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Cartesian Certainty, or Awakening from the Dreams of a Slave

In the *Meno,* Socrates and his interlocutor never succeed in defining virtue. Once Meno loses his initial confidence and has to admit that he is at a loss, he petulantly accuses Socrates of bewitching him. Undismayed, Socrates says that he wants "to examine and seek together with" Meno what virtue is (80d). Meno will have none of such inquiry and instead challenges Socrates as follows:

> How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it how will you know that this is the thing you did not know? (80d)

Socrates responds with the pronouncement that "... all of nature is akin and the soul has learned everything ..." (81d) in a time before birth. Later he says that "...we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that we must search for the things we do not know" (86c). He emphasizes the point by saying that he would do battle to defend it, both in word and deed, so far as he is able. To illustrate how one can learn what one does not already know from what one does know consciously, Socrates uses a slave boy who speaks Greek and has no formal education. The example must suffice. No argument but only a rather far-fetched story asserting the immortality of the all-knowing soul, a mysterious something that absorbs truth in its immaterial state, demonstrates why we should continue to inquire.

But perhaps we do have something else to go on in determining which is more compelling, Meno's challenge or Socrates' response. Besides the example, the rather fantastic story and Socrates' exhortation we have our own experience to confirm that the conscious life of the determined individual offers opportunities to recapture what one has

once learned, apparently even to acquire understanding of things entirely unknown to us before. Whether or not we think all knowledge is ultimately available to us, at least we have all come to recognize something or other to be true. But how can we tell whether the experience we call *recognition* is in fact a sign of truth? Although the example in the slave boy episode is mathematical Socrates evidently considers all realms of knowledge available to the inquiring mind, even the knowledge of what is simply good.

No decent human being who is even semi-aware can fail to wonder sometimes how he or she should live. Furthermore, almost everyone at some point notices that the dictates of authority cannot suffice to guide us. The character Meno in the Platonic dialogue that bears his name is not such a decent human being. He is in no way exemplary. He is pretentious, envious and only superficially interested in the question he asks of Socrates, namely "Can virtue be taught?" and then mostly as a means of enhancing his reputation. He is not very smart. In his defense the most one can say, such as it is, is that he assumes the conventional standard of virtue to be if not wholly true, at least generally accepted and thus powerful. Despite Meno's character, or maybe more pressingly because of the baseness of his character, his question cannot be ignored. Since nature cannot be counted upon to direct people to act well, maybe proper education will succeed. In his determination to take Meno's question seriously Socrates asks first "What is virtue?" a question that has much in common with "How ought I to live?" For surely one ought to aim at virtue if it is in any way within our power to achieve. But what if it is disadvantageous to be virtuous? Is it possible for virtue and the good for human beings to be at odds? Meno's willful refusal to engage in the search for answers to these

questions ought only to irritate the reader into a more determined endeavor to see clearly what is choiceworthy. To recognize that one lacks knowledge both supplies a precondition for that search and entails a criticism of the complacent conventionalism that Meno shares with most seekers of worldly success.

Descartes aims in his philosophical work to discourage us from seeking the basis for our convictions concerning what is best for human beings. In *The Meditations* as in *The Discourses* Descartes provides a solid foundation for the sciences by limiting their scope, and knowledge of the good is and will forever be beyond the scientific pale. In place of a goal to strive for he offers a rule for determining that an assertion is true, and an example of strict self-restraint in refusing to assent to anything that may be illusory. The discipline is hard. Descartes feels himself slipping back into what he calls the dreams of liberty enjoyed by a slave (end, *Meditation I*). Perhaps not all dreams are illusions from which one must strive to be liberated. But which should we trust?

Knowledge for Descartes is of that which is *very* "clear and distinct" in one's mind (Meditation III, end 1st paragraph). In the pursuit of knowledge one must refrain from assenting to anything that is obscure or confused. A good part of the convictions we rely on in making our way in the world undoubtedly lack such clarity and distinctness. Descartes is careful to claim that confused opinions cannot always be replaced by truth. Without advancing any recognizable theory of the good Descartes replaces virtue with proper self-discipline. Such discipline requires that one adhere strictly to his method for avoiding delusion. In *The Passions of the Soul* he claims that to practice virtue is "...

never to lack the will to undertake and accomplish all things that one decides to be best ..." knowing that nothing really belongs to one but the "free disposition of one's will." (*Passions,* Art. 153) Without envy or bad character and seemingly with the greatest rationality, Descartes sides with Meno in his indifference to Socrates' inquiry. What in particular is best for human beings Descartes does not undertake to discuss. Besides the necessity of restraining one's will in accord with what can be known, no general statement about the ends worth pursuing is appropriate.

