

RESEARCH

What Am I? Descartes's Various Ways of Considering the Self

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In the *Meditations* and related texts from the early 1640s, Descartes argues that the self can be correctly considered as either a mind or a human being, and that the self's properties vary accordingly. For example, the self is simple considered as a mind, whereas the self is composite considered as a human being. Someone might object that it is unclear how merely considering the self in different ways blocks the conclusion that a single subject of predication—the self—is both simple and composite, which is contradictory. In response to this objection, this paper develops a reading of Descartes's various ways of considering the self. I argue that the best reading of Descartes's qualified claims about the self, i.e., about the self *qua* mind or the self *qua* human being, presupposes an account of the unqualified self, that is, of the self *simpliciter*. I argue that the self *simpliciter* is not a mind, and that it is not a human being either. This result might suggest the pessimistic conclusion that Descartes's view of the self is incoherent. To avoid this result, I introduce a new metaphysical account of the Cartesian self. On my view, the self is individuated by a unified mental life. The self is constituted by the beings that jointly produce this mental life, and derives its unity from it.

Keywords: Descartes; self; embodiment; mind; union; person

‘I do not yet clearly know what I am, I who am certain that I exist...’
—Descartes

1. Introduction

What sort of being is the Cartesian self (or *I*)?¹ In other words, what sort of being is the meditator whose philosophical development we trace through the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (hereafter *Meditations*) and with whom we are supposed to identify? In the *Meditations* and related texts from the early 1640s, Descartes argues that what the self is like—that is, what properties it has—depends on whether the self is considered as a mind or a human being.² For example, the self is simple when considered as a mind, whereas the self is composite when considered as a human being. The self can exist apart from the body when considered as a mind, whereas the self cannot so exist when considered as a human being. Some commentators have recognized *that* Descartes qualifies his claims about the self in these kinds of ways.³ But they do not typically explain *how* the self's properties can vary depending on how it is considered.⁴

¹ By ‘Cartesian self’ or ‘self’ I mean the being that Descartes refers to using the first-person pronoun ‘I’ (*ego, je*), and related expressions like ‘me’ (*me, moi*), and ‘myself’ (*me, moi-même*), or by a verb conjugated in the first-person in Latin (like *cogito* or *ambulo*). In other words, I use ‘self’ as a common noun to refer to the kinds of beings we are.

² By ‘mind’ I mean a thinking substance, and by ‘human being,’ I mean the compound of mind and body—the ‘one thing’ (*unum quid*)—that is the metaphysical result of uniting a mind to a human body. For more discussion of the Cartesian human being, see, for example, Voss (1994), Kaufman (2008), and Kolesnik-Antoine (2009). I will treat the following expressions as equivalent: ‘the self is *F* qua mind,’ ‘the self in so far as it is a mind is *F*,’ ‘the self considered as a mind is *F*,’ ‘the self as a mind is *F*,’ ‘the self conceived as a mind is *F*,’ etc.

³ See, for example, Alanen (1989: 402; 2008: 466–67), Carriero (2009: 89), Hennig (2011), Thiel (2011: 37), Brown (2014: 255), and Simmons (2014: 265).

⁴ Carriero (2009) and Hennig (2011) are important exceptions. I discuss their readings below.

This is a serious omission. Someone might object that if the self is simple *qua* mind, and composite *qua* human being, then a single subject of predication—the self—is both simple and composite, which is contradictory.⁵ Similarly, someone might object that if the self can exist apart from the body *qua* mind, but cannot exist apart from the body *qua* human being, then the self both can and cannot exist apart from the body. The problem is that it is unclear how merely considering the self in different ways can block these contradictions.⁶ To alleviate this worry, we need an account of Descartes's various ways of considering the self that explains why qualified claims about the self (e.g., the self is simple *qua* mind) do not always entail corresponding unqualified claims (e.g., the self is simple). This paper undertakes to give such an account.

In section two, I present textual evidence that in the *Meditations*, published in 1641, and in related texts from the early 1640s, Descartes holds that the self may be correctly considered as either a mind or a human being, and that the self's properties vary accordingly. In section three, I explore four ways of analyzing Descartes's qualified claims about the self. I argue that the best analysis of Descartes's qualified claims—for example, about the self *qua* mind, or the self *qua* human being—presupposes an account of the self without qualification, that is, of the self *simpliciter*. In section four, I argue that the self *simpliciter* is not (identical to) a mind, and that it is not (identical to) a human being either. In section five, I present an alternative account of the Cartesian self. On my view, the self is individuated by a unified mental life. The self is constituted by the beings that jointly produce this mental life, and derives its unity from it. Thus, the trajectory of this paper moves from a puzzle about the different ways Descartes considers the self to a thoroughgoing reimagining of the Cartesian self.

2. Descartes's Various Ways of Considering the Self

2.1. *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641)

The *Meditations* is a fertile source of self-conceptions. Over the course of this work, the meditator⁷ considers herself: (i) as a 'human being [*homo*]' (*M1*, AT VII 19/CSM II 13; see also *M2*, AT VII 25–26/CSM II 17), (ii) as a disembodied being without 'hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses' (*M1*, AT VII 23/CSM II 15), (iii) as having a body with 'a face, hands, arms, and the whole mechanical structure of limbs which can be seen in a corpse' (*M2*, AT VII 26/CSM II 17), (iv) as 'a thinking thing' (*M2*, AT VII 27/CSM II 18), and, more specifically, (v) as 'a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions' (*M2*, AT VII 28/CSM II 19), (vi) as 'a thing that thinks and is not extended' (*M3*, AT VII 44/CSM II 30; and *M6*, AT VII 78/CSM II 54), (vii) as 'something intermediate between God and nothingness, or between supreme being and non-being' (*M4*, AT VII 54/CSM II 38), (viii) as 'not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship,' but, rather, 'very closely joined, and, as it were, intermingled with the body' (*M6*, AT VII 81/CSM II 56), and, finally, (ix) as 'composed of body and mind' (*M6*, AT VII 81/CSM II 56). As Schechtman (2014: 499) observes, some of these conceptions are artifacts of the meditator's progress through the *Meditations* and do not reflect Descartes's considered position.⁸ The meditator's conception of the self as lacking 'hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses' is at least incomplete, whereas the conception of the self as a mere body is incorrect. Nevertheless, I will argue that, for Descartes, the self of the *Meditations* may be *correctly* considered as either a mind or a human being, and that the self has different properties relative to these ways of considering it.

Let's now work through the *Meditations* more slowly, following the evolution in the meditator's understanding of herself. In *Meditation 1*, the meditator initially conceives of herself as a human being. This conception is inchoate at first, but is centered on the belief that she has a human body of a certain kind. This conception gradually comes into focus as a target of the meditator's various skeptical arguments. These arguments are not just about raising doubts about the world external to the meditator. They are as much about dislodging the meditator's previous conception of herself, which is resilient in the face of all but the most radical skeptical scenarios.

After observing that her senses sometimes deceive her, the meditator suggests that the mere possibility of sensory error does not yet provide her with any reason to doubt that 'these hands or this whole body are mine,' from which we may infer that her previous self-conception involved having a body (*M1*, AT VII 19/CSM II 13). The meditator wonders whether the madness hypothesis might dislodge this belief, as

⁵ A structurally similar problem arises in Spinoza: viz. of explaining how the one substance can have incompatible properties when it is considered in different ways. See Douglas (2018) and Newlands (2018).

⁶ Van Cleve (1999: 8) draws attention to this problem.

⁷ I refer to the meditator as 'she' or 'her' to distinguish this fictional character from the historical Descartes.

⁸ See also Cunning (2010) for discussion of the interpretive difficulties the *Meditations* raises.

madmen are often confused about what they are, for example, when they maintain 'that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass' (*M1*, AT VII 19/CSM II 13). Although the meditator sets this hypothesis aside, her description of it suggests that she previously considered herself as having a human body with a specific constitution, made of flesh and blood, rather than earthenware, pumpkin, or glass.

The dream argument is more successful at raising doubts about the meditator's previous belief that she had 'such hands or such a body,' but it does not raise any genuine doubt about the more generic belief that the meditator has *some* kind of body or other (*M1*, AT VII 19/CSM II 13). Someone might dream that she is seven feet tall, thereby raising doubts about the dimensions of her body, without raising any doubts about the more fundamental claim that she is embodied. Indeed, the meditator introduces dreaming as *something that is characteristically done by human beings*, and so cannot be used to doubt the meditator's belief that she is a human being, and, hence, has a body:

As if I were not **a human being** [*homo*] who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake—indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events—that I am here in my dressing gown, sitting by the fire—**when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!** (*M2*, AT VII 19/CSM II 13, emphasis added)

Because the dream argument presupposes that the meditator is a human being lying in bed, it cannot undermine the meditator's conception of herself as a human being. With the evil deceiver hypothesis, finally, the meditator lands on a way of calling this conception into doubt: by raising the more radical possibility that there are no bodies at all, and, hence, no bodies to be had. In the culminating paragraph of *Meditation 1*, the meditator writes:

I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgment. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things. (*M1*, AT VII 23/CSM II 15)

We might hear an implicit 'therefore' between these two sentences, in which case the meditator would be doubting that she has a body—'hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood, or senses'—in virtue of doubting the more general belief that there is an external world.

Thus, in *Meditation 1*, the meditator initially considers herself as *having* a body, and as *a human being*. Indeed, she regards these ways of considering herself as more or less interchangeable. But she is vague about the relevant sense of 'having' and what exactly a human being is. We cannot assume that Descartes regards this conception of the self as correct, since it is part and parcel of the pre-theoretical, sense-based picture of the world that the *Meditations* aims to revise. But we also cannot assume that this conception is wholly incorrect either, given that the meditator rehabilitates many sense-based beliefs in *Meditation 6*.

In *Meditation 2*, the meditator briefly reviews the skeptical results of the previous *Meditation*, and in the process gives more clues about how she formerly considered herself. The meditator is *now* supposing that she has 'no senses and no body,' from which we may infer that she *formerly* considered herself as having them. The meditator wonders whether she 'is so bound up with a body and with senses that I cannot exist without them,' which, again, suggests that she *formerly* considered herself as essentially having a body and senses (*M2*, AT VII 25/CSM II 16). All these beliefs are doubtful, however, and she sets them aside.

Once she strips away her old ways of considering herself, the meditator discovers that, nevertheless, there is one thing she cannot doubt: that she exists.⁹ 'After considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude,' explains the meditator, 'that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind' (*M2*, AT VII 25/CSM II 17). What should the meditator make of this discovery? The meditator is certain *that* she exists, but not *what* she is. 'I do not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this "I" is,' says the meditator, 'that now necessarily [i.e., certainly] exists' (*M2*, AT VII 25/CSM II 17). To answer this question, the meditator's strategy is to revisit what she formerly believed

⁹ See Paul (2018) for more details.

herself to be and to subtract any features that are so much as conceptually separable from the 'I' whose existence she has just discovered, in order to build a new and improved conception of herself.

After the brief flash of clarity that occurs during the *cogito* reasoning, the meditator dives back into her old conception of herself as a human being:

What then did I formerly think I was? A human being [*hominem*]. But what is a human being [*homo*]? Shall I say 'a rational animal'? No; for then I should have to inquire what an animal is, what rationality is, and in this way one question would lead me down the slope to other harder ones.... Instead I propose to concentrate on what came into my thoughts spontaneously and quite naturally [*sponte & natura*] whenever I used to consider what I was. Well, the first thought to come to mind was that I had a face, hands, arms and the whole mechanical structure of limbs which can be seen in a corpse, and which I called the body. The next thought was that I was nourished, that I moved about, and that I engaged in sense perception and thinking; and these actions I attributed to the soul. (*M2*, AT VII 25–26/CSM II 17)

Let me highlight three points. First, the meditator's former self-conception as a human being was not especially theoretical: it was not something she needed to be taught in school.¹⁰ Instead, her former self-conception arose 'spontaneously and quite naturally,' which suggests a sensory origin (*M2*, AT VII 25–26/CSM II 17; see also *M6*, AT VII 74/CSM 51–52).¹¹ Second, the meditator's previous self-conception included body and soul. But this conception emphasized the body more than the soul, and was clearer about the body's nature. Third, the meditator's conception of herself as a human being included various actions that she took herself to perform, namely, nourishment, self-motion, sense perception, and thinking, which she 'attributed to,' or, took to be explained by, the soul (*M2*, AT VII 25–26/CSM II 17).

Next, the meditator considers which elements of her previous self-conception, if any, are conceptually inseparable from herself. If an element is conceptually separable—that is, if she can conceive of herself as lacking a property—she sets it aside. If an element is conceptually inseparable—that is, if she cannot conceive of herself without it—then she builds it into the new conception of herself that she is in the process of constructing. Nutrition, movement, and sense perception—the meditator sets these aside. The only property that the meditator cannot separate from herself is thinking, which leads to the conclusion that she is a thinking thing: 'Thinking? At last I have discovered it—thought; this alone is inseparable from me.... I am, then, in the strict sense only [*praecise tantum*] a thinking thing; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason' (*M2*, AT VII 27/CSM II 18). The meditator subsequently fills in this new conception of the self by clarifying what thinking is. 'But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing,' the meditator explains, 'that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions' (*M2*, AT VII 28/CSM II 19).

Thus, in *Meditation 2*, the meditator both spells out her previous conception of herself as a human being, and then executes a transition to the new self-conception as a thinking thing or mind. This new conception is clearly supposed to be correct, even if the meditator cannot yet say whether it is complete. Despite some of the rhetoric in *Meditation 2*, the meditator has *not* shown that her old conception of herself as a human being is false or incorrect. She has shown that it is dubitable, and so she has set it aside for the moment. The point of the qualification 'in the strict sense only' is to flag that the only thing she *knows* about herself at this point is that she is a thinking thing (*M2*, AT VII 27/CSM II 18).¹² It does not follow that the meditator is *only* a thinking thing. A final decision on her previous self-conception must wait until *Meditation 6*.

In *Meditations 3–5*, the meditator widens her focus to consider not merely her own nature, but also her relation to God and the essence of material things. Throughout this process, the meditator elaborates her conception of herself as 'a thing that thinks and is not extended' (*M3*, AT VII 30/CSM II 44). In the causal argument for God's existence in *Meditation 3*, for example, the meditator argues that when she is considered as a mind or thinking thing, she was *not* created by her parents:

¹⁰ See also *The Search for Truth*, AT X 515–16/CSM II 410.

