Doubt and Human Nature in Descartes's *Meditations*[1]

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> *La première Méditation n'est plus une théorie à comprendre, c'est un exercice à pratiquer.* Étienne Gilson[2]

1. Introduction

Descartes is well known for his employment of the method of doubt. His most famous work, the *Meditations*, begins by exhorting us to doubt all our opinions, including our belief in the existence of the external world. But critics have charged that this universal doubt is impossible for us to achieve because it runs counter to human nature. If this is so, Descartes must be either misguided or hypocritical in proposing it. Hume writes:

> There is a species of scepticism, antecedent to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Des Cartes and others, as a sovereign preservative against error and precipitate judgement. It recommends an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties… The Cartesian doubt, …*were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not)* would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject (*Enquiry* 12.3; emphasis added).[3]

Hume thinks that this antecedent or methodological scepticism is simply a dead end; if we could achieve Descartes's universal doubt, we could never escape from it. But there is a more fundamental

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[2] Etienne Gilson, *Etudes sur le rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien* (Fourth Edition. Paris: Vrin, 1975), 186.

[3] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). References by section and paragraph number.

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problem with Descartes's method, and that is that the doubt he recommends is so contrary to human nature that it is unattainable by any human creature. In particular, Hume regards Cartesian doubt about the existence of the corporeal world as impossible. The sceptic 'must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body', because 'Nature has not left this to his choice'.[4] As he famously says, 'Nature by an absolute and uncontroulable necessity has determined us to judge as well as to breathe and feel'[5] and 'Nature is always too strong for principle'.[6]

Reid is another critic who regards it as impossible for us to genuinely doubt the existence of the external world, as the First Meditation enjoins us to do. 'The perception of an object', Reid writes, 'implies both a conception of its form, and a belief of its present existence'[7]; and it is not in our power to 'throw off this belief of external objects', any more than it is in our power to free ourselves from the natural force of gravity.[8]

If our nature compels us to believe in the existence of external things when we perceive them, then it seems that Descartes must be either deluded or disingenuous when he claims to doubt the existence of the corporeal world. Indeed, the fact that he manages to navigate that world successfully would seem to prove it. Reid tartly remarks:

> I resolve not to believe my senses. I break my nose against a post that comes in my way; I step into a dirty kennel; and after twenty such wise and rational actions, I am taken up and clapt into a mad-house…If a man pretends to be a sceptic with regard to the informations of sense, and yet prudently keeps out of harm's way as other men do, he must excuse my suspicion, that he either acts the hypocrite, or imposes upon himself.[9]

Hume and Reid agree that Descartes's injunction to doubt our senses is impossible to carry out, because our nature as human beings compels us to believe that we sense external bodies. They also agree

[4] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 187.

[5] Op. cit. note 4, 183.

[6] Op. cit. note 3, section 12, paragraph 23.

[7] T. Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1801) in *Thomas Reid's Inquiry and Essays*, eds. R. E. Beanblossom and K. Lehrer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 84.

[8] Op. cit. note 6, 85.

[9] Op. cit. note 6, 86.

that if we could manage to overcome nature and attain Cartesian doubt, we would gain nothing. Descartes, then, must be misguided, hypocritical or both in exhorting us to doubt our senses and all our former opinions.

Many contemporary readers of Descartes will respond that these criticisms are based on a misunderstanding of the aims of Cartesian scepticism. They may agree with Hume and Reid that it is not humanly possible for us to disbelieve our senses to the extent of walking into posts or stepping into ditches, still less to do so as a result of reading the First Meditation. But this is irrelevant, the response goes, if Descartes is not aiming to induce such disbelief. Descartes himself says that 'the sceptics who neglected human matters to the point where friends had to stop them falling off precipices deserved to be laughed at'[10], and that no sane person has ever seriously doubted that material things exist.[11] Indeed, the fact that he describes the reasons for doubt he presents as 'slight, and, so to speak, metaphysical'[12] and as exaggerated[13] suggests that he does not expect them to generate genuine doubt. What, then, is his aim in advancing reasons to doubt? Well, the response goes, when Descartes asks how we know that we are not dreaming or deceived by an evil demon, or contemporary epistemologists ask how we know we are not brains in a vat, they are not trying to get us to withhold assent to our ordinary beliefs, but challenging us to provide a positive account of our justification for holding them. Since the doubts are advanced for theoretical ends, they can have a theoretical payoff. This also provides a response to the second charge, that the doubt has no value.

This response may paint an accurate picture of some contemporary uses of sceptical argument, but I believe that it is not an accurate interpretation of the *Meditations*. There is strong textual evidence that Descartes wants his readers to engage in genuine doubt – that is, that he wants us not just to accept that there is theoretical reason to doubt our opinions, but actually to withhold assent from them. The Preface states that he wants no readers except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously and 'to withdraw their minds

[10] References by volume and page number to C. Adam and P. Tannery (eds.) *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 vols. (Paris: Vrin, 1904), and J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (eds.) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vols. I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) (AT 7 351, CSM 2 243).

[11] AT 7 16, CSM 2 11.

[12] AT VII 36, CSM II 25.

[13] AT VII 89, CSM II 61; AT VII 226, CSM II 159.

from the senses and from all preconceived opinions'.[14] Descartes writes in the Fifth Replies:

> When I said that the entire testimony of the senses should be regarded as uncertain and even as false, I was quite serious; indeed this point is so necessary for an understanding of my *Meditations* that if anyone is unable or unwilling to accept it, he will be incapable of producing any objection that deserves a reply.[15]

'Regarding the testimony of the senses as uncertain' might sound like taking a theoretical stance towards such testimony, rather than genuinely doubting it. But Descartes continues by pointing out that this attitude towards the senses should not be extended to everyday life, but should be reserved for the investigation of the truth. It is here that he remarks that the ancient sceptics deserved to be laughed at. But this suggests that he finds those sceptics ridiculous not because they doubted their senses, but because they extended the doubt to everyday life instead of reserving it for meditation. It is precisely because the disbelief in the senses is genuine that it is dangerous to extend it to the actions of everyday life; if we do so we will fall off precipices and walk into posts. While we are meditating, though, it is vital that we withdraw our minds from the senses. The importance of this process is emphasised at the start of the Second, Third and Fourth Meditations, and it is clear that it is a process that we as meditators are meant to carry out.

So the questions pressed by Hume and Reid arise afresh. How can Descartes think it humanly possible for us to genuinely doubt our senses, to doubt that material things exist? And what benefit could possibly be gained by doubting our senses? In this paper I offer an account of Descartes's use of doubt in the *Meditations*, particularly doubt about the senses. On the interpretation I favour, Descartes uses doubt as a tool for cognitive reform.[16] This reform is needed

[14] AT VII 9, CSM II 8.

[15] AT VII 350, CSM II 243.

