

Excerpts from Descartes's *Objections & Replies*
Selected and Organized Thematically by Russell Marcus

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A. To the Arguments from Doubt

1. From Third Objections (Hobbes, 195-6): The dream doubt has not been resolved.

Consider someone who dreams that he is in doubt as to whether he is dreaming or not. My question is whether such a man could not dream that his dream fits in with his ideas of a long series of past events. If this is possible, then what appear to the dreamer to be actions belonging to his past life could be judged to be true occurrences, just as if he were awake.

Moreover, as the author himself asserts, the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends solely on our knowledge of the true God. But in that case an atheist cannot infer that he is awake on the basis of memory of his past life.

Descartes's response:

A dreamer cannot really connect his dreams with the ideas of past events, though he may dream that he does. For everyone admits that a man may be deceived in his sleep. But afterwards, when he wakes up, he will easily recognize his mistake.

An atheist can infer that he is awake on the basis of memory of his past life. But he cannot know that this criterion is sufficient to give him the certainty that he is not mistaken, if he does not know that he was created by a non-deceiving God.

B. To the Cogito

2. From Second Objections (Mersenne, 124-5): The cogito is not known clearly and distinctly.

In Meditation II, you are not yet certain of the

existence of God, and you say that you are not certain of anything, and cannot know anything clearly and distinctly until you have achieved clear and certain knowledge of the existence of God. It follows from this that you do not yet clearly and distinctly know that you are a thinking thing, since, on your own admission, that knowledge depends on the clear knowledge of an existing God. This you have not yet proved in the passage where you draw the conclusion that you clearly know what you are.

Descartes's Response (140-1):

When I said that we can know nothing for certain until we are aware that God exists, I expressly declared that I was speaking only of knowledge of those conclusions which can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments by means of which we deduced them. Now awareness of first principles is not normally called 'knowledge' by dialecticians. When we become aware that we are thinking things, this is a primary notion which is not derived by means of any syllogism. When someone says "I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist," he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind. This is clear from the fact that if he were deducing it by means of a syllogism, he would have to have had previous knowledge of the major premise "Everything which thinks is, or exists." In fact he learns it from experiencing in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing.

3. From Fifth Objections (Gassendi, 258-9): One's existence may be proven in other ways.

In Meditation II, you persist with your elaborate pretense of deception. But you go on to recognize at least that you, who are the subject of this deception, exist. And thus you conclude that this proposition, "I am, I exist," is true whenever it is put forward by you or conceived in your mind. But I do not see that you needed all this apparatus, when on other grounds you were certain, and it was true, that you existed. You 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.

Descartes's Response (352):

What reason have you for saying that I, "Did not need all this apparatus," to prove I existed? These

very words of yours surely show that I have the best reason to think that I have not used enough apparatus, since I have not yet managed to make you understand the matter correctly. When you say that I "could have made the same inference from any one of my other actions" you are far from the truth, since I am not wholly certain of any of my actions, with the sole exception of thought (in using the word 'certain' I am referring to metaphysical certainty, which is the sole issue at this point). I may not, for example, make the inference "I am walking, therefore I exist," except in so far as the awareness of walking is a thought. The inference is certain only if applied to this awareness, and not to the movement of the body which sometimes, in the case of dreams, is not occurring at all, despite the fact that I seem to myself to be walking. 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. The same applies in other cases.

4. From Sixth Objections (Mersenne, 413): The cogito involves an infinite regress.

From the fact that we are thinking it does not seem to be entirely certain that we exist. For in order to be certain that you are thinking you must know what thought or thinking is, and what your existence is. But since you do not yet know what these things are, how can you know that you are thinking or that you exist? Thus neither when you say, "I am thinking," nor when you add, "Therefore, I exist," do you really know what you are saying. Indeed, you do not even know that you are saying or thinking anything, since this seems to require that you should know that you know what you are saying. This in turn requires that you be aware of knowing that you know what you are saying. And so on ad infinitum. Hence it is clear that you cannot know whether you exist or even whether you are thinking.

Descartes's Response (422):

It is true that no one can be certain that he is thinking or that he exists unless he knows what thought is and what existence is. But this does not require reflective knowledge, or the kind of knowledge that is acquired by means of demonstrations. Still less does it require knowledge of reflective knowledge, i.e. knowing that we know, and knowing that we know that we know, and so on ad infinitum. This kind of knowledge cannot

possibly be obtained about anything. It is quite sufficient that we should know it by that internal awareness which always precedes reflective knowledge. This inner awareness of one's thought and existence is so innate in all men that, although we may pretend that we do not have it if we are overwhelmed by preconceived opinions and pay more attention to words than to their meanings, we cannot in fact fail to have it. Thus when anyone notices that he is thinking and that it follows from this that he exists. Even though he may never before have asked what thought is or what existence is, he still cannot fail to have sufficient knowledge of them both to satisfy himself in this regard.

