

**Lecture Notes**  
**“Comments on a Certain Broadsheet”**  
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This short work was published in 1648, in response to some published criticisms of Descartes. The work mainly analyzes and rebuts a broadsheet or flier published in 1647 by Henri de Roi (Henricus Regius). This sheet, consisting of twenty-one articles, was entitled “An Account of the Human Mind, or Rational Soul, which Explains What it is and What it Can Be.” It also attacks two pamphlets, also published in 1647, by Jacques de Rives (Jacobus Revius). The pamphlets were collectively entitled *Gemina Disputatio Metaphysica de Deo* (*Two Metaphysical Disputes Concerning God*).

Regius was a follower of Descartes who taught medicine at Utrecht in the Netherlands and polemically defended views he attributed to Descartes. He got into trouble for his efforts, particularly at the hands of Gijbert Voet (Gisbertus Voetius), who in turn attacked not only Descartes’s views on natural philosophy, but also his religious beliefs and his morality. (Descartes replied in a very lengthy letter of May, 1643, to Voetius’s attacks.)

In the *Comments*, Descartes describes the relationship with Regius. At first he thought well of the man, but then he repudiated him. He states that he is “forced to admit that I blush in shame to think in the past I have praised this author as a man of the most penetrating intelligence” and endorsed Regius’s teachings as his own (AT VIII B 364, CSM I 307). In the French Preface to the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes had already condemned his views (AT IX B 19, CSM I 189). There he notes that in his *The Foundations of Physics*, Regius copied Descartes’s views on physics and medicine. But even these views were tainted, as the copying was inaccurate, the order of presentation was changed, and metaphysical truths on which the physics was based were denied. As a result, “I am obliged to disavow his work entirely. And I must also beg my readers never to attribute to me any opinion they do not find explicitly stated in my writings” (AT IX B 19-20, CSM I 189).

In the *Comments*, Descartes notes that he had originally credited Regius with some insight, due to the fact that he found his own views reflected in his writing. But when Regius tried to think originally, he showed himself to do nothing but make things up, and his “innovations” were uniformly wrong. Descartes states that Regius is utterly unreliable in presenting Descartes’s views, whether in metaphysics where he flat-out contradicts Descartes or in physics where he gives a distorted account. “So I find this learned doctor’s treatment of my writings and his efforts at interpreting (or rather, falsifying) them much more annoying than the most bitter attacks which others have made upon them” (AT VIII B 365, CSM I 308).

On the other hand, de Rives was a religious skeptic whose pamphlets do not mention any specific philosopher, but Descartes thought that for various reasons he “may as well suppose” that they were directed at him (AT VIII B, CSM I 308). He describes “the result of his grotesque effort” as being “simply a heap of worthless quibbles and slanders which no one could believe” (AT VIII B 365, CSM I 308). They show the truth of the doctrines of Descartes (at the expense of de Rives’s own reputation) better than could any praise.

There are twenty-one articles in the Regius's Broadsheet. They are summarized here.

