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Descartes's Case for Dualism

MARLEEN ROZEMOND

ONE OF DESCARTES'S MOST LASTING CONTRIBUTIONS to philosophy is his well-known argument for dualism. This argument continues to attract attention not just from historians of philosophy, but from the philosophical community at large. It is generally believed that the modal claim that mind can exist unextended or without body is central to this argument. According to some, Descartes's dualism simply consists in the separability of mind and body. Others hold that it does not consist in this modal claim, but believe that this claim is central to his argument for dualism. I wish to propose a radically different interpretation. It is true that Descartes was concerned with the possibility of mind existing unextended and without body. But I will contend that this idea is not central to the argument. Descartes's dualism does not consist in this modal notion, nor is this notion fundamental to his argument.

The most prominent statement of the argument is to be found in the *Meditations*. In this work the argument has two focal points, one in the Second and the other in the Sixth Meditation. As a result of the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation, Descartes doubts in the Second Meditation that there are any bodies. Nevertheless he is certain that he exists and thinks. Using these observations Descartes argues that he has a clear and distinct perception of the mind as a thinking, unextended thing. In the Sixth Meditation he uses this perception to show that the mind is an incorporeal substance, really distinct from the body. This is the conclusion of what I will call the Real Distinction Argument.¹ What exactly does Descartes think he accomplishes in his discus-

¹ What I call the Real Distinction Argument is not, however, Descartes's only argument for dualism. Also in the *Meditations* Descartes argues that mind and body are distinct on the ground that the mind is indivisible, while body is divisible (AT VII 85–86). In the *Discourse* and other places Descartes lists various human capacities in favor of the idea that the human being is not just a body (AT VI 55–60). References to Descartes are specified as follows. I always provide the reference to Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1964–1978), using the abbreviation AT and specifying volume and page numbers. Translations can be found in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, trans., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 2 volumes), which provides the AT page

sion of the mind in the Second Meditation, and how does he think he can get from the results of the Second Meditation to the real distinction of mind and body in the Sixth Meditation? The argument is often criticized on the ground that the claims about the mind that Descartes is entitled to in the Second Meditation are insufficient to lead to dualism.

My interpretation of the Real Distinction Argument provides answers to these questions. The argument, I will contend, crucially relies on various aspects of Descartes's conception of substance. Descartes held that each substance has a principal attribute, a property which constitutes its nature or essence.² Other properties of the substance are its modes. The modes of a substance presuppose this attribute: they cannot exist without it, nor be clearly and distinctly understood without it. These aspects of Descartes's conception of substance lead to the real distinction of mind and body in the following way. In the Second Meditation we find we can clearly and distinctly understand a thinking thing while doubting that there are bodies, and while ascribing no corporeal properties to the mind. This leads to the conclusion that thought is not a mode of body, but a principal attribute (sections 2–3). Furthermore, extension is the principal attribute of body (section 4). Finally the argument relies on the idea that a substance has only one principal attribute (section 5). It follows then that mind and body are different substances, and really distinct. After completing my account of the argument I consider its relationship to the idea that mind and body can exist without one another (section 6).

The purpose of this paper is not to claim that Descartes's argument for dualism works. I will, however, conclude that the argument is not vulnerable to various serious objections raised in the literature.

1. THE REAL DISTINCTION

Before analyzing the Real Distinction Argument we must consider what exactly Descartes means it to show. In the *Meditations* the argument is developed over the course of the whole work. It concludes in the Sixth Meditation as follows:

Since I know that anything that I clearly and distinctly understand can be brought about by God just as I understand it, it is sufficient that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing without another in order for me to be certain that one is different from the other, since they can be placed apart [*seorsim poni*] at least by God. And it does not matter by what power that happens, in order for them to be regarded as different. Consequently, from the very fact that I know that I exist, and that at the same time I notice nothing else at all to pertain to my nature or essence, except that I

numbers in the margins. Translations of the correspondence can be found in Anthony Kenny, trans., *Descartes: Philosophical Letters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), abbreviated as K. Translations in the paper are my own.

² As will become clear later, there are complications regarding this claim (see pp. 51–52).

am a thinking thing, I conclude correctly that my essence consists in this one thing, that I am a thinking thing. And although perhaps (or rather, as I will soon say, certainly) I have a body, which is very closely joined to me, because, however, I have on the one hand a clear and distinct idea of myself, insofar as I am only a thinking, not an extended, thing, and on the other hand a distinct idea of body insofar as it is only an extended thing, not thinking, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it. (AT VII 78)

Descartes is clearly interested in establishing the modal claim that mind and body are separable, that is, that each can exist without the other. He is particularly interested in the idea that he, or his mind, can exist without his body. This claim is important because it provides hope for an afterlife, as Descartes explains in the Synopsis to the *Meditations*.³ In the Sixth Meditation, however, a different concern is more prominent. Descartes does conclude there that mind can exist without body, but he does not discuss the issue of the afterlife. His primary concern there is rather to establish the claim that mind and body are different substances. Descartes is interested in this claim because he aims to develop a view according to which mind and body are different kinds of substances each with different kinds of modes. Descartes pursues this goal in the Sixth Meditation as follows: immediately after the statement of the final stage of the Real Distinction Argument just quoted, he discusses the question which modes belong to which substance. He argues that sensation and imagination belong to him, that is, his mind; the 'faculties' for changing location, taking on various shapes and the like belong to a corporeal substance.⁴ The idea that mind and body are different kinds of substances with different kinds of modes is important because it allows Descartes to assign to body only those modes that can be dealt with by mechanistic explanations. The mind is the incorporeal subject of states that cannot be so understood. In this way he aims to provide metaphysical support for his view that mechanistic explanations can account for all phenomena in the physical world.⁵

³ AT VII 13.

⁴ AT VII 78–79. Whereas Descartes says here that sensation and imagination are modes of his mind, it has been argued that he held (at least at some point) that they really belong to the union of mind and body, rather than just the mind. See Paul Hoffman, "Cartesian Passions and Cartesian Dualism," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 71 (1990): 310–32. See also John Cottingham, *Descartes* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

⁵ Clear appreciation for both these points can be found in Julius Weinberg, *Ockham, Descartes, and Hume: Self-Knowledge, Substance, and Causality* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 72. Daniel Garber points out an interesting problem for the argument's success in defending Descartes's view of the scope of mechanistic explanation. See Garber, *Descartes's Metaphysical Physics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 92–93, 111. An important question about the Real Distinction Argument is this: what exactly was Descartes's view of the nature of mind and body in terms of the kinds of properties that he ascribed to them, and why he held this view. I say little about this issue in the present paper, which is more concerned with the role of general

Although Descartes is interested in establishing the separability of mind and body, the conclusion of the argument is most properly understood to consist in the claim that mind and body are different substances—*diversae substantiae*.⁶ It will be important for understanding the argument to distinguish these two points. I will use Descartes's characterizations of real distinction and substance found in the *Principles of Philosophy*, which contains the most extensive and most formal exposition of his metaphysics. Descartes writes there: "a real distinction obtains properly only between two or more substances."⁷ The notion of real distinction was not, of course, new with Descartes and had its roots in the scholastic theory of distinctions. The characterization from the *Principles* is very close to the one used by scholastics such as Suárez and Eustacius. They defined real distinction as distinction of one thing from another: *una ab alia re*. It is crucial in this context that the term thing—*res*—is for them a technical term: modes are not *res* in this sense.⁸ In this sense of the term only substances are *res* for Descartes, modes are not. Descartes himself sometimes uses the term *res* in a sense that excludes modes.⁹ A difference between Descartes and the scholastics is that for the latter *res* includes real qualities—a category that Descartes famously rejected.

It is often thought that, contrary to the view I am propounding, for Descartes the real distinction of mind and body simply consists in their separability.¹⁰ This interpretation derives support from Descartes's definition of real

aspects of his conception of substance in the argument. I address it at greater length in "The Incorporeity of the Mind," in *Essays on Descartes's Philosophy and Science*, ed. Stephen Voss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁶ AT VII 13, 78, 226, 423.

⁷ *Principles* I, 60.

⁸ See Eustacius, *Summa Philosophiae Quadripartita* (Paris: Carolus Chastellain, 1609), part 4, p. 80. Extensive discussion of these issues can be found in Suárez's *Disputationes metaphysicae* (in *Opera Omnia*, vols. 25–26 [Paris: Vivès, 1856]), Disp. VII. Characterization of real distinction as the distinction of one thing from another is provided at Disp. VII.I.I, and used throughout the disputation. For more discussion of my understanding of the conclusion of the argument, see my dissertation, *Descartes's Conception of the Mind* (University Microfilms International, 1989).

⁹ In the Fourth Replies Descartes comments on the employment of the term in the *Meditations*, and says that he had used it to stand for complete things, which are substances. He points out that he did not call the faculties of imagination and sensation *res*, but distinguished them accurately from *res sive substantias*—things or substances (AT VII 224). On the other hand, at *Principles* II, 55 Descartes calls both substances and their modes *res*.

¹⁰ See Garber, *Descartes's Metaphysical Physics*, 85, 89. Paul Hoffman and Margaret Wilson hold that it is sufficient for real distinction of mind and body that they can exist apart. In principle one might think separability is sufficient for establishing real distinction without being constitutive of real distinction. But Hoffman and Wilson think that real distinction consists in separability. See Hoffman, "The Unity of Descartes's Man," *Philosophical Review* 85 (1986) 339–70, p. 343n., Wilson, *Descartes* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 190, 207. Descartes does think that separability is a sufficient indication, a sign, of real distinction, because he thinks that only two (or more) substances, entities existing in their own right, can be separated from one another.

distinction in the appendix to the Second Replies entitled "Reasons that Prove the Existence of God and the Distinction of the Soul from the Body Expounded in Geometrical Fashion" (henceforward Geometrical Exposition). He writes there that "two substances are said to be really distinct when each of them can exist without the other."¹¹ But we must be careful, for elsewhere in the Second Replies Descartes considers separability as a *sign* of real distinction. In response to the objection that he has failed to show that body cannot think he writes: "I don't really see what you can deny here. That it is sufficient that we clearly understand one thing without another in order to recognize that they are really distinct? Provide then some more certain sign of real distinction; for I am confident that none can be given. For what will you say? That those things are really distinct of which each can exist without the other?" (AT VII 132). Descartes then argues that in order for separability to be a sign of real distinction, it must be known. Consequently, he contends, this sign is not an alternative to his way of proving the real distinction; but it leads to his own requirement that we clearly and distinctly understand one thing without another. This discussion suggests that separability does not constitute real distinction.¹²

One might think that Descartes rejects here the idea that separability is a sign of real distinction. But in fact his point is that by itself separability is not enough: one also needs to know, with certainty, that separability obtains. Even if Descartes does not claim in this passage that separability is a sign of real distinction, however, the passage strongly suggests that separability is not constitutive of real distinction. For the way in which Descartes considers separability as a candidate for being a sign of real distinction is hard to reconcile with the idea that instead it is constitutive of real distinction. That idea is conspicuously absent. If Descartes thought that real distinction simply consists in separability one would expect him to say so in this context.

