Fourth Objections (Arnauld) and Descartes’s Replies

Introduction to the Objections

[Arnauld, born in 1612, wrote these Objections in 1640; his important exchange of letters with Leibniz began in 1686! Here he addresses his comments to Mersenne, who had solicited them.] You have done me a kindness, but are making me pay a high price for it! You have allowed me to see this brilliant work only on condition that I make public my opinion of it. This is a hard condition, which I have been driven to accept by my eagerness to see this superb piece of work. . . . You know how highly I rate the power of Descartes’s mind and his exceptional learning.

The work you are giving me to scrutinize requires an uncommon intellect; and if you over-rate my powers, that doesn’t make me any less aware of my own inadequacy. The work also requires a mind that is calm, free from the hurly-burly of all external things, and attentive to itself—which can happen only if the mind meditates attentively and focuses on itself. You know this, and you also know about all the tiresome duties that are keeping me busy; but still you command, and I must obey! If I go astray it will be your fault, since it’s you who are making me write.

This work could be claimed to belong entirely to philosophy; but Descartes has very properly submitted himself to the judgment of the theologians, so I am going to play a dual role here. I shall first present what seem to me to be the possible philosophical objections concerning the major issues of the nature of our mind and [starting at page 64] of God; and then [starting at page 75] I shall present problems that a theologian might come up against in the work as a whole.

Introduction to the Replies

[Descartes addresses his replies to Mersenne.] I couldn’t possibly wish for a more perceptive or more courteous critic of my book than Antoine Arnauld, whose comments you have sent me. He has dealt with me so gently that I can easily see his good will towards myself and the cause I am defending. He does attack various things in the Meditations, but two aspects of his attacks keep me cheerful. When he does attack me, he has looked into the issues so deeply, and examined all the related topics so carefully, that I am sure there aren’t any other difficulties that he has overlooked. And where he thinks my views are not acceptable, he presses his criticisms so acutely that I’m not afraid of anyone’s thinking that he has kept back any objections for the sake of the cause. So I am not so much disturbed by his criticisms as happy that he hasn’t found more to attack.

Objections concerning the human mind

The first thing that I find remarkable is that Descartes has based his whole philosophy on a principle that was laid down by St Augustine—a man of amazing abilities in theology and also in philosophy. In his book On Free Will a participant in a dialogue [Arnauld gives the details] prepares the way for a proof of the existence of God, thus:

First, if we start from what is most evident, I ask you: Do you yourself exist? Or are you perhaps afraid of making a mistake in your answer? You shouldn’t be, because if you didn’t exist it would be quite impossible for you to make a mistake.

Compare that with what Descartes says:
·Perhaps· there is a supremely powerful and cunning deceiver who deliberately deceives me all the time. Even then, if he is deceiving me I undoubtedly exist. But let us move on from this to the more central matter of Descartes’s way of getting from this principle to the result that our mind is separate from our body [Arnauld here fairly represents Descartes’s argument, but this isn’t an exact quotation from the Meditations]:

·I can doubt whether I have a body, and even whether there are any bodies at all in the world; but I can’t doubt that I am, or that I exist, so long as I am doubting or thinking.
·So I who am doubting and thinking am not a body. For if I were, my doubts about my body’s existence would be doubts about my existence, ·and we have just seen that the latter doubt is ruled out. ·Indeed, even if I stubbornly maintain that there are no bodies whatsoever, the conclusion I have reached still stands: I am something, and therefore I am not a body.

This is certainly very acute. But someone will bring up the objection that Descartes raises against himself: the fact that I have doubts about bodies, or even deny that there are any, doesn’t make it the case that no body exists. He writes [this is quoted from the Meditations]:

These things that I suppose to be nothing because they are unknown to me—mightn’t they in fact be identical with the I of which I am aware? I don’t know; and just now I shan’t discuss the matter, because I can form opinions only about things that I know. I know that I exist, and I am asking: what is this I that I know? My knowledge of it can’t depend on things of whose existence I am still unaware.