¹¹ See, for example, Chamberlain (2019).

¹² See, for example, *O/R* 3, AT VII 175 /CSM II 123, *O/R* 7, AT VII 492/CSM II 333, and the *Synopsis* to the *Meditations*, AT VII 13/CSM II 9. Commentators who emphasize this point include Alanen (1989: 402), Skirry (2005: 143n.23), Brown (2006: 4), and Carriero (2009: 94).

as regards my parents, even if everything I have ever believed about them is true, it is certainly not they who preserve me; and **in so far as I am a thinking thing** [*me, quatenus sum res cogitans*], they did not even make me; they merely placed certain dispositions in the matter which I have always regarded as containing **me, that is, the mind, for that is all I now take myself to be** [*me, hoc est mentem, quam solam nunc pro me accipio*]. (*M3*, AT VII 50/CSM II 35, emphasis added; see also *M3*, AT VII 49/CSM II 33–34)

The meditator goes out of her way to qualify this claim about her causal history: she is just talking about herself *considered as a mind*.

In *Meditation 4*, the meditator examines the implications of the fact that God is her creator. The meditator holds that she is 'something intermediate between God and nothingness, or between supreme being and non-being,' and that her mixed nature corresponds to two different ways of considering herself:

in so far as I was created by the supreme being [*quatenus a summo ente sum creatus*], there is nothing in me to enable me to go wrong or lead me astray; but in so far as I participate in nothingness or non-being [*quatenus etiam quodammodo de nihilo, sive de non ente, participo*], that is, in so far as I am not myself the supreme being [*quatenus non sum ipse summum ens*] and am lacking in countless respects, it is no wonder that I make mistakes. (*M4*, AT VII 54/CSM II 38)¹³

These conceptions of the self—as created by God, and as participating in nothingness—do not obviously map onto the meditator's conceptions of herself as a human being and a mind. Nevertheless, this passage illustrates that two very different ways of considering oneself might be simultaneously correct, and both do explanatory work. In so far as God created her, the meditator's cognitive faculties tend towards the true and the good; in so far as she participates in nothingness, the meditator is fallible. Hence, we should remain open to the possibility that the conceptions of the self as a human being and mind might be simultaneously correct as well.

Finally, in *Meditation 6*, the meditator examines whether her previous conception of herself as a human being is correct in light of her new and improved conception of herself as a mind. This occurs as part of the meditator's more general reevaluation of her sense-based beliefs, which she introduces as follows:

To begin with, [1] I will go back over those things, which as they were perceived by the senses I previously thought to be true; and [2] I will go over my reasons for subsequently calling these things into doubt. And finally [3] I will consider what I should now believe about them. (*M6*, AT VII 74/CSM II 51)

Since the meditator's previous conception of herself as a human being was one of her most important, and arguably among the most resilient, sense-based beliefs, she unsurprisingly reevaluates this conception.¹⁴

The meditator starts by going back over her old conception of herself as a human being: 'First of all then, I perceived by my senses that I had a head, hands, feet, and other limbs making up the body which I regarded as part of and perhaps even as the whole of myself' (*M6*, AT VII 74/CSM II 51–52). In this passage, the meditator highlights the sensory origin of her previous self-conception. She considered herself to be human because she had a sensory experience of herself as *having* a body, and, more specifically, because she experienced herself as inseparable from this body, and felt all her sensations 'in' and 'on account of' this body (*M6*, AT VII 76/CSM II 53).¹⁵ Someone might object that the meditator isn't referring to her previous conception of herself as a human being (*homo*) in these passages, but merely her previous belief that she had a body. But, as we saw above, the meditator treated these conceptions more or less interchangeably in *Meditations 1* and *2*. Second, the meditator rehearses her reasons for doubting her previous conception of herself as a human being, mentioning cases of phantom limb pain to illustrate the fallibility of its basis in the internal

¹³ See also *O/R 4*, AT VII 234/CSM II 164. A few pages later, the meditator introduces another way of considering herself: as a totality, i.e., as if she were a world unto herself (*M4*, AT VII 61/CSM II 42 and AT IX 49; cf. *Letter to Elisabeth*, 15 September 1645, AT IV 293/CSMK III 266).

¹⁴ My discussion of the meditator's reevaluation of the senses is indebted to Simmons (2014: 263).

¹⁵ For more extensive discussion of Descartes on the experience of embodiment, see Brown (2006, 2007, 2014), Kolesnik-Antoine (2009), Curley and Koivuniemi (2015), Simmons (2014, 2017), and Chamberlain (2019).

senses or bodily awareness (*M6*, AT VII 76–77/CSM II 53). Again, the only skeptical argument that strikes at the heart of the meditator's previous self-conception is the deceiver hypothesis.

Third, the meditator considers what she should now believe about her previous conception of herself as a human being. During the meditator's review of her sense-based beliefs she begins ('First of all then ...') with the conception of herself as human, and the meditator's reevaluation begins in the same place, with the real distinction argument. On the basis of her clear and distinct idea of herself as 'a thinking, non-extended thing' and her clear and distinct idea of body 'as a non-thinking, extended thing,' the meditator argues that 'it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it' (*M6*, AT VII 78/CSM II 54). So it looks like the meditator is telling us what she should now believe about herself: that she is a thinking, non-extended thing, really distinct from the body, and, *a fortiori*, not a human being.

If the *Meditations* ended at this point, that would be a reasonable conclusion. We might justifiably conclude that the meditator's new and improved conception of the self as a mind is correct, her old conception of herself as a human being is wrong, and that the argument I am trying to make—that both conceptions are correct—is doomed to failure. But the *Meditations* doesn't end there. In the second half of *Meditation 6*—which is sometimes referred to as *Meditation 6.5*—the meditator rehabilitates many of her former sensory beliefs, including her previous conception of herself as a human being. Thus, the meditator's final position—and, hence, presumably Descartes's—is that the self is correctly considered as a thinking thing or mind, but *also* as a human being.

The meditator argues that because God created her sensory faculties, her sense-based beliefs must contain some truth.¹⁶ Her previous conception of herself as a human being arose 'spontaneously and naturally' from her senses.¹⁷ So the divine guarantee applies. In the famous 'teachings of nature' passage, the meditator explains what can be salvaged from her previous self-conception: namely, that (i) she *has* or *possesses* a body, (ii) her relationship to this body is *not* like a pilot in a ship, but is closer and more intimate, and (iii) her body is surrounded by other bodies, such 'that some of these are to be sought out and others avoided' (*M6*, AT VII 81/CSM II 56). To this point, everything the meditator has said is (arguably) compatible with her new identity as a mind or thinking thing. But then the meditator throws a curve ball. She argues that agreeable and disagreeable sensations also 'make it quite certain that my body, or rather my whole self, in so far as I am **composed** of body and mind [*meum corpus, sive potius me totum, quatenus ex corpore & mente sum compositus*], can be affected by the various beneficial or harmful bodies which surround it' (*M6*, AT VII 81/CSM II 56, emphasis added).¹⁸ This is a striking claim: the meditator is saying that there are some things that are true about her—namely, that she can be affected by bodies in her vicinity—in so far as she is **composed** (*compositus*) of body and mind.

The language of composition ('*compositus*') shows that the meditator is not merely adding to the conception of the self as a mind, but is considering herself in a radically different way, namely, as a human being. As the meditator explains a few pages later, when she considers herself as a mind, that is, 'in so far as I am merely a thinking thing,' she discovers that she is simple and wholly lacking parts (*M6*, AT VII 86/CSM II 59). Thus, the claim that the self is *composed* of mind and body is incompatible with conceiving of the self as a mind. In this pivotal passage, then, the meditator rehabilitates a conception of the self *as* a human being (*M6*, AT VII 81/CSM II 56). Crucially, this conception is true or correct. The meditator introduces the teachings of nature precisely to identify the truth in the senses.

The human being the meditator rehabilitates differs from the one described in *Meditations 1* and *2*. A point of comparison may be helpful here. When the meditator proves the existence of material things in *Meditation 6*, she replaces 'the Aristotelian sense-based conception of body with [her] purified intellectual conception of body,' as Simmons (2014: 262) puts it. Similarly, when the meditator argues that she is correctly considered as a human being, she replaces the confused sense-based conception of a human being with a corrected Cartesian one. The transformation in the case of human beings is not as radical, however, as in the case of bodies. The sense-based conception of bodies as colorful, smelly, tasty, etc. bears little resemblance to the intellectual conception of bodies as geometrical objects made actual.¹⁹ In contrast, the meditator retains much of her pre-theoretical conception of what human beings are like. Considered as a human being, she *is* composed of soul and body, which is what she always believed. Considered as a human being, she engages in many of the same activities as before. She is nourished, moves about, senses, and thinks. But

¹⁶ See Simmons (2014: 263–65).

¹⁷ Again, see Chamberlain (2019).

¹⁸ See also *M3*, AT VII 49/CSM II 33–34 and *M6*, AT VII 88/CSM II 61.

¹⁹ This description of bodies comes from Garber (1992).

the significance of these claims has changed. Her understanding of the human being's constituents—soul and body—has been transformed, as has the division of labor between them. Whereas the meditator previously attributed all her activities to the soul (nourishment, self-motion, sense perception, and thinking), now she attributes many of her vital functions to the human body on its own, which she considers 'as a kind of machine' (*M6*, AT VII 84/CSM II 58).²⁰ The mind or soul is no longer the principle of life.²¹

Let me add one last piece of evidence from *Meditation 6* for the claim that the self may be correctly considered as both a mind *and* a human being: the meditator's description of her 'own nature in particular.' The meditator explains that by 'my own nature in particular [*naturam meam in particulari*],' she means 'nothing other than the complex [*complexionem*] of things bestowed on me by God' (*M6*, AT VII 80/CSM II 56). Her own nature includes 'many things that belong to the mind alone—for example my perception that what is done cannot be undone, and all other things that are known by the natural light,' 'much that relates to the body alone, like the tendency to move downward, and so on,' but also 'what God has bestowed on me *as* a composite of mind and body' (*M6*, AT VII 82/CSM II 57, emphasis added; see also *M6*, AT VII 88/CSM II 61 and AT VII 90/CSM II 62). This suggests that (i) the meditator can be correctly considered as a mind, a human being, and perhaps even as a human body, and that (ii) her properties vary accordingly. For example, the meditator writes that it is specifically her nature 'as a combination of mind and body' that teaches her 'to avoid what induces feelings of pain and to seek out what induces feelings of pleasure' (*M6*, AT VII 82/CSM II 57; see also *M6*, AT VII 85/CSM II 59). In contrast, 'knowledge of the truth about such things [viz. things located outside us] seems to belong to the mind alone, not to the combination of mind and body' (*M6*, AT VII 82–83/CSM II 57).

In the final sentence of the *Meditations*, the meditator invokes the fallibility of the human aspect of her nature: 'it must be admitted that in this human life [*humanam vitam*] we are often liable to make mistakes about particular things, and we must acknowledge the weakness of our nature [*naturae nostrae*]' (*M6*, AT VII 90/CSM II 62). The meditator has come full circle ... almost. She is back to considering herself as a human being, but now with a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. The conception of the self as a mind is still available to her, whenever she meditates. But, crucially, the account of the self the meditator develops over the course of the *Meditations* incorporates both perspectives.

Thus, the meditator's final position—and, hence, presumably, Descartes's—is that we may correctly consider the self as either a mind or a human being. The question that I am ultimately interested in is *how* the self can be correctly considered in *both* these ways. In the remainder of this section, however, I will provide further textual evidence that the 'I' of the *Meditations* admits of this conceptual variability, by looking at texts where Descartes is pressed to clarify the views presented in this work: namely, the *Objections and Replies* (1641) and in his correspondence with Elisabeth (1643). In these texts, Descartes speaks in his own voice, and so they are useful for confirming which of the views expressed by the meditator are in fact Descartes's.

2.2. The Objections and Replies (1641)

Whereas the meditator refines the conceptions of the self as a mind and a human being over the course of the *Meditations*, in the *Objections and Replies* Descartes takes these hard-won conceptions for granted. Together, these conceptions provide Descartes with a powerful dialectical tool, as they allow for flexibility in the claims that he can make about the self. In the *First Replies*, for example, Descartes revisits the *Meditation 3* claim that the meditator's parents did not create her. He is now even more explicit that he was only talking about the self *qua* mind, not *qua* human being:

in inquiring about what caused me, I was asking about myself, not in so far as I consist of mind and body [*mei, quatenus consto mente & corpore*], but only and precisely in so far as I am a thinking thing [*praecise tantum quatenus sum res cogitans*]. The point is, I think, of considerable relevance. (*O/R 1*, AT VII 107/CSM II 77)

²⁰ See also *Treatise on Man*, AT XI 119–20/CSM I 99, *Discourse V*, AT VI 46/CSM I 134, *O/R 4*, AT VII 229/CSM II 161, *Description of the Human Body*, AT XI 223–25/CSM I 314–15, and *Passions* I.3, AT XI 329/CSM I 329.

²¹ See, for example, Bitbol-Hespéris (1990, 1996), Des Chene (2001), Wilson (2005), Kolesnik-Antoine (2009), and Hatfield (2012). As Simmons (2017: 6–7) notes, the *Meditation 6* account of the human being leaves many questions unanswered. Notably, the meditator does not say whether the human being is a substance. This lack of clarity has prompted a lively scholarly debate about whether Descartes is better described as a substance dualist, rather than a dualist. See, for example, Hoffman (1986), Rodis-Lewis (1998), Schmaltz (1992), Chappell (1994), Rozemond (1998), Shapiro (2003), and Skirry (2005). I will remain neutral on this vexed interpretive question. My quarry is elsewhere.

This passage suggests that one *could* legitimately ask about what caused the self *qua* consisting of mind and body (i.e., *qua* human being). Indeed, a few sentences later Descartes allows that there's a sense in which 'my father begot me' (*O/R* 1, AT VII 107/CSM II 78).²² But, in fact, that was not the way Descartes was considering the self in *Meditation 3*. Thus, Descartes's different conceptions of self allow him to simultaneously make counter-intuitive philosophical claims about the self ('my parents did not make me'), while also speaking with the vulgar ('yes, they did'), by indexing these claims to the different conceptions of self *qua* mind and *qua* human being.

