

# Descartes' Slight and Metaphysical Doubt

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2013

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# ABSTRACT

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The goal of my dissertation is to argue that Descartes arrives at his account of self-knowledge by grappling with skepticism about introspection. As I interpret him, Descartes has his meditator attempt to undermine introspection so that he can replace his former beliefs about his mind's nature and activities with an account of self-knowledge that is immune from doubt. Just as he must show that reason and sense perception are sources of knowledge because they can withstand his skeptical challenges, he must also show that introspection is equally indubitable. To this end, he constructs the strongest arguments he can from the perspective of a skeptic who maintains that we can be ignorant of or in error about our thought. Then he attempts to show that none of the skeptic's premises can undermine his conclusion that we have infallible knowledge of our mind's nature and activities. My dissertation reconstructs these skeptical arguments in order to clarify the role they play in motivating (and ultimately grounding) Descartes' account of self-knowledge

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The goal of my dissertation is to argue that Descartes' initial skepticism extends to introspection as well as to sense perception and reasoning. As I interpret him, Descartes has his meditator attempt to undermine introspection so that he can replace his former beliefs about his mind's nature and activities with an account of self-knowledge that is immune from doubt. Just as he must show that reason and sense perception are able to withstand his skeptical attacks in order to be sources of knowledge, he must also show that introspection can survive the most extreme skeptical challenges. He tries to cast doubt on introspection by raising the skeptical possibility that we may be ignorant of or in error about even the most obvious features of our thought such as the kind of thought we are engaged in and whether we are thinking at all. For instance, he suggests that we can fail to recognize the contributions our mind makes to our thought or mistake our strong preference for one object or outcome for indifference. Even more troublingly, we can confuse bodily disturbances such as the effects of illness or intoxication with the activities of what he takes to be our incorporeal mind so that we cannot distinguish between our thoughts and things outside our mind.

Other scholars have argued that Descartes initially casts doubt on some aspects of our self-knowledge, but they take these doubts to have a fairly limited scope. Matthew Eshleman holds that, on Descartes' account, we can be ignorant about our genuine motives for action because they are obscured by the passions. According to Eshleman, Descartes also denies that we can know the cause of our passions or distinguish between similar passions. However, Eshleman claims that, for Descartes, we can only be mistaken or ignorant with regard to the passions. He denies that Descartes entertains similar worries about other realms of thought.<sup>1</sup> Lex Newman believes that Descartes entertains more radical doubts about introspection. On

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<sup>1</sup> 2007: pgs. 301-309

Newman's account, Descartes fears that we can mistake thoughts that are produced by our mind's own activities for thoughts that are caused by things outside the mind.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we can be ignorant of some of our mind's activities and in error about the cause of some of our thoughts. However, Newman confines these errors to our faculty of sense perception and a mysterious "unknown faculty" that Descartes posits in order to raise this skeptical possibility. He does not think Descartes considers the possibility that introspective errors about these faculties could also cause us to make errors about the activities of our other faculties. Nor does he believe that Descartes entertains independent doubts about our knowledge of the activities of these other faculties. In contrast, I argue that Descartes raises very general doubts about introspection. As I interpret him, he entertains the skeptical possibilities that we can be in error about the activities of our will and ignorant of the contribution our intellect makes to our thought by combining our innate ideas. I also take him to fear that our ignorance or error about the activities of one cognitive faculty makes us vulnerable to ignorance or error about the activities of our other cognitive faculties. Thus, I believe that the scope of his doubt about introspection is much wider than other scholars have supposed.

I argue that Descartes raises these broad doubts about introspection by having the meditator suppose that his cognitive faculties are the creation of a deceitful God. Descartes uses the possibility that the mind's Creator is a deceiver in order to generate more radical doubts than the doubts he has already raised about the reliability of sense perception and the existence of an external world. Although he has the meditator put this possibility in language that is reminiscent of the traditional problem of evil,<sup>3</sup> I think he is concerned with something other than the apparent

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<sup>2</sup> 1994: pg. 493

<sup>3</sup> For instance, in Meditation 4 he has the meditator ask "the more skilled the craftsman the more perfect the work produced by him; if this is so, how can anything produced by the supreme Creator of all things not be complete and perfect in all respects" (AT 7: 55; CSM 2: 38).

incompatibility between a perfect Creator and an imperfect creation. The most straightforward way of understanding the word ‘deceit’ is to take it to mean ‘lying’ or ‘intending that others (and perhaps oneself) come to believe falsehoods’. One might imagine other ways the meditator could go wrong without his Creator intending to deceive him. For instance, he could fear that his mind’s Creator lacks the knowledge or skill necessary to create faculties that never go wrong without fearing that he is being intentionally led astray. A Creator with limited knowledge and power might intend that the human mind be perfect (or as perfect as a created thing can be) but fail to anticipate that its faculties are susceptible to particular kinds of error or lack the skills necessary to produce faculties that are immune from error. Alternately, a Creator Who withheld perfect faculties from us out of malice might do so without intending that we believe falsehoods. As Descartes and his interlocutors agree, God might demonstrate His benevolence through benign forms of deceit: “...I would not want to criticize those who allow that through the mouths of the prophets God can produce verbal untruths which, like the lies of doctors who deceive their patients in order to cure them, are free of any malicious intent to deceive” (R 2 = AT 7: 143; CSM 2: 102). Thus, the meditator does not merely suppose that his Creator may lie to him or lack the knowledge and power to endow him with flawless faculties. Instead, he speculates that his Creator intends that he errs by coming to believe falsehoods. Because he holds that God is all-powerful, he reasons that God will always successfully deceive him. For this reason, he fears that he can never judge truly.

If the meditator can be mistaken about the nature and activities of his mind, then he can fall victim to this thoroughgoing deceit. No matter how he conceives of introspection, the threat of radical skepticism looms. He might hold that he comes to know that he is thinking a particular thought just by thinking that thought. If, as I will argue, he can be mistaken about the

contents of his thought or the kind of thought he is engaged in, there is nothing that his error can be. That is, his error cannot be the false conclusion of an inference or a false second order belief because he did not introspect by making an inference or forming a belief about his beliefs. His error is literally a non-being. As a kind of non-being, it cannot stand in any relation to things outside the mind. It cannot resemble external things, represent them, conform to them, or be identical to them. For this reason, it cannot provide the materials for any true judgments. Alternately, the meditator might believe that he makes a judgment when he introspects. If this judgment can be false, an absurdity results. When he introspects, he might judge that he is considering evidence that supports  $q$  and tells against not- $q$ . However, he might make an additional introspective judgment and misidentify his belief that  $q$  as a doubt that  $q$ . As a result, he can judge that  $q$  is true and judge that he does not believe that  $q$ .<sup>4</sup> The conclusion of this absurd inference also cannot stand in any relation with things outside the mind. There is nothing that the paradox ‘ $q$  and I do not believe that  $q$ ’ can be identical to, resemble, conform to, or represent. Thus, it also fails to provide the materials for a true judgment. Whether the meditator comes to know that he is thinking a thought just by thinking it or by making some kind of judgment, he cannot make true judgments about things outside his mind. Since, by hypothesis, introspection fails, he is also ignorant and in error about his mind’s nature and activities. Therefore, he is constantly mistaken, just as he would be if he were being deceived by a malevolent, all powerful Being.

Many scholars hold that Descartes uses the skeptical possibility that God is a deceiver to challenge the notion that there is a privileged class of beliefs that are immune to doubt. Once he articulates this challenge and shows it can be dismissed, he believes, he can establish that

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<sup>4</sup> This is Moore’s Paradox:  $p$  is true, and I do not believe that  $p$ .



“whatever [we] perceive clearly and distinctly is true” (M 3 = AT 7: 35; CSM 2: 24). There are two ways of understanding this challenge. Understood in the first way, it is the worry that some of our beliefs may appear indubitably true to us even though it turns out that they are false. I do not engage with this worry in my dissertation. Understood in the second way, however, this challenge is just a special case of the skepticism about introspection that I am concerned with. Descartes holds that we can recognize beliefs belonging to this privileged class because they have a special character—they are “present and accessible to the attentive mind” and “so sharply separated from all other perceptions that [they] contain[] within [themselves] only what is clear” (PP I.45 = AT 8A: 22; CSM 1: 208). If the meditator can confuse beliefs with this special character and beliefs that lack it, he can make an introspective error. That is, he can be mistaken about the character of his thought. I do not think that there is any reason to suppose that Descartes confines his fear that we can be mistaken about the character of our thought to clear and distinct beliefs. As I will argue, he raises the skeptical possibility that our thoughts can appear to have a character marking them as having been caused by bodies in the external world even though they were produced by our mind’s own activities. He also fears that thoughts that appear to issue from one of our cognitive faculties can turn out to have another cognitive faculty, or even a non-thinking corporeal faculty, as its source.

I articulate these broad worries about introspection in three essays. Each essay is devoted to one of the introspective errors the meditator would be condemned to make if his Creator deprived him of necessary cognitive faculties or endowed him with malfunctioning cognitive faculties in order to deceive him. I organize each essay around the skeptical hypothesis that the meditator’s cognitive faculties resemble the injured, incompletely developed, or non-existent cognitive faculties of adult human beings with serious mental illness, human children, and non-

human animals. I argue that if the meditator has such faculties, he will be ignorant or in error about the nature and activities of his mind. Thus, he will not be able to attain self-knowledge or come to know anything that depends on his insight into the nature and activities of his mind. A brief outline of the argument of my essays follows.

- **Madness Skepticism:** I introduce the account of self-knowledge that Descartes seeks to defend against even the most extreme skeptical challenges. On this account, we cannot be mistaken about the kind of thought we are engaged in (and whether we are thinking) and what it is that we are thinking about. I then argue that Descartes initially (and, as he believes, unsuccessfully) tries to undermine this account by having the meditator posit that he was created with a mind resembling the mind of an individual with a serious mental illness. If he has such a mind, the meditator can confuse thoughts that take place without the intervention of a body with thoughts that are essentially connected to bodies. He can also will without recognizing himself as the author of his volitions. For these reasons, he can doubt introspection as a reliable source of knowledge.
- **Childhood Skepticism:** Descartes has the meditator criticize his teachers because they affirm doctrines without being convinced of their truth and reason from principles that they know to support incompatible conclusions. However, he fears that he cannot help but make the very same mistakes because his natural impulses, the so-called “teachings of nature,” lead him astray. He can obey the teachings of nature and affirm an opinion even though he knows by means of his intellect that this opinion is false. He is also impelled in opposite directions by the teachings of nature so that he is inclined to pursue and avoid the very same objects. The meditator is susceptible to these errors, I will argue, because he can mistake a strong inclination for indifference and an obscure and confused sense perception for a clear and distinct intellectual apprehension. As a result, he can doubt introspection as a source of knowledge.
- **Animal Skepticism:** As I will interpret them, the meditator’s worries about dreams and the perception of small, distant objects are worries about the nature of his faculties of

sense perception and imagination. He fears that these faculties are not faculties for thought because they seem to be limited and fallible in the same way that the faculties of bodies are limited and fallible. That is, they seem to function haphazardly or at random by causing him to seem to see and hear when he is dreaming even though his eyes and ears are not being stimulated by some external body. If these cognitive faculties are corporeal, he fears, he will be no different from a non-human animal because he will not be able to think or have any insight into his mind. His self-knowledge will be limited to what he can fallibly infer from the motion and arrangement of his faculties' various corporeal parts, so he will be prone to error when he introspects. Thus, he can doubt introspection as a source of knowledge.

Although Descartes dismisses his doubt that God is a deceiver as "slight and metaphysical," his willingness to raise it shows just how wide-ranging he intends his initial skepticism to be. Thinkers who are willing to question everything from abstruse theoretical matters and ethical requirements to the taste of honey and the color of chalk exempt introspective beliefs from their otherwise rigorous and thoroughgoing doubt.<sup>5</sup> Hume raises powerful doubts about induction, personal identity, and the persistence of bodies, but he musters (at most) very tepid skepticism about what we can know by means of introspection.<sup>6</sup> Even Peter Unger's attempted proof of his

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<sup>5</sup> Reporting on the Cyrenaic school, Plutarch claims "so, when belief, restricts itself to affections, it is infallible, but when it oversteps them and meddles with judgments and assertions about external objects, it often disturbs itself" (qtd. in Fine 2003: 205). Sextus makes a similar claim about his own Pyrrhonist school, asserting that "for example, they [=skeptics] would not say, when heated or chilled, "I think I am not heated (or: chilled)". Rather, we say that they do not have beliefs in the sense in which some say that belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences; for Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything unclear" (ibid: 208).

<sup>6</sup> Hume suggests that it is difficult to avoid errors in introspection, but we can improve our introspective judgments by means of "habit and reflection": "It is remarkable concerning the operations of the mind, that, though most intimately present to us, yet, whenever they become the object of reflection, they seem involved in obscurity; nor can the eye readily find those lines and boundaries, which discriminate and distinguish them. The objects are too fine to remain long in the same aspect or situation; and must be apprehended in an instant, by a superior penetration, derived from nature, and improved by habit and reflection" (1.13 = pg. 93)

non-existence leaves introspection untouched.<sup>7</sup> Despite their theological motivation and grounding in late medieval accounts of the mind, Descartes' attempts to undermine introspection anticipate the arguments of the most radically skeptical contemporary philosophers of mind.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the skeptical possibility that God is a deceiver motivates arguments that are not merely historical curiosities or relics of a more religious period of philosophy. Instead, they are important yet unappreciated contributions to an ongoing contemporary debate.

## Essay 1: Madness Skepticism

So that he can doubt even the “simplest and most general things,” Descartes has his meditator-spokesperson suppose that he lacks the kind of mind capable of understanding what it is to be a body or for a body to persist and other notions that cannot “incur any suspicion of

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<sup>7</sup> Unger uses a Sorites of Decomposition Argument to argue that he does not exist. He imagines having each of his cells removed and kept alive separately. Taking away a single cell, he reasons, does not make a difference to his survival. Nor does taking away another and then another, but after a while nothing will remain. He concludes, “thus, the supposition of my existence has been reduced to an absurdity” (1997: 183). He gives another argument purporting to show that we cannot know anything at all because we “...ought not, really, be absolutely certain that [we] now exist, or that something exists, or that [we] feel[] pain now, or whatever” (2004: 51). However, this argument does not depend on premises detailing introspective errors and does not aim at undermining introspection.

<sup>8</sup> Maja Spener argues that we cannot “...settle questions about whether visual consciousness involves intrinsic, non-representational properties, relations to mind-independent objects and properties, and so on” by means of introspection. Thus, it seems false that “...the basic nature of what it is visually like for one to undergo experience is plainly given to introspective reflection” (2007: 14, 4). Eric Schwitzgebel claims that “there are major lacunae in our self-knowledge that are not easily filled in, and we make gross, enduring mistakes about the most basic features of our currently ongoing conscious experience (or “phenomenology”), even in favorable circumstances of careful reflection, with distressing regularity” (2008: 247). Spener and Tim Bayne attempt a project that is similar to the project that I attribute to Descartes since they raise skeptical challenges to introspection in order to undermine them. However, the account of self-knowledge that they endorse is far more modest than the account Descartes ultimately accepts, and their challenges to introspection take the form of arguments from disagreement (2010: 1-22). Descartes is impatient with such challenges, responding brusquely to Gassendi's objection that his experience of the will's indifference is unlike that of the meditator: “but although these propositions [about our experience of the will's indifference] are self-evident, I am not prepared to set about proving them here. These are the sorts of things that each of us ought to know by experience in his own case, rather than having to be convinced of them by rational argument...” (R 5 = AT 7: 377; CSM 2: 259).

being false” (M 1 = AT 7: 20; CSM 2: 14). To convince himself that even these seemingly “transparent truths” are doubtful, the meditator imagines that he has been endowed with faculties that malfunction or deprived of the faculties necessary for solving basic math problems or contemplating “even simpler matter[s]” (ibid. = AT 7: 21; CSM 2: 14). He speculates that his mind’s origins might explain why it could be missing some faculties for thought or going wrong because of the shortcomings of the faculties it has. Since he has always believed that his mind is a divine creation, he hypothesizes that its Creator might have had reason to withhold the necessary faculties from it or to equip it with faculties that inevitably err. He spends the rest of the *Meditations* trying to reconcile what he takes to be his mind’s divine origins with its propensity for error.

The goal of this essay is to argue that the nature and activities of his mind are among the simple and general things that the meditator calls into doubt by means of the skeptical possibility that his Creator endows him with malfunctioning faculties. As I interpret him, Descartes has the meditator attempt to undermine introspection so that he can replace his former beliefs about his mind’s nature and activities with an account of self-knowledge that is immune to doubt. Just as he believes that reason and sense perception cannot be sources of knowledge unless they can withstand his skeptical attacks, he holds that introspection must be able to survive even the most radical skeptical challenges. In this essay, I articulate a skeptical challenge that Descartes believes his account of self-knowledge must overcome.

Before I articulate the skeptical possibility that the cognitive faculties that have been bestowed upon him prevent the meditator from knowing his own mind, I will introduce the account of self-knowledge that emerges from Descartes’ engagement with skepticism about introspection. I begin with this account because I think it reveals the range of skeptical

possibilities that the meditator will need to eliminate in order to show that introspection is reliable. As I interpret him, Descartes holds that we can never be mistaken about the nature and activities of our mind, so he must eliminate relatively modest skeptical possibilities along with the radical doubts that I discuss in this essay. He accepts a two part claim about our knowledge of our cognitive faculties and their modes that I will call the “Transparency Doctrine”:

1. we know that we are engaged in some form of thought just by engaging in that form of thought and adding our will’s affirmation; and
2. we cannot be mistaken that we are having an idea of x even if our idea does not give us insight into x’s nature or essence. Therefore, we know that we are having an idea of x just by having that idea and adding our will’s affirmation.

These two claims about our knowledge of our mind entail a claim about our mind’s nature—namely, that it does not contain any faculties that we cannot discover by means of introspection. Thus, doubting introspection not only allows the meditator to doubt what he can know of his mind but also the kind of thing that it is.

Once I have outlined this account of self-knowledge, I will show how Descartes has the meditator try to undermine it by means of his skeptical possibility that he has been deprived of the cognitive faculties necessary for knowledge because his Creator is a deceiver. The meditator speculates that God has endowed him with malfunctioning faculties in order to deceive him—that is, he fears that his Creator intends that he errs by coming to believe falsehoods. Since he believes that God is all-powerful, he reasons that God will never fail to deceive him. For this reason, it must be impossible for him to judge truly. As I will argue, he cannot make true judgments about his mind or anything outside it if he is vulnerable to introspective errors. If he can mistake one thought for another, his error will result in some kind of absurdity. Suppose the

meditator can mistake a sensation of warmth for a sensation of cold. Since a sensation of warmth is, for Descartes, nothing more than seeming to be warmed, a sensation of warmth that was misidentified as a sensation of cold would be an appearance of warmth that appeared cold. This is clearly absurd. Because it is an absurdity, it cannot resemble, conform to, represent, or stand in any relation at all to things in the outside world or other thoughts in the meditator's mind. Therefore, it could not provide him with the materials for a true judgment. If it is always possible that the meditator makes an introspective error, it is also possible that he fails to judge truly. Thus, he is always deceived because he lacks faculties that are transparent to him.

I end my essay by arguing that the meditator could be vulnerable to introspective errors if his mind resembled the mind of an individual afflicted with a serious mental illness. If he has been endowed with such faculties, I will argue, the meditator can be in error about the kind of thought he is engaged in. That is, he can confuse possibilities he merely entertains in his intellectual imagination with beliefs he has formed by means of the intellect or senses and have volitions without recognizing that he is willing. Because he can mistake his intellectual imaginings for sense perceptions, he can fail to distinguish thoughts that Descartes takes to originate from the communication between the body and the mind from thoughts that he believes to have a purely mental, incorporeal origin. For this reason, it seems that the meditator can neither know his own mind nor the supposedly clear and distinct separation between the mind and body and all that depends on it.

## 1. Descartes' Account of Self-Knowledge

Descartes' account of self-knowledge emerges from his interaction with skepticism about introspection. These skeptical arguments aim to show that our introspective errors take the form of paradoxes or contradictions and, for this reason, they are a kind of non-being. As non-beings,

our introspective errors cannot stand in any relation with things outside the mind, so they cannot provide the materials for true judgments about the mind or anything else. In order to dispel this skeptical conclusion, Descartes argues that God's benevolence ensures that our ideas of our mind and its activities, along with our other clear and distinct ideas, are beings. "...[E]very clear and distinct perception," he claims, "is undoubtedly something, and hence cannot come from nothing, but must necessarily have God for its author" (M 4 = AT 7: 62; CSM 2: 43). He holds that our ideas of the mind are clear and distinct, and therefore beings, because he accepts two theses about self-knowledge that I will call the Transparency Doctrine. The Transparency Doctrine guarantees that:

1. we know that we are engaged in some form of thought just by engaging in that form of thought and adding our will's affirmation; and
2. we cannot be mistaken that we are having an idea of x even if our idea does not give us insight into x's nature or essence. Therefore, we know that we are having an idea of x just by having that idea and adding our will's affirmation.

The Transparency Doctrine ensures that all of our thoughts are clear and distinct i.e. we have a clear and distinct idea of a thought with a particular content, whether or not that content presents a clear and distinct idea of any object, and therefore something, by denying that introspective errors are possible. According to this Doctrine, our thoughts are exactly as they appear to us, so neither our thoughts nor their contents can escape our awareness. This means that our awareness of our mind's nature and activities is clear. Because we cannot mistake one form of thought for another or a thought with one content for a thought with some other content, our awareness of our mind is also distinct. If we cannot mistake one thought for another, an appearance of cold can never appear warm to us and we can never take p to be true without failing to recognize that



we believe it. Thus, we do not have to fear that what we take to be a sensation of cold or an intellectual apprehension that *p* is a contradiction or a paradox—i.e., a non-being.

### 1.1 Descartes' Account of Introspection

The Transparency Doctrine not only specifies what we know about the nature and activities of our mind but also how we come to know it. Descartes' thesis that we can be certain about the kind of thought we are engaged in and the contents our thoughts represent commits him to the view that we are clearly and distinctly aware of our thoughts just by thinking them. That is, we do not have to engage in a reflective act separate from our original thought such as a judgment or second order idea in order to be certain that it is, e.g. a volition to boil an egg.<sup>9</sup> Of course, Descartes holds that we can (and should) engage in reflection in order to make our ideas clearer and more distinct, to expand upon what we know by introspection alone, and to break ourselves of the habit of conjoining our clear and distinct awareness of our thoughts with obscure and confused ideas of things outside the mind.<sup>10</sup> However, we do not need to reflect in order to be certain that we are engaged in a particular kind of thought or having an idea with such and such a content.<sup>11</sup> "It is quite sufficient," Descartes claims "that we should know it by that internal awareness which always precedes reflective knowledge" (R 6 = AT 7: 422; CSM 2: 285). He also makes clear that we cannot engage in reflection unless we are first aware of our thoughts just by thinking them. If we cannot be aware of our thoughts just by having them,

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<sup>9</sup> As Daisie Radner has pointed out, knowing or believing that we are engaged in a particular form of thought requires "...a mental state over and above the original state," namely the will's affirmation (1988: 450). However, we do not need the will's affirmation in order to be certain or perceive clearly and distinctly that we are engaged in that form of thought.

<sup>10</sup> Simmons makes a similar point, observing that "I am genuinely acquainted with my neighbor, Maya, and the fact that I don't know everything there is to know about her doesn't change the fact that I am genuinely acquainted with her. If I want to learn more about her I have to do some investigative work. So too with my ideas. If I want to learn more about my idea of a triangle I can do some work: I can attend to it, reflect on it, and thereby learn a thing or two" (2012: 20).

<sup>11</sup> As Daisie Radner puts it, "the consciousness which accompanies all thought...does not require any act of thinking over and above the original act" (1988: 448).

having an additional thought will not reveal them to us. There must be something that we are aware of initially in order to think about our thoughts: “the initial thought by means of which we become aware of something does not differ from the second thought by means of which we become aware that we were aware of it, any more than this second thought differs from the third thought by means of which we become aware that we were aware that we were aware” (R 7 = AT 7: 559; CSM 2: 382).

What we are aware of initially is our thoughts themselves. On Descartes’ account, we cannot think (in the broad sense of imagine, have sense perceptions, will, or intellectually apprehend) without being aware that we are thinking. In the Fourth Set of Replies, he makes clear that “...we cannot have any thought of which we are not aware at the very moment when it is in us” (AT 7: 246; CSM 2: 171). This is because he identifies our thoughts with our awareness of them, so that it is trivially true<sup>12</sup> that we cannot think without being aware that we are thinking. For instance, he holds that “...we cannot will anything without thereby perceiving that we are willing it” because “this perception is really one and the same thing as the volition” (PS I.19 = AT 8A: 343; CSM 2: 335-336). We do not need to observe that our thoughts have some quality such as appearing in our mind under particular circumstances and infer from that quality that they are thoughts or thoughts of a certain kind.<sup>13</sup> Instead, we can be certain that we are

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<sup>12</sup> As Jonathan Bennett puts it, “this keeps malfunction at bay by denying that there is any function: when a volition occurs, there is a perception of it; and this is guaranteed in the same way as the great truth that wherever Ulysses is found, there is Odysseus” (2001: 109).

<sup>13</sup> Shoemaker explains, “it would be wrong to characterize this awareness [that I believe that Boris Yeltsin is President of Russia] by saying that at some point I became aware of an entity, as a belief that Boris Yeltsin holds that office. To say that would suggest that it ought to be possible for someone to become aware of a belief and misidentify it as something other than a belief” (1996: 213).

thinking and that our thoughts are imaginings, intellectual apprehensions, sense perceptions, or volitions just by engaging in them.<sup>14</sup>

Descartes not only takes our awareness of our thoughts to be immediate because it does not require a separate act of reflection but also because there is no gap between appearance and reality.<sup>15</sup> If we seem to be assenting to *p* or having an idea of a yak, then we are in fact assenting to *p* or having an idea of a yak, and if we are assenting to *p* or having an idea of a yak, it cannot seem to us that we are doubting that *p* or having an idea of a water buffalo.<sup>16</sup> Since our awareness of our thoughts is immediate in both senses, it is infallible. We cannot be mistaken because our thoughts are exactly as they appear to us, and, unless we engage in a separate act of reflection, we do not risk going wrong by making a false inference, failing to focus our attention, or improperly resolving a complex concept into simpler constituents.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, we can be certain of all that the Transparency Doctrine guarantees. “Are not all these things [i.e., that I am doubting almost everything, understanding some things, desiring to know more, imagining

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<sup>14</sup> Desmond Clarke suggests that Descartes borrows a vocabulary from Augustine to describe our self-knowledge without committing himself to Augustine’s view that “...the mind is directly accessible to itself without depending on reflective acts of awareness of its own mental acts” (2003: 189). However, as Clarke himself points out, Descartes does not make an effort to redefine these terms as he often does when he appropriates his predecessors’ vocabulary without also adopting their views. For instance, in his discussion of the abilities of non-human animals, Descartes is careful to note that he has used the Aristotelian terms ‘soul,’ ‘principle of life,’ and ‘sensation’ in an idiosyncratic way (cf. AT 5: 276-279; CSMK 365-366). When the Second Objectors ask him to give his arguments in synthetic form, he defines thought in a way that is compatible with the Augustinian tradition of thinking about the mind. ‘Thought,’ he explains, is “...everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it. Thus, all the operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination, and the senses are thoughts” (AT 7: 160; CSM 2: 113).

<sup>15</sup> This was a common way of understanding immediacy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In explaining Locke’s account of introspection, Shoemaker observes “...immediacy was taken to involve not only lack of inference but also the lack of any distinction between appearance and reality—the objects of immediate perception necessarily are as they appear and appear as they are” (1996: 203).

<sup>16</sup> As Broughton puts it, Descartes “...also seems to say that *necessarily* whenever I have a thought, I am conscious of having it, and whenever I am conscious of having a thought, I am having that thought” (2008: 188, original emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> Bennett characterizes Descartes’ view of introspection harshly but not inaccurately. He claims that Descartes “takes self-knowledge out of any comparison with the outer senses, treating it as magic rather than as the exercise of powers that supervene on structure” (2001: 109).

many things, and being aware of many things that apparently come from the senses],” Descartes has the meditator ask rhetorically, “just as true as the fact that I exist, even if I am asleep all the time, and even if He who created me is doing all He can to deceive me?” (M 2 = AT 7: 28-29; CSM 2: 19).<sup>18</sup> Our reflective judgments about these thoughts might be false—for instance, we may be mistaken that our sensation of a blaring siren is caused by a fire truck or ambulance—but we cannot be mistaken about what is revealed to us just by our having these thoughts.

## 1.2 The Transparency Doctrine

Descartes’ requirement that introspection be immediate and infallible limits him to a view of introspection according to which our thought and our awareness of it are identical. It also limits his view of what can belong to the mind. On his account, “...there can be nothing in the mind, in so far as it is a thinking thing, of which it is not aware...” (R 4 = AT 7: 246; CSM 2: 171).<sup>19</sup> For this reason, he eliminates stored memories, personality traits such as dispositions to be cheerful or sullen, and many of the passions from the mind and takes them to be states of our body instead. Thus, the certainty that his Transparency Doctrine and account of introspection guarantee only extends to our thoughts, i.e. our volitions, sense perceptions, imaginings,

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<sup>18</sup> Radner rejects this interpretation and argues that Descartes is making the limited claim that there is something that we are aware of when we introspect even if it is entirely other than we take it to be (1988: 450). What could we be aware of, however, if our introspective errors result in contradictions or paradoxes—i.e., kinds of non-beings?

