

# Descartes on Subjects and Selves

Vili Lähteenmäki  
University of Helsinki

## 1. Background

The Cartesian self is a topic that is recognized far beyond the bounds of Descartes scholarship. According to the picture still widespread within the larger philosophical audience, Descartes, together with Locke, is among the most notable figures associated with what is sometimes called an early modern turn inwards. Influential philosophers have given such labels as minimalist, disengaged subject, and punctual to their views of selfhood.<sup>1</sup> Descartes is widely known for his claims that “my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing” (AT VII 78, CSM II 54),<sup>2</sup> that “this *I* which is thinking is *an immaterial substance* with no bodily element” (AT III 247-8, CSMK 159), and that “it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it” (AT VII 78, CSM II 54). Considering these statements from an ontological perspective, minimalism may seem as an apt descriptive label: the referent of the first-personal pronoun is a simple and in itself complete unextended substance the nature of which is to think.

Descartes may appear a minimalist also from historical perspective, relative to the background of pre-modern conceptions of the self. An arguably central approach to the question of selfhood is characterized by a type of holism which allows for metaphysical, psychological, material or physical as well as moral and social aspects as proper constituents of selves and which may also involve a teleology about realizing one’s individual nature.<sup>3</sup> As opposed to his predecessors, Descartes may hence be seen as divesting the self of constituents other than what is knowable by subjective means, by an infallible awareness the mind has of its own acts. It is a result of the subjective method of exploration that the mind comes out as a distinct entity. And when the mind is equated with the self, as Descartes seems to be doing, it follows that the self relates to features in virtue of which it is considered a human being and a moral agent in the same way as it relates to features of the external world. This way of portraying Descartes sees him as starting from an epistemological motive for finding secure knowledge and arriving at a minimalist metaphysics of the self.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Rorty 1979, 54ff., Taylor 1989, ch. 8 & 9, Sorabji 2006, 1.

<sup>2</sup> References to Descartes’ work are to *Œuvres de Descartes*, 12 vols., edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1964–1976) (cited as AT). Translations from *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols. Vols. 1–2 (ed. and trans.) J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (cited as CSM I and CSM II), Vol. 3 with A. Kenny (cited as CSMK) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985–1991), and *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes* (cited as Corr.) (ed. and trans.) Lisa Shapiro (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Gill 2008 and Sorabji 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Rorty (1979) has a weighty role in the recent history of this view.

In the scholarship both the centrality of discovering the self through an inner awareness and the self's nature as a simple unextended thinking thing have been challenged in many ways. One line of inquiry calls into question that Descartes' primary interest is epistemological focusing instead on the scope and powers of the mind regarding its relation with the world.<sup>5</sup> This is to portray Descartes as seated in the preceding traditions in which our cognitive faculties—memory, imagination, understanding, will, and sensory perception—account for our engagement with the world.<sup>6</sup> According to this approach, Descartes' metaphysics is not about pinpointing what the mind *is*. Instead, Descartes is concerned with “what mind *does* and sees the exercise of its various intellectual capacities and the standards governing them as essential.”<sup>7</sup> As imagination and sensory perception are faculties dependent on both mind and body, the nature of the self is not a clear-cut issue.

Without rehearsing interpretative traditions more closely, suffice it to note that a number of interpretations carefully attend to Descartes' notion of mind-body union.<sup>8</sup> Although they differ greatly in details, together they indicate that considering the question of selfhood as a question about the Cartesian mind is inadequate and falsely suggests that Descartes does not have a genuine interest in us as human beings—as the embodied subjects that we experience ourselves.

