Descartes’s Theory of Distinction

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In the first part of this paper I explore the relations among distinctness, separability, number, and non-identity. I argue that Descartes believes plurality in things themselves arises from distinction, so that things distinct in any of the three ways are not identical. The only exception concerns universals which, considered in things themselves, are identical to particulars. I also argue that to be distinct is to be separable. Things distinct by reason are separable only in thought by means of ideas not clear and distinct. In the second part I argue that the notion of separability in Descartes’s account of real distinction between mind and body is subject to five different interpretations. I claim that the heart of Cartesian dualism concerns the separability of the attributes thought and extension. It does not require that mind and body are separable in the sense that each can exist without the other existing.

I would like to raise and to attempt to answer some questions that will help us understand Cartesian dualism. These questions shed light on what Descartes means in asserting that mind and body are really distinct and on his argument for that conclusion. Real distinction between mind and body is my primary interest, and I will be defending an interpretation that is consistent with the claim I have made elsewhere that Descartes thinks the composite of mind and body is itself one substance. But I have broader interests as well. Real distinction is only one of three kinds of distinction recognized by Descartes, the others being modal distinction and rational distinction. The first group of questions I will raise concerns Descartes’s entire theory of distinction. They involve the relations among the notions of distinctness, separability, number, and non-identity. I believe that they reveal that his theory of distinction as a whole merits more attention than it has received.

Let me begin with the following question: are the three kinds of distinction recognized by Descartes—real distinction, modal distinction, and rational distinction or distinction of reason—intended to be mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive in the sense that for any things A and B, A and B are either really distinct, modally distinct, or rationally distinct?

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For a long time I believed and argued in my courses that the answer to this question was yes. For it seemed to me that Descartes saw his distinctions as a way of exclusively and exhaustively carving up logical space. That is, I thought that Descartes's distinctions were founded on and justified by appeal to three different conceptual possibilities that correspond to three different metaphysical possibilities. The first conceptual possibility is that A can be clearly and distinctly conceived without B and that B can be clearly and distinctly conceived without A. In the *Principles*, Part I, Article 60, Descartes states, "Strictly speaking, a real distinction exists only between two or more substances; and we can perceive that two substances are really distinct simply from the fact that we can clearly and distinctly understand one apart from the other" (AT VIII A 28; CSM I 213). The metaphysical possibility corresponding to this conceptual possibility is that A can exist without B and that B can exist without A. In the Geometrical Exposition in the Replies to the Second Objections Descartes defines real distinction as follows: "Two substances are really distinct when each of them can exist without the other" (AT VII 162; CSM II 114). That Descartes thinks we can infer the metaphysical possibility from the conceptual possibility is made clear from his argument for a real distinction between mind and body, which proceeds by inferring the metaphysical possibility of mind and body existing without each other from the corresponding conceptual possibility of our clearly and distinctly conceiving each without the other. Thus in introducing his first argument for real distinction in the Sixth Meditation he asserts that "since I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God such as I understand it, it is sufficient that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing without another to be certain that one is diverse from the other, since they can be posited separately at least by God" (AT VII 78; CSM II 54). And in the Replies to the Second Objections Descartes explains that we can have evidence of the metaphysical possibility of two substances existing apart only by means of our access to what is conceptually possible:

Do you claim that if we clearly understand one thing apart from another this is not sufficient for the recognition that the two things are really distinct? If so, you must provide a more reliable criterion for a real distinction—and I am confident that none can be provided. What will

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2 The abbreviations to editions of Descartes's works are as follows:


A translation is my own if it differs from the English source cited.
you suggest? Perhaps that there is a real distinction between two things if one can exist apart from the other? But now I will ask how you know that one thing can exist apart from another. You must be able to know this, if it is to serve as the criterion for a real distinction. The sole possible source of such understanding is that we perceive one thing apart from another, and such understanding cannot be certain unless the idea of each thing is clear and distinct. So if the proposed criterion for a real distinction is to be reliable, it must reduce to the one which I put forward (AT VII 132-33; CSM II 95).

The second conceptual possibility is that A can be clearly and distinctly conceived without B but that B cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived without A. The corresponding metaphysical possibility is that A can exist without B but that B cannot exist without A. Alternatively B can be clearly and distinctly conceived without A but A cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived without B, and correspondingly B can exist without A but A cannot exist without B. In either of these cases, Descartes would say that A and B are modally distinct. In the Principles Part I, Article 61, Descartes asserts that “the first kind of modal distinction can be recognized from the fact that we can clearly perceive a substance apart from the mode which we say differs from it, whereas we cannot, conversely, understand the mode apart from the substance” (AT VIII A 29; CSM I 214).

Finally, the third conceptual possibility is that A cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived without B and B cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived without A. The corresponding metaphysical possibility is that A cannot exist without B and B cannot exist without A. In this case Descartes would say that A and B are distinct by reason or rationally distinct. In the Principles, Part I, Article 62, he says, “Such a distinction is recognized by our inability to form a clear and distinct idea of the substance if we exclude from it the attribute in question, or, alternatively, by our inability to perceive clearly the idea of one of the two attributes if we separate it from the other” (AT VIII A 30; CSM I 214).

Since these conceptual and metaphysical possibilities seem to exhaust logical space, it would seem to follow that Descartes sees his three kinds of distinction as mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. That is, at the conceptual level, for any things A and B, both can be conceived clearly and distinctly without the other, exactly one can be clearly and distinctly conceived without the other, or neither can be clearly and distinctly conceived without the other. At the metaphysical level, for any things A and B, each can exist without the other, exactly one can exist without the other, or neither can exist without the other. There is, of course, an important complication arising from the fact that Descartes recognizes a second sort of modal distinction according to which even if A and B can both be clearly and distinctly conceived without the other, they are modally distinct if neither can be conceived without some third thing C (AT VIII A 29, CSM I 214). Given that Descartes thinks that mind and body cannot be clearly and distinctly
conceived apart from God, in order to preserve his view that mind and body are not modally distinct in this second sense but rather really distinct, he would have to argue first, that there is more than one way things can be conceptually and metaphysically dependent on something else, and second, that the sort of dependence mind and body have on God does not undermine the claim that they are really distinct.