C. To the Ontological Argument for God's Existence

5. From First Objections (Caterus, 99-100): The ontological argument only establishes conceptual existence.

Even if it is granted that a supremely perfect being carries the implication of existence in virtue of its very title, it still does not follow that the existence in question is anything actual in the real world. All that follows is that the concept of existence is inseparably linked to the concept of a supreme being. So you cannot infer that the existence of God is anything actual unless you suppose that the supreme being actually exists. Then it will actually contain all perfections, including the perfection of real existence.

Pardon me, gentlemen: I am now rather tired and propose to have a little fun. The complex 'existing lion' includes both 'lion' and 'existence', and it includes them essentially, for if you take away either element it will not be the same complex. But now, has not God had clear and distinct knowledge of this composite from all eternity? And does not the idea of this composite, as a composite, involve both elements essentially? In other words, does not existence belong to the essence of the composite 'existing lion'? Nevertheless the distinct knowledge of God, the distinct knowledge he has from eternity, does not compel either element in the composite to exist, unless we assume that the composite itself exists (in which case it will contain all its essential perfections including actual existence). Similarly even if I have distinct knowledge of a supreme being, and even if the supremely perfect being includes existence as an essential part of the concept, it still does not follow

that the existence in question is anything actual, unless we suppose that the supreme being exists (for in that case it will include actual existence along with all its other perfections). Accordingly we must look elsewhere for a proof that the supremely perfect being exists.

Descartes's Response (116-120):

In the first place we are so accustomed to distinguishing existence from essence in the case of all other things that we fail to notice how closely existence belongs to essence in the case of God as compared with that of other things. Next, we do not distinguish what belongs to the true and immutable essence of a thing from what is attributed to it merely by a fiction of the intellect. So, even if we observe clearly enough that existence belongs to the essence of God, we do not draw the conclusion that God exists, because we do not know whether his essence is immutable and true, or merely invented by us.

To remove the first part of the difficulty we must distinguish between possible and necessary existence. It must be noted that possible existence is contained in the concept or idea of everything that we clearly and distinctly understand; but in no case is necessary existence so contained, except in the case of the idea of God. Those who carefully attend to this difference between the idea of God and every other idea will undoubtedly perceive that even though our understanding of other things always involves understanding them as if they were existing things, it does not follow that they do exist, but merely that they are capable of existing. For our understanding does not show us that it is necessary for actual existence to be conjoined with their other properties. But, from the fact that we understand that actual existence is necessarily and always conjoined with the other attributes of God, it certainly does follow that God exists.

To remove the second part of the difficulty, we must notice a point about ideas which do not contain true and immutable natures but merely ones which are invented and put together by the intellect. Such ideas can always be split up by the same intellect, not simply by an abstraction but by a clear and distinct intellectual operation. Any ideas which the intellect cannot split up in this way are clearly not put together by the intellect. When, for example, I think of a winged horse or an actually existing lion, or a triangle inscribed in a square, I readily understand that I am also able to think of a horse

without wings, or a lion which does not exist, or a triangle apart from a square, and so on. Hence these things do not have true and immutable natures. But if I think of a triangle or a square, then whatever I apprehend as being contained in the idea of a triangle, for example that its three angles are equal to two right angles, I can with truth assert of the triangle. And the same applies to the square with respect to whatever I apprehend as being contained in the idea of a square. For even if I can understand what a triangle is if I abstract the fact that its three angles are equal to two right angles, I cannot deny that this property applies to the triangle by a clear and distinct intellectual operation, that is, while at the same time understanding what I mean by my denial. Moreover, if I consider a triangle inscribed in a square, with a view not to attributing to the square properties that belong only to the triangle, or attributing to the triangle properties that belong to the square, but with a view to examining only the properties which arise out of the conjunction of the two, then the nature of this composite will be just as true and immutable as the nature of the triangle alone or the square alone. Hence it will be quite in order to maintain that the square is not less than double the area of the triangle inscribed within it, and to affirm other similar properties that belong to the nature of this composite figure.

Let us now take a thing, whatever this thing turns out to be, which possesses all the perfections which can exist together. If we ask whether existence should be included among these perfections, we will admittedly be in some doubt at first. For our mind, which is finite, normally thinks of these perfections only separately, and hence may not immediately notice the necessity of their being joined together. Yet if we attentively examine whether existence belongs to a supremely powerful being, and what sort of existence it is, we shall be able to perceive clearly and distinctly the following facts. First, possible existence, at the very least, belongs to such a being, just as it belongs to all the other things of which we have a distinct idea, even to those which are put together through a fiction of the intellect. Next, when we attend to the immense power of this being, we shall be unable to think of its existence as possible without also recognizing that it can exist by its own power; and we shall infer from this that this being does really exist and has existed from eternity, since it is quite evident by the natural light that what can exist by its own power always exists. So we shall come to understand that necessary existence is contained in the idea of a supremely

powerful being, not by any fiction of the intellect, but because it belongs to the true and immutable nature of such a being that it exists. And we shall also easily perceive that this supremely powerful being cannot but possess within it all the other perfections that are contained in the idea of God. Hence these perfections exist in God and are joined together not by any fiction of the intellect but by their very nature.