## 2. The Union

Descartes describes the *human* mind “as it were intermingled” with the body (AT VII 81, CSM II 56), which is little more than a statement that the two are united. It is more substantive to say that “it is not *sufficient* for [the mind] to be lodged in the human body like a pilot in his ship [but] it must be more closely joined and united with the body to have ... feelings and appetites like ours and so constitute a real human being” (AT VI 59, CSM I 141; added emphasis). Such feelings and appetites as pain, hunger, and thirst and perceptions of color, sound, flavor, smell, heat, cold etc. (AT VII 437, CSM II 294-295) have a special status because they can only belong to a real human being. Internal and external sensations, as the variety of thought that tends to misrepresents the world beyond remedy (AT VII 35-36, CSM I 218-219), provide the internal evidence that we consist of a union between mind and body. Indeed, sensations are in themselves distinctive of what it is to be a human mind (AT VI 59, CSM I 141), for nearly all of our thoughts involve the body. According to Descartes' own report, he is able to entertain thoughts which occupy solely the intellect few hours per year (AT III 694, Corr. 70)! Sensations are unique products of the union, something that “God has bestowed on me as a combination of mind and body” (AT VII 82, CSM II 57).

---

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Hatfield (1997) and (1998).

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Perler (2015)

<sup>7</sup> See Alanen 2016 for a concise articulation of this point.

<sup>8</sup> Hoffman 1986, Alanen 1996 & 2003, Carrierio 2009, Brown 2006, Rozemond 2003, Shapiro 2003, Koivuniemi & Curley 2015, and Simmons 2017 among others. Voss (1994) is notable in arguing that while Descartes has such an interest, he fails to account for a human being.

Distinctive of sensations is that they represent things not only as existing outside the mind but also with a host of secondary qualities, such as colors and sounds, as if they are qualities inhering in those things. We falsely refer sensations, which *qua* thoughts are states of the mind, outside the mind: we “feel a pain as if it were in our foot” and “see light as if it were in the sun” (AT VIIIA 33, CSM I 217). However, in doing so they promote preservation of the human body, and hence also the embodied human mind (AT VIII 81, CSM II 56). Associated with most sensations is a degree of pain or pleasure in the guise of which our own nature teaches us to “avoid what induces a feeling of pain and seek out what induces feelings of pleasure” (AT VII 82, CSM II 57). We cannot help regarding the objects of sensation as beneficial or harmful. In this respect, the body has genuine authority over the mind. A teaching of nature is different from what Descartes calls “natural light.” A Teaching of nature indicates to me *that* I’m embodied, whereas by natural light we come to have clear and distinct understanding of *how* things are (AT VII 82, CSM II 57). A looser instrumental connection between a mind and a body would not be “sufficient” for teachings of nature. What to us are thirsts, colors, sounds, pains, and pleasures would be a matter of pure intellectual understanding of (mechanically describable) states of bodies. It would require specific intellectual expertise to interpret material changes and infer to their harmfulness or beneficiality to the body.

God could of course have ordained things differently. The phenomenology of sensations could presumably be different and still perform the same function of leading us to behave in ways conducive to preservation of the union. That thirst prompts us to drink is one thing, what thirst feels like is another.<sup>9</sup> But there is something more to the specialty of sensations than their phenomenology and prompting us to act favorably with respect to the well-being of the union. Namely, they also bring about that I take myself as a single embodied being as I perceive things in my vicinity. It is particularly clear that I take myself as embodied when I pursue or avoid what the senses have presented to me. It is not just that I care about my body but I also take my activity of thinking, that is my mind, as spatially located relative to what the senses have presented to me (I am *thinking* about the lion that roars *behind* me). This aspect is distinct from the phenomenology of sensations because, again, taking myself to be spatially located is one thing and what the phenomenology is like that makes me so take myself is another.<sup>10</sup> It is also distinct from the urge to act favorably with respect to the well-being of the union. So, for the present purpose, the most important feature of how the body delimits the mind in sensation is that body and mind are amalgamated in our experience of ourselves.

The first-person perspective experiences that ensue from the union and cause us to experience ourselves as embodied beings can be contrasted to Descartes’ third-

---

<sup>9</sup> “[T]here is absolutely no connection (at least that I can understand) between the tugging sensation and the decision to take food” (AT VII 76, CSM II 53).

