Descartes, *Sixth Meditation*: The External World, ‘Nature’ and Human Experience

JOHN COTTINGHAM

The Sixth Meditation deals, as its title proclaims, with ‘the existence of material things, and the real distinction between the mind and body of man’. In this paper, I want to start by examining Descartes’ argument for the existence of material things—for the existence of an ‘external’, physical world around us. Next, in section two, I shall use this argument concerning the external world to bring out an important general point about the ‘dialectical’ way in which Descartes presents his reasoning in the *Meditations*. This will lead me on to the third section of the paper, which will analyse the concept of ‘nature’ and the role it plays in Descartes’ reasoning, particularly in the Sixth Meditation. And this in turn will bring me to the fourth and final part of the paper, which will focus on what is by general consensus the most fascinating part of the Sixth Meditation—Descartes’ account of the relation between mind and body. What I shall try to do in this final section is to highlight a curious tension between Descartes’ recognition of the facts of human experience on the one hand, and on the other hand his doctrine that we are essentially incorporeal or non-physical substances.

1 E 127 (AT VII 71; CSM II 50). References to ‘E’ are to page numbers of the Everyman edition of Descartes which is the prescribed A-level text: *Descartes, A Discourse on Method, Meditations and Principles*, trans. J. Veitch (London: Dent, 1912). All quotations are taken from this edition. For the reader’s convenience, I have added, in brackets, cross-references to the standard twelve-volume edition of Descartes known as ‘AT’—*Oeuvres de Descartes*, C. Adam and P. Tannery (eds), rev. edn (Paris: Vrin, 1964–76), and to the new two volume English translation ‘CSM’—*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, (Cambridge University Press, 1985). Veitch’s translations, though first issued by Everyman in 1912, originally appeared in 1850–53; they are tolerably accurate, if sometimes rather stilted. Readers should, however, be warned that Veitch sometimes follows Descartes’ original Latin text of the *Meditations* (1641) and sometimes (often without indication) follows the later French version of 1647 which was not by Descartes. Thus in the title of the Sixth Meditation quoted above, the phrase ‘of man’ is not in the original Latin.
1. The proof of the external world

The flow of argument in the *Meditations* is from self to God to the external world. Having established first that he exists as a thinking thing, then that God exists, Descartes finally, in the Sixth Meditation, arrives at the conclusion that the external world exists. There are indeed, he decides, ‘corporeal’ (i.e. physical) things: these include his own body and numerous other physical objects all around him.

This is not perhaps a very surprising or spectacular result to reach after six days of intense meditation. As Descartes himself admits in the Synopsis to the *Meditations*, facts such as the fact ‘that there is in reality a world, that men are possessed of bodies, and the like’ are ones which ‘no one of sound mind ever seriously doubted’. But for Descartes, even these seemingly obvious and elementary truths are less certain, and more complicated to establish, than the knowledge of our minds and of God. ‘So that the latter [truths] are of all which come under human knowledge, the most certain and manifest—a conclusion which it was my single aim in these Meditations to establish’.

The proof of the existence of an external world in the Sixth Meditation is in fact quite difficult to isolate on a first reading. There are several seemingly false starts—apparently promising lines of reasoning which are eagerly taken up only to be discarded. To begin with, Descartes notes that he has the power to imagine, or picture, corporeal objects; such a power could easily be accounted for, suggests Descartes, if his mind is united to a body, and can somehow make use of that body in order to form images of things.

This is somewhat mystifying as it stands, and Descartes says little to explain just what he has in mind. But some years later, when he was questioned about this passage by the young Dutchman Frans Burman, he supplied a fuller explanation. Imagination, he tells us, differs from pure ‘intellection’ or understanding in so far as it involves actually ‘picturing’ an object in the mind’s eye. For example, I can understand that a thousand-sided figure has a thousand angles without being able to picture the figure (except perhaps in a very confused way). But if we take the proposition that a triangle has three angles, I not only understand this to be true, I can also vividly picture the triangle: I ‘see’ the three lines ‘there in front of me’ as if they were actually, physically present. Now this vivid process of ‘imaging’ or ‘depicting’ objects could easily be accounted for, Descartes suggests, if there is a physical organ, the brain, where the three lines are actually, physically traced out, so

---

2 E78 (AT VII 16; CSM II 50).
3 Ibid.
that the mind can directly ‘contemplate’ or ‘inspect’ the resulting picture.  

The argument, in sum, is that imagination requires a brain for the forming of physical images; therefore at least one physical object—the brain—exists. The modern reader is unlikely to be very impressed by the details of this argument. Indeed, to anyone even remotely familiar with the neurophysiology of the brain, the bizarre notion of images being actually, physically traced out there will sound quite absurd. Fortunately, however, we do not have to spend further time on this curious argument since from the standpoint of the *Meditations* Descartes is of course committed to supplying absolutely firm and unshakeable reasoning to support his conclusions. And he has to admit here in Meditation Six that his conjecture about the physiological basis for imagining does not have the status of a watertight argument. His reflection on the power of imagining entitles him, he says, to make a ‘probable conjecture’ that material objects exist, but, he does not find here an argument from which he can ‘necessarily infer the existence of any body’.

