

DESCARTES

LETTER REGARDING the PINEAL
GLAND

TO MEYSSONNIER, 29 JANUARY 1640

AT III

I would have been the first to write to you, if I had had the advantage of 18
knowing you to be such as you describe yourself in the letter which you so 19
kindly sent me; for the search for truth is so essential and so vast an
undertaking as to need the united effort of many thousands; and there are
so few people in the world who join it wholeheartedly that those who do
should especially cherish each other and seek to help each other by sharing
their observations and their thoughts. This I am most willing to do with
every kind of affection.

As a beginning, I will answer the question you asked me about the
function of the little gland called *conarion*.¹ My view is that this gland is
the principal seat of the soul, and the place in which all our thoughts are
formed. The reason I believe this is that I cannot find any part of the brain,
except this, which is not double. Since we see only one thing with two eyes,
and hear only one voice with two ears, and in short never have more than
one thought at a time, it must necessarily be the case that the impressions
which enter by the two eyes or by the two ears, and so on, unite with each
other in some part of the body before being considered by the soul. Now it
is impossible to find any such place in the whole head except this gland; 20
moreover it is situated in the most suitable possible place for this purpose,
in the middle of all the concavities; and it is supported and surrounded by
the little branches of the carotid arteries which bring the spirits into the
brain. As for the impressions preserved in the memory, I imagine they are
not unlike the folds which remain in this paper after it has once been
folded; and so I think that they are received for the most part in the whole
substance of the brain. But I do not deny that they can also be present in
some fashion in this gland, especially in people whose minds are sluggish.
In the case of very good and subtle minds, I think the gland must be free
from outside influence and easy to move, just as we observe that the gland

¹ The pineal gland.

is smaller in man than it is in animals, unlike the other parts of the brain. I
think also that some of the impressions which serve the memory can be in
various other parts of the body: for instance the skill of a lute player is not
only in his head, but also partly in the muscles of his hands, and so on. As
for the likenesses of little dogs, which are said to appear in the urine of
those who have been bitten by mad dogs, I must admit that I have always
thought it was a fable, and unless you tell me that you have seen very
distinct and well-formed specimens I shall still find it difficult to believe in
them. However, if it is true that they can be seen, they could be explained in
21 some way similar to the birth marks which children receive from the
cravings of their mothers.¹