

## Second Meditation

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### AT 23

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#### SECOND MEDITATION

*The nature of the human mind, and how it is better known than the body*<sup>1</sup>

So serious are the doubts into which I have been thrown as a result of yesterday's meditation that I can neither put them out of my mind nor see any way of resolving them. It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top. Nevertheless I will make an effort and once more attempt the same path which I started on yesterday. Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least recognize for certain that there is no certainty. Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable.<sup>2</sup>

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### AT 24

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I will suppose then, that everything I see is spurious. I will believe that my memory tells me lies, and that none of the things that it reports ever happened. I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, movement and place are chimeras.<sup>3</sup> So what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain.

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### AT 24

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Yet apart from everything I have just listed, how do I know that there is not something else which does not allow even the slightest occasion for doubt?<sup>4</sup> Is there not a God, or whatever I may call him, who puts into me the thoughts I am now having?<sup>5</sup> But why do I think this, since I myself may perhaps be the author of these thoughts?<sup>6</sup> In that case am not

<sup>1</sup>The subtitle lays out one of the things that Descartes will discuss in this meditation. The topic is the human mind and Descartes will claim that he knows it better, or more intimately, than the human body. But, as will become clear, this is not the first thing that Descartes discusses.

<sup>2</sup>It looks like Descartes is picking things up where he left off last time. He is attempting to establish something, or some things, that he can know with certainty.

<sup>3</sup>Chimera *noun* [kī- mir-ə, kə-] : a monster from Greek mythology that breathes fire and has a lion's head, a goat's body, and a snake's tail (from Merriam-Webster). Okay, so Descartes is talking about body, shape, extension, movement, and place in a general sense. Rather than specific bodies, for instance, he is talking about the quality of having a body in general. He obviously does not mean that body (and these other things) are literally mythical beasts with the head of a lion and the tail of a snake. So he must be using the word "chimera" figuratively.

<sup>4</sup>Descartes is on the lookout for something that he cannot doubt at all.

<sup>5</sup>This is the first possibility of something that cannot be doubted: God's existence. The suggestion seems to be that God must exist in order for Descartes to have the thoughts that he is currently having.

<sup>6</sup>With this one rhetorical question, Descartes rejects the idea that God's existence is required in order to explain where his thoughts come from. He suggests that they might come from another source, so God is not needed to explain their origin.

I, at least, something?<sup>7</sup> But I have just said that I have no senses and no body. This is the sticking point: what follows from this? Am I not so bound up with a body and with senses that I cannot exist without them?<sup>8</sup> But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.<sup>9</sup>

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**AT 25**

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But I do not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this 'I' is, that now necessarily exists.<sup>10</sup> So I must be on my guard against carelessly taking something else to be this 'I', and so making a mistake in the very item of knowledge that I maintain is the most certain and evident of all. I will therefore go back and meditate on what I originally believed myself to be, before I embarked on this present train of thought. I will then subtract anything capable of being weakened, even minimally, by the arguments now introduced, so that what is left at the end may be exactly and only what is certain and unshakeable.<sup>11</sup>

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**AT 25**

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What then did I formerly think I was? A man. But what is a man? Shall I say 'a rational animal'?<sup>12</sup> No; for then I should have to inquire what an animal is, what rationality is, and in this way one question would lead me down the slope to other harder ones, and I do not now have the time to waste on subtleties of this kind. Instead I propose to concentrate on what came into my thoughts spontaneously and quite naturally whenever I used to consider what I was. Well, the first thought to come to mind was that I had a

<sup>7</sup>With this rhetorical question, Descartes suggests another thing that perhaps cannot be doubted: that he is something or that he exists.

<sup>8</sup>We are getting an important line of thought here. Descartes has suggested that perhaps he must exist. He recognizes, however, he has already doubted whether he has a body and whether anything that his senses tell him is true. So he is proceeding under the assumption that he has no body and that he cannot trust anything his senses tell him. The question is whether that implies that he does not exist.