6. From First Objections (Caterus): Can we have clear and distinct knowledge of the infinite, and of God?

Are you clearly and distinctly aware of an infinite being? What is the meaning of that well-worn maxim, 'the infinite qua infinite is unknown'? When I think of a chiliagon, and construct for myself a confused representation of some figure, I do not distinctly imagine the chiliagon itself, since I do not distinctly see the thousand sides. And if this is so, then the question obviously arises as to how the infinite can be thought of in a distinct as opposed to a confused manner, given that the infinite perfections that make it up cannot be seen clearly before the eyes, as it were.

This is perhaps what Aquinas meant when he denied that the proposition 'God exists' is self-evident. He says that the knowledge that God exists is naturally implanted in us only in a general sense, or in a "confused manner," as he puts it, that is, in so far as God is the ultimate felicity of man. But this, he says, is not straightforward knowledge of the existence of God, just as to know that someone is coming is not the same as to know Peter, even though it is Peter who is coming. He is in effect saying that God is known under some general conception, as an ultimate end or as the first and most perfect being, or even under the concept of that which includes all things in a confused and general manner. But he is not known in terms of the precise concept of his own proper essence, for in essence God is infinite and so unknown to us.

Descartes's response:

First of all, the infinite *qua* infinite can in no way be grasped. But it can still be understood, in so far as we can clearly and distinctly understand that something is such that no limitations can be found in it, and this amounts to understanding clearly that it is infinite.

In the case of the thing itself which is

infinite, our understanding is not adequate, that is to say, we do not have a complete grasp of everything in it that is capable of being understood. When we look at the sea, our vision does not encompass its entirety, nor do we measure out its enormous vastness, but we are still said to “see” it. In fact, if we look at a distance so that our vision almost covers the entire sea at one time, we see it only in a confused manner, just as we have a confused picture of a chiliagon when we take in all its sides at once. But if we fix our gaze on some part of the sea at close quarters, then our view can be clear and distinct, just as our picture of a chiliagon can be, if it is confined to one or two of the sides. In the same way, God cannot be taken in by the human mind, and I admit this, along with all theologians. Moreover, God cannot be distinctly known by those who look at a distance as it were, and try to make their minds encompass his entirety all at once. This is the sense in which Aquinas says, in the passage quoted, that the knowledge of God is within us, “in a somewhat confused manner.” But those who try to attend to God’s individual perfections and try not so much to take hold of them as to surrender to them, using all the strength of their intellect to contemplate them, will certainly find that God provides much more ample and straightforward subject-matter for clear and distinct knowledge than does any created thing.

7. From Second Objections (Mersenne, 127): We can not understand the essence of God.

You argue that the nature or essence of God cannot be conceived apart from existence. Hence, granted the essence, God really exists. It does not follow from this that God in fact exists, but merely that he would have to exist if his nature is possible, or non-contradictory. This comes down to an argument which others have stated as follows: “If there is no contradiction in God’s existing, it is certain that he exists; but there is no contradiction in his existing.” The difficulty here is with the minor premise, “But there is no contradiction in his existing.” Those who attack the argument either claim to doubt the truth of this premise, or deny it outright. You yourself admit that you apprehend an infinite being only in an inadequate way. And clearly the same must be said of every single attribute of God. Whatever is in God is utterly infinite; so who can for a moment apprehend any aspect of God except in what may be called an utterly inadequate manner? How then can you have made a sufficiently clear and distinct investigation of

what God is?

Descartes’s response (150-151, 152):

If by “possible,” you mean what everyone commonly means, namely, ‘whatever does not conflict with our human concepts’, then it is manifest that the nature of God, as I have described it, is possible in this sense, since I supposed it to contain only what, according to our clear and distinct perceptions, must belong to it. Hence it cannot conflict with our concepts.

Alternatively, you may well be imagining some other kind of possibility which relates to the object itself. Unless this matches the first sort of possibility it can never be known by the human intellect, and so it does not so much support a denial of God’s nature and existence as serve to undermine every other item of human knowledge. For as far as our concepts are concerned there is no impossibility in the nature of God. On the contrary, all the attributes which we include in the concept of the divine nature are so interconnected that it seems to us to be self-contradictory that any one of them should not belong to God. Hence, if we deny that the nature of God is possible, we may just as well deny that the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, or that he who is actually thinking exists. If we do this it will be even more appropriate to deny that anything we acquire by means of the senses is true. The upshot will be that all human knowledge will be destroyed, though for no good reason.

