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# Substance, Reality, and Distinctness

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**ABSTRACT:** Descartes claims that God is a substance, and that mind and body are two different and separable substances. This paper provides some background that renders these claims intelligible. For Descartes, that something is real means it can exist in separation, and something is a substance if it does not depend on other substances for its existence. Further, separable objects are correlates of distinct ideas, for an idea is distinct (in an objective sense) if its object may be easily and clearly separated from everything that is not its object. It follows that if our idea of God is our most distinct idea, as Descartes claims, then God must be a substance in the Cartesian sense of the term. Also, if we can have an idea of a thinking subject which does not in any sense refer to bodily things, and if bodily things are substances, then mind and body must be two different substances.

**KEYWORDS:** Clear and distinct ideas, Descartes, dualism, God, objective reality, separability, substance.

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The Cartesian notion of substance is surrounded by mysteries and apparently unacceptable doctrines. First, Descartes claims that mind and body are two distinct and separable substances. One might agree with him to the extent that there are bearers of mental properties and bearers of physical ones. But to claim that these are separable substances is much more controversial. Second, Descartes claims that our ideas of substances have more objective reality than other ideas. But since this should also hold true of our ideas of non-existing substances, it would follow that our idea of Pegasus is more objectively real than our idea of Redness. Yet this does not seem to be true. In any case, how are we to understand the claim that reality comes in degrees? In this article I will argue that such difficulties may at least be mitigated by taking into account how the Cartesian notions of substance and reality are connected to Descartes' distinction between confused and distinct ideas. The following discussion is divided into six sections. First (1) I consider Descartes' claim that the meditator's idea of a thinking subject is more distinct than her ideas of sensory qualities. I then

(2) discuss Descartes' notion of distinctness, (3) his claim that our idea of God is our most distinct idea, and his notions of (4) substance and (5) reality. It will be seen (6) that an idea is distinct (in an objective sense) to the extent to which its object is real, separable, and substantial.

### 1. The Meditator's Idea of Herself

Descartes emphasizes that what he is establishing in the Second Meditation is the claim that we can have a complete and coherent notion of a thinking subject without in any sense referring to the human body (VII 13).<sup>1</sup> He introduces the notion of a thinking subject as follows. The only thing the meditator cannot possibly doubt is her capacity to doubt things. To doubt is to doubt the reliability of one's judgment about something and decide not to rely on it. Hence, doubting involves at least the following activities: some activity that provides content for a judgment, the formation of a judgment, and the decision not to rely on it. This is basically what Descartes lists as paradigmatic instances of thought (*cogitatio*): a *res cogitans* is a *res dubitans, intelligens, affirmans, negans, volens, nolens, imaginans quoque, & sentiens* (VII 28). The doubting meditator does not want to affirm a judgment based on sense perception or imagination. All we know by the end of the Second Meditation is that there must be some logical subject of the activities involved in doubting.

However, it seems that this logical subject need not be a substance. A logical subject is simply something of which something else may be predicated, and in this sense redness, velocity, and predication are also logical subjects (for one may predicate things of redness, velocity, and predication). Also, Descartes has clearly not shown that the logical subject of thought is an *incorporeal* substance. The thinking thing may well be identical to a material thing.

Descartes is well aware that both claims, i.e. that the subject of thought is a substance, and that it is an immaterial one, require more argument. He does not even use the term "substance" in the Second Meditation (cf. Marion, 1996: 112), and all he claims to have shown here is that there must be a logical subject of thought, and that the notion which this subject has of herself must be more distinct than her notions of material things. He establishes the latter claim in the concluding sections of the Second Meditation.

