as it is united with the body, it is joined to it just at a small part, likely in the brain.

If we accept that the mind communicates with the body in the brain, and that external objects communicate with it at the surface of the sense organs, something has to happen to bring the effect from the sense organ to the mind. Consistent with his belief that all we can be sure bodies have is extension and motion, Descartes supposed that what happens in sensation is that certain bodies either emit or reflect particles or themselves fly through the air and hit our sense organs. Depending on the shape and motion and size of these impacting bodies, the sense organs are impressed, like wax, or made to vibrate, like drum skins. Behind the sense organ Descartes supposed there to be a number of “tubes” or “strings” — the nerves. (If the nerves are tubes, then they are filled with a very fine, vaporous fluid or gas called the animal spirits.) The effect of impression or vibration of the sense organ is to “pull” on the nerve cord, or change the motions of the animal spirits flowing through the nerves. These effects are propagated along the nerves and into the brain, where a physical organ called the corporeal imagination is impressed. Impressions on the corporeal imagination in turn, through more nerves, propagate impressions to the part of the brain that communicates with the soul. At this point the soul is inspired to produce the idea that God ordained should correspond to that particular motion.

Even if this story is not correct in all of its details, it makes a general point that Descartes took to be beyond doubt: given that our bodies are extended and our minds capable of communicating with them only at point, it is inevitable that sensation be the product of transmitting a signal from receptors on the body's surface in to the locus of its communication with the mind. But that means that, equally inevitably, there will be some chance that the process of sensation will be interfered with, due to agents acting within the body to interrupt, alter, or even generate a signal in the absence of its usual cause. This is a feature of the design that follows necessarily from the fact that an unextended mind has been joined to an extended body, and even God could not do anything to rectify it. God has designed us in such a way that certain kinds of signal, coming to the locus of the soul from the receptors on the outer surface of



the body, arouse certain kinds of ideas of sensation in the mind. And, being all good, God has actually made us so that the ideas that are aroused by a signal are the ones that represent those objects that are the normal causes of the signal. That is:

- the ideas we get of the shape, size, position, order, and motion of objects are ideas that represent the actual shape, size, position, order, and motion of the objects normally causing the signal;
- the ideas we get of the sensible qualities contained within a particular figure at least correspond to some smaller structure of parts within the figure of the objects normally causing the signal so that same corpuscular structures always bring about same ideas
- our ideas of pleasure and pain are caused by truly beneficial or harmful corpuscular structures in the objects normally causing the signal;
- our sensations of bodily states like hunger, thirst, fatigue, and cramping, are linked to volitions to move our bodies in ways that are truly beneficial to the union.

It is just that, sometimes, these signals can be interfered with, either by very small, undetectable parts entering into the bodies that normally cause a sensation, or by some agent interfering with the transmission of the signal *en route*. God can do nothing to prevent this, and it is rather a mark of his goodness that we have been designed so as to get the correct ideas in normal circumstances.

There are three conclusions to be drawn from these reflections. The first is that, on this story, the idea that the mind gets is nothing like the sensation as it exists in the body. The sensation as it exists in the body is made up of a chain of mechanical pushes and pulls or hydraulic pressures. But that is not what the mind “sees” when it has an idea of sensation. The mind does not see the corporeal imagination being buffeted or impressed by a flowing stream of animal spirits or a tugging nerve cord. It sees red (or some other colour). If this story is correct, then all ideas are actually innate. They arise in the mind, as a result of the way it has been made by God to react to the occurrence of certain motions in the brain. It is just that some of these ideas, those of extension and its modes, correspond to something that is actually to be found in bodies.

The second conclusion to be drawn from these reflections is that, in normal circumstances, we can trust our senses to inform us accurately about the disposition of objects in space around our bodies, and about at least their larger-scale shapes, sizes, positions, orders and motions.

The third conclusion is that when mistakes are made they will typically be the result of some specific agent interfering with the connection between one of the sense organs and the brain. It is unlikely that all five senses, distributed throughout the body as they are, would simultaneously be attacked at once. Consequently, we have a ready means at our disposal to correct almost all sensory errors. We need merely be careful to check the reports given by one sense against those given by the others and assent only to those reports that all the senses agree on giving.

