Meditation II Of the Nature of the Human Mind; and that it is more

easily known than the Body.

The Meditation of yesterday filled my mind with so many doubts

that it is no longer in my power to forget them. And yet I do not see in

what manner I can resolve them; and, just as if I had all of a sudden

fallen into very deep water, I am so disconcerted that I can neither make

certain of setting my feet on the bottom, nor can I swim and so support

myself on the surface. I shall nevertheless make an effort and follow

anew the same path as that on which I yesterday entered, i.e. I shall

proceed by setting aside all that in which the least doubt could be

supposed to exist, just as if I had discovered that it was absolutely false;

and I shall ever follow in this road until I have met with something

which is certain, or at least, if I can do nothing else, until I have learned

for certain that there is nothing in the world that is certain. Archimedes,

in order that he might draw the terrestrial globe out of its place, and

transport it elsewhere, demanded only that one point should be fixed

and immoveable; in the same way I shall have the right to conceive high

hopes if I am happy enough to discover one thing only which is certain

and indubitable.

I suppose, then, that all the things that I see are false; I persuade

myself that nothing has ever existed of all that my fallacious memory

represents to me. I consider that I possess no senses; I imagine that

body, figure, extension, movement and place are but the fictions of my

mind. What, then, can be esteemed as true? Perhaps nothing at all,

unless that there is nothing in the world that is certain.

But how can I know there is not something different from those

things that I have just considered, of which one cannot have the

slightest doubt? Is there not some God, or some other being by

whatever name we call it, who puts these reflections into my mind?

That is not necessary, for is it not possible that I am capable of

producing them myself? I myself, am I not at least something? But I

have already denied that I had senses and body. Yet I hesitate, for what

follows from that? Am I so dependent on body and senses that I cannot

exist without these? But I was persuaded that there was nothing in all

the world, that there was no heaven, no earth, that there were no minds,

nor any bodies: was I not then likewise persuaded that I did not exist?

Not at all; of a surety I myself did exist since I persuaded myself of

something [or merely because I thought of something]. But there is

some deceiver or other, very powerful and very cunning, who ever

employs his ingenuity in deceiving me. Then without doubt I exist also

if he deceives me, and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can

never cause me to be nothing so long as I think that I am something. So

that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we

must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist,

is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally

conceive it.

But I do not yet know clearly enough what I am, I who am certain

that I am; and hence I must be careful to see that I do not imprudently

take some other object in place of myself, and thus that I do not go

astray in respect of this knowledge that I hold to be the most certain and

most evident of all that I have formerly learned. That is why I shall

now consider anew what I believed myself to be before I embarked

upon these last reflections; and of my former opinions I shall withdraw

all that might even in a small degree be invalidated by the reasons

which I have just brought forward, in order that there may be nothing at

all left beyond what is absolutely certain and indubitable.

What then did I formerly believe myself to be? Undoubtedly I

believed myself to be a man. But what is a man? Shall I say a

reasonable animal? Certainly not; for then I should have to inquire

what an animal is, and what is reasonable; and thus from a single

question I should insensibly fall into an infinitude of others more

difficult; and I should not wish to waste the little time and leisure

remaining to me in trying to unravel subtleties like these. But I shall

rather stop here to consider the thoughts which of themselves spring up

in my mind, and which were not inspired by anything beyond my own

nature alone when I applied myself to the consideration of my being. In

the first place, then, I considered myself as having a face, hands, arms,

and all that system of members composed on bones and flesh as seen in

a corpse which I designated by the name of body. In addition to this I

considered that I was nourished, that I walked, that I felt, and that I

thought, and I referred all these actions to the soul: but I did not stop to

consider what the soul was, or if I did stop, I imagined that it was

something extremely rare and subtle like a wind, a flame, or an ether,

which was spread throughout my grosser parts. As to body I had no

manner of doubt about its nature, but thought I had a very clear

knowledge of it; and if I had desired to explain it according to the

notions that I had then formed of it, I should have described it thus: By

the body I understand all that which can be defined by a certain figure:

something which can be confined in a certain place, and which can fill a

given space in such a way that every other body will be excluded from

it; which can be perceived either by touch, or by sight, or by hearing, or

by taste, or by smell: which can be moved in many ways not, in truth,

by itself, but by something which is foreign to it, by which it is touched

[and from which it receives impressions]: for to have the power of selfmovement,

as also of feeling or of thinking, I did not consider to

appertain to the nature of body: on the contrary, I was rather astonished

to find that faculties similar to them existed in some bodies.