Self-contradiction in our concepts arises merely from their obscurity and confusion. There can be none in the case of clear and distinct concepts. In the case of the few attributes of God which we do perceive, it is enough that we understand them clearly and distinctly, even though our understanding is in no way adequate. And the fact that, amongst other things, we notice that necessary existence is contained in our concept of God (however inadequate that concept may be) is enough to enable us to assert both that we have examined his nature with sufficient clarity, and that his nature is not self-contradictory.

D. To the Role of the Senses and the Account of Error

8. From Sixth Objections (Mersenne, 418): The senses, not the intellect, correct errors.

Our most worrying difficulty is your

assertion that we ought to mistrust the operations of the senses and that the reliability of the intellect is much greater than that of the senses. But how can the intellect enjoy any certainty unless it has previously derived it from the senses when they are working as they should? How can it correct a mistake made by one of the senses unless some other sense first corrects the mistake? Owing to refraction, a stick which is in fact straight appears bent in water. What corrects the error? The intellect? Not at all. It is the sense of touch. And the same sort of thing must be taken to occur in other cases. Hence if you have recourse to all your senses when they are in good working order, and they all give the same report, you will achieve the greatest certainty of which man is naturally capable. But you will often fail to achieve it if you trust the operations of the mind. The mind often goes astray in just those areas where it had previously supposed doubt to be impossible.

Descartes's Response (436-9):

If we are to get a clear view of what sort of certainty attaches to the senses, we must distinguish three grades of sensory response. The first is limited to the immediate stimulation of the bodily organs by external objects. This can consist in nothing but the motion of the particles of the organs, and any change of shape and position resulting from this motion. The second grade comprises all the immediate effects produced in the mind as a result of its being united with a bodily organ which is affected in this way. Such effects include the perceptions of pain, pleasure, thirst, hunger, colors, sound, taste, smell, heat, cold and the like, which arise from the union and as it were the intermingling of mind and body, as explained in Meditation VI. The third grade includes all the judgements about things outside us which we have been accustomed to make from our earliest years, judgements which are occasioned by the movements of these bodily organs.

For example, when I see a stick, it should not be supposed that certain 'intentional forms' fly off the stick towards the eye, but simply that rays of light are reflected off the stick and set up certain movements in the optic nerve and, via the optic nerve, in the brain, as I have explained at some length in the *Optics*. This movement in the brain, which is common to us and the brutes, is the first grade of sensory response.

The second grade extends to the mere perception of the color and light reflected from the stick. It arises from the fact that the mind is so

intimately conjoined with the body that it is affected by the movements which occur in it. Nothing more than this should be referred to the sensory faculty, if we wish to distinguish it carefully from the intellect.

But suppose that, as a result of being affected by this sensation of color, I judge that a stick, located outside me, is colored. Suppose that on the basis of the extension of the color and its boundaries together with its position in relation to the parts of the brain, I make a rational calculation about the size, shape and distance of the stick. Although such reasoning is commonly assigned to the senses (which is why I have here referred it to the third grade of sensory response), it is clear that it depends solely on the intellect.

I demonstrated in the *Optics* how size, distance and shape can be perceived by reasoning alone, which works out any one feature from the other features. The only difference is that when we now make a judgement for the first time because of some new observation, then we attribute it to the intellect. When from our earliest years we have made judgements, or even rational inferences, about the things which affect our senses, then, even though these judgements were made in exactly the same way as those we make now, we refer them to the senses. The reason for this is that we make the calculation and judgement at great speed because of habit, or rather we remember the judgements we have long made about similar objects. So, we do not distinguish these operations from simple sense perception.

It is clear from this that when we say "The reliability of the intellect is much greater than that of the senses," this means merely that when we are grown up the judgements which we make as a result of various new observations are more reliable than those which we formed without any reflection in our early childhood. This is undoubtedly true. It is clear that we are not here dealing with the first and second grades of sensory response, because no falsity can occur in them. Hence when people say that a stick in water "appears bent because of refraction," this is the same as saying that it appears to us in a way which would lead a child to judge that it was bent, and which may even lead us to make the same judgement, following the preconceived opinions which we have become accustomed to accept from our earliest years. But I cannot grant my critics' further comment that this error is corrected "not by the intellect but by the sense of touch." As a result of touching it, we may judge that the stick is straight. The kind of judgement

involved may be the kind we have been accustomed to make since childhood, and which is therefore referred to as the 'sense' of touch. But the sense alone does not suffice to correct the visual error. In addition we need to have some degree of reason which tells us that in this case we should believe the judgement based on touch rather than that elicited by vision. And since we did not have this power of reasoning in our infancy, it must be attributed not to the senses but to the intellect. Thus even in the very example my critics produce, it is the intellect alone which corrects the error of the senses. It is not possible to produce any case in which error results from our trusting the operation of the mind more than the senses.