Just as Descartes alters the ancient understanding of *ta mathematica* to include the elements out of which all figures are composed and only indirectly the figures (curves) themselves, so in general Descartes lowers our philosophical sights to focus on the bases of knowledge. In doing so he shows the way to develop an enormously successful investigation into the workings of nature. But instead of the hope for true if not always satisfying answers to fundamental moral and human questions, we get a rule for the management of our will. The best way to live can be known only formally. What one 'decides' to be best may be best by convention, for our health and well-being or for the improvement of our souls. Hedonistic abandon would be irresponsible insofar as it clouds thought, but might one not decide that the best end to pursue would be tyrannical power? Descartes' moral thought requires that one give up the vain ambition to know what is truly and unequivocally good. But for all his promise to lay the foundation for a science that will disclose the secrets of the natural world, that science can provide little or no defense against evil ambition. Cartesian inquiry is detached from, even indifferent to the most pressing human questions. His answer to the question "How ought one live?" can

be caricatured in this fashion: "Live as though the whole in which you think you find yourself is a fantasy and that the questions you consider fundamental are unintelligible." He is far from indifferent to the need for self-restraint necessary for the development of the sciences. That self-restraint requires that one abandon the search for the highest things. Such a search is based on a dream befitting a slave. Am I being too hard on Descartes? Let us see.

In this talk I will follow the structure of *The Meditations* in discussing first (I) Descartes' project of founding the sciences on a solid foundation and the necessity of the distinction between thinking and extended substance. Next (II), I will argue that his proof of the existence of God, really the proof that there is a reliable distinction between truth and falsehood, is that foundation. Thirdly (III), I will turn to Descartes' use of rules in establishing the distinction between freedom and slavery. Finally (IV) I will consider the successes and the failures of Descartes' method in *The Meditations* and with reference to his moral theory in *The Passions of the Soul.*

I. The Solid Basis of the Sciences

In writing *The Meditations*, Descartes tells us that he thinks it an appropriate time in his life to "destroy generally all my old opinions Meditation I (Pléiade edition: p. 267)," because his mind is free of all cares. Earlier, he explains, he had thought it a fault to deliberate when there was an opportunity usefully to act. Nothing in his own life is apparently at stake in his meditative inquiries. (Compare Descartes' use of a "provisional

morality" in *Discourses.*) He is free to jettison all opinions he received from elsewhere and to "Begin anew from the foundations ..." in order to establish "something firm and constant in the sciences." (*Meditation 1,* p. 267)) To make this possible Descartes decides that he need not examine separately every opinion he holds, for if he attacks the principles the whole edifice will surely fall. *The Meditations* begins as a work of demolition from below the ground up. In Descartes' demolition of conventional and borrowed edifices, anything that can possibly be false must be construed as such. Of what he calls 'general things' such as eyes, a head, hands, we have only suspect images that need not accurately represent anything but, Descartes asserts, there must be things that are simpler and more universal out of which these images are made. The simple and universal things can be known. Corporeal nature and in particular extension belong to this category. Numbers and their relations also pass the test of simplicity and generality that Descartes applies here.

What Descartes refers to as "the things of nature" may or may not be true or real, but the elements out of which they are composed cannot be otherwise, and therefore they are intelligible. Even to make this assertion with confidence, Descartes says he must exert all his care deliberately to go too far, to 'deceive himself' by feigning that "all his thoughts are false and imaginary' (*Meditation I,* p. 272) so as finally to strike a proper balance of belief. Such self-deception is both a demonstration of freedom and the path to real freedom, he seems to say, not the imaginary freedom of a slave who dreams of liberty (cf. end *Meditation I,* p. 272-3). The implication is that the trust we place in what we perceive in the world around us and in ourselves tends to enslave us. Only a radical

disruption of that trust can liberate our thought. Descartes has rejected the dialectical reasoning familiar to us from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Bk. I, 4; 1095b 1-3) that begins with what is first for us in the pursuit of what is first in itself. Contrary to Socrates' argument in Book V of *The Republic* there is no divided line of ascent culminating in intellectual intuition. Rather, intellectual integrity and accomplishment require submission to a rule or a standard. It must begin from what is "certain and indubitable," however abstract and far removed from where we naturally begin our inquiry. Virtue, not surprisingly, will never come up in this series of meditations, but we will be brought to assent that there is an ineluctable distinction between mind and body and that there must be a god. Descartes' god, as we shall see, has little to do with Christianity or with the salvation of souls. He is rather the guarantor of intellectual freedom and integrity. His true nature is to be found in the human mind itself. (What does the preposition 'in' mean here?) The freedom at which Descartes' self-examination aims is self-reliance or more precisely autonomy, the giving of a rule to oneself. The "natural light" of reason which gives rise to such autonomy also engenders distrust of nature as a teacher or a guide.

Descartes' self-reliance must compel the respect of every modern reader. On what else if not on our own minds can we possibly rely? The teachings of the ancients are not in every case reliable (Ex. A's *Physics*). The Bible if taken literally is no better with its hypebolic life spans of men and women, an unconsumed burning bush and a miraculously parting sea. Moreover, interpretations of sacred text are often at odds. Without a Tieresias to prophesy to us or a Virgil to guide us must we not rely on the

naked abilities of our mind to grasp what is indubitably true? Must we not be on our guard against all kinds of deception? Why then does Descartes bother to offer an argument for the existence of God?

