

Introduction



THE *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* is a truly revolutionary work, one that radically reshaped the landscape of metaphysics and epistemology. The three main topics taken up in the *Meditations*—the mind and its nature, body and its nature, and God—would become the focal points for subsequent metaphysics, especially for the rationalist side of early modern philosophy and for Kant. The broad idea that philosophy ought to begin with an account of mind and knowledge would also prove extremely influential, especially for the subsequent empiricist tradition and, again, for Kant. Indeed, it does not seem too much of an exaggeration to say, paraphrasing Whitehead, that early modern philosophy consists largely of footnotes to Descartes.

Revolutionary though it is, the *Meditations* is remarkably engaging and short. In seventy-five pages—not much longer than a journal article—Descartes takes up questions that almost every reflective person thinks about at some point. What can I know with certainty? Is there an external world? What is the nature of my mind? Does God exist? What is the nature of body? What is knowledge? How is my mind related to my body? Descartes's exploration of these questions proceeds in an intimate, almost conversational, manner. His bold and original answers continue to occupy our attention.

One of the factors contributing to the work's accessibility is Descartes's wish to make a clean start in philosophy (the first in a series of clean starts that philosophers will make, as it happens). The work is addressed to a reader—a meditator—relying only on her native faculties; it is not intended to require prior exposure to the philosophical tradition. I believe that Descartes's relation to the tradition is more complicated than he seems to think, because (as will emerge) he is as much reshaping it as extricating himself from it. Still, one can open the *Meditations* to almost any page and soon find oneself drawn in and absorbed in his discussion of the world and our place in it. He was an absolute master: he knew how to approach fundamental matters in a direct and nontechnical manner.

Like others of his time, Descartes had confidence in the ability of the human mind to fruitfully pursue questions about God, the nature or essence of the mind, and the nature or essence of the physical world. We

don't have that same confidence today. I don't think this is because we know more than Descartes, or because we have, in our sophistication, seen through his naïveté. Rather, too much water has passed under the bridge for us to be able to enter fully, let alone adopt, the perspective of a seventeenth-century thinker; the philosophical conversation has moved on. It is not necessary, however, to recover that confidence in order to appreciate Descartes's thought. Powerful philosophical minds have a way of making their presence felt even across a vast intellectual divide of differences in starting points, basic questions, methods, and general worldview. Exploring the thought of a major figure of the past, such as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, or Descartes, has the paradoxical effect of reinforcing its foreignness while at the same time helping us to appreciate its attraction and power. If one can't go home again to the seventeenth century, one can still find a visit enlightening.

Although the *Meditations* occupies a pivotal place in the history of philosophy, it has received unbalanced scholarly attention. For much of the twentieth century, scholars tended to read the work through an epistemological lens, with a focus on its handling of skepticism, certainty, justification of belief, and knowledge. Scholars offered sustained, often quite intricate, accounts of the First Meditation's skeptical arguments and the Second Meditation's cogito argument. Often, however, they have proceeded to take up remaining topics in the work—the wax passage, the various arguments for the existence of God, the proof that mind and body are really distinct, the proof that body exists, and so on—in a more occasional and less systematic way.

Behind this way of proceeding is a familiar picture of Descartes's place in the history of philosophy. Descartes is credited with ushering in a modern conception of mind and knowledge, where the mental is characterized as the seat of consciousness or (an incorrigible) subjectivity. The skeptical arguments and the cogito argument are of central importance because they help us appreciate that the mind is what, as it were, lies behind the veil of ideas, beyond the reach of the skeptical doubt. (Not infrequently, of course, this conception of mind is seen as harboring disastrous mistakes for subsequent tradition.) On this picture, most of the exciting work takes place early in the *Meditations*. Descartes's resolution of the skeptical doubt feels anticlimactic, almost disappointing; a curious and unpersuasive argument for the existence of God in the Third (which is supposed to afford our best hope of securing the certainty that two and three together make five), another unconvincing argument for the existence of God in the Fifth (coupled with the troubling claim that all of my knowledge depends on my knowledge of God), an intriguing but dubious argument for the claim that my mind and my body are different things (different enough that my mind cannot exist without my body), and a

disappointing argument for the existence of body (again trading heavily on the existence of God) in the Sixth to try to bring back the external world. On this approach, we wonder how Descartes thought he could get so much metaphysics past the careful standards of inquiry implicit in the skeptical doubt (prove that God exists, tell us what the natures of mind and body are, prove that mind and body are distinct substances).

More recently, scholars have been moving away from this picture of Descartes and emphasizing the metaphysical side of his thought. I agree that excessive focus on skepticism—in particular, a misunderstanding of what Descartes is using the skepticism for—has distorted our understanding of his thought. A reading that seeks to leverage Descartes’s conception of mind out of external-world skepticism leaves as irrelevant or desperate too much of what is going on in the *Meditations*. Still, I don’t think an alternative picture that orients us to the *Meditations* as a whole has emerged. I would like to suggest a candidate.

Very roughly, for reasons that go back to the scientific revolution, it became untenable in the seventeenth century to think of human knowledge the way Descartes’s scholastic Aristotelian teachers did. They thought of human understanding as basically a form of universal cognition, abstracted from sensory experience. As a famous scholastic slogan has it, there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses. Descartes did not find this a plausible way of thinking about what he regarded as the three main areas of human knowledge: the mind, God, and body. Descartes thought that our understanding of the mind, as something that affirms, denies, doubts, understands, and so forth, owes very little to the senses. He believed that our basic understanding of God, as, for example, an unlimited being that sustains everything in existence from one moment to the next, could not possibly have come to us through the senses. And he thought that our basic grasp of a body, as extended substance in motion, transcends anything that we acquire through our senses.

Therefore, in the *Meditations*, Descartes develops a new conception of the human mind and its situation in the universe that it knows. In the Second Meditation, he explains its essence or nature. The mind, on Descartes’s telling, turns out to be quite a bit more independent from the rest of the human being than it is on an Aristotelian telling. In particular, it no longer requires the senses in order to operate naturally. It is not merely a power (the intellect) of some more fundamental thing (a human being). It is a thing in its own right, a “substance.” In the Third Meditation, Descartes argues that the mind was created by a supremely perfect being (God). In the Fourth Meditation, he explains how, even so, it is possible for it to go wrong, as well as what it can do to avoid going wrong; in the Fifth Meditation, he tells us something about the truth or reality (certain “true and immutable natures”) to which the mind is related

when it knows, and he offers an account of the highest form of knowledge, what Descartes calls *scientia*. Finally, in the Sixth Meditation, he attempts to position the mind vis-à-vis its body.

I would like to describe in somewhat more detail some of the main themes emerging from my reading of the text, indicate some of my methodological commitments, and position my interpretation vis-à-vis a prevalent picture of Descartes. Because here I am only sketching and charting out, not developing or explaining in detail, some of what follows will be opaque to readers not already familiar with the main contours of the *Meditations* or some of the main currents in Descartes scholarship; still, I believe that even for these readers the following discussion will provide a useful first pass at the important framing issues and orienting ideas to come, even if my summary remarks contain what are for them placeholders that will need to be filled in later. Descartes tried, in the *Meditations*, to proceed strictly in a manner where nothing that came earlier depended on something to come later, but in this case I find myself unable to follow his example.