E. To Clarity and Distinctness and the Nature of Knowledge

9. From Second Objections (Mersenne, 126): The criterion for certainty must itself be ensured.

It is not necessary to suppose that God is a deceiver in order to explain your being deceived about matters which you think you clearly and distinctly know. The cause of this deception could lie in you, though you are wholly unaware of it. Why should it not be in your nature to be subject to constant, or at least very frequent, deception? How can you establish with certainty that you are not deceived, or capable of being deceived, in matters which you think you know clearly and distinctly? Have we not often seen people turn out to have been deceived in matters where they thought their knowledge was as clear as the sunlight? Your principle of clear and distinct knowledge thus requires a clear and distinct explanation, in such a way as to rule out the possibility that anyone of sound mind may be deceived on matters which he thinks he knows clearly and distinctly. Failing this, we do not see that any degree of certainty can possibly be within your reach or that of mankind in general.

Descartes's Response (144-146):

As soon as we think that we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously convinced that it is true. Now if this conviction is so firm that it is impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are convinced of, then there are no further questions for us to ask. We have everything that we could reasonably want. But it may be doubted whether any such certainty, or firm and immutable

conviction, is in fact to be had.

It is clear that we do not have this kind of certainty in cases where our perception is even the slightest bit obscure or confused; for such obscurity, whatever its degree, is quite sufficient to make us have doubts in such cases. Again, we do not have the required kind of certainty with regard to matters which we perceive solely by means of the senses, however clear such perception may be. For we have often noted that error can be detected in the senses, as when someone with dropsy feels thirsty or when someone with jaundice sees snow as yellow; for when he sees it as yellow he sees it just as clearly and distinctly as we do when we see it as white. Accordingly, if there is any certainty to be had, the only remaining alternative is that it occurs in the clear perceptions of the intellect and nowhere else.

Now some of these perceptions are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true. The fact that I exist so long as I am thinking, or that what is done cannot be undone, are examples of truths in respect of which we manifestly possess this kind of certainty. We cannot doubt them unless we think of them. But we cannot think of them without at the same time believing they are true.

It is no objection to this to say that we have often seen people, "Turn out to have been deceived in matters where they thought their knowledge was as clear as the sunlight." For we have never seen, indeed no one could possibly see, this happening to those who have relied solely on the intellect in their quest for clarity in their perceptions; we have seen it happen only to those who tried to derive such clarity from the senses or from some false preconceived opinion.

There are other truths which are perceived very clearly by our intellect so long as we attend to the arguments on which our knowledge of them depends. We are therefore incapable of doubting them during this time. But we may forget the arguments in question and later remember simply the conclusions which were deduced from them. The question will now arise as to whether we possess the same firm and immutable conviction concerning these conclusions, when we simply recollect that they were previously deduced from quite evident principles. My reply is that the required certainty is indeed possessed by those whose knowledge of God enables them to understand that the intellectual faculty which he gave them cannot but tend towards

the truth. The required certainty is not possessed by others.

10. From Second Objections (Mersenne, 126-7):

The criterion for truth is too strict.

If this rule of yours that the will never goes astray or falls into sin so long as it is guided by the mind's clear and distinct knowledge is true, then there is almost nothing that the will is going to be allowed to embrace, since there is almost nothing that we know with the clarity and distinctness which you require for that kind of certainty which is beyond any doubt. So, you see how, in your desire to champion the truth, you may end up proving too much, and thus overturn the truth rather than build it up.

Descartes's response (149):

I should like you to remember that, in matters which may be embraced by the will, I made a very careful distinction between the conduct of life and the contemplation of the truth. As far as the conduct of life is concerned, I am very far from thinking that we should assent only to what is clearly perceived. On the contrary, I do not think that we should always wait even for probable truths. From time to time we will have to choose one of many alternatives about which we have no knowledge, and once we have made our choice, so long as no reasons against it can be produced, we must stick to it as firmly as if it had been chosen for transparently clear reasons. When we are dealing solely with the contemplation of the truth, surely no one has ever denied that we should refrain from giving assent in matters which we do not perceive with sufficient distinctness. In my *Meditations*, I was dealing solely with the contemplation of the truth; the whole enterprise shows this to be the case, as well as my express declaration at the end of the First Meditation where I said that I could not possibly go too far in my distrustful attitude, since the task in hand involved not action but merely the acquisition of knowledge.

