meets all her poets; it is they
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wiser law of music sway
l imaginings.
– Lowell

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How Does a Seminar Work?

The opening question of this talk seems to presuppose resolution of what may well be taken as a prior question: how can a seminar work? That is, how is it possible for a seminar to work? In either question, the two key words to be considered are, of course, "seminar" and "work." What are we to mean by either? As I hope to show, the appropriate meanings for these two words are intimately linked.

Some of you who are here have been enrolled in courses called seminars, but there would probably be a wide latitude amongst them with respect to structure and content. There are, however, some common elements to be discerned. An obvious characteristic is limitation as to size: it doesn't make sense to populate a seminar with 200, 100, or even 50 participants. In my experience 20 is a rough upper limit. Well, why 20, but not 50? Because interaction of a certain sort is possible in the former case, but not the latter. The intention to make possible interaction of a certain sort, then, emerges as the reason for limiting the size of a seminar. And I will show that this limitation is not simply practical but verges on the theoretical. Before attempting to indicate what I mean by "a certain sort" of interaction, let me briefly remind you of what the opposite of a seminar is, namely a lecture course.

A lecture course is one in which, typically, there are two non-intersecting classes of people, those who know the subject and those who do not. Those who know impart the knowledge needed for successful completion of the course to those who do not have it. An appropriate analogy might be taken from physics: given a large enough room with a constant temperature provided by a practically inexhastible heat source, any number of bodies can be brought in from the cold and raised to ambient temperature. To fill out the analogy, the practically inexhaustible external heat source is the

fund of the lecturer's knowledge, only some of which is needed to teach the course, that is, to warm up the cold bodies. "A" students are those who have become perfectly warm; lower grades indicate the presence of heat sinks.

Now, one characteristic of lecture courses that becomes manifest is that there is no theoretical limit to the size of the room or the number of people who can come in to get warm. The reason thereof is clear: interaction is not of the essence of a lecture course. To be sure, there are occaisional questions, but these usually are requests for clarification. And if such questions probe more deeply, they result in at most a redirection of the flow of information from the learned to the ignorant.

Consider again the meaning of a seminar. There is an exemplary description of one sort of seminar in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. Robert Pirsig, the author and erstwhile teacher of rhetoric at a state university in Montana, comes to that great grey citadel of learning, the University of Chicago, there to read Plato and Aristotle with the master teachers (presumably Richard McKeon and Allan Bloom). I do not wish to evaluate Pirsig's reading of Plato's Phaedrus, but to indicate the kind of interaction that went on in this seminar. And I use this example because its description is both readily accessible and typical of what goes on in most seminars and in many law school courses -- and therefore has wide resonance. In brief, what we see there is lecturing by covert means: asking questions which have predetermined answers. The interaction takes the form of pseudo-Socratic questions from the side of the professor and, from the side of the students, attempts to guess what's in his mind. How this procedure affects children is made clear in John Holt's Why Children Fail; in Pirsig's classmates one sees it producing a familiar, if complex behavior pattern of brown-nosing and covering one's ass, a pattern based on the fear of appearing ignorant. To be sure, there is interaction: its goal is to allow the professor to determine whether each student is getting the canonical message, whether that message is primarily one of content or one of method.

There is another sort of seminar which I consider to be exemplary. One sees it most often, perhaps, in a discipline like mathematics or physics. What I have in mind is the seminar given by, say, a visiting topologist for a group of her university peers. Such a seminar takes the form of the visitor's presenting the results of -- and the questions raised by -- her current research. Such a seminar is alive, precisely because, I would say, the visitor does not present herself -- nor is she taken by her peers -- as an authority in the manner of Pirsig's seminar leader. The interaction in this case is real, by which I mean two-sided, for everyone is learning. When people understand themselves as peers, there is only one court of appeal in the discussion, and that is "sweet reason" herself.

Now the kind of seminar I want to talk about is one appropriate for, among other people, undergraduates at our university. And the kinds of texts I mean to propose for discussion may, perhaps, be better exemplified than characterized. Let me name only a few: the Iliad and Odyssey, the Nichomachean Ethics, and the Bible. There is an immediately plausible reason why such texts should be read by such people as those who are here this evening: the authors were composing these works not for specialists, but for people like you and me. And who am I vis-a-vis you? Well, in one sense, no one special, or rather special only in the sense that all of us are special. True, I do know a little Greek -- alas, no Hebrew -- enough to dope out some passages, not enough to read comfortably. Perhaps I have read the Odyssey more often than most of you; probably some of you have a more intimate aquaintance with the Bible than I. The point is that, with respect to thaese texts, you and I are essentially peers.

One of the seminar participants asked me after our last meeting what it would be like to have books of the Book as texts for a seminar. My short answer was that it would be no different than what should happen in a seminar on Aristotle. This lecture gives me the occaision to propose a longer answer and to use this answer as a way of addressing the question of the lecture's title. Wendell Berry shows as direct a route as I know to the heart of this question.

There is a recurring concern in the American polity that the Bible should not be a subject of study in public schools, or if it is to be studied, it should be studied as literature. But Berry is surely right in arguing that "the interesting question here is not whether young English-speakers should know the Bible -- they obviously should -- but whether a book that so directly offers itself to our belief or disbelief can be [read] 'as literature.' It clearly cannot be so [read] except by ignoring 'whatever else [it] may be,' which is a very substantial part of it. The question, then, is whether it can be adequately or usefully [read] as something less than it is. The fact that they were writing ... 'literature.' They thought they were writing the truth, which they expected to be believed by some and disbelieved by others. It is conceivable that the Bible could be well taught by a teacher who believes that it is true, by a teacher who believes that it is untrue, or by a teacher who believes that it is partly true. That it could be well taught by a teacher uninterested in the question of its truth is not conceivable."*

But the larger point here is "that we could not consider teaching the Bible 'as literature' if we were not already teaching literature 'as literature' -- as if we do not care, as if it does not matter, whether or not it is true. The causes of this are undoubtedly numerous, but prominent among them is a kind of shame among teachers of literature and other 'humanities' that their truths are not objectively provable as are the truths of science. There is now an embarassment about any statement that depends for confirmation upon experience or imagination or feeling or faith, and this embarassment has produced an overwhelming impulse to treat such statements merely as artifacts, cultural relics, bits of historical evidence, or things of 'aesthetic value.' We will study, record, analyze, criticize, and appreciate. But we will not believe; we will not, in the full sense, know.