[16] For other interpretations stressing the importance of cognitive reform in the *Meditations*, see J. Carriero's *Between Two Worlds: A Reading of Descartes's* Meditations (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), as well as D. Garber, '*Semel in vita*: The Scientific Background to Descartes's *Meditations*' and G. Hatfield, 'The Senses and the Fleshless Eye: The *Meditations* as Cognitive Exercises', both in A.O. Rorty (ed.) *Essays on Descartes's* Meditations (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Garber traces what he sees as a dialogue between Descartes and common sense in the *Meditations*; I would suggest that what he calls 'common sense' is what Descartes regards as prejudice. Carriero stresses

to overcome the legacy of childhood errors. Descartes stresses the fact that we begin life as infants, dependent on the senses, and form beliefs and habits of thought before we can make correct use of the natural light of reason. We regard the cognitive dispositions so formed as *natural* because of their familiarity. In Descartes's view, however, they are merely *habitual*; thus habit usurps the place of nature. Doubting the senses can free us from these habitual errors and restore our nature to us, Descartes believes, but only if the doubt is not merely theoretical.

2. Reasons to Doubt in the First Meditation

Let us briefly review the sequence of doubts that begin the *Meditations*. When Descartes looks for reasons to doubt the senses, he first notes that the senses sometimes deceive, and that those who deceive even once are not worthy of trust. But though they sometimes deceive us about things which are very small or very distant, we would surely be insane, he says, to doubt the evidence of our senses when we see our hands in front of our faces. Then he reflects that dream experience can seem as evident; dreams may trick us into believing that we are sitting by the fire when we are asleep in bed. Finally, he suggests that an omnipotent God could have brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while ensuring that these things appear to us to exist just as they do now.[17]

Does Descartes seriously expect us to doubt our senses on the basis of these considerations? He describes his conclusion that all his former beliefs are subject to doubt as 'based on powerful and well thought-out reasons', and continues:

> (1) So in future I must withhold assent from these former beliefs just as carefully as I would from obvious falsehoods, if I want to discover any certainty.[18]

Descartes's disagreements with Scholastic Aristotelian epistemology. Since Descartes regards this as grounded in childhood prejudices (see e.g. footnote 6 below), our approaches are not incompatible.

[17] AT VII 21, CSM II 14. The supposition that we are deceived by an evil demon is not included here because Descartes does not introduce it as a reason to doubt our existing opinions. Instead, he introduces it to ensure that we do not assent to opinions we have found reason to doubt (AT VII 22-3, CSM II 15).

[18] AT VII 21, CSM II 14.

Descartes here presents suspension of belief as the rational response to his sceptical arguments. Surely Hume and Reid are right to regard it as psychologically impossible, not to speak of irrational, not to believe our senses on these grounds.

Maybe so, but is this what Descartes intended? We must read him carefully. The resolution expressed in (1) is conditional: *if* he wants to discover any certainty (the French translation adds, 'in the sciences'), *then* he must withhold assent from his former beliefs. This suggests that suspension of belief is the rational response to his sceptical arguments under certain conditions, the conditions depicted in the opening paragraphs of the *Meditations*. Call the person in these conditions 'the meditator'. In his guise as meditator, Descartes earlier says:

> (2) Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those that are patently false.[19]

For the meditator, reason dictates that assent should be withheld from beliefs that are subject to any doubt at all. Consequently, suspension of belief is the meditator's rational response to the sceptical arguments. But why is it rational for the meditator to withhold assent from beliefs that are in any sense dubitable, as (2) claims? Notice that the meditator says 'Reason *now* leads me to think…'. This suggests, again, that there is something about the meditator's specific conditions that makes it rational to withhold assent from anything dubitable. What are these conditions? The *Meditations* begins thus:

> (3) Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. *I realized that it was necessary*, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations *if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last*.[20]

The later reference to certainty in (1) presumably alludes to this aim of establishing something stable and lasting in the sciences. Passage (3) tells us that stable certainties can be established in the sciences only if we demolish our existing beliefs and start afresh. This demolition is necessary, Descartes says, because our beliefs constitute a

[19] AT VII 18, CSM II 12.
[20] AT VII 17, CSM II 17, emphasis added.

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doubtful structure based on falsehoods accepted in our infancy. Taken together, passages (2) and (3) tell us that *if* we seek to demolish a belief structure based on falsehoods accepted in childhood in order to establish stable certainties in the sciences, *then* it is rational for us to withhold assent from beliefs about which any doubt can be raised. Only in the context of this project of demolition and reconstruction, then, does Descartes claim that the meditator should withhold assent from the senses on the basis of his sceptical arguments.

What are the implications of this for the objection that Cartesian doubt about the senses is both impossible and fruitless? Firstly, it implies that the sceptical arguments are not expected to induce suspension of belief all on their own, as it were. The role of the sceptical arguments is simply to show that our beliefs are 'in some sense doubtful', as Descartes puts it. It is only in the context of the resolution to demolish our existing beliefs and start afresh that it is rational to suspend belief in whatever is in some sense doubtful. Secondly, it means that the feasibility and value of suspension of belief in the senses depends on the feasibility and value of the project of demolishing our existing beliefs in order to establish something lasting in the sciences. What reason does Descartes give to persuade us that this project of demolition and reconstruction is necessary?

At first sight, the motivation Descartes offers for the project seems slender. He says that he was struck by the large number of falsehoods he had accepted as true in his childhood. Presumably we can all think of some falsehoods we accepted as true in childhood; perhaps, as children, we believed that Father Christmas brought us presents, or that monsters lived under the bed, or that babies are delivered by storks, or some such. But the fact that we now recognise these falsehoods as such means that we no longer accept them, so it is hard to see how they could render other beliefs we have dubious. Presumably we are all modest enough to accept that we have some unrecognised false beliefs, some of which may well have been acquired in childhood. But this commonplace observation hardly seems to necessitate what Descartes describes as the 'enormous task' of demolishing all our beliefs and starting again from the beginning. If some of our beliefs are false, why not identify and correct them piecemeal, instead of attempting to reject all our opinions at once?

The fact that the rationale for the project of demolition and reconstruction seems so slight fuels the suspicion that Descartes has another agenda, such as a particular conception of knowledge or of enquiry, or a preoccupation with indubitability. Descartes does have an agenda that cannot be revealed to the reader at this initial stage, if only in the sense that he knows what the outcome of the

project will be, while the reader does not. But this point is compatible with many different views of what that agenda is, of what Descartes aims to achieve through the use of doubt. I suggest that we should take Descartes at his word when he says that the reason we should demolish and rebuild our beliefs is that they are founded on falsehoods accepted in childhood. On this more literal reading of the aim and motivation for the project of doubt, it is precisely because we are subject to these founding falsehoods that cognitive reform is needed.[21] Let us see what can be said for this for this more literal reading of Descartes's agenda.