Descartes first points out that the idea of a logical subject of sensory qualities cannot be directly conveyed by the senses. What our senses per-

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to Volume VII, page 13 of the *Oeuvres de Descartes*, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris, 1996). I will follow this convention throughout the paper.

ceive are only qualities, and the logical subject of such qualities is not a further quality. (If it were, it would have to be a quality of some further logical subject, which would either be unperceivable or, again, a quality of some further subject.) Yet, in fact, we do not perceive mere properties; we always perceive things that have properties, by virtue of these very properties.<sup>2</sup> Hence Descartes concludes that the perception of sensory objects must involve more than a mere affection of the senses; it must also involve something that the thinking subject does. From this it follows that whenever we perceive sensory objects, there must also be thought. Any perception of a subject of sensory qualities involves thinking. Moreover, where there is thinking, there must also be a subject of thought. (This does not prove that there can be no sensory quality in the absence of a thinking subject. Rather, it proves that only thinking subjects, and not merely sensing ones, can have the idea of a bearer of sensory qualities.)

Taking a further step, Descartes concludes that the meditator's notion of herself as a thinking thing must, therefore, be more distinct than any of her notions of sensory objects:

If the perception of wax appears to be more distinct when it is conveyed not only by the sense of sight and touch but by several causes, how much more distinctly must I then admittedly know myself; since all reasons that could support the perception of the wax or of any other bodily thing prove more evidently the nature of my mind! (VII 33)

This passage may be understood in two ways. First, Descartes might be arguing that one idea is more distinct than another if the former can be derived from more different sources than the latter. For one thing, however, it is not clear why such an idea should be more distinct, rather than more reliable or confirmed. There does not seem to be a strong conceptual connection between distinctness and reliability. Moreover, Descartes argues that the idea of a pure mind is more distinct than the idea of a human being with both bodily and mental attributes. Yet it would seem that the second idea stems from several different sources, whereas the first emerges only in metaphysical considerations such as the *Meditations*.

A second reading of the argument may be given, in which it is based on the following principle:

(\*) If idea A presupposes more other ideas than idea B, then A is less distinct than B.

Descartes would then be arguing that since any idea of a subject of sensory qualities presupposes the idea of a subject of thought, but not vice

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<sup>2</sup> For the general principle that every property, mode, attribute, or accident must inhere in a substance, see VII 79, 176, and 222.

versa,<sup>3</sup> the latter presupposes more other ideas and is more distinct. On the face of it, this second reading is not much more plausible than the first, since it is not entirely clear why principle (\*) should hold true. In order to see this, we need first to ask what it means for an idea to be distinct.

## 2. Distinctness

In *Principia* I 45, Descartes writes:

I call a perception *clear* that is present and disclosed to the attentive mind, just as we say that something appears clearly if it moves the looking eye sufficiently more strongly and manifestly. I call a perception *distinct* if, given that it is clear, it is clear-cut and separate from others, such that it plainly contains nothing but what is clear. (VIII A 22)

A perception is clear to the extent to which its proper content is manifest, and distinct if its manifest content is clearly separate from what is either not its content or not manifest. In order to understand this notion of distinctness, one needs to distinguish between two kinds of content of a perception. I will refer to these as (1) *proper* and (2) *presupposed* content.<sup>4</sup> A perception is distinct if its proper content is separate from its presupposed content.

The *Logic of Port Royal* also distinguishes between confusedness and distinctness with regard to the two kinds of content of ideas (Arnauld and Nicole, 1992).<sup>5</sup> Arnauld and Nicole distinguish between different parts of certain ideas that signify in either a confused or a distinct way. For instance,

‘the white’ confusedly signifies a body, and distinctly its whiteness; ‘Aristotle’s opinion’ confusedly signifies some opinion, thought, or doctrine, and distinctly the relatedness of this thought to Aristotle, to whom it is attributed. (1.8: 61; cf. 2.1: 96)

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<sup>3</sup> There are, according to Descartes, at least a few thoughts that do not require sensory input in any way; the object of such ideas is either God or the soul (cf. VII 73, VII 358–9 and XI 342–3).

<sup>4</sup> Gewirth (1943: 24) draws a similar distinction between *direct* and *interpretive* content, and claims that an idea is distinct if both contents are identical. However, whether the *direct* content of an idea differs from its *interpretive* content depends exclusively on how one interprets it. Therefore, Gewirth cannot distinguish between subjective and objective distinctness as I will do below.

<sup>5</sup> Note that Arnauld and Nicole’s account of distinctness differs from Descartes’ in important respects. They identify clarity and distinctness (1.9: 63) and call the notion of a *res* “tres-confus” (1.15: 92); they also allow for the case of an idea being confused because too many distinctions are drawn (2.15: 155, following Seneca, Ep. 89.2).