In Meditations (1 and) 2 Descartes proceeds to articulate the one most reliable assertion on which all else he claims to be true will depend, the assertion of his own existence. Here too he distinguishes mind from body; they are *the* two fundamentally different sorts of thing. All this is evidently possible without a conviction of God's existence. The inference from the observation "I think," to the assertion"I am" strikes me as it strikes Descartes: it is inescapable. But what does it mean? I am not so sure that it implies that thinking cannot occur without a thing, i.e., an independent being, with the capacity for thought. (In general, I wonder what Descartes means to convey with his frequent use of the word "thing" (*une chose*)). The inference, it seems to me, is primarily grammatical. Moreover, while I cannot deny that thinking of some kind does occur, if by "thinking" I mean something as unsophisticated as doubting, surmising, guessing, wondering, or anything of that sort, again the independence of the subject of the sentence that includes such verbs does not follow at all. But Descartes indeed infers that "I am a thinking thing." In fact, in asking as well as in answering his own question, he says more:

> "I am a true thing, and truly existent, but what thing? I have said it: a thing that thinks. And what further? I will exercise my imagination to seek whether I am not something more. I am certainly not this assemblage of members that we call the human body; I am not a subtle air distributed through the members; I am not a wind, a breath, a vapor, nor anything that I can feign or imagine, since I have supposed all these things to be nothing, and without changing this supposition, I find that I do not leave off being certain that I am some thing." (*Meditation* II, p. 277)

The apparent modesty of Descartes' claim arises from his leaving aside any thing that he cannot clearly associate with the I that thinks. Body in particular has extension but evidently no connection with thought. Given the extreme care with which Descartes dispenses with anything that is unclear, however obvious to everyday understanding, it seems niggardly for the reader to withhold assent to the little he asserts. What it is to be is to be graspable by the mind or rather by thinking. Descartes' rhetoric notwithstanding, this is I believe all that he really means, since a "thing" is surely not necessarily corporeal. In fact, even to be body turns out to be nothing more than to be graspable as extended by thought.

The special character of the wax Descartes examines in *Meditation II* is that it may be grasped as something characterized by extension. The same "thing" that thinks in the broadest sense both recognizes its own existence and grasps the extended character of corporeal things. Extension is a quality wholly intelligible and measurable and thus without residue that eludes the mind. While particular bodies are normally understood only in a confused and imperfect manner that depends upon the senses, Descartes denies that one knows extended things in the same manner. What it is to be known is nothing other than to be graspable by the mind and, I argue, what it is to be mind is to grasp what is known. In following Descartes' analysis we are left with a rather empty, formal idea of mind as well as with an idea of body stripped of sensual characteristics. Body does possess a kind of independence, however, in that it is other than the I that thinks and understands. Like anything that is other than the I itself, it is mediated by the thing that thinks. But what is that thing? For all its immediacy it knows itself only in that it thinks,

desires, fears, or opines something other than itself. Just as grammar requires a subject of the verb in a sentence, mind requires not only a subject of some kind but also an object to complete the transitive verb, "to think." Descartes' approach to knowledge is formal. Can it yield anything but formal truths?

The personal qualities of an individual clearly form no part of the "I" that must indubitably exist. Similarly, the piece of wax Descartes reports examining turns out to be simply an extended "thing" of certain dimensions. The odor Descartes noticed in it at first vanishes in the attempt to clarify precisely what the wax is. All bodies are the same insofar as they are knowable and any extended thing in particular may or may not exist. Mind is similarly indistinguishable from other mind or, to be more precise, there is only one mind, the "I" that any thinker must recognize as necessarily involved in all thought. Descartes calls it "*l'esprit humain*" (title to *Meditation II*), saying that it is better known than "body," but he is careful to use the verb *connaître* (*to know* in the sense of *to be familiar with)* here rather than *savoir (to know* in a scientific sense). Presumably it is inevitably familiar to each of us even though it is entirely without content or character. But science will demand more than familiarity. The transparency of the twofold assertion "I think, I am" is merely a place for Descartes to begin, not an adequate ground for any respectable scientific claim to know.

II. The Proof of God's Existence, or That There is Truth

Without the proof of the existence of God and the account of his nature that Descartes gives in *Meditation III*, there could be no ground or reliable basis for the claim of

scientific knowledge. Meno's challenge to Socrates seems especially relevant in Descartes' *Meditation III.* How is it possible to know whether the being Descartes describes here is in fact properly deserving of the title "God?" Perhaps it is easier to see that the conviction that there is a being independent of his own mind which Descartes claims to know supplies a basis for his reliance on "God" as a single Archimedean point on which scientific inquiry must rely. Something must rescue his work from the subjectivity that threatens to engulf it on one side and the emptiness that threatens to make it meaningless on the other.

