Descartes is commonly regarded as the origin of mind–body dualism and the modern mind–body problem. A little historical reflection reveals that this picture cannot be entirely accurate: some form of dualism is at least as old as Plato. Furthermore, long before Descartes, a central component of the Christian tradition had been the idea that the human soul is immortal and this idea was often (although not always) supported by arguments to the effect that it is incorporeal. So the incorporeality of the human soul or mind was not a novel idea. But there is reason to say that Descartes made a significant contribution in a different way: he redrew the boundary between mind or soul and body and between the corporeal and the incorporeal. In brief, before Descartes, the incorporeal mind was generally identified with the intellect. But Descartes formulated our modern conception of the mental as including far more: sense perception, imagination, feeling, emotion. The mind, in his words, is a thing that thinks, _res cogitans_, and he defined thought in terms of consciousness: “I understand by the term ‘thought’ everything that is in us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it. Thus all operations of the will, intellect, imagination and the senses are thoughts” (AT vii, 160). So Descartes initiated the modern mind–body problem in the sense that he formulated the modern view of what belongs to the category of the mental, the category which we investigate in its relation to the physical.

This is not a novel picture of Descartes’ contribution, but it is rarely taken into account in scholarly interpretations of his writings. And whether or not this broad picture of Descartes’ contribution is entirely accurate, it does capture an important aspect of his own view of the matter. Descartes aimed to supplant Aristotelianism, as he indicated to his friend Mersenne:

[T]hese six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please don’t say so, for those who favor Aristotle would perhaps have more difficulty approving of them. And I hope that those who read them will gradually get used to my principles
and recognize their truth before realizing that they destroy the principles of Aristotle.
(AT iii, 298)

Descartes speaks of his physics here, but crucial to his physics, as we will see, is the way in which he drew the boundary between the mental and the physical. And while Descartes spoke of Aristotle, he was more specifically concerned with Aristotelianism as it existed in his day, scholastic Aristotelianism.

I will relate Descartes’ treatment of the mind in Meditation II to Aristotelian scholasticism. This approach helps us to understand the structure of his argumentation: it helps us to see what he thought needed a lot of argument, and what he thought would be readily accepted. I will focus on St Thomas Aquinas and on Francisco Suárez, an influential Jesuit who closely preceded Descartes. Next, I will turn to an idea that has often been central to the conception of Descartes’ view of the mind in contemporary (certainly analytical) philosophy: the idea that each of us has a special, privileged type of knowledge of her own mental states; the doctrine of transparency of the mental. I will argue that there is good reason to believe that Descartes did not accept this doctrine. His conception of the mind results from a redrawing of the boundaries between the mental and the physical in view of his commitment to mechanistic science rather than a commitment to transparency.

**Descartes’ Novel Conception of the Mind**

The Aristotelian scholastics did not agree on all matters concerning the nature of the soul, but for our purposes some generalizations apply. For the Aristotelians, the soul is the form of the body; this is true for any living thing. The soul, *anima*, is what makes something a living thing, and for a particular living being, say a cow, its soul makes it the particular kind of living thing that it is. The soul is the principle of life, and life is manifested in a range of activities: nutrition and growth in plants; in animals, also motion and sense perception; in humans, intellectual activity and will. The presence of these functions is explained by the soul. So for an Aristotelian, the term “soul” is a broad term that does not have religious connotations. For the Christian Aristotelians, only the human, intellectual soul can exist after the death of the body. And there was a strong tradition among the scholastics of arguing for this claim on the basis of the nature of the intellect. 

Medieval Aristotelians attributed the idea that intellection is not an operation of the body to Aristotle (Aristotle 1968: III. 4, 429a 18–28, 5, 430a 10–25). Then Aquinas, for instance, argued:

> The intellectual principle which is called the mind or intellect has an operation through itself [*per se*] in which the body does not participate. Nothing, however, can operate through itself unless it subsists through itself; for activity only belongs to a
being in act, and hence something operates in the same way in which it is. For this reason we do not say that heat heats, but that something hot heats. Consequently, the human soul, which is called intellect or mind, is something incorporeal and subsisting. (Aquinas 1964: I. 75. 2; see also Suárez 1856: I. IX.)

So intellectual activity is an operation of the human soul alone, and that requires that this soul is a subsistent entity, an entity that exists in its own right, and that can exist without the body. Much of what I will say about the intellect is also true of the will – which the scholastics saw as intellectual appetite (Aquinas 1964: I. 80. 2) – but the discussions both in scholasticism and in Descartes focus on the intellect.

The scholastics had a different view of sense perception, and other activities we now regard as mental. Aquinas draws the contrast as follows:

Certain powers are related to the soul alone as their subject, such as the intellect and the will. And such powers necessarily remain in the soul when the body is destroyed. But other powers inhere in the composite [conjuncto] as their subject, such as all the powers of the sensitive and nutritive parts. (Aquinas 1964: I. 77. 8)

So for Aquinas, sense perception pertains to the soul–body composite, rather than the soul alone. And we can see now a striking difference between Aquinas’s conception of the soul and modern worries about the mind–body problem: Aquinas focuses on human intellectual activity in defending the soul’s incorporeity, whereas in contemporary philosophy the question of whether the mind can be understood in physical terms focuses on experiences like pain, color sensations, experiences that belong to the realm of the sensory, which, for Aquinas, pertain to the body–soul composite rather than the soul alone. This difference finds its origin in Descartes’ reconceptualization of the mental, although I will argue that the transition is not complete in his thought.

