

Philosophy 168
Lectures on *Meditation Two*
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The aim of the Second Meditation (M2) as stated in its sub-title is two-fold: 1) to establish the nature of the human mind, and 2) to show that the mind is better known than bodies.

In the Synopsis (AT VII 12, CSM II 9), Descartes describes the outcome of M2 somewhat differently. First, the mind is said to use “its own freedom” to suppose that everything about which it has the slightest doubt does not exist. In the process, the mind discovers “that it is impossible that it should not exist during this time.” The exercise of supposing the non-existence of that whose existence can be doubted has a side-benefit of enabling “the mind to distinguish without difficulty what belongs to itself, i.e. to an intellectual nature, from what belongs to the body.” Descartes does not try to prove the immortality of the soul here, but he does provide the basis for a proof: “Now the first and most important prerequisite for knowledge of the immortality of the soul is for us to form a concept of the soul which is as clear as possible and is also quite distinct from every concept of body; and this is just what has been done in this section” (AT VII 13, CSM II 9).

In the Second Replies, Descartes states that he was not at this point claiming that the mind is distinct from the body, “but was merely examining those of its properties of which I can have certain and evident knowledge” (AT VII 129, CSM II 93). He goes on to state that his goal was to show that the mind when taken in isolation from bodily attributes is better known than the body when taken in isolation from the mind.

The *Cogito*

The first three paragraphs of M2 culminate in one of the most famous claims in the Cartesian philosophy: “that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived by my mind” (AT VII 25, CSM II 17). A similar claim had been made earlier in Part Four of the *Discourse on Method*.

But immediately I noticed that while I was trying thus to think everything false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth “*I am thinking, therefore I exist*” was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking. (AT VI 32, CSM I 127)

This principle has come to be known as the *Cogito*, after the Latin word which is here translated as “I am thinking.” We will return shortly to the difference between the two formulations of this principle.

In the Fourth Objections (AT VII 197-198, CSM II 138), Arnauld notes that St. Augustine had already pointed out that it is impossible for one to be mistaken about one's own existence. (*On Free Will*, Book II, Chapter 3). Descartes responds by thanking Arnauld "for bringing in the authority of St. Augustine to support me" (AT VII 219, CSM II 154). Late in 1640, Descartes wrote letters to Colvius and to Mersenne, thanking each of them for bringing to his attention Book XI, Chapter 26 of Augustine's *City of God*. He wrote to Colvius that he had examined the passage in the library and "I do indeed find that he does use it to prove the certainty of our existence" (AT III 247, CSMK 159). He describes the inference "that one exists from the fact that one is doubting" as being one that "could have occurred to any writer. But I am very glad to find myself in agreement with St. Augustine, if only to hush the little minds who have tried to find fault with the principle" (AT III 248, CSMK 159).

We now turn to the narrative of M2. Descartes reiterates that he is searching for what is "certain and unshakeable," and to this end he has "set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false" whatever "admits of the slightest doubt" (AT VII 24, CSM II 16). A possible outcome of this procedure is that the only thing he finds certain is that nothing is certain. But if he can find a single item, not matter how "slight," that does not admit doubt, "I can hope for great things." Here Descartes makes the analogy with the boast of Archimedes that if he could find a lever long enough and a place to stand, he could move the earth. So, sometimes the single item Descartes does find is called his "Archimedean point." This is what will give him the ability to use something like leverage to enable him to recover some of his former beliefs.

Specifically, what Descartes supposes to be true is that past events have not occurred as they are represented in his memory, that he has no senses, that there is no "body, shape, extension, movement, and place" (the latter of which are what Descartes will claim to be the chief properties of bodies).

After having suspended his belief in the world of extended things, he moves to the question of whether there is a God ("or whatever I may call him") who is the cause of his having his present thoughts. He immediately finds grounds for doubting that claim, since he may himself be the author of his thoughts. But if he is the cause of his thoughts, it seems that he is something.

The problem ("sticking point") is that it does not seem that there is any way that he could be something, since he denied that he has a body. But then he asks the crucial question: why could he not exist without a body and senses? He has convinced himself that there is no world of extended thing, and so there must be something that has been convinced: "If I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed" (AT VII 25, CSM II 17).