3. The Consequences of the Errors of Childhood

The ill-formed, ill-founded character of our early beliefs and the consequent necessity of starting afresh is a frequent theme in Descartes's work. The earlier *Discourse* compares our beliefs to an unplanned city that has grown up through the haphazard addition of buildings, the unfinished *Search After Truth* compares them to a picture badly drawn by a young apprentice, and the Seventh Replies compares them to a barrel of sound apples contaminated by rotten ones. In all three cases the defective character of our beliefs is connected to their childhood origin. Descartes writes:

> I reflected that we were all children before being men and had to be governed for some time by our appetites and our teachers, which were often opposed to each other and neither of which, perhaps, always gave us the best advice; hence I thought it impossible that our judgements should be as unclouded and firm as they would have been if we had had the full use of our reason from the moment of our birth, and if we had always been guided by it alone.[22]

[21] I believe that a stronger claim can be made out: that (with one exception) the project of cognitive reform through doubt is (a) feasible and (b) necessary only for those who are subject to the founding errors of childhood. An exception is needed to allow for those whose beliefs are subject to major error and distortion *independent of* these founding errors. Descartes would not of course deny that there could be such people, nor that they could undergo and benefit from a further round of demolition and reconstruction. But for most human beings, Descartes believes, reform of the errors and biases originating in childhood is necessary and sufficient to remove the main cause of error in our beliefs.

[22] *Discourse* II, AT VI 13, 14, CSM I 117.

> …Our senses, inclinations, teachers and the intellect are the different artists who may work at this task [sc. of tracing ideas on a child's imagination], and among them the least competent are the first to take part, namely our imperfect senses, blind instincts and foolish nurses. The most competent is the intellect, which comes last…[23]
>
> …those who have never philosophized correctly have various opinions in their minds which they have begun to store up since childhood, and which they therefore believe may *in many cases* be false.[24]

Descartes uses these comparisons to recommend the demolition of the city, the erasure of the drawing, the emptying of the barrel; the city is to be rebuilt according to a plan, the picture redrawn by the master artist, the barrel refilled with sound apples. Similarly, the opinions acquired since childhood should be cleared away, so that they can be replaced with better ones:

> …regarding the opinions to which I had hitherto given credence, I thought I could not do better than undertake to get rid of them all at one go, in order to replace them afterwards with better ones, or with the same ones once I had squared them with the standards of reason.[25]

> …[the master] painter would do far better to make a fresh start on the picture; rather than wasting time correcting the lines he finds on the canvas, he should wipe them off it with a sponge. Similarly, as soon as a man reaches what we call the age of discretion, he should resolve once and for all to remove from his imagination all traces of the imperfect ideas that have been engraved there up till that time. Then he should begin in earnest to find new ideas, applying all the strength of his intellect so effectively that if he does not bring these ideas to perfection, at least he will not be able to blame the weakness of the senses or the irregularities of nature.[26]

> …in order to separate out the true ones, it is best to begin by rejecting all our opinions and renouncing every single one; this will make it easier, afterwards, to recognise those which were

[23] *Search After Truth*, AT X 507, CSM II 406.
[24] Seventh Replies, AT VII 481, CSM II 324; emphasis added.
[25] *Discourse* II, AT VI 13, 14, CSM I 117.
[26] *Search After Truth*, AT VII 508, CSM II 406.

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> true (or discover new truths), so that we end up admitting only what is true.[27]

The architectural metaphors used in the *Discourse* and *Search* indicate the instability of childhood opinions as a foundation for our beliefs. The passages from the *Search* and the Seventh Replies emphasise the magnitude of the falsity to be found in opinions formed in childhood. The *Discourse*, *Search* and *Principles* link the falsity of these beliefs to the fact that the intellect or reason is not fully developed in childhood; the *Search* and *Principles* also implicate the senses in these errors. The description of our predicament in the *Search* is particularly striking:

> The intellect is like an excellent painter who is called upon to put the finishing touches to a bad picture sketched out by a young apprentice. It would be futile for him to employ the rules of his art in correcting the picture little by little, a bit here and a bit there, and in adding with his own hand all that is lacking in it, if, despite his best efforts, he could never remove every major fault, since the drawing was badly sketched from the beginning, the figures badly placed, and the proportions badly observed.[28]

Here the faults in the image sketched by the apprentice are so extensive and so fundamental that it is necessary for the master to erase it and begin again; the picture cannot be corrected piecemeal. The message of the simile is that the errors in the opinions acquired in childhood via our senses, instincts and teachers are so extensive and so fundamental that the intellect, the master, cannot correct them one by one. This message is most explicit in the opening words of the later *Principles*:

> *The seeker after truth must, once in the course of his life, doubt everything, as far as is possible*. Since we began life as infants, and made various judgements concerning the things that can be perceived through the senses before we had full use of our reason, *there are many prejudices that keep us from knowledge of the truth*. It seems that the only way of freeing ourselves from these opinions is to make the effort, once in the course of our life, to doubt everything which we find to contain even the smallest suspicion of falsity.[29]

[27] Seventh Replies, AT VII 512, CSM II 349.
[28] AT VII 507–8, CSM II 406.
[29] AT VIIIA 5, CSM I 193, emphasis added.

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This passage also mentions a further problem: the opinions acquired in childhood are not just false, they are also obstacles to the knowledge of the truth.

It is clear from these texts that the project of demolishing and reconstructing our opinions is not motivated simply by the banal observation that we acquire the occasional false belief in childhood. In Descartes's view, the mistakes we make in childhood are so fundamental and so pervasive that piecemeal correction is hopeless; that is why we must 'demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations'.[30] When he begins the *Meditations* by speaking of the 'large number' of falsehoods accepted in childhood, and the 'highly dubious' character of the beliefs based on them, he is perfectly sincere.

4. The Need to Doubt the Senses

What is the nature of these fundamental childhood errors? When Descartes sets to work to undermine the edifice of belief, he targets the senses: 'whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired by or through the senses'.[31] The implication is that the many basic falsehoods taken as true in childhood are acquired through reliance on the senses. That this is his considered view is plain from Descartes's explicit descriptions of our early cognitive development, as well as his frequent references to the prejudices of the senses.[32] The later *Principles* states that 'the chief cause of error arises from the prejudices of childhood'.[33] Our infant reliance on the senses imbued our minds with 'a thousand prejudices'; and in later childhood, 'forgetting that they were adopted without sufficient examination', we regarded these prejudices as 'known by the senses or implanted by nature, and accepted them as utterly true and evident'.[34]

How do these prejudices 'keep us from knowledge of the truth', as Descartes claims they do? He explains in the Second Replies that the reason it is difficult for us to perceive the primary notions of metaphysics clearly and distinctly is that they conflict with 'many prejudices derived from the senses which we have got into the habit of

[30] AT VII 17, CSM II 12.
[31] AT VII 18, CSM II 12.
[32] See, for example, AT VII 158, CSM II 112.
[33] AT VIIIA 35, CSM I 218.
[34] *Principles* I.71, AT VIIIA 36, CSM I 219.