Let us now turn to Descartes. Meditation II begins where Meditation I leaves off: he has brought out the full skeptical machinery, and now the question is whether any firm footing can be found in the middle of the resulting skeptical morass. The first item he retrieves is his knowledge that he himself exists. But another question arises immediately: what is he? He considers several answers: a man – an answer he dismisses quickly. Then he turns to ideas that used to occur to him “spontaneously and naturally”: first, the idea that he is a body, and then the following list of activities, which shows him reflecting on the Aristotelian conception of the soul as principle of life: “It occurred to me that I was nourished, that I walked, sensed, and thought: which actions I referred to the soul” (AT vii, 26). The question Descartes raises now is this: assuming that there is a very powerful deceiver what can I still claim I am? He dismisses the idea that he is a body without argument, no doubt because he is at this point skeptical about the existence of body. He then uses the doubt about body to sort through the Aristotelian list of activities pertaining to the soul:
Nutrition or movement? But I do not now have a body, these things are nothing but imaginings. Sensation? This also does not happen without a body, and I seem to sense many things in dreams that later I notice I did not really sense. Thinking? I have found it: it is thinking; this alone cannot be taken away from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I think, for certainly it could happen that if I cease to think entirely, I thereby entirely cease to be. I now do not admit anything unless it is necessarily true; I am then strictly speaking \( \text{praecise tantum} \), only a thinking thing, that is, a mind, spirit, intellect or reason, words whose meaning was previously unknown to me. I am a real thing, and really exist, but what kind of thing? I have said it, a thinking thing. (AT vii, 27)

It is tempting to interpret Descartes’ claim that he is a thinking thing in light of the broad list of mental states that includes sense perception and imagination. But, in fact, he has really only identified himself as an intellectual being: he says he is a “mind, spirit, intellect or reason \( \text{mens, sive animus, sive intellectus, sive ratio} \),” and these terms only refer to the intellectual aspect of the scholastic soul.

This result – Descartes accepts intellectual thought but not sense perception in the face of the doubts about body – makes perfect sense given the Aristotelian background, where sense perception, but not intellectual activity requires the existence of body for its subject of inherence. And so the skeptical doubts about body stand in the way of attributing sense perception to oneself in a way that they do not for intellectual activity. But later in Meditation II he takes a different stance, and writes: “I am a thing that thinks. What is that? Something that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, is unwilling, and also imagines and senses” (AT vii, 28). This is the characterization of a thinking thing that corresponds to his definition of thought in terms of consciousness (although it is worth noting that in the Meditations Descartes never uses the notion of consciousness to characterize thought or a thinking thing). Descartes is now deliberately developing a conception of the mind as including not just intellectual and volitional activity, as the Aristotelians would have it, but also imagination and sense perception, which for them reside in the body–soul composite. (Imagination was counted among the internal senses; see Aquinas 1964: I. 78. 4.) One can see the significance of the Aristotelian background in the way in which Descartes presents the expanded list. He thinks there is no need or possibility to explain that he has the traditional functions of the mind: “For the fact that I am the one who doubts, understands, wills, is so manifest that nothing occurs by which it can be explained more evidently.” He expects his readers to accept this much quite readily. But he does see a need to offer an argument for his sensing and imagining:

But I am also the same who imagines; for although perhaps, as I have supposed, no imagined things are at all real, the very power of imagination does, however, really exist and is part of my thinking. And again I am the same who senses, or who notices corporeal things as if through the senses; for instance, I see light, I hear noise, I feel heat. These things are false, for I am asleep. But certainly I seem to see, hear, become
warm. This cannot be false, and this is properly what is called sensing in me, and this
strictly speaking is nothing other than thinking. (AT vii, 29)

In fact, Descartes departs from his scholastic predecessors in his conception of
the soul and mind in two ways. What we just saw is that he expands the concep-
tion of the mind. But, on the other hand, he narrows the role of the soul by
making it the principle of thought and removing from it various traditional func-
tions: nutrition, growth, motion. Thus he explains in response to Gassendi:

the first men did not perhaps distinguish between, on one hand, that principle in us
by which we are nourished, grow, and perform without any thought all the other
functions we have in common with the brutes, and on the other hand, that principle
by which we think. They applied to both the single term “soul.” Then, noticing that
thought is different from nutrition, they called that which thinks “mind,” and
believed that it is the principal part of the soul. I, however, noticing that the principle
by which we are nourished is entirely different from the principle by which we think,
have said that the term “soul” is ambiguous when it is used for both. And in order
to understand it as the first act or principal form of man, it must only be understood
as the principle by which we think. To this I have as much as possible applied the
term “mind,” in order to avoid ambiguity. For I do not regard the mind as a part
of the soul, but as the whole soul, which thinks. (AT vii, 356)

What happened to the other traditional roles of the Aristotelian soul? Descartes
relegated those to the realm of mechanistic explanation. This is not explicit in the
Meditations, but it is central to his famous discussion of humans, animals, and
machines in the Discourse. There Descartes argues that the human body is “a
machine, which, having being made by God, is incomparably better ordered, and
contains within itself more admirable motions than any of those that can be
invented by men” (AT vi, 56). Human beings also have a soul, which accounts
for thought and thus for behavior that manifests thought. But animals are just
machines; all of their behavior can be explained mechanistically.

Two other aspects of the contrast with the Aristotelian scholastic view are espe-
cially worth noting. Philosophers today tend to question Descartes’ dualistic view
that the mental cannot be explained scientifically and that it must be immaterial.
But from the perspective of his contemporaries, Descartes went rather far in his
claims about what is within the scope of materialistic scientific explanation and in
thinking that quite so little required a soul. Thus his friend Arnauld wrote:

As far as the souls of the brute animals are concerned, M. Descartes elsewhere sug-
gests clearly enough that they have none. All they have is a body with a certain con-
figuration, made up of various organs in such a way that all the operations that we
observe can be produced in it and by means of it. But I think that in order for this
conviction to find faith in the minds of men, it must be proved by very valid reasons.
For it seems incredible at first sight that it can happen without the help of any soul
that the light reflected from the body of a wolf into the eyes of a sheep moves the very thin optical nerves, and that upon that motion reaching the brain, animal spirits are diffused through the nerves in such a way as is necessary to make the sheep flee. (AT vii, 205)

So Arnauld thought Descartes went awfully far in thinking that mechanistic explanation could account for all animal behavior.