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps (what to us are) internal sensations could have been made different also in the respect that they would not be experienced as in the body and yet they would incline us to behave in ways that preserve the body, but that would be a radically different form of life.

person perspective characterizations of the ontological status of the mind-body union. It is “a unity in its own right” (AT VII 222, CSM II 157), the notions of body, mind, and their union are all primitive (AT III 665, Corr. 65), and “to conceive a union between two things is to conceive of them as one single thing” (AT III 692, Corr. 69-70). Also, Descartes’ denial that sensations should themselves be thought of as constitutive of the union—as they rather “*arise* from the union” (AT VII 81, CSM II 56; added emphasis)—indicates that it has an ontological status prior to and independent of how it manifests in our internal states. Discussing individuation of bodies Descartes says that “‘by one body’ or ‘one piece of matter,’ I mean whatever is transferred at a given time, even though this may in fact consist of many parts which have different motions relative to each other” (AT VIIIA 53-54, CSM I 233). ‘One body’ here means a quantity of extension in fact consisting of several, possibly indefinitely many, parts individuated as a single thing by a common motion. The membership status of such fully material things within Descartes’ ontology which officially comprises only the categories of substance and mode is a complex issue in its own right.<sup>11</sup> Namely, substances need only the concurrence of God to exist (AT VIIIA 25, CSM I 210) and modes need a substance to inhere in: “we employ the term ‘mode when we are thinking of a substance as being affected or modified” (AT VIIA 26, CSM I 211). Modes may be thought of as affections of substances as their limitations or determinations. For example, a given shape limits or determines extension by introducing boundaries in it and a particular act of thought limits or determines thinking (*qua* the nature of mind) with regard to the particular object the act of thought represents.<sup>12</sup> It seems that for Descartes nothing other than modes are individuated by a relation to something else. However, as Deborah Brown and Calvin Normore argue, Descartes appeals in his physics and elsewhere to a further category of things: quantities of material bodies, plants, animals, as well as artefacts like machines or parliaments. They call such things composites and point out that the mind-body union, which is a primitive notion and has its own true nature, is indeed the paradigmatic Cartesian composite.<sup>13</sup> When we grant both the unique nature of sensations and the union’s status as a single thing within the Cartesian overall ontology, it is quite natural to emphasize the union’s non-reducibility to the substances of which it is composed. It seems also quite natural to translate the non-reducibility into the idea that the union, rather than the mind, forms the Cartesian self. Especially given the widely received view of Descartes as a minimalist on selfhood, it is helpful to bear these points in mind.

### 3. The Union and the Self

I will suggest a reading that while we should respect the unique nature of sensations and grant the union its status as a single thing, we should resist the move of treating the union as the self. The following seems now clear enough. Since the human being

---

<sup>11</sup> See Brown & Normore (forthcoming) for a detailed and extensive discussion.

<sup>12</sup> Hatfield (2014), 214-5, Bolton (2013), 81; see also Secada (2000).

<sup>13</sup> See Normore 2011, 238 and Brown & Normore, forthcoming, for the details of how to locate mind-body unions within the inventory of things in the Cartesian universe.

is not a mere assemblage of two entities but a unique subject of which sensations are predicated, an adequate account of the Cartesian self will have to somehow involve the mind-body union. Difficulties start right here. Although the union has a robust status as an ontologically single thing and as one of the three primitive notions, it differs from the other two in that there cannot be a metaphysical explanation of it commensurate to those of mind and of body.<sup>14</sup> This is because a clear and distinct grasp of the essence of a thing is required of a successful Cartesian metaphysical explanation (AT VII 35, CSM II 24). The third notion does not lend itself to such explanation and hence we cannot have clear and distinct intellectual understanding of our nature as human beings. As Descartes writes to Elisabeth, the way of conceiving the union can result from “using only life and ordinary conversations and in abstaining from meditating” (see AT III 692, Corr. 70). His point is that once we understand what sensations are and learn the teaching of our own nature that our mind and body form a unit, we should also refrain from attempting to intellectually grasp the union, because it is a hopelessly counterproductive strategy for making sense of it. For this reason, it is not clear how the mind-body union should figure in an account of the Cartesian self.