holding from our earliest years'.[35] He writes in the earlier *Discourse* that

> many are convinced that there is some difficulty in knowing God, and even in knowing what their soul is. The reason is that they never raise their minds above things that can be perceived through the senses; they are so used to thinking of things only by imagining them (a way of thinking especially suited to material things) that whatever is unimaginable seems to them unintelligible.[36]

As this passage shows, Descartes believes that our childhood reliance on the senses entrenches a habit of thinking in terms of what can be sensed. The soul is thought of, if it is thought of at all, as a kind of attenuated body, a wind or ether permeating the limbs.[37] Things that do not affect the senses, such as God and the soul, are regarded as difficult to know. Conversely, bodies are regarded as easy to know, since they are assumed to resemble our sensory perceptions completely.[38] For example, distant stars are taken to be small, because that is how they appear to our senses; space where we sense nothing is taken to contain nothing corporeal; bodies are taken to possess heat, colour and other sensible qualities wholly resembling our sensory perceptions.[39]

In contrast to what he regards as the widespread conviction that it is difficult to know God and the soul, Descartes believes that our own minds and God are 'the most certain and evident of all possible objects of knowledge for the human intellect'. That, he says, is the one thing he set himself to prove in the *Meditations*.[40] This remark testifies to the importance Descartes attaches to overcoming the prejudices of the senses and learning to appreciate 'the certainty that belongs to metaphysical things' such as God and the soul.[41]

[35] AT VII 157, CSM II 111.
[36] AT VI 37, CSM I 129.
[37] Second Meditation, AT VII 26, CSM II 17.
[38] Third Meditation, AT VII 35, CSM II 25; Sixth Meditation, AT VII 75, CSM II 52.
[39] These are not the only effects of the founding error. Thanks to our infant reliance on the senses and the vividness of sensory ideas, we form the belief that nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses, a tenet of Scholastic Aristotelian epistemology (AT VII 75, CSM II 52).
[40] Synopsis, AT VII 16, CSM II 11. This last remark about the aim of the *Meditations* should be taken with a pinch of salt, given Descartes's confession to Mersenne that the work contains all the foundations of his physics (see AT III 298, CSM III 193).
[41] AT VII 162, CSM II 115.

Thanks to the continuing effect of the habitual prejudices of the senses, 'only those who really *concentrate* and *meditate*, and *withdraw their minds from corporeal things*, so far as is possible, will achieve perfect knowledge' of metaphysical things.[42] The 'greatest benefit' of the First Meditation doubt, Descartes says, is precisely that it both frees our minds from prejudices, and provides a way to draw the mind away from the senses.[43]

In effect, the *Meditations* attempts to correct the effects of the process that occurred in childhood, when our minds were stocked with beliefs acquired through reliance on the senses, and the intellect exercised little or no critical scrutiny. Hence Descartes writes,

> the only opinions I want to steer my readers' minds away from are those which they have never properly examined – opinions which they have acquired not on the basis of any firm reasoning but from the senses alone.[44]

These long-standing opinions based on the senses are to be eradicated, and our minds are to be re-stocked with opinions subjected to the scrutiny of the intellect and based on firm reasoning. If this is Descartes's plan, it is clear that it can proceed only if we really do renounce our old opinions and cease to trust our senses, so far as we can. So the questions raised by Hume and Reid press with particular force. How can we do this if we could not doubt our senses without falling into danger? How can we do this if we are psychologically incapable of doubting our senses?

Precisely because he is so insistent that his readers should genuinely withdraw their minds from their senses, Descartes is sensitive to these questions of practicality. He stresses that the meditator should have 'a clear stretch of free time'[45], and that the task of meditation 'does not involve action but merely the acquisition of knowledge'.[46] If the meditator is sitting quietly, engaged only in meditation, the danger of walking into posts is minimal. But of course there is no such danger if it is psychologically impossible for us not to trust our senses. What is Descartes's response to this charge?

[42] AT VII 157, CSM II 111; emphasis added. It is because of the importance of attentive meditation, Descartes explains, that he wrote 'Meditations' rather than 'Disputations' or 'Theorems and Problems' (AT VII 157, CSM II 112).

[43] AT VII 12, CSM II 19.

[44] AT VII 158, CSM II 112.

[45] AT VII 18, CSM II 17.

[46] AT VII 22, CSM II 15.

Descartes holds that trust in the senses is both habitual and natural for us. It is natural because we have, he believes, a strong natural propensity to believe that we perceive material bodies when we sense. It is habitual because we are in the habit of believing that the senses are the source of certainty and truth. Having decided in the First Meditation that he must withhold assent from his existing opinions, he finds that these habitual opinions 'keep coming back, and despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as the result of long occupation and the law of custom'.[47] The existence of these natural and habitual tendencies to belief means that a special measure is needed to enable the meditator to withdraw the mind from the senses and suspend belief in the existence of bodies, so far as possible.[48] The measure Descartes uses is the pretence of falsity. He resolves to deceive himself by 'pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary'; and he resolves to do this until 'the weight of prejudice is counter-balanced and the distorting influence of habit no longer prevents my judgement from perceiving things correctly'.[49] As he says here, the pretence of falsity is needed to counteract the effect of the prejudices ingrained since childhood, the habits that distort our judgement and prevent us from perceiving clearly and correctly. Although it is a pretence, it serves the purpose of counteracting our natural and habitual tendencies towards belief in the sensible world. Before we examine how the pretence of falsity is put to use, it will be useful to clarify the character of the fundamental error of childhood.

5. The Nature of the Founding Error

Is our fundamental error an error of the senses, or an error of judgement? On the one hand, when Descartes sets out to undermine the foundations of our existing opinions in the First Meditations, he

[47] AT VII 22, CSM II15.

[48] It is particularly difficult for us to doubt the existence of our own bodies because we are taught by nature that we are intermingled with them to make one thing. Presumably that is one reason that Descartes explicitly discusses the feasibility of doubting the existence of our hands and bodies in the First Meditation. At first he suggests that only the insane could do this; then he points out that in dreams we believe false things about our own bodies (AT VII 18–9, CSM II 13).

[49] AT VII 22, CSM II 15.

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targets the senses, saying that 'whatever I had accepted as most true I had accepted by or through the senses'.[50] And we have already seen that he attributes our childhood errors to a preoccupation with the senses. On the other, Descartes invokes the pretence of falsity to counteract prejudices or pre-judgements, and to correct the effect of habits that distort our judgement.

Descartes finally identifies our fundamental error regarding the senses in the Sixth Meditation. It is that of misusing sensory perceptions by treating them as reliable guides for immediate judgements about the essences of external bodies, without waiting for the intellect to examine the matter.[51] In doing this, he says, we habitually pervert the order of nature.[52] The proper purpose of our sensory perceptions is to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the mind-body composite, the human being. When we use them as touchstones for immediate judgements about the essences of the external bodies we sense, we use them for an unnatural and improper purpose.