<sup>19</sup> Gail Fine wants to commit Descartes to a much weaker account of self-knowledge than I do, so she argues that we should place less weight on the above quoted passage than other passages in which he uses the qualifications “in some way aware” or “some knowledge” (2003: 230, en. 132). I think we should take this passage seriously because it is a clarification of his views about self-knowledge in response to Arnauld’s objection that “...all of us can surely see that there may be many things in our mind of which the mind is not aware” (O 4 = AT 7: 213; CSM 2: 150). Given this context, it seems that Descartes would attempt to be especially precise. If he intended any qualifications, we should expect to see them here. In the passage Fine refers to, Descartes is not trying to elucidate his account of self-knowledge. He claims that “...there can be nothing within me of which I am not in some way aware” in order to clarify the role that premises about the mind play in his theological arguments (R 1 = AT 7: 107; CSM 2: 77). He is attempting to explain how his arguments differ from Aquinas’ attempt to show that a supernatural Being must be the efficient cause of all that exists. He is not trying to show what he takes self-knowledge to be or to explain how we come to have it.

intellectual apprehensions, and memories we have called to mind. States of our body that have the power to produce thoughts such as the brain impressions that bring about some of the judgments associated with our passions or the movements of the pineal gland that Descartes takes to bring about sensations are not covered by the Doctrine.<sup>20</sup>

### 1.2.1 The Transparency Doctrine: Part I

The first part of the Transparency Doctrine ensures that we cannot be mistaken about the origins of our thoughts. Thus, we are not only clearly and distinctly aware that we are thinking just by engaging in thought, but we are also clearly and distinctly aware of the particular kind of thought we are engaged in. We are clearly and distinctly aware of the kind of thought we are engaged in because each kind of thought presents itself in its own peculiar way. Sense perceptions feel like sense perceptions, volitions like volitions, and so on. For instance, there is a seamless flow between trying to conjure up some mental image and imagining. We do not conjure up the image and then infer on that basis that we must be imagining rather than intellectually apprehending. Imagining just presents itself as imagining, a form of thought that “...requires a peculiar effort of mind which is not required for understanding; this additional effort of mind clearly shows the difference between imagination and pure understanding” (M 6 = AT 7: 73; CSM 2: 51). Just by feeling this particular mental strain (or its absence), we can be aware of the kind of thought in which we are engaged.<sup>21</sup> We do not perceive a lack of mental

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<sup>20</sup> I include this clarification because some scholars have argued that our inability to know the brain impressions associated with our passions and sense perceptions constitute a challenge to the Transparency Doctrine. For instance, Matthew Eshleman has argued that we can make sense of a “Cartesian unconscious” that is constituted by these brain impressions: “Descartes, then, treats brain impressions as potential thoughts. In cases where experiences are impressed in the brain in a way that circumvents the soul, those impressions, once actualized into thoughts, cannot be necessarily explained in terms of their origins. Furthermore, they may be rather susceptible to misinterpretation” (2007: 308).

<sup>21</sup> Alison Simmons makes the related claim that each kind of thought, including intellectual apprehension, has its own distinctive phenomenology. As she points out, Descartes “must think that clear and distinct

strain and then infer that we are having an intellectual apprehension. Instead, being aware that we are thinking without any mental strain just is being aware that we are engaged in intellectual apprehension rather than imagining or perceiving through the senses.<sup>22</sup>

Something similar is true of the modes of our faculties, our ideas.<sup>23</sup> When we experience an idea as a mode of a particular faculty, we also experience it as having a corresponding origin—our nature for intellectual apprehensions, the activity of our faculties for volitions and imagined ideas, and external, corporeal things for sensory ideas. Each kind of idea—innate, imagined, or adventitious—presents itself in a way that makes its origin clear.<sup>24</sup> Innate ideas present themselves as lying latent in the intellect, imagined ideas present themselves as resulting from the mind’s own activities, and adventitious ideas present themselves as having been caused by external corporeal things. In a passage from Meditation 5, for example, the meditator describes his experience of contemplating various geometric shapes: “...the truth of these matters is so open and so much in harmony with my nature that on first discovering them it seems that I am not so much learning something new as remembering what I knew before” (AT

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perception—intellectual thought at its purest and most trustworthy—has a phenomenology. After all, he spends the bulk of the *Meditations* trying to get us to recognize it when it occurs” (2012: 4).

<sup>22</sup> Some contemporary philosophers of mind defend the related thesis that conscious, intentional states such as believing, doubting, supposing, and so on have a distinct phenomenology just as qualitative states such as feeling pain or tasting a pineapple do. A philosopher who holds this view is David Pitt (2004).

<sup>23</sup> Pitt holds that believing not only has a distinctive phenomenology, but believing that p has a different qualitative character than believing that q or believing that r (2004: 4 ff.).

<sup>24</sup> Janet Broughton observes that a remark Descartes makes in Meditation 3 seems to show that he rejects this thesis: “but perhaps all my ideas may be thought of as adventitious, or they may all be innate, or all made up; for as yet I have not clearly perceived their true origin” (AT 7: 38; CSM 2: 26). However, she points out that it is inconsistent with his comments in Meditation 2 that if we take ourselves to be sensing (i.e. having an adventitious idea) then we cannot doubt that we are sensing (AT 2: 19; AT 7: 29). She suggests that we can always distinguish imagined and adventitious ideas from sensory ideas but not always from one another (2008: 190-192). One way of addressing Broughton’s worry is to hold that Descartes takes the category of adventitious ideas to include imaginings that are caused by the coursing of animal spirits and thus lack the voluntary character of so-called intellectual imaginings, mental images that we create at will (cf. PS I.20-21 = AT 11: 344-345; CSM 1: 336). As I will argue below, I think Descartes holds that we can distinguish our sensory ideas from ideas originating in the corporeal imagination.

7: 63-64; CSM 2: 44). That is, nothing more than the meditator's experience of the triangle and chiliagon reveals to him that his ideas of these shapes are innate. On Descartes' account, having an innate idea just is having an idea that presents itself as especially clear and harmonious, so the meditator can be certain that his ideas of geometry are innate just by entertaining them.

In Meditation 6, we learn that this guarantee, that our experience of an idea allows us to determine its cause, extends to our sensory ideas as well. In particular, we learn that these ideas' non-voluntary character—we have them whether we want to or not so long as some corporeal thing stimulates our brain, nerves, or sensory organs—marks them as adventitious ideas. We are certain that only bodies can be the source of these ideas because they would have another character if they were innate, imagined, or caused in us by God or a malevolent spirit etc. Just as we have a faculty for recognizing our innate ideas (the intellect), we would need a special faculty for recognizing the ideas caused in us by God or the malevolent spirit. Moreover, the contents of these ideas—blackness, whiteness, and having horns and hooves in the case of a Holstein cow—would be eminently contained in God or the spirit. This means that God or the spirit would not have the properties of blackness, whiteness, and having hooves and horns, but would somehow contain or express them in a different form (cf. M 6 = AT 7: 79-80; CSM 2: 55). Therefore, the ideas we formed on the basis of these eminently contained properties would have a different character than the ideas we had of the properties themselves. While our ideas of the properties themselves would present themselves as issuing from our faculty of sense perception, our ideas of the eminently contained properties would present themselves as issuing from some faculty for receiving ideas from God. In this way, we can be certain that our sense perceptions are caused by external things and were not generated by the activity of our faculties or implanted in us by God or some malevolent spirit.

Although our sense perceptions and corporeal imaginings both originate in states of the brain that have been communicated to the mind by means of the pineal gland, they each have their own distinctive character. Descartes claims that our corporeal imaginings such as dreams and hallucinations present themselves as being fainter and less distinct than our sense perceptions. The cause of corporeal imaginings, he asserts, "...is not so conspicuous and determinate as that of the perceptions which the soul receives by means of the nerves [i.e., sense perceptions], and they seem to be mere shadows and pictures of these perceptions" (PS I.21 = AT 11: 345; CSM 1: 336). He makes a similar point in Meditation 6 by having the meditator observe that his sensory ideas are livelier, more vivid, and more distinct than the ideas that come to him by means of the imagination: "...the ideas which I formed myself were less vivid than those which I perceived with the senses..." (AT 7: 75; CSM 2: 52). The special character of our sensory and imagined ideas also plays an important role in his attempt to show that we can distinguish our dreams from our waking sense perceptions. At the end of Meditation 6, he observes that our sense perceptions feel as though they are integrated into our other thoughts while the corporeal imaginings that constitute our dream images come to us abruptly and haphazardly (AT 7: 89-90; CSM 2: 62). Because our corporeal imaginings have this distinctive character, we can be certain that we are imagining just by engaging in this form of thought. We must make an inference to know whether we are awake because the parts of the brain that bring about corporeal imaginings can be stimulated whether we are awake (resulting in daydreams and hallucinations) or asleep (resulting in dreams), but we do not need to make an inference to know that we are imagining.

### 1.2.2 The Transparency Doctrine: Part II



The second part of the Transparency Doctrine concerns the contents of our thoughts. As I interpret him, Descartes holds that we cannot entertain an idea without being aware that we entertaining that idea. Just as an additional thought could not reveal our original thought to us unless we were already aware of it, we would not be able to clarify our ideas and make them more distinct by means of reflection unless we were already aware of their content. That is, we could not achieve a clear and distinct understanding of a piece of wax as a quantity of extension arranged in such and such a way unless we were first clearly and distinctly aware of what was represented in our obscure and confused idea of the wax. Thus, this guarantee that we cannot be ignorant of or in error about the content of our thoughts extends not only to our clear and distinct ideas but also to ideas that do not give us insight into the nature or essence of the beings they represent. These ideas include our sensations and imaginings as well as any volitions and intellectual apprehensions that fall short of clarity and distinctness.

In a letter to Mersenne, Descartes claims “it must be agreed, then, that we have the idea of God, and that we cannot fail to know what this idea is or what must be understood by it; because without this we could not know anything at all about God” (AT 3: 394; CSMK 185). That is, when we contemplate the divine nature, we cannot be mistaken that our idea represents God or be ignorant of its content. We can be certain about the content of our ideas even when, unlike our idea of the divine nature, they fail to be clear and distinct. In the same exchange with Mersenne, he discusses another, unnamed correspondent who has objected that his account of God, the soul, and other imperceptible things is incomprehensible. By his lights, this correspondent cannot be having a clear and distinct perception of God or the soul since the correspondent finds these notions obscure and doubtful. However, he does not deny that his correspondent knows that he is having an idea of God and the soul (as he conceives of them)

despite the obscurity and confusion of his perception: “but if he had any conception corresponding to these expressions, as he doubtless had, he knew at the same time what was to be understood by these ideas—namely nothing other than the conception which he himself had” (ibid. = AT 3: 392; CSMK 185). Even though he conceives of God and the soul obscurely and confusedly, the correspondent cannot be mistaken that he is conceiving of them in the manner that he does, e.g. as bodies that can be pictured in the imagination. In other words, there is a gap between what Descartes considers the correct conception of God (i.e., as an incorporeal Being) and the embodied deity represented in his correspondent’s idea of God. However, there is no gap between what the correspondent takes his idea to represent (i.e., an embodied being) and what it actually represents (i.e., that embodied being). For this reason, it seems that we cannot be mistaken about the content of our intellectual apprehensions even if they are obscure and confused.

It is also impossible for us to be mistaken about the content of our volitions. In a letter to Regius, Descartes states that “...we cannot will anything without understanding what we will...” (AT 3: 372; CSMK 182). That is, we cannot will an action or state of affairs without being aware that it is the action or state of affairs that we desire. We also cannot will an action or state of affairs if we believe that it is impossible. On Descartes’ account, “...we can desire only what we consider in some way to be possible...” (PS II.145 = AT 11: 438; CSM 1: 380). For this reason, we cannot clearly and distinctly perceive that a unicorn does not exist or that we cannot breathe underwater without assistance and desire it nevertheless. However, a passage from Meditation 3 suggests that we sometimes desire (and thus know that we desire) things that are wicked or non-existent. Descartes asserts, “as for the will ...here too one need not worry about falsity; for even if the things I desire are wicked or non-existent that does not make it any less

true that I desire them” (AT 7: 37; CSM 2: 26). If we desire a unicorn, it must be because we fail to perceive it clearly and distinctly so that we do not recognize that part of what it is to be a unicorn is to be a non-existent creature. Since we cannot will without being aware of what it is that we desire, we must be aware that we are willing a unicorn if we are having a volition to capture one. Our perception of the unicorn cannot be a clear and distinct idea of that ‘object’—otherwise we would no longer desire it—so our clear and distinct awareness of what we are willing must extend to our volitions that represent their objects obscurely and confusedly.

This part of the Transparency Doctrine also extends to our imaginings and sense perceptions even though these ideas are obscure and confused by their very nature. Descartes classifies our invented ideas along with our volitions: “when our soul applies itself to imagine something non-existent...the perceptions it has of these things depend chiefly on the volition which makes it aware of them” (PS I.20 = AT 11: 344; CSM 1: 336). Because our imaginings depend on our will in this way, we must be able to understand what it is that we imagine just as we understand what it is that we will. Descartes has the meditator remark, “for whether it is a goat or a chimera that I am imagining, it is just as true that I imagine the former as the latter” (M 3 = AT 7: 37; CSM 2: 26). Even though our idea of a chimera is an invented idea of a non-existent beast, we cannot doubt that we are entertaining it. This idea is especially obscure and confused because the ideas of the snake, lion, and goat we combine to form it are themselves obscure and confused. In an exchange with Caterus, he announces that he “...will not now include the lion or the horse [among our clear and distinct ideas] since their natures are not transparently clear to us” (R 1 = AT 7: 117; CSM 2: 84). Because we cannot will without being aware of what it is that we are willing, we cannot fail to be aware that we are willing to call an

idea of a chimera to mind even though the ideas of this ‘object’ and its components are obscure and confused.

Just as we cannot have an intellectual apprehension without being aware of what it is that we are intellectually apprehending, we cannot have a sense perception without being aware of what it is that we are sensing. The meditator observes, “...I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false...” (M 2 = AT 7: 29; CSM 2: 19). Even if our idea of a blaring siren is caused by something other than an ambulance or a fire truck, we cannot doubt that we are having this idea.

However, Descartes sometimes seems to back away from this claim and to suggest that we can be mistaken about the content of our sensory ideas. For instance, in a passage from the *Principles of Philosophy* he seems to claim that we can have a sensory idea without being able to discern its content: “...if he examines the nature of what is represented by the sensation of color or pain—what is represented as existing in the colored body or the painful part—he will realize that he is wholly ignorant of it” (PP I.68 = AT 8A: 33; CSM 1: 217). That is, our sensations of pain and color are so obscure and confused that they seem to represent one thing—a quality of the human body or some other corporeal thing—even though they really represent another—what bodily disorder or seeing a tomato feels like for an embodied thinking thing.<sup>25</sup> As I understand the passage, however, Descartes is explaining that we do not know the nature of whatever it is that our sensations of cold or pain represent. In other words, he is telling us that these ideas are obscure and confused like our idea of a chimera or even our idea of a goat or a lion and not that they seem to represent one thing but really represent another. Since he holds

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<sup>25</sup> This is Carriero’s view. He holds that Descartes takes our sensory ideas to be so obscure and confused that we are either ignorant of or in error about their content (2009: 105).

that we can be certain that our idea of a lion represents a lion despite its obscurity and confusion, it seems that he would also hold that we can be certain that our sensation of a pain represents that pain even if it is so obscure and confused that we are ignorant of or in error about what it is to be a pain. Even though we err because we conceive of pain as something corporeal as well as mental, we cannot be mistaken that we take it to be a quality of bodies as well as minds.

It might be objected that it should be impossible for us to be mistaken about the nature of a pain if the Transparency Doctrine is true. This is because a pain is a kind of thought, and, according to the Transparency Doctrine, we cannot be ignorant of or in error about the nature of our thoughts. That is, it seems that we cannot be clearly and distinctly aware that we are having a pain sensation without knowing that it is a thought or mode of mind and not a quality of bodies. However, Descartes never denies that we conceive of our pain sensation as a kind of thought and therefore as a mode of mind. If we took our pain sensation to be a mode of bodies and not a mode of our mind, we could not go wrong by judging that it resembles a corporeal mode. Descartes thinks that we make precisely this error. An injured person, he claims, "...may easily convince himself that he has some knowledge of what he sees or feels because he may suppose that it is something similar to the sensation of color or pain which he experiences within himself" (PP I.68 = AT 7: 33; CSM 1: 217). It would be strange to conceive of our sensation as resembling some mode of bodies if we took it to be itself a corporeal mode. Rather than merely resembling a mode of bodies, our pain sensation as we conceived of it would be a corporeal mode. Thus, it seems that we are clearly and distinctly aware of our pain sensation and do not mistake it for an idea representing a mode of bodies. We must err because it is possible for us to be clearly and distinctly aware that we are having a pain sensation without being able to know everything that follows from our awareness that our mind is being affected in this way. In other

words, we can be clearly and distinctly aware that we are having a sensation of pain without being able to infer that this sensation does not resemble any qualities of corporeal things or that only beings with a mind like ours can feel pain. Because we are unable to infer all that follows from our awareness that we are having a pain sensation, we can be mistaken or in error about its consequences. Descartes often suggests that we can clearly and distinctly perceive *p* and judge that *q* even though *p* entails the falsity or impossibility of *q*. For example, the meditator clearly and distinctly perceives the divine nature but still entertains the possibility that God is deceiving him even though deceit is incompatible with the perfections he perceives. The meditator makes a similar error when he clearly and distinctly perceives that his sensory idea of the sun represents it as a tiny dot on the horizon when it is in fact an immense orb and infers that this "...idea which seems to have emanated most directly from the sun itself has in fact no resemblance to it at all" (M 3 = AT 7: 39; CSM 2: 27). Once he investigates corporeal things more thoroughly, he comes to recognize that his sensory ideas do indeed import a kind of sameness or structure from the external world—something that would be false if no relation of resemblance held between our sensory ideas and the bodies they represent.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, it seems that we can be clearly and distinctly aware that we are having a pain sensation while judging falsely that it exactly duplicates a quality of bodies or that our body is also in pain whenever our mind has a pain sensation.

Moreover, Descartes holds that our ideas of bodies are often obscure and confused. Because these ideas are so obscure and confused, we sometimes conceive of bodies as having mind-like qualities such as knowledge or foresight. He recalls conceiving of bodies' tendency to

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<sup>26</sup> As Carriero understands Descartes' view of sense perception, "Descartes is operating in what might be called a resemblance framework, since what matters for sensory representation is sameness of something: if the same structure exists formally in the world and objectively in the idea, then there is a similarity or resemblance between the idea and the thing" (2009: 158).

fall to earth as if it emanated from a faculty for knowledge or desire rather than the motion and arrangement of corporeal parts: : “...I thought that gravity carried bodies towards the center of the earth as if it had some knowledge of the center within itself. For this surely could not happen without knowledge, and there can be no knowledge except in a mind” (R 6 = AT 7: 442; CSM 2: 298). Since he is willing to attribute knowledge and foresight to bodies, it is not surprising that we could make a similar error by attributing such purely mental qualities as pain, hunger, and thirst to them. Combined with the lack of limits on what we can infer from our clear and distinct awareness that we are having a pain sensation, the obscurity and confusion of our idea of bodies causes us to judge that there is something that “...exists in the painful spot and which we suppose to resemble the sensation of pain” (PP I.46 = AT 8A: 22; CSM 1: 208). For this reason, our propensity to judge that our sensation of pain resembles some quality of bodies should not undermine our certainty about the contents of our ideas. We can be certain that we are having an idea with such and such a content even if that idea is obscure and confused or provides us with the materials for false judgments about things outside the mind.

### 1.1.3 Immunity from Error

The two claims that make up the Transparency Doctrine ensure that we cannot be in error about or ignorant of the kinds of thought we are engaged in or the content of those thoughts. By guaranteeing that it is impossible to be mistaken about our thoughts, this Doctrine also ensures that our awareness of our thoughts and their contents is clear and distinct. The first claim of the Doctrine guarantees that we cannot think without being aware that we are thinking, so it rules out the possibility of unconscious thoughts. Similarly, the Doctrine’s second claim ensures that we cannot be ignorant of or in error about the content of our thoughts, so their content is always accessible to us. Thus, our awareness of our thoughts and their contents is clear in Descartes’

technical sense because the activities of our faculties and the nature of their modes are always “present and accessible to the attentive mind” (PP I.45 = AT 8A: 22; CSM 1: 207). The Transparency Doctrine also guarantees that our awareness of our thoughts and their contents is distinct as well as clear. Descartes holds that a thought’s distinctness “...depends on our carefully distinguishing what we do include in it from everything else” (PP I.63 = AT 8A: 31; CSM 1: 215). Since we do not need to perform a separate act of reflection to become aware of our thoughts or their contents, there is no danger that our awareness of our thought will include anything beyond what is contained in our thought itself. That is, we do not need to fear that what we are aware of is not the thought we are thinking but that thought plus a false judgment or misleading second order idea about its origins or the nature of its content. Thus, our awareness of our thoughts is clear and distinct because the Transparency Doctrine guarantees that we cannot be ignorant or in error about the content of our thought or the form of thought we are engaged in.<sup>27</sup>

## 2. Deceitful God

To show that his account of self-knowledge is certain, Descartes subjects it to radical skeptical challenges. Just as he believes that he must show that reason and sense perception can withstand broad skeptical attacks, he believes that he must also show that introspection is immune to doubt. As I will argue, he tries to cast doubt on introspection by having his meditator assume that he has been endowed with malfunctioning faculties so that his Creator can ensure that he is always in error. If introspection can fail, it will be impossible for the meditator to make true judgments about his mind or anything outside it. For this reason, he will always go astray.

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<sup>27</sup> Steven L. Reynolds argues that “...claims of clear and distinct perception in the particular cases could do all of the work for which a general claim of first person authority might seem to be wanted” (1992: 187).



## 2.1 Traditional Interpretations

Descartes raises the possibility that the mind's Creator is a deceiver to generate more radical doubts than he has already raised about the reliability of sense perception and the existence of an external world. Although he has the meditator put this possibility in language that is reminiscent of the traditional problem of evil<sup>28</sup>, I think I he is concerned with something other than the apparent incompatibility between a perfect Creator and an imperfect creation. The most straightforward way of understanding the word 'deceit' is to take it to mean 'lying' or 'intending that others (and perhaps oneself) come to believe falsehoods'.<sup>29</sup> One might imagine other ways the meditator could go wrong without his Creator intending to deceive him. For instance, he could fear that his mind's Creator lacks the knowledge or skill necessary to create faculties that never go wrong without fearing that he is being intentionally led astray. A Creator with limited knowledge and power might intend that the human mind be perfect (or as perfect as a created thing can be) but fail to anticipate that its faculties are susceptible to particular kinds of error or lack the skills necessary to produce faculties that are immune from error. Alternately, a Creator Who withheld perfect faculties from us out of malice might do so without intending that

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<sup>28</sup> For instance, in Meditation 4 he has the meditator ask "the more skilled the craftsman the more perfect the work produced by him; if this is so, how can anything produced by the supreme Creator of all things not be complete and perfect in all respects" (AT 7: 55; CSM 2: 38).

<sup>29</sup> Many scholars have understood this skeptical possibility as an epistemological variant of the traditional problem of evil. Rather than asking "why do human beings sin?" as his predecessors have, they take Descartes to be asking "why do human beings have false beliefs?". They take him to begin with an assumption such as "a perfect Being would create perfect creatures" and then try to explain how, by Descartes' lights, this assumption is incorrect. Zbigniew Janowski's comments are representative: "although the traditional subject matter of theodicy is moral evil, nothing in the notion of theodicy prevents us from extending it to other realms of philosophical inquiry... The Fourth Meditation... provides ample evidence that error is of interest to Descartes insofar as it is voluntary and as such begs for explanation" (2000: 25). Carriero interprets the problem in this way and is explicit that he thinks this worry has little to do with God's veracity and related notions of truth and falsity: "...the Fourth Meditation is organized around the theodical project of explaining how error is compatible with the fact that the mind's Author is a supremely perfect Being, God. But I don't think that this explains fully the purpose of the meditation. For one thing, its title 'Truth and Falsity' suggests a different focus" (2009: 223). Other scholars who take this approach include Tierno (1997), Newman (1999), Latzer (2001), and Ragland (2007).

we believe falsehoods. As Descartes and his interlocutors agree, God might demonstrate His benevolence through benign forms of deceit: "...I would not want to criticize those who allow that through the mouths of the prophets God can produce verbal untruths which, like the lies of doctors who deceive their patients in order to cure them, are free of any malicious intent to deceive" (R 2 = AT 7: 143; CSM 2: 102). Thus, the meditator does not merely suppose that his Creator may lie to him or lack the knowledge and power to endow him with flawless faculties. Instead, he speculates that his Creator intends that he errs by coming to believe falsehoods. Because he holds that God is all-powerful, he reasons that God will always successfully deceive him. For this reason, he fears that he can never judge truly.

## 2.2 Deceitful God and Transparency

If the meditator can be mistaken about the nature and activities of his mind, then he cannot help but err. On Descartes' account, we know that we are engaged in some form of thought or having an idea of *x* just by entertaining that idea or engaging in that form of thought. For this reason, any mistake that the meditator makes about the content of his thought or the form (sense perception, imagination, volition, or intellectual apprehension) that it takes must come from the cognitive faculties themselves. That is, he could not err by associating a quality like urgency or indefiniteness with the wrong kind of thought, making a false judgment about a thought's origins, or having a second-order idea that misrepresented his original idea. The only way that he could err would be if his Creator withheld transparent faculties from him. If the meditator's faculties failed to be transparent, I will argue, he will not be able to make true judgments about his thoughts or anything outside them.

### 2.2.1 Potential Failures of Part I of the Doctrine

Some of our thoughts are paired with a judgment. Intellectual apprehensions are paired with the judgment that such and such is the case and sense perceptions are paired with the judgment that they were caused by bodies. Other forms of thought, such as imaginings, lack this judgmental element. We imagine without affirming or denying that whatever we are imagining exists or has a particular cause and so on. One kind of imagining is entertaining an idea to better understand an interlocutor's point of view or because we are curious about what it would be like to believe that *p* or because we want to know what would follow from so believing. In none of these instances do we try to determine whether our idea (the imagined belief) corresponds with external things. If the meditator could confuse imaginings of this sort with his sense perceptions or intellectual apprehensions, however, he could end up with beliefs that he did not take to be true. This would be absurd because we cannot believe that *p* without taking *p* to be true.

Suppose the meditator imagines that fish have rich emotional lives in order to understand why someone might think it is morally wrong to eat them. Suppose further that before he began this exercise, he had no beliefs about whether fish have any kind of emotional lives, and, if pressed he would admit that he was not inclined to judge either way. Now suppose that he could confuse his imagining that fish have rich emotional lives with an intellectual apprehension or sense perception that they do. Because he would take himself to have sensed or intellectually apprehended this claim about fish, he would refer it to the will for judgment. This is because intellectual apprehension and sense perception both present themselves as about mind independent things—bodies in the case of sense perception and true and immutable natures in the case of intellectual apprehension. Since they seem to represent something outside the mind, intellectual apprehensions and sense perceptions are the kind of idea that we refer to the will for judgment. We refer such ideas to the will for judgment because judgment is the cognitive

activity for seeing that things are so—i.e., for seeing that our ideas conform (or fail to conform) to external things. Since he would take himself to have intellectually apprehended or perceived this idea about fish, he would assent to it when it was presented to the will for judgment. However, he would not have come to believe that fish have rich emotional lives. He did not really discover anything that could have moved his will to affirm that fish have these kinds of lives—he merely imagined that they do while remaining agnostic about this question. He would have affirmed what he took to be an intellectual apprehension or sense perception while merely imagining what he took himself to intellectually apprehend or perceive through the senses. In this case, he would end up with a belief that he did not take to be true. This is absurd because in order to believe that *p*, we must take *p* to be true.

If this sort of mistake were possible, all of the meditator's beliefs would be suspect. He would have no way of determining whether he held them because we assented to a genuine sense perception or intellectual apprehension or because he mistook another kind of thought for a sense perception or intellectual apprehension. He could not try to reconcile his belief with other beliefs he held because he could never tell which were genuine beliefs and which were illusory. If, on reflection, he seemed to assent to *p* (i.e., believe it) yet not take *p* to be true, he would not know which (if either) of those cognitive attitudes were genuine. That is, he could be in error about any or all of the beliefs we seem to have. In that case, it seems that he could not have any beliefs at all. He would have to treat all of his beliefs as potentially something other than an intellectual apprehension or sense perception paired with the will's affirmation because they could result from misidentified imaginings or volitions. The same would be true of his doubts. Anything that seemed to be a doubt—an intellectual apprehension or sense perception paired with the will's denial—could also be a misidentified imagining or volition. He would be in the

same dire epistemic position as he was at the start of Meditation 2 when he asks “so what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain” (AT 7: 24; CSM 2: 16).

Similar absurdities would result if we could be in error about the content of our ideas. If our ideas could seem to represent one thing yet actually represent another, it would be impossible for us to judge truly about them. In that case, our ideas would be false in Descartes’ special sense. If all of our ideas were false in this way, not only would we be unable to judge truly, but we would be unable to judge at all for a number of reasons.

### 2.2.2 Potential Failures of Part II of the Doctrine

As we have seen, Descartes conceives of judgment as picking out a relation between an idea and things outside it—corporeal objects, geometrical axioms, or even other ideas. If we judge truly, our ideas conform to or correspond with these external things. If we judge falsely, we pick out the wrong relation between our ideas and these external things. Whether or not we judge truly, the idea we try to conform to external things must be true. That is, it must be possible to judge truly about it. Consider the example of a trompe l’oeil painting. The meditator could make a false judgment about it—that it is an open window, for instance. There is a true judgment that he could have made about it, however. He could have picked out the right relation between the painting and a window (representation rather than identity) and therefore judged truly that it represents a window. All of our ideas, even the purportedly materially false ones, are supposed to be like the trompe l’oeil painting. Even though we might pick out the wrong relation between our ideas and external things, we must be able to discover a relation that allows them to conform to these external things. If the meditator did not know whether his ideas represented what he took them to represent, it would be impossible to discover such a relation. This is because one of the relata might be missing—even though he might take himself to have

an idea representing a goat, there may be no such idea. Therefore, there would be nothing to try to adequate or conform to a goat. What he took to be an idea representing a goat might actually represent a chimera.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, if he could be mistaken about the contents of his ideas, he could not judge at all because there would be nothing for him to try to adequate or conform to external things.<sup>31</sup> He would not be able to access the genuine content of the idea, and the illusory content is a non-being. It is not another idea, the conclusion of an inference, or some other mode of mind. As a non-being, it cannot stand in any relation with external things. Since judgment just is discovering a relation between our ideas and external things, judgment would be impossible. Without the ability to judge, he would be unable to believe or doubt.