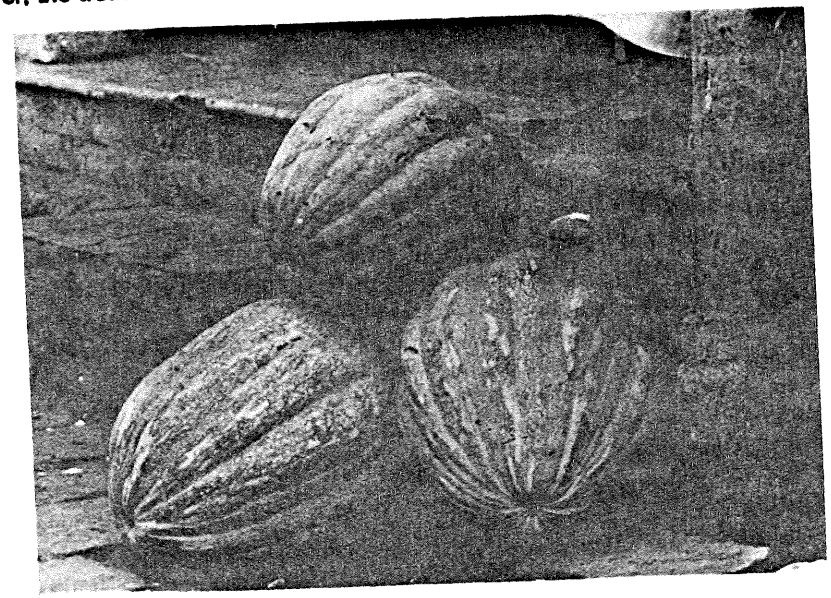
"The result is a stance of 'critical objectivity' that causes many teachers, historians, and critics of literature to sound -- not like mathematicians or chemists; their methodology does not permit that yet -- but like ethologists, students of the behavior of a species to which they do not belong, in whose history and fate they have no part, their aim being, not to know anything for themselves, but to 'advance knowledge.' This may be said to work, as a textual mechanics, but it is not an approach by which one may know any great work of literature [or philosophy]. That route is simply closed to people interested in what 'they' thought 'then'; it is closed to people who think that 'Dante's world' or 'Shakespeare's world' is far removed and completely alienated from 'our world'; and it is closed to the viewers of poetic devices, emotional effects, and esthetic values."**

"Objectivity, in practice, means that one studies or teaches one's subject as such, without con-

*Wendell Berry, Home Economics, "The Loss of the University," pp. 91-92.

**Ibid., pp. 92-93.

cern for its relation to other subjects or to the world -- that is, without concern for its truth. If one is concerned, if one cares, about the truth or falsity of anything, one cannot be objective: one is glad if it is true and sorry if it is false; one believes it if it is judged to be true and disbelieves it if is judged to be false. Moreover, the truth or falsity of



-- RAKESH BRENNIG '93

some things cannot be objectively demonstrated, but must be determined by feeling and appearance, intuition and experience. And this work of judgement cannot take place at all with respect to one thing or one subject alone. The issue of truth rises out of the comparison of one thing with another, out of the study of the relations and influences between one thing and another and between one thing and many others.

"Thus, if teachers aspire to the academic virtue of objectivity, they must teach as if their subject has nothing to do with anything beyond itself. The teacher of literature, for example, must propose the study of poems as relics left by people who, unlike our highly favored modern selves, believed in things not subject to measurable proof; [the works of Homer and Aristotle, or the Bible itself] may be [read] as having to do with matters once believed but not believeable. [Religious] poetry, [for example], is to be learned about; to learn from it would be an embarrassing betrayal of objectivity."***

Let me once again return to the seminar and admit that I have not been speaking so much about what it is as about what it is not -- or rather about the conditions which make it impossible. I will now try to speak more directly. The seminar, then, is a learning, not a learned community dedicated to the task of examining the claims of worthy authors to truth. Seminar participants are explicitly dedicated to learning from the texts, not about one another. The last assertion may seem harsh or, as one of my students would say, "hyperrationalistic." But I mean something rather simpler and gentler, however out of fashion, namely, listen "not to me, but to the logos." And the other side of the coin is this: it does not matter from whom the speech comes which illuminates the text for all, but that the appropriate words are spoken.

To conduct a seminar effectively requires, of course, certain ground rules. These could certainly vary in detail, but those which are adopted must be such as to promote civility. This word "civility" itself illuminates the true nature of the seminar, for its roots are the same as those of the "citizen." A successful seminar, like the discussion in the Peiraeus recorded in Plato's Republic, founds a city in speech, the true city in which all are citizens -- a city that is a democracy which learns to recognize the true and disarm the seeming.

How, then, does a seminar work? I have spoken about the seminar. What I have to say about the working of a seminar follows almost immediately. The notion of working here is to be understood by reference to the Greek word energeia, meaning "being at work, in the sense of a thing's doing that which it is its nature to do." A seminar such as I have described can work and does work because there human beings become most fully themselves. "A man who does not need to live in a city is either a beast or a god." And the mark of an individual's success in a seminar has almost nothing to do with what could be measured by an "objective" test: the point is not to be well read, but to read well. To aspire to be broadly rather than narrowly learned is to miss the true dimensionality of the seminar: it is not breadth, but depth we are after.

Allow me to conclude by a reflection on what I have just been doing, namely, giving a lecture. For despite my having called it a talk at its beginning, I have chosen to deliver it as a formal lecture. This has been a lecture about the seminar, but has included a critique of the activity of lecturing. But a more attentive reading of my text would reveal that my concerns are focused on lecturing as a matter of course -- or, rather, as a method of courses. A formal lecture, given on a formal occasion, is another -- and essential -- way of a democracy's speaking to and learning from itself. For it is inappropriate for one to offer long speeches in a seminar. But there are occasions on which development of a thought requires a sustained performance. It is my hope that the very formality of this lecture will be understood as a safeguard against your listening to me rather than the logos. As I now step out of this unaccustomed role of lecturer, I am eager to engage in discussion with you, my peers, my fellow citizens.

--PHILIP CHANDLER
Univ. of Oklahoma
(former SJC tutor at SF)

***Ibid. pp. 90-91. I have taken the liberty of broadening Berry's position only (I hope) slightly by citing these texts as exemplifying his point in the same way that religious poetry does.

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Lace and Satin and What?! Leather! And a Dawn at the Capitol Grounds

For my prom I got my dad to get me a very expensive dress from I. Magnin's in Chicago. It wasn't that it looked so great on me; I just thought it was beautiful on its own. It wasn't dramatic, exactly, but you could come up close to it and see all the little designs. It was of sheer ivory-colored lace overlaying a satin slip. On its front panel were two lace doves, which is ironic to me, considering the evening. The skirt was a sheer spread of lace with wonderful little clumps of flowers interspersed.

