



## The Scepticism of Descartes's *Meditations*

James Thomas

Volume 67, numéro 2, juin 2011

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1007008ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1007008ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses, Université Laval

### ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Thomas, J. (2011). The Scepticism of Descartes's *Meditations*. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 67(2), 271–279. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1007008ar>

### Résumé de l'article

Je suggère dans cet article que le modèle de la défense par Descartes de la science de la Renaissance pourrait être celui par Thomas d'Aquin de la science « aristotélicienne » du treizième siècle, n'était le fait que c'est la cohérence de la volonté qui prit en charge chez Descartes le rôle de la consistance des concepts comme facteur contrôlant dans les analyses de tous les types de science. En conséquence, la science nouvelle pouvait intégrer la conscience des idées platoniciennes et la divisibilité de l'espace euclidien comme un apport tout aussi valide dans la connaissance dialectique de l'expérience sensorielle. On peut interpréter les premiers arguments invitant à douter de la réalité de l'expérience sensorielle et de la raison comme une façon de scinder l'expérience de la volonté dans l'affirmation et la négation de la nature d'un objet, ce qui sera le sujet d'une enquête ultérieure.

# THE SCEPTICISM OF DESCARTES'S *MEDITATIONS*

James Thomas

Faculty of Philosophy  
Dominican University College, Ottawa

*RÉSUMÉ* : Je suggère dans cet article que le modèle de la défense par Descartes de la science de la Renaissance pourrait être celui par Thomas d'Aquin de la science « aristotélicienne » du treizième siècle, n'était le fait que c'est la cohérence de la volonté qui prit en charge chez Descartes le rôle de la consistance des concepts comme facteur contrôlant dans les analyses de tous les types de science. En conséquence, la science nouvelle pouvait intégrer la conscience des idées platoniciennes et la divisibilité de l'espace euclidien comme un apport tout aussi valide dans la connaissance dialectique de l'expérience sensorielle. On peut interpréter les premiers arguments invitant à douter de la réalité de l'expérience sensorielle et de la raison comme une façon de scinder l'expérience de la volonté dans l'affirmation et la négation de la nature d'un objet, ce qui sera le sujet d'une enquête ultérieure.

*ABSTRACT* : What I'm suggesting is that the model for Descartes's defence of Renaissance science would be Aquinas's own defence of thirteenth-century Aristotelian science, except that the coherence of the will took on the role of the consistency of concepts, as the controlling factor in the analyses of all types of science. As a result, the new science would incorporate the awareness of Platonic ideas and the divisibility of Euclidean space as equally valid input into a dialectical knowledge of sensory experience. You can read the early arguments to doubt the reality of sensory experience and reason as a way of dividing out the experience of the will in affirming or denying an object's nature, as the subject for subsequent inquiry.

---

The objective of the early sceptical inquiry of Descartes's *Meditations* would be one of engendering an experience of a “person,” in the sense Aquinas accepted — following Boethius — of an “individual substance of a rational nature” (ST I.29.1), or in the meditator's terms, “a thing that thinks” (AT VII 27, CSM II 18).<sup>1</sup> The sceptical arguments of the First Meditation had the aim, according to Descartes in the Synopsis, of “freeing us from all our preconceived opinions,” and the “eventual result of this doubt is to make it impossible for us to have any further doubts about what we subsequently discover” (Synopsis, AT VII 12, CSM II 9). The arguments have seemed to many a cauldron of demons concocted to distil from our

---

1. *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, New York, Benziger, 1948 ; *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vol., trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (the correspondence), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984 ; see Charles ADAM and Paul TANNERY, ed., *Œuvres de Descartes*, 12 vol., Paris, Vrin, rev. ed., 1964-1976.

sensory and linguistic experience an absolutely certain foundation of a new and largely *a priori* science, and to have the “eventual result” of disqualifying every objective ground for any science. Yet that, I suggest, is to accept the point of view of the meditator and to obscure the role of the image of the meditator as the signifier of the subject for the analysis of knowledge set forth in the *Meditations*. You can read the early arguments to doubt the reality of sensory experience and reason as a way of dividing out the experience of the will in affirming or denying an object’s nature, as the subject for subsequent inquiry ; and the “eventual result,” the capacity of the coherence of the will to independently establish the ontological foundations of a new science.

