**Locke and Descartes on Unavoidable Thoughts of Essence**

# Two Lockean Objections

I want to look at two Lockean criticisms of Descartes’s epistemology of essence that haven’t attracted commentary and which are mysterious without it.[[1]](#footnote-1) Most of Locke’s arguments that the essence of body isn’t extension aim at showing the conceivability of a vacuum,[[2]](#footnote-2) but these two criticisms target the assumptions behind Descartes’s general approach to essence.

The criticisms aren’t great. Considered on their own terms, they’re not entirely persuasive. Considered as a criticism of Descartes, Locke hasn’t described the targetted view accurately. Still, if we pull at the seemingly loose thread of understanding these arguments, we can track it back to a deeper understanding of the disagreements between Locke and Descartes on epistemology. My main goal is to sketch Descartes’s view of the role of knowledge of essence, and I’ll bookend this account with a discussion of Locke’s rejection of that view. Locke misunderstands his Cartesian target out of a lack of sympathy. Essence doesn’t play the same role in Locke’s epistemology.

The Locke’s criticism occurs in section 24 of the *Essay’*schapter on the simple modes of space*.* He addresses “those, who conclude the essence of Body to be *Extension,* because, they say, they cannot imagine any sensible Quality of any Body without Extension.” To them he writes,

I shall desire them to consider, That had they reflected on their *Ideas* of Tastes and Smells, as much as on those of Sight and Touch; nay had they examined their *Ideas* of Hunger and Thirst, and several other Pains, they would have found, that they included in them no *Idea* of Extension at all. (*Essay* 2.13.24)[[3]](#footnote-3)

We can consider the taste and smell of food without considering its extension, according to Locke. Since extension isn’t privileged by being unavoidably attached to our thoughts of every quality of each body, we should conclude that it “is but an affection of Body, as well as the rest discoverable by our Senses, which are scarce acute enough to look into the pure Essences of things” (*Essay* 2.13.24).

Locke is attributing the following principle to his Cartesian opponents: whenever you think of a quality of a substance, you also think of the essence of the substance.Call this principle ‘The Necessity of Unavoidability for Essence.’ From the premise that you can think food as tasty and smelling good without thinking of it as extended,it would follow, if this principle were true, that extension is not the essence of any piece of food.

Locke believes that we can think of sensible qualities of bodies without thinking of the bodies as extended. Ideas of taste, smell, hunger, thirst, and other pains are supposed illustrate that point. The examples are a little puzzling coming from Locke. He himself emphasizes the importance of distinguishing ideas and qualities, that is, in distinguishing perceptions in the mind and powers outside the mind (*Essay* 2.8.7). In thinking about how these examples are supposed to work against the Cartesian thesis that the essence of body is extension, it’s best to heed that advice. Locke asserts elsewhere that pains are “only different Constitutions of the Mind” (*Essay* 2.20.2), but the point of the exercise is to show that it’s possible to consider the sensible *qualities* of bodies without considering their extension.

Indeed, as Jennifer Marušić (2) observes, Locke goes on to remark that hunger and thirst include no idea of extension, which one might have thought could go without saying and which doesn’t seem relevant to the question of whether we can conceive of bodies without thinking of them as extended. Locke goes on to say that extension “is but an affection of Body, as well as the rest discoverable by our Senses, which are scarce acute enough to look into the pure Essences of Things” (*Essay* 2.13.24).

Marušić (4-5) and Matthew Stuart (3) both argue that the point of the section is about phenomenology: smell and taste don’t (Locke thinks) present bodies as extended, and this is part of a diagnosis of how Cartesians get things wrong about the essence of body: they emphasize sight and touch at the expense of smell and taste. That much is certainly going on. Locke writes, “the readiness of Extension to make it self be taken notice of so constantly with other *Ideas,* has been the occasion, I guess, that some have made the whole essence of *Body,* to consist in Extension” (2.13.14). But Marušić (2) and Stuart go on to deny what I want to affirm, that Locke is attacking the premise that we can’t imagine sensible qualities of things without extension. Stuart (2-3) cites *Essay* 2.8.9, where Locke argues “the mind finds” primary qualities “inseparable from every particle of matter, though less than to make it self singly be perceived by our Senses.” I think Locke’s point in 2.8.9 is not that every time we think of a quality that turns out to inhere in a material thing, we inevitably think of extension. Rather, I think his point there is that, when we consider the topic, we realize that extension can’t be removed from matter through pounding or other natural means.[[4]](#footnote-4)

I grant that Locke thinks that the idea of extension is part of the idea of matter, and thus that when we think of a material thing as a material thing, we think of it as extended. But he doesn’t think that we have to think about the physical causes of our ideas in that way. In 2.13.14 Locke wants to show that those who think that we can’t conceive of sensible qualities of bodies without thinking of extension are mistaken, since we can think of them as tasty or odorous without the idea of extension occurring to us.

