

Descartes's Substance Dualism and His Independence Conception of Substance

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I

DESCARTES MAINTAINED WHAT I SHALL CALL “substance dualism,” namely that no substance has both mental and material properties. His main argument for substance dualism, the so-called “separability” argument of the Sixth Meditation, has long puzzled readers. Descartes had at least two different conceptions of substance. One is a conception of substance as a subject of properties; the other is a conception of substance as an independent entity. In this paper I shall argue that the independence conception of substance is crucial for the success of the separability argument. Thus my aim in this paper is twofold: (a) to clarify what Descartes’s independence conception of substance is, and (b) to show the philosophical importance of the independence conception of substance. Regarding (a) I shall argue, in particular, that Descartes’s independence conception is that *a* is a created or dependent substance if and only if God is the only other entity without which *a* cannot exist. Regarding (b) I shall argue that it follows from the independence conception that substance and attribute are not distinct entities. This allows Descartes to derive two of his distinctive theses on substance, namely that each substance has only one principal attribute, and that the distinction between substance and attribute is conceptual. That substance and attribute are not distinct entities plays a significant role in Descartes’s defense of substance dualism. Recent commentators have argued that the independence conception of substance is not fruitful within Descartes’s metaphysics and that Descartes’s metaphysics is dominated by the subject conception.¹ If the arguments of this paper are correct,

¹For the first claim, see Louis Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume: Continental Metaphysics and the Development of Modern Philosophy* [*From Descartes to Hume*] (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 328. For the second claim, see Jonathan Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume* [*Learning from Six Philosophers*] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), vol. 1, 134–35.

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then, contrary to what Loeb and Bennett think, the independence conception of substance is crucially important in Descartes's philosophy.²

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2 I shall present a reconstruction of Descartes's separability argument for substance dualism, and an important objection to it, namely that it does not prove substance dualism. Since Descartes's answer to this objection depends on his thought on substance, I present Descartes's subject conception of substance in section 3. In section 4 I argue that Descartes's theses that each substance has a unique principal attribute and that the distinction between substance and attribute is conceptual are difficult to make sense of given the subject conception of substance. In section 5 I propose my interpretation of the independence conception of substance. In section 6 I show how my interpretation of the independence conception can make sense of the theses that substances have a unique principal attribute and that the distinction between substance and attribute is conceptual. In section 7 I elaborate on the evidence for my interpretation of the independence conception, respond to certain objections, and criticize some alternative interpretations. In section 8 I show that Descartes used a consequence of the independence conception as I interpret it—namely, that substance and attribute are not distinct entities—to respond to the objection presented in section 2. That substance and attribute are not distinct entities makes substance dualism equivalent to a version of property dualism, which I call "attribute dualism." In section 9 I argue that, even so, Descartes still needs arguments for his version of attribute dualism and that the argument he in fact gives for it is a version of the separability argument. Section 10 is a brief conclusion.

2

Consider the following three Cartesian theses:

Substance dualism: Any substance with mental properties lacks material properties and any substance with material properties lacks mental properties.

Property dualism: Mental properties and material properties are different properties.

Real distinction between mind and body: The mind and the body are numerically distinct substances.³

How are these theses logically related? Substance dualism is the strongest of the three, and entails the other two. It entails the real distinction between mind and body. For the mind is a substance with mental properties, and the body is

²Peter Markie has discerned a third conception of substance, as a mereologically independent entity, which he finds in the Synopsis of the *Meditations*. I have nothing to say in this paper about this third Cartesian notion of substance. See Peter Markie, "Descartes's Concepts of Substance," in *Reason, Will and Sensation: Studies in Descartes's Metaphysics*, ed. John Cottingham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

³This terminology is not always adopted. Marleen Rozemond, for instance, understands by the real distinction what I understand by substance dualism. See Marleen Rozemond, *Descartes's Dualism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 31.

a substance with material properties. Now if the mind lacks material properties, and the body lacks mental properties, then the mind and the body cannot be the same substance. But the real distinction between mind and body does not entail substance dualism. For that mind and body are two numerically distinct substances is compatible with both of them having both mental *and* material properties.

Substance dualism also entails property dualism. For if a substance with mental properties lacks material properties, then mental and material properties are different properties—otherwise, a substance with mental properties would be a substance with material properties. But property dualism does not entail substance dualism. It could be that mental properties and material properties are different properties and yet a substance with mental properties is also a substance with material properties.

But the real distinction between mind and body and property dualism do not entail each other. It could be that mind and body are numerically distinct substances but mental and material properties are the same. For instance, it could be that mind and body are distinct because they have different properties: the mind has a property M that the body lacks, and the body has a property B that the mind lacks. This does not preclude that both M and B are both mental and material properties. So the real distinction between mind and body does not entail property dualism. Nor does property dualism entail the real distinction between mind and body. For even if mental and material properties are different properties, it can still be the case that the mind, which has mental properties, and the body, which has material properties, are the same substance.

Substance dualism is the view for which Descartes is most famous. Descartes had more than one argument for it, but the one I am interested in here is the so-called “separability argument,”⁴ whose *locus classicus* is the following passage from the Sixth Meditation:

First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God. The question of what kind of power is required to bring about such a separation does not affect the judgment that the two things are distinct. Thus, simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing. It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.⁵

⁴‘Separability argument’ is Bennett’s name (*Learning from Six Philosophers*, 71). Margaret Wilson (*Descartes* [London: Routledge, 1978], 186) calls it the ‘epistemological argument’. It is also often called the ‘conceivability argument’.

⁵CSM II, 54; AT VII, 78. ‘CSM’ stands for *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. 1–2, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). ‘CSMK’ stands for *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). ‘AT’ stands for Adam and Tannery’s

Here Descartes puts the argument in the first person, i.e., in terms of himself and his body. But this is not essential to the argument. In fact, Descartes sometimes presents the same sort of argument without doing it in the first person, for instance in the Second Replies (AT VII, 170). I shall interpret him in the passage of the Sixth Meditation as arguing for the general conclusion that the mind (any mind) is distinct from the body (any body), and so the mind (any mind) can exist without the body (any body) and *vice versa*. But it is not easy to see what the argument is, and different interpretations have been proposed. I doubt that there is any single interpretation that can make sense of everything Descartes says in the passage, but I think it is possible to reconstruct this argument in a way that makes sense of much of what Descartes says here and that coincides with things he says elsewhere. This reconstruction, which I give below, takes into consideration not only what Descartes says in the passage above, but also Descartes's replies to Caterus's and Arnauld's objections, which is why the first premise of the reconstruction is about clear, distinct, and complete conception, rather than about merely clear and distinct conception.