I had tried on some antique dresses (none

would fit -- guess I'm not as frail as Victorian ladies), and some flashier dresses: some pink poofy ones, and a certain yellow one with a bustle. That was $600. I tried it on for fun at the hoody-doo ladies' shop at Lord and Taylor's. The saleswomen were awfully nice. I let them think I would be back for it. Well, they wanted so badly to put it on hold for me !

My friends spent much less on dresses in Des Moines, but I thought this one was special. It looked like a treasure out of the past (that fit).

And when I posed for pictures in it in my mother's old-fashioned living room, I looked like a treasure out of the past. Forgive my immodesty, but everyone ought to be beautiful for Prom.

My friends came over; she took their pictures, too. Those of me didn't turn out so well. Diane wore pink taffeta with a lacy collar, and she had little tendrils at her ears; Brook wore a sexier number -- plain black and strapless. Becca was demure in her pretty white dress.

They went to Diane's with their boyfriends for dinner prepared by her mother. My date was vegetarian, and we were going out for Thai food.

I drove my little red Chevette to collect him, Dan Koenig. Now, Dan had asked me to the Prom spontaneously during a conversation a few weeks earlier at Maggie's Bar. Later, he made no mention of it. A third party told me to remind him. Then, in the art room at school, he told me he might not be able to afford to go after all. I told him, Oh yes, we were going. I said something about splitting the costs.

I heard I would have been asked by Jared, with the very big nose, who is a nice person and very straight-laced (till he went to college. You can imagine the type: wanting to be free, but anchored by his parents, friends, teachers. Meanwhile my friends and I were being as crazy as we could, and now I'm more reserved. But when I saw Jared again that first Christmas home from college, his hair was flowing, and I could see that he was a Birkenstocks convert.). But Jared wasn't going to be asking me to Prom because he'd heard that I'd been asked.

And Jason, who excelled at everything he did, and who I longed for from afar all year, and since junior high for that matter, was going with Jennifer, who was very straight-laced and uptight. My friends and I had a good time making fun of her. But I was in closer proximity to her than they were because of French class and a play, and now imagine my maliciousness growing as she and Jason came together. We could never have been friends anyway, though we feigned a certain friendliness briefly while we were one on one. But she knew who my friends were, and I think she was a little afraid of me. You see, Diane and Rachel had bonked her on the head with their flutes, on which they'd stuck gum, when they sat behind her in band in junior high. I suppose you never forget those things. I certainly appreciated Diane and Rachel's humor more than I appreciated Jenifer Gatti, though.

But Jason was not to be for me, and I was doomed on one occassion to hear him reassure her, at her prompting, just how academically capable she really was (mind you, she studied all the time, but she was still anxious about it), and another time he was comforting her that, even though she would have to leave theater at Roosevelt High School behind, there would be theater at her college, you know.

Funny thing is, I heard that she later broke up with him. I would have thought he was a great catch, but she must know something I didn't.

Well, my having Dan for a date gave the nice clean people in my French IV class a little shock. Dan was tall, extremely and overly thin, had blond dreadlocks, was a follower of our local punk movement, and amused me when he sat behind me in American Lit. Once he stood up and told the teacher that he had to let him go to the bathroom because he needed to have a bowel movement right away.

Dan and I were about the only ones who showed any interest at all in that class. It was one of the classes of non-academic people. At my high school, there were the academic people and the non-academic people. Now, some of the academic ones were truly idiots. But in high school, being on the football team or wearing pearls with a sweater could qualify you. It indicated that you would be going to college and not wasting away -- supposedly.

There were also the scruffy non-conformists, who were less full of shit in terms of lifestyle, but I never found any of them to be very friendly to me. However, by my senior year, I felt alienated from most of the people in my high school, except for my friends. Earlier in high school, I wore things like pearls myself. Then I found a certain group of people, and I wore things like ragged jeans, like them.

I'd like to think I've gotten better at accepting people and interacting in general, but I don't think I could go back and rework those high school dynamics. Would I want to?

So, when Dan asked me, I thought it was novel, I'd had a small crush on him in American Lit. the year before, and I was worried that I wasn't going to get asked to Prom. I said, "Ya."

I can't believe I put up with the scenario, but I accepted it all then. I took what I needed from it; I knew appearances were a little shocking, but I couldn't go with the one I really wanted to. I didn't want to be in a situation with Jared where it was "kissing time," and by God, I wanted to go to Prom like my friends. Why I went with someone so minimally acceptable I don't know. I think my best friends, who had boyfriends, felt a little sorry for me watching me improvise when, at the age of 18, Prom came around.

Diane's mother told her she felt a little sorry for me when I came to her doorstep with Dan to meet the others: I, looking so nice, and Dan, in black jeans and a black leather jacket, and I believe, without having had a shower. You see, abandon was th e concept of his look. Remember the blond dreadlocks -- they did hold one's attention, at least on certain doorsteps in Des Moines, Iowa.

Why is this part of my past? This group date with my three best friends an their long-time boyfriends in tuxes, and me with my asshole date who actually made me a wrist corsage (with the help of his punkster girlfriend) out of grass? Well, I'll tell you the only just place that I can find for this experience is a story. I've got to believe that I paid these dues in order to sing the blues! Otherwise, I just kind of cringe when I remember my Prom.

But I am a little proud of the spirit showed to go through with this date. And besides, there was dawn at the grounds of the State Capitol Building ... I can remember it fondly, even if he thinks to this day that my enjoyment was because of him. Not at all, Dan, it was in spite of you (did I hear someone say "spite"?). I admit, he was just a vehicle for a young dreamer to fulfill her dreams of "Prom."

I knew at the time that Prom is kind of silly. Those pearl-girls who organize these things got a polka band. You see why "idiots" is not too strong a word? I feel there's a time and a place for polka, but really, not on what is supposed to be the most elegant night of my young life so far.

My friends and their boyfriends wanted to leave after ten minutes. They didn't need to stay -- they were fulfilled. But I, stubbornly looking for moonbeams -- I don't know where I thought I might find them, under the cocktail napkins or something -- I told Dan

we were going to stay and dance.

What I remember about the prom is trying to dance to "Roll Out the Barrel," seeing Jason and Jennifer -- she looked nice, for a horse, -- and Jared coming over to me with hopeful eyes and us not having much to say to each other.