It is worth noting that Descartes's position so understood is also the one taken by Suárez. He characterizes real distinction as the distinction of one thing (*res*) from another, and devotes considerable attention to the question how one can detect a real distinction. He discusses various signs of real distinction and separability is one of them.¹³

What is Descartes's notion of substance? In the *Principles* Descartes defines substance as something "that *so exists* that it needs nothing else in order to

¹¹ AT VII 162.

¹² If Descartes does not think that real distinction consists in separability, the question arises why he provides the definition in the Geometrical Exposition in terms of separability. Descartes must have been moved to do so in view of its use in the argument for the real distinction of mind and body a little later in the text.

¹³ Disp. VII. II. 9–27.

exist" (emphasis added).¹⁴ There is a temptation to read this definition as saying that being a substance simply consists in having the ability to exist apart from anything else. Descartes's notion of substance is often understood this way. On this interpretation the real distinction of mind and body, the idea that they are different substances would, after all, reduce to their separability.¹⁵ But the definition in the *Principles* makes clear that there is more to Descartes's notion of substance. For it presents the idea that a substance needs nothing else in order to exist not as fundamental, but *as a result* of its actual mode of existence. What could Descartes have in mind?

Descartes's ontology contains substances and modes. A mode exists in or through something else, a substance, whereas a substance exists through itself. Descartes quite frequently characterizes substances as things existing through themselves—*res per se subsistentes*.^{16,17} In Descartes's definition of substance in

¹⁴ *Principles* I, 51. Strictly speaking, of course, this definition only applies to God, since all created substances depend on Him, as Descartes immediately makes clear in this section of the *Principles*. Something is a created substance, then, when it so exists that it can exist without anything else except God. I will generally omit this qualification.

¹⁵ Cf. Garber, *Descartes's Metaphysical Physics*, 65, 85, 89. Wilson also interprets the real distinction as consisting in the ability to exist apart (*Descartes*, 207).

¹⁶ AT III 456–57, AT III 502, K 128, VII 222, 226, VIII 348. See E. M. Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 4–11, for the view that this way of distinguishing substances and modes was common at the time.

In the Fourth Replies Descartes gives a weaker characterization of substance in terms of the ability to exist *per se*: ". . . this is the very notion of substance, that it can exist *per se*, that is, without the help of any other substance." On the same page, however, he gives a stronger description of substances as *res per se subsistentes*—not merely as things that *can exist per se* (AT VII 226). Existence *per se* is compatible with being joined to another substance in some way other than by inhering in it, and it should be distinguished from existing without or apart from other substances. Thus the mind exists *per se*, without the *help* of any other substance, in particular without inhering in another substance. But it does not, of course, exist without the body existing, or in separation from it, because it is in this life united to the body.

¹⁷ Paul Hoffman has argued that for Descartes the soul is the form of the body. In his defense of this position he relies on the view that for Descartes a substance is something that *can* exist apart, but that also can exist in, inhere in, something else ("The Unity of Descartes's Man," 352–55). The mind does so when it is joined to the body. So Hoffman disagrees with my interpretation of Descartes's notion of substance according to which it does not (and could not) exist in or through something else. But Hoffman's position in fact does not require that a substance can inhere in something else. I regard my interpretation of Descartes's notion of substance as compatible with Hoffman's view that for Descartes the human soul is the substantial form of the body in the sense found in Scotus and Ockham. My reasons are as follows. For the Aristotelian scholastics substantial forms are very different from accidents. Substantial forms fall under the category of substance (although they are incomplete ones); they are not accidents. For present purposes it is important that they thought the relationship an accident bears to the substance it belongs to is different from that of a substantial form to what it is united with. This difference is manifested by the fact that one can find them saying that accidents inhere in, exist through, or are in substances: substantial forms, such as the human soul, *inform* the body. (Cf. Suárez, *Disputationes metaphysicae*, VII.I.18, p. 256; Eustacius, *Summa*, I, p. 97, IV pp. 45, 46; and a quote in Gilson, *Index scolastico-cartésien* [Paris: Vrin, 1979], 275–77.) I am not sure that the precise terminology is essential here,

the Geometrical Exposition this way of distinguishing modes and substances is present in a different way. Descartes does not on this occasion describe substance as a *res per se subsistens*, but he describes it as that through which properties exist. He writes: "Each thing in which inheres [*inest*] immediately, as in a subject, or through which exists something that we perceive, that is, some property, or quality, or attribute, of which a real idea is in us, is called substance."¹⁸ The Aristotelian scholastics commonly distinguished substances and qualities in this way. For instance, Eustacius of St. Paul wrote that a substance is a "being that subsists or exists *per se*." And he explains: "to subsist or exist *per se* is nothing other than not to exist in something else as in a subject of inherence, in which a substance differs from an accident, which cannot exist *per se* but only in something else in which it inheres."¹⁹

The idea, I take it, is that a substance, unlike a mode, is a thing in its own right. A substance has its own existence, unlike a mode.²⁰ Descartes expresses this idea in one of his discussions of the scholastic notion of a real quality—a quality that is supposed to be a *res*. He often criticizes this notion, arguing that it is the result of regarding a quality as a substance—which he thinks is incoherent. Sometimes, when he makes this point, he says that we think of such a quality as a substance because we ascribe to it the capacity to exist separately.²¹ But in a letter to Elizabeth he writes about real qualities as qualities "that we have imagined to be real, that is, to have an existence distinct from that of body, and consequently to be substances, although we have called them qualities."²²

but what is important is that the relationships differ. Thus the view that the soul is the substantial form of the body does not require that it can inhere in the body. This view also does not require that the soul can be a quality of the body. On the contrary. For the Aristotelian scholastics composites of matter and substantial form constitute a genuine, hylomorphic individual, but not composites of substance and accident (cf. Marilyn Adams, *Ockham* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987], 633). See also fn. 22 below.

¹⁸ AT VII 161. See also AT VII 222.

¹⁹ *Summa Philosophiae* I pp. 96–97. For several more references see Gilson, *Index*, 275–77.

²⁰ Strictly speaking this is not quite accurate, given that Descartes believes God continuously creates the world. Thus really the existence of a substance continuously comes from God. One might say then that God gives a substance its existence directly—its own existence. A mode does not receive existence directly from God, but exists by virtue of inhering in a substance: it participates in the existence of the substance.

²¹ AT VII 434, and letter for Arnauld, July 29, 1648, AT V 223, K 236.

²² May 21, 1643, AT III 667, K 139. On my interpretation, something that is a substance cannot be a quality for Descartes. There is a passage in the Sixth Replies, however, where he does seem to allow for this possibility. He says that "clothing, considered in itself, is a substance, but when it is referred to a clothed man, it is a quality; and also the mind, although it really is a substance, can nevertheless be called a quality of the body to which it is joined" (AT VII 441–42). Thus the suspicion arises that Descartes did think the mind, a substance, can also be a quality. This fact would be quite problematic given Descartes's contention earlier in the Sixth Replies that "it is contradictory that there should be real accidents"—accidents, that is, that are also substances by virtue of their ability to exist apart from any other subject (AT VII 434). For Descartes all

The connection with separability is now as follows: a substance can exist without anything else, because it has existence in its own right, *per se*. Modes are different because they exist by virtue of inherence in something else. Consequently, a mode cannot exist without such a subject of inherence. In non-Cartesian terms the idea is a very simple one. The world contains things and properties. The primary entities are things, which exist in their own right. Properties don't exist in their own right; they exist by virtue of being the properties of things. The basic idea of the distinction between these two categories is not modal, but it does have modal consequences. To take an arbitrary example, a piece of wax is a thing, which exists in its own right. Its shape and size are properties of it, which exist by belonging to the piece of wax. As a result, if one were to destroy the piece of wax, the shape and size would disappear. The piece of wax itself is not a property of something else such that its existence depends on that entity in this way.²³ What Descartes wants to establish then regarding mind and body, is that each is a thing in its own right, and that they are different from each other.

2. MODES AND ATTRIBUTES

The Real Distinction Argument should be understood in terms of Descartes's theory of substance. The crux of this theory can be found at *Principles* I, 53:

... there is one principal property for each substance, which constitutes its nature and essence and to which all the other ones are referred. Namely, extension in length, width and depth constitutes the nature of corporeal substance; thought constitutes the nature of thinking substance. For everything else that can be attributed to body presupposes extension, and is only a mode of some extended thing; and similarly all those we find in the mind, are only different modes of thinking. So for instance, figure can only be understood in an extended thing, motion in extended space; and imagination, sensation or the will only in a thinking thing. But on the other hand, extension can be understood without shape or motion, and thought without imagination or sensation and so on: as is clear to anyone who attends to the matter.

accidents are modes, which cannot exist apart from a subject. Fortunately, he clears himself of this suspicion in the Sixth Replies. After his criticism of real accidents Descartes says that he admits that a substance can be an accident of, or belong to another substance (*unam substantiam alteri substantiae posse accidere*). But he clarifies this point by saying "it is not the substance itself that has the form of an accident, but only the mode in which it belongs to [*accidit*] the other substance does. Just as when clothing belongs to [*accidit*] a man, it is not the clothing itself, but the being clothed that is an accident [*est accidens*]" (AT VII 435).

Descartes's comparisons of the soul with the scholastic notion of gravity as a real quality might lead one to think that Descartes did think the soul could be a quality. It would lead too far afield to deal with this issue adequately. But on my view Descartes does not use these comparisons to argue that the soul can be a quality. Rather his point is that the soul is whole in the whole body and whole in its parts, and united to the body in such a way that they can interact. See also fn. 17 above.

²³ Although it has dependence relations other than this ontological one, such as causal ones. Descartes ignores other kinds of dependence relation, and so will I.

So Descartes thinks that each substance has a principal attribute that constitutes the nature or essence of that substance. All the other (intrinsic) properties of a substance are 'referred to' this attribute; they are modes, ways of being of the principal attribute, and, as Descartes often says, *presuppose* it.²⁴ A principal attribute constitutes a substance in that it makes it a complete thing, a substance, and makes it the kind of substance that it is. Modes cannot do that.

Descartes wants to argue that mind or thinking substance and body are different substances. In other words, he wants to show that they are not one and the same substance. The Real Distinction Argument can be understood as ruling out various specific ways in which mind and body could be the same substance. First, the discussion of the mind in the Second Meditation leads to the conclusion that thought is not a mode of body but a principal attribute. As a result it is not the case that the mind is a body by virtue of thought being a mode of body. Second, the argument relies on the claim that extension, which constitutes the nature of body, is the principal attribute of body. Consequently mind and body are not identical by virtue of extension being a mode of thought. These results are not yet sufficient to establish the real distinction because they are compatible with the idea that mind and body constitute one substance with two principal attributes. But this possibility is ruled out for Descartes, since he held that a substance has only one principal attribute. I will discuss these three stages of the argument in this order.