It is clear from this diagnosis that the founding error is an error of judgement, rather than of the senses proper. The character of the error fits Descartes's description of the predicament of the human mind in infancy. Our earliest judgements, he believes, are governed by our desire to survive. As a result, in childhood 'the mind judged everything in terms of its utility to the body in which it was immersed'.[53] Since our capacity for sensory perception is given to us by Nature as a guide to what is beneficial and harmful to us as embodied creatures, it is not surprising that the infant should rely on sensory perceptions for survival. As Descartes explains in the Sixth Replies,

> From infancy I had made a variety of judgements about physical things in so far as they contributed to preserving the life which I was embarking on…But at that age the mind employed the bodily organs less correctly than it now does, and was more firmly attached to them; hence it had no thoughts apart from them and perceived things only in a confused manner…Now *I had never freed myself from these prejudices in later life*, and hence there was nothing that I knew with sufficient distinctness, and nothing I did not suppose to be corporeal.[54]

[50] AT VII 18, CSM II 12.
[51] AT VII 82–3, CSM II 57–8.
[52] AT VI 83, CSM II 57.
[53] AT VIIIA 36, CSM I 219.
[54] AT VII 441, CSM II 297, emphasis added.

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The founding error becomes entrenched when the confused judgements made in childhood become habitual, instead of being revised in later life.

Descartes's claim that we pervert or overturn the order of nature might be taken to mean that we allow the senses to usurp the place of the intellect. But that would suggest that the senses and the intellect compete for the control of judgement, and that is not how he views the matter. For Descartes, the senses and the intellect are faculties of perception; they do not make judgements. Judgement occurs only when we affirm or deny the content of a perception by an act of will. Our errors of judgement stem from our misuse of our free will (as it must do, given that the author of our nature is not responsible for them). We use our wills incorrectly whenever we affirm something without perceiving its truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness; and this is what we do habitually when we draw conclusions about the nature of external bodies from sensory perceptions without adequate intellectual examination. Such judgements are erroneous in Descartes's specific sense of the term: they involve the incorrect use of free will that is, for him, the essence of judgement error.[55]

Mistaking the epistemic role of the senses, we treat sensory perceptions as the source of certainty. The founding error, then, is an error of judgement that becomes habitual. In particular, we habitually judge that external things wholly resemble our sensory perceptions. Worse still, we fail to recognize our responsibility for these judgements; we regard our habitual view of the world as implanted by nature or known by the senses, as he puts it in the *Principles*.[56] This mistake is reinforced by the fact that we fail to recognize the role of judgement in what we call 'sensing'. The senses do not make judgements, but the final stages of what we call sensing are the product of judgement, the work of the intellect and will. There is no falsity in the sensory perceptions of external objects that occur in our minds when our sense organs are stimulated.[57] Descartes does describe these perceptions as materially false, but this simply means that they provide material for false judgements.[58] Because these ideas are obscure and confused, we are liable to misudge their objects.[59] In particular, we are liable to judge that they represent

[55] AT VII 60, CSM II 41.
[56] I.71, AT VIIIA 36, CSM I 219.
[57] AT VII 438, CSM II 295–6.
[58] AT VII 234, CSM II 164.
[59] AT VII 233, CSM II 163.

qualities in objects which they wholly resemble, as happens when we judge that heat in a body is something wholly resembling the idea of heat that is in us.[60] Sensory perceptions of heat are given to us by nature to inform us of the potential of other bodies to help or harm our own, and as such they are sufficiently clear and distinct.[61] Sensory perceptions also carry information about the essential natures of these bodies, but in an obscure form.[62] That is why careful thought is needed if we are to make true judgements about the corporeal world on the basis of such perceptions. In Descartes's view, we are solely responsible for the mistakes we make when we judge without such careful thought; the sensory ideas themselves are not the source of our errors.

This point is worth stressing because it is so often missed. It is easy to miss, because Descartes himself obscures it by his talk of the errors and prejudices of the senses. When he speaks in this way, Descartes is speaking colloquially, attributing to the senses what is actually the result of judgement.[63] His considered view is that we do make fundamental errors because of our reliance on the senses, but these errors are not due to our reliance on a faculty that is by nature unreliable, erroneous or otherwise faulty. Our benevolent creator would not, indeed could not give us such a faculty. Instead, the errors are due to our misuse of a faculty of sensation that is perfectly in order, and indeed testifies to the power and goodness of God.[64] We err when we misuse sensory perceptions by assigning them a role for which nature (i.e. God) did not intend them.

6. Correcting the Founding Error

Let us now begin to map out the way in which the *Meditations* uses doubt about the senses to correct the founding error. As we saw, Descartes directs us to pretend that our long-standing opinions are false, that our senses delude us, to ensure that we do not slip back into our errors. The pretence of falsity is put into effect using the device of the evil demon. We are to suppose that we are being deceived by a demon of the utmost power and cunning, who not only supplies us with delusory experience but also deludes us about the

[60] AT VII 82, CSM II 56.
[61] AT VII 83, CSM II 57.
[62] AT VII 83, CSM II 58.
[63] AT VII 437–8, CSM II 295; see also AT VII 32, CSM II 21.
[64] AT VII 87–8, CSM II 60.

very existence of bodies. This supposition is intended to disrupt our habitual trust in the senses and to draw our minds away from their preoccupation with sensible things.

Pursuing this supposition, Descartes begins the Second Meditation by supposing that everything he sees is spurious (*falsa*), that his memory lies, that he has no senses, that body, shape, extension and place are chimeras.[65] The first fruit of this rejection of the sensible is a conception of the self as 'a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason – words whose meaning I have been ignorant of until now'.[66] This grasp of the self as a thinking thing does not depend on the grasp of anything corporeal; in fact, it is arrived at by supposing the non-existence of anything corporeal. This being so, Descartes argues, the mind must be 'most carefully diverted' from sensory images of corporeal things 'if it is to perceive its own nature as distinctly as possible'.[67]

Despite having been introduced to this intellectual grasp of the self as a mind, the meditator 'cannot stop' thinking that corporeal things, which can be sensed and imagined, are known more distinctly than the mind, which cannot.[68] Descartes confronts this childhood prejudice directly through the examination of the piece of wax. The essential nature of the wax is grasped not by the senses, which perceive only its outward forms, nor by the imagination, which can form only a limited number of images, but by the intellect, when we understand that the wax is a body capable of being extended in an infinity of different ways. Even what we call 'seeing with our eyes' involves an act of judgement, Descartes argues. We *judge* that the wax is there before us when we perceive its colour and shape, just as we *judge* that there are men in the square below us when we see hats and coats. Hence we not only perceive what the wax is using the intellect, by conceiving of it as an extended body; we also perceive the wax itself using the intellect when we do what we ordinarily call 'sensing' it.