At the close of *Meditations* VI Descartes applied this claim to resolve the doubts raised by the dreaming argument. He claimed that as long as we bring all our faculties, particularly our memory, to bear before making a judgment, we will discover that dreams contain tell-tale discontinuities. When the dreaming sequence starts, a whole scene just pops into existence without our being able to tell where it came from or how we got to be there observing it. Moreover, in dreams events frequently occur that are in violation of established laws of nature. In waking life, in contrast, there is a continuity to our experience and a rigorous obedience of events to natural laws. Therefore, we need merely carefully consider whether our experiences are coherent and regular in order to discriminate waking from dreaming experiences.



Though it is not explicit, this argument most likely depends on the same appeal to the goodness of God in not allowing us to be deceived that all of the other doctrines of the second half of *Meditations* VI presuppose. It is logically possible that we could have coherent dreams. It is also logically possible that we might dream that we remember a coherent past to our current dream. Descartes seems to have rejected these possibilities on the ground that God would not have made our memories defective in any irremediable or undetectable way, and would not have allowed us to have dreams that are so coherent as to be more than temporarily undetectable.

### CARTESIAN DUALISM

One of the most serious challenges faced by the Cartesian philosophy concerns the nature of the relation between mind and body and the manner of their interaction with one another. Critics have charged that it is impossible to understand how the mind is able to move the body or the body able to cause the mind to experience sensations, and that it is impossible to understand how two such radically distinct substances could be welded together to form the “substantial union” Descartes spoke of in *Meditations* VI.

This problem becomes particularly acute in connection with Descartes’s attempt to resolve the problem of sensory error. In that attempt, he maintained that since the mind is unextended and the body extended, there must be just one place within the body where the two communicate. Earlier, this claim was defended by appeal to experiments with amputations. But these experiments only provide partial confirmation of Descartes’s position. Were I to have a stroke, or were a part of my brain to be amputated, I would sense that I had lost a part of my mental capacities. This suggests that the mind may be connected with the body at more than just a point, and that severing off parts of the brain may be tantamount to severing off parts of the mind.

Hobbes’s materialism took this consequence to its logical conclusion: simply deny that there is any such thing as mind and attempt to account for all the characteristic mental functions by reducing them to operations of the brain. Berkeley’s immaterialism offered another solution to the mind/body problem: simply deny that there is any such thing as matter and maintain that nothing exists but minds that receive the same sorts of ideas they would receive if there were material things.

Those who have been unwilling to accept either of these radical solutions are called dualists, because they follow Descartes in holding that mind and body are two distinct kinds of thing, neither of which is reducible to the other, and they have inherited Descartes’s problem of accounting for how the thing in us that senses, thinks, and wills could interact with the body. Among the solutions to this problem that dualists have come up with are Leibniz’s pre-established harmony, Spinoza’s double aspect theory, and Malebranche’s occasionalism. According to the theory of pre-established harmony there are both material and spiritual things, but neither interacts in any way with the other; rather, like two clocks that independently tell the same time, each evolves over time in accord with its own internal principles, but does so in such a way that changes in the one just happen to be completely in accord with changes in the other. According to the double aspect theory, there is really only one substance, but this substance appears to us in two different ways depending on whether it is considered through the senses or through the intellect; therefore, mind does not interact with body; there is just one thing that changes over time and that appears in one way as a body in motion (when viewed using the senses) and in another way as a mind with ideas (when viewed using the intellect). According to



the theory of occasionalism, God is constantly inspecting minds and bodies, and on those occasions where particular motions occur in the sensory parts of the brain, God causes the mind to experience corresponding ideas of sense, whereas on those occasions where particular volitions occur in the mind, God moves the body in corresponding ways.

Descartes own position on this problem is difficult to make out. While some of his remarks might be taken to suggest a commitment to occasionalism, his claims that when God made us he mixed two distinct substances to form a substantial union, and that the mind is naturally so constituted as to receive certain sensations as a consequence of affection of the corporeal imagination suggest that he may have held that there is some sort of real causal interaction between the mind and the body. But since the interaction cannot take place at many points without treating the mind as coextensive with the brain and reverting to Hobbit materialism, the one-point interaction theory appears to have been Descartes's only remaining option. The precise nature of his position continues to be a matter of dispute among commentators.

