

Real Distinction, Separability, and Corporeal Substance in Descartes

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Descartes's notion of real distinction is central to his dualism: He states his dualism as the thesis that mind and body are really distinct. The notion is widely understood to consist in the idea that two really distinct things are separable in the sense that each can exist without the other. In the past, I have argued against this interpretation; in my view, for Descartes, as among the scholastics, where the notion originates, real distinction between two things is at heart not a modal notion but consists in a claim about the *actual* state of the entities in question.¹ Separability does not constitute a real distinction, but is, in Suárez' words, a *sign* of it, a way of telling that two things are really distinct. In this paper I return to Descartes's notion of real distinction. I will first examine the relationship between real distinction and separability and respond to some objections raised against my non-modal interpretation (section 1). I will then take up an issue Paul Hoffman raised in his excellent and important paper "Descartes's Theory of Distinction". Hoffman argues against the standard view that for Descartes the separability involved in real distinction consists in each thing being able to exist without the other thing existing. I think he was right in rejecting this view, and that this is an important, and very useful point. Hoffman used his own positive analysis of separability in support of his position that for Descartes the human soul is the substantial form of the body and that he held that the mind-body composite is a substance. This position I disagree with.² But I aim to use Hoffman's point in the service of addressing a different problem.

The notion of real distinction is not only important in the context of dualism, but also in the context of the metaphysics of body. A real distinction, for Descartes, is a distinction between substances, and the two notions are intimately connected. In particular, it is central to the question whether Descartes held that there is a plurality of corporeal substances or whether, like Spinoza, he regarded the entire physical world as a single substance (although, in addition, for Spinoza extension is just one attribute of the single substance that is God). The nature of separability and its relation to the real distinction are central to this problem:³ Spinoza argued that any body requires the existence of all other bodies and so there is no real distinction between bodies. So there is only one corporeal substance because a distinction between substances is a real distinction. Some interpreters have argued for such a monist interpretation of Descartes on the ground that his views imply Spinoza's line of thought, and so his position implies that there is only one material substance. Furthermore, Descartes himself seems to express something like this position in the Synopsis to the *Meditations* where he claimed that corporeal substance in general -- *corpus in genere sumptum*-- is not corruptible. But a human body is corruptible, he writes, thus implying that it is not a substance. The phrase "body in general" has been taken to refer to the entire physical world; his comment about the human body is taken to imply that individual bodies are not substances.

But there is strong textual evidence against such a monist interpretation and for a pluralist interpretation. Thus Descartes begins his characterization of the real distinction at *Principles* I. 60 as follows: "Properly speaking, there is a real distinction only between two or more substances". We are accustomed to think of his mind-

body dualism as the prime instance of two really distinct things. But in fact his *first* example of a real distinction is this: “For example, ... if [extended or corporeal substance] exists, every part of it defined by us in our thought [*a nobis cognitione definitam*], is really distinct from the other parts of the same substance.” So right at the center of Descartes’s section on real distinction, when it is the focus of his attention, he expresses a clear commitment to the plurality of corporeal substances. In addition he often lists individual bodies as corporeal substances: a hand, a human body, a stone (AT VII 78; CSM II 54, AT VII 222; CSM II 157, AT VII 44-45; CSM II 30-31).⁴ There seems to be then a serious tension between the apparent implication of his views that individual bodies are not really distinct substances and Descartes’s labeling them substances. What to do?

Some interpreters have argued that Descartes must be using two different senses of created substance. Individual bodies are substances in a sense different from the sense in which a mind, or the entire physical world, is a substance.⁵ Now Descartes does distinguish two senses of substance for God and creatures, but he does not do so for individual bodies. He writes that mind and body are substances in the same sense (*Principles* I.51, 52). While one could take him to refer to “body in general”, here, it’s surprising that he does not explain here that he has yet another sense for individual bodies, if he does.

I will pursue a different approach, and mine the scholastic background for solutions. Descartes himself does not give a very detailed analysis of what it means for two things to be really distinct; he is much less explicit on this issue than various representatives of Aristotelian scholasticism, where the notion originates. So we have to do some work for him. I will use my view that real distinction does not consist in

separability and an analysis of the notion of separability at issue to respond to the monist arguments. This approach makes it possible to accept the clear textual evidence in favor of the pluralist position at face value while resolving the philosophical problems relating to separability seemingly implicit in that position.

1 The Notion of Real Distinction

The idea of separability was very prominent in discussions of the real distinction, but we find in important sources closely relevant to Descartes that real distinction clearly was not understood to *consist in* separability. A good source is Francisco Suárez' extensive discussion of the various types of distinctions in his influential *Disputationes metaphysicae*. He describes a real distinction not in terms of separability but as "a distinction of a thing from a thing, *rei a re*, which consists in the fact that one thing is not another thing and vice versa" (DM VII.I.1). This is perhaps not the most illuminating description. But one idea to keep in mind is that *res* was often used as a technical term, which excluded modes, and so a real distinction does not include, say, a distinction between a thing and its mode. Suárez makes very clear that he does not think the real distinction *consists in* separability. Instead he described separability as a *sign* [*signum, indicium*] of real distinction: "although a number of signs [*indicia*] are usually introduced to recognize a real distinction, two of them, based on separation, seem the most important" (DM VII.I.9). Furthermore, he explicitly addressed the question whether really distinct things are always separable, and as we will see below, this depends on the *type* of separability (DM VII.II.9).