The present section will be concerned with what Descartes means to accomplish in the Second Meditation. Interpreters have answered this question in different ways. Descartes might think that he clearly and distinctly perceives that the mind is not extended. In that case dualism would follow quite simply by way of the validation of clear and distinct perceptions. But I will argue that he does not proceed in this way. Sometimes Descartes presents the result of the Second Meditation as a claim about his nature or essence. He says in the

²⁴ This is a bit of a simplification. For Descartes allows for a third category of properties, such as duration, existence, number, that belong to any substance (*Principles* I, 48). For discussion of this issue see Garber, *Descartes's Metaphysical Physics*, 66–67.

Descartes often describes the relationship between modes and their principal attribute using the term 'presupposition'. Descartes says that the modes of body presuppose extension (*Principles* I, 53), and in the Sixth Meditation he argues that the active faculty of producing ideas is not in me because it does not presuppose intellection (AT VII 79). These remarks would seem to imply that the modes of the mind *presuppose* thought. But it is striking that he never explicitly says so. I wonder whether he thought that the term 'presuppose' captures the relationship between thought and its modes less well than the relationship between extension and its modes. Nevertheless I will generally use this term to refer to the relationship between an attribute and its modes. There are two aspects to this relationship, an epistemic and a metaphysical one. It is not clear to which of these the term 'presuppose' is meant to refer. I will use it to refer to the metaphysical aspect.

Sixth Meditation: "I noticed nothing else to pertain to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing." This phrase is ambiguous.²⁵ It could mean either that he did not notice that anything else belongs to his nature or essence, or that he noticed that nothing else belongs to his nature or essence. This ambiguity could be a very serious one. Descartes's argument might rely on ambiguities of this kind in a way that is fatal to it.²⁶ The first of these claims is weaker and easier to establish than the second one. But the question is often raised whether it would be sufficient for establishing dualism. The second claim is obviously harder to defend. Thus a common objection to the argument is that the Second Meditation fails to show that the mind is not essentially extended. Philosophers have questioned the idea that this claim, and dualism, can be established *a priori* by means of a thought experiment of the kind found in the Second Meditation.²⁷

These problems are very pressing if one assumes that the question whether the mind is essentially extended comes down to the question whether it is necessarily extended. But Descartes's use of the thought experiment must be understood in light of his notion of a principal attribute and his view that the essence of a substance consists in such an attribute. The contribution of the Second Meditation is a clear and distinct perception of the mind that shows that thought is such an attribute. From this perspective it will be clear that the argument does not fall victim to ambiguities of the sort noted above, and it will account for Descartes's confidence that the argument succeeded in establishing dualism.

Descartes does not think he has established in the Second Meditation that he clearly and distinctly perceives that the mind is not extended. He addresses this issue in a letter to Clerselier, in which he responds to an objection from Gassendi concerning that Meditation: "I said in one place that, while the soul doubts the existence of all material things, it only knows itself precisely taken, *praecise tantum*, as an immaterial substance; and seven or eight lines below, in order to show that by these words *praecise tantum*, I do not understand an entire exclusion or negation, but only an abstraction from material things, I said that nevertheless one was not assured that there is nothing in the soul that is corporeal, although one does not know anything corporeal in it" (AT IX

²⁵ "*nihil plane aliud ad naturam sive essentiam meam pertinere animadvertam, praeter hoc solum quod sim res cogitans*" (AT VII 78, see also AT VII 8, 219). For discussion of this ambiguity see Curley, *Descartes against the Skeptics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 196, and Anthony Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1968), 83ff.

²⁶ Steven J. Wagner has argued for this view in "Descartes's Arguments for Mind-Body Distinctness," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1983): 499–517.

²⁷ See Sydney Shoemaker, "On an Argument for Dualism," in Carl Ginet and Sydney Shoemaker, eds., *Knowledge and Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 233–58.

215). The Second Meditation itself is quite clear about this point. Descartes argues there that in spite of the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation he is certain that he exists and that he is a thinking thing. Throughout this discussion the crucial doubts are about bodies. After he has established that he is a thinking thing, he considers the question whether he might be a body, but he concludes that he cannot settle that issue yet. He writes: "What else am I? I will use my imagination. I am not that complex of limbs, which is called the human body; I am also not some thin air infused in these limbs, nor a wind, fire, vapor, breath, nor anything that I imagine. For I have supposed those things to be nothing. The position remains: I am nevertheless something. Perhaps it happens to be the case, however, that these very things which I suppose to be nothing, because they are unknown to me, do not in reality differ from that I that I know? I don't know, I don't dispute about this yet: I can only judge about those things that are known to me" (AT VII 27). So here Descartes clearly thinks that he has not established that he (clearly and distinctly) perceives that the mind is not corporeal. Whereas he does not mention extension explicitly in this passage, it is covered by what he says. For earlier he announced: "By body I understand all that which is apt to be limited by some shape, confined in a place, and which can fill a space in such a way that it excludes any other body from it" (AT VII 26). This last characteristic, filling space in a way that excludes other bodies or other things, Descartes identifies with extension, and he sometimes specifies the essence of body in terms of it. For instance, in writing to Hyperaspistes he denies of the mind "real extension, that is, that by which it occupies a place and excludes something else from it."²⁸

Let us now turn to what Descartes does think he establishes by means of the Second Meditation. In response to questions from Caterus and Arnauld Descartes defends the argument in the First and Fourth Replies by claiming that he has a clear and distinct conception of the mind *as a complete thing*.²⁹ As has been pointed out by Margaret Wilson and others this notion is very important for the Real Distinction Argument.³⁰ A complete thing, for Descartes, is "a substance endowed with those forms or attributes which are sufficient for recognizing it as a substance."³¹ In the Fourth Replies he writes: "The mind

²⁸ August 1641, AT III 434, K 119–120. He speaks of *real* extension to distinguish the feature that characterizes body from the sense in which he is willing to say that mind is extended. See also the letters of July 22, 1641, possibly to de Launay (AT III 420–21, K 109), to Elizabeth of June 28, 1643 (AT III 694–95, K 143) to More of February 5, 1649 (AT V 269–70, K 238–39), and April 15, 1649 (AT V 341–42, K 248–49), and the Sixth Replies (AT VII 442).

²⁹ AT VII 120–21, 221–27.

³⁰ *Descartes*, 191–97.

³¹ AT VII 222.

can be perceived distinctly and completely, or sufficiently for it to be regarded as a complete thing, without any of those forms or attributes from which we recognize that body is a substance, as I think I have sufficiently shown in the Second Meditation" (AT VII 223). Now in the Second Meditation Descartes considers the mind only as a *thinking* thing. The import of the idea that mind can be conceived as complete without any corporeal attributes is thus that thought is perceived to be sufficient for the mind to be a substance.³² This is what the Second Meditation is supposed to establish.

In terms of Descartes's theory of substance this leads to the result that thought is a *principal attribute* and not a mode.^{33,34} The thought experiment contributes to this result by showing that thought is not a mode of body. In other places the point is that thought does not presuppose *extension*. Thought not being a mode that presupposes extension is precisely what Descartes regarded as sufficient to argue that thought is a principal attribute. The reason is, briefly, that extension is the principal attribute of body, and Descartes is concerned with the question whether mind and body are the same substance. I will return to this question later.³⁵

How does the thought experiment of the Second Meditation show that thought is not a mode of body or extension? In the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* Descartes provides an explanation: ". . . it belongs to the nature of a mode that although we can easily understand any substance without it, we cannot, however, *vice versa* clearly understand a mode unless we conceive at the same time a substance of which it is a mode; as I explained at *Principles* I, 61, and as all philosophers agree. It is clear from his fifth rule, however, that

³² The idea that thought is sufficient to constitute a complete thing should not be understood merely modally. One might think the idea is that thought and extension *can* each constitute a complete thing, but that they do not necessarily do so. Instead, however, the idea is that they have what it takes to constitute complete things and thus *do* always constitute complete things. In other words, Descartes thinks that thought and extension are always principal attributes.

³³ Taken in one sense, the mere idea that the mind is conceived of as a substance or complete thing is trivial. For on Descartes's view the mind is the substance that thinks, whether this is in fact also a corporeal substance or not. Thus in the Geometrical Exposition Descartes defines mind as the substance that thinks, body as the substance that is the subject of extension, and then says that it remains to be determined whether mind and body are the same substance (AT VII 161–62). The substantive contribution that the Second Meditation makes is then not just the (clear and distinct) idea that mind is a thinking substance, but the idea that it is sufficient for it being a substance that it thinks.

³⁴ There is a complication in that Descartes also used the term 'thought' to refer to the modes of the mind. He distinguishes carefully between these two uses of the term, however. (Cf. *Principles*, I, 63 and 64, and the letter to Arnauld of July 29, 1648, AT V 221, K 234–35.)

³⁵ There are two aspects to the notion of a principal attribute: (a) it does not presuppose another property; (b) it is presupposed by other properties. The argument as I present it relies on (a), and Descartes's discussions of the argument tend to emphasize this aspect of the notion. But in the Third Replies Descartes presents the case for dualism by emphasizing (b) (AT III 176).

our author had not attended to this rule: for there he admits that we can doubt about the existence of body, when we do not at the same time doubt the existence of the mind. Hence it follows that the mind can be understood by us without the body, and that therefore it is not a mode of it" (AT VIII-2 350). Descartes makes clear here that the mind is not a mode of body because we can doubt the existence of body while not doubting the existence of mind, and because a mode cannot be clearly understood without conceiving of the kind of substance to which it belongs.³⁶ In this text Descartes identifies the claim that the mind is not a mode of body with the idea that thought is a principal attribute. A little later he makes basically the same point in terms of attributes: "From this fact that one [attribute] can be understood in this way [that is, distinctly] without the other [attribute], it is known that it is not a mode of the latter, but a thing or an attribute of a thing which can subsist without it" (ibid.). The point is really that the Second Meditation is supposed to show that *thought* is not a mode of body.

We can see now why the thought experiment of the Second Meditation shows that thought is not a mode of body. The reason is that Descartes thought that a mode depends not only ontologically, but also epistemically on its attribute. He believed that a mode cannot be conceived clearly and distinctly without the substance of which it is the mode, or without the attribute of that substance. Thus he claimed in the Sixth Meditation (in language that is very close to that of the *Comments*) that we can see that sensation and imagination are modes of him, that is the mind, because he can clearly and distinctly conceive of himself without them, but they cannot be so conceived without an intelligent substance in which they inhere.³⁷ Motion, shape and size are modes of the body, and they cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived without extension.