In the First Meditation Descartes presents skeptical arguments that are supposed to leave us in a condition of total bewilderment, causing us to wonder whether it is in our power to know any truth at all. As we enter the Second Meditation, under the spell of this uncertainty, we begin to doubt whether there even is a truth or reality for us to know: “So what remains true? Perhaps just this one thing, that nothing is certain” (¶2; 7:24; 2:16). Then something quite remarkable happens: I come to see (through the so-called cogito argument) that, come what may, I do know that at least this much is true: I exist. That is, I come to see not only that there is (at least) one reality for me to know (namely myself) but also that this real thing that I know to exist has the ability to *see that at least some things are true*. This being is usually called the mind; however, for reasons I will explain in chapter 2, I sometimes prefer to call this being—namely, me insofar as I am a cognitive being (see, e.g., III.¶32; 7:49; 2:33–34)—the *cogito being*.

The discovery of the cogito being provides Descartes with an Archimedean point (II.¶1) from which he levers a systematic exploration of the being’s nature, its proper functioning, and its metaphysical preconditions. What is the nature of this being? What is its origin? When does it understand well and judge properly? When it understands well and judges properly, what are the “somethings,” “not nothings,” to which its cognition relates it? And, finally, why is it that when this being understands well and judges properly, it reaches truth or reality?

The rest of the Second Meditation contains an account of the nature of the cogito being and explains how it is better known and understood

than body. At the beginning of the Third Meditation, the meditator, reflecting on what went well in the Second Meditation, hypothesizes that this being gets to truth or reality when it perceives clearly and distinctly (III.¶2). In order to discover whether this hypothesis is itself true, we need to find out who or what created the cogito being (the main subject of the Third Meditation) and to understand the nature of judgment and error (a goal of the Fourth Meditation). At the beginning of the Fifth Meditation, Descartes introduces the notion of a true and immutable nature: a true and immutable nature is a locus of understanding; it is the reality that the cogito being is characteristically related to when it understands. These true and immutable natures, he explains, do not require real existence; for example, the true and immutable nature that the cogito being understands when it sees that the three angles of a triangle sum to two right angles, is not a “nothing” but a “something,” and is independent of the cogito being, even if it should turn out that no triangles exist anywhere outside its thought. Finally, at the end of the Fifth Meditation, Descartes explains why the cogito being must recognize the author of its nature, God, if it is to have *scientia* (knowledge in its fullest sense). The Sixth Meditation unfolds a new chapter in the story. Up to that point, we have been concerned with only the cogito being itself. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes undertakes to position the cogito being with respect to physical reality, a project that is necessarily original inasmuch as Descartes’s conceptions of the cogito being (or “mind”) and body (as simply extension) are both novel.

This book follows this story across the *Meditations*. It is something of a cross between a running commentary and a thematically organized series of essays. Because my goal is to provide a sustained reading of the *Meditations*, I focus on the text itself. I look to other of Descartes’s writings (especially the Replies and Objections, and sometimes his correspondence) mainly when the text of the *Meditations* resists direct treatment. As noted earlier, I believe that Descartes attempted to write the *Meditations* in an intuitive and accessible way that encourages this sort of direct encounter.

All the same, Descartes’s intentions notwithstanding, the text, for all its surface familiarity, was written in an alien philosophical landscape (a landscape that it did much to reshape). We will need to be comfortable with that terrain—perhaps even more than is first apparent—in order to recognize what Descartes’s larger argument is all about and so to locate its originality. What I have in mind here is not so much the technical scholastic notions that crop up from time to time (e.g., objective and formal reality, formal and eminent causation, material falsity, and so forth), but rather more central and fundamental differences between Descartes’s intellectual milieu and our own. There are two large impediments, in

particular, that I think can stand in the way of our entering Descartes's thought.

First, the *Meditations* presupposes a familiarity with the project of scholastic philosophical theology that few readers have today. Philosophical theology is absolutely central to *Meditations* Three through Six. In the Third Meditation, Descartes twice argues that the cogito being could have been caused only by God; in the Fourth Meditation, Descartes explains how the mind's liability to error is compatible with its being created by a supremely perfect being; in the Fifth Meditation, Descartes presents an argument for the existence of God and an explanation of how *scientia* depends on the recognition of God's existence; and in the last third of the Sixth Meditation, he explains how a certain kind of instinctual error, belonging to the composite of mind and body, is compatible with God's having designed the union of the mind and body. To the extent that we are uncomfortable with traditional philosophical theology, we will have to hold these discussions—which seem to me to lie at the heart of the *Meditations*—at arm's length.

Second, and less obviously, lying in the immediate background to much of the *Meditations* is a general picture of human cognition, which Descartes set his face against and against which much of his argument takes shape. According to this picture, all human cognition arises out of sensation and remains essentially dependent on it. While this picture has an affinity with some modern versions of empiricism, it differs in certain fundamental ways that matter for understanding the *Meditations*' argument and for appreciating the originality of Descartes's position.¹

For help with both these aspects of the intellectual setting of the *Meditations*, I have turned to Thomas Aquinas. Of course Descartes did not compose the *Meditations* with Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* in front of him; after all, almost five centuries separate the two thinkers. I believe, though, that broad lines of Thomistic Aristotelianism helped to shape Descartes's discussion and set the stage for much of his major philosophical innovation—more so than did other forms of Aristotelianism, or other traditions of thought. I assume (this is not controversial) that Descartes's Jesuit teachers at La Flèche gave him a good feel for Thomistic Aristotelianism, and (this may be more controversial) that that training provided him with something that functioned as a sort of standard view against which he developed his own philosophy, somewhat in the way that his own thought would provide Spinoza and Locke with a starting point for their philosophy (or that Locke would provide Berkeley with one). In the case of his account of the mind, Descartes self-consciously departed from what he learned at La Flèche in fundamental ways. There is, I think, more continuity between Descartes and Aquinas with respect to philosophical theology, but even here Descartes innovated in very

significant ways—ways that are decisive for the subsequent rationalist tradition. Confronting Descartes's philosophical theology with that of Aquinas is made easier by the fact that Caterus, the Thomistically inclined author of the First Set of Objections, practically staged the confrontation for us.

