

Descartes, *Meditations* II

In *Meditations* II Descartes set out to determine whether there is anything that I could be certain of after the doubts of *Meditations* I. He quickly determined that there is: the fact that I exist. But to know that I exist is one thing, and to know exactly what I am is something else. The main part of *Meditations* II is devoted to answering this further question. Descartes's answer was novel. It consisted of formulating a concept that had not existed before: the concept of an entirely incorporeal mind. What I am, Descartes claimed, is a mind or thing that thinks. People prior to Descartes had of course had ideas of something in us that thinks, called the soul or the spirit. But they had thought of souls and spirits as parts or forms of the body. Spirits were traditionally thought of as a mixture of warm air, fire, and aether. Note that these are all physical, gaseous bodies, invisible to our eyes but still occupying a specific region of space and able to move and act under compression. Souls were considered to be something in the body responsible for animating it and so making it move, grow, reproduce, digest food, sense, and reason. Many people identified the with the gaseous animal spirits they supposed to flow through the tubes of the nerves. Those who came closest to thinking that souls are immaterial were the Christianizing medieval interpreters of Aristotle, who viewed souls as forms that might be separated from the matter of the body, and even they still viewed the soul as being intimately associated with the body, as its form. Even Aristotle's predecessor, Plato, when arguing for immortality in the *Phaedo*, conceived of the soul as a material particular that bears the form of life essentially, the way fire bears heat. Descartes's *Meditations* II, in contrast, forged a conception of mind as a purely thinking thing. Though he did not go so far as to affirm that the mind could not possibly be an extended body part, like the brain (that strong claim was one he waited until *Meditations* VI to make), he did insist that he could conceive of himself as existing just as a thinking thing, without thereby being compelled to suppose that he was an extended or physical thing. It was perhaps because this claim was so new and so radical that he felt compelled to back it up with an argument concerning the nature of a piece of wax that occupies the second half of the meditation.

Meditations II makes continual reference to a traditional view of the human cognitive powers. According to that view, we possess three powers: sense, imagination, and understanding or intellect. Sense gives us our sensory experiences, imagination allows us to form pictures or images of things that are not currently presented to us by sensory experience, and the understanding gives us our power to think in general or abstract terms. It will become clear that Descartes meant to subsume the sensory and imaginative functions under the intellectual, but because he assumed that his readers would think of them as distinct, he began by speaking in those terms. [His own position on the cognitive powers](#) emerges gradually as this and the other meditations proceed.

QUESTIONS ON THE READING

1. What was Descartes's reason for rejecting the claim that God or some other great being might give all his thoughts to him?
2. Why did Descartes think that each of the following reasons for denying that he exists is inadequate:
 - i. I have denied that I have senses or a body



- ii. I have persuaded myself that nothing at all exists in the world
- iii. There could be a deceiver who is deceiving me about this
- 3. Why did Descartes reject the traditional view that he is a rational animal?
- 4. Why did he reject the “spontaneous and natural” view that he is a body animated by natural spirits?

Note: “What about sensing?” AT VII 27. By “sensing” Descartes must have meant the operation of having one’s sense organs affected by external objects and receiving impressions of those objects as a consequence. There is another, leaner sense of “sensing” that involves simply experiencing sensations, like the aches a person who has had a limb amputated experiences as if they were in the absent limb. This is what Descartes later (AT VII 29) referred to as sensing “properly speaking,” and what he identified as simply a mode of thinking. This “proper” sensing can take place without a body and can occur in dreams.

- 5. What is there that Descartes found to be inseparable from himself?
- 6. Would Descartes accept that one ceases to think while in a deep sleep?
- 7. What are the sorts of things that are involved with thinking and that are in Descartes insofar as he is a thinking thing?
- 8. What is there that cannot be false in sensing and imagining?
- 9. What is there that is really essential to a sensible body like a piece of wax after we remove everything that has to do merely with the way it manifests itself on special occasions and concentrate just on those features it must always possess in any circumstance whatsoever?
- 10. How do these features of the wax come to be known?
- 11. How do the features that Descartes originally perceived the wax to have come to be known?

NOTES ON THE READING

Descartes opened *Meditations* II by observing that my belief in my own existence resists all attempts at doubt. Though the dreaming argument should have convinced me that I cannot be certain of the existence of an external world or even of my own body, this is not the same thing as convincing me that I cannot be certain of my own existence. After all, Descartes observed, why should I think I am so tied to my body that I cannot exist without it? The main point of *Meditations* II is made right here. It is still voiced hesitantly, by way of expressing a doubt (I cannot be certain that I need a body in order to exist), but it will be voiced with more confidence later.

