Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy

Excerpts from Meds. I, II, and VI[1]
PHIL101
Prof. Oakes
updated: 9/9/13 10:16 AM

Section II: What is the Self?
Reading II.3

Descartes was born in France in 1596 and died in 1650 while a guest in the court of Queen Christina of Sweden. He was educated by the Jesuits in France and also took a degree in law. He was a brilliant mathematician and scientist, developing analytic geometry and contributing to such diverse fields as optics, meteorology, and physics.

Descartes lived during a period of great upheaval in Europe: Martin Luther and Henry VIII of England had posed divisive political and theological challenges to the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, and deep intellectual challenges to that authority were emerging from thinkers such as Galileo and Descartes himself. What was then dubbed the "New Philosophy" helped to establish the ascendancy of the human intellect as our chief means of the discovery of truth. The Age of Reason begins here, with the Scientific Revolution to follow.

Descartes's philosophical works are among the most important in the Western world. The "father of Modern Philosophy," he helped to define the terms of epistemology as it continues to be studied today. His primary goal, in the *Meditations*, was to establish a "firm foundation" for the sciences – i.e., to demonstrate exactly how it is possible for humans to have knowledge of the empirical world.[2] This discussion turns out to center on an account of the human self.

In the following, note the problem that Descartes initially encounters: if we wish to know truth, what are we to do about beliefs that we already have that may be false? Might our false beliefs not "infect" our pursuit of truth, leading us to further false beliefs? In order to escape this problem, Descartes proposes considering false *all* the beliefs that he doesn't know with certainty to be true. This effort is known as the *Method of Doubt*: to doubt, or consider false, any proposition not certain to be true. You might ask yourself how, exactly, you might go about doubting all of your beliefs. In the august project of demonstrating the viability of science, you must be sure that no false belief evades your notice. Consequently, Descartes proposes two hypotheses intended to raise doubts about all of his beliefs. The first of these is the hypothesis

---

[1] Descartes, Rene. 2000. *Meditations on First Philosophy.* John Veitch, trans., with my minor alterations. The Classical Library: Descartes, Rene – Meditations on First Philosophy: http://www.classicallibrary.org/descartes/meditations/. (Use unrestricted as per: http://www.classicallibrary.org/about.htm. Public Domain, as per: http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=766&Itemid=28)

[2] The word 'empirical' derives from the Greek, *εμπειρια* (*empeiria*), meaning "experience". In our usage, it means being verified or verifiable by sense observation. Thus, the "empirical world" is the world open to our senses – i.e., the physical world located in space and time.

that he is dreaming, which calls into question many of his beliefs. The second is the hypothesis that he is being deceived in every possible way by a "malicious demon," which appears to raise doubts about all of his beliefs, leading to the bewilderment with which the first Meditation ends.

It is at this point, in the second Meditation, that Descartes proposes an account of the self, one which he hopes will begin the process of the restoration of his beliefs. Take note, then, of the account of the self that Descartes proposes and of the arguments (reasoning) by means of which he seeks to establish this account as true. Some of these arguments occur in his sixth Meditation, excerpted below.

MEDITATION I: OF THE THINGS OF WHICH WE MAY DOUBT

SEVERAL years have now elapsed since I first became aware that I had accepted, even from my youth, many false opinions for true, and that consequently what I afterward based on such principles was highly doubtful; and from that time I was convinced of the necessity of undertaking once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted, and of commencing anew the work of building from the foundation, if I desired to establish a firm and abiding superstructure in the sciences. … To-day, then, since I have opportunely freed my mind from all cares and am happily disturbed by no passions, and since I am in the secure possession of leisure in a peaceable retirement, I will at length apply myself earnestly and freely to the general overthrow of all my former opinions.

But, to this end, it will not be necessary for me to show that the whole of these are false--a point, perhaps, which I shall never reach; but as even now my reason convinces me that I ought not the less carefully to withhold belief from what is not entirely certain and indubitable, than from what is manifestly false, it will be sufficient to justify the rejection of the whole if I shall find in each some ground for doubt. Nor for this purpose will it be necessary even to deal with each belief individually, which would be truly an endless labor; but, as the removal from below of the foundation necessarily involves the downfall of the whole edifice, I will at once approach the criticism of the principles on which all my former beliefs rested.

All that I have, up to this moment, accepted as possessed of the highest truth and certainty, I received either from or through the senses. I observed, however, that these sometimes misled us; and it is the part of prudence not to place absolute confidence in that by which we have even once been deceived.