If we must doubt that God created us and the world we live in and that he is a kind and merciful being, and surely Descartes means for us to do so, what will reassure us when we meet with his assertion that God is the being *par excellence?* Here is a test whether Descartes' claim is true that clarity and distinctness can rescue us from ignorance. If we strip from the idea of God all extraneous images we must see that the idea of being is innate and yet beyond our power to engender it. The mind cannot think clearly without recognizing what it is to be. Prior even to the recognition of any particular thing that exists Descartes' directs his mind to the idea of God as being itself. Being is both beyond human imagining and allows for the distinction between the imagined and the real. Since this is the key to my reading of *The Meditations* allow me to examine the argument in detail.

Descartes' line of reasoning is as follows. To begin with, he reiterates that whatever else is doubtful, he is sure that all his thoughts, sentiments and imaginings "...certainly reside

and are encountered in me," (p. 284) and that is all he has noticed so far that he knows (*savoir*). On further reflection he infers that he is certain as well of a general *rule*, that "all the things that we conceive very clearly and distinctly are true (p. 284)." Clarity and distinctness admit of degrees, but presumably one can tell unequivocally when they have been achieved, if not fully, superlatively. Descartes goes on to make two distinctions which together lay the groundwork for his proof of the existence of God. *First*, he distinguishes among innate ideas, those which apparently come from without, and those which we simply invent. The ability to recognize that one thinks is surely innate, but warmth appears to derive from something outside us that we call the sun and I may, of course, have an idea of a centaur without there being any such thing. The innate idea of God in a certain sense violates Descartes' threefold distinction among things that derive from ourselves, that appear from without (like the sun) and that we invent (centaurs). This idea of a Being as "... sovereign, eternal, infinite, unmovable, all-knowing and all-powerful..." contains unequivocally, according to Descartes, more objective reality than those ideas which represent finite substances (*Meditation III*, p. 289), and thus cannot derive from myself, and yet the idea of God's true nature is found *in* the mind.

Secondly, there are different reasons for believing that objects are as I think them. He calls these "nature" or "a certain inclination" on the one hand and, on the other, the "internal light" which makes one aware *(fasse connaître)* that something is true. (Is this natural light what accounts for what we call *recognition*?) Since no faculty ever contradicts the latter, Descartes deems it trustworthy. Since the force loosely called "nature" leads as often to vice as to virtue, to evil as to good, Descartes deems it

untrustworthy in distinguishing the true from the false. One can only wonder at this point what faculty allows Descartes to distinguish good from evil more reliably than the inclination that appears to come from nature. (Is he relying on pleasure and pain, on convention?) Clearly the idea of God is suspect unless it can be both illumined by the internal light of nature and representative of something beyond the thinking self. Does the "objective reality" contained in the idea of God enable it to illuminate the character of objects around us?

The phrase "objective reality" is in need of some explanation. Is Descartes perhaps begging the question what distinguishes the idea of God from other innate ideas when he ascribes such reality to the idea of God? While it is clear enough that ideas may arise in a human mind without being representative of an independent (real) state of affairs, it is not yet clear how one can be sure that any ideas accurately represent an object distinguishable from the subject that thinks them. In principle this is possible, or at least not self-contradictory, but on what grounds can one say more? When Descartes answers that the natural light makes manifest the objective reality of the idea of God he is not claiming that God must be outside the mind, an object separable from the thinking subject. He says rather: "... there must be as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect: for whence may the effect acquire its reality if not from the cause? And how may such a cause be communicated to it [the effect] if it does not have it within itself?" (p. 289). The idea of God supersedes in reality any other idea we may have and even the mind itself that possesses ideas. The response contains an ambiguity: does Descartes acknowledge any real difference between the cause and the effect to which he

refers? Surely we are not dealing here with a cause and an effect separate from one another in time and in space. Are they separable at all?

As Descartes continues his discussion of the existence of God, it becomes clear that the issue that concerns him has nothing to do with sin and forgiveness, judgment or mercy, or even with whether or not there is a creator of the world of man. *Meditation III* is the articulation of the one fixed and assured Archimedean point to which he refers at the beginning of the *Second Meditation*. The point on which all the rest of Descartes' assertions rely is simply this: being is not nothing and cannot arise from nothing. Being is what Descartes entitles "God." Only that which has being can be very clear and distinct to the human mind. Almost everything we think of lacks a source of being in itself – it may or may not be. Unless its truth or its existence can be verified, it may and ought to be doubted. Only God, or Being itself, can be reliably asserted to be the object that corresponds to the subject that thinks. Without such a God, we may simply be kidding ourselves when we claim to know anything at all. Two and two must be four if they are to be at all, but they cannot bring about their own union. Nor can the thinker take responsibility for making one number out of the two, for in doing so he follows a rule that governs unequivocally and independently of his desires. But insofar as it thinks what is intelligible, does the thinker even possess desires? The intelligible for Descartes is what is. It is Being or God. It is not so much beyond the being that thinks as it is distinct from the human that pretends to be thinker. So long as we have access to the God of what is, we ought to be in a position to acquire a body of knowledge worthy of the name. When Descartes says of the idea of God that it cannot arise from himself, he means to show that

it justifies the most indisputable, "objective" assertions that something must be. It was already implied in the movement from the observation "I think", to the claim, "I am."