The other grounds for doubt fare no better. Might I just be dreaming that I exist? Then I would have to be there to do the dreaming. Might there be an evil genius who tries to trick me into believing that I exist when in fact I do not? But how could the evil genius set out to deceive me unless I exist to be deceived?

So the belief in my own existence is certain because it resists all attempts to show that it is uncertain.

Having established the certainty of my own existence, Descartes proceeded to ask what exactly it is that I know to exist. We think that we are human beings. But it is not clear what makes one thing a human being and another not, so that could not be what I can say I know with certainty about myself insofar as I am certain that I exist.

According to one opinion, the opinion of what we might consider to be the educated person of Descartes’s day, what it means for me to be a human being is that my nature is determined by



an essential form that differentiates me, as a human being, from other kinds of animal life. This essential form is the form of rationality.

But Descartes quickly dismissed this view as obscure, claiming that he had no clear idea of what “rational animality” means, and no hope of being easily able to find out. If I am *now* certain that I exist, then I must *now* be certain of what it is that I am talking about when I say I exist. (Otherwise, how could I claim to know that I exist? It would be absurd to claim that something exists and yet have no idea what this thing is.) But this means that if I do not *now* know what rational animality is, then *that* cannot be what I know about when I claim to be certain of my own existence.

So the traditional view of human nature, and thereby of what I am, cannot be the correct one.

Descartes turned to consider a second view. This is a view that we might consider to be the view of the average person, not exposed to academic teachings might hold of human nature. As Descartes represented it, this view is an amalgam of information about our nature gleaned from sensory experience and from a bit of creative imagination. If you ask the average person what it means to be a human being, they will probably respond by saying, first off, that it means to have a human body. That is, that it means having human limbs, a human head, eyes, and other organs. Of course all of these things could just as well be found in a stone or a freshly dead corpse. A mannequin has human limbs and head and eyes and so on. So Descartes conjectured that the average person would probably add that over and above the body parts, human beings contain some animating principle, which we call the soul. This is not something we sense, and the average person is likely to have only the vaguest notions of it, but Descartes remarked that those who have thought about the matter have imagined that the soul must be some sort of very subtle or rare stuff, since it must permeate all the apparently solid parts of the body, like the muscles, yet something that is also solid enough to make them move, and so mobile in its own right. Perhaps it is something like warm air or breath or fire, which can still exercise a considerable force when compressed. Descartes’s contemporaries referred to this conjectural gas as “the animal (i.e., animating) spirits.”

But these common sense views are also open to doubt. The view that I am my body has already been cast into doubt by the dreaming argument. And the view that I am animated by some sort of vapour or fiery breath is wholly speculative. It is not based on any evidence at all but is a mere conjecture.

Yet, all the same, Descartes observed, I am sure that I exist. What therefore is it that I am sure of? And, just as importantly, how do I come to be sure of it? Apparently, my knowledge is not obtained from education, from sense experience, or from conjecturing about or imagining likely possibilities.

With all the other possible sources of self-knowledge out of contention, Descartes turned to the one remaining one: intellectual judgment or understanding. What, he asked, do we understand ourselves to be? What can we deduce that we must be if we are to restrict ourselves just to asserting things that cannot be doubted?

One thing that cannot be doubted is our very thoughts themselves insofar as they exist in us. Even an evil genius could not deceive me about the existence of my thoughts. For example, an evil genius could not make me think that I am experiencing red without giving me a thought of red. Were the evil genius to destroy that thought, then I could not think it.



These reflections led Descartes to conclude that whatever else he is, he must be *at least* a thing that has various kinds of thoughts, including sensations, fantasies, desires, aversions, and intellectual apprehensions of both the imagistic and the more abstract, purely conceptual type; also a thing that contemplates these different thoughts and connects them together in judgments that it affirms, denies, or doubts; and finally a thing that reasons and draws conclusions from its judgments.

In drawing this conclusion, Descartes did not rule out the possibility that I might be something more than just a thinking thing. In particular, he did not mean to positively deny that I might also have a body. His point was just that, at this stage in his investigations, all that I can know for sure is that I am a thinking thing. Since I cannot grasp how other supposed aspects of human nature, like having a body, could possibly be required for doing those things I can be certain I am doing (I see no contradiction in the notion of an immaterial spirit or angel having thoughts or dreams), I am in no position, at least at that stage, to include anything like a body in my notion of myself.