But Descartes admits ·in his Preface to the Meditations· that in the ·version of the· argument set out in his Discourse on the Method, the proof excluding anything corporeal from the nature of the mind was put forward not ‘in an order corresponding to the actual truth of the matter’ but in an order corresponding to his ‘own perception’—so that the sense of the passage was that he wasn’t aware of anything that he knew belonged to his essence except that he was a thinking thing. That makes it clear that the objection still stands, exactly as before, and that he still owes us an answer to the question ‘How does he get from the premise that ·he isn’t aware of anything else belonging to his essence to the conclusion that ·nothing else does in fact belong to it?’ I admit that I’m a bit slow about such things, but I haven’t been able to find an answer to this question anywhere in the second Meditation. It seems, though, that Descartes does attempt a proof of this conclusion in the sixth Meditation, ·presumably postponing it because· he takes it to depend on his having clear knowledge of God, which he hadn’t yet achieved in the second Meditation. Here is the proof:

I know that (1) if I have a vivid and clear thought of something, God could have created it in a way that exactly corresponds to my thought. So the fact that (2) I can vividly and clearly think of one thing apart from another assures me that the two things are distinct from one another—that is, that they really are two—since they can be separated by God. Never mind how they could be separated; that doesn’t affect the judgment that they are distinct. . . . On the one hand I have a vivid and clear idea of myself as something that thinks and isn’t extended, and one of body as something that is extended and doesn’t think. So it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it.
We must pause a little here, for it seems to me that in these few words lies the crux of the whole difficulty.

First of all, if premise (1) of this argument is to be true, its topic must be not \(\text{any kind of knowledge of a thing, or even •vivid and clear knowledge, but rather •knowledge that is adequate.}\) For Descartes admits in his reply to Caterus [page 16] that for one thing to be conceived distinctly and separately from another they don’t have to be really distinct—i.e. to be two things rather than one—and that all that is needed is for them to be ‘formally distinct’, which can be achieved ‘by an abstraction of the intellect that conceives the thing inadequately’. And in that same passage he draws the following conclusion:

In contrast with that, when I think of a body as merely something having extension, shape and motion, and deny that it has anything belonging to the nature of mind, this involves me in a complete understanding of what a body is. Conversely, (2) I understand the mind to be a complete thing that doubts, understands, wills, and so on, while denying that it has any of the attributes contained in the idea of a body. This would be quite impossible if the mind weren’t really distinct from the body.

But someone may question whether (2) is true, and maintain that the conception you have of yourself (your mind-) when you conceive of yourself as a thinking, non-extended thing is an inadequate one; and the same may be true of your conception of yourself (your body-) as an extended, non-thinking thing. So we must look at how this is proved in the earlier part of the argument. For I don’t think that this matter is so clear that it should be assumed without proof as a first principle that can’t •and therefore needn’t• be demonstrated.

Let us start with the first part of your claim, namely that when you think that a body is merely something having extension, shape, motion etc., and deny that it has anything in the nature of a mind, you have a complete understanding of what a body is.

This •is evidently true, but it• doesn’t do much for you. Those who maintain that our mind is a body don’t infer from this that every body is a mind. On their view, •body relates to •mind as •genus to •species. A complete thought of a genus can leave out a species, and can even include a denial of properties that are special to that species—which is why logicians say ‘The negation of the species doesn’t negate the genus’, for example, ‘x is not a marmoset’ doesn’t entail ‘x is not a mammal’. Thus I can understand the genus figure without bringing in my understanding of any of the properties that are special to a circle. So it remains to be proved that the mind can be completely and adequately understood apart from the body.

I can’t see anywhere in the entire work an argument that could serve to prove this claim, apart from what is laid down at the start [this isn’t an exact quotation from the Meditations]:

I can deny that any body exists, or that anything is extended, but while I am thus denying, or thinking, it goes on being certain to me that I exist. Thus, I am a thinking thing, not a body, and body doesn’t come into the knowledge I have of myself.

But so far as I can see, all that follows from this is that I can obtain some knowledge of myself without knowledge of the body. But it isn’t transparently clear to me that this knowledge is complete and adequate, enabling me to be certain that I’m not mistaken in excluding body from my essence. I’ll explain through an example.

