

Sixth Meditation

AT 71

SIXTH MEDITATION

*The existence of material things, and the real distinction between mind and body*¹

It remains for me to examine whether material things exist. And at least I now know they are capable of existing, in so far as they are the subject-matter of pure mathematics, since I perceive them clearly and distinctly.² For there is no doubt that God is capable of creating everything that I am capable of perceiving in this manner; and I have never judged that something could not be made by him except on the grounds that there would be a contradiction in my perceiving it distinctly. The conclusion that material things exist is also suggested by the faculty of imagination, which I am aware of using when I turn my mind to material things. For when I give more attentive consideration to what imagination is, it seems to be nothing else but an application of the cognitive faculty to a body which is intimately present to it, and which therefore exists.

AT 72

To make this clear, I will first examine the difference between imagination and pure understanding.³ When I imagine a triangle, for example, I do not merely understand that it is a figure bounded by three lines, but at the same time I also see the three lines with my mind's eye as if they were present before me; and this is what I call imagining. But if I want to think of a chiliagon, although I understand that it is a figure consisting of a thousand sides just as well as I understand the triangle to be a three-sided figure, I do not in the same way imagine the thousand sides or see them as if they were present before me. It is true that since I am in the habit of imagining something whenever I think of a corporeal thing, I may construct in my mind a confused representation of some figure; but it is clear that this is not a chiliagon. For it differs in no way from the representation I should form if I were thinking of a myriagon, or any figure with very

¹In the French version the phrase “between mind and body” is translated as “between the soul and body of man.” Let’s review what has happened so far in the Meditations. Descartes doubted away all of his former beliefs. Then he found what he knew to be certain: that he exists, and that he is a thinking thing. At this point he had only demonstrated the existence of what was available to his mind. From the contents of his mind he proved the existence of God, and responded to a potential problem for the claim that God exists. Then he presented a different proof of God’s existence. That very brief recap brings us up to the present point. Descartes still hasn’t proven that ordinary physical objects—his hands, mountains, chairs—exist. In this Meditation he attempts to prove, with only the resources already available to him, that these material objects do exist and are roughly as he perceives them to be. He also then demonstrates “the real distinction between mind and body”. This is a technical phrase for Descartes. He means something very specific by it, and not necessarily what you might guess those words mean.

²By “pure mathematics” Descartes seems to primarily have in mind geometry. All that Descartes is claiming here is that material things are “capable of existing”. This is different from claiming that they in fact exist.

³In the following paragraph we get an explanation of how Descartes understands “imagination” and “pure understanding” and the difference between them. Descartes will then use the fact that he has the capacity to imagine in an argument that material objects probably exist.

many sides.⁴ Moreover, such a representation is useless for recognizing the properties which distinguish a chiliagon from other polygons. But suppose I am dealing with a pentagon: I can of course understand the figure of a pentagon, just as I can the figure of a chiliagon, without the help of the imagination; but I can also imagine a pentagon, by applying my mind's eye to its five sides and the area contained within them. And in doing this I notice quite clearly that imagination requires a peculiar effort of mind which is not required for understanding; this additional effort of mind clearly shows the difference between imagination and pure understanding.

AT 73

Besides this, I consider that this power of imagining which is in me, differing as it does from the power of understanding, is not a necessary constituent of my own essence, that is, of the essence of my mind.⁵ For if I lacked it, I should undoubtedly remain the same individual as I now am; from which it seems to follow that it depends on something distinct from myself.⁶ And I can easily understand that, if there does exist some body to which the mind is so joined that it can apply itself to contemplate it, as it were, whenever it pleases, then it may possibly be this very body that enables me to imagine corporeal things. So the difference between this mode of thinking and pure understanding may simply be this: when the mind understands, it in some way turns towards itself and inspects one of the ideas which are within it; but when it imagines, it turns towards the body and looks at something in the body which conforms to an idea understood by the mind or perceived by the senses. I can, as I say, easily understand that this is how imagination comes about, if the body exists; and since there is no other equally suitable way of explaining imagination that comes to mind, I can make a probable conjecture that the body exists.⁷ But this is only a probability; and despite a careful and comprehensive investigation, I do not yet see how the distinct idea of corporeal nature which I find in my imagination can provide any basis for a necessary inference that some body exists.