Let us distinguish between the sensations of sweet, acrid, hunger, thirst, and pain, on the one hand, from sweeteners, caustics, appetizers, the parching, and the painful on the other. That is, let us distinguish the ideas that he mentions and the powers to produce those ideas. According to Locke, we can think of the things that have the powers to produce ideas of hunger and the smell of bread in us without conceiving of those things as extended. If we can, then, if the *Necessity of Unavoidability for Essence* were true,it would follow that the essence of those bodies isn’t extension.Well, can we?

This may seem like a psychological question that everyone may test for themselves. You might try to think of food without thinking of its extension and succeed straightaway. Or you might try it and find the idea of extension sneaking around the corner. I bet different people will give different answers and the same person might give different answers at different times. There’s variation in this kind of introspection, both between individuals and also over time. I don’t myself find much difficulty in thinking of extended things without thinking of their extension, but others may find it impossible.

Locke offers a second criticism of appealing to unavoidable thoughts as a method of discovering the essence of things*.* He writes,

If those *Ideas,* which are constantly joined to all others, must therefore be concluded to be the Essence of those Things, which have constantly those *Ideas* joined to them, and are inseparable from them; then Unity is without doubt the essence of every thing. For there is not any Object of Sensation or Reflection, which does not carry with it the *Idea* of one (*Essay* 2.13.25)

Since we think of everything as being one, it would follow from Descartes’s principles that unity is the essence of everything, and, according to Locke, that’s absurd.

Locke doesn’t attribute the *Necessity of Unavoidability for Essence* to the Cartesians here*,* but rather to its complement: It’s a sufficient condition for an attribute’s being the essence of a thing that whenever you think of that thing, you think of that attribute. (Call this, ‘the Sufficiency of Unavoidability for Essence.’) He argues that since we can’t help but think of everything as one, if this principlewere true, it would follow that unity is the essence of each thing. He assumes that his readers will reject the conclusion that unity is the essence of each thing, and thus reject theprinciple for entailing it. He offers this as another example to show “the weakness of this kind of Argument” (*Essay* 2.13.25.).

Is it true that the idea of unity is inescapably joined to our thoughts of everything? Can you think of something as extended without thinking of it as one thing having extension? Well, try. Consider the nearest table without thinking of it as *one* table. Did you succeed? You might reasonably complain that this is a trick question, like asking you not to think of an elephant. Normally, it’s easy to not think of unity. It’s only in the special context where you’re asked to not think of unity that the appearance of a problem arises. I don’t think that the revised version of Locke’s argument works, since, if we haven’t been specially primed, we can think of things without considering their unity.

# Descartes’s True View

In Book 2, Chapter 13 of the *Essay* Locke argues against the doctrine that “Body and Extension are the same thing” (*Essay* 2.13.11). He argues along multiple dimensions, beginning with an enunciation of the ideas that Locke associates with the words ‘body’ and ‘extension’ and observing that these are distinct (*Essay* 2.13.11-14). The arguments that I’m discussing aren’t making that point. Locke doesn’t deny that the idea of extension is part of the idea of body and he doesn’t believe that the idea of unity is part of every nominal essence. His premises are that we can think of the tastes and smells of bodies without thinking of their extension and that the idea of unity accompanies every other idea. The point of the premises is not to establish anything about nominal essences, but to undermine the principles that his foes use to establish their conclusion. His opponents, apparently, appeal to the principle that thoughts of essence invariably accompany our thoughts of objects.

Descartes comes closest to asserting the principles that Locke attributes to him in section 53 of Part 1 of the *Principles of Philosophy*. There, Descartes identifies the principal attribute of a substance with its essence: “a substance is indeed known through any attribute you please; but each substance still has one principal property which constitutes its very nature and essence and to which all the other properties are referred” (*PP* 1.53). The examples at the end of the section reveal a principle that Descartes believes will allow us to find these attributes: if a substance is G and has a principal attribute F, you can’t understand that the substance has the mode G, unless you think of it as being in a F-thing: “Thus, for example, figure can only be understood in an extended thing, nor can motion be understood except in extended space; and neither imagination, nor sense, nor will can be understood except in a thinking thing (*PP* 1.53; Rozemond 8-9). When you understand a substance as being G, you need to consider it as being in a substance that is F, where F is the essence of the substance.