On a first reading, the argument appears to be very simple. From the fact that something is clearly and distinctly conceivable apart from something else, it follows that they can exist separately. And things which can exist separately are numerically distinct. Therefore, since the mind and the body can be clearly and distinctly conceived apart from one another, it follows that the mind and the body are numerically distinct.

But this cannot be all there is to Descartes's argument. First, the conclusion of Descartes's argument is that the mind is really distinct from the body, and can exist without it. That the mind is really distinct from the body suggests that the mind and the body are substances.⁶ And if *a* and *b* are numerically distinct substances, and so really distinct, then they can exist without each other, since this possibility of separate existence is both a consequence and a sign of real distinction (AT VII, 162; AT VIII-1, 28-29). So the reconstruction of the argument must have it conclude not merely that mind and body are numerically distinct, but that they are numerically distinct substances.

Second, from the fact that one can clearly and distinctly conceive one thing apart from another, it does not follow that these things can exist separately. As Arnauld pointed out, one may be able to conceive clearly and distinctly of a right triangle without conceiving that the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the squares of the sides. Yet it does not follow that the triangle can exist without the square of the hypotenuse being equal to the squares of the other sides (AT VII, 201-02).

In his reply, Descartes accepts Arnauld's point with respect to merely clear and distinct perception and says that, for it to follow that *a* and *b* are really distinct (and

edition of Descartes's works (Paris: Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964-76). All translations are from CSM, CSMK, and, in one case, from Cottingham's 1976 translation of the *Conversation with Burman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press). When I refer to the *Principles of Philosophy*, I shall sometimes give part and article number. Thus 'Principles I: 60' refers to article 60 of the first part of the *Principles*.

⁶This might be questioned since Descartes claims that the distinction between a substance and a mode of another substance, or between two modes of distinct substances, can be called a real distinction (AT VIII-1, 30). But as we shall see, what Descartes says about complete ideas in relation to his argument indicates that he saw it as concluding that both mind and body are substances.

so that they can exist separately), both *a* and *b* must be understood as complete, and it must be possible to understand each one without the other. Understanding something as complete is the same as having a complete understanding or idea of the thing in question (AT VII, 221). What is it to have a complete idea of a thing? To Gibieuf, Descartes explains that it is to have an idea such that one can deny of it everything else of which one has an idea, and Descartes adds that the ideas of thinking and extended substance are complete ideas (AT III, 475–76). To clearly, distinctly, and completely conceive *a* apart from *b* is to have a clear and distinct conception of *a* as a complete being, which conception does not include *b*. But what is a complete thing? For Descartes a complete thing is a substance endowed with the forms or attributes which enable one to recognize that it is a substance (AT VII, 222). Thus if one clearly, distinctly, and completely conceives of *a* without conceiving of *b*, *a* is a substance and does not need *b* in order to exist.

Thus, when complete conception is brought into the picture, Descartes is in a position to respond to Arnauld. For while one cannot deny of a clear and distinct idea of a right triangle that there is a certain ratio between the squares of the hypotenuse and the sides, according to Descartes, one can conceive clearly and distinctly of the mind as a complete thing without conceiving of any body. So taking the conception of mind and body of which he speaks in the passage of the Sixth Meditations to be clear, distinct, and complete conception of the mind without the body (and *vice versa*) allows Descartes to conclude that the mind and the body are numerically distinct substances, i.e., that they are really distinct and so can exist separately. Here is the reconstruction of the argument:

- (1) If I clearly, distinctly, and completely conceive or understand *a* apart from *b*, then *a* is a substance and it is possible that *a* exists without *b*.
- (2) If it is possible that *a* exists without *b*, then *a* and *b* are numerically distinct.
- (3) I clearly, distinctly, and completely understand the mind apart from the body (any mind and any body), and I clearly, distinctly, and completely understand the body apart from the mind (any body and any mind).
- (4) The mind (any mind) is a substance, and it is possible that it exists without the body (any body), and the body (any body) is a substance, and it is possible that it exists without the mind (any mind).
- (5) Therefore, the mind and the body (any mind and any body) are numerically distinct substances.

This argument is valid. (1)–(3) are the premises of the argument. (4) follows from premises (1) and (3), and (5) follows from premise (2) and line (4).⁷ Premise (1) reflects Descartes's claim that "everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understand-

⁷Whether the argument is sound, and so whether Descartes really meets Arnauld's objection depends, among other things, on whether one can have a complete conception of the mind that does not include anything material. For discussion of this point, see Stephen Yablo, "The Real Distinction between Mind and Body" ["The Real Distinction"], *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume 16 (1990): 149–201, at 174–75.

ing of it" (CSM II, 54; AT VII, 78). If so, God is also able to create what one clearly, distinctly, and completely conceives. Premise (3) states what Descartes took to be a fact about what he (or anyone, for that matter) could conceive in a certain way. Premise (2) links separability with numerical distinctness. Note that this premise is about any entities and not about substances in particular. This marks a difference between my reconstruction and Wilson's reconstruction, by which mine is inspired. In Wilson's reconstruction, the corresponding premise reads as follows: "If *A* can exist apart from *B*, and vice versa, *A* is really distinct from *B*, and *B* from *A*."⁸ The problem with this premise is that different modes of one and the same substance, which are not *really* distinct, can exist without each other. But premise (2), as I have formulated it, is a fully general principle valid for all entities, not only for substances or modes of different substances, and so does not have the problem that Wilson's premise has. Furthermore, there is some textual evidence that Descartes believed in premise (2) as I have formulated it.⁹

The above is a faithful reconstruction of the way Descartes intended to argue for substance dualism in the passage of the Sixth Meditation. The problem with this argument is that it is not an argument for substance dualism. What the conclusion states is the real distinction between mind and body and, as we saw, this does not even entail substance dualism.

It might be thought, however, that although this is a faithful reconstruction of the way Descartes structures the argument in the passage above, it does not represent his real intentions there. For it is plausible to think that Descartes saw that substance dualism entails the real distinction between mind and body and so it may be thought that Descartes obviated stating substance dualism and went directly to give the ultimate conclusion of the argument, the real distinction between mind and body.

But can this be right? Does Descartes have the elements to establish substance dualism in the passage above? It does not look like it. Given his premises all he can show is that the mind can exist with mental properties but without any material properties and that the body can exist with material properties but without any mental properties. And all this can establish, apart from the real distinction between mind and body, is property dualism. But property dualism does not entail substance dualism.

⁸Wilson, *Descartes*, 197.