- 1) The human mind is a faculty of thinking which is "that by means of which man immediately performs acts of thinking."
- 2) Mind could be a substance or a mode of a corporeal substance, or perhaps merely different attributes of a single substance (though neither is contained in the other). There is no contradiction in this, so it is possible.
- 3) Because of this possibility, one cannot prove that we clearly and distinctly perceive mind and body as really distinct.
- 4) On the other hand, divine Scripture attests beyond doubt to the separability of mind and body.
- 5) The claim that we can have doubts about whether bodies exist but not about whether the mind exists proves nothing more than that we cannot say that the mind is a mode of the body so long as we are doubting that bodies exist.
- 6) Although the human mind is a substance really distinct from the body, it is "organic in all its actions" while united with the body, so that "as the disposition of the body varies, so the mind has different thoughts."
- 7) The mind is incorruptible because it is distinct from the body and its dispositions.
- 8) It is pointless to ask whether the whole mind exists in the whole body, or as a whole in each part of the body, since "in our conception of it, the mind has no parts or any extension."
- 9) It is by nature doubtful that bodies are really perceived by us, since the mind "can be affected by imaginary things just as much as real things," but Scripture "removes even this doubt, and shows it to be indubitable that God created heaven and earth and everything in them, and keeps them in existence now.
- 10) It is the law of the immutability of nature, "according to which everything remains in its present state so long as it is not disturbed by anything else," that binds the soul to the body.
- 11) It seems that the soul is brought into existence by an immediate act of creation by God in the process of "generation" of a new person.
- 12) Since the faculty of thinking is the only thing the mind needs to perform its own acts, it "has no need of ideas, or notions, or axiom which are innate."
- 13) From this it follows that the origin of "all common notions which are engraved on the mind" is either observation or verbal instruction.
- 14) This applies even to the idea of God, with the third option of divine revelation.
- 15) The fact that we have an idea or concept of God in our minds does not go far to prove that God exists, since "it is not the case that everything of which we have an explicit conception exists." The idea of God does not transcend our powers of thinking any more than an idea of any other thing, even though we do not grasp the idea of God perfectly.
- 16) There are two different kinds of thoughts in the mind: intellect and volition.
- 17) In intellect we find perception and judgment.
- 18) Perception consists of sense-perception, memory, and imagination.
- 19) Sense-perception is almost entirely perception of corporeal motion. There is no need for intentional forms. Sense-perception takes place in the brain alone, and not in the sense organs.
- 20) We know from our inner awareness that the will is free. In the case of natural (as opposed to supernatural) things, it is "indifferent as between opposites."

21) The will is not blind, but is self-determining. We would not say that vision is deaf, and similarly we should not say that will is blind.

We may summarize the contents of the articles as follows:

- Articles 1-8, 10-11. The nature of the mind (or soul) and its relation to the body.
- Article 9. Skepticism concerning the existence of bodies.
- Articles 12-14. The origin of ideas.
- Article 15. The proofs of the existence of God.
- Articles 16-21. The faculties of the mind.

## **Mind and Body**

Regius agrees with Descartes that the soul “consists solely in the faculty, or inner principle, of thinking” (Article 1). But this does not define the soul, since it gives only what differentiates it from other things. A genus is needed. Regius presents a set of three options, all of which he thinks to be possible in the sense of not being contradictory.

- The soul is a substance (as the body is a substance).
- The soul is a mode of a corporeal substance.
- The soul is an attribute of a substance which also has the attribute of being extended.

The first possibility, commonly known as “dualism,” is the one accepted by Descartes. The second is materialism, and it is this option that Descartes took Regius to have adopted, despite some appearances to the contrary. In his comments on Article 6, Descartes concludes that, “in fact he asserts, though not quite in so many words, that ‘the mind is nothing but a mode of the body,’ as though he had set the sights of all his arguments on this one target” (AT VIII B 356, CSM I 302). Descartes thought that “the more sharp-witted of his readers would recognize . . . that he is entirely of the opinion that the mind is nothing but a mode.”

So we will first consider the alleged possibility that the mind is a mode of a body. First, we must be clear about what a mode is. A mode of a substance depends on a substance, while the substance does not depend on it. Moreover, a mode is a contingent feature of a substance, so that the substance might or might not have it. For example, engaging in the activity of writing is a mode of Descartes. He may be writing, but he need not be doing so.

With this clear understanding of the nature of a mode, we turn to a syllogistic argument Regius uses to support the claim that it is possible that the mind is a mode of a body.

1. Whatever we can conceive of can exist as it is conceived.
2. We can conceive of the mind as a mode of a corporeal substance.
3. Therefore, the mind can exist as a mode of a corporeal substance.