We find a similar picture in Eustachius of St Paul's *Summa philosophica quadripartita*. This work is of particular interest in relation to Descartes as he at one point meant to publish a work that would consist in Eustachius' *Summa* combined with his own version of things.⁶ In the end this plan resulted in the publication of the *Principles of Philosophy*, without Eustachius' work. Eustachius writes that a real distinction is "as one thing from another thing, or as an integral part from another integral part –*ut res una ab alia re, aut ut pars integrans ab alia integrante*". Eustachius makes quite clear that separability is not necessary for real distinction. He writes that either one of two criteria is sufficient: either that two things "can be apart through different existences at least in virtue of divine power, or that one has the nature [*ratio*] of the producer, the other, however, the nature [*ratio*] of what is produced" (SP IV 80). Eustachius explains that in the following cases of really distinct entities, separability does not obtain but instead the relation of producer and produced: the real distinction between the persons of the Trinity, and between God and creatures.⁷ So for these scholastics separability is not constitutive of real distinction. And for both it does not go without saying that all really distinct things are separable.

What about Descartes? Interestingly enough, Descartes also labels separability a *sign* of real distinction, in the Second Replies:

I don't really see what you can deny here. That in order to recognize that they are really distinct it is sufficient that we clearly understand one thing without another? 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? But again I ask, how do you know that one thing

can exist without another? For in order for something to be a sign of real distinction, it must be known. (AT VII 132/ CSM II 95, emphasis added)

Descartes's presenting separability as a sign of real distinction strongly suggests that real distinction does not consist in separability. What about his other treatments of the notion of real distinction? We already saw that at *Principles* I.60 he characterizes real distinction as follows: "Properly speaking, there is a real distinction only between two or more substances". This means we need to look at his notion of substance: If it is understood in terms of separability, real distinction would in the end consist in separability. In the *Principles* he characterizes substance as follows: "By 'substance' we can understand only something that so exists that it needs nothing else in order to exist" (*Principles* I 51). This may look as if it defines substance in terms of independence, where this is a modal notion that amounts to the ability to exist without other things. But Descartes writes that a substance *so exist that* it has such independence. So its independence *is a consequence of* its actual mode of existing. And often Descartes describes substances as things that (actually) subsist *per se*, in their own right, not merely that they *can* so exist: they are *res per se subsistentes* (AT III 502/ CSM III 207; AT VII 222, 226/ CSM II 157, 159; AT VIII-2 348/ CSM I 297).

His point is this: a substance exists in its own right, by contrast with a mode. A mode exists by inhering in a substance and consequently it depends on that substance, and can't exist without it. But unlike a mode, a substance has its own act of existence. Often Descartes has in mind his criticism of the scholastic notion of a real quality, which is a quality that can exist without its subject of inherence. He writes to Elisabeth that thinking of a quality as having its own act of existence means thinking of it as a

substance (21 May 1643, AT III 667/ CSM III 219). Descartes is offering a straightforward, intuitive point: he is distinguishing between things and their states, qualities, properties.

Now matters are not quite as simple as I have just suggested. Elsewhere it does look like Descartes understands real distinction and the notion of substance in modal terms. Thus in the appendix to the Second Replies, labeled the Geometrical Exposition (GE), Descartes writes: "Two substances are said to be really distinct when each of them can exist without the other." (AT VII 162/ CSM II 114). And he sometimes describes substances as things that *can* exist *per se* rather than as (actually) subsisting *per se* ". So in the Fourth Replies he explains: "this is the very notion of substance, namely that is can exist without the help of any other substance" (AT VII 226; CSM II 159). These texts suggest that both notions may be modal after all.⁸ What should we make of all this?

Let me begin with the notion of substance. We have seen that Descartes sometimes describes substances as things that (actually) subsist *per se* and sometimes as things that are merely *capable* of subsisting *per se*. Indeed, he sometimes uses both phrases in the very same text, as in the Fourth Replies. Only a few lines after his characterization of substance in terms of its ability to subsist *per se*, but he describes substances as *res per se subsistentes* (AT VII 226/CSM II 159). Philosophically speaking, it strikes me as more natural to think he held the stronger view that substances actually subsist *per se*: why would he use the corresponding phrase repeatedly if he did not accept that view? Furthermore, the definition in the *Principles* indicates that being a substance is not merely a matter of something an entity *can* do, but a matter of its actual mode of existence. But then why does he sometimes use the weaker description? The

scholastic background is not easy to use, because the notion of *subsistere* was used in a large number of different ways: there are too many options. Eustachius of St Paul, whose discussions usually stand out for their succinctness, lists five senses of *subsistere* (SP IV p 41-45)!⁹

The following explanation makes good sense, however. Suárez explains that there is a difference between God and created substances of the following kind:

If a substance is complete, *although it subsists per se*, it does not exist in virtue of its essence formally and precisely but through some mode and act of its essence, and therefore a substantial created nature, as I will say below, is not *essentially* a subsisting act but *by aptitude* (*non est essentialiter actus subsistens sed aptitudine*). (DM XXXII.I.7, emphasis added)

God subsists in virtue of his essence, but creatures don't; they require something that is external to their essence. For this reason, the nature of created substance consists in an aptitude to subsist *per se*, even though they do actually subsist *per se*. So when Descartes sometimes speaks of substances as capable of subsisting *per se* perhaps he does not mean to suggest that they sometimes subsist in something else, as modes do; instead the point is rather that they do not exist simply in virtue of their essence, which only God does. It seems to me that this explanation fits Descartes's texts quite well: he describes substances as *res per se subsistentes*, but like Suárez, in the Fourth Replies he indicates that even though created substances subsist *per se*, he characterizes their nature (Descartes uses the term "notion") consists in an ability or aptitude to do so.

What about the definition of real distinction in terms of separability in the GE? And how do we reconcile the description of real distinction in terms of separability

here with his characterization of separability elsewhere in the Second Replies as a *sign* of real distinction? We need to reflect on how to understand the definitions Descartes offers in the GE. The term “definition” suggests that Descartes is explaining the very essences contained in the notions at issue. But these definitions are more naturally read in a different way. Consider the definition of thought:

Thought I use this word to include everything that is in us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it. Thus all the operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination and the senses are thoughts. I say “immediately” so as to exclude the consequences of thought; a voluntary motion, for example, originates in a thought, but it is not itself a thought (AT VII 160/CSM II 113).