Descartes has not quite arrived at the *Cogito*, however. He must still confront his supposition of the malicious demon. Perhaps this "deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving" him about the existence of the extended world. Nonetheless, if he is

deceived, then the must exist. “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” (AT VII 25, CSM II 17). At this point, he announces the *Meditations* version of the *Cogito*: “that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived by my mind” (AT VII 25, CSM II 17). Note that this is a very narrow claim. Descartes might have said that the proposition, *I exist*, is necessarily true whenever he is thinking, which would be more in line with the formulation of the *Discourse*. But here he draws the most conservative conclusion possible: he can be absolutely certain of his own existence when he is thinking about his existence. He seems to want to indicate that it is the very process of doubt which leads to knowledge of his own existence, so that he might well have inferred, “*I am doubting, therefore I exist.*”

As noted, in the *Discourse*, Descartes had referred to the proposition “*I am thinking, therefore I exist*” (*Cogito, ergo sum*). The use of the term ‘therefore’ indicates that *I exist* is the conclusion of an inference. The inference can be captured in an argument with a single premise:

1. I am thinking. (Premise)
2. Therefore, I exist. (Conclusion)

Note that this argument is not formally valid in the syllogistic logic of Descartes’s time. To make the argument valid, a “major” premise is needed. Such a premise would be a universal proposition whose subject encodes the premise of Descartes’s inference and whose predicate contains the conclusion.

Before turning to the structure of the inference, we should note that a question was raised about whether the concepts occurring in the propositions making up the inference are understood. In a letter to Descartes, Hyperaspistes claimed that before he can know that the proposition *I am thinking, therefore I exist* is true, he must be told the meanings of the components of the propositions, such as “thing,” “exist,” and “thought.” Descartes responds by saying that we do know what these terms mean, and that people need not be told their meanings, because “it is so self-evident that there is nothing which could serve to make it any clearer” (AT III 247, CSMK 192). This issue will come up again shortly.

Descartes was aware of the fact that the argument is incomplete from the standpoint of syllogistic logic. He recognized that with the required major premise, the argument looks like this:

1. Whatever is thinking exists. (Major premise)
2. I am thinking. (Minor premise)
3. Therefore, I exist. (Conclusion)

In the Second Replies, Descartes denies that the inference he made is a syllogistic inference that includes the major premise. The proposition *I am thinking, therefore I exist* is said in the Second

Replies to be recognized “as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind” (AT VII 140, CSM II 100).

In the *Principles of Philosophy* of 1644, Descartes states that *I am thinking, therefore I exist* “is the first and most certain of all [propositions] to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way” (AT VIII A 9, CSM I 196). But in saying this, he is not denying that “one must first know what thought, existence, and certainty are.” Nor is he denying that one must first know “that it is impossible that that which thinks should not exist.” (The latter is an alternative form of the major premise.) He did not “list” the notions of thought, existence and certainty only because “these are very simple notions, which on their own provide us with no knowledge of anything that exists.” Given that reference to the knowledge of the major premise occurs after the list of three notions but before the word ‘these,’ it seems that Descartes wanted to hold that the major premise is also a very simple notion which has no existential consequences. But that cannot be right, because it does have existential consequences, namely the consequence that he exists.

Frans Burman when interviewing Descartes quotes the Second Replies: “When we become aware that we are thinking beings, this is a primary notion, which is not derived by means of any syllogism” (Originally at AT VII 22, CSM II 15, quoted at AT V 147, CSMK 333). Burman asks whether in fact Descartes had asserted “the opposite” in the passage from the *Principles* discussed above.

Descartes responds by looking at the inference *I am thinking, therefore I exist* in two different ways. He states that in the *Principles*, he was making the point that the major premise “comes first” because “implicitly it is always presupposed and prior,” and that “my inference depends on it.” Here, he seems to be making the point that the formal validity of the inference in syllogistic logic depends on the presence of the major premise.

On the other hand, although the major premise “can be known” before the inference, it does not have to be known before the inference is made, nor is it the case that “I am always expressly and explicitly aware of its priority.” The reason is that when he attends “only to what I experience within myself,” he finds that he is not paying “attention in the same way to the general notion ‘whatever thinks exists’.”

Thus it seems that Descartes is claiming that he can know that his inference is sound without knowing that it is syllogistically valid. The reason is that the soundness of the inference is self-evident. As Descartes stated in the Second Replies, it is the evident nature of the particular proposition concerning himself (*I am thinking, therefore I exist*) which provides the basis for his knowledge of the proposition that *whatever is thinking exists*. “It is in the nature of our mind to construct general propositions on the basis of our knowledge of particular ones” (AT VII 141, CSM II 100). So he knows first that it is impossible for him to think without existing and he then uses that knowledge as the basis for knowing that whatever is thinking exists. This is the line which he reiterates in the conversation with Burman: “As I have explained before, we do not

separate out these general propositions from the particular instances; rather it is in the particular instances that we think of them” (AT V 147, CSMK 333).