In addition to the necessity of referring other properties to the essence of a substance, Descartes makes a complementary claim that our thoughts of essence don’t need to be supplemented by ideas of anything else. That is to say, essences are unlike modes in that thinking of the essence of a substance doesn’t require thinking of any other properties: “extension can be understood without figure or motion, and thought without imagination or sense, and so on for the rest” (*PP* 1.53). We can think of substances as extended or thinking without needing to think of any further properties.

A contrast with Descartes’s treatment of ‘conceptual distinction’ (*distinctio rationis*) is illuminating here. According to him, a conceptual distinction is one that obtains between a substance and one of its attributes or between two of its attributes (*PP* 1.62). (In this context, an ‘attribute’ is an unchanging quality of a substance.) The criterion for there being only a conceptual distinction between substance and attribute is “that we can’t form a clear and distinct idea of this very substance, if we exclude that attribute from it” (*PP* 1.62). So, for example, a substance’s duration and the substance itself are only conceptually distinct, since you can’t form a clear and distinct idea of the substance while excluding its duration (*PP* 1.62; Nolan 131-32). He also says that there’s merely a conceptual distinction between “modes of thought which we consider as being in objects” and the objects, which is a reference to his earlier treatment of time, number, and other universals as being that sort of mode (*PP* 1.57-58).

The examples Descartes gives of merely conceptually distinct attributes aren’t the principal attributes of substances. He believes each simple substance has only one essence, that finite substances can be understood though those essences, that the essence of souls is thinking, and the essence of bodies is extension (*PP* 1.53, CSM 1.298=AT 8B 349-50; Rozemond 24-28). Thought duration is merely conceptually distinct from souls and bodies, it isn’t the essence of either.

Descartes isn’t contradicting himself. Not being able to exclude an attribute is a weaker condition than being forced to refer toan attribute*.* For example, our inability to think of a durationless Fido doesn’t entail that every time we think of Fido, we must consider his duration.

Given the apparatus of merely conceptual distinctions, we can guess how Descartes might reply to Locke’s argument that, given Cartesian assumptions, unity ought to be the essence of everything. Descartes would grant that unity isn’t the essence of anything, since doesn’t do the explanatory or taxonomic work that either Descartes or Locke wants from essences. Knowing that a thing is one tells you very little about it, nor does it separate tightly unified things off from other more diverse objects. Descartes would also grant that everything participates in unity (CSM 1.63=AT 10.449-50). But he would deny that each time we think of a thing, we think of it as being one, even though it might be true that we can’t clearly conceive of a thing if we exclude unity from that thing. After all, according to him, we can think of a thing as extended without thinking of any of its other properties. Thus, for him, a thing’s unity is merely conceptually distinct from the thing; that is, we can’t form a clear and distinct idea of a thing while excluding its unity.[[5]](#footnote-5) So, Descartes isn’t committed to thinking that unity is the principal attribute of anything.

In sections 24 and 25 of the *Essay’s* chapter on our ideas of extension, Locke attributes to his Cartesian opponents the doctrines that every time we think of a substance, we unavoidably think of its essence and that every unavoidable thought of a thing constitutes its essence. In *Principles* 1.53, Descartes asserts that thinking of a substance through its principle attribute is necessary and sufficient for understanding the substance, where understanding gives us a better cognitive hold on a thing than merely thinking of it. These are different, since thinking of a thing is easier than understanding it. This gap between thought and understanding constitutes the widest gap between the principles that Locke attributes to his Cartesian opponents and what Descartes himself actually asserts in the *Principles of Philosophy.*

Descartes doesn’t suppose that any old cognition of a thing requires thinking of its essence. Instead, thinking of essence is a precondition for what ‘is known’ and for ‘being understood’ (‘*cognoscitur*’ and ‘*intelligi’ PP* 1.53). *Principles of Philosophy* 1.53 gives a necessary condition on understanding a substance, and understanding is a relatively high cognitive level for Descartes. He denies that our indirect and relative judgment that something produces a sensation in us makes the grade.

So, for example, Descartes’s recommended analysis of color perception is “we perceive something in objects although we don’t in fact know what it is, but it produces in us a very manifest and perspicuous sensation called the sensation of color” (*PP* 1.70). Visible color and shape both make us certain of the presence of a body, “but we still recognize much more evidently what being figured is in a body than what being colored is” (*PP* 1.69; Downing 2011: 118-28). Even though sensations of color and shape are sure indications of an external body, we comprehend the extension of bodies more clearly than their colors, and that clarity is needed for understanding.

When Descartes says that our understanding of bodies is always accompanied by a thought of extension, he doesn’t mean that everyone thinks of each body like a geometer. We may be able to think of a certain body as Uncle Greg’s favorite dessert, but for Descartes that kind of conception doesn’t bring understanding in the way that thinking of a cookie as a determination of extension does.