Note also that, by saying that I am a thing that has various kinds of thoughts, including sensations, fantasies, and desires, Descartes did not mean to imply that objects corresponding to or resembling what is envisioned in these thoughts must exist *outside* of me. He was only affirming that thoughts of these different types must exist *inside* of me, and that I must exist as a thing that is having these thoughts. Indeed, Descartes took this last point so far as to speculate that thinking might be so central to my nature that I can exist only insofar as I think, so that a suspension of the act of thinking would entail the destruction of my being, just as a suspension of the capacity to move, reproduce, and take in nourishment from the environment would entail the destruction of an animal, which can only be considered to be alive insofar as it performs these functions.

Note further that in reaching this conclusion about what I am, Descartes was actually expanding the list of things that I can be certain of. It turns out that I cannot just be certain that I exist; I must also be certain that my thoughts exist in me insofar as I think them. After all, if I know myself as a thinking being, then I must know of my thoughts as things that are in me.

all of these things [doubts, thoughts, affirmations, denials, volitions, refusals, images, sensations] belong to me. Is it not the very same "I" who now doubts almost everything, who nevertheless understands something, who affirms that this one thing is true, who denies other things, who desires to know more, who wishes not to be deceived, who imagines many things even against my will, who also notices many things which appear to come from the senses? What is there in all of this that is not every bit as true as the fact that I exist ...? Which of these things is distinct from my thought? Which of them can be said to be separate from myself? [AT VII 28-29]

The point is put more emphatically later, in *Meditations III*:

what was it about these things that I clearly perceived? Surely the fact that the ideas or thoughts of these things were hovering before my mind. But even now I do not deny that these ideas are in me. [AT VII 35]

Note finally that in reaching this foundational conclusion, Descartes avoided any reliance his senses. He relied instead on a kind of inward observation or consciousness that made him aware of, among other things, the existence of sensations. But he did not rely on the sensations themselves — as he would have if he supposed that they told him about things that exist outside



of his mind. Rather than learn about himself by doing medical, anatomical, physiological, or psychological research, he uncovered what he took to be his essential nature merely by introspection.

Descartes was not entirely comfortable with this last observation. He worried that, as certain and evident as it appeared to him to be, his position on his nature was too unconventional, too radical, and too much at variance with both established opinion and common sense to win ready acceptance. The “armchair” reflections that justify it pose a particular impediment to its acceptance. Descartes was aware that we have a sort of prejudice in favour of whatever we can come to know through the exercise of our senses and imagination, and a contrary prejudice against all abstract and purely intellectual thought. Our senses and imaginations give us concrete images or pictures of things and these thoughts are vivid and detailed. The abstract notions we grasp with pure understanding and reasoning, in contrast seem to us to be ephemeral and difficult to get a hold on. How can it be, Descartes worried, that what he took to be most true and certain about us should be grasped by a kind of abstract thinking rather than by what we intuitively take to be the more accurate and reliable picturing and imaging capacities provided by our senses and imaginations?

What may have been particularly troubling to Descartes was the thought that he had not really answered the question of what I am. He had stated that I am “A thing that thinks,” that is “A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills refuses, and that also imagines and senses.” (AT VII 28). But this is not really what I *am*; it is rather what I *do*. Descartes answered the question of what sort of thing I am by giving a list of the operations that this thing performs. But what is the *thing* that performs these operations, the substance or substratum in which they inhere? If I say that I am a body, then I can at least point to it and describe it as a thing that fills space and persists over time. But what could Descartes identify as the thing does the thinking?

This may be why, even though the job of *Meditations* II was effectively over once Descartes had established that I know myself just as a thinking thing, he could not leave the subject without backing it up by further attack on the kind of pictorial thinking that makes us believe we know things we can sense and imagine better than ourselves considered as thinking things.

THE ARGUMENT FROM THE PIECE OF WAX

In order to buttress his conclusion, Descartes asked us to consider a paradigm instance where we would think we are getting information about an object through the senses. He then brilliantly managed to convince us that what we most certainly know about this object is not anything that we can picture, but only something that we can understand. All the pictorial qualities of the object turn out, upon due consideration to be transient and merely apparent. His point was that if this paradigm case of sensory experience does not in fact yield valuable knowledge of an object, but what we most accurately know of the object is instead revealed by understanding, then we should not hesitate to recognize that the same is true of our knowledge of ourselves.