In the Appendix to the Fifth Objections and Replies, Descartes considers a claim made by Gassendi, who supposes “that knowledge of particular propositions must always be deduced from universal ones, following the same order as that of a syllogism in Dialectic” (AT IXA 205, CSM II 271). This is the basis of an objection that the major premise *Whatever thinks exists* is a preconceived opinion and cannot therefore be used in the inference *I think, therefore I exist*. Descartes notes that if the major is a preconceived opinion, it need not remain one, “for when we examine it, it appears so evident that we cannot but believe it, even though this may be the first time in our life that we have thought about it.” But the greater mistake is that one must know the general proposition in order to know that particular proposition. This is simply not how we learn, as can be seen from the fact that a child needs examples before being able to understand “When equal quantities are taken from equal amounts the remaining amounts will be equal” (AT IXA 206, CSM II 271).

What Descartes is describing here is a form of induction, an inference from particular propositions to general ones. He does not here describe under what conditions such an inference is justified. He apparently believed that when one considers one or more obvious cases of a certain relation (e.g. thinking and existing), one is able to recognize that the relation is fully general. There must be some kind of recognition of this sort, since inductive inferences based on mere experienced association is dangerous (as Hume was to point out in the eighteenth century).

One might wish to say that Descartes’s explicit inference is an enthymeme, an argument with and implicit or suppressed premise. Although the major premise is not explicitly thought in the making of the inference, it is implicitly thought through the recognition of the connection between the single premise and its conclusion.

Gassendi in the Fifth Objections claims that Descartes “could have made the same inference from any one of your other actions, since it is known by the natural light that whatever acts exists” (AT VII 259, CSM II 180). Then the syllogistic form of the inference would contain a further major premise, from which the original major follows.

1. Whatever acts exists. (New major premise)
2. Thinking is an action. (New minor premise)
3. Therefore, whatever is thinking exists. (Original major premise)
4. I am thinking. (Original minor premise)
5. Therefore, I exist. (Conclusion)

Descartes responds that only thinking would do (in the minor premises of our reconstructed inference). Thought is the only action of which I am certain. The inference: *I am thinking, therefore I exist*, does not confer certainty, since it is not certain (at this point) that I have a body.

On the other hand, my thinking that I am walking would be sufficient. “Hence from the fact that I think I am walking I can very well infer the existence of a mind which has this thought, but not the existence of a body that walks” (AT VII 352, CSM II 244). The point was made in letter from 1638, well before the publication of the *Meditations*. Here the example is “I am breathing, therefore I exist.” One cannot prove one’s existence in this way unless one can prove that he is breathing. On the other hand, one can prove that he exists from his feeling or belief that he is breathing, since feeling and belief are forms of thinking. “In such a case the thought of breathing is present to our minds before the thought of our existing, and we cannot doubt that we have it while we have it” (Letter to Renieri for Pollot, 1638, AT II, 37-38, CSMK 98).

What I am

The proposition that *I exist* does not have much meaning until it is understood what the “I” is. Indeed, there is danger of going astray in this understanding, and going wrong would undermine the value of the knowledge that *I exist*. (For example, if I = my body, we could conclude that my body exists, which is inconsistent with the supposition that there are no bodies.)

To get a clear understanding of what he is, Descartes recapitulates the progression of M1. That is, he begins with his opinions and then strips away all those that are dubious, until nothing remains but “what is certain and unshakable” (AT VII 25, CSM II 17).

Descartes’s initial conception of himself is that he is a man. But he finds this description of himself to be unsatisfactory because ‘man’ is a universal term which requires a definition in order to be understood. To be sure, there is available the Aristotelian definition of man as rational animal. ‘Rational’ and ‘animal’ are also universal terms which demand definition, and in fact the process of definition gets harder the further the concept of man is decomposed. Descartes declares that he does not have time to waste by looking for definitions. So instead of looking for a general term to describe himself, he turns to particular parts, properties, activities, etc. that naturally and spontaneously occur to him to apply to himself. (It appears that at least some of these features of himself are in reality what was taught to him, as the features of the soul reflect the Aristotelian account of it.)