What I’m suggesting is that the model for Descartes’s defence of Renaissance science would be Aquinas’s own defence of thirteenth-century Aristotelian science. Aquinas’s proofs of God’s existence effectively established the necessity of the complete Aristotelian science as the outcome of the dialectical reasoning developed to account for events in our experience (ST 1.2.3 ; see also ST 1.16.1). The completeness of the “cause,” or argument, for these events ensured the “eternity” and “immutability” of the complete Aristotelian science, as the divine science : a complete science would have no potentiality of change, and hence the ultimate consistency and reliability of the science we developed through sensory experience (ST 1.16.7-8). The proof of God’s existence would have the rational legitimacy of a proof of the consistency of a formal logic, except the outcome would be the stability of a complete system of empirical knowledge.

Whereas the consistency of the Aristotelian science depends on the proof of the existence of God, the objectivity would rely on the soul’s immortality. Aquinas argued that the objectivity of a science of sensory experience entailed its enabling of the soul to determine itself by an argument, independently of the objects, and the organs, of sensory and bodily experience (ST 1.75.2). The objectivity of the Cartesian science would likewise rely on the capacity of the science to enable the mind to determine itself by an argument, independently of sensory and bodily experience. While the Cartesian mind is still the “form of the body” (AT III [505], CSMK III 208, to Regius, January 1642), the science would focus on relations of dependence or independence of the “substantial form” as the necessary “attribute” of a substance, as capable of being modified but in some way definitive of it throughout the dialectical knowledge of such a substance, and the accidents, as the “modes” of a substance of that nature. While rejecting the “principles of Aristotle” (AT III 297-298, CSMK III 173, 28 January 1641), the Cartesian science nevertheless accepted the Aristotelian-Thomistic ontology, and the need to independently establish the consistency and the objectivity of the characteristically geometrical perspective of Renaissance science.

What the shift in methodology entails is that the coherence of the will took on the role of the consistency of concepts, as the controlling factor in the analyses of all types of science. Within the Aristotelian-Thomistic perspective, the issue of Renaissance science would be the tendency of its geometric and Platonic analyses to tell us more about the “one who understands” than any objective reality (see ST 1.85.1ad 1, 2). The methodology of the Aristotelian science would, by contrast, be one initially of

abstracting an idea of an individual in sensory experience, and then of going back over the concrete reality of experience to divide out from the accidents the essential nature of such objects (ST 1.84.6). The Cartesian science would likewise accept the mind's sensory and bodily experience as the point of departure and input into a dialectic of knowledge. Yet the shift to the coherence of the will in the role of the controlling factor in the analysis enabled the new science to incorporate the awareness of Platonic ideas and the divisibility of Euclidean space as equally valid input into a dialectic of the mind's experience.

We would tend to ask about the "public accessibility" of the will to serve as the ground for a science. Jean-François Méthot has suggested that the narrative of the meditator's quest for certain knowledge ensures the public accessibility of the arguments of the *Meditations*,<sup>2</sup> and I take it then the arguments, themselves, could meaningfully disclose the mind's nature as the will. To respond to Jean-Luc Marion's charge of the solipsism of the *cogito* as the ground for a scientific method, Leslie Armour and Suzie Johnston suggest the will. The issue would respond to the universality of the "will," in the sense of the capacity of the mind to determine itself by an awareness of "ideas" independently of sensory experience. While divorced from the reality of sensory objects, the mind is nonetheless capable of comprehending the universe outside of itself. They cite a letter to Christina, according to which the "free will makes us in a way equal to God," hence capable in principle of comprehending the universe in this way (AT V 87, CSM III 326, to Christina, 20 November 1647, see AT 445, CSM I 384, pt 3, § 152).<sup>3</sup> The will is elemental to clearly distinct knowledge, yet "free will," in the sense of the "spontaneity" of such knowledge would be marked by a continuity of affirmation or denial. "[I]n order to be free," the meditator contends, "there is no need for me to be inclined in both ways ; on the contrary, the more I incline in one direction [...] the freer is my choice" (AT VII 57-58, CSM II 40). The coherence of the will in the role of the independent basis of conceptual knowledge should be understood by contrast to the opposing experience of self-conflict. The experience of self-conflict is like one of becoming aware of a counter-example to a thesis one accepts. It should be somewhat like suffering a guilty conscience or encountering the ungrammatical form of a sentence.