Finally, Descartes had a striking view of how his position fits into the relationship between religion and science. Historically, expanding the scope of scientific explanation has often created tensions with religion, and, of course, most relevant to Descartes is Christianity. Thus the idea that scientific explanation can account for the mental generates tension with the idea of an immortal soul. But Descartes thought that his own expansion of the scope of scientific explanation strengthened the defense of the immortality of the soul. Seeing that our souls are radically different from those of animals means, he thinks, that “one has a much better understanding of the reasons that prove that our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body, and that, consequently, it is not subject to dying with it” (AT vi, 59–60).

Why does Descartes think that his view helps support immortality for human souls? One reason is that on his view, as Arnauld pointed out, only humans have souls, not animals. One difficulty for his contemporaries had been to explain why only our souls, and not those of animals, should be immortal, as Christianity would have it. Indeed, one purpose of the discussion in the *Discourse* is to respond to philosophers like Montaigne who had argued that the difference between animals and humans simply is not that radical (for discussion, see Gilson 1976: 425–9 and 435–6). But on Descartes’ view there clearly is a radical difference. Another reason is that scholastics like Aquinas argued for the incorporeity of the human soul on the basis of intellectual activity. And Descartes restricted the soul to its intellectual part, the mind, so he restricted it precisely to those functions that support its immortality, as opposed to other functions that can only be carried out by an ensouled body.

Indeed, although full discussion of this issue would lead us too far afield, it is worth noting the following. Descartes’ principal argument for dualism is generally regarded as based on a conception of thought in his broad sense, but in fact it should be understood as focused only on intellectual activity. This is strongly suggested by his remarking, right after the conclusion of the argument in Meditation VI:

Moreover, I find in me faculties for certain special modes of thinking, namely the faculties of imagining and sensing. I can clearly and distinctly understand myself as a whole without them; but not *vice versa* them without me, that is, without an intelligent substance in which they are. For they include some intellection in their formal concept: hence I perceive that they are distinguished from me as modes from a thing. (AT vii, 78)
Sensation and imagination are modes of the mind, but the argument for dualism had been based on a conception of its essence which Descartes presents as intellectual. And, indeed, he repeatedly suggests that focus on sensation brings out the union of mind and body rather than their distinction (AT vii, 81, 228–9). So in this regard, Descartes’ argument for dualism is akin to Aquinas’s argument for the status of the soul as a subsistent incorporeal entity. And both differ sharply from the modern mind–body problem with its focus on sensory states.

The Intellect and the Senses

Descartes modifies the Aristotelian conception of the mind significantly, then, in assigning sense perception to the mind rather than to the soul–body composite, and similarly for imagination and emotions. Or to be more precise, he assigns an aspect or stage of sense perception to the mind. In Meditation II, after claiming that he senses, he qualifies this claim on the ground that the skeptical worries about the existence of body imply that he might not really be sensing. But, he continues, he certainly seems to sense, and “this is properly what is called sensing in me, and this strictly speaking is nothing other than thinking” (AT vii, 29). What does this “seeming to sense” mean exactly? What aspect of sense perception is Descartes trying to assign to the mind?

The phrase “seeming to sense” could mean different things, but in the Sixth Replies Descartes offers a clear view of what aspect of sense perception is supposed to pertain to the mind. He explains that sense perception consists in three stages, or “grades”: the mechanical process in the body, and then two stages that occur in the mind:

The second [grade] contains everything that results immediately in the mind due to the fact that it is united to the corporeal organ so affected, and such are the perceptions of pain, pleasure, thirst, hunger, colors, sound, flavor, smell, heat, cold, and the like, which result from the union and, as it were, intermingling of mind and body, as I said in Meditation VI. The third grade comprises all those judgments about external objects which we have been used to making since our earliest childhood on the occasion of the motions of the corporeal organ. (AT vii, 437)

So now we can see what components of sense perception pertain to the mind: the immediate affects in the mind and the subsequent judgments. Given Descartes’ definition of thought in terms of consciousness elsewhere, the immediate affects are no doubt conscious sensations of the types mentioned.

On the other hand, this passage hints at a complication in Descartes’ view that emerges more clearly in other contexts: sense perception and intellection do not belong to the mind in the same way. The second grade of sensation, he writes here, results from “the union and, as it were, intermingling of mind and body.”
In Meditation VI, Descartes had written that sensations arise from the “union and, as it were, intermingling of mind and body” and that this shows that the mind is not united to the body merely as a sailor to a ship, or else the mind would instead have purely intellectual perceptions of what goes on in the physical world (AT vii, 81). Descartes sees a metaphysical contrast between sensation and imagination, on the one hand, and intellectual activity, on the other hand. Consider the following statements about the nature of intellectual activity:

[W]hen the mind understands, it turns in some way towards itself and inspects one of the ideas which are in itself; but when it imagines, it turns towards the body and looks at something in the body which conforms to an idea understood by the mind or perceived by the senses. (Meditation VI, AT vii, 73)

I have also often distinctly shown that the mind can operate independently of the brain; for certainly the brain can be of no use to pure intellection, but only to imagination or sensation. (Fifth Replies, AT vii, 358; see also AT vii, 385, and AT ii, 598)

But in what sense does sense perception require the union? Does it simply require the body to be united to the mind so that it can act on the mind and provide the efficient causes of sense perception? (Chappell 1994b: 404–6; Kenny 1999; Margaret Wilson sees evidence of interactionism as well as a different view in Descartes: Wilson 1978: 205–20). But some of his analyses suggest something stronger. Consider Principles I, art. 48:

I do not, however, recognize more than two highest types of things: first, intellectual or thinking things, that is, those pertaining to the mind or thinking substance; second, material things, or those which pertain to extended substance, that is, body. Perception, volition, and all the modes of perceiving and willing are referred to thinking substance; magnitude, or its extension in length, width and depth, shape, motion, place, the divisibility of parts and the like are referred to extended substance.