My decision to focus on the text of the *Meditations* itself and to use Aquinas as the primary background for understanding Descartes's thought brings with it methodological limitations. For one thing, this commitment—the sustained reading of the text in light of Thomistic Aristotelianism—limits my ability to engage with the contemporary secondary literature. To be sure, there is a wealth of insightful and valuable literature on Descartes that touches on the aspects of the *Meditations* that I write about. However, most articles on Descartes are organized around themes or topics (e.g., Descartes's attitude toward substance, or his argument for the mind-body distinction, or his view of sensory qualities), and not around the text of the *Meditations*. Moreover, articles that are devoted to parts of that text—the First Meditation and the discussion of the piece of wax in the Second Meditation, for instance, have come in for much discussion over the years—are not concerned with working out the import of those parts against the context of a broadly speaking Thomistic Aristotelian outlook, nor do they aim to place them in the context of an overall, sustained reading of the *Meditations*. My engagement with the secondary literature is occasional because I did not see a way to treat it in a more consistent and systematic manner that would still allow me to work through Descartes's text continuously, in a direct and uncluttered way.²

My focus on Aquinas, to the neglect of scholastic authors much more contemporary to Descartes, will strike some as curious. I have not tried to take account of the many scholastic sources, both direct and indirect, that influenced (or may have influenced) Descartes's thought. In part, this is because I believe that Descartes was a truly revolutionary figure and that his originality can more readily be appreciated if one concentrates on certain fundamental themes (e.g., the place of the senses in human cognition, or certain framing commitments in philosophical theology and what sort of cognition of God is supposed to be available to us in this life) than if one focuses on more technical matters. While I do believe Descartes won the revolution he initiated, I don't think he gained the victory through hand-to-hand combat. Moreover, in my view, the most important payoff of contextualizing Descartes's thought would be a better *philosophical* understanding of that thought. Noting that others in the period held similar or different views, as the case may be, does not of itself take us very far toward that goal. If, for example, we discover that others held views like the one Descartes adopts, but we have no real sense of why they found those views philosophically attractive, then we

have deferred rather than illuminated a question. Or if we learn that others held a position that differs from one that Descartes adopts, but we have no real sense of how that position hangs together philosophically, then our understanding of what the disagreement is really about is still deficient. So it has seemed more important to try to get a philosophical feel for a few especially central commitments in Thomistic Aristotelian thinking about cognition and philosophical theology than to canvass the many fascinating estuaries, tributaries, and streams that fed into Descartes's thought and which a more properly historical treatment of it would have taken account of.

In the remainder of this chapter, I first provide an overview of Descartes's main enduring innovation in philosophical theology. I then sketch a Thomistic theory of cognition that I believe serves as background for much of the argument of the *Meditations*. Descartes, as noted earlier, took himself to be making a clean break with the philosophical tradition he inherited, especially Thomistic Aristotelianism, and we will want to understand something about the position he is rejecting in order to appreciate what he is arguing about and how his argument is supposed to work. This will allow me to introduce some of the main ideas in my interpretation of the *Meditations*. I conclude with a brief account of a prevalent contemporary picture of Descartes's achievement that, in my view, gets us off on the wrong foot.

PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

Of special importance to Descartes, as he develops his novel account of mind, is our cognitive relation to God. Both of Descartes's arguments for the existence of God are based on the thought that we start out with some cognitive purchase on God's essence or nature, that is, some positive knowledge of what God is, as opposed to a merely negative and relative knowledge (e.g., as the first mover unmoved of the motion we see in the world). The need for such a starting position is more obvious in the case of the Fifth Meditation's argument, which requires that we have some grasp of God's nature (some grasp of *what* God is) that enables us to see that God's nature contains existence. But it is equally true of the Third Meditation's argument. The argument presented there, at bottom, is that we couldn't have the cognition of God that we have unless God had a direct role in bringing it about. Descartes holds this position, I will suggest, only because he thinks our cognition of God reaches to God's very essence or nature, and so goes much beyond what Aquinas thought was available to us in this life. As Aquinas would have been the first to agree, we could not arrive at cognition of what God is by

abstracting from, and reasoning about, materials provided by the senses. Indeed, Descartes thinks (as he hints in the final paragraph of the Third Meditation) that our cognition of God in this life approaches the *visio dei* vouchsafed to the blessed in the next, a cognitive achievement that Aquinas believed requires special assistance from God.

Let me say something about the place of philosophical theology in Descartes's thought. Philosophical theology pervades the *Meditations*. As noted above, it is important not only for the Third and Fifth Meditations' discussions of God's existence but also for the Fourth's account of error and the Sixth's account of instinctual misfire; in any reasonable accounting, it takes up well over half of the work. Moreover, I believe Descartes's specific approach to philosophical theology, as well as the centrality that he gives it for metaphysics and epistemology, was decisive for the subsequent pre-Kantian rationalist tradition. This newfound centrality of philosophical theology to philosophy is, I believe, one of Descartes's principal legacies to his rationalist successors. Indeed, it is one of the primary ways by which the rationalist tradition differs from the empiricist tradition: Locke and Hume (Berkeley is an exception) assign a less central place to philosophical theology than do Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. Let me explain.

There is a sense in which philosophical theology is more integral to Descartes's metaphysics and epistemology than it was to Aquinas's. For Aquinas there is a path that leads gradually from natural philosophy and metaphysics to natural theology, but one can, and indeed must, learn a considerable amount of philosophy before one is ready to take up natural theology.³ For example, one needs to be familiar with Aristotelian ways of thinking about change, form, matter, and causation before one is ready to understand what is going on in the "Five Ways" (the five demonstrations of God's existence that Aquinas offers in the *Summa Theologiae*). By way of contrast, one can hardly take a step in the metaphysics and epistemology of Descartes (the Third Meditation, if not the First) before finding oneself knee-deep in philosophical theology. The same is true of the metaphysics and epistemology of his rationalist successors: consider, for example, Spinoza's doctrine that there is no substance besides God, or Malebranche's occasionalism, or Leibniz's theory of preestablished harmony. None of these philosophers think we can get very far in understanding the basic structure of the world and our place in it without theorizing about God.

Further, Spinoza's and Leibniz's ways of thinking about demonstrations of God's existence are closer to Descartes's arguments than to Aquinas's Aristotelian-style cosmological arguments; both seem to believe that we have the unproblematic access to God's essence or nature that Descartes thinks we have. This is so much the case that Kant—who

did more than anyone else to sow the seeds of doubt about the viability of the rationalist project in philosophical theology—holds that even the rationalist cosmological (causal) arguments for the existence of God (which were current in his time) were really, at bottom, disguised ontological arguments. Part of what is going on here, of course, is that Aristotelian ways of thinking about causation are coming under significant pressure with the advent of the new science, and the Five Ways are deeply indebted to Aristotelian ways of thinking about causation. (The first two of the Five Ways are based on the Aristotelian efficient cause, and the remaining three are based on the material, formal, and final cause, respectively.) But there is something else that is going on here as well, I believe. Spinoza and Leibniz also share with Descartes the idea that our cognitive access to God, to God's essence or nature in particular, is much less complicated than thinkers in the high Aristotelian scholastic tradition took it to be.

Although Descartes's philosophical theology is important to the *Meditations*, and important to his influence on the subsequent rationalist tradition, it can be difficult to keep this aspect of his philosophy squarely in view. Philosophical theology is not an enterprise in which the larger philosophical culture, especially that found in the world of analytic philosophy, places a great deal of confidence these days. (I offer this as a general proposition; obviously there are exceptions.) Many scholars, working from their sense of what might be valuable and enduring in Descartes's thought, have not wanted to emphasize this side of it. To be sure, they haven't ignored his philosophical theology completely—his demonstrations of the existence of God and his doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths have received their share of attention over the years—but commentators have tended to work around these commitments where they felt they could, often contenting themselves with pointing out where this or that demonstration of God's existence fails or begs the question. Since we now seem to know that such a demonstration is doomed from the start—carrying it through would be like trisecting the angle—the serious questions that remain are along the lines of “Where is the fallacy?” or perhaps “How did such a great mind get taken in?” In our more humble moments, we realize that this cannot be the last word, and that there is something deserving of intellectual respect going on here, even if it is difficult to recover and we can no longer take it at face value (in the same way that many scholars find it difficult to take at face value Marxist philosophy or Freudian psychology but still find value and interest in these traditions).