The noun phrase “the white” explicitly mentions the color white, but it is understood or presupposed that this color must be the color of some surface. What is presupposed is signified only confusedly. Likewise, the noun phrase “Aristotle’s opinion” explicitly mentions the relation of some opinion to Aristotle, but merely presupposes that this opinion has some content.

In this way, one may distinguish between the distinct and confused content of any idea of a property. Since all properties are necessarily properties of something, their presence presupposes the presence of a property bearer; but they are not ideas of such a property bearer. Hence, they refer to this property bearer in a confused way. To distinctly conceive of such an idea is to focus exclusively on its proper rather than its presupposed content (cf. VII 46).

In this sense, a distinct perception is not distinct in itself, but only by being considered in such a way that its clear content is separated from the rest. Distinctness is only a matter of how we interpret our perceptions, and two perceptions with exactly the same content may differ in their distinctness, depending on how they are conceived (Gewirth, 1943: 23). I will call this *subjective* distinctness.

Descartes often uses the notion of distinctness in an *objective* sense. For instance, he writes that it is sometimes not easy to tell which of our ideas are distinct (VI 33, cf. Gewirth, 1943: 18). If distinctness were only a matter of how we conceive of a perception, this would not be difficult; for even if we know nothing else, at least we know how we perceive things (VII 29). Further, Descartes often refers to distinct ideas simply by citing their content: he claims that the idea of God is more distinct than any other idea, apparently regardless of how it is conceived (VII 46). There seem to be certain ideas that are simply more distinct than others. However, it is not at all clear how ideas should differ in their degree of objective distinctness. One might think that the degree to which an idea is objectively distinct is the degree to which it may possibly be rendered distinct. Although I will argue that this is not quite what Descartes means, let me first cite some evidence in favor of this account.

The opposite of distinctness is confusedness; and if perceptions differ in the degree to which they may be rendered distinct, there should be ideas that are necessarily confused to a certain extent. And indeed, sensory impressions and feelings seem to be necessarily confused (VII 43). Such phenomena involve both body and mind, and so it seems they cannot be conceived in a perfectly distinct way. Notions of unity (of body and mind) have more presupposed content than ideas of sensory qualities, since they presuppose not just one property bearer, but two – unity is an accident of both united items (VII 435; Hoffman 1990). According to principle (\*)

above, this should mean that notions of unity are even less distinct than ideas of sensory qualities. The following observation seems to confirm this. Descartes sometimes divides all notions into three classes: those pertaining exclusively to the mind; those pertaining exclusively to extended things; and those describing the way in which mind and body are united (III 665). In *Principia* I 54, however, he mentions only *two* kinds of distinct notions:

And therefore we can easily have two clear and distinct notions or ideas: one of the created thinking substance, the other of bodily substances; if we carefully separate all attributes of thought from attributes of extension. (VIII 25–26)

Thus it may seem that all notions pertaining to the unity of body and mind are not distinct, but rather necessarily confused. They must be confused, it seems, since they lump body and mind together.

Accordingly, one might argue that for a notion, idea, or perception to be objectively distinct is for it to be separable from other notions, ideas, and perceptions. This would explain why ideas of sensory qualities are less distinct than ideas of substances: the first cannot be separated from the second, whereas the second may be separated from the first. (Every sensory quality must be a quality of something, but there can be things without sensory qualities.) Therefore, a notion of how mind and body are related cannot be very distinct, since it cannot be separated from the two notions of the united things, i.e. the mind and the body.

However, we cannot attribute to Descartes an account of objective distinctness according to which there are necessarily confused ideas. The problem is that Descartes does claim, in a letter to Princess Elisabeth, that there is a way of considering notions of unity apart from the notions of the united things. One can “conceive of the notions that belong to the union of body and mind apart from those which belong only to the body or only to the mind” (III 666).<sup>6</sup> Hence, there is a way of distinguishing the proper content of notions of unity from the content they presuppose. Our ideas of how body and mind are united have clear content, and it is possible to focus on this exclusively.