Descartes made his case by considering a piece of wax. What do we really know about it, he asked, and how do we know it? We think we know it by sensing, which gives us a vivid and detailed picture of the object. But just how accurate is this picture? Here is what we sense: a yellow colour, the taste of honey, a flowery smell, a rapping sound the wax makes when tapped, and certain tangible qualities of firmness, coolness, shape, and size. But heat the wax and see what happens: The yellow colour disappears and the wax turns white and even transparent. The



honey taste and flowery smell are burned off. The wax turns too soft to make a sound when hit and has become hot. It grows larger and changes its shape.

Yet we still think this is the same piece of wax.

But how could this be, unless none of those features our senses revealed to us were really essential to the wax? The features may have all been there in the wax, but obviously the wax now continues to exist without any of them. They were nothing more than accidental features of the wax. They were just temporary modes in which the wax happened to appear, but which it could just as well lose without being destroyed.

Descartes proceeded to ask what is really essential to the wax. He determined that we can say at least that it is a physical body that takes up space. Were it not to take up space (were it, for example, to be consumed in the fire) then certainly it would cease to exist.

But what sort of space does the wax take up? A cubical space? A globular one? And how much space does it take up? 10 millilitres? 12? We have already seen that just as the wax lost or changed its sensible qualities, so it changed its shape and size. Yet it is still wax even though it has changed the particular way it happens to be extended over space. So having a *particular* shape and size could not be essential to it. All that is really essential to it is that it take up *some* space, but not that it take it up in any specific way or that it take up any specific amount. In other words, all that is really essential to the wax is just that it be extended *in general*. Descartes expressed this notion by saying that it must be something extended (something that takes up space somehow), flexible (since it can change the shape and size of space it takes up) and mutable (since it can change the other sensible qualities it exhibits).

But if this is what the wax really is — something extended, flexible, and mutable — how do we know it? We cannot know it by sense, because all our senses ever reveal to us is some particular size and shape — indeed, some particular size and shape invested with other sensible qualities. The senses give us no concept of extension in general.

Nor can we get this idea from the imagination. We can indeed imagine a whole range of different sizes, shapes, and sensible qualities that the wax might take on, but when we do this we never imagine extension *in general* or mutability *in general*. We always imagine some series or sequence of *particular* shapes, sizes, and other properties. And if we tried to imagine all of the different sizes, shapes, and other properties that we understand (note the word) the wax could take on, our imaginations would quickly become overtaxed. They are simply inadequate to picture for us the full range of what we find ourselves able to understand in the abstract or general concepts of extension, flexibility, and mutability.

We obtain a conception of extension in general and of the wax as something that can take on an infinite or arbitrarily large range of sizes, shapes, and other properties through the understanding rather than through the senses or the imagination. Thus, the really essential feature of the wax is something grasped by the understanding, and not by the picturing capacities of the mind.

Someone might object that even if it is only through the understanding that we come to grasp a part of the true essence of the wax, it is only through consulting sense experience that the understanding gets the information it needs to work up to the apprehension of a general concept like that of extension. After all, were there no piece of wax given in sensory experience, what would give us the occasion to think of one?

Descartes's answer to this worry is worth citing.



But I need to realize that the perception of the wax is neither a seeing, nor a touching, nor an imagining. Nor has it ever been, even though it previously seemed so; rather it is an inspection on the part of the mind alone. This inspection can be imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct, as it is now, depending on how closely I pay attention to things in which the piece of wax consists. [AT VII 31]

In this passage Descartes rejected the notion that there are three distinct cognitive faculties or capacities: sense, imagination, and understanding. There is only one act of the mind, he claimed, which can be indifferently called thinking or perceiving. The thoughts obtained from this act can be more or less clear or obscure, distinct or confused. And far from what we might at first have thought, sensing and imagining, rather than being vivid and detailed, are actually just initial, more obscure and confused thoughts that are rendered successively more clear and distinct by a more careful inspection.

Note the contrast between this view and that attributed to Hobbes in Chapter 5. Whereas Descartes declared that all ideas are grasped by the understanding and that sensing and imagining are just more confused and obscure apprehensions on the part of the understanding, Hobbes took the understanding to be nothing more than an ability to grasp the precise meaning of words, and hence to refer words back to the sensory experiences they were originally designed to signify. Thus, whereas Descartes treated sense and imagination as more confused forms of understanding, Hobbes declared that understanding can only be clarified by referring back to what is given in sense. Both philosophers ended up rejecting the Aristotelian view that there is both a higher (intellectual) and a lower (sensory-imagistic) cognitive power, but they did so in opposite ways.