Next, Descartes considers the faculty of ‘sense-perception’—though it is worth noting right away that there is a slight awkwardness in the Everyman translation here. The term ‘sense-perception’ as used in modern English already implies the existence of the body: sense-perception is what one does with the five senses—sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch—and these senses of course involve the use of bodily organs. Furthermore, ‘perception’, as ordinarily used, is an ‘achievement’ concept: that is, to say that someone perceives X implies that there really exists an X which is perceived. But as Descartes uses the term ‘sense-perception’ (in the original Latin *sentire*, literally ‘to sense’) it does not imply the existence either of external objects of perception or of any bodily organs of perception. By *sentire* Descartes means merely the having of sensory ‘ideas’ (what Hume was later to call ‘impressions’); that is, Descartes is talking merely of the subjective consciousness of certain kinds of visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory and tactile data. ‘Sense-perception’ construed in this narrow sense is simply a characteristic kind of conscious awareness; and its use at this stage does not commit Descartes to any implications either about external objects or about the possession of a body, or bodily sense organs.

Descartes proceeds to note that in virtue of this faculty of sense-perception (or sensory awareness), certain sensory ideas are presented to him. I am aware of certain sensory ideas being presented to my

---


5 E129 (AT VII 73; CSM II 51).
consciousness (I do not yet know their cause)—ideas of ‘hardness, heat and the other tactile qualities, and in addition, light, colours, odours, tastes and sounds’. Let us call this ‘proposition one’:

(1) I have sensory ideas.

The next point Descartes makes is that these ideas are apparently caused by something outside me. The main reason for supposing this is so is that the ideas in question do not depend on my will: they are ‘presented to me without my consent being required’. What Descartes means by this, is, I think, quite straightforward. For example, as I sit composing this paper, the visual impressions of my typewriter, books, papers and so on, come to me whether I like it or not. I cannot conjure them into existence or make them go away at will. So now we have proposition number two:

(2) Sensory ideas are caused by something other than myself.

But if sensory ideas are caused by something external to me (or my mind), then the most obvious supposition to make, says Descartes, is that they are caused by real external objects which resemble the ideas: ‘As of those objects I had no knowledge beyond what the ideas themselves gave me, nothing was so likely to occur to my mind as the supposition that the objects were similar to the ideas which they caused’. So we arrive at our conclusion, proposition number three:

(3) Sensory ideas are caused by objects resembling my sensory ideas.

So far so good. Or rather so far not so good. For in case anyone should suppose that the reasoning just sketched settles the question of the existence of external objects, Descartes now proceeds to make it clear that such reasoning will not do. Indeed, it emerges that what he has so far given us is merely a kind of résumé of the train of thought of an ordinary person who has not subjected his beliefs to philosophical

---

6 E 129 (AT VII 75; CSM II 52). Descartes first of all talks of the perception of qualities; later (E 130, line 2) he says that it is the ideas of these qualities ‘which alone I properly and immediately perceive’. For a useful discussion of the origins of this use of ‘idea’ see P. Alexander, Ideas, Qualities and Corpuscles (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 97ff.

7 E 130 (AT VII 75; CSM II 52).

8 Cf. Berkeley, The Principles of Human Knowledge (1710) Section 29: ‘When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or not, or to determine what particular objects present themselves to my view . . . The ideas imprinted on [the senses] are not creatures of my will.’

Descartes, Sixth Meditation

scrutiny. The easy three-step argument just sketched represents merely the thinking of the typical 'pre-philosophical man'—the person who has not done any Cartesian meditations. Such a man has sensory impressions or 'ideas' of trees and mountains, tables and chairs, and he takes it as just obvious that these sensory impressions are produced by objects which more or less resemble the ideas—which are more or less the way he perceives them to be.