In any event, because of the centrality of philosophical theology to the *Meditations*, one cannot attempt a serious reading of that text without engaging with this aspect of Descartes's thought. In order to recover

Descartes's philosophical theology, I have found myself leaning on the contextual background more at this juncture than elsewhere, drawing extensively on the Replies and Objections as well as on Aquinas himself. By doing so, at least we can become more sophisticated students of Descartes's thought. For example, although his second argument for the existence of God—based on the inability to hold oneself in existence from one moment to the next—is often viewed, both by Descartes's contemporaries and by modern scholars,⁴ as little more than a reprise of one of Aquinas's cosmological arguments, this assessment seems superficial. The superficiality becomes apparent when one reflects that the causal principles that Aquinas employs lead to something *uncaused* (an *unmoved mover* or *uncaused cause*), whereas Descartes's principles lead (much to Arnauld's chagrin) to something that supports itself in existence, that is, something *self-caused* rather than not caused. (Descartes's way of thinking about this matter seems to have influenced Spinoza, who characterizes God as *causa sui*.)

This difference seems to reflect a more fundamental difference between Descartes and Aquinas over how human beings come to have cognition about God. For Aquinas, we arrive at our conception of God by reflecting on natural processes in the world and reasoning about them. This path leads gradually to a first mover unmoved and, from there, to the idea of a being whose essence is its *esse*. For Descartes, our cognitive approach to God is more immediate. We begin not with the question "What, if anything, is ultimately responsible for the change and motion that we find around us?" but rather a question that is more overtly metaphysical, "What keeps me in existence from one moment to the next?" (or, for that matter, "What holds me in existence at the present moment?"). Descartes does not find it plausible that we could reach this sort of question using materials acquired from sensory experience; rather, he thinks our ability to understand and operate with such questions shows us that we already have in place a robust idea of God (an "innate idea" that makes available something of God's essence or nature).

AQUINAS ON HUMAN COGNITION

Aristotle famously writes in *De Anima* that the soul becomes, in a way, all things.⁵ In the Aristotelian tradition, knowledge is a matter of the assimilation of the known by the knower. An Aristotelian account of knowledge sets out to characterize this relation between knower and known and to detail how that relationship came about. In order for one thing to know another, the knower must have something in common with the thing known. This commonality is understood in terms of formal identity: the

knower assimilates a form of the thing that is known. In the case of human natural knowledge, this assimilation takes place through the cooperation of our lower, sensory faculties and higher, intellectual faculties. So, Aquinas holds, with respect to human cognition, *nihil est in intellectu nisi prius fuerit in sensu*, that is, nothing is in the intellect unless it was first in the senses. In particular, although cognizing universally is an immaterial process, it requires (in the case of human beings) the presence of corporeal images (“phantasms”), which come from *species* acquired by the senses. We abstract from these phantasms when we cognize universally.

On this theory, structure that is initially found in the world is imported into the soul through the senses, where it is refined and stored as phantasms in the imagination (which includes the memory). This material is further refined, through abstraction, into intellectual cognition. Put slightly more technically, our sensory faculties take in sensory forms (*sensible species*) from the world, which are further processed and stored in the imagination as phantasms. The intellect proceeds to refine this material by abstracting away from what belongs to the sensed things as individuals, pulling out what they have in common so as to arrive at something universal; when this happens, a second, intellectual form (*intelligible species*) is produced, thereby bringing about an intellectual assimilation (via the *intelligible species*) of known by knower. When one cognizes intellectually, one must “turn toward the phantasms” from which one is abstracting. We never, then, leave the phantasms behind in our intellectual cognition; they provide us with, as it were, our portal to the world. It is only through the possession of phantasms (and the species from which the phantasms come) that the soul (in this life, according to its natural mode of cognition) has access to truth or reality; the natural functioning of the human intellect is such that the intellect must employ these stored images in order to cognize truth or reality. Thus, if someone were to lose all of her phantasms, her intellect would lose its access to the world. She would not only be unable to remember and imagine particular things, she would also be unable to abstract, to cognize universally, to understand.

It is easy enough to see why someone might hold that it is impossible to cognize the natural world, that is, to do natural philosophy, which is about material things, without working with some structure acquired from the world through the senses. It is perhaps more difficult to see why someone would think that the same holds true of our knowledge of mathematics, which is not an overtly empirical discipline, and more difficult still to see why someone would think the same of our knowledge of immaterial things, such as God and our own intellect, which do not fall under the senses at all. So let’s briefly review how Aquinas worked out this picture in the context of these three domains of cognition.

According to Aquinas, mathematics is concerned with intelligible matter. Intelligible matter is sensible matter considered only with the accident quantity. We conceive mathematical things, such as circles or triangles, by considering matter only under those accidents associated with the accident quantity; when we do so, we abstract⁶ in particular from those accidents involving change and motion. Since the mathematician neglects change and efficient causation, her concern is much simpler and more tractable than that of the natural philosopher. On account of this, the mathematician is able to reason in an *a priori* manner, in the traditional sense of *a priori*, from cause to effect, that is, from definitions of various kinds of quantified matter to the consequences of those definitions, whereas the natural philosopher must reason in an *a posteriori* manner, from effects to causes, that is, from the sensible effects to the underlying essences or natures responsible for those effects. Notwithstanding this important methodological difference between mathematics and natural philosophy, the mathematician no less than the natural philosopher depends on the senses in order to receive forms from the world, which forms (when suitably refined) give her cognitive access to the object of her discipline, intelligible matter.⁷

The story with the knowledge of immaterial things is different. Since the human soul's acquisition of forms takes place through the senses, the natural object of human knowledge, that is, what human beings are by nature best suited to know, is sensible things. It does not follow, however, that human beings have no knowledge of immaterial things; it follows only that what knowledge they do have of immaterial things is more circuitous than the knowledge that they have of sensible, material things. This obliqueness is felt differently in the case of human knowledge of God from the way it is felt in the case of intellectual self-knowledge.⁸

According to Aquinas, the human mind cannot grasp the essence of God, that is, cannot grasp *what* God is. Rather, we are able to infer certain things about God, including that he exists. There are three principal routes to such knowledge, "by way of negation, by way of causality, and by way of transcendence" (*In Boetium de Trinitate* Q. 6, A. 3). We know, for example, that God exists, that he is the first cause of all bodies "by way of causality," that he is immaterial, that is, not a body "by way of negation," and that he is more perfect than any body "by way of transcendence." The point of departure for each of these paths is our knowledge of body; hence, our knowledge of divinity works through images acquired from sensory experience.⁹ Now, the dependence of human knowledge of God on the senses envisioned here is not simply genetic: the human intellect understands God *through* the images that enable it to understand body. When we understand, we must always turn to the phantasms that contain structure imported from the world. So, for example, if a human being

were to lose her phantasms, she would lose her cognitive access to the nature of body; and if she lost that, she would also lose her conception of God as a being that causes bodies, is not a body, and transcends body. This is why Aquinas compares the way images ground human knowledge to the way the principles of demonstration ground “the whole process of science.”¹⁰