Descartes generalizes this point in the *Second Replies* when he argues that the mind and the human being each have their own kind of truth:

As everyone knows, there are two quite distinct ways of speaking about God. The first is appropriate for ordinary understanding and does contain some truth, albeit **truth relative to human beings** [*veritatem quidem aliquam, sed ut ad homines relatam*]; and it is this way of speaking that is generally employed in Holy Scripture. The second way of speaking comes closer to expressing **the naked truth—truth which is not relative to human beings** [*nudam veritatem, nec ad homines relatam*]; it is this way of speaking that everyone ought to use when philosophizing, and that I had a special obligation to use in my *Meditations*, since my supposition there was that no other human beings were yet known to me, and moreover **I was considering myself not as consisting of mind and body but solely as a mind** [*necque etiam meipsum ut constantem mente & corpore, sed ut mentem solam, considerarem*]. (*O/R* 2, AT VII 142–43/CSM II 102, emphasis added)

Although the distinction between the two kinds of truth is murky, this passage illustrates the philosophical work that considering the self in different ways can do. Descartes can accommodate *both* an ordinary, everyday kind of truth *and* the philosophical, naked truth, by indexing them to the self *qua* human being and the self *qua* mind, respectively.

Finally, Descartes's dual perspectives on the self play a pivotal role in his exchange with Arnauld. In the *Fourth Objections*, Arnauld launches a two-pronged attack on the *Meditations'* account of the self. First, Arnauld criticizes Descartes's real distinction argument, which is supposed to show that the self can exist apart from the body. Arnauld objects that Descartes cannot infer 'from the fact that he is aware of nothing else [besides thought] belonging to his essence, that nothing else does in fact belong to it' (*O/R* 4, AT VII 199/CSM II 140). Thus, Descartes cannot rule out the possibility that his essence includes a secret connection to the body. Second, Arnauld objects that even if Descartes could establish the real distinction, this would be a bad result, leading to an unacceptably Platonic view of the self:

It seems, moreover, that the [real distinction] argument proves too much, and takes us back to the Platonic view (which M. Descartes nonetheless rejects) that nothing corporeal belongs to our essence [*nostram essentiam*], so that man is merely a soul and the body merely a vehicle for the soul [*homo sit solus animus, corpus vero non nisi vehiculum animi*]*—a view that gives rise to the definition of man [hominem definiunt] as 'a soul which makes use of a body'.* (*O/R* 4, AT VII 203/CSM II 143)

Arnauld has set a formidable dialectical trap, as any response to the first objection will set Descartes up for the second one.

In the face of Arnauld's criticism, Descartes does not abandon the claim that the self is really distinct from the body. Instead, Descartes appeals to the conception of the self *qua* mind in response to the first objection, while he wheels out the self *qua* human being in response to the second. This strategy presupposes that both conceptions are correct. In a bit more detail, Descartes responds to Arnauld's first objection as follows:

Now it may be that there is much within me of which I am not yet aware (for example, in this passage I was in fact supposing that I was not yet aware that the mind possessed the power of moving the body, or that it was substantially united to it). Yet since that of which I am aware [namely, thought] is sufficient to enable me to subsist with it and it alone, I am certain that I could have been created by God without having these other attributes of which I am unaware, and hence that

²² As Descartes reiterates to Mesland a few years later, 'one human being can produce another human being' (*Letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644*, AT IV 111/CSMK III 231).

these other attributes do not belong to the essence of the mind. For if something can exist without some attribute, then it seems to me that that attribute is not included in its essence. (*O/R* 4, AT VII 219/CSM II 154–55; see also *O/R* 3, AT VII 175 /CSM II 123)

Descartes argues that each of us is aware of oneself as having a property—thinking—that is sufficient for the possibility of our independent existence. We might see this as the conjunction of two claims: (a) thinking is sufficient for the self's existence, and (b) thinking is self-sufficient, that is, it is possible for God to create an instance of thinking without creating any other attributes. Descartes clearly uses the conception of the self *qua* mind in this argument, since the conception of the self *qua* mind just is a conception of the self *qua* thinking, non-extended thing.

In contrast, Descartes deploys the conception of the self *qua* human being in order to deflect Arnauld's criticism that he (Descartes) has proved 'too much' (*O/R* 4, AT VII 203/CSM II 143). Making sense of Descartes's response to this objection is tricky, however, because Arnauld's use of the Latin term '*homo*' differs from Descartes's typical usage. To mark this difference, I have translated '*homo*' as 'man' in Arnauld's objection, whereas I have been translating '*homo*' as 'human being' in Descartes.

In his objection, Arnauld uses the term '*homo*' to refer to the kinds of beings we are, whatever that might turn out to be. His willingness to switch back and forth between questions about 'our essence' and questions about 'the definition of man' indicates this usage. Thus, when Arnauld asks 'what is man?' that is more or less equivalent to asking, 'what are we?' or 'what am I?'²³ In contrast, Descartes typically uses the term '*homo*' to refer to a specific kind of entity: namely, the mind-body composite that results when a mind is substantially united to a human body. When Descartes asks 'what is a human being?' that is *not* equivalent to asking 'what are we?' or 'what am I?' For one thing, 'a human being' is supposed to be an informative answer to the 'what am I?' question, as we saw in *Meditation 2* (*M2*, AT VII 25–26/CSM II 17). Rather, in Descartes's hands, the question 'what is a human being?' is a request for more information about a certain kind of composite, for example, is the human composite a substance? What is its principle of unity?²⁴ That being said, Descartes adopts Arnauld's usage of the term '*homo*' in responding to his second objection. This is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. Using the language of one's interlocutors helps avoid talking past one another. But it makes our job more difficult as interpreters. When Descartes uses '*homo*' à la Arnauld, I will also translate it as 'man' to help keep things straight.

With these terminological preliminaries out of the way, let's take a look at what Descartes says:

Nor do I see why this argument 'proves too much'. For the fact that one thing can be separated from another by the power of God is the very least that can be asserted in order to establish that there is a real distinction between the two. Also, I thought I was very careful to guard against anyone inferring from this that man [*hominem*] was only [*solum*] 'a soul which makes use of a body'. For in the Sixth Meditation, where I deal with the distinction between the mind and the body, **I also proved at the same time** that the mind is substantially united with the body [*Nam in eadam sexta Meditatione, in qua egi de distinctione mentis a corpore, simul etiam probavi substantialiter illi esse unitam*]. And the arguments which I used to prove this are as strong as any I can remember ever having read. (*O/R* 4, AT VII 227–28/CSM II 160, emphasis added; see also *O/R* 5, AT VII 352/CSM II 244)

Descartes claims to have avoided the implication that man or the self is 'only [*solum*] "a soul which makes use of a body,"' on the grounds that he proved *both* the real distinction *and* the substantial union of mind and body in *Meditation 6*. Recall what happened at these two moments. In the real distinction argument, the meditator argues that her conception of herself as a thinking, non-extended thing—that is, as a mind—is correct, and, hence, that there is a sense in which she can exist apart from the body. But the meditator isn't *only* ('*solum*') a mind, because her sense-based conception of herself as composed of mind and body—that is, as a human being—is also correct, at least when suitably corrected. Thus, Descartes resists Arnauld's charge of taking us back to the Platonic view of man, by pointing out that he (Descartes) recognizes *two* views of the self: the admittedly Platonic self *qua* mind, but also the embodied self *qua* human being.²⁵ This response presupposes the correctness of both ways of considering the self.

²³ Thus, Arnauld's use of the term 'man' is very close to my use of the term 'self.' They are both ways of referring to the kinds of beings we are, without prejudging substantive metaphysical issues about what kind that might be.

²⁴ Voss (1994: 277) is helpful here.

²⁵ See Voss (1994) and Skirry (2005: 100–112) for more discussion of the Platonic view of man, and Descartes's attitude towards it.

In the next paragraph, Descartes drives home the difference between these two ways of considering the self by clarifying their respective essences. The essence of the mind consists only in thought, whereas the essence of the human being includes both mind *and* body (*O/R 4*, AT VII 228/CSM II 160; see also *O/R 4*, AT VII 219/CSM II 155, *Letter to Hyperaspistes*, August 1641, AT III 422/CSMK III 189). From this essential difference it follows that the self *qua* mind is really distinct from the body and can exist apart from it, whereas the self *qua* human being is not really distinct from the body and cannot exist without both a mind *and* a body. Descartes explicitly draws out this latter implication in a letter to Regius: 'the union which joins a human body and soul to each other is not accidental to a human being, but essential, since a human being without it is not a human being' (*Letter to Regius*, January 1642, AT III 508/CSMK III 209).²⁶ There can be disembodied minds, but there cannot be disembodied nor mindless human beings.

To sum up: Arnauld objects to Descartes's account of the self (or *I*) on two fronts. First, Arnauld objects that Descartes has failed to establish that the self can exist apart from the body, and, second, that Descartes is going down the wrong path by even trying to establish that conclusion. Descartes responds to the first objection by arguing that the self considered as a thinking, non-extended thing has everything it requires for separate existence, while he responds to the second objection by reminding Arnauld that although the self can be correctly considered as a mind or thinking thing, the self can *also* be correctly considered as a human being. Hence, it would be a grave error to infer that the self is 'only' (*solum*) a mind or thinking thing. Moreover, Descartes proved the real distinction and the substantial union 'at the same time' (*simul etiam*), which suggests that he takes the corresponding conceptions of the self *qua* mind and *qua* human being to fit together somehow (*O/R 4*, AT VII 227–28/CSM II 160).

In the *Objections and Replies*, we see the fruit of conceiving the self as both a mind and a human being. Although these dual perspectives introduce complexity into Descartes's account of the self, this complexity earns its keep by allowing him to defend the account against objections.

2.3. The correspondence with Elisabeth (1643)

In 1643, so two years after the publication of the *Meditations* and the *Objections and Replies*, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia sends Descartes a letter asking him to explain himself: if, as his *Meditations* claims, 'the soul of a human being' is 'only a thinking thing,' how can it 'determine the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions' (AT III 661)?²⁷ Elisabeth frames her question as being about the soul and its power to move the body, rather than in the first-personal terms of the self (or *I*) of the *Meditations*. In his response Descartes refers to the soul as well, much as he picks up Arnauld's usage of the term 'man' in the *Fourth Replies*. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that Descartes hears Elisabeth as objecting to his account of the self, since the idea of the mind as 'only a thinking thing' is introduced as a conception of the self in the *Meditations*. We might then reformulate Elisabeth's objection like this: if the self is only a thinking thing, how can it possibly set the body in motion, when, for example, someone wills to raise their arm?

Descartes responds to Elisabeth's question by claiming that the causal interaction between mind and body depends on their union, admitting that he has not said much about this topic up until this point:

There are two things about the human soul on which all the knowledge we can have of its nature depends: one of which is that it thinks, and the other is that, *being united to the body, it can act and be acted upon it*. I have said almost nothing about the latter, and have concentrated solely on making the first better understood, as my principal aim was to prove the distinction between the soul

²⁶ Since, in this letter, Descartes is advising his follower Regius on how to extract himself from the theological controversy he stirred up in Utrecht, we cannot assume—*pace* Hoffman (1986)—that Descartes accepts all the views there expressed, anymore than we can assume that Descartes would endorse everything the meditator says. See, for example, Chappell (1994) for discussion of the interpretive complexities raised by Descartes's correspondence with Regius. In this case, however, Descartes is drawing a conclusion that is already implicit in the *Fourth Replies*, and so we can be confident in the attribution. For helpful discussion of the theological issues at stake in the Utrecht affair, see Fowler (1999) and Curley and Koivuniemi (2015).

²⁷ Simmons claims that prior to his correspondence with Elisabeth, Descartes 'has done little more than commit himself to the claim that human beings *are* unions of mind and body and offer up the presence of sensations, appetites, and passions as decisive evidence for it' (Simmons 2017: 6). Simmons does not give Descartes, and the *Meditations*, enough credit. At the end of *Meditation 6*, the meditator has a more sophisticated understanding of human nature than she started with. She no longer falsely believes that the soul is responsible for all her vital functions. What's more, the meditator argues that *she* is just as much a human being as she is a mind. And that is a significant result. Still, I am greatly indebted to Simmons's reading of Descartes's correspondence with Elisabeth. See also Shapiro (1999) and Kolesnik-Antoine (2009) for discussion of the Elisabeth correspondence.

and the body. *Only the first was able to serve this aim, and the other would have been harmful to it.* (Letter to Princess Elisabeth, 21 May 1643, AT III 664/CSMK III 665)

Descartes's response to Elisabeth resembles his strategy in the *Fourth Replies*. When Arnauld accused Descartes of taking us back to the Platonic view of man, Descartes responded by saying that, actually, he recognizes two views of the self: the self *considered* as a mind or thinking thing, and the self *considered* as a human being. Similarly, when Elisabeth presses Descartes to explain how the soul can act on the body, Descartes responds that there are two ways of looking at the soul or self: as a thinking thing, or as a mind-body union.

In his letter to Elisabeth, Descartes undertakes to give a more explicit account of how to conceive the union. He argues that we have a 'primitive notion of union' alongside the clear and distinct ideas of thought and extension:

First, I consider that there are in us certain primitive notions that are like originals on the pattern of which we form all our other knowledge. There are only very few of these notions ... as regards body in particular, we have only the notion of extension, which entails the notions of shape and motion; and as regards the soul on its own, we have only the notion of thought, which includes the perceptions of the intellect and the inclinations of the will. Lastly, as regards the soul and body together, we have only the notion of their union, on which depends our notion of the soul's power to move the body, and the body's power to act on the soul and cause its sensations and passions. (Letter to Elisabeth, 21 May 1643, AT III 665/CSMK III 218)

The primitive notion of union seems to be a relabeled version of the sense-based conception of the human being we encountered in *Meditation 6*. Admittedly, this point is not wholly obvious in this passage. But, in Descartes's next letter to Elisabeth, from June 28, 1643, Descartes argues that the idea of the union is primarily a sensory idea of *oneself* as composed of mind and body. Descartes tells Elisabeth that the notion of union is something:

which everyone invariably experiences in himself without philosophizing. **Everyone feels that he is a single person with both body and thought**, so related by nature that the thought can move the body and feel the things which happen to it [*que chacun éprouve tousjours en soy-mesme sans philosopher; à sçavoir qu'il est une seule personne, qui a ensemble un corps & une pensée, lesquels sont de telle nature que cette pensée peut mouvoir le corps, & sentir les accidens qui luy arrivent*]. (Letter to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643, AT III 694/CSMK III 228, emphasis added)

Experiencing the union just is a matter of sensorily experiencing oneself as composed of mind and body. The idea of the union can be misapplied to other things, when, for example, Scholastics use this idea to form a confused idea of heaviness (Letter to Elisabeth, 21 May 1643, AT III 667–68/CSMK III 219). But this idea's proper object is the self.