This much suggests a straightforward dualistic picture. Immediately afterwards, however, Descartes adds:

But we also experience certain other things in us, which must be referred [referri] neither to the mind alone, nor to the body alone, and which, as will be shown below in its proper place, arise from [profiscuntur] the close and intimate union of our mind with the body; namely the appetites of hunger and thirst etc.; similarly, the emotions or passions of the soul, which do not consist in thought alone, such as the emotion of anger, joy, sadness, love, etc.; and furthermore all sensations, such as the sensations of pain, pleasure, light and colors, sounds, smells, flavors, heat, hardness and the other tactile qualities.

So Descartes claims that there are only two highest types of things, ones referred to body and ones referred to mind, but at the same time acknowledges ones that
“arise from [proficiscuntur] the close and intimate union of our mind with the body.” How should we understand this view? Some interpreters have argued that Descartes in fact acknowledges a distinct, third type of mode (Cottingham 1986: 127–32; Schmaltz 1992). But I wish to propose a different view. In letters to Regius and Gibieuf, he suggests that sense perception is not pure thought, or an act of the pure mind:

we perceive that sensations of pain and all other sensations are not pure thoughts of the mind distinct from the body, but confused perceptions of the mind really united [to the body]; for if an angel would be in a human body, it would not sense like us, but only perceive the motions that would be caused by external objects and in this way he would be distinguished from a real human being. (AT iii, 493)

I do not see any difficulty in understanding that the faculties of imagination and sensation belong to the soul, because they are species of thought; nevertheless they only belong to the soul insofar as it is joined to the body, because they are sorts of thoughts without which one can conceive the soul entirely pure [toute pure]. (AT iii, 479, emphasis added)

Intellectual activity, Descartes claims, is an activity of just the mind by itself, the pure mind. But sensations are impure thoughts and belong to the mind as united to the body.

The first of these passages is similar to the discussion in Meditation VI, where Descartes contrasts the mind–body union with the union of a pilot and a ship. This passage suggests that sensation does not merely require that the body acts on the mind in order to produce sensory states as an external efficient cause. That idea is compatible with the body causing perceptions of motions and other primary qualities like an angel would have if united to a human body, according to Descartes. He seems to think that the nature of the union of mind and body in a human being explains not just the occurrence of mental states on the occasion of states of the body, but it explains the qualitative nature of sensory states: it explains that we see colors, hear sounds, sense smells rather than merely perceive configurations of primary qualities, as an angel would, in accord with his mechanistic picture of the physical world. The sensory affects in the mind are the result of the mind’s close, special union with the body; it is, as it were, intermingled with the body, for Descartes.

Now it is not clear what that means; the talk of mixture is an analogy – the mind is as it were [quasi] intermingled with the body. Since the mind is incorporeal, indivisible, for Descartes, it cannot be literally mixed in with the body. But the letters to Gibieuf and Regius do suggest a specific view about the ontology of sensations. They are modes of the mind, but modes of the mind insofar as they are united to the body. The mind is not in the right metaphysical state to be the subject of sensory states when separated from the body. Sensations are not a third type of mode in addition to intellectual thoughts, but they are a peculiar kind of sub-species of thought.
In a sense, then, there is after all a similarity with the scholastics: as we saw for Aquinas, for him too a separated soul cannot have sensations, but only intellectual states. For him too something is missing in the metaphysical subject of inherence when the soul is separated from the body. Descartes differs from Aquinas (and others) when he moves a stage of sense perception into the mind; sense perception is not a mode of the body, even the ensouled body, or of the mind–body composite. But he is similar in thinking that sense perception requires that the mind be united to the body to constitute the appropriate metaphysical subject. In its union with the body in the human being, the mind is in a special state that makes it capable of having a certain type of mode, sense perception.

There is a further element of continuity. Descartes defined the mind as a thinking thing and thinking in terms of consciousness so that it includes more than just intellectual activity. This may suggest a broad conception of the essence of the mind. But, as we saw at the end of the previous section, in his principal argument for dualism in Meditation VI, Descartes presents the essence of the mind as intellectual: the argument relies on claims about the essence of the mind, and afterwards he contends that it can be conceived as a whole without sensation and imagination which belong to the mind because they include intellection in their formal concept. So the definition of thought in terms of consciousness is perhaps best seen as a definition that picks out what pertains to the mind without revealing its essence: in Lockean terms, it is a nominal rather than a real definition. So, for Descartes, the mind’s essence is intellectual, as was the case for the scholastics.