AT 74

⁴A myriagon is a polygon with 10,000 edges.

⁵In the first half of the next sentence, Descartes explains what he means when he says that imagination is “not a necessary constituent” of his essence.

⁶This is a crucial premise in the argument that Descartes is presenting in this paragraph.

⁷In this paragraph we get an argument. The argument starts with the fact that Descartes has an imagination, and it concludes that there probably is corporeal, material, bodily reality. But as we see in the next sentence, this is not enough for Descartes. He doesn't just want to show that material things probably exist. He wants an argument that shows that they necessarily exist.

But besides that corporeal nature which is the subject-matter of pure mathematics, there is much else that I habitually imagine, such as colours, sounds, tastes, pain and so on - though not so distinctly. Now I perceive these things much better by means of the senses, which is how, with the assistance of memory, they appear to have reached the imagination. So in order to deal with them more fully, I must pay equal attention to the senses, and see whether the things which are perceived by means of that mode of thinking which I call 'sensory perception' provide me with any sure argument for the existence of corporeal things.

AT 74

To begin with, I will go back over all the things which I previously took to be perceived by the senses, and reckoned to be true; and I will go over my reasons for thinking this. Next, I will set out my reasons for subsequently calling these things into doubt. And finally I will consider what I should now believe about them.⁸

AT 74

First of all then, I perceived by my senses that I had a head, hands, feet and other limbs making up the body which I regarded as part of myself, or perhaps even as my whole self. I also perceived by my senses that this body was situated among many other bodies which could affect it in various favourable or unfavourable ways; and I gauged the favourable effects by a sensation of pleasure, and the unfavourable ones by a sensation of pain. In addition to pain and pleasure, I also had sensations within me of hunger, thirst, and other such appetites, and also of physical propensities towards cheerfulness, sadness, anger and similar emotions. And outside me, besides the extension, shapes and movements of bodies, I also had sensations of their hardness and heat, and of the other tactile qualities. In addition, I had sensations of light, colours, smells, tastes and sounds, the variety of which enabled me to distinguish the sky, the earth, the seas, and all other bodies, one from another. Considering the ideas of all these qualities which pre-

⁸Okay, now we have an outline of what Descartes is going to do in the coming pages. Here he lists four things that he is planning on doing. Figure out what these four things are. The first he does in the first half of the next paragraph. The second he does in the remainder of that paragraph. The third thing listed here happens in the paragraph after that (AT 76-77), beginning "Later on, however" and ending with "which produced them." He then goes on to do the fourth thing.

sented themselves to my thought, although the ideas were, strictly speaking, the only immediate objects of my sensory awareness, it was not unreasonable for me to think that the items which I was perceiving through the senses were things quite distinct from my thought, namely bodies which produced the ideas. For my experience was that these ideas came to me quite without my consent, so that I could not have sensory awareness of any object, even if I wanted to, unless it was present to my sense organs; and I could not avoid having sensory awareness of it when it was present. And since the ideas perceived by the senses were much more lively and vivid and even, in their own way, more distinct than any of those which I deliberately formed through meditating or which I found impressed on my memory, it seemed impossible that they should have come from within me; so the only alternative was that they came from other things. Since the sole source of my knowledge of these things was the ideas themselves, the supposition that the things resembled the ideas was bound to occur to me. In addition, I remembered that the use of my senses had come first, while the use of my reason came only later; and I saw that the ideas which I formed myself were less vivid than those which I perceived with the senses and were, for the most part, made up of elements of sensory ideas. In this way I easily convinced myself that I had nothing at all in the intellect which I had not previously had in sensation.^{†1} As for the body which by some special right I called 'mine', my belief that this body, more than any other, belonged to me had some justification. For I could never be separated from it, as I could from other bodies; and I felt all my appetites and emotions in, and on account of, this body; and finally, I was aware of pain and pleasurable ticklings in parts of this body, but not in other bodies external to it. But why should that curious sensation of pain give rise to a particular distress of mind; or why should a certain kind of delight follow on a tickling sensation? Again, why should that curious tugging in the stomach which I call hunger tell me that I should eat, or a dryness of the throat tell me to drink, and so on? I was not able to give any explanation of all this, except that nature taught me so. For there is absolutely no connection (at least that I can understand) between the tugging sensation and the decision to take food, or between the sensation of something causing pain and the mental apprehen-

sion of distress that arises from that sensation. These and other judgements that I made concerning sensory objects, I was apparently taught to make by nature; for I had already made up my mind that this was how things were, before working out any arguments to prove it.⁹