This raises the following problem. First, Descartes writes that to distinctly conceive of an idea is to separate its proper content from all content really belonging to other ideas. Second, the suggestion being considered here is that an idea may be called objectively distinct if it is possible to

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<sup>6</sup> In VIII 22, Descartes also writes that pain is not *always* distinct; hence it *may* be distinct. In VII 83 and *Principia* I 66–70 he implies that all actual confusion rests on misinterpretation.

conceive it distinctly. However, Descartes claims that we may separate the content of our least distinct ideas, namely our notions of the union of mind and body, from the content of all other ideas. This implies that notions of unity may be conceived in a perfectly distinct way. Hence, ideas do not differ in the degree to which they may be distinctly conceived.

But although there are no necessarily confused ideas, there are ideas that lend themselves more easily to confusion. The idea of a sensory quality, for instance, easily leads to the assumption that there is something in the world which possesses it. This is part of its presupposed content; and the proper content of such ideas may be confused with their presupposed content, such that they are mistaken for ideas of quality bearers. Similarly, the ideas of heat and weight lead us to the assumption – mistaken according to Descartes – that there are hot and heavy objects in the world. Further, we are inclined to think that the weight of a body moves it downwards, just as the soul may move the human body. This is a confusion of mental and physical properties (VII 441). It does not follow that ideas with more presupposed content are necessarily more confused. But they are more *easily* confused with what they presuppose.

Hence, one should define the notion of objective distinctness as follows:

An idea A is *objectively more distinct* than another idea if and only if it is easier to distinguish A's proper content from A's presupposed content (for instance, because A does not have as much presupposed content as the other idea).

This explains why principle (\*) above holds true. If idea B presupposes idea A, but not vice versa, B will probably have more presupposed content than A. Therefore, B's content is more easily confused with A's, whereas A's content is more easily separated from B's.

### 3. God

According to Descartes, the idea of God presupposes no other idea, and hence it is the most distinct of all our ideas. As I have argued, this does not mean that no other idea could be equally distinct (in the subjective sense). As Descartes shows, one may derive the notion of God from the idea of thought; and this means that the idea of a thinking subject has some presupposed content. The existence of God is presupposed by the existence of a thinking subject, and, in this sense, we have an idea of God even before we have a clear idea of ourselves (VII 45).

That the idea of God can be derived from the idea of a thinking subject does not mean that it depends on this idea. In order to understand



Descartes' argument, we need to recall that "thought" is a general heading for all activities that are involved in doubt. In his proof of the existence of God, Descartes takes up this idea by pointing out that doubt implies a certain limitation. A thinking subject who knows everything would also know that she knows everything, and hence she would have no reason for doubting anything. The Cartesian meditator, however, does have reason to doubt various things; hence, she does not know everything. Further, lack of knowledge is a privation for a thinking subject (VII 54–5). Whenever one can rightly say that a subject does not know everything, there must be more of what such a subject could possibly know. For to know everything is to know everything that can be known, and not to know everything is not to know everything that can be known.

Hence, the idea of a doubting subject presupposes the idea of further knowledge to be had. It does not follow from this that there actually is a subject having this knowledge. But the notion of God as a subject of knowledge is dubious, in any case. God does not think in the same sense in which the Cartesian thinking subject does. Descartes uses "thought" as a label for all activities involved in doubting; but God has no reason to doubt anything. To be sure, the fact that all activities involved in doubting are thoughts does not imply, conversely, that all thinking involves doubt. Yet it is at best an open question whether there can be a thinking thing that never doubts. Further, as Descartes sometimes writes, God's knowledge cannot be separated from his will, since, for God, to know something is to bring it into existence (I 149, IV 119). Since everything is at once created and known by God, he cannot be mistaken about what exists. Therefore, he cannot doubt anything. To call God an infinite thinking substance, as Descartes does, is therefore misleading. It might be better to follow Augustine and identify God with Truth itself.