This view of the mode-attribute relation explains why the connection between a mode and its attribute can be detected by the kind of thought experiment executed in the Second Meditation. Descartes makes this point very clear in the letter to Gibieuf of January 19, 1642:

... when I consider a shape without thinking of the substance or the extension of which it is a shape, I make an abstraction of the mind which I can easily recognize afterwards, by examining whether I did not draw that idea that I have of figure alone from some richer idea that I also have in me, to which it is so joined that, although one can think of one without paying attention to the other, one cannot deny it of the other

³⁶ In one sense of 'understanding without' or 'conceiving without' this cannot be enough. For when I am certain that my mind exists while doubting the existence of body, I conceive of body. As will become clear in a moment what is important is that one can conceive of the mind without thinking of it as corporeal or as mode of body while conceiving of body.

³⁷ AT VII 78. See also *Principles* I, 53 and 61.

when one thinks of both. For I see clearly that the idea of figure is so joined to the idea of extension and of substance, given that it is not possible for me to conceive a shape while denying that it has extension, nor to conceive of extension while denying that it is the extension of a substance. But the idea of an extended and shaped substance is complete because I can conceive it all by itself, and deny of it everything else of which I have ideas. Now it is, it seems to me, quite clear that the idea I have of a substance that thinks is complete in this way, and that I have no other idea that precedes it in my mind, and that is so joined to it that I cannot conceive them well while denying one of the other; for if there were such an idea in me I would necessarily know it. (AT III 475–76, K 123–24)

In this letter Descartes allows that we can think of a mode without thinking of its attribute by an abstraction of the mind—that is to say, by not thinking of the attribute at all.³⁸ But when we consider both the mode and its attribute together we will see that the mode depends on that attribute.

So in order to establish whether some property F is a mode of another property G, one would have to consider them both together, and then see whether one can deny G of F. Or, more properly, the question is whether one could (clearly and distinctly) conceive of something as a thing that has F while denying G of it. Consequently in order to establish that thought is not a mode of extension, or rather, that it is not a mode of an extended substance, we have to consider whether we can conceive of a thinking thing while denying extension of it. For the purpose of the Real Distinction Argument, then, this is Descartes's task in the Second Meditation. And, of course, what is at issue is the question whether we can have *clear and distinct* conceptions of the right kind. Descartes does not always specify the requirement of clarity and distinctness. In the *Meditations* the notion of a clear and distinct idea or conception does not emerge until after the discussion of the mind in the Second Meditation. Like Descartes, I will sometimes omit it.³⁹

In the Second Meditation this strategy is carried out as follows. Descartes doubts that there are bodies, yet he is certain that he exists. He establishes that

³⁸ See also a letter of 22 July 1641, probably to de Launay (AT III 419, K 109).

³⁹ One might think that in light of the letter to Gibieuf Descartes should be saying that he knows he is not a body. But that is not so. The letter to Gibieuf explains how one can find out whether the *idea* of a thinking substance depends on the idea of extension, and thus whether the idea of a thinking thing is an idea of a complete thing. It does not say that one can find out whether any thinking thing has the property of extension by means of the procedure described. This is an important point, for it is consistent to hold that the completeness of some entity, that is, its status as a substance, might be guaranteed by thought and not require extension, while the entity is extended. Failing to see this distinction would amount to confusing having a complete idea of something (which is the same as having an idea of it as complete) with having an adequate idea of it, which requires knowing everything about it. Descartes is careful about this distinction in the Fourth Replies (AT VII 220–21).

he is a thinking thing. We saw that then he turns to the question whether he might be a body, and he concludes that he cannot settle that issue yet. But after he has made that point he makes clear that there is something that is certain already: "It is very certain that the notion of this [I] so precisely taken does not depend on those things which I do not yet know to exist; it does not depend therefore on any of those things that I feign in imagination" (AT VII 27–28). In light of his theory of substance and, in particular, the letter to Gibieuf, this passage has the following significance. Before the above quote Descartes establishes that he is a thinking thing: he focuses his attention just on thought while not considering corporeal characteristics—that is, in abstraction from such characteristics. Then he in effect considers thought and extension (as well as other corporeal characteristics) together: he wonders whether he is a body in addition to being a thinking thing. At first he claims he is not a body, since he assumes there are none. But then he considers the possibility that he is, after all, a body, and he says he does not know, that he cannot settle the question now. But what he does think he can claim is that his *notion* of himself does not depend on the objects of the imagination, that is, bodies or extended things.⁴⁰

According to the letter to Gibieuf, if thought were in fact a mode of extension, Descartes would recognize at this point that his idea of a thinking thing depends on the idea of extension, or of extended substance. Given that he knows he is a thinking thing, he would now see that he also is a body. But he doesn't. Then he draws the conclusion that one expects in light of the letter to Gibieuf: the notion that he has of himself at that point, the notion of a thinking thing, does not depend on the objects of the imagination, that is, bodies.⁴¹

Let us now return to the question whether the Real Distinction Argument relies on a problematic equivocation. We noticed the ambiguity in Descartes's phrase, "I know nothing else to belong my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing." In the Synopsis to the *Meditations* Descartes explicitly makes the weaker claim and says: ". . . I clearly had no cognition of [*cognoscere*] anything that I knew [*scire*] to pertain to my essence, except that I was a thinking

⁴⁰ We saw above (p. 39) that although Descartes does not mention extension explicitly here, it is covered in this passage.

⁴¹ Really what Descartes should be saying here is that his notion of himself does not depend on his *notion* (or idea) of body, rather than body. But this must be what he means. It is what he needs, and in addition, it is more plausibly what he is entitled to rather than the claim that the notion of himself does not depend on body. What he has said in this paragraph provides support for the idea that his notion of a thinking thing does not entail corporeity, but it does not directly address the question whether this notion could exist without body existing (although Descartes thinks that this also is true).

thing" (AT VII 8). In a moment we will see why Descartes thinks this claim is sufficient.⁴²

Descartes uses a variety of other descriptions of the epistemic result of the Second Meditation. These descriptions can often be interpreted in different ways. Some of them suggest that we can form a conception of the mind that excludes extension. Descartes says so in a letter to Mesland: "There is a great difference between abstraction and exclusion. If I said only that the idea that I have of my soul does not represent it to me as dependent on body, and identified with it, that would only be an abstraction, from which I could only form a negative argument, that would be unsound. But I say that this idea represents it to me as a substance that can exist even if everything that belongs to body is excluded from it, from which I form a positive argument, and conclude that it can exist without the body" (AT IV 120). In the letter to Gibieuf Descartes claims that extension can be denied of the mind.⁴³ But sometimes Descartes's point seems to be that one can form a conception of the mind that merely omits extension. In the Fifth Replies he says that we don't have to regard the mind as an extended thing, and that the concept of it developed in the Second Meditation does not contain corporeal characteristics: "I discover that I am a thinking substance, and form a clear and distinct concept of that thinking substance in which [concept] none of those things that belong to the concept of corporeal substance is contained. This clearly suffices for me to affirm that insofar as I know myself, I am nothing other than a thinking thing, which I affirmed in the Second Meditation. And I did not have to admit that thinking substance is some mobile, pure, subtle body, since I had no reason that persuaded me to do so" (AT VII 355). In the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* he describes the point as being that we can doubt the existence of body, while not doubting (and being certain of) the existence of the mind (AT VIII-2, 350). This analysis also suggests that Descartes is concerned with omission of extension from the conception of the mind.

Thus there is variation in Descartes's formulations of the conception of the mind needed for the Real Distinction Argument. In addition, several of these formulations are susceptible to different interpretations. We have seen, however, that Descartes wants to establish that thought is not a mode of extension. In light of Descartes's views of the relationship between modes and attributes it is now clear what he has in mind. For Descartes believes that a mode depends epistemically on its attribute in such a way that one would see the connection between a mode and its attribute, were one to consider them

⁴² Descartes was asked this question by his contemporaries, and was clearly confident that it posed no problems for him (AT VII 8, 219, 355).

⁴³ See also AT VII 121, 227.

together—as opposed to not paying attention to corporeal characteristics, as happens in abstraction. Thus if thought were a mode of extension, considering them together would force us to say that a thinking thing must be extended. The crucial result for the Real Distinction Argument is that we are not forced to do so. Given this result one can make various claims that provide what is needed for the argument. One could say that extension can be omitted from the concept of a thinking thing. This claim is insufficient if it is made while abstracting from extension. But it is sufficient if the omission of extension is found possible *while considering the question whether extension should be included*. Descartes's weaker statements must be understood with this qualification in mind. Alternatively, we could say that we can deny extension of the mind, or that we can form a conception of the mind that excludes extension from it in the sense that we can do so coherently.⁴⁴ Finally, it should be clear now that the claim that we do not clearly and distinctly perceive extension to belong to the essence of the mind is sufficient if this claim is established while considering whether it does so belong.⁴⁵

So in the Second Meditation we learn that we can consider thought and body together without seeing that a thinking thing must be extended and a body. In terms of Descartes's theory of substance it follows that thought is not a mode of extension and of body. Finally, since thought is not a mode of body, Descartes thinks, it is a principal attribute, and makes something a complete thing. I will now turn to questions one might raise about this last inference.

3. THOUGHT A PRINCIPAL ATTRIBUTE

The idea that thought is not a mode of extension is not by itself enough to establish that thought is a principal attribute. Thought could be a mode of

⁴⁴ Descartes would say also that sensation can be denied of the mind: it is merely a mode of it. But it does not follow that the mind does not have the faculty of sensing or does not actually sense.

There is an ambiguity in the claim of exclusion. Descartes might mean that we can exclude extension from our conception of the mind, or that we can form a conception of the mind as something from which extension is excluded. This ambiguity, however, makes no difference to Descartes's purposes. They are hardly different, and Descartes would wish to make both claims given that the point is that one is not forced to think of a mind as extended.

⁴⁵ Sometimes Descartes seems to commit himself to the idea that the argument relies on the stronger claim that he clearly and distinctly perceives that extension does not belong to the essence of the mind. Passages that suggest this commitment can be found at AT VII 13, 169–70, 219, 226. He is entitled to such a perception when the implications of the weaker claim (that he does not perceive that extension belongs to the mind) is combined with further views he held and that the Real Distinction Argument relies on. The weaker claim supports the idea that he perceives that thought is not a mode of body, but a principal attribute. Given Descartes's view that the essence of a substance consists in its principal attribute, and that a substance has only one such attribute, he can derive the clear and distinct perception that extension does not belong to the essence of mind. These aspects of Descartes's views can explain the occurrence of that stronger claim. But the contribution of the thought experiment by itself is just the weaker one.

some other attribute. It could also be identical with extension, but Descartes does not actively consider this possibility. In the sequel I will assume that the idea that thought is a principal attribute includes the idea that thought is not identical with extension and will usually omit this specification.⁴⁶

The point that thought might presuppose some other property is sometimes raised as an objection to Descartes's argument. The question is whether this possibility threatens the attempt to show that the mind is an incorporeal substance. For if thought were a mode of some other property which is, however, a principal attribute distinct from extension, then the conclusion could still be established. So thought being a mode of some other property would be a problem for the argument if either (a) thought were a mode of some other *corporeal* property, or (b) thought were a mode of some property that is presupposed by both thought and extension. These are the possibilities Descartes needs to rule out.