To return to the text, Descartes's point was that while we may have needed to first get informed of the existence of the wax through what we call sensing, this sensing is not a distinct cognitive operation, rivaling understanding, but merely a more imperfect and inadequate form of understanding that was subsequently rendered more adequate.

In order to further justify this claim, Descartes argued that the distinction between sensing and understanding is really a distinction in degree and not a distinction in kind. Even what we consider to be simple acts of sensing actually involve judgment, and the more judgment there is, the more detailed and correct we take the sensing to be; whereas the less judgment there is, the more raw and uninformative we take the sensing to be. Looking out a third story window in a 17th century French city, we see what we take to be men, dressed like musketeers, walking up and down. But we do not in all strictness *see* this. We *judge* that there are musketeers walking up and down. All we strictly see are hats and cloaks that we take to be covering men, but that could possibly be covering robots. Indeed, even this is going too far. All that we really see is a collection of colour patches that we suppose to be hats and cloaks but that may be nothing more than dreams and figments of our imagination. Further, insofar as we suppose these colour patches to even look like hats and cloaks it is only because we are judging that they go together in a certain way. On our visual fields different colour patches are simply set one alongside another. Each one is distinct from the surrounding ones. But when we think that we are seeing a kilt, we taking a whole group of adjacent colour patches and draw an outline around them, considering that they all belong together as parts of one object, the kilt, whereas others colour patches that immediately touch those composing the kilt make up other objects. In effect, we make the boundaries between some colour patches more important than the boundaries between others by considering them to be boundaries between objects and not just boundaries between



differently coloured regions of the same object. This is a judgment that we make about what we see, not something that we actually see. We put colour patches together under concepts of objects, they do not come glued together in that way. Grasped in this context, what we strictly see is not very much at all. Right from the outset, Descartes observed, judgments (or, equivalently put, acts of the understanding) are necessary to infuse raw sensory data with meaning, and the more the process of judgment is exercised, the more, not the less accurate the result becomes.

Let us apply all these reflections back to the case of the wax. We have learned that we actually know the wax best through an exercise of the understanding that involves judging what is essential to it. That judgment tells us that the wax is something extended, flexible, and mutable. Compare this piece of information to what my understanding tells me about myself: that I am a thing that thinks. The form of both pieces of information is rather similar. In both cases we allude to the existence of some thing and then we go on to talk about operations the thing manages to perform. In the one case these operations are sensing, imaging, conceiving, judging, asserting, denying, willing, and so on. In the other they are filling more or less space, flexing, and changing. In neither case do we really end up identifying the nature of the thing that performs these operations. We describe it merely by appeal to the operations. In the one case, we talk about an extended thing, in the other about a thinking thing.

Note something further. In the case of the wax we have no assurance that the thing we are making the judgment about exists anywhere outside of our thoughts. What we are really making the judgment about is not some object outside of us, but merely about the content that appears in some of our thoughts. In other words, our judgment about the wax is in a way really a judgment about ourselves or something that appears in us. But if that is the case then we are brought back to Descartes earlier claim: what we know best is not anything outside of us that we think we can picture through sense or imagination. It is rather ourselves as thinking things that we know best. And the fact that we can form no picture or image of that thing does not mean that we do not know it better than anything we can form pictures or images of.

ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. What is the basis for Descartes knowledge of his own existence? Did he base it on a piece of reasoning or an argument, or did he come to know it in some other way? If the former, how is his knowledge compatible with the possible existence of an evil genius? If the latter, how is his knowledge to be understood?
2. Was Descartes entitled to claim, at this stage in his argument, that he did not need to have a body in order to be able to understand, affirm, deny, doubt, will, etc.?
3. Could an evil genius make me be mistaken about what it is that I am thinking? Would Descartes have allowed that self-deception is possible?
4. Descartes claimed to know that he is a thinking thing. However, to say that what exists is a “thing” suggests that there is something that bears properties (in this case, that there is something that has thoughts) and that this thing endures over time, perhaps altering in state (i.e., changing its thoughts) over time. Is there anything in Descartes’s account in *Meditations* II that might entitle him to affirm that, in addition to the thoughts that he knew must exist, there must be some one substance in which they all inhere?