Indeed, along a certain dimension, Locke himself wouldn’t suppose that we get the best cognition of a piece of bread by smelling and tasting it. He argues that the idea of yellowness is “not really in the Gold, considered barely in itself” (*Essay* 2.23.37) and that an idea of a primary quality is “an *Idea* of the thing, as it is in it self” (*Essay* 2.8.23). He is happy to say that ideas of secondary qualities only give us a relative and indirect grasp of substances. If we restrict the level of understanding involved in the *Necessity of Unavoidability for Essence* to cases where we have some grip on substances as they are in themselves, then ideas of secondary qualities don’t provide counterexamples, even by Locke’s own lights.

# The Order of Inquiry Principle

Descartes thinks that the best kind of knowledge requires knowledge of essence, and Locke does not. Here, Descartes is the traditionalist. The doctrine that knowledge of essence is required for the best kind of cognition goes back to the origin of the concept of essence.

In the dialogues that seem to reflect his conversational practice, Socrates moves his interlocutors away from such questions as ‘is it pious to prosecute one’s father for murder?’ and ‘does learning to fight in armor make boys courageous?’ to ‘what is piety?’ and ‘what is courage?’. Plato has Socrates ask, “If I do not know what something is, how could I know what qualities it possesses?” (*Meno* 71b). According to Socrates, until you can give an account of a thing, you can’t know anything else about it. Until you can give a unitary definition, a definition offering necessary and sufficient conditions in terms that are more fundamental than the thing that’s supposed to be defined, then you can’t have any knowledge about that thing at all. Aristotle seems to assume that real, non-incidental knowledge requires knowledge of essence, and thus, knowing that something exists requires knowing its essence: “insofar as we know incidentally that something exists, we don’t get it at all from the essence, for we don’t even know that it exists” (*Post. An.* 93a24-26).

Though Plato and Aristotle agree that essence is required for the best cognition of a thing, they don’t suppose that you need to know the essence of a thing to think of it at all. In the *Meno,* Plato distinguishes between knowledge, which requires an account, and true opinion, which doesn’t. True opinion is a useful guide for behavior, but it isn’t stable, and it can’t be taught (*Meno* 97e-99b). So, for example, Pericles stumbled upon true opinions about virtue without having an account of its essence (99b-c). He can lead Athens but he can’t teach his sons to be virtuous (94a-b, 99b). Aristotle allows that we may have incidental knowledge of a thing when we grasp it under a non-essential description, even if we don’t know the thing’s essence (*Post. An.* 93a24-26).[[6]](#footnote-6)

We might reasonably worry that the *Order of Inquiry Principle* flirts with tautology if we make the relevant sort of valuable cognition into a belief about a thing with an awareness of its essence. If the that’s the relevant kind of cognition, then the principlewill be true, but it’s not clear that we’ve learned anything interesting from the exercise. If the *Order of Inquiry Principle* amounts to saying that you can’t know the essence of a thing without knowing the essence of a thing, then it doesn’t amount to much.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The *Order of Inquiry Principle* gains weight by being supplemented by an concrete account of how to acquire the best sort of cognition and by a concrete account of what essences are. Judging by the *Apology,* the historical Socrates never reaches the point where he thinks that he can give accounts of the virtues. Judging by the *Republic,* Plato thinks that the best recipe for grasping the forms was a mixture of music, gymnastics, communism, and dialectic. Judging by the *Republic* and the *Phaedo,* essences are real beings existing out of the world of becoming which we might hope to encounter in between lives. Aristotle thinks that sensation leads to memory, which leads to experience, which leads to the formation of universals, and to a knowledgeable grasp of those universals (*Post. An.* 2.19).[[8]](#footnote-8) Aristotelian essences are arrangements of matter that give rise to substances (*Met.* 8.2) and in living things they are internal principles of motion and rest (*Phys.* 2.1).

For Descartes, the relevant sort of knowledge at issue is Cartesian certitude. For corporeal substance, this amounts to mathematics and applied mathematics, especially when supplemented by a proof of the existence of God and a vindication of clear and distinct perception. For thinking substances, it amounts to the *cogito* and other possible objects of subjective certainty, again supplemented by a vindication of clear and distinct perception.

