CHAPTER 3

Everything which Thinks is Immaterial

I am not so surprised that, among all the questions of philosophy, although there is none which has ever been so much studied nor about which there has been such a variety of views among ancient and modern philosophers as that which concerns the nature of the human mind, there is none nevertheless in which they have succeeded less. This has happened, not only because of the difficulty of the material which is beyond the scope of the senses but also because, having committed themselves primarily to examining the relationship between the mind and the body to which it is joined, they have made knowledge of what the mind is in itself more difficult. For by not distinguishing the power which the body has to move itself from the power by which some movements of the body are subject to the will of the mind, some people have thought that the mind is a body or, at least, that it is the harmony or motion of a body. If some others, reflecting on its most noble and superior actions or being informed by the light of faith, thought that the mind is something immaterial, they nevertheless constructed an idea of the mind which is partly corporeal and partly spiritual, as ridiculous as the idea of chimeras and hippocentaur, because they thought about it in the same way as other forms of matter and attributed to the mind all the functions which are found in us. They could still have avoided these mistakes quite easily if, by postponing the examination of the body, they had stopped to examine what the mind is in itself before looking at the nature of its union with the body. For, whatever that union may be, it could not prevent the mind from being what it is.

This is what our philosopher did so admirably and in this way he has demonstrated the mind’s immateriality so convincingly that I could excuse myself here from adding anything to what he said about it if I did not notice that, because his demonstrations were not accommodated to the style of the Schools, they did not resolve all the problems which the Schools derive from the subtleties of logic. Besides, since this question is the most important in this whole work, it would be in some way imperfect if, without explaining it further, I were content simply to deduce the consequences which follow necessarily from his demonstrations. That is why I shall try to show as clearly as I can that everything which thinks is immaterial. Once that is well established, everything else that I have to say about the nature of the human mind follows necessarily. I shall do this in a general way at the beginning and then later, in more detail, in opposition both to those who accept only corporeal substances and those who admit both corporeal and spiritual substances.

Since I need to convince you that everything which thinks is immaterial, I think I could not get you to understand the state of the question better than if I were to explain, firstly, how I understand the words ‘thought’ and ‘matter’, so that subsequently you would be better able to judge whether matter and thought could occur in the same simple substance; the fact that they sometimes occur joined toget-
her in a composite subject is something that we cannot doubt, because of what we experience every day in ourselves. I shall tell you then that, in this context, I understand thought as that perception, consciousness, or inner knowledge which each one of us experiences directly in ourselves when we are aware of what we do or of what takes place in ourselves. Thus all knowledge of our own understanding and of all the movements of our will, all our imaginings and all the actions of our senses, are nothing but different kinds of thinking. On the other hand, by ‘matter’ I understand every kind of bodily substance, that is, extension of every kind, whether it is course or subtle, which (as Mr Descartes demonstrated) has for its essence extension in length, breadth and depth and which is indefinitely divisible, is mobile and impenetrable. For since being extended is simply having parts outside each other, it seems to me that the penetration which would put some parts in others could not be naturally compatible with extension. Thus I call a being which has no extension ‘immaterial’, which is therefore incapable of being the subject of any bodily accidents and I shall try to show you that everything which thinks is of this nature.

I ask you to consider first that, since we have no other concept of being and of substance in general except that it is the primary subject of some attributes or properties, we could likewise have no better basis for recognizing if two substances are different than if we find that they are subjects of different attributes. For each thing has its essence which distinguishes it from all others and, since that essence can be known only through its properties, there could be no other way of knowing the distinction between two essences apart from the diversity of their properties. Besides, no one has so far provided any other sign apart from that to show the difference between individuals, species and genera. If it is enough to show the difference between Peter and Paul, fire and water, marble and milk, to say that Peter is in Paris and Paul is in Rouen; that fire warms and dries us, while water cools and wets us; that marble is cold, dry and black while milk is soft, white and moist; why could the same argument not show that extended substance and thinking substance are completely different since one could not find in the whole of nature two attributes which are further apart and which have less in common than thought and extension? For, I ask you, what connection and resemblance is there between being aware of what one does and being extended in a place, between the will and divisibility, between doubt and motion or shape? Have we not shown above that we can doubt and that we can even deny that there is any body in the world, but not that we who think and doubt do not exist, and therefore that the idea of extension and the idea of thought are completely different and independent of each other? It

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