This claim that what we call 'sensing' involves an intellectual act is elaborated in his discussion of the three grades or stages of sensing in the Sixth Replies. The first stage consists of physical motions in the bodily organs, the second of the immediate mental effects of these, 'including perceptions of pain, pleasure, thirst, hunger, colours, sound, taste, smell heat, cold and the like' (AT VII 437, CSM II 294). Sensing proper ends with these. The third stage includes 'all

[65] AT VII 24, CSM II 16.
[66] Second Meditation, AT VII 27, CSM II 18.
[67] AT VII 28, CSM II 19.
[68] AT VII 29, CSM II 20.

the judgements about things outside us which we have been accustomed to make from our earliest years' (AT VII 437, CSM II 295); but 'when from our earliest years we have made judgements, or even rational inferences, about the things that affect our senses', we do not distinguish these judgements from simple sense-perception. Descartes writes:

> We make the calculation and judgement at great speed because of habit, or rather, we remember the judgements we have long made about similar objects (AT VII 438, CSM II 295).

Thus we refer these judgements to the senses because they are so habitual that they have become, in effect, an automatic part of the process set in train by the stimulation of our sense organs.

The realisation that much of what we call sensing is in fact the work of the intellect is of key importance for Descartes's project of challenging the 'prejudices of the senses'. It marks the meditator's first step on the path to exposing the founding error. The second step is taken in the Third Meditation, when Descartes identifies

> something which I used to assert, and which through habitual belief I thought I perceived clearly, though I did not in fact do so. This was that there were things outside me which were the sources of my ideas and to which they were wholly similar [*omnino similes*].[69]

Why, he asks, do we believe that external things are wholly similar to our sensory ideas? (Notice that the accent is on the resemblance claim, rather than the existence claim.) Firstly, nature has apparently taught us to think this; that is, we have a spontaneous impulse to believe it. But our natural impulses have led us astray in the past, so this is not a good enough reason. Secondly, we think that our sensory ideas come from something outside us, because their occurrence is not under our control; and the most obvious judgement for us to make is that these external things transmit their likenesses to us. But this is not a good enough reason either. These ideas might come from a source within us, as they do when we are dreaming; and even if they come from external things, that does not entail that they must resemble them. Here Descartes points out that we have two incompatible ideas of the sun. One, derived from what we call sensing, represents it as small; the other, derived from astronomical observation and reasoning, represents it as many times larger than the Earth. The sun cannot

[69] AT VII 35, CSM II 25.

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resemble both ideas, and in this case we judge that the first idea is the one it least resembles.[70]

Descartes concludes that it is 'not reliable judgement but merely some blind impulse' that has made us believe up till now that there are external things which transmit their likenesses to us through the senses.[71] As we have seen, the belief that external bodies wholly resemble our sensory perceptions is one of the most entrenched prejudices of childhood (as well as a cornerstone of Scholastic Aristotelian epistemology). This habitual belief now appears far more dubious than it did after the arguments of First Meditation. There habitual beliefs were still regarded as being highly probable opinions, ones it is much more reasonable to believe than deny.[72] By this point in the meditator's progress, this habitual belief seems to be without justification.

The belief in the existence of external bodies wholly resembling our sensory perceptions is finally reassessed in Sixth Meditation, in the light of the knowledge of own nature and its creator that has been gained through meditating. Descartes's reasoned proof of the existence of body appeals to the fact that God has given us a 'great propensity' to believe that our sensory perceptions are caused by material things, and no faculty for recognizing any other source. The impulse to believe that sensory ideas are *caused* by external bodies is thus legitimated as a natural propensity bestowed by a veracious creator. Now that we know that our creator is not a deceiver, we can say that

> There is no doubt that everything I am taught by nature contains some truth. For if nature is considered in its general aspect, then I understand by the term nothing other than God himself, or the system of created things established by God. And by my own nature in particular I understand nothing other than the totality of things bestowed on me by God.[73]

Descartes claims that our God-given nature teaches us that we have bodies to which we are united, and that our bodies are surrounded by other bodies that vary in ways corresponding to the variation in our sensory perceptions.[74] But the impulse to believe that external

[70] AT VII 39, CSM II 27.
[71] AT VII 40, CSM II 27.
[72] AT VII 22, CSM II 15.
[73] AT VII 80, CSM II 56.
[74] AT VII 81, CSM II 56.

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bodies *wholly resemble* sensory ideas is *not* legitimated as a teaching of nature. Descartes writes:

> There are, however, many other things which *I may appear to have been taught by nature*, but which in reality I acquired not from nature but from *a habit of judging without consideration*, and therefore it may easily turn out that these are false. Cases in point are the belief that any space in which nothing is occurring to stimulate my senses must be empty; or that heat in a body is something exactly resembling the idea of heat that is in me; or that when a body is white or green, the same whiteness or greenness which I perceive through my senses is present in the body; or than in a body that is bitter or sweet there is the same taste which I experience, and so on; or, finally, that stars and towers and other distant bodies have the same size and shape which they present to my senses, and other examples of this kind.[75]

The beliefs listed here are childhood prejudices, beliefs acquired through a habit of making judgements without due consideration that dates back to our earliest years. Since they all reflect the assumption that external bodies wholly resemble our sensory perceptions, that assumption too is a prejudice of childhood. The impulse to believe that external things resemble sensory ideas is revealed as an acquired tendency masquerading as a teaching of nature.

Teachings of nature and childhood habits are easily confused, since long-standing habits are so familiar that they seem natural to us. But their provenance, and hence their epistemic status, is completely different. Teachings of nature come from a God who cannot deceive, so they are guaranteed to contain some truth.[76] Habits of judgement acquired in childhood are most likely to be false. In childhood, as we saw, we are reliant on sensory perceptions for survival, and we come to treat them as infallible guides to truth, a role they were never intended to play. Descartes explains this in an important discussion in which he clarifies what he means by a teaching of nature. Our nature as embodied minds teaches us to avoid external bodies that cause painful sensations, since these are signs of potential

[75] AT VII 82, CSM II 56–7, emphasis added.

[76] Why is what our nature teaches only guaranteed to contain *some* truth? We learn later in the Sixth Meditation that our inner sensations sometimes deceive. This occasional deception of the senses is a natural and unavoidable consequence of our composite nature as human beings, so it is compatible with the perfection of our creator (AT VII 88–9, CSM II 62).

harm, and to seek out ones that cause pleasant sensations, since these are signs of potential benefit. It is here that he says that the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given to us by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful to the mind-body composite. But our nature as composites of mind and body

> does not appear to teach us to draw any conclusions from these sensory perceptions about things located outside us before waiting until the intellect has examined the matter, for knowledge of the truth about such things seems to belong to *the mind alone*, not to the combination of mind and body.[77]

This is a crucial passage. Descartes claims that knowledge of the truth about external bodies belongs to the mind alone, and that is why intellectual examination is required before we make judgements about such things on the basis of sensory perceptions. Of course we made such judgements without intellectual examination in childhood, before we had full use of our reason. But we are at fault because we have continued to make them ever since, even though we now have the capacity to correct them.[78] Through our failure to correct them, we are

> in the habit of perverting the order of nature. For the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part…But I misuse them by treating them as reliable touchstones for immediate judgements about the essences of the bodies located outside us; yet this is an area where they provide very obscure information.[79]

We misuse sensory perceptions when we make them the basis for precipitate judgements about external things without waiting for the intellect to examine the matter.[80] This is the founding error of childhood, which we are now in a position to correct.