This definition does not easily read as a characterization that tells us what the nature of thought in itself is. It tells us that we are immediately aware of thoughts. But that is telling us how we know thought, and it gives us a way to determine the extension of the term “thought”, to pick out what things count as thoughts.

Similar observations apply to the definition of substance in the GE: contrary to his customary practice, Descartes does not rely on the idea of *per se* subsistence. Rather he defines substance as follows: “Anything in which inheres immediately as in a subject or through which exists whatever we perceive—that is, any property, quality of attribute, of which a real idea is in us, is called “substance”. (AT VII 161/CSM II 114, my translation) In the *Principles* this feature of substance is presented in a different way: There Descartes does not define substance as a subject of inherence, but he writes that *substances are known through* what inheres in them.¹⁰ And, ostensibly referring back to the characterization of substance in the previous article as something that “so exists

that it needs nothing else in order to exist”, he explains that we cannot come to know a substance “merely through its being an existing thing, since this alone does not of itself have any effect on us” (*Principles* I.52). So the definitions in the GE are best be read not as offering the essences of the items defined. Instead they offer ways of picking out the entities in question. And they do so in view of the arguments Descartes is about to offer. This fits extremely well with his presenting separability as a *sign* of real distinction in the Second Replies to which these definitions are appended: for a sign is a way of establishing a real distinction, of telling whether two (or more) things are really distinct.¹¹

So in my view, real distinction does not consist in separability. One reason this point strikes me as important is this: in arguing for dualism, Descartes does not merely mean to establish that mind can exist without body; that point is important to the immortality of the human soul. But he also wanted to establish that mind and body are each distinct subjects of inherence, each with its own nature and its own type of mode. The nature or essence of the mind is to think and as such all its modes are modes of thing: intellectual thought, sensation, imagination, volition, passions. The nature or essence of body is extension and its modes are shape, size, motion and position. This is important in the context of Descartes’s mechanical philosophy: everything physical is explicable in terms of what we now call primary qualities, and bodies only have those types of qualities. But this is a point about the actual state of the world and not a modal point about what is possible.

This point, however, is compatible with two ways of thinking about the relationship between separability and real distinction: it might be that for Descartes,

like for Suárez and Eustachius, real distinction is a notion that only specifies the actual state of the world and does not include separability; or it could be that it *both* includes an idea about the actual state of the world *and* an idea about the modal properties of substances. Separability, however, can't be *whole* story and any interpretation that claims it is, fails to do justice to a central feature of Descartes's dualism: the non-modal claim that mind and body are distinct types of substances each with its own kinds of modes.¹² But in addition, it seems to me that separability is not fundamental, it is not brute, neither for Suárez and Eustachius, nor for Descartes: it is grounded in the way substances exist. They exist in their own right, unlike modes. I find this point very intuitive, whereas I do not find the idea that separability is basic intuitive. It seems to me that when a cannot exist without b, or it can, there should be some story about the actual nature or structure of the entities concerned that underlies and explains the modal claims.

The non-modal interpretation of real distinction helps address the question whether individual bodies can count as really distinct substances for Descartes. If real distinction does not consist in separability, we have a reply-- but only an initial one-- to arguments for a monist interpretation grounded in concerns about the inseparability of bodies; if for bodies to be really distinct does not consist in their separability their inseparability is not a problem. But even if real distinction does not *consist in* separability, there can be no doubt that Descartes often connects real distinction and separability.

If Descartes thinks that separability is necessary for real distinction it does not follow, however, that it is constitutive of it, part of the essence of real distinction. In

contemporary analytic philosophy it is often assumed that if F necessarily belongs to G, then F is (part of) the essence of G.¹³ But in Descartes's time this was not so: philosophers widely recognized the notion of a *proprium*, a property in the technical sense of a feature that necessarily belongs to the entity in question, but is not part of its essence. For instance, the essence of a human being consists in "rational animal". But the capacity for laughter was regarded as a property in the technical sense. So in this period necessity is not sufficient for essentiality.

In the next section we will address two questions: does he think separability is necessary or is it, in its capacity as a sign, merely sufficient for real distinction? And what does separability mean?

2 Separability and Corporeal Substance

If Descartes thinks separability is a sign, it could be merely sufficient. In that case, although he thinks mind and body are separable, perhaps he thinks individual bodies are not. As we saw, Eustachius explicitly wrote that separability is only one of two ways in which two things can be found to be really distinct, and not all really distinct things are separable. Now when Descartes talks about signs of real distinction, he claims that the best way of establishing a real distinction is his epistemological sign: "in order to recognize that [two things] are really distinct it is sufficient that we clearly understand one thing without another" (AT VII 132/CSM II 95). Unlike Eustachius, Descartes does not suggest there are other signs. At the same time he does not say that conceivability apart is *the only* sign: he says there is no *more certain* sign of real distinction.

So this passage does not make entirely clear whether conceivability apart is necessary for real distinction.

It is tempting to assume that separability is required on the way to establishing a real distinction; clearly and distinctly perceiving two things apart establishes a real distinction by way of separability. This is indeed how Descartes's main argument for dualism is usually interpreted. I think there are complications around this issue: sometimes what Descartes suggests is that understanding one thing apart from another means recognizing that each has a different essence and that each is a complete thing, a thing in its own right in virtue of that essence. I have argued elsewhere that this line of thought involves a set of non-modal ideas that actually underlies the separability of mind and body and that can establish dualism directly.¹⁴ So it's not obvious to me from these considerations that separability is necessary for real distinction. But for present purposes I do not wish to pursue this line of thought.