Even with this complicating factor, it still seemed true on this picture that the various kinds of distinction were intended to be jointly exhaustive. It also seemed that they were mutually exclusive, provided we assume what seems implicit in Descartes's account of real distinction, that when A and B are really distinct there is no third thing C to which they both are related in the way in which things modally distinct in the second sense are related. But I now think this way of looking at things is not quite right. I now believe that Descartes is better understood as thinking that there are cases in which A and B are not distinct in any of the three ways—they are not really distinct, modally distinct, or rationally distinct. So I used to think that Descartes would say that A is rationally distinct from A, because A cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived apart from A and A cannot exist apart from A. But now I think Descartes would say that A is not distinct from A. There is not even a rational distinction between A and A, between a thing and itself.

This may seem like a trivial matter, but it suggests that we should understand Descartes to maintain not that for any things A and B, A and B are really distinct, modally distinct, or rationally distinct, but rather that for any two things A and B, A and B are really distinct, modally distinct, or rationally distinct. This interpretation is supported by Descartes's introduction of his theory of distinction in the Principles, Part I, Article 60, when he says, "Now number, in things themselves, arises from the distinction between them. But distinction can be taken in three ways: as a real distinction, a modal distinction, or a distinction of reason" (AT VIII A 28; CSM II 213). I take Descartes to be implying here that whenever things are distinct in one of the three ways, they are not numerically the same. And if they are not numerically the same, then they are not identical (in the sense of identity which means not numerically the same as opposed to the sense which means not exactly alike). However, this leads us to some vexing textual and philosophical questions about distinctness, separability, number, and non-identity.

There is an important passage in the correspondence which can easily be read as showing that I am wrong to claim that things distinct by reason are not numerically the same. In explaining his distinction of reason in a letter to an unknown correspondent, he asserts that:

It seems to me that the only thing which causes difficulty in this area is the fact that we do not sufficiently distinguish between things existing outside our thought and the ideas of things, which are in our thought. Thus, when I think of the essence of a triangle, and of the existence
of the same triangle, these two thoughts, as thoughts, even taken objectively, differ modally in the strict sense of the term 'mode'; but the case is not the same with the triangle existing outside thought, in which it seems to me manifest that the essence and existence are in no way distinct. The same is the case with all universals. Thus, when I say Peter is a man, the thought by which I think of Peter differs modally from the thought by which I think of man, but in Peter himself being a man is nothing other than being Peter (AT IV 350; CSMK 280-81).

Here Descartes implies that some things that are distinct by reason are in no way distinct outside our thought and he might well be construed to be implying that all things that are distinct by reason are in no way distinct outside our thought. To say that A and B are in no way distinct could be interpreted strongly, as it has in a series of papers by Larry Nolan, to mean that A is identical with B. On Nolan’s interpretation, things that are distinct by reason are therefore not two in reality. There is, however, another way of understanding Descartes’s claim that existence and essence are in no way distinct outside our thought. It could be interpreted weakly to mean that A and B are inseparable outside of thought. That is, when Descartes says things are distinct he means that they are separable. So things that are in no way distinct outside of thought would be in no way separable outside of thought. But they need not be identical.

A similar ambiguity surrounds Descartes’s assertion in the Principles I, Part I, Article 63, that “Thought and extension can be regarded as constituting the natures of intelligent substance and corporeal substance; they must then be considered as nothing else but thinking substance itself and extended substance itself—that is, as mind and body” (AT VIII A 30; CSM II 215). He might be interpreted, as Nolan interprets him, to be making the very strong assertion that thought is identical with the mind and extension is identical with the body. But he might instead be interpreted as making the weak assertion that thought and mind are inseparable and that extension and body are inseparable. It seems to me that it is much more plausible to read Descartes as making the weak assertion. First, he defines body as the subject not just of the modes of extension but of extension itself, and he seems to think of mind also as the subject not just of the modes of thought but of thought considered as constituting its essence (AT VII 161; CSM II 114). If A is the subject of B, but B is not the subject of A, I do not see how it could be plausible to maintain that A and B are identical. But it is plausible to say that A and B are inseparable. Second, on Nolan’s reading Descartes is also committed to saying that extension is identical with other attributes such as duration and existence. But this has the seemingly unCartesian implication that extension can be singled out as the principal attribute of body not as body is in reality but only as we conceive of body. Similarly, thought could be singled out as

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the principal attribute of mind not as mind is in reality but only as we conceive of mind.

Thus, in light of what I take to be infelicitious implications of taking Descartes when he asserts that things distinct by reason are in no way distinct outside our thought to mean that they are identical, I propose reading him more weakly as saying that they are inseparable. But now one might ask if distinctness amounts to separability, how can things that are distinct by reason be separable? The things that are distinct by reason are precisely those that cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived separately, so it would seem that they are not separable even in thought. The key to answering this question is to note that Descartes’s view is that things distinct by reason are inseparable in thought only to the extent that they cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived separately. Descartes thinks they can be conceived separately, just not clearly and distinctly. So earlier in the same letter to the unknown correspondent he states that “we do indeed understand the essence of a thing in one way when we consider it in abstraction from whether it exists or not, and in a different way when we consider it as existing, but the thing itself cannot be outside our thought without its existence, or without its duration or size, and so on” (AT IV 349; CSMK 280). So we can, by abstraction, think of the essence of the thing apart from its existence, and this is sufficient to make them distinct in our thought, but since abstraction does not generate clear and distinct conceptions, and since essence and existence cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived apart, it follows that they are inseparable outside our thought.