These cognitive disasters would be instances of deceit because they would render the meditator's thought false in Descartes' special sense. That is, he would not be able to have the kinds of mental states that could be the subject of a true judgment. He would not be able to make true judgments about his ideas or discover whether they corresponded with other ideas or things outside the mind. Even though his thought would be false in this way, it would present itself as true. In other words, he would take ourselves to have the kind of immediate, infallible access to his faculties and their modes that the Transparency Doctrine is supposed to guarantee.

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<sup>30</sup> Schwitzgebel thinks that we can be radically mistaken about the contents of our ideas in this way: "if you admit the possibility that you're dreaming, I think you should admit the possibility that your judgment that you are having reddish phenomenology is a piece of delirium unaccompanied by any actual reddish phenomenology" (2008: 253). In Descartes' terminology, this would mean that we could seem to have an idea of redness without having any such idea.

<sup>31</sup> It might seem that there are plenty of true judgments that the meditator could make such as 'my thought is unreal' or 'I am not having a sense perception'. At least superficially, none of these judgments seem paradoxical like 'this sentence is false' or 'p is true and I do not believe it'. However, as Carriero suggests, they are not true in the sense that Descartes cares about. He describes the stance that a materialist would have to take towards a world without bodies as follows: "such propositions would be negative in character. One might feel that a world exclusively characterized by negative propositions—'cold fusion is an illusion'...and so on—supported only notional truth, as opposed to be termed substantial or real truth. After all there, is nothing in the world that gives rise to the truths" (2009: 72-73). My worry suggests that there could be nothing on the mind side of the relation between mind and world that could give rise to truth even if his mind could be characterized exclusively by negative propositions.

He would think that his ideas represented what they seemed to represent and that he was engaged in the kind of thought he seemed to be engaged in. For this reason, he would take himself to have beliefs and doubts and to be able to think about their relation to other modes of mind—desires, imaginings, other beliefs and doubts, and so on—and to things outside the mind. God would deceive the meditator, not by “producing verbal untruths”, but by creating him with faculties that made true beliefs, or any beliefs at all, impossible.

### 2.3 Deceit and Clarity and Distinctness

Many scholars hold that Descartes uses the skeptical possibility that God is a deceiver to challenge the notion that there is a privileged class of beliefs that are immune to doubt. Once he articulates this challenge and shows it can be dismissed, he believes, he can establish that “whatever [we] perceive clearly and distinctly is true” (M 3 = AT 7: 35; CSM 2: 24). There are two ways of understanding this challenge. Understood in the first way, it is the worry that some of our beliefs may appear indubitably true to us even though it turns out that they are false.<sup>32</sup> I do not engage with this worry in my dissertation. Understood in the second way, however, this challenge is just a special case of the skepticism about introspection that I am concerned with.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> This interpretation is offered by Nelson and Newman (1999) and Della Rocca (2005). While I think that Descartes is clearly concerned with this worry, he does not engage with it to the extent we would expect if it were his only concern. His notion of clarity and distinctness is reminiscent of the Stoic cognitive impression, impressions “..which arise[] from what is and [are] stamped and impressed exactly in accordance with what is” (40 C2). They defend this truth criterion against elaborate attacks from Pyrrhonist and Academic skeptics who attempt to show that impressions arising from what is not “...are found to be equally self-evident and striking..” (40 H2). When the Second Objectors raise a challenge in a similar spirit, Descartes dismisses it as unworthy of consideration: “what is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is absolutely false? Why should this alleged absolute falsity bother us...” (R 2 = AT 7: 145; CSM 2: 103). As Byron Williston observes, “asked to justify our beliefs further, we will say that they are justified in virtue of having been produced by a reliable procedure [i.e., clear and distinct perception]...Asked how we can justify a criterion of reliability, we answer that requires a view *sub species aeternitatis*. And we will simply show the skeptic the door if he pushes us beyond this” (2004: 370).

<sup>33</sup> Newman and Nelson mention this interpretation but do not engage with it. Gassendi seems to think this is what is at stake in Descartes’ discussion of clarity and distinctness, alleging that Descartes himself

Descartes holds that we can recognize beliefs belonging to this privileged class because they have a special character—they are “present and accessible to the attentive mind” and “so sharply separated from all other perceptions that [they] contain[] within [themselves] only what is clear” (PP I.45 = AT 8A: 22; CSM 1: 208).<sup>34</sup> If the meditator can confuse beliefs with this special character and beliefs that lack it, he can make an introspective error. That is, he can be mistaken about the character of his thought. I do not think that there is any reason to suppose that Descartes confines his fear that we can be mistaken about the character of our thought to clear and distinct beliefs. As I will now argue, he holds that we can confuse sense perceptions, thoughts that present themselves as originating from bodies, with intellectual imaginings, thoughts that are produced independently of anything corporeal.

### 3. Madness Skepticism

So that he can attempt to undermine introspection, Descartes has the meditator raise the skeptical possibility that he is mad. That is, he has the meditator suppose that his mind resembles the mind of an individual afflicted with a serious mental illness. Some psychologists and philosophers have tried to explain delusions, disordered patterns of thought, and hallucinations, illusory sensory experience, by arguing that individuals with schizophrenia

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“...mention[s] the difficulty that ‘[he] previously accepted as certain many things which [he] afterwards realized were doubtful’. But in this passage you neither resolve the difficulty nor confirm your rule” (O 5 = AT 7: 279; CSM 2: 194).

<sup>34</sup> Fine holds that Descartes denies that we can always be certain that our ideas are genuinely clear and distinct: “...but though Descartes certainly thinks one can improve one’s ability to discriminate clear and distinct perceptions from others, he doesn’t seem to think we can become infallible about this” (2003: 229-230, en. 130). I think this would pose a major problem for Descartes. Even if our genuinely clear and distinct perceptions are always true, clarity and distinctness is not a useful criterion of truth if we end up doubting some clear and distinct perceptions because we cannot always tell that they are clear and distinct and assenting to some falsehoods because they appear clear and distinct. This seems to be the point that Sextus is making when he raises the following objection against the Stoics: “thus when Heracles stood before Admetus, having brought Alcestis back from the dead, Admetus then took in a cognitive impression of Alcestis, but did not believe it...” (40 K2). As I understand this passage, Admetus doubts the cognitive character of his impression because it seems absurd that Alcestis could have returned from the dead. Thus, he doubts what this criterion of truth reveals to be true, so, as Sextus argues, it cannot be a genuine criterion of truth.



cannot distinguish what they imagine from what they believe. By having the meditator suppose that he is mad, Descartes has him raise the possibility that he can imagine and will without knowing that he is imagining and willing. If, as I will argue, the meditator can confuse sense perceptions with intellectual imaginings and volitions, he can confuse thoughts with a corporeal cause and thoughts that issue from the mind's activities alone.

### 3.1 Delusions

Some patients with schizophrenia experience bizarre or disturbing delusions. Bouvet and Parnas, two Swiss psychiatrists, describe patients who maintain that they are about to be transformed into animals through hypnosis, that they are capable of controlling the weather or single-handedly protecting their countries' armies, or that they have uncovered conspiracies by shadowy government agencies.<sup>35</sup> One explanation for these patients' utterances is that they confuse what they merely imagine with their beliefs, what they take to be true.<sup>36</sup> Consider an example drawn from Bouvet's and Parnas' article (and discussed by Currie), of a soldier who sees cows on the hospital grounds and became convinced that his doctors would transform him into a cow through hypnosis. Looking at the cows on the grounds, the anxious soldier begins to have the kinds of thoughts that even a psychologically healthy person might have in a frightening situation. He might think of the metaphor 'being slaughtered like cattle' or even imagine being a cow. The soldier, however, cannot recognize this train of thought as the product of his imagination. Instead, he treats it as a belief—something he takes to be true. Rather than recognizing the cow-thought as the product of his imagination, he might treat it as a thought he

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<sup>35</sup> 1993: 587

<sup>36</sup> Other explanations for schizophrenic patients' delusions include: delusions are not imaginings masquerading as beliefs or any other recognizable mental state; instead, they are explicable only in terms of the particular brain injuries or biochemical disruptions that caused them (Jaspers 1963); delusions are false beliefs that the patient forms in response to new or frightening experiences (Maher 1992); delusions are false beliefs that the patient forms because her ability to reason is impeded by two biases, an implicit negative self concept (i.e., she views herself in a negative light) and an attributional bias, a tendency to treat adverse events as externally caused (Bentall 1994).

came to have by observing his surroundings and drawing some inference from what he observed the way a psychologically healthy person might see that the emergency department is crowded and infer that she has a long wait ahead of her. As Currie characterizes it, such a patient is suffering from "... 'cognitive hallucinations' which occur when a mental state of one kind (an imagining) presents itself to the subject as a mental state of another kind (a belief).<sup>37</sup>

If these cognitive hallucinations are possible, then it seems that Descartes' Transparency Doctrine is false. Patients who experience cognitive hallucinations can imagine without being aware that they are imagining because their imaginings seem to them to be intellectual apprehensions. Because they experience their imaginings as intellectual apprehensions, their imaginings and intellectual apprehensions are also missing the characteristics that mark them as such. That is, their imaginings either seem as effortless as intellectual apprehensions or these patients' intellectual apprehensions seem as mentally taxing to them as imaginings should be. Both possibilities point to a failure of the Transparency Doctrine (the patients cannot recognize their imaginings as such) and some underlying malfunction in their imaginations or intellects that is responsible for their imperfect access to their faculties and their contents. Perhaps their imaginations are missing whatever element it is that makes imagining seem so taxing for psychologically healthy cognizers or perhaps there is some additional, feature of their intellects that makes intellectual apprehension seem as arduous as imagination.

### 3.2 Hallucinations

Currie also characterizes hallucinations as misidentified imaginings. On his account, patients who experience hallucinations mistake their imaginings for veridical sense perceptions. Like the first example, it suggests that we can imagine without being aware that we are

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<sup>37</sup> 2000: 175

imagining. It also suggests that we cannot recognize the origins of our ideas. That is, we could experience an idea concocted by our imaginations as an adventitious idea caused by something external to us.

The kind of imagination Currie has in mind in his explanation of hallucinations is what Descartes would call the ‘intellectual imagination’. As Descartes characterizes it in the *Passions of the Soul*, the intellectual imagination is what we exercise when we “...imagine something non-existent—as in thinking about an enchanted palace or a chimera...” (I.20 = AT 8A: 344; CSM 1: 336). This is in contrast with the so-called ‘corporeal imagination,’ which we exercise when the animal “...spirits, being agitated in various ways...make their way by chance through certain pores [in the brain] rather than others. Such are the illusions of our dreams..” (PS I.21 = *ibid.*). The agitation of animal spirits is Descartes’ preferred explanation for hallucinations (PS I.26 = AT 8A: 348; CSM 1: 338). However, he can suppose that hallucinations are caused by the intellectual imagination to try to undermine introspection, just as he supposes that he can dream without a body in order to cast doubt on the external world.<sup>38</sup> According to Currie, part of the reason why patients with schizophrenia experience hallucinations is that they are unable to recognize their own agency—i.e., they cannot recognize that they generate their own imaginings through associations, their interpretations of visual cues, and so on. The imaginings that are part of a hallucination are not just something that happen to the patient, on Currie’s account. She plays some role in generating its content, even though she may be incapable of recognizing that she is its source.<sup>39</sup> One of the ways that Descartes distinguishes between the intellectual and corporeal imaginations is by means of the will. Intellectual imagination involves the will while

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<sup>38</sup> As Lex Newman puts it, Descartes has the meditator assume that “...dream-stuff (whatever that turns out to be) is produced solely by means of mind-stuff (whatever that turns out to be)” (1994: 521 fn. 53) even though his considered view is that dreams are produced in the mind, something incorporeal, by movements in the brain and other bodily organs.

<sup>39</sup> pg. 179

corporeal imagination does not (PS 1.21 = AT 8A: 344; CSM 1 336). Therefore, Currie's account challenges the first part of the Transparency Doctrine in two ways. It suggests that, at least in some cases, we can confuse imaginings and sense perceptions. It also suggests that we can will (i.e., to imagine something) without being aware that we are willing. Moreover, it suggests that we are unable to determine the origin of our ideas in the way that this part of the Doctrine is supposed to guarantee.

As Currie understands it, hallucinations result from the voluntary exercise of the imagination that the patient cannot recognize as voluntary: "to explain hallucinations in terms of the misidentification of imagining, we may assume that a loss of agency robs the subject of the capacity to distinguish between genuinely perceptual experience and mental imagery".<sup>40</sup> This mental imagery is something that the patients will to summon to mind, even though they are not aware they are doing so in the way that Descartes thinks that psychologically healthy cognizers can will to imagine a chimera by combining ideas of different animal parts. In contrast, our sensory ideas are not voluntary—they are "...produced without [our] cooperation and often even against [our] will" (AT 7: 79; CSM 2: 55). Because our sensory ideas are non-voluntary, they come from something outside of our minds while what we imagine by means of the intellectual imagination comes from the mind's activity alone. If our sensory ideas did come from within the mind, Descartes claims, we would be able to recognize them as originating there (ibid.). This is what the first part of the Transparency Doctrine is supposed to guarantee. Since they are externally caused, our sensory ideas result from a causal chain that starts with interactions between bodies and ends with the mind. As a result of their origin in the corporeal realm, our sensory ideas are essentially connected to bodies. So when a hallucinating patient experiences

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<sup>40</sup> pg. 179

her imaginings as sensations, she is experiencing something that is essentially mental and unconnected to bodies at all as something that is essentially connected to bodies. Let me describe this worry in more detail.

When we have a veridical perception, the nerves and animal spirits transmit sense data (what Descartes sometimes calls ‘impressions’) to the brain. Each set of motions in the nerves is correlated with a set of motions in the brain which, in turn, move the pineal gland. For Descartes, the pineal gland serves the purpose of the so-called ‘common sense’. This region of the brain accommodates data from the inner (pain, emotions, and appetites) and outer (vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell) senses and translates this raw data into a form that is intelligible to the mind. Each state of the pineal gland is correlated with its own set of brain motions that allow it to “...present[] the same signs to the mind...” (AT 7: 86; CSM 2: 59-60).<sup>41</sup> These signs are brain motions that are put in a form that can be used by the mind—even the motions and states of the brain that are correlated with a particular thought are unintelligible to the mind because they are modes of the body. The mind recognizes these signs and produces the appropriate visual sensation—redness or serrated-ness, for example. In contrast, when we imagine a cardinal’s feather no physiological process is involved in combining the red hue and serrated shape or calling the resulting image to mind. If Currie’s explanation is correct, then hallucinating patients cannot distinguish something essentially connected to bodies (the sense organs and the corporeal things that excite them) and something that issues from a faculty of the mind, with no connection to the corporeal realm whatsoever (the so-called intellectual imagination). Currie’s explanation, therefore, suggests that we can confuse ideas with disparate origins (corporeal and non-corporeal) because we can confuse the operation of one faculty (the

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<sup>41</sup> How to understand Descartes’ account of the communication between mind and body is a difficult interpretive problem that goes beyond the scope of this essay. I have tried to give as neutral a characterization of this view as possible to make the point that some of our thoughts originate in the body while some do not.

intellectual imagination) with the operations of another (sense perception). The hallucinating patients confuse an idea that has an involuntary character (because it was caused by the interaction between a corporeal thing and a sensory organ) with one that is voluntary (because it results from the exercise of the intellectual imagination).

I will elaborate on this example by introducing two objections that suggest that it is a less serious counterexample to the Transparency Doctrine. According to the first objection, a hallucination of a red feather and a veridical perception of the feather are both ideas—the only difference is that one happens to be an idea of the imagination while the other happens to be a sensory idea. While this is an error, it does not seem to be particularly serious. We often confuse what we remember with what we have learned through testimony, for instance, but this does not seem to pose a challenge for the Doctrine. According to the second objection, we may confuse imagined and sensory ideas, but we can always sort out this confusion by means of the intellect. Neither of these objections seems successful. Pushing this line of objection mischaracterizes sensations. Sensations are a very special kind of idea because they are essentially connected to bodies—our sensory organs and the corporeal things that affect them. The second line of objection is also unsuccessful because it too mischaracterizes sensations. In the end, a hallucination of a red feather and the veridical perception of the feather are both just ideas. That is, someone experiencing a hallucination confuses two kinds of ideas, sensory and imaginary, but her confusion is confined to the mental realm. This is a problem for the Transparency Doctrine, but it is a less serious problem than the possibility that we could confuse something that is essentially related to bodies (a sensation) and something that is not (a mode of the intellectual imagination). As well as telling against the Doctrine, this possibility would tell against Descartes' claim that the distinction between the mind and its modes on the one hand and

the body and its modes on the other is clear and distinct. According to this objection, however, what we are confusing is just two modes of mind—something akin to confusing a remembered event with one we merely imagined.

### 3.2.1 Objection 1: Parity between Ideas

However, this line of objection confuses sensations with ideas of sensations. As we saw above, sensations are modes of mind that result from the interaction between the mind and body. Even though they are modes of minds, sensations cannot occur without the presence of two bodies—the sense organs of the human body and the corporeal thing being sensed. Ideas of sensations, in contrast, represent sensations. If they are true, they represent sensations as confused modes of thought; if they are materially false, they represent sensations as properties of bodies (ex. they represent redness as a property of the feather). If we are merely confusing one idea with another, we would be confusing an idea generated by the imagination with an intellectual apprehension of a sensation—namely, the judgment that to be a sensation is to be a mode of mind, a real quality, or something else. This is not what happens in the case of a hallucination. According to Currie, the patients are not confusing their sensory experience of, say, a feather (ex. as red, jagged, shiny, and smooth) with a judgment about how to interpret their sensory experience (ex. as representing primary qualities, secondary qualities, positive qualities, negative qualities etc.). Instead, the patients are confusing a feather, a material object, with a mode of the intellectual imagination that is not at all material.

Descartes' comments about mind-body interaction tell us that the distinction between the sensory experience of a body and some kind of intellectual apprehension cannot be what is at stake: "I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship," the meditator observes, "...if this were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain

when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in the ship is broken” (AT 7: 81; CSM 2: 56). Sensations allow for the intermingling between body and mind. If we had ideas of sensations rather than sensations, we would intellectually apprehend the states of our bodies the same way that we intellectually apprehend the states of any corporeal thing. That is, we would experience the jaggedness of the feather as the intellectual apprehension that the molecules of the feather and the molecules of our fingers were arranged in such and such a way just as we can intellectually apprehend the corner of a table as matter at a 90 degree angle. We would not experience the feather’s texture as pleasant or unpleasant or having a soothing or prickly effect on our skin. In other words, intellectually apprehending the interaction between the feather and our bodies would seem no different than intellectually apprehending the interaction between a bird’s feather and the air when it flies or the feather and the forest floor.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, sensations are impossible without human bodies and the corporeal things perceived by the senses. They result from a causal chain that starts with a corporeal thing and ends in the mind with stops in the nerves, brain, and pineal gland along the way. Ideas generated by the (intellectual) imagination do not result from such a causal chain. As Descartes explains in the *Passions of the Soul*, “some [of our perceptions] have the soul as their cause, others the body. Those having the soul as their cause are the perceptions of our volitions and of all the imaginings or other thoughts which depend on them” (PS I.19 = 8A: 343; CSM 1: 335). Our imaginings do not relate us specially to our bodies because they are generated in the absence of corporeal things—they can even represent things such as chimeras that do not exist in the corporeal world.

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<sup>42</sup> Simmons (1999) offers a variant of this response. She claims that sensations have a special character because they are motivationally salient. Sensations can motivate us to act (ex. move away from a painful stimulus, choose the fuzziest, softest peach) in a way that no other mode of mind, including clear and distinct perceptions, cannot.



Finally, our ideas of sensations are about our knowledge rather than about the body itself. That is, they tell us how we take ourselves to be gaining cognitive access to particular properties of bodies. If our ideas of sensations are true, they tell us that we are experiencing (knowing) a property of a body through some modification of our minds. If they are materially false, they (falsely) tell us that we know the body in itself and not through the mediation of our minds. However, the patients Currie describes are not confusing a veridical representation of some corporeal thing with a representation of how they come to have that representation. If this were the case, they would be confusing a sense perception (of a feather) and an intellectual apprehension (that they know about the feather by means of the senses). Instead, they are confusing a sense perception of a feather and an imagined idea of a feather.

### 3.2.2 Objection 2: The Intellect Can Remove Confusion

Another objection might be that the confusion—between perceiving and imagining, sensation and pure idea, and mental things and their modes and corporeal things and their modes—could be removed by means of the intellect. In the Sixth Set of Replies, Descartes claims that the intellect can help us to distinguish between conflicting sensory experiences such as the tactile sensation that a stick is straight and the visual sensation that it is bent: “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 judgment based on touch rather than elicited by vision” (AT 7: 439; CSM 2: 296). If the intellect can help us to distinguish between conflicting sensory appearances, perhaps it can help us to determine which of our ideas are sensory and which are actually imagined. This possibility would not completely save the Transparency Doctrine—according to the first part of the Doctrine, we can immediately and

infallibly determine the origins of our ideas—but it would at least suggest that we can correct any errors about their origins.

In the same passage from the Sixth Set of Replies, Descartes explains that all of our sense perceptions are accompanied by a judgment. When we have a color sensation, for example, we judge that our sensory organs are being affected by something colored: “I make a rational calculation about the size, shape, and distance of the [object]: although such reasoning is commonly assigned to the senses...it is clear that it depends solely on the intellect” (AT 7: 438; CSM 2: 295). That is, our sensations are accompanied by an intellectual apprehension of a body’s essential properties. Ostensibly, our imaginings are not accompanied by this judgment because there are no such properties to intellectually apprehend. There is no extension that could be arranged in a certain shape or spread out across a certain distance. Therefore, it seems that we could use the presence or the absence of this intellectual act as a guide to whether we are perceiving veridically or hallucinating. If we were aware that we were intellectually apprehending some property of bodies, we would know whether we were experiencing a genuine sensation or merely an idea manufactured by the imagination.

There are a number of problems with this line of reply. First, it seems that the intellectual apprehension that is supposed to accompany a veridical perception is no different than thinking about the essential properties of some body, independently of perceiving it. In other words, what links the intellectual apprehension with a veridical sense perception? It seems that we could think about the essential properties of some body without ever having seen it (as in the case of certain geometric shapes) or even while having a hallucination of it. Therefore, intellectually apprehending the body must differ somehow from merely thinking about its essential properties. However, it is difficult to make sense of an intellectual act that did not involve representing

something's essential properties. The intellect is just our faculty for "...perceiv[ing] the ideas which are subjects for possible judgments..." (M 4 = AT 7: 56; CSM 2: 39), and, as the meditator learns in Meditations 2 and 5, the subjects of these judgments are essential properties. So, it seems that the intellect would not be involved if our veridical perceptions were accompanied by something other than the representation of a body's essential properties. However, if the Transparency Doctrine is true, we would be able to know what this cognitive activity is and which faculty performs it. Moreover, we could imagine that we were performing whatever cognitive activity is supposed to accompany our veridical perceptions.

Secondly, whatever cognitive activity we perform—an intellectual act or something else—is irrelevant to sensation. If this cognitive activity does turn out to be intellectual apprehension, then it involves pure ideas rather than sensations. As we have seen, pure ideas do not stand in any special relation to bodies while sensations are essentially connected to bodies, human bodies and the corporeal things that affect our sense organs. Consider the tactile hallucination that insects are crawling over one's skin. Part of this hallucination, on Currie's theory, would involve an imagined idea of itchiness. To simplify things, suppose that the sensation of itchiness is a kind of pain, what we experience in our minds when our bodies are damaged. Whatever the essential properties of bodily damage are, they are not what is conveyed in a sensation of pain or itchiness. That is, the essential properties of bodily damage involve some disorder in the body's extension. A sensation, by contrast, does not represent the bodily disorder. Instead, it represents what that disorder feels like to us as embodied thinking things. Even an idea of the sensation of pain would not represent the bodily disorder—it would merely represent the sensation as a mode of mind if it were true and as a property of some external thing

if it were materially false. So the intellect would represent something very different than the pain sensation its representations are supposed to be tracking.

Moreover, this intellectual activity could not tell us whether we were having the sensation, even if this intellectual activity is something other than merely representing a body's essential properties to ourselves. In Discourse 4 of the *Optics*, Descartes notes that "...when the soul is distracted by an ecstasy or deep contemplation, we see that the whole body remains without sensation, even though it has various objects touching it" (AT 8: 109; CSM 1: 164). We might be able to perceive the essential properties of certain bodies without being aware that we were having a sensation at all. So the intellectual act might mislead us. The intellectual act would alert us to the presence of a body, but not a body that was causing any sensation in us. This is a dramatic example of a pure idea having no relation to a sensation. We could have the pure idea of some shape (X configuration of the body's microstructure) without having the corresponding sensation. Furthermore, there is nothing to stop this pure idea from accompanying an imagined sensation. That is, we could have the pure idea of a shape and hallucinate some shape, leading us to conclude that the shape was affecting our faculty of sense perception, causing a veridical sensation.

Therefore, neither line of objection seems particularly promising. The first line of objection, that our sensations and imagined ideas are on a par is not successful because it mischaracterizes sensations. Sensations are essentially connected to bodies, both states of the human body and the bodies that affect our sensory organs, while imagined ideas are entirely unrelated to the corporeal realm. The second line of objection, that the intellect can help us distinguish between imagined and ideas and sensations, is also unpromising. First, there is no reason why we could not perform some intellectual act while hallucinating. That is, we might

think about a body's essential properties while hallucinating. Second, the intellect represents ideas of sensations rather than the sensations themselves. But, as we saw in the reply to the first objection, ideas of sensations are not relevant here. Our idea of pain represents a disorder in the body's matter, but this is not what our sensation of pain represents. Our sensation of pain represents what this disorder feels like to an embodied, thinking thing. Finally, we could have an intellectual apprehension of a body's essential properties even if that body did not cause a sensation in us. We could hallucinate a sensation while intellectually apprehending the properties of a body that was not affecting our brain and nerves in the right kind of way—i.e., a body that was not producing some sensation in us.

For these reasons, it seems that hallucinations, understood in this way, are a counterexample to both parts of the Transparency Doctrine. On Currie's account, someone who experiences hallucinations mistakes her imaginings for sense perceptions because she is unable to recognize the role her will plays in her imaginings. This account is a counterexample to the first part of the Transparency Doctrine because it suggests that we can will without being aware that we are willing and imagine without being aware that we are doing so. It is a counterexample to the second part of the Transparency Doctrine because it suggests that we can imagine without experiencing our imaginings as voluntary. It is also a counterexample because it suggests that we can confuse ideas with very different origins. Our sensations are the result of a causal chain that starts with interaction between a body and the human sensory organs and ends in the mind, with stops in the brain, nerves, and pineal gland along the way. Therefore, they are essentially connected to bodies—the human body and the bodies that affect our sensory organs. In contrast, our imaginings begin and end in the mind. So, in confusing sensations and imaginings, we

confuse modes of mind that are unconnected to the corporeal world and modes of mind that bear an essential relation to corporeal things and their modes.

### 3.3 Intellect v. Imagination

One of Gassendi's objections seems to undermine Descartes' account of self-knowledge in the same way as the skeptical possibility that the meditator is mad. Although Descartes is dismissive of the objection, I think it can be used to formulate a challenge to introspection that his account would need to overcome. If Gassendi is correct, even psychologically healthy cognizers can confuse one kind of thought with another and be mistaken about the content and origin of their ideas. Gassendi worries that Descartes' distinction between imagination and intellectual apprehension is unmotivated. Rather than being its own form of thought, Gassendi suggests, intellectual apprehension is just a particularly confused kind of imagining. As a result, what Descartes calls 'intellectual apprehension' involves manipulating imagistic ideas at will just as we do when we imagine. This is a particularly serious objection because it challenges both parts of the Transparency Doctrine. Like the first two examples, it suggests that we can be wrong about the kind of cognitive activity we are engaged in, in violation of the first part. It also suggests that we can be mistaken about the content of these ideas. Before I turn to these apparent failures of the Transparency Doctrine, I will lay out Gassendi's initial objection in some detail.

#### 3.3.1 Descartes' Distinction is Unmotivated

Gassendi holds that Descartes' distinction between the intellect and the imagination is unmotivated. For him (Gassendi), intellectual apprehension and imagination "...appear to be acts of one and the same faculty...and if there is a distinction between them it seems to be no more than one of degree" (O 5 = AT 7: 329; CSM 2: 228). He goes on to argue that whether we are intellectually apprehending or imagining depends on the distinctness of what we are

imagining and not different strengths or limitations intrinsic to the two faculties. He is basing his objection on an example Descartes uses in Meditation 6. According to Descartes, when we imagine a chiliagon, we construct a confused pictorial representation that cannot be distinguished from the representations we might form of a myriagon or any other many-sided figure. When we intellectually apprehend, in contrast, we are able to understand the chiliagon as the thousand-sided figure that it is (AT 7: 72; CSM 2: 50). Gassendi draws another lesson from this example, namely that imagination and intellectual apprehension are the same cognitive activity just applied to different objects: "...it is purely a contingent matter, and a question of degree, whether you contemplate any given figure distinctly or confusedly, and with or without a concentrated effort" (O 5 = AT 7: 331; CSM 2: 229). In other words, we perceive confusing or complicated entities like chiliagons confusedly and we perceive simple entities like triangles clearly. It is not the case, as Gassendi takes Descartes to be claiming, that there is one faculty (the intellect) for clear, non-imagistic thought and another faculty (the imagination) for confused, imagistic thought. Instead, a single faculty represents simple things as clear images and more complex things as less clear images. When it comes to representing very complex things such as chiliagons or myriagons, the image this faculty forms is so unclear that we cannot recognize it as an image, so we conclude that there is a non-imagistic form of thought: "you are in a confused state...and hence you think that in the case of the chiliagon or myriagon you have understanding, not imagination" (ibid. = AT 7: 330; CSM 2: 229).