Reading Descartes's exchange with Elisabeth as concerning the conception of the self *qua* human being, we may draw three main conclusions. First, the exchange with Elisabeth confirms that the conception of the self *qua* mind is an intellectual idea, whereas the conception of the self *qua* human being is sensory. As Descartes writes, 'the soul is conceived only by the pure intellect,' whereas 'what belongs to the union of the soul and body is known only obscurely by the intellect alone or even by the intellect aided by the imagination, but is known very clearly by the senses [*elles se connoissent tres-clairement par les sens*]' (Letter to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643, AT III 691–92/CSMK III 227). Second, Descartes argues that the primitive notion is '**known** very clearly by the senses [*elles se connoissent tres-clairement par les sens*]' (Letter to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643, AT III 691–92/CSMK III 227, emphasis added). This indicates that the conception of the self *qua* human being is true or correct, since knowledge is factive. Third, Descartes's claim that the union is known *best* through the senses helps explain why the conception of the human being that the meditator rehabilitates in *Meditation 6* is not that different from her initial conception. The senses provide the best access to the nature of human beings, and so the meditator's initial sense-based conception of her human nature was not that far off the mark. As Descartes writes, 'it is the ordinary course of life and conversation, and abstention from meditation and from the study of the things which exercise the imagination, that teaches us how to conceive the union of the soul and the body' (Letter to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643, AT III 692/CSMK III 227).

2.4. The problem

Descartes holds that the self (or *I*) of the *Meditations* can be correctly considered as a mind, but also as a human being. The problem is that the mind and human being have different, and, indeed, incompatible properties. This might seem to imply that a single subject of predication—the self—has incompatible properties. For example, we might worry that if the self *qua* mind is simple, while the self *qua* human being is composite, then the self is both simple and composite, which is a contradiction. As Descartes writes to Hyperaspistes, 'a human being, being a composite entity, is naturally corruptible, while the mind is incorruptible and immortal' (*Letter to Hyperaspistes, August 1641*, AT III 422/CSMK III 189). Similarly, if the self *qua* mind can exist apart from the body, while the self *qua* human being cannot, then it might seem to follow that the self both can and cannot exist apart from the body. More generally, we might worry that Descartes's qualified predications imply corresponding unqualified predications.²⁸ In response, Descartes might argue that the whole point of the qualifications '*qua* mind' and '*qua* human' is to block these sorts of implications. But that seems like a placeholder rather than a proper account. How does the addition of a '*qua*' or a 'considered as' prevent the self's seemingly incompatible properties from crashing into one another? To answer this objection, we need an account of the significance of *considering* the self in different ways.

3. Four Readings of Descartes's Ways of Considering the Self

In this section, I will consider four analyses of Descartes's qualified claims about the self: (1) an *explicative* analysis, on which a connection between a thing's properties is explained, (2) a *representational* analysis, according to which a representation's content is spelled out, (3) a *predicate* analysis, on which the qualification is built into the predicate, and, finally, (4) a *subject* analysis on which the qualification attaches to the subject of predication.²⁹ I will argue that the subject analysis yields the best reading of Descartes's various ways of considering the self. Working through the other options will pave the way for this conclusion.

3.1. The explicative analysis

Consider an expression of the form '*S is P qua Q.*' This claim attributes a property *P* to a subject of predication *S* with the qualification *Q*. On the explicative analysis, both the predicate *P* and the qualification *Q* are attributed to the subject *S*. The '*qua*' articulates an explanatory connection between the property *P* and the qualification *Q*. On this analysis, *S is P qua Q* if and only if (i) *S is P*, (ii) *S is Q*, and (iii) the fact that *S is Q* *explains* the fact that *S is P*. For example, the self is simple *qua* mind if and only if (i) the self is a mind, (ii) the self is simple, and (iii) the fact that the self is a mind *explains* the fact that the self is simple, perhaps because simplicity is built into the nature of the mind. On this option, expressions of the form '*S is P qua Q*' specify explanatory relations between a thing's properties.

Although the explicative analysis of qualified statements was historically important, this analysis cannot explain how Descartes avoids contradiction when he relativizes incompatible properties to different ways of considering the self.³⁰ Consider, for example, the following pair of claims (which I will keep coming back to):

- (1) The self is simple *qua* mind.
- (2) The self is composite *qua* human being.

On the explicative analysis, (1) says that the self is a mind, that the self is simple, and that the self is simple *because* it is a mind. (2) says that the self is a human being, that the self is composite, and that the self is a composite *because* it is a human being. Thus, Descartes's endorsement of (1) and (2) would imply that the self is simple and composite, which is precisely the kind of contradiction that we are trying to avoid.

²⁸ In effect, we might worry that a *secundum quid ad simpliciter* inference is warranted here. See Bäck (1996) for extensive discussion of this kind of inference in the logical tradition going back to Aristotle.

²⁹ I borrow the labels for options (1), (3), and (4) from Hennig (2011), and I have benefited greatly from his work. For more extensive discussion of the history of these options in medieval and early modern logic, see, for example, Ashworth (1974), Bäck (1996), Hennig (2011), and Douglas (2018). Since options (1), (3) and (4) are discussed in the logical tradition leading up to Descartes's period, it seems plausible that they would have been available to him. I am unsure whether option (2) is taken up by the logical tradition before Descartes, but it tracks an important position that has been implicitly adopted in the secondary literature, and so deserves discussion.

³⁰ See Douglas (2018: 266).

3.2. The representational analysis

Another option is that expressions of the form 'S is P *qua* Q' spell out the content of a certain representation of S. On this analysis, the claim that S is P *qua* Q does not directly describe S, but, rather, describes a way that S is represented. More specifically, S is P *qua* Q if and only if a representation of S as Q includes or entails a representation of S as P. On this analysis, for example, the self is simple *qua* mind if and only if representing the self as a mind implies representing the self as simple, in roughly the same way that representing a shape as a triangle implies representing the shape as having three sides. Whereas the explicative analysis takes '*qua*' expressions to articulate the relations between a thing's properties, the representational analysis understands '*qua*' expressions as articulating the relations between *representations* of a thing's properties.

The representational analysis does a better job of removing the contradictions. Consider, again, the following pair of claims:

- (1) The self is simple *qua* mind.
- (2) The self is composite *qua* human being.

On the representational analysis, (1) says that a representation of the self as a mind includes simplicity. Similarly, (2) says that a representation of the self as a human being includes compositeness. Descartes's endorsement of (1) and (2) would then imply that the self is represented as both simple and composite. Does this imply a contradiction? No. Although someone cannot have incompatible properties, there is nothing contradictory about someone being represented in incompatible ways, so long as at least one of these representations is erroneous. This last qualification is important, since being truly represented as simple and composite implies being simple and composite, in which case we would be back where we started.

According to this option, the apparent variation in the self's properties plays out at the level of representations, rather than at the level of the object. Commentators who defend this kind of reading arguably include Williams (1978) and Curley and Koivuniemi (2015).³¹ Williams argues that Descartes's descriptions of the embodied self are mere reports of the way the self is represented by the senses: 'the *entire* content of Descartes's denial that he is a pilot in a ship is phenomenological—it is *exclusively* about what the experience of being embodied is like' (1978: 267, emphasis added). Curley and Koivuniemi (2015) argue that Descartes's puzzling characterizations of the human being or union—for example, his claim that the mind is the 'form' or the 'substantial form' of the human body, or that the human being is an '*ens per se*'—describe the way someone sensorily represents her connection to her body, which is otherwise merely causal.³² These commentators suggest, in effect, that Descartes's claims about the self *qua* human being are really just claims about the way the self is (erroneously) *represented* by the senses. In a similar vein, we might add that claims about the self *qua* mind are claims about the way the self is (truly) represented by the intellect.

This strategy avoids contradiction by saying that, for every pair of representations attributing incompatible properties to the self, at least one of these representations is erroneous. Hence, for every pair of incompatible properties, this reading forces Descartes to choose one as truly applicable to the self, while rejecting the other as an illusion or misrepresentation. Simple or composite, really distinct or substantially united, created by its parents or not—which is the self really? Should we trust the intellect or senses here? But Descartes appeals to conception-relativity precisely in order to 'have it both ways,' as Baier (1981: 169) puts it, and he doesn't seem to think that he needs to choose.³³ He insists that the self is *both* a mind *and* a human being, *both* simple *and* composite, *both* really distinct from the body *and* substantially united to it, *both* created by its parents *and* not. As Descartes reminds Arnauld in the *Fourth Replies*, 'in the Sixth Meditation, where I deal with the distinction between the mind and the body, I also proved at the same time [*simul etiam*] that the mind is substantially united with the body' (*O/R* 4, AT VII 227–28/CSM II 160). The representational analysis does not explain how both these perspectives on the self can be simultaneously correct, but instead denies the phenomenon to be explained. Hence, the representational analysis fails as a reading of Descartes's various ways of considering the self.

³¹ Normore (2011: 238–39) hints at a reading along these lines as well.

³² Curley and Koivuniemi (2015) are not as explicit as we might like that a person's sensory experience of their embodiment systematically misrepresents a person's connection to her body. But it is unclear how they could avoid this conclusion.

³³ See, for example, *M6*, AT VII 80/CSM II 56, *O/R* 4, AT VII 228/CSM II 160, and *Letter to Elisabeth*, 28 June 1643, AT III 691–92/CSM III 227.

3.3. The predicate analysis

The next option for analyzing statements of the form 'S is P *qua* Q' suggests that the qualification Q is built into the predicate P. On this proposal, we attribute the qualified property P-*qua*-Q to the subject S. For example, John is good *qua* cobbler if and only if the subject John has the qualified property good-*qua*-cobbler, which is just to say that John is a good cobbler.³⁴ The claim that John is a good cobbler does not imply that John is good. In general, on the predicate analysis, the claim that S is P *qua* Q does not imply that S is P. Consider, then, our pair of seemingly conflicting claims:

- (1) The self is simple *qua* mind.
- (2) The self is composite *qua* human being.

On the predicate analysis, (1) does *not* entail that the self is simple, *nor* does (2) entail that the self is composite. Instead, (1) implies that the self has the qualified property simple-*qua*-mind, and (2) implies that the self has the qualified property composite-*qua*-human-being. And perhaps something *can* be both simple-*qua*-mind and composite-*qua*-human being without contradiction. Hence, the predicative analysis can avoid the looming contradiction, at least at a formal level.

It is unclear, however, how to understand the qualified properties in question: namely, the properties simple-*qua*-mind and composite-*qua*-human-being. Although she does not spell out the details, Baier suggests one option: namely, that the self's seemingly incompatible properties consist in relations to the theoretical and practical standpoints:

[Descartes] can have it both ways, maintain both the real distinction and the 'substantial union' ... of mind and body, not merely because of his belief that mind and body are in a unique sort of causal and phenomenological relation, but because of the methodological dualism which underlies his metaphysical dualism. Descartes has a distinction which foreshadows and inverts Kant's distinction between practical and theoretical reason, the requirements of action and theory.... Descartes gives the empirical phenomena the role of guiding our action, while theoretical reason discovers both the pure essences and the things themselves whose essences they are. Descartes believed that it is from the standpoint of practical agents that we know ourselves to be *in* the world, to be so blended with a body that it becomes proper to 'ascribe matter and extension to the soul.' (Baier 1981: 169–70)

On this Baier-inspired reading, the self is simple-*qua*-mind if and only if the self is simple relative to the theoretical standpoint, whereas the self is composite-*qua*-human-being if and only if the self is composite relative to the practical standpoint.³⁵ Descartes might then argue that the qualified properties—simple-*qua*-mind and composite-*qua*-human-being—are compatible, since these properties are relational, and something can stand in different relations to different things. And similarly for all of the Cartesian self's other incompatible properties.

The problem with this Baier-inspired reading is that the self's incompatible properties do not lend themselves to reinterpretation as relations. Simplicity and compositeness do not seem to consist in relations to different standpoints (whatever those might be). As Van Cleve writes, it is unclear how 'the mereological structure of an object can be one thing in a certain relation and another thing apart from that relation' (1999: 149). Or consider the real distinction. Descartes holds that the self *qua* mind is really distinct from the body, while the self *qua* human being is not. The self's real distinction from the body does not seem to consist in a relation to the theoretical standpoint, nor does its substantial union to the body seem to consist in a relation to the practical standpoint.³⁶ So the predicate analysis fails as an account of Descartes's qualified claims about the self as well.

³⁴ I borrow this example from Hennig (2011: 150).

³⁵ See, for example, *O/R* 2, AT VII 142–43/CSM II 102.

³⁶ In light of these problems, we might wonder whether Baier (1981) meant to relativize the Cartesian self's properties to different standpoints by construing these properties as relations. Perhaps Baier is better understood as saying that the Cartesian self's properties are *represented* differently from the practical and theoretical standpoints, along the lines of the representational analysis above. But then Baier's Descartes wouldn't really have it both ways.

3.4. The subject analysis

The final and most promising analysis for Descartes's statements of the form 'S is P *qua* Q' interprets the qualification Q as attaching to the subject S. The property P is attributed not to S *simpliciter*, but to the qualified subject S-*qua*-Q. On this analysis, S is P *qua* Q if and only if S-*qua*-Q is P. For example, John is red *qua* beard if and only if John-*qua*-beard is red, or, equivalently, John's beard is red. The claim that John's beard is red does not imply that John is red, however. In general, on the subject analysis, the claim that S is P *qua* Q does not imply that S is P. Consider, one last time, our pair of examples:

- (1) The self is simple *qua* mind.
- (2) The self is composite *qua* human being.

On this proposal, claim (1) implies that the self-*qua*-mind is simple, while claim (2) implies that the self-*qua*-human being is composite. Hence, claims (1) and (2) attribute properties—namely, simplicity and compositeness—to logically distinct subjects of predication. Since we cannot, in general, infer that S is P from the claim that S-*qua*-Q is P (recall John's beard), we cannot infer that the self is simple from the claim that the self-*qua*-mind is simple, nor that the self is composite from the claim that the self-*qua*-human-being is composite, at least not without some further argument. Hence, (1) and (2) would not be formally contradictory.³⁷ Whereas the predicate analysis of '*qua*' allows more precision about the *properties* we attribute to the self, the subject analysis enables more precision about *the subjects* of predication to which these properties are attributed.