The first (major) premise seems to be one that Descartes would endorse. For example, at the beginning

of the Sixth Meditation, Descartes says that material objects “are capable of existing, in so far as they are the subject-matter of pure mathematics, since I perceive them clearly and distinctly” (AT VII 71, CSM II 50). Descartes notes that the qualifier “clearly and distinctly” would have to be added to the first premise, so that it should read, “Whatever we can conceive of clearly and distinctly can exist as it is conceived.” The second (minor) premise should then read, “We can conceive clearly and distinctly of the mind as a mode of a corporeal substance.”

It is the modified minor premise that Descartes denies. The problem is that we can also clearly and distinctly conceive of the mind as a substance in its own right. So if the modified minor premise is correct, there are two distinct ways in which we can clearly conceive of the mind. This is to say that we can clearly conceive that “one and the same thing possesses one or the other of two totally different natures” (AT VIII B 352, 300). But this is in fact self-contradictory, and the fact that Regius asserts it “shows how irrational his mind is” (AT VIII B 352, 300).

The problem is that if mind is a mode, then it is dependent on some substance, while if it is a substance, it is not dependent on any mode. The “nature” or “essence” of a thing is what it is to be that kind of thing, and one kind of thing is dependent and the other kind of thing is (relatively) independent. “When it is the question of the essence of something, it would be quite foolish and self-contradictory to say that the nature of things leaves open the possibility that the essence of something may have a different character from the one it actually has” (AT VIII B 348, 297). Thus, in the thrall of preconceived opinion, Regius mistakenly thinks that a kind of thing that is independent could be dependent.

It might be thought that Regius could reply that it remains possible that the mind is a mode of the body, because we only conceive mind and body as being distinct when we are doubting the existence of body. This point is made in Article 5. If there are times when we need not conceive them as being distinct, we could claim that at least some times we can think of mind as a mode, in which case it could be a mode. Descartes says in response that this kind of objection shows “that he is utterly ignorant of what it is that philosophers term a ‘mode’” (AT VIII B 355, 301). Since Regius admits that sometimes the mind can be conceived of as independent of the body (and hence as a mode), he has to admit that it always must be conceived that way. “Now what is sometimes true of the essence or nature of something is always true of it” (AT VIII B 365, 302). To claim that it sometimes is and sometimes is not the nature of mind to be dependent on body therefore implies a contradiction.

Now let us turn to the third alleged possibility, that mind and body (or more properly, thought and extension) are attributes of a single substance. This view, now known as “neutral monism,” was in fact adopted by Spinoza in his *Ethics*. It is called “monism” because it is opposed to “dualism” in that it involves only one substance. It is “neutral” in the sense that neither thought nor extension has primacy over the other. Regius proposes that, “the one attribute is not included in the concept of the other” (Article 1). On the other hand, the two attributes do not exclude each other either: they “are not opposites, but merely different” (Article 1).

Descartes recognizes that the classification of substances according to the attributes of thought and of extension is his own doing. However, he rejects the claim that a substance can have more than one

attribute in the sense of “attribute” in which thought and extension are attributes. In fact, Descartes will claim, there is a sense in which thought and extension are “opposites.”

The word “attribute” can be used generically to refer to whatever belongs to a substance: “whatever we recognize as being naturally ascribable to something,” including modes (AT VIII B 348, 297). But while modes are contingent and changeable, thought and extension are “attributes” in the sense of essences which necessarily belong to the substances of which they are attributes: “the absolutely immutable essence of the thing in question” (AT VIII B 348, 297).

Since the question is about what the soul is, and the soul is essentially “thought itself,” the question is whether the substance of which thought is an attribute is corporeal or incorporeal. It could not be corporeal, for in that case, its nature would be to be extended. In that case, the substance would have two different natures, “a statement that implies a contradiction, at least when it is a question of a simple subject (as in the present case) rather than a composite one” (AT VIII B 350, CSM I 298). So neutral monism is not, after all, a possibility.