This is the final step on the path to correcting the prejudices of the senses. It makes essential use of the lesson learned at the first step, in the Second Meditation, when the meditator discovered that bodies

[77] AT VII 82–3, CSM II 57.

[78] The fact that our creator is not a deceiver guarantees that any falsity in our opinions is correctible by some faculty that is part of our natural endowment (AT VII 80, CSM II 55–6).

[79] AT VII 83, CSM II 57–8.

[80] AT VI 83, CSM II 57–8.

such as the wax are known not by the senses but by the mind alone. This lesson is applied when the meditator reasons that knowledge of the truth about external bodies belongs to the mind alone, not the mind-body composite. Our natures as composites teach us to avoid things that cause pain and seek out what causes pleasure, but it does not teach us to draw conclusions from sensory perceptions about external things 'without waiting until the intellect has examined the matter'.[81] Our tendency to do this is not natural, as we take it to be, but habitual. By nature, knowledge of the truth about external things 'belongs to the mind alone', and that is why we must examine and interpret sensory perceptions before we make judgements about the natures of external bodies.[82] Our failure to do this is the source of the founding error that perverts our nature.

7. The Role of Doubt About the Senses

What role does doubt about the senses play in the process of correcting the founding error? One might think that it operates only at the outset, that it simply helps to wipe the slate clean, to free our minds from our old beliefs or prejudices, so that the process of reconstruction can begin. But such an interpretation would obscure the process of active doubting in which Descartes wants us to engage as the *Meditations* progresses. As we have seen, Descartes states in the Synopsis that the greatest value of the First Meditation doubt is that it frees our minds from prejudices and lays down the easiest route by which the mind may be drawn away from the senses.[83] But he describes the *actual* withdrawal of the mind from the senses as occurring in the Second Meditation, in which the mind uses the freedom it has gained to suppose the non-existence of things perceived through the senses, and thereby becomes aware of its own nature for the first time.[84] He claims in the Second Replies that although many writers had said that the mind must be drawn away from the senses in order to understand metaphysical matters, no

[81] AT VII 82, CSM II 57.
[82] AT VII 82, CSM II 57
[83] AT VII 12, CSM II 9.
[84] AT VII 12, CSM II 9. The Synopsis states that 'this exercise [sc. of doubting the existence of all things, especially material things] is also of the greatest benefit since it enables the mind to distinguish without difficulty what belongs to itself…from what belongs to body' (AT VII 12, CSM II 9).

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one had shown how this could be done. He, Descartes, has provided the correct – and, he claims, unique – method of doing this in the Second Meditation.[85]

As we saw, Descartes begins the Second Meditation by supposing that everything he sees is spurious (*falsa*), that his memory lies, that he has no senses, that body, shape, extension and place are chimeras.[86] The pretence of deception by the demon is invoked several times (AT VII 24–6, CSM II 17–8), reinforcing the thought that sensory images are no more than dreams (AT VII 28, CSM II 19). By disregarding sensory images and denying that anything material exists, we learn to distinguish what belongs to an intellectual nature from what belongs to corporeal things (AT VII 131, CSM II 94).

This direction of mental attention away from sensory perceptions and towards the objects of the understanding is a reversal of the direction it has had since childhood. So it is not surprising that Descartes warns that 'protracted and repeated study' of the Second Meditation is required 'to eradicate the lifelong habit of confusing things related to the intellect with corporeal things, and to replace it with the opposite habit of distinguishing the two'.[87] It takes effort to withdraw attention from sensory images and concentrate the mind on things that cannot be sensed.[88] We have to learn to exercise 'the intellectual vision which nature gave [us], in the pure form which it attains when freed from the senses; for sensory appearances generally disturb and obscure it to a very great extent.[89]

By the start of the Fourth Meditation, the meditator can declare that

> During these past few days I have accustomed myself to leading my mind away from the senses…The result is that I now have no difficulty in turning my mind away from imaginable things and towards things which are the objects of the intellect alone and are totally separate from matter.[90]

[85] AT VII 131, CSM II 94.
[86] AT VII 24, CSM II 16.
[87] AT VII 131, CSM II 94.
[88] Descartes explains in the *Principles* that 'our mind is unable to keep its attention on things without some degree of difficulty and fatigue; and it is hardest of all for it to attend to what is not present to the senses or even to the imagination' (AT VIIIA 37, CSM I 220).
[89] AT VII 162–3, CSM II 115.
[90] AT VII 53, CSM II 37.

The meditator now understands that our own minds and God are 'the most certain and evident of all possible objects of knowledge for the human intellect', as Descartes puts it in the Synopsis.[91]

This realisation corrects one of the prejudices of childhood, the belief that God and the soul are difficult to know because they cannot be sensed. But how does withdrawing the mind from the senses in the Second Meditation enable us to correct our erroneous beliefs about things that *can* be sensed? At the start of the Third Meditation, the meditator realises that the habitual judgement that there are things outside us wholly resembling our sensory ideas is not based on clear perception, and may be false. What puts us in a position to realise this? The realization follows the acknowledgement that we 'previously accepted as wholly certain and evident many things which [we] afterwards realized were doubtful', namely, the earth, sky, stars, and everything that we apprehended with the senses.[92] Presumably these things were realized to be doubtful in the First Meditation. But now the meditator is able to isolate why it is that these things we apprehend through the senses are doubtful. That we have sensory ideas of such things is not in doubt. But the claim that there are external things that wholly resemble our sensory ideas of earth, sky, stars and so on is now recognized as being doubtful because we do not clearly and distinctly perceive that it is true. If we were as certain of this as we are that we are thinking things, we would not be able to doubt it; or, rather, we would be able to doubt it only by doubting the truth of clear and distinct perceptions.

Withdrawal from the senses, as practiced in the Second Meditation, contributes to this discovery in two ways. Firstly, withdrawal from the senses enables us to learn what clear and distinct perception is like. Through discounting sensory images and denying that any body exists, we are able to form 'a concept of the soul which is as clear as possible and is also quite distinct from any concept of body'.[93] We are also able to form a clear and distinct intellectual conception of the piece of wax as an extended thing. Secondly, withdrawal from the senses enables us to understand the limitations of the senses, through the examination of the piece of wax. It reveals that what we call 'sensing' a particular body involves intellectual judgement, and it reveals that the senses grasp the outward forms of extended things. We judge that the wax is there from the colour and shape that we

[91] AT VII 16, CSM II 11.
[92] AT VII 35, CSM II 24.
[93] Synopsis, AT VII 13, CSM II 9.

perceive; knowledge of the wax comes from the scrutiny of the mind alone, not from what the eye sees.[94] But this means that the judgements that the wax is there, and that the wax is thus-and-so, require reasons. If we perceived the existence of the wax as clearly and distinctly as we perceive our own existence, we would be as certain of the former as we are of the latter. However, our claims about the existence of external bodies are not based on clear perception, so we are able to doubt their existence despite our natural propensity to affirm it.