F. To Necessary Truths

11. From Sixth Objections (Mersenne, 417-8): How can the necessary truths depend on God?

How can the truths of geometry or metaphysics, such as those you refer to, be immutable and eternal and yet not be independent of God? What

sort of causal dependence on God do they have? Could he have brought it about that there has never been any such thing as the nature of a triangle? And how could he have made it untrue from eternity that twice four makes eight, or that a triangle has three angles? Either these truths depend solely on the intellect that is thinking of them, or on existing things, or else they are independent, since it seems that God could not have brought it about that any of these essences or truths were not as they were from all eternity

Descartes's Response (435-6):

If anyone attends to the immeasurable greatness of God he will find it manifestly clear that there can be nothing whatsoever which does not depend on him. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason for anything's being true or good. If this were not so, then, as noted a little earlier, God would not have been completely indifferent with respect to the creation of what he did in fact create. If some reason for something's being good had existed prior to his preordination, this would have determined God to prefer those things which it was best to do. But on the contrary, just because he resolved to prefer those things which are now to be done, for this very reason, in the words of Genesis, "they are very good." In other words, the reason for their goodness depends on the fact that he exercised his will to make them so. There is no need to ask how God could have brought it about from eternity that it was not true that twice four make eight, and so on. I admit this is unintelligible to us.

On the other hand I do understand, quite correctly, that there cannot be any class of entity that does not depend on God. I also understand that it would have been easy for God to ordain certain things such that we men cannot understand the possibility of their being otherwise than they are. Therefore it would be irrational for us to doubt what we do understand correctly just because there is something which we do not understand and which, so far as we can see, there is no reason why we should understand. Hence we should not suppose that eternal truths "depend on the human intellect or on other existing things." They depend on God alone, who, as the supreme legislator, has ordained them from eternity.

G. To the Mind-Body Distinction

12. From Third Objections (Hobbes, 172-3):

Descartes confuses an action with a subject which acts.

In Meditation II, Descartes concludes, "I am a thinking thing." Correct. From the fact that I am thinking it follows that I exist, since that which thinks is not nothing. But when the author adds, "That is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect or reason," a doubt arises. It does not seem to be a valid argument to say, "I am thinking, therefore I am thought;" or, "I am using my intellect, hence I am an intellect." I might just as well say, "I am walking, therefore I am a walk." Descartes is identifying the thing which understands with intellection, which is an act of that which understands. Or at least he is identifying the thing which understands with the intellect, which is a power of that which understands. Yet all philosophers make a distinction between a subject and its faculties and acts, i.e. between a subject and its properties and its essences. An entity is one thing, its essence is another. Hence it may be that the thing that thinks is the subject to which mind, reason or intellect belong. This subject may thus be something corporeal.

Descartes's Response:

When I said "that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect or reason," what I meant by these terms was not mere faculties, but things endowed with the faculty of thought. This is what the first two terms are commonly taken to mean by everyone; and the second two are often understood in this sense. I stated this point so explicitly, and in so many places, that it seems to me there was no room for doubt.

There is no comparison here between 'a walk' and 'thought'. 'A walk' is usually taken to refer simply to the act of walking, whereas 'thought' is sometimes taken to refer to the act, sometimes to the faculty, and sometimes to the thing which possesses the faculty.

I do not say that the thing which understands is the same as intellection. Nor, indeed, do I identify the thing which understands with the intellect, if 'the intellect' is taken to refer to a faculty; they are identical only if 'the intellect' is taken to refer to the thing which understands. Now I freely admit that I used the most abstract terms I could in order to refer to the thing or substance in question, because I wanted to strip away from it everything that did not belong to it.

This philosopher, by contrast, uses absolutely concrete words, namely 'subject', 'matter' and 'body', to refer to this thinking thing, because he wants to prevent its being separated from the body.

But I am not afraid that anyone will think my opponent's method is better suited to the discovery of the truth than my own; for his method lumps together a large number of different items, whereas I aim to distinguish each individual item as far as I can.

13. From Fourth Objections (Arnauld, 198-202):

Clear and distinct knowledge of one's mind does not exclude one's body from one's essence.

The fact that I have doubts about the body, or deny that it exists, does not bring it about that no body exists. "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 know that I exist; the question is, what is this 'I' that I know? If the 'I' is understood strictly as we have been taking it, then it is quite certain that knowledge of it does not depend on things of whose existence I am as yet unaware."

The sense of the passage was that he was aware of nothing at all which he knew belonged to his essence except that he was a thinking thing. How does it follow from the fact that he is aware of nothing else belonging to his essence, that nothing else does in fact belong to it? I must confess that I am somewhat slow, but I have been unable to find anywhere in Meditation II an answer to this question. As far as I can gather, however, the author does attempt a proof of this claim in Meditation VI, since he takes it to depend on his having clear knowledge of God, which he had not yet arrived at in Meditation II.

Suppose someone knows for certain that the angle in a semi-circle is a right angle, and hence that the triangle formed by this angle and the diameter of the circle is right-angled. In spite of this, he may doubt, or not yet have grasped for certain, that the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the squares on the other two sides; indeed he may even deny this if he is misled by some fallacy. But now, if he uses the same argument as that proposed by our illustrious author, he may appear to have confirmation of his false belief, as follows: "I clearly and distinctly perceive," he may say, "that the triangle is right-

angled; but I doubt that the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the squares on the other two sides; therefore it does not belong to the essence of the triangle that the square on its hypotenuse is equal to the squares on the other sides.”

