

## **Selections from Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* (1644)**

### **1. That the enquirer after truth should, once in their life, doubt everything as much as they can.**

We are diverted from true knowledge by many preconceptions which we have accumulated since birth. This is because we were born without speech, and we made various judgments about sensible things before our reason was fully developed. It seems that the only way we can free ourselves from these preconceptions is this: that just once in our lives, we should make a concerted effort to doubt every previous belief in which we find so much as the slightest hint of uncertainty.

### **4. Why we can have doubts about sensible things.**

So now let us embark on our enquiry into what is true (but only what is true). To begin with, it can be doubted whether any sensible or imaginable things exist. The first reason is that we sometimes notice that our senses deceive us, and it is wise never to put too much trust in what has let us down, even if on only one occasion. The second reason is that in our dreams we regularly seem to sense or imagine many things which are completely non-existent, and there are no obvious signs which would enable someone having such doubts to distinguish between sleeping and waking with any certainty.

### **7. That we cannot doubt that we exist while we are doubting; and this is the first thing we know when philosophising in the right order.**

So, if we reject everything we can doubt in any way, and even imagine it all to be false, we can readily suppose that there is no God, no sky, and no bodies — and even that we ourselves have no hands, no feet, and indeed no body at all. However, this does not allow us to suppose that we who are thinking such things are nothing, since it is a contradiction to believe that something which thinks does not exist at the very time when it is thinking. So the knowledge that I think therefore I am is the first and most certain of all items of knowledge which anyone will arrive at if they philosophise in the right order.

### **8. This enables us to recognise the distinction between soul and body, or between thinking thing and corporeal thing.**

This is also the best approach for understanding the nature of mind, and its distinction from body. Let us introspect about who we are — we who are supposing that everything distinct from ourselves is illusory. It will be transparently obvious that our nature contains no extension, no shape, no motion, nor any such thing which could be ascribed to body. All we shall find is

thought. Consequently, we know thought before, and more certainly than, we know any corporeal thing, since we have already perceived it, while still doubting about everything else.

## **9. What thought is.**

By the word 'thought', I mean everything which happens in us while we are conscious, in so far as there is consciousness of it in us. So in this context, thinking includes sensing as well as understanding, willing, and imagining. If I say, 'I see therefore I am,' or 'I walk therefore I am,' and mean by that the seeing or walking which is performed by the body, the conclusion is not absolutely certain. After all, when I am asleep I can often think I am seeing or walking, but without opening my eyes or moving, — and perhaps even without my having any body at all. On the other hand, the conclusion is obviously certain if I mean the sensing itself, or the consciousness that I am seeing or walking, since the conclusion then refers to the mind. And it is only the mind which senses, or thinks about its seeing or walking.

## **53. That each substance has one distinctive attribute — that of mind is thought, and that of body is extension.**

Although the presence of substance can be recognized through any attribute, each substance has just one distinctive property, which constitutes its nature and essence, and which is the foundation of all its other properties. So, extension in length, breadth, and depth, constitutes the nature of bodily substance; and thought constitutes the nature of thinking substance. And everything else which can be attributed to body presupposes extension, and is only a mode of that which is extended; similarly, all the contents of our minds are merely different modes of thinking. Thus, for example, we can only make sense of shape in that which is extended, or of motion in extended space; and we can only make sense of imagination, or sensation, or willing in a thinking thing. Whereas we can make sense of extension without shape or motion, and of thought without imagination or sensation, and so on. This should be obvious to anyone who considers it carefully.

## **54. How we can have clear and distinct notions of thinking and bodily substance, and of God.**

So we can certainly have two clear and distinct notions or ideas: one of created thinking substance, and one of bodily substance. The way to achieve this is by carefully separating all the attributes of thought from the attributes of extension. In the same way, we can also have a clear and distinct idea of uncreated and independent thinking substance, namely of God. However we must not suppose that it adequately reveals to us everything that there is in God; nor should we pretend that it contains anything which we are not aware of as actually being included in it, and which we do not vividly perceive as belonging to the nature of a totally perfect being. Nobody can deny that we have such an idea of God within ourselves, unless they judge that there is no notion whatever of God in human minds.

## **60. On distinctions; and firstly, real distinction.**

... Strictly speaking, a 'real' distinction is... one between two or more substances. And we perceive that they are really distinct from each other only by virtue of the fact that we can understand the one clearly and distinctly without the other. Acknowledging God, we are certain that he can bring about whatever we understand distinctly. So much so, that, for example, we are certain that it is possible for extended or bodily substance to exist, even though we do not yet know for certain that any such thing actually exists, simply from the fact that we already have an idea of it. Furthermore, if it exists, each and every part of it as defined by our thought is really distinct from the other parts of the same substance. Likewise, it is certain that each one of us is really distinct from every other thinking substance, and from every bodily substance, simply by virtue of the fact that each one of us understands that we are a thinking thing, and can in thought shut out from ourselves every other substance, whether thinking or extended. And even if we suppose that God has joined a bodily substance to such a thinking substance so closely that they could not be joined more closely, and thus welded together something unitary out of these two, nevertheless, they remain really distinct, because, however closely he might have united them, he could not have divested himself of the power he previously had of separating them, or of keeping one of them in existence without the other. And things which God can separate, or preserve separately, are really distinct.