Suppose someone knows for certain that the angle in a semi-circle is a right angle, and thus that this angle and the
diameter of the circle form a right-angled triangle. In spite of knowing this, he may •doubt, or •not yet have grasped for certain, that the square on the hypotenuse equals the sum of the squares on the other two sides; indeed he may even •deny this if he has been misled by some fallacy. (For brevity’s sake, I’ll express this as ‘the triangle’s having the property P’.) But now, if he argues in the same way that Descartes does, he may appear to have confirmation of his false belief, as follows: ‘I vividly and clearly perceive that the triangle is right-angled; but I doubt that it has the property P; therefore it doesn’t belong to the essence of the triangle that it has the property P.’

Again, even if I deny that the square on the hypotenuse equals the sum of the squares on the other two sides, I still remain sure that the triangle is right-angled—my mind retains the vivid and clear knowledge that one of its angles is a right angle. And given that this is so, not even God could bring it about that the triangle is not right-angled.

Therefore, •I might argue•, the property P that I can doubt—•or indeed that I can remove•—while leaving my idea •of the triangle• intact doesn’t belong to the essence of the triangle. Now look again at what Descartes says:

I know that if I have a vivid and clear thought of something, God could have created it in a way that exactly corresponds to my thought. So the fact that I can vividly and clearly think of one thing apart from another assures me that the two things are distinct from one another—i.e. that they are two—since they can be separated by God.

Well, I vividly and clearly understand •that this triangle is right-angled, without understanding •that the triangle has the property P. It follows, on Descartes’s pattern of reasoning, that God at least could create a right-angled triangle with the square on its hypotenuse not equal to the sum of the squares on the other sides!

The only possible reply to this that I can see is to say that the man in this example doesn’t vividly and clearly perceive that the triangle is right-angled. But how is my perception of the nature of my mind any better lit than his perception of the nature of the triangle? He is just as certain •that the triangle in the semi-circle has one right angle (which is the criterion of a right-angled triangle) as I am that •I exist because I am thinking.

Now although the man in the example vividly and clearly knows that the triangle is right-angled, he is wrong in thinking that property P doesn’t belong to the nature •or essence •of the triangle. Similarly, although I vividly and clearly know my nature to be something that thinks, mightn’t I also be wrong in thinking that nothing else belongs to my nature apart from my being a thinking thing? Perhaps my being an extended thing also belongs to my nature. Someone might also point out that since I infer my •existence from my •thinking, it’s not surprising if the •idea that I form by thinking of myself in this way represents me to myself purely as a thinking thing; for the •idea was derived entirely from my thought. So •this idea can’t provide any evidence that only what is contained in •it belongs to my essence.

One might add that the argument seems to prove too much, and takes us back to the Platonic view (though Descartes rejects it) that nothing corporeal belongs to our essence, so that man is only a mind, with the body being merely its vehicle—giving rise to the definition of man as ‘a mind that makes use of a body’.

You might reply, •in an attempt not to be pushed to the Platonic extreme of denying that I am any way corporeal•, that body is •excluded from my essence only in so far as I am a thinking thing.
and not

• excluded from my essence period.

But that could raise the suspicion that in my knowledge of myself as a thinking thing I don’t, · after all, · have a complete and adequate conception of myself, but only an inadequate conception reached through intellectual abstraction.

Geometers conceive of a line as a length without breadth, and they conceive of a surface as length and breadth without depth, despite the fact that no length exists without breadth and no breadth without depth. Well, in the same way someone might suspect that every thinking thing is also an extended thing, having • the attributes that all extended things have—shape, motion, etc.—and also • the special power of thought. Given that it had that power, it could by an intellectual abstraction be thought of as just a thinking thing, though really it had bodily attributes as well. In the same way, although quantity can be conceived in terms of length alone, in reality breadth and depth belong to every quantity, along with length.

The difficulty is increased by the fact that the • power of thought seems to be tied to bodily organs, since • it can be thought to be dormant in infants and extinguished in madmen. Impious soul-destroyers—i.e. those who deny there is such a thing as the soul—make a great deal of this fact; • but it can also be appealed to by those who think that there are indeed souls, which are bodies.

Up to here I have been discussing the real distinction between our mind and the body. But since Descartes has undertaken to demonstrate • the immortality of the soul, we ought to ask whether • this obviously follows from soul’s being distinct from the body. No it doesn’t, according to the philosophical principles of the man in the street; for people ordinarily take it that the souls of brute animals are distinct from their bodies, but nevertheless perish along with them.