My friends had been worried that Dan would be in the pictures taken at the dance, they wanted them nice for posterity, not, "What's wrong with these pictures?" pictures. I told them not to worry; I would make sure he wouldn't get in the pictures. You see the responsibility that came with bringing this date? Back in the hotel room, Dan argued for a painfully long time with Brook's conservative boyfriend. You know how arguments can get blown up like a photo as the wine flows? Well, I think that Brook's boyfriend is an idiot, too, but Dan, on the other hand, was a man driven to enlighten us all, whom he saw to be members of the evil herd. He also indulged in our party items and gave us a tirade against such items. He is really full of shit, which is just the thing to be for having stupid arguments, and in this little room, we all had to listen to it.

We girls had our fun in the bathroom. I did, after all, compromise with this schmuck to be with all of them at this pinnacle of events. It wasn't like their boyfriends were so with it, either -- besides Dave, Mark (whom we called Dweeb behind his and Becca's backs) cried in the bathroom because he thought nobody there liked him, and Jeff was a wreck because this was a school function and he'd just dropped out of school.

Maybe my friends sound snobby about the dance pictures, but you've got to remember, they're still my friends and I'm hoping I'll never run into Dan at the grocery store. Besides, they did all look nice, and Dan looked downright unwholesome. He'd thought he would be pretty clever to wear a leather jacket at his prom, but right before we went in, he got Dweeb to let him wear his rented tux jacket. I tried to tell him that was creepy of him, because Becca herself had paid for it, and she would probably have liked to see him in it. But Dan didn't pay any attention to me, I don't think he thought that much about other people -- except for all the ones at the dance who would now see how little effort he had made for his date.

He started to rethink his coolness the moment I gave him his boutonniere. He saw that this was important to me and I was taking my end of it somewhat seriously. He asked me in the car if I was embarrassed to be going with him. I had already resolved myself to my lot and I was trying to make a memory for myself. I told him, "No, I'm proud to be going with you."

Later, of course, I thought, "Why did I say that?" This guy asked me to the prom, then tried ot back out of it, and he did come along with my friends, but I paid for almost everything, and he was obnoxious. My friends put up with him for me, their boyfriends put up with him for them, and I put up with him to keep from having a complex about having missed my Prom.

When we finally left all of them, Dan said, "You know, I don't like your friends." I didn't oppose him. To be honest I think I might have even said, "Ya." But that's why this was so hard -- to want to be able to do this thing, and have to act like some things were o.k. when they were not. I felt like I needed to stay on good terms with Dan till the night was over.

We ran into my friend Rachel, who'd somehow gotten separated from her date. They hadn't been any great match either, though, to be sure, he was more presentable than Dan, but I think what probably happened is he brushed her off. She's not the most easy person to tolerate. But it was good to see her then.

The struggle

Thou ar'st but a humble soul
Amidst the crowd, among the whole;
You reckon that you are but one.
But dearest, this is hardly done
When someone mighty, someone strong,
Tells you, "Surely you know you're wrong."

From there thine struggle does commence
-- All inner conflict aroused from thence
To trouble in even the greatest hour,
To turn life itself morbid, sour.
Then one day you are visited by a sacred being
Who informs you true life is not what you're seeing.
Your oracle --- his name you can only guess ---
Tells you that life isn't really a test.

He compares life, instead, to a beautiful flower
Whose soft petals, though fragile, are endowed with great power
To move, to inspire, to make happy a day
Which would otherwise, no doubt, be gloomy and gray.
A struggle indeed, for struggle is growth,
And life, after all, is filled with both
The good and the bad; the rain and the sun ---
And through perseverance, the battle is won
For the better. Oh! And reader, be glad!
The struggle exists, and for good or for bad,
Life is to be lived; the victory to be had.

-- ELIZABETH DIDATO '92

I just think how Rachel's mother would have died for her to so the Prom thing very successfully, and it makes me so sad to think how Rachel didn't fit either.

It must have been me who suggested going to the capitol before going home because it was one of the places I was always drawn to on nights of just driving around. It is grand, lit up in the night, with a great gold dome, and there are gardens off to the side. We went to a little open structure there.

I really hate to share this next bit, but surely you did something in your youth and now can't imagine what you were thinking of at the time. Well, actually, it's pretty obvious what I was thinking of. But it was just kissing! I swear.

Maybe his girlfriend comes to your mind. I sure didn't know about her when he asked me on this madcap night of the living iguanas. Well, she came to my mind at this point:

"What about your girlfriend?"

"Oh, it's o.k.! She doesn't -- we allow this!" And why should I start ob-

jecting at this point?

The sky was pink and gold and I took Dan home.

I realized I'd lost my flowers. My mother had given me white roses and baby's breath for my hair. I went all the way back and found them on the grass. Well, they weren't given to me by some great love, but I really love them.

The capitol affords a fine view of downtown Des Moines. I looked at it now, knowing I was leaving soon for college, and things weren't going to be the same as they'd been. I was glad I had come here like a bandit at this hour before leaving my town.

Well, at least I went to the Prom. Somebody told me once that you shouldn't be afraid of how life's experiences can hurt you. You can take it, really, and you'll see a lot of interesting things. Because unless you're lucky enough to be asked by the right one and have everything go right for you, you're going to have to make your own night.

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On the Book of John: Two Translations

Whenever a translator is tasked with "carrying across" a written work from one language to another, he must attempt to be both literal in his work and at the same time communicate the message of the original. I believe this is nearly impossible in most cases, as the gap between any two languages usually forces the translator into compromises. A very interesting debate exists as to whether translation is ever truly possible: one camp holding that a language and the thoughts of those thinking it are so inextricably intertwined that any attempt to translate necessarily becomes interpretation; the other, that thoughts are universal, and language is simply the tool by which those thoughts are communicated. Avoiding this split for now, permit me to postulate the following: the translator should not interpret, since the purpose of the translation is to make the thoughts of the original writer appear in the minds of the readers of the translation. For example, the reader of Aristotle wants to apprehend what Aristotle is saying and not what a translator believes him to be saying.

Translating a book of faith is a particularly delicate task. The Bible is no exception. I would guess that many English-speaking Christians have not put much thought into the notion that Christ spoke not in English (or, for that matter, Greek); nor are they aware of the near-inability of a translation to communicate precisely what those thoughts were. Because of this, a translation might be mistaken as gospel, and the readers of it elevate the words of its translator to the same level as those of the original writer.