Things are not as tidy as this proposed interpretation of the distinction of reason might suggest so far. First, Descartes does think that if we exclude existence we can still have clear and distinct ideas of any essence except for God’s essence. We can, for example, clearly and distinctly understand the essence of a triangle apart from existence. Descartes’s point in the letter is rather that we cannot form a clear and distinct idea of the essence of a triangle existing outside our thought if we abstract from the idea of its existence. Thus I take Descartes’s position to be that the idea of the essence of a triangle can be clear and distinct considered in one way but not in another. The idea of the essence of a triangle considered in abstraction from whether or not it exists is clear and distinct apart from the idea of existence. But the idea of the essence of a triangle considered existing outside our thought is not clear and distinct considered apart from the idea of existence.

A second complication arises from Descartes’s distinction in the *Principles*, Part I, Article 57, between two sorts of attributes: those that are in things and those that are only in thought. Time, understood as a measure of movement, is an example of an attribute that is only in our thought, duration is an example of an attribute that is in things. Number considered in general or in the abstract is also only in thought, as are all universals. Attributes that
are only in our thought Descartes refers to as modes of thought (AT VIII A 26–27; CSM I 212).

In his discussion of the distinction of reason in the *Principles*, Descartes allows that we can consider modes of thought as being in the objects themselves (AT VIII A 30; CSM I 214). What I take Descartes to mean here is that something which is a mode of thought when it is considered in general or in abstraction can also be considered to be in the objects themselves. Such a thing would presumably be a particular when it is in an object. So we find in Article 10 of Part II of the *Principles* that Descartes contrasts extension considered in general, which is what he considers space to be, with the particular extension that belongs to each body (AT VIII A 45; CSM I 227). Space, then, since it is just extension considered in general, is presumably, like time, just a mode of thought. Now I am tempted to take Descartes's point to be that space or internal place, considered in the object, is just the particular extension of that body. In other words, I am tempted to read him as saying that space or internal place, considered in the object, is identical to the particular extension of that body. By the same token, his point in the letter is that if we consider the universal “man” as being in a particular such as Peter, it just is the particular property of being Peter. On this interpretation we might describe Descartes as holding a reductionist account of universals as they are outside of thought—they are just particulars. This reductionist interpretation seems more plausible than reading Descartes as saying that universals as they are in objects are merely inseparable from the particular properties.

So I am inclined to think that Descartes is best interpreted as treating different sorts of cases of rational distinction differently. In the case of attributes which are in objects, those that cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived apart are inseparable in reality. In the case of attributes which are only in our thought, namely the universals, when we consider them in objects they are identical with the particular attributes in the object.

The main problem with this interpretation is that Descartes himself sometimes talks as if he is treating the cases in the same way. So he seems to think that the relation between existence and essence (which on my reading is not identity) is the same as the relation between the universal man as it is considered in Peter and the particular property of being Peter (which on my reading is identity). But here I am inclined to say that Descartes’s brevity in discussing the distinction of reason leads him to gloss over differences implied by his handling of different cases.

One might still wonder how Descartes thinks we should apply the concept of number to those particular attributes in objects (such as extension and existence) that are inseparable in reality. Should we say that in reality they are a plurality because they are not identical or should we say they are not a plurality but rather a unity because they are inseparable and thus constitute one thing? I have been tempted by both alternatives, but since Descartes, in
illustrating the distinction of reason in Article 62, provides as an example the
distinction between two or more attributes of a single substance, neither of
which can be conceived clearly apart from the other, and moreover, since he
has indicated in Article 60 that he is talking about number in the things
themselves, I think he should be read as saying that such attributes are a
plurality in reality. It would very misleading of him if he were using the
number two here to refer not to number in the things themselves, but to
number as it is applied to things only in our thought.

In the letter to the unknown correspondent Descartes suggests a criterion
for determining which things are not distinct in any of the three ways and
which are distinct in one of the three ways. If the idea of A does not differ
objectively from the idea of B, then A and B are not distinct in any of the
three ways. If the idea of A does differ objectively from the idea of B, then A
and B are distinct in one of the three ways. Now most commentators interpret
Descartes as maintaining that the objective reality of an idea is transparent to
us. If this is correct, then it would seem to follow that we can tell right away
for any things A and B whether or not they are distinct. Therefore, it would
also seem to follow that in most cases it will be transparent to us whether or
not A and B are identical in reality. The only exception I have acknowledged
so far are cases in which A is something general (for example extension in
general) and B is a particular (the extension of a particular body). Even
though the objective reality of the idea of extension in general is different
from the objective reality of the extension of a particular body, I have argued
that Descartes thinks they are identical in reality.

This line of thought might tempt one to conclude that whenever A and B
are particulars, it will be transparent to us whether or not they are identical
and that the only remaining issue is what sort of distinction obtains between
them. However, I think there are other important exceptions to this conclu-
sion. First, I think Descartes might allow that what exists objectively in an
idea that is not clear and distinct might not be transparent to us. So I have
argued elsewhere that he might allow that what exists objectively in the
obscure idea we call the idea of yellow is some mode of extension that only
appears to be yellow. If so, then it could turn out that the obscure idea we
call the idea of yellow is an idea of the very same thing as the idea of that
mode of extension, even though that would not be transparent to us.

