Discovering Bodies: Descartes on the Existence and Nature of Material Things

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<1642, Second Edition, Amsterdam> Renatus Des-Cartes’, Meditations on First Philosophy, In which [Meditations] the existence of God, & the distinction of the human soul from the body, are demonstrated.

11 November 1640 to Mersenne (1): I sent yesterday my Metaphysics to M. de Zuylichem [=Huygens] in order to send to you; but he’ll send it to you only in eight days, for I have given him this time to look at it. I haven’t put on it a title, but it seems to me that the most appropriate will be to put Rene Des-cartes’ Meditations on first Philosophy for I don’t treat in particular of God, & of the Soul, but in general of all the first things that one can known when philosophizing [toutes premiers choses qu’on peut connaître en philosphant]. (III 235)

11 November 1640 to Mersenne (2): I am sending you finally my writing on Metaphysics, on which I have not put a title, in order to make you its godfather, & to leave you the power to baptize it. I think that one will be able to name it, as I have written you by my previous [letter], Meditations on First Philosophy; for I don’t treat in it only of God, & of the Soul, but in general of all the first things that one can know when philosophizing in order [toutes les premières choses qu’on peut connaître en philosphant par ordre]. And my name is known to so many people that, if I shouldn’t want to put it here, one would think that I was intending some deceit, & that I was doing it rather out of vanity than out of modesty. (III 238-239)

Preface to the Meditations: Questions about God & the human mind I have already touched a few years ago in the Discourse on the Method of rightly conducting reason & searching for truth in the sciences, published in French in 1637, not indeed in order that I carefully treat them, but only that I take a taste of them, and learn from the judgments of readers how they should afterwards be treated… But now, after I have once in some way experienced the judgments of men, I shall again here undertake to treat the same questions about God & the human mind, and at the same time [simulque] the beginnings of the whole first Philosophy [totius primae Philosophiae initia]. (VII 7, 9)

II. Principia

...it is already some time that I have received [the letter] that you have taken the trouble to write me; but I thought that you would not be very anxious to have a response to the question that it pleased you to propose to me, concerning that which one must take for the first principle [le premier principe], because you have already responded to it better than I could do.

I add only that the word principle can be taken in different senses, and that it is one thing to search for a common notion, which is so clear & so general that it can serve as a principle to prove the existence of all the beings [tous les Estres, les Entia], that one knows afterwards; & another thing to search for a Being [un Estre], the existence of which is more known [plus connu] to us than that of any others, so that it can serve us as a principle for knowing them.

In the first sense, one can say that it is impossible that the same thing simultaneously be and not be is a principle, & that it can generally serve, not properly to make known the existence of any thing [l’existence d’aucune chose], but only to make it that when one knows [that thing], one confirms its
truth by such a reasoning: *It is impossible that that which is not be; now I know that such a thing is; therefore I know that it is impossible that it not be.* This is of very little importance, & and does not render us any more knowing.

In the other sense, the first principle is *that our Soul exists*, because there is nothing with whose existence we are better acquainted [*dont l’existence nous soit plus notoire*].

I add also that it is not a condition that one must require of a first principle, that it be such that all the other propositions can be reduced and proven by it [*se puissent reduire & prouver par lui*]; it is enough that it can serve to find more of them, & that there isn’t another on which it depends, nor that one can find rather than it [*n’y qu’on puisse plutost trouver que lui*]. For it can happen that there isn’t in the world [*qu’il n’y ait point au monde*] any principle to which alone all the things can be reduced [*auquel seul toutes les choses se puissent reduire*]; & the way one reduces the other propositions to this one: *it is impossible that the same thing simultaneously be and not be,* is superfluous and of no use; whereas it is with great utility that one begins to assure oneself of the existence of God, & following that [*ensuite*] of that of all creatures, by the consideration of one’s own existence. (IV 443-445, June or July 1646 to Clerselier, in response to objections to the Principles from Le Conte.)

### III. The titles of the individual Mediations (both in the autograph and as revised, based on 28 January 1641 to Mersenne)

1. About those [things] that can be called into doubt.
2. About the human Mind.
3. About God.
4. About the true & false.
5. About the Essence of material things.
6. About the Existence of material things.