In an attempt to clear some ground, we can distinguish between two ways of inquiring into what the first-personal pronoun picks out for Descartes. We may ask *what*, metaphysically, is the referent of ‘I’? The challenge with answering the question is not only that we cannot expect to arrive at similar clear and distinct metaphysics regarding the mind, the body, and the union, but also that Descartes has no qualms to use ‘I’ to refer both to the mind and to the union. Surely, he does not refer to both at once but qualifies the ‘I’ with an ‘insofar as.’ On the one hand, he says that “I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing” (AT VII 78, CSM II 59) and, on the other, that “my whole self [*me totum*], in so far as I am a combination of body and mind,” is a thing that can be affected by (other) bodies (AT VII 81, CSM II 56).<sup>15</sup> If we insist on asking after metaphysics of the self, we would want to know on what the ‘insofar as’ qualification is based, which leads us back at asking about the metaphysics of the union. I take Descartes’ shifting between the referents of the ‘I’ as an invitation to resist this question.

Instead, we may inquire about the referent of ‘I’ outside the strictly metaphysical framework. Namely, ‘I’ always picks out the psychological subject or the subject of experience. It does that regardless of whether the subject of experience knows what it is, whether it might be the mind or the union: “let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I’m nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something” (AT VII 36, CSM II 25; see also AT VIIIA 9, CSM I 196). The question to

---

<sup>14</sup> Alanen 1996, Simmons 2017, Brown 2019. Simmons has recently offered a thorough argument that reconstructive attempts at a Cartesian metaphysics of the union will be misguided and that it is Descartes’ own view that a phenomenology of embodiment is what we should be doing instead.

<sup>15</sup> See Carriero 2013, 89-90 for a discussion of qualifying the ‘I’ and Brown 2014 for an argument that being a self is for Descartes a contextualized matter.

ask about the role of the union with regard to self is now how the union is manifested or how the body and mind are amalgamated in what and who the subject of experience takes itself to be in different circumstances, that is, in having purely intellectual thoughts, sensory thoughts, episodic memories, etc.

The expression used in the beginning that Descartes is philosophically concerned with us as the ‘embodied subjects that we experience ourselves’ is not descriptive of selfhood from an impersonal realist perspective, but indicative of a particular way of conceiving the relation between the subject of experience and the mind, on the one hand, and the subject of experience and the union, on the other. The view put forth here is that the bodily features partaking in what one takes herself to be are in the end a matter of representation. I will also suggest that bodily self-presence is on a par with intellectual self-presence, because the latter is likewise a matter of representation. It is important to remember that since the experience of embodiment arises from the union and its character hinges on the union, accounting for the Cartesian self by reference solely to the mind’s capacity to represent will be unavoidably inadequate, “the mind is aware that sensations do not come from itself alone, and that they cannot belong to it simply in virtue of its being a thinking thing” (AT VIIIA 41, CSM I 224). Nevertheless, pure intellectual perception is a self’s thought in the same sense of ownership of an experience as a sensory perception is a self’s thought. What differs in these cases is of what the subject of experience takes itself to be constituted.<sup>16</sup> I take the idea of a subject of experience as taking itself one way or another to be in the background of Descartes’ usage of ‘I’ in reference to both the mind and the union.