AT 76

Later on, however, I had many experiences which gradually undermined all the faith I had had in the senses.¹⁰ Sometimes towers which had looked round from a distance appeared square from close up; and enormous statues standing on their pediments did not seem large when observed from the ground. In these and countless other such cases, I found that the judgements of the external senses were mistaken. And this applied not just to the external senses but to the internal senses as well. For what can be more internal than pain? And yet I had heard that those who had had a leg or an arm amputated sometimes still seemed to feel pain intermittently in the missing part of the body. So even in my own case it was apparently not quite certain that a particular limb was hurting, even if I felt pain in it. To these reasons for doubting, I recently added two very general ones.¹¹ The first was that every sensory experience I have ever thought I was having while awake I can also think of myself as sometimes having while asleep; and since I do not believe that what I seem to perceive in sleep comes from things located outside me, I did not see why I should be any more inclined to believe this of what I think I perceive while awake. The second reason for doubt was that since I did not know the author of my being (or at least was pretending not to), I saw nothing to rule out the possibility that my natural constitution made me prone to error even in matters which seemed to me most true. As for the reasons for my previous confident belief in the truth of the things perceived by the senses, I had no trouble in refuting them. For since I apparently had natural impulses towards many things which reason told me to avoid, I reckoned that a great deal of confidence should not be placed in what I was taught by nature. And despite the fact that the perceptions of the senses were not dependent on my will, I did not think that I should on that account infer that they proceeded from things distinct from

⁹Okay, so we have a long characterization of the kinds of things that Descartes previously believed based on his senses and the tentative reasons that he had for believing them. More importantly, he thinks that he believed many things without having proven them. This should sound a lot like Meditation 1.

¹⁰Now we get a summary of some of the reasons that he had for doubting his senses.

¹¹He is about to summarize the two big reasons that he gave in Meditation 1 for doubting what his senses told him: first will be dream skepticism, and second will be malicious demons skepticism with a special emphasis on the possibility that the malicious demon could have made him in such a way that he is prone to error.

myself, since I might perhaps have a faculty not yet known to me which produced them.

AT 77

But now, when I am beginning to achieve a better knowledge of myself and the author of my being, although I do not think I should heedlessly accept everything I seem to have acquired from the senses, neither do I think that everything should be called into doubt.¹²

AT 78

First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God.¹³ The question of what kind of power is required to bring about such a separation does not affect the judgement that the two things are distinct. Thus, simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing.¹⁴ It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me.¹⁵ But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.¹⁶

AT 78

Besides this, I find in myself faculties for certain special modes of thinking, namely imagination and sensory perception.¹⁷ Now I can clearly and distinctly understand myself as a whole without these faculties;

¹²So it looks like Descartes is going to stake out a kind of moderate position: he can trust some of his sensory experiences, but not all of them. But how can he trust any of them? Throughout the Meditations, Descartes has set a very high bar for whether he is going to believe something: he has to know that it is true for certain. And he has raised the possibility that he might be dreaming or that a malicious demon might be deceiving him. So how can he trust that any of his sensory experiences are accurate? We get his argument in the next two paragraphs. First, Descartes will demonstrate that the mind and body are “distinct”. Then we get his argument for the existence of the material bodies that he experiences. Here we go.

¹³Descartes is using the word “distinct” in a very particular sense, and here he says what he means when he says that two things are distinct. Do not miss this point. Make sure you understand what it means for two things to be “distinct” in the sense that Descartes has in mind.

¹⁴Here Descartes claims more than what he claimed back in Meditation 2. There he merely seemed to claim that thinking was part of his essence. Here he seems to be claiming that nothing other than thinking is part of his essence.

¹⁵We get a bit of foreshadowing here. Back toward the beginning of the Meditation, Descartes argued that he probably has a body. Here he mentions that he will attempt to prove that he certainly has a body. In fact, that proof is already underway. By the end of the coming paragraph, we will have that proof.