⁹The evidence is this text from the Sixth Replies:

Also, the fact that we often see two things joined together does not license the inference that they are one and the same; but the fact that we sometimes observe one of them apart from the other entirely justifies the inference that they are different. . . . For it is a conceptual contradiction to suppose that two things which we clearly perceive as different should become one and the same . . . this is no less a contradiction than to suppose that two things which are in no way distinct should be separated. (CSM II, 299; AT VII, 444–45)

It may be thought that here Descartes is using 'thing' to mean substance. But this is not so: '*substantia*' does not occur in the original passage (nor does the word '*res*'), but if Descartes meant to speak of substances in his technical sense rather than of entities in general, it is plausible to suppose he should have used the word '*substantia*'. Pointing out that neither '*substantia*' nor '*res*' occur in the passage is not to criticize the translation by Cottingham, et al.; using 'thing' was the best way to translate the passage.

So the verdict on Descartes's argument is negative: it does not establish substance dualism. All Descartes can get are the weaker theses of property dualism and the real distinction between mind and body, but not the targeted substance dualism.

Can Descartes escape from this predicament? Does he have an answer to this objection? Yes, he does, but that answer depends on his thought on substance. To his thought on substance we now turn.

3

I shall use the word 'property' as an umbrella word to refer to what Descartes variously called 'attributes', 'modes', 'qualities', 'acts', and 'accidents'.¹⁰ Descartes had a conception of substance as a subject of properties. This conception of substance is exemplified in many different texts, but the following text, from the Second Replies, is representative:

This term ['substance'] applies to every thing in which whatever we perceive immediately resides, as in a subject, or to everything by means of which whatever we perceive exists. By 'whatever we perceive' is meant any property, quality or attribute of which we have a real idea. The only idea we have of a substance itself, in the strict sense, is that it is the thing in which whatever we perceive (or whatever has objective being in one of our ideas) exists, either formally or eminently. For we know by the natural light that a real attribute cannot belong to nothing. (CSM II, 114; AT VII, 161)

Descartes's intention in this text is to give a definition of 'substance'. Descartes says that 'substance' applies to every thing which is a subject where whatever we perceive resides. He suggests that those subjects are also the things "by means of which" whatever we perceive exists. One might give the rather obscure phrase 'by means of which' different interpretations. One might, for instance, give it a causal interpretation, in which case that first sentence in Descartes's text would remind one of Locke's dual characterisation of the substratum as something "wherein [ideas] do subsist, and from which they do result."¹¹ But this characterization of a substance as something by means of which what we perceive exists rapidly drops out of the picture. For Descartes continues the passage by telling us what our only idea of substance is, and Descartes says it is a thing in which what we perceive exists, but he does not say that it is a thing by means of which what we perceive exists. So, given what Descartes says in this and other texts, it seems plausible to think that with the phrase 'everything by means of which whatever we perceive exists' Descartes simply meant everything in which whatever we perceive resides as in a subject.

Descartes restricts, in this text, 'whatever we perceive' to properties, qualities, or attributes of which we have a real idea.¹² Here Descartes is not using the term

¹⁰Some commentators use 'quality' as I use 'property' (see Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume*, 83, and Markie, "Descartes's Concepts of Substance," 75). The decision to use 'property' as an umbrella word is to some extent arbitrary, but the decision not to use 'quality' as an umbrella word is not arbitrary at all, since for Descartes the word 'quality' is a technical term like 'attribute' and 'mode' (AT VIII-1, 26).

¹¹John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. Niddich. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II.xxiii.1.

¹²This is not the place to enter into a discussion of exactly what Descartes meant by 'real idea'. But, as an anonymous referee pointed out, Descartes does not mean that all we perceive is a property

'attribute' in his technical sense, to be discussed in section 4, in which an attribute and a mode are two completely different things. He is using it in a general way, as synonymous with the word 'property' in my usage. So we can say that here Descartes takes a substance to be a subject of properties, where properties include both attributes and modes. In the text above Descartes *seems* to restrict 'substance' to that in which the properties *that we perceive* reside. Nevertheless there is no reason to build that idea into Descartes's subject conception of substance. For the general idea behind this conception of substance—an idea known by the natural light—is that "a real attribute cannot belong to nothing," not that a *perceived* real attribute or property cannot belong to nothing. So, according to the subject conception of substance, a substance is a subject of properties—whether perceived or not. We can put it in the following form:

- (1) *a* is a substance =_{def.} some property F exists in *a*.

But this definition does not distinguish between substances and properties, since even properties, for Descartes, are subjects of other properties (AT III, 355). But clearly for Descartes the difference between substances and properties lies in the fact that substances are basic subjects of properties, i.e., substances do not exist in any entities. So Descartes's conception of a substance as a subject of properties is captured by (2):

- (2) *a* is a substance =_{def.} some property F exists in *a* and *a* does not exist in any entity.

4

Among what I am here indistinctly calling 'properties' Descartes made an important technical distinction between *modes* and *attributes*:

[W]e employ the term *mode* when we are thinking of a substance as being affected or modified; when the modification enables the substance to be designated as a substance of such and such a kind, we use the term *quality*; and finally, when we are simply thinking in a more general way of what is in a substance, we use the term *attribute*. (*Principles* I: 56, CSM I, 211; AT VIII–I, 26)

So modes and attributes are analogous in that they are properties, since they are in substances, but they are different kinds of properties. The difference is one of generality. Attributes are the most general kind of properties. Some attributes, called *principal attributes*, constitute the nature and essence of substances (*Principles* I: 53, AT VIII–I, 25). Descartes admits two principal attributes: thought and extension. From now on when I speak of attributes I shall always have in mind *principal attributes*.¹³

of which we have a real idea, since Descartes allows materially false ideas, which correspond to no properties outside the mind and so require nothing in which to reside.

¹³There is a kind of properties—such as duration, order and number—that are even more general than principal attributes, since those properties apply to "all classes of things" (*Principles* I: 48, CSM I, 208; AT VIII–I, 22–23). These properties necessarily belong to every substance, but precisely for this reason they do not constitute the nature and essence of any substance. I shall ignore these "transcendental properties." I shall also ignore the category of *quality* distinguished by Descartes in the passage above. This category does not play in Descartes's philosophy a role as important as those of *attribute* and *mode*.

How are attributes and modes related? Modes refer to attributes in the sense that they are ways of instantiating an attribute: *thinking that p* is a way of thinking and so a mode of the attribute *thought*; being rectangular is a way of being extended, and so a mode of the attribute *extension*. But not only is every mode a mode of a certain attribute, every mode of any single substance is a mode of one and the same attribute. This is because for Descartes every substance has only one principal attribute to which all its other properties refer. Thus extension is the principal attribute of extended substance, and thought is the principal attribute of thinking substance. Everything else that can be attributed to an extended substance is a mode of extension, and everything else that can be attributed to a thinking substance is a mode of thought (*Principles* I: 53, 65, AT VIII-I, 25, 32).