What does Descartes have to say to this objection? The following considerations address (a). In the Second Meditation Descartes does not merely try to establish that *extension* can be denied of the mind. He uses the assumption that bodies don't exist, and lists various corporeal characteristics. So any corporeal properties thus included in the Second Meditation are supposed to be ruled out on the basis of the thought experiment. Consequently in the *Meditations* Descartes does not assume that thought's not being a mode of extension is sufficient for its being a principal attribute.

Often he does make this assumption, however, and the reason is that extension is the crucial property, because it is the principal attribute of body for Descartes. If one grants Descartes that extension is the principal attribute of body, he has an additional reply to (a). For then all the other properties of body presuppose extension. Consequently if thought presupposed some corporeal property other than extension, it would turn out that in the end

⁴⁶In the Sixth Replies he does seem to say that he used to identify thought and extension. He writes: "although the mind had the idea of thought no less than of extension, since it did not understand anything unless it also imagined something, it identified them [*utrumque pro uno et eodem sumebat*], and referred all the notions which it had of intellectual things to the body" (AT VII 441). In other places he addresses the question whether thought might be identical with motion. At one point he allows that one might think so, though only if one made the mistake of relying on one's imagination (AT VII 425). But elsewhere he seems to think this mistake is out of the question, and that the only error one might make is ascribing both thought and motion to the same thing (AT VII 422–23). The passage quoted above combines both ideas applied to extension instead of motion. The cure for identifying thought with motion or extension seems to consist in using one's pure intellect. This cure is provided by the withdrawal from the senses, including the imagination (cf. *Meditations*, AT VII 28) that the first two Meditations are supposed to produce. But I don't think Descartes really meant to be *arguing* that thought is not extension.

thought presupposes extension.⁴⁷ Thus if one grants Descartes that extension is the principal attribute of body, showing that thought does not presuppose extension is enough to show that thought is either (i) a principal attribute or (ii) a mode of a principal attribute F which is different from extension, and which—since extension and F are principal attributes—is neither presupposed by extension, nor presupposes it. I have pointed out that (ii) is not a worrisome possibility. So I will disregard it.

What does Descartes have to say about (b), the possibility that there is some other property that is presupposed by both thought and extension? In the first place, Descartes generally neglects this possibility. He seems to assume that he just needs to show that thought is not a mode of body. Accordingly, I will schematize the argument as relying on this assumption. Nevertheless Descartes would have something to say to (b). For a passage in the Third Replies makes it clear that he thinks (b) can be ruled out by considering thought and extension together. There Descartes claims that if one considers modes that presuppose the same attribute together, one will see that they have this attribute in common. Thus he thinks that when we consider the various modes of mind together we see they have thought in common, and similarly for the modes of body. He also claims that we see no connection between thought and extension.⁴⁸

This reply may well leave Descartes's critic unsatisfied. Descartes's approach can only establish that thought does not presuppose extension by virtue of some *a priori* dependence. On Descartes's view, establishing that there is no *a priori* truth by virtue of which thought entails extension is enough to show that thought is not a mode of extension. But one might question Descartes's view that the mode-attribute relation is always detectable *a priori*. Alternatively, one might grant that it is, but doubt that a strategy like the one pursued in the Second Meditation and described in the letter to Gibieuf is enough to see whether some property is a mode of another one. This strategy might not be enough to determine whether there is an *a priori* connection.

⁴⁷ I know of only two places where Descartes seems to allow for the possibility of a mode presupposing another mode which then in turn presupposes a principal attribute. In Meditation III Descartes seems to describe the modes of body as ordered in a hierarchy of presupposition (AT VII 43). In a letter (probably to Mersenne for Hobbes) he says "there is no problem or absurdity in saying that an accident is the subject of another accident, as one says that quantity is the subject of other accidents" (AT III 355). The example Descartes is interested in there is the relationship between movement and its determination.

⁴⁸ AT VII 176. In the letter to Gibieuf Descartes makes a comment that suggests that if there were such a connection, and we did not know of it, God would be a deceiver. He writes: "I do not deny that there may be several properties in the soul or body of which I have no ideas. I only deny that there are any that are inconsistent with the ideas of mind and body that I have, including my idea of their distinctness. For otherwise God would be a deceiver, and we would have no rule for assuring ourselves of the truth" (AT III 478, K 152).

This is a very serious problem for the argument. Descartes needs to rule out the possibility that thought might be a way of being extended despite there being no *a priori* connection between thought and extension, or none that is so easily detected. It is important to see, however, that this line of objection could have rather strong implications. For Descartes might be able to develop a response that derives from the particular sense in which a mode is supposed to be a way of being of a principal attribute. This sense is such that a mode cannot be understood without its principal attribute. This view is plausible for examples of modes found in Descartes's writings, such as motion, shape, sensation, imagination. According to this response, the objection about the epistemic relation of modes to principal attributes results in questions about the ontological picture. It would turn the present worries into a questioning not just of the view that modes epistemically depend on their attributes, but of the view that a substance has a principal attribute of which the other properties are modes in Descartes's sense.

4. THE NATURE OF BODY

The claim that thought is a principal attribute is not enough to establish that my mind is not actually extended. If my mind is a thinking, complete thing by virtue of the attribute of thought, it follows that my mind could exist as just a thinking thing that is not extended. But that conclusion is compatible with the idea that it is actually extended. Descartes relies on two other premises to conclude that his mind is not extended: the claim that extension is the principal attribute of body, and the claim that a substance has exactly one principal attribute. I will now discuss the claim that extension is the principal attribute of body. This claim rules out the possibility that mind and body are identical by virtue of extension, which constitutes the nature or essence of body for Descartes, being a mode of thought. I wish to emphasize the importance of this premise to the argument. Generally discussions of the argument focus on the mind and pay little attention to Descartes's claims about body. But Descartes's conception of body is absolutely crucial.

Two aspects of the claim that extension is the principal attribute of body are important. (1) The first is the idea that *extension* rather than some other property is the principal attribute of body. Descartes himself regarded this point as important for the Real Distinction Argument, as is clear from the following passage:

The earliest judgments which we have made since our childhood, and the common philosophy also later, have accustomed us to attribute to the body many things which belong only to the soul, and to attribute to the soul many things which belong only to body. People commonly mingle the two ideas of body and soul in the composition of the ideas that they form of real qualities and substantial forms, which I think should be

completely rejected. By examining physics carefully, one can reduce all those things in it which fall under the knowledge of the intellect to very few kinds, of which we have very clear and distinct notions. After considering them I do not think one can fail to recognize whether, when we conceive one thing without another, this happens only by an abstraction of our mind or because the things are truly different. When things are separated only by a mental abstraction, one necessarily notices their conjunction and union when one considers them together. But one could not notice any between the body and soul, provided that one conceives them as one should, the one as that which fills space, the other as that which thinks. (Letter of July 1641, possibly to de Launay, AT III, 420–21, K 109)

Descartes claims here that when we clean up our notions of body and soul, and think of body as what is extended, and of the soul as what thinks, it is easier to see that the body is really distinct from the soul. Descartes saw his conception of body as an advance over the Aristotelian Scholastic conception which mixed ideas of body and soul.⁴⁹

(2) It is crucial to the argument that body has a *principal attribute* different from thought. That is to say, it is important that body is a substance by virtue of some property different from thought, and does not have to think in order to be a substance.⁵⁰ This point is important, because, as we shall see, the argument relies on the idea that extension is a *principal attribute* to show that the mind is not extended. Descartes takes the point that body has a principal attribute different from thought to be pretty obvious, and it will strike most people as not in need of much defense. One can easily conceive of a corporeal, nonthinking complete thing such as a stone, and we easily grant that there are such things. But it is worth pointing out that this claim was denied, for instance, by Leibniz, who thought that all substances are perceiving substances. In Cartesian terms, for Leibniz extension is not a principal attribute, and perception is the only principal attribute.

Although Descartes thought it was an advantage of his conception of body that he regarded its essence as consisting in extension, the argument could

⁴⁹ In the *Meditations* this point is not made explicit. A well-known comment in a letter to Mersenne of March 4, 1641, suggests that this is intentional. Descartes says to Mersenne: "I will say to you, between us, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my Physics. But please do not say so, for those who favor Aristotle might cause more problems for their approval. And I hope that those who will read it, will get used to my principles without noticing, and that they will recognize the truth before realizing that they destroy those of Aristotle" (AT III 298, K 94).

⁵⁰ Strictly speaking, neither of these two points about body relies on peculiarities of the notion of a principal attribute. The first one could be stated by saying that the essence or nature of body is extension. The importance of the second point lies in the idea that something can be a corporeal, nonthinking substance. I have stated both in terms of the notion of a principal attribute, because that notion does play a role in the way in which the premise currently under discussion ("extension is the principal attribute of body") gets used. For it is combined with the premise that a substance has just one principal attribute to reach the conclusion that mind and body are really distinct.

have gone through, in principle, on a conception of body as having a different principal attribute. The present point is just that in order to get the conclusion that the mind is not a body, Descartes needs the claim that some property different from thought is the principal attribute of body.

The fact that denial of the possibility of corporeal, nonthinking substances is unusual explains why generally little attention is paid to the role of claims about body in the Real Distinction Argument. But it is important to see that claims about the nature of body are indispensable to Descartes's argument. Central statements of the argument should make this clear. For instance, in the Sixth Meditation Descartes relies on clear and distinct conception of both mind and body—and not just of the mind.

5. ATTRIBUTES AND SUBSTANCES

How close are we to the conclusion that mind and body are different substances? At this point in the argument it is established that both thought and extension are principal attributes. Consequently two ways in which the mind might be a body are ruled out: thought cannot be a mode of extension, and extension cannot be a mode of thought. What is left, however, is the possibility that the mind has two principal attributes, thought and extension. But Descartes holds that a substance cannot have more than one principal attribute. I will call this premise the Attribute Premise. Given that the mind is a thinking thing and that thought and extension are both principal attributes, it follows that the mind is not extended.

We have, in fact, already encountered the Attribute Premise in Descartes's account of substance. For we saw that at *Principles* I, 53 he writes that each substance has one principal attribute that constitutes its nature or essence. The premise is generally not at all explicit when Descartes argues for the real distinction of mind and body. But Descartes appeals to it in the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*.⁵¹ Regius had written: "since those attributes [extension and thought] are not opposites but diverse, there is no obstacle to the mind being some attribute belonging to the same subject as extension, although one is not comprehended in the concept of the other."⁵² Descartes writes in reply that this is possible for modes, but: "About other attributes that constitute the natures of things it cannot be said that those that are different and of which neither is contained in the concept of the other, belong to the same subject. For it is the same as saying that one and the same subject has two different natures, which implies a contradiction, at least when the question concerns a simple and noncomposite subject, as is the case here" (AT VIII-B 349–50).