The King James translation of the Bible, finished in 1611, became the singular English translation; no other authorized English translations were made for two and a half centuries after its completion. It became the Bible to English speakers, and many of its readers have structured their lives on what it says, forgetting that it is merely a translation. The Revised Standard Version (R.S.V.) was both an attempt to update the King James (by getting rid of anachronistic and cumbersome language) and a revision based on texts discovered in the intervening centuries (which have led to the conclusion that the Greek texts upon which the King James translation was based were "corrupt" to some degree). Because of this, the R.S.V. has, to some extent, become the "de facto" English translation. I intend to discuss the first fifteen lines of John, comparing my own thoughts on translating the Greek text to the R.S.V.

Verses 1-5

My translation of the first five lines of John:

(1) In the beginning was the word, and the word was according to God, and the word was God. (2) This [the word] was in the beginning according to God. (3) All things came into being through him, and without him not one came into being. That which has come into being (4) within it was life, and the life was the light of mankind. (5) And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overpower it.

My reading of these lines corresponds fairly closely to the King James translation. The most difficult word is ὁ λόγος . It can mean many things, from "a word" to "thought," but I find the most appealing definition that which reads in the Liddell and Scott: " the word or that by which the inward thought is expressed". In other words, word in its most basic sense-- a communication of the thought. So "the word" (nominative masculine singular) is the thought of God as manifested in our universe.

From verse two on, the R.S.V. refers to the word as "he". I disagree with this usage. The relative pronoun requires the case of its antecedent, in this case "the word". Now "the word" is masculine in Greek, but it is genderless in modern English; thus a masculine relative pronoun in Greek may be rendered as a neuter in English. There is no reason to believe that either God or the word has gender, or even that the idea of gender is applicable, so the use of "he" here is, I believe, editorializing.

The first paragraph is for the most part very faithful to the original. Use of the phrase "the Word" as the one communication or manifestation of the one thought of God is the best translation from the Greek, which is somewhat ambiguous(at least to the translator). However the attribution of the male gender to the word, and hence to God -- and thus the implicit anthropomorphization of the word and God -- is uncalled for.

Verses 6-8

(6) A man came into being, a messenger from God; the name for him was John; (7) he came to bear witness in order that witness was borne concerning the light, that all should have faith through him. (8) That man was not the light, but he was that he should bear witness concerning the light.

My reading of lines 6-8 was that John's "final cause" was the bearing witness to the light and thus his source was directly from God. In the R.S.V., his genesis is muddled. Compare "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John...He was not the light but came to bear witness concerning the light" to verses 6 and 8 above, and you will note a subtle difference. Was John prior to the mission on which he is sent? In the R.S.V. it sounds as if that might be the case. But the original has him coming into being (or being born) for the sake of bearing witness. Again, in the R.S.V., "whose name was John" sounds as if he already had a name, whereas I read it as "the name to/for him was John", meaning the source of his name, in addition to the source of his mission, was God.

Finally, in the R.S.V., the introduction of the word "came" into verse 8 where there is no corresponding Greek verb makes his "final cause" ambiguous. Does the importance lie in his coming? In the Greek, the second phrase lacks a verb, but is in direct contrast with the first phrase's verb "he was." I see the second phrase as implying the same verb, i.e.: "but [he was] in order that he should bear witness..." This reading brings out the idea of "final cause" better than the R.S.V.'s reading, for through it we see that John's being is the bearing of witness.

Verses 9-13

(9) It was the true light, which illuminates all mankind, coming into the universe. (10) It was in the universe, indeed the universe came into being through it, although the universe did not perceive it. (11) Into its own people it came, and his own people did not invite his presence. (12) But enough people received him, to them he gave the potential to be children of God, to the ones believing in his name, (13) who were born not from blood nor from desire of the flesh nor from desire of man but from God.

Here the question of gender is most revealing. The pronouns in verses 9 and 10 are masculine, but I still hold that the gender is reflective of nothing more than the antecedent, viz. "the word." In the first phrase of verse 11, this seems to be born out by the neuter gender of τὰ ἴδια. The nature of the adjective requires that it agree with what it modifies, so "his own" refers to a being without specific gender. Now, in the second phrase of the same verse, the gender has suddenly become masculine. For this reason I rendered it as I did, above. It has a jarring sound to it, as I am sure it did to the Greek reader two thousand years ago.

What is the significance of this change, which is conspicuously absent from the R.S.V. translation? "It" came to the world (its people), but once here, "he" was not received well. It would seem that a new nature has come into being for the light, one of becoming something akin to man. The act of acquiring a gender seems to distance the light from God (who transcends gender) and brings together the light with his own people. This seems to have been the intent, for the people and the light appear bonded in some fashion prior to the actual coming (i.e. "its people"). But all of this is lost in the R.S.V.

The R.S.V. translators also shifted two phrases in verse 12 for, I would guess, clarity, but I do not see how this helps the reader. The shifting makes the antecedent in verse 13 ambiguous. Is it the children of God who are the ones born of God? The reorganization implies this. But the relative pronoun which begins verse 13 is masculine, while "children" is neuter. The antecedent must therefore be "enough" (or "all" in the R.S.V.).

Verses 14-15

(14) And the word became flesh and lived amongst us, and we beheld the glorious vision of him, since the glorious vision was of the only begotten born from his father, and was full of grace and truth. (15) John bears witness concerning him, indeed he is crying aloud saying, "This is who I spoke of, he coming after me has come into being before me, for he was first and foremost."

The first thing I noticed about the R.S.V. translation was the repositioning of the phrase "full of grace and truth". As I suspect the translators did in verse 12, they are moving the verse to imply a connection which may not be present in the Greek. In their version, it is manifestly the word as flesh which is full of grace, yet it is not entirely clear to me that this was the original intent. As it reads in Greek, it might be the glorious vision which is full of grace and truth.

The R.S.V. translation also takes what may be an analogy of a father and his only son, and labels the two "the Father" and the "Son." It would follow that if the word as man is the son, then the source of the word (God) is the father. This attribution of the male sex to God follows from their word usage before, but may not be valid.

Finally, I disagree with the use of the word "ranks" in verse 15. The verb is γίγνομαι which has been used consistently in John to mean "come into being, be borne." I believe John was saying that the one coming after him had already existed in a different form. We witnessed the transformation in verse 11 (which was missing in the R.S.V.), and now John is revealing the nature of that transformation. Is he not saying that he (who will come after me) *qua* the word was first or prior (as we saw in verse 1: "In the beginning was the word") while he *qua* flesh was yet to come? The consistency of the message vanishes if you believe that John is "ranking" himself below "he."