Descartes has another reason for holding that the imagination and intellect are two separate faculties, each with its own unique form of thought. As I explained in Section II, Descartes believes that we can distinguish imagining from intellectual apprehension because imagining feels arduous while intellectual apprehension feels natural and easy. Gassendi

believes that he can account for this phenomenology without having to posit two faculties for what he calls “internal” (i.e., non-sensory) cognition. When we are doing what Descartes would call imagining, forming a mental image, we are straining to make our mental image as clear and detailed as possible. When we are trying to represent something very complicated like a chiliagon, however, we cannot create a representation that we would recognize as an image of a chiliagon or anything else. Faced with this difficulty, we simply give up on creating a clear and detailed representation, and content ourselves with whatever representation we have managed to create: “...because you can no longer grasp the figure explicitly, you do not bother to make a supreme mental effort” (ibid.). Gassendi seems to understand imagination as a cognitive activity and what Descartes would call ‘intellectual apprehension’ as a failure of that cognitive activity. Imagining requires us to combine remembered sensory ideas to create a mental image. It also requires us to subtract elements from those remembered ideas. For instance, he thinks we can have an idea of God or an angel by abstracting from the human form. Ostensibly we form a mental image of an angel by subtracting any physical flaws from our mental image of a human being and adding a pair of wings (ibid. = AT 7: 332; CSM 2: 230). When we try to imagine something very complex like the chiliagon, we can no longer add enough elements (ex. angles and sides) and perhaps we cannot subtract ideas that distract us (ex. we cannot imagine a colorless, un-textured line). At this point, we no longer add and subtract ideas to achieve an accurate mental image and give up. Because the image we are left with is so muddled, we cannot recognize it as an image. Our inability to recognize the image leads us to conclude that we engage in a special kind of non-imagistic thought, intellectual apprehension. Instead, so-called intellectual apprehension is really muddled, inaccurate imagining.



Even though our mental images are so muddled we cannot recognize them as such, our thought does not appear to us to be about muddled images or nothing at all. Instead, we are merely aware of simple identity statements that, according to Gassendi, accompany these confused mental images: "...although you perceive that the word 'chiliagon' signifies a figure with a thousand angles, that is just the meaning of the term, and it does not follow that you understand the thousand angles of the figure any better than you imagine them" (AT 7: 330; CSM 2: 229). In other words, the only non-imagistic aspect of our thought is a statement about the meanings of words. However, this statement cannot help us to gain the kind of penetrating, insightful knowledge that Descartes claims is peculiar to intellectual apprehension. All it does is convey a trivial fact about what the word 'chiliagon' means. Because our mental images are so confused, we think that the only content of our thought is these identity statements. These identity statements are not imagistic, so we take ourselves to engage in a special kind of non-imagistic thought, so-called intellectual apprehension.

### 3.3.2 The Challenge to Introspection

If Gassendi is right that all thought involves mental images, then it seems that both parts of the Transparency Doctrine are false. The first part is false because Gassendi's objections suggest that we are unaware that we are imagining when we are thinking about complex things like chiliagons, and because we do not notice that we are exercising the will when, daunted by the complexity, we give up. Moreover, it seems that we cannot determine the origin of our imagined ideas, also in violation of the first part of the Doctrine. Rather than experiencing these ideas as issuing from the imagination, we experience them as being caused by something else because they do not have the character of imagined ideas. In other words, we do not experience these ideas as imagistic and voluntary. When we think about complex things, we do not

recognize that the content of our thought is a very confused mental image joined by whatever that muddled image can express about what it represents. Because the image is so confused, we take our thought to only be about this latter bit and we come to believe that we have a non-imagistic form of thought.

As I explained above, Gassendi holds that there are only two kinds of thought, external cognition (sense perception) and internal cognition (the cognitive activities Descartes divides between the imagination and the intellect). This latter kind of thought is always imagistic, but sometimes, when we try to think about something very complex like a chiliagon, the mental image we form is so muddled that we cannot recognize it as an image. All we are aware of is the identity statement that accompanies this confused image, so we come to believe that some of our thought is non-imagistic. In other words, the object of our thought seems to be some non-imagistic statement about words and their meanings rather than the muddled mental image that we are simultaneously entertaining. If Gassendi is correct, then it seems that we can be wrong about the content of our thoughts.

As Descartes seems to understand it, intellectually apprehending, e.g. a triangle, is supposed to involve something over and above merely representing it. It involves representing the triangle in such a way that certain relationships (ex. between sides and angles) or certain features (ex. three sidedness) are apparent in a way they would not be if we imagined the triangle or perceived it through the senses. These features and relationships might even be absent from imagined or sensory ideas of triangles. When we take ourselves to imagine rather than intellectually apprehend we go wrong because we take our thought to be about these features and relationships. On Gassendi's account, however, our thought is really about whatever can be captured by or expressed in a mental image—i.e., something other than these features and

relationships. This is a violation of the second part of the Transparency Doctrine because we are supposed to be infallibly aware of the content of our thought. If it seems to us that we are thinking about x, then it is impossible that we are in fact thinking only about y. On Gassendi's proposal, it seems that we are often wrong about the content of our thought. It seems to us that we are thinking about something that cannot be revealed or expressed by an image when, in fact, we are thinking about whatever a very muddled mental image would allow us to think about. Therefore, it seems that this part of the Transparency Doctrine is false.

Gassendi's explanation also violates the first part of the Transparency Doctrine. This part of the Transparency Doctrine states that we cannot engage in some cognitive activity without being aware that we are engaging in it. However, Gassendi's proposal suggests that we can will without being aware that we are willing. On his account, we stop trying to make our mental images of complex entities sharper and more detailed because we are daunted by the difficulty of our task. That is, it seems that we will to stop refining our mental image. We reach a point when adding more detail or subtracting extraneous elements strikes us as irrelevant or too frustrating, and we decide to stop. So it seems that we will to stop creating a mental image without recognizing that we are willing. We do not recognize that we are willing because our idea does not seem to be created by us. As I argued above, our idea of the chiliagon seems to be something independent of us and our exercise of our wills. Rather than recognizing that we are choosing not to refine our mental image of the chiliagon any further, we think that we are engaging in a special kind of non-imagistic thought, intellectual apprehension. Because we think we are engaging in this special kind of non-imagistic thought, we also do not recognize that we are imagining. So, if Gassendi is correct, his objections suggest two failures of the first part of the Transparency Doctrine. We do not recognize that we are imagining because our mental images

of complicated entities like chiliagons are so muddled that we do not recognize them as images. We will without realizing that we are willing because we are not aware that we have decided to no longer refine our mental image of the chiliagon. We do not recognize that we choose to give up because we think that we are engaging in a special kind of non-imagistic thought.

Gassendi's proposal also violates another aspect of the first part of the Transparency Doctrine. According to the Transparency Doctrine as I have interpreted it, we have infallible access to the origin, as well as the content, of our ideas. This means that we can tell that intellectual ideas come from the mind itself, sensory ideas come from some external body, and so on. Each kind of idea—innate, invented, and adventitious—has its own special character that allows us to immediately and infallibly recognize it as such. Innate ideas strike us as natural and especially clear, invented ideas strike us as resulting from the operations of our own faculties (the imagination and will), and sensory ideas strike us as involuntary and therefore originating outside of our minds. Another hallmark of intellectual ideas is their involuntary character. Just as our sensory ideas are involuntary because they are caused by external, corporeal things, our intellectual ideas are involuntary because they represent so-called true and immutable natures, "...determinate nature[s], or essence[s], or form[s]...which [are] immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind" (AT 7: 64; CSM 2: 45). In other words, the content of our intellectual ideas is fixed or determined by what they represent. We cannot add to them or take away from them as we can in the case of imagined ideas. If we imagine a triangle, for instance, we can form a mental image without specifying a particular angle measure or ratio between the side lengths and angle measures. We could not intellectually apprehend a triangle, however, without including the angle measures and ratio between side lengths and angle measures in our idea: "...since these properties are ones which I now clearly recognize whether

I want to or not, even if I never thought of them at all when I previously imagined the triangle, it follows that they cannot have been invented by me” (ibid.). That is, we cannot influence the contents of our intellectual ideas because they represent some entity independent of our minds just as our sensory ideas represent external, corporeal things. Unlike sense perception, which we engage in whenever we are confronted with an external corporeal thing, intellectual apprehension is in some sense voluntary.

On Gassendi’s account, however, we can have imagined ideas that we mistake for intellectual ideas. In other words, we can have ideas that are essentially voluntary yet mistake them for ideas that are importantly involuntary—i.e., they come with a content that has already been determined. As we have seen, Gassendi holds that all of our thought involves mental images that we create by combining various remembered sensory ideas. When we think about something very complex, however, we cannot recognize that the content of our thought is an image. When we can no longer recognize the content of our thought as an image, we give up and cease to add elements that would give the mental image more detail (ex. another set of angles) or remove elements that make it needlessly complex (ex. a particular texture). However, we experience the content of this idea as preset or determined. That is, we are unaware that our idea has the content it has because of the elements we have added to it or subtracted. It seems to us instead that the content of our idea comes to us from something else—a true and immutable nature that does not depend on us despite being innate in our minds. So, if Gassendi is correct, it is false that we can immediately and infallibly know the origin of our ideas. Rather than experiencing our ideas of complex figures like chiliagons as being created by means of the imagination, we experience them as imposed on us from a true and immutable nature that is independent of our minds and their activities.

I have argued that Gassendi's objections point to three failures of the Transparency Doctrine. Because we fail to recognize our muddled mental images as images, we are wrong about the content of our thought. We believe that we are engaging in a special kind of non-imagistic thought when the content of our thought is in fact a very muddled mental image. This is a failure of the second part of the Transparency Doctrine. Gassendi's objections also tell again another aspect of this part of the Transparency Doctrine. Even though an idea of a chiliagon is imagined, we fail to recognize it as such. Ideas of the imagination have a voluntary character—i.e., we recognize them as resulting from the exercise of our faculties of will and imagination. However, our idea of a chiliagon seems to be involuntary. Although we can think of a chiliagon at will, it seems to us that we are not responsible for the content of the idea. It seems to us instead that the content of our idea is determined by a true and immutable nature, something that is independent of our minds and their operations.

My three examples were designed as a challenge to Descartes' account of self-knowledge. That is, we could be wrong about the kind of thought we are engaged in and the content of our thoughts could be something other than we take it to be. Together the examples show that we could be thinking about one thing (whatever is expressed by a muddled mental image) and take ourselves to be thinking about another (something over and above what those images could express). They also show that we can mistake imagination for sense perception or intellectual apprehension and that we can will without being aware that we are willing. If the Transparency Doctrine is false, then the kinds of cognitive disasters I explained above—having beliefs that we do not take to be true and being unable to judge at all—are possible. If these cognitive disasters were possible, God would be a deceiver because He would have created us with faculties that rendered our thought false in a special sense. Our thought would be false in

this sense because it could not provide the materials for a true judgment. Thought that does not provide the materials for a true judgment does not allow us to judge at all. We would be deceived because our thought would present itself as true—i.e., as providing the materials for a true judgment.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have argued that Descartes subjects his account to extreme skeptical challenges so that he can eventually show that it is immune to doubt. As I interpret him, he initially tries to show that introspection is unreliable by having the meditator suppose that his mind's Creator is a deceiver. Because the meditator has always believed that his Creator is all-powerful he reasons that he will always be susceptible to error if his Creator intends to deceive him. That is, he will never be able to judge truly. If he can be mistaken about the nature and activities of his mind, he will not be able to make true judgments about his thoughts or anything outside his mind. In this essay, I have raised the possibility that he is vulnerable to error because his cognitive faculties resemble the injured faculties of an individual afflicted with a serious mental illness. If he has been endowed with such faculties, I have argued, the meditator would not be able to distinguish thoughts that originated in the mind alone from thoughts with a bodily cause. For this reason, he would be mistaken about the origins of his thought as well as the supposedly clear and distinctly known distinction between minds and bodies. Thus, even the "simplest and most universal things" would be open to doubt.

## Essay 2: Childhood Skepticism

So that he can doubt even those beliefs that seem as if they cannot possibly “...incur any suspicion of being false,” Descartes has his meditator-spokesperson suppose that he is incapable of understanding what it is to occupy a space or have particular shape and other notions that he had always taken to “contain something certain and indubitable” (M 1 = AT 7: 20; CSM 2: 14). To convince himself that even these seemingly “transparent truths” are doubtful, the meditator imagines that he has been equipped with faculties that malfunction or that he has been deprived of the faculties necessary to “count the sides of a square” or comprehend “even simpler matters” (ibid. = AT 7: 21; CSM 2: 14). He hypothesizes that his mind’s origins might explain why it could be missing some faculties for thought or going wrong because of the shortcomings of the faculties it has. Since he has always believed that his mind is a divine creation, he speculates that its Creator might have had reason to withhold the necessary faculties from it or to endow it with faculties that inevitably err. He spends the rest of the *Meditations* trying to reconcile what he takes to be his mind’s divine origins with its imperfections, especially its propensity to err, and trying to show that he can attain certain and indubitable knowledge despite these imperfections.

The goal of this essay is to understand Descartes’ skepticism about the teachings of nature, his name for natural impulses to judge, as part of this larger project. Descartes has the meditator criticize his teachers because he believes that they affirm doctrines without being convinced of their truth and reason from principles that they know to support incompatible conclusions. For this reason, he rejects his early education as a source of knowledge and concludes that he must “...demolish everything completely and start again from the right foundations” (M 1 = AT 7: 17; CSM 2: 12). However, he fears that he cannot help but disregard



the truth and accept principles that support conclusions and their contraries because he is “taught by nature” to pursue and avoid the very same object and to make judgments that he suspects are false. Just as his teachers’ doctrines led him astray, it seems that his natural impulses also incline him to err. These natural impulses incline him to pursue bodily pleasures at the expense of the genuine goods of virtue and a good will that the intellect inclines him to pursue and to judge that his stomach is empty when he feels a sensation of hunger even though reason shows him that it would collapse like a deflated balloon if it truly were empty. Although he began to doubt his teachers’ doctrines once he reached adulthood, the teachings of nature “capture his belief” so that it is “as it were bound over to them” (ibid. = AT 7: 22; CSM 2: 15). Therefore, it seems that he cannot help but err when he follows the teachings of nature.

The meditator is vulnerable to more serious errors than occasionally making false judgments. As I will argue, the conflict between his natural impulses and his intellect’s inclination towards truth disposes him towards *akrasia* or genuine weakness of the will. That is, he can obey the teachings of nature and affirm an opinion even though he knows by means of the intellect that this opinion is false. Unlike his teachers who affirm doubtful doctrines because they want to be known for their subtlety and originality, the meditator does not err due to a passion such as his teachers’ vanity. Instead, his natural impulses incline him in one direction while his intellect inclines him in the opposite direction so that he is genuinely weak-willed. Moreover, since his natural impulses oppose his intellect’s inclination towards truth, he cannot use reason to resolve the conflicts that inevitably arise between his natural impulses. Nature teaches him to pursue whatever causes pleasant sensations and to avoid whatever causes disagreeable sensations, but the same food may seem delicious under some circumstances and disgusting under others. As a result, his natural impulses incline him to pursue and avoid the

very same food. Because deliciousness and disgustingness do not belong to the essence of bodies, the intellect cannot help him to determine whether he should pursue or avoid the food. Therefore, he is in the same state of perplexity that he experienced when he recognized that his teachers' principles supported opposing conclusions. For this reason, neither his natural impulses nor his teachers' principles can be a source of knowledge.

The meditator's vulnerability to genuine weakness of the will and his inability to decide between conflicting appearances suggest that his mind is not transparent. On Descartes' account, our will and intellect aim at goodness and truth, so we cannot assent to an opinion unless we take it to be true. Because the meditator experiences genuine weakness of the will, however, he seems to affirm opinions that he knows to be false. Therefore, something outside of his faculties for thought must explain how he can temporarily take these opinions to be true so that his will affirms them. As I will argue, the passions or some other kind of bodily disturbance cannot explain how he comes to make a judgment even though he knows that this judgment is false. Thus, I will claim, he makes this error because he is mistaken about the activities of his faculties so that falsehoods seem to be truths. His inability to decide between conflicting appearances also suggests that his mind is not transparent because he is mistaken about the strength of his inclinations. Because his inclinations to make a true judgment are stronger than his inclinations to judge falsely, one of his opposing inclinations should be stronger than the other. Since both inclinations appear equally strong to him, it seems that he can be mistaken about their strength. If he can be mistaken about the activities of his faculties in this way, he will not be able to have achieve any of the knowledge that depends on his having immediate and infallible insight into the contents and activities of his mind. This knowledge not only includes knowledge of his own existence, but also his knowledge of logic, mathematics, and metaphysics, and even his

knowledge of the external world. He will lack this knowledge because of the nature of his faculties. In other words, he will have been endowed with faculties that cannot serve as a source of knowledge and will have been deprived of the faculties he needs to think and know. This discovery will confirm his worst fears that his mind is unfit for knowledge by its very nature because its Creator withheld the necessary faculties from it.

### 1. Against the Professors

Descartes begins the First Meditation by having his meditator recall being "...struck by the large number of falsehoods that [he] had accepted as true in [his] childhood..." (AT 7: 17; CSM 2: 12). He came to believe these falsehoods, Descartes suggests, because of the kind of education he received. He accuses his teachers of accepting doctrines without being convinced of their truth and even when they are convinced of these doctrines' falsity. For instance, he alleges that his teachers accept views that they acknowledge are merely plausible and do not try to establish that these views are in fact true: "for if they want to be able to speak about everything and acquire the reputation of being learned, they will achieve this more readily by resting content with plausibility, which can be found without difficulty in many subjects, than by seeking the truth" (DM §6 = AT 6: 71; CSM 1: 147). He offers an even harsher assessment of his teachers in a letter to the faculty of the Sorbonne, alleging that many teachers of philosophy believe "...that everything can be argued either way; so few people pursue the truth, while the great majority build up their reputation for ingenuity by boldly attacking whatever is most sound" (AT 7: 5; CSM 2: 5). These teachers recognize that the doctrines they reject are true, but they are more concerned with having reputations as subtle, original thinkers than discovering and communicating the truth. Because his teachers encouraged him to follow their example, the

meditator came to accept a variety of claims while acknowledging that they might be false or even while recognizing that they are false.

Descartes also criticizes teachers of philosophy for reasoning from what he takes to be a faulty set of premises. He claims that the premises his teachers accept are flawed because the same premises can be used to support a conclusion and its contrary. Even though his teachers accept the same philosophical positions and reason from the same set of premises, they endorse opposing positions. He observes, “and, considering how many diverse opinions learned men may maintain on a single question—even though it is impossible for more than one to be true—I held as well-nigh false everything that was merely probable” (DM §1 = AT 6: 8; CSM 2: 115). He recognizes that his teachers’ conclusions might seem plausible, but the contraries of those conclusions seem equally plausible and are endorsed by equally respected thinkers and teachers. Since his teachers’ lectures and writings appear to provide equally good grounds for accepting a conclusion and its contrary, he becomes so confused and perplexed that he cannot assent to any of their claims. He suspends judgment and treats all of his teachers’ conclusions as if they were false because he cannot dispel his confusion and discover the truth.

Some passages in the First Meditation suggest that the meditator has absorbed his teachers’ bad habits along with their doctrines. For instance, he continues to affirm his former opinions even though he recognizes that they are doubtful. He compares himself to a dreamer who “...as he begins to suspect that he is asleep, he dreads being woken up, and goes along with the pleasant illusion as long as he can” (AT 7: 23; CSM 2: 15). Like his teachers, he prefers to accept opinions that he acknowledges to be merely probable or even doubtful because he fears having to admit his ignorance. Although he does not share his teachers’ vanity or desire for novelty, he also values his intellectual comfort more than he values the truth. He fears the

feelings of perplexity and disorientation that will result from admitting his ignorance and the hard work it will take to transform his ignorance into knowledge. He confesses, "...I happily slide back into my old opinions and dread being shaken out of them, for fear that my peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labor when I wake and that I shall have to toil in the...inextricable darkness of the problems I have now raised" (ibid). Since he shares his teachers' disregard for the truth, he accepts his old opinions even though he recognizes that they might be false. He also shares their willingness to accept principles that appear to support opposite conclusions. For instance, his confidence that his senses do not err when they perceive large, nearby bodies leads him to hold conflicting beliefs about the shapes and sizes of towers and statues. He recalls noticing that "...enormous statues standing on their pediments did not seem large when observed from the ground" (M 6 = AT 7: 76; CSM 2: 53). That is, he comes to believe that the statues are small when he observes them from above and comes to believe that they are large when he sees them at eyelevel. His acceptance of the principle that the senses are reliable when they perceive bodies like statues inclines him to make conflicting judgments just as his teachers' acceptance of the same philosophical positions lead them to support opposite conclusions. Because he cannot determine which of his conflicting sense perceptions is correct, he doubts them both just as he doubts his teachers' doctrines.

## 2. Skepticism about Teachings of Nature

Descartes has the meditator worry that his teachers might not be entirely to blame for his tendencies to affirm his former opinions although he has judged that they are doubtful and to accept principles that support a conclusion and its contrary. He fears that he is naturally inclined to err because he "...apparently had natural impulses towards many things which reason told [him] to avoid" (M 6 = AT 7: 77; CSM 2: 53). That is, he fears that the source of his errors is

not some external influence like his teachers but rather his own faculties for thought: "...the impulses which I was speaking of a moment ago seem opposed to my will even though they are within me..." (M 3 = AT 7: 39; CSM 2: 27). Whatever faculty it is that produces these impulses inclines him to judge that: he has sense perceptions resembling the particular bodies that cause them; he has a body that is responsible for his experience of these external sensations as well as the internal sensations of pleasure, pain, hunger, and thirst and "propensities towards cheerfulness, sadness, anger, and other emotions"; and he is identical to this body or otherwise inseparable from it (M 6 = AT 7: 74-76; CSM 2: 52). When he reflects on these judgments, however, he recognizes that they are doubtful because they are prompted by impulses that are opposed to reason. "But as for my natural impulses," he observes, "I have often judged in the past that they were pushing me in the wrong direction when it was a question of choosing the good, and I do not see why I should place any greater confidence in them in other matters concerning truth and falsehood" (M 3 = AT 7: 39; CSM 2: 27).

Some of the judgments that these impulses prompt seem to be false while others seem merely doubtful. For instance, his judgment that his sensory ideas resemble the particular bodies that cause them seems false. When he looks at the sun it appears very small even though he knows by means of reason that it is enormous, so he concludes that his sense perception and the impulse that prompted it are misleading: "...reason persuades me that the idea which seems to have emanated most directly from the sun itself has in fact no resemblance to it at all" (M 3 = AT 7: 39; CSM 2: 27). In contrast, his judgment that he has a body that is responsible for his inner and outer sensations is merely doubtful. While he is supposing that he might be dreaming, he doubts that he has a body that is affected by bodies outside it. If he can show that this supposition is false or that knowing that he has a body does not depend upon knowing that he is

awake, his judgment that he is embodied will not be false. Nevertheless, the impulse that prompted this judgment seems misleading because it preempts reason. Before the meditator determines whether there is a viable response to the dreaming doubt, his natural impulses incline him to judge as if he had already dismissed it. “These and other judgments that I made concerning sensory objects,” he concludes, “I was apparently taught to make by nature; for I had already made up my mind that this was how things were, before working out any arguments to prove it” (M 6 = AT 7: 76; CSM 2: 53). Whether the judgments that they prompt are true or false, the meditator’s natural impulses seem to conflict with his intellect’s inclination towards the truth. For this reason, the faculty or faculties from which these impulses emanate seems to be the source of his errors.

Although he initially feared that these impulses were random and disorderly because they inclined him to assent before he could determine whether he should affirm, deny, or suspend judgment, he comes to recognize that they are united by their common origin. As he already suspected, these impulses belong to his nature. They are within him from birth as part of “...the totality of things bestowed on [him] by God” (M 6 = AT 7: 80; CSM 2: 56). In particular, they belong to his nature as a human being, a thinking nature united with a corporeal nature, “...what God has bestowed on [him] as a combination of mind and body” (ibid. = AT 7: 82; CSM 2: 57). That is, they are inclinations to judge that result from his mind’s union with his body just as the intellect’s tendency to affirm its clear and distinct perceptions results from its thinking nature and a body’s tendency to fall to earth results from its extended nature. However, they are distinct from his purely intellectual inclination and the inclinations that belong to his body alone such as his leg’s tendency to move when his knee is tapped. “[W]hen I say that I am taught something by nature, Descartes has the meditator explain, “...I am taking nature to be something more

limited than the totality of things bestowed on me by God. For this includes many things that belong to the mind alone...It also includes much that relates to the body alone..." (ibid).

Understood in this limited way, our nature inclines us "...towards the preservation of our body, towards the enjoyment of bodily pleasures, and so on" (AT 2: 599; CSMK 140). Like the intellect's inclinations to affirm its clear and distinct perceptions and to doubt its other thoughts, these natural impulses have a kind of coherence or integrity that makes them more than a miscellaneous collection of urges or whims.<sup>43</sup> They fit together because they incline the meditator to conceive of the union between his mind and body in the way that will ensure that it remains intact and is not threatened by damage to the body.

His strongest natural inclination—what his "own nature teaches [him] most vividly"—is to conceive of the mind-body composite as if it constituted a single substance rather than the union between two utterly distinct substances. He observes, "nature also teaches me by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, and so on that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined, and as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit" (M 6 = AT 7: 81; CSM 2: 56).<sup>44</sup> That is, when he feels pain or another inner sensation, he takes himself to be undergoing the changes that his body is undergoing so that he is harmed when it is damaged even though he is nothing but a thinking thing. Since he "should not doubt that there is some truth in this," the judgment that he and his body are very

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<sup>43</sup> As John Carriero puts it, "...the promptings and urgings (including among other things, pain and pleasure, hunger and thirst) that occur in me naturally fit together in a certain way; they are not a miscellaneous or arbitrary collection of messages from God that mysteriously appear from time to time. That is why it makes sense to think of them as reflecting a nature" (2009: 393).

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Menn's translation of this passage supports my interpretation that our natural tendency to judge that we are embodied also inclines us to conceive of their union as constituting a single thing: "nature teaches [us] that we are "very tightly conjoined and as it were intermixed with [our body], in such a way that [we] form some *one thing* with it" (1998: 370, my emphasis).



closely joined and even intermingled is true.<sup>45</sup> Otherwise, he would merely perceive damage to his body like a bystander or external observer “...just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken” (ibid). Similarly, he would intellectually apprehend that his body was dehydrated or undernourished just as a sailor would perceive by sight or touch that his ship was in need of fuel: “when the body needed food or drink, I should have an explicit understanding of the fact instead of having confused sensations of hunger and thirst. For these sensations...are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union, and, as it were, intermingling of the mind and body” (ibid).

The meditator’s nature also inclines him to judge that his body is surrounded by other bodies that are the cause of his external sensations. Although his external sensations do not resemble these bodies, they are capable of informing him of what he needs to know to navigate the corporeal world: “from the fact that I perceive by my senses a great variety of colors...and the like, I am correct in inferring that the bodies which are the source of these various sensory perceptions possess differences corresponding to them, though perhaps not resembling them” (M 6 = AT 7: 81; CSM 2: 56). These bodies can also bring about internal sensations of pain and pleasure. His nature inclines him to judge that bodies that bring about distressing sensations can harm him while bodies that bring about pleasant sensations can benefit him: “...the fact that some of the perceptions are agreeable to me while others are disagreeable makes it quite certain that my body, or rather my whole self, in so far as I am a combination of body and mind, can be affected by the various beneficial and harmful bodies which surround it” (ibid).

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<sup>45</sup> My understanding of this passage is modeled on Lilli Alanen’s clear and helpful exposition in her article “Cartesian *Scientia* and the Human Soul”: “in feeling pain and other sensations I feel myself affected by what affects my body to the point of not distinguishing body and self, and since there is some truth in teachings like this, it is true that I am as it were intermingled or one with my body” (2008: 429).

Just as the meditator learns more about his mind's nature and activities than the piece of wax when he intellectually apprehends its nature, he learns more about his nature as a composite of body and mind than he does about external bodies when he has a sense perception.<sup>46</sup> As the quoted passage suggests, his sensations of pain and pleasure help him to conceive of himself as intermingled with his body so that his body and mind comprise a single thing. They give him far less insight into the external bodies themselves. Since he cannot doubt that there is some truth in all that his nature teaches him, his judgment that something in a fire causes his sensations of heat and pain even though he cannot tell what it is or how it brings those sensations about: "there is simply reason to suppose that there is something in the fire, whatever it may eventually turn out to be, which produces in us feelings of heat or pain" (ibid. = AT 7: 83; CSM 2: 57). However, his natural inclinations cannot justify him in making any further judgments about the fire, its qualities, or its abilities to produce sensations in him. Thus, he observes that his nature "...does indeed teach [him] to avoid what induces a feeling of pain and to seek out what induces feelings of pleasure, and so on. But it does not appear to teach [him] to draw any conclusions from these sensory perceptions about things located outside [him] without waiting until the intellect has first examined the matter" (ibid. = AT 7: 82; CSM 2: 57). Although all that nature teaches him contains some truth, some of his natural impulses incline him to make judgments that may need to be corrected or supplemented by an intellectual apprehension.

Moreover, the judgments that these natural impulses incline us to make seem to conflict with the judgments that are prompted by the intellect's impulses towards truth and goodness.

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<sup>46</sup> Descartes has the meditator exclaim "surely my awareness of my own self is not merely much truer and more certain than my awareness of the wax, but also much more distinct and evident. For if I judge that the wax exists from the fact that I see it, clearly this same fact entails much more evidently that I myself also exist" (M 2 = AT 7: 33; CSM 2: 22).