Even if I deny that the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the square on the other two sides, I still remain sure that the triangle is right-angled, and my mind retains the clear and distinct knowledge that one of its angles is a right angle. I clearly and distinctly understand that this triangle is right-angled, without understanding that the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the squares on the other sides.

I do not see any possible reply here, except that the person in this example does not clearly and distinctly perceive that the triangle is right-angled. But how is my perception of the nature of my mind any clearer than his perception of the nature of the triangle? He is just as certain that the triangle in the semi-circle has one right angle as I am certain that I exist because I am thinking.

Now although the man in the example clearly and distinctly knows that the triangle is right angled, he is wrong in thinking that the aforesaid relationship between the squares on the sides does not belong to the nature of the triangle. Similarly, although I clearly and distinctly know my nature to be something that thinks, may I, too, not perhaps be wrong in thinking that nothing else belongs to my nature apart from the fact that I am a thinking thing? Perhaps the fact that I am an extended thing may also belong to my nature.

If you reply that body is not straightforwardly excluded from my essence, but is ruled out only and precisely in so far as I am a thinking thing, it seems that there is a danger that someone will suspect that my knowledge of myself as a thinking thing does not qualify as knowledge of a being of which I have a complete and adequate conception.

Geometers conceive of a line as a length without breadth, and they conceive of a surface as length and breadth without depth, despite the fact that no length exists without breadth and no breadth without depth. In the same way, someone may perhaps suspect that every thinking thing is also an extended thing.

Descartes's Response (219-223):

I will begin by pointing out where it was that I embarked on proving “how, from the fact that I am aware of nothing else belonging to my essence (that is,

the essence of the mind alone) apart from the fact that I am a thinking thing, it follows that nothing else does in fact belong to it.” The relevant passage is the one where I proved that God exists - a God who can bring about everything that I clearly and distinctly recognize as possible.

Now it may be that there is much within me of which I am not yet aware (for example, in this passage I was in fact supposing that I was not yet aware that the mind possessed the power of moving the body, or that it was substantially united to it). Yet since that of which I am aware is sufficient to enable me to subsist with it and it alone, I am certain that I could have been created by God without having these other attributes of which I am unaware, and hence that these other attributes do not belong to the essence of the mind. For if something can exist without some attribute, then it seems to me that that attribute is not included in its essence. And although mind is part of the essence of man, being united to a human body is not strictly speaking part of the essence of mind.

I must also explain what I meant by saying that “a real distinction cannot be inferred from the fact that one thing is conceived apart from another by an abstraction of the intellect which conceives the thing inadequately. It can be inferred only if we understand one thing apart from another completely, or as a complete thing.” For there to be a real distinction between a number of things, each of them must be understood as “an entity in its own right which is different from everything else.”

After saying that I had “a complete understanding of what a body is,” I immediately added that I also “understood the mind to be a complete thing.” The meaning of these two phrases was identical; that is, I took ‘a complete understanding of something’ and ‘understanding something to be a complete thing’ as having one and the same meaning. But here you may justly ask what I mean by a ‘complete thing’, and how I prove that for establishing a real distinction it is sufficient that two things can be understood as ‘complete’ and that each one can be understood apart from the other.

My answer to the first question is that by a ‘complete thing’ I simply mean a substance endowed with the forms or attributes which enable me to recognize that it is a substance. We do not have immediate knowledge of substances, as I have noted elsewhere. We know them only by perceiving certain forms or attributes which must inhere in something if

they are to exist; and we call the thing in which they inhere a 'substance'. But if we subsequently wanted to strip the substance of the attributes through which we know it, we would be destroying our entire knowledge of it. We might be able to apply various words to it, but we could not have a clear and distinct perception of what we meant by these words.

I am aware that certain substances are commonly called 'incomplete'. But if the reason for calling them incomplete is that they are unable to exist on their own, then I confess I find it self-contradictory that they should be substances, that is, things which subsist on their own, and at the same time incomplete, that is, not possessing the power to subsist on their own. It is also possible to call a substance incomplete in the sense that, although it has nothing incomplete about it qua substance, it is incomplete in so far as it is referred to some other substance in conjunction with which it forms something which is a unity in its own right.

Thus a hand is an incomplete substance when it is referred to the whole body of which it is a part; but it is a complete substance when it is considered on its own. And in just the same way the mind and the body are incomplete substances when they are referred to a human being which together they make up. But if they are considered on their own, they are complete.

For just as being extended and divisible and having shape etc. are forms or attributes by which I recognize the substance called body, so understanding, willing, doubting etc. are forms by which I recognize the substance which is called mind. And I understand a thinking substance to be just as much a complete thing as an extended substance.

