Descartes - Blurb #4

by Forrest Cameranesi

In his Principles of Philosophy, Rene Descarte attempts to argue that the nature of "body" (material substance) does not consist in it its various perceptible attributes, those things which act upon our senses, but rather only of the abstract property of "extension". In support of this thesis, he describes how "hardness" cannot be an essential property of a body, for if every time we went to touch an object it moved, then no object would ever feel hard to us, and we certainly would not say that objects thereby lose their bodily nature; thus hardness cannot be essential to the nature of a body.

I am unconvinced of this argument, for to say that a thing is hard is not to say that it is presently felt by someone, any more than to say that a thing is green is to say that it is presently seen by someone. Rather, such claims are counterfactual statement that a thing will feel or look a certain way under certain conditions; which may be to say, if you are a phenomenalist, when other perceptual conditions are met. E.g., to say a thing is hard is to say that the potential of feeling certain sensations of hardnees is bundled up with the potential for certain sights and other experiences such that when it appears, to all other applicable senses, that my hand is touching that object, I will feel the appropriate sensations of hardness. In Descartes' scenario, all my senses would tell me that I had not touched the receding objects at all, and thus I would say that I in fact had not, and so I could not comment on whether or those objects were hard or not, for I would not have been able to touch them. On the other hand, if I had the visual sensations of touching the object and yet did not have the tactile sensation of resistance characteristic of hardness, I would be inclined to say that the object was not hard. With perceptual qualities thus understood (as potentials or counterfactuals), I see no reason why bodies cannot be understood simply as bundles of such qualities, rather than as this abstract quality of "extension"