I reached this point in my comments, and was planning to show how Descartes’s own principles, which I thought I had gathered from his way of doing philosophy, would make it easy to infer • the immortality of the soul from • the mind’s real distinctness from the body. But then a little study composed by our illustrious author—namely, his ‘Synopsis of the Meditations’—was sent to me. It sheds much light on the Meditations as a whole, and offers the treatment of the immortality issue that I had been about to propose. As for the souls of the brutes, Descartes elsewhere indicates that they don’t have souls; all they have is a body whose structure of parts is such that all the movements we see • the animal make- can be produced in it and by means of it.

I’m afraid this view won’t be widely accepted unless it is supported by very solid arguments. Consider just one example:

The light reflected from the body of a wolf onto the eyes of a sheep moves the tiny fibres of the optic nerves, and when this motion reaches the brain it spreads the animal spirits throughout the nerves in the manner required for the sheep to start running away.

At first sight it seems incredible that this should happen without the assistance of any soul. [Cartesians and others believed in ‘animal spirits’, which have been described as the animal body’s ‘hydraulic system’—a fluid or gas that was so superfine that it could move around the body very fast and get in anywhere.]

I want to add here that I wholly agree with Descartes’s views about • how imagination differs from intellect or thought, and about • how much more certain we can be of things we have grasped through reason than of what we observe through the bodily senses. I long ago learned from Augustine. . . .that we must completely dismiss those who think that what we see with the intellect is less certain than what we see with these bodily eyes. . . . He wrote. . . .that
when doing geometry he found the senses to be like a ship, because. . .

. . . when they had brought me to the place I was aiming for, I sent them away; and now that I was standing on dry land I started to examine these geometrical matters using only my thought, with no appeal to my senses, though for a long time my footsteps were unsteady. Thus, I think that a man has a better chance of sailing on dry land than of perceiving geometrical truths through the senses, although the senses do seem to help a little when we begin to learn.

Replies concerning the nature of the human mind

I shan’t waste time here by thanking my distinguished critic for bringing in Augustine’s authority to support me, and for setting out my arguments so vigorously that his main fear seems to be that others won’t see how strong they are. But I will begin by pointing out where it was that I set out to prove that

*the fact that all I am aware of as belonging to my essence (that is, the essence of the mind alone) is my being a thinking thing it follows that

*nothing else does in fact belong to my essence,

—namely, in the place where I proved that God exists, a God who can bring about everything that I vividly and clearly recognize as possible. Now there may be much within me that I’m not yet aware of. For example, in the passage in question I was supposing that I wasn’t yet aware—as I would come to be in the sixth Meditation—that the mind had the power of moving the body, or that the mind was substantially united to the body.

[That later awareness was expressed in a memorable passage in the sixth Meditation:

Nature teaches me, through these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I (a thinking thing) am not merely in my body as a sailor is in a ship. Rather, I am closely joined to it—intermingled with it, so to speak—so that it and I form a unit. If this weren’t so, I wouldn’t feel pain when the body was hurt but would perceive the damage in an intellectual way, like a sailor seeing that his ship needs repairs.

Descartes uses ‘substantial unity’ and its cognates in various places, though not in the Meditations, to refer to the ‘not-like-a-sailor-in-a-ship’ idea. He never provides an account of what this substantial unity is, as distinct from what it is not.]

But what I am aware of in the second Meditation is sufficient for me to be able to exist with it and it alone; so I am certain that *I could* have been created by God without having other attributes of which I am unaware, and hence that *these other attributes don’t belong to the essence of the mind.* For it seems to me that if something can exist without attribute A, then A isn’t included in its essence. And although *mind is part of the essence of *man,* being united to a human body is not part of the essence of *mind.*

I must also explain what I meant by this:

A real distinction between x and y can’t be inferred from the fact that x is conceived apart from y by an abstraction of the intellect that conceives x inadequately. It can be inferred only if we have a *complete understanding of x as apart from y, an understanding of x as a complete thing.*

Arnauld assumes my view to be that *adequate knowledge of a thing is required here; but that’s not what I was saying. Complete knowledge is different from adequate knowledge. If a piece of knowledge about x is to be adequate, it must contain absolutely all the properties of x. God has adequate knowledge of *everything,* and knows that he has; but that is his special privilege. A created intellect, though it may have adequate knowledge of many things, can never know...