Given the subject conception of substance, the thesis that every substance has a unique principal attribute is puzzling: what could rule out several attributes residing in the same subject? Later on I shall argue that the thesis that each substance has only one principal attribute can be derived from the independence conception of substance.¹⁴

But that substances have only one principal attribute is not the only puzzling Cartesian thesis about substance. Given that Descartes distinguishes between substances and properties, and among these between attributes and modes, it looks as if Descartes has a tripartite ontology—an ontology consisting of three kinds of entities: substances, attributes, and modes. But in fact this is not so. All Descartes has are three different ontological *notions* or *concepts*: the notion of substance, the notion of attribute, and the notion of mode. These are *ontological* notions or concepts because they refer to what there is. But at the ontological level there are not three different kinds of entities, one corresponding to each notion, but only two kinds of entities. This is because for Descartes a substance and its attribute are not distinct entities. And so even if at the conceptual level we have the three notions of *substance*, *attribute*, and *mode*, at the ontological level there are only two entities, or kinds of entities, corresponding to those three notions.

Indeed, Descartes claims that the distinction between a substance and its principal attribute is conceptual. This distinction he contrasts both with a real distinction (which obtains between two substances) and with a modal distinction (which obtains between a mode and the substance of which it is a mode, and between two modes of the same substance) (*Principles* I: 60–2, AT VIII-I, 28–30). A conceptual distinction is one that stems from the mind's considering one and the same thing under different aspects or in different ways. What is distinct in a

¹⁴According to Rozemond (*Descartes's Dualism*, 9, 27), what explains that a substance must have only one principal attribute is that such an attribute determines the properties a substance can have and so it is, in this respect, like the atomic structure of gold, which determines the properties of gold and how it behaves. But the attribute of a substance is not like the atomic structure of gold. First, modes presuppose their attribute in a way in which the properties of gold do not presuppose its atomic structure: a shape presupposes extension in that it must be the shape of something extended, but yellow can be the color of things other than gold. Second, appeal to an attribute does not explain why a certain substance has a certain mode rather than another: I believe that Descartes was French, but thought, or that I am a substance whose principal attribute is thought, does not explain why I believe that rather than that he was Italian; but the atomic structure of gold explains why a certain piece of gold is yellow rather than red. Third, the principal attribute does not causally determine the modes a substance has, but the atomic structure of gold causally determines the properties of gold.

conceptual distinction is not the thing considered by the mind, but the different manners in which the mind considers the thing. So a conceptual distinction is one that does not have an ontological correlate, although it does have a foundation in reality (AT IV, 349–50). Thus the fact that the distinction between substance and attribute is conceptual means that, although the concepts *substance* and *attribute* are distinct concepts, a substance and its attribute are not distinct entities. Thought is nothing other than thinking substance. Similarly for extension and extended substance (*Principles* I: 63, AT VIII–I, 30–31).¹⁵

The thesis of the conceptual distinction between substance and attribute is puzzling, for the view of substance as a subject suggests in a natural way that a substance is something other than its properties. The attribute is something that resides or inheres in a substance. This suggests that when we have something extended, or something that thinks, we have two entities: the attribute (extension or thought) and the substance wherein it inheres.

So why did Descartes think that there was only a conceptual distinction, and thus no distinction in reality, between a substance and its attribute? Because, as I shall argue below, this thesis derives from Descartes's independence conception of substance. Let us see what this conception is.

5

The independence conception is introduced in the following passage from the *Principles*:

By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence. And there is only one substance which can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God. In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God's concurrence. Hence the term 'substance' does not apply univocally . . . to God and to other things; that is, there is no distinctly intelligible meaning of the term, which is common to God and his creatures. In the case of created things, some are of such a nature that they cannot exist without other things, while some need only the ordinary concurrence of God in order to exist. We make this distinction by calling

¹⁵So a principal attribute is general in the sense that all the other properties of a substance are modes of it, but not in the sense that two substances have numerically the same principal attribute. If this were the case, given the thesis that substance and principal attribute are not two distinct entities, it would follow that there is only one thinking substance, for example. So what makes two substances both thinking substances is that their principal attributes are of the same kind—not that their principal attributes are numerically the same. This also holds of extended substances, though here this point may be less important given that it is not clear that Descartes admitted a plurality of extended substances. (There are those who think that Descartes admitted a plurality of material substances; for instance, Matthew Stuart, "Descartes's Extended Substances," in *New Essays on the Rationalists*, ed. R. J. Gennaro, and C. Huenemann [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999]; those who think that Descartes admitted only one material substance, for instance, John Cottingham, *Descartes* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1986], 84–85; and Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* [London: Penguin, 1978], 128; and those who think that Descartes did not admit any material substances at all but only matter as such, for instance, Roger Woolhouse, *Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz: The Concept of Substance in Seventeenth Century Metaphysics* [London: Routledge, 1993], 22–24.) What is the difference between the generic thought and the individual thought which is the essence of some mind? That the generic thought is a product of our conceptualizing the resemblances of the various individual thoughts (AT VIII–I, 27–28). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this last point.

the latter 'substances' and the former 'qualities' or 'attributes' of those substances. (*Principles* I: 5 I, CSM I, 210; AT VIII–I, 24)¹⁶

This is the canonical text for the independence notion of substance, but Descartes also explicitly espouses this notion of substance in many other parts of his work, such as the Third Meditation (AT VII, 44), the Fourth Replies (AT VII, 226), and the letter to Hyperaspistes (AT III, 429).

According to the passage above, 'substance' does not apply univocally to all substances. Thus God and created substances are substances in different senses: God is a substance in the sense that he depends on no other entity for his existence, and created substances are substances in the sense that they depend only on God for their existence. Thus created substances are not fully independent, but their relative independence is enough for them to count as substances in an extended sense. So Descartes's independence conception of substance makes room for two kinds of substances: independent and dependent or created substances. Let us define them as follows:

- (3) a is an independent substance =_{def.} a depends for its existence on no other entity;
- (4) a is a dependent substance =_{def.} a depends for its existence on God alone.

To know what these definitions mean we need to know what notion of dependence Descartes had in mind. Descartes is normally taken to have had a causal notion of dependence.¹⁷ This is because the dependence of creatures on God is causal.¹⁸ We might unpack this thought as follows. To remain in existence, creatures need to be preserved by God. God's concurrence consists precisely in this preservation. But this preservation is an act of continual creation (AT VII, 49, 369). And creation is a causal act. So God's concurrence to preserve his creatures is a causal act, and so their dependence on God is causal dependence. Furthermore, since there is no sense in which God depends on any other entity, God is causally independent.