⁵¹ This passage was pointed out to me by Jeremy Hyman.

⁵² AT VIII 342–43.

Less obviously, the premise is just below the surface in Descartes's discussion of the argument in the Fourth Replies. He writes: "No one who perceived two substances through two different concepts has ever failed to judge that they are really distinct" (AT VII 226). On a simpleminded reading of this sentence Descartes would be suggesting something like this: whenever we have two concepts, and we wonder whether they correspond to one or two substances, we must think there are two. But he cannot mean to say that. The concepts in question are, of course, those of the mind as a thinking complete thing, and the body as an extended complete thing, where neither concept contains what belongs to the other substance. Thus the idea is that mind and body are perceived through thought and extension respectively. I think that what is behind this comment is the fact that for Descartes two principal attributes yield two substances. The comment suggests that Descartes thought this pretty obvious—which view might contribute to an explanation of the fact that the idea is not made more explicit by Descartes.

Descartes's use of the premise in the passage from the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* suggests that we need to make a modification in the statement of the premise. For Descartes draws a distinction between simple and composite subjects, and what he says seems to suggest that he allows for complex *substances* which have more than one principal attribute. An example of a complex subject for Descartes is the human being who is a composite of mind and body, and in which more than one attribute can be found. We must be cautious, however, for Descartes does not use the term 'substance' here. But as I understand it the role of the Attribute Premise is compatible with Descartes's accepting complex substances. The role of the premise in the argument is to establish that when there are two principal attributes, there are two substances, but it is compatible with the idea that two substances could in turn compose a third substance. So it leads to the conclusion that mind and body are both substances, while allowing for the possibility that together they compose a third substance, a human being.⁵³ To put the point slightly differently: according to the Attribute Premise, if there are substances that think and are extended they are always composites of two different substances, a

⁵³ The view that Descartes held this position is defended by Paul Hoffman in "The Unity of Descartes's Man." Insofar as I know Descartes never calls the human being a substance, although he does call it here a (complex) subject (see also AT VII 425) and elsewhere an *ens per se* (in letters to Regius, December 1641, AT III 460; K 121–22, January 1642, AT III 493, 508–509; K 127, 130) and *unum per se* (AT VII 222). I owe this observation to Jeremy Hyman. Though I find this fact intriguing I am not sure what its significance is. Descartes does claim that there is a substantial union between mind and body (letter to Regius, January 1642, AT III 493, 508, K 127, 130, letter to Mesland, February 9 1645, IV 166, K 157, and VII 219, 228, 585). Geneviève Rodis-Lewis defends the idea that Descartes thinks the human being is a genuine individual without claiming he regards it as a substance (*L'individualité selon Descartes* [Paris, Vrin, 1950], 74–81).

thinking one and an extended one. In the sequel I will leave this complication out of consideration. Supposing that Descartes does allow for complex substances, in effect my discussion will concern simple ones.⁵⁴

The Attribute Premise is generally not explicit in Descartes's discussions of the Real Distinction Argument. But there are good reasons for thinking that the argument relies on it. First, Descartes adhered to the Premise, as is quite clear at *Principles* I, 53, and in the *Comments*. Second, in the *Comments* he does ascribe a role to the Premise in the case for dualism. Finally, there is the philosophical consideration that the argument requires *something* to do the work the Premise does. Without the Attribute Premise the argument establishes the possibility of a thinking, nonextended substance. But it simply does not rule out the possibility that there are thinking substances that are also extended and corporeal (without being composites of a thinking and an extended substance). Thus it does not rule out the possibility that my mind is in fact extended and corporeal. The Attribute Premise solves the problem by appeal to a view Descartes clearly committed himself to, and which he did cite in support of dualism. Of course the role of the Premise is generally implicit. Thus it is quite likely that Descartes himself did not fully appreciate its importance.⁵⁵

Why does Descartes hold the Attribute Premise?⁵⁶ The premise makes a strong claim, and the question whether one should accept or reject it is not easy to answer. Descartes never really defends it. The closest he comes is in the passage from the *Comments* where Descartes simply says that a substance cannot have two natures, because this would imply a contradiction. That remark does not teach us much. The question why he might have held this premise is

⁵⁴ The quote from the *Comments* suggests that Descartes might have yet another qualification in mind, namely, that the Attribute Premise applies only to attributes that constitute the natures of things and *neither of which is contained in the concept of the other*. Clearly that condition applies to thought and extension. I don't know of an example in Descartes of attributes that constitute the natures of things without satisfying this condition. Moreover, perhaps Descartes did not really mean to suggest that there are such attributes. The clause might be there just because he wanted to mention this characteristic of attributes that constitute the natures of substances. I will leave this condition out of consideration.

⁵⁵ It is worth noting that Descartes's statements of the argument in major texts such as in the *Discourse*, *Meditations*, and *Principles* tend to be quite elliptical and omit not just the role of the notion of a principal attribute. When responding to questions and objections he came up with various elaborations that have contributed significantly to our understanding of the argument and Descartes's confidence in it. For instance, whereas in the *Replies* and in correspondence Descartes is quite explicit about the importance for the argument of the notion of a complete thing, his statements in these major texts do not appeal to this notion. Whereas for the *Discourse* and the *Meditations* the explanation could be that the role of the notion of a complete thing was really an elaboration Descartes developed later, that explanation does not apply to the *Principles*.

⁵⁶ Stephen Schiffer defends something like this premise in "Descartes on His Essence," *Philosophical Review* 85 (1976): 21–43. See especially 36–37.

an interesting one, however, and I wish to pursue it to some extent, although doing so is necessarily speculative.

One consideration worth mentioning is the fact that the resulting picture is quite appealing: it is very clean and neat. According to this picture a substance has a very orderly set of properties; a particular kind of substance cannot have just any kind of property. Its properties are unified by means of its principal attribute, which accords with the idea, common in the history of philosophy, that a substance is a unity in some strong sense. In addition, part of the attraction of the resulting view for Descartes is, of course, that corporeal substances can be accounted for entirely mechanistically.

Further examination of the role of the principal attribute in Descartes's conception of substance helps make sense of his adherence to the Attribute Premise from a different angle. It is useful to compare his conception of substance to two others, namely, what I will call the Bare Subject View, and the Aristotelian scholastic conception of corporeal substance. For this purpose we must distinguish between the notion of a substance and that of a subject of inherence. On the Bare Subject View a substance just is a subject of inherence of properties. Properties inhere in the subject, but are not constituents of a substance. The subject constitutes the entire substance.⁵⁷ According to the Aristotelian scholastics, on the other hand, a corporeal substance is a composite of prime matter and substantial form. Each of these is a constituent of the substance. Prime matter is a bare subject in the sense that it, too, is in itself featureless and understood as the bare subject for substantial form. But an important difference with the Bare Subject View is that prime matter is merely a constituent of the substance, which in addition includes one or more substantial forms.⁵⁸

Descartes clearly rejects the Bare Subject view, and agrees with the Aristotelians in thinking that the substance itself is more than just a bare subject. He thinks it contains the principal attribute. In fact, often he seems to hold a view that is exactly the opposite of the Bare Subject View. For much of what Descartes says suggests that the principal attribute constitutes the entire substance, and that there is no bare subject of inherence at all. On this view there

⁵⁷ This view can be found in Locke, for instance, in Bk. II, ch. 23 of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). For a discussion and more references see Edwin McCann, "Cartesian Selves and Lockean Substances," *The Monist* 69 (1986): 458–82. Locke's conception of substance is controversial, however. For a different interpretation see M. R. Ayers, "The Idea of Power and Substance in Locke's Philosophy," in *Locke on Human Understanding*, ed. I. C. Tipton (Oxford, 1977).

⁵⁸ There was debate among the scholastics about the question whether a substance can have more than one substantial form. For this debate see Marilyn McCord Adams, *Ockham*, part IV, ch. 15; and Robert Zavalloni, *Richard de Mediavilla et la controverse sur la pluralité des formes* (Louvain: Éditions de l'Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, 1951).

is nothing to the substance over and above the principal attribute, and the substance is entirely constituted by it.

It is clear that for Descartes the substance includes the principal attribute. Thus in the Fourth Replies he writes that surfaces and lines can be understood as complete things (that is, substances) only if one adds besides length and width also depth.⁵⁹ Descartes's point is here that one needs to include the principal attribute of extension in order to get completeness. In the letter to Gibieuf he says that in order to have a complete idea of shape (which is the same as understanding shape as a complete thing)⁶⁰ one needs to include extension and substance—not just substance. This point again shows that completeness requires a principal attribute. Otherwise it should be enough for completeness to think of shape as inhering in a substance without including extension. Furthermore Descartes's view that thought is *sufficient* for completeness would be puzzling if the subject by itself constitutes the complete thing or substance.⁶¹

Various comments Descartes makes suggest that for him there is no bare subject as a constituent of substance at all. He rejects the scholastic notion of prime matter in *The World* as unintelligible, saying "it has been so deprived of all its forms and qualities that nothing remains that can be clearly understood."⁶² Matter must be conceived as extended, he contends. In the *Principles* he allows only a distinction of reason between the subject and its principal attribute: "Thought and extension can be regarded as constituting the natures of intelligent and corporeal substance; and then they must be conceived not otherwise than as thinking substance itself and extended substance itself, that is, as mind and body. In this way they are understood most clearly and distinctly. For this reason we understand extended or thinking substance more easily than substance alone when the fact that it thinks or is extended is omitted. For there is some difficulty in abstracting the notion of substance from the notions of thought and extension, because these are different from it only by reason" (*Principles*, I 63). Descartes seems here to *identify* the principal attributes with the substances. If there is only a distinction of reason between principal attribute and substance, then it is impossible to see how there could be anything to a substance over and above the principal attribute. For a distinction of reason is just a conceptual distinction.⁶³ In the *Comments* Descartes

⁵⁹ AT VII 228.

⁶⁰ See AT VII 221.

⁶¹ AT VII 219.

⁶² *The World*, AT XI 33, 35.

⁶³ In a letter to an unknown correspondent of 1645 or 1646 Descartes claims that a distinction of reason is always founded in a distinction in reality (AT IV 349–50, K 187–88). So there is a distinction in reality, though not a *real* distinction, between the principal attribute and the sub-

writes: "I have not said that those attributes [thought and extension] are in [incorporeal substance and corporeal substance] as in subjects different from them. . . ." (AT VIII-B 348).⁶⁴ It is worth pointing out also that in the *Comments* Descartes uses 'thought' and 'mind' interchangeably.

