
SYNOPSIS OF THE SIX FOLLOWING MEDITATIONS

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In the First Meditation I set down the reasons which enable us to place everything in doubt, especially material things, at least as long as we do not have foundations for the sciences different from those we have had up to now. Although at first glance the usefulness of such a widespread doubt is not apparent, it is, in fact, very great, because it frees us from all prejudices, sets down the easiest route by which we can detach our minds from our senses, and finally makes it impossible for us to doubt anymore those things which we later discover to be true.

In the Second Meditation, the mind, using its own unique freedom, assumes that all those things about whose existence it can entertain the least doubt do not exist, and recognizes that during this time it is impossible that it itself does not exist. And that is also extremely useful, because in this way the mind can easily differentiate between those things pertaining to it, that is, to its intellectual nature, and those pertaining to the body. However, since at this point some people may perhaps expect an argument [proving] the immortality of the soul, I think I should warn them that I have tried to avoid writing anything which I could not accurately demonstrate and that, therefore, I was unable to follow any sequence of reasoning other than the one used by geometers. That means I start by setting down everything on which the proposition we are looking into depends, before I reach any conclusions about it. Now, the first and most important prerequisite for understanding the immortality of the soul is to form a conception of the soul that is as clear as possible, one entirely distinct from every conception [we have] of the body. And that I have done in this section. After that, it is essential also for us to know that all those things we understand clearly and distinctly are true in a way which matches precisely how we think of them. This I was unable to prove before the Fourth Meditation. We also need to have a distinct conception of corporeal¹ nature. I deal with that point partly in this Second Meditation and partly in the Fifth and Sixth Meditations, as well. And from these we necessarily infer that all those things we conceive clearly and distinctly as different substances, in the same way we think of the mind and the body, are, in fact, truly different substances, distinct

1 Bodily, physical.

from one another, a conclusion I have drawn in the Sixth Meditation. This conclusion is also confirmed in the same meditation from the fact that we cannot think of the body as anything other than something divisible, and, by contrast, [cannot think of] the mind as anything other than something indivisible. For we cannot conceive of half a mind, in the same way we can with a body, no matter how small. Hence, we realize that their natures are not only different but even, in some respects, opposites. However, I have not pursued the matter any further in this treatise for two reasons: (1) because these points are enough to show that the annihilation of the mind does not follow from the corruption of the body, so we mortals thus ought to entertain hopes of another life; and (2) because the premises on the basis of which we can infer the immortality of the mind depend upon an explanation of all the principles of physics. For (2), first of all, we would have to know that all substances without exception—or those things

14 which, in order to exist, must be created by God—are by their very nature incorruptible and can never cease to exist, unless God, by denying them his concurrence,² reduces them to nothing, and then, second, we would have to understand that a body, considered generally, is a substance and thus it, too, never dies. But the human body, to the extent that it differs from other bodies, consists merely of a certain arrangement of parts, with other similar accidental³ properties; whereas, the human mind is not made up of any accidental properties in this way, but is a pure substance. For even if all the accidental properties of the mind were changed—if, for example, it were to think of different things or have different desires and perceptions, and so on—that would not mean it had turned into a different mind. But the human body becomes something different from the mere fact that the shape of some of its parts has changed. From this it follows that the [human] body does, in fact, perish very easily, but that the mind, thanks to its nature, is immortal.

In the Third Meditation I have set out what seems to me a sufficiently detailed account of my main argument to demonstrate the existence of God. However, in order to lead the minds of the readers as far as possible from the senses, in this section I was unwilling to use any comparisons drawn from corporeal things, and thus many obscurities may still remain. But these, I hope, have later been entirely removed in the replies [I have made] to the objections.⁴ For instance, among all the others, there is the

2 The continuous divine action which many Christians think necessary to maintain things in existence.

3 See the section in the Introduction, “Some Useful Background Information,” I., for explanation of “accidental” here.

4 Descartes refers to the set of objections and replies he published at the end of *Meditations*, not reprinted here.

issue of how the idea of a supremely perfect being, which is present within us, could have so much objective reality that it is impossible for it not to originate from a supremely perfect cause. This is illustrated [in the replies] by the comparison with a wholly perfect machine, the idea of which exists in the mind of some craftsman. For just as the objective ingenuity of this idea must have some cause, that is, the technical skill of this craftsman or of someone else from whom he got the idea, so the idea of God, which is in us, cannot have any cause other than God Himself. 15

In the Fourth Meditation, I establish that all the things which we perceive clearly and distinctly are true, and at the same time I explain what constitutes the nature of falsity; these are things that we have to know both to confirm what has gone before and to understand what still remains. (However, in the meantime I must observe that in this part I do not deal in any way with sin, that is, with errors committed in pursuit of good and evil, but only with those which are relevant to judgments of what is true and false. Nor do I consider matters relevant to our faith or to the conduct of our lives, but merely those speculative truths we can know only with the assistance of our natural light.)

In the Fifth Meditation, I offer a general explanation of corporeal nature and, in addition, also demonstrate the existence of God in a new argument, in which, however, several difficulties may, once again, arise. These I have resolved later in my replies to the objections. And finally, I point out in what sense it is true that the certainty of geometrical demonstrations depends upon a knowledge of God.

Finally, in the Sixth Meditation, I differentiate between the understanding and the imagination and describe the principles of this distinction. I establish that the mind is truly distinct from the body, and I point out how, in spite of that, it is so closely joined to the body that they form, as it were, a single thing. I review all the errors which customarily arise through the senses and explain the ways in which such errors can be avoided. And then finally, I set down all the reasons which enable us to infer the existence of material things. I believe these are useful not because they demonstrate the truth of what they prove—for example, that there truly is a world, that human beings have bodies, and things like that, which no one of sound mind ever seriously doubted—but rather because, when we examine these reasons, we see that they are neither as firm or as evident as those by which we arrive at a knowledge of our own minds and of God, so that the latter are the most certain and most evident of all things which can be known by the human intellect. The proof of this one point was the goal I set out to attain in these *Mediations*. For that reason I am not reviewing here, as they arise [in this treatise], various [other] questions I have dealt with elsewhere. 16