Some of the judgments that our nature prompts us to make are practical<sup>47</sup> judgments, judgments about what to do. In particular, they are judgments about what we must do to ensure that the union between our mind and body remains intact. For this reason, they concern our good as beings that are a composite of body and mind rather than the goods necessary for a happy or virtuous life that are the subjects of our intellect's practical judgments. Our nature inclines us to pursue whatever will quell our sensations of hunger, thirst, and so on even though eating and drinking do not contribute to a genuinely happy and virtuous life as Descartes understands it. He suggests that our natural impulses for food, drink, good health, and other bodily pleasures undermine our attempts to live happily because they incline us towards merely apparent goods. Bodily pleasures, including good health and the absence of pain, are merely apparent goods because they do not contribute to happiness. On Descartes' account, all we need to live happily and well is a good will, and our urges for bodily pleasure make it more difficult to cultivate a good will. Striving for these merely apparent goods undermines our quest for virtue and happiness. Since attaining bodily pleasures depends on something other than the quality of our will, we often strive for them in vain "...thus making us the more irritated the more strongly we wished for them" (PS II.145 = AT 11: 437-438; CSM 1: 380). Our struggle for these merely apparent goods also distracts us from the genuine goods that will bring us happiness, virtue and a good will: "...in occupying our thoughts they prevent our forming a liking for other things whose acquisition depends on us" (ibid). By inclining us to pursue the merely apparent good of

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<sup>47</sup> Menn holds that the judgments that nature urges us to make lack a theoretical function. He claims "...the proper function of *nature*, as distinguished from intellect, is to give practical guidance for action, and not to perceive the truth of things" (1998: 368, original emphasis). Ann Wilbur MacKenzie makes a similar point, asserting that "the epistemological bottom line, for Descartes, is that sensations are inherently non-veridical and can play no role in the mind's search after truth. Instead, the role Descartes assigns (in the Sixth Meditation) to sensations...is merely to help embodied minds get around on a day to day basis" (1990: 125). Richard Kennington claims "prudence, or practical judgment, governs because the truth or falsity of a sensation is determined for the sake of the practical end" (1972: 102).

bodily pleasure, our nature distracts us from the genuine goods of happiness and virtue so that they become more difficult to attain. Therefore, our natural impulses seem opposed to our intellect's impulses towards genuine goodness.<sup>48</sup>

Our nature also prompts us to make theoretical<sup>49</sup> judgments, judgments about what is so. These judgments are judgments about what is so from our perspective as a composite of body and mind. In a letter to More, Descartes explains that our sensory judgments do not concern the nature of bodies or the immutable natural laws that explain the movements of their parts. Instead, our sensory judgments concern the effects of these laws and natures as we experience them from the perspective of an embodied thinking thing: "...our senses do not always show us external bodies exactly as they are, but only insofar as they are related to us and can benefit or harm us" (AT 5: 241; CSMK 362). When we are hungry, for instance, we judge that our stomach is empty even though it is full of gastric juices, air particles, and other tiny bodies. We make this judgment because our stomach is empty of anything that could nourish us and thereby prolong the union between our body and mind. If it is functioning correctly, however, the intellect will judge that our stomach is full (or at least not empty). Descartes holds that a simple thought experiment will show that our stomach would collapse on itself like a deflated balloon if it were truly empty (cf. PP II.18 = AT 8A: 50; CSM 1: 230-231). Even when we are not

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<sup>48</sup> Robert Rethy observes that Cartesians have "...no reason for believing that God or Nature has the good of man or even the good in itself as an end of its actions" (2000: 677). Rethy's observation supports the worry expressed above that our nature as composite beings urges us towards things that are neither good in themselves nor good for us as thinking beings.

<sup>49</sup> Some commentators suggest that the sensory judgments that nature prompts us to make have a theoretical function, even though they may not perform this function well. Alison Simmons holds that "sensations conduce to self-preservation by showing the mind what bodies (its own included) are like, not in themselves as conceived by the Cartesian physicist, but relative to the body's own wellbeing. In other words, they represent to the mind ecologically salient properties of (or perhaps facts about) the corporeal world (1999: 355). Raffaella De Rosa claims that "sensations are materially false ideas because they represent their objects as other than they are. But as long as sensations do represent existing objects and allow us to distinguish one from another, they contain 'some' truth and therefore allow us to move around in the environment quite successfully" (2007: 334).

misusing our senses by trying to investigate the essences of corporeal things, they still contribute to judgments that are false by the intellect's lights. Our nature inclines us to make these theoretical judgments so that we can use them in our practical calculations about how best to maintain the union between our body and mind. However, judgments that are true from our point of view as an embodied thinking thing are false from the perspective of our intellect. For this reason, the natural impulses that incline us to make sensory judgments seem opposed to our intellect's impulses towards the truth.

### 3. Serious Errors

Because the meditator's natural impulses can conflict with his intellect's inclinations towards goodness and truth, he is susceptible by his very nature to his teachers' errors. That is, his natural impulses can incline him to affirm one of his former opinions even though he knows by means of the intellect that it is doubtful or even false. Just as his teachers accept doctrines that they know to be false, the meditator affirms his former opinions despite judging that he should deny them. Unlike his teachers, he does not affirm these opinions because he wants a reputation as a subtle, original thinker or because he is in the grip of a passion other than vanity. Instead, as I will argue, he suffers from genuine weakness of the will because his natural impulses oppose his intellect's inclinations towards truth. Since his natural impulses conflict with the intellect's inclination towards truth, he also cannot make use of his intellect to resolve conflicts between opposing natural impulses. As a result, his natural impulses render him as confused and perplexed as his teachers' principles.

#### 3.1 Genuine Weakness of the Will (*Akrasia*)

Descartes denies that *akrasia* or genuine weakness of the will is possible. On his account, every instance of apparent *akrasia* is really a case of wavering between two options. He

holds that we alternate between judging that  $x$  is good and judging that it is shameful or harmful so quickly that we seem to desire  $x$  and its opposite at once. This often happens because a bodily disturbance brought about by a passion causes a movement of the pineal gland—the organ that he takes to be responsible for communication between the mind and body—and thus a new thought in the mind. The newly formed thought represents  $x$  in a more favorable light, enticing our will to affirm it. If we end up affirming this thought, we will come to judge that  $x$  is good. We reassess  $x$  so quickly that we seem to desire it while still judging that it is shameful or harmful even though we only begin to desire it once we have come to believe that it is good (PS I.47 = AT 11: 365-366; CSM 1: 346). For this reason, he conceives of weakness of the will in terms of our inability to remain resolute when we are disturbed by the passions rather than our inability to stop desiring  $x$  once we have judged that it is not good: “the weakest souls of all are those whose will is not determined in this way to follow such judgments, but constantly allows itself to be carried away by present passions” (PS I.48 = AT 11: 367; CSM 1: 347).

He conceives of weakness of will in the theoretical realm the same way. That is, he denies that we can affirm that  $p$  while continuing to maintain that  $p$  is doubtful or uncertain. He holds instead that we waver between two options. He has the meditator observe, “whenever my preconceived belief in the supreme power of God comes to mind, I cannot but admit that it would be easy for Him...to bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think I see utterly clearly...Yet when I turn to the things themselves...I am so convinced by them...” (M 3 = AT 7: 36; CSM 2: 25). The meditator wavers between affirming his clear and distinct perception that the sum of two and three is five and doubting that he can do simple arithmetic without going wrong, but he does not simultaneously affirm and deny that two and three make five. Descartes has the meditator make a similar observation in Meditation 5: “...other

arguments can now occur to me which might easily undermine my opinion if I were unaware of God and I should thus never have true and certain knowledge about anything, but only shifting and changing opinions” (AT 7: 69; CSM 2: 48). Without a divine guarantee, Descartes claims, we would waver between affirming and denying that the two angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, so we would never come to a certain judgment. Even without God’s help, he suggests, we would not affirm that the two angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles while also denying it at the same time.

If there can be conflicts between our faculties, however, it seems that we can suffer from *akrasia* or genuine weakness of the will and not merely waver between two incompatible options. That is, our nature teaches us to affirm what we have already judged to be false by means of the intellect just as the meditator’s teachers try to persuade their pupils to accept claims that they know to be false. For this reason, we seem to suffer from *akrasia* or genuine weakness of the will. In other words, we do not merely waver between two options as the meditator does when he describes feeling as if his will is being pulled in one direction by his probable conjectures and in the opposite direction by his recognition that he should only assent to certainties: “for although probable conjectures may pull me in one direction, the mere knowledge that they are simply conjectures, and not certain and indubitable reasons, is itself quite enough to push my assent the other way” (M 4 = AT 7: 59; CSM 2: 41). Instead, as I will argue below, we can obey the teachings of nature and assent to  $p$  while judging by means of the intellect that  $p$  is false.

### 3.1.1 *Akrasia* about Best Knowledge

Midway through Meditation 2, the meditator continues to doubt everything that is not encompassed in his idea of himself as a thinking thing. However, he also judges that his ideas of

particular bodies are immune from doubt because they are more certain than his idea of his mind. He confesses, “but it still appears—and I cannot stop thinking this—that the corporeal things... which the senses investigate are known with even more distinctness than this puzzling ‘I’ which cannot be pictured in the imagination. And yet it is surely surprising that I should have a more distinct grasp of things which I realize are doubtful...than I have of that which is true and known” (AT 7: 29; CSM 2: 20). In other words, he judges that his imagined ideas of particular bodies are the most certain and least open to doubt of his ideas while acknowledging at the same time that only his intellectual idea of his thinking nature is immune from doubt. This seems to be an example of genuine weakness of the will. The meditator simultaneously affirms his imagined ideas of particular bodies while judging that they are doubtful—that is, denying them. Rather than being indifferent to the two opposing ideas or affirming the idea that careful reflection has convinced him is certain, he affirms both his intellectual and imagined ideas despite judging that he should only affirm the former. Just as his teachers reject doctrines that they acknowledge to be true, the meditator doubts his intellectual idea of his nature while judging at the same time that it is immune from doubt.

The meditator’s teachers reject doctrines that they acknowledge are true and accept doctrines that they know are merely plausible because they are more concerned with being recognized as learned, subtle thinkers than with discovering the truth. He affirms that his ideas of particular bodies are immune from doubt while judging that only his intellectual idea of himself is certain and doubts anything that he cannot picture in the imagination while acknowledging that his imagination is not a source of knowledge because his nature urges him to affirm whatever ideas will preserve the union between his mind and body. His imagined ideas help to preserve this union because they, along with the memory and the other inner senses,



represent bodies that are no longer present to the five outer senses. Affirming the imagination's ideas of absent bodies ensures that we do not overlook those bodies when we encounter them so that we can pursue them if they will benefit us and avoid them if they will harm us. For this reason, the meditator's nature inclines him to affirm his ideas of particular bodies. However, his intellect inclines him to withhold his assent from these ideas because they are obscure and confused and thus affirming them will not result in knowledge. Because the function of the intellect is opposed to the function of the imagination, these faculties incline the meditator to make conflicting judgments. Therefore, he affirms that his ideas of particular bodies are immune to doubt while also acknowledging that they are doubtful and uncertain.

This episode seems to be an instance of *akrasia* or genuine weakness of the will rather than mere wavering between two incompatible judgments. If the meditator were wavering between affirming that he can only be certain about what is encompassed in his intellectual idea of himself and affirming that his best knowledge concerns the particular bodies he imagines, there would have to be a time when he no longer perceived his idea of himself clearly and distinctly. Otherwise, he could not make a judgment that he knows to be incompatible with his idea of himself unless he could simultaneously affirm this idea and affirm that his imagined ideas are the source of his best knowledge. He could only do so if *akrasia* or genuine weakness of the will were possible. Therefore, he must turn his attention away from his idea of himself and his reasons for doubting particular bodies if he is merely wavering. However, the passage suggests that his attention does not falter until he voluntarily decides to relax his attention and allow his imagination free reign. When the passage begins, the meditator is reflecting on his newly gained insight into his nature. After subjecting his former beliefs about his nature to the general doubts about his beliefs he had already raised, he recognizes that his idea of himself as a thinking thing

is immune to these doubts. He observes, “from all this I am beginning to have a rather better understanding of what I am” (M 2 = AT 7: 29; CSM 2: 20). The phrase “from all this” suggests that he is attending to his reasons for conceiving of himself as a thinking thing as well as his clear and distinct idea of his thinking nature. For this reason, he cannot be distracted by fears that he came to his conclusion by means of faulty premises or premises that he can no longer recall. Both his premises—that whatever he perceives by means of the senses is doubtful and various sensory ideas of his body and its powers for movement and nutrition—and his conclusion that he is a thinking thing are present to his mind. Because he is perceiving his conclusion and the premises it follows from clearly and distinctly, he can be confident that his intellectual idea of his nature is “true and known”. This is exactly how he describes his idea of his nature even once he has confessed that it is puzzling because it cannot be pictured in his imagination. He would not assert that this idea is true and known if he were not entertaining it attentively. By this point in his investigation, he has realized that some of his former beliefs seemed true until he began to focus on them intently. For instance, when he entertains his former belief that he is a rational animal, he recognizes that he cannot know whether this belief is true because his understanding of what it is to be rational and what it is to be an animal is obscure and incomplete: “...then I should have to inquire what an animal is, what rationality is, and in this way one question would lead me down the slope to harder ones...” (AT 7: 25; CSM 2: 17). Therefore, it seems that he would only credit himself with knowledge while he entertained an idea attentively and did not waver between opposing judgments. Moreover, the passage ends with the meditator’s announcement that he will give his imagination “...a free rein, so that after a while, when it is time to tighten the reins, it may more readily submit to being curbed” (M 2 = AT 7: 30; CSM 2: 20). If he had already become distracted or forgotten his

reasons for doubting his sensory ideas, he would not need to announce that he was temporarily suspending his doubts so that his mind could have the freedom to wander. His mind would have already begun to wander, and his doubts and his clear and distinct perception of his nature would have already been forgotten, so his announcement would be unnecessary.

Even if the meditator were distracted or forgetful, his judgment that his sensory ideas of particular bodies are the source of his best knowledge is still an example of choosing the worst or acting against his better judgment.<sup>50</sup> If a passion breaks his concentration and he no longer perceives his intellectual idea of himself clearly and distinctly, he should withhold his assent and refrain from making any judgments about his nature and his knowledge until he is in better circumstances. Affirming that his ideas of particular bodies are the source of his best knowledge is a clear example of misuse of his power of judgment: “if...I simply refrain from making a judgment in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, I am not using my free will correctly” (M 4 = AT 7: 59; CSM 2: 41). Although he has not yet established that he should limit his assent to his clear and distinct perceptions, he has been determined to affirm only certainties since the First Meditation. Therefore, he acts against his better judgment by affirming that his sensory ideas are the source of his best knowledge even if he does so because he no longer remembers perceiving his intellectual idea of his nature clearly and distinctly. Rather than providing an alternate explanation for the meditator’s behavior,

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<sup>50</sup> Tenenbaum claims that we can experience *akrasia* even if we affirm a conclusion because we have forgotten our reasons for judging that we ought to deny it. He uses the meditator’s inability to stop assenting to his former opinions despite having vowed to doubt them to argue that “if my will compares this mere recollection with the ideas of sensory perception...I might find the latter convincing while still agreeing that I ought to be convinced by the former...If this happens, we have a case of theoretical *akrasia*” (1999: 897).

appealing to wavering caused by the passions or other bodily disturbances like fatigue also suggests that he is suffering from *akrasia* or genuine weakness of the will.

The meditator would not act against his better judgment if his experience of a passion were so intense that he temporarily could not call any other thoughts to mind. Since he would be unable to entertain any thoughts except for those brought about by the passion by means of the pineal gland, he could not remember his vow to withhold his assent from his uncertain former opinions or recall his reasons for doubting these former opinions. Thus, he would affirm that his sensory ideas are the source of his best knowledge without acting against his better judgment. However, it seems that this would be a case of compulsion rather than wavering between two conflicting judgments.<sup>51</sup> Descartes holds that very strong passions can overwhelm us and temporarily deprive us of our freedom to judge. On his account, the will "...can easily overcome the lesser passions, but not the stronger and more violent ones, except after the disturbance of the blood and spirits has died down. The most the will can do while this disturbance is at its full strength is not to yield to its effects and to inhibit many of the movements to which it disposes the body" (PS I.46 = AT 11: 364; CSM 1: 345). Just as the bodily disturbances caused by a passion can cause us to move our limbs against our will, these agitations of the blood and animal spirits can cause movements of the pineal gland that result in thoughts that conflict with our judgments about what to do or what is so. If our experience of a passion is especially intense, we cannot help but assent to the thoughts it causes. The intensity of the passion "...makes the soul feel itself impelled, almost at one and the same time, to desire and not desire one and the same

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<sup>51</sup> Tenenbaum shares my intuition that weak-willed judgments or actions differ from compelled judgments or behavior. He claims, "there seems to be a difference between *akrasia* and compulsion...[W]e do conceive of an *akratic* person as a free and responsible agent...On the other hand, an agent acting under compulsion is not to blame for her actions; if my desires, working 'behind my back,' drive me to an action despite myself, I am no more free than in cases of external compulsion" (1999: 877).

thing” so that we cannot help affirming an opinion we would have denied if we were not in the throes of the passion (PS I.47 = at 11: 366; CSM 1: 346). When we are in the throes of these opposing passions, “...the will obeys first one and then the other, [so that] it is continually opposed to itself, and so it renders the soul enslaved and miserable” (PS I.48 = AT 11: 367; CSM 1: 347). Since the meditator would be in thrall to an equally intense passion, it would compel him to affirm that bodies are the source of his best knowledge. Therefore, he would not be acting against his better judgment because he would not be doing anything at all; he would be the passive victim of his passions. Showing that we do not act against our better judgment because there are instances in which we cannot act does not seem to be a good strategy for showing that *akrasia* or genuine weakness of the will is impossible.

### 3.1.2 *Akrasia* about the Distinction between Mind and Body

Descartes describes another bout with *akrasia* in the Sixth Set of Replies. He admits to his interlocutors that he initially could not accept his conclusion that the mind is distinct from anything corporeal even though he took his demonstration to be valid and sound: “...I was compelled to accept these results because everything in the reasoning was coherent and was inferred from quite evident principles in accordance with the rules of logic. But I confess that for all that I was not entirely convinced” (AT 7: 440; CSM 2: 296). In other words, he believes that he has reasoned validly and argued from true premises while simultaneously doubting the conclusion that he acknowledges to be entailed by this set of premises. Thus, he both believes that the body is distinct from the mind and doubts this very same conclusion at the same time. He hints at how it might be possible to affirm and deny this conclusion by comparing himself to astronomers who find that their childhood beliefs are resistant to correction by the intellect. “I was in the same plight as astronomers who have established by argument that the sun is several

times larger than the earth, and yet still cannot prevent themselves [from] judging that it is smaller when they actually look at it,” he recalls (ibid). Even though they know by means of the intellect that the sun is an immense orb, the astronomers cannot help but accept their senses’ testimony and judge that it is far smaller. They affirm their sensory idea of the sun while judging by means of the intellect that it is false because their nature inclines them to affirm whatever idea will preserve the union between the body and mind. Since the purpose of the faculty of sense perception is to preserve this union, the astronomers’ nature urges them to affirm its ideas even though their intellect has judged that they are false. Similarly, Descartes might doubt his conclusion that the mind is distinct from the body because holding that the mind and body are distinct does not help to preserve their union. Conceiving of the two as distinct might lead us to neglect our body or to judge falsely that we will not suffer if our body is injured or destroyed. For this reason, Descartes’ nature inclines him to judge that his mind and our body compose a single, indivisible substance. However, his intellect recognizes that the conclusion of a valid and sound demonstration cannot be false, so it inclines him to deny that the mind and body are a single thing and assent to the conclusion that he has reached by means of reason. Therefore, he doubts his conclusion that the mind and body are distinct while affirming that it is a “conceptual contradiction” to conceive of them as constituents of a single thing (ibid. = AT 7: 444; CSM 2: 299).

Descartes’ initial inability to affirm a conclusion that he takes to follow from a valid and sound set of premises seems like an instance of *akrasia* or genuine weakness of the will. As I explained above, Descartes holds that we sometimes waver between two conflicting judgments because we forget having made the first, or we become so distracted that we can no longer enumerate our reasons for judging as we did: “...as soon as I turn my mind’s eye away from the

proof, then in spite of still remembering that I perceived it very clearly, I can easily fall into doubt about its truth...” (M 5 = AT 7: 70; CSM 2: 48). We might doubt our conclusion because we forgot the steps we took to reach it or because we were reminded of our fallibility or something else that undermined our confidence in our demonstration. However, Descartes does not describe himself in the passage as distracted, forgetful, or unconfident. He is disturbed by his doubt because he recognizes that he arrived at his conclusion by means of a valid and sound argument. If he took himself to have forgotten his premises or to be in thrall to a passion, he would deem his doubt appropriate and not liken it to the astronomers’ unwarranted doubt about the falsity of their childhood beliefs. Therefore, it seems that he is suffering from *akrasia* or genuine weakness of the will and not wavering between affirming and denying that his mind is distinct from his body. That is, he seems to take himself to be certain that his mind is distinct from his body while doubting this conclusion at the same time.

Moreover, the influence of a passion is not guaranteed to bring about a judgment that opposes the intellect’s judgment. Even if we are too weak-willed to resist the passion’s influence, we may still end up disobeying the teachings of nature. This is because our passions and our natural impulses can sometimes conflict. Sometimes the passions seem to urge us to make judgments that are incompatible with our sensory judgments and other judgments we make on the basis of our natural impulses. For example, the passion of boldness “...is a kind of courage which disposes the soul to carry out the most dangerous tasks” (PS III.171 = AT 11: 460; CSM 1: 391). This passion inclines us to judge that risking our lives is good even though nature inclines us to judge that we should do whatever will keep the union between our mind and body from being destroyed by the body’s death. Similarly, we might feel the passion of repulsion from “the touch of an earthworm, the sound of a rustling leaf, or [the sight of] our

shadow” even though nature does not teach us to regard these sensations as harmful or unpleasant (PS II.89 = AT 11: 395; CSM 1: 360). Even if the bodily disturbances caused by a passion are strong enough to move our pineal gland, the resulting thought may not support the judgment that nature is urging us to make. As the examples of boldness and repulsion suggest, the thoughts that our passions bring about may even conflict with the judgments that we are naturally inclined to make.

The concluding passages of Meditation 1 seem to illustrate a conflict between the passions, the intellect, and the imagination, one of the faculties that is charged with prolonging the union between mind and body. This example suggests that there can be a conflict between the intellect and the imagination even without the influence of the passions. Because the passions seem to be in conflict with the imagination as well as the intellect, they do not seem to make the meditator’s imaginings exert a stronger influence on his will than his intellectual apprehensions. At the end of the First Meditation, the meditator confesses that he cannot help but affirm his former opinions even though he has vowed to withhold his assent from them. He decides to “...deceive [himself] by pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary” (AT 7: 22; CSM 2: 15). Even then he admits that he “...happily slide[s] back into [his] old opinions and dread[s] being shaken out of them” (ibid. = AT 7: 23; CSM 2: 15). In these passages, he comes to three conflicting conclusions about what to do. When he considers his former opinions by means of the intellect, he determines that he should suspend his judgment and neither affirm nor deny these “probable conjectures”. Because he imagines that his former opinions are false, his imagination inclines him to deny them. Finally his passions—his love of familiarity, desire for comfort, and fear of admitting his ignorance—

incline him to affirm his former opinions. Therefore, the intellect, imagination, and passions will



incline the meditator towards three different responses to the question whether *p*. The intellect and imagination will incline him towards different responses whether or not he is experiencing a passion, so it seems that he can make opposing judgments even when a passion does not cause him to reassess his intellect's original judgment.

It might be objected that the meditator's intellect and imagination are not really in conflict because he is pretending that his former opinions are false in order to achieve his intellect's goal of withholding assent. Although this may be true, the intellect and imagination come to opposite conclusions regarding the kinds of considerations that should move our will to judge or withhold its assent. That is, the kinds of doubts that are compelling from the imagination's point of view are not terribly compelling from the point of view of the intellect. For instance, the meditator manages to deny his former opinions by imagining that they were planted in his mind by an evil deceiver. However, as Menn points out this is a much less compelling doubt from the intellect's point of view than the doubt that the meditator's faculties are the product of fate or chance: "the latter situation is the more serious threat...[S]ome sane people seriously believe that they are products of fate or chance while no sane people seriously believe that they are products of an omnipotent deceiver".<sup>52</sup> Even though this latter doubt is more compelling from the intellect's point of view, it does not have the same effect on his imagination as the more vivid but more farfetched doubt that he is the victim of an evil being. Therefore, it seems that there is a conflict between the intellect and imagination over what kinds of considerations should lead us to judge that *p* is merely uncertain and what kinds of considerations should lead us to believe that it is false. Because there can be conflicts between the imagination and intellect without a passion to incline the will, Descartes' inability to affirm a

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<sup>52</sup> 1998: pg. 242

conclusion he knows to be true seems to be an instance of *akrasia* or genuine weakness of the will. Experiencing a passion might make him even more likely to affirm his intellect's conclusion and disobey his natural impulse to judge that the mind and body are inseparable or it might incline him to come to yet another conclusion. Therefore, it seems that he is weak-willed because he doubts his conclusion while judging that it is certain and not because a passion causes him to waver between incompatible judgments.

Because he affirms a conclusion while denying that it is true, the meditator seems to make the same mistake that his teachers do. However, he does not err because he is in the throes of vanity or some other passion like they are. Instead, his nature inclines him to make judgments that will help to prolong the union between his mind and body even though they are false from the intellect's point of view. Just as education cannot be a source of knowledge because it inclines him to err, his faculties also prevent him from having knowledge because their conflicts result in *akrasia* or genuine weakness of the will.

### 3.2 Inability to Decide between Conflicting Appearances (*Aporia*)

Descartes criticizes his teachers because they accept premises that can support a conclusion and its contrary. Since both conclusions seem equally plausible, he finds himself in a state of confusion or perplexity and does not assent to either of them. Similarly, our nature teaches us to both pursue and avoid the same body and does not provide us with a means for determining which of the conflicting impulses we should follow. Just as Descartes recalls being so perplexed that he could not decide which of his teachers' doctrines are true, we cannot determine which teachings of nature will best preserve the union between our body and mind.

Descartes holds that we are able to decide between conflicting sense perceptions, such as a visual sensation that an oar in water is curved and a tactile sensation that it is straight, by means

of reason: “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 judgment based on touch rather than that elicited by vision” (R 6 = AT 7: 439; CSM 2: 296). Reason can settle the dispute between our sense of vision and our sense of touch because we are making a judgment about truth and falsity when we try to determine the shape of the oar. However, it seems that we cannot use reason to decide between conflicting sense perceptions when we are not making a judgment about shape or other qualities that belong to the true and immutable nature of bodies. For instance, our visual and olfactory sensations of a rose incline us to pursue it while our tactile sensation of its thorns incline us to avoid it. Thus, the same teaching of nature—to “avoid what induces a feeling of pain and to seek out what induces feelings of pleasure”—inclines us to both pursue and avoid the rose (M 6 = AT 7: 83; CSM 2: 57). Similarly, the same food or aroma can cause us to experience conflicting inner sensations of pleasure and pain. On Descartes’ account, “disgust is kind of sadness which results from the same cause as that which joy came previously. For we are so constituted that most of the things we enjoy are good for us only for a time, and afterwards become disagreeable” (PS III.208 = AT 11: 484; CSM 1: 402). Just as the same oar can appear straight when it is on a docked rowboat and curved when it is submerged in a lake, the same food or aroma can appear pleasant and enticing when we are in one state and disagreeable and repulsive when we are in another. A food that we enjoy when we are in good health might seem disgusting when we are ill whether or not eating it would harm us. Moreover, a food that we enjoyed sampling might seem cloying or too heavy whether or not a large portion could sicken us. According to Descartes, nature teaches us to avoid the sources of our sensations of disgust so that we can avoid rotten food or filthy conditions that might sicken our body and threaten its union with our mind. Nature teaches us to

seek out the sources of our sensations of pleasure so that we maintain the body's union with the mind by ensuring that we eat and drink to keep it in good health. However, these sensations and the corresponding teaching of nature are useless if we cannot determine whether we should eat the food or avoid it. Because our sensations incline us to believe that the food is both pleasant and disgusting, our nature teaches us to both pursue and avoid it.

Just as reason inclines Descartes to suspend judgment when he is faced with his teachers' opposing viewpoints, it cannot incline us to accept one of the conflicting teachings of nature rather than another. This is because pleasure and disgust are not qualities that belong to the essence of body. Moreover, we use reason to make judgments about the truth, so we can only use our intellect to judge whether there is some quality in the food that our sensations of pleasure and disgust resemble. We also cannot rely on other senses to help us to determine which of the conflicting teachings of nature we should accept. Since our faculty of sense perception is the source of our opposing sensations, it cannot resolve the conflict between them. If we could determine which sensation would best preserve the union between our mind and body by means of our senses, there would not have been a conflict. Therefore, it seems that we have no way of deciding between our conflicting sensations and the conflicting inclinations they prompt.

#### 4. No Knowledge

These examples of conflict within and between the faculties suggest that the meditator's nature inclines him to make the same mistakes that his teachers' instruction encouraged him to make. That is, his nature seems to teach him to make judgments that he acknowledges to be false and to affirm conflicting perceptions of the same body just as his teachers encouraged him to accept doctrines they know to be false and to reason from principles that support opposing conclusions. When he realized that his teachers' doctrines made them go wrong, he concluded

that their teachings cannot be a source of knowledge. Because his own nature seems to incline him to err in similar ways, he fears that it may impede his search for truth just as his formal education did. Moreover, his vulnerability to genuine weakness of the will and inability to decide between conflicting sense perceptions suggest that he might not be capable of having any knowledge at all. This is because we cannot have any knowledge, as Descartes conceives of it, unless our mind is transparent in his special sense. In other words, we must be able to know with certainty that we are willing, intellectually apprehending, imagining, or having a sense perception just by engaging in that form of thought. Being certain of our mind's nature and activities, he claims, allows us to gain certain knowledge of our own existence, the truths of logic and metaphysics, and even the existence of an external world. However, it seems that we will lack immediate and infallible insight into our mind's nature and activities if we can suffer from genuine weakness of the will or affirm two conflicting sense perceptions. As I will argue below, it seems that when we suffer from genuine weakness of the will, we are mistaken about the kind of thought we are engaged in.

#### 4.1 *Akrasia* as a Skeptical Challenge

Positing different functions for the intellect and our faculties of inner and outer sense explains why these faculties conflict, but it cannot explain how the meditator comes to assent to the falsehoods that his nature inclines him to accept. To explain how he can affirm these falsehoods, it is necessary to show how he can temporarily come to take them to be true. On Descartes' account, we can only assent to what we take to be true and desire what we take to be good because our will has goodness and truth as its ends: "but as for man, since he finds that the nature of all goodness and truth is already determined by God, and his will cannot turn towards anything else, it is evident that he will embrace what is good and true" (R 6 = AT 7: 432; CSM

2: 292). As I have already argued, claiming that a passion affects the meditator so violently that he no longer perceives clearly and distinctly cannot explain why he would obey the teachings of nature and assent to an opinion that he has judged is false. If he assents despite perceiving obscurely and confusedly, he will have shunned what he takes to be the greater good of suspending judgment when he is uncertain. Since neither a bodily disturbance nor the mind's faculties of intellect, will, imagination, and sense perception can explain how the meditator comes to affirm what he takes to be false, something else must explain this very grave error. As I will argue below, he might make this error because he is mistaken about his mind's activities.