Still, this strategy requires that we give an account of these special qualified subjects of predication, viz. the self-*qua*-mind and the self-*qua*-human-being. This is analogous to the task in the preceding section of giving an account of the special qualified properties simple-*qua*-mind and composite-*qua*-human-being. The qualified subjects of predication are not mysterious, however. The self-*qua*-mind *just is* the mind. The self-*qua*-human-being *just is* the human being. The main textual evidence for this claim is Descartes's willingness to treat claims about the self *qua* mind interchangeably with claims about the mind. In *Meditation 3*, for example, Descartes treats the expression 'I in so far as I am a thinking thing [*me quatenus sum res cogitans*]' interchangeably with 'the mind [*mentem*]' (M3, AT VII 50/CSM II 35; see also M6, AT VII 86/CSM II 59). Passages like this suggest that the expressions 'I in so far as I am a mind or thinking thing' or 'I considered as a mind' are just roundabout ways of referring to a certain mind, namely, mine. And similarly, the expression 'I in so far as I am a human being' refers to a certain human being, namely, the one I normally take myself to be.

One presupposition of this strategy is that the mind and human being are distinct subjects of predication. If the claim 'the self is simple *qua* mind' implies that the mind is simple, and if 'the self is composite *qua* human being' implies that the human being is composite, then Descartes avoids contradiction only if the mind and human being are distinct subjects of predication. Let me ward off a possible misunderstanding here. By saying that the mind and human being are distinct subjects of predication, I am *not* assuming that the mind and human being are really distinct substances. As I use the term, a subject of predication is just something with properties. Subjects of predication come cheap. Anything with properties counts. A sensation of red, for example, is a subject in the relevant sense, since it has properties that distinguish it from a sensation of green, or an intellectual idea of a triangle. A sensation of red is not a substance, however, because it lacks the independence Descartes requires of substances (*Principles* I.51, AT VIII A 24/CSM I 210). In short: a subject of predication is something with properties; a substance is a suitably independent subject of predication.³⁸ We might then wonder how to characterize the sense in which the mind and human being are distinct, if not in terms of a real distinction between substances.³⁹ Without begging substantive metaphysical questions at this point, we cannot say much more than that they are numerically distinct subjects of predication.⁴⁰ Different accounts of the mind and human being will then suggest more precise charac-

³⁷ This is the major upshot of Douglas's (2018) discussion of the structurally similar problem in Spinoza.

³⁸ This point is sometimes expressed by saying that a substance is an *ultimate* subject of predication: i.e., a subject in which properties inhere, but which does not inhere in anything else. See Schechtman (2016) for insightful discussion of the kind of independence substance-hood requires.

³⁹ The theory of distinctions Descartes presents in *Principles* I.60 makes this question more pressing, since none of the three kinds of distinctions—distinctions of reason, modal distinctions, and real distinctions—seems to characterize the sense in which the mind is distinct from the human being (AT VIII A 28–29/CSM I 213).

⁴⁰ Even this minimal claim is controversial. Hennig (2011) suggests an alternative: the human being and mind are distinct with respect to their being, but not with respect to their identity. On this proposal, the mind is *identical* to the human being, despite the fact that the *being* of the mind is *distinct* from the *being* of the human being. As Hennig points out, this proposal requires abandon-

terizations of the distinction between them. A trialist like Hoffman (1986) or Skirry (2005), for example, will give a very different account of the mind's distinction from the human being, than, say, Rozemond (1998) or Chappell (1994).

Although the subject analysis provides the best reading of Descartes's various ways of considering the self, it raises difficulties of its own. I will mention two. First, if the expressions 'I in so far as I am a mind' and 'I in so far as I am a human being' refer to the mind and human being, why refer to them in such a clunky, round-about way? One reason is that these more elaborate expressions allow Descartes to specify *whose* mind and *which* human being is at stake: namely, my own mind, and the human being that I typically take myself to be. Reflecting on ourselves, rather than on an arbitrary mind or human being, is important for Descartes, because each of us stands in a unique or privileged epistemic relation to ourselves. Descartes holds that I know my own mind—through consciousness or reflection—in a way that differs from the way I know yours. This first-person perspective grounds many of Descartes's signature claims about the self or mind, for example, the certainty that I exist, and that I am a thinking thing. Expressions like 'I in so far as I am a mind or thinking thing' are one of Descartes's linguistic strategies for getting his readers to adopt this perspective. Similar considerations explain why Descartes uses qualified expressions like 'I in so far as I consist of mind and body.' Descartes also holds that each of us has a first-person perspective on our humanity. I know my own human nature—through proprioceptive or bodily awareness—in a way that differs from the way I know yours. The first-person perspective afforded by bodily awareness also grounds many of Descartes's claims about human nature, for example, the claim that mind and body are closely joined and intermingled (*M6*, AT VII 81/CSM II 56), and that dropsy—or, more generally, sickness—is 'a true error of nature' with respect to the composite (*M6*, AT VII 85/CSM II 59). By using the expression 'I in so far as I am a human being,' Descartes encourages his readers to adopt this embodied first-person perspective as well.

The second objection to the subject analysis is more serious. On this analysis, the expression 'the self qua mind' refers to the mind, while the expression 'the self qua human being' refers to the human being. We can then explain how Descartes avoids contradiction when he attributes incompatible properties to the self, because he attributes one property to the mind, the other to the human being. In a sense, this procedure explains how Descartes can 'have it both ways' (Baier 1981: 169). But we have *not* yet explained how Descartes can have it both ways *with respect to the self*. So the mind is simple, and the human being is composite. What does any of that have to do with the self? Without a story about how the self fits into the picture, and, more specifically, about how the self relates to the mind and human being, it is mysterious what bearing, if any, the mind's and human being's properties have for the self. Thus, we have removed the threat of contradiction, but at the expense of saying anything informative about what the self is like.

An analogy may be helpful here. Consider the claim that John is red *qua* beard. On the subject analysis, John is red *qua* beard if and only if John-*qua*-beard is red, or, equivalently, John's beard is red. Although it may be tempting to assume that if John-*qua*-beard is red, then John is partly red, this conclusion would be somewhat hasty. On its own, the claim that John's beard is red does *not* imply any conclusions about what color John might be: it all depends on how John relates to his beard. To make this point vivid, let's consider some options for how John might relate to his beard. If John's beard covers part of his face, then his beard's redness would entail that John is partly red. In contrast, if John cut off his beard long ago and keeps his old beard in a box in the attic, then his beard's redness would *not* entail that John is even partly red. Finally, if John were extremely hairy, so that his beard covered every inch of his body, then his beard's redness would imply that John is red all over. My point is this: on the subject analysis, the claim that John is red *qua* beard tells us virtually nothing about what John is like. The claim that John is red *qua* beard only becomes informative about John when it is supplemented with an account of how John relates to his beard. Similarly, the claim that the self is F *qua* mind (or human being) is only informative about the self when this claim is supplemented with an account of how the self relates to the mind (or human being).

In a way, the solution to this problem is obvious: we need to say what the self is, and how it relates to the mind and human being. We need an account of the unqualified self, or the self *simpliciter*, so that we can make sense of how Descartes's qualified claims bear on what the self is like. Such an account would make

ing the indiscernibility of identicals. This seems like too high a price to pay. That being said, I am happy to concede that there is an interpretive choice point here, and I would be willing to conditionalize my subsequent analysis as follows: 'If we read Descartes's claims about the self in light of the indiscernibility of identicals ...' Moreover, the positive account of the Cartesian self I develop in section five *could* be repackaged as an account of what unites the 'being' of the mind and the 'being' of the human composite, to use Hennig's terminology. So perhaps the interpretive choice point is more terminological than substantive.

clear how claims about the mind and human being are informative about the self: it would allow us to move in some cases—but not all—from premises about what the self-*qua*-mind is like, or what the self-*qua*-human being is like, to conclusions about what the self is like. But, as we shall see in the next section, giving an adequate account of the self *simpliciter* is not so easy.

Someone might object that there is no such thing as the self *simpliciter* in Descartes, and that my call for an account is misplaced. This would imply that there are just two first-person pronouns. One refers to the mind, while the other refers to the human being. Their referents overlap, since the mind is part of the human being. But neither has priority over the other. This would mean that the first-person is ambiguous unless suitably qualified. Any unqualified claim of the form 'I am *F*' would be ambiguous between 'I-*qua*-mind am *F*' and 'I-*qua*-human-being am *F*' (Brown 2014: 245). This ambiguity would infect many of the questions Descartes cares most about: What is my essence? Can I exist apart from my body? What is my relationship with matter? Can I survive death and the destruction of my body? Despite Descartes's willingness to qualify the first-person pronoun when pushed into a corner, he would not accept that these questions are fundamentally indeterminate. Consider that last question again. Can I survive death and the destruction of my body? If someone were to respond, 'Well, it all depends, you-*qua*-mind can survive the destruction of your body, you-*qua*-human-being cannot,' we might reasonably be unsatisfied with this answer.⁴¹ And Descartes would be too. Hence, Descartes needs to specify a referent for the unqualified first-person pronoun. He needs an account of the self *simpliciter*.⁴²

4. What the Cartesian Self Is Not

In this section, I will argue that, for Descartes, the self *simpliciter* is not a mind, and that it isn't a human being either. This will clear the way for my alternative account of the Cartesian self, which I present in section five below.

4.1. The traditional reading

On the traditional reading, the Cartesian self *just is* the mind.⁴³ At face value, this reading fits nicely with the subject analysis of Descartes's various ways of considering the self. Here's the idea. The self is the mind. In fact, the self *just is* the mind: they are identical. So the self has all the same properties as the mind. In this life, the self/mind is united to a human body. The compound resulting from this union is the human being, which is composed of the self/mind *and* a human body. The self/mind is related to the human being as part to whole. The self/mind and the human being are distinct subjects of predication, and they have many different properties. The essence of the self/mind consists only in thought, whereas the essence of the human being includes thought *and* extension, mind *and* body. The self/mind is simple, whereas the human being is composite. The self/mind is really distinct from the body, whereas the human being is not. And so forth.

On the traditional reading, Descartes's qualified claims about the self bear on the self *simpliciter* as follows. When Descartes claims that the self is simple *qua* mind, this implies that the self *simpliciter* is simple. In contrast, when Descartes claims that the self is composite *qua* human being, this implies that the human being of which the self is a part is composite. When Descartes talks about the self *qua* mind, he is really just talking about the self. When Descartes talks about the self *qua* human being, he is talking about the human being that envelops the self.

⁴¹ For one thing, we might wonder: if I-*qua*-mind can survive death, but I-*qua*-human being cannot, should death still be feared? We can keep turning this screw. But I'll stop here.

⁴² In grappling with this problem, Brown suggests that the mind and human being relate to the self *simpliciter* as answers to two different kinds of question: 'What am I? and Who am I?' (2014: 255). This might suggest that the self is a mind *qua* what I am, whereas the self is a human being *qua* who I am. On the subject analysis, we would then get the claims that the self-*qua*-what-I-am is a mind, and that the self-*qua*-who-I-am is a human being. We might still want to know: how do these two qualified subjects—viz. the self-*qua*-what-I-am and the self-*qua*-who-I-am—relate to the self? If Brown denies that there is anything like the self *simpliciter*—if, in effect, she denies that there is a single entity that is the subject-matter of her 'who' and 'what' questions—then she would seem to be forced to the conclusion that the self's identity is 'completely indeterminate,' a conclusion she herself rejects (Brown 2014: 245). So Brown (2014) needs an account of the self *simpliciter* as much as anyone else, and she has not given one yet.

⁴³ See, for example, Wilson (1978), McCann (1986), Voss (1994), Nelson (2005: 400–402), Thiel (2011: 36–43), and Shapiro (2013). To be clear, someone can accept the traditional reading of Descartes, on which the self *just is* a mind, and still be sensitive to his account of the embodied aspect of our lives. See, for example, Shapiro (2003). Since Shapiro holds that 'Descartes takes the self to be a thinking substance,' she counts as a proponent of the traditional view for my purposes, even though she problematizes the identity conditions of this substance by arguing that they have an irreducibly psychological dimension (2013: 236).

Although the self is intimately related to the human being, as essential part to whole, this account presupposes that the self is numerically distinct from the human being. This is built into the claim that the self/mind and human being are distinct subjects of predication, and is required to avoid contradiction.⁴⁴ Hence, the self does not *really* have any of the properties proper to the human being. The self isn't *really* composed of mind and body. Rather, the self is closely related to something that is composed of mind and body. Attributing the human being's properties to the self is a mere *façon de parler*, in roughly the same way that a husband might say 'we are having a baby' when his wife is in labor, even though he is clearly *not* the one having the baby. This result should give us pause.

In *Meditation 6*, when Descartes claims that the senses teach him that he is 'composed of body and body,' and, hence, capable of being affected by surrounding bodies, this does not sound like a mere *façon de parler* (*M6*, AT VII 81/CSM II 56). In the *Fourth Replies*, when Descartes claims that his arguments against the Platonic view of man—that is, the view that the self *just is* the mind—are 'as strong as any I can remember ever having read,' this does not sound like loose speech (*O/R 4*, AT VII 228/CSM II 160). Similarly, in his correspondence with Elisabeth, I take Descartes literally when he says that the 'union is known very clearly through the senses,' and that one of the things someone can know in this distinctively sensory, first-personal way is that 'he is a single person with both body and thought so related by nature that the thought can move the body and feel the things which happen to it' (*Letter to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643*, AT III 692–94/CSMK III 227–28).

We can put the objection like this. Descartes holds that the self—the self *simpliciter* and not just the self-qua-human being—has a characteristically human property, namely, the property of being composed of mind and body.⁴⁵ That's the force of saying that the self may be *correctly* considered as a human being. But the mind is not composed of anything, let alone a mind and body. The mind, even a mind united and intermingled with a body, 'is something quite single and complete' and lacks parts of any kind (*M6*, AT VII 86/CSM II 59, emphasis added). So the self *simpliciter* has a property—namely, being composed of mind and body—that the mind lacks. Assuming the indiscernibility of identicals, it then follows that the self is not identical to the mind. And that would mean that the traditional reading of Descartes is wrong.