Intellectual self-knowledge also presents a difficult challenge to the principle *nihil est in intellectu nisi prius fuerit in sensu*. How can it be that likenesses obtained from the senses are relevant to our understanding of our own intellect? Indeed, it might seem that the intellect is specially aware of itself in a way that ought to suffice for intellectual self-knowledge. Aquinas responds to such concerns by maintaining that, since in general a power is understood through its activity and “in this life our intellect has material and sensible things for its proper natural object,” the intellect “understands itself according as it is made actual by the species abstracted from sensible things” (ST I, Q. 87, A. 1). Now, when the intellect is made actual through the acquisition of intelligible species abstracted from sensible phantasms, it comes to know itself in two ways, first, “singularly,” as “when Socrates or Plato perceives that he has an intellectual soul because he perceives that he understands,” and second, “universally,” as “when we consider the nature of the human mind from the act of the intellect [*ex actu intellectus*].” Aquinas goes on to note that while “the mere presence of the mind suffices for the first” sort of self-knowledge, the second is more difficult, requiring “a careful and subtle inquiry.” Aquinas outlines this “careful and subtle inquiry” in his treatment of a similar question in *De Veritate*:

Hence, our mind cannot so understand itself that it immediately apprehends itself. Rather, it comes to a knowledge of itself through apprehension of other things, just as the nature of the first matter is known from its receptivity for forms of a certain kind. This becomes apparent when we look at the manner in which philosophers have investigated the nature of the soul.

For, from the fact that the human soul knows the universal natures of things, they have perceived that the species by which we understand is immaterial. Otherwise, it would be individuated and so would not lead to knowledge of the universal. From the immateriality of the species by which we understand, philosophers have understood that the intellect is a thing independent of matter. And from this they have proceeded to a knowledge of the other properties of the intellectual soul. (DV Q. 10, A. 8)¹¹

We understand the intellect to be that faculty which knows the universal natures of material things. This understanding of the intellect serves as

the basis for our knowledge of other properties of the intellect, such as its independence of matter and its incorruptibility. As our knowledge that the intellect is a faculty that knows the universal nature of material things depends on the senses, so too does the entire edifice of intellectual self-knowledge.

In Aquinas's view, what is distinctive of human—as opposed to (non-human) animal—cognition is our ability to understand. Aquinas saw understanding as fundamentally a matter of cognizing universally: we, unlike (the other) animals, are able to grasp the universal nature *cow*, and not merely this cow or that cow; similarly, we, unlike animals, are responsive to good in general, and not merely this good or that good. Further, according to Aquinas, cognizing universally is an immaterial process, taking place in an immaterial subject, the human intellect. The human intellect does not have a location in the body in the way that our faculty of digestion or faculty of vision does. It is in virtue of its possession of this immaterial power that the human soul can, according to Aquinas, survive the dissolution of its body.

To be clear, the preceding concerns Aquinas's views on the human intellect's *natural* functioning. There are other modes of cognition open to the human intellect that take it beyond its nature in certain respects. One, available to every human intellect between death and bodily resurrection, involves the infusion of special species or likenesses by God. Without the body, the intellect would not have phantasms from which to abstract; so if the intellect is to be able to function at all in this condition, it must receive some assistance from above. Over the course of his career, Aquinas changed his view from regarding this mode of cognition as in some way preferable to the human intellect's natural mode of cognition (because it is similar to that enjoyed by higher, purely intellectual beings) to regarding it as second best, a sort of stopgap (because it is unsuited to the human intellect, which is not powerful enough to make good use of the infused species).¹² And a second mode of cognition beyond our natural function is available only to the blessed; this requires the special strengthening of the created intellect by God's divine light ("the light of glory").

These qualifications aside, however, the nature of the human intellect is to understand truth or reality only by abstracting from phantasms, originally acquired through senses; and the intellect must turn to these phantasms whenever it functions according to its natural mode of operation. Although it is sometimes thought that Aquinas's allowing for the soul to have some cognition without the body brings his position close to Descartes's in certain ways, it is Aquinas's account of the intellect's natural mode of cognition that I believe matters most for our understanding

of the *Meditations*, since that is a work about the natural functioning of the human mind.

It is worth pausing to consider the sense in which Aquinas's account of human cognition counts as a philosophical account of human knowledge. It is not (directly) an account of how our beliefs or knowledge claims are justified, although it may have consequences for this. Nor is it an *a priori* "first philosophy"—quite clearly Aquinas's theory is available only after we have learned quite a bit about the world. But it is an explanation of how human cognition is related to reality, and in particular, how reality is given to human cognition. As such, the account sets limits to human cognition: for example, since the essence of God cannot be recovered from God's sensible effects, the account tells us we cannot (in this life) grasp God's essence.

As an account of the various ways in which reality is given to our cognition, Aquinas's account, it seems to me, stands in a line with accounts offered by Locke and Kant. They, too, were interested in how the world and its structure is made available to our cognition, and thought that careful reflection on this topic served to show our cognitive limits. Locke, for example, argued that materials for human cognition come through experience (sensation and reflection) and that these materials simply do not provide the human mind with the wherewithal to address many metaphysical questions (e.g., Can matter think? What is the nature of substance?). Kant argued that objects are given to the human mind only through (sensible) intuition, and this fact dooms the rationalist's metaphysical project. Neither Aquinas nor Locke, nor for that matter Descartes, has, of course, a Kantian conception of an object, but they do ask to what extent the world's "structure" (form, essence, nature) is given to us, and they connect this question to a general theory of how such structure is given to our thought. I find it sometimes useful to place Aquinas's account of cognition, along with Descartes's nativist alternative, in a line of philosophical reflection that includes Locke's and Kant's theories, the very obvious and significant philosophical differences among them notwithstanding, in order to help draw out the philosophical character of the former.