The meditator might experience genuine weakness of the will because he confuses his will's strong inclination to affirm that his ideas of bodies are the source of his best knowledge with his will's full-fledged assent to this opinion. That is, he might take himself to have assented to this opinion even though he has managed to resist his strong natural inclination to assent.<sup>53</sup> Since he would not make a judgment at all, he would not make a judgment that he took to be false, but he would still suffer from *akrasia* if he did not try to correct himself by calling additional reasons for doubt to mind or by going through his reasons for believing that he is a thinking thing once more. Instead, he persists in what he takes to be his judgment that his ideas of particular bodies are the source of his best knowledge even though he recognizes that this judgment is false. If he is *akratic* for this reason, then it seems that his mind fails to be transparent. This explanation suggests that he can be in error about the will's activities because he can mistake a potential judgment, an opinion that the will has yet to affirm, deny, or withhold its assent from, with an actual judgment. In other words, he can take his will to be active when it

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<sup>53</sup> Eric Schwitzgebel suggests that an individual may take herself to believe that *p* yet act or judge in ways that are inconsistent with its truth because she is not fully committed to *p*. That is, she has some, but not all, of the "cognitive, phenomenal, and behavioral dispositions" that Schwitzgebel takes to constitute belief even though she takes herself to avow that *p* (2010: 534-536).

is being moved by impulses that are external to it. On Descartes' account, the will is freest when it is not determined by anything but its own nature as a faculty for pursuing goodness and truth: "...not only are we free when ignorance of what is right makes us indifferent, but we are also free—indeed, at our freest—when a clear perception impels us to pursue some object" (R 6 = AT 7: 433; CSM 2: 292). We are freest when we perceive clearly and distinctly because our will is completely free from any external constraints: "...a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will, and thus the spontaneity and freedom of my belief was all the more in proportion to my lack of indifference" (M 4 = AT 7: 59; CSM 2: 41). When we are not perceiving clearly and distinctly, as the meditator is not when he seems to affirm that his ideas of particular bodies are the source of his best knowledge, we are less free because our will is subject to external constraints. These external constraints such as ignorance or rashness partially determine our will because they lead it to judge in a manner that is incompatible with its nature as a faculty for pursuing what is genuinely good and affirming what is indubitably true. Since nothing within the will can prevent it from acting in accordance with its nature, external constraints such as ignorance or rashness must be partially responsible for its inclinations to affirm uncertain opinions. Rather than aiming at what is genuinely good or indubitably true, our will can only pursue what seems good or true to it as a will encumbered by the external constraints of ignorance and rashness. As a result, the will is only imperfectly or incompletely free.<sup>54</sup> Because our will is not entirely free, it is also not entirely active. External constraints such as our natural impulses to obey the teachings of nature are what move it, so it is passive while these impulses are active. Thus, the meditator will take his will to be active and moving

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<sup>54</sup> On Paul Hoffman's account, "our intellectual limitations together with the fact that we cannot avoid making judgments pertaining to action entail that some of our judgments will not be compelled by clear and distinct ideas. Such judgments will not be fully free" (2009: 209).

itself even though it is passive and being moved by his natural impulses. For this reason, his mind does not seem to be transparent.

The meditator might also experience genuine weakness of the will because he might take himself to have perceived his intellectual idea of himself clearly and distinctly even though he did not. That is, it might seem to him that he is perceiving clearly and distinctly even though he is engaged in a form of thought that only yields obscure and confused insights. Because he takes himself to be perceiving clearly and distinctly, he will affirm that he is a thinking thing. He will also doubt this judgment, however, because his obscure and confused perception causes him to feel uncertain. Since he will not be aware of having perceived obscurely and confusedly, he will take himself to affirm a clear and distinct idea of himself while doubting it at the same time. If he can mistake an obscure and confused perception for a clear and distinct perception, it seems that his mind is not transparent. To be mistaken in this way, the meditator would have to confuse one form of thought with another. For instance, he might take himself to be intellectually apprehending his idea when he is in fact imagining it or perceiving it by means of the senses. In this way, he would confuse an idea that is obscure and confused by its very nature with an idea that is inherently clear and distinct. He might also confuse his intellect's passive perception of an idea with its active combination of ideas. According to Descartes, our intellect cannot err when it merely perceives its various ideas: "...all that the intellect does is enable me to perceive the ideas which are subjects for possible judgments; and when regarded strictly in this light, it turns out to contain no error in the proper sense of the term" (M 4 = AT 7: 56; CSM 2: 39). Error creeps in, however, when the intellect combines its innate ideas. Although each individual idea is clear and distinct, the resulting composite idea may be obscure and confused: "it happens in almost every case of imperfect knowledge that many things are apprehended together as a



unity, though they will later have to be distinguished by a more careful examination” (R 6 = AT 7: 445; CSM 2: 300).<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the meditator might take himself to perceive the composite idea clearly because he perceives each component idea clearly. Or else, he might fail to recognize his intellect’s role in creating these composite ideas and take himself to be perceiving passively. Either way, he is mistaken about the kind of thought he is engaged in, so his mind fails to be transparent.

Moreover, the meditator will be mistaken about his will’s activities if he can confuse an obscure and confused perception with a clear and distinct perception. Descartes holds that we must always assent to our clear and distinct perceptions. In a letter to Regius, he claims that “...our mind is of such a nature that it cannot help assenting to what it clearly understands” (AT 3: 64; CSMK 147). He elaborates in the Fourth Meditation that we can never be indifferent when we are perceiving clearly and distinctly; we must automatically assent: “...if I always saw clearly what was true and good, I should never have to deliberate about the right judgment or choice; in that case, although I should be wholly free, it would be impossible for me ever to be in a state of indifference” (AT 7: 58; CSM 2: 40). In contrast, it is open to the will to affirm, deny, or withhold its assent when an obscure and confused idea is presented to it for judgment: “...this indifference does not merely apply to cases where the intellect is wholly ignorant, but extends in general to every case where the intellect does not have sufficiently clear knowledge at the time when the will deliberates” (ibid. = AT 7: 59; CSM 2: 41). Therefore, if the meditator could be mistaken about whether he is perceiving clearly and distinctly, he would also be mistaken about whether his will was indifferent or whether it was determined by its own nature to assent. He would take his will to have immediately assented even though it would move back and forth

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<sup>55</sup> Alan Nelson explains confusion as follows: “one judges, at least initially, that two or more ideas belong together; if they do not in fact fit together, the result is confusion” (1997: 168).

between affirming, denying, and withholding assent. Thus, he would be in error about his will's activities as well as the activities of his intellect if he could mistake an obscure and confused perception for a clear and distinct perception. For this reason, his mind would fail to be transparent.

#### 4.2 *Aporia* as a Skeptical Challenge

The meditator's inability to decide between conflicting appearances also suggests that his mind is not transparent. He is in a state of ignorance or confusion because his inclination to pursue the rose based on its enticing aroma is matched by an equally strong inclination to avoid it based on its sharp thorns. Since his opposing inclinations are equally strong, he cannot determine whether pursuing the rose or avoiding it will best maintain the union between his body and mind. Just as he cannot determine whether his teachers' conflicting doctrines are true or false, he cannot determine whether the rose will harm or benefit him. However, he may be in this state of perplexity because he is in error about the strength of his inclinations.

Descartes suggests that the stronger our inclination, the more reliable it is. This is especially apparent in the case of our intellectual inclination towards the truth, but he also suggests that our strongest natural inclinations are the most reliable. For instance, he claims that "...although a star has no greater effect on [our] eye than the flame of a small light, that does not mean that there is any real or positive inclination in me to believe that the star is no bigger than the light" (M 6 = AT 7: 83; CSM 2: 57). If we feel inclined to judge that the stars are no bigger than a lantern, it is because we have been in the habit of making this judgment since childhood. Although this inclination may be strong enough to bring about a judgment, Descartes suggests that it is weaker than our inclination to judge that our sense perceptions are caused by external, corporeal things. In the Third Meditation, he has the meditator observe that he is prone to

judging that "...the ideas which are in [him] resemble, or conform to, things located outside [him]" (AT 7: 37; CSM 2: 26). When he reflects on this judgment, he recognizes that his grounds for it are weak. Even though some of his ideas come to him against his will, he reasons, he cannot conclude that they come from outside of him. They may be like the natural impulses that oppose his will from within. Moreover, he recognizes that some of his sensory ideas fail to resemble the bodies that supposedly cause them at all. Although he dismisses this judgment and his grounds for it, he returns to his claim that his sensory ideas originate in external, corporeal things. For instance, in the very same Meditation he argues that his idea of God could not have come from his senses because "it has never come to [him] unexpectedly, as usually happens with the ideas of things that are perceivable by the senses, when these things present themselves to the external sense organs..." (ibid. = AT 7: 51; CSM 2: 35). He makes a similar observation in Meditation 6, noting that his sensory ideas "...came to [him] quite without [his] consent, so that [he] could not have sensory awareness of any object, even if [he] wanted to, unless it was present to [his] sense organs; and [he] could not avoid having sensory awareness of it when it was present" (AT 7: 75; CSM 2: 52). Because his inclination to judge that his sensory ideas are caused by external, corporeal things recurs, it seems stronger than his inclination to judge that his sensory ideas resemble these objects. It is also a more reliable inclination. Since it is among the teachings of nature, it contains some truth. His inclination to judge that his sensory ideas resemble the bodies they represent turns out to be weaker and less reliable. It results from his "...habit of making ill-considered judgments; and it is therefore quite possible that [it is] false" (ibid. = AT 7: 82; CSM 2: 56). Therefore, it seems that the stronger our natural impulses, the more reliable they are—i.e., the more likely they are to incline us to make a judgment that will prolong the union between our body and mind.

It seems that one of the meditator's inclinations to pursue or avoid the rose will be more likely to prolong the union between his body and mind. Therefore, his inclination towards pursuit or avoidance will be stronger than his opposing inclination. If he takes his inclinations to be equally strong, however, then it seems that he can be in error about the nature and activities of his mind. That is, his opposing inclinations must seem equal because he mistakes a weak inclination for a strong inclination (or a strong inclination for a weak inclination). To be mistaken about the strength of his inclinations is also to be mistaken about the movement of his will. Even if he disobeys his natural impulses and suspends judgment, they still incline his will to affirm and "pull [him] in one direction" (M 4 = AT 7: 59; CSM 2: 41). The stronger his impulse to assent, the more it will move his will even if it cannot manage to incline his will to assent.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, he will also be mistaken about the state of his will if he is mistaken about the strength of his inclination. If he takes his inclinations to be equally strong, he will also take his will to be unmoved by forces external or internal to it even though it is being moved by the stronger inclination. As a result, he will be in error about the activities of his faculties as well. Because he is in error about the strength of his inclinations and the activities of his will, it seems that his mind fails to be transparent.

## 5. Conclusion

The meditator abandoned the principles that he had been taught in childhood when he realized that they could not serve as a source for knowledge. He recognized that some of these principles supported opposite conclusions and that others were false but his teachers accepted them because they wanted to be regarded as subtle, original thinkers. However, his nature also

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<sup>56</sup> As C.P. Ragland explains, "...the term 'indifference' denotes a motivational state that comes in degrees...In a state of perfect indifference, the motivation for and against a given act of will are perfectly balanced. We become progressively less indifferent as the motivations on one side outweigh those on the other, and we lose indifference altogether when we are motivated in only one direction" (2006: 381).

seems to teach him to make the same errors as his teachers and make judgments that he knows to be false and accept principles that support conflicting conclusions. Because he is prone to these errors by his very nature, his faculties cannot be a source of knowledge. His susceptibility to genuine weakness of the will and inability to decide between conflicting judgments suggests that his mind is not transparent. He goes so seriously wrong, I have argued, because he can confuse the activities of one faculty for the activities of another and mistake the activity of external forces such as a bodily disturbance for the activities of his will. If he can be mistaken about the kind of thought he is engaged in, then he lacks the immediate and infallible insight into his mind necessary for knowledge. He will have been deprived of the transparent faculties he needs in order to know anything at all, thus calling his Creator's good intentions into doubt.

### Essay 3: Animal Skepticism

So that he can doubt even the “simplest and most general things,” Descartes has his meditator-spokesperson suppose that he lacks the kind of mind necessary for understanding what it is to be a quantity of extension or what it is to be a body at rest and other notions that he had always taken to be “certain and indubitable” (M 1 = AT 7: 20; CSM 2: 14). To convince himself that even these seemingly “transparent truths” are doubtful, the meditator imagines that he has been equipped with faculties that malfunction or has been deprived of the faculties necessary to perform basic arithmetic and contemplate “even simpler matters” (ibid = AT 7: 21; CSM 2: 14). He speculates that his mind’s origins might explain why it could be missing some faculties for thought or going wrong because of the shortcomings of the faculties it has. Since he has always believed that his mind is a divine creation, he speculates that his mind’s Creator might have had reason to withhold the necessary faculties from it or to endow it with faculties that inevitably err. He spends the rest of the *Meditations* trying to reconcile what he takes to be his mind’s divine origins with its imperfections, especially its propensity to err.

The goal of this essay is to understand Descartes’ skepticism about the senses as part of this larger project. As I will interpret them, his worries about dreams and our perceptions of small and distant objects are worries about the nature of our faculties of sense perception and imagination. He fears that these faculties are not faculties for thought because they seem to be limited and fallible in the same way that the faculties of bodies are limited and fallible. That is, they seem to function haphazardly or at random by causing us to seem to see and hear when we are dreaming even though our eyes and ears are not being stimulated by some external body. Since they appear to function haphazardly or at random, our imagination and faculty of sense perception seem like faculties of a body rather than faculties of an incorporeal mind. This is

because Descartes conceives of bodies as beings that are not structured or organized by an end, so their activities cannot be purposeful. In contrast, he holds that minds are moved to will particular goods by their end of goodness and to believe particular truths by their end of truth.

If it turns out that our faculties for thought are corporeal, our mind will be vulnerable to error by its very nature. Our insight into our mind and its activities will be limited to what we can merely fallibly infer from the motion and arrangement of their parts, so we cannot have any knowledge that depends on our immediate and indubitable awareness that we are thinking. This knowledge not only includes our knowledge of our own existence but also our knowledge of logic, mathematics, and metaphysics, and even our knowledge of the external world. We will lack this knowledge because of the nature of our faculties. That is, we will have been endowed with corporeal faculties that can neither think nor serve as a source of knowledge and deprived of the incorporeal faculties that we need to think and know. This discovery will confirm the meditator's worst fears that the human mind is unfit for knowledge by its very nature because its Creator withheld the necessary faculties from it.

I will begin by envisioning what Descartes would take to be the worst case scenario—namely, that our entire mind is just another organ of our body like our brain or our heart. If our entire mind were a body, we could not have any certain knowledge of its nature and activities even if we could perceive the motion and arrangement of its parts clearly and distinctly. Once I have motivated Descartes' conclusion that a corporeal mind cannot know, I will try to show how his Dreaming and Imperfect Resemblance Doubts contribute to his worry that the mind might be a kind of body. Finally, I will argue that by his lights a mind with only some corporeal faculties is as susceptible to error as a mind that is entirely corporeal. Even if the meditator only has

reason to fear that his imagination and faculty of sense perception are corporeal, he will still lack the immediate and infallible insight into his mind necessary for attaining any knowledge at all.

### 1. The Worst Case Scenario

Descartes holds that we cannot have certain knowledge of anything outside our mind unless we have infallible insight into its nature and activities. Because this insight is infallible, it must also be immediate. We cannot become aware that we are thinking a thought by inferring that this thought has special traits peculiar to it. If we try to know our mind's activities in this way, we are susceptible to error since we could misidentify or neglect to notice our thoughts' special traits or be mistaken about their meaning. However, there would be no other way of knowing our mind's nature and activities if it were some kind of body. This is because Descartes conceives of bodies mechanistically. That is, he holds that the modes such as roundness or roughness that we observe in bodies are the result of "...the motions and impacts of submicroscopic particles, or corpuscles, each of which can be fully characterized in terms of a strictly limited range of (primary) properties: size, shape, motion, and, perhaps, solidity or impenetrability".<sup>57</sup> Thus, he would hold that a corporeal mind would gain and lose its modes, its thoughts, by virtue of the motion and arrangement of its parts. To know that we were thinking, we would have to observe those motions and arrangements and infer that they constituted some kind of thought. We would have to be able to recognize, for instance, that when the mind's particles are arranged in a *w*-configuration it means that we are willing and to distinguish this configuration from other, similar configurations that indicate that we are engaged in another form of thought or that we are not thinking at all. As I will argue below, it would be very difficult for us to make these inferences correctly, so we could easily be mistaken about the

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<sup>57</sup> Wilson 1999: pg. xiv, note 1



nature and activities of our mind. For this reason, our mind would fail to be transparent by Descartes' lights. Transparency, as he conceives of it, means that "...each mind is infallible and omniscient about its current activities"<sup>58</sup>. Given this understanding of transparency and Descartes' claim that the mind is transparent, the mind cannot be corporeal on his account. Otherwise we could be mistaken about the kind of thought that we were engaged in and whether we were thinking at all.

### 1.1 A Corporeal Mind is not Transparent

On Descartes' account, a body undergoes a change when another body or something internal to it causes its parts to move and reconfigure themselves: "all the properties which we clearly perceive [in matter] are reducible to its divisibility and consequent mobility in respect of its parts, and its resulting capacity to be affected in all the ways which we perceive as being derivable from the movement of the parts" (PP II.23 = AT 8A: 52; CSM 1: 232). Therefore, if the mind were a kind of body, it would think when the minute parts composing it moved into a new configuration. Even a relatively simple change requires many successive motions and rearrangements of a body's parts. For instance, in order for two particles to change places, the first particle must vacate its place so that the second particle can occupy it. Then the first particle must move from its temporary resting place to the place originally occupied by the second particle. Thus, three separate motions must occur for this extremely simple change to take place. Since thinking is a very complex activity, it seems that the mind would need to execute a long sequence of motions in order to have a single thought such as a volition to take a step. Even if we were clearly and distinctly aware of these motions as they were taking place, we would not know that we were thinking or the kind of thought we were engaged in unless we

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<sup>58</sup> Bennett 2001: vol. 1 pg. 109.

were aware of the entire sequence. Otherwise, at some points in the process, the various motions of our mind's particles might constitute something that is not a thought at all because it is insufficiently complex or sophisticated or is taking place in the wrong region of the mind. At other points in the process, these motions might constitute some other kind of thought. The same motion that usually initiated a sequence of motions that made up an intellectual apprehension, for example, might instead initiate a sequence of motions that made up a sense perception or imagining if the sequence terminated early or unfolded differently after being interrupted. For this reason, we would have to observe the entire sequence unfold and then infer that it culminated in an intellectual apprehension or a sense perception etc. once it was complete in order to determine the kind of thought we were engaged in. If we were distracted or overlooked a step in the sequence of motions or we could not recognize a particular sequence, our judgment about the kind of thought we were engaging in would be false. Hence, we could be mistaken about the kind of thought we were engaged in, so our mind would fail to be transparent by Descartes' lights.

Not only could we be mistaken about the kind of thought that we were engaged in, but we might also be mistaken about whether we were thinking at all. We would be vulnerable to this kind of error because we could confuse a sequence of motions that does not constitute a thought with a sequence of motions that constitutes a sense perception, a kind of thought<sup>59</sup>. On Descartes' account, bodies are constantly changing because the interaction between their various parts and their contact with other bodies causes them to gain, lose, and rearrange their parts (PP

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<sup>59</sup> Descartes holds that sense perceptions are a kind of thought. In the Second Set of Replies, he explains that he understands the term 'thought' to "...include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it. Thus, all the operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination, and the senses are thoughts" (AT 7: 160; CSM 2: 113). In the *Principles of Philosophy*, he claims that "...thinking is to be identified here not merely with understanding, willing, and imagining, but also with sensory awareness" (I.9 = AT 8A: 7; CSM 1: 195).

IV.200 = AT 8A: 323; CSM 1: 286). If our mind were a kind of body, it would undergo these changes to its shape, density, and surface texture by virtue of being a body along with the kinds of changes that would constitute its thoughts. Obviously non-thinking beings of a similar shape, density, and texture could undergo the very same changes in shape, density, or texture even though their particles could not be arranged in a configuration that would produce a thought. For this reason, such changes in shape, density, and texture would not constitute a thought despite taking place within our mind. Therefore, we could not know that we were thinking unless we could distinguish the sequence of motions that bring about these changes from the sequences of motion that bring about thoughts such as volitions or sense perceptions. To this end, we would have to observe the entire sequence of motions unfold and then infer that what we observed is a kind of thought and not a change that could take place in a similarly shaped and textured artifact. We would not only have to make sure that we observed the entire sequence of motions accurately but also guarantee that we were able to determine whether that sequence is a kind of thought. As the example of sense perception will show this seems extremely difficult to do.

In his *Treatise on Man*, Descartes claims that our brain changes when we have a sense perception because the body we are sensing imprints itself on the surface of the brain. This “trace,” as he calls the imprint, does not resemble the body that caused it but rather changes the arrangement of the minute parts that make up the brain’s surface (AT 11: 176; CSM 2: 106). If our mind were a kind of body, external corporeal things might imprint themselves on it in order to bring about the kinds of thoughts that Descartes calls ‘sensations’ and ‘sensory judgments’. Thus, the mind’s surface would change in the same way that the brain’s does when a trace is created. This suggests that our mind could undergo two kinds of changes to its surface as a result of its interaction with corporeal things even though only the second kind of change would

be a thought. First, contact with some other corporeal thing such as another bodily organ could make it gain, lose, or rearrange its parts just because it is a body. Second, a corporeal thing could imprint itself on the mind and create a trace in order to produce a sensation or sensory judgment in us. The first kind of change is not a thought because it results from a disposition that is common to all bodies, but we could easily confuse it with the thoughts produced by the second kind of change. We could easily confuse the two kinds of changes because both would alter the mind's surface by means of contact with another body. Moreover, the region of the mind that constituted our faculty of sense perception could lose or gain parts just because it is a body, so it could undergo changes to its surface that are not sense perceptions. Therefore, it seems that we could confuse a sense perception—a kind of thought—with a change that our minds undergo just by virtue of being a body—something that is not a thought. If we could make this mistake, we could judge that we were thinking when our mind was merely undergoing a kind of change that is common to all corporeal things, including inanimate objects. We might also judge that we were not thinking even though we were having a sense perception because we misidentified the sequence of motions that constitute this kind of thought with a sequence of motions that does not constitute a thought. For this reason, our mind would fail to be transparent. Our knowledge of our mind would be fallible because we could confuse a sense perception for something that is not a thought, and we would be less than omniscient in this realm because we could have a sense perception without knowing that we were engaged in this kind of thought or any thought at all.

Descartes' remarks about the value of our obscure and confused sensations suggest that we are especially susceptible to errors about the kind of thought we are engaged in and whether we are thinking at all. In the Sixth Meditation, he argues that a clear and distinct perception of,

say, the increased motion of the particles that compose our body would not inform us that we have a fever as effectively of our obscure and confused sensations of heat and cold. Using the example of a pain sensation, he claims “it is true that God...might have made the mind aware of the actual motion occurring in the brain, or in the foot, or in any of the intermediate regions...But there is nothing else that would have been so conducive to the continued wellbeing of the body” (AT 7: 88; CSM 2: 60-61). Descartes never explains why he thinks that having clear and distinct perceptions of the particles composing its limbs and organs will not ensure our body’s wellbeing. However, he suggests that we would be vulnerable to misjudging our body’s condition because sequences of motion that indicate very different states such as sickness and health unfold very similarly. In the *Passions of the Soul* he observes that “...what we call ‘titillation’ or ‘pleasurable sensation’ occurs when the objects of the senses produce some movement in the nerves which would be capable of harming them if they did not have the strength to resist them...” (II.94 = AT 11: 399; CSM 1: 362). His follower Malebranche claims more explicitly that we could be confused or in error about the meaning of the various motions and agitations of particles that our clear and distinct perceptions would reveal. On his account, we would not be able to infer that our body’s temperature was elevated or that its limbs were injured from observing the increased or slowed motion of the particles that make up our nerves and organs: “...it [= the mind] would not be thereby enlightened in order to judge whether the things surrounding us were capable of destroying the body’s equilibrium”.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, we would either be ignorant of our body’s condition because we could not interpret the motions and agitations of its particles or we would be in error if we misinterpreted these changes. For this

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<sup>60</sup> 1997 (1674-1675): pg. 51

reason, we would lack even the obscure and confused insight into our body that our sensations confer despite having clear and distinct perceptions of its constituents.

If our mind were a kind of body, we would observe the same kinds of motions and agitations of particles when we reflected on our thoughts. Thus, we would make similar mistakes when we tried to infer the kind of thought we were engaged in and whether we were thinking at all from the motions and arrangements of particles that we observed. Just as we might mistake an injury to our flesh for the effects of a caress because we could not grasp the bodily state that a sequence of motions constituted, we might mistake a sense perception for an intellectual apprehension or a state of the mind that is not a thought. Because we could be mistaken about the kind of thought we were engaged in and whether we were thinking at all, our mind would fail to be transparent.

## 1.2 A Transparent Mind is Necessary for Knowledge

Since our mind would fail to be transparent if it were some kind of body, we could not know anything that depends on our being certain that we are thinking or engaged in a particular kind of thought, including the truths of mathematics and metaphysics, the existence of an external world, and even our own existence. In what follows, I will show why we could not have any of this knowledge if our mind were corporeal and therefore failed to be transparent.

### 1.2.1 Knowledge of Our Own Existence

Descartes holds that only thinking can make us certain that we exist because we cannot be mistaken about whether we are thinking—if we believe that we are thinking, then we must actually be engaged in thought. Since we cannot doubt that we are thinking, he claims, we cannot doubt that we exist: “but we cannot...suppose that we, who are having such thoughts, are nothing. For it is a contradiction to suppose that what thinks does not, at the very same time

when it is thinking, exist” (PP I.7 = AT 8A: 7; CSM 1: 194-195). Other activities such as seeing or walking cannot make us certain that we exist because we can doubt that we are engaged in them: “for if I say ‘I am seeing, or I am walking, therefore I exist,’ and take this to apply to vision or walking as bodily activities, then the conclusion is not absolutely certain. This is because...it is possible for me to think I am seeing or walking, though my eyes are closed and I am not moving about” (PP I.9 = AT 8A: 7; CSM 1: 195). If our mind were a kind of body, we could doubt that we were thinking just as we can doubt that we are walking or seeing<sup>61</sup>. Just as we walk or see when the tiny particles that compose our limbs and organs move and rearrange themselves, we would think when the tiny particles that would compose a corporeal mind changed their speed and position. To know that we were thinking, we would have to observe long sequences of the motions and agitations of the mind’s parts and then infer that those particular sequences produced a thought rather than some kind of change common to all corporeal things, including non-thinking beings. Since the motions that constitute states of the mind that are thoughts and states of the mind that are not thoughts are complex and only subtly different, we would be likely to mistake one for the other and thus judge that we were thinking when we were not. For this reason, thinking would not make us any more certain that we exist than walking or seeing. Thus, we could not know that we exist if our mind were a kind of body.

### 1.2.2 Knowledge of Mathematics, Logic, and Metaphysics

If our mind were a kind of body, we also could not know the truths of mathematics, logic, and metaphysics because we could confuse our innate ideas with our memories. Descartes holds that we come to know logical and geometrical axioms and metaphysical principles by

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<sup>61</sup> David Cunning claims that we can doubt our own existence if we perceive it confusedly as, say, the kind of bodily existence we share with plants, non-human animals, and even inanimate objects. Because this idea is obscure and confused, we can withhold our assent from it and thereby doubt our own existence (2007: 112 ff.). If our mind were a kind of body, however, we could doubt our existence even if we could clearly and distinctly perceive the motions and arrangements of its parts.

recollecting the ideas of them that are innate in our intellect: “and the truth of these matters is so open and so much in harmony with my nature that, on first discovering them, it seems that I am not so much learning something new as remembering what I knew before” (M 5 = AT 7: 63-64; CSM 2: 44). Although we recall our memories by turning to the imprints of past thoughts on our brains, we must also intellectually apprehend that we have already had the thought that we are attempting to recall: “it is necessary in addition that we should recognize, when it [= the remembered thought] occurs the second time, that this is happening because it has already been perceived by us earlier” (AT 5: 220; CSMK 356). Therefore, in order to recall a memory we must have a volition to recall the memory or have another thought that leads us to begin recalling it, perceive the imprint of the past thought in our brains, and intellectually apprehend that we have had that thought before. If the mind were a kind of body, recalling our memories would require us to observe three sequences of motions and arrangements of its parts in quick succession and infer that we had a volition, a perception of the imprint, and an intellectual apprehension that the imprinted thought is not new. Given the complexity<sup>62</sup> and difficulty of this task, it seems that we would be even more prone to error than usual when we tried to infer the kind of thought we were engaged in. For instance, we might recognize that we were recalling a past thought despite having confused our perception of its imprint with the kind of change our mind would undergo just by virtue of being a body. As a result, we would have a thought that felt familiar to us and fail to notice that this thought was preceded by a perception of a state of the brain. Thus, we might confuse our memory of the past thought with a recollection of an

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<sup>62</sup> Alison Simmons makes a similar point in order to defend Descartes’ claim that we are aware of our thoughts as we think them and then quickly forget them, making it (falsely) appear that the mind is not transparent. She explains, “as Descartes understands it, remembering a conscious thought involves no fewer than five steps: (1) having a conscious thought; (2) the intellect’s recognizing at that moment that [this] is a new thought; (3) storage of the thought in the form of a trace in the brain; (4) retrieval of the thought afresh in the mind; (5) the intellect’s recognizing that this thought is one that the mind has had before” (2009: 20).



innate idea—another kind of intellectual apprehension that also appears to be a thought we are not entertaining for the first time.