Let me add one last piece of textual evidence against the traditional reading. After Gassendi suggests that Descartes regards himself 'not as a whole human being but as an inner or hidden component—the kind of component you previously considered the soul to be' (*O/R 5*, AT VII 260/CSM II 181), Descartes vehemently disagrees:

You then adopt a droll figure of speech and pretend to interrogate me as if I were present; and you address **me no longer as a whole human being but as a separated soul** [*me non amplius ut hominem integrum, sed ut animam separatam*], I think that you are indicating here that these objections of yours did not originate in the mind of a subtle philosopher but came from the flesh alone. (*O/R 5*, AT VII 352/CSM II 244, emphasis added)

Descartes recoils from the view that the self is 'an inner or hidden component' inside the body, as the traditional view would seem to imply. Descartes is adamant that he should *not* be addressed as a mind. But what else might he be?

4.2. Re-humanizing Descartes

Dissatisfaction with the traditional reading of Descartes has led some commentators to argue that, in fact, the Cartesian self *just is* a human being.⁴⁶ Call this the *re-humanized reading* of the Cartesian self.⁴⁷ For our purposes, we can assume that the mind and the human being stand in all the same relations as before. The only difference is that we are now taking the self to be identical with the human being, rather than the mind. So the self and human being will have exactly the same properties. Let's see how that looks. In this life, the mind is united to a human being. The compound resulting from the union *just is* the self/human being.

⁴⁴ As I mentioned above, another way to avoid contradiction would be to give up on Leibniz's law. I cannot pursue this possibility here.

⁴⁵ See also *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, AT X 411/CSM I 39; *The Treatise on Man*, AT XI 119/CSM I 99; *Discourse on Method*, AT VI 46/CSM I 134; *M3*, AT VII 49/CSM II 34, *M6*, AT VII 82/CSM II 57; *O/R 1*, AT VII 107/CSM II 77; *O/R 2*, AT VII 142–43/CSM II 102; and *Passions* II.139 AT XI 432/CSM I 377.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Hoffman (1986), Alanen (1989), Schmaltz (1992), Almog (2002), Skirry (2005), and Carriero (2009: 89–90).

⁴⁷ I borrow this label from Simmons (2011).

The self/human being is composed of mind *and* body, so that the self/human being relates to the mind as whole to part. As before, the self/human being and the mind are distinct subjects of predication, and have different properties. The essence of the self/human being includes thought *and* extension, mind *and* body, whereas the essence of the mind consists only in thought. The self/human being is composite, while one of its parts—the mind—is simple ... Well, you get the idea.

The re-humanized reading can also be used to explain how the self *simpliciter* relates to Descartes's various ways of considering the self. When Descartes claims that the self is composite *qua* human being, this implies that the self *simpliciter* is composite. In contrast, when Descartes claims that the self is simple *qua* mind, this implies that a *part* of the self—viz. the mental part—is simple. More generally, when Descartes talks about the self *qua* human being, he is talking about the self. When he talks about the self *qua* mind, he is talking about a part of the self. One advantage of this reading is that it goes further than the traditional one in vindicating Descartes's view that the self has incompatible properties. The self is wholly identical to the human being, and partially identical to the mind, and so we can make more sense of the idea that the self participates in the properties of both. The claim that the self is simple, for example, is not a mere *façon de parler*. This claim is about the innermost part of the self, although the self as a whole is composite.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, there are problems with the re-humanized reading as well. This reading implies that the self *simpliciter* cannot exist apart from the body. This follows more or less immediately from the claim that the essence of the self/human being includes mind *and* body. As Descartes writes to Regius, for example, 'the union which joins a human body and soul to each other is not accidental to a human being, but essential, since a human being without it is not a human being' (*Letter to Regius, January 1642*, AT III 508/CSMK III 209; see also *Letter to Hyperaspistes, August 1641*, AT III 422/CSMK III 189).⁴⁹ The problem for the re-humanized reading, then, is that Descartes holds that the self—the self *simpliciter*—*can* in fact exist apart from the body. Rozemond puts this point beautifully: 'In the *Meditations* (and, in fact, often elsewhere) [Descartes] does not state dualism by saying that *mind* is really distinct from body, but that *he* is really distinct from body' (1998: 159).⁵⁰ As the meditator writes in *Meditation 6*, 'it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it [*certum est me a corpore meo revera esse distinctum, & absque illo posse existere*]' (*M6*, AT VII 78/CSM II 54, emphasis added).⁵¹ In the next paragraph, the meditator argues further that she can clearly and distinctly understand herself as a whole (*totum me*) in an even more attenuated sense, namely, as lacking not merely a body, but also the faculties for imagination and sensation (*M6*, AT VII 78/CSM II 54; see also *M6*, AT VII 86/CSM II 59). This clear and distinct perception suggests that the self can exist not merely in a disembodied state, but as a pure intellect.

We can then put the objection like this. Descartes holds that the self—the self *simpliciter*, and not just the self-*qua*-mind—can exist apart from the body. But the human being cannot exist apart from the body. So the self *simpliciter* has a property—a way in which it *can* exist—the human being lacks. Assuming, again, the indiscernibility of identicals, it then follows that the self is not identical to the human being. So the re-humanized reading is wrong too. Notice that this problem has exactly the same structure as the one faced by the traditional reading.

The proponent of the re-humanized reading cannot downplay the conclusion of the real distinction argument in *Meditation 6*, as they might for the meditator's claim in *Meditation 2* that she is 'only a thinking thing' (*M2*, AT VII 27/CSM II 18). By the time the meditator reaches this point in *Meditation 6*, she has emerged from the skeptical doubts of the previous *Meditations* and is speaking in Descartes's voice. This is confirmed by the fact that Descartes claims that *he* is really distinct from the body in other texts, such as the *Fourth Replies*, which are free of the interpretative complexities raised by the *Meditations'* narrative and

⁴⁸ See also *Passions* II.139, AT XI 432/CSM I 377; and *Letter to Elisabeth, 4 August 1645*, AT IV 264/CSMK 257.

⁴⁹ Granted, the self *qua* mind is really distinct from the body, but that is just to say that the mind can exist apart from the body. On the re-humanized reading, a disembodied mind is merely a fragment of the self, which does not suffice for the re-humanized self's survival. Aquinas embraces this consequence of holding that the self is identical to the compound of soul and body. In a commentary on St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Aquinas writes, 'the soul is not the whole human being, only part of one: my soul is not me. So that even if [my] soul achieves well-being in another life, that doesn't mean I do or any other human being does' (cited in Van Dyke 2014: 32). Similarly, in his *Commentary on Lombard's Sentences*, Aquinas argues, 'Abraham's soul is not, strictly speaking, Abraham himself; it is rather a part of him (and so too for others). So Abraham's soul's having life would not suffice for Abraham's being alive.... The life of the whole compound is required: soul and body' (cited in Van Dyke 2014: 31). For helpful discussion of Aquinas on the relation between soul, body, and self, see Pasnau (2002: 380ff.), Stump (2003: 210–12), and Van Dyke (2014).

⁵⁰ See also Carriero (2009: 90) and Brown (2014: 242).

⁵¹ See also *Discourse IV*, AT VI 33/CSM I 127; *Letter to Colvius, 14 November 1640*, AT III 247/CSMK III 159; *O/R 4*, AT VII 219/CSM II 155; and *Principles I.8*, AT VIII 7/CSM I 195.

developmental structure (*O/R* 4, AT VII 219/CSM II 154–55). A defender of the re-humanized reading might argue that Descartes doesn't really mean it when he suggests that the self *simpliciter* can exist apart from the body. Perhaps Descartes is implicitly considering the self as a mind.⁵² But that seems like a stretch to me. I think Descartes means it when he says that you and I can exist without our bodies.

4.3. A pessimistic conclusion?

We need an account of the self and how it relates to the mind and human being. Otherwise Descartes's qualified claims about the self won't tell us anything about the self *simpliciter*. I have argued against the traditional reading, on which the self is (identical to) a mind, as well as the re-humanized reading, on which the self is (identical to) a human being. We can summarize this negative argument as follows:

- (1) The self is composed of mind and body, whereas the mind is not.
- (2) The self can exist apart from the body, whereas the human being cannot.
- (3) But, if $x = y$, then x and y have all the same properties.

Therefore,

- (4) The self is not a mind, and it's not a human being either.

Both the traditional and the re-humanized reading latch onto an aspect of the self—the mind or the human being—and then treat this aspect as if it were the whole truth about the self. But Descartes holds that *both* the sensory and intellectual perspectives reveal important aspects of the self. The intellect tells us that we are thinking beings capable of existing apart from our bodies, while the senses tell us that we are embodied, composite creatures, tightly bound to our bodies. The traditional and re-humanized reading each respects one of these perspectives, but at the expense of the other. The inadequacy of these readings might suggest that Descartes lacks a coherent account of the self.⁵³ The way to avoid this pessimistic conclusion is to sketch a new account of the Cartesian self that integrates them. We need to explain how the self can be composed of mind and body, and yet capable of existing in disembodied form.

5. A New Account of the Cartesian Self

A self, as I am using the term, is something that can be appropriately referred to using the first-person pronoun 'I' and related expressions like 'me' (*me, moi*), and 'myself' (*me, moi-même*). Descartes recognizes that the first-person pronoun is reflexive: that 'I' refers to its thinker (*Discourse IV*, AT VI 32/CSM I 127; see also *Principles* 1.7, AT VIII A 7/CSM I 195). Thus, a self must be capable of thinking 'I,' and, *a fortiori*, of thinking. This line of thought might seem to lead inevitably to the traditional reading on which the self *just is* a thinking thing or mind. I would like to suggest that the Cartesian self is a thinker in a different sense: namely, that the self is individuated by a unified totality of thoughts—a mental life—so that whatever entities are jointly responsible for producing this mental life constitute a single self.⁵⁴ (I comment on the relevant sense of 'producing' below.)

This account of the Cartesian self takes a certain effect as primary, and then builds the self around this effect.⁵⁵ The relevant effect is a unified collection of thoughts or a mental life. The self is constituted at a time by just those entities that produce the unified totality of its thoughts at that time.⁵⁶ The self's identity is

⁵² See, for example, Almog (2002: ch. 2) and Skirry (2005: 141).

⁵³ Carriero (2009: 393) alludes to this pessimistic conclusion.

⁵⁴ Marshall (2010: 1–2) inspires this formulation. My account of the Cartesian self has the same general shape as the one Marshall (2010) attributes to Kant. The central difference between my Descartes and Marshall's Kant is that my Descartes holds that we can know quite a lot about the entities producing a mental life, whereas Marshall's Kant denies this.

⁵⁵ Other commentators emphasize the Cartesian self's connection to the activity or production of thinking. In Curley's analysis of the cogito reasoning, for example, he glosses the conclusion 'I exist' by saying, 'the "I" of the conclusion is short for "that thing, whatever it is, of which the aforementioned thought is an activity"' (Curley 1978: 156; see also 92–93). See also Carriero (2009: 81–82). My development of this idea is novel in the Descartes literature, however.

⁵⁶ When I say that the self is *constituted* by the mind, or *constituted* by the human being, I mean that the self stands in roughly the same kind of relation as the statue to the infamous lump of clay: the statue is one with the lump of clay, but in a way that falls short of strict identity. The analogy is somewhat misleading, however, since the self is *not* a material object, and one of its constituents, viz. the mind, is immaterial. Stump's (2003) reading of Aquinas provides a precedent for appealing to the constitution relation in this context, however. On Stump's reading, Aquinas holds that the human being is constituted by a mind and body in this life, but can be constituted by a disembodied mind (2003: 53). My account of the Cartesian self has a similar structure to Stump's account, albeit developed in Descartes's non-hylomorphic framework. See Van Dyke (2014) for critical discussion of Stump.

determined by the identity of its defining effect. The self is *one thing* at a time, because all of its constituents contribute to *one* mental life. The self is *one thing* over time, because its mental life continues as *one and the same* mental life over time.⁵⁷

At any given moment, the self is constituted by the entities producing its unified collection of thoughts. In this life, the self is constituted by a human being because (i) in this life, the self's mental life includes sensory and imaginative thoughts, and (ii) sensory and imaginative thoughts are produced by the human being. The self *can* be constituted by a mind alone, however, because (i) there are some thoughts—namely, purely intellectual thoughts—produced by the mind alone, and (ii) the self's defining effect—namely, its mental life—can shrink so as to include only these kinds of thoughts. From this it follows that the Cartesian self can be variably constituted. There are two ways the self can exist. When its thoughts are sensory and imaginative, the self exists as a mind-body union or human being. When its thoughts are purely intellectual, the self exists as a mind alone.

The Cartesian self's identity both *at a time* and *over time* is secured by the identity of its mental life. Let's start with the self's identity *at a time*. Suppose that self₁ is thinking about a triangle, while self₂ is thinking about a circle. Self₁ is identical to self₂ just in case the thought about the triangle and the thought about the circle belong to one and the same mental life. A multiplicity of thoughts does not automatically entail a multiplicity of selves. Whether we are dealing with one self or two depends on whether these thoughts belong to the same mental life. Let's consider, next, the self's identity over time. Suppose that a self at *t*₁ is having a sensory experience of a goldfinch, and, hence, is constituted at *t*₁ by the combination of mind and body that jointly produce this experience. And suppose that a self at *t*₂ is engaged in purely intellectual thoughts about God and triangles, and, hence, is constituted at *t*₂ by the mind that produces these thoughts. Again, the self at *t*₁ is identical to the self at *t*₂ just in case their respective thoughts—viz. the sensory experience of the goldfinch at *t*₁ and the intellectual thoughts about God and triangles—are integrated into a single mental life. As the meditator writes in *Meditation 2*, 'I am; I exist—that is certain. But for how long? *For as long as I am thinking*' (M2, AT VII 27/CSM II 18, emphasis added; see also *Discourse IV*, AT VI 33/CSM I 127). This account of the self takes the unity of a mental life—the fact that a variety of thoughts belongs to a single perspective or consciousness—and then builds the self around this unity.