In Part 2 of the *Discourse,* Descartes claims that when he came to consider algebra and geometry as part of his project of establishing the sciences on firm foundation, he found algebra treated abstract matters which have no use and geometry was a discipline so closely tied to figures that it tires the imagination (CSM 1.119=AT 6.17-8). He claims that he invented analytic geometry by considering proportion in general and taking lines to be the relata, “because I did not find anything simpler, nor anything that I could represent more distinctly to my imagination” (CSM 1.121=AT 6.20). One represents these by the simplest possible symbols to keep them straight. In this way, he freed geometry from diagrams and gave meaning to algebra through geometrical interpretation. This may not be an accurate a history of his discovery. He describes the *Discourse* as a “history, or, if you prefer, a fable” which suggests that it may be a rational reconstruction (CSM 1.112=AT 6.4). Still, in this telling, our understanding of extension lies at the foundation of a proper understanding of algebra and geometry.

In the third meditation, the meditator reflects on what he clearly and distinctly in corporeal things: “The list comprises size, or extension in length, breadth and depth; shape, which is a function of the boundaries of this extension; position, which is a relation between various items possessing shape; and motion, or change in position” (CSM 2.30=AT 7.43), which suggests a certain picture of how corporeal qualities are supposed to be understood under the aegis of extension. We begin with extension, arrive at shape as its determination, then get position by considering the relations between shape, and motion by considering the change in relations between these shapes. In the fifth meditation, he gives a similar story: “I distinctly imagine continuous quantity, that is, extension of objects. I enumerate the parts of the object and attribute sizes, shapes, locations, and movements, and then attribute durations” (CSM 2.44=AT 7.63). And, of course, in the *Principles of Philosophy,* he builds an entire physics upon the foundation of extension.

Having given knowledge of essence a central place in his account of knowledge of substance, Descartes takes the further step of identifying them: “Thinking and extension can be considered as constituting the natures of understanding and corporeal substance; but then they must not be conceived except as the very thinking substance and extended substance themselves, that is, as mind and body” (*PP* 1.63, Rozemond 10-11). Once we make this identification, the *Order of Inquiry Principle* seems to be irresistable. If a substance is identical with its principal attribute, you can’t understand one without understanding the other. So, for example, you can’t really grasp a thinking thing without understanding it as a thinking.

We could take this to mean that Descartes’s version of the *Order of Inquiry Principle* is trivial. If an essence is its substance, then one cannot be understood without the other. It’s better, I think, to take his identification of essence and substance as a substantive metaphysical thesis added to a substantive epistemological thesis. He takes a traditional epistemological doctrine, adds a substantive claims about the best methods for discovering the nature of things, and then adds an identification of substance and essence on top of that as a way of tidying up the system. If you don’t need a thing in addition to its principal attribute, you might as well not multiply entities beyond necessity.

In addition to these differences of epistemology and metaphysics, there’s another distinctive feature in Descartes’s use of the *Order of Inquiry Principle* which is worth mentioning. Perhaps because he identifies principal attribute and substance or perhaps for another reason, Descartes thinks that you need to actively conceptualize a substance as falling under its principle attribute in order to have the best sort of knowledge of the substance. It’s not enough to have a dispositional knowledge of the essence, but for Descartes, you need to actively refer the qualities of the substance through the principal attribute in order to truly know that the substance has that quality.

# Applications to the Philosophy of Mind

The *Order of Inquiry Principle* is also central to Descartes’s doctrine that the essence of mind is to think. Just as Descartes thinks that our best understanding of bodies is unavoidably accompanied by ideas of extension, he thinks that our best understanding of minds is unavoidably accompanied by ideas of thought. We don’t need to understand his application of the *Order of Inquiry Principle* to the philosophy of mind to in order to understand Locke’s criticisms. Still, the principle that Locke is criticizing, in the form that Descartes actually believes it, is more interesting then the criticisms. For Descartes, our best understanding of minds is the sort of knowledge that can survive radical doubt and we get this understanding only when we think of ourselves as thinking.

Descartes explicitly asserts the *Order of Inquiry Principle* in its application to the mind in a remark he makes to Gassendi: “I am surprised that you admit here that all I consider in the wax ‘to demonstrate indeed that I distinctly know that I exist, but neither who or what I am,’ since one does not demonstrate one without the other” (CSM 2.248=AT 7.359; Secada 146-47). In this context, ‘what I am’ should be read with a metaphysical emphasis: what my essence is. Thus, according to Descartes, you can’t distinctly know that you exist without knowledge of your nature.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Descartes thinks that he can discover his essence by considering what he would know under conditions of extreme epistemic deprivation. Even on the supposition that there’s a supremely powerful demon doing his best to deceive you, you can still be absolutely certain that you exist. If this is the best kind of cognition, and it’s a precondition of the best kind of cognition that it contains a reference to the essence of the relevant thing, it follows that this cognition refers to your essence, even assuming that you are in the grip of a powerful and malevolent spirit. The relevant essence is *thinking* for Descartes. It’s the only determinable feature that you have knowledge of in the context and it’s your path in to your having the best kind of knowledge of yourself. So, Descartes concludes, thinking is his essence. This, modulo some variations, is Stephen Schiffer’s account of Descartes’s reasoning in “Descartes on His Essence,” Marleen Rozemond’s in *Descartes’s Dualism* (Ch. 1)*,* and Jorge Secada’s in *Cartesian Metaphysics* (esp. 22-25, 143-47, 238-42)*.*