Unlike our innate ideas, however, our memories are fallible. If we could confuse the recollection our innate ideas with the retrieval of a memory, we could confuse an idea that can only be the subject of true judgments with what Descartes calls a “materially false” idea, an idea that can “...provide the subject matter for error” (R 4 = AT 7: 232; CSM 2: 163). Since we could not be certain that what we took to be an intellectual apprehension of an innate idea was not an intellectual apprehension of a memory, we could not be certain that it would not lead us to judge falsely. That is, we could take ourselves to be recollecting the true and immutable nature of a triangle when we were in fact retrieving an idea of a triangle from our memory. Our remembered idea might contain qualities that do not belong to a triangle’s true and immutable nature or omit others that are essential to it if we were distracted while committing the idea to memory or if it became jumbled together in our memory with sensory ideas of triangle-like figures. Such an idea would no longer represent a triangle but rather a crude approximation of it: “geometrical figures are composed...of straight lines; yet no part of a line that was really straight could ever affect our senses, since when we examine through a magnifying glass those lines which appear most straight, we find they are quite irregular and always form wavy curves” (R 5 = AT 7: 381-382; CSM 2: 262). Thus, what we took to be a recollection of an innate idea could merely be a memory of having once entertained a crude approximation of it. For this reason, we could doubt that our recollections of our innate ideas are genuine because they might be a retrieved memory in disguise. Therefore, we could doubt the axioms of logic and geometry and the principles of metaphysics.

### 1.2.3 Knowledge of the External World

Finally, we could not know that there is an external world if our mind were an organ of the human body or some other kind of corporeal thing. Descartes tries to show that an external world exists by arguing that our adventitious ideas—ideas that seem to be caused by external, corporeal things—could not have been caused by anything but those things. If our adventitious ideas were caused by our mind’s own activity or the intervention of God or another incorporeal being, we would be able to recognize that bodies were not their cause. Because he holds that the mind is transparent, he claims that we would be aware that we had a faculty for generating our supposedly adventitious ideas ourselves or receiving them from God or another being like a demon or an angel. However, our mind would fail to be transparent if it were a kind of body, and we could be mistaken about the origins of our seemingly adventitious ideas (M 6 = AT 7: 79-80; CSM 2: 55). In particular, we could confuse our sense perceptions (i.e. our genuinely adventitious ideas) with our intellectual apprehensions of our innate ideas.

When we have an innate idea, Descartes holds, we come to know about something that exists independently of our mind like a geometrical figure or a metaphysical principle by turning inwards and recollecting what has been in our intellect since birth. On his account, our innate ideas represent what he calls “true and immutable natures,” “...determinate nature[s], essence[s], or form[s]... which [are] immutable and eternal, and not invented by [us] or dependent on [our] mind” (M 5 = AT 7: 64; CSM 2: 44-45). If our mind were a kind of body, we would come to believe that we were having an innate idea of, say, a sphere by making three inferences. First, we would have to infer that the entire sequence of motions and rearrangements of our mind’s parts was caused by the mind itself. Then we would have to infer that the first sequence of motions was not produced by the imagination or the intellect’s own capacity to create new ideas by combining its innate ideas. This would require us to make yet another inference that our

imagination was inactive or else undergoing a sequence of motions that could not culminate in an idea of a sphere. Since coming to believe that we were having an innate idea would be the conclusion of an extremely complex chain of inferences, we would be likely to judge falsely and misidentify the kind of thought we were engaged in. We would be especially likely to confuse our intellectual apprehensions with our sense perceptions. Coming to believe that we were having a sense perception of a bowling ball would also require us to determine that the sequence of motions our mind was undergoing was caused by something other than its capacities for generating new ideas, the imagination and intellect. This would in turn require us to verify that our imagination, intellect, and will were inactive or at least not undergoing a sequence of motions that would culminate in an idea of a bowling ball. If we were distracted and did not recognize that our minds had turned inwards in order to begin the process of having an innate idea, we might judge that the second step of this process was the first step of the process of having a sense perception. Thus, we might come to believe that our idea of the sphere was caused by a particular body in the external world like a bowling ball and thereby come to believe that there are particular bodies besides our mind. However, we would come to believe that these external bodies exist on the basis of an idea that would be innate in our minds whether or not there were other bodies outside it. Thus, if we could confuse our sense perceptions and our innate ideas we could come to believe that there are particular bodies outside our mind even if no such bodies exist. Therefore, we could not be certain that an external world exists.

If the worst case scenario comes to pass and our mind is a kind of body, we will not be able to know anything at all because our mind will fail to be transparent. A corporeal mind would, at best, have unreliable and limited insight into its own nature and activities, so it could not know itself, the truths of logic, metaphysics, and mathematics, or the existence of an external

world. However, by Descartes' standards, I have been overly charitable to the materialist position by assuming that bodies could have even the fallible and chaotic thoughts that I have claimed a corporeal mind would think. As I will explain in the next section, he denies that bodies can think at all because he holds that all thoughts aim at ends and bodies, by their very nature, are not teleological.

## 2.1 Minds and Bodies

Descartes holds that all of our thoughts are either judgments themselves or ideas<sup>63</sup>, the subjects of possible judgments (M 3 = AT 7: 37; CSM 2: 25-26). On his account, all of our judgments, including our judgments about what is so, must aim at some end. That is, we make judgments about what we ought to do (volitions) for the sake of the good and judgments about what is so (beliefs and doubts) for the sake of the true. Our volitions aim at the good and our beliefs and doubts aim at the true because our faculties for judgment, our intellect and will, have truth and goodness as their ends: “but as for man, since he finds that the nature of all goodness and truth is already determined by God, and his will cannot turn towards anything else, it is evident that he will embrace what is good and true...” (R 6 = AT 7: 432; CSM 2: 292). When we make a judgment, the intellect and will aim at particular truths such as ‘a square has four sides’ and ‘it is raining’ or particular goods such as a slice of strawberry pie. Our faculties for judgment can aim at ends like geometrical knowledge and a slice of strawberry pie because having truth and goodness as their ends allows them to recognize and pursue whatever particular things seem true or good.<sup>64</sup> Particular things seem true or good to us and therefore worth

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<sup>63</sup> Alan Nelson, in contrast, argues that all of our thoughts, including our ideas, are judgments. He holds that we cannot have a clear and distinct idea without assenting to it, so our clear and distinct ideas are affirmations. He also claims that our obscure and confused ideas are compound ideas, and the mental operation required to create the compound is a kind of judgment (1997: 163, 167).

<sup>64</sup> John Carriero interprets the above quoted passage along similar lines: “for Descartes, there is a suitable object, the good (or the good and the true), which is prior to the faculty of the will and in terms of

pursuing because we are able to evaluate their merits by exercising knowledge and foresight—abilities that we have because we are thinking things with an intellect and will that have truth and goodness as their ends. In other words, our intellect and will must aim at truth and goodness so that we can make judgments about what is so and what to do, and we must be able to make judgments about what is so and what to do in order to pursue particular truths and goods. Therefore, we are able to think because our faculties for judgment have truth and goodness as their ends, and we are able to pursue particular truths and goods because we can exercise knowledge and foresight.

In contrast, the behavior of bodies reveals that there is no end like goodness or truth that structures the activities of their faculties because they cannot pursue particular ends. Throughout his writings, especially his treatises on natural philosophy, Descartes restricts acting for an end to beings with the capacity for thought. In these writings, he argues that his predecessors' understanding of gravity and other natural phenomena is flawed because it requires them to attribute ends to such corporeal (and obviously non-thinking) things as stones and plants. This is a mistake by his lights because it attempts to explain the behavior of corporeal things in terms of abilities for recognizing and pursuing apparent truths and goods that can only belong to a thinking, incorporeal mind. Once we begin to conceive of corporeal things as discrete quantities of extension that have been divided and arranged in a variety of ways, we will recognize that it is impossible for them to act for ends. Acting for an end requires knowledge and forethought, abilities that can only belong to beings with the capacity for thought: "...I thought that gravity carried bodies towards the center of the earth as if it had some knowledge of the center within itself. For this surely could not happen without knowledge, and there can be no knowledge

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which it is defined (that is which figures into the faculty's essence). This orientation to the good and true belongs to a fundamental characterization of what the will is...[O]ur wills are, by their very nature, good embracers and truth embracers" (2009: 250-251).

except in a mind. Nevertheless, I continued to apply gravity to various attributes that cannot be understood to apply to a mind in this way—for example, its being divisible, measurable, and so on” (R 6 = AT 7: 442; CSM 2: 298). That is, Descartes blames his mistaken former beliefs about gravity on his initial inability to distinguish properly between the mind and anything corporeal. He believed that heavy bodies fall to earth in order to reach its center because his confused idea of bodies contained attributes such as knowledge that can only belong to the mind. After restricting his idea of bodies to contain only those attributes that are modifications of extension such as divisibility and having a particular shape and size, he realized that bodies cannot act for ends because they lack the ability to think (cf. AT 5: 222-223; CSMK 358).

Descartes holds that bodies cannot make the judgments that they would need to set ends for themselves like seeking the center of the earth because their faculties for movement, changing shape, and so on do not aim at some end the way that the human faculties of intellect and will aim at goodness and truth. In the Sixth Meditation, he denies that the human body has an end such as health that it achieves when its parts are intact and that it fails to achieve when its parts are damaged. He argues that we come to believe that the human body and other corporeal things have ends by means of an unfounded and misleading comparison with our assumptions about how they ought to function: “when we say, then with respect to the body suffering from dropsy that it has a disordered nature because it has a dry throat and does not need a drink, the term ‘nature’ here is used merely as an extraneous label” (M 6 = AT 7: 85; CSM 2: 59). When we believe that there is some way that corporeal things ought to function, we are appealing to an end that could direct or structure their activities in the same way that our intellect’s end of truth structures our judgments about what is so and our will’s end of goodness structures its judgments

about what we ought to do.<sup>65</sup> However, the nature of any corporeal thing is nothing more than a discrete quantity of extension divided into parts that move in accordance with the laws of motion. Thus, the only way that such a nature could be disordered would be if its parts moved in a way that is contrary to the laws of motion—something that Descartes holds is impossible.<sup>66</sup> Because it is impossible for a corporeal nature to be disordered or to depart from the way that it ought to be, it is also impossible for a corporeal thing to be properly ordered or to have and fulfill some purpose.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, he concludes that there is no end that organizes or structures a body's faculties so that they can contribute to the pursuit of particular ends. Moreover, because there is no end that structures a body's faculties the way truth and goodness structure our intellect and will, nothing that is a body can think.

## 2.2 The Two Tests

Descartes uses his observation that only thinking things can act for ends<sup>68</sup> as a way of distinguishing the automatic, unthinking behavior of automata—and, as he argues elsewhere, non-human animals—from the actions that human beings engage in by means of reason and will.<sup>69</sup> In the *Discourse*, he proposes a thought experiment in which an observer is challenged to

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<sup>65</sup> Aquinas' argument for the thesis that everything in the natural world acts for the sake of an end depends on this sort of observation. He claims, "again, there is no fault to be found, except in the case of things that are for the sake of an end... We do find fault with things... done according to nature, as is evident in the case of the birth of monsters. Therefore, it is just as true of the agent that acts in accord with nature as of the agent who acts in accord with art and as a result of previous planning that action is for the sake of an end" (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III.2.7)

<sup>66</sup> As Carriero puts it, "...there is nothing in a mechanical system that plays the same role as an end in an Aristotelian substance: in an Aristotelian substance, the end guides the exercise of the substance's faculties... whereas everything that the Cartesian mechanical system does happens through its parts' obeying the laws of motion" (2009: 240).

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*: 416-417

<sup>68</sup> As Richard Kennington puts it, "Meditation VI shows sufficiently that not the dualism of mind and body but that of mechanism and purposiveness (or of science and human experience) is the basic Cartesian dualism" (1972: 116).

<sup>69</sup> As Lilli Alanen puts it, "what is excluded from physics is not only acceptable but a *necessary requirement* (or postulation) for human psychology, ethics, and practical rationality. Here, in so far as

distinguish between a living human being and a cleverly constructed automaton. He claims that the observer will be able to recognize the automaton because it will fail to imitate two kinds of actions that could only have been performed for the sake of an end. The first of these actions is using spoken words or other signs in order to communicate its thoughts: "...if any such machines bore a resemblance to our bodies and imitated our actions as closely as possible, we should still have two very certain means of recognizing that they were not real men. The first is that they could never use words, or put together signs as we do in order to declare our thoughts to others" (DM 5 = AT 6: 56-57; CSM 1: 139-140). A being that cannot use language in this way reveals that it cannot employ means (the words or signs) to achieve an end (expressing its thoughts). Thus, the being also reveals that its behavior is caused by a purely corporeal faculty and not a faculty for thought.

The second kind of action is devising a new tactic or strategy in order to overcome a challenge that would otherwise prevent the being from achieving its end: "for whereas reason is a universal instrument which can be used in all kinds of situations, these organs need some particular disposition for each particular action; hence it is for all practical purposes impossible [*moralement impossible*] for a machine to have enough different organs to make it act in all the contingencies of life in the way in which our reason makes us act" (DM 5 = AT 6: 57; CSM 1: 140). Descartes holds that having the ability to reason allows us to modify our means so that we are always able to achieve whatever end we have judged is good, beneficial, or otherwise worth pursuing. For instance, he claims that our ability to reason allows us to pursue the end of happiness, an end that all human beings judge is worth pursuing, even when poverty or poor health stand in our way. Reason allows us to adapt our judgments about what is good or

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psychology and practical rationality are concerned, Descartes seems simply to follow the very [i.e. Aristotelian] tradition he rejects in his philosophy of nature" (2008: 436, my emphasis).



desirable so that we do not fruitlessly pursue wealth and good health as a means to happiness: “for our will naturally tends to desire only what the intellect represents to it as somehow possible; and so it is certain that if we consider all external goods as equally beyond our power we shall not regret the absence of these goods...when we are deprived of them” (DM 3 = AT 6: 26; CSM 1: 124). By adapting our judgments about what is good or desirable, we will be able to achieve our end of happiness regardless of our circumstances: “...we easily acquire the habit of governing our desires so that their fulfillment depends only on us, making it possible for them always to give us complete satisfaction” (PS II.146 = AT 11: 440). In contrast, a wholly corporeal being can only produce a given action—i.e., what we might naively describe as its end—by means of a set number of motions and changes of shape. Such a being will fail to produce this action if something disrupts the functioning of its corporeal mechanism.<sup>70</sup> Without the ability to reason, it will not be able to employ a new strategy or tactic (a means) in order to overcome this malfunction and produce the action (an end). The being’s failure to adapt will allow Descartes’ hypothetical observer to recognize that it cannot act for an end and, as a consequence, it is a wholly corporeal being.

### 2.3 Against the Dominant Interpretation

Before I show how these two tests can be used to generate the skeptical possibility that our mind is a kind of body, I will explain why I depart from the most popular way of understanding them. This interpretation commits Descartes to the view that a finite number of corporeal parts arranged in a finite number of ways cannot account for the indefinitely many

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<sup>70</sup> It might seem that a disruption in one of the human body’s mechanisms could prevent the mind from thinking. Descartes addresses this objection in the Fifth Set of Replies, alleging that illness and intoxication prevent us from properly manipulating our bodies but not from having a volition or engaging in some other form of thought: “[the mind’s] actions can often be slowed down by wine and other corporeal things. But all that follows from this is that the mind, so long as it is joined to the body, uses it like an instrument to perform the operations which take up most of its time” (AT 7: 354; CSM 2: 245).

words that human beings can utter and indefinitely many actions that human beings can perform.<sup>71</sup> I depart from this interpretation because I think that it relies on a claim that Descartes takes himself to know with merely moral certainty and not the metaphysical certainty that he thinks only clear and distinct perceptions can confer. Moreover, I think it depends on an assumption about the limitations of minds and bodies that Descartes seems to reject.

### 2.3.1 Moral and Metaphysical Certainty

Even supporters of the interpretation that I am disputing concede that Descartes merely takes himself to be morally certain that corporeal things have too few parts to utter all of the words or perform all of the actions that reason allows us to.<sup>72</sup> As he understands it, the things that we know with moral certainty have “...sufficient certainty for application to ordinary life, even though they may be uncertain in relation to the absolute power of God” (PP IV.205 = AT 8A: 327; CSM 1: 289-290). To illustrate this notion, he uses the examples of scientific claims that he believes he has established experimentally or deduced from principles that are not themselves absolutely or metaphysically certain. Unlike the truths that we know with absolute or metaphysical certainty such as the conclusions of mathematical proofs or deductions from principles that we know clearly and distinctly, Descartes holds that it is possible that his claims about magnetism or the behavior of fire may be “...otherwise than we judge [them] to be” (PP IV.206 = AT 8A: 328; CSM 1: 290). Although we may make use of morally certain claims to solve practical problems or investigate the qualities of corporeal things that we cannot know

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<sup>71</sup> Desmond Clarke’s comments are representative: “given the assumption that each stimulus-response must be explained in terms of a ‘mechanical’ disposition in the animal, the total number of linguistic responses that could be programmed is limited... In contrast, the number of linguistic responses that are appropriate to any given sample of human speech is indefinitely large, and the number of linguistic stimuli to which human beings can respond is equally large” (2003: 173).

<sup>72</sup> For instance, in a passage from Clarke: “hence the conclusion that it is *morally impossible* for any machine (that is, anything that is to be explained mechanically) of limited size to be programmed so that it could store and produce a range of appropriate responses that would match the creativity and flexibility of human beings” (ibid, my emphasis).

clearly and distinctly, morally certain claims cannot ground our reasoning about the nature of minds or the nature of bodies. Anything that we establish with merely moral certainty involves probable conjectures, and probable conjectures cannot be the basis for genuine knowledge. In the Seventh Set of Replies, Descartes defends his decision to doubt what he has his meditator call “highly probable opinions, opinions which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful...it is still much more reasonable to affirm than deny” (M 1 = AT 7: 22; CSM 2: 15). He tells Bourdin, the author of the Seventh Objections, that he “...frequently stressed that there is a very great difference between this type of knowledge [i.e. morally certain knowledge] and the metaphysical knowledge we are dealing with here” (AT 7: 475; CSM 2: 320 Q). Descartes uses his claim that bodies cannot think as a premise in his argument for the real distinction between mind and body, so it must be absolutely certain if the conclusion of this argument is to be absolutely certain. Since Descartes takes himself to be absolutely certain that the human mind is distinct from the human body and all other corporeal things, he must also take himself to be absolutely certain that bodies cannot think. Therefore, this claim cannot be supported by a merely probable conjecture about the limitations of bodies.

In contrast, Descartes takes himself to be metaphysically or absolutely certain that corporeal things cannot act for ends.<sup>73</sup> He argues that what it is to be a body is to be a being that is not organized or structured by an end the way our faculties of intellect and will are organized or structured by their orientation towards goodness and truth. Conceiving of corporeal things as beings that are structured by some end, he claims, prevents us from gaining any insight into their nature. He holds that his predecessors’ attempts to understand why things in the natural world

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<sup>73</sup> As Lex Newman puts it, “explanations in terms of final causality provide the wrong model for understanding purely mechanical behavior. As [Descartes] conceives of machines, it is *strictly impossible* for them to adapt means (*qua* means) to ends (*qua* ends), appearances to the contrary notwithstanding” (2001: 12, my emphasis).

are organized as they are, composed of the parts they have, and behave as they do in terms of ends or purposes are mistaken because they prevent us from grasping their essences. He remarks to his interlocutor Frans Burman, that the natural world seems utterly incomprehensible<sup>74</sup> when we try to understand the beings that populate it as guided by their pursuit of ends: “this rule—that we must never argue from ends—must be observed. For, first, the knowledge of an end does not lead us to knowledge of the thing itself; its nature is still hidden from us...Second, all the ends of God are hidden from us, and it is rash to want to delve into them” (AT 5: 158; CSMK 341). In other words, we make the same mistake when we try to understand bodies in terms of an end that supposedly structures or guides them as we do when we try to understand bodies in terms of their sensible qualities like sweetness or roughness. Whether we try to understand an oak tree as a being that is woody, green, and brown or a being that exists for the sake of bearing acorns, we fail to understand it as a discrete quantity of extension arranged in a particular way (cf. M 2 = AT 7: 31; CSM 2: 20-21). It is not in the nature of any body to be rough, green, or sweet; nor is it in the nature of any body to be organized around or to pursue an end. Thus, just as we must eliminate color and taste from our notion of what it is to be a body, we must eliminate being organized around or pursuing an end from that notion as well. We can eliminate these qualities from our notion of corporeal nature because we can be absolutely certain that they do not belong to it. For this reason, we can be absolutely or metaphysically certain that bodies are not organized around or guided by their pursuit of some end.

### 2.3.2 The Mind's Limitations

I also depart from the dominant interpretation because I believe that it rests on the false assumption that a being must be able to produce an indefinite—or even infinite—number of

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<sup>74</sup> Simmons identifies this observation as one of the main motivations for Descartes' denial of what she calls “natural teleology,” appealing to ends and purposes to explain the organization, composition, and behavior of things in the natural world (2001: 69-72).

effects in order to think. As a thought experiment in the Fourth Meditation suggests, the most perfect created mind is perfect because its capacities for thought prevent it from having anything other than a relatively small class of clear and distinct perceptions. In this Meditation, Descartes has his meditator speculate about safeguards that could have been included in our mind to prevent us from assenting to anything other than our clear and distinct perceptions. One of the potential safeguards he considers is God's having "...endowed my intellect with a clear and distinct perception of everything about which I was ever likely to deliberate" (M 4 = AT 7: 61; CSM 2: 42). Since such a mind could not be free of the defects that belong to created things by virtue of their finitude like the tendency to get distracted or to be overwhelmed by long and complicated inferences, its perfections would result from its inability to have thoughts that could lead to error even if they were clear and distinct in themselves.

Thus, if the human mind had been created so that it only contained clear and distinct perceptions of the subjects of our deliberation, it would be unable to produce the same variety of effects that it can in its present, less perfect condition. In that case, our deliberation would have fewer stages because everything but its clear and distinct conclusion would be eliminated to prevent us from prematurely stopping our deliberation at some intermediate stage. The ability to go through an entire chain of practical reasoning from uncertainty about what to do to reviewing our possible options to choosing one of those options would introduce the possibility of error because we could get distracted or overwhelmed by all the options and end our deliberation prematurely even if each stage of our deliberation were clear and distinct. As a result, we would have fewer volitions because we could not will to perform some action and then reverse ourselves once we realized that performing that action would not allow us to achieve the end we desired or that we had not given enough weight to a particular consideration and so on. Instead,

we would simply have a volition to do whatever the clear and distinct conclusion of our deliberation represented. Moreover, our mind would not be capable of having ideas that were not clear and distinct, either on their own or once they were combined with other clear and distinct ideas by means of a judgment.<sup>75</sup> To prevent us from combining our ideas into a compound that is no longer clear and distinct, our mind would lack the capacity for entertaining more than a very small number of ideas at once. This would limit the number and kind of truths we could contemplate because we could not entertain complex ideas or a large number of ideas in order to think about difficult and complex subjects. Such a mind might not even be able to do something as trivial as counting indefinitely upwards. As it counted, it might lose its place in a long string of numbers or it might lose track of how many zeroes followed a number's first digit. Moreover, its ideas of very high numbers would be complex because it could only conceive of them as ten times another very high number which itself could only be conceived of as ten times another very high number and so on *ad infinitum*. For this reason, a more perfect kind of mind would lack nearly all of the thoughts and capacities that belong to the human mind.

Despite lacking nearly all of the thoughts and capacities that belong to our mind, such a mind would still be capable of thought and reasoning. In fact, Descartes suggests that such a mind might think and reason more perfectly than the human mind. He has his meditator remark, "had God made me this way, then I can easily understand that, considered as a totality, I would have been much more perfect than I am now (ibid. = AT 7: 61; CSM 2: 42). If, in contrast, the ability to think or reason just is the ability to combine an unlimited (or nearly limitless) number of thoughts in an unlimited (or nearly unlimited) number of ways, this more perfect kind of mind would be incapable of thought or reasoning. Like a corporeal thing, this more perfect kind of

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<sup>75</sup> Nelson holds that all of our ideas are clear and distinct; we end up with obscure and confused ideas when we improperly combine clear and distinct constituents or make false judgments about their origins such as judging that our idea of pain is caused by something resembling it (1997: 167-169).

mind would lack the dispositions necessary to produce an unlimited variety of actions because it would be incapable of having and then acting on volitions that resulted from particular thoughts and combinations of thoughts.<sup>76</sup> It seems absurd to claim that its incapacity to have obscure and confused ideas or to combine its clear and distinct ideas to create complex thoughts that are no longer clear and distinct or even to reach a clear and distinct conclusion from a long and detailed list of clear and distinct premises would render this more perfect kind of mind incapable of thought and reason. Therefore, it seems that what makes minds of all kinds, including the human mind, capable of thought cannot be the ability to bring about an unlimited (or nearly unlimited) variety of effects.

A proponent of the interpretation that I seek to reject might object that this more perfect kind of mind might still have an unlimited capacity to reflect on its thoughts even if its capacities for generating thoughts were limited in the way I have described. If such a mind can reflect on its thoughts as the Transparency Doctrine demands it must, then it must be able to reflect on its reflections so that it knows that it is thinking, knows that it knows that it is thinking, and so on *ad infinitum*. Descartes considers a similar claim in the Sixth Replies. He replies to an objection from Mersenne and his theologian colleagues alleging that we cannot know that we are thinking because "...this seems to require that you should know that you know what you are saying; and this in turn requires that you be aware of knowing that you know what you are saying, and so on *ad infinitum*" (O 6 = AT 7: 413; CSM 2: 278). He attempts to dismiss this objection by arguing that not only is it unnecessary to know that we know that we are thinking but that this kind of knowledge is impossible, whether it concerns our own thought or anything else. He asserts,

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<sup>76</sup> A being with such a mind would be a better deliberator than human beings by Descartes' lights. As Tom Sorell puts it, "...the good use of the free will is to discipline choice by reason, and the effect of it is supposed to be to deliver the agent from regret or avoidable desire" (2000: 376). However, it would have fewer thoughts (and indeed fewer clear and distinct thoughts) than an ordinary human agent.

“...still less does it [= knowledge that we are thinking] require knowledge of reflective knowledge, i.e. knowing that we know, and knowing that we know and so on *ad infinitum*. This kind of knowledge cannot possibly be obtained about anything” (R 6 = AT 7: 422; CSM 2: 285). In this passage, he is claiming that it is impossible to expand our knowledge by reflecting on it so that one item of knowledge, that we know that we are thinking, becomes a second item of knowledge, that we know that we know that we are thinking, and the second item of knowledge becomes a third item, and so on to an infinity of items of knowledge. He denies that we can expand our knowledge in this way because, like Mersenne and his colleagues, he believes that it is impossible for us to have infinite knowledge even if having infinite knowledge does not require us to be omniscient or to be able to have an infinity of different perceptions and to combine those perceptions in an infinite number of ways. Thus, it seems that having an infinite capacity for knowledge, reasoning, reflection or any other cognitive activity cannot be what allows minds to think.

Finally, Descartes holds that our minds are more perfect because the number of thoughts we can think is restricted. He holds that a variety of movements in our body such as nerves in our head and in the roof of our mouth can cause the same motion in the pineal gland, the part of the brain that he holds is responsible for communication between the mind and body. Each pineal motion brings about the same thought so that the motions of the nerves in our head and the roof of our mouth bring about the same headache sensation: “...any given movement occurring in the part of the brain that immediately affects the mind produces just one corresponding sensation; and hence the best system that could be devised is that it should produce the one sensation...which is most especially and most frequently conducive to the preservation of the healthy man” (M 6 = AT 7: 87; CSM 2: 60). Later in the passage, Descartes suggests that each



neural motion might bring about a unique pineal motion that could bring about a unique sensation or that we could be guaranteed to have unique sensations in some other way.

However, a mind that had the capacity for having a greater variety of sensations would be less perfect than our mind: “and experience shows that the senses which nature has given us are all of this [limited yet more perfect] kind; and so there is absolutely nothing to be found in them that does not bear witness to the power and goodness of God” (ibid. = at 7: 87-88; CSM 2: 60).

Having a capacity to experience a wider variety of sense perceptions would make our mind less perfect than it is in its present, limited state even though it would allow us to think a greater number of thoughts. If our mind is more perfect because it is subject to the limitation of having one thought per pineal motion, it seems that having the capacity to produce an unlimited variety of sensations or other thoughts cannot be what makes our mind or any other mind capable of thought.

Instead, what allows a mind to reason and engage in other forms of thought is its ability to adapt means to ends. The kind of mind that the meditator speculates about in Meditation 4 reasons more perfectly than the human mind because it never errs when it adopts particular goods or truths as its ends or when it devises means to those ends. Because each stage of its deliberation, including the conclusion, is clear and distinct, such a mind will always be able to identify the particulars that are genuinely true and good and to devise the appropriate means for pursuing those ends. This is an ability that no corporeal thing can share whether it is a relatively simple automaton constructed by human beings or an incredibly sophisticated product of the natural world. Thus, it seems that what distinguishes minds from bodies cannot be the number of effects that their faculties allow them to bring about. Rather, the difference lies in the kinds of

effects—actions for the sake of an end versus actions that seem random and unmotivated from the point of view of ends and means—that the two kinds of beings can bring about.

### 3.1 The Human Mind might be a Body

Thus, to argue for his skeptical conclusion that we cannot know anything at all because our mind might be a body, the meditator must show that some of our faculties do not aim at ends. As I will argue, Descartes has his meditator raise this skeptical possibility by reflecting on his dreams and sense perceptions of small and distant objects. Our faculty of sense perception seems to operate at random when we dream because we seem to see and hear even though there is no external body stimulating our eyes and ears. It seems to undermine its supposed end of representing particular bodies when it continues to represent heavenly bodies as tiny pinpricks of light even though the intellect represents them as enormous orbs. To motivate this interpretation, I will argue that these faculties seem to be subject to the same limitations that lead Descartes to conclude that the behavior of non-human animals is not caused by reason, the will, or any other faculty for thought. My goal is not to show that his conclusions about non-human animals are persuasive or even particularly plausible. Instead, I want to suggest that his acceptance of the conclusion that non-human animals do not think because their behavior seems random and self-defeating also enables him to formulate the deeper skeptical claim that the human faculties of imagination and sense perception are not faculties of thought for the same reasons.<sup>77</sup>

### 3.1 Descartes' Denial of Thought to Non-Human Animals

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<sup>77</sup> Peter Harrison also holds that there is an important connection between the skeptical arguments of Meditation 1 and Descartes' denial of thought to non-human animals. On Harrison's account, "animal souls were merely one of the casualties of methodological skepticism—along with God, other minds, and the external world" (1992: 225). While Descartes eventually assured himself of the existence of God, other minds, and the external world, Harrison holds that he continued to suspend judgment about the existence of animal minds or souls.