While the meditator's quest for certain knowledge is apt to generate the experience of affirming or denying a concept's nature, it is of equal importance to see the meditator's arguments for doubting the reality of the objects of sensory experience and those of self-evident knowledge as a way of dividing out the will to serve as the primary subject for the inquiry. As Descartes replied to the colleagues of Mersenne, regarding a certain geometric style of argument, the methodology of the *Meditations* would have more of the nature of the exploratory, or "analytic," mode of geometry — as opposed to "a long series of definitions, postulates, axioms, theorems and problems, so that if anyone denies one of the conclusions it can be shown at once that it is contained in what has gone before" — and he consequently called the *Meditations*

2. "Embrayages narratifs en philosophie cartésienne," *Dialogue*, 49 (2010), p. 550.

3. "Ipséité et générosité selon Descartes," *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 53, 3 (1997), p. 702-707.

“Meditations,” rather than “Disputations” or “Theorems and Problems” (AT VII 156-157, CSM II 110-112, Second Replies). The popular literature of the seventeenth century suggests the *Mediations* would have responded to a crisis of confidence in reason, but these remarks of Descartes on the analytic method in the *Mediations* and those setting out the objective of the early arguments for scepticism in the Synopsis and Third Replies to Hobbes suggest the “meditator” of the inquiry acts as a “circle” or a “triangle” drawn in the sand. In the same way as drawings in the sand help us to follow out the analysis of the potentiality of objects defined by space, the meditator is of help to us in following out the analysis of the capacity of the mind to “clearly” or “coherently” distinguish the objects of empirical knowledge (Synopsis, AT VII 12, CSM II 9 ; Third Replies, AT VII 172, CSM II 121). The argument that “from time to time I have found that the senses deceive,” demonstrates the capacity of the “Cartesian mind” to coherently conceive of itself as distinct from the objects of sensory and bodily experience, as the idea of occasionally deceptive sensory and bodily experience — although not independently of the contextual factors needed to account for the illusions of occasionally deceptive experience (AT VII 18, CSM II 12). The meditator suggests the possibility of knowledge of sensory objects on grounds of an understanding of such contextual factors, and therefore constructs the argument from mental illness in an attempt to reject the stronger doctrine of empirical knowledge.

Yet the emphasis of the argument from mental illness is on the thinker’s sensory and bodily experience, as suggested through the reference to the “vapours of melancholia,” and if the immediate objective of the sceptical inquiry was actually one of separating out the mind’s essential nature, it makes sense of the meditator’s rejecting the argument from mental illness on grounds that those who suffer so “are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself” (AT VII 19, CSM II 13). The physiological bases of our sensory and bodily experience could have evolved to enable us to survive only by a systematically deceptive sensory experience. Yet the meditator’s quest for absolutely certain knowledge is a fable, and the objective of the discourse was actually one of dividing out the mind’s nature. While a perfectly adequate ground for doubt, the possibility of a deceptive physiological nature would be rejected in favour of the argument from dreaming, or as the meditator contends, “there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep” (AT VII 19, CSM II 13). That the meditator should have argued from the confused knowledge of a dreamer’s experience once again suggests the objective is to clearly divide out the mind from the objective reality of even clearly distinct knowledge. You find the emphasis is on the distinctness of the dreamer’s mind from the objects of empirical knowledge, even as clearly defined by contextual factors ; after considering the argument, the meditator ironically admits, “I begin to feel dazed, and this very feeling only reinforces the notion that I may be asleep” (AT VII 19, CSM II 13). The confused knowledge of a dreamer is an invalid basis of doubt, but to conceive of one’s self as dreaming involves no conflict in the will. The argument from dreaming actually demonstrated the capacity of the mind to clearly conceive of itself as distinct from the objects of sen-

sory and bodily experience, as the experience of dreaming — although not independently of the simple natures of sensory experience.

We see the meditator therefore suggest the possibility of empirical knowledge grounded in the “general kinds of things” apparent in sensory experience, and the reading of such data of experience in accordance with the self-evident findings of geometry (AT VII 20, CSM II 14). The deceiving-God hypothesis is then put forward, plausibly enough, on grounds of the experience of finding errors in others’ seemingly self-evident reasoning. “Just as I consider that others sometimes go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, how do I know that God,” the meditator initially asks, “who made me the kind of creature that I am [...] has not brought it about that there is not earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist [...] has not brought it about I too go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable” (AT VII 21, CSM II 14). Though it is little noticed, the meditator rejects the deceiving-God hypothesis, although it is, as many do recognize, an effective argument to doubt knowledge of both sensory experience and reason. However, it is disqualified, I suggest, because it is less effective as a way of dividing out the mind’s essential nature.