1. About those [things] that can be called into doubt.
2. About the nature of the human mind. That it is better known than the body.
3. About God, that he exists.
4. About the true & false.
5. About the Essence of material things, & again about God that he exists.
6. About the Existence of material things, & the real distinction of the mind from the body.

### IV. The proof for the existence of material things (attached)

### V. Useful passages for the proof

(1) From Discourse, Fifth Part: The Human Body as a Machine

For examining the functions, which could following that be in this [human] body, I found there exactly all those that can be in us without our thinking of them [*sans que nous y pensions*], nor consequently [*ni par consequent*] that our soul, that is, that part distinct from our body whose nature it was said above is only to think, contributes to them [*y contribue*], and which are all the same in which one can say that animals without reason resemble us. (VI 46)

(2) From the Fourth Replies: Descartes’ Mechanism

…it seems to me that what should be most noted is that there can happen to motions, both in the bodies of animals and in ours, unless there are present absolutely all the organs, or instruments, but the instrumentality of which the same [motions] could be carried out also in a machine; so that even in us ourselves the mind does not immediately move the external members, but directs only spirits flowing from the heart through the brain into the muscles, and determines them to certain motions, since these spirits are of themselves are equally easily applies to many different actions. Now many of the motions that occur in us, in no way depend on the mind [*nullo pacto a mente dependent*]: such are the beating of the heart, the digestion of food, nutrition, respiration of sleep, and indeed in waking [ones] walking, singing, and similar [things], when the happen with the soul not noticing [*animò non advertente*]. And when those who fall from a height, and put their hands before them to the ground, in order that their head be protected, they do this with surely no deliberation of reason [*nullo sane consilio rationis*], but only because the vision of the impending fall, reaching to the brain places the animals spirits into the nerves, in the same way as is necessary for producing this motion, even with the mind unwilling, & as if in a machine [*vel mente invítà, & tanguam in machinâ*]. And since we certainly experience this in ourselves, why is it that we should be so greatly surprised, if *the light reflected from the body of a wolf into the eyes of a sheep,* has the same force for exciting in it the motion of flight?

But now, if we want to use reason for telling whether some motions of animals are similar to those that are carried out in us by the instrumentality of the mind [*ope mentis*], or to those only that depend on only an influx of spirits & a disposition of the organs, there should be considered the differences that are found between them: namely those that I explained in the fifth part of the Discourse on the Method, for I
think none others are found; and then it will easily appear, that all actions of animals are similar to those only that occur in us without any instrumentality of the mind [sine ullo ape mentis]. From which we are forced to conclude that absolutely no principle of motion in them is known by us, except only the disposition of organs, & the continual afflux of spirits, which is produced by the heat of the heart thinning the blood. And at the same time we will notice that nothing had until now given us occasion for ascribing another [principle of motion] to them, except only that not distinguishing those two principles of motion, when first, we saw that that [principle] which depends on only the spirits & organs is in animals, as in us, we unadvisedly believed that also that other [principle] that consists in mind, that is, thought [in mente, sive cognitione consistit] is in them. And surely whatsoever in this way we persuaded ourselves from our beginning age, however much it is afterwards shown to be false by reasons, we cannot easily erase from our opinion, unless we attend for a long time & frequently to those reasons. (VII 229-231. Cf V 275-279 to Hobbes 5 February 1649)

(3) From Meditation Four: Will and Understanding

For example, when I was examining these last days whether anything existed in the world, and I noticed, from this very thing that I examined that, it evidently followed that I exist, I was indeed not able not to judge that that which I so clearly understood is true; not because I was forced to it by some external force, but because from a great light in the understanding there followed a great propensity in the will, and in this way I believed it so much more on my own [sponte] and freely, as I was less indifferent to that itself. (VII 58-59)

(4) From the Second Replies: Descartes' Epistemology

Nay indeed also, that which is greater, sometimes we see that we are really deceived by the very natural instinct, which has been granted to us by God, as when one with dropsy thirsts; for then he is impelled positively to a drink by nature, which has been given to him by God for the conservation of the body, when nevertheless this nature deceives him, because a drink is harmful to him; but how this does not contradict with the goodness or truth of God, I have explained in the sixth Meditation.