¹⁶This is an important conclusion. Descartes thinks that if he has a body, then he is distinct from his body and that he could possibly exist without his body. This is the first of several arguments that Descartes gives in this Meditation for the distinction between mind and body. Also, in the French translation it is clear that when Descartes says “I” here he means it to be synonymous with “my soul”.

¹⁷Get ready. A lot happens in this paragraph. Here he presents his argument for the existence of material objects. The argument will rely on lots of the things he has already established in this Meditation and earlier Meditations.

but I cannot, conversely, understand these faculties without me, that is, without an intellectual substance to inhere in. This is because there is an intellectual act included in their essential definition; and hence I perceive that the distinction between them and myself corresponds to the distinction between the modes of a thing and the thing itself.¹⁸ Of course I also recognize that there are other faculties (like those of changing position, of taking on various shapes, and so on) which, like sensory perception and imagination, cannot be understood apart from some substance for them to inhere in, and hence cannot exist without it. But it is clear that these other faculties, if they exist, must be in a corporeal or extended substance and not an intellectual one; for the clear and distinct conception of them includes extension, but does not include any intellectual act whatsoever. Now there is in me a passive faculty of sensory perception, that is, a faculty for receiving and recognizing the ideas of sensible objects; but I could not make use of it unless there was also an active faculty, either in me or in something else, which produced or brought about these ideas.¹⁹ But this faculty cannot be in me, since clearly it presupposes no intellectual act on my part, and the ideas in question are produced without my cooperation and often even against my will. So the only alternative is that it is in another substance distinct from me - a substance which contains either formally or eminently all the reality which exists objectively in the ideas produced by this faculty (as I have just noted).²⁰ This substance is either a body, that is, a corporeal nature, in which case it will contain formally {and in fact} everything which is to be found objectively {or representatively} in the ideas; or else it is God, or some creature more noble than a body, in which case it will contain eminently whatever is to be found in the ideas. But since God is not a deceiver, it is quite clear that he does not transmit the ideas to me either directly from himself, or indirectly, via some creature which contains the objective reality of the ideas not formally but only eminently.²¹ For God has given me no faculty at all for recognizing any such source for these ideas; on the contrary, he has given me a great propensity to believe that they are produced by corporeal things. So I do not see how God could be understood to be anything but a deceiver if the ideas were transmitted from a source other than corporeal things.²² It follows that corporeal things

¹⁸Remember from Meditation 3 the distinction between a substance and a mode? A substance is a thing with properties. A mode is one of those properties—a way that that thing is. Descartes thinks that faculties (like the faculty of imagination, for example) are modes and they require substances to exist. The modes “inhere” in the substances. That is, they exist in those substances.

¹⁹So there are these ideas that involve extension, like the ideas of motion and shape. And these ideas are the results of some faculties, which produce them. And like all faculties, these material faculties need some substance or substances in which to exist. The question is: which substances could these material faculties exist in?

²⁰Remember the distinction between formal and objective reality from Meditation 3? Objective reality is the reality had by ideas that corresponds to the things that they are ideas of—their objects. The goal is to explain the objective reality of these ideas. Say, for example, that Descartes has the idea of a cat. There are three ways that we could explain his having this idea. First, Descartes himself could be the source of this idea. He has just ruled out this possibility. Second, the idea could come from an actual cat. In this case, we would say that the objective reality of the idea of the cat comes from the actual cat, which has that reality formally. Third, the idea of a cat could come from someone like God. In this case, we would say that the objective reality of the idea of the cat comes from God, who contains that reality eminently. Descartes is about to choose between the second and third options.

²¹This is an important part of the argument. God is not a deceiver.

²²An important move in this argument comes in the previous sentence. Descartes get all of these ideas of material things via his senses. And once he gets these ideas he has no way of checking to see where they came from. Take, for example, a visual experience of a cat. You open your eyes and you seem to see a cat before you. How could you check that that experience is accurate? How could you tell whether that experience came from a genuine cat in front of you? Well, you could reach out and try to pet the cat. In this case, though, anything that you discovered by petting the cat would also be coming to you through your senses—your sense of touch. Do you have any way of checking whether all of your sense experiences are accurate? No, it does not seem that you do. Now remember earlier in Meditation 4 when Descartes explained how his error is compatible with God’s being a non-deceiver. He explained the possibility of error by saying that the error is Descartes’s fault, not God’s. It is a result of Descartes extending his beliefs beyond what his intellect can prove. So error is compatible with God’s goodness because the error is Descartes’s fault. But here Descartes has shown that he has no way of checking to see if all his sense experiences are false. So if they are false, then it wouldn’t be Descartes’s fault. It would be God’s fault for not giving him any faculty for checking sense experiences. So if Descartes’s sense experiences were inaccurate, God would be a deceiver. But God is not a deceiver. So his experiences of material objects are accurate, at least for the most part.