Descartes adopts the apparently Aristotelian distinction between potentiality and actuality to argue that an idea of God in all his perfection cannot arise from a merely potential being "which is, to speak precisely, nothing" (*Meditation III*, p. 296) but only from one that is actual and formal. While the distinction sounds familiar, Descartes' alterations render it very different in meaning from Aristotle's use of the terms. Instead of looking from the variety of particular beings to their natural ends as Aristotle does – from an acorn to an oak, to use the standard example, or from a baby to an adult - Descartes relies for actuality on the universal and formal ways in which something may be, either as thinking or as extended substance. In both cases, its being is unequivocal. The equivocal (e.g., my fourteen year old son) remains unknown and for now quite unintelligible.

Descartes' idea of God is then nothing more than the abstraction and generalization of the copula "is" and as such it is more real than anything else about which we can speak. Not only are there particular beings about which one may or may not have accurate knowledge, in fact which may or may not exist at all, but for Descartes there is also Being itself, a guarantor that the distinction between what is and what is not rests on solid ground. No less than Plato and Socrates, Descartes is determined that truth not be confused with opinion any more than with falsehood. Truth may be recognized or ignored but in any case it will remain what it is. Having made the reliability of every assertion depend on the awareness of the I that thinks ("opines, fears, presumes, etc.), it is

of great importance for Descartes to assert that there is a truth independent of the individual who takes it upon himself to judge. Descartes' proof of the existence of God is nothing more nor less than the proof that there is such a thing as truth, that something can be known. I am not, as Descartes says, "...alone in the world, but there is something else that exists ...." (*Third Meditation*, p. 291). What exists, as we all must acknowledge, may be something very different from what we expect and hope to find.

III. Submission to Rule as the Way to Freedom

The primary way that what exists in the Cartesian world differs from what one tends to expect in that it consists almost entirely of general rules. Those rules indeed are meant to apply to particular beings, but anything particular is unknowable and unreliable in itself. Particular things, in fact, can be known only insofar as they follow the rules Descartes articulates. There is neither a knowable whole nor a knowable individual. Just as a variety of ideas can be either clear and distinct or murky and confused, so also all body is objectively extended and only subjectively endowed with color, taste, odor, or feel. There is a hierarchy of knowables with the existence of God and the distinction between thinking and extended substance at the top. The argument for the existence of God is in fact primarily the laying out of a standard of intelligibility. Only the intelligible can be asserted indubitably to be. The light of nature teaches that fraud and deception must arise from some defect in the deceiver (end *Meditation* III, p.300) and Being can have no defect in itself.

If all substance is either thinking or extended, all knowable beings must be one or the other. Extended things can be measured and compared with one another by means of a common unit, for example of length. But how important is it to the being of a hippopotamus or an apple tree that they have different measurements? Moreover, how can a human being be both thinking and extended? It is impossible to know that any natural being coheres, except murkily and provisionally. What is truly knowable, however certain and even useful it may be, leaves out a good deal that one might wish to find out. In *The Meditations* Descartes educates his reader to free him or herself from false hopes. He is confident that, wishes aside, the knowable leaves out nothing without which one cannot proceed to develop a secure foundation for the sciences.

The key to the foundation of the sciences is the ability reliably to distinguish the true and the false, and this is the subject of *Meditation IV*. Descartes feels justified in building upon the distinction having assured himself that there is nothing equivocal in our recognition of God or Being as a standard. There is no possibility of deception or trickery by a Being that is in no way defective. This may sound like a moral claim, and in fact Descartes means it to give such an impression. But is it true that an entity that lacks nothing would be in no way tempted or inclined to deceive another? Could a benevolent governor of the universe and of men never be inclined to deceive an inferior being for his own good? If the light of nature pronounces unequivocally on this issue, it seems to me it can only mean that Descartes' God is so far removed from defects that it has no response to them, no awareness of them, whatsoever. There is no more reason to attribute benevolence to such a Being than fraud or malevolence. Descartes' God is not

even conscious of the inferior beings that look to "him" for guidance. Furthermore, he is no more thoughtful than he is an extended substance. He is rather pure, formal being, that which the two kinds of substance have in common and which partakes no more in one than in the other. While this God facilitates the foundation of all the sciences indifferently through establishing the distinction between the true and the false, he has nothing to contribute to our understanding of human life or anything else that is problematic for thoughtful and imperfect beings.

But surely the true and the false matter in the specifically human striving for a life worth living. Descartes' promise is hardly to be disdained. He says:

> And already it seems to me that I am discovering a road which will lead us from the contemplation of the true God (in whom all the treasures of science and wisdom are contained) to the knowledge of the other things in the universe. (p. 301)

Surely wisdom and the knowledge of such treasures is a goal worth seeking, maybe even the proper goal for human life. Descartes is quick to tell us, though, that the ends of God are inscrutable and that final causes "... have no use in physical, or natural, things." (p. 303) The science he promotes has nothing to do with ends; or rather lacking knowledge of ends humans can use the knowledge scientific inquiry enables us to acquire for any ends we choose. Descartes' repudiation of final causes leads naturally to the distinction between the will which is unlimited in scope and our knowledge which is necessarily limited. To avoid error we must learn to restrain our will within the bounds set by our limited understanding. True freedom requires such restraint.