In the conversation with Burman, Descartes dismisses outright the possibility that the mind could be either a substance or a mode: “if it is one, it is not the other” (AT V 163, CSM III 345). But he does allow the question of whether thought is an attribute of corporeal or incorporeal substance. Our clear conceptions of the two kind of substances show that thinking and corporeal substance are incompatible with each other. “In view of this, you would be going against your own powers of reasoning in the most absurd fashion if you said the two were one and the same substance. For you have a clear conception of them as two substances which not only do not entail one another but are actually incompatible” (AT V 163, CSM II 345).

As noted above, Descartes conjectured that Regius was trying to defend the view that the mind is a mode of the body. This is on the surface an odd claim, given that Regius stated on several occasions that the mind and body are distinct. But he bases that claim only on Scripture, not philosophical argument. Descartes held that the citation of Scripture is inappropriate in this case, since the question lies in the range of competence of natural reason. In his comment on Article 6, Descartes speculates that the appeal to Scripture, is aimed at “satisfying in some way his more simple-minded readers and fellow theologians” (AT VIII B 356, CSM I 302).

### **Skepticism About Bodies**

Article 9 gives a reason for skepticism about the existence of bodies: that the mind “can be affected by imaginary things just as much as real things.” Descartes notes that this is a reason to be skeptical only if the mind lacks the ability to distinguish between the two kinds of affection. Such a deficiency would indicate that the human mind has no more power than a brute animal. But humans have the light of reason, which can be used to make the distinction. Descartes in fact has explained how this is done (presumably in the Sixth Meditation), “and my account is so exact that I am confident that no one who has read it, and is capable of understanding it, can possibly be skeptical about it” (AT VIII B 357, CSM I 303).

## **The Origin of Ideas**

Regius claims that the mind needs no innate ideas, notions, or axioms, because “its faculty of thinking is all it needs for performing its own acts” (Article 12). Descartes seems to agree with Regius on this point and to reduce innate ideas to what come solely from the power of thinking, and not from anything external. This would distinguish them from “adventitious” ideas. Further, they can be distinguished from “made up” ideas because the will makes a contribution to the latter. An analogy is made with the “innateness” of susceptibility to certain diseases in a family. One does not have the disease in the womb, but is “born with a certain ‘faculty’ or tendency to contract them.”

Although there is agreement on the nature of innate ideas, Regius goes on in Article 13 to draw “an extraordinary conclusion from the preceding article” (AT VIII B 358, CSM I 304). Regius writes, “Thus all common notions which are engraved in the mind have their origin in observation of things or in verbal instruction” (Article 13). His reasoning seems to be that if there are no ideas with which we are born, all the ideas we have come from either observation or teaching. Descartes points out that Regius has overlooked the very thing he acknowledged in the previous article: that the mind is capable of carrying out its own acts when thinking. Why can the mind not, then, produce ideas of its own?

In fact, all ideas are produced by the mind: “there is nothing in our ideas which is not innate to the mind or the faculty of thinking” (AT VIII B 359, CSM I 304). The only exception is the judgment we make when we refer the content of our ideas to external things. The reason for this claim is that the only thing that reaches the mind from bodies is motions, and the ideas of these motions (or figures, etc.) are produced by the mind on the occasion of receiving motions from bodies. This is especially apparent in the case of colors and other purely sensory ideas. Moreover, neither observation nor teaching (both of which produce only motions in our bodies) could account for the fact that we have common notions such as that “things which are equal to a third thing are equal to each other,” since motions are particular but these common notions “are universal and bear no affinity with, or relation to, the motions” (AT VIII B 359, CSM I 304-5).

## **Existence of God**

Regius maintains that our knowledge of God must come either from divine revelation or from observation or instruction. He dismisses the argument from the idea of God to the existence of God, “for it is not the case that everything of which we have an explicit conception exists,” and the idea of God is no different from any other concept in the sense that just having an explicit conception of it does not imply its existence (AT VIII B 360, CSM I 305).