Another reason for thinking that Descartes thinks that really distinct things are always separable is that when he concludes his main argument for dualism in Meditation VI he closely connects real distinction and separability: "... I am really distinct from body and can exist without it" (AT VII 78/CSM II 54). And in the *Principles* Descartes first concludes mind and body are really distinct and then insist on the separability of mind and body, despite their current close union.¹⁵ To turn now to the issues of body, in his argument against the possibility of atoms, Descartes insists that bodies are indefinitely divisible. Even if some particle is naturally indivisible, God can divide it; his power to do so can't be compromised, as he had noted already at *Principles* I.60 (*Principles* II.20). And in fact he

argues that bodies are actually indefinitely divided (*Principles* II.33-35). But that implies some type of separability within the realm of bodies.

I do not think it is as clear as is sometimes assumed that real distinction entails separability for Descartes. But for now I will proceed on the assumption that it does. I will return to this point later. Now it is time to turn to the question how we should understand the relevant notion of separability. Recall the two sources for concern for the real distinction of bodies I cited: the passage from the Synopsis and the Spinozistic argument. I will address the former briefly, and then offer a more detailed approach to the latter.

In the Synopsis to the Meditations Descartes characterizes substances as follows: he writes that “absolutely all substances, or [*sive*] things that must be created by God in order to exist, are by their nature incorruptible and cannot ever cease to be unless they are reduced to nothing by God denying his concurrence to them” (AT VII 14/CSM II 10). And he writes that not only mind but also body in general, -- *corpus in genere sumptum* – is a substance and so incorruptible. On the other hand, he claims that the human body is corruptible. Some interpreters have taken this to mean that there is only one material substance, body in general, which is the entire physical world, and that there are no really distinct individual corporeal substances. Or at least, there are no such substances in the sense in which mind is a substance and the entire world. Individual bodies are either substances in some different, weaker sense, or they are modes of the one corporeal substance. The real distinction and its concomitant notion of separability cannot be applied, or not straightforwardly, to individual bodies.

This conclusion can be avoided, however, by a careful analysis of the Descartes’s use of the notions at issue, in particular the notions of “body in general” and the notion

of corruptibility and its relations to divisibility and separability. For this analysis I am indebted to Dan Kaufman.¹⁶ Let me begin with the phrase “body in general” – *corpus quidem in genere sumptum*. For the monist, this phrase refers to the entire physical world. But examination of Descartes’ use of this phrase elsewhere suggests that this is not what it means. Rather it means something like: body taken as such, that is, as a chunk of extended stuff as opposed to taken as a human body or a hand. Consider the following text: “When we speak of a body in general [*un corps en general*], we mean a determinate part of matter, a part of the quantity of which the universe is composed.” (Letter to Mesland, 9 February, 1645, AT IV 166/CSM III 241-242).¹⁷

In the Synopsis Descartes contrasts body in general with a human body, which “insofar as it differs from other bodies is simply made up of a certain configuration of limbs and other accidents”. A human body, he claims, “loses its identity merely as a result of a change in the shape of some of its parts. And it follows from this that while the body can very easily perish [*interire*], the mind is immortal by its very nature” (AT VII 14; CSM II 10). Interpreters have sometimes proposed that the human body is a mode, or that it is a substance in a different sense from a part of matter. I think treatment of this issue has often assumed that there are only two choices: an entity is *either* a substance *or* a mode. While I cannot here discuss this topic in the detail it deserves, I think it is best to think of the human body as a hybrid entity; it is *an extended substance as modified in specific ways*. This makes sense of Descartes’s use earlier in the passage of the term “*pure substance*” for mind and “body taken in general”. The human body is an impure substance. The chunk of matter that constitutes it, body as such, is a pure substance. The latter is incorruptible, because

substances are. The human body, being a hybrid, is corruptible, as a result of (particular kinds of) changes in its modes.

This leads us to the notion of corruption, and by implication, its companion notion of generation. Commentators have sometimes connected it to the notion of divisibility,¹⁸ and it is natural to do so and common in the history of philosophy: an individual body is divisible, its parts can be scattered and in this way it would be corrupted. By Descartes's conception of substance as formulated in the Synopsis it would follow that individual bodies can't count as substances. But this was not his understanding of the notion of corruption; instead his use of the term derived from a specific scholastic practice. The scholastics accepted a notion of natural or corporeal substance that consists of matter and form. The terms "corruption" *corrompere*, and "perishing", *interire* were used specifically within (at least late) scholasticism to refer to the process of substantial change where matter and form separate and where a being of one kind perishes and a being (or beings) of another kind (kinds) comes (or comes) to be.

These terms did survive in Descartes and other non-Aristotelians, despite their rejection of hylomorphic substances.¹⁹ But for him as for as the scholastics, "corruption" specifically refers to a change where one type of thing ceases to be and another type of thing comes to be.

A simple alteration [*alteratio*] is a process which does not change the form of a subject, such as the heating of wood; whereas generation [*generatio*] is a process which changes the form, such as setting fire to the wood. (AT III 461 / CSM III 200)

When we burn wood, it ceases to be wood. Similarly, when the human body changes in certain ways, it ceases to be a human body. For Descartes the process is not one of separation of matter and form, but a change in modes. It is easy to see now how Cartesian substances do not undergo the process of corruption. Minds and bodies are the only two kinds of substances; they are not composites of matter and form, and they do not change into one another. Minds do not cease to be minds when their modes change. Chunks of extended stuff, matter as such, can be divided, moved around, and separated in space. When this happens, human bodies, animals, wood, may cease to exist as such, and a chunk of matter may cease to be the same individual. But the chunks of extended stuff, even if scattered, still belong to the same kind: extended stuff. And so they do not corrupt and their status as substances is not threatened. Consequently, the incorruptibility of body in the sense of matter as such does not stand in the way of parts of matter being separable in *some* sense, since they can be separated from each other in space without corruption occurring. And when Descartes writes at *Principles* I.60 that bodies are really distinct, he does not mean they are corruptible. Separability must be kept apart from corruptibility.