To act spontaneously, according to Descartes, is evidence of only a very low level of freedom. He contrasts the freedom of indifference with the free pursuit of something one knows to be both true and good. I am not sure what sort of good or goods Descartes has in mind here. It is clear though that he considers assent a kind of action, and that one should withhold assent unless the degree of clarity and distinctness of one's ideas compel one to acknowledge their truth. Besides self-awareness, the only thing within our possession is our unlimited ability to accept as true even what lies beyond our ken. In other words, we possess unlimited freedom of the will or a boundless capacity for error. Cautious control of one's assent to such claims Descartes calls a "good" use of one's freedom. In this, he says "the greatest and principle perfection of man consists." (*Meditation* IV, p. 309), (cf. opening definition of virtue) presumably because no man has the capability to recognize a good beyond himself and to pursue it. We possess in great measure the ability to deceive ourselves by accepting as true what we have no business claiming to know. A perfect being would never succumb to the delusions that plague humans. Such a being also may lack not only the answers to Socrates' questions but even an awareness that they demand to be asked.

Descartes' response to Meno's challenge to Socrates, then, is somewhat less than satisfying, but it is clear. You will recognize what you are seeking to discover if you have a standard by which to evaluate it (namely clarity and distinctness). If the response fails to meet that standard, you will do well to withhold your assent, and in doing so you will remain free in the low sense of the term. With careful reformulation, presumably most questions worth pursuing can find satisfactory responses. Meno's unwillingness to

think for himself would not meet with Descartes' approval any more than it impresses Socrates. The slave boy despite his dependence on Socrates appears freer than his master in that he ventures suggestions and revises his judgment in accord with what he sees and understands. As the slave boy episode in the *Meno* suggests, a slave is someone who fails to strive to replace his ignorance with knowledge. Meno is more slavish than the man whose life and labor he commands. Like Plato, Descartes condemns inactivity. He closes *Meditation V* by proclaiming that he knows now "... how I should act in order to arrive (p. 309) at the truth. For certainly I shall arrive at this end if I devote my attention sufficiently to those things I conceive perfectly ...." But this says nothing about the raising of uncomfortable questions that his method cannot address.

In the *Meditations* Descartes does not emphasize the limits to our knowledge, instead focusing on what can be known. Although *Mediation III* contains Descartes' proof of the existence of God and he builds upon that proof in his subsequent reasoning, he devotes much of *Meditation V* to the same issue. In the course of examining other ideas which might be perfectly clear and distinct and therefore true, or which might contain something confused and therefore suspect, Descartes remarks that the idea of God is different from all others in that it alone combines inseparably essence and existence. This idea and no other represents something true and unalterable which must always have been and which must continue for all eternity the same. None of what Descartes says here adds anything new to the idea of God he describes earlier. It does make manifest the implication we saw already in *Meditation III*, namely that there is nothing in this idea of God that resembles a personal or individual being. Even in comparison with the idea of a triangle,

Descartes insists, the clarity of the idea of God is unsurpassed. Moreover, it underlies and justifies everything that can be known: "The certitude of all other things depend on it so absolutely, that without this knowledge (*connaissance*) it is impossible ever to know (*savoir*) anything perfectly." (p. 315) Being and nothing can have nothing in common. The freedom to judge for oneself responsibly derives from this fact.

Freedom from authority in the establishment of the sciences is essential in Descartes' understanding. Among his followers no scholastic philosophy will hinder the examination of one's presuppositions and the investigation of nature. As much as Bacon, Descartes vilifies the dependence on idols (Bacon, *The New Organon,* I, 39-68). True freedom, in contrast with the freedom in which the slave delights in his dreams, requires strict mental discipline, which in turn requires that one keep in view the impassable barrier between those things we are naturally led to consider true without proof and those things unequivocally known. As I noted earlier, for Socrates and Plato too it is crucial that one distinguish between opinion and knowledge. The thinker must continue to seek knowledge with unflagging effort, but with respect to most things of importance it appears to elude the seeker continually. (cf. Socrates, *Apology,* 21d: "...whatever I do not know, I do not even suppose I know.") Only if one knew for certain what virtue was could one know how, or whether, it could be conveyed from one human being to another. Meno for one is astounded that Socrates can claim openly to know so little. There is only a superficial similarity between Socrates' acknowledgement of ignorance and Descartes' deliberate ploy of going too far when he doubts even that he is awake when he sits by the

fire and writes, or whether his hands are his own. Descartes is thoroughly convinced that he can resolve this doubt satisfactorily.