You see the deceiving-God hypothesis re-emerge as a source of doubt regarding all types of objects of knowledge in the Third Meditation, but there its purpose is to define the issue of the conformity of Cartesian science to the external reality of the objects of knowledge (AT VII 35-36, CSM II 24-25). The curvature of space, for example, could throw off the apparently self-evident reasoning of Euclidean geometry, and be created by a divine mind, but for those only capable of finite reasoning the case would be much as it is now. As the meditator is led to admit in the case of the deceiving-God hypothesis at the close of the First Meditation, “[m]y habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief [...]. I shall never get out of the habit of confidently assenting to these opinions, so long as I suppose them to be what in fact they are, namely highly probably opinions, opinions which despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful [...] it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny” (AT VII 22, CSM II 15). The pretext the meditator offers for discarding the argument from the possibility of God’s giving us a deceptive nature — one capable, say, only of Euclidean geometry — was to strengthen the experience of doubt, but the upshot is that a less powerful being, a “demon,” is accepted in place of God. “I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of all truth, but rather some malicious demon [*genium aliquem malignam*] of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies to deceive me” (AT VII 22, CSM II 15). Though only an example of a less powerful being, the demon is not merely a rhetorical image; it is indeed helpful in analysing out the essential nature of the mind itself. “Demons [*Daemones*] cannot put thoughts in our minds,” Aquinas tells us, “by causing them from within, since the act of the cogitative faculty is subject to the will; nevertheless the devil is called the kindler of thoughts, inasmuch as he incites to thought, by desire of the things thought of, by way of persuasion, or rousing of the passions” (ST 1.111.2ad 2). The demon plays on

our desires and fears to engender acceptance of a false reading of the simple natures of experience. Without rejecting the naive principle of coherence, or any other ground for the new scientific method, the argument from the deceiving demon sets into relief the possibility of a more fundamental basis of science — within the coherence of the will. The deceiving-demon hypothesis demonstrated the capacity of the Cartesian mind to “coherently” distinguish itself as the self-deluding image of experience — although not independently of the will in affirming or denying its nature.

Within the opening paragraphs of the Second Mediation, the wearied meditator takes on the figure of Don Quixote raising a fist to the windmills: “Let him deceive me as much as he can,” the meditator declares of the demon, “he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So [...] I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me” (AT VII 25, CSM II 17). As the existence of a subject follows on its “substantial form” or nature (ST 1.77.6), the reader of the *Meditations* could be said to now enjoy — along with the meditator — an “acquaintance” or awareness of the substantial form of a thinking substance. With the publicly accessible dialectic of the meditator’s attempt to doubt the reality of all types of objects of knowledge, we individually arrive at the awareness of the mind’s nature as the will. The principle of the dialectic is one of the unity of difference, where each of the coherently conceivable differences results in an awareness of the unity of those differences, an awareness eventually of the active will, beyond the imagery of sensory experience and kinetic imagery of the passive will, in the self-evident knowledge of concepts. The meditator thereby achieves an experience of the active will to serve as subject for the inquiry.

As the meditator suggests, the concept is the publicly accessible activity of thinking, understood, however, independently of language or other outward forms of expression and thereby enjoying a “meaning” — it is suitable for the meditator to admit — “I have been ignorant of until now” (AT VII 27, CSM II 18). The Cartesian sense of self-knowledge depends, though, on the absurdity of the mind’s attempt to deny of itself the nature of the will: “I have never judged that something could not be made by him,” the meditator explains, speaking of God in the Sixth Meditation, “except on the grounds that there would be a contradiction in my perceiving it distinctly” (AT VII 71, CSM II 50). The mind’s attempt to deny of itself the capacity of affirming or denying a subject in a predicate generates a conflict in the will. “Thought,” the meditator concludes, “this alone is inseparable from me” (AT VII 27, CSM II 18). There is an inference, a type of *reductio ad absurdum*, depending on the absurdity of denying of the mind its essential nature. Yet if the ground for it is the mere consistency of concepts, the inference would have needed to already assume a concept’s reality. Adapted to the role of the consistency of concepts, the coherence of the will becomes an independent basis of conceptual knowledge.