It is now time to turn to the notion of separability relevant to the real distinction.

Spinoza offered the following argument:

For if corporeal substance could be so divided that its parts were really distinct, why, then, could one part not be annihilated, the rest remaining connected with one another as before? And why must they all be so fitted together that there is no vacuum? Truly, of things which are really distinct from one another, one can be, and remain in its condition, without the other.

Since therefore, there is no vacuum in nature (a subject I discuss elsewhere), but all its parts must so concur that there is no vacuum, it follows also that they cannot be really distinguished, i.e., that corporeal substance, insofar as it is substance, cannot be divided (1P15S).

The parts of matter cannot be divided and are inseparable; so can be no plurality of really distinct corporeal substances. This argument relies on the view that a vacuum is impossible, a view Descartes accepted. The avoidance of a vacuum implies that any body requires the existence of all other bodies. But that means that bodies fail the separability requirement for really distinct substances.

Spinoza's argument relies on separability in a specific sense: it consists in an entity's ability to exist without another entity existing: he explicitly refers to God annihilating a body. But as Hoffman argues, this is not the only possible sense of separability.²⁰ With characteristic ingenuity, Hoffman distinguishes 5 notions of separability; I will restrict myself to two. Hoffman agreed that bodies are really distinct substances, but his untimely death prevented him from addressing that issue in print. In person he offered a different solution from the ones I will propose. But I think his paper is enormously helpful in undermining the dominant view that separability must be understood as separability with respect to existence. I will add to Hoffman's arguments against that view, and I will propose two different replies to Spinoza's challenge.

It is useful to return to Suárez' theory of distinctions. We already saw that Suárez did not think separability constitutes the real distinction but is a sign of it. He explicitly addressed the question whether really distinct things are always separable

and distinguished between two different senses of separability, which he claims are the most important signs of real distinction: (1) The ability of a to exist *without a real union with b*, and (2) the ability of a to exist *without b existing* (DM VII.II.9).²¹ What does it mean for two things to require a real union? It is a rather broad category for Suárez. He explains that when two things require a real union, it is always because one of them depends on the other for some particular reason. Suárez mentions, for instance, dependence on another thing as some type of cause: formal, material or efficient. He argued that separability with respect to union always obtains between really distinct entities. For where any of the types of dependence at issue obtains, he contends, God can supply what is needed in (DM VII.II.22). For instance, normally an accident exists in real union with its subject, through which it exists. But “by maintaining an accident in being without its subject, [God] supplies for material causality” (DM VII.II.8).

Matters are more complicated for the ability to exist without the other entity existing. Suárez holds that generally this condition obtains for really distinct entities, but he lists 3 exceptions: (i) God and creatures: (ii) a relation and its terms: (iii) the persons of the Trinity (DM VII.II.24-27). It is worth pausing over some of the details of what Suárez says about these exceptions. For Suárez the issue of separability is not a brute fact, but it is grounded in specific actual features of the entities involved. And the reasons vary significantly. For instance, God and creatures are really distinct in spite of the fact that creatures cannot exist without God “not only because God is a necessary per se being, but on account of the essential dependence of creatures on God” (DM VII.II.25). One among several reasons the persons of the Trinity can’t exist without one another is that each exists necessarily. Creatures can’t exist without the persons of the

Trinity: “although they do not *per se* depend on the divine relations as such, [they] cannot be separated in their being from those relations. For creatures cannot exist except on the supposition that the divine relations exist, since these relations are simply necessary being” (DM VII.II.27). So one reason why it may be the case that a can’t exist without b is that a depends on b. But another type of reason does not rely on dependence; instead it is grounded in the idea that b is a necessary being.

So for Suárez, there are two types of separability. Furthermore, these types are not brute: in each case when separability fails, there is a specific reason why it fails, a reason that is grounded in the actual natures of the entities in question. This is in stark contrast with the usual analyses of Descartes’s notion of separability: it is often taken as a brute notion, and it is generally assumed to consist in separability with respect to existence.

Armed with this sense of the rich background for Descartes’s notion of real distinction, we can now turn to the question what type of separability Descartes had in mind. Descartes is not explicit about this question. His statements of the argument for dualism in the *Meditations* and the *Principles* have generally been taken to mean that he intends separability with respect to existence. But he makes no explicit claim to this effect; as Hoffman points out the expressions he uses are ambiguous. Descartes speaks of God’s ability to place things apart; the ability of mind to exist without body [*seorsim ponere, absque illo posse existere*] (AT VII 78/CSM II 54); and God’s ability to separate or conserve each without the other [*separare, unam absque alia conservare, sejuncti conservare*] *Principles*. I.60). Any of these expressions seems compatible with

separability consisting in the possibility of both entities existing, but being in separate in some other sense.

Furthermore, as we saw above, Descartes describes a real distinction as a distinction between substances and so the independence he attributes to substances can be helpful to explain the separability involved in real distinction. In the Fourth Replies he writes: “The very notion of a substance is the notion of something that can exist *per se*, that is, *without the help [ope]* of any other substance.” (AT VII 226/CSM II 159) This suggests that the notion of the ability to exist apart relevant to the notion of substance is the idea that one entity contributes in some way to the existence of another entity. So when that ability is absent, some sort of union between the two is required. But as Suárez would point out, the contributions can vary: they can, for instance, consist in material, formal or efficient causality. Within Descartes we can see at least two: (1) Existence through another thing as a subject. This is what modes do and substances don’t. Claiming that a quality can exist in separation from a subject turns it into a substance, Descartes thinks. This is the type of dependence Descartes’s argument for dualism is meant to rule out. (2) At *Principles* I.51 he explains that God’s concurrence in the existence of creatures affects their status as substance. This is efficient causality. It leads him to specify that a creaturely substance does not depend on any other creaturely substance. God alone is a substance in the absolute sense.