The only reason why God may be called a *thinking* substance is that this is how he is known to the Cartesian meditator. God is known as a thinking substance because only the idea of thought (i.e. all activities involved in doubting) presupposes the existence of something beyond the thinking subject. For, as Descartes writes, there is no reason why it should be impossible for the thinking subject to have developed its ideas of all corporeal and sensory things merely from itself: "As for the ideas of corporeal things, there is nothing in them that would be so great that it could not originate from myself..." (VII 43–4). The only idea that the thinking subject could not derive from the idea of itself is the idea of a perfect thinking subject (or, more appropriately, the idea of God as Truth personified).

In any case, the idea of God is more distinct than the meditator's idea of herself, since it does not presuppose any other idea, but is presupposed



by the idea of thought. Yet this does not clarify in what sense it would be appropriate to call God an infinite thinking *substance*; and indeed, it is still not clear in what sense the mind is one. All we know so far is that the idea of God is the most distinct of our ideas. It remains to be shown that such a distinct idea must also be the idea of a substance.

#### 4. Substances

In order to understand why our most distinct ideas must be ideas of substances, we need to ask what Descartes means when he calls something a substance. He gives two explicit definitions of this notion. The first occurs in the appendix to his Second Replies:

Everything in which something that we perceive (i.e. some property, or quality, or attribute of which there is an actual idea in us) inheres immediately as in a subject, or by which it exists, is called a *Substance*. Strictly speaking, we do not have any idea of a substance in itself other than that it is a thing in which that which we perceive, or that which is objectively in any of our ideas, exists formally or eminently; because it is known by the natural light that nothing can be an attribute of no real thing. (VII 161)

This is basically the Aristotelian notion of a substance: that in which a property, mode, or attribute inheres (*Categories* and *Metaphysics* Δ8). According to Suárez, this definition of the term “substance” may be etymologically derived from the Latin verb *substare*: to underlie something. That something underlies another thing means that the latter may be truly predicated of the former; hence one can say that something underlies another thing in at least three distinct senses. First, a thing may be said to underlie its properties and qualities: they are exemplified by this thing. Second, a thing may be said to underlie its kind: the kind is instantiated by this thing. Third, a quality may be said to underlie its kind, or a determinate universal may be said to underlie its determinable; as when we say that scarlet is a kind of red. Scarlet, however, is not a substance. One should therefore add, following Suárez, that “a substance underlies the accidents such that it does not require a similar substratum” (*Disputationes Metaphysicae* XXXIII 1.1).

As at the end of the Second Meditation, Descartes emphasizes here that substances are objects of thought, not of sense perception. He writes that we can have no idea whose only content is a substance. There are, accordingly, no pure substances in Descartes’ metaphysical framework. He consistently refers to substances by way of what he calls “principal attributes” (*Principia* I 53 and 63; V 156). Principal attributes have a special status: their ideas not only presuppose the substance they inhere in, but are as close to this substance as is possible. The idea of extension, for

instance, presupposes the idea of an extended thing, but the idea of an extended thing presupposes, in turn, the idea of extension. There is not even a clear distinction between an extended substance and its extendedness – extension itself is extended. For this reason, the idea of an extended substance cannot be more objectively distinct than the idea of extension. Likewise, the idea of thought presupposes the idea of a thinking thing, but the idea of a thinking thing also presupposes the idea of thought.

The definition of “substance” in the Second Replies involves the notions of formal, eminent, and objective reality, which I will discuss in a moment. For now, it is sufficient to note that Descartes does not suppose that every quality must inhere in an actually existing substance. It may also exist objectively, that is, only as the object of an idea. Only the formal or eminent reality of a quality requires a really existing substance (and the formal existence of an idea requires the real existence of a thinking subject).

The second definition of “substance,” which Descartes gives in *Principia* I 51, is more akin to the notion of substance which Suárez derives from the Latin verb *subsistere*.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, a substance is what abides. Descartes writes:

By *substance* we can understand nothing but a thing that exists in such a way that it depends on no other thing for its existence. And of course, we can think of only one substance that does not at all depend on anything, namely God. We realize that all other substances cannot exist without the aid of God. Yet the term substance does not apply to God and to them *univocally*, as they say in the schools; that is, we cannot distinctly conceive of any signification of this term that would be common to God and to creation. (VIII 24)

According to this definition, a substance is something that does not depend on any other thing for its existence. If a thing depends on another thing for its existence, the idea of this thing may be said to presuppose the idea of that other one. Hence, ideas of dependent entities lend themselves to greater confusion, as there is more content that might be confused with their proper content. This clarifies in what sense ideas of substances are more distinct than other ideas: they have less presupposed content.

