Descartes, Meditation Two (1641)

1. The project once again: Descartes begins anew, reiterating his method of doubt. He states,

I will … [put] aside everything that admits of the least doubt, as if I had discovered it to be completely false. I will stay on this course until I know something certain, or, if nothing else, until I know for certain that nothing is certain.

2. The quest for that one certain thing: Archimedes, the ancient Greek philosopher who wrote of the power of levers and fulcrums claimed that, if he could just find one single immovable point to serve as a fulcrum, he could place a lever upon it and move the entire Earth.

Similarly, Descartes desperately wants to find “just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshaken” so that he can likewise make tremendous progress.

3. That one certain thing is that “I exist!": Descartes considers the possibility that, if ALL truths are uncertain, then it is even uncertain whether or not he exists.

Reply: A-ha! As soon as he doubts his own existence, Descartes realizes that his own non-existence is impossible. For, SOMETHING must be doing the doubting.

If I doubt something, then the very act of doubting affirms that something exists; namely, ME, the thing that doubts. So, “I exist” is necessarily true. Whenever I assert or conceive of this statement, it affirms itself. To deny such a thing would be self-defeating, for SOMETHING must exist in order to do the denying. Therefore, I know for certain that I AM.

4. What am “I”? With Descartes, I may affirm that SOMETHING exists, and I call this thing “me” or “myself”, but what IS this thing? In other words, what am I?

Reply: Recall the evil genius scenario from Meditation One. If there is an evil genius deceiving me, then everything that I perceive about the MATERIAL world is false. Things like extension, shape, size, color, etc., as well as nutrition, movement, and sense perception are all non-existent or deceptive. And yet, I STILL EXIST. This much, we have said, is undeniable. So, I am not a material thing.

But, what about thinking? Could the evil genius deceive me into thinking that I am thinking, when in fact I am not thinking at all? No! That is impossible. Therefore, at the very least, THINKING exists, and thought is inseparable from me.
5. I am a thinking thing: It must be that “I” am a thinking thing. The existence of my thoughts cannot be doubted. Furthermore, their very existence affirms MY existence. And this includes ANY form of thought (doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, unwilling, imagining, and sensing). Every time any of these things occur, their existence—and therefore MY existence—is certain.

Note: Descartes includes “sensing” in this list of certain things. Why would he do this, when previously he said that the senses do not tell us anything with certainty? The answer is that, while the THINGS that I seem to perceive with my senses may or may not actually exist, it is nevertheless the case that THE FACT THAT I SEEM to be seeing tables, chairs, hands, and colors, etc. is certain and indubitable.

6. Body vs. mind: Descartes has said that the most certain thing is any mental action that occurs in the mind, and the existence of that mind. So, if the one certain thing is the thinking “I”, then why is it the case that the material bodies that I seem to perceive are SO much more distinct?

In other words, if mind is certain and matter is not, then why do I understand what matter is so much more clearly than mind?

Reply: Descartes considers the following illustration.

• Descartes examines a piece of wax, taken from a honeycomb. It tastes like honey, it smells like flowers; it has color, shape, size; it is hard, cold, and it makes a sound when he strikes it. But, he puts it near the fire, and the taste and smell go away. The color, shape, and size change; the wax becomes soft, hot, and no longer makes a sound when he strikes it. In other words, every perceivable property that it formerly had goes away when heat is applied. Yet, somehow, it is still the same wax!

Descartes asks, if every perceivable attribute of the wax disappears, and yet we still think it is the SAME object, then WHAT is it that remains the same throughout the changes?

We never perceive matter, even though we think we do: Matter is the underlying substance or THING that possesses properties. We may THINK we understand what matter is, but this illustration demonstrates that we really have no idea what the underlying thing that possesses properties is. We do not, in fact, ever even perceive matter! Material bodies are not something we PERCEIVE with the senses. Rather, they are something we JUDGE to exist with the mind.
Here is an example of why we get confused: When I see a man, I say, “I see a man.” As if I could see the “thinking thing”! No, when I say this, something that I claimed to “see” was not something I perceived at all. Rather, it was really something I judged to exist in my mind.

So, bodies are not more distinct than minds. They only SEEM to be understood more clearly because when we claim to “see” them, the thing that is really distinct to us is a thought-judgment. But, then, “seeing” material things only serves to reinforce the claim that “I exist.” Because, whenever I assert that I see something, it is just yet ANOTHER mental action; one that makes it impossible that “I”—this thinking thing—do not exist.

**Conclusion: The Cogito:** In short, the conclusion is that, “Cogito, ergo sum” or, “I think, therefore I am.”