For present purposes it is not clearly necessary to establish a precise sense for the notion of separability at issue, but it is important to establish that it is not separability with respect to existence. That would create problems for the real distinction of individual bodies as a result of the Spinozistic argument. I will label the

weaker sense of separability “separability with respect to union”. I do not have some specific type of union in mind, but intend the label broadly, as Suárez used it.

One might object that the argument for dualism is meant to establish that the mind can exist without my body existing on the ground that this surely is the possibility imagined, or rather, clearly and distinctly conceived, in Meditation II. It is true that in that Meditation Descartes has us conceive of the possibility of the non-existence of body. But notice: it has us conceive that *there are no bodies at all*. Surely, this is overkill for the purposes of dualism itself (as opposed to the argument for it). The separability of mind and body that is involved in Descartes’s dualism is presumably important for immortality. But immortality does not require the possibility that my soul or mind exists without *any* bodies existing: it requires that my soul or mind can be separated from *my body* and still continue to exist. Indeed, immortality is compatible even with *my body* continuing to exist, depending on how one uses the term “my body”. It does not require the non-existence of the chunk of matter that constitutes my body. Whether one thinks the human body survives its separation from the mind depends on one’s conception of that body. Immortality most clearly requires the end of the *union* of the soul with the body.

Nor does the *argument* for dualism require the non-existence of bodies. For Descartes the upshot of Meditation II is that he now has a clear and distinct perception of the mind as a thinking, unextended thing (AT VII 12, 223, 354-5; CSM II 9, 157, 245). He sees that thought constitutes the nature of the mind, and conceives of the mind as a complete thing even if he attributes no extension to it. This point also does not require the complete non-existence of bodies. So while Meditation II does ask us to conceive of

no bodies existing, this is a kind of overkill in view of the real distinction; while it is sufficient for the argument for the real distinction of mind and body, it is more than what is really required for it.

Descartes did think that the human body -- as opposed to the chunk of matter that constitutes it -- ceases to exist after we die. But Meditation II does not address that idea at all: it asks us to conceive of the possibility that there are no bodies, no extended stuff at all. It does not address the possibility of our body *qua* human body not existing. And in his argument for dualism he insists on the possibility of conceiving of ourselves as something thinking and unextended, which is more general and more generic than conceiving of the demise of the human body (Letter to Mesland, 9 February 1645, AT IV 166-167/CSM III 243).²²

Let us now return to the monist argument from Spinoza. It explicitly relies on separability understood as the ability to exist apart with respect to existence: Spinoza envisioned the *annihilation* of a part of matter. But if for Descartes instead real distinction requires separability with respect to union (whatever exactly that means) and not with respect to existence, then the plurality of corporeal substances is not endangered by the Spinozistic argument.

Furthermore, recall that for Suárez the question whether two entities are separable was not a brute matter, but it rested on particular features of the nature of the entities in question. The explanations for inseparability ranged from ones that relied on a real dependence of one entity on another to ones where a can't exist without b because b is a necessary being. Now consider the problem of the vacuum. The impossibility of the vacuum indicates no what Suárez calls "essential" dependence of

one body on another body; it does not indicate that one body contributes in any real sense to the existence of another body -- by being its subject of inherence, by concurrence, or in any other way. Bodies are things, and exist *per se* just as much as minds do. They have their own existence, which Descartes writes to Elisabeth makes them substances. It is just that the annihilation of a body would leave an empty space. But this is a type of consideration more akin to the inability of creatures being unable to exist without the persons of the trinity existing because of their status as necessary beings. In both cases there is no essential dependence, no contribution to the existence of an entity at stake.

It seems to me then that we can solve this problem if we take the following approach: while Spinoza was influenced by Descartes, the latter used a different version of the separability criterion, separability with respect to union rather than with respect to existence.

A different reply to Spinoza's challenge, however, is suggested by an exchange between Leibniz and De Volder. De Volder offered a version of Spinoza's challenge.²³ The philosophical context is different, but Leibniz' reply can easily be used to address the challenge on behalf of Descartes. Objecting to Leibniz' view that Cartesian matter can have no unity, De Volder wrote:

As far as I am concerned, where one thing can neither exist nor be conceived of without another, and vice versa, they are one thing. Moreover, since it is inconsistent for a vacuum either to exist or be conceived of, it is inconsistent, if we are willing to speak this way, for one part of matter to be conceived of

or to exist without all the rest. (De Volder to Leibniz, 13 May 1699; G II, 178; LDV 324)

So De Volder argued that the parts of matter are unified because they can't be conceived or exist without one another on account of the vacuum. He does not use the notion of real distinction, but he is using a Cartesian way of establishing a real distinction. He thinks it fails for the parts of matter; again the implication is, placing the objection in the Cartesian context, that all of matter is a single substance. Leibniz responds:

You say that the unity of that which is extended is perceived even if it is divided into parts moving around in different ways, because given parts can neither exist nor be conceived without the others. And so you assume two things that I could not bring myself to concede: that one part of what is extended cannot exist or be conceived of without the others, and that things of this sort are one. From this you show that a vacuum is impossible. But your arguments did not accomplish this. *If it is conceded that a vacuum is impossible, it indeed follows that one part of matter cannot exist without some other part, but it does not follow at all that it cannot exist without this part or that part.* (Draft of 23. June 1699; LDV 335-36; emphasis added)²⁴