But it may be said, perhaps, that, although the senses occasionally mislead us respecting minute objects, and such as are so far removed from us as to be beyond the reach of close observation, there are yet many other of their informations (presentations), of the truth of which it is manifestly impossible to doubt; as for example, that I am in this place, seated by the fire, clothed in a winter dressing gown, that I hold in my hands this piece of paper, with other intimations of the same nature. But how could I deny that I possess these hands and this body, and withal escape being classed with persons in a state of insanity, whose brains are so disordered and clouded by dark bilious vapors as to cause them pertinaciously to assert that they are monarchs when they are in the greatest poverty; or clothed in gold and purple when destitute of any covering; or that their head is made of clay, their body of glass, or that they are gourds? I should certainly be not less insane than they, were I to regulate my procedure according to examples so extravagant.

Though this be true, I must nevertheless here consider that I am a man, and that, consequently, I am in the habit of sleeping, and representing to myself in dreams those same things, or even sometimes others less probable, which the insane think are presented to them in their waking moments. How often have I dreamt that I was in these familiar circumstances, that I was dressed, and occupied this place by the fire, when I was lying undressed in bed? At the present moment, however, I certainly look upon this paper with eyes wide awake; the head which I now move is not asleep; I extend this hand consciously and with express purpose, and I perceive it; the occurrences in sleep are not so distinct as all this. But I cannot forget that, at other times I have been deceived in sleep by similar illusions; and, attentively considering those cases, I perceive so clearly that there exist no certain marks by which the state of waking can ever be distinguished

from sleep, that I feel greatly astonished; and in amazement I almost persuade myself that I am now dreaming.

Let us suppose, then, that we are dreaming, and that all these particulars--namely, the opening of the eyes, the motion of the head, the forth- putting of the hands--are merely illusions; and even that we really possess neither an entire body nor hands such as we see. Nevertheless it must be admitted at least that the objects which appear to us in sleep are, as it were, painted representations which could not have been formed unless in the likeness of realities; and, therefore, that those general objects, at all events, namely, eyes, a head, hands, and an entire body, are not simply imaginary, but really existent. For, in truth, painters themselves, even when they study to represent sirens and satyrs by forms the most fantastic and extraordinary, cannot bestow upon them natures absolutely new, but can only make a certain medley of the members of different animals; or if they chance to imagine something so novel that nothing at all similar has ever been seen before, and such as is, therefore, purely fictitious and absolutely false, it is at least certain that the colors of which this is composed are real. And on the same principle, although these general objects, viz. a body, eyes, a head, hands, and the like, be imaginary, we are nevertheless absolutely necessitated to admit the reality at least of some other objects still more simple and universal than these, of which, just as of certain real colors, all those images of things, whether true and real, or false and fantastic, that are found in our consciousness, are formed.

To this class of objects seem to belong corporeal nature in general and its extension; the shape of extended things, their quantity or magnitude, and their number, as also the space in and the time during which they exist, and other things of the same sort.

We will not, therefore, perhaps reason illegitimately if we conclude from this that Physics, Astronomy, Medicine, and all the other sciences that have for their end the consideration of composite objects, are indeed of a doubtful character; but that Arithmetic, Geometry, and the other sciences of the same class, which regard merely the simplest and most general objects, and scarcely inquire whether or not these are really existent, contain somewhat that is certain and indubitable: for whether I am awake or dreaming, it remains true that two and three make five, and that a square has but four sides; nor does it seem possible that truths so apparent can ever fall under a suspicion of falsity or incertitude.

Nevertheless, the belief that there is a God who is all powerful, and who created me, such as I am, has, for a long time, obtained steady possession of my mind. How, then, do I know that he has not arranged that there should be neither earth, nor sky, nor any extended thing, nor shape, nor magnitude, nor space, providing at the same time, however, for the rise in me of the perceptions of all these objects, and the persuasion that these do not exist otherwise than as I perceive them? And further, as I sometimes think that others are in error respecting matters of which they believe themselves to possess a perfect knowledge, how do I know that I am not also deceived each time I add together two and three, or number the sides of a square, or form some judgment still more simple, if more simple indeed can be imagined? But perhaps God has not been willing that I should be thus deceived, for he is said to be supremely good. …