But in those [things] that cannot be explained in this way, namely in our most clear & accurate judgments [in maxime claris & accuratis nostris judicis], which, if they were false, could not be corrected by means of any other natural faculty, I completely affirm that we cannot be deceived. For since God is the highest being, he cannot not be also the highest good & true, and for that reason it is contradictory, that something be from him, which positively tends to falsity. But yet, since there can be nothing real in us, which has not been given by him (as has been demonstrated together with his existence) not we have a real faculty for recognizing the truth, and distinguishing it from the false (as is evident from this alone that there are in us ideas of false & true), unless this faculty tended to the truth, at least when we rightly use it (that is, when to assent to no [things] except clearly & distinctly perceived [things], for no other right use of it can be feigned), God its giver would deservedly be considered as a deceiver.

And so you see, that after is has been known that God exists, it is necessary that we feign him a deceiver, if we want to call into doubt those [things], which we clearly & distinctly perceive; & because he cannot be feigned a deceiver, those [things] are to be completely admitted as true and certain.

But because I notice at this point that you still stick in the doubts that, having been put forth by me in the first Meditation, I thought were sufficiently carefully removed in the following [Meditations], I shall put out here again the foundation [fundamentum] on which it seems to me all human certainty can rest.

First, as soon as we think something [aliquid] is rightly perceived by us, we on our own [sponte] persuade ourselves that that is true. Now this persuasion if it is so firm that we can never have any reason for doubting about that which we have so persuaded ourselves, there is nothing that we should search further; we have all that one should desire rationally [habemus omne quod cum ratione licet optare]. For what is it to us, if perhaps someone feigns that that very [thing], about whose truth we are so firmly persuaded, appears false to God or to an Angel, and for that reason, absolutely speaking is false? Why should we care about that absolute falsity, since we in no way believe it, nor even the least suspect it? For we have supposed the persuasion so firm, that in no way can it be removed; which persuasion is absolutely the same as most perfect certainty.

But it can be doubted whether any such certainty, that is firm & immutable persuasion is had.....

It remains that if any is had, it is only about those [things] that are clearly perceived by the understanding.

Now of these [things] certain are so perspicuous, and at the same time so simple, that we can never think of them, without believing that they are true; for example that I, while I am thinking, exist, that those [things], which once have been done, cannot be undone, & such things, about which it is manifest that this certainty is had. For we cannot doubt them, unless we think of them; but we cannot think of them, without at the same time believing that they are true, as has been assumed; therefore we cannot doubt them, without at the same time believing that they are true, that is, we cannot ever doubt [them].... (VII 143-146, Second Replies, Objection 4)
Introduction

But now after I have begun to be better acquainted with me myself and the author of my origin, I do not indeed think that all [things] that I seem to have from the senses are to be rashly admitted; but neither also that all are to be called into doubt.

The Real Distinction Proof

And first since I know that all [things] that I clearly & distinctly understand, can be made by God such as I understand them, it is sufficient that I can clearly & distinctly understand one thing without another, in order that I be certain that one is different from another, because it can be placed apart at least by God; & it does not matter by what power this is made, in order that they be reckoned different; and therefore from this alone that I know that I exist, and that at the same time I notice absolutely nothing else to pertain to my nature, that is, essence except this alone that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists in this one [thing] that I am a thinking thing. And although perhaps (or rather as I shall a little later say, certainly) I have a body that is very closely conjoined to me, because nevertheless on one side I have a clear & distinct idea of me myself insofar as I am only a thinking thing, not extended, & on the other side a distinct idea of a body, insofar as it is only an extended thing, not thinking, it is certain that I am in reality distinct from my body, & can exist without it.