Descartes documents his recovery from the excess of doubting his own corporeality, his return to a more natural level of self-scrutiny, in *Meditation VI*. There Descartes acknowledges that he does indeed have a body that is inextricably his own and that other corporeal bodies exist in the world where he cannot help but interact with them. His trust in his everyday sense of the world does not seem to be noticeably altered; it has merely been placed on a reliable, "scientific" foundation which allows Descartes to assent to it freely. Descartes is confident that his method can replace slavish images of liberty. While the Platonic Socrates never engages in the particular excesses of doubt from which Descartes recovers, he ends most of his conversations with an acknowledgement of at least partial ignorance. With respect to the question of what virtue is, for example, he progresses little further than the slave boy with whom he demonstrates the availability of knowledge to Meno. If certain knowledge about the most important things gives one freedom, he does not hesitate to accept the company even of slaves.

IV. Success and Failure

In Descartes' return to normalcy he acknowledges an intimate tie between God and nature, which teaches many things by means of the senses. As long as these things can be grasped clearly and distinctly Descartes now considers himself justified in trusting them. Having trained himself to withhold assent unless a claim can be known with certainty, the author cannot have turned as gullible as most of his readers in our

uneducated state. The assertions that Descartes accepts as the teaching of the senses are preternaturally precise and particular. Measurement supplants classification of things by more subjective and questionable criteria. Using the distinction between the singular mind and the divisible body to underlie his inquiry Descartes asks which part of a body is moved in exactly which way when a sensation is felt. In *The Passions of the Soul* Descartes uses a similar sort of reasoning to designate the pineal gland as the site of the interaction of soul and body (Part I, Article 31). For the most part the human body functions as a machine (Art. XIII). All the power we have to seize control of ourselves when a violent emotion disposes us to act in a way we judge wrong must act on this tiny gland. However small the gland, though, the action of thinking upon extended substance remains a mystery.

It is possible that Descartes' discussion of the role of the pineal gland is not entirely serious. As an explanation of the integrity of body and soul the account is obviously inadequate. Descartes asserts that the soul belongs to the body as a whole (*Passions*, Part I, Article 30. Still, by means of his account of the role of the pineal gland Descartes rightly and definitively rejects the notion that corporeal nature completely accounts for human behavior, thus obviating any need for moral judgment. The physical science that investigates bodily processes must be complemented, in Descartes' view, with a scientific study of the passions and our power to control their effects. Proper action is the goal of Descartes' study of the passions of the soul. In my introduction I have alluded to the notion of virtue that results from the Cartesian analysis of the passions. In true modern fashion it lacks any reference to a final cause and thus is thoroughly at odds with ancient

ethical thought. In fact, Descartes opens the *Passions* by announcing that "There is nothing in which the defective character of the sciences that we have from the ancients appears more fully than in what they have written concerning the passions." (Art. 1) In Article 47 Descartes outlines his line of attack on Platonic and Aristotelian ethics. There is no distinction between the higher and lower parts of the human soul. The body alone is the source of everything repugnant to reason. Our ability to live in accord with reason depends simply on our strength of soul to adhere to our moral and prudential judgments. True generosity (*générosité*) seems to be the highest passion. It consists partly in the knowledge that "...nothing truly belongs to a man but the free disposition of his volitions (will) ... and partly in that he senses in himself a firm and constant resolution to use it well, that is never to lack the will to undertake the things he judges to be best; which is perfectly to follow virtue." (Article 153). Meno would have been impressed.

The seeming simplicity of Descartes' account of generosity is seductive. His confidence that no soul lacks the ability to exert absolute control over one's passions is reassuringly democratic (*Passions,* Article 50; but see also Article 46). When he offers no explanation of the end toward which one's self-control must be directed, perhaps it is natural to shrug one's shoulders and admit that everyone knows that to be in command of oneself is good. Yet it seems to me that the questioning of ends arises naturally and that it cannot justifiably be suppressed. Is there any appropriate goal for humans as humans, or only a variety of particular ends? If there is a universal goal, is it clearly and distinctly recognizable as freedom or self-rule?

As I wonder about ends I find I must retreat and ask a preliminary question. Does Descartes succeed in freeing himself from slavish ignorance by means of distinguishing and assenting to those things that are certain? It seems to me that in the course of the *Meditations* Descartes narrows painfully (despotically?) the scope of what human beings aspire to know. If Descartes is correct, only within that narrow scope does it make sense to seek certainty. In eliminating the dreams of the slave to know things that no one else has yet clarified sufficiently, he deliberately restricts our intellectual and moral freedom. Descartes' God is a guarantor of only the most limited sort of knowledge, that which is characterized by perfect transparency. (Euclid's *Elements* ?) The edifice of modern science has indeed been built upon the things that one can measure and quantify, abstracting from what Newton called "secondary qualities," those qualities deemed too subjective to be unqualifiedly known. The usefulness of scientific research into diseases and their cures, for example, ought to go without saying. The dangers too of modern science and its technological applications merit a great deal of our attention both in public discussion and in private inquiry. But even the intellectual climate in which such issues are raised bears the marks of the narrowing of the scope of human inquiry. The standard of certainty that has been raised on high does not cover over the ignorance of ends that plagues us moderns. We who have inherited and been shaped by the Cartesian scientific approach tend to believe that apart from a mysterious sort of conviction called "faith," the aspects of the world that can be known are limited. They have little to do with determining how one ought best to live.