I will suppose, then, not that God, who is sovereignly good and the fountain of truth, but that some malicious demon, who is at once exceedingly potent and deceitful, has employed all his artifice to deceive me; I will suppose that the sky, the air, the earth, colors, figures, sounds, and all external things, are nothing better than the illusions of dreams, by means of which this being has laid snares for my credulity; I will consider myself as without hands, eyes, flesh, blood, or any of the senses, and as falsely believing that I am possessed of these; I will continue resolutely fixed in this belief, and if indeed by this means it be not in my power to arrive at the knowledge of truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, viz, suspend my judgment and guard with settled purpose against giving my assent to what is false, and being imposed upon by this deceiver, whatever be his power and artifice. But this undertaking is arduous, and a certain indolence insensibly leads me back to my ordinary course of life; and just as the captive, who, perchance, was enjoying in his dreams an imaginary liberty, when he begins to suspect that it is but a vision, dreads awakening, and conspires with the agreeable illusions that the deception may be prolonged; so I, of my own accord, fall back into the train of my former beliefs, and fear to arouse myself from my slumber, lest the time of laborious wakefulness that would succeed this quiet rest, in place of bringing any light of day, should prove inadequate to dispel the darkness that will arise from the difficulties that have now been raised.

MEDITATION II: OF THE NATURE OF THE HUMAN MIND; AND THAT IT IS MORE EASILY KNOWN THAN THE BODY

The Meditation of yesterday has filled my mind with so many doubts, that it is no longer in my power to forget them. Nor do I see, meanwhile, any principle on which they can be resolved; and, just as if I had fallen all of a sudden into very deep water, I am so greatly disconcerted as to be unable either to plant my feet firmly on the bottom or sustain myself by swimming on the surface. I will, nevertheless, make an effort, and try anew the same path on which I had entered yesterday, that is, proceed by casting aside all that admits of the slightest doubt, not less than if I had discovered it to be absolutely false; and I will continue always in this track until I shall find something that is certain, or at least, if I can do nothing more, until I shall know with certainty that there is nothing certain. Archimedes, that he might transport the entire globe from the place it occupied to another, demanded only a point that was firm and immovable; so, also, I shall be entitled to entertain the highest expectations, if I am fortunate enough to discover only one thing that is certain and indubitable.

I suppose, accordingly, that all the things which I see are false; I believe that none of those objects which my fallacious memory represents ever existed; I suppose that I possess no senses; I believe that body, shape, extension, motion, and space are merely fictions of my mind. What is there, then, that can be esteemed true? Perhaps this only, that there is absolutely nothing certain.

But how do I know that there is not something different altogether from the objects I have now enumerated, of which it is impossible to entertain the slightest doubt? Is there not a God, or some being, by whatever name I may designate him, who causes these thoughts to arise in my mind ? But why suppose such a being, for it may be I myself am capable of producing them? Am I, then, at least not something? But I before denied that I possessed senses or a body; I hesitate, however, for what follows from that? Am I so dependent on the body and the senses that without these I cannot exist? But I had the persuasion that there was absolutely nothing in the world, that there was no sky and no earth, neither minds nor bodies; was I not, therefore, at the same time, persuaded that I did not exist? Far from it; I assuredly existed, since I was persuaded. But there is I know not what being, who is possessed at once of the highest power and the deepest cunning, who is constantly employing all his ingenuity in deceiving me. Doubtless, then, I exist, since I am deceived; and, let him deceive me as he may, he can never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I shall be conscious that I am something. So that it must, in fine, be maintained, all things being maturely and carefully considered, that this proposition, 'I am, I exist,' is necessarily true each time it is expressed by me, or conceived in my mind.[3]

But I do not yet know with sufficient clearness what I am, though assured that I am; and hence, in the next place, I must take care, lest perchance I inconsiderately substitute some other object in place of what is properly myself, and thus wander from truth, even in that knowledge which I hold to be of all others the most certain and evident. For this reason, I will now consider anew what I formerly believed myself to be, before I entered on the present train of thought; and of my previous opinion I will retrench all that can in the least be invalidated by the grounds of doubt I have adduced, in order that there may at length remain nothing but what is certain and indubitable.

What then did I formerly think I was? Undoubtedly I judged that I was a man. But what is a man? Shall I say a rational animal?[4] Assuredly not; for it would be necessary forthwith to inquire into what is meant by animal, and what by rational, and thus, from a single question, I should insensibly glide into others, and these more difficult than the first. … In the first place, then, I thought that I possessed a countenance, hands, arms, and all the fabric of members that appears in a corpse, and which I called by the name of

---

[3] This is the source of Descartes's famous pronouncement, "I think, therefore, I am." He first wrote it in Latin, "*Cogito, ergo sum*," and later in French: "*Je pense, donc, je suis*."