Descartes denies this vigorously. Verbal instruction or images of God cannot exhaust the content of the idea of God, on pain of atheism and a total lack of intellect. The idea of God exists within us potentially. As far as the proof is concerned, Descartes denies that the idea of God is not unique. Necessity of existence is found only in that idea. Further, the idea of God is more perfect, containing “this superabundance of perfections, in which our concept of God surpasses all others” (AT VIII B 360, CSM I 305). These unique facts about the idea of God are the basis of his proofs of God’s existence.

## The Faculties of the Mind

Regius distinguishes the same two primary faculties of the mind, thinking and willing, as does Descartes. However, he commits two errors in his further classifications. The first is to divide the functions of thinking into perceiving and judging. Only perceiving is proper to thinking, while judging (which requires affirming, etc.) is a function of the will. The second is to limit perceiving to sensing, remembering and imagining. This leaves out the most important kind of perceiving, which is perception by the pure understanding, “i.e. understanding which is not concerned with any corporeal images” (AT VIII B 364, CSM I 307). Without this kind of perception, we can have “no knowledge of God, or of the human mind, or of other incorporeal things.” Descartes can explain this omission only by assuming that Regius’s thoughts “on these matters are so confused that he is never aware of having a pure thought, a thought which is quite distinct from any corporeal image” (AT VIII B 364, CSM I 307). This is a charge Descartes made against other empiricist philosophers such as Gassendi (in the Fifth Objections and Replies to the *Meditations*).

## Religious Skepticism

The two pamphlets published by Jacques de Rives were received by Descartes as he was finishing the writing of his criticisms of Regius. The first pamphlet criticizes “some innovators” who allow that we can deny God’s existence even if we have an idea of God naturally implanted in us. (This claim would be an innovation because the easy route to skepticism about God’s existence would be by maintaining that the idea of God is “made up.”)

Descartes notes that numerous arguments are mustered by de Rives to show that there is no innate idea of God in us: for example that a baby lacks it while in his mother’s womb. He responds emphatically that he has never claimed that innate ideas are “*actual*, or that they are some sort of ‘forms’ which are distinct from our faculty of thinking” (AT VIII B 366, CSM I 309). So this reason for skepticism is removed.

As for the charge that we can deny that God exists while having an idea of God, Descartes notes that in the very title of the *Meditations*, a proof for God’s existence is promised. The doubts about God’s existence are part of a general strategy to doubt whatever can be doubted, in order to refute these doubts. It is childish to say that Descartes became a temporary atheist (or more precisely, agnostic) while at work trying to refute atheism, as if he would be damned if he had died before writing the Third Meditation. Further, Descartes notes that even the Scriptures contain passages which seem to suggest that God is advocating the commission of actions which in fact he would condemn.

The second pamphlet charges that Descartes allows that God is “the efficient cause of himself not just in a negative sense but also in a positive sense” (AT VIII B 368, CSM I 310). This is not a view Descartes has espoused anywhere. “Anyone who has read my writings, or has any knowledge of me, or at least does not think me utterly silly, knows that I am totally opposed to such extravagant views” (AT VIII B 369, CSM I 310). Try as they might, his critics will never find them in his writings.

Although Descartes does not mention it here, this issue was also raised in the Objections and Replies

to the *Meditations*. In the First Replies, Descartes states that “there is no need to say that God is the efficient cause of himself, for this might give rise to a verbal dispute” (AT VII 110-111, CSM II 80). Yet he also states that God “derives his existence from himself,” using the phrase “in an absolutely positive sense.” After being prodded by Arnauld in the Fourth Objections, Descartes states that God’s being “in a sense his own cause,” which means that “the inexhaustible power of God is the cause or reason for his not needing a cause,” that is, not needing another being as the cause of his existence (AT VII 236, CSM II 165). But an efficient cause is a being which brings another being into existence. “What derives its existence ‘from another’ will be taken to derive its existence from that thing as efficient cause” (AT VII 238, CSM II 166).