#### 4. Self-Presence

Despite due emphasis on the robust status of the union—that in sensation the body inevitably affects the mind—in certain other respects the mind has precedence over the body. Presenting the famous (dis)analogy between how mind relates to its body and how a sailor relates to his ship Descartes points out that, unlike the sailor and the ship, “I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with my body, so that I and the body form a unit” and immediately notes that “if this were not so, *I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt*” and that “sensations are [...] modes of thinking” (AT VII 81, CSM II 56, my emphasis). Here the subject of experience, the ‘I’, is claiming knowledge of his true nature (as a thinking thing) and he also understands that the pain is a confused mode of thinking that arises from the union,<sup>17</sup> but that it is a mode of thinking nonetheless. Despite all this, the experience of embodiment is unavoidable: he feels pain instead of having just “explicit understanding of the fact” that something is not right in his body (*ibid.*).

---

<sup>16</sup> To be clear, by “taking” oneself to be constituted of merely mental or both mental and material properties I mean that, under normal circumstances, we cannot avoid so taking ourselves, not that it is, at least easily, up to us to construct ourselves.

<sup>17</sup> See Simmons (2017, 16-17) for an analysis that the fundamentally different way of representing things is what differentiates sensations from intellectual thoughts rather than their lack of clarity and distinctness.

I take Descartes to tell us here that while it is possible for us to clearly and distinctly grasp our nature as thinking things and have that piece of knowledge presently in mind while undergoing sensory thoughts, our selfhood is nonetheless not reducible to the thinking thing or to the activity of thinking. That the same subject of experience is capable of existing without sensations does not entail that the *self* is *nothing but* a thinking thing. Thoughts are indeed constitutive of selfhood, but not in virtue of their being modifications of the mind but rather in virtue of conveying content that affects what we take ourselves to be. They enter into our self-constitution in virtue of their content.

In order to properly appreciate this aspect of sensory thoughts, let us for the moment treat them as mere thoughts, as something purely mental, and ask how is my presence to myself *qua* a mind achieved? Descartes says, “we do not have immediate knowledge of substances” (AT VII 222, CSM II 156). We know substances, our own mind included, only through its modes. An actual instance of a mind relating to itself requires having an actual thought. There are two ways in which to interpret the nature of “having” a thought here. Granted the metaphysical status of a given mind as an individual substance, it is related to itself simply by entertaining a thought, because the thought is *its* modification. In this sense there is no open question about ownership of thoughts for Descartes. But this is also not the sense of self-presence that interests us here, because the mere metaphysical ownership does not entail that an occurrent thought is present to the subject in a way that it involves an experience of herself as its subject (in addition to what the thought otherwise represents to her). We are interested in what brings about an experience of being the subject of the thought and whether we constantly have that experience?

We can seek some help from Arnauld, who critically addresses whether our experience of ourselves is temporally continuous. He does so against two Cartesian commitments. First, substances (mind and matter) are incessantly modified in one way or another, otherwise they cease to exist. Second, the substance’s unified essence is exhibited in any and all of the modes of a substance. In this respect all the modes of a substance have something in common with one another. For example, “the thing that understands and the thing that wills are one and the same in virtue of a *unity of nature*” (AT VII 424, CSM II 286; added emphasis). Against this background Arnauld challenges the view that a substance necessarily constantly exhibits its essence. He notes, just like some Lockeans later on,<sup>18</sup> that it does not “seem necessary that the mind be always thinking, even if it is a thinking substance, for it is enough that the power of thinking be always in it.”<sup>19</sup> But unlike the Lockeans, Arnauld agrees with Descartes in maintaining that it follows from the very idea of substance that it must be always modified in some way, lest it go out of existence.

---

<sup>18</sup> According to John Locke (Journal note, 20<sup>th</sup> February 1682, in Locke 1936), thinking substance “may subsist in a state of insensibility without partakeing in ... any perception whatsoever” and according to Anthony Collins “thinking is an Action which may commence after the existence of its Subject, and may perish or cease to exist, its Subject still remaining” (1731, 81)

<sup>19</sup> Arnauld (1990a), 186.