In arguing for dualism in the sixth meditation*,* Descartes appeals to his state of mind in the second meditationwhen he observed that he was a thinking thing. If we look closely at the sixth meditation text, we can see that he reasons in this way. He writes, “and thus, from the fact that I’ll know that I exist while I’ll notice nothing plainly different pertaining to my nature or essence[[10]](#footnote-10) beyond the single fact that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists in this alone, that I am a thinking thing” (CSM 2.54=AT7.78). When we have the best sort of knowledge of our existence, the indubitable, immune-to-an-evil-deceiver knowledge of the second mediation, we notice that we think, which is what Descartes’s version of the *Order of Inquiry Principle* tells us we must notice, if thinking is our nature. And we notice it without considering anything else besides thinking, as we can, if thinking is our nature (Schiffer 33-34). Thus, Descartes concludes that his essence is to think. Without these principles, or ones like them, we can’t understand his reasoning.

Descartes divides his argument between the second and sixth meditations. In the synopsis, he writes that the major accomplishment of the second meditation with respect to the metaphysics of mind is “to form a concept of soul which is maximally perspicuous and is also plainly distinct from all concepts of body” (AT 7.13=CSM 2.9). Thoughts of our essence are thoughts of features of ourselves that accompany our best understanding of ourselves, where this turns out to be the incorrigible self-knowledge that’s even the evil deceiver can’t cast into doubt (Hamou 126-7). By the sixth meditation*,* he has argued for the existence, goodness, and omnipotence of God, which entails, he believes, that things with distinct essences can exist apart from one another and thus that minds and bodies can exist apart from one another (Wilson 5-6). With the help of God’s veracity and power, Descartes concludes that the essences he has discovered through psychological and epistemic criteria reveal the deep metaphysical structure of the world (Schiffer 38-39). In effect, Descartes uses the veracity and power of God to infer the metaphysical thesis that there can be a thinking substance without a corporeal substratum from the psychological, epistemic thesis that we can form a clear idea of a thinking substance through the attribute of thought alone.

We can easily be misled by Descartes’s claim in the synopsis that his metaphysical accomplishment in the second meditation is only to have established a maximally clear idea of the mind independent of the body. This carries the false suggestion that perhaps any carefully enunciated and explicit idea of the would do as well. We can see that this isn’t right by considering Descartes’s reply to Regius in the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*. Regius argues that since we can conceive of the mind as “a sort of attribute co-existing with extension in the same subject, . . . it is possible that the mind is some such item” (CSM 1.295=AT 8B 343). Descartes replies by claiming that the principle “whatever we can conceive of can exist” as his own but specifying that “it is true only so long as we are dealing a conception which is clear and distinct, a conception which embraces the possibility of the thing in question” (CSM 1.299=AT 8B 351-2). Only maximally clear ideas are candidate essences, and once he proves the existence of God, Descartes thinks he can promote them from candidate essences to actual essences. What makes his idea of the self as thinking substance such a maximally clear idea is that it meets his version of the *Order of Inquiry Principle.*

Descartes’s method for seeking a maximally clear idea of himself relies on the principle that “the precise notice taken of this does not depend on things whose existence I do not yet know” (AT 7.27-8=CSM 2.18-9). The meditator excludes acts upon which any doubt can be cast as not belonging to a clear idea of himself. He thus excludes the Aristotelian accounts of *being a rational animal, being capable of self-movement,* and *being nourished,* and the Epicurean account *depending on tenuous matter* from being elements of his clear idea of the soul as a thinking thing (Wilson 4). Regius’s purported conception of the mind as a mode of a corporeal substance would also be disqualified on these grounds.

Descartes’s deferral of knowledge of the thesis his thinking is our essence to the sixth meditationis compatible with his statement to Gassendi that a person can’t show that he exists without considering his principal attribute, namely, thinking. In order to know that I exist, I have to be aware of my principal attribute, but I don’t have to know that my principal attribute is my principal attribute. That is, in order to know that I exist, I have to know that I think, but I don’t have to know that thinking is my essence. The meditator’s knowledge that he exists depends on his knowing that he thinks, which is his essence, though the meditator’s knowledge that thinking is his essence doesn’t come until later.