Contemporary readers cannot easily dismiss Descartes' implicit criticism of the thought of his predecessors. Where it is possible to obtain certain knowledge, to accept as true what, in the most extreme case, we merely wish to believe, is slavish. To accept as probable what can be proven indubitably is irresponsible. Descartes' works powerfully illustrate the drive to achieve perfect clarity and undeniable certainty concerning anything that can be known. Yet he nowhere gives an account of the drive itself. He never explains the nature of the scientist who strives to distinguish the basis of scientific knowledge and moreover to guide others in its pursuit. The self-command Descartes places at the pinnacle of virtue has nothing in common (or almost nothing) with the passion that motivates such striving. Can the desire to know be just an accident that results from the movement of "animal spirits" in Descartes' blood? Perhaps a Socratic dialogue with the lover of clarity would reveal the character of this yearning. Descartes would undoubtedly refrain from posing any question to which he could not give a definitive response. He would offer carefully contrived answers difficult to dispute. We have seen how he would respond to Meno. It is not clear whether Socrates' playful charm and logical flexibility would have much effect.

From the point of view of modern Cartesian science Plato's dialogues indulge an intellectual failing in leading readers to suppose we know something about ourselves when we recognize a yearning that moves one of Plato's characters. Descartes confines himself to recognizing his mere existence when he reflects on the proposition "I think." He refrains from attributing anything to his own being than its undeniability. Not only his self-restraint but also his *générosité,* his commitment to pursuing what he deems good,

is impeccable. Yet the consequence of Descartes' virtue is that he fails to account for the extraordinary drive that distinguishes his desire for knowledge from ordinary desires. In scientific inquiry the outcome of the drive, namely clarity and therefore useful and reliable knowledge, is all that matters. Nonetheless, it is a failing of his science that it does not illuminate the nature of the seeker of knowledge himself.

Conclusion

True to Descartes' teaching, modern natural science does not invite questions about the scientist's own endeavor, but such questions naturally and I hope persistently arise. Can the desire to know be understood without introducing a final cause? Is the search for definitive knowledge, whether or not one attains it, human excellence? Is this search accidental and finally irrational? This much seems to me clear: to fail to seek further understanding in such pressing matters where even the questions have not been definitively formulated is no virtue. How indeed are we to recognize the standard of human excellence if we do not know where it may be found? And what does it mean in general to *recognize* something as true and compelling? Why can we not dispense with this turn of phrase, which recalls Socrates' response to Meno, even in discussing Cartesian thought? Perhaps when we speak of recognition we are indulging in a habit that derives from the unjustified prejudice that our souls have an inkling of things of which we are not fully aware. The truth about the soul is of no small concern. For may not even a "free" and rational man who has discerned new and useful truths but who lacks self-understanding be more a slave than Meno's slave boy, who has learned that the

free use of reason may lead to an answer that a narrow use of reasonable rules rejects as irrational and thus false?

Descartes developed a mathematical method for relating rational and irrational numbers. Algebra allows one to manipulate numbers without either identifying them or translating them into geometrical shapes. In freeing number from geometry and from the numerable in general Descartes created an indispensable tool for modern mathematics. It nonetheless "frees" the mathematician from asking even about the relation of number to truth. The light of nature may fail to illuminate all that is obscure; it may hinder the recognition that something lurks unexamined in the darkness. What it is to be human is among those things about which it fails to enlighten the modern soul.

While the greatness of Descartes' accomplishment may cloud some readers' recognition of the limits he places on human knowledge, I must be careful not to focus my attention exclusively on what he failed to offer. Descartes was clairvoyant about the accomplishments of modern science. The blinders he imposed upon himself and his readers were deliberately imposed and meant to preserve us from wandering astray in pursuit of what cannot be. The imagination of men's hearts leads them astray and the path of righteousness, like that of truth, may be narrow. But the freedom to wander even in blind alleys and cul-de-sacs, to ask questions that may meet with no satisfactory response, seems to me eminently worth defending. Seen from the perspective of the dialectician, no opinion is too trivial or too seemingly pernicious to forbid examination. Socrates welcomes Meno's challenge and he has greater patience for the man than his

character can possibly justify. In his willingness to continue to ask unwelcome questions, if in nothing else, I hope we may try to imitate Plato's Socrates. To protect freedom in an age that takes for granted the standard of scientific certainty may take a level of persistence that borders on the quixotic. It is right to wonder whether it is best to discipline one's mind to forget the questions that seemingly are doomed to fail of a response. If Nietzsche is correct, forgetfulness is a precondition of higher accomplishment (*The Use and Abuse of History,* Part I, p. 6). It may just as easily be the accompaniment of terrible if not irreparable loss – the loss of the human itself.