I do think, however, that Descartes believes that we cannot be mistaken
about what is contained objectively in our clear and distinct ideas. So I
believe it is safe to infer that Descartes thinks that for any attributes that
exist in things, namely those that are particulars, it is self-evident to us when
we clearly and distinctly conceive them whether or not they are identical. So

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once we form clear and distinct ideas of thought and extension, it is self-evident that they are numerically distinct attributes, and the difficult question that requires argument or at least careful consideration is which of the three kinds of distinction obtains between them. This interpretation finds support from the fact that Descartes never takes up the question of whether every mode of thinking is a mode of extension. This has been the crucial question in contemporary philosophy of mind, but for Descartes it never makes it to the table.5

One might well ask at this point whether on my interpretation Descartes also thinks it is self-evident that mind and body are not numerically the same and that the issue that needs to be determined is which kind of distinction—real, modal or rational—obtains between them. Descartes thinks that we do not have cognitive access to mind and body directly, but only via their principal attributes thought and extension (AT VII 222–23; CSM II 156: AT VIII A 25; CSM I 210).6 Having claimed that Descartes thinks it is self-evident that thought and extension are numerically distinct, it might seem to follow that it is equally self-evident that mind and body are numerically distinct. However, I believe that Descartes would say that if it turned out that thought and extension are only distinct by reason, that is, if it turned out that neither attribute could be conceived apart from the other, then instead of drawing the weak conclusion that their subjects are distinct by reason, that is, instead of drawing the weak conclusion that their subjects cannot exist apart from one another, we should draw the strong conclusion that they have the same subject. So in the case of mind and body, the subjects of thought and extension, instead of there being four possibilities, that they are really distinct, modally distinct, rationally distinct, or identical, there were only three possibilities. They could have turned out to be really distinct, modally distinct or numerically the same substance, that is, identical.

It has recently been argued by Marleen Rozemond that once Descartes establishes that mind and body are substances having different principal attributes, it follows right away that they are really distinct. She claims that this conclusion follows because Descartes is committed to the principle, which she calls the Attribute Premise, that a substance has only one principal attribute.7

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5 Marleen Rozemond makes what I take to be a similar point. See her Descartes’s Dualism: Something Old, Something New (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 50–51.
6 Descartes asserts that substance can be recognized through any attribute, but he also thinks that all modes of a substance are referred to its principal attribute. Rozemond, op. cit., pp. 24–28. In “Descartes’s Ontology,” Topoi 16 (1997), pp. 116–17 & 119, Vere Chappell also endorses the attribution of this principle to Descartes.
Descartes does appear to endorse such a principle in a prominent passage in the *Principles*, Part I, Article 53:

To each substance there belongs one principal attribute; in the case of mind, this is thought, and in the case of body it is extension.

A substance may indeed be recognized through any attribute at all; but each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred. Thus extension in length, breadth and depth constitutes the nature of corporeal substance; and thought constitutes the nature of thinking substance. (AT VIIIA 25; CSM I 210)

Nevertheless, it is my conviction that this passage is superseded by a later passage, also cited by Rozemond, in which Descartes provides a fuller explanation of attributes. In the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* Descartes asserts the following:

As for the attributes which constitute the natures of things, it cannot be said that those which are different, and such that the concept of the one is not contained in the concept of the other, are present together in one and the same subject; for that would be equivalent to saying that one and the same subject has two different natures—a statement that implies a contradiction, at least when it is a question of a simple subject (as in the present case) rather than a composite one. (AT VIIIIB 349–50; CSM I 298)

While I agree with Rozemond that this passage provides conclusive evidence that some version of the Attribute Premise plays a central role in Descartes’s dualism, I would claim that it differs in fundamental ways from the version she ascribes to Descartes. First, Descartes makes it clear in this passage that he believes even a simple subject can have two or more attributes of the sort that constitute the natures of things. This can happen when the concept of one is contained in the concept of the other. So it cannot be a basic metaphysical principle that no simple subject can have more than one attribute of the sort that constitute the natures of things. Thus I would argue that the correct Attribute Premise is this: no simple subject can have more than one attribute of the sort that constitute the natures of things when their concepts are independent. Second, this passage makes clear that Descartes thinks it is true only of simple subjects that they can have only one principal attribute conceived independently of other attributes. Composite subjects can have more than one such principal attribute, and, as I have argued on other occasions, I think that Descartes conceives of such composite subjects as substances. This marks an important difference between Rozemond’s interpretation and mine, because she denies that such composite subjects are substances. I think Descartes’s use of the Attribute Premise looks less question begging if he allows that there are substances, namely human beings, that have both attributes thought and extension. Stephen Yablo, for example, seems to think that the main objection to Descartes’s argument for real distinction is precisely that he does not allow there to be things that are
extended and thinking by nature. My response is that Descartes thinks a human being is thinking and extended by nature.

In claiming that the *Principles* passage is superseded by the *Comments* passage, I am not claiming that the two passages cannot be reconciled. I think that the *Principles* passage reflects Descartes’s view that as a matter of fact the simple substances created by God have one principal attribute. But I think it is a mistake to read the *Principles* passage as implying that it is some sort of fundamental metaphysical truth that there can be no simple substance that has more than one principal attribute.

So on my reading of Descartes, once he has established that thought is the sort of attribute which constitutes the nature of its subject, mind, and that extension is the sort of attribute which constitutes the nature its subject, body, he still needs to show that these attributes can be clearly and distinctly conceived separately in order to show that mind and body are really distinct.

This leads to the main question I want to take up in this paper. In setting out his theory of distinction, Descartes repeatedly writes in terms of one thing being clearly and distinctly conceivable without another or of one thing being able to exist without another. Many, and I am tempted to say almost all, commentators take Descartes to mean by this that we are conceiving the one existing without the other existing and that the one thing can exist without the other existing. So, for example, almost everyone takes Descartes to mean or at least to imply when he asserts that mind and body are really distinct that mind can exist without body existing and that body can exist without mind existing.

But I want to claim that the notions of conceiving one thing without another and of one thing existing without another are ambiguous. They are subject to at least five possible interpretations. So my question is, which of these possible interpretations provides the best interpretation of what Descartes means in asserting that mind and body are really distinct?

All five interpretations are suggested by things Descartes says, but I think it is possible that he himself failed to see that his writings suggest different interpretations. Nevertheless, I will be arguing that one interpretation best captures the notion of separability that Descartes has in mind in arguing in the *Meditations* proper that mind and body are really distinct. But the story is complicated by the fact that in response to objections, Descartes adds an

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important clarification of what is required for real distinction between mind and body, a clarification that amounts to requiring that mind and body are separable in another sense as well. So I will be arguing that real distinction between mind and body requires that they are separable in two of the five ways.