This deep structure of the *cogito* comes out in the second replies, where Descartes takes up the question the nature of our self-understanding in the second meditation. He ties our recognition of our thinking to our recognition of our existence as follows: “When someone says ‘I think, therefore I am (or exist)’ he doesn’t deduce existence from thinking by a syllogism but recognizes it as something known through itself by a simple intuition of the mind” (CSM 2.100=AT 2.140). The simplicity of the intuition should be understood as follows: when we grasp our thinking, we grasp our existence, because our thinking just is our existence.

Thinking is a determinable: there are many particular ways to think. Each of these licenses an inference to the meditator’s existence. In his proof of his own existence at the beginning of the second meditation, Descartes allows us multiple ways in. He offers three propositions which, if you think them, you can recognize your existence with absolute certitude. If you think “there is utterly nothing in the world” then doubtless you exist (CSM 2.16-7=AT 7.25). “If I will think that I am something” then I exist, no matter how much the evil deceiver tries to fool me (CSM 2.17=AT 7.25). And “I am, I exist” is infallibly true, every time that I conceive it (CSM 2.17=AT 7.25). Each of these thoughts (*there’s nothing in the world, I am something, I exist*) allows us to have the highest degree of certainty of our own existence, but none is necessary. Though they are all different thoughts, they all fall under the determinable ‘thought’ and that’s enough for Descartes to say that these modes are referred to the essence *thought* when we think with understanding. Descartes’s version of the *Order of Inquiry Principle* requires that we think of our essence when we have the best sort of knowledge of a thing, but he makes it clear that determinations of that essence count: “thought constitutes the nature of thinking substance . . . . since all things we find in mind are only diverse modes of thinking” (*PP* 1.53). To Hobbes, he describes his method as a matter of distinguishing corporeal acts from acts of thought, since acts of thought “all fall under the common account of thought, that is to say, of perception or consciousness” (AT 7.176=CSM 2.124).

For thinking substances, the standard for the best sort of knowledge is that it can survive the doubt raised by the possibility that there’s a maximally powerful doubt doing his utmost to deceive us. Our essence is thus thinking, since that’s the determinable attribute that allows us to have that level of certainty of our own existence. A mode counts as a determination of thinking insofar as it licenses such an inference with the requisite degree of certainty.

Consider Descartes’s discussion of whether sensations ought to be counted as cognitive acts:

I am also the same ‘I’ who is sensing: that is, who attends to corporeal things as though through the senses: to wit, I am now seeing light, hearing a racket, sensing heat. These things are false, since I am sleeping. Yet I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; this is properly that in me which is called sensing, and taken precisely thus, is nothing other than thinking (CSM 2.19=AT 7.29)

Descartes distinguishes between two concepts of sensing, one proper and one improper. In the improper concept, if think I sense a dog, and the dog isn’t really there, either because I’m dreaming or because I’m being fooled by an evil spirit, then I’m mistaken in thinking that I sense a dog. In accordance with the proper concept of sensing, if I think I’m sensing a dog, then I’m sensing a dog.[[11]](#footnote-11) On this proper conception, I can’t be mistaken about what I’m sensing, and, because of that, it constitutes a determination of thinking.

# Locke’s Rejection of the *Order of Inquiry Principle*

Locke doesn’t believe that the best sort of knowledge requires knowing the essence of a thing. Though generality has a place in his system, his standard inclination is to argue that we have knowledge of particular truths without needing to know to have these claims be backed up by generalities. So, he thinks that a baby knows “That the *Wormseed* or *Mustard* it refuses, is not the *Apple* or *Sugar* it cries for” but that no one reasonable will think that this “is by Virtue of this Principle, *That it is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be*” (*Essay* 1.2.25).Likewise, and along the same lines, he argues that our knowledge of particular truths doesn’t depend on our knowledge of maxims, since children have more difficulty grasping abstract ideas than they do grasping particular truths (such as *one is not two* or *yellow is not blue*) that instantiate maxims (*Essay* 4.7.9-10).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Locke grants the incorrigibility of the mental but denies that it shows that thinking is our essence. For him, no other proposition is “more evident to me, than my own Existence” (*Essay* 4.9.3). He thinks that our knowledge of our own existence is intuitively obvious, that is, that the mind can perceives the agreement of our idea of self and our idea of existence through “internal infallible Perception” (*Essay* 4.9.3). He recapitulates and paraphrases some of Descartes’s arguments from the second meditation: “*I think, I reason, I feel Pleasure and Pain*; Can any of these be more evident to me, than my own Existence? If I doubt of all other Things, that very doubt makes me perceive my own *Existence,* and will not suffer me to doubt of that” (*Essay* 4.9.3). Locke, like Descartes, believes that we can be certain that we exist. Unlike Descartes, however, he doesn’t believe in the *Order of Inquiry Principle,* so he can’t infer from this fact that our essence is to think. Instead, he argues that having ideas is “to the Soul, what motion is to the Body, not its Essence but one of its Operations” (*Essay* 2.1.10; Kemerling 459-60, Hamou 131-4). If you reject the *Order of Inquiry Principle* and its variants*,* you can grant that we have a clear idea of ourselves as incorrigibly existing things and even that such a thought is always accompanied with the idea of thinking without having to concede that thinking is our essence.