- I have a body
 - My body is composed of parts such as a face, hands, arms.
 - My body is a mechanical structure.
- I have a soul.
 - My soul nourishes me (Aristotelian nutritive or vegetative soul—living things).
 - My soul enables me to move about (Aristotelian sensitive soul—animals).
 - My soul engages in sense-perception (Aristotelian sensitive soul—animals).
 - My soul engages in thinking (Aristotelian rational soul—humans).

This list will be pared down, to the point that his conception of himself is that of a soul which

thinks. The two main theses to be rejected are those of materialism, according to which the soul is nothing more than the body, and Aristotelianism, which divides the soul into a hierarchy based on functions, some of which (nourishment, self-motion and sense-perception) are bodily.

The nature of the soul (as opposed to what the soul does) is something he has either not thought about or else imagined to be something “like a wind, or fire, or ether, which permeated my more solid parts” (AT VII 26, CSM II 17).

The nature of the body, on the other hand, he thinks he knows “distinctly.”

- A body has a determinable shape.
- A body has a definable location.
- A body can occupy a space in such a way as to exclude other bodies.
- A body can be perceived by the senses.
- A body can be moved around by bodies that come into contact with it (but not by itself).

The claim that bodies are not self-moving is based on Descartes’s thought that “the power of self-movement, like the power of sensation or of thought, was quite foreign to the nature of a body” (AT VII 26, CSM II 17). He notes that it found it a “source of wonder” that “certain bodies were found to contain faculties of this kind” (i.e., bodies can move themselves, sense and think).

Given the ongoing supposition of the existence of an evil deceiver, who has brought it about that he has no body, Descartes cannot assert that he has either of the first two features of the soul (nourishment and motion). Sense-perception requires a body. Further, since we have perceptions when we dream which are indistinguishable from the perceptions we would have by way of the body, it seems that a body is not needed for sense-perception. So it is possible that I exist without having bodily sense-perception.

But thinking is something that is “inseparable from me,” and alone is so inseparable. (Note that the conclusion that body alone is inseparable from him may be too strong, since he will later declare that he does not know whether he is identical to a body. He should have stated instead that thinking is the only thing he knows to be inseparable from him. This point will be discussed shortly.) Here it seems that Descartes has in mind the proposition *I am thinking, therefore I am*. According to this proposition, merely thinking is sufficient for his existence, though it does not establish that thinking is necessary for his existence or that he is exclusively a thinking thing.

Descartes considers the possibility that thinking is a necessary condition of his existence, as he notes that “it could be that were I totally to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist” (AT VII 27, CSM II 18). He does not pursue the matter here, as he is only allowing himself to admit “what is necessarily true.” He then draws one of his main conclusions: “I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason”

(AT VII 27, CSM II 18).

The wording of the conclusion naturally suggests that he is exclusively, or nothing more than, a thing which thinks, which would preclude his being a thing that moves, is nourished, etc.

Gassendi inquired as to what the term ‘only’ means in this context. “Does it not have a restrictive force, limiting you only to a thing that thinks and excluding other things such as a structure of limbs, a thin vapor, etc?” (Appendix to Fifth Objections and Replies, AT IXa 214-15, CSM II 276). Descartes responds by claiming that the word ‘only’ modifies ‘strict sense,’ rather than ‘I am.’ Thus, I am, in the strict sense only, a thinking thing. He states that a few lines down he showed that by his statement in M2 “I do not at all mean an entire exclusion or negation, but only an abstraction from material things” (AT IXA 215, CSM II 276).

Specifically, Descartes goes on to ask, “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 . . .” (AT VII 27, CSM II 18). He says that Gassendi has been “unfair” to him by reading the original passage in such a way that it looks like he is contradicting himself by stating that he is only a thing that thinks but does not know whether he is only a thing that thinks.

Descartes summarizes his findings by stating that he is a thing that exists, and when asked what kind of thing, he replies that he is “a thinking thing” (*res cogitans*).

After stating that he is a thinking thing, Descartes goes on to use his imagination to think of what else he is besides being a thinking thing. (And as we have seen, he professes not to know at this point whether he is anything else but a thinking thing.) The appeal to the imagination here (as opposed to his earlier appeal to his preconceived opinions) seems to be an attempt to undermine the claims of the materialists, who identify the self with the body or something bodily. This use of the imagination in fact shows him what he is not:

- A structure of limbs called a human body.
- A thin vapor that permeates the limbs.