According to the first interpretation already mentioned, Descartes means that the mind can exist without the body existing and the body can exist without the mind existing. So the notion of separate existence is, we could say, separate existence with respect to existence.

Francisco Suarez, one of Descartes’s most important medieval predecessors, developed an elaborate theory of distinction, and he considered this notion of separate existence—the ability to exist without the other existing—to be one of two signs of real distinction.\footnote{Francisco Suarez, \textit{On the Various Kinds of Distinctions} (\textit{Disputationes Metaphysicae}, Disputatio VII, de varis distinctionum generibus), trans. by Cyril Vollert (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1976), p. 5.} Since Descartes was familiar with Suarez’s work, this at least suggests that he might have had this interpretation in mind.

The main textual evidence for this interpretation in the \textit{Meditations} is found the Second Meditation. The thought experiment he conducts there is to conceive a state of affairs in which no bodies exist and in which the mind does exist. So it seems that what we are clearly and distinctly conceiving is the mind existing without body existing.

If this is what Descartes means generally when he says things are really distinct, then it would follow that God is not really distinct from creatures, but only modally distinct from them, and therefore, mind and body would also be modally distinct from each other in Descartes’s second sense, according to which things are modally distinct if they can be clearly and distinctly conceived apart from each other but not from some third thing. But surely Descartes would not want this outcome.

A second interpretation is that mind can exist without a real union with body and body can exist without a real union with mind. This is Suarez’s second sign of real distinction, which again provides some evidence that this is what Descartes might have in mind.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 46.} We might describe the sort of separability as separability with respect to union.

Again there is some textual evidence in Descartes for this reading. Consider the modal distinction—when Descartes says that we cannot conceive of shape apart from substance, he does not mean merely that we cannot conceive of shape existing without the substance existing. He means that we cannot conceive of the shape existing without existing in the substance, that is, the shape must have a real union with the substance. At least one Aris-
totelian critic of Descartes, Pere J. B. de la Grange, understood Descartes’s real distinction in this second sense.\textsuperscript{13}

The second interpretation has an advantage over the first interpretation. On the first interpretation, it looks as if mind and body might be modally distinct in the second sense, but on the second interpretation it works out the way it should. Although Descartes thinks neither mind nor body can exist without God existing, both can exist without a real union with God.

The third interpretation, as far as I know, has no historical antecedents and at first blush it may well seem to be coming from left field. But I want to claim that there is considerable textual evidence that, in the Meditations proper, what Descartes means when he says that mind and body are really distinct is that mind can exist without the essential attribute of body existing in it (and hence without any of its modes) and that body can exist without the essential attribute of mind existing in it (and hence without any of its modes). We might characterize this sort of separability as separability with respect to attributes.

The textual evidence for this interpretation is provided by six passages in which Descartes tries to state or clarify his argument for real distinction in the Meditations. In these passages he explains what it is to conceive mind and body clearly and distinctly without each other along the lines of this third interpretation. It is worth quoting all six of them because the repetition helps to reinforce the case that Descartes does think of separability in terms of the separability of attributes.

One very nice passage is from the Synopsis of the Meditations, which suggests that Descartes supposes at the outset of the Second Meditation that there are no bodies existing not in order to establish that he can conceive himself existing without his body existing, but in order to establish that he can conceive of himself existing without the attributes of body:

In the Second Meditation, the mind uses its own freedom and supposes the non-existence of all the things about whose existence it can have even the slightest doubt; and in so doing the mind notices that it is impossible that it should not itself exist during this time. This exercise is also of the greatest benefit, since it enables the mind to distinguish without difficulty what belongs to itself, i.e. to an intellectual nature, from what belongs to the body. (AT VII 12, CSM II 9)

A second is a passage from the Replies to the Fourth Objections:

Now the mind can be perceived distinctly and completely (that is, sufficiently for it to be considered as a complete thing) without any of the forms or attributes by which we recognize that body is a substance, as I think I showed quite adequately in the Second Meditation. And similarly a body can be understood distinctly and as a complete thing, without any of the attributes which belong to the mind. (AT VII 223; CSM II 157)

\textsuperscript{13} Pere J. B. de la Grange, Les Principes de la Philosophie contre les nouveau philosophes, (Paris: Georges Josses, 1675), p. 58.
The next passage is from the Replies to the Fifth Objections:

Hence, when I discover that I am a thinking substance, and form a clear and distinct concept of this thinking substance that contains none of the things that belong to the concept of corporeal substance, this is quite sufficient to enable me to assert that I, in so far as I know myself, am nothing other than a thinking thing. This is all that I asserted in the Second Meditation, which is what we are dealing with here (AT VII 354–55; CSM II 245)

The following passage is taken from Descartes's first argument for real distinction in the Sixth Meditation:

on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it (AT VII 78; CSM II 54)

Still another passage comes from the Replies to the Sixth Objections:

In fact I have never seen or perceived that human bodies think; all I have seen is that there are human beings, who possess both thought and a body. This happens as a result of a thinking thing's being combined with a corporeal thing: I perceived this from the fact that when I examined a thinking thing on its own, I discovered nothing in it which belonged to a body, and similarly when I considered corporeal nature on its own I discovered no thought in it. (AT VII 444; CSM II 299)

One final passage comes from the Replies to the First Objections:

By contrast [with things that are modally distinct] I have a complete understanding of what a body is when I think that it is merely something having extension, shape and motion, and I deny that it has anything which belongs to the nature of a mind. Conversely, I understand the mind to be a complete thing, which doubts, understands, wills, and so one, even though I deny that it has any of the attributes which are contained in the idea of a body. This would be quite impossible if there were not a distinction between mind and body. (AT VII 121; CSM II 86)