In order to undermine this naive pre-philosophical view, Descartes reminds us of the systematic doubts introduced in the First Meditation. Can we really trust the senses? Are they not subject to illusions? 'The senses sometimes mislead' warned the First Meditation. Now, in the Sixth Meditation, Descartes reinforces the point with an example: 'I frequently observed that towers which at a distance seemed round appeared square when more closely viewed'. And it is not just the external senses which can be convicted of deception. Even the 'internal' senses—those which seem to tell me about my own bodily condition—can provide misleading information. Descartes' example—one that particularly interests him as a student of physiology—is the curious phenomenon of the 'phantom limb': 'I have sometimes been informed by parties whose arm or leg had been amputated that they still occasionally seemed to feel pain in that part of the body which they had lost—a circumstance that led me to think that I could not quite be certain even that any one of my members was affected when I felt pain in it.'

After this recapitulation of, and expansion of, his earlier doubts about the senses, Descartes—still speaking with the voice of the philosophical meditator who will take nothing for granted—specifically addresses the naive argument for the existence of external objects which he has just sketched out a moment ago. To the pre-philosophical man it may seem just obvious and 'natural' to suppose that sensory ideas are caused by external objects; but 'as nature seemed to incline me to many things from which reason made me averse, I thought that I ought not to confide much in its teachings'. And here Descartes reminds us of the extreme or 'hyperbolical' doubt he had raised in the First Meditation: 'I saw nothing to prevent my having been so constituted by nature as that I should be deceived even in matters that appeared to me to possess the greatest truth.'

For the 'pre-philosophical' man, cf. Descartes' Conversation with Burman, AT V 146; Cottingham (op. cit. note 4), 3.

10 For the 'pre-philosophical' man, cf. Descartes' Conversation with Burman, AT V 146; Cottingham (op. cit. note 4), 3.
11 E 80 (AT VII 18; CSM II 12).
12 E 131 (AT VII 76; CSM II 53).
13 Ibid.
14 E 132 (AT VII 77; CSM II 53).
15 Ibid. Cf. Meditation One: E 82 (AT VII 21; CSM II 14).
At this point, however, the argument enters yet another phase, and Descartes now proceeds to allay the doubts he has just raised. We are, he reminds us, no longer in the morass of doubt characteristic of the earlier Meditations. God’s existence has been established (at least, Descartes takes it to have been established) by the arguments of the Third and Fifth Meditations. And God, being defined as the supremely perfect being, is necessarily benevolent and incapable of malicious deception. ‘It is impossible for him ever to deceive me’, Descartes had observed in the Fourth Meditation, ‘for in all fraud and deceit there is a certain imperfection . . . The will [to deceive] testifies without doubt of malice and weakness and such, accordingly, cannot be found in God.’

With this in mind, Descartes returns to his sensory ideas. ‘I cannot doubt’, he resumes, ‘that there is in me a certain passive faculty of perception, that is of receiving . . . the ideas of sensible things.’ Clearly something must produce these ideas. And while it is theoretically possible that the ideas could be produced directly by God himself or by some intermediate cause other than a physical object, nevertheless God has given us ‘a very strong inclination to believe that those ideas arise from corporeal objects’. And so, finally, Descartes is able to arrive at his long-sought conclusion: ‘I do not see how God could be vindicated from the charge of deceit if in truth [these ideas] proceeded from any other source, or were produced by any other causes, than corporeal things; and accordingly it must be concluded that corporeal objects exist’.

2. Descartes as Dialectician

It is, then, not until the point we have just reached, halfway through the final Meditation, that Descartes actually reaches the firm result that physical (or ‘corporeal’) objects exist. I hope I have brought out how many twists and turns the argument has taken along the way, and how Descartes’ reasoning is divided into successive phases. The starting point (phase one) is the thought that it is natural or ‘obvious’ to suppose that external objects exist in a way that matches our sensory ideas of them. Next (phase two) cold water is thrown on this: the senses are often unreliable; and in any case the fact that I am naturally strongly inclined to believe something is no guarantee of its truth. But then, finally, (phase three) these doubts are swept away as we are reminded of

16 E 111/2 (AT VII 53; CSM II 37).
17 E 133 (AT VII 79; CSM II 55).
18 E 134 (AT VII 80; CSM II 55). Italics supplied.
the existence of a benevolent God who would not allow us to be subject to systematic deception. And in the light of this I can conclude that my inclination to believe in corporeal objects must have some foundation in reality.

But even now Descartes' twisting argument has not exhausted itself. Although I can conclude that physical objects exist, there is a qualification: 'they are not perhaps exactly such as we perceive them by the senses, for their comprehension by the senses is in many instances very obscure and confused'. And the rest of the Meditation is taken up with examining exactly how far I am justified in concluding that the world conforms to my sensory perception of it (and whether, if it does not, this fact can be reconciled with the benevolence of God).