But that the dependence of such substances on God is causal, and that Descartes recognizes this, does not mean that his notion of dependence is causal. Indeed, I think the way to interpret Descartes's passage is as follows. He points out that created substances depend causally on God, but this does not mean that his conception of dependence is causal. His conception of a created substance is

¹⁶The last two sentences in this passage are added from the original French translation of the *Principles* (AT IX–2, 47).

¹⁷See Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume*, 94–95; Markie, "Descartes's Concepts of Substance," 66; Stuart, "Descartes's Extended Substances," 88; and Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers*, 134.

¹⁸Loeb (*From Descartes to Hume*, 94–95) gives this kind of reason. Markie ("Descartes's Concepts of Substance," 66) and Bennett (*Learning from Six Philosophers*, 134) do not give explicit reasons, but give the impression that it is evident from Descartes's text that the reason why he has in mind a causal notion of dependence is because the dependence of creatures on God is causal. Stuart ("Descartes's Extended Substances," 87–88) gives other reasons for attributing to Descartes a causal notion of dependence: specifically, he argues against alternative reconstructions of Descartes's thoughts. Some of his arguments may be used against the interpretation of Descartes's conception I shall propose; I address those arguments in section 7.

that of something that is independent—causally or otherwise—of any other thing except God. When he suggests that created substances *causally* depend on God, he is just being specific about the way in which they depend on God. But the notion of dependence itself is not causal dependence but a more general one:

(Dep) *a* depends on *b* if and only if *a* cannot exist without *b*.

This is a general notion of dependence in that it does not specify what type of dependence must obtain between *a* and *b* if they satisfy (Dep). So *a* and *b* may satisfy (Dep) because *a* cannot exist without having *b* as a cause; or they may satisfy it because *a* cannot exist without having *b* as a subject of inherence; or they may satisfy it because *a* cannot exist without having *b* as a part; or they may satisfy it because *a* cannot exist without having *b* as a property, etc. As it happens, a created substance and God satisfy (Dep) because the former cannot exist without having God as a cause of its existence and of its continuing to exist.¹⁹

This suggests the following definitions:

- (5) *a* is an independent substance =_{def.} *a* can exist without any *other* entity;
 (6) *a* is a dependent substance =_{def.} God is the only *other* entity without which *a* cannot exist.

I think (5) and (6) together express Descartes's independence conception of substance. Let us see whether they are extensionally correct. (5) applies to God, since God could have decided not to create any other entity and so would have existed without any other entity. And it applies only to God, since no other entity, in the Cartesian system, could exist if God did not. Since God is the only totally independent substance, (5) seems to be extensionally correct.

Is (6) extensionally correct? (6) is correct in not applying to God, for although God cannot exist without God, God is not *another* entity without which God cannot exist. It also is correct in not applying to modes, for modes cannot exist without the substance that they modify.²⁰ Finally, (6) correctly applies to substances, for although mind and body need modes to exist, they do not need any particular modes to exist:

But the mind cannot ever be without thought; it can of course be without this or that thought, but it cannot be without some thought. In the same way, the body cannot, even for a moment, be without extension. (*Conversation with Burman*, AT V, 150)²¹

¹⁹As an anonymous referee pointed out, the notion of dependence encapsulated by (Dep) is consistent with dependence being non-symmetrical, i.e., it allows for cases of mutual dependence. But this does not mean that (Dep) does not capture a notion of dependence, since it is not analytic that dependence cannot be mutual. Of course (Dep) can be complemented with definitions or principles that rule out some or all cases of mutual dependence. Indeed, as we shall see with definitions (5) and (6) below, Descartes conceives of independent and dependent substance in such a way that there can be no *mutual* dependence between any substance and any other entity.

²⁰As an anonymous referee has reminded me, this necessitation of a substance by a mode would not, in Descartes's view, preclude God from extraordinarily bringing a mode into existence without thereby creating a substance.

²¹This passage may be thought to be consistent with a different interpretation in the case of the body. For an anonymous referee rightly pointed out that one who holds that Descartes maintained that

So, that substances need their modes to exist is not a problem for (6). For a substance does not need specific modes to exist, and so there is no single mode without which the substance cannot exist.

Yet it may be thought that (6) is incorrect, since modes satisfy it after all. Consider, for instance, the particular shape of a certain particular triangular thing. It might be thought that this particular shape can exist as the shape of other triangles. So this particular shape would count as a substance according to (6), for there is no triangle, and no other entity except God, without which it cannot exist. Similarly, it might be thought, a certain particular desire of a certain mind can exist as the desire of other minds. If so, there is no other entity, except God, without which the desire cannot exist. And so this desire would count as a substance according to (6). So (6) seems to be the wrong definition.

But Descartes denied that a mode can be a mode of different substances:

Thus shape and motion are modes, in the strict sense, of corporeal substance; because the same body can exist at one time with one shape and at another with another, now in motion and now at rest; whereas, conversely, neither this shape nor this motion can exist without *this* body. Thus love, hatred, affirmation, doubt and so on are true modes in the mind. (Letter to unknown correspondent, 1645 or 1646, CSMK, 280; AT IV, 349; emphasis added)

So, for Descartes, there is an asymmetry between substances and modes: a substance needs modes to exist, but it does not need any particular modes. But a mode needs a particular substance to exist. So (6) does not apply to modes.

6

So far so good, but what about attributes? Attributes seem to present an important problem for (5) and (6), for attributes constitute the essence of substances. So a substance cannot exist without its attributes. So God cannot exist without his attributes. Nor can created substances exist without their attributes. So no substances satisfy (5) or (6).²²

But this is not a real problem. From the fact that God cannot exist without his attributes, it does not follow that (5) is incorrect. All that follows, given (5), is that no divine attribute is an entity other than God—that God and his attributes are not distinct entities. Similarly, from the fact that a dependent substance cannot exist without its attributes, it does not follow that no such substances satisfy (6).

there is only one material substance may also wish to argue that, for him, this one body may have an indefinite size, and then might go on to argue that an indefinite size is a mode of extension. However the key phrase in this passage is 'In the same way' (*Eodem modo*). This suggests that what holds of the mind holds, in this case, of the body. And what Descartes says of the mind is that, while it cannot exist without some thought, it can exist without any particular thoughts. So, as I interpret him, Descartes is saying here that, although the body cannot exist without some (mode of) extension, it can exist without any particular modes of extension. Further evidence that Descartes held this is found in AT VIII-1, 31.