These two definitions of a substance may be taken as referring to two different ways in which one thing can be said to depend on another. First, qualities inhere in their bearer; hence ideas of qualities confusedly signify the bearers of these qualities. Second, something may depend on something else as the cause of its existence. It is in this way, according to

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<sup>7</sup> *Disputationes Metaphysicae* XXXIII 1.1. Suárez refers to Augustine, *De Trinitate* 7, 4, 9: *ab eo quod est subsistere substantiam dicimus*. Cf. Flasch, 1986: 84: “‘Wirklich’ ist danach, was bleibt.”

Descartes, that the thinking subject depends on God. The thinking subject is not a quality, mode, or attribute of God, and thus it is a substance in the first sense. But the thinking subject depends on God as the cause of its existence; and so while it is not a substance in the strict sense of the second definition, it still qualifies as a substance in a less strict sense, since it depends on God alone for its existence, and not on anything else (VIII A 24–5). Qualities, in contrast, depend on another substance for their reality, and this other substance depends on God.<sup>8</sup>

## 5. Reality

There is thus a hierarchy of ideas in terms of objective distinctness and presupposed content. Ideas of sensory qualities, for instance, presuppose ideas of extended substances as their bearers, and these in turn presuppose the ideas of thought and of a cause on which they depend for their existence. The idea of doubt implies the idea of a finite thinking substance, and this presupposes the idea of truth. The idea of God presupposes no further idea. In this sense, the idea of God is more distinct than the idea of a finite thinking substance, and the idea of a finite thinking substance is more distinct than ideas of sensory properties.

Descartes describes exactly this hierarchy in the Third Meditation; but there he writes that the idea of God contains more *objective reality* than the idea of any other substance, and that ideas of substances in general contain more objective reality than ideas of modes and accidents. He writes:

The ideas that present substances to me are without doubt somewhat more, or, as they say, contain more objective reality in them, than those that represent only modes or accidents. Again, the idea by which I conceive of some eternal, infinite, omniscient, and omnipotent God who is the creator of all things other than himself certainly contains more objective reality than those by which finite substances are presented. (VII 40)

As is well known, it would be erroneous to suppose that ideas with an objective reality have a real object, or are objectively valid in the modern sense of “real” and “objectively” (Cronin, 1987; Wells, 1993). In the scholastic terminology employed by Descartes, that something is objectively real does not at all mean that it really exists in the outside world. That something is *objective* simply means that it is an object of something; and ideas may have objects which do not really exist. As for *reality*, the following passage from the Sixth Replies is revealing:

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<sup>8</sup> The way in which sensory qualities depend on the thinking subject is a still different one: they depend for their existence not on it, but rather on something that can only be grasped by thought.

Further, it is entirely incoherent to assume real accidents, because whatever is real can exist in separation from every other subject; and what can exist thus separately is a substance, not an accident. (VII 434)

Real attributes are assumed in order to explain how, in the context of the sacrament of Communion, the bread changes into the body of Christ: the substance changes, while its accidents remain identical. However, this is possible only if the accidents can be identified as the same before and after the substantial change; and Descartes denies that this is possible.<sup>9</sup> When he says that accidents are not real, he is making a point about the way in which they are individuated and re-identified as the same. One can only individuate accidents and identify them as the same by individuating and identifying their bearer. For instance, two different slices of bread may have exactly the same color, yet different instances of this color. If this is the case, the two instances of this color can only be distinguished by reference to their bearer: one is the color of the first slice, while the other is the exactly similar color of the second slice. This is the sense in which accidents depend on substances: they are real (separable and enduring individuals) only because substances are real (separable and enduring individuals).<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted that principal attributes have a status analogous to Aristotelian substance predicates or Strawsonian sortal universals.<sup>11</sup> Whereas accidents are individuated in terms of their bearer, attributes are features in terms of which substances are individuated and identified as the same. Attributes are not accidents, but essences.