This twisting and turning of argument and counter-argument—the setting up of one position which is immediately knocked down, the reaching of a conclusion which immediately needs modifying—is extremely characteristic of Descartes' style throughout the Meditations. Indeed, it is a feature of a great deal of philosophy, from Socrates onwards, that it proceeds in 'dialectical' fashion. A proposition or a definition is put forward only to be attacked; as a result of the attack, it is revised, and then the revision is in turn criticized and subsequently modified. In Plato's writings, this cut and thrust of refutation and counter-refutation is especially vivid, because the train of the argument is presented in dialogue form: we actually see character A setting up a position and character B knocking it down. This is of course not the case in Descartes (though Descartes did embark on—but unfortunately never finished—a presentation of the arguments of the Meditations in dialogue form, which he called La Recherche de La Vérité, or The Search for Truth). But although the Meditations themselves are not explicitly cast in dialogue form, the presentation of successive arguments and counter-arguments is highly 'dialectical', and to interpret a given passage correctly we need constantly to ask ourselves who is speaking, as it were. In the case of any given passage we need to ask: are we dealing with the views of the ordinary 'pre-philosophical' man; or are we dealing with the exaggerated sceptic of the early Meditations who is prepared to take nothing whatever for granted; or are we at the stage where the existence of a benevolent creator has been established? Context is all important; and it follows that it is often disastrous to lift a given proposition or conclusion out of the Meditations and quote it as if it represented Descartes' final and considered philosophical view. We

19 Ibid.
20 This unfinished dialogue was found among Descartes papers on his death in Stockholm in 1650. Its date is uncertain, but it may well have been compiled at roughly the same time as the Meditations. See CSM II 399.
must always ask which Meditation we are dealing with, and be aware of which stage the dialectic has reached. What is more, as we have just seen in the case of Meditation Six, even within a single Meditation the dialectical process continues to develop constantly, with new twists and turns from paragraph to paragraph. Descartes refers back to previous trains of thought; arguments are recapitulated and elaborated, conclusions reinforced or modified. Nowhere in the *Meditations* do we find a static exposition of finished results. The work, as its name implies, is not a set of finished doctrines, but a series of mental exercises which have to be *worked through*. And it is all-important to keep track of the precise stage of the workout which we have reached.

3. ‘Nature’ and Knowledge

Having established, to his satisfaction, the existence of an external world of physical objects independent of himself, Descartes proceeds, in the remainder of the Sixth Meditation, to develop an account of how we gain information about this external world (including information about what is happening to our own bodies).

In this third section of the paper, I want to focus attention on a concept which plays an important role in Descartes’ account of how we gain knowledge of the external world: the concept of ‘nature’ and what it is ‘natural’ to believe. As we have seen, the argument for the existence of external objects started from the thought that when I consider what causes my sensory ideas, the natural and obvious supposition for me to make is that they are caused by physical objects. As Descartes expresses it, I have a ‘very strong inclination to believe that sensory ideas arise from corporeal objects’.  

Human beings it would appear, are *naturally inclined* towards certain beliefs and suppositions. But now an important question arises: if, as Descartes firmly believes, God created me and gave me the nature which I have, does it not follow that whatever I am naturally inclined to believe is true?

At first Descartes seems to answer unambiguously in the affirmative:

> On the ground that God is no deceiver . . . I may with safety conclude that I possess in myself the means to arrive at the truth. And . . . it cannot be doubted that in each of the dictates of nature there is some truth . . .

The three ensuing paragraphs all begin with the Latin phrase *Natura docet* (or its close equivalent): ‘nature teaches’. First, nature expressly

---

21 E 134 (AT VII 79; CSM II 55).

22 Ibid.
Descartes, Sixth Meditation

teaches me that I have a body. Second, nature teaches me that I am not just lodged in my body (like a pilot in a vessel) but 'intimately conjoined and intermingled with it'. And third, nature teaches me that my body is surrounded by many other bodies—some beneficial to me, others harmful.23

What exactly does this talk of nature's teaching mean? Rather too helpfully for comfort, Descartes initially provides no less than three explanations of the term 'nature'. By nature considered in general, he says, I understand nothing other than (i) God himself, or (ii) the order and disposition established by God in created things. And he goes on to say that by my nature in particular I understand (iii) the assemblage of all that God has given me.24 The first two glosses, which deal with 'nature in general' can be made sense of fairly easily. When Descartes equates nature with God himself, he is following the traditional theological account of God as 'pure being'—the supreme reality, everything that is. Since God comprises the whole of nature, everything in the natural world is (a part of) God: every natural thing partakes of and reflects the divine being.25 The second gloss—nature is the 'order and disposition established by God in created things'—is also standard orthodoxy: the natural world is a set of divinely ordained structures and patterns of events initiated and sustained by God's creative fiat. But it is the third gloss, dealing with 'my nature in particular' that is of special interest for the present discussion. Nature, my nature as a human being, is, says Descartes, the totality of what the creator has given me. Since God is the sole source of being, everything positive which I have, I have from God.