Transparency

Descartes’ definition of thought in terms of consciousness makes clear that he held that we are conscious of all our thoughts. He is also commonly thought to accept transparency of the mental, a strong view of our knowledge of our own minds; our knowledge of what goes on in our own minds is characterized by certainty and immunity to error. But there is good reason to believe that Descartes was not committed to transparency, although this is not a simple matter (see Curley 1978: 170–93; Wilson 1978: 150–65). I will not attempt a full treatment of this issue, but confine myself in this issue to Descartes’ treatment of the mental in the context of the use of the skeptical arguments in Meditation II. The issue of transparency raises the question of Descartes’ primary purposes, in particular, in the Meditations. Interpreters (at least in the English-language literature) have primarily offered two different views on this issue. One view makes the purpose of defeating the skeptic primary (for example, Frankfurt 1970: 174; Curley 1978: 44). On the other view, which has been more prominent in recent decades, Descartes was in the first place concerned with a set of purposes having to do with his dualism and his mechanical conception of the physical world, and the role of the senses; the skeptical argument served a subsidiary role (see Wilson 1978: esp. 1–11; and, for a more recent source, Hatfield 2003: ch. 1).
When we focus on Descartes’ attempt to defeat the skeptic, it may seem natural to read him as committing himself to a type of transparency in Meditation II: self-ascriptions of particular thoughts escape the strong skeptical arguments, and so (or because) they are infallible, or incorrigible, or indubitable. I will argue, however, that the escape from skepticism neither relies on nor generates a commitment to transparency. When one focuses on the metaphysics, it is less obviously tempting to attribute such a commitment to Descartes. It is true that sometimes his dualism has been seen as intimately connected to transparency on the ground that what for Descartes distinguishes the mental from the physical is its special epistemic status (Ryle 1960: 13–15; Rorty 1980: 54–9; McDowell 1986). But his principal argument for dualism, which relies on the treatment of the mind in Meditation II, does not appeal to anything like transparency and the extensive literature on the argument reflects this fact (Wilson 1978: 185–201; Shoemaker 1983; Rozemond 1998: ch. 1).

The idea of transparency of the mental comprehends various forms of knowledge, not all of which will be at issue here. I will focus on the possibility of error about occurrent mental states. When we consider the issue of latent mental items, it is easy to see that it is quite implausible that Descartes would be committed to full-fledged transparency: he was an innatist, and clearly thought that we all have various innate ideas of which we are not aware, or whose content we do not know. We all have innate ideas of God, the mind, the nature of body, mathematics. And he thinks that we can be confused about the contents of these ideas. Indeed, part of his undertaking in the Meditations is to render these ideas clear and distinct, and this can take a lot of work.

It is useful to distinguish between two types of special knowledge about occurrent mental states that have been attributed to Descartes, although they are not the only ones: (a) when I think I am in a particular mental state, I am in that state. Such judgments are certain. Scholars have used subtly different epistemic notions – infallibility, incorrigibility, indubitability. I will speak of indubitability. (b) The other claim is roughly the converse: when I am in a particular mental state, I cannot fail to know this: I am, one might say, omniscient about my mental states. Descartes’ definition of thought in terms of consciousness has been thought to imply this thesis (for criticism of this idea, see Radner 1988: 447, 449). The discussion of the mental in Meditation II raises the question of whether, for Descartes, our self-ascriptions of mental states have special status of type (a), and I will focus on this question.

In Meditation II, Descartes uses the method of doubt to develop his notion of the self, in effect, the mind, in three stages: (1) he knows that he exists, the result of the cogito, although not all interpreters think that Descartes relies on the cogito here (Broughton 2002: 109–19); (2) he is a thinking thing; (3) thinking includes a wide range of activities that belong to him. And as we saw, at this last stage he focuses on an aspect of sensing about which he thinks this is true.
We can see relatively quickly that the first and second stages of self-exploration do not commit Descartes to transparency. He does sometimes write as if the *cogito* relies on full-blown self-reports, reports that specify the contents of thoughts – I think I am seeing, I think I am walking – (*Principles I*, art. 9, *Fifth Replies*, AT vii, 352). This would seem to imply that we are certain that such specific self-reports must be certain, indubitable, or else they could not serve as the foundation for the certainty of one’s own existence. But philosophically speaking all one needs is the generic claim “I think,” and on one occasion Descartes himself suggests as much. He rejects the idea that one could infer one’s own existence from the observation that one is breathing. One must start with the premise that one thinks that one is breathing:

> For the thought of breathing is present to our mind before the thought of our existing, and we cannot doubt that we have it while we have it. To say: “I am breathing therefore I exist” in this sense, is simply to say “I think, therefore I exist.” *If you pay attention, you will find that all the other propositions from which we can thus prove our existence, reduce to this same one* [reviennent à cela même] . . . (To Reneri for Pollot, April or May 1638, AT ii, 37–8, emphasis added)

At the next stage in Meditation II, Descartes turns to the question of what he is, and he throws out everything from his old conception of himself to retain only thinking: “I am therefore precisely only [præcise tantum] a thinking thing, that is, a mind, intelligence, intellect or reason, words whose significance was previously unknown to me. I am a thing that is real and that really exists; what kind of thing? I have said it: a thinking thing” (AT vii, 27). At this stage, again, little or no transparency could be at stake, since here too Descartes makes a generic claim, the claim that he is certain that he thinks: he is not claiming that he knows what particular mental state(s) he is in.

Up to this point, then, Descartes’ argumentation does not rely on or imply transparency. But matters are more complicated at the third stage of self-exploration, the stage where he defends his fuller list of what counts as thought, which includes imagination and sense perception. One might think that, in particular, his discussion of sense perception here commits Descartes to the general indubitability of specific self-reports. I will question this interpretation from four different angles.