A comparison between Descartes's view and the hylomorphic conception of corporeal substance is interesting at this point. For the Aristotelians a corporeal substance consists of prime matter and substantial form. Descartes eliminates prime matter. In Aristotelian terms the result is that a substance just consists in a substantial form. In Descartes's terms it is that the substance just consists in a principal attribute. Now these notions are different, but it is worth pointing out that the notion of a principal attribute inherited certain features of the notion of substantial form, in particular of a version of this notion found, for instance, in Aquinas and Suárez. On this view substantial forms constitute the natures of substances. For Descartes the principal attribute plays this role. The substantial form of a hylomorphic substance is the principle or source of the properties, faculties, and activities of a substance, and determines what kinds a substance can have; for Descartes its principal attribute determines what kinds of modes belong to a substance.⁶⁵ For Aquinas and others the substantial form is what gives the substance its being, its actuality. It makes something a substance.⁶⁶ For Descartes the principal attribute makes something a substance, a being in its own right as opposed to a mode, which has being through something else. In the light of these similarities it is significant for our present purposes that Descartes eliminated prime

stance, and it results from the fact that there is a subject of inherence. A real distinction, *distinctio realis*, is a distinction between *res*, things, but for Descartes a principal attribute and its subject of inherence are not two different *res*.

This letter does not show, however that there is a distinction in reality in a substance between its principal attribute and the subject of inherence. The question at issue in this letter is the nature of the distinction between essence and existence. The distinction in reality results there, Descartes seems to claim, from the fact that there is a distinction in reality between the *thought* of the essence of the thing and the *thought* of its existence. In addition, there is a distinction in reality between something as it exists in the intellect and as it exists outside the intellect. In the thing as it exists outside thought there is no distinction between its essence and its existence. Thus, similarly, for the subject and the attribute there would not be a distinction in the thing as it exists outside thought.

⁶⁴ This passage is less clear than the one from the *Principles*, for Descartes's primary concern here is to draw the distinction between modes and attributes. Descartes's point could just be that an attribute is not different from its substance in the way in which a mode is.

⁶⁵ Cf. Suárez, *Disputationes metaphysicae* XV.1.7, X.64, *De Anima* I.I.9, 11 (in volume 3 of his *Opera Omnia*). Descartes, *Principles* I 53, *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* AT VIII-2 349. See also Garber, "How God Causes Motion: Descartes, Divine Sustenance, and Occasionalism," *Journal of Philosophy* (1987): 574.

⁶⁶ Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* II, ed. Leonine (Turin: Marietti, 1946). For a translation see James F. Anderson, trans. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), c. 68, p. 204.

matter. For, in a sense, as a result of eliminating prime matter the substance just consists in the principal attribute.

Descartes's commitment to the identification of principal attribute and substance is not unproblematic. He makes various claims that raise questions about this commitment. It would lead us too far afield to consider these problems.⁶⁷ But at least there is a clear tendency in Descartes to make this identification. This tendency provides a very simple hypothesis about why Descartes adheres to the Attribute Premise. For given this identification a substance contains nothing over and above the principal attribute: there are no additional constituents. Consequently where there are two such attributes there must be two substances.

6. SEPARABILITY

The previous section concludes my account of the structure of the Real Distinction Argument. I now want to return to the issue of the separability of mind and body. I have argued that the real distinction of mind and body does not consist in their separability. But as we saw earlier, Descartes was not just interested in the claim that mind and body are really distinct, that is, actually different substances. He was also concerned with the idea that mind and body are separable, in particular that the mind can exist without the body. What is the relationship between the separability of mind and body and their being different substances, and what is the role of separability in the argument?

One connection between real distinction and separability, as we have seen, is that the first entails the second. For Descartes a substance is a thing in its own right. Furthermore, because a substance exists in its own right, it can exist without anything else. Clearly, then, it follows from the idea that mind and body are really distinct, that is, different substances, that they can exist without one another. But it does not follow from these considerations that this must be the order of inference in the Real Distinction Argument. According to many interpreters the inference goes in the opposite direction: the separability of mind and body is an essential step for deriving their real distinction. Prominent statements of the argument, such as in the *Meditations*, the Geometrical Exposition, and the *Principles* seem to support such an interpretation. I believe, however, that this approach misrepresents the precise significance of

⁶⁷ For a discussion of the question whether the substance is identical with its principal attribute see Jean Laporte, *Le rationalisme de Descartes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1945), 185–90, and “Expérience ontologique et déduction systématique dans la constitution de la métaphysique de Descartes,” *Cahiers de Royaumont, philosophie no II, Descartes* (New York: Garland, 1987), 10–71. The latter is a presentation by Fernand Alquié followed by discussion that includes as its main other protagonist Martial Gueroult.

separability in the Real Distinction Argument, and overestimates its importance. I now wish to address this issue.

In the Geometrical Exposition Descartes clearly does infer the real distinction of mind and body from their separability. He argues there that mind can be without body and *vice versa* at least by God's power. Then he concludes: "Substances that can be without one another are really distinct (by definition 10). But mind and body are substances (by definitions 5, 6, and 7), that can be without one another (as has already been proved). Therefore mind and body are really distinct" (AT VII 170).⁶⁸ But the Geometrical Exposition is unusual in presenting the real distinction so clearly as derived from separability. Whereas the idea of the separability of mind and body is in evidence in the Sixth Meditation and in the *Principles*, in neither of these texts does Descartes clearly infer real distinction from separability. In the Meditations he first makes general claims about how to establish a real distinction. He seems to be saying that it is established via separability, when he says: "Since I know that anything that I clearly and distinctly understand can be brought about by God just as I understand it, it is sufficient that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing without another in order for me to be certain that one is different from the other, since they can be placed apart [*seorsim poni*] at least by God." But when he moves to the discussion of mind and body in particular, their separability does not figure as a premise. Their separability does show up: Descartes concludes the argument by saying, "it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it." But this sentence is more easily read as presenting the direction of inference to be from real distinction to separability! Finally, in the *Principles* also Descartes seems to conclude that mind and body are really distinct before he addresses their separability.

It is important that on various occasions Descartes presents the real distinction as derived simply from the claim that he has clear and distinct conceptions of mind and body as different substances. The Sixth Meditation can be read that way. Most strikingly in the Synopsis Descartes presents the final stage of the argument as follows: "I concluded that all those things which are clearly and distinctly conceived as different substances, as are mind and body, are substances really distinct from one another" (AT VII 13). Now statements of the argument where he infers that mind and body are different substances simply from the fact that he had different conceptions of them, or, as here, from the observation that he clearly and distinctly conceives them to be different, might be elliptical. There might be an implicit step to the effect that mind and body are separable. But there are two philosophical points to be made here. First, in fact that step is not needed: on my reconstruction the argument

⁶⁸ See also AT VII 227.

arrives at the real distinction without any appeal to separability. Second, interpretations that do see the argument as deriving the real distinction from the separability of mind and body tend to run into problems with respect to this inference. The literature in English has often taken this approach. I will consider two examples.

According to one common analysis the argument works as follows. In the Second Meditation Descartes argues that it is conceivable that he (his mind) exists, and thinks without being extended. Furthermore, he believes that whatever is conceivable is possible. Let us call this the Conceivability Premise. It follows that it is possible for him to exist, and think without being extended. The argument then needs a further premise to show that he *actually* is not extended, and thus not a body. This job can be done by the premise that what is extended is necessarily extended, where this claim is to be understood *de re*. I will call this premise the Essentialist Premise. The conceivability and possibility of him existing without being extended should also be understood as *de re* claims about a particular. Let us call this the Essentialist Argument.^{69,70}

There are two problems with this interpretation. The first one is that the Essentialist Premise is introduced just on the basis of the philosophical need for it, and not at all on the basis of textual evidence.⁷¹ The second one is that the Essentialist Argument has the following serious philosophical flaw. Des-

⁶⁹ Versions of this interpretation can be found in Wagner, "Descartes's Arguments for Mind-Body Distinctness"; Michael Hooker, "Descartes's Denial of Mind-Body Identity," in Hooker, ed., *Descartes: Critical and Interpretative Essays* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 171–85. Bernard Williams's interpretation is different in important respects, but he also claims the argument relies on *de re* modal claims (*Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry* [Penguin, 1978], 115–16). Hooker's interpretation is adopted by James Van Cleve in "Conceivability and the Cartesian Argument for Dualism," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1983): 35–45. Sydney Shoemaker discusses the argument in "On an Argument for Dualism." He uses Norman Malcolm's interpretation from "Descartes' Proof That He Is Essentially a Non-Material Thing," in *Thought and Knowledge: Essays by Norman Malcolm* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 58–84. The term "Essentialist Premise" is taken from Shoemaker's article. The papers by Van Cleve and Shoemaker are concerned with philosophical rather than scholarly issues. Interpretations that do not ascribe *de re* modal claims to Descartes are Margaret Wilson's (*Descartes*, 185–200), and E. M. Curley's (*Descartes against the Sceptics*, 193–206).

⁷⁰ This argument is stated in terms of the ability of the mind to exist without being extended rather than in terms of separability. But separability is at issue in the following sense. The question at issue is, of course, whether a person's mind is identical with her body or a thing distinct from it. If the mind can exist without being extended, it can exist without this body with which it might be identical.

⁷¹ Stephen Wagner pays more attention than others to the question of textual evidence for the Essentialist Premise. He claims that there is no question that Descartes held it. But he thinks that Descartes failed to supply it explicitly, or argue for it, and suspects confusion on Descartes's part on the distinction between the Essentialist Premise, which is a *de re* claim, and the *de dicto* claim that necessarily bodies are extended. Insofar as I know there is no textual evidence for Descartes's adhering to this premise, let alone for the idea that he regarded the argument as relying on it.

cartes might find it conceivable that he exists without being extended, and from this infer, by way of the Conceivability Premise, that it is possible for him not to be extended. But on the other hand, it might be that, unbeknownst to him, he is actually extended. But then by the Essentialist Premise he would be necessarily extended. So given the Essentialist Premise, the conceivability of existing unextended is insufficient to establish its possibility.^{72,73}

Margaret Wilson reconstructs the argument as follows. If A can exist apart from B, and vice versa, A is really distinct from B, and B from A. Furthermore, the argument relies on premises that establish the following: if I clearly and distinctly perceive that A can exist apart from B and *vice versa*, then they can so exist, because God can bring it about, and thus they are really distinct. The question is now: what does it take to perceive that A can exist without B? Wilson says: "I can clearly and distinctly perceive the possibility that A and B exist apart, if: there are attributes ϕ and φ such that I clearly and distinctly understand that ϕ belongs to the nature of A, and that φ belongs to the nature of B (and $\phi \neq \varphi$), and I clearly and distinctly understand that something can be a complete thing if it has ϕ even if it lacks φ (or has φ and lacks ϕ)." Thought and extension then fulfill the conditions on ϕ and φ for mind and body, and it follows that mind and body are really distinct.⁷⁴

⁷² Thus a conflict arises between the Essentialist Premise and the Conceivability Premise. One might drop the premise that what is conceivable is possible. The question then arises how else one could establish that it is possible that one exists and thinks without being extended. Sidney Shoemaker has argued that there is no way of doing so without begging the question ("On an Argument for Dualism," 247–48). For a different version of the same criticism see Van Cleve ("Conceivability and the Cartesian Argument," 41).