But this result seems too strong for Descartes' purpose. If everything I have, I have from God, then all my natural inclinations would seem to have their source in the creator; and it appears to follow from this that anything I am naturally inclined to believe can be thought of as involving a God-given impulse, and will therefore be true. I say this result is 'too strong' for the obvious reason that in past ages, and no doubt today as well, very many human beings have been strongly inclined to believe things that are false. What is more, Descartes' own method of philosophizing seems to acknowledge this; for his starting point in philosophy is the idea that all of us since early childhood have been in the grip of 'prejudices', or preconceived opinions which are often confused, and may very well be quite false. As Descartes puts it in the

23 E 134/5 (AT VII 81/2; CSM II 56).
24 E 134 (AT VII 80; CSM II 56).
25 'God cannot incline to nothingness, since he is supreme and pure being', Conversation with Burman, AT V 147; cf. Cottingham (op. cit., note 4), 5 and 56ff.
opening article of his *Principles of Philosophy*, these preconceived opinions 'stand in the way of our arriving at knowledge of the truth'.

Some examples of these preconceived opinions are listed towards the end of Book One of the *Principles*. One case mentioned concerns the shape and movement of the earth. Most children until they are taught otherwise, are inclined to suppose that the earth is immobile and its surface flat. (I suspect that this is just as true of children today as it was in the seventeenth century. The majority of parents, I think, would testify that the average five or six year old tends to be highly sceptical when told that the earth spins on its axis.) But the problem for Descartes now seems more serious than ever: do we not have a clear example here of a 'natural' belief that is none the less false?

Descartes has an answer to this—or an answer of sorts. 'Such beliefs', he says in the Sixth Meditation, 'though seemingly the teachings of nature are not in reality so, but obtained a place in my mind through a habit of judging inconsiderately of things'. But how on earth are we supposed to distinguish the 'genuine' teachings of nature from such 'seeming' teachings, or pseudo-teachings? A clue finally emerges when Descartes proceeds to discuss another favourite example, that of the size of the stars. Most children (and uneducated people) tend to suppose that the stars are very small (compare the nursery rhyme 'Twinkle twinkle, little star'). But the belief that the stars are small is not, says Descartes, the result of the genuine teaching of nature:

> Although the impression a star makes on my eye is not larger than that from the flame of a candle, I do not, nevertheless, experience any real or positive impulse determining me to believe that the star is not greater than the flame; the true account of the matter being merely that I have so judged from my youth without any rational ground.

The key phrase here is 'rational ground'. It turns out that, for Descartes, my *nature* is a reliable guide to the truth only is so far as I am endowed with a faculty of *reason*. Human beings may believe all sorts of things, but it is the human power of reasoning, the God-given *lux rationis* ('light of reason') as Descartes terms it elsewhere, that enables them to sort out the true from the false. So Descartes' talk of 'nature', and of our strong inclinations to believe in certain things, turns out, in the end, to be rather misleading. A strong impulse to believe something

---

26 *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) Book I, art. 1: E 165 (AT VIII 5; CSM I 193).
27 *Principles* Book I, art. 71: E 195 (AT VIII 36; CSM I 219).
28 E 135 (AT VII 82; CSM II 56). Italics supplied.
29 E 136 (AT VII 83; CSM II 57).
is, it emerges, no guarantee of its truth. For the impulse counts as 'natural' in Descartes' special sense only if the inclination to believe is a result of clear and distinct intellectual perception and rational deliberation. It is no accident that Descartes uses the phrases *lux rationis* ('light of reason') and *lumen naturae* ('light of nature') more or less interchangeably. Both refer simply to the innate faculty of reason.30

But what then, is the connection, if any, between the use of reason, and the impulse to believe something? In the Fourth Meditation Descartes makes the point that transparent rational understanding generates assent: we cannot but judge that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true, since 'great clearness of the understanding' naturally gives rise to 'strong inclination of the will'.31 This little piece of introspective psychology is surely sound enough. Once I have clearly understood a proposition like 'Two plus two equals four', once I have clearly perceived what is being asserted, then I have a strong (indeed irresistible) impulse to assent to the truth of the proposition in question. When the light of reason has been shed on some simple and self-evident proposition, there follows a strong inclination to assent to its truth. But it is very important to note that the converse does not hold. The fact that I am strongly inclined to believe something does not show that its truth has been established by the light of reason: a strong inclination to believe is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition of clear and distinct intellectual perception. For my inclination to assent to a proposition may be the result not of rational scrutiny but of habitual and unthinking acceptance of something that 'seemed plausible' when I was young. My acceptance may ultimately be due to nothing more than unthinking prejudice.