[4] This was Aristotle's answer to the question, What is man?, which would have come to Descartes's via his training by the Jesuits. See also the "attributes of soul," below, also originally expounded by Aristotle. Note Descartes's analysis of Aristotle's statement into the terms 'animal', and 'rational, and his observation of the need to explicate each of these terms in order to understand the whole.

body. It further occurred to me that I was nourished, that I walked, perceived, and thought, and all those actions I referred to the soul; but what the soul itself was I either did not stay to consider, or, if I did, I imagined that it was something extremely rare and subtle, like wind, or flame, or ether, spread through my grosser parts. As regarded the body, I did not even doubt of its nature, but thought I distinctly knew it, and if I had wished to describe it according to the notions I then entertained, I should have explained myself in this manner: By body I understand all that can be terminated by a certain figure (shape); that can occupy a certain place, so as to exclude every other body; that can be perceived either by touch, sight, hearing, taste, or smell; that can be moved in different ways, not indeed of itself, but by something foreign to it by which it is touched and from which it receives the impression; for the power of self-motion, as likewise that of perceiving and thinking, I held as by no means pertaining to the nature of body; on the contrary, I was somewhat astonished to find such faculties existing in some bodies.

But as to myself, what can I now say that I am, since I suppose there exists an extremely powerful, and, if I may so speak, malicious being, whose whole endeavors are directed toward deceiving me? Can I affirm that I possess any one of all those attributes of which I have lately spoken as belonging to the nature of body? After attentively considering them in my own mind, I find none of them that can properly be said to belong to myself. … Let us pass, then, to the attributes of the soul. The first mentioned were the powers of nutrition and walking; but, if it be true that I have no body, it is true likewise that I am capable neither of walking nor of being nourished. Perception is another attribute of the soul; but perception too is impossible without the body; besides, I have frequently, during sleep, believed that I perceived objects which I afterward observed I did not in reality perceive. Thinking is another attribute of the soul; and here I discover what properly belongs to myself. This alone is inseparable from me. I am – I exist: this is certain; but how often? As often as I think; for perhaps it would even happen, if I should wholly cease to think, that I should at the same time altogether cease to be. I now admit nothing that is not necessarily true. I am therefore, precisely speaking, only a thinking thing, that is, a mind, understanding, or reason, terms whose signification was before unknown to me. I am, however, a real thing, and really existent; but what thing? The answer is, a thinking thing.

…

But what, then, am I ? A thinking thing, it has been said. But what is a thinking thing? It is a thing that doubts, understands, conceives, affirms, denies, wills, refuses; that imagines also, and perceives.

… In fine, I am the same being who perceives, that is, who apprehends certain objects as by the organs of sense, since, in truth, I see light, hear a noise, and feel heat. But it will be said that these presentations are false, and that I am dreaming. Let it be so. At all events it is certain that I seem to see light, hear a noise, and feel heat; this cannot be false, and this is what in me is properly called perceiving, which is nothing else than thinking.

…

MEDITATION VI: OF THE EXISTENCE OF MATERIAL THINGS, AND OF THE REAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE MIND AND BODY OF MAN

[Substance and Mode distinguished:]

Moreover, I find in myself diverse faculties of thinking that have each their special mode: for example, I find I possess the faculties of imagining and perceiving, without which I can indeed clearly and distinctly conceive myself as entire, but I cannot reciprocally conceive them without conceiving myself, that is to say, without an intelligent substance in which they reside, for in the notion we have of them, or to use the terms of the schools in their formal concept, they comprise some sort of intellection; whence I perceive that they are distinct from myself as modes are from things. I remark likewise certain other faculties, as the power of changing place, of assuming diverse figures, and the like, that cannot be conceived and cannot therefore exist, any more than the preceding, apart from a substance in which they inhere. It is very evident, however, that these faculties, if they really exist, must belong to some corporeal or extended substance, since in their clear and distinct concept there is contained some sort of extension, but no intellection at all.