<sup>9</sup>This is a crucial section of text, starting from "But I have now..." and going until "...conceived in my mind." Here Descartes is answering the first big question of this meditation: what can I know for certain? Before moving on, get clear on exactly what fact Descartes thinks he can know with certainty and why he thinks that that fact cannot be doubted.

<sup>10</sup>After making his first major claim of the meditation, Descartes considers another question that immediately comes up. The question is about this "I" that he thinks necessarily exists: what kind of a thing is it? What can he know about himself, this "I"?

<sup>11</sup>Okay, so Descartes just told us his plan for how to answer the question of what kind of thing this "I" is. He discusses this question for the next six or so paragraphs, through most of AT 29. He is going to start with what he previously thought he was, and subtract all of the aspects of that conception of himself that include anything that he has doubted.

<sup>12</sup>According to Aristotle the essence of a human was rationality. So, a man was, by definition, a rational Animal. But Descartes doesn't seem to agree, does he? Even though Descartes doesn't mention Aristotle by name, he is pretty clearly dismissing Aristotle's conception of what a human or a person is.

face, hands, arms and the whole mechanical structure of limbs which can be seen in a corpse, and which I called the body. The next thought was that I was nourished, that I moved about, and that I engaged in sense-perception and thinking; and these actions I attributed to the soul.<sup>13</sup> But as to the nature of this soul, either I did not think about this or else I imagined it to be something tenuous, like a wind or fire or ether, which permeated my more solid parts.<sup>14</sup> As to the body, however, I had no doubts about it, but thought I knew its nature distinctly. If I had tried to describe the mental conception I had of it, I would have expressed it as follows: by a body I understand whatever has a determinable shape and a definable location and can occupy a space in such a way as to exclude any other body; it can be perceived by touch, sight, hearing, taste or smell, and can be moved in various ways, not by itself but by whatever else comes into contact with it.<sup>15</sup> For, according to my judgement, the power of self-movement, like the power of sensation or of thought, was quite foreign to the nature of a body; indeed, it was a source of wonder to me that certain bodies were found to contain faculties of this kind.<sup>16</sup>

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**AT 26**

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But what shall I now say that I am, when I am supposing that there is some supremely powerful and, if it is permissible to say so, malicious deceiver, who is deliberately trying to trick me in every way he can? Can I now assert that I possess even the most insignificant of all the attributes which I have just said belong to the nature of a body?<sup>17</sup> I scrutinize them, think about them, go over them again, but nothing suggests itself; it is tiresome and pointless to go through the list once more.<sup>18</sup> But what about the attributes I assigned to the soul?<sup>19</sup> Nutrition or movement? Since now I do not have a body, these are mere fabrications. Sense-perception? This surely does not occur without a body, and besides, when asleep I have appeared to perceive through the senses many things which I afterwards realized I did not perceive through the senses at all.<sup>20</sup> Thinking? At last I have discovered it - thought; this alone is inseparable from me. I am, I exist - that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. For it could be that were I totally

<sup>13</sup>Descartes is referring in this sentence to Aristotle's conception of the soul. Descartes lists four functions that the soul had according to Aristotle. These will come up again later. Make sure you are clear on what these four functions are.

<sup>14</sup>In modern chemistry "ether" means a certain type of organic compound. But that is not what Descartes means by it. "Ether" used to refer to a kind of thin, rarefied element that was thought to occupy the upper regions of the heavens.

<sup>15</sup>This is very important. Descartes explains what he means by "body".

<sup>16</sup>Based on his understanding of body, Descartes thinks that it is somewhat mysterious how any bodies could move themselves. There is nothing in the definition of body that would explain it.

<sup>17</sup>This is a somewhat confusingly written question, but here is what Descartes is asking: of all of the features distinctive of a body, does he—the necessarily existent "I"—have any of them? That is, is he essentially a body? Read back through this question and make sure that you understand what it means.