The upshot is that Descartes' talk about the 'teachings of nature', and his admission that some of the things we are inclined to believe are only the 'seeming' teachings of nature, is not very happily expressed. What he might better have said (and what he comes near to saying elsewhere) is: be on your guard against an apparently spontaneous inclination to believe something. Such an inclination is to be trusted only when it directly results from a previous clear and distinct perception of the

30 *Lumen naturale* or *lumen naturae* ('natural light', 'light of nature') are the phrases most commonly found in the *Meditations* and *Principles*. For the phrase *lux rationis* ('light of reason'), cf. *Rules for the Direction of the Understanding* (1628): AT X 368; CSM I 14. Commenting on the 'light' metaphor Descartes observed to Hobbes: 'As everyone knows, a “light” in the intellect means transparent clarity of cognition' (*Third Set of Objections and Replies*) AT VII 192; CSM II 135). (The *Objections and Replies* were published with the *Meditations* in 1641.) For the innateness of the natural light see *The Search for Truth*, AT X 495; CSM II 400.

31 E116 (AT VII 58; CSM II 41).
intellect. If the matter is put this way, then we have the classic Cartesian formula for the avoidance of error: ‘restrain your will, and give assent only to what your intellect has clearly and distinctly perceived’.  

4. Sensory information and the body

Strict adherence to the Cartesian formula just quoted (‘assent only to what is clearly and distinctly perceived by the light of reason’) would result in a very austere picture of the world. According to Descartes, the light of reason enables me to perceive clearly and distinctly two principal kinds of things: firstly, I can achieve knowledge of the nature of intellectual essences, or minds (e.g. myself qua thinking thing, and also God and other intellectual natures); and, secondly, I can achieve knowledge of the nature of corporeal objects—but only in so far as these can be characterized in terms of pure mathematics.

I possess the means of acquiring a perfect knowledge as well relative to God himself and other intellectual objects as to corporeal nature, in so far as it is the object of pure mathematics.

But of course the world as we actually experience it is strikingly different from this. We do not apprehend the world as consisting on the one hand of pure intellectual essences, and on the other hand of mathematical objects such as spheres and triangles. Indeed, both these kinds of items seem more like abstractions than real inhabitants of the world (I have certainly never encountered either a pure incorporeal mind or an object of pure mathematics, and I am not sure I would count either of these items as real things, in the ordinary robust sense of ‘real’).

Consider how we actually experience first, the external world and second, the inner world of our own consciousness. The world ‘out there’ is not perceived by us in pure geometrical terms; rather, what we characteristically perceive are collections of objects possessing various sensible qualities. In other words, the world around us, as we ordinarily experience it, consists not of abstract geometrical essences, but rather of things having colours and textures and smells and tastes and sounds. What we are aware of is (to quote Wordsworth’s famous list) ‘the light of setting suns, and the round ocean, and the living air, and the blue sky’ . . . and much else besides. Secondly, as for our own inner life, our awareness of ourselves as conscious beings, what we are aware of is,

33 Fifth Meditation: E 126 (AT VII 71; CSM II 49).
34 W. Wordsworth Lines written above Tintern Abbey (1798).
Descartes, Sixth Meditation

pretty clearly, not just a series of modes of thought or modifications of a pure 'intellectual substance'. When Claudio in Measure for Measure talks about the horror of death:

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot
This sensible, warm motion to become
A kneaded clod

what he fears is not primarily the cessation of thought (indeed the rest of the speech makes it clear that he believes this will continue in some spiritual form); what he fears is the cessation of 'this sensible warm motion'—the rich and vivid sensuous experience that constitutes the conscious life of an embodied, warm-blooded human being.

Thus there is a striking gap between the Cartesian clear and distinct perception of the outer world (in terms of pure geometrical essences) and our ordinary experience of it. And there is, secondly, a striking gap between the Cartesian clear and distinct perception of ourselves (as necessarily incorporeal, non-material, intellectual substances) and our sensory awareness of ourselves as physically embodied beings.

With respect to the first gap, Descartes is fully prepared to defend his position that the real external world should be characterized purely in terms of the sizes, shapes and motions of particles; the grasp of the senses is, he says, 'very obscure and confused', and sensory information about colours, sounds, odours, tastes and so on should not be taken as providing a reliable guide to what really exists in nature. Whether Descartes' position here is tenable is a complicated question that is the subject for a separate discussion.