Looking at this verse, and the previous fourteen, it is apparent that the R.S.V. translation endeavors to be faithful to the original. It falls short of this mark, however, and these shortcomings are important ones indeed. The insistence on a gender for "the word" (vs. 1-11) obliterates the significance of the transformation in verse 11. Since the transformation was missed, the import of John's speech in verse 15 is lost. Furthermore, the translator moved entire phrases in two different sentences, which in one case implies a meaning that was not there, and in another (verse 14) renders the meaning ambiguous. It is hard to imagine these construances to be oversights. I am led to conclude that the translators were insinuating their own prejudices into the text in very subtle ways. Because of this, the R.S.V. does not accurately reflect the message of the writer but is rather an interpretation by the translator. By this account, the translation falls short.

-- BRYAN DORLAND '92

caterpillar in mezcal

long ago i saw
my mother's father
with life in bottle
and money in leaves
love from lies was he

a worm he's not
set it free set it free
oh Lord sweet Christ
intercede set him free

now i see a man
my mother's daddy
his life with purpose
the spirit is first
fam'ly held the next

'morrow tears will flow
my grandpa he is
his wings i[illegible]n't see
old halo in his cap
shadow he'll fly through

a worm he's not
he's set free he's set free
oh Lord sweet Christ
all to You glory be

-- L. K. '93

Tracy Chapman and the problem of Forgiveness

"Behind the Wall" by Tracy Chapman

Last night I heard the screaming
Loud voices behind the wall
Another sleepless night for me
It won't do no good to call
The police
Always come late
If they come at all

And when they arrive
They say they can't interfere
With domestic affairs
Between a man and his wife
And as they walk out the door
The tears well up in her eyes

Last night I heard the screaming
Then a silence that chilled my soul
I prayed that I was dreaming
When I saw the ambulance in the road

And the policeman said
"I'm here to keep the peace
Will the crowd disperse

I think we all could use some sleep"

Ms. Chapman sings of a person lying in bed at night listening to a husband beat his wife in the apartment next door. She sings without accompaniment, her clear strong voice bursting forth from silence. The listener is struck by her courage and by its contrast to the helplessness of the players in her song.

In the first stanza, the witness to the violence is fixated by a fear which does not allow for the possibility of interference. Perhaps she will become a second victim; perhaps stopping the violence in this instance will serve only to exacerbate it in the next. The witness is assured by previous experience that no one else, not even the authorities, is willing to stop the terror.

The witness envisions and Ms. Chapman emphasizes the tears in the woman's eyes as a sign of the hopelessness of the situation. Tinbergen wrote that other animals do not attack members of the opposite sex within their own species. It seems that because humans are able to institute order in our lives, we operate on a different plane and can achieve disorder far worse than the regular chaos of animal life. The events depicted in Ms. Chapman's song are unnatural. They reveal a deterioration of both political and spiritual order. They reveal the horror and depravity of which the human soul is capable.

Ms. Chapman's song is a challenge to its listeners. It asks in bold, clear tones: Are you going to allow this to continue? The song, its contents, and its message are also a challenge to philosophy. They demand, as did Socrates of Thrasymachus in Plato's Republic,

...do you suppose you are trying to determine a small matter and not a course of life on the basis of which each of us would have the most profitable existence (344 d6 - e3)?

It is with the questions brought up in the song "Behind the Wall" that we must hound our thinkers. They are questions which disrupt the notion of a perfect universe operating on "thought thinking itself," as Aristotle put it. The occurence in Ms. Chapman's song and others like it rarely appear in works of philosophic inquiry to be discussed along with noble ideas of mind, politics and soul.

Nonetheless, it is the matter which induces the need to question the validity of philosophic and moral precepts, to reform states. It is the matter which should constantly remind us that while building speculative cities in our minds, it is imperative to remember that there are particular human beings in agony in the actual cities we live in.

One precept which comes to mind is contained in the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament of the Bible:

But what I tell you is this: Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left (V. 38-40).

The issues brought up in "Behind the Wall" go beyond the injunction to "turn the other cheek" (V. 40). To turn the other cheek is the action of one declared enemy to another. It means: "I do not wish to partake in the violence which you have proposed by slapping me."

In verse V. 29 of Matthew's Gospel, it is written:

If your right eye is your undoing, tear it out and fling it away; it is better to lose one part of your body than for the whole of it to go to hell.

This is repeated almost verbatim in verse V. 30, substituting only the word "hand" for "eye". The implication is a systematic removal of body parts which are the deprecation of the soul, as if the soul could exist on its own without a body.

Furthermore, it is written in V. 44, V. 45 and V. 48:

Love your enemies and pray for your prosecutors; only so can you be children of your heavenly Father, who makes his sun shine on good and bad alike, and sends rain on the honest and dishonest...There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds.

Here the present life is further depreciated by another which is "beyond" both temporally and conceptually. The reader is advised to have compassion beyond bounds because not only will it make a life after this bearable, but it will bring one's soul closer to a divine will in this life. But why should we behave so, when we are bound by both time and space?

What does it mean to love one's enemies? There are two immediate reasons for having an enemy. One is chivalric -- a person who wears a different color armor; the other is more essential to survival -- a person who has the capability to cause permanent and lasting harm to one's self and loved ones. In the second case, the one in which I am interested, there is no matter of love and hate. It is simply a matter of practical reason to shy away from and refrain from interacting with this person.

Tell the woman in "Behind the Wall" that she is better off than her husband because she is suffering and, in a terrible and morbid way, loving her enemy. Certainly it is obvious that the husband partakes in no divine grace as the institutor of violence--he beats the person he should cherish next to himself. But he is no cognizant persecutor; he is gripped by a mass of confused emotions and can probably not comprehend the extent of the evil he commits. He beats though his motions do not constitute action; his motions are simply the continuation of an instant when he lost control of a directionless anguish or rage.

Still, tell the woman that she will be exalted in a life beyond this. Tell her that she is infinitely more noble than her husband when she is bruised and broken by the person whom she should cherish next to herself.

Tell her to be a martyr and to "turn the other cheek." Not only will she not be able to listen; the comments will be completely irrelevant. Both man and woman sung about are defiled by the occurences. They are defiled in body -- he by the motions and she by the bruises -- and consequently in soul.

The most profound implications brought up in the song "Behind the Wall" are prompted by these questions: Why can't anybody act? How could they have let it come to this? Why can't the neighbor stomp next door and say, "Cut it out. I'm trying to sleep." Why do the police turn their backs?