14. From Sixth Objections (Mersenne, 413): Is it impossible for the mind to be corporeal?

When you say you are thinking and that you exist, someone might maintain that you are mistaken, and are not thinking but are merely in motion, and that you are nothing else but corporeal motion. For no one has yet been able to grasp that demonstration of yours by which you think you have proved that what you call thought cannot be a kind of corporeal motion. Can you show us that it is self-contradictory that our thoughts should be reducible to these corporeal motions?

Descartes's Response (422-4, 425):

When someone notices that he is thinking,

given that he understands what motion is, it is quite impossible that he should believe that he is mistaken and is "not thinking but merely in motion." Since the idea or notion which he has of thought is quite different from his idea of corporeal motion, he must necessarily understand the one as different from the other. Because, however, he is accustomed to attribute many different properties to one and the same subject without being aware of any connection between them, he may possibly be inclined to doubt, or may even affirm, that he is one and the same being who thinks and who moves from place to place.

If we have different ideas of two things, there are two ways in which they can be taken to be one and the same thing: either in virtue of the unity or identity of their nature, or else merely in respect of unity of composition. For example, the ideas which we have of shape and of motion are not the same, nor are our ideas of understanding and volition, nor are those of bones and flesh, nor are those of thought and of an extended thing. Nevertheless we clearly perceive that the same substance which is such that it is capable of taking on a shape is also such that it is capable of being moved, and hence that that which has shape and that which is mobile are one and the same in virtue of a unity of nature. Similarly, the thing that understands and the thing that wills are one and the same in virtue of a unity of nature.

Our perception is different in the case of the thing that we consider under the form of bone and that which we consider under the form of flesh. Hence we cannot take them as one and the same thing in virtue of a unity of nature but can regard them as the same only in respect of unity of composition, i.e. in so far as it is one and the same animal which has bones and flesh.

Now the question is whether we perceive that a thinking thing and an extended thing are one and the same by a unity of nature. That is to say, do we find between thought and extension the same kind of affinity or connection that we find between shape and motion, or understanding and volition? Alternatively, when they are said to be "one and the same" is this not rather in respect of unity of composition, in so far as they are found in the same man, just as bones and flesh are found in the same animal? The latter view is the one I maintain, since I observe a distinction or difference in every respect between the nature of an extended thing and that of a thinking thing, which is no less than that to be found between bones and flesh.

The only way of understanding the

distinction is to realize that the notions of a thinking thing and an extended or mobile thing are completely different, and independent of each other; and it is self-contradictory to suppose that things that we clearly understand as different and independent could not be separated, at least by God. Thus, however often we find them in one and the same subject, e.g. when we find thought and corporeal motion in the same man, we should not therefore think that they are one and the same in virtue of a unity of nature. We should regard them as the same only in respect of unity of composition.

15. From First Objections (Caterus): Our ability to conceive two things distinctly does not entail that they are really distinct.

Descartes's proof of the supposed distinction between the soul and the body appears to be based on the fact that the two can be distinctly conceived apart from each other. Here I refer the learned gentleman to Scotus, who says that for one object to be distinctly conceived apart from another, there need only be what he calls a *formal and objective* distinction between them (such a distinction is, he maintains, intermediate between a *real* distinction and a *conceptual* distinction). The distinction between God's justice and his mercy is of this kind. For, says Scotus, "The formal concepts of the two are distinct prior to any operation of the intellect, so that one is not the same as the other. Yet it does not follow that because justice and mercy can be conceived apart from one another they can therefore exist apart."

Descartes's response:

The *formal* distinction applies only to incomplete entities, which I have carefully

distinguished from complete entities. It is sufficient for this kind of distinction that one thing be conceived distinctly and separately from another by an abstraction of the intellect which conceives the thing inadequately. It is not necessary to understand it as an entity in its own right, different from everything else; for this to be the case the distinction involved must be a real one. For example, the distinction between the motion and the shape of a given body is a formal distinction. I can very well understand the motion apart from the shape, and vice versa, and I can understand either in abstraction from the body. But I cannot have a complete understanding of the motion apart from the thing in which motion occurs, or of the shape apart from the thing which has the shape. I cannot imagine there to be motion in something which is incapable of possessing shape, or shape in something which is incapable of motion.

In the same way, I cannot understand justice apart from the person who is just, or mercy apart from the person who is merciful. I am not at liberty to imagine that the same person who is just is incapable of mercy. By contrast, I have a complete understanding of what a body is when I think that it is merely something having extension, shape and motion. I deny that it has anything which belongs to the nature of a mind. Conversely, I understand the mind to be a complete thing, which doubts, understands, wills and so on, even though I deny that it has any of the attributes which are contained in the idea of a body. This would be quite impossible if there were not a real distinction between the mind and the body.

Adapted from:

<http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/dc-obj-cogito.htm>

<http://www.philosophy.leeds.ac.uk/GMR/hmp/texts/modern/hobbes/objections/objects.html#o1>

Cottingham, John, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume II*. 1984: Cambridge University Press.