exist.²³ They may not all exist in a way that exactly corresponds with my sensory grasp of them, for in many cases the grasp of the senses is very obscure and confused. But at least they possess all the properties which I clearly and distinctly understand, that is, all those which, viewed in general terms, are comprised within the subject-matter of pure mathematics.²⁴

AT 80

What of the other aspects of corporeal things which are either particular (for example that the sun is of such and such a size or shape), or less clearly understood, such as light or sound or pain, and so on? Despite the high degree of doubt and uncertainty involved here, the very fact that God is not a deceiver, and the consequent impossibility of there being any falsity in my opinions which cannot be corrected by some other faculty supplied by God, offers me a sure hope that I can attain the truth even in these matters. Indeed, there is no doubt that everything that I am taught by nature contains some truth. For if nature is considered in its general aspect, then I understand by the term nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God. And by my own nature in particular I understand nothing other than the totality of things bestowed on me by God.²⁵

AT 80

There is nothing that my own nature teaches me more vividly than that I have a body, and that when I feel pain there is something wrong with the body, and that when I am hungry or thirsty the body needs food and drink, and so on. So I should not doubt that there is some truth in this.

AT 81

Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit. If

²³Boom. There it is.

²⁴Remember, of course, Descartes doesn't think he has proven that all of his sense experiences are trustworthy, just some of them.

²⁵Here Descartes applies the same line of reasoning that we saw in the last paragraph. God would not deceive him about those things "which cannot be corrected by some other faculty supplied by God." If Descartes has no way of checking and correcting false beliefs about something, then Descartes can trust what he is naturally inclined to believe about that thing. In the following paragraphs he is going to say some of the things that he is naturally inclined to believe and which, therefore, he can be certain are true.

this were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken. Similarly, when the body needed food or drink, I should have an explicit understanding of the fact, instead of having confused sensations of hunger and thirst. For these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body.²⁶

AT 81

I am also taught by nature that various other bodies exist in the vicinity of my body, and that some of these are to be sought out and others avoided. And from the fact that I perceive by my senses a great variety of colours, sounds, smells and tastes, as well as differences in heat, hardness and the like, I am correct in inferring that the bodies which are the source of these various sensory perceptions possess differences corresponding to them, though perhaps not resembling them. Also, the fact that some of the perceptions are agreeable to me while others are disagreeable makes it quite certain that my body, or rather my whole self, in so far as I am a combination of body and mind, can be affected by the various beneficial or harmful bodies which surround it.

AT 82

There are, however, many other things which I may appear to have been taught by nature, but which in reality I acquired not from nature but from a habit of making ill-considered judgements; and it is therefore quite possible that these are false.²⁷ Cases in point are the belief that any space in which nothing is occurring to stimulate my senses must be empty; or that the heat in a body is something exactly resembling the idea of heat which is in me; or that when a body is white or green, the selfsame whiteness or greenness which I perceive through my senses is present in the body; or that in a body which is bitter or sweet there is the selfsame taste which I experience, and so on; or, finally, that stars and towers and other distant bodies

²⁶This is a famous analogy. Descartes thinks that he is connected with his body in an especially intimate manner, not analogous to the way a sailor is connected to his ship.