With respect to the second gap (between our conception of ourselves as pure thinking substances and our sensory awareness of ourselves as embodied beings) Descartes certainly acknowledges—in a famous passage to which we have already referred above—how strongly our inner experience testifies to the fact that we are physically embodied beings:

There is nothing that nature teaches me more expressly than that I have a body which is ill affected when I feel pain, and stands in need of food and drink when I experience the sensation of hunger and thirst. ... Nature likewise teaches me by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, etc., that I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in

35 W. Shakespeare Measure for Measure (c. 1604), Act III, Scene 1.
36 E 134, 135, 137 (AT VII 89–83; CSM II 55–58).
37 For a stimulating treatment of this issue see B. Williams, Descartes, The Project of Pure Inquiry (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) Ch. 8.
a vessel, but that I am intimately conjoined and as it were intermixed with it. 38  

On reflection, however, there is something very curious about this. A strong impulse to believe something is, as we have seen, no guarantee of its truth. Descartes will normally allow that the voice of ‘nature’ is speaking only when the light of reason is involved. But now there seems to be a direct conflict between what reason establishes about my essence, and what my own inner experience tells me. The voice of reason has quite clearly established—only four paragraphs before the passage just quoted—that I am purely a thinking thing—entirely distinct from the body: ‘my essence consists only in my being a thinking thing’.39 As Descartes puts it in the Discourse on the Method, where he summarises his rational conclusions about the distinctness of mind from body:

I concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing; so that ‘I’, that is to say the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body, and ... is such that, although the latter were not, it would still continue to be all that it is.40

So on the one hand there is the voice of nature as reason telling me that I am wholly distinct from my body; yet on the other hand there is the voice of nature as experience telling me that I am ‘intimately conjoined and intermixed with the body’—so much so, indeed, that ‘my mind and body compose a certain unity’.41

The teachings of ‘nature’ would thus appear to be nothing less than contradictory. And the contradiction seems to be highlighted later on in the Sixth Meditation when Descartes reflects further on what he means by the term ‘nature’. As initially introduced, my ‘nature’ was supposed to mean the totality of what God has given me. This, says Descartes, comprises everything that belongs to the mind, including ‘all the truths I discern by the aid of the natural light’. But ‘nature’ in the present context (i.e. when associated with the experiences of hunger, thirst, pain, etc.) is, says Descartes, to be taken in a different sense, ‘to designate the things which God has given me as [a composite being or] a being composed of mind and body’.42 What this boils down to is that firstly I possess clear and distinct perceptions of the natural light,
which are attributable to me _qua_ thinking thing, and which tell me that I am a non-corporeal, purely thinking substance; and secondly I have 'natural' feelings and sensations (e.g., of pain, hunger and thirst) which are attributable to me _qua_ compound of mind and body, and which tell me that I am (at least partly) corporeal.

The problem is now all too plain. If the true me ('I, that is to say the mind by which I am what I am') is wholly distinct from the body, how can it be that experience tells me that I am united with the body? It appears that I am two incompatible things: (i) I am a pure incorporeal mind—this the light of reason tells me; and (ii) I am a psycho-physical being, a compound of mind and body, and this my experience tells me.

When Frans Burman interviewed Descartes in 1648, he picked up this contradiction. Quoting the passage from the Sixth Meditation about the mind and body being 'very closely joined and intermixed' so as to form a unity, he asked 'how can this be, when [according to you] their natures are so completely different?' Descartes lamely replied

This is very difficult to explain; but here our experience is sufficient, since it is so clear on this point that it just cannot be gainsaid. 43

The reply is lame because although the evidence of my inner sensory experience may, as Descartes says, be undeniable, the result it seems to lead us to (that I am an embodied creature) is incompatible with Descartes' central claim that I am essentially incorporeal.

Those inclined to defend Descartes here may be asking why Descartes cannot maintain both positions. Why cannot he say something like this: 'Yes, I am essentially and necessarily a pure, incorporeal mind. But for the duration of my life on earth, I am also equipped with a body. (In theological terms, God has conjoined a body to my soul.) Thus, though my experience does indeed inescapably testify to my possession of a body, this body is "mine" only in a contingent sense. It is not essential to what makes me *me*; I could do without it—and perhaps will do without it in the next world'. Incidentally, the theological overtones of this imaginary defence of Descartes fit quite well with some of the things Descartes himself says about life after death. In the first edition of the _Meditations_, it is claimed on the title page that the work includes a demonstration of the immortality of the soul. And in the Synopsis to the _Meditations_, Descartes says that his distinction between mind and body is 'sufficient to show that the destruction of the mind does not follow from the corruption of the body, and thus to afford to men the hope of a future life'. 44