In order to reach the conclusion that what Descartes means in saying that mind and body are really distinct is that each can exist without the essential attribute of the other, we need only to add the premise that the relevant metaphysical possibilities that define real distinction correspond to the conceptual possibilities. So if what we conceive is mind existing without the essential attribute of body, then the corresponding metaphysical possibility is that mind can exist without the essential attribute of body. And if what we conceive is body existing without the essential attribute of mind, the corresponding metaphysical possibility is that body can exist without the essential attribute of mind. I think this premise is justified by Descartes’s assertion in the conceivability argument for real distinction in the Sixth Meditation that the inference from what is conceived to what is possible is justified by God's power to make things such as I clearly and distinctly understand them.
So I think there is strong textual evidence in favor of this third interpreta-
tion as capturing the sort of separability Descartes has in mind in the
Meditations proper. Despite possible first impressions to the contrary,
additional reflection reveals the intuitive plausibility of this interpretation.
Something lacking the attribute extension is not a body and something
lacking the attribute thought is not a mind. So to say that mind can exist
without the attribute extension existing in it amounts to saying that mind
can exist without being a body; and to say that body can exist without the
attribute thought existing in it amounts to saying that body can exist without
being a mind.

Notice that this interpretation is considerably weaker than the first two: it
would allow that mind and body are really distinct even if one of them
requires the existence of the other in order to exist or even if one of them
requires real union with the other in order to exist.14 It is important to note
that it does not require denying that Descartes believes that mind and body can
exist without union with the other or without the other existing—it just
requires denying that it is part of the meaning of saying mind and body are
really distinct. But I do not necessarily even want to insist on this, because I
think that Descartes himself was not entirely clear on the potential ambigu­
ities in his account. What I do want to insist on however, is that this third
interpretation captures the heart of Cartesian substance dualism. It expresses
the core thesis that reveals what is most powerful and interesting in Cartesian
dualism, namely, that thought and extension are attributes that can exist
without co-existing in the same subject. We can dispense with the stronger
claims reflected by the first two interpretations as distractions from the core
thesis.

One obvious objection to this interpretation is that it would seem to
entail that individual minds are not really distinct from one another. Since all
minds have thought as their principal attribute, no mind can be conceived
without the principal attribute of any other mind. To respond to this objec-
tion, it is necessary to appeal to a distinction between attribute types
and attribute tokens. Even though a mind cannot exist without the attribute type
of other minds, it can exist without the attribute tokens of other minds. I
think that this is an acceptable strategy, because I believe that Descartes
follows Aristotle in thinking of all qualities, including modes and principal
attributes, as particulars.15 Nevertheless, this defense puts some pressure on

14 In commenting on an earlier version of this paper presented at UC Berkeley, Hannah
Ginsborg made a subtle observation connecting my discussion of the distinction of reason
with this discussion of separability. She noted that if we reject my account of the distinc-
tion of reason and agree with Larry Nolan that things distinct by reason are identical in
reality, then the second and third accounts of separability collapse into one. So, for
example, to say that body can exist without a real union with mind would amount to
saying that body can exist without the attribute thought existing in it.

15 Vere Chappell, op. cit., pp. 121–22, makes a similar claim.
the interpretation, because Descartes clearly means something stronger when he says that mind and body are really distinct. It is not just that my mind can exist without the attribute token of extension that constitutes the essence of my body, but it can exist without any attribute token of extension. Thus the interpretation has the undesirable outcome that when Descartes asserts that my mind is really distinct from your mind he is using a different notion of real distinction from the one he uses when he asserts that my mind is really distinct from my body. I do not what to downplay this shortcoming, but my strategy is to find the interpretation that is most plausible all things considered.

I noted earlier that in responding to objections, Descartes adds a further condition for real distinction between mind and body. In his Replies to the First and Fourth Objections, he argues that in order to establish that mind and body are really distinct, we need to show that we can clearly and distinctly conceive of them as complete things apart from each other. But what is it to be a complete thing? What sort of implications does it have for the notion of separability entailed in asserting that mind and body are really distinct?

In her book on Descartes, Margaret Wilson offers a reconstruction of the argument for real distinction according to which the notion of being a complete thing plays a crucial role in generating the conclusion that mind and body can exist apart from or in separation from each other. Although the terms ‘apart from’ and ‘in separation from’ are ambiguous in the same way as the term ‘without’, her commentary suggests that what she means is that the mind can exist without the body existing and the body can exist without the mind existing. Whether or not Wilson does in fact intend this strong conclusion, the more substantive issue is whether the notion of a complete thing in fact justifies the inference from the premise that mind and body can be conceived as complete things without the essential attribute of the other to the conclusion that mind and body are separable in the strong sense that each can exist without the other existing.

In the crucial Replies to the Fourth Objections Descartes uses the terms ‘complete thing’, ‘ens per se’, and ‘substance’ interchangeably, so to see if the inference goes through we need to ask what is entailed in conceiving of something as a complete thing, or a substance, or an ens per se. The inference would go through if to conceive of something as a complete thing is to

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17 In the following passage Descartes identifies the notions of being complete, subsisting per se, and being a substance:

> I am not unaware that some substances are commonly called ‘incomplete’. But if they are said to be incomplete because they cannot exist *per se* alone, I confess that it seems contradictory to me that they should be substances, that is, things subsisting *per se* and at the same time incomplete, that is, unable to subsist *per se*. (AT VII 222; CSM II 156–57)
conceive it as existing without any other created thing existing. But I do not think this is what Descartes understood by a complete thing. I think that Descartes’s notion of a complete thing is a weaker notion. Indeed he seems to make use of two different notions of separability in explaining what it is to be a complete thing or substance, and these provide our fourth and fifth notions of separability.