Let me ward off a possible misunderstanding. It might sound like the Cartesian self's defining effect—a mental life—is a free-floating entity, unmoored from any particular substance. That is not what I am saying. Descartes holds that thoughts are modifications of mind, or ways in which a mind exists. Thus, a mental life—an appropriately unified collection of thoughts—is always the mental life *of* a mind. 'It is certain,' Descartes writes in the *Third Replies*, 'that a thought cannot exist without a thinking thing [*re cogitante*]; and in general no act or accident can exist without a substance for it to belong to' (O/R 3, AT VII 175–76/CSM II 124). He elaborates a few lines down:

There are other acts which we call 'acts of thought', such as understanding, willing, imagining, having sensory perceptions, and so on: these all fall under the common concept of thought or perception or consciousness, and we call the substance in which they inhere a 'thinking thing' or a 'mind'. (O/R 3, AT VII 176/CSM II 124; see also M6, AT VII 78/CSM II 54; and *Principles* I.53, AT VIIIA 25/CSM I 210)

The self's defining effect plays out within a mind, but this fact does not collapse the distinction between self and mind. On my reading, the self is *not* the thing or substance modified by a mental life, or in which thinking occurs. Rather, the self is constituted by just those entities that produce a mental life. Although the mind always plays some role in this process, the mind is not typically wholly responsible for producing its mental life.⁵⁸ When the self's mental life includes sensory and imaginative thoughts, its mental life arises from the cooperation of mind and body together, in which case the self is constituted by both these entities together. So self and mind come apart, and my account does not collapse into the traditional reading.

This account of the Cartesian self is built around two main planks: (i) different kinds of thoughts are produced by different entities, and (ii) these different kinds of thoughts can be integrated into a single mental

⁵⁷ I will sometimes refer to the *self's* mental life or the *self's* thoughts. These formulations are potentially misleading, since they might suggest that the self is metaphysically prior to, and constituted independently of, the mental life that it possesses. But that gets things precisely backwards. On my view, a unified mental life is metaphysically prior to, and grounds the identity of, the self. So it might be more accurate to refer to a mental life's self. We sometimes talk that way, e.g., when we refer to a mental life's subject.

⁵⁸ Descartes suggests that the mind is always at least partly responsible for producing its thoughts, because the mind contributes their formal reality (M3, AT VII 40/CSM II 27–28; and O/R 1, AT VII 103/CSM II 75).

life, both at a time and across time. In the remainder of this section, I will clarify each of these planks, as well as defend their attribution to Descartes. I will then elaborate on the possibility of the self's disembodied existence. Finally, I will defend my account against the objection that Descartes's metaphysical framework does not allow for 'effect-relative composites' of the kind that I take the Cartesian self to be.⁵⁹

5.1. The Cartesian self's variable constitution

My account presupposes that sensory and imaginative thoughts differ in kind from purely intellectual thoughts, and that the human being and mind produce these different kinds of thoughts. There is ample textual evidence that Descartes accepts both these claims.⁶⁰ In *Meditation 6*, for example, the meditator distinguishes 'certain special modes of thinking, namely imagination and sensory perception' from pure understanding (*M6*, AT VII 78/CSM II 54). Imagination and sensory perception are imagistic forms of thinking, whereas the pure understanding is non-imagistic. The meditator illustrates this difference by contrasting the experience of imagining a geometrical figure and understanding one. When I imagine a triangle, I form a mental image of this shape, such that I 'see the three lines with my mind's eye as if they were present before me' (AT VII 72/CSM II 50). I can understand a triangle, in contrast, without forming any kind of image: I simply grasp its nature as a three-sided figure.⁶¹

The meditator argues that the special modes of thinking and pure understanding are activities of different things. Sensory and imaginative thinking are activities performed by the mind and body together. In *Meditation 6*, the meditator suggests that imagining depends on corporeal images in the brain (*M6*, AT VII 73/CSM II 51), whereas she claims that sensory perceptions, as we saw above, 'arise [*exorti*] from the union, and, as it were, intermingling of mind and body' (*M6*, AT VII 81/CSM II 56). In both the imaginative and sensory cases, the mind joins forces with the human body to bring about these distinctively embodied forms of thought. In contrast, the mind performs its acts of pure understanding without any assistance from the body. 'When the mind understands,' the meditator explains, 'it in some way turns towards itself and inspects one of the ideas which are within it' (*M6*, AT VII 73/CSM II 51).⁶²

When Descartes revisits this material in the *Fifth Replies*, he argues that 'the powers of understanding and imagining do not differ merely in degree but are two quite different kinds of mental operation' (*O/R 5*, AT VII 385/CSM II 264). The imagination is bound up with the body in a way that the pure understanding is not: 'For in understanding the mind employs only itself, while in imagination it contemplates a corporeal form' (*O/R 5*, AT VII 385/CSM II 264). In this passage, Descartes focuses on the imagination's dependence on the body, in contrast to the pure understanding. But there are many places where Descartes argues that sensory perception is similarly dependent. In *Principles* I.48, for example, Descartes argues that sensations, natural appetites, and passions 'must not be referred either to the mind alone or to the body alone,' but that 'these proceed [*proficiscuntur*] from the close and intimate union of our mind with the body' (AT VIII A 23/CSM I 209). And in *Principles* II.2, he writes:

the conclusion that there is a particular body that is more closely joined with our mind than any other body follows from our clear awareness that pain and other sensations come to us quite unexpectedly. The mind is conscious that these **sensations do not come from itself alone** [*non a se sola proficisci*], and that they cannot belong to it simply in virtue of its being a thinking thing; instead, they can belong to it only in virtue of its being joined to something other than itself which is extended and moveable—namely, what we call the human body. (AT VIII A 41/CSM I 224)⁶³

Sensory perceptions do not 'come from' the mind alone. Rather, sensory perceptions are produced by the joint agency of mind and body, or, in other words, by the compound or human being.

Descartes also reiterates that the mind *can* think independently of the body. In the *Comments on a Certain Program* (1647), Descartes responds to Regius's contention that the human body 'so long as it is in the body, is organic [*organica*] in all its actions. Thus, as the disposition of the body varies, so the mind has different thoughts' (*Comments*, AT VIII B 355/CSM I 295). Descartes interprets Regius as saying that the mind 'does

⁵⁹ I borrow this expression from Marshall (2010).

⁶⁰ My discussion in this section is indebted to Rozemond (1998: ch.6).

⁶¹ For more on the 'difference in kind' between the special modes of thinking and pure understanding, see Simmons (2017: 16–17).

⁶² *M5*, AT VII 67/CSM II 46.

⁶³ See also *Letter to Gibieuf*, 19 January 1642, AT III 479/CSM III 203; *Letter to Regius*, January 1642, AT III 493/CSM III 206; *Passions* II.137, AT XI 430/CSM I 376.

not act on its own [*per se nihil agat*], but is something of which the body makes use, just as it makes use of the arrangement of its limbs and other corporeal modes' (*Comments*, AT VIII B 355–56/CSM I 302). Descartes signals his disagreement with Regius in no uncertain terms. Descartes argues that if the mind were just the body's tool, as Regius suggests, then the mind would be 'nothing but a mode of body' (*Comments*, AT VIII B 356/CSM I 302). But this consequence flies in the face of the mind's real distinction from the body, which Regius and Descartes both accept. This exchange provides further evidence that Descartes holds that the mind *can* act on its own, namely, to produce intellectual thoughts of God and common notions (*Comments*, AT VIII B 359/CSM I 304).

In arguing for this division of cognitive labor, Descartes further specifies his new account of the human being. Consider, again, the meditator's list of the human being's activities in *Meditation 2*: the human being is nourished, moves, and engages in sense perception and thinking (*M2*, AT VII 25–26/CSM II 17). The meditator's pre-theoretical conception of a human being attributed all these operations to the soul; the correct Cartesian account is more fine-grained. By the end of the *Meditations*, as we saw above, the meditator attributes the human being's vital functions—such as nourishment and breathing—to the human body reconceived as a machine. This section shows that Descartes attributes sense perception and imagination to the composite of soul and body, while intellectual thinking (and perhaps willing) is the only human action reserved for the soul on its own.

Now, we might wonder about the relevant sense of production in these passages, especially since I am claiming that the self is constituted by the entities jointly producing its mental life. Someone might worry, for example, that many entities outside me play a role in producing my mental life—surrounding bodies, my community, God, and so forth. Reflecting on the influences on our mental lives might lead to the conclusion that the universe as a whole always plays a role in the production of our mental lives, and, hence, that the universe as a whole constitutes each of us.⁶⁴ To answer this objection, we need to identify a sense of production in which the mind-body union or human being uniquely produces sensory and imaginative thoughts, and in which the mind alone uniquely produces intellectual thoughts.

My strategy is ostensive. Descartes clearly holds *that* there is an important sense of production—an important sense of cause or activity—in which it can be truly said that the union of mind and body is *the* producer of sensations and imaginative thoughts, and in which the mind alone is *the* producer of intellectual thoughts. This commitment emerges in the passages we have looked at so far, and provides a fixed interpretive point for any reading of Descartes. When Descartes claims, for example, that sensations 'arise from' or 'proceed' from the mind-body union, rather than, say, one's complete causal history, *that's* the sense of production that I am appealing to when I say that the Cartesian self is constituted by the entities that jointly produce the totality of its mental life. Similarly, when Descartes claims that 'in understanding the mind employs only itself,' *that's* the sense of production I'm appealing to (*O/R 5*, AT VII 385/CSM II 264; see also *Comments*, AT VIII B 356–61/CSM I 302–305).⁶⁵

Commentators disagree about how to understand the relevant kind of production in these passages, and especially about how to understand the way mind and body jointly produce sensory and imaginative thoughts.⁶⁶ Some commentators—like Wilson (1978: 211) and Chappell (1994)—argue that sensations 'arise' from the union of mind and body through a purely causal process. The body causes the mind to have sensations and imaginative thoughts, and that's all there is to it. Other commentators—like Rozemond (1998: ch. 6)—argue that the cooperation of mind and body is not merely causal, but includes a metaphysical

⁶⁴ Whether this would amount to a *reductio* on the view I leave as an exercise to the reader. But note that this swelling of the self needn't erase the numerical distinctness of selves. So long as you and I have different mental lives, then you and I will be distinct selves on my account, even if the universe as a whole constitutes each of us.

⁶⁵ My account of the Cartesian self will be more elegant if the sense of production is univocal here, that is, if the union *produces* sensory thoughts in the same sense that the mind alone *produces* intellectual thoughts. But the account is compatible with these kinds of production being distinct, so long as there is a sense of production—call it production₁—such that the union is *the* unique producer, of sensory and imaginative thoughts, and a sense of production—call it production₂—such that the mind alone is the unique producer, of intellectual thoughts. We could then formulate the view by saying that the self is constituted by those entities which either produce₁ or produce₂ the thoughts integrated into its mental life.

⁶⁶ The body's role might seem especially puzzling in light of Descartes's suggestion in the *Comments* that the mind, in addition to producing the formal reality of its thoughts, produces the objective reality of its sensory thoughts: 'the ideas of pain, colors, sounds and the like must be all the more innate if, on the occasion of certain corporeal motions, our mind is capable of representing them to itself, for there is no similarity between these ideas and the corporeal motions' (*Comments*, AT VIII B 359/CSM I 304). If the mind produces both the formal and objective reality of its thoughts, what is left for the body to do? Descartes says that the body is required to serve as 'the occasion' for sensory thoughts, but it is unclear what that means. See Rozemond (1999: 457) for discussion.

dimension. As Rozemond writes, 'the union of mind and body is such that it affects the mind so that it becomes susceptible to a new type of mode of the mind [viz. sensation], a subspecies of thought, which the mind in separation does not have' (1998: 188). Adjudicating between these options would take us beyond the scope of my current project. All I need is that there is some such sense of production, according to which the mind-body union is singled out as *the* producer of sensory and imaginative thoughts, while the mind is singled out as *the* producer of intellectual thoughts. Whatever the best interpretation of this kind of production turns out to be, we can substitute that into my account of the self.

5.2. The Cartesian self's identity

Whereas the self's variable constitution is explained by the *variety* of thoughts a single mental life can incorporate, the self's identity—both at a time and over time—is explained by the fact that we are dealing with a *single* mental life. Suppose that self₁ is having a visual experience of a goldfinch, while self₂ is having a purely intellectual thought about a triangle. Self₁ and self₂ are identical just in case their respective thoughts are integrated into a single mental life, whether at a time or across time. The *unity* of a mental life is what justifies saying that we are dealing with *one* self. To be clear, my proposal is not that every thought corresponds to its own little self, in which case a multiplicity of thoughts would imply a multiplicity of little selves. Rather, a unified collection of thoughts—a unified mental life—grounds a self. We count selves by counting unified mental lives.

Despite his keen appreciation for the complexity of our mental lives, Descartes takes the unity of one's mental life more or less for granted. When each of us reflects, we discover that all our various thoughts belong to *one* mental life—a single consciousness or perspective.⁶⁷ As Descartes writes in *Meditation 2*:

Is it not one and the same 'I' who is now doubting almost everything [*Nonne ego ipse sum qui jam dubito fere de omnibus*], who nonetheless understands some things, who affirms that this one thing is true, denies everything else, desires to know more, is unwilling to be deceived, imagines many things even involuntarily, and is aware of many things which apparently come from the senses? ... Which of all these activities is distinct from my thinking? Which of them can be said to be separate from myself? **The fact that it is I who am doubting, and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer** [*Nam quod ego sim qui dubitem, qui intelligam, qui velim, tam manifestum est, ut nihil occurrat per quod evidentius explicetur*]. But it is also the case that the I who imagines is the same I [*Sed vero etiam ego idem sum qui imaginor*]... Lastly, it is also the same I who has sensory perceptions [*Idem denique ego sum qui sentio*], or is aware of bodily things as it were through the senses. (M2, AT VII 28–29/CSM II 19, emphasis added)

Descartes suggests that the synchronic unity of a mental life—that is, its being a *single* mental life—is given in reflection. And presumably he also takes the diachronic unity of a mental life—that is, its being a *single* mental life *over time*—as similarly unproblematic. The crucial claim for my reading is that this unity of a mental life, consciousness, or perspective grounds the self's identity.

My reading is compatible with various substantive accounts of what the unity of a mental life consists in, just as it is compatible with various accounts of the way the union 'produces' sensations. All I need is the claim, which Descartes clearly accepts, *that* mental lives are strongly unified. For the purposes of this paper, then, I will remain neutral on what makes it the case that a given mental life is unified.

