

René Descartes  
“The Wax Argument”<sup>\*</sup>  
Meditations on First Philosophy (1639)

Let us consider the things that people ordinarily think they understand best of all, namely the bodies that we touch and see. I don't mean bodies in general – for our general thoughts are apt to be confused – but one particular body: this piece of wax, for example. It has just been taken from the honeycomb; it still tastes of honey and has the scent of the flowers from which the honey was gathered; its colour, shape and size are plain to see; it is hard, cold and can be handled easily; if you rap it with your knuckle it makes a sound. In short, it has everything that seems to be needed for a body to be known perfectly clearly. But as I speak these words I hold the wax near to the fire, and look! The taste and smell vanish, the colour changes, the shape is lost, the size increases; the wax becomes liquid and hot; you can hardly touch it, and it no longer makes a sound when you strike it. But is it still the same wax? Of course it is; no-one denies this. So what was it about the wax that I understood so clearly? Evidently it was not any of the features that the senses told me of; for all of them – brought to me through taste, smell, sight, touch or hearing – have now altered, yet it is still the same wax.

Perhaps what I now think about the wax indicates what its nature was all along. If that is right, then the wax was not the sweetness of the honey, the scent of the flowers, the whiteness, the shape, or the sound, but was rather *a body* that recently presented itself to me in those ways but now appears differently. But what exactly is this thing that I am now imagining? Well, if we take away whatever doesn't belong to the wax (that is, everything that the wax *could* be without), what is left is merely *something extended, flexible and changeable*. What do 'flexible' and 'changeable' mean here? I can imaginatively picture this piece of wax changing from round to square, from square to triangular, and so on. But that isn't what changeability is. In knowing that the wax is changeable I understand that it can go through *endlessly many* changes of that

---

<sup>\*</sup> From the end of the “Second Meditation: the Nature of the Human Mind, and how it is Better Known than the Body”

kind, far more than I can depict in my imagination; so it isn't my imagination that gives me my grasp of the wax as flexible and changeable. Also, what does 'extended' mean? Is the wax's extension also unknown? It increases if the wax melts, and increases again if it boils; the wax can be extended in many more ways (that is, with many more shapes) than I will ever bring before my imagination. I am forced to conclude that the nature of this piece of wax isn't revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone. (I am speaking of this particular piece of wax; the point is even clearer with regard to wax in general.) This wax that is perceived by the mind alone is, of course, the same wax that I see, touch, and picture in my imagination – in short the same wax I thought it to be from the start. But although my perception of it *seemed* to be a case of vision and touch and imagination, it isn't so and it never was. Rather, it is purely a perception by the mind alone – formerly an imperfect and confused one, but now clear and distinct because I am now concentrating carefully on what the wax consists in.

As I reach this conclusion I am amazed at how prone to error my mind is. For although I am thinking all this out within myself, silently, I do it with the help of words, and I am at risk of being led astray by them. When the wax is in front of us, we say that we *see* it, not that we *judge* it to be there from its colour or shape; and this might make me think that knowledge of the wax comes from what the eye sees rather than from the perception of the mind alone. But this is clearly wrong, as the following example shows. If I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I have just done, I say that I *see* the men themselves, just as I say that I see the wax; yet do I see any more than hats and coats that could conceal robots? I *judge* that they are men.

Something that I thought I saw with my eyes, therefore, was really grasped solely by my mind's faculty of judgment. However, someone who wants to know more than the common crowd should be ashamed to base his doubts on ordinary ways of talking. Let us push ahead, then, and ask: *When* was my perception of the wax's nature more perfect and clear? Was it when I first looked at the wax, and thought I knew it through my senses? Or is it now, after I have enquired more carefully into the wax's nature and into how it is known? It would be absurd to hesitate in answering the question; for what clarity and sharpness was there in my earlier perception of the wax? Was there anything in it that a lower animal couldn't have? But when I consider the wax apart from its outward forms – take its clothes off, so to speak, and consider it naked – then

although my judgment may still contain errors, at least I am now having a perception of a sort that requires a human mind.

But what am I to say about this mind, or about myself? (So far, remember, I don't admit that there is anything to me *except* a mind.) What, I ask, is this 'I' that seems to perceive the wax so clearly? Surely, I am aware of my own self in a truer and more certain way than I am of the wax, and also in a much more distinct and evident way. What leads me to think that the wax exists – namely, that I see it – leads much more obviously to the conclusion that I exist. What I see might not really be the wax; perhaps I don't even have eyes with which to see anything. But when I *see* or *think I see* (I am not here distinguishing the two), it is simply not possible that I who am now thinking am not *something*. Similarly, that *I exist* follows from the other bases for judging that *the wax exists* – that I touch it, that I imagine it, or any other basis, and similarly for my bases for judging that anything else exists outside me. As I came to perceive the wax more distinctly by applying not just sight and touch but other considerations, all this too contributed to my knowing myself even more distinctly, because whatever goes into my perception of the wax or of any other body must do even more to establish the nature of my own mind. What comes to my mind from bodies, therefore, helps me to know my mind distinctly; yet all of that pales into insignificance – it is hardly worth mentioning – when compared with what my mind contains *within itself* that enables me to know it distinctly.

See! With no effort I have reached the place where I wanted to be! I now know that even bodies are perceived not by the senses or by imagination but by the intellect alone, not through their being touched or seen but through their being understood; and this helps me to understand that I can perceive my own mind more easily and clearly than I can anything else. Since the grip of old opinions is hard to shake off, however, I want to pause and meditate for a while on this new knowledge of mine, fixing it more deeply in my memory.