Why can't the woman put up her hand and say, "Stop." And why can't the man hold back his fist, stop crushing his life along with his wife's face?

It is written just after the Lord's Prayer,

For if you forgive others the wrongs they have done, your heavenly Father will forgive you (VI.14);

My objection to this is that it is that it is a statement of resignation. The forgiveness is for wrongs that have already been completed. If one has followed the edicts previously explicated, one forgives for wrongs that were suffered without a murmur. Between the resignation and the forgiveness, there is no place for action, for choosing not to be a part of evil doing, if even on the receiving end.

The combination of resignation and forgiveness in and throughout unbearable situations does not sound like ensuring that one goes to a better world in the afterlife; it sounds

like abandoning one's fortitude and giving in to the inertia of inaction. It sounds like weakening a soul to the point that it doesn't matter what happens during or after this life. It does not determine, as Plato wrote, "a course of life on the basis of which each of would have a most profitable existence." Rather, it advises the witness, the police, the husband, and the wife in "Behind the Wall" to remain in their positions.

The precepts in Chapter V of Matthew's Gospel advise that a person reduce herself to a state of resourcelessness and self deprecation -- self destruction -- for an unguaranteed "afterlife." It is this same type of resourcelessness that prevents the players in Ms. Chapman's song from their plight.

-- TEQUILA BROOKS '91

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A Reading of Descartes' Meditations

1. The scope of Descartes' doubt. Contrary to a popular view, Descartes was not concerned with doubting the truth of all propositions. In his reply to the second set of objections to the Meditations, Descartes asks his readers to "rehearse those propositions, intelligible per se, which they find they possess, e.g., that the same thing cannot at the same time both be and not be; that nothing cannot be the efficient cause of anything, and so forth." We also find, in Principle X of the Principles of Philosophy, the remark that:

when I stated that this proposition I think, therefore I am is the first and most certain which presents itself to those who philosophise in orderly fashion, I did not for all that deny that we must first of all know what is knowledge, what is existence, and what is certainty, and that in order to think we must be, and such like. These are notions of the simplest possible kind, which of themselves give us no knowledge of anything that exists....(I, 222)

Neither does Descartes attempt to doubt the existence of all things. He surely does not doubt that at least ideas exist. In fact, the alleged conflict between some of his ideas first led him to wonder whether he could be certain other things existed. Descartes believes, however, that there are degrees of existence or reality. The objects of ideas contain merely objective reality, or "that in respect of which the thing represented in the idea is an entity, insofar as that exists in the idea" (II, 52). Consequently, it would be incorrect to say that Descartes attempts to doubt the objective existence of things, or the truth of all propositions.

Descartes' doubt, however, is even more restricted. One of the innate principles accepted by Descartes is that "whatever reality...exists in a thing, exists formally or else eminently in its first and adequate cause" (II, 56). From this, argues Descartes, it follows that "the objective reality of our ideas requires a cause in which the same reality is contained not indeed objectively but formally or eminently" (ibid.; see also I, 162, 225-6). Now, a thing exists formally when it

exists in the object of an idea in such a manner that the way in which it exists in the object is exactly like what we know if it when aware of it; it exists eminently when though not indeed of identical quality, it is yet of such amount as to be able to fulfill the function of an exact counterpart (II, 53).

For instance, an idea of a human being could have as its formal cause (or could be the cause of the formal reality of the idea of) only a human being, though anything possessing more

reality could be its eminent cause. (The word translated as "eminently" is the Latin 'eminenter', meaning "in a higher way.") Thus while God might perhaps be the cause of my idea of John Jones, John Jones could not be the cause of my idea of God. From these remarks we can conclude that ideas cannot cause other ideas, since ideas contain only objective reality, while the cause of an idea must contain formal or eminent reality. That is, the mere objective reality of ideas demands a formal reality of objects. Since ideas exist, it follows that their causes exist, and that these causes are not themselves ideas.

It is with the efficient causes of ideas that Descartes is concerned. In the Regulae he writes as we have seen that "we seek to derive causes from effects when we ask concerning anything whether it exists or what it is" (I, 51). In fact, we might go so far as to say that Descartes believes that something exists if and only if it is either an idea or can be the cause of an idea. He does not doubt that such causes exist. The weight of his doubt rests on the question of whether or not the nature of the cause of any given idea can be known. In Principle 48 he writes that "all objects of our perceptions are to be considered either as things or the affections of things or else as eternal truths" (I, 238). In the Meditations he does not care to discover the nature of eternal truths, since these are innate and their nature is already known. This leaves only substance ("things") and modes ("affections of things") to claim title as the cause of our ideas. But if a substance is the cause of an idea, then a substance exists, since "a thing, and likewise an actually existing perfection belonging to anything, as the cause of its existence" (II, 56; see also I, 223). And if a mode is the cause of an idea, then a substance exists, by the same axiom and also that which states that "no qualities or properties pertain to nothing" (I, 223).

Whichever way we view Descartes' enterprise we see that he wants to discover which kind of substance of those of which we have ideas (II, 53) indubitably exists. He knows that at least one, Body, God, or Mind, must exist, since he believes that either mode or substance is the cause of his ideas of existing things. If a mode is the cause, then the substance in which it inheres exists. If a substance is the cause, then the substance exists. On this interpretation we can understand why Descartes' argument proceeds as it does, in an attempt to doubt Body, God, and then Mind. It is because he is convinced from the start that at least one of these must be the efficient cause of some of his ideas; but he does not know which one, if any, cannot help but be the cause of at least some of his ideas.

Some writers on Descartes attempt to show that he is concerned primarily with proving that his ideas correspond with external material objects. But if my reading has merit, Descartes wants more than that. He would like to show that our ideas are also caused by objects which contain formally what the ideas contain objectively. In the Sixth Meditation, in discussing the "faculty" which produces his ideas of material objects, he writes that

It is thus necessarily the case that faculty resides in some substance different from me in which all the reality which is objectively in the ideas that are produced by this faculty is formally or eminently contained...And this substance is either a body...in which there is contained formally all that which is objectively in those ideas, or it is God Himself, or some other creature more noble than body in which that same is contained eminently. But since God is no deceiver it is very manifest that He does not communicate these ideas to me immediately and by Himself, nor yet by the intervention of some creature in

which their reality is not formally, but only eminently contained. For since He has given me no faculty to recognize that this is the case, but on the other hand, a very great inclination to believe that they are conveyed to me by corporeal objects, I do not see how he could be defended from the accusation of deceit if these ideas were produced by causes other than corporeal objects. (I, 191)

Descartes would not be satisfied, I think, with the Berkeleyan position that God produces in us ideas of material objects exactly as they exist in the world.