[The Conceivability Argument:]

And, firstly, because I know that all which I clearly and distinctly conceive can be produced by God exactly as I conceive it, it is sufficient that I am able clearly and distinctly to conceive one thing apart from another, in order to be certain that the one is different from the other, seeing they may at least be made to exist separately, by the omnipotence of God; and it matters not by what power this separation is made, in order to be compelled to judge them different; and, therefore, merely because I know with certitude that I exist, and because, in the meantime, I do not observe that anything else necessarily belongs to my nature or essence beyond my being a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists only in my being a thinking thing or a substance whose whole essence or nature is merely thinking. And although I may, or rather, as I will shortly say, although I certainly do possess a body with which I am very closely conjoined; nevertheless, because, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in as much as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and as, on the other hand, I possess a distinct idea of body, in as much as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that I, that is, my mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it.

[The Divisibility Argument:]

To commence this examination accordingly, I here remark, in the first place, that there is a vast difference between mind and body, in respect that body, from its nature, is always divisible, and that mind is entirely indivisible. For in truth, when I consider the mind, that is, when I consider myself in so far only as I am a thinking thing, I can distinguish in myself no parts, but I very clearly discern that I am somewhat absolutely one and entire; and although the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, yet, when a foot, an arm, or any other part is cut off, I am conscious that nothing has been taken from my mind; nor can the faculties of willing, perceiving, conceiving, etc., properly be called its parts, for it is the same mind that is exercised all entire in willing, in perceiving, and in conceiving, etc. But quite the opposite holds in corporeal or extended things; for I cannot imagine any one of them how small it may be, which I cannot easily sunder in thought, and which, therefore, I do not know to be divisible. This would be sufficient to teach me that the mind or soul of man is entirely different from the body, if I had not already been apprised of it on other grounds.

[Pilot in a Ship Analogy:]

Nature likewise teaches me by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, etc., that I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but that I am besides so intimately conjoined, and as it were intermixed with it, that my mind and body compose a certain unity. For if this were not the case, I should not feel pain when my body is hurt, seeing I am merely a thinking thing, but should perceive the wound by the understanding alone, just as a pilot perceives by sight when any part of his vessel is damaged; and when my body has need of food or drink, I should have a clear knowledge of this, and not be made aware of it by the confused sensations of hunger and thirst: for, in truth, all these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain, etc., are nothing more than certain confused modes of thinking, arising from the union and apparent fusion of mind and body.

Commentary

Descartes's application of his method of doubt leads him to the conclusion that what he is, properly speaking, is simply a "thinking thing." His body, he finds, is not an essential feature of him. Generalizing on these results, the account that Descartes offers is that the human self is a non-physical thing that thinks. Thinking, further, for Descartes, includes the various mental activities included loosely under that heading. Thinking includes doubting, understanding, conceiving, willing, imagining, and sensing, on this account. How exactly does Descartes reach these conclusions, and what should we think of them?

As we see in Meditations I and II, the core of Descartes's method is doubt: If I can doubt a proposition, then it might be false. Where the self is concerned, what can we doubt and what can we not doubt? It appears that it is possible to doubt that we have bodies. It is possible to imagine, that is, that the various mental states – "thoughts" – that you are having right now don't depict the true nature of reality. It could be that you are dreaming; or it could be that you are being deceived by an evil demon.[5] If so, then it is possible that you don't have a body; indeed it is possible that there exist no bodies – i.e., physical objects – whatsoever. And if this is possible, it would seem that your body is not an essential part of you, since "you", your ongoing experiences, could continue despite the lack of your body. To be sure, you might think that without a body you could not have thoughts or experiences, since you probably think that your mind is a product of the functioning of your brain, which is part of your body. But is it not possible that you have just that thought – that your mind is a function of your body – without, in fact, having any body at all? This line of thinking is known as Descartes's "Separability Argument."

Descartes bolsters his argument in Meditation II with two arguments located in Meditation VI. In what is known as the "Conceivability", he argues that the body is not an essential part of the human self. His argument for this conclusion relies on two claims. First, he argues that whatever he can "very clearly and distinctly" conceive is possible. That is, any state or event or object of which we can form a clear, precise concept is possible.[6] Isn't is conceivable that by violently flapping one's arms, one might fly? It might not be compatible with our present laws of physics, but could those laws not have been different? Descartes's second primary claim in this argument is the claim that we can clearly conceive our existing without a body. This is the substance of his arguments in Meditations I and II, that it's possible that his body is but a dream or an illusion created in his mind by a malicious demon. So if it's possible clearly and distinctly to conceive of existing without one's body, and if what one can conceive is possible, then it is possible that one exist without one's body. And this, of course, means that one's body is not an essential part of one's essence or nature. On the other hand, it is difficult if not impossible to conceive of one's existing if there is no thinking going on. Descartes's conclusion is that thought is essential to his nature, not his physical body.

