Some themes from Meditation Six

1) Descartes’ arguments for the distinction between mind and body:
I perceive clearly and distinctly that my mind is separate from my body—only thought is essential to it. Anything that can be conceived as separate is in fact separable (by God). Hence, I am in fact a thinking substance.

First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated at least by God... Thus, simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consist solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing. It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it. (p.54)

Also, mind and body have distinct natures: bodies are divisible, minds indivisible:
...there is a great difference between a mind and a body, in that a body, by its very nature, is always divisible. On the other hand, the mind is utterly indivisible. (p.59)

2) His argument for the existence of objects external to the mind
When I reflect upon my modes, I notice a passive faculty (sensory perception) for receiving ideas. But this would be inert if there were not also some active faculty that sets it in operation. The question then arises as to where this faculty resides.

Descartes concludes that it can’t be within himself (images appear against his will, also the faculty doesn’t presuppose thought). Furthermore, while such images might arise from a spiritual or material substance, or from God, since he is disposed by nature to see them as arising from bodies, and God wouldn’t make him subject to this kind of error, it follows that bodies must exist.

Now there is in me a passive faculty of sensory perception, that is, a faculty for receiving and recognizing the ideas of sensible objects; but I could not make use of it unless there was also an active faculty, either in or in something else, which produced or brought about these ideas. this faculty cannot be in me, since clearly it presupposes no intellectual act on my part, and the ideas in question are produced without my cooperation and often even against my will. So the only alternative is that it is in another substance distinct from me—a substance which contains either formally or eminently all the reality which exists objectively in the ideas produced by this faculty (as I have noted). This substance is either a body, that is, a corporeal nature, in which case it will contain formally <and in fact> everything which is to found objectively <or representatively> in the ideas; or else it is God, some creature more noble than a body, in which case it will contain eminently whatever is to be found in the ideas. But since God is not a deceiver, it is quite clear that he does not transmit the ideas to me either directly from himself, or indirectly, via some creature which contains the objective reality of the ideas not formally but only eminently. For God has given me no faculty at all for recognizing any such source for these ideas; on the contrary, he has given me a great propensity to believe that they are produced by corporeal things. So I do not see how God could be understood to be anything but a deceiver if the ideas were transmitted from a source other than corporeal things. It follows that corporeal things exist. (p.55)
3) The fact that while Descartes infers that bodies exist on the basis of his sensory experience, he does *not* allow that he can reliably draw conclusions about their natures on this basis:

> It follows that corporeal things exist. They may not all exist in a way that exactly corresponds with my sensory grasp of them, for in many cases the grasp of the senses is very obscure and confused. But at least they possess all the properties which I clearly and distinctly understand, that is, all those which, viewed in general terms, are comprised within the subject-matter of pure mathematics.  (p.55)

4) Descartes explanation for why we have any qualitative experience if the senses aren’t there to provide knowledge:

He observes that, amongst the material bodies that exist, he’s aware of his own body and reflects upon how it is related to his mind:

> There is nothing that my own nature teaches me more vividly than that I have a body, and that when I feel pain there is something wrong with the body, and that when I am hungry or thirsty the body needs food and drink, and so on. (p.56)

He is commingled with his body; body & mind form a unity, and the function of the senses is only to help this mind/body composite navigate the world—his tendency to draw hasty conclusions from sensory experience notwithstanding.  (See pp.57-8)

5) The problem of sensory error: if the senses are intended to warn us what to seek and what to avoid for our own well being, how is it that they sometimes lead us astray?

For Descartes, his body is a sort of machine, with wires and pulleys, designed in such a way that, when some extremity is stimulated a signal is transmitted along the nerve until it reaches the brain (and thus the mind, via the pineal gland): same stimulus, same signal.

> ...my mind is not immediately affected by all the parts of the body, but only by the brain, or perhaps just by one small part of the brain... Every time this part of the brain is in a given state, it presents the same signals to the mind, even though the other parts of the body may be in a different condition at the time.  (pp.59-60)

Now, *the signals are arbitrary*, but have been well designed by God to serve their purpose. However, the very nature of the mechanism makes mistakes possible (e.g. phantom pain, dropsical thirst). This in no way reflects badly on our creator; it’s an inevitable consequence of our status as mind/body composites.

6) Descartes’ summary dismissal of the argument from dreams.  (See pages 61-2.)