Descartes uses his conclusion that only thinking beings can act for the sake of an end to undermine the claim that the behavior of non-human animals resembles human actions that could only have been caused by a faculty of thought. He argues that the behavior of non-human animals fails to resemble actions for the sake of an end because it seems to occur at random unless we posit that it is the product of a corporeal mechanism governed by the laws of efficient causation. That is, much of the behavior of non-human animals seems incomprehensible when we try to understand it by attributing it to ends that result from their judgments about what would be harmful, beneficial, pleasant, or painful to pursue. For instance, in a letter to the Marquess of Newcastle, he observes that apes' "...instinct to bury their dead is no stranger than that of dogs and cats which scratch the earth for the purpose of burying their excrement; they hardly ever bury it, which shows that they act only by instinct and without thinking" (AT 4: 576; CSMK 304). If we try to explain this canine and feline behavior by appealing to ends that the dogs and cats have set for themselves or judgments that they have made about the means necessary for achieving these ends, it will seem utterly mysterious. Without appealing to purely corporeal and mechanical causes, we cannot give a satisfactory explanation for the dogs' and cats' behavior. From the perspective of ends, means, and judgments, Descartes suggests, their behavior seems utterly mysterious. An example from the nature writer Esther Woolfson helps to illustrate this claim even more perspicuously. She describes a captive rook engaging in the behavior that wild rooks use to signal that they have found a suitable food source even when it has not been given anything to eat. In an unsuccessful attempt to understand the rook's behavior, she confesses, that "in the absence of carcasses it's difficult to know why, what inspires [the rook], and what initiates it, and although I have tried to see a pattern or a cause, I never have".<sup>78</sup> Since there is no

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<sup>78</sup> 2009: 74

food available and no flock mates to hear its cries and see its gestures, the rook is not engaging in this behavior in order to signal that it has found food or in order to perform any function that can be properly understood in terms of ends, means, or judgments about what to do. By Descartes' lights, the only way to understand the rook's behavior is to attribute it to a corporeal mechanism that operates without the need for a will, intellect, or other faculty of thought.

Descartes also tries to deny that non-human animals are capable of thought by arguing that their behavior seems to undermine the ends that both laymen and philosophical opponents such as Montaigne attribute to them. Since the behavior of non-human animals seems to undermine their supposed ends, it does not resemble human actions that we know to be produced by a faculty of thought. Another example from Woolfson's book suggests that the behavior of non-human animals is not directed towards an end. She describes the ramshackle nests that wild rooks build and repeatedly repair each year: "even in the wild, rooks are known to have a relaxed attitude towards the construction of nests, preferring loose, un-engineered structures, which sometimes fall apart and have to be reconstructed, the results it seems of their coming into the world equipped with more instinct than expertise".<sup>79</sup> The rooks' haphazard arrangement of twigs and moss seems to undermine what Descartes' opponents would claim is their end of building a secure container for their eggs as does their failure to modify their strategy after their nest collapses. Rather than merely appearing random or purposeless, the rooks' behavior seems as if it were intended to undermine their supposed end of building a nest and protecting their eggs from harm. By persisting in building their nests from the same materials in the same loose and haphazard arrangement, the rooks fail to pursue what thinkers like Montaigne claim they

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<sup>79</sup> 2009: 237. While the two examples I have taken from Woolfson's book support Descartes' thesis that non-human animals are incapable of thought, Woolfson rejects this thesis along with similar claims about the capacities of non-human animals.

have judged to be good or beneficial.<sup>80</sup> As his advice about achieving happiness suggests, Descartes holds that its ability to reason allows a thinking being to pursue whatever ends it has judged to be good, desirable, beneficial and so on regardless of its circumstances. Therefore, a being that genuinely acts for an end will never act in ways that undermine its pursuit of that end or that seem contrary to the judgments it has made about what is good, desirable, or otherwise worth pursuing.<sup>81</sup> For this reason, the rooks' nest building behavior fails to resemble human actions that could have only been produced by a faculty of thought such as the intellect or will. Thus, by Descartes' lights, the rooks' behavior could only have been produced by the movement and agitation of their nerves and organs and other wholly corporeal causes.

### 3.2.2 The Dreaming Doubt

Like the behavior of non-human animals, human beings' imaginings and sense perceptions appear to occur haphazardly or at random unless we posit that they are caused by some kind of corporeal faculty. As the case of dreams and hallucinations suggests, we can have sense perceptions and imagine even if there is no corporeal thing to stimulate our brains and sensory organs.<sup>82</sup> Unless we suppose that our faculties for sense perception and imagination operate by means of a corporeal mechanism, it seems impossible to explain how these faculties

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<sup>80</sup> "Do the swallows...search without judgment and choose without discrimination, out of a thousand places the one which is most suitable for them to dwell in," asks Montaigne rhetorically (qtd. in Newman 2001: 25).

<sup>81</sup> Descartes denies that *akrasia* (weakness of the will) is possible. He claims that we are sometimes urged towards what we have judged is harmful etc. because our animal spirits have compelled the soul to consider that object or action in a different light (e.g. as beneficial or brave). If we come to desire what the animal spirits have impressed upon the soul, it is because we have revised our initial judgment and (temporarily) come to believe that the object or action is good and desirable (PS I.47 = AT 11: 364-366; CSM 1: 345-346). I discussed his account of *akrasia* in detail in my second essay.

<sup>82</sup> Following predecessors like Aquinas, Descartes holds that the imagination is a kind of inner sense for representing absent bodies and combining or integrating the representations of the five outer senses: "but when [the mind] imagines, it turns towards the body and looks at something in the body which conforms to an idea understood by the mind or perceived by the senses" (M 6 = AT 7: 73; CSM 2: 51; cf. PS I.21 = AT 11: 344-345; CSM 1: 336).

for representing corporeal things could produce these representations without the assistance of anything corporeal.<sup>83</sup>

In the Sixth Set of Replies, Descartes enumerates what he calls the three grades of sensory response. The first grade of sensory response takes place outside of the mind. It begins with the interaction between a corporeal thing and a perceiver's sense organs and ends with movements in the brain initiated by their interaction. These cerebral motions are followed by a sensation in the mind, i.e. "...the perception[] of pain, pleasure, thirst, hunger, colors, sound, taste, smell, heat, cold, and the like" that take place at the second grade of sensory response (AT 7: 437; CSM 2: 294). Finally, at the third grade, the mind conjoins this sensation with other ideas that it has come to associate with the sensation by means of habit or experience to form a more complex sensory idea. For instance, the sensation of fuzziness that a perceiver experiences at the second grade of sensory response might be combined with ideas of being blush colored and roughly palm sized at the third grade to form a complex sensory idea of a peach. Descartes calls the complex sensory idea that results from the third grade of sensation a judgment even though it is produced in the mind by means of the association of ideas alone and without the will's affirmation or denial.<sup>84</sup> Often one of the ideas that we conjoin with a sensation when we make this sort of judgment is an idea of extension, distance, or another quality that can only belong to an external, corporeal thing. The result is a judgment that the source of the sensation is

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<sup>83</sup> Ultimately, Descartes claims that our dreams are caused by the fortuitous course of the animal spirits, his name for minute particles in the blood, so all of our sense perceptions—including the sense perceptions we have when we are asleep or hallucinating—are caused by something outside the mind (PS I.21 = AT 11: 344-345; CSM 1: 336). However, as Lex Newman points out, Descartes cannot reach this conclusion until he can dismiss the dreaming doubt by showing that our mind is transparent and cannot generate thoughts like dream images without our being aware of its activity. This, in turn, requires him to show that the mind is not a body (1994: 496-501).

<sup>84</sup> Alison Simmons suggests that we should understand the third grade of sense perception as "a mental operation (or set of operations) that falls somewhere between the mere perception of ideas and the affirmation or denial by the will of whatever those ideas represent to the mind..." (2003: 566).

something other than the mind, namely a corporeal thing that has the quality represented to us in our sensation: “as a result of being affected by this sensation of color, I judge that a stick, located outside me is colored” (6 R = AT 7: 437; CSM 2: 295). Similarly, people who have been injured are in the habit of conjoining their sensation of pain with their ideas of corporeal things to form a judgment “...concerning the nature of something which they think exists in the painful spot and which they suppose to resemble the sensation of pain” (PP I.46 = AT 8A: 22; CSM 1: 208). In this way, the senses are able to perform what seems to be their function of representing corporeal things.

However, reflecting on the causes of our dreams suggests that the senses sometimes represent particular bodies even when there is no corporeal thing to stimulate them. That is, we can have a sensation and conjoin it with other ideas without undergoing any of the bodily processes that are initiated at the first grade of sensory response. In the Third Meditation, the meditator rejects his earlier hypothesis that the things he seems to see in his dreams are nothing more than sense perceptions he has had while awake that have been combined to form new images (cf. M1 = AT 7: 20; CSM 2: 13-14). Instead, he suggests that these images might be created in his mind without borrowing even the simplest and most universal elements of number, size, extension, and so on from external, corporeal things. He speculates that the images in his dreams—and perhaps all of his ideas of bodies—originate in an unknown faculty of his mind “...which produces these ideas without any assistance from external things; this is, after all, just how I have always thought ideas are produced in me when I am dreaming” (M 3 = AT 7: 39; CSM 2: 27). On this account, we can have sensations and conjoin them with other ideas to form a complex sensory idea while we are asleep and dreaming (and maybe even while we are awake)

even though there is no corporeal thing to stimulate our sense organs and cause the neural and cerebral motions that take place at the first grade of sensory response.

Since the second and third grades of sensory response can take place without our having experienced the first, we seem to have sensations and complex sensory ideas at random.<sup>85</sup> Just as the rook that Woolfson describes engages in behavior signaling that it has found food despite not having been given anything to eat, we sometimes have a sensation and conjoin that sensation with other ideas despite there being no corporeal thing to stimulate our senses. Even though the rook might seem to act for an end when food is present, the fact that it engages in the same behavior when there is nothing to eat renders this behavior inexplicable when we try to understand it in terms of ends and means. Similarly, when we have a sensation and conjoin it with other ideas after a corporeal thing has stimulated our sense organs we seem to have a sense perception in order to represent that corporeal thing. However, it seems impossible to understand our sensations and complex sensory ideas in terms of ends and means when we have them without our sensory organs being stimulated by a corporeal thing. Therefore, it seems that we have sensations and conjoin these sensations with other ideas at random unless we posit that they are the output of an automatic, unthinking corporeal process.

### 3.2.2 The Imperfect Resemblance Doubt

The meditator's initial skeptical worry that our sense perceptions and imaginings sometimes fail to resemble the bodies that they represent also suggests that our mind is a kind of body. When he worries that "...the senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance," the meditator is raising a skeptical possibility that implies that our sense perceptions and imaginings are random, haphazard, and self-defeating (M 1 = AT 7:

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<sup>85</sup> As Stephen Menn points out, even the sense perceptions that result from the interaction between a body and our sensory organs are random and haphazard: "...[O]ur beliefs are determined by fate and chance to the extent that we allow the senses to determine our judgments of the natures of things" (1998: 242).



18; CSM 2: 12). Our sense perceptions and imaginings fail to resemble the bodies that they represent, so we seem to experience them haphazardly or at random because there is no connection between the qualities that bodies have and the qualities that we attribute to them on the basis of our sense perceptions and imaginings. Moreover, we can recognize by means of the intellect that our sense perceptions and imaginings fail to resemble the qualities of a particular body without correcting them. This suggests that like the behavior of non-human animals, our sense perceptions and imaginings seem opposed to what appear to be their ends and our judgments about what is true or false or harmful or beneficial. Therefore, having a sensation and conjoining it with other ideas seems utterly incomprehensible unless we suppose that the faculties of sense perception and imagination operate by means of some corporeal mechanism.

The meditator's struggles to doubt his beliefs about the nature and existence of corporeal things support this claim. He persists in believing that corporeal things exist and have qualities that resemble his ideas of them in spite of the skeptical conclusions he has reached because he is in the habit of assenting to the complex sensory idea he creates when he conjoins his sensations with ideas of extension and other qualities of external, corporeal things. He tries to justify his beliefs about the nature and existence of these external bodies by pointing out that he has sensations and conjoins them with the will's affirmation or denial, but he recognizes that "...although these ideas do not depend on my will, it does not follow that they must come from things located outside me" (M 3 = AT 7: 39; CSM 2: 27). Since he has sensations and conjoins them with other ideas, including ideas of extension and other qualities of corporeal things, whether or not anything outside of him exists, he seems to have these ideas at random. That is, his sensations and complex sensory ideas seem utterly incomprehensible if we try to understand them as a means to the end of representing particular bodies. Because he has sensations and

conjoins them with other ideas whether or not there is a corporeal thing to stimulate his sense organs, it seems strange to hold that they are means to the end of representing particular bodies. Instead, the best way to understand our sensations and complex sensory ideas is in terms of a faculty that operates automatically and unthinkingly. Descartes has his meditator come to a similar conclusion, asserting that "...it is not reliable judgment but merely some blind impulse that has made me believe up until now that there exist things distinct from myself which transmit ideas or images of themselves through the sense organs or in some other way" (ibid. = AT 7: 40; CSM 2: 27).

In a passage from Meditation 6, Descartes suggests even more strongly that the process by which we conjoin our sensations with other ideas at the third grade of sensory response is random and arbitrary. He has his meditator recount an episode from the period when he accepted Scholastic and other theories that privilege the senses. Even then the meditator could not shake his suspicion that the association he makes between his sensations and other ideas is inherently random or arbitrary. Unlike his outer sensations which seem to imperfectly or incompletely resemble the particular bodies they represent, his inner sensations like pain, hunger, and thirst seem entirely unlike the states of his body that they supposedly represent. He wonders "...why should that curious sensation of pain give rise to a particular distress of mind...or a dryness of the throat tell me to drink and so on" (AT 7: 76; CSM 2: 53). Despite his lifelong habit of conjoining his sensations of pain with other unpleasant sensations and his sensations of thirst with volitions to drink, he cannot understand why he would combine his sensations and volitions in this way. He suspects that these and similar associations—such as the associations between a tickling sensation and a sensation of delight and a sensation of hunger and a volition to eat—are random and arbitrary: "...there is absolutely no connection (at least that I can

understand) between the tugging sensation and the decision to take food, or between the sensation of something causing pain and the mental apprehension of distress that arises from the sensation” (ibid). That is, there is no reason why a tugging sensation should bring about a volition to eat rather than a volition to stop eating or a volition to do anything else. In contrast, we can easily understand why a clear and distinct perception is followed by a volition to affirm it—the will has truth as one of its ends, and our clear and distinct perceptions are indubitably true.

Because the connection between, say, a sensation of hunger and a volition to eat appears random or arbitrary, claiming that we have complex sensory ideas of hunger in order to ensure that we nourish ourselves by eating seems mistaken and misleading. That is, since we apparently conjoin our sensations with other ideas at random, it seems odd to hold that we have the resulting complex sensory idea in order to achieve some end. For this reason, we cannot understand how our faculty of sense perception produces sensations and complex sensory ideas if we try to understand its activities in terms of ends such as representing particular bodies or ensuring that we are nourished. Thus, it seems that we should conclude that our faculty of sense perception is not a faculty of thought but rather a corporeal faculty like the faculties for motion and changing shape that govern the instinctive behavior of non-human animals. Descartes has the meditator come to a similar conclusion when he suggests that he conjoins various ideas independently of the intellect or some other faculty for thought: “these and other judgments that I made concerning sensory objects, I was apparently taught to make by nature; for I had already made up my mind that this was how things were, before working out any arguments to prove it” (M 6 = AT 7: 76; CSM 2: 53). He contrasts his natural impulses with what he establishes by means of the intellect, which suggests that there is part of his nature that is something other than an

incorporeal faculty of thought. At least one such aspect of his nature seems to be his faculty for sense perception.

Not only do our imaginings and sense perceptions fail to resemble the bodies they represent, but sometimes they seem self-defeating as well as random and haphazard. Sometimes they seem to undermine their supposed end of representing particular corporeal things because they do not take the intellect's judgments about truth and falsity into account. For example, astronomers imagine that the moon and stars are very small in spite of having judged that these heavenly bodies are immense: "in our early childhood we imagined the starts as being very small; and although astronomical arguments now clearly show that they are very large indeed, our preconceived opinion is still strong enough to make it very hard for us to imagine them differently from the way we did before" (PP I.72 = AT 8A: 36-37; CSM 1: 220). In order to achieve what seems to be its end of "...contemplating the shape or form of a corporeal thing" the imagination would have to represent the moon and stars as immense orbs (M 2 = AT 7: 28; CSM 2: 19). When the imagination does not modify its representation in accordance with the intellect's judgment, it seems to undermine its supposed end just as the wild rooks do when they do not redesign their nest after their original nest collapses. Since Descartes holds that it is inconceivable that a thinking being would act for an end yet act in ways that undermined that end, he concludes that the nesting birds' behavior is not caused by a faculty of thought. Similarly, it seems that the astronomers' imaginings are not caused by a faculty of thought because such a faculty would not undermine its ends. Therefore, our faculty of imagination, like the rooks, does not seem to pursue an end. Instead, it must be some kind of corporeal, unthinking faculty.

Our sensations and complex sensory ideas also seem to conflict with our judgments about what is harmful or beneficial in a way that thoughts should not. For example, some individuals who suffer from heart and lung disease feel thirsty and want to drink even though they have judged that drinking would harm them. That is, patients with congestive heart failure (what Descartes calls “dropsy”) have a sensation of thirst and conjoin that sensation with a volition to drink to form a complex sensory idea despite having judged that drinking would be harmful. In contrast, we can adapt our thoughts so that they become means to achieving what we judge to be beneficial rather than obstacles to it. As Descartes’ comments about achieving happiness suggest, once we judge that willing good health or wealth is irrelevant or even opposed to pursuing happiness, we will no longer have these volitions. “Making a virtue out of necessity,” he advises “...we shall not desire to be healthy when ill or free when imprisoned, any more than we now desire to have bodies or a material as indestructible as a diamond or wings to fly like the birds” (DM 3 = AT 6: 26; CSM 1: 124). Our ability to modify our volitions ensures that they do not undermine our end of achieving happiness by inclining us to pursue what is irrelevant or even opposed to it. However, the cardiac patients’ sensations and complex sensory ideas persist in spite of their judgment that drinking would be harmful. Therefore, trying to understand the patients’ sensations and complex sensory ideas as the products of a faculty of thought renders them entirely incomprehensible. By Descartes’ lights, we cannot conceive of a faculty of thought that would prevent us from pursuing an end that the intellect has judged to be beneficial. Such a faculty would share the limitation of being unable to adapt a means (its thoughts) to an end (whatever the intellect judges is beneficial) with non-human animals and all other corporeal things, so it would turn out to be a corporeal faculty itself. For this reason, it seems that we should doubt that our faculty for sense perception is a faculty for thought. Instead, it seems to be

a faculty whose activities result from nothing more than the rearrangement, motion, and agitation of purely corporeal parts. In other words, it seems to be a faculty of a corporeal mind.

### 3.3 The Imperfect Resemblance Doubt Revisited

I have argued for my interpretation of the Dreaming and Imperfect Resemblance Doubts by appealing to Descartes' non-teleological notion of bodies. However, I do not believe that my interpretation of these skeptical arguments depends on the reading of Descartes' two tests that I advocate in §2 and the notion of bodies that emerges from it. I will close this section by arguing that, according to the reading I reject, constraints on what the imagination can represent suggest that it is a kind of corporeal faculty. While the intellect can represent all of the indefinitely many potential states of a piece of wax, the imagination can only represent a small number of these states. Like an automaton that can utter and respond to a tiny fraction of the words used and understood by a human speaker, the imagination seems to reveal that it operates by means of the motion and arrangement of purely corporeal parts.

Towards the end of the Second Meditation, the meditator contrasts his intellect with his imagination. He concludes that his imagination can grasp the qualities of bodies imperfectly and incompletely while the intellect can understand these qualities thoroughly and without error. While he can imagine some of the changes that a piece of wax can undergo, he cannot imagine the full range of possible (or even actual) changes: "...I can grasp that the wax is capable of countless changes of this kind, yet I am unable to run through this immeasurable number in my imagination" (AT 7: 31; CSM 2: 20 -21). That is, he can imagine a candle changing shape from a cylinder to a blob, but he cannot imagine all of the intermediate shapes or other shapes that the wax could take on if it were melted down and remolded. However, his intellect can grasp each of these shapes and all of the changes the wax can undergo by means of its clear and distinct

ideas of flexibility and malleability. Because the imagination cannot grasp and represent each state of the wax, it can only bring about a very limited number of effects. The intellect, in contrast, can represent indefinitely many states of the wax and matter in general through its ideas of flexibility and malleability. Since there is an upper limit on the number of changes the imagination can represent, it seems like an automaton that can only produce the actions or utter the words permitted by the number and disposition of its parts. Therefore, it seems that the imagination must also create its representations by means of the motion and arrangement of corporeal parts.

The meditator compares his imagination to an animal's faculty when he realizes its limitations. While reflecting on his failure to imagine the wax's nature, he remarks "for what distinctness was there in my earlier perception [i.e., his imagining]? Was there anything in it which an animal could not possess? But when I distinguish the wax from its outward forms... then although my judgment may contain errors at least my perception now requires a human mind" (M 2 = AT 7: 32; CSM 2: 22). While his intellectual apprehension of an innate idea encompassing all of the wax's possible states could only arise from a faculty of a human mind, his imagining could arise just as easily from the corporeal faculties of a non-human animal.<sup>86</sup> Unlike his innate ideas that encompass every possible state of the wax, his imaginings are able to represent only a few of the changes in shape, color, and texture that the wax undergoes. Since the effects it can produce are so limited, the imagination does not appear to be indefinite as a

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<sup>86</sup> Carriero claims that this passage is not intended to be read in light of Descartes' view that non-human animals lack an incorporeal mind or soul. Instead, he holds, it is meant to draw the reader's attention to the kind of complex structure that he believes is present in our intellect's judgments and absent from other forms of thought (2009: pgs. 118-119; cf. pg. 70). However, Gassendi seems to read the passage as I do, arguing that both human beings and non-human animals are capable of thought because thinking is just a function of the "rarified matter" that he takes to compose human and animal souls (5 O = AT 7: 269; CSM 1: 188). The Sixth Objectors also make similar points, connecting the meditator's denial that his mind is a flame or breath of air to Descartes' discussion of the abilities of non-human animals (cf. AT 7: 413-414; CSM 2: 278-279).

faculty of thought must be on this reading. Instead, it seems to be a kind of corporeal faculty like the faculties for motion and changing shape that are common to all bodies.

Therefore, even the reading of Descartes' two tests that I dispute supports my thesis that his skepticism about the senses is also meant to generate doubts about the nature of the mind. Since the imagination's inability to represent every state of the wax suggests it is not an indefinite capacity, the meditator's worries about its scope are also worries about its immateriality if we accept the view that indefiniteness is the mark of the mental. If, on the other hand, we take teleology to be the mark of the mental, the meditator's observations that his sensations are random and self-defeating suggest that his faculty for sense perception is bodily. Thus, my reading of the First Meditation does not hinge on a particular interpretation of the two tests introduced in the *Discourse*. The imagination and faculty of sense perception seem to fail these two tests, no matter how we choose to interpret them.

#### 4. Cognitive Disasters

Initially, the skeptical conclusion that our imagination and faculty of sense perception are fallible because they are bodily faculties might seem to fall short of the "worst case scenario" I envisioned in §1. While these faculties would fail to be transparent because they are bodily, we would still appear to have infallible insight into the nature and activities of our incorporeal intellect and will. However, we could be mistaken about the kind of thought we were engaged in and whether we were thinking at all despite having an incorporeal intellect and will. As I will argue below, our mind would fail to be transparent because we could confuse thoughts that originated from its own activities with thoughts that originated from the activities of bodily faculties. For this reason, we would not be able to know anything at all, so we would be just as ignorant and prone to error as we would be in the "worst case scenario".



If our imagination and faculty of sense perception were bodily, we would imagine and sense by turning our intellect and will towards them just as we turn to the brain to remember and experience some of the passions. That is, we would have to retrieve a trace from our brain or whatever organ housed our imagination and faculty of sense perception in order to imagine, have a sensation, or make a sensory judgment. In order to distinguish our memories from our sense perceptions and imaginings, we would have to make a judgment about whether a retrieved trace was newly created by the interaction of some external, corporeal thing on these faculties or had persisted in the brain. Since we would have to make an inference about the age and origin of the trace to determine whether we were sensing, imagining, or remembering, our insight into our mind's activities would be fallible if this inference could be false. It seems that this inference could be false because we could confuse an imagining with a memory. We would imagine by turning to our imagination, calling a trace to mind, and judging that the trace was newly created. However, we would perform a similar sequence of steps when we remembered something. Our intellect would turn to our brain and call to mind the trace left by its prior thought and judge that it had entertained that thought before. If we confused a new configuration of the imagination's parts with a previous configuration, we could confuse a newly created trace with a persisting one. Thus, when we called the trace to mind, we would judge that it was caused by a configuration that we had already observed and confuse our imagining with a memory. As a result, we could be mistaken about whether we were imagining, making a judgment about the state of the imagination, or remembering something. Therefore, we could be mistaken about the kind of thought we were engaged in.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> We would make the two kinds of mistakes that Matthew Eshleman claims to render our mind less than completely transparent: misunderstanding the origin of our thought and misperceiving its content. Eshleman holds that this kind of mistake is confined (for the most part) to our experience of the passions,

Moreover, confusing a trace created by the activities of corporeal faculties of imagination and sense perception with a trace created by a previously entertained thought would mean confusing something that originated in a non-thinking faculty with something that originated in a faculty for thought. Our memories originate in our intellect because they are thoughts that our intellect previously entertained. Although they are stored in the brain, our memories are created when we entertain a thought for the first time and resolve to remember it by means of a volition. In contrast, our imaginings and sense perceptions would originate in a non-thinking, corporeal faculty, and our judgments about these activities would concern the modes of a corporeal thing. If we could confuse our imaginings and the trace element of a memory in the manner that I described above, we could confuse something that originated outside a faculty of thought with something that resulted from our intellect's activities. As a result, we could confuse something with corporeal origins with something that originated in the mind. In other words, we could confuse something that was originally a thought with something that was not originally a thought.

Such an error would be similar to the mistake we would make if we confused our sensations with our ideas of sensations.<sup>88</sup> Once Descartes has taken himself to show that the entire mind is incorporeal, he claims that we have sensations as a result of the interaction between our own body, the bodies that surround it, and our mind. Unless our mind is affected by these corporeal things, we cannot have a sensation.<sup>89</sup> In contrast, our ideas of sensations are

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but the possibility that our imagination and faculty of sense perception are corporeal widens the scope for this kind of error (2007: pg. 300).

<sup>88</sup> This distinction and my understanding of it is due to Cunning's 2006 article "Descartes on Sensations and Ideas of Sensations". Unlike Cunning, I interpret Descartes as holding that sensations are a kind of idea and not mere *qualia*, but this interpretive difference is irrelevant to my use of his distinction to illustrate the errors we would be prone to if the mind's entire essence was not thought.

<sup>89</sup> Simmons holds that our sensations represent particular bodies in virtue of having been caused by the interaction between those bodies and our own body. She uses the example of a disembodied angel to

ideas of the activities of our own mind and represent sensations as confused modes of thought. If we could confuse our sensations with our ideas of sensations, we could confuse a thought that has the modes of bodies as its cause with a thought that is caused by a mode of the mind alone. As a result, we could not only confuse our reflection on our mind's activities (the idea of sensation) with its activities (the sensation) but we could also confuse a thought with entirely incorporeal origins with a thought that could not exist without the intervention of something corporeal. Similarly, if we could confuse our judgment that our imagination was undergoing some kind of change (a thought that originated in something corporeal) with a judgment that the trace in our brain was the result of having previously entertained an idea (a thought caused by his intellect), we would confuse thoughts with corporeal and incorporeal origins. Just as an idea of a sensation results from reflection on a mode of the mind that originated partially outside it, the judgment that accompanied our memory would result from our reflection on something that originated in our mind, was stored briefly in the body, and then was returned to the mind. Our judgments about our imaginings, in contrast, would be like sensations as Descartes' understands them when he gives up his skepticism about the mind's corporeal nature. That is, these judgments would be essentially connected to a state of a body because they would represent the motions and arrangements of corporeal particles. Thus, we could confuse a judgment about current and previous states of our intellect, a faculty for thought, with a judgment about current and previous states of our imagination, a corporeal, non-thinking faculty. For this reason, our mind would fail to be transparent because we could confuse thoughts representing other thoughts with thoughts representing the activities of non-thinking, corporeal faculties.

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argue that a representation of a particular body that was created without the intervention of a perceiver's body would be more like an intellectual apprehension than a sensation (1999: pg. 358; cf. pg. 367 en.22).

## 5. Conclusion

Therefore, even an incorporeal intellect would not be transparent to us because we could confuse thoughts about its activities with thoughts about the activities of a corporeal faculty. Because we would lack infallible insight into our intellect and its activities, we would not be able to have any of the knowledge that depends on it, including knowledge of our own existence. Thus, the conclusion that our faculties of imagination and sense perception are fallible because they are bodily can generate the same skeptical result as the “worst case scenario” in which all of the mind’s faculties are bodily. That is, we would be ignorant and vulnerable to error by our very nature because our mind would lack the faculties necessary for judging truly. By suggesting that our imagination and faculty of sense perception are bodily, the meditator’s reflections on his dreams and perceptions of distant objects reinforce his fear that the human mind may be the creation of a deceitful God and help to generate his deepest skeptical worries.

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