In any case, to be real is to be a separable *res*, and accidents are not *res*. Accidents are not real because they cannot be individuated in separation from their bearer. Further, Descartes assumes that there are degrees of reality, and this can only be understood by assuming that something is real *to the extent* to which it may exist and be individuated in separation. Separability is a comparative notion, since some things are more separable from all the rest than others.

Descartes distinguishes three kinds of reality. The most basic kind is *formal* reality (which he also calls actual reality; VII 41).<sup>12</sup> If reality is the

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<sup>9</sup> As Arnauld points out, Descartes denies that there is a substance beyond the attribute of extension which might change from being bread to being Christ (VII 217–8; cf. VII 248–56).

<sup>10</sup> O'Neill, 1987: 231: "It appears that 'reality' will have to get fleshed out in terms of some complex notion of relative independence." She refers to VI 35, VII 138 and VIII A 13–14.

<sup>11</sup> See Code (1986) and Strawson (1959: 167–73).

<sup>12</sup> In VII 8 and 232 Descartes also speaks of *material* reality, thereby apparently confusing his own terminology. For a possible coherent reading, see Kemmerling, 1996: 39–42.

same as separability, then the formal reality of a thing is its actual separability. An actually existing substance, such as God, a thinking thing, or an extended body, is real to the extent to which it may be individuated and identified without individuating and identifying other things.

Ideas and thoughts have *objective* reality to the extent to which their objects are real (formally, objectively, or eminently). This is why the idea of God has the most objective reality: God is most separable, hence the idea of God has the most separable object. But the object of an idea need not be formally real. An idea can have another idea as its object, or it can have an object which has eminent reality.

The *eminent* reality of a thing is the reality (separability) of what it can produce without further assistance (cf. O'Neill, 1987: 235–40). For instance, since the thinking subject can produce certain ideas and thoughts without further assistance, these ideas and thoughts are eminently real in the thinking subject. The degree of eminent reality which a thing possesses depends ultimately on the degree of reality of what it may produce without further assistance. If the thinking subject could produce the idea of God without further assistance, it would have as much eminent reality as the idea of God has objective reality; and the idea of God has as much objective reality as God has formal reality. However, the thinking subject does not have as much eminent reality as God has formal reality, since otherwise it would also be able to produce God, and not just the idea of God.<sup>13</sup> From this it follows that the thinking subject cannot even produce its own idea of God. There must be something other than the thinking subject with enough formal, objective, or eminent reality to engrave the idea of God on the thinking subject's mind.

## 6. Conclusion

We can now tie the various strings together. For Descartes, substantiality, separability, and formal reality amount to the same thing. An entity is more real and substantial than another if it is more separate or more separable. Properties, modes, and accidents are less real than substances because they are not separable from substances. Instances of properties, modes, and accidents can only be individuated by individuating their bearers. Attributes are as real as substances. The reason is not that they are separable from substances (for they are not), but that substances are like-

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<sup>13</sup> By the same token, the thinking subject can produce without further assistance only such ideas whose object is the thinking subject itself or something that the thinking subject can produce without further assistance. These are *only* the ideas of pure mind and pure extension, as developed in the Second and Fifth Meditations. For all other ideas, the mind depends on God or the human body.

wise not separable from their attributes, and are individuated in terms of their principal attributes.

Furthermore, an idea of a more separable, real, and substantial entity has more objective reality. Ideas of substances have more objective reality than ideas of properties, modes, and accidents, because substances are more real (separable) than properties, modes, and accidents.

Finally, an idea which has more objective reality than another is also more distinct. Ideas of properties, modes, and accidents have more presupposed content than ideas of substances, and thus it is less easy to focus exclusively on their proper content. The idea of God is more distinct than any other idea, because it has less presupposed content than any other: God is more independent, and thus more separable and real, than anything else. Hence, the distinctness of an idea directly corresponds to its objective reality: ideas with more real objects are also, in an objective sense, more distinct. This is why Descartes can rely on principle (\*) above: if idea A presupposes more other ideas than idea B, A is less distinct than B. Objects of distinct ideas are more real and more separable than those of confused ideas, and if A presupposes more other ideas than B, then its object is not as separable, real, and substantial as B's object. Based on this, we can answer several questions that have emerged in this paper.