The reason for rejecting these materialist identifications of himself with his body or something bodily is that he can conceive himself as existing while supposing that bodies do not exist. The key claim is that in understanding the “I,” as he puts it, “strictly,” “it is quite certain that knowledge of [the ‘I’] 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” (AT VII 27-28, CSM II 18-19). In this sentence, the word ‘it’ must refer back to ‘knowledge,’ so the claim would be that knowledge of the “I” does not depend on anything dependent on the imagination.

Imagining is the contemplation of “the shape or image of a corporeal thing.” But corporeal things have been supposed not to exist, because the images could merely be the product of

dreams. Use of the imagination to gain knowledge of the “I” is futile, as it is inferior to the intellect. Using the imagination rather than the intellect is like falling asleep in order to represent things more clearly. So to perceive the nature of his mind “as distinctly as possible,” he must divert his mind from things as presented by his imagination (AT VII 28), CSM II 19.

Now that we have seen the argument for the claim that the “I” is not known to be a body and is not known through the senses or imagination, we will turn to his critics’ objections against his arguments and their conclusions.

Gassendi’s charge that Descartes was claiming that he is not a body was first made by Mersenne in the Second Objections. “You say ‘I am a thinking thing,’ but how do you know that you are not corporeal motion, or a body which is in motion?” (AT VII 123, CSM II 88). Mersenne correctly notes that this conclusion does not follow from the supposition that the images of all bodies are delusive.

Descartes points out in response that he has already expressed his own skepticism, when he asks whether the things he has supposed to be nothing “are in reality identical with the ‘I’ of which I am aware” (AT VII 129, CSM II 93). But this does not preclude him from knowing later that they are not. The point of the exercise in M2 was to separate out notions of the mind that had been mixed up. The main goal is to show that the ideas of mind and body are distinct. In M6, Descartes will argue that if the ideas of mind and body are distinct, the things are distinct as well. The reason people think that they need their bodies to think is that they have never been without bodies and in fact have been obstructed by them in their thinking.

The Third Objections, made by Hobbes, contain the same charge. Hobbes questions the inference he attributes to Descartes: *I am using my intellect, hence I am an intellect*. Hobbes here makes his famous comparison: *I am walking, hence I am a walk*. Descartes is identifying himself with an intellect, but intellect is only a power of a subject. Yet “all philosophers make a distinction between a subject and its faculties and acts” (AT VII 172, CSM II 122). So, the subject may be corporeal, while intellection is a power of the corporeal subject. “The contrary is assumed, not proved.”

Descartes responds that mind, intelligence, intellect, and reason are all things which are endowed with the faculty of thought. ‘Mind’ and ‘intelligence’ are commonly thought of in this way by everyone. ‘Intellect’ and ‘reason’ are “often thought of in this sense” (AT VII 174, CSM II 123). The analogy with a walk is fallacious, since a walk is commonly understood as an act, while ‘thought’ is sometimes understood as an act, sometimes as a faculty, and sometimes as the subject of a faculty.

The major difference between himself and Hobbes, according to Descartes, is that he, Descartes, tries isolate concepts to the greatest possible extent in order to avoid confusion, whereas Hobbes lumps them together to gain favor for materialism.

Hobbes goes on to claim that because a thinking requires a thinker (and other such dependencies that hold), a thinking thing must be corporeal, because all subjects are corporeal. This seems to be based on the assumption that only matter can serve as a subject. The claim that it follows from the fact that all acts of thinking have a subject that the subject must be material is made “quite without any reason, and in violation of all usage and all logic” (AT VII 175, CSM II 123-4). Descartes is willing to concede grudgingly that the subject may be called “metaphysical matter,” but this does not make it corporeal matter.

Descartes ends his reply to Hobbes by noting that acts of thought have nothing in common with acts of bodies, and that thoughts are different in kind from extension. If this is granted, it is easy to establish as in M6 that the substances which think and those which are extended are distinct.

One interesting claim made by Descartes in the heat of battle is that “it is certain that . . . in general no act or accident can exist without a substance for it to belong to” (AT VII 175-6, CSM II 124). Thus, there can be no thinking without a thinker, no figure without a body. This point becomes important in the dispute about transubstantiation. The prevailing doctrine was that the accidents that had belonged to bread become unattached to any substance once the bread is changed into the body of Christ.