Among Locke’s arguments is to say that there’s a burden of proof that defenders of the Cartesian position haven’t met. The claim “That the *Soul thinks,* even *in* the soundest *Sleep, but the Memory retains it not*,” is a strong assertion “and would need some better Proof than bare Assertion, to make it be believed” (*Essay* 2.1.14). Locke is so far from thinking that there’s a decent argument from the unavoidability of thinking of oneself as a thinking thing under conditions of epistemic deprivationto the conclusion that our essence is to think that he doesn’t notice it as an argument at all.

To be fair, the crucial premise in Descartes’s argument that his essence is to think, his version of *the Order of Inquiry Principle*, is only implicit in the body of the *Meditations* and is only made explicit in his reply to Gassendi and in the *Principles of Philosophy*. I think that Descartes thinks that the relevant premise should be shown and not said. He thinks that it’s blazingly obvious that if you conceptualize yourself as a thinking thing, it will be obvious that you exist and that, in the same way, it will be blazingly obvious that that way of conceiving of the self reveals its essence.

Descartes’s methods for getting at his conclusions about aren’t more obvious than the conclusions. Locke doesn’t believe the conclusions, that is, he doesn’t believe that the essence of the mind is to think nor does he believe that the essence of body is extension. Because he doesn’t agree with the conclusions, he doesn’t agree with the methods for getting at those conclusions, even if he isn’t entirely clear on what those methods are

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1. This paper started out as comments on Lisa Downing’s (2016), as presented at the 2012 meeting of the Pacific APA. I could find much to disagree with in Lisa’s excellent paper, so I mostly made supplementary remarks. I presented this paper at a virtual session of the Eastern APA in 2021 and I received very helpful comments from Matthew Stuart, Jennifer Marušić, and members of the audience. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On which see Downing 2016: 108-11 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. References to CSM are to *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenney, 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-91. References to AT are to *Oeuvres de Descartes,* edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 11 vols. Paris: Vrin, 1996. References to *PP* are to part and section of the *Principles of Philosophy* and may be found in vol. 1 of CSM and the first part of volume 8 of AT. I’ve modified some ofthe translations. References to Locke’s *Essay* are to book, chapter, and section of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* edited by Peter Nidditch, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975. The quotation from Plato is unmodified from *Five Dialogues,* translated by G.M.A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981. The quotation from Aristotle is a modified version of that in Barnes 1993. The Greek text may be found at Thesaurus Linguae Graecae. I took translation advice from Katy McNamee. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Jacovides (2017: 88-9) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I owe this point to an anonymous reviewer. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is controversial. Some commentators (e.g. Demoss and Devereux 147-49) take incidental knowledge to mean the sort of knowledge we can have when we don’t understand the relevant term. See Barnes (218-19) for discussion and a defense of the view that I assert in the main text. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I owe the objection to x. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Most scholastic philosophers think that knowledge of essence precedes knowledge of existences (Secada 7-13) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See also CSM 2.78=AT 7.108 and Secada 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “*interim nihil plane aliud ad naturam sive essentiam meam pertinere animadvertam*” One might put this into indirect discourse as “while I’ll notice *that* nothing plainly different pertains to my nature or essence”. On the interpretation suggested by this translation, Descartes could move directly from the premise *I notice that my essence consists only in thinking* to the conclusion that *my essence consists only in thinking*. Against this reading, it makes his appeal to his knowledge of his own existence irrelevant to the inference, which doesn’t fit the text. For discussion see Rozemond (13-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Compare Elizabeth Anscombe (1981) on material and intentional objects of sensation. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It’s worth noting that Locke thinks that when we ask for persistence conditions, it’s important to ask after the relevant kind of thing, “it being one thing to be the same *Substance,* another the same *Man,* and a third the same *Person*” (*Essay 2.27.7).* So, perhaps the *Order of Inquiry* sneaks back into Locke’s system in his account of identity. Even so, he doesn’t think that our knowledge of our own existence and our knowledge of bodies presupposes a knowledge of the essences of these things. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)