²²Of course, Descartes believes that substances have only one principal attribute. But at *Principles* 1: 51, he has only advanced the independence conception and has not yet stated the thesis of the unique principal attribute. As we shall see in a moment, this thesis derives from a consequence of the independence conception. So at this stage in the argument I cannot use the thesis that substances have a unique principal attribute. Nor can I assume that they have a plurality of them. Thus 'attributes' should here be understood in the neutral sense of 'attribute or attributes'.

All that follows, given (6), is that a dependent substance and its attributes are not distinct entities—i.e., that no attribute of a dependent substance is an entity other than the substance itself.

But are these consequences acceptable for Descartes? Yes. For if no attribute of a substance is an entity distinct from the substance, then no substance can have a plurality of *distinct* attributes. For if a substance had several distinct attributes, these attributes would be distinct entities, and so there would be at least one attribute that would be an entity other than the substance; i.e., the substance and that attribute would be distinct entities. But this is ruled out by definitions (5) and (6), together with the fact that substances cannot exist without their attributes. So, given that substances have attributes, the conception of substance encapsulated by (5) and (6) gives Descartes the result that each substance has only one principal attribute—a result that Descartes goes on to state in *Principles* I: 53, almost immediately after he puts forward the independence conception.

But if substance and attribute are not distinct entities, then between them there can be only a conceptual distinction. And this is what Descartes says (AT VIII-1, 30). So (5) and (6) also give Descartes the thesis that the distinction between substance and attribute is conceptual.²³

Thus, given that substances cannot exist without their attributes, (5) and (6) have the consequence that no attribute of a substance is an entity other than the substance in question. But from this it follows that a substance can have no more than one attribute, and that only a conceptual distinction can obtain between a substance and its attribute. Thus taking (5) and (6) to express Descartes's independence conception of substance removes the puzzles about the doctrine of the unique principal attribute and the conceptual distinction between substance and attribute. This is a role that the independence conception of substance plays: to provide Descartes with those two distinctive theses on substance.

7

I have interpreted Descartes's independence conception of substance along the lines of (5) and (6). But the textual evidence for this reading is inconclusive (as it

²³I think it is clear that Descartes meant the thesis of the conceptual distinction to apply both to God and created substances. First, there is no indication that the three sorts of distinctions are to be restricted to dependent or created substances. Second, the conceptual distinction is said to be recognized by our inability to form a clear and distinct idea of the substance if we exclude from it the attribute in question (AT VIII-1, 30). But we can have a clear and distinct idea of God (AT VIII-1, 26). And we are unable to form such a clear and distinct idea if we exclude from it God's attributes, for an idea of God lacking one of his attributes is self-contradictory, and no clear and distinct idea is self-contradictory (AT VII, 151, 152). The fact that, after advancing the thesis of the conceptual distinction, Descartes goes on, in *Principles* I: 63, to use this thesis to explain how thought and extension can be recognized as the nature of mind and body respectively should not suggest that the thesis is meant to apply only to created substances. The explanation of this may simply be that Descartes was interested in pointing out how the thesis of the conceptual distinction impinged on recognizing a distinctively Cartesian thesis, namely that thought and extension constitute the nature of mind and body, respectively. There are places where Descartes says that God has attributes but no modes (AT VIII-1, 26; AT VIII-2, 348). But what Descartes says there leaves open that these attributes are only conceptually distinct, in which case these texts are compatible with the present interpretation. In any case, as was pointed out by an anonymous referee, Descartes's doctrine of the simplicity of God suggests that God cannot have a plurality of distinct attributes.

is with the alternative interpretations I have come across). So the textual evidence is only part of the total evidence for attributing these definitions to Descartes. What is the rest of the evidence for attributing these definitions to Descartes? That they allow us to derive, and in that way to make sense of, otherwise puzzling theses on substance that are prominent in the immediate context of the passage where Descartes introduces his independence conception. This is the main piece of evidence for my interpretation. *Principles* I: 51, the canonical text for this conception of substance, is at the beginning of a group of articles (*Principles* I: 51–65) constituting a body of doctrine on substance, modes, and attributes. Characteristic theses like the thesis that each substance has only one attribute, and that the distinction between substance and attribute is conceptual, are part of this doctrine. Taking Descartes to propose (5) and (6) makes sense of these theses and gives unity to the whole doctrine.

Based on some comments of Stuart's, one may object that (6) cannot do all the metaphysical work Descartes requires of it.²⁴ For in the Synopsis of the *Meditations* Descartes says that (created) substances are naturally immortal because they cannot cease to exist unless God denies them their concurrence. But (6) does not guarantee this. However there is no evidence that Descartes required of the independence conception of substance in the *Principles* a guarantee that created substances are naturally immortal. And the passages in the *Principles* do not manifest a concern with the natural immortality of substances in general or of souls in particular. But they do contain the theses that substances have only one principal attribute and that the distinction between substance and attribute is conceptual, which can be derived from (5) and (6).

So my interpretation gives unity and coherence to Descartes's doctrines on substance and attribute in the *Principles*. But, an objector might say, perhaps there is no such unity and coherence. For, after introducing the independence conception of substance at *Principles* I: 51, Descartes goes on to use the subject conception at *Principles* I: 52 to explain how substances are known. Does this not mean that Descartes's doctrine on substance in the *Principles* is inconsistent? If it is inconsistent, there is no value in an interpretation that gives those passages coherence and unity.

To the extent that Descartes's definitions of 'substance' are meant to capture the intension of the notion of substance, they are inconsistent with each other. But this does not mean that Descartes's doctrine on substance in the *Principles* is inconsistent. For in the *Principles* he gives only one definition of substance. At *Principles* I: 52, Descartes does not define substance in terms of being a subject of inherence; he merely appeals to the fact that substances are subjects of inherence to explain our knowledge them.²⁵ That sometimes Descartes ran both conceptions of substance together (as he did in the *Principles*) should be seen not as an indication of incoherence, but as an indication that he saw how to combine and articulate in a single argument different features of substance.

²⁴See Stuart, "Descartes's Extended Substances," 88.

²⁵This is a point that commentators sometimes miss. See, for instance, E. McCann, "Cartesian Selves and Lockean Substances," *The Monist* 69 (1986): 548–82, at 562.