Now, Descartes parts company with Aquinas in a very fundamental way over the question of how structure is given to human cognition. He holds that the mind does not depend on the senses for its access to reality, but rather is naturally endowed by God with such access. This break brings with it a new understanding of the relation between intellectual and sensory cognition (as clear and distinct versus obscure and confused), of the relation between the intellect (the "mind alone") and body. It also brings with it a new, fundamental characterization of the mind

according to which what is fundamental is not the ability to cognize universally (to abstract universals) but to see that something is true (to make judgments).¹³

As the story of the cogito being unfolds, it quickly emerges that its connection to the truth or reality that it cognizes does not depend on the senses, phantasms, or the body. Thus, early in the Second Meditation, immediately after establishing that the cogito being's essence is to think, Descartes warns the meditator against using the imagination in her attempt to understand better the nature of the cogito being (II.¶7). Later in that meditation, in the well-known discussion of a piece of wax, he argues that the cogito being's grasp of what an extended thing is outstrips what the cogito being can imagine or sense. In that discussion, understanding the piece of wax turns out to be a matter of using one's mental vision to penetrate to the wax's deep structure—of “distinguish[ing] the wax from its outward forms and, as it were, strip it and consider it naked” (II.¶14; 7:32; 2:22)—rather than of pulling out some common nature. On this telling, the distinguishing mark of human cognition is not the ability to cognize universally. As the *Meditations* continues, we come to see that we have a sort of cognitive access to God that even Aquinas would have agreed could not have come from corporeal phantasms (as noted in our discussion of philosophical theology, the demonstrations of God's existence in the Third and Fifth Meditations rest on this). Finally, Descartes claims, near the beginning of the Fifth Meditation, that our geometrical cognition does not depend on our having acquired from the senses ideas of the figures that we make judgments about; and, near the beginning of the Sixth Meditation, that we can draw conclusions about figures that cannot be perspicuously represented by our imagination.

Because the cogito being does not depend on its lower, corporeal faculties—sense and imagination—for its access to truth and reality, it is, by its nature, less wedded to its body than the human intellect is on Aquinas's theory. This, it seems to me, is the fulcrum for Descartes's well-known claim that the mind and body are metaphysically independent of one another, that is, two “really distinct” beings. The cogito being (the mind) does not require the body in order to function according to its natural mode of operation, and so body does not enter (even obliquely) into an account of its essence or nature. So, in Descartes's view, the human mind depends less on the body than Aquinas thought.¹⁴

Descartes holds that the converse is true as well—the body depends less on the mind—in the following sense. According to Aquinas, the human soul (which includes the intellectual soul) is related to the human body as substantial form is to matter. Now, in order for matter to exist, it must be actualized by form; so, on Aquinas's theory, the human body is

made actual by the human soul. In contrast, Descartes understands the physical world—*res extensa*—as consisting of a fluidlike plenum, extending indefinitely in all directions. Individual bodies are mechanisms holding the status of relatively stable patterns of motion within this plenum, roughly analogous to a tornado or the jet stream, although often more enduring and, especially in the case of plants and animals, much more complex. The plenum is self-sufficient; it does not require form in order to exist. The same is true of the various individual mechanistic systems within the plenum: they are not actualized by form. So, in particular, in Descartes's view, the systems of matter that count as human bodies are not "actualized" by human minds (even if it is the case that for those systems to count as human bodies, they must be united to human minds). Thus, Descartes finds himself faced with the task of positioning (what would be from the point of view of his Thomistic education) two new entities, an autonomous mind and a self-sufficient mechanistic system, *vis-à-vis* each other. Although metaphysically independent, these beings are somehow intimately related. Articulating their relationship is an important task of the Sixth Meditation.¹⁵

Even though Descartes breaks with Aquinas over the doctrine of abstraction, there remains an important continuity between his way of thinking about cognition and Aquinas's. This point of continuity has to do with the tricky subject of how "intentionality" plays out within Descartes's philosophy, and the little I have to say on this topic revolves around it.

In the Aristotelian tradition, cognition is understood as the existence of some mind-independent structure, form, in the soul. There has to be form (or nature or essence) first before there can be form (or nature or essence) in the soul. Whether this form, nature, or essence exists in the world, whether it exists in the mind of God, or whether it has some other "ontological status" (perhaps as the effect of some decrees that God makes) does not matter for the point I am making here, which is that whatever its ontological status, human cognition involves form or structure, which is independent of and prior to the soul, coming to exist in the soul.

Now, it might be thought that Descartes, perhaps through his theory of innate ideas, takes a step away from this picture of human cognition toward Kant, where basic forms of human thought are not essentially dependent on an objective order or reality from which they are taken but rather are used to generate such an order or reality. Such an interpretation is encouraged by Descartes's use of skeptical doubt, which can make it seem as if my ideas depend only on me, without any other metaphysical presuppositions (at least if we drop well-placed scruples about sliding from my certainty that I am having an idea while in doubt about other things to an account of the nature of the idea).

Nevertheless, it seems clear to me that Descartes is, on this point, still thinking of cognition in a more or less traditional way. A point that Aquinas makes when treating the cognition of God is that the Latin *forma* is the term traditionally used to translate the Greek *idea*.¹⁶ So the term *idea* carries with it overtones of a thing's structure. I believe that this overtone continues with Descartes, so that for him, too, an idea is some form or structure—some “reality”—existing objectively in the mind (hence Descartes denies that the idea of nothing is an idea in the proper sense [5:153; 3:338]). As with his scholastic predecessors, that structure is prior to my cognition at least to the extent that it “determines” my cognition (and not the other way around). So, in his discussion of true and immutable natures in the Fifth Meditation, Descartes writes concerning his cognition of a triangle that “even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind” (V.¶5; 7:64; 2:45). This is in line with the explanation of objective reality Descartes gives to Caterus in the First Replies (7:102; 2:75), where he writes as if there is some single thing—the sun—with two modes of existence (in a way that suggests that the sun is prior to the modes of existence rather than posterior to them, as it would be if, for example, it were extracted from what the two modes of existence have in common).¹⁷ Descartes's (and Aquinas's) outlook may run against the grain of a modern tendency to think of ideas as primary and the “objective order” as (co-)dependent on the ideas. However, the general thought that the objective order is somehow built up out of our ideas, as opposed to the position that an idea is a trace or image of a prior objective order coming to exist in us, seems to me to belong to a later moment in the history of philosophy. Perhaps this general thought occurs in one way in an empiricist like Hume (who seems to disavow any important distinction between an idea and its object) and in a very different way in Kant. But for Descartes, as for the Aristotelian tradition, ideas are best thought of as vehicles through which some reality or structure (i.e., some “nature, or essence, or form”) comes to exist in the mind and is made available to cognition: since the idea of a triangle is just the true and immutable nature of triangle existing objectively within me, without the true and immutable nature (or essence or form) of triangle there could be no idea (or essence or form) of triangle.