The second argument by means of which Descartes reinforces the results of Meditation II is called the "Divisibility Argument." Here, Descartes's intent is simply to demonstrate that the mind and the body are not one thing, but two. His argument relies on a principle, unstated here, that if something *A* has different properties from something *B*, then *A* and *B* cannot be the same one thing.[7] The property in question in this case is the property of divisibility – i.e., being capable of division into distinct parts, as when a sheet of paper is cut in two. It appears, as described by Descartes, that while physical objects such as the body are divisible, the mind lacks this property. Descartes's reasoning is typically clear and brilliant. All physical objects are extended in space – they have size. And any quantity of space is easily understood to be divisible: any measurement along any dimension is easily divided by two. The mind, however,

---

[5] A more contemporary version of this possibility is portrayed in the popular film, *The Matrix*. It is possible, that is, that you are living in a slime-filled pod, alongside millions of others, being fed, electronically, via cables inserted into your spine, all your present experiences.

[6] This claim he supports with the observation that whatever he can so conceive could be made so by God. Note that Descartes's argument doesn't strictly depend on the existence of God. "It matters not what power" we conceive to separate one thing from another, he asserts. If we can conceive the separation, clearly and distinctly, we have no reason to think that it isn't possible.

[7] This principle derives from *Leibniz's Law*, after Gottfried von Leibniz, the German philosophy who first formulated it. That law states that *A* and *B* are one and the same thing if and only if they share all of the same properties.

is not so easily "divided". Descartes considers the result of removing from the mind some source of "input". What happens if we loose an arm or a leg? Is there "less of a mind" there, than previously? The answer would appear to be, no. However the body is divided, the mind remains single and whole, it would seem. And if this is so, then it would seem that the mind and the body fail to share the property of divisibility, which implies that they are not one and the same thing. This argument serves to reinforce Descartes's claim that it is the mind, and not the body, that is essential to the human self, as it supports the possibility of the one existing without the existence of the other. If mind and body are distinct, then it seems possible that they diverge.

It remains to consider the significance of Descartes's famous Pilot analogy.[8] In fact, we have a disanalogy. In the sixth and final Meditation, Descartes seeks to restore to our good intellectual graces the existence of the body and its relationship to the mind. In this context, he seeks a characterization of that relationship. This relationship is *not* like that of a pilot and his or her ship. The pilot is a conscious being *apart* from the ship. When the ship is damaged, the pilot does not feel the damage in his or her own experience, but, rather, sees it as something external; a broken mast is "over there," not "inside me." On the contrary, the relationship between the mind is much more intimate. Indeed, this relationship is so close as to merit description as "united" or "fused", in Descartes's own words. If the pilot-ship relationship were like that of the mind and body, it would be as though the whole ship were the pilot's body; his or her consciousness would be infused throughout the ship's structure, as it seems to be infused throughout the human body. The human mind and body are one.

The difficulty that this raises, however, is that Descartes has previously and strenuously argued that the mind and body are *distinct*, not one thing but two. It is difficult to see just how to reconcile these two claims. One the one hand, we have arguments to show that the mind is distinct from the body and can exist without it; on the other hand, we have a characterization of mind and body as joined as one. The difficulty posed, here, remains a central part of the most trenchant problem in philosophy: what is the relationship between the mind and the body? This is known as the mind-body problem.

Ask Yourself

"The point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it."

In Lesson I.1 we saw Bertrand Russell's comment that philosophy involves beginning with simple, innocuous propositions that everyone accepts and winding up with claims that seem preposterous. This remark is apt in the present context.

1. What is Descartes's overall goal, as of the beginning of the *Meditations*?
2. What is Descartes's method, and how is it intended to reach his goal?
3. In what sense is Descartes's method a rationalist method?
4. By what line of thought does Descartes convince himself that he is a thinking thing?
5. What reasons has Descartes for thinking that his body is not an essential part of him?
6. What is your view of Descartes's contention that the mind is independent of the body? If he goes wrong, at some point, which point is it?
7. Can you characterize the relationship between your mind and your body without falling into the apparent contradiction that Descartes faces?

[8] Or *infamous*, given the difficulties that it raises.