Faculties, Modes, and the Modal Distinction

Moreover I find in myself faculties for thinking in certain particular ways [specialibus quibusdam modis], namely faculties of imagining, & of sensing, without which I can clearly & distinctly understand myself whole, but not vice versa them without me, that is, without an understanding substance in which they exist [cui insint]: for they include in their formal concept some understanding, from which I perceive that they are distinguished from me, as modes from a thing. I recognize also certain other faculties, for example, of changing place, of taking on various figures, & similar ones, which indeed, no more than the previous ones, can be understood without some substance in which they exist [cui insint], nor therefore also exist without it: But it is manifest that these [faculties], if in fact they should exist, must exist in [inesse] a corporeal, that is, extended substance, but not in an understanding [substance], because namely some extension, but not any understanding at all is contained in their clear & distinct concept.

Passive and Active Faculties

But now there indeed is in me a certain passive faculty of sensing, that is, of receiving & and knowing ideas of sensible things, but I could have no use of it unless a certain active [faculty] also were to exist, either in me, or in another [thing], a faculty for producing or making [producendi, vel efficiendi] those ideas.

The External Reference of the Active Faculty (and Descartes’ Mechanism)

And this [active faculty] surely cannot be in me myself, because it presupposes no understanding at all, & with me not co-operating, but often even unwilling [invito] those ideas are produced:

Objective Reality

therefore it remains that it be in some substance different from me, in which since all the reality that is objectively in the ideas produced by that faculty must be [inesse] either formally or eminently (as I have already noticed above) either this substance is a body, that is, a corporeal nature, in which to be sure all [things] are contained formally that in ideas [are contained] objectively; or at least is God, or some creature more noble that body in which they are contained eminently;

The Non-Deceptive God

but since God is not a deceiver, it is altogether manifest that he neither by himself immediately sends those ideas to me, nor also by some mediating creature, in which their objective reality is contained not formally, but only eminently.

The Great Propensity for Believing

For since he has given me no faculty at all for recognizing this, but on the contrary a great propensity for believing that they have been sent out from corporeal things, I do not see how it could be understood that he is not a deceiver, if they were sent out from elsewhere than from corporeal things:

Conclusion: The Existence (and Nature) of Bodies

And therefore corporeal things exist. Nevertheless they do not perhaps all exist altogether such, as I grasp them by sense; since that grasping of the senses is in many [things] very obscure, & confused; but at least all those [things] are in them that I clearly & distinctly understand, that is, all [things] generally regarded that are grasped in the object of pure Mathesis. (VII 77-80)
Descartes' Proof for the Existence of Material Things: Principles' Version

Second Part of the Principles of Philosophy.

On the Principles of material things.

I. By what reasons the existence of material things is known with certainty.

Even if no one does not sufficiently persuade himself that material things exist, because nevertheless this has been called into doubt by us a little before, and counted among the prej udgments of our first age, now it is necessary, that we investigate the reasons, through which that is known with certainty. Of course whatever we sense, without doubt comes to us from some thing, which is different from our mind. For it is not in our power to make it, that we sense one [thing] rather than another; but this completely depends on that thing that affects our senses. It can indeed be sought whether that thing is God, or something different from God: But because we sense, or rather impelled by sensation we clearly and distinctly perceive a certain matter extended in length, width & depth, whose various parts are endowed with various figures, and put into motion by various motions; and also make it that we have various sensations of colors, of smells, of pain, etc. If God were to immediately by him himself exhibit the idea of that extended matter to our mind, or only if he were to make it, that it was exhibited by some thing, in which there was nothing of extension, nor of figure, nor of motion: no reason can be thought up, why he should not be thought a deceiver. For we clearly understand that [matter] as a thing completely different from God, & from ourselves, that is, from our mind; and also we clearly seem to ourselves to see, that its idea comes to us from things placed outside ourselves, to which it is altogether similar: Now (that) it would be completely repugnant to the nature of God that he be a deceiver, has already before been noticed. And therefore at this point it should be completely concluded, that a certain thing extended in length, width & depth, and having all those properties that we clearly perceive to belong to an extended thing, exists. And it is this extended thing, which we call body, that is, matter. (VIII-1 40-41)