<sup>18</sup>And here is his answer. Remember, he is still operating under the assumption that he is being fooled by a malicious demon. Under that assumption, he cannot find any features of body that he possesses. The question he is trying to answer here is what kind of thing he is. He just ruled out one possibility: that he is a body.

<sup>19</sup>Okay, now he is considering another possibility. Maybe he is a soul or something like a soul. He is going to consider the four qualities of a soul (or the four activities that a soul partakes in), which he mentioned on AT 26. He is going to ask, under the assumption that he is being fooled by a malicious demon, which of these characteristics of the soul he has.

<sup>20</sup>Descartes has rejected that he has these features (nutrition, movement, and sense-perception).

to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist. At present I am not admitting anything except what is necessarily true. I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason - words whose meaning I have been ignorant of until now. But for all that I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of a thing? As I have just said - a thinking thing.<sup>21</sup>

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AT 27

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What else am I? I will use my imagination. I am not that structure of limbs which is called a human body. I am not even some thin vapour which permeates the limbs - a wind, fire, air, breath, or whatever I depict in my imagination; for these are things which I have supposed to be nothing. Let this supposition stand; for all that I am still something. And yet may it not perhaps be the case that these very things which I am supposing to be nothing, because they are unknown to me, are in reality identical with the 'I' of which I am aware? I do not know, and for the moment I shall not argue the point, since I can make judgements only about things which are known to me.<sup>22</sup> I know that I exist; the question is, what is this 'I' that I know? If the 'I' is understood strictly as we have been taking it, then it is quite certain that knowledge of it does not depend on things of whose existence I am as yet unaware; so it cannot depend on any of the things which I invent in my imagination. And this very word 'invent' shows me my mistake. It would indeed be a case of fictitious invention if I used my imagination to establish that I was something or other; for imagining is simply contemplating the shape or image of a corporeal thing.<sup>23</sup> Yet now I know for certain both that I exist and at the same time that all such images and, in general, everything relating to the nature of body, could be mere dreams {and chimeras}. Once this point has been grasped, to say 'I will use my imagination to get to know more distinctly what I am' would seem to be as silly as saying 'I am now awake, and see some truth; but since my vision is not yet clear enough, I will deliberately fall asleep so that my dreams may provide a truer and clearer representation.' I thus realize that none of the things that the imagination enables me to grasp is at all relevant

<sup>21</sup>This was a crucial section, from "Thinking?" through this last sentence of the paragraph. Here is where Descartes first gives his answer to what kind of a thing he is that necessarily exists. Reread this section a few times.

<sup>22</sup>So Descartes thinks that he is a thinking thing. He considers whether he might also be a corporeal, bodily thing. His conclusion here is that he might be, but that he can't be sure because it is possible that he is being fooled by a malicious demon. And since his whole purpose in these meditations is to discover what he can know for certain, he is going to carry on under the assumption that he is not also a body.

<sup>23</sup>Here Descartes tells us what he means by "imagination" or "imagining". In understanding this, it is useful to keep in mind that imagination has to do with the idea of an *image*. Descartes seems to understand imagination as a special faculty of the mind used for thinking about corporeal nature.

to this knowledge of myself which I possess, and that the mind must therefore be most carefully diverted from such things if it is to perceive its own nature as distinctly as possible.<sup>24</sup>

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AT 28

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But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.<sup>25</sup>

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AT 28

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This is a considerable list, if everything on it belongs to me. But does it? Is it not one and the same 'I' who is now doubting almost everything, who nonetheless understands some things, who affirms that this one thing is true, denies everything else, desires to know more, is unwilling to be deceived, imagines many things even involuntarily, and is aware of many things which apparently come from the senses?<sup>26</sup> Are not all these things just as true as the fact that I exist, even if I am asleep all the time, and even if he who created me is doing all he can to deceive me? Which of all these activities is distinct from my thinking? Which of them can be said to be separate from myself? The fact that it is I who am doubting and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer.<sup>27</sup> But it is also the case that the 'I' who imagines is the same 'I'. For even if, as I have supposed, none of the objects of imagination are real, the power of imagination is something which really exists and is part of my thinking. Lastly, it is also the same 'I' who has sensory perceptions, or is aware of bodily things as it were through the senses. For example, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup>He comes to a conclusion here. Nothing that he can form an image of in his imagination is part of the "I".