1. On various occasions in his writings Descartes allows for errors about one’s own mental states:

> For experience shows that those who are the most strongly agitated by their passions are not those who know them best, and that the passions are to be numbered among the perceptions which the close alliance of mind and body renders confused and obscure. (*Passions* I. 28)
I thought too that in order to discover what opinions [the most sensible among us] really held I had to attend to what they did rather than what they said. For as a result of our declining morals, few people are willing to say everything that they believe; and besides, many people do not know themselves what they believe, since believing something and knowing that one believes it are different acts of thinking, and the one often occurs without the other. (Discourse on Method, AT vi, 23)

What is this wax, which is perceived only by the mind? It is of course the same wax which I see, which I touch, which I imagine, finally it is the same wax which I thought it to be from the start. And yet, and this is what must be pointed out, the perception I have of it is a case not of vision or touch or imagination – nor has it ever been, although it seemed to be so before. It is an inspection of the mind alone, which can be imperfect and confused as it was before, or clear and distinct, as it is now, depending on how carefully I attend to what it consists in. (Meditations, AT vii, 31, emphasis added)

And when the body was affected by nothing very beneficial or harmful, [the mind] had various sensations corresponding to the diversity of the parts in which and to the ways in which it was affected, namely what we call the sensations of flavors, odors, sounds, heat, cold, light, colors and the like, which do not represent anything posited outside our thought. And at the same time it perceived also sizes, shapes, motions, and such. These were exhibited to it not as sensations, but as certain things, or modes of things existing outside our thought, or as at least capable of so existing, even if it did not yet notice this difference between them. And next, when the mechanism of the body which is so constructed by nature that it can move in various ways by its own power, twisting around heedlessly seeking what is beneficial or fleeing what is harmful, the mind attached to it began to notice that what it thus sought or fled is outside it. And it attributed to it not only sizes, shapes, motions and the like, which it perceived as things or modes of things, but also flavors, odors and such, of which it noticed that sensation was produced in itself by that very thing \( ab ipso \). (Principles I, art. 71)

The first two quotes contain commonsensical comments about our capacity for errors about our passions and beliefs. In a more theoretical vein, in the third quote Descartes argues that we all make mistakes starting in childhood about whether we now call primary and secondary qualities are presented to us in our minds in the same way. But perhaps particularly relevant is the wax passage, which occurs in Meditation II itself.

Descartes gradually reveals a clear and distinct perception of the wax. He takes a piece of wax and brings it closer to the fire. Initially, he describes it in terms of the qualities we attribute to it on the basis of sense perception, such as its (current) scent, color, shape, size. Then he brings it closer to the fire, and notes that these qualities change: “it loses its residual flavor, its smell disappears, its color changes, its shape is lost, its size increases, it becomes liquid, warm, it can hardly be touched, and when you strike it, it no longer emits any sound” (AT vii, 30). Yet he thinks it is still the same piece of wax. Some perception of it other than the sensory one
must underlie that judgment. After eliminating the possibility that it was the imagination that provided this perception, Descartes concludes that it is an intellectual perception of the wax as extended, flexible, and changeable that made us judge that it was numerically the same through its change in appearance. And this is not a case of revealing an idea that was merely latent until it has been clarified. From the beginning, we had a certain conception of the wax that we relied on to identify it as the same through its changes in appearance, even though we were initially confused about its content and about what faculty was its source.

Descartes’ more theoretical remarks in the Principles and in the wax passage strike me as the more relevant ones. For, whether or not sometimes Descartes may look like he believes in transparency, the more interesting question is whether his philosophical system and argumentation involve real dependence on and commitment to transparency. Given his denial of transparency elsewhere in his writings, we may now ask ourselves whether his treatment of sense perception in the third stage of self-exploration in Meditation II commits him to indubitability of our self-reports.

(2) Let us first turn to the metaphysical purposes Descartes has in mind. In this third stage of self-exploration he is preparing the way for his mind–body dualism, but he is focused on what exactly is included in the mental rather than on the claim that the mind is distinct from the body. And he is developing a conception of the mind different from the Aristotelian scholastic one, by including sense perception, or rather, an aspect of sense perception: full-blown sense perception also contains a bodily component. So he is trying to isolate that aspect of sense perception. Now does doing so require or imply transparency? I do not think so.

To begin with, the doubts in Meditation II that Descartes reiterates are doubts about body. Already at the end of Meditation I, that is his focus (AT vii, 22–5). And to assign sense perception proper to the mind, it is enough if doubts about body do not generate doubts about sensing proper. That much is sufficient to generate the conceptual distinction and independence between the mental and the physical. This conceptual separation is important for Descartes’ principal argument for dualism (although how he uses the distinction is a complex matter): in Meditation VI he arrives at dualism on the ground that he has a clear and distinct idea of himself as a thinking, unextended thing, and of body as an extended thing that does not think (AT vii, 78). And it underlies Descartes’ view that sense perceptions are modes of the mind and not of the body. In the technical terminology of the Principles, a mode presupposes – ontologically and epistemologically – the attribute of the substance it pertains to (Principles I. arts 53, 61), and so this part of Meditation II supports the idea that (an aspect of) sense perception belongs to the mind, rather than the body. It is enough for these purposes if I am certain that I have some sort of sensation while doubting the existence of body. I may be unclear or mistaken about what exactly it is I am sensing, but what matters is that I seem to sense something. This leaves open the possibility that I can doubt
whether what I seem to feel is an itch or a pain. There is a sense in which there is no appearance–reality distinction: when I have a particular sensation, I am directly conscious of it. But I may have trouble analyzing, labeling, making a judgment about my mental state. If I think you are putting a knife to my throat, I may mistake a sensation of cold for the pain caused by a cut.

This point may help address the following objection. In the argument under discussion, Descartes claims that he is certain that he seems to sense something, but in the wax passage he suggests that we can be mistaken about what faculty is responsible for a particular perception. This point raises the whole question of just what sorts of errors Descartes does and does not envision we can make about our thoughts. I cannot offer a full treatment of that question here; my current focus is on the question of what emerges from the use of the doubt in Meditation II. When Descartes carves out the mental aspect of sensation he is only focused on arguing that doubts about body do not generate doubts about my seeming to sense. The discussion in the wax passage, on the other hand, implies a possibility of error about our mental states that has nothing to do with doubts about body.