First, Descartes' conception of reality in terms of separability explains how reality can be a matter of degree. Something is real to the extent to which it is a separable *res*. In the strictest sense, only God is real, since only God is separable from all other things (there are no other things on which God depends). In a comparative sense, the thinking subject is more real than sensory qualities, while the latter are more real than the union of mind and body.

Why is God a substance? Descartes' argument for the substantiality of God relies on the observation that substances are separable things, and that our ideas of them are therefore objectively distinct: it is easier to separate and clearly distinguish what belongs to them from what does not belong to them.<sup>14</sup> Descartes shows in the Third Meditation that our idea of God must be the most distinct idea, since it is presupposed by all other ideas and does not rest on any further one. Since more distinct ideas also have more objective reality (their object is more separable), Descartes concludes that the object of our idea of God must have more objective, formal, or eminent reality than that of any other idea. But the object of the idea of God

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<sup>14</sup> Note that there is a certain gap in Descartes' argument as presented here. He starts from the claim that all our ideas of substances are objectively distinct, but makes use of the converse statement: that all distinct ideas are ideas of substances. The second does not follow from the first; however, there may be independent reasons for its truth.

is not a further *idea*, and so does not have objective reality; and the only thing with enough eminent reality to produce God is God himself. This means that God has more formal reality and is more separable from other objects than anything else. And to be separable from other things, at least to this extent, is surely the same as to be a substance.

Why and in what sense is the mind a substance? The reason is certainly not that Descartes conceives of the mind as something like a material thing, as Ryle assumes (1949: 11–24); for, according to Descartes, material things are *less* substantial than the mind. Rather, the reason is that if the mind were not a substance, it would be not a *res*, but an accident; accidents, however, do not think. If there is a thinking *thing*, then there is also a thinking *substance*. In the course of the first three Meditations, Descartes demonstrates that the idea of a thinking thing is distinct enough to qualify as the idea of a separable *res*. The first two Meditations show that the idea of the thinking subject can be developed without referring to any other substance than God; and the Third Meditation shows that the idea of a subject of doubt is not separable from the idea of God. Even at this stage, however, no reference to any other substance is required, and thus the idea of a thinking substance depends only on the idea of God. The introduction of the idea of extension in the Fifth Meditation requires more preliminaries, while the ideas of sensory qualities, feelings, and the union of body and mind, as introduced in the Sixth Meditation, depend on still other ideas. The series of steps in which the different ideas of substances, attributes, and modes are introduced roughly mirrors the hierarchy of separability. To be a substance, however, is to be independent of other substances; hence the thinking thing is the second most substantial thing we can imagine.

Why are mind and body two *different* substances? It should first be noted that Descartes does not claim that mind and body are actually separate; he only claims that God *may* separate them (III 265–6, VII 12–13). In any case, to call the mind a thing (*res*) is to call it a substance, since only substances are things; and to call it a substance is to imply that it is separable from other substances. To the extent that a thing is a substance, it is separable from other things except God and the corresponding principal attribute. If the body is another thing than the mind, it must therefore be separable from the mind. Descartes claims to have shown that the attributes of thought and extension can each be grasped clearly and distinctly; and since the idea of an attribute is as distinct as the idea of the corresponding substance, we can thus have different distinct ideas of mind and body. Further, the idea of thought is more distinct, in an objective sense, than the idea of extension, since the idea of extension is not among its presupposed contents (and has, in turn, more presupposed content). This may not



be true for such modes of thought as imagination and sensory perception, since both depend on the human body; but it is at least true for the ideas that Descartes introduces in the first two Meditations. The ideas that the meditator has of herself as a thinking thing and of God are (objectively) distinct from the idea of extension. Our idea of a thinking substance does not have any presupposed content other than the idea of God. For Descartes, this implies that mind and body are two separable substances.

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