There is textual evidence that strongly suggests that Descartes understands a complete thing to be a thing which can exist without having to exist in something else as a subject. One piece of evidence comes from the term *ens per se*. The term *per* is one of the terms Descartes uses in the definition of substance to characterize the relation between a quality and a substance. So an *ens per se* is a being which exists “through” itself, that is, it does not need something else as a subject. Another piece of evidence is that he refers to modes as incomplete things (AT VII 120, 224; CSM II 85–86, 158) and modes are dependent because they must exist in a subject in order to exist.

Given that Descartes uses the terms ‘substance’, ‘complete thing’, and ‘*ens per se*’ interchangeably, the most important evidence that a complete thing is merely a thing that can exist without having to exist in a subject is found in an argument he makes in the Replies to the Sixth Objections against what he calls real accidents. He asserts that “whatever is real can exist separately from any other subject, yet anything that can exist separately in this way is a substance, not an accident” (AT VII 434; CSM II 293). On this understanding of the notion of separability entailed in asserting that something is a complete thing, it follows that in asserting mind and body are really distinct Descartes means that they are separable in two ways. They can exist without the essential attribute of the other and they can exist without existing in the other as in a subject.

In a passage in the Replies to the Fourth Objections Descartes suggests that being a complete thing involves another notion of separability. He asserts at one point that a substance or what can exist *per se* is something that can exist without the help (*ope*) of any other substance (AT VII 226; CSM II 159). On this understanding of the notion of separability entailed in being a complete thing, when Descartes asserts that mind and body are really distinct he means that they are separable first in that they can exist without the essential attribute of the other and second they can exist without requiring the help of the other.

One reason for preferring the first account of what it is to be a complete thing over this second account is that the second account leads to the worry that mind and body are only modally distinct. If to be really distinct from something a substance must be able to exist without requiring the help of that thing, then since mind and body need the help of God in order to exist, they would be only modally distinct from God and hence modally distinct
from each other. But Descartes certainly believes that mind and body can exist without existing in God as a subject.

On either of these weaker notions of what it is to be a complete thing, the inference Wilson apparently wants to make does not go through. So I think it is a mistake to claim that part of what Descartes means in asserting that mind and body are really distinct is that each can exist without the other existing.

So far in this discussion of separability, I have avoided mention of the *Principles*. But it contains two passages that bear on this question of the kind of separability involved in asserting that things are really distinct. My own view is that Descartes's theory of distinction does not undergo any significant shifts between the *Meditations* and *Principles*, so that my interpretation succeeds only if it can be reconciled with these passages from the *Principles*.

The first passage is from Descartes's definition of substance in Part I, Article 51. He asserts that created substances need only the help of the concurrence of God in order to exist (AT VIII A 24–25; CSM I 210). Now he could be, and I believe standardly is, read as asserting here that created substances need nothing but the concurrence of God in order to exist, which would imply that they can exist without the existence of any other created substances. But the assertion need not and I believe should not be read this way. It can also be read as asserting that created substances need the help of the concurrence only of God in order to exist. And to assert that something can exist without the help of the concurrence of any other created substance is not necessarily to imply that it can exist without any other created substances existing. Given that created substances depend on God as an efficient cause of their existence, what Descartes presumably has in mind is that created substances do not require other created substances as an efficient cause of their existence.

The other passage is from Descartes's definition of real distinction in Part I, Article 60:

Similarly, from the mere fact that each of us understands himself to be a thinking thing and is capable, in thought, of excluding from himself every other substance, whether thinking or extended, it is certain that each of us, regarded in this way, is really distinct from every other thinking substance and from every corporeal substance. For no matter how closely God may have united them, the power which he previously had of separating them, or conserving one without the other, is something he could not lay aside; and things which God has the power to separate, or to conserve separately, are really distinct (AT VIII A 29; CSM I 213)

The last sentence is naturally read as referring to God’s power of conserving one without conserving the other, which would suggest that in asserting that mind and body are really distinct Descartes has in mind the first interpretation according to which each can exist without the other existing. But even this passage is ambiguous. It can also be read consistently with the other interpre-
tations of separability so that Descartes's point might be that God could conserve one without real union with other, or without the essential attribute of the other, or without existing in the other or without the help of the other. So I would conclude that the Principles' account of substance and real distinction is sufficiently ambiguous as to be consistent with any of the proposed interpretations of separability.

There is one other passage worth mentioning. In a letter to Mesland, February 9, 1645, Descartes distinguishes between the determinate parts of matter that constitute the human body and the human body. The human body remains numerically the same, even though it is constituted by numerically distinct determinate parts of matter over time. What accounts for the numerical identity of the human body over time, according to Descartes, is that it is united to the same soul (AT V 166–67; CSMK 242–43). So if we want to read Descartes as claiming that the mind is really distinct from the human body, and not just from the determinate parts of matter which constitute the human body, then we must understand real distinction along the lines of my favored interpretation according to which really distinct substances are separable in two senses: they can exist without the principal attribute of the other and without existing in the other as in a subject. While it is true according to the Mesland letter that mind can exist without a real union with the body, it is false that the human body can exist without the mind existing or without a real union with mind. Since Descartes does not think that in being united with the mind the human body exists in the mind as in subject, nor, presumably, does he think its being united with the mind entails that the attributes of mind exist in it, then, unlike the first two interpretations, the third interpretation is consistent with both the Mesland letter and the claim that the mind is really distinct not from the human body but only from the determinate parts of matter that constitute the human body.

Finally, as I have argued elsewhere, I think it is absolutely central to Descartes's attempt to preserve the unity of the human being with the real distinction between mind and body that he can argue that mind and body are substances only in the weak sense of being able to exist apart from a subject.18 And to the extent that contemporary philosophers are concerned to maintain that human beings are genuinely one, then Descartes looks much more plausible if we understand the real distinction between mind and body less stringently along the lines of my proposed interpretation. But there is another contemporary perspective on the mind/body problem from which

there is less concern with the question of whether human beings are genuinely one or merely composites. From this perspective, the issue of what sort of separability is entailed in being a created substance is really a side issue. It does not matter so much whether a created substance can exist without any other created thing existing, or without the help of another created substance, or without existing in another created substance. Rather the significant point is that thought by itself constitutes the nature of substance and extension by itself constitutes the nature of a substance. My point again is that the separability of the attributes constitutes the heart of Cartesian dualism.