The Second Meditation thus plays a key role in exposing the prejudices of the 'senses' and revealing the standard of clear intellectual perception to which they are to be compared. This fact helps to explain an aspect of Descartes's procedure which might otherwise be puzzling. Descartes believes that our assumption that there are bodies resembling our sensory perceptions is a prejudice, a judgement made without clear rational support. So why does he not launch straight into the critique of the grounds for this judgement at the start of the *Meditations*? Why postpone it until the Third Meditation?

The judgement that we perceive material things through the senses is one that Descartes thinks we have a strong natural propensity to make, so it is not easy for us to withhold assent from it. That is why we need the arguments of the First Meditation to give us reason to withhold assent from it, and the pretence of deception by the demon to enforce the withholding of assent. The belief that external things wholly resemble sensory ideas is not natural, but it is strongly fixed in our minds by habit, so similar measures are needed to loosen our allegiance to it. Our attachment to the senses is so deep-rooted that we are unable to achieve clear intellectual perception until it is loosened; and we need to experience the certainty that attaches to clear and distinct perception in order to realize that the belief is not genuinely certain, but only seems certain because of its familiarity.[95]

So, the First Meditation doubt about the senses, carried forward by the pretence of deception, introduces the meditator to clear intellectual perception in the Second Meditation. This prepares the way for the Third Meditation critique, which introduces deeper and more theoretically significant reservations about the senses than

[94] AT VII 32, CSM II 21.

[95] The confusion of the two is readily explained within Descartes's framework. Clear and distinct perception inclines the will to assent (AT VII 59, CSM II 41), but so does a habit of assenting.

were mooted in the First Meditation. The Third Meditation critique introduces worries about the reliability of teachings of nature, as distinct from worries about clear and distinct perceptions. Since our natural impulses have lead us astray when choosing the good, it seems that we cannot trust our impulse to believe that there are bodies outside us that resemble our sensory perceptions. This worry is finally resolved in the Sixth Meditation, as we have seen. To resolve it we need to know not only that our nature is the gift of a non-deceiving God, but also which impulses derive from that nature and which are due to habit. The impulse to believe that we perceive material things through our senses is natural, and therefore trustworthy. The impulse to believe that those material things wholly resemble our sensory perception derives from a habit of misusing sensory perceptions as guides to the essential natures of external bodies. It is the intellect, not the senses, that grasps the truth about the bodies we perceive, as we learned in the Second Meditation; and we should not make judgements about the bodies we perceive without proper intellectual examination. Here, finally, the meditator is in a position to expose the founding error of childhood, and to correct the habits of bad judgement that perpetuate it.

8. Responding to Hume and Reid

Hume and Reid charge that Cartesian doubt, particularly doubt about the senses, is so unnatural as to be impossible; and they charge that if it could somehow be achieved, it would be of no benefit. Descartes agrees that it is natural for us to believe that we perceive material things when we sense; that is something our nature teaches us. But he also believes that much of what we think we perceive through the senses is simply the result of habits of judgement. If we seek firmer foundations for the sciences than the prejudices of childhood, we must suspend these natural and habitual tendencies to judgement by pretending that we are deceived by an evil demon. By reversing our long-standing preoccupation with sensible things, this process enables us not only to achieve clear intellectual perception, but also to understand our own natures. In particular, it enables us to expose and correct our erroneous beliefs about the purpose of the senses.

In a sense, then, Hume and Reid are right. They are right that the Cartesian meditator does not doubt the existence of the external world in everyday contexts, since the doubt is practiced only during meditation. The withholding of assent is an artificial exercise,

pursued through the pretence of falsity. But Hume and Reid are wrong to claim that Descartes is hypocritical or disingenuous in enjoining us to doubt. The *Meditations* is a manual for cognitive reform, designed for practical use. If the work is to have the psychological effects Descartes wants to achieve, if his readers are to genuinely reform their ways of thinking, they must genuinely withdraw their minds from the senses and treat their old opinions as false. Nothing less will serve to reverse the bad habits of a lifetime and restore us to our true nature as cognitive agents. Moreover, it is precisely because so much of our thinking is grounded in habit rather than nature that it is possible for us to change it. This marks one of Descartes's most fundamental disagreeements with Hume. For Hume, habit is a manifestation of nature; our most basic beliefs, such as our belief in causal connections, are acquired through the influence of habit on the imagination. For Descartes, nature and habit are in conflict. Our habit of reliance on sensory images obscures the natural light of intellectual perception and leads us to confuse habits of bad judgement with genuine teachings of nature.

If the interpretation of the *Meditations* sketched here is along the right lines, there is one final challenge that should be addressed. If the errors we make in childhood are as numerous and as pervasive as Descartes claims, how is it that they have so little practical impact on us? Without the corrective exercise of the *Meditations*, Descartes believes that most people live and die without ever achieving a distinct perception.[96] But most people are not noticeably disadvantaged by this; they still manage to live successful lives. How can this be so? And, if it is so, what advantage could we expect to gain from the arduous task of reversing long-standing beliefs through meditation?

Presumably the errors in question have little everyday impact because they are errors in our beliefs about the underlying structure of the world. Not surprisingly, given their natural purpose, sensory perceptions are a good enough guide to the corporeal world to serve in our daily dealings with it. They tell us where neighbouring objects are and enable us to distinguish them from one another. The fact that we have a confused grasp of the nature of God and the soul has little practical impact. Presumably Descartes thinks that even if we find these metaphysical things hard to understand, we can still know them well enough to do our duty and hope for salvation. Why, then, is it so important for us to correct these errors? Descartes has, I think, at least two answers to this question. Firstly,

[96] AT VIIIA 37, CSM I 220.

if we seek to understand the hidden structure of the corporeal world, if we want to understand it well enough to create new technologies in mechanics or in medicine, we must correct our fundamental childhood misapprehensions. In this way, the correction of these errors is necessary for practical advances. Secondly, we will not understand the truth about our own natures and our relationship to God and the corporeal world unless we correct these fundamental mistakes. We will not achieve the clear intellectual perception that is God's gift to the human mind until we correct the habits of thought that block our way. For both these reasons, we cannot set the sciences on a firm foundation until we correct these habitual errors. For Descartes, the aim of the seemingly artificial process of Cartesian doubt is to reverse the distortions of habit and to show us how to use our faculties as nature intended.

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