This approach may well leave one with the following worry: if Descartes only applies the doubts to the existence of body, is he not limiting the force of his own skeptical arguments in an illegitimate fashion? Perhaps so, but it does not follow that we should understand his line of reasoning as implying transparency after all. This objection amounts to a philosophical criticism of Descartes’ use of the skeptical arguments, but it leaves standing the claim that his use of these arguments here does not imply transparency.

(3) Before further addressing this last point, it is important to consider the examples of sense perception Descartes uses: seeing light, hearing sound, feeling heat. These examples correspond to what in the Aristotelian tradition were known as proper sensibles. A proper sensible is an object of sense that is perceived by only one sensory faculty: light or color by sight, sound by hearing, heat by touch. Aristotle had claimed that the senses do not err about their proper sensibles but they do err about so-called accidental sensibles. In the Latin translation of Moerbeke, which Aquinas used (see Aquinas 1948), the relevant passage reads: “[E]ach sense judges about its proper sensibles, and is not deceived; sight is not deceived that there is color, hearing that there is a sound. But they can be deceived about what is colored or where it is, or what makes the sound (Aristotle, De anima, II. 6 15–17). This view can also be found among the Aristotelian scholastics. In his commentary on Aristotle’s De anima, Aquinas writes that each of the external senses “judges about its proper sensibles and is not deceived about them; thus sight is not deceived that there is color, hearing that there is a sound. But they can be deceived deceived about sound” (Aquinas 1948: n. 384). In the Summa, he offers more detail and introduces a caveat. He writes that the senses are never deceived about the proper sensibles except “per accidens”: “from the impediment of an organ as when the taste of a person with a fever judges that sweet things are bitter because the tongue is full of bad humors” (Aquinas 1964: I. 85. 6).
In his *De anima*, Francisco Suárez acknowledges the possibility of mistakes in specific judgments about proper sensibles: thus we can be mistaken in thinking we see a particular color. But he is optimistic about generic claims: “A sensory power cannot be mistaken about its own proper adequate sensible [*circa sensibile proprium adaequatum*]; so sight cannot be mistaken when it judges that something is colored, nor hearing when it judges that there is a sound” (Suárez 1856: III. X. 2; see also Aquinas 1964: I. 85. 6). So sight cannot be mistaken about sensing color, but it can be mistaken about what particular color is present. In addition, Suárez readily agrees with Aristotle that the senses can make mistakes about so-called accidental sensibles: the things that have colors, make sound.

Now it is hard to imagine that Descartes did not choose his examples – seeing light, hearing sound, feeling heat – deliberately, given that they are instances of proper sensibles. The examples vary in how specific they are: sensing heat is more specific than hearing noise [*strepitum*], although perhaps Descartes had in mind sensing temperature. And he speaks of seeing light, whereas the Aristotelians tended to focus on color in their discussion of sense perceptions that cannot be mistaken. But this difference may be explained as follows. Another relevant notion in this context was the notion of the adequate object of a sensory power, the object that the sensory power is suitable to know. And the Aristotelians asked themselves what is the adequate object of sight: light or color (Suárez 1856: III. XVI. 1)? Suárez opts for light, offering a complex discussion about the nature of the relationship between light and color (Suárez 1856: III. XVI. 6). And in favor of the certainty of sensory judgments about proper sensibles, he cites the argument that a sensory power cannot be wrong about its *adequate* object. So in light of this consideration (certain kinds of) judgments about either color or light would seem to be immune to error.

So it seems significant that Descartes does not suggest that you can be certain that, say, you seem to see a red garment or seem to hear the sound of the crackling fire. I imagine what he had in mind was this: you might think that you cannot be mistaken in thinking that you see light etc., the most certain type of sensory judgments as an Aristotelian would have it. But what if you are dreaming or some very powerful being makes you believe in a physical world that does not exist? This suggests instead that all you might be incapable of making a mistake about is that you *seem* to be seeing light, hearing noise, and feeling heat.

This approach offers a very different perspective on what Descartes is up to from the usual kind of perspective. The usual perspective holds that he is striking for holding a strong *positive* view about the level of certainty of a particular type of knowledge, our knowledge about our own mental states. But we can now see that Descartes’ retreat from certainty that “I see light, hear noise, feel heat” to “I seem to see, hear, become warm” means that in relation to the Aristotelian background he is *limiting* the range of certainty. Furthermore, we cannot assume that Descartes would be willing to generalize from the certainty of our judgments about perceptions of proper sensibles, which from the point of view of the
Aristotelian tradition were privileged, to certainty for all claims about what we seem to sense (or otherwise think or experience). Indeed, his allowance for error about our mental states in other contexts suggests not.

(4) Finally, how should we understand Descartes’ discussion of self-reports in Meditation II in light of his aim to respond to skepticism? This question requires us to consider why for him the self-reports escape the doubt. On one possible view, defended recently by Janet Broughton (2002: 131–43), Descartes concludes that our self-reports are indubitable on the ground that they are conditions for the possibility of doubt. So reflection on the doubt reveals that using it presupposes that we can ascribe various thoughts to ourselves: the very skeptical scenarios, the dream scenario, the deceiver hypothesis require this.

Now it seems true that in order to make sense of the doubts of Meditation I, I must assume self-reports. The coherence of the skeptical scenarios – the possibility that I am dreaming or that a demon deceives me – requires that I seem to have sensory experiences. But does it now follow that the details of such self-reports, the details of what exactly we seem to sense, cannot be subject to error or doubt? I do not see why this should be so. And so, on this approach, only quite a narrow range of self-reports emerges as indubitable, and a rather weak version of transparency emerges, a version so weak that it seems to me that not enough is left to warrant the label “transparency.”