<sup>25</sup>Here we get a glimpse of what Descartes understands by "thinking". It is a general kind of mental activity that includes all these particular activities.

<sup>26</sup>We get a new question that Descartes is going to answer: is it the same single thing, the same "I", that does all of these mental activities?

<sup>27</sup>So far his answer to the question of whether it is one, single "I" that does all these mental activities is: yes. So far he has considered all the kinds of thinking except imagination. That's next.

<sup>28</sup>Okay, so Descartes thinks that imagination and having sensory perceptual experiences are also mental activities that are done by the very same "I". To show this, he defines "having a sensory perception" as just *seeming* to see (or hear or smell, etc.) something. As he is using the phrase "sensory perception", he is still having sensory perceptions even if he is being fooled by a malicious demon and the things that he seems to see are not really there. Descartes says this, even though earlier (on AT 27) he rejected sense-perception as part of the "I" that necessarily exists. This appears to be a problem. Earlier he said that sense-perception is not part of the necessarily existing "I", but here he seems to say the opposite. Do you see the tension? Can we understand Descartes in a way that he is not contradicting himself?

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**AT 29**

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From all this I am beginning to have a rather better understanding of what I am. But it still appears - and I cannot stop thinking this - that the corporeal things of which images are formed in my thought, and which the senses investigate, are known with much more distinctness than this puzzling 'I' which cannot be pictured in the imagination.<sup>29</sup> And yet it is surely surprising that I should have a more distinct grasp of things which I realize are doubtful, unknown and foreign to me, than I have of that which is true and known - my own self. But I see what it is: my mind enjoys wandering off and will not yet submit to being restrained within the bounds of truth. Very well then; just this once let us give it a completely free rein, so that after a while, when it is time to tighten the reins, it may more readily submit to being curbed.<sup>30</sup>

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**AT 30**

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Let us consider the things which people commonly think they understand most distinctly of all; that is, the bodies which we touch and see. I do not mean bodies in general - for general perceptions are apt to be somewhat more confused - but one particular body. Let us take, for example, this piece of wax.<sup>31</sup> It has just been taken from the honeycomb; it has not yet quite lost the taste of the honey; it retains some of the scent of the flowers from which it was gathered; its colour, shape and size are plain to see; it is hard, cold and can be handled without difficulty; if you rap it with your knuckle it makes a sound. In short, it has everything which appears necessary to enable a body to be known as distinctly as possible. But even as I speak, I put the wax by the fire, and look: the residual taste is eliminated, the smell goes away, the colour changes, the shape is lost, the size increases; it becomes liquid and hot; you can hardly touch it, and if you strike it, it no longer makes a sound. But does the same wax remain? It must be admitted that it does; no one denies it, no one thinks otherwise. So what was it in the wax that I understood with such distinctness? Evidently none of the features which I arrived at by means of the senses; for whatever came

<sup>29</sup>Descartes is still drawn back to feeling that he better knows bodily things than the thinking "I" that he has concluded he necessarily is. This is a good opportunity to check our understanding of one of the subtler points in this meditation. Here Descartes says that he can't picture the "I" in his imagination. Why does he think that? In order to answer this question you will have to go back and remind yourself exactly how he understands "imagination" and how he understands the "I".

<sup>30</sup>Here Descartes is telling us that he is going to deviate from the overall focus of this meditation. For most of the rest of this meditation we get a bit of a digression.