### SUBSTANCE, REAL QUALITIES, AND THE EUCHARIST

One of the most serious difficulties with Descartes position in the Catholic France of his own day concerned the threat his philosophy was taken to pose for the theology of the Eucharist. Unlike the more internal, enthusiastic and iconoclastic forms of Reformed Protestantism dominant in England and Holland, Catholicism tended to place emphasis on a more external, ritualistic form of worship, involving beliefs and ceremonies that the Protestants denounced as absurd, superstitious and quasi-magical. One such element was the ceremony of the Eucharist, at which a piece of bread is supposed to be literally (not just figuratively or metaphorically) turned into the body of Christ, despite continuing to look to all appearances like bread. This belief was underwritten by the Aristotelian notions of substance and real quality. At the moment when the priest consecrated the host, it was thought that the essence or substantial form of the host changed from that of bread to that of the body and blood of Christ. However, all the qualities were supposed to remain the same (which is why the host still looked, felt, and tasted the same after consecration). Crucial to this explanation of the miracle was the notion that sensible qualities like colour, smell, and taste, are real qualities actually inherent in objects.

Insofar as the Cartesian philosophy was taken to be unfriendly to the notion of real qualities, it was taken to imply a heretical, Protestant stance on the miraculousness of the Eucharist. Descartes was, not surprisingly, very circumspect about this issue. He was always careful to say no more than that we could not be sure that bodies actually possess qualities corresponding to those revealed by our senses, and that he in fact found reference to such qualities unnecessary for doing physics. This was a stance that opened the door for a belief in the existence of real qualities on the basis of revelation. And when his associates pressed or threatened to press his position beyond those bounds he always cautioned them to refrain (the letter to Regius, cited at the end of Chapter 7, is a good example of this). In fact, he had good reason for doing so because the arguments of *Meditations* VI are simply not strong enough to give us reason to deny the existence of real sensible qualities. Those arguments go so far as to assure us that bodies must have the primary qualities of extension and motion, but they do not rule out the possibility that bodies might turn out to have other qualities as well.

But though Descartes did not deny the existence of real sensible qualities in bodies, he did hesitate to affirm their existence and he did have no use for them. In fact, he prided himself on



having written a physics that accounted for all of the phenomena of nature without having to talk about them. This left him open to charges of wanting to insinuate more than he let on.

#### ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. Over the course of the *Meditations*, and particularly over the second half of *Meditations* VI, Descartes frequently invoked the term, “nature,” and discriminated a number of different kinds of “nature” and senses in which he wanted the term, “nature” to be understood. “Nature taken generally” is defined at AT VII 80, but there is another definition of “nature taken more narrowly” at AT VII 82. Descartes outlined correspondingly different accounts of what is “taught by nature” in each of these senses and what is taught to us by “a certain habit of making reckless judgments.” At AT VII he also contrasted what has been “taught by nature” with what is known in the “light of nature.” And over AT VII 84-85 “nature” is used again in a “latter” and a “former” sense that do not bear any obvious relation to either the “general” or the “narrow” definitions of “nature.” Taking all of these passages into account, formulate a general account of Descartes’s position on “nature” in all of its senses. Determine whether he managed to clearly separate the different senses of the term.
2. Did Descartes have any principled way of distinguishing between what is “taught to us by nature” and what is taught to us by “a certain habit of making reckless judgments” or is this distinction irredeemably confused and ambiguous?
3. Undertake a study of Descartes’s correspondence and that of his contemporaries in order to determine exactly what problems he got into over the issue of the Eucharist and why.
4. One of Descartes’s most astute critics was Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, who pressed him on the issue of the nature of the relation between the soul and the body. Descartes’s *The passions of the soul* is in part an attempt to address her concerns. Do a study of Descartes’s correspondence with Elizabeth and draw up an account of what Elizabeth’s main concerns were and how Descartes attempted to address them. Assess the adequacy of Descartes’s responses to Elizabeth.
5. Undertake a this same project with reference to Descartes replies to the author of the fifth set of the objections to the *Meditations*, Pierre Gassendi.
6. Did Descartes come up with an adequate response to the dreaming argument?