For our purposes Leibniz' crucial point is this: we must distinguish between two senses of separability, a weak and a strong one. According to the weak one, any particular part of matter can exist without any other particular part of matter; to avoid a vacuum, all that is required is that when a part of matter is annihilated, a new part be substituted for it. In the strong sense, any particular part of matter requires the existence of any other particular part of matter. Leibniz' point is that the impossibility of the vacuum

only requires the weaker sense of inseparability. This line of thought suggest a further specification of what separability might mean in the context of the relationship between really distinct substances: they are suitably separable as long as each *particular* entity can exist without the other *particular* other entity.²⁵

Indeed, this response is in the spirit of an important passage on the vacuum on Descartes. For at *Principles* II.18 he writes about belief in empty space:

Almost all of us fell into this error in our early childhood. Seeing no necessary connection between a vessel and the body contained in it, we reckoned there was nothing to stop God, at least, removing the body which filled the vessel, and preventing any other body from taking its place. But to correct this error we should consider that, *although there is no connection between a vessel and this or that particular body contained in it*, there is a very strong and wholly necessary connection between the concave shape of the vessel and the extension, taken in its general sense, which must be contained in the concave shape. (Emphasis added)

Descartes' treatment of the issue is rather different from Leibniz': he goes on to say that if God removes a body without allowing another one in, the sides of the vessel would touch. But the important point is this: Descartes says that *there is no connection between a vessel and this or that particular body contained in it*.

Before closing I wish to discuss one final problem: how should we think of the relationship between a chunk of matter and its parts? I have to be brief and cannot do full justice to this issue. But according to *Principles* I.60 they are all substances and so they must be really distinct: "each part of [extended or corporeal substance], as

delimited by us in thought, is really distinct from all the other parts of that same substance". But can a piece of matter exist without its parts in a suitable sense? Sometimes Descartes expresses a very strong view to the effect that it cannot. About a determine part of matter, he writes to Mesland: "... if the smallest amount of that quantity were removed, we would judge without more ado that the body was smaller and no longer whole; and if any particle of the matter were changed, we would at once think that the body was no longer quite the same, no longer numerically the same" (AT IV 166/CSM III 243). This suggests that Descartes thinks that a chunk of matter can't exist without any of its parts. And he does not mean in the sense that it can't exist without a part existing: rather it requires that a part be present in a specific way. Does this mean that it can't exist without a real union with its parts? Now it seems to become important what exactly one might mean by real union. Suárez allowed that various types of dependence would count as a requiring a "real union", except in the case where God provides what is needed. Can we suggest a specification for Descartes that allows that a body is really distinct from its parts and separable from its parts in the sense of being able to exist without a union with its parts?

I find this approach unpromising. A return to Suárez' discussion suggests a different answer. When Suárez discusses the question whether really distinct entities are always separable in *either* of his two senses of separability, he prefaces this discussion by saying that he won't address this question for a whole and its parts. He only addresses it for really distinct entities that are altogether *-omnino—*distinct: "I assume, of course, that the question turns upon things that are altogether distinct from each other, so that they are not related as whole and part, or container and contained;

for of such things it is evident that what includes another cannot be preserved without that other, since it is intrinsically made up of it" (DM VII.II.22, translation altered). He thinks that a whole and its parts are not the same, because a whole contains something that the part does not contain (DM VII.I.24). So his position is that there are really distinct things that are related as whole and part, and he indicates that obviously separability does not obtain in such cases. Of course, this is a manifestation of his view that separability is not constitutive of real distinction. On my interpretation, Descartes shared that view, and this would allow him to say that a whole and its parts are not separable, but still really distinct.

So far I have proceeded as if Descartes accepted that nonetheless really distinct things are always separable. But this solution to the mereological problem requires that, like Suárez, he held that separability is not necessary for real distinction. It is a sign of real distinction, but a sign is only a way of recognizing a real distinction, it is not constitutive of it. And there is nothing that philosophically requires that a sign of real distinction must accompany every case of a real distinction. At the beginning of this section I discussed the evidence about the question whether separability is necessary for real distinction. There seemed to be reasons to think that Descartes did think so. We have now found a philosophical reason for thinking he did not hold this. Of course, Descartes may simply have failed to anticipate this problem, and his account may simply be philosophically defective in this regard. On the other hand, it may be that he thought along Suárez' lines: generally speaking really distinct things are separable, but there are specific exceptions. As long as we are not dealing with those exceptions, we can assume that really distinct things are separable.

Conclusion

I have attempted to illuminate Descartes's notion of real distinction and I have offered solutions to problems around the notion of corporeal substance. I have defended my view that real distinction does not consist in separability; the real distinction of mind and body consists in the idea that they are different substances, things that subsist *per se*, each with its own nature and types of modes. And I have argued that separability is not the same as corruptibility. Furthermore, I have adopted Hoffman's claim that it is important to distinguish between types of separability. The importance of the differences between various types of separability cannot be overestimated. Interpreters have too often assumed that separability must mean separability with respect to existence. I have agreed with his view that that type of separability is not involved in the real distinction, but instead proposed that separability with respect to union is at stake. Furthermore, I have suggested that for Descartes real distinction involves the mutual separability of *particular* entities. These clarifications of the notion of separability help address problems around the notion of corporeal substance.

There is a widespread strategy of attributing to Descartes the view that bodies are a special type of substance or that they are modes. Such interpretations are unsupported by the textual evidence. Furthermore, the monist interpretation flies in the face of substantial, straightforward textual evidence for Descartes's commitment to the plurality of corporeal substances. I have drawn on the scholastic background to offer solutions on his behalf for the problems that motivate rejection. It is possible,

then, to take him for his word: he did hold that there is a plurality of really distinct corporeal substances. As a result of placing his position in its historical context, it turns out that it is not nearly as philosophically troubling as is often thought.