This same point can be revealed in still another way. Aristotle, without taking into account the ambiguities in the notion of separability noted here, argues that A is separable from B if A has a function or affection that is independent of B.\textsuperscript{19} Gassendi seems to have this sort of criterion in mind when he objects to Descartes’s argument for a real distinction between mind and body. Gassendi challenges Descartes first, by objecting that he has not offered a criterion to show that his nature is incorporeal, and second, by asserting that the proper criterion to show that his nature is incorporeal is to show that the mind has some operation which takes place independently of the brain (AT VII 269; CSM II 188). Descartes’s response is twofold. The first part of his response is to assert that he has offered a criterion to show that the mind is something other than body. The criterion is that the whole nature of mind consists in the fact that it thinks and that the whole nature of body consists in the fact that it is extended, and that thought and extension have nothing in common (AT VII 358; CSM II 248). The second part of Descartes’s response is to assert that he has in fact also satisfied Gassendi’s criterion. He has shown that the mind can operate independently of the brain because the brain cannot be employed in pure understanding. What is interesting in this response is that while Descartes apparently thinks it is important to be able to meet Gassendi’s criterion, he treats it as if it is independent from his own criterion for real distinction. He suggests, in other words, that he thinks he can show that mind and body are really distinct without showing that mind can operate independently of the brain. So what provides the basis for real distinction is that the mind can exist without extension existing in it, not that the mind can operate independently of extended things.

One might object not just to my answer to the question of what notion of separability Descartes has in mind in asserting that mind and body are really distinct, but one might object to the very question itself on the grounds that he intends to establish not just the weak conclusion that mind and body are separable, but the strong conclusion that they are separate. In responding to this objection, I would note that our notion of being separate is ambiguous.

\textsuperscript{19} Aristotle, \textit{De Anima}, 405a4–12.
In one sense, to be separate is to be numerically distinct, that is, non-identical. Now if mind and body are separable, that is, if they can be separated, then it follows they are numerically distinct, which means that they are separate in this first sense. Nothing is separable from itself. Since things distinct in any of Descartes's three ways are separate in this first sense, to say that really distinct things are separate does not tell us everything we want to know. We also want to know in which respects they are separable, that is, in what ways or in respect to what they can be separated.

In the other sense, to be separate means to be separated. Things can be separate in the first sense without being separate in the second sense. In other words, things can be numerically distinct without being separated. I would deny that Descartes believes real distinction requires that mind and body are separate in the second sense. That is, I think he would deny that real distinction between mind and body requires that they are separated. It requires only that they are separable in the sense that they can be separated, and that brings us back to my interpretive question, separated with respect to what: existence, union, attributes and so on?

This leads to a further objection. It is clear that Descartes thinks that while we are alive, mind and body are not separated with respect to existence, nor are they separated with respect to their union. Is it true that mind and body are merely separable and not separated in those senses that I have claimed capture his understanding of real distinction? First, are the attributes of thought and extension merely separable or are they separated? One might argue that Descartes thinks they are always separated in the sense that extension never exists in the mind and thought never exists in the body. That is, they never exist together in the same simple substance. However, I would reply that Descartes would think it appropriate to say that thought and extension exist in the human being, which is a composite substance, and that in that sense the attributes thought and extension are not separated but merely separable. Second, are mind and body merely separable in the sense that each can exist without existing in the other as a subject or are they separated in the sense that neither does exist in the other as in a subject? Here I would respond that while the body never exists in the mind as a subject, there is some evidence that Descartes thinks the mind exists in the body as a subject. In the Principles, Part IV, Article 189 he asserts that the soul informs the entire body (AT VIII A 315; CSM I 279); in the Replies to the Sixth Objections he says that the mind can be said to be a quality of the body to which it is joined (AT VII 441–42; CSM II 297–98); and he never challenges his former judgment mentioned in the Third Meditation that the mind exists in the body (AT VII 50–51; CSM II 35). Thus I believe Descartes thinks that so long as we are alive the mind is not separated from the body as its subject, but merely separable from it as its subject.
Let me briefly summarize my main claims. First, I have argued that Descartes believes that plurality in things themselves arises from distinction, so that things that are distinct in any of the three ways are not numerically the same and hence not identical. The only exception to this concerns universals which, when considered in things themselves, are identical to particulars. Second, I have argued that to be distinct is to be separable, and in the case of things distinct by reason, this separability occurs only in thought and only by means of ideas that are not clear and distinct. Third, I have argued that the sort of separability involved in the real distinction between mind and body is weaker than it is typically construed because Descartes’s notion of what it is to be a substance or a complete thing is very weak—to be a created substance it is sufficient to be able to exist apart from any other subject or perhaps not to need the help of any other created substance. Fourth, I have argued that the heart of Cartesian dualism concerns the separability of the attributes thought and extension.20

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I have worked on this paper on and off for twenty years, and I am afraid I will not remember all whose comments have helped. Let me thank my dissertation supervisors Robert M. Adams and Rogers Albritton; others who provided comments at the time I was working on my dissertation, including David Sachs, Ed McCann and Marilyn Adams; John Carrico, who has been a constant source of useful advice; Margaret Wilson, Larry Nolan, Marleen Rozemond, Vere Chappell, and Stephen Yablo, whose excellent work on these issues enabled me to formulate my own views; Hannah Ginsborg and David Cunning, who commented on an earlier version of this paper at The Fifth Annual Meeting of the California Scholars in Early Modern Philosophy, University of California, Berkeley, CA, September, 1998, and other members of the audience; and finally, the referees for Philosophy and Phenomenological Research.

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