Whereas the unity of dialectical knowledge could be conceived independently of the various stages of the dialectic, differences such as of the will informed by self-evident knowledge and by wishful thinking are “modes” or accidents of a thinking substance (see AT VIII A 28-30, CSM I 213-215, pt I, secs. 60-62). The meditator therefore encounters something about the *a posteriori* concepts of sensory and imagi-

native experience it is impossible to coherently distinguish from the mind itself — “even if, as I have supposed, none of the objects of the imagination are real,” the meditator informs us, “[...] the ‘I’ who imagines is the same ‘I’ [...] it is the same ‘I’ who has sensory perceptions, or is aware of bodily things” (AT 28-29, CSM II 19). The ways the will is disposed by a mind’s understanding of the objects of empirical knowledge would be modes of a thinking substance. Yet knowledge of body would be equally or more so one of the mind’s nature, as the mind’s determining itself by an argument to comprehend the experience (AT VII 31, CSM II 21). The nature of the mind itself is therefore independently determinative of the complete dialectic of empirical knowledge, and the Cartesian mind has in itself an “analogical” knowledge of the divine science.

With the analogical knowledge of the science distinctive of the divine mind, the meditator constructs a proof God’s existence, on grounds of the principle of the greater or equal reality of the “cause” of the meditator’s abstract idea of God’s science (AT VII 40, CSM 28). The principle depends on the felt inconsistency of the attempt to deny of a subject in a predicate the greater or equal “reality” of the argument. The subject in a predicate is always more elaborately defined by an argument. Dialectical reasoning must be altogether irreducible to a predicate of the subject. The Cartesian mind’s understanding of God’s nature would be as a subject in a predicate, and hence the greater or equal reality of the argument for it in the divine mind. The failure of the Cartesian mind to otherwise account for its own existence, given the meditator’s capacity of so conceiving of the divine science, would have established the Cartesian mind’s understanding of the divine science as one of the ways the divine mind has of knowing itself, such that the meditator can now see the source of the idea developed through the coherence of the will to be “innate,” and indeed that “I am somehow made in his image and likeness” (AT VII 51, CSM II 35). The Cartesian mind’s understanding of the divine science would have only a certain probability — a consequence of its subjectivity. Although it is in the same way governed by the coherence of the will, the scheme of things is more extensively developed in the divine mind. The Cartesian mind’s confused knowledge of the universe could be, nevertheless, an element in the divine mind’s dialectical knowledge and hence, as the meditator speculates, “quite perfect” in its “function as a part of the universe” (AT VII 56, CSM II 39). The Cartesian mind has an approach to God through the effects of entertaining concepts on the quality of the will, the “spontaneity” of the will in line with itself, as I suggest, by contrast to the “indifference” of the will in itself divided between alternative points of view (AT VII 57-58, CSM II 40). The guiding principle of Cartesian science would tend toward the completeness of dialectical knowledge.

While supportive of the dialectical knowledge of the existence of God, the “coherence” or unity of the will is equally supportive of the mode of discovery of geometry (see Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1051a20-34, for the mode of discovery of geometry); and hence, as the meditator suggests, the proofs of God’s existence also established the “eternity” and “immutability” of the classical theorems of geometry (AT VII 64, CSM II 45). The coherence of the will is the principle of the Cartesian



science, whether in the Cartesian or in the divine mind's subjectivity, and the infinity of the divine mind's subjectivity establishes the eternity and the immutability of objects of such knowledge. Yet the emphasis of the alternative, or "ontological," proof of God's existence would be on the mind's "objective reality," and the inability of the Cartesian mind to coherently conceive of any objective reality over and beyond the divine science, and hence the necessity or "existence" of God's nature (AT VII 66, CSM II 46 ; see ST 1.77.6). The alternative proof depends, however, on the earlier arguments for the existence of God to establish the consistency and reliability of clearly distinct knowledge (AT VII 115, CSM II 82-83), so the objective of the alternative proof of God's existence could be to establish the conformity of the objects of sensory experience to such knowledge. As the meditator concludes, the consequence would be to ensure the "memory" of clearly distinct knowledge (AT VII 70, CSM II 48), or the eternity and immutability of the objects of sensory experience as conceived through the Cartesian science (AT VII 70-71, CSM II 49). The meditator now accepts that the proof of God's existence defeats the deceiving-demon and the deceiving-God hypotheses and the argument from dreaming (AT VII 70-71, CSM II 48-49). The objects of dreams "are never linked by memory with all the other actions of life as waking experiences are" (AT VII 89, CSM II 61-62). The science responded to the earlier arguments to doubt knowledge of sensory experience and the naive "self-evidence" of concepts on grounds of the conformity of sensory objects to the demands of science.