²⁷Remember from a few pages ago (AT 78) that Descartes has a kind of moderate view of what he can be certain of. He can trust his natural inclinations and his senses about some things but not others. In the previous few paragraphs he has been going through something that he can trust, and now he is going to discuss some things that he cannot.

have the same size and shape which they present to my senses, and other examples of this kind. But to make sure that my perceptions in this matter are sufficiently distinct, I must more accurately define exactly what I mean when I say that I am taught something by nature. In this context I am taking nature to be something more limited than the totality of things bestowed on me by God. For this includes many things that belong to the mind alone - for example my perception that what is done cannot be undone, and all other things that are known by the natural light; but at this stage I am not speaking of these matters. It also includes much that relates to the body alone, like the tendency to move in a downward direction, and so on; but I am not speaking of these matters either. My sole concern here is with what God has bestowed on me as a combination of mind and body. My nature, then, in this limited sense, does indeed teach me to avoid what induces a feeling of pain and to seek out what induces feelings of pleasure, and so on. But it does not appear to teach us to draw any conclusions from these sensory perceptions about things located outside us without waiting until the intellect has examined the matter. For knowledge of the truth about such things seems to belong to the mind alone, not to the combination of mind and body. Hence, although a star has no greater effect on my eye than the flame of a small light, that does not mean that there is any real or positive inclination in me to believe that the star is no bigger than the light; I have simply made this judgement from childhood onwards without any rational basis. Similarly, although I feel heat when I go near a fire and feel pain when I go too near, there is no convincing argument for supposing that there is something in the fire which resembles the heat, any more than for supposing that there is something which resembles the pain. There is simply reason to suppose that there is something in the fire, whatever it may eventually turn out to be, which produces in us the feelings of heat or pain. And likewise, even though there is nothing in any given space that stimulates the senses, it does not follow that there is no body there. In these cases and many others I see that I have been in the habit of misusing the order of nature. For the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part; and to this extent

they are sufficiently clear and distinct. But I misuse them by treating them as reliable touchstones for immediate judgements about the essential nature of the bodies located outside us; yet this is an area where they provide only very obscure information.²⁸

AT 83

I have already looked in sufficient detail at how, notwithstanding the goodness of God, it may happen that my judgements are false. But a further problem now comes to mind regarding those very things which nature presents to me as objects which I should seek out or avoid, and also regarding the internal sensations, where I seem to have detected errors - e.g. when someone is tricked by the pleasant taste of some food into eating the poison concealed inside it. Yet in this case, what the man's nature urges him to go for is simply what is responsible for the pleasant taste, and not the poison, which his nature knows nothing about. The only inference that can be drawn from this is that his nature is not omniscient. And this is not surprising, since man is a limited thing, and so it is only fitting that his perfection should be limited.²⁹

AT 84

And yet it is not unusual for us to go wrong even in cases where nature does urge us towards something. Those who are ill, for example, may desire food or drink that will shortly afterwards turn out to be bad for them. Perhaps it may be said that they go wrong because their nature is disordered, but this does not remove the difficulty. A sick man is no less one of God's creatures than a healthy one, and it seems no less a contradiction to suppose that he has received from God a nature which deceives him. Yet a clock constructed with wheels and weights observes all the laws of its nature just as closely when it is badly made and tells the wrong time as when it completely fulfils the wishes of the clockmaker. In the same way, I might consider the body of a man as a kind of machine equipped with and made up of bones, nerves, muscles, veins, blood and skin in such a way that, even if there were no mind in it, it would still perform

²⁸Descartes has said what kinds of things he can trust his senses about, and what kinds he cannot.

²⁹Here Descartes has introduced a new problem that he is going to try and respond to. It is similar to, but importantly not the same as, the problem of error discussed in Meditation 4. Descartes continues to elaborate on the problem in the next two paragraphs. Make sure you see how this is a problem—what about it is seemingly bad for Descartes—and also how this problem is different from the problem we saw in Meditation 4.

all the same movements as it now does in those cases where movement is not under the control of the will or, consequently, of the mind. I can easily see that if such a body suffers from dropsy, for example, and is affected by the dryness of the throat which normally produces in the mind the sensation of thirst, the resulting condition of the nerves and other parts will dispose the body to take a drink, with the result that the disease will be aggravated.³⁰ Yet this is just as natural as the body's being stimulated by a similar dryness of the throat to take a drink when there is no such illness and the drink is beneficial. Admittedly, when I consider the purpose of the clock, I may say that it is departing from its nature when it does not tell the right time; and similarly when I consider the mechanism of the human body, I may think that, in relation to the movements which normally occur in it, it too is deviating from its nature if the throat is dry at a time when drinking is not beneficial to its continued health. But I am well aware that 'nature' as I have just used it has a very different significance from 'nature' in the other sense. As I have just used it, 'nature' is simply a label which depends on my thought; it is quite extraneous to the things to which it is applied, and depends simply on my comparison between the idea of a sick man and a badly-made clock, and the idea of a healthy man and a well-made clock. But by 'nature' in the other sense I understand something which is really to be found in the things themselves; in this sense, therefore, the term contains something of the truth.

