

Nobody can have any doubt of that; one need only know that the prophets and apostles and the others who composed the Holy Scriptures at the dictate of the Holy Ghost never thought of these philosophical entities, which are quite unknown outside the Schools. To avoid verbal ambiguity, it must here be remarked that the 'substantial form' we are denying means a sort of substance adjoined to matter and constituting along with it a whole that is purely corporeal, something that is not less of a true substance or self-subsistent thing than matter is, but rather more, as it is called 'actuality' and matter 'potentiality'. I do not think this substance or substantial form existing in material things and distinct from matter is mentioned anywhere in Holy Writ . . . The words *genus* and *species* (in the Latin of the Vulgate) cannot be said to stand for substantial differences; for there are genera and species of accidents—e.g. *figure* is a genus relatively to circles and squares, which nobody imagines to have substantial forms. . . .

IXA. PRINCESS ELIZABETH TO DESCARTES¹

[On the relation of soul and body]

The Hague, 6-16 May 1643.

. . . I beg of you to tell me how the human soul can determine the movement of the animal spirits in the body so as to perform voluntary acts—being as it is merely a conscious (*pensante*) substance. For the determination of movement seems always to come about from the moving body's being propelled—to depend on the kind of impulse it gets from what sets it in motion, or again, on the nature and shape of this latter thing's surface. Now the first two conditions involve contact, and the third involves that the impelling thing has extension; but you utterly

¹ [Corresp., No. 301; *Œuvres*, A.-T., vol. III, p. 661.—Ed.]

exclude extension from your notion of soul, and contact seems to me incompatible with a thing's being immaterial.

I therefore ask you for a more specific definition of the soul than you give in your metaphysics: a definition of its substance, as distinct from its activity, consciousness (*pensée*). Even if we supposed these to be in fact inseparable—a matter hard to prove in regard to children in their mother's womb and severe fainting-fits—to be inseparable as the divine attributes are: nevertheless we may get a more perfect idea of them by considering them apart.

IXB. DESCARTES TO PRINCESS ELIZABETH¹

Egmond, 21 May 1643.

. . . I may truly say that what your Highness is propounding seems to me to be the question people have most right to ask me in view of my published works. For there are two facts about the human soul on which there depends any knowledge we may have as to its nature: first, that it is conscious; secondly, that, being united to a body, it is able to act and suffer along with it. Of the second fact I said almost nothing; my aim was simply to make the first properly understood; for my main object was to prove the distinction of soul and body; and to this end only the first was serviceable, the second might have been prejudicial. But since your Highness sees too clearly for dissimulation to be possible, I will here try to explain how I conceive the union of soul and body and how the soul has the power of moving the body.

My first observation is that there are in us certain primitive notions—the originals, so to say, on the pattern of which we form all other knowledge. These notions are very few in number. First, there are the most general ones, existence, number, duration, etc., which apply to

¹ [Corresp., No. 302; *Œuvres*, A.-T., vol. III, p. 663.—Ed.]

From G.E.M. Anscombe 874 P.T. Geach (eds) Descartes: Philosophical Writings²⁷⁵
(Bobbs-Merrill, 1971)

LETTERS

everything we can conceive. As regards body in particular, we have merely the notion of extension and the consequent notions of shape and movement. As regards the soul taken by itself, we have merely the notion of consciousness, which comprises the conceptions (*perceptions*) of the intellect and the inclinations of the will. Finally, as regards the soul and body together, we have merely the notion of their union; and on this there depend our notions of the soul's power to move the body, and of the body's power to act on the soul and cause sensations and emotions.

I would also observe that all human knowledge consists just in properly distinguishing these notions and attaching each of them only to the objects that it applies to. If we try to explain some problem by means of a notion that does not apply, we cannot help making mistakes; we are just as wrong if we try to explain one of these notions in terms of another, since, being primitive, each such notion has to be understood in itself. The use of our senses has made us much more familiar with notions of extension, shape, and movement than with others; thus the chief cause of our errors is that ordinarily we try to use these notions to explain matters to which they do not apply; e.g. we try to use our imagination in conceiving the nature of the soul, or to conceive the way the soul moves the body in terms of the way that one body is moved by another body.

In the *Meditations* that your Highness condescended to read, I tried to bring before the mind the notions that apply to the soul taken by itself, and to distinguish them from those that apply to the body taken by itself. Accordingly, the next thing I have to explain is how we are to form the notions that apply to the union of the soul with the body, as opposed to those that apply to the body taken by itself or the mind taken by itself. . . . These simple notions are to be sought only within the soul, which is naturally endowed with all of them, but does not

276

SOUL AND BODY

always adequately distinguish between them, or again does not always attach them to the right objects.

