

THE SEAT OF THE SOUL

By Rene Descartes

From *The Passions of the Soul, Part One* (1649)

Article 30 *That the soul is united to all the parts of the body jointly.*

But to understand all these things more perfectly, it is necessary to know that the soul is really joined to all the body, but it cannot properly be said to be in any of the parts thereof, excluding the rest, because it is one, and in some sort indivisible ... [And] you cannot conceive the half or third part of a soul, nor what space it takes up, and that it becomes not any whit less by cutting off any part of the body, but absolutely withdraws when the contexture of its organs is dissolved.

Article 31 *That there is a little kernel (the pineal gland) in the brain wherein the soul exercises her functions more peculiarly than in the other parts.*

It is also necessary to know that although the soul be joined to all the body, yet there is some part in that body wherein she exercises her functions more peculiarly than all the rest. And, it is commonly believed that this part is the brain, or it may be the heart. The brain, because thither tend the organs of the senses, and the heart because therein the passions are felt. But having searched this business carefully, me thinks I have plainly found out that that part of the body wherein the soul immediately exercises her function is not a jot of the heart, nor yet all the brain, but only the most interior part of it, which is a certain very small kernel situated in the middle of the substance of it and so hung on the top of the conduit by which the spirits of its anterior cavities have communication with those of the posterior, whose least motions in it cause the course of the spirits very much to change, and reciprocally, the least alteration befalling the course of the spirits cause the motions of the kernel very much to alter.

Article 34 *How the soul and the body act one against another.*

Let us then conceive that the soul holds her principal seat in that little kernel in the midst of the brain, from whence she diffuses her beams into all the rest of the body by intercourse of the spirit, nerves, yea and the very blood, which participating the impressions of the spirits, may convey them through the arteries into all the members. And remembering what was formerly said concerning this machine our body, to wit, that the little strings of our nerves are so distributed into all parts of it, that upon occasion of several

motions excited therein by sensible objects, they variously open the pores of the brain, which causes the animal spirits contained in the cavities thereof, to enter divers ways into the muscles, by whose means they can move the members all the several ways they are apt to move and also that all the other causes which can differently move the spirits, are enough to convey them into several muscles. Let us here add, that the little kernel which is the chief seat of the soul hangs so between the cavities which contain these spirits, that it may be moved by them as many several fashions as there are sensible diversities in objects. But withal, that it may be moved several ways by the soul too, which is of such a nature, that she receives as many various impressions (that is, has as many several apprehensions) as there come several motions into this kernel. As also on the other side, the machine of the body is so composed that this kernel being only divers ways moved by the soul, or by any other cause whatsoever, it drives the spirits that environ it towards the pores of the brains, which convey them by the nerves into the muscles by which means it causes them to move the members.

Article 41 *What is the power of the soul in respect of the body.*

But the will is so free by nature that it can never be constrained. And of two sorts of thoughts which I have distinguished in the soul, whereof some are her actions, to wit her wills; others, her passions, taking that word in its general signification, which comprehends all forms of apprehensions. The first are absolutely in her own power, and cannot, but indirectly, be changed by the body; as on the contrary, the last depend absolutely upon the actions which produce them, and they cannot, unless indirectly, be changed by the soul, except then when her self is the cause of them. And all the action of the soul consists in this, that she merely by willing anything can make the little kernel, whereunto she is strictly joined, move in the manner requisite to produce the effect relating to this will.

Article 43 *How the soul can imagine, be attentive, and move the body.*

So when one would imagine anything one has never seen, this will has the power to make the kernel move in the manner requisite to drive the spirits towards the pores of the brain by the opening of which this thing may be represented. So, when one would fix his attention some pretty while to consider, or ruminate on one object, this will holds the kernel still at that time, leaning ever to one side. So, finally, when one would walk, or move his body any way, this will causes the kernel to drive the spirits towards the muscles which serve to that purpose.