AT 85

When we say, then, with respect to the body suffering from dropsy, that it has a disordered nature because it has a dry throat and yet does not need drink, the term 'nature' is here used merely as an extraneous label. However, with respect to the composite, that is, the mind united with this body, what is involved is not a mere label, but a true error of nature, namely that it is thirsty at a time when drink is going to cause it harm. It thus remains to inquire how it is that the goodness of God does not prevent nature, in this sense, from deceiving us.³¹

AT 85

³⁰Dropsy is a kind of disease. You should be able to figure out just from the text what the main symptom of dropsy is.

³¹Okay, so that's the problem. This is particularly a problem with dysfunctional bodies. In responding to it, Descartes will go through some very interesting and influential considerations about the nature of body and about the relationship between mind and body.

The first observation I make at this point is that there is a great difference between the mind and the body, inasmuch as the body is by its very nature always divisible, while the mind is utterly indivisible. For when I consider the mind, or myself in so far as I am merely a thinking thing, I am unable to distinguish any parts within myself; I understand myself to be something quite single and complete. Although the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, I recognize that if a foot or arm or any other part of the body is cut off, nothing has thereby been taken away from the mind. As for the faculties of willing, of understanding, of sensory perception and so on, these cannot be termed parts of the mind, since it is one and the same mind that wills, and understands and has sensory perceptions. By contrast, there is no corporeal or extended thing that I can think of which in my thought I cannot easily divide into parts; and this very fact makes me understand that it is divisible. This one argument would be enough to show me that the mind is completely different from the body, even if I did not already know as much from other considerations.³²

AT 86

My next observation is that the mind is not immediately affected by all parts of the body, but only by the brain, or perhaps just by one small part of the brain, namely the part which is said to contain the 'common' sense. Every time this part of the brain is in a given state, it presents the same signals to the mind, even though the other parts of the body may be in a different condition at the time. This is established by countless observations, which there is no need to review here.

AT 86

I observe, in addition, that the nature of the body is such that whenever any part of it is moved by another part which is some distance away, it can always be moved in the same fashion by any of the parts which lie in between, even if the more distant part does nothing.³³ For example, in a cord ABCD, if one end D is pulled so that the other end A moves, the ex-

³²In this paragraph Descartes has presented another argument that the mind is distinct from the body, although here he says that they are "different" as opposed to "distinct". Make sure you see what the argument here is.

³³Descartes is describing a biological fact about the movement of our limbs or parts of our bodies. He does a pretty good job of clearly explaining what he has in mind. Go through it slowly if necessary.

act same movement could have been brought about if one of the intermediate points B or C had been pulled, and D had not moved at all. In similar fashion, when I feel a pain in my foot, physiology tells me that this happens by means of nerves distributed throughout the foot, and that these nerves are like cords which go from the foot right up to the brain. When the nerves are pulled in the foot, they in turn pull on inner parts of the brain to which they are attached, and produce a certain motion in them; and nature has laid it down that this motion should produce in the mind a sensation of pain, as occurring in the foot. But since these nerves, in passing from the foot to the brain, must pass through the calf, the thigh, the lumbar region, the back and the neck, it can happen that, even if it is not the part in the foot but one of the intermediate parts which is being pulled, the same motion will occur in the brain as occurs when the foot is hurt, and so it will necessarily come about that the mind feels the same sensation of pain. And we must suppose the same thing happens with regard to any other sensation.³⁴

AT 87

My final observation is that any given movement occurring in the part of the brain that immediately affects the mind produces just one corresponding sensation; and hence the best system that could be devised is that it should produce the one sensation which, of all possible sensations, is most especially and most frequently conducive to the preservation of the healthy man. And experience shows that the sensations which nature has given us are all of this kind; and so there is absolutely nothing to be found in them that does not bear witness to the power and goodness of God. For example, when the nerves in the foot are set in motion in a violent and unusual manner, this motion, by way of the spinal cord, reaches the inner parts of the brain, and there gives the mind its signal for having a certain sensation, namely the sensation of a pain as occurring in the foot. This stimulates the mind to do its best to get rid of the cause of the pain, which it takes to be harmful to the foot. It is true that God could have made the nature of man such that this particular motion in the brain indicated something else to the mind; it might, for example, have made