What about rival interpretations? I do not have here space to discuss all rival interpretations, but it is safe to assume that all plausible alternative interpretations are variants of the idea that Descartes's notion of dependent substance is that of an entity *causally* dependent on God alone. As I have already indicated, I think that this idea is mistaken. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how the theses that substances have only one principal attribute and that the distinction between substance and attribute is conceptual can be derived from a conception of dependent substance as an entity causally dependent on God alone. This is even true of interpretations that see Descartes advancing a definition of dependent substance that contains both causal and non-causal relations of dependence. Markie, for instance, proposes the following definition:

- (7) *a* is a dependent substance =_{def.}
- (a) *a* is necessarily dependent upon the power of God to remain in existence;
 - (b) *a* can exist and not be dependent upon the causal power of any other created thing to remain in existence; and
 - (c) *a* can exist without being a property of some other thing.²⁶

But although (7) is compatible with the theses that each substance has only one principal attribute and that the distinction between substance and attribute is conceptual, it does not entail them, not even together with the idea that substances cannot exist without their attributes. Thus this definition does nothing to remove the puzzle of why Descartes maintained such theses.

But is my interpretation of the independence conception of substance really different from a causal interpretation? Some may think (6) collapses into some version of a causal interpretation. Stuart, for instance, considers what he calls the "logical reading" of Descartes's independence conception—something similar to (6)—and rejects it because he says that it collapses into a causal reading. How? He considers some Cartesian arguments that the existence of dependent substances—minds and bodies—entail the existence of God. He says that if every created mind contains an idea of God innately, then the Third Meditation contains an argument that the existence of each created mind implies the existence of God. But he points out that that argument depends on some causal principles, like the principle that the cause of an idea must have as much formal reality as the idea has objective reality. If the existence of created minds implies God's existence only because of such causal principles, then, Stuart says, the "logical" reading of the independence conception of substance threatens to collapse into a causal reading. Similarly, he thinks that the Cartesian argument that bodies entail the existence of God depends on the causal principle that the life span of any thing

²⁶See Markie, "Descartes's Concepts of Substance," 69. I have slightly altered Markie's definition in two ways to adapt it to my terminology. First, Markie proposes his definition as a definition of *created* substance, rather than *dependent* substance. Second, instead of the word 'property' he uses 'quality'. My comments on Markie's definition do not depend on these changes. Previously Markie had given another reconstruction of Descartes's independence conception of substance (Peter Markie, *Descartes's Gambit* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986], 200). In "Descartes's Concepts of Substance" (70 n. 6), Markie criticizes his earlier reconstruction.

is composed of causally independent temporal parts, and so he concludes that also in this case the logical reading of the independence conception of substance threatens to collapse into a causal reading.²⁷

But the argument that (6) collapses into a causal reading does not go through. First, Descartes has an argument that everything entails God's existence that does not depend on any causal principle. This is the ontological argument, whose conclusion is that God's existence is necessary. If God is necessary, then the existence of anything entails the existence of God in the required sense, namely that it is impossible for anything to exist without God. Second, as we have seen, even if the reason why a thing, *a*, cannot exist without God is that *a* must have God as a cause, this does not make (6) collapse into a definition of substance in causal terms.²⁸

8

I have identified a precise role that the independence conception plays in Descartes's philosophy, namely that it allows Descartes to derive the theses that each substance has only one principal attribute and that the distinction between substance and attribute is conceptual. The key element in this derivation is the idea that substance and attribute are not distinct entities—a consequence of the independence conception of substance. I shall now show that the idea that substance and attribute are not distinct entities plays an important role in Descartes's defense of substance dualism. This makes the role of the independence conception of substance even more significant.

Remember the objection, presented towards the end of section 2, against Descartes's argument for substance dualism. The objection was that, apart from the real distinction between mind and body, all Descartes can claim to have established is property dualism. For that there can be a substance that thinks without being extended, and that there can be an extended substance that does not think, establishes only that thought and extension are distinct properties. Thus the argument does not establish that no substance has both thought and extension.

This objection presupposes that a substance and its attributes are distinct entities, for if they are not, to show that two attributes are distinct is to show that no substance has both. It is thus clear how Descartes *should* reply to this objection. He should invoke his idea that substance and attribute are not distinct entities. Thus if thought and extension are distinct entities, and neither is a mode of the other,

²⁷See Stuart, "Descartes's Extended Substances," 87–88.

²⁸Eternal truths seem to satisfy (6), for there is no other entity, except God, that must exist for an eternal truth to hold, or—what in Descartes's philosophy seems to be the same—exist; but Descartes distinguished eternal truths from substances (AT VIII–I, 22–23). Nevertheless, Descartes's doctrine of eternal truths is unclear, if not incoherent. So the fact that eternal truths may satisfy (6) is not a reason not to attribute (6) to Descartes. It is interesting to note that eternal truths also pose a problem to the other proposed reconstructions of the independence conception: Loeb's, Markie's, and Stuart's reconstructions are satisfied by eternal truths; similarly, if eternal truths have properties, they satisfy the subject conception of substance. However some scholars may want to argue that since all these interpretations lead to the claim that eternal truths are substances—a claim Descartes would not have adopted—they are all inadequate. An anonymous referee (to whom I am grateful for pointing this argumentative possibility to me) would be inclined to argue in that way. I lack here the space to engage in a detailed discussion of how much considerations from Descartes's doctrine of eternal truths should bear on interpretations of his doctrine on substance.

no substance is both thinking and extended; no substance has both mental and material properties. So substance dualism is true.

This *should* be Descartes's answer. But was it? Yes. Regius made basically the same objection we raised in section 2:

[I]f we are to follow some philosophers, who hold that extension and thought are attributes which are present in certain substances, as in subjects, then since these attributes are not opposites, but merely different, there is no reason why the mind should not be a sort of attribute co-existing with extension in the same subject . . . (CSM I, 295; AT VIII-2, 342-43)

Regius is basically saying that since a substance is the subject of attributes, there is no reason to think that it does not have different attributes. Only if these attributes are incompatible—"opposites" as Regius says—could we conclude that a substance does not have all of them. But for all Descartes has shown, thought and extension are merely different, not incompatible, and so what Descartes has shown is that it is possible that a subject with one of those attributes lacks the other, but he has not shown that what thinks is not extended, or that what is extended does not think. In other words, Regius's point is that all Descartes has established is property dualism, not substance dualism.

Descartes's answer to Regius could not have been clearer. Admitting that he takes extension to be the attribute of body, and thought to be the attribute of mind, he goes on to say: "But I did not say that these attributes are present in the substances as in subjects distinct from them" (*Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, CSM I, 297; AT VIII-2, 348). So, in response to Regius, Descartes denies that substance and attribute are distinct entities. If substance and attribute are not distinct entities, then there cannot be distinct attributes in the same substance. And this is precisely the point that he makes shortly after the passage just quoted:

As for the attributes which constitute the natures of things, it cannot be said that those which are different, and such that the concept of one is not contained in the concept of the other, are present together in one and the same subject; for that would be equivalent to saying that one and the same subject has two different natures—a statement that implies a contradiction . . . (*Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, CSM I, 298; AT VIII-2, 349-50)²⁹

Descartes is thus using his idea that substance and attribute are not distinct entities to defend substance dualism. To that extent, he is using the independence conception to defend substance dualism.