Now, one might agree with what I have just claimed with respect to intellectual ideas but harbor doubts about whether this could be right about sensory ideas. Perhaps, for Descartes, sensory ideas are brute (“arbitrary”) effects of the physical world on the mind, and not structures imported from the physical world into the mind (his attack on the Aristotelian claim that sensory ideas “resemble” their objects might seem to

point in this direction, toward a “brute effect” view). However, I think it is the same story with sensory ideas.¹⁸ They, too, involve the existence of structure (presumably some corporeal configuration) in the mind. What Descartes says about sensory ideas is that the structure (the “reality”) that is found objectively in them is obscure and confused. This vocabulary is easily understood if we think of sensory ideas as depositing structure into the mind: the point would be that while they deposit structure, they do so in such a way that it is made available only obscurely and confusedly. By way of contrast, this vocabulary is harder to understand (as Locke in effect noted) if we think of sensory ideas as brute impingements of the physical world on the mind. On that model, vocabulary like “obscure and confused” seems out of place, inasmuch as it is hard to understand what it would be for a brute impingement to be either clear or obscure, either distinct or confused. Soon enough the philosophical tradition will move away from thinking of the difference between sensation and intellection in terms of (what Kant will term) the “logical” difference between clarity and distinctness, on the one hand, and obscurity and confusedness, on the other, to making a distinction based on the genesis or origin of the idea—but that, too, is a subsequent development. (One can raise questions about defective ideas, e.g., materially false ideas; even these, I think, should be measured against a paradigm of an idea as an imported reality.)¹⁹

The view I am attributing to Descartes clashes with a picture of him as a certain sort of epistemologist.²⁰ Many are accustomed to thinking of a Cartesian idea as consisting of precisely whatever is made available to the mind (perhaps after some careful attention) for the purposes of reflectively grounding our beliefs, so that the structure found in an idea is exhausted by whatever can be brought to explicit awareness. Sensory ideas come to be, as it were, the epistemological surfaces of a thing. This makes difficult the thought, at least suggested by language like “obscure” and “confused,” that sensory ideas should have a metaphysical backside,²¹ that is, contain some additional structure we cannot get at by contemplating the idea because that structure is present in the idea only obscurely or confusedly. Indeed, many find it natural to think that one of the primary purposes of the First Meditation’s skeptical doubt is to teach us how to lift these epistemological surfaces off of bodies. I don’t think Descartes was interested in these epistemological surfaces. To be sure, there are things he says that could be read as espousing such a view, but quite a bit of what he says, at least if taken at face value, runs against the grain of such a view. Certainly his basic cognitive framework, where ideas are realities existing objectively, and a sensory idea is confused and obscure, does not encourage the view that ideas, by their nature, must be epistemically transparent in such a way that an idea cannot contain

more than meets (or can meet) the eye, so to speak. (For example, if my sensory idea of white is a certain surface texture existing in a confused manner in my mind, then it seems that the idea contains more structure than I have access to.) Further, one does not find in his writings the sort of developed theory of these surfaces and their relation to the objects to which they belong that one would hope for if he were advancing such a position. And what is perhaps most important, none of his major undertakings in the *Meditations* has much, if anything, to do with these epistemological surfaces (by his major undertakings, I have in mind providing an account of the nature of the human mind, its origin, its relation to truth or reality, and the truth or reality to which it is related). Things run more smoothly if we do not read Descartes as an epistemological-surface theorist and instead see him as sharing with his scholastic predecessors the basic tenet that cognition involves a common reality, form, or structure existing both in the mind (“objectively”) and in the world (“formally”), even at the level of sensory cognition.

A FAMILIAR VIEW OF DESCARTES’S CONCEPTION OF THE MIND

The picture of Descartes as working with epistemological surfaces is, of course, part of a larger conception of him as a certain sort of epistemologist; this conception has, to my mind, often obscured Descartes’s own philosophical agenda.

The First Meditation has been looked to as a *locus classicus* for questions of skepticism, knowledge, and certainty, topics that have been of considerable interest to philosophers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is credited for moving these questions to the center of philosophy, and for raising in a particularly forceful way, and perhaps for the first time in its full generality, the question, Can I really know that there is an external world? Notice that this focus already subtly directs our attention away from Descartes’s ambitious substantive metaphysics. For example, if I have trouble knowing that there is a table in front of me, it seems a tall order to know what the essence of the mind is or whether God exists. Apparently he let his guard down somewhere along the line, and now the task becomes to figure out where.

Moreover, readers have sometimes taken Descartes’s characterization of the mind to fall more or less directly out of the First Meditation’s external-world skepticism. The mind and its states reach as far as, but no farther than, what is left unchallenged by the dreaming doubt—the epistemological surfaces just alluded to. So, for example, I can use the dreaming doubt (or some suitably similar device) to factor those aspects of my current encounter with the keyboard I take to be under my fingers into

two metaphysically independent components, one that belongs to the mind and one that belongs to the physical world: I think to myself, “I see and feel a keyboard in front of me.” But what if I were dreaming or hallucinating (or whatever)? Well, in any case, there are “keyboard ideas” or “keyboard experiences” (or “keyboard sense data”?) of which I am indisputably aware, even if it should turn out that there is no keyboard (or, for that matter, no external world). These epistemological surfaces, be they “keyboard ideas” or “keyboard experiences” or whatnot, belong to the mind; and the mind is, fundamentally, the locus of such conscious “states” (to use a word that Descartes does not himself use), which states are sufficiently distinct from body that they could occur in me if I had no body.

This view is naturally combined with two other positions. First, when I sense, say, a red truck, what I am in immediate epistemic contact with is not the physical truck but instead certain mental items, for example, red sensory ideas, which stand in some special (usually causal in nature) relation with the truck. In other words, I start my cognitive life from behind a veil of sensory perception, and must find a means of arguing my way out, to an external physical world. Second, consciousness is the distinguishing feature of the mind: my mind extends as far as my certainty, in the face of a doubt based on the idea that I might, for all I know, be dreaming or hallucinating, and that certainty extends only to that of which I am consciously aware (the “keyboard ideas” or “keyboard experiences”). Thus, when Descartes says that the essence of the mind is to think, what he really means is that the essence of the mind is to be conscious, and that the mind is fundamentally the seat of consciousness, the subject of my conscious states—that is, those states which I can know that I am having even while assuming that I am dreaming or hallucinating.

Obviously the foregoing is not a very carefully developed or complete account, but I hope it is familiar. In calling the view familiar, I do not mean to imply that it represents a consensus among Descartes scholars today. Indeed, many have begun to wonder about the place of consciousness in Descartes’s conception of mind, especially as he presents it in the *Meditations*.²² And there are very able Descartes scholars on both sides (and, I think, in the middle) of the question of whether he was committed to a veil of ideas.²³ Still, this picture of Descartes has enough currency within a wider philosophical audience that I think it is not misleading to call it the familiar view.

I have not found that the familiar view is something that emerges from a patient consideration of the text. Nor have I found it a useful guide to bring to the text in order to illuminate it. It leaves too much of what is going on (for example, most of the philosophical theology mentioned

earlier) out of the picture and, to my mind, where the view is supposed to apply, does too little to motivate the very substantive philosophical claims that Descartes is depicted as advancing. More often than not, these claims and the reasoning on which they rest turn out to be “instructive mistakes.” This feeling can be traced back to the fact that so little of the familiar view is explicitly worked out (rather than simply assumed or presupposed) in the text of the *Meditations*. If the point of the *Meditations* is to advance the familiar view, Descartes has left most of the important philosophical work to the reader.²⁴ So, for the most part, I have ignored the familiar view, as distracting us from the concerns that, it seems to me, Descartes is plainly and centrally advancing and developing in the text.