On another approach, the certainty of one’s self-reports emerges in a different way: Descartes simply finds that it is impossible to make mistakes about them and that is why they escape the skeptical doubt (Wilson 1978: 152; Rorty 1980: 54–9). But his claims elsewhere to the effect that we do make mistakes about our thoughts suggest otherwise: the possibility of such mistakes suggests that our self-reports are dubitable (especially since in Meditation I he had suggested that we doubt our mathematical judgments on the ground that we make mistakes in them). What should we make of all this?

At this point, I propose that we ask ourselves the following question: we may be inclined to approach Descartes either assuming that he was committed to some version of transparency about the mental or asking the question of whether he was. But was this question on Descartes’ mind? Furthermore, one way to take his treatment of self-reports in Meditation II is that he applies the skeptical doubts to them and thinks they are immune to the doubts. But another way to look at the matter is that Descartes simply does not give “the Deceiver Hypothesis the full force that seems, logically, to be implicit in it” (Wilson 1978: 152). And I think this approach makes it easier to make sense of his various comments on errors about the mental. As we saw before, in Meditation II Descartes’ focus is on the doubts about body, and I suggest that he did not really apply the doubts to self-reports; he did not seriously consider the possibility of deception about them by the deceiver. We may see this as a philosophical shortcoming. But here it is relevant again that from an Aristotelian point of view he has already enlarged the realm of doubt quite far by narrowing the scope of certainty with respect to
sensory judgments from judgments that we perceive proper sensibles to judgments to the effect that we seem to perceive them.

This suggestion brings us back to the question of what Descartes’ focus was: a preoccupation with skepticism and certainty or with other metaphysical and epistemological purposes, such as his campaign against the senses, a defense of his dualism and his conception of the physical world? The latter perspective fits more comfortably with the suggestion that he failed to give the skeptical arguments their full force. This failure is more understandable if he engages with skepticism primarily not for its own sake, but in view of other purposes. His discussion of the range of operations that he wishes to include under the category of thought in Meditation II is surely aimed at developing his dualism and from the perspective I am proposing this is his primary aim rather than the refutation of skepticism.

Let us take stock of the results of our discussion. There are several reasons for doubting that Descartes is committing himself to indubitability for our judgments about our mental states in the third stage of self-exploration in Meditation II. First, elsewhere he allows for mistakes in such judgments. Furthermore, Descartes is focused on the idea that such claims are unaffected by the doubts about body, which point is important for his dualism. But this does not mean that they are utterly certain and indubitable. In addition, he limits his claims of certainty here to a narrow range of examples. Finally, even his concerns with skepticism do not clearly commit him to transparency, and I have suggested that in fact he did not really apply the skeptical arguments to self-reports.

So what was his view about one’s knowledge of one’s own mind? I cannot fully address this question here. But if it is true that he did not really apply the skeptical arguments to self-reports, we should examine this question outside of a discussion of his treatment of skepticism.

**Conclusion**

There is ample reason to think that Descartes did not see transparency as the mark of the mental; he did not develop his novel conception of the mind by assigning to it all those types of human functions to which transparency applies. We might then ask why Descartes offered his particular conception of the mental. In order to answer this question we need to turn to his well-known preoccupation with mechanistic science. Doing so does not yield an explicit argument from Descartes for his particular conception of the mental, but it does explain from within his system why he adopted this conception.

Descartes developed a conception of the physical world as purely mechanical in nature, thus making it safe for his view that all physical phenomena can be explained mechanistically. He eliminated other types of entities from the physical world, arguing that they involve a projection of the mental onto the physical. Thus he eliminated Aristotelian substantial forms (claiming that the human soul is the
only one: AT iii, 503, 505) and real qualities from the physical world, and cleared out secondary qualities, which he called sensible qualities. The latter category is particularly relevant for our purposes: qualities like color, flavor, smell, sound, hot, cold. The true story about these, for Descartes, is that configurations of mechanical qualities in bodies produce the sensations as of these qualities in our minds. The common-sense view, which the Aristotelians shared, that these qualities as we perceive them really exist in the physical world is the result of the projection of sensations onto the physical world. As we saw him saying above at Principles I, art. 71, we wrongly assimilate our sensation of such qualities to our perceptions of mechanical qualities, and thus erroneously think they pertain to physical objects. In the Meditations he cures the problem as follows. When he argues in Meditation VI that the physical world does exist, he only concludes that it exists insofar as it has mechanical qualities, types of qualities we perceive clearly and distinctly. Sensible qualities we only perceive obscurely and confusedly, he argues in Meditation III (AT vii, 43–4), and he refuses to attribute them to bodies (AT vii, 80–3). They are left with the status of sensations.

But now it is important that sensations pertain to the mind, rather than the body. For consider, for contrast, the Aristotelian view: on that view, in sensation so-called species, likenesses, of sensible qualities occur in the ensouled body. When I see a red vase, its redness transmits to the sensing subject a likeness of itself, which is a special form of existence of redness. Such species come to exist in the sense organs, and they are non-mechanical. Descartes’ mechanistic conception of the human body leaves no room for such entities. But we do have the experience as of something red, or the smell of roses, or the taste of wine. And we have what Descartes calls internal sensations, sensations of what occurs in our own body: pains and tickles, hunger and thirst. They all wind up in the mind without, in his words, resembling what occurs in the physical world (Meditation VI, AT vii, 83, and The World ch.1). In this way, his conception of the mind as including sensations (as well as other non-intellectual states) contributes to the purely mechanical conception of the physical world, including the human body.

In sum, Descartes’ peculiar brand of dualism, his peculiar way of drawing the boundary between the mental and the physical, which underlies the modern conception of the mind, derives from a commitment to mechanical philosophy rather than from an interest in transparency.