43 AT V 163; Cottingham (op. cit., note 4), 28.
44 E 76 (AT VII 13; CSM II 10). Note that 'mind' (_mens_, _esprit_) and 'soul' (_anima_, _âme_) are used interchangeably by Descartes.
Unfortunately, however, this way of defending Descartes will not work; and part of the reason why it will not work emerges in the crucial passage from the Sixth Meditation to which we have already referred more than once. If I were just a mind, temporarily lodged in a body like a pilot in a ship, then, Descartes has to admit,

I should not feel pain when my body is hurt, seeing I am merely a thinking thing, but should perceive the wound by the understanding alone, just as a pilot perceives by sight when any part of his vessel is damaged.45

The point about the damage to a ship is that whether the pilot sees it for himself or merely hears it reported (‘Damage to the starboard bow, sir!’), he is aware of it as something as it were external to himself. The ship in which he is sailing is damaged, but he is still intact. Perhaps the damage can be repaired; perhaps he can take to the lifeboats, or get a new ship. But, at all events, what has happened affects him only, so to say, contingently and indirectly. By contrast, when a steam roller goes over my foot, I do not merely receive a report from the nervous system (‘damage to the right foot!’) I am aware of something’s being wrong in a peculiarly intimate way—I feel pain. The inescapable fact, moreover, and this is the crucial point for the present purpose, is that I feel it as my pain. It is not just that the body to which I am attached is damaged; rather I am injured, I have been hurt. (Compare the soldier wounded on the battlefield: he does not say ‘My foot’s been damaged’ but rather ‘I’ve been hurt’.) In such cases, to insist on the mutually exclusive categories of Cartesian mind/body dualism—e.g. to ask ‘is the pain a mental or a physical event?’—really does not work. For the pain belongs not to my mind or to my body but to me qua embodied creature, human being composed of flesh and blood.46

It is perhaps remarkable that, despite such clear acknowledgement of this inner experience of himself as an embodied being, Descartes never retracted or modified his official arguments to the effect that his ‘true nature or essence’ was wholly incorporeal and independent of the body. It has not been part of my purpose in this paper to expound those official arguments. Just to summarize them: the groundwork is laid in the Second Meditation (where Descartes observes that he can doubt that he has a body)47; the bulk of the argumentation is in the Sixth Meditation, where Descartes claims he has a clear and distinct percep-

45 Loc. cit., note 38.
46 For further discussion of the problems which sensations pose for mind/body dualism, see J. Cottingham, ‘Cartesian Trialism’ Mind XCIV, No. 374 (April 1985).
47 E 88 (AT VII 28; CSM II 19).
tion of himself as a thinking and unextended thing (in contrast to body which he clearly perceives to be unthinking and extended),\textsuperscript{48} and later on Descartes bolsters his position by claiming first that mind is always indivisible while body is divisible, and second, that the removal of any part of the body leaves the mind intact.\textsuperscript{49} One reason why I have not examined these classic arguments is that they have been analysed and evaluated \textit{ad nauseam} by almost every commentator on Descartes. Suffice it to say that I accept the consensus view that the arguments are invalid. The fact that I can doubt that I have a body does not entail that the body is a non-essential part of me (any more than the fact that I can doubt that a triangle has some property F entails that F is a non-essential property of the triangle).\textsuperscript{50} Further, the alleged clarity and distinctness of the perception that the mind is unextended and indivisible is open to question. Finally, the claim that any part of the body (including the brain!) can be removed, while leaving the mind intact, is unsupported and—to the modern ear—preposterous.

So at the end of the day it was the ‘light of nature’ in the sense of the processes of rational argument that led Descartes astray. The arguments supposed to establish the real distinction between mind and body are flawed. But alongside the voice of nature as reason, Descartes is, to his credit, prepared to acknowledge the conflicting voice of nature as experience. And this voice tells a different story: that we humans are not incorporeal minds attached to bodies, we are creatures of flesh and blood, physical beings. To acknowledge the physicality of man is of course not at all to deny the rich intellectual life that our species enjoys. The Aristotelian definition of man as a \textit{rational animal} acknowledges our physical nature while also stressing, quite rightly, our ability to think and reason. So to say that we are ‘thinking things’ is in a sense quite correct, provided we do not follow Descartes in making the further, illegitimate, move of saying that what \textit{does} the thinking is something incorporeal—a pure, non-extended mind or soul. Rather what does the thinking is a \textit{person}, and a person is, necessarily, something with a body.

\textsuperscript{48} Loc. cit., note 39.
\textsuperscript{49} E 139 (T VII 86: CSM II 59).
\textsuperscript{50} Cf. Antoine Arnauld’s criticisms of Descartes in the \textit{Fourth Set of Objections}: AT VII 201; CSM II 141.