³⁴Do you understand what Descartes is getting at here? It is this insight that allows us to make sense of scenarios like the Matrix or a brain-in-a-vat that is being fed information to make it think that it had a body.

the mind aware of the actual motion occurring in the brain, or in the foot, or in any of the intermediate regions; or it might have indicated something else entirely. But there is nothing else which would have been so conducive to the continued well-being of the body. In the same way, when we need drink, there arises a certain dryness in the throat; this sets in motion the nerves of the throat, which in turn move the inner parts of the brain. This motion produces in the mind a sensation of thirst, because the most useful thing for us to know about the whole business is that we need drink in order to stay healthy. And so it is in the other cases.³⁵

AT 88

It is quite clear from all this that, notwithstanding the immense goodness of God, the nature of man as a combination of mind and body is such that it is bound to mislead him from time to time. For there may be some occurrence, not in the foot but in one of the other areas through which the nerves travel in their route from the foot to the brain, or even in the brain itself; and if this cause produces the same motion which is generally produced by injury to the foot, then pain will be felt as if it were in the foot. This deception of the senses is natural, because a given motion in the brain must always produce the same sensation in the mind; and the origin of the motion in question is much more often going to be something which is hurting the foot, rather than something existing elsewhere. So it is reasonable that this motion should always indicate to the mind a pain in the foot rather than in any other part of the body. Again, dryness of the throat may sometimes arise not, as it normally does, from the fact that a drink is necessary to the health of the body, but from some quite opposite cause, as happens in the case of the man with dropsy. Yet it is much better that it should mislead on this occasion than that it should always mislead when the body is in good health. And the same goes for the other cases.³⁶

AT 89

This consideration is the greatest help to me, not only

³⁵Now we are getting Descartes's response to the problem. The response relies on the claim that Descartes made about the relationship between the mind and the body and the claim that he made about the nature of the body transmitting information to the brain. He elaborates on this attempted solution to the problem in the following paragraph.

³⁶We might not think that this is ultimately a fully satisfactory response, but it is important to see what Descartes's response is.

for noticing all the errors to which my nature is liable, but also for enabling me to correct or avoid them without difficulty. For I know that in matters regarding the well-being of the body, all my senses report the truth much more frequently than not. Also, I can almost always make use of more than one sense to investigate the same thing; and in addition, I can use both my memory, which connects present experiences with preceding ones, and my intellect, which has by now examined all the causes of error. Accordingly, I should not have any further fears about the falsity of what my senses tell me every day; on the contrary, the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable. This applies especially to the principal reason for doubt, namely my inability to distinguish between being asleep and being awake.³⁷ For I now notice that there is a vast difference between the two, in that dreams are never linked by memory with all the other actions of life as waking experiences are. If, while I am awake, anyone were suddenly to appear to me and then disappear immediately, as happens in sleep, so that I could not see where he had come from or where he had gone to, it would not be unreasonable for me to judge that he was a ghost, or a vision created in my brain, rather than a real man. But when I distinctly see where things come from and where and when they come to me, and when I can connect my perceptions of them with the whole of the rest of my life without a break, then I am quite certain that when I encounter these things I am not asleep but awake. And I ought not to have even the slightest doubt of their reality if, after calling upon all the senses as well as my memory and my intellect in order to check them, I receive no conflicting reports from any of these sources. For from the fact that God is not a deceiver it follows that in cases like these I am completely free from error. But since the pressure of things to be done does not always allow us to stop and make such a meticulous check, it must be admitted that in this human life we are often liable to make mistakes about particular things, and we must acknowledge the weakness of our nature.³⁸

³⁷Descartes is giving a new, different response to the dream skepticism from Meditation 1.

³⁸This pretty well sums up one important conclusion that Descartes has reached. He thinks that he can be certain about things that he is inclined to believe but for which he has no faculty for checking to see if his inclinations are correct. But, on the other hand, he cannot be certain about many other things and if he falls into error in those areas, then it is his fault, not God's.