The Fourth Objections, lodged by Arnauld, follow in the same vein. He, too, thinks that Descartes has tried to establish in M2 that “I am not a body” (AT VII 198, CSM II 139). The argument is that while I can doubt that I have a body, I cannot doubt that I exist as long as I am thinking. Arnauld is sensitive to the fact that Descartes has expressed skepticism about what the “I” is, citing the same passage as Descartes himself cited. He then goes on to criticize the argument of M6. The responses are based on the arguments of M6, so they will be passed over here.

In the Fifth Objections, by Gassendi, a real battle begins. Gassendi notes that “the point at which all the hard work begins” is to understand what the “I” is. The method of beginning with what he previously thought himself to be is endorsed by Gassendi. But Descartes proceeds by regarding himself as a soul, “not as a whole man but as an inner or hidden component” (AT VII 260, CSM II 181). At this point, he begins to address Descartes as “Soul.” He then asks a series of questions as to why soul could not be corporeal.

Descartes protests that Gassendi is not taking his method seriously. He gets into the game by addressing Gassendi as “Flesh,” because his objections originate not “in the mind of a subtle philosopher but came from the flesh alone” (AT VII 352, CSM II 244). Descartes claims that he has “corrected the common view whereby that which thinks is supposed to be like wind or a similar body.” He has done so by showing that while it can be supposed that there are no bodies, it cannot be supposed that there is that “which enables me to recognize myself as a thinking thing” (AT VII 353). He has given reasons “to assert that I, in so far as I know myself, am

nothing other than a thinking thing. This is all that I asserted in the Second Meditation” (AT VII 355, CSM II 245).

The replies to the Sixth Objections contain a distinction between the unity of nature and unity of composition. The unity of nature comes to this: the same substance which can have a shape can move. The same thing that understands also wills. But there is no such unity of nature between flesh and bone. And none between thought and extension. There is only unity of composition. The notion that mind and body are united in a single being is made explicit in M6.

Next, Descartes asks what a *res cogitans* or thing which thinks is. He responds by providing the following list, here followed by examples that seem to be intended by Descartes:

- I doubt (a process in which I am presently engaged).
- I understand (e.g. that I am a thinking thing).
- I affirm (that I am a thinking thing).
- I deny (everything that is uncertain).
- I am willing (to uncover new knowledge).
- I am unwilling (to be deceived).
- I imagine (many things).
- I have sensory perceptions (which seem to come from the senses).

Even if I am asleep all the time and am the victim of deception by my creator (whomever that might be), these facts hold of me. None of these facts is distinct from my thinking or from myself.

In generating this list, Descartes cleverly trades on the process of doubt itself. If I am doubting (and doing all the other things ancillary to doubting), then I exist. All these things fall under the general heading of “thinking,” so the general form of inference *I am thinking, therefore, I exist* remains correct.

Further, none of these activities make any reference to the body. Descartes clearly intended to overthrow the Aristotelian and materialist conceptions of the human being as being in some way essentially physical. “But what shall I now say that I am, when I am supposing that there is some supremely powerful . . . 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 body?” (AT VII 26, CSM II 18).

Still, Descartes had to deal with two aspects of the “I” which seem to involve the body. These are acts of “sensing” and of “imagining.” Neither is required for the method of doubt to proceed, so he cannot establish that the “I” is a sensing and imagining thing in the same way he establishes that the “I” is a willing thing, etc. His only recourse is to appeal to phenomenology, or the way things appear to his mind. He must appeal to the brute fact that he has images and

that there is therefore “the power of imagination.” This power “must exist,” in order to account for my having images, and is claimed to be “part of my thinking.”

The basis for the latter claim is not clear. Why might the power of imagination not be purely bodily? The same treatment is given to sense perception. It is a phenomenological fact that “I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat” (AT VII 29, CSM II 19). Even if I am asleep, it remains that I seem to perceive these things. Thus, Descartes concludes, sense-perception as such is merely seeming to perceive. “What is called ‘sensory perception’ is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking” (AT VII 29, CSM II 19). One must ask again what it is exactly that makes this thinking. Imagining and sensing seem to be “poor relations” to the other forms of thinking, because they at least simulate bodily processes and because their existence cannot be discovered using the intellect alone. It is not made clear whether the “I” could exist without having these two powers.

The ultimate conclusion Descartes wants to draw in M6 is that the mind exists separately from the body, while at the same time being united to it in such a way as to make up a single thing. The first step in prying them apart is to note the distinction in certainty between beliefs about my thinking self and beliefs about my body. Here is where the supposition that “he who created me is doing all he can to deceive me” comes into play (AT VII 29, CSM II 19). I can know a number of things about myself even under the supposition that I have no body. This conclusion is purely epistemological, that is, a conclusion about what can be known better than what.