<sup>31</sup>This is where we get the famous wax example.

under taste, smell, sight, touch or hearing has now altered - yet the wax remains.<sup>32</sup>

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AT 30

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Perhaps the answer lies in the thought which now comes to my mind; namely, the wax was not after all the sweetness of the honey, or the fragrance of the flowers, or the whiteness, or the shape, or the sound, but was rather a body which presented itself to me in these various forms a little while ago, but which now exhibits different ones. But what exactly is it that I am now imagining? Let us concentrate, take away everything which does not belong to the wax, and see what is left: merely something extended, flexible and changeable.<sup>33</sup> But what is meant here by 'flexible' and 'changeable'?<sup>34</sup> Is it what I picture in my imagination: that this piece of wax is capable of changing from a round shape to a square shape, or from a square shape to a triangular shape? Not at all; for I can grasp that the wax is capable of countless changes of this kind, yet I am unable to run through this immeasurable number of changes in my imagination, from which it follows that it is not the faculty of imagination that gives me my grasp of the wax as flexible and changeable. And what is meant by 'extended'? Is the extension of the wax also unknown? For it increases if the wax melts, increases again if it boils, and is greater still if the heat is increased. I would not be making a correct judgement about the nature of wax unless I believed it capable of being extended in many more different ways than I will ever encompass in my imagination. I must therefore admit that the nature of this piece of wax is in no way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone. (I am speaking of this particular piece of wax; the point is even clearer with regard to wax in general.) But what is this wax which is perceived by the mind alone? It is of course the same wax which I see, which I touch, which I picture in my imagination, in short the same wax which I thought it to be from the start. And yet, and here is the point, the perception I have of it is a case not of vision or touch or imagination - nor has it ever been, despite previous appearances - but of purely mental scrutiny; and this can be imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct as it is now, depending on how

<sup>32</sup>With this example, Descartes is investigating what the wax itself is and by what means—by what faculty of the mind—he is aware of this wax. In this crucial example, all of the sensible characteristics of the wax—its qualities that can be known via the senses—are changed. Yet it remains the same wax and Descartes is somehow aware that it is the same wax.

<sup>33</sup>These are the features which are supposedly the nature of body. Does he know them through his imagination?

<sup>34</sup>This question here, and the question below—“And what is meant by ‘extended’?”—are a little confusing. These questions seem like they are asking what Descartes means by the words “flexible”, “changeable”, and “extended”. But that is not what Descartes goes on to explain in response to these questions. Rather, he goes on to discuss whether he is aware of these distinctive features of body via the faculty of the imagination.

carefully I concentrate on what the wax consists in.<sup>35</sup>

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AT 31

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But as I reach this conclusion I am amazed at how {weak and} prone to error my mind is. For although I am thinking about these matters within myself, silently and without speaking, nonetheless the actual words bring me up short, and I am almost tricked by ordinary ways of talking. We say that we see the wax itself, if it is there before us, not that we judge it to be there from its colour or shape; and this might lead me to conclude without more ado that knowledge of the wax comes from what the eye sees, and not from the scrutiny of the mind alone. But then if I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves, just as I say that I see the wax. Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I *judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind.<sup>36</sup>

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AT 32

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However, one who wants to achieve knowledge above the ordinary level should feel ashamed at having taken ordinary ways of talking as a basis for doubt. So let us proceed, and consider on which occasion my perception of the nature of the wax was more perfect and evident. Was it when I first looked at it, and believed I knew it by my external senses, or at least by what they call the 'common' sense - that is, the power of imagination? Or is my knowledge more perfect now, after a more careful investigation of the nature of the wax and of the means by which it is known?<sup>37</sup> Any doubt on this issue would clearly be foolish; for what distinctness was there in my earlier perception? Was there anything in it which an animal could not possess? But when I distinguish the wax from its outward forms - take the clothes off, as it were, and consider it naked - then although my judgement may still contain errors, at least my perception now requires a human mind.

<sup>35</sup>Now we have our answer: no, he knows these things not through imagination but through "pure mental scrutiny".