So I think people have hitherto confused the notions of the soul's power to act within the body and the power one body has to act within another; and they have ascribed both powers not to soul, whose nature was so far unknown, but to various qualities of bodies—gravity, heat, etc. These qualities were imagined to be real, i.e. to have an existence distinct from the existence of bodies; consequently, they were imagined to be substances, although they were called qualities. In order to conceive of them, people have used sometimes notions that we have for the purpose of knowing body, and sometimes those that we have for the purpose of knowing the soul, according as they were ascribing to them a material or an immaterial nature. For example, on the supposition that gravity is a real quality, about which we know no more than its power of moving the body in which it occurs towards the centre of the Earth, we find no difficulty in conceiving how it moves the body or how it is united to it; and we do not think of this as taking place by means of real mutual contact between two surfaces; our inner experience shows (*nous expérimentons*) that that notion is a specific one. Now I hold that we misuse this notion by applying it to gravity (which, as I hope to show in my *Physics*, is nothing really distinct from body), but that it has been given to us in order that we may conceive of the way that the soul moves the body.

XA. PRINCESS ELIZABETH TO DESCARTES¹

[*On the relation of soul and body*]

The Hague, 10-20 June 1643.

. . . <I cannot> understand the idea by means of which we are to judge of the way that the soul, unextended and

¹ [*Corresp.*, No. 308; *Œuvres*, A.-T., vol. III, p. 684.—Ed.]

277

immaterial, moves the body, in terms of the idea you used to have about gravity. You used falsely to ascribe to gravity, under the style of a 'quality', the power of carrying bodies towards the centre of the Earth. But I cannot see why this should convince us that a body may be impelled by something immaterial; why we should not rather be confirmed in the view that this is impossible, by the demonstration of a true <view of gravity>, opposed <to this>, which you promise us in your *Physics*; especially as the idea <that a body may be so impelled> cannot claim the same degree of perfection and representative reality (*réalité objective*) as the idea of God, and may be a figment resulting from ignorance of what really moves bodies towards the centre. Since no material cause was apparent to the senses, people may well have ascribed this to the opposite cause, the immaterial; but I have never been able to conceive *that*, except as a negation of matter, which can have no communication with matter.

And I must confess that I could more readily allow that the soul has matter and extension than that an immaterial being has the capacity of moving a body and being affected by it. If the first, <the soul's moving the body>, took place by <the soul's giving> information <to the body>, then the <animal> spirits, which carry out the movement, would have to be intelligent; but you do not allow intelligence to anything corporeal. You do indeed show the possibility of the second thing <the body's affecting the soul>, in your *Metaphysical Meditations*; but it is very hard to see how a soul such as you describe, after possessing the power and the habit of correct reasoning, may lose all that because of some vapours <in the brain>; or why the soul is so much governed by the body, when it can subsist separately, and has nothing in common with it. . . .

XB. DESCARTES TO PRINCESS ELIZABETH¹

Egmond, 28 June 1643.

I am most deeply obliged to your Highness for condescending, after experience of my previous ill success in explaining the problem you were pleased to propound to me, to be patient enough to listen to me once more on the same subject, and to give me an opportunity of making remarks on matters I had passed over. My chief omissions seem to be the following. I began by distinguishing three kinds of primitive ideas or notions, each of which is known in a specific way and not by comparison to another kind; viz. the notion of soul, the notion of body, and the notion of the union between soul and body. I still had to explain the difference between these three kinds of notions, and again between the operations of the soul by means of which we get them, and to show the means of becoming readily familiar with each kind. Further, I had to explain why I used the comparison of gravity. Next, I had to show that even if we try to conceive of the soul as material (which means, properly speaking, to conceive of its union with the body), we cannot help going on to recognise that it is separable from the body. This, I think, is the sum of the task your Highness has set me.

In the first place, then, I discern this great difference between the three kinds of notions: the soul is conceived only by pure intellect; body (i.e. extension, shape, and movement) can likewise be known by pure intellect, but is known much better when intellect is aided by imagination; finally, what belongs to the union of soul and body can be understood only in an obscure way either by pure intellect or even when the intellect is aided by imagination, but is understood very clearly by means of the senses. Consequently, those who never do philosophise and make use

¹ [Corresp., No. 310; *Œuvres*, A.-T., vol. III, p. 690.—Ed.]