It is a great pleasure and a privilege to participate in a volume in honor of Paul Hoffman. I am heavily indebted to Paul. His work has been nothing less than formative for me. I read his dissertation when I first started working on Descartes. His “Union of Man” paper and its sequels have been enormously stimulating and thought provoking. We often disagreed, but the disagreements were for me very fruitful. His work forced me to think harder about Descartes, and this led to a deeper understanding. I am very grateful, and only wish our philosophical conversation could have lasted longer.

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¹ See Rozemond 1998, ch. 1 pp. 3-12. While I will not always make this explicit, for or all the philosophers I will discuss, the relevant notion is *mutual* separability.

² See Rozemond 1998, ch. 5.

³ Another prominent motivation for a monist interpretation arises from problems for the individuation of Cartesian bodies. See for instance, Sowaal 2004. This problem I cannot address here. For insightful discussion of Descartes on the individuation see Normore 2008.

⁴ I use standard references to Descartes. For texts in the original languages see AT:

Charles Adam and Paul Tannery eds., *Œuvres de Descartes*. For translations: CSM: John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch eds., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. I refer to both by volume and page number. For references to scholastic sources I use the following abbreviations: DM: Francisco Suárez, *Disputationes metaphysicae*, by disputation, section and note; SP: Eustachius of St Paul, *Summa philosophica quadripartita*, by book and page number.

⁵ For a classic in this tradition, see Gueroult 1994, v. I pp. 63-74. More recently, Sowaal 2004, Nelson and Smith 2010. For recent defenses of a pluralist interpretation see Stuart 1999, Normore 2008.

⁶ AT III 233/CSM III 157.

⁷ Both Suárez and Eustachius held that the persons of the Trinity are really distinct. This may come as a surprise for readers used to emphasis on divine simplicity. But the denial of a sufficiently strong type of distinction between the persons of the Trinity was known as the Sabellian heresy.

⁸ Hoffman has argued that substances do sometimes subsist through something else. He focused on texts where Descartes uses this weaker notion. See especially 2009c.

⁹ I owe the reference to this discussion in Suárez to Schmaltz (forthcoming).

¹⁰ See also the Fourth Replies (AT VII 222/CSM II 156) where Descartes describes a complete thing as “a substance endowed with the forms or attributes which enable me to recognize that it is a substance”, and then goes on to write that we only know substances through the “forms or attributes which must inhere in something if they are to exist”.

¹¹ In fact, the characterizations of the various types of distinctions in the *Principles* also do not read as specifying the essence of what a particular notion stands for. For, instance, the “definition” of real distinction starts out by stating that it only pertains, strictly speaking, between substances. This claim specifies what things count as really distinct rather than explaining what real distinction is. And it is really a polemical point against the scholastic notion of a real quality, a quality that is has its own existence and can exist without its subject. Next Descartes goes on to explain how we know, “perceive”, that two things are really distinct. Similarly, the presentations of other distinctions specify instances of them, and ways of telling when a particular distinction obtains, but not clearly what they consists in.

¹²Hoffman expresses a measure of agreement with this point: he writes that “the heart of Cartesian dualism” consists in the point “that thought by itself constitutes the nature of substance and extension by itself constitutes the nature of a substance” (Hoffman 2009b, p. 68). But Hoffman interprets this claim in modal terms: rather than a point about the actual constitution of mind and body it consist in “the separability of the attributes”. I see it as a claim about the actual state of substances, in line with *Principles* I.53, where Descartes explains that each substance has one principal attribute.

¹³ For an exception, see Fine 1994.

¹⁴ See Rozemond 1998 ch.1.

¹⁵ See Kaufman (forthcoming) for the view that separability is necessary in the case of mind-body distinction, but not for real distinction as such.

¹⁶ See Kaufman (unpublished). For more on the metaphysical issues at stake in this passage in the Synopsis, see Rozemond 2010.

¹⁷ Besides Kaufman (unpublished) for this point see also Stuart 1999.

¹⁸ See in particular, Nelson and Smith 2010. For rejection of this connection, see Kaufman (unpublished) and Rozemond 2010.

¹⁹ Descartes did of course call the human soul a substantial form on several occasions; he connected that claim to the idea that is an incorruptible substance (letter to Regius AT III 505, 505/CSM III 207, 208). Hoffman ingeniously argued that Descartes held that the mind-body composite is a hylomorphic substance (Hoffman 2009a). I think Descartes's claim that substances are incorruptible is hard to reconcile with that interpretation since such composites do get corrupted.

²⁰ Hoffman 2002. This paper, "Descartes's Theory of Distinction", was published in 2002, but Hoffman already formulated thoughts about different types of separability in his much earlier "Union of Descartes's Man" of 1986, (see fn. 14 and 52.)

²¹ Aquinas did not use the term "real distinction", but there has been much discussion about his *de facto* use of this notion. Interpreters have found several different criteria, what Suárez calls "signs", of real distinction. See Henninger 1989, pp. 29-31.

²² This should address a point Hoffman makes about this letter: he writes that interpretations of the real distinction require addressing what Descartes says in this letter about the human body: there is a sense in which it can't exist without the soul or mind because it is individuated by its union with the mind (Hoffman 2009b, p. 67). I say more about this letter in Rozemond 1998, pp. 162-163.

²³ I am grateful to Adam Harmer for drawing my attention to this exchange between Leibniz and De Volder.

²⁴ This translation is forthcoming in a bilingual edition. But the Latin text and translation can be found on Paul Lodge's website, which I refer to as LDV.

²⁵ For use of this line of thought and some more detailed discussion, see Normore 2008, p. 283.