That the objects of knowledge conformed to the demands of the Cartesian science would make the existence of sensory objects immediately evident. The Sixth Meditation only developed the Cartesian mind's knowledge of the independent reality of sensory objects for the sake of the proof of the soul's immortality (AT VII 78, CSM II 54ff.). The separate existence of the objects of sensory experience would be important to the issue of the immortality of the soul because of developments in the debate with the Averroists, the issue alluded to in the Dedicatory letter to Sorbonne (AT VII 3, CSM II 4). The Averroists denied the view of our souls as separate developments of each body, and held instead the view of these diverse embodiments as developments of one overarching intellect. Pomponazzi entered the debate with arguments against both sides, including an objection to the argument from the possibility of an objective science (ST 1.75.2). The dependence of the Aristotelian science on sensory experience seemed to entail that the soul is never really capable of determining itself by Aristotelian arguments independently of sensory and bodily experience.

Though the soul's sensory and bodily experience would be needed to account for the objects of knowledge, Aquinas considered that it fails to account for the soul's independently self-determining nature (ST 1.75.2ad 3). The soul may at no time develop an understanding independently of sensory experience, yet that is to be expected from the point of view of Christian belief — the principle of the soul's activity of abstracting and becoming more and more aware of the essential natures of the objects of such experience would be in itself. The soul in the role of the "form" of its body differed from other forms of sensory objects, in that the mind is also the whole essence, as well as the differentiating character of the species — as the whole es-

sence, a mind is the self-knowledge of its body and is capable of separate existence (ST 1.76.1ad 5). The abstract idea of its capacity of doing so enters into its self-knowledge as one of the parts of the composite definitive of its nature (ST 1.75.5). The genus or “body” of the composite would be defined by an extension distinctive of Euclidean space (ST 1.3.1ad 1). The Cartesian argument from the mutual independence of the mind’s body and the mind itself contributed to the debate, in the sense of demonstrating the capacity of the new science to comprehend the difference. Whereas the continuity of the “motion” of objects in space would have clearly and independently controlled the dialectic of the geometrical knowledge of sensory objects, the coherence of the will in affirming or denying an object’s nature would likewise control the dialectic of the mind’s self-knowledge (AT VII 78, CSM II 54 ; see also the *Geometry*, AT VI 389-390). Though Descartes distinguished the mind independently of the specifically Aristotelian dialectic of sensory experience as Father Dewan suggests, the Cartesian science nevertheless accomplished the mind’s distinctness as a consequence of a dialectical knowledge of sensory objects, albeit from the inside, and hence the meditator could reject the Platonic image of the mind’s relation to its body as “a sailor [...] in a ship,” in favour of the Aristotelian form of the body (AT VII 81, CSM II 56).<sup>4</sup> Though Descartes discounted the usefulness of “substantial forms” in the science of sensory objects, he considered the “soul [...] the true substantial form,” of humanity (AT III [505], CSMK III 208, to Regius, January 1642). The significance of the passage is not that the doctrine of hylomorphism should be discarded, but that the Cartesian science would be concerned fundamentally with the “form” of a thinking substance, as the only one to be genuinely considered in science.

You find the meditator discussing “dropsy” and the self-defeating nature of some of the ways sensory and bodily experience may dispose the will. It is a way of focusing on the mind’s essential nature as informed by science (AT VII 88-89, CSM II 60-61). Though the Cartesian science depends on the qualitative response of the will to the understanding, it is the “intellective,” not the “sensitive,” appetite (ST 2-2.24.1). The coherence of the will became the independent basis of the wider dialectic of experience to support the geometrical perspective on sensory objects and the proofs of the ontological foundations of the new science. Yet the coherence of the intellective appetite would be equally capable of acting as the controlling factor in the analysis of the concepts of community and the self and be supportive of the dialectical knowledge of an initially sensitive desire.

---

4. “St. Thomas, Metaphysics, and Human Dignity,” in *Wisdom, Law, and Virtue*, Moral Philosophy and Moral Theology, 2002, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008, p. 61-64 ; for the dependence of existence on the substantial form, see *St. Thomas and Form as Something Divine in Things*, Milwaukee, Wis., Marquette University Press, 2007, p. 25ff.