Still, what might some of the options be? We might argue that since thoughts are just *ways* in which a mind exists, the question of what unifies a collection of thoughts into a single mental life is really just the question of what unifies the multiplicity of *ways* in which a mind exists into a single mind. One possibility—defended by Nelson (2005)—is that Descartes takes the unity of a mental life, or of the mind, as primitive. After all, the meditator says that 'the fact that it is *I* who am doubting, and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer' (M2, AT VII 29/CSM II 19, emphasis added). Another possibility—defended by Shapiro (2013)—is that the unity of a mental life is brought about through the psychological relations between its constituent thoughts, most vividly in the case of memory. As Shapiro writes, 'memory unifies the meditator's thoughts by effecting a continuity of the awareness of those thoughts. And

⁶⁷ Hatfield, for example, appeals to the unity of consciousness to explain how Descartes might respond to Lichtenberg's famous objection that introspection reveals thoughts but not an 'I' to which they belong (Hatfield 2003: 105; 2011: 372). See also Williams (1978: 79), Nelson (2005), and Newman (2015: 134).

in providing this unity, memory further helps make the meditator the thinking thing—that is, the self—she is' (2013: 236).⁶⁸ Adjudicating between these options would, again, take us too far afield. Whatever the best interpretation of the unity of a mental life turns out to be, we can substitute that into my account of the self as well.

5.3. Taking stock

My account of the Cartesian self incorporates the insights of both the re-humanized and traditional readings. The re-humanized reading recognizes that, for Descartes, the self is composed of mind and body—not merely in a figurative or loose sense, but literally. On my reading, the self is constituted by a human being in this life, and, hence, is composed of mind and body. The traditional reading, in contrast, highlights that the self can exist apart from the body. On my view, the possibility of the self's disembodied existence is grounded in virtue of the facts that (i) purely intellectual thoughts are operations of the mind's alone, and (ii) it is possible for one's mental life to consist solely in intellectual thoughts. Thus, my account explains how the self *simpliciter* is composed of mind and body and yet can exist apart from the body. The 'self *qua* human being' refers to the way the self actually exists, whereas the 'self *qua* mind' refers to the way the self can exist (as well as to one of its actual constituents). By splitting the difference between the re-humanized and traditional readings, my reading does a better job of allowing Descartes to have it both ways.

Before considering an objection to my account, let me clarify one last point about the self's capacity for disembodied existence. This possibility depends not merely on the distinction between the special modes of thinking and pure understanding, but also on the possibility of *purifying* one's mental life of any of the special modes.

Suppose, for example, that someone is currently enjoying a visual experience of a goldfinch, imagining other birds she has seen, and intellectually understands what it is to be a goldfinch. She will then be constituted by those entities that produce the totality of the thoughts she is currently having. These various entities will be woven into a *single* self because they all contribute to producing a *single* mental life. In this case, there is overlap. Her visual experience and imaginative act are produced by the mind and body together (i.e., the human being as a whole), while her intellectual understanding is produced by the mind alone (i.e., a part of the human being). So she is composed of mind and body. Thus, if someone has even a single sensory or imaginative thought, then she will be composed of mind and body in that moment. In contrast, if someone could purge her mental life of every sensory and imaginative trace, so that all of her thoughts were purely intellectual, then in that moment all of her thoughts would be produced by the mind alone, and that is what she would be.

Can our mental lives be thus purified?⁶⁹ Descartes suggests that it won't be easy. Our mental lives are typically suffused with sensory and imaginative thoughts. We clothe even abstract topics in images. 'Your imagination insistently mixes itself up with your thoughts,' Descartes writes, 'and lessens the clarity of this knowledge by trying to clothe it with shapes' (*Letter to [Silhon], March or April 1648*, AT V 138/CSMK III 331). The method of the *Meditations* can help to some degree. It can help cure 'the lifelong habit of confusing things related to the intellect with corporeal things, and replace it with the opposite habit of distinguishing the two' (*O/R 2*, AT VII 130–31/CSM II 94).⁷⁰ But this method does *not* wholly extinguish the sensory and imaginative thoughts in question. It allows us to hold these thoughts at arm's length, but it does not make them vanish. Even when we are deep in meditation, our stomachs still grumble, we feel the temperature of the room, and the pressure of the floor beneath our feet. We always feel our own bodies. As the meditator writes, 'I will now shut my eyes, stop my ears, and withdraw all my senses. I will eliminate from my thoughts and images of bodily things, or rather, *since this is hardly possible*, I will regard all such images as vacuous, false and worthless' (*M3*, AT VII 34/CSM II 24, emphasis added; see also *M6*, AT VII 76/CSM II 54; and *July 1*

⁶⁸ This account of the self's identity conditions bears more than a passing resemblance to Locke's account of personal identity as presented in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Whereas Locke takes the unity of consciousness to ground the identity of the self or person, Descartes, on my reading, appeals to the unity of a mental life. Of course Locke scholars disagree about what Locke means by 'consciousness.' See, for example, LoLordo (2012) and Weinberg (2016). Nevertheless, both accounts take the unity of the self to be grounded in a certain kind of psychological unity. To borrow some of Shapiro's terminology, both accounts of the self have an 'irreducibly psychological dimension' (2013: 239). The fundamental difference, as I see it, is that Descartes binds the relevant kind of psychological unity—viz. of a mental life—to a specific kind of substance, namely, an immaterial thinking substance, whereas Locke does not.

⁶⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer at the *Journal of Modern Philosophy* for pressing me to clarify this point.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Paul (2018: 1117–21).

1648, *Letter to Arnauld*, AT V 219/CSMK 356). Hence, the skeptical exercises of the *Meditations* do not allow the self to exist as, or be constituted by, a mind alone.⁷¹

While the method of the *Meditations* approximates a purely intellectual state, death sets us free. When the body breaks down, the mind's union with the body snaps (*Passions* I.6, AT XI 330/CSM I 329). The mind loses its ability to sense and imagine. The imagistic layer of our mental lives melts away. As Descartes writes in a letter to More, 'the human mind separated from the body does not have sense-perception strictly so called' (*Letter to More, August 1649*, AT V 402/CSMK 380; see also *Letter to [Silhon], March or April 1648*, AT V 138/CSMK III 331). Pure understanding is all that's left. In death, and perhaps only in death, the self is constituted by the mind alone.⁷²

5.4. A metaphysical objection

On my reading, the Cartesian self is what Marshall calls 'an effect-relative composite' (2010: 14). An effect-relative composite exists when 'a set of entities ... compose[s] a single individual on the basis of their jointly making a distinctive contribution to a single effect' (2010: 14). In the case of the Cartesian self, the relevant effect is a unified mental life. Someone might object that effect-relative composites have no place in Descartes's substance-mode ontology.⁷³ Are effect-relative composites substances? No. Are effect-relative composites modes? No. Therefore, we might conclude, there cannot be any effect-relative composites in Descartes's world. And that would be a bad result for my analysis of the Cartesian self, for if there's anything we know about the self by Descartes's lights, it's that the self exists.

In response to this objection, we might point out that the Cartesian self is not the only effect-relative composite Descartes recognizes. Drawing on Des Chene's (2001) influential work, I would like to suggest that living things, like plants and animals, are plausibly effect-relative composites as well. The place of living things is not entirely clear in the world of *res extensa*. In order to identify some configuration of matter as an animal, for example, Descartes needs to have some way of distinguishing the animal from the swirling matter surrounding it. That is, he needs to specify an appropriate principle of unity that tells us which bits of matter are parts of the animal and which bits are not, much as I specified a principle of unity for the Cartesian self. Des Chene puts the point like this:

A living body, evidently, has parts—its organs, the blood—which, even if they are not distinct substances, can subsist in some way (though perhaps not as organs or blood) apart from the rest. The principle of its unity is the ground upon which the body is nevertheless said to be one thing. (2001: 122)

Common motion and rest—which is the principle of unity Descartes offers for the bodies of his physics—is not a good candidate to explain the unity of living things (*Principles* II.55, AT VIII A 71/CSM I 246; see also *Principles* II.25, AT VIII A 53–54/CSM I 233). A dog wagging its tail is one living thing, even though the tail and the rest of its body have different motions. Conversely, a dog with a thorn stuck in its paw might move as one with the thorn, but presumably the thorn does not thereby become part of the dog. A better strategy,

⁷¹ Brown (2014: 246), in contrast, sometimes writes as if the self literally becomes disembodied during meditation, but this might just be a figurative turn of speech. In 1690, the French Jesuit Gabriel Daniel published a satirical work *Voyage du Monde de Descartes* imagining that Descartes is able to leave his body at will, and go wandering around as a disembodied soul. But this is *not* Descartes's view. See Smith (2019) for discussion.

⁷² Descartes doesn't say much about what the self's disembodied existence will be like. His follower Louis de la Forge is more forthcoming, devoting an entire chapter of his *Treatise on the Human Mind* (1666) to 'The State of the Soul After Death.' Here's a taste: 'when our soul is no longer united to the body, it won't have any more sensations, memory, nor imagination; because these manners of thinking are dependent on the body, and serve for the most part for knowing its body and the harmful and useful bodies which surround it. But the soul will conceive objects by the sole action of the intellect, which will furnish it with ideas much clearer and more distinct than all the ideas in this life...' (La Forge 1997: 213; see also 61–66). In contrast, another philosopher in the Cartesian tradition, Nicolas Malebranche, argues in the *Dialogues on Death* (1696) that we are never separated from an 'ideal' or 'experiential body,' not even in death. Malebranche appeals to the phenomenon of phantom limbs to argue for this startling and seemingly anti-Cartesian claim. As Malebranche writes, 'a man who has two arms cut off, has two more. And these two arms that you have, and are right here, they wouldn't really be your arms, or do you any benefit or harm, if you didn't have the other two arms that I'm talking about, those two arms that you don't think about at all... Now in death we only lose these two arms here: since the others are incorruptible. Death corrupts only that body which can never do us any benefit or harm. You are therefore wrong to fear death for that silly reason that it separates you from your body, if it is true that your body is the one that hurts you' (*Dialogues on Death*, OCM XIII 405). I mention these examples to illustrate the diversity of options within the Cartesian tradition for thinking about what it's like to be a disembodied mind, although Descartes himself is a philosopher more focused on the here and now.

⁷³ Relatedly, someone might raise more purely philosophical concerns about whether the category of effect-relative composites is ontologically sound. See Marshall (2010: 14) for a nice discussion and defense.

it seems, is to analyze living things in terms of their ability to produce certain characteristic effects. And that is tantamount to analyzing living things as effect-relative composites.

This is Des Chene's strategy. Des Chene (2001: 132) argues that Descartes wavers between dispositional and functional analyses of living things. On the dispositional analysis, a collection of material parts constitutes a dog just in case these parts are arranged in such a way that they produce a certain kind of motion, for example, the pattern of motion characteristic of dogs (which includes tail wagging, chasing sticks, and so forth). The functional analysis includes a teleological twist. On the functional analysis, a collection of material parts constitutes a dog just in case the arrangement of these parts is *for the sake of* producing a certain kind of motion, for example, the pattern of motion characteristic of dogs. Crucially, the dispositional and functional analyses both treat animals as effect-relative composites. Assuming that the broad brushstrokes of Des Chene's reading are correct, this would mean that Descartes appeals to a notion of effect-relative composites in his biology, and, hence, plausibly does so in other contexts as well. Although other commentators disagree with Des Chene about the *details* of his reading, they seem to agree that animals are effect-relative composites of some kind: the debate is primarily about how to specify the relevant effect. Brown (2012: 88), for example, argues that Descartes's animals are constituted by collections of matter that are configured in such a way that they preserve their own configurations. This suggests that the concept of an effect-relative composite has legitimate application in Descartes's framework.

If Descartes can appeal to effect-relative composites in his biology, then there cannot be any general prohibition on effect-relative composites in his framework. Somehow they have got to fit into the substance-mode ontology, or that ontology needs to be relaxed. This 'partners-in-guilt' response does not tell us which of these options we should pursue. I am inclined to follow Normore (2011) in relaxing the framework, so as to allow for composite beings that are somehow *grounded in* substances and modes. Defending Normore's approach would take us beyond the scope of the current paper, however. In any case, the comparison to living things suggests that the concept of an effect-relative composite is *not* foreign to Descartes's thought, and, hence, that we may employ this concept when giving an account of the self.

6. Conclusion

What sort of being is the Cartesian self (or *I*)? Descartes often seems ambivalent, suggesting that what the self is like—that is, what properties it has—all depends on whether we consider the self as a mind or a human being. I have argued that the best analysis of Descartes's qualified claims about the self presupposes an account of the self *simpliciter*. The secondary literature suggests two main options. According to the traditional reading, the self *simpliciter* is a mind or soul: when each of us reflects upon our own minds, that is where we find our selves. Over the last few decades, however, commentators have increasingly appreciated the embodied side of Descartes's system. It turns out there is more to Descartes—and to the Cartesian self—than *Meditation 2* would suggest. Scholars have examined, *inter alia*, Descartes's views on sensory perception, the passions, physiology, and his account of the mind-body union. This appreciation has led to dissatisfaction with the traditional reading of the Cartesian self. Some commentators have subsequently defended a re-humanized reading, which identifies the self *simpliciter* not merely with the mind, but with the human being of which the mind is a part. Both these readings track important strands in Descartes's thinking about the self. But neither is complete as it stands.

The account of the Cartesian self defended in this paper charts a middle course between the two dominant approaches in the secondary literature, and corrects their excesses. On my view, the Cartesian self is not (identical to) a mind, and it is not (identical to) a human being either. Rather, the Cartesian self is *both* a mind and a human being, or, to be more precise, the Cartesian self is possibly a mind and actually a human being. On my reading, the Cartesian self is constituted by whatever produces its mental life. When a mental life consists in purely intellectual thoughts, the mind alone produces this mental life, and the mind alone thereby constitutes the self. When a mental life includes sensory and imaginative thoughts, the union of mind and body produces its mental life, and, hence, the union constitutes the self. This reading of the Cartesian self yields the best explanation of how Descartes can have it both ways, and provides the most thoroughgoing reconciliation of the sensory and intellectual perspectives on ourselves. Our actual constitution—as human beings—is known very clearly through the senses, while our possible constitution—as disembodied minds—is known very clearly by the intellect.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the University of Notre Dame, the University of Pittsburgh, UC Riverside, Temple University, the NEH Summer Seminar *Between Medieval and Modern*, the *History of Philosophy Work in Progress Group* at Harvard University, and the *Center for the Humanities* at Temple University. I am grateful to audiences at these events for their questions and

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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