On my interpretation Descartes's argument is not vulnerable to these problems. It does not rely on the Essentialist Premise nor on the Conceivability Premise. This latter premise is supposed to capture how one can use the result of the thought experiment of the Second Meditation. It is a very strong claim about *a priori* access to what is possible, as it contends that *anything* that is conceivable is possible. (Other notions of conceivability are possible, but would not be appropriate in an interpretation of the Real Distinction Argument, which is meant to be *a priori*.) Descartes's argument does require, however, the narrower claim that the connection between modes and attributes is an *a priori* matter. This claim allows one to conclude that thought is a mode of extension on the basis of the thought experiment. It is compatible with the Essentialist Premise, which, however, is not used in Descartes's argument.

⁷³ An important feature of Descartes's argument is brought out by the following difference between it and the Essentialist Argument. Sidney Shoemaker has claimed about the Essentialist Argument that it may be thought to work because it is assumed that if dualism is true for some thinking subject, then it is true for every thinking subject. His point, I take it, is this. One might find the notion of a thinking substance that is not extended coherent, and infer that it is possible for there to be such an entity. But supposing these claims are correct, it still does not follow about any particular thinking thing (such as Descartes or his mind) that it is unextended ("On an Argument for Dualism," 248–49). Descartes's argument, however, tries to *establish* that dualism is true for any thinking subject. For it purports to establish that it is impossible for any thinking thing to be an extended thing.

⁷⁴ *Descartes*, 185–200.

On this interpretation the argument relies on the perception that thought belongs to me, and that thought is sufficient to constitute a complete thing. Consequently it establishes that my completeness, my existence as a substance, does not require extension, and that I *can* exist without being extended. But on this interpretation nothing in the argument rules out that *actually* I am extended and a body. This would not be a problem if Descartes was merely concerned to establish that I can exist without body, or, to put it differently, that I can exist in an entirely incorporeal form. Now Wilson thinks that this is all Descartes wants to establish, because she thinks that real distinction is nothing over and above separability. Mind and body are different things, on her view, just in the sense that they can exist apart.⁷⁵ But I have argued that there is more to Descartes's notion of real distinction. Mind and body are different substances for him in the sense that each is a thing in its own right different from the other. This idea is important since he thinks each is a subject of inherence for different types of properties. Addition of the Attribute Premise would result in the conclusion that mind and body are different substances in this stronger sense.⁷⁶

Furthermore, once this point is recognized, it should be clear that separability can be dropped from Wilson's reconstruction. On her interpretation, Descartes bases the claim that we clearly and distinctly perceive the separability of mind and body on the claim that we perceive that thought belongs to mind, and extension to body, and that each of these is complete with just the attribute in question.⁷⁷ Wilson is right on this point. On the other hand, if one takes the clear and distinct perceptions of mind and body as complete with just thought and extension respectively, the real distinction can be established without an appeal to separability by adding the Attribute Premise (and the validation of clear and distinct perceptions via God).⁷⁸ In other words, for Descartes these

⁷⁵ Descartes, 190, 207.

⁷⁶ Curley tries to accomplish this by appealing to the notion of a rigid designator developed by Kripke (*Descartes against the Skeptics*, 201–206).

⁷⁷ Cf. Descartes, 193–98, esp. 193–94.

⁷⁸ Two other items that tend to figure in Descartes's statement of the argument do not appear in my reconstruction of it, namely, Descartes's references to clear and distinct perceptions and to God. The reason is as follows. I think that the role of God in the argument is just to validate clear and distinct perceptions. It is needed given the skeptical arguments of the First Meditation. The notion of clear and distinct perception enters into the argument only to make the point that a reliable cognition is at issue, a perception of the kind we know to be true. If skeptical worries are ignored the philosophical structure of the argument does not include explicit reference to God or the notion of clear and distinct perception. Descartes himself seemed to see the argument this way (cf. Synopsis to the *Meditations* AT VII 13, Fourth Replies AT VII 226), but this interpretation is not uncontroversial. It is often thought that God plays a bigger role. (See Curley, *Descartes against the Skeptics*, 198–200; Wagner, "Descartes's Arguments for Mind-Body Distinctness.")

It is worth pointing out that the fact that Descartes invokes God's power (rather than his veracity) in the argument is not sufficient to show that his role goes beyond the validation of clear and distinct perceptions. For Descartes clearly thought that limits on God's power would create

clear and distinct perceptions allow us to conclude both that thought and extension are principal attributes, and that mind and body are separable. But the first of these two claims is more fundamental philosophically: mind and body can exist without one another because thought and extension are different principal attributes. Moreover, this claim is more important for the argument, since it allows the inference to dualism when combined with the Attribute Premise.

So both these interpretations try to establish the real distinction via separability, and run into obstacles trying to do so. Arguing that mind and body are actually different substances in the sense that Descartes wants by way of their separability is not a trivial matter. The inference from the conceivability of mind existing (as a complete thing) without being extended and without body to its possibility is problematic. Nor is there an automatic step from this possibility to the mind actually not being extended and a body. Furthermore, as we have seen, if the argument is understood in light of Descartes's theory of substance, the separability of mind and body is not needed to establish their real distinction.

Descartes himself did, however, seem to think that one can infer from the separability of mind and body to their being different substances. He did not seem to see the problems with this inference. But these problems are not serious for Descartes since his conception of substance allows the argument for the real distinction to go through without running afoul of them. The reconstruction of the argument I propose avoids philosophical problems that arise from focus on separability and reveals, I believe, the fundamental ideas underlying the argument.⁷⁹

7. CONCLUSION

The argument can now be schematized as follows:

- (1) I can doubt that I am extended but I cannot doubt (that is, I am certain) that I think.⁸⁰

problems for the reliability of our perceptions (cf. *Meditations*, AT VII 21). For this issue see also Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, *L'oeuvre de Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1971), 338–39, and Martial Gueroult, *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*, Roger Ariew, ed. and trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), II, 48–49. Both Rodis-Lewis and Gueroult point out the relevance of the fact that Descartes tries to establish the real distinction in the face of the union of mind and body. In a different context Gueroult argues that God's veracity follows entirely from his omnipotence as deception is an imperfection for Descartes (21–26).

⁷⁹One reason, of course, why separability is bound to emerge in Descartes's statements of the argument is because he is interested in separability in view of the issue of the afterlife. Another relevant point is the fact that, as the French commentators like to point out, Descartes clearly thought that the close union of mind and body constituted an obstacle to recognition of the real distinction. For this issue see the references to Gueroult and Rodis-Lewis in the previous footnote.

⁸⁰One might think that by virtue of (1) the argument relies on *de re* modal claims about particulars. But it should be clear from (3) that the argument relies on what (1) shows about thought, not on what it shows about a particular, namely, me.

- (2) For any (intrinsic) properties ϕ and φ , if it is possible to doubt that something is ϕ while not doubting (that is, while being certain) that it is φ , then φ is not a mode of ϕ .
- (3) Thought is not a mode of extension. (1, 2)
- (4) Extension is the principal attribute of body, that is, corporeal substance.
- (5) If thought is not a mode of extension, it is a principal attribute distinct from extension.
- (6) Thought is a principal attribute distinct from extension. (3, 5)
- (7) Every substance has exactly one principal attribute.
- (8) The substance that is the subject of my thoughts (= my mind) is not extended. (4, 6, 7)
- (9) My mind is a different substance from body. (4, 8, LL)
- (10) If A and B are different substances, they are really distinct.
- (11) My mind is really distinct from body. (9, 10)

So interpreted, Descartes's argument escapes various philosophical problems, and it explains his confidence in the argument in terms of views he clearly held. It does not suffer from the problems that arise for the Essentialist Argument and Wilson's interpretation that result from focusing on the possibility of mind existing unextended or without body. In addition, my understanding of the argument should do away with ascriptions to Descartes of the so-called 'Argument from Doubt' which runs as follows: "I can doubt that body exists, I cannot doubt that I exist, therefore I am not identical with body," where the conclusion follows simply by an application of Leibniz's Law. Sometimes this argument is attributed to Descartes, but its shortcomings are clear.⁸¹ My interpretation explains the role of the doubt without committing Descartes to the Argument from Doubt. The importance of the doubt is this: because we can doubt that bodies exist while being certain that mind exists, we discover that mind, or thought, is not a mode of body.⁸²

We can see now why Descartes thought he could establish dualism by means of the kind of *a priori* reasoning displayed in the thought experiment of

⁸¹ Cf. Wilson, *Descartes*, 190.

⁸² There are places where it does look as if Descartes uses the Argument from Doubt for real distinction, in particular in the *Search for Truth* (AT X 518), *Discourse* (AT VI 32–33) and at *Principles* I, 8. Wilson thinks that it is not necessary to attribute the argument to Descartes in the latter two places. Furthermore, since the *Search* is a questionable source it does not force one to attribute the argument to Descartes (*Descartes*, 242–43). I think that the passage in the *Discourse* is the most troubling, and that it is very hard not to see Descartes as using the argument in that passage—if read in isolation. But elsewhere Descartes claims that in the *Discourse* he is summarizing arguments which really require more extensive treatment (letter of May 1637 to an unknown correspondent, AT I 352, K 34). The Real Distinction Argument receives such treatment in the *Meditations* and other places, where the role of the skeptical doubts is more complicated.

the Second Meditation. It is supposed to show that we can form a clear and distinct conception of the mind as a thinking, unextended substance. This result is significant since it supports the claim that thought is a principal attribute. We have seen how that claim is used in the argument.

This virtue of my interpretation of the argument helps meet the following objection. Descartes's theory of substance is not in evidence in the Second Meditation. Consequently one might be puzzled by the idea of understanding the Meditation in terms of this theory. But I have argued that an important part of the point of what he says there *can* be understood in the context of this theory, and that doing so explains Descartes's confidence in the Real Distinction Argument. In addition, it is worth pointing out that his conception of the relationship between modes and principal attributes, which I have claimed is at issue in the Second Meditation, is expressed in the Sixth Meditation. Descartes relies on it in his discussion of the question what modes belong to what substance, immediately after the conclusion of the Real Distinction Argument. Finally, I do not wish to claim that in writing the *Meditations* Descartes had his conception of substance in mind in precisely the terms in which he expounded it in the *Principles*. I don't know whether he did. The fact is that this conception allows one to understand Descartes's faith in the argument in the *Meditations*. This fact is sufficiently explained if the ideas fundamental to this conception of substance were operative in Descartes's mind—whether or not he had formulated them to himself as he did in the *Principles*.

How defensible is the Real Distinction Argument? Crucial to the argument are the Attribute Premise and Descartes's view that the modes of a substance depend epistemically on its principal attribute. A full critical assessment of the argument would devote much attention to these claims, as they are both strong claims and far from uncontroversial. But such an assessment falls far beyond the scope of this paper.⁸³

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