9

This Cartesian defense of substance dualism casts Descartes's substance dualism in a new light. For if substance and attribute are not distinct entities, then substance dualism is equivalent to a version of property dualism, *attribute dualism*: the thesis that thought and extension are distinct attributes. And so by establishing attribute

²⁹Yablo suggests that Descartes's claim that no simple entity is both extended and thinking is a last-ditch appeal to a basic conviction (Yablo, "The Real Distinction," 197, 199). If my argument in this paper is right, this is not a basic conviction, but a conviction that derives from the independence conception of substance through the idea that a substance and its attribute are not distinct entities.

dualism Descartes is able to establish both substance dualism and the real distinction between mind and body.

But then, it may be asked, if substance dualism is equivalent to attribute dualism, why did Descartes worry so much about giving arguments for substance dualism? After all, attribute dualism is evident. He could have just pointed out that obviously extension and thought are not the same and then claim to have established substance dualism.

But it is not evident that thought and extension, or mental and material properties, are not the same. Both in the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries (some) materialists would deny property dualism. So Descartes needs an argument for property dualism. And since Descartes has a principle that guarantees the possibility of certain conceptions (that whatever he conceives of in a certain way can be so created by God), a principle that ensures the numerical distinctness of separable entities, and since he can conceive in the appropriate way of thought and extension existing separately, he can use a separability argument to establish attribute dualism. And given his theory of attributes and modes, an argument for attribute dualism would also be an argument for property dualism in general.

Nevertheless some may object that Descartes admitted having no argument for property dualism and so no argument for attribute dualism. So he was not prepared to use a version of the separability argument to establish attribute dualism. But if my interpretation is right, one would expect that he would be prepared to use a separability argument to establish attribute dualism.

Someone who may make this objection is Bennett. He says that property dualism took root in Descartes's mind at a level too deep for argument, and that Descartes admitted having no argument for it.³⁰ This is the passage, from the Sixth Replies, where, according to Bennett, Descartes admits having no argument for property dualism:

[C]an I therefore show my critics . . . that it is self-contradictory that our thought should be reduced to corporeal motion? By 'reduced' I take it that they mean that our thought and corporeal motions are one and the same. My reply is that I am certain of this point, but I cannot guarantee that others can be convinced of it, however attentive they may be, and however keen, in their own judgement, their powers of perception may be. I cannot guarantee that they will be persuaded, at least so long as they focus their attention not on things which are objects of pure understanding but only on things which can be imagined. (CSM II, 286–87; AT VII, 424–25)

But here there is no admission, on Descartes's part, that he lacks an argument for property or attribute dualism. All Descartes says is that he is certain that it is self-contradictory to reduce thought to corporeal motion, and that he cannot guarantee that he will convince and persuade others of it. But saying that one cannot guarantee being able to convince others of a point is not admitting that one lacks arguments for the point in question. On the contrary, what Descartes says even suggests he is going to produce an argument. And we shall see that this is exactly what he does in the following lines. Indeed he proceeds to support attribute dualism through a version of the separability argument.

³⁰Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers*, 66.

But first let us be clear that there are two different ways in which attribute dualism can be denied: (a) by affirming that thought and extension are the same attribute, and (b) by denying that either thought or extension are attributes. One form of instancing (b) is by taking one of thought and extension to be a mode of the other. If this is the case, then there is a modal distinction between thought and extension, and although one of them can exist without the other, the latter cannot exist without the former. One way to reply to this is by invoking separability considerations and showing that *each* of them can exist without the other. Regius had considered the possibility that the mind was a mode of a corporeal substance, and at one point in his reply in the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, Descartes said:

A composite entity is one which is found to have two or more attributes, each of which can be distinctly understood apart from the other. For, in virtue of the fact that one of these attributes can be distinctly understood apart from the other, we know that the one is not a mode of the other, but is a thing, or attribute of a thing, which can subsist without the other. A simple entity . . . is one in which no such attributes are to be found. It is clear from this that a subject which we understand to possess solely extension and the various modes of extension is a simple entity; so too is a subject which we recognise as having thought and the various modes of thought as its sole attribute. (CSM I, 299; AT VIII-2, 350-51)

Here Descartes is invoking separability considerations to show that neither thought is a mode of extension, nor extension is a mode of thought. Similarly, Descartes could invoke separability considerations in response to those who claim that thought and extension are the same attribute, or in response to those who ask him to prove that thought and extension are distinct attributes. The authors of the Sixth Objections objected that Descartes had not demonstrated that thought did not reduce to *corporeal motion*. One line after the passage of the Sixth Replies where Bennett thinks Descartes admits having no argument for property dualism, Descartes says:

The only way of understanding the distinction [between thought and corporeal motion] is to realize that the notions of a thinking thing and an extended and mobile thing are completely different, and independent of each other; and it is self-contradictory to suppose that things we clearly understand as different and independent could not be separated, at least by God. (CSM II, 287; AT VII, 425)

What Descartes is saying here is that, in order to understand the difference between thought and motion, one has to realise that the notions of a thinking thing and an extended thing are different. That is, he can conceive of a thinking thing that is not extended and of an extended thing that does not think. So far, the separation of thought and extension is in thought. But God can make the separation in reality. That is, it is possible that there is a thinking thing that is not extended and an extended thing that does not think. So thought and extension are distinct attributes. Not only is he giving an argument for attribute dualism, he is giving precisely a version of the separability argument.

So the argument for attribute dualism is a separability argument. But this does not mean that all Descartes can show by its means is property dualism. For given Descartes's thesis that substance and attribute are not distinct entities, by being an argument for attribute dualism, this is also an argument for substance dualism.

To conclude, the notion of dependence involved in Descartes's independence conception of substance is not causal. Descartes's independence conception is encapsulated by definitions (5) and (6). This conception of substance entails that a substance and its attribute are not distinct entities. This allows Descartes to derive the theses that each substance has only one principal attribute, and that the distinction between substance and attribute is conceptual. The idea that a substance and its attribute are not distinct entities is used by Descartes to respond to the objection that his separability argument does not prove substance dualism. Given that substance and attribute are not distinct entities, substance dualism is equivalent to attribute dualism, and Descartes used a version of the separability argument to argue for the latter. Thus, the independence conception of substance is a philosophically fruitful idea that plays a very important role in Descartes's philosophy.³¹

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