But what am I, now that I suppose that there is a certain genius

which is extremely powerful, and, if I may say so, malicious, who

employs all his powers in deceiving me? Can I affirm that I possess the

least of all those things which I have just said pertain to the nature of

body? I pause to consider, I revolve all these things in my mind, and I

find none of which I can say that it pertains to me. It would be tedious

to stop to enumerate them. Let us pass to the attributes of soul and see

if there is any one which is in me? What of nutrition or walking [the

first mentioned]? But if it is so that I have no body it is also true that I

can neither walk nor take nourishment. Another attribute is sensation.

But one cannot feel without body, and besides I have thought I

perceived many things during sleep that I recognized in my waking

moments as not having been experienced at all. What of thinking? I

find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot

be separated from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often?

Just when I think; for it might possibly be the case if I ceased entirely to

think, that I should likewise cease altogether to exist. I do not now

admit anything which is not necessarily true: to speak accurately I am

not more than a thing which thinks, that is to say a mind or a soul, or an

understanding, or a reason, which are terms whose significance was

formerly unknown to me. I am, however, a real thing and really exist;

but what thing? I have answered: a thing which thinks.

And what more? I shall exercise my imagination [in order to see if

I am not something more]. I am not a collection of members which we

call the human body: I am not a subtle air distributed through these

members, I am not a wind, a fire, a vapour, a breath, nor anything at all

which I can imagine or conceive; because I have assumed that all these

were nothing. Without changing that supposition I find that I only

leave myself certain of the fact that I am somewhat. But perhaps it is

true that these same things which I supposed were non-existent because

they are unknown to me, are really not different from the self which I

know. I am not sure about this, I shall not dispute about it now; I can

only give judgment on things that are known to me. I know that I exist,

and I inquire what I am, I whom I know to exist. But it is very certain

that the knowledge of my existence taken in its precise significance

does not depend on things whose existence is not yet known to me;

consequently it does not depend on those which I can feign in

imagination. And indeed the very term feign in imagination9 proves to

me my error, for I really do this if I image myself a something, since to

imagine is nothing else than to contemplate the figure or image of a

corporeal thing. But I already know for certain that I am, and that it

may be that all these images, and, speaking generally, all things that

relate to the nature of body are nothing but dreams [and chimeras]. For

this reason I see clearly that I have as little reason to say, “I shall

stimulate my imagination in order to know more distinctly what I am,”

than if I were to say, “I am now awake, and I perceive somewhat that is

real and true: but because I do not yet perceive it distinctly enough, I

shall go to sleep of express purpose, so that my dreams may represent

the perception with greatest truth and evidence.” And, thus, I know for

certain that nothing of all that I can understand by means of my

imagination belongs to this knowledge which I have of myself, and that

it is necessary to recall the mind from this mode of thought with the

utmost diligence in order that it may be able to know its own nature

with perfect distinctness.

But what then am I? A thing which thinks. What is a thing which

thinks? It is a thing which doubts, understands, [conceives], affirms,

denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels.

Certainly it is no small matter if all these things pertain to my

nature. But why should they not so pertain? Am I not that being who

now doubts nearly everything, who nevertheless understands certain

things, who affirms that one only is true, who denies all the others, who

desires to know more, is averse from being deceived, who imagines

many things, sometimes indeed despite his will, and who perceives

many likewise, as by the intervention of the bodily organs? Is there

nothing in all this which is as true as it is certain that I exist, even

though I should always sleep and though he who has given me being

employed all his ingenuity in deceiving me? Is there likewise any one

of these attributes which can be distinguished from my thought, or

which might be said to be separated from myself? For it is so evident

of itself that it is I who doubts, who understands, and who desires, that

there is no reason here to add anything to explain it. And I have

certainly the power of imagining likewise; for although it may happen

(as I formerly supposed) that none of the things which I imagine are

true, nevertheless this power of imagining does not cease to be really in

use, and it forms part of my thought. Finally, I am the same who feels,

that is to say, who perceives certain things, as by the organs of sense,

since in truth I see light, I hear noise, I feel heat. But it will be said that

these phenomena are false and that I am dreaming. Let it be so; still it

is at least quite certain that it seems to me that I see light, that I hear

noise and that I feel heat. That cannot be false; properly speaking it is

what is in me called feeling ...