2. The purpose of Descartes' doubt. We can now say clearly what Descartes hopes to accomplish by his attempt at systematic doubting. He is trying to ascertain whether or not it is possible to be certain which substance or mode is the cause of any given idea, and hence which substance cannot be doubted to exist. Another way of putting this is that Descartes wants to determine if the apparent cause of some idea cannot be doubted also to be the real cause of that idea. Reading the First Meditation under this interpretation sheds light on Descartes' project. Descartes remarks that sometimes the senses deceive us (I, 145). What he means is simply that sometimes the apparent cause of one of our ideas seemingly gained through the senses is not the real cause. The apparent cause need not contain formally what the idea contains objectively, thought the real cause must. So, the apparent cause -- say a material object -- need not exist at all. As far as Descartes is concerned, if one member of the class of material objects need not exist, then possibly no member exists. And although the senses may deceive us only with respect to "things which are hardly perceptible, or very far away" (I, 145), being fooled by dreams occurs much more frequently. "There are no certain indications by which we may distinguish wakefulness from sleep" (I, 146), and so, perhaps the causes of our sense-ideas of material objects are the same as the causes of our dream-ideas. And surely, these latter causes need not material objects.

Descartes continues his methodic doubt by rejecting the suggestion that mathematical propositions, at least, are indubitable. While it is not entirely clear that Descartes held one consistent view on the nature of mathematics, at least we can say then he believed that "number is a mode of thought" (I, 242), under which we consider material things. As such their level of reality lies below that of substance, since "substance has more reality than accident or mode" (II, 56). Descartes' reasons for doubting the truth of mathematical propositions can be found in one form in the First Meditation.

...as I sometimes imagine that others deceive themselves in the things which they think they know best, how do I know that I am not deceived every time that I add two and three...? (I, 147)

In Principle 5 he adds the reason that "God who created us can do all he desires" (I, 220).

I think we can best interpret these remarks in the light of Principles 48 and 58. In the former, Descartes writes:

I distinguish all the objects of our knowledge either into things or the affections of things, or as eternal truths having no existence outside our thought. Of the things we consider real, the most general are substance duration, order number...(I, 238)

In the latter we find:

[Number,] when we consider it abstractly or generally and not in created things, is but a mode of thinking...(I, 242)

It seems that Descartes

considers numbers in two different ways. They can be viewed as existing "in created things," which would be as modes of Body, or they can be considered "generally," as modes of thought. In in the first cases, the possibility that material objects have no formal reality entails that numbers, considered as modes of material objects, also lack formal reality. Hence, it can be doubted that our ideas of numbers are caused by this mode of Body. In the second case, however, number is viewed as a mode of thought. The non-existence of material substance would have no effect on the formal existence of number thus conceived. So Descartes introduces two further arguments, namely that in the past we have been deceived concerning mathematical propositions, and that God can do all that he desires. Descartes is here suggesting that the cause of our ideas of mathematical propositions might be a deceitful god and not numbers (or other mathematical objects) themselves. That is, instead of a mode of thought causing an idea of a mathematical demonstration, perhaps in fact some evil genius causes the idea.

Hence, at this point Descartes is as yet uncertain whether or not he is able to determine what the efficient cause of any of his ideas is, though he knows such a cause exists at least formally. He is trying to find an idea the cause of which cannot be doubted. And so his remark in the opening paragraph of the Second Meditation, that he might learn "for certain that there is nothing that is certain" (I, 149), is not so paradoxical as it at first seems. Descartes fears to discover that he has no idea of which the objective reality is indubitably contained formally in its apparent cause. Under my interpretation, it makes sense for Descartes to express such a fear.

3. The "cogito." Descartes' line of argument culminates in his claim that at least he knows that he exists. Although the cogito has been regarded by some as an interference, we can be sure it is not inferential in the commonly accepted use of the term. Although in reference to the cogito Descartes uses words like "therefore" and "since," he quite explicitly denies that it is a syllogistic inference. In the reply to the second set of Objections, he writes:

[When] we become aware that we are thinking beings, this is a primitive act of knowledge derived from no syllogistic reasoning. He who says, 'I think, hence I am, or exist,' does not deduce existence from thought by a syllogism, but by a simple act of mental vision, recognizes it as if it were a thing that is known per se (II, 38, see also I, 7).

We can construct a pseudo-syllogism which might be construed as proving that one exists. It could be the following:

If an idea exists, its cause exists.
My idea of my doubting exists, when I doubt.
Therefore, I exist, as the cause of my idea, when I doubt.

This argument is fallacious. It is true that Descartes admits that we can infer that if an idea exists, so does its cause, and that the cause contains formally (or eminently) what is contained only objectively in the idea. It is also true that my idea of my doubting exists when I doubt, since doubting is a species of thinking, and an idea is the form of a thought (II, 52). All that can be inferred, however, is that the cause of my idea of my doubting exists, not that I am necessarily that cause.

This, however, marks the heart of Descartes' intuitions. This doubting, which I now experience, is my doubting. This idea of my doubting is my idea. Descartes already knows that this idea has a cause, since every idea has a cause. What he grasps intuitively (and not inferentially) is that he is himself

the cause of this idea of his doubting. (When ever he recognizes that something else causes his ideas, it is only by an inference that he does so.) Someone else may have an idea of Descartes' doubting but it is only to this idea of his doubting that Descartes can "mentally point." His privileged access to this idea makes him aware that he is the cause of at least some of his ideas. Thus has he argued that it is indubitable that at least some ideas have a determinable cause.

Descartes goes on to consider what he is. But this project needn't detain him long, since most of the relevant arguments have already been presented. Descartes has ideas of only three kinds of substance: Body, God, and Mind (II, 53). He has already shown that it can be doubted that Body or its modes cause any ideas. Likewise has he shown that God need not be the cause of any idea (at least of any idea Descartes has yet presented), for he has written:

[Is] there not some God, or any other being by whatever name we call it, who puts these reflections into my mind? This is not necessary, for is it not possible that I am not capable of producing them myself (I, 150)?

Hence only mental substance or a mode of mental substance necessarily causes ideas. He himself is not a mode of mental substance, since he thinks, and thought does not think. Descartes concludes that he must himself be a mental substance.

-- JOHN VERDI

All quotations are from The Haldune and Ross translation, cited by volume and page.

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