

Result of *Meditations* VIa

The ideas that come to me in sensation must be caused by something that formally contains at least as much as what is clearly and distinctly real in those ideas

so they must be caused by something extended

but perhaps not extended in precisely the way those ideas are

“because of the very fact that God is not a deceiver ... it is impossible for there to be any falsity in my opinions which I cannot correct with another faculty God has given me”
(AT VII 80)

But both reason and sense experience tell me that objects are not always shaped or sized or moving or divided into parts exactly as they sometimes appear to be

A new criterion of truth

Whatever my “nature” (the sum total of things bestowed on my by God) teaches me must have some truth in it.

Things my nature teaches me

1. Though I am essentially just a thinking thing, and the idea of thought and its operations involves no reference to any thing extended,

I have a body that is extended somehow

- Because I perceive the world from the perspective it occupies
- Because I am able to move it by acts of will (and other things only by moving it)

Things my nature teaches me, cont.'d

2. My body is surrounded by other bodies that mechanically affect it

Depending on how they affect it, it is changed for better or worse

My continued union with it is thereby preserved or imperilled.

Things my nature teaches me, cont.'d

3. I am, moreover, not simply contained in this body, like a sailor in a ship, but intimately united with it, so that rather than simply perceive its states intellectually, I am made to feel things (pleasure, pain, hunger, thirst, desire, aversion, passion) as a consequence of the states it is in.

When my body is in a particular state, its parts are very likely moved, arranged, divided, or joined in particular ways

But I do not clearly and distinctly perceive this micro-constitution of physical parts

Instead, I confusedly perceive this micro-constitution by means of feelings of pleasure, pain, hunger, thirst, etc.

Because God has constituted me in this way, it must have been for some good reason

Plainly, this is because the sensory states are more quickly and strongly motivating than a laboured intellectual deduction from a perception of the body's mechanism.

Things my nature teaches me, cont.'d

4. While I have some perception of the shapes, sizes, motion, and arrangement of the medium-sized bodies in my vicinity

I also experience sensations of heat and cold, moisture and dryness, light, taste, smell, sound, that my intellect tells me could be materially false ideas of nothing,

but which are nonetheless pleasurable or painful or agreeable or disagreeable to varying degrees

Since these sensations too are part of my nature, there must be some reason why God made me to experience them

It is very likely that different sensations are caused by (and so correlated with and symbolic of) different unknown mechanical features of ambient bodies

And that their agreeable or disagreeable qualities are signs of beneficial or harmful features of those bodies

Again, it is plainly better that I be quickly and strongly motivated by agreeable or disagreeable sensible qualities to pursue or shun particular objects

rather than be put in a position of having to intellectually deduce what effects the mechanism of surrounding bodies would have on the mechanism of my body and its consequent union with my mind

A conclusion from these reflections

“sense perceptions are, strictly speaking, given to me by nature merely to indicate to my mind which things are agreeable or disagreeable to that combination of which it is a part,” and not for recognizing “the essence of bodies placed outside of me.” (AT VII 83)

Two important consequences

1. My nature does *not* teach me that surrounding bodies have anything in them that resembles those sensible qualities that serve to indicate which are beneficial or harmful or simply to tell which are which from a distance
2. My nature does *not* teach me that where there are no qualities presented to my senses there is an empty space.

It is of the utmost importance for Descartes to have put himself in a position to draw these conclusions

because his physics is heavily invested in the thesis that space and body are identical

bodies are just cut up bits of space, nothing more, and wherever there is space there is body

A problem:

Our sensations sometimes deceive us about what is good or ill for our bodies

So might they not have been given to us for this purpose?

Or might God be a deceiver after all?

Descartes's Answer

The senses do misinform us in some cases.

But we should still trust that they inform us correctly most of the time.

This is because it is intrinsic to the nature of a thing that is a substantial union of a mind and a body that this sort of error should be possible, so that even God could do nothing to prevent it.



We can trust that God would have designed us so that our senses work reliably most of the time.

To what extent can we trust our senses when they tell us about external things?

Whenever the senses, memory, and reason all agree in what they tell us about a thing, we can trust that the thing really is that way.

For this reason, we can answer the dreaming argument

Since we can't be deceived without having been given some way of detecting the error

dreams will *always* identifiable by the discontinuities they involve

God just would not allow us to have dreams that are perfectly coherent within themselves and with our waking experience

or, if he would, he would not allow us to be more than temporarily and harmlessly deceived by them

Meditations VI, concluding sentence:

“But because the need to get things done does not always permit us the leisure for such a careful inquiry, we must confess that the life of man is apt to commit errors regarding particular things, and we must acknowledge the infirmity of our nature.”