<sup>36</sup>By "judges" Descartes means the action of forming a belief or judgment. Here Descartes draws a strict distinction between what he senses and what he judges on the basis of that sensation.

<sup>37</sup>This is good opportunity to check our understanding of what Descartes is saying here. He is considering two ways of knowing about the wax. He lays them out in the previous two questions (from "Was it when..." to "...by which it is known?"). He is interested in which of these two ways of knowing about the wax is better, which is "more perfect and evident". The following two questions and the sentence after them (from "Any doubt..." to "...a human mind") answer this question. What is Descartes's answer?



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**AT 33**

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But what am I to say about this mind, or about myself? (So far, remember, I am not admitting that there is anything else in me except a mind.) What, I ask, is this 'I' which seems to perceive the wax so distinctly? Surely my awareness of my own self is not merely much truer and more certain than my awareness of the wax, but also much more distinct and evident.<sup>38</sup> For if I judge that the wax exists from the fact that I see it, clearly this same fact entails much more evidently that I myself also exist. It is possible that what I see is not really the wax; it is possible that I do not even have eyes with which to see anything. But when I see, or think I see (I am not here distinguishing the two), it is simply not possible that I who am now thinking am not something.<sup>39</sup> By the same token, if I judge that the wax exists from the fact that I touch it, the same result follows, namely that I exist. If I judge that it exists from the fact that I imagine it, or for any other reason, exactly the same thing follows. And the result that I have grasped in the case of the wax may be applied to everything else located outside me. Moreover, if my perception of the wax seemed more distinct after it was established not just by sight or touch but by many other considerations, it must be admitted that I now know myself even more distinctly. This is because every consideration whatsoever which contributes to my perception of the wax, or of any other body, cannot but establish even more effectively the nature of my own mind. But besides this, there is so much else in the mind itself which can serve to make my knowledge of it more distinct, that it scarcely seems worth going through the contributions made by considering bodily things.

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**AT 34**

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I see that without any effort I have now finally got back to where I wanted. I now know that even bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of imagination but by the intellect alone, and that this perception derives not from their being touched or seen but from their being understood; and in view of this I know plainly that I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of

<sup>38</sup>Interesting. Descartes is operating with a distinction between true and certain, on the one hand, and distinct and evident, on the other. It is not clear from what Descartes says here what exactly he means.

<sup>39</sup>Here (from "But when I..." to "...located outside me") Descartes is summarizing and repeating his argument that he necessarily exists. Notice that at the beginning of this section—"when I see, or think I see (I am not here distinguishing the two)"—Descartes notes that he is not making a distinction that he made back on AT 29.

anything else. But since the habit of holding on to old opinions cannot be set aside so quickly, I should like to stop here and meditate for some time on this new knowledge I have gained, so as to fix it more deeply in my memory.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Okay, let's recap. In this Meditation, Descartes appears to have done four things. First, he tries to climb his way out of the skepticism of the first Meditation by finding one thing that he can know for certain. What can he know for certain? (Hint: this happens entirely in the first three paragraphs of the Meditation.) Second, Descartes tries to determine what kind of thing he is. Specifically, he thinks that a certain activity is essential to him. What activity? (Hint: this happens from midway on AT 25 through AT 27.) Third, Descartes says some more about what he means by "thinking". Is Descartes using the word "thinking" in the same way that we would most typically use it now, or is he using it in some more restrictive or more inclusive sense? (Hint: this happens from midway on AT 28 through AT 29.) Fourth, we get the passage discussing the wax example. This is a difficult passage, and it is a difficult task to say how exactly it fits into the rest of the Meditations. Descartes is drawing a specific conclusion from the example of the wax. And before we get around to asking how this specific conclusion fits with his other goals in the Meditations we can at least try to say what this specific conclusion is. So, what conclusion does Descartes draw from the wax example? (Hint: this all starts on AT 30, and Descartes narrows in on the upshot around the end of AT 31.)