I have not been able to ignore the familiar view completely, however. Although I think it mostly false, it is not obviously so. Indeed, it is hard not to bring the familiar view to the text and to suppose that Descartes held some such view in the back of his mind when he wrote the *Meditations*, even if it is very difficult to read his text as the working out of such a view. And, I agree, there are some things that Descartes says along the way that (at least on their face) encourage the idea that he held some of the commitments attributed to him by the familiar view. To mention three examples: First, Descartes makes a remark in the Second Meditation about the senses that has suggested to many that he factors sensation into mental and physical components and identifies sensation with the mental side, treating the physical side as not essential to the activity (II.¶9). Second, when he does this, he seems to be using consciousness (or indubitability under external-world skepticism) as a criterion of the mental, thus lending support to the view that he identifies the essence of mind with consciousness. Finally, the fact that Descartes sees a need to prove that bodies exist, coupled with a comment he makes in the Sixth Meditation about what he regards as the proper object of the senses (III.¶6), can be taken as evidence that he embraces some sort of “veil of ideas” theory of perception.²⁵ We will examine all of this later *in situ*, but I would like to indicate here in a general way why these moments don’t seem to me to go very far toward showing that Descartes held the familiar view. (When treating issues connected with the familiar view, I am sometimes more resolute than I perhaps should be, giving the impression that the rejection of the familiar view is a considered commitment on Descartes’s part. It seems to me, rather, that for the most part it is not on his radar screen, which, I must admit, makes it unclear exactly what he would want to say if confronted with a question such as “Do you mean to say that we could sense even if we had no bodies?” or “Do you mean to say that we perceive only ideas ‘directly’ and not bodies or their qualities?”)

Let’s begin with consciousness. Consciousness is probably at some level important to Descartes’s conception of the mind, even if this

importance is not especially emphasized in the *Meditations*. (The Latin word for consciousness, *consciūs*, appears only once in the *Meditations*. Other cognitive terminology—for example, *cognoscere* and *cognitio*—can carry connotations of consciousness or awareness, but as Descartes does not draw explicit attention to such connotations, it is hard to know to what extent he means to be invoking them.)²⁶ But what is important here is that if consciousness does enter into Descartes's account of mind, it does not lie at the heart of it. Rather, what is fundamental is the ability *to see that something is so*, to make judgments and (at times) to know the truth, to penetrate beneath the surface of things to the underlying structure. Consciousness enters the picture (to the extent that it does) through its connection with these activities: Descartes understands seeing that something is so as paradigmatically an occurrent, conscious activity, which is why he thinks that we can be conscious of the mind's exercise of its powers; and, conversely, when we are conscious of the exercise of a power, as when we sense or imagine, that activity becomes available to assist us in our judgments, and so the relevant power, at least to that extent, belongs to the mind.

This is what, I think, leads Descartes to associate the mental with the conscious and, in some settings, to use consciousness (or indubitability under external-world skepticism) as a sort of criterion by which to distinguish between those aspects of a given complex activity (especially sensing) that belong to the mind and those aspects that do not (which usually belong instead to the body). But—and this seems to me important—when Descartes uses consciousness (or indubitability under external-world skepticism) in this way, he is employing the criterion to settle the question of the relationship between the different (i.e., mental, corporeal) aspects of the activity to one another, or their relation to the larger activity itself. In particular, I do not see him as implying that the aspect of sensing singled out by consciousness or indubitability—the mental aspect—could somehow exist in reality without the rest of the package. Nothing along these lines would follow from the fact that, even under external-world skepticism, I am certain about the mental aspects that have occurred but uncertain whether the corporeal aspects have occurred. Indeed, for him to have to assume that this did follow—that is, that because I can be certain that mental aspects associated with sensation have taken place while I am in doubt about whether there have been any corporeal goings-on in the universe, it follows that the mental aspects could take place without any corporeal goings-on—would be for Descartes to make, at the level of sensation, a mistake that he has often been (unfairly) accused of making when he argues that the mind can exist without the body. In the latter case, he is often accused of inferring that my mind can exist without my body from the fact that I can be certain that my mind exists while I am in

doubt that my body exists; in the case of sensation, he would be arguing that sensing, or the mental aspects of sensing, can exist without body because I can be certain that sensing, or the mental aspects of sensing, is going on while I am in doubt that my body exists. Neither argument, as it stands, seems very compelling, and I do not believe that Descartes offers either of them. In the case of mind and body, he does hold the conclusion (i.e., that the mind can exist without the body), but offers a different argument for it (roughly, that the mind does not need corporeal phantasms in order to function successfully cognitively, in order to make true judgments about reality). In the case of sensation, I do not think Descartes even holds the conclusion (i.e., that beings without bodies can have sensory ideas).

Rather, when Descartes uses consciousness (or indubitability) as a criterion to show that sensation, or some aspect of it, belongs to the mind, I think his point is that I can see beyond doubt that there is something going on in me that is at least in the vicinity of sensation—call this something that is going on, as Descartes himself sometimes does, “as it were sensing”; exactly what it is awaits a fuller account. So, for example, I can tell that there is something going on in me right now—call it “seeming to see a keyboard” or “as it were seeing a keyboard”—even while, under the spell of the First Meditation, I find myself doubting that keyboards exist (or that I have a body). But under these circumstances, I would have only a very partial view of this “seeming to see.” A fuller characterization of what this seeing is, including an account of the place of body in seeing, awaits a more complete view of the situation.²⁷

Finally, I don’t read Descartes as holding that I am (immediately) aware only of my sensory ideas and only subsequently (and perhaps indirectly) aware of bodies or their qualities. (To be sure, the ground here is difficult because of the variety of things that philosophers have wanted to mean by “immediately,” “subsequently,” and “indirectly.”)²⁸ Part of my reason for thinking this is based on the scholastic picture of cognition sketched above. On that picture, I become cognizant of the red in a body simply by having the form of red exist in me (in some “cognitive” or “spiritual” or “objective” mode of existence); in order to sense a body, I don’t need to first direct my attention to some mode of the mind. In other words, what a sensory idea does is to make me (immediately) cognizant of, aware of, or conscious of a quality in a body, some physical structure in the keyboard.

But, one might object, if this is so, why does Descartes feel obliged to offer an argument for the existence of body? Wouldn’t it suffice to show that one has a sensory idea, coupled with the thesis that sensory ideas function so as to import reality transmitted from currently existing bodies, and be done with it? Well, before the argument for the existence of

body, the meditator does not know what sensory ideas do, how they function; she does not know that her possession of a sensory idea makes her cognizant of something existing in a body. She has her suspicions, of course. So we might put it thus: before the argument she does not know that sensory ideas function in the way she suspects they do, in the way she finds herself naturally inclined to believe they do. And the point of the argument is simply to show that sensory ideas *do* function more or less in the way she naturally (i.e., has “a great propensity to”) thinks they function. The argument (as I understand it) is not intended to get us from a realm of inner mental objects (“sensory ideas”) to some other realm of outer, physical objects (“bodies”); rather, it is to confirm our instinctive feeling that we have been receiving information (“directly”) from outer objects, bodies, all along.

Some will, no doubt, disagree with my tendency to distance Descartes from the familiar view. For much of what follows, it will not matter very much, because the familiar view seems to be more in the line of something that one might bring to the text in order to attempt to illuminate it, rather than something that emerges from the text. As things turn out, we can make much headway in understanding the text without becoming very involved with the familiar view.