Gassendi presses against Descartes the point that some of the activities of “thinking” seem to have bodily components, particularly sensory perceptions. He asks whether Descartes believed that the kind of sense perception he classifies as thinking is what “completes” what is begun by a “bodily faculty which resides in the eyes, ears and other organs, . . . that receives the forms of sensible things” (AT VII 268, CSM II 187). He asks whether this is the reason Descartes classifies sensory perception and imagination as kinds of thought. But if completion of the actions of a bodily sensory faculty constitutes thought, then because “brutes” (non-human animals) have sensory perception, it would seem that he would have to allow that they think as well, something Descartes is unwilling to concede. Gassendi goes on to contest Descartes’s view on the point of whether non-human animals think.

Descartes responds by saying that the *a priori* investigations of the *Meditations* are not the place to discuss the question of whether brutes have minds, which is something that must be investigated *a posteriori* by observing their behavior. He then goes on to claim that he has in fact given a “criterion to establish that the mind is different from the body, namely that the whole nature of the mind consists in the fact that it thinks, while the whole nature of the body consists in its being an extended thing; and there is absolutely nothing in common between thought and extension” (AT VII 358, CSM II 248). This criterion is not given in M2, however. Descartes also claims that he has “distinctly shown on many occasions that the mind can operate independently of the brain” (AT VII 358, CSM II 248). For example, although in sleep the mind

has images, “to be aware that we are dreaming we need only the intellect” (AT VII 359, CSM II 248).

The Second Objections contains the criticism that Descartes has not excluded the possibility that thinking is a bodily activity. “How do you demonstrate that a body is incapable of thinking, or that corporeal motions are not in fact thought?” (AT VII 123, CSM II 88). Descartes replies that he is not yet concerned with the nature of thinking itself. This will be taken up in M6. Here, he notes that people think there is a necessary connection between mind and body because they only experience mind with body, and body influences their thinking. But always being associated with a body does not prove that there is a necessary connection between the two. “It is just as if someone had had his legs permanently shackled from infancy: he would think the shackles were part of his body and that he needed them for walking” (AT VII 133, CSM II 96). His only point in M2 was to show (as the sub-title of M2 puts it) that he knows his mind better than his body.

Gassendi disputes Descartes’s use of the term ‘mind,’ rather than ‘soul,’ to describe himself. His problem is that he thought that he was addressing (in his objections) a human soul, “or the internal principle by which a man lives, has sensations, moves around and understands” (AT VII 263, CSM II 183). Instead, he finds himself “addressing a mind alone, which has divested itself not just of the body but also of the very soul” (AT VII 263, CSM II 183). However, Gassendi is willing to concede that Descartes means by ‘mind’ only the function of the soul which enables us to think.

Descartes responds that people have become accustomed to use the word ‘soul’ to encompass both “the principle by which we are nourished and grow and accomplish without thought all the other operations which we have in common with the brutes” and “the principle by virtue of which we think” (AT VII 365, CSM II 252). The element that thinks is subsequently called “mind,” and it is believed to be “the principal part of the soul.” Because Descartes believes that what performs the bodily function is different in kind from what makes us think, he has reserved ‘mind’ for the latter function, which he describes in scholastic terms as “the ‘first actuality’ or ‘principal form of man’” (AT VII 356, CSM II 246). The mind is “the thinking soul in its entirety,” not simply one part of the soul.

Superiority of the Intellect

The final part of Meditation Two is devoted to establishing the claim that “The puzzling ‘I’ that cannot be pictured in my imagination” is better known than corporeal things, of which one has images in thought. This is the reverse of the standard view, which is based on giving the lesser-known images priority over the better-known self. Descartes engages in a thought-experiment to show that his view is superior to the standard view. In this experiment, he gives the imagination free reign, though only to show that it cannot get very far and should be curbed in the future.

Rather than focus on “general perceptions” of “bodies in general,” Descartes will focus on a

particular body, a piece of wax. The reason he considers the particular body is that “general perceptions are apt to be somewhat more confused” (AT VII 30, CSM II 20).

Descartes enumerates some of the properties of the wax, that it has just been taken from the hive, that it still has some of its taste and scent, that it is hard and cold, and when rapped it makes a sound. “In short, it has everything which appears necessary to enable a body to be known as distinctly as possible” (AT VII 30, CSM II 20). But when placed by the fire, all these characteristics vanish, while “the same wax” remains. Descartes concludes that because one can identify the same wax through all these changes, there must be something other than the sensible characteristics just listed that allows us to understand the wax “with such distinctness” (AT VII 30, CSM II 20).

Now the thought occurs to him that something other than the sweetness, fragrance, color, shape, sound which make up the wax. Instead, the wax is “a body which presented itself to me in these various forms a little while ago, but which now exhibits different ones” (AT VII 30, CSM II 20). Then the question becomes, what is this body which exhibits the various forms? If we “take away everything which does not belong to the wax,” we are left with something:

- Extended.
- Flexible.
- Changeable.

Now the question turns to how these characteristics of the wax are represented by the mind. It is not by the imagination, but a “purely mental scrutiny” which is now “clear and distinct” that reveals these characteristics to him. It is not the imagination because that power is too limited to be able to picture all the “countless” possible ways in which the wax can be extended, flexible and changeable. For example, how big can it get if more and more heat is applied to it? Descartes concludes that the nature of the wax is known by “the mind alone,” i.e., by the understanding or intellect (AT VII 31, CSM II 21). If the question is about the characteristics of wax in general, rather than this particular piece of wax, then “the point is even clearer,” since the imagination cannot depict generalities, but only particulars.

The wax that the mind perceives alone is the same wax that is perceived by sense or imagination. But “the point” is that the perception of the wax is “of purely mental scrutiny” and not of imagining or perceiving (AT VII 31, CSM II 21). This mental scrutiny maybe initially obscure, but it can become distinct if I concentrate on it carefully.

Although we initially think otherwise, one does not see the wax itself when one sees its properties, any more than one sees a man himself when he sees a cloaked figure moving down the street. The intellect takes off the hat and coat and inspects the man naked, so to speak. This leads to a dispute with Gassendi, who asks: if you strip off everything the imagination provides, what do you have left? We may think that something remains when the accidents are removed,

(“the substance or nature of the wax”) but this is something that “always eludes us; and it is only a kind of conjecture that leads us to think that there must be something underneath the accidents” (AT VII 271, CSM II 189). We get no insight into the substance of the wax by the intellect. So the analogy with the man beneath the clothes is not appropriate.

Descartes properly responds that he has not really stripped the accidents off from the wax, but rather has understood “how the substance of the wax is revealed by means of its accidents, and how a reflective and distinct perception . . . differs from the ordinary confused perceptions” (AT VII 359, CSM II 248).

A further objection by Gassendi is that every conception of the wax involves “having some kind of shape, . . . some sort of color” (AT VII 272, CSM II 190). These determinate characteristics of the wax seem to require that the understanding be some kind of imagination. This objection is not directly answered by Descartes.

The analysis of our knowledge of the wax leads Descartes to conclude that the mind is better known than the body. The awareness of the mind itself is truer, more certain, more distinct, more evident, than the awareness of the body.

This claim is based on three reasons:

1. Every act of examining the wax implies my own existence.
2. The process of examining the nature of the wax reveals the nature of my own mind even more distinctly.
3. The mind has great resources for determining its own nature distinctly, and any contribution of the body would be insignificant.

The question that prompted the examination of the wax was whether bodies, whose images appear to be the most distinct conceptions in our minds, are known better than “my own self” (AT VII 29, CSM II 20). The results up to that point had established this conclusion already, but the wax case is supposed to nail it down. The result of the investigation is that bodies are “strictly” perceived through the intellect alone, by being understood by the intellect. The result of the use of the senses or the faculty of the imagination is not “strictly” perception of the wax. And even when we understand them by the intellect, we still thereby understand the intellect itself better.

Hobbes objects that everyone recognizes that knowledge by reasoning is superior to perception by the senses. But reasoning is only about names, not the nature of things, and names are conventional. In fact, it seems that names arise from the imagination, which shows its priority within the mind (AT VII 178, CSM II 125-6).

Descartes flat-out denies this. Reasoning is linking “of the things that are signified by names.”

This explains how people using different languages can reason about the same things. Further, if names are purely conventional, then what Hobbes is asserting could mean anything.

[Note on citations. Citations from Descartes are given first with the volume and page from the Adam and Tannery edition of Descartes's works (*Œuvres*), which are given in the margins of the Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch translations, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. The citation 'CSM' with volume and page numbers are to Volumes I and II of that work, while 'CSMK' refers to volume III, translated by Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch and Kenny.]