Arnauld's worry is that Descartes has not satisfactorily explained how the essence is constantly exhibited in the substance's modifications. A series of modes, actual thoughts, do not seem to qualify as exhibiting the essence of mind, as they keep changing consequent to what they are about.<sup>20</sup> Arnauld's own solution is that there must be something in all the changing modes of the thinking substance in virtue of which they partake in and exhibit the essence of the substance and hence accord with its unified nature. His solution brings us to the question of subject of experience, for according to him an inherent reflexivity is included in each and every act of thought, a *reflexion virtuelle*, as a result of which I can have no thought that does not present myself to myself.<sup>21</sup>

Concerning Arnauld's own view, he is rather clear that such self-presence is built into any single act of thought as its secondary object alongside its primary object.<sup>22</sup> Is the same the case with Descartes? There are some well-known passages, which indicate Descartes' commitment to the view that we are aware of all our thoughts. He explains that "I use this term [thought] to include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it. Thus, all the operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination and the senses are thoughts" (AT VII 160, CSMK II 113) and that "there can be nothing in the mind, insofar as it is a thinking thing, of which it is not conscious" (AT VII 246, CSM II 171). But what does such awareness of thoughts afford with regard to the subject of experience? Descartes has an act-content theory of thoughts, where the act is an act of thinking and the content is the object existing in the act of thinking. Descartes defines 'idea' as follows, "I understand this term to mean the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me conscious of this thought" (AT VII 160, CSM II 113). According to this passage, becoming conscious of something is a matter of an immediate perception of an idea. In order for me to experience myself as the subject of a thought, sensory or intellectual, I have to have an immediate perception of an idea such that this experience ensues. If this is right, then my experience of being the subject of a thought is a matter of (re)presentation by an idea.<sup>23 24</sup>

It is appropriate to note that the passage in which Descartes defines 'idea' leaves some room for other interpretations, because the notion of idea is ambiguous for him. It "can be taken materially, as an operation of the intellect [i.e. the mind]" or "objectively, as the thing represented by that operation" (AT VII 8, CSM II 7). Materially the idea is the act and objectively the idea is the content and they relate to one another so that the content is presented to the mind in the act of thinking. A

---

<sup>20</sup> Bolton (2013), 186.

<sup>21</sup> Arnauld (1990b), 71.

<sup>22</sup> Nadler (1989), 120–121. Nadler reads Arnauld as a same-order theorist of self-consciousness in the context of Arnauld's direct realism. My approach here complies with Bolton's in reading the inherent reflection as an attempted solution to the question of the unified nature of the thinking substance.

<sup>23</sup> Although the claim is that the mind is presented to itself ideationally, we can remain neutral about whether Descartes' realism is ultimately of representational or direct variety. The answer depends on how the reality that a thing has in a mind when it is thought about relates to the reality the thing has in itself. This question is beyond the scope of the present paper.

<sup>24</sup> This line of interpreting Descartes on consciousness stems from an ongoing work with Christian Barth.



natural reading of the passage is that Descartes means idea taken objectively. It is the primary sense of 'idea,' and this passage is explicitly intended as a definition. Descartes also speaks here of "form of any given thought," which suggests that the intended sense allows ideas to be different from one another with respect to their form, and strictly materially taken ideas are all similar as modifications of the mind. However, given the two senses of idea, if Descartes can allow idea materially understood to be directly related to itself, there might be a non-representational way for the mind's self-presence.<sup>25</sup> However, in the definition he seems to associate becoming conscious of something with an immediate perception of an idea objectively understood, which leaves little room for a reflexivity of an idea purely materially understood such that it would result in the mind's consciousness of itself. It hence seems that we have good reason to think of Cartesian self-relation in terms of presentation of content of thought.

Descartes recognizes different ways in which the content of thought may bring about a representation of the subject of experience. Consider first Descartes' explanation to Arnauld of the difference between thoughts of infants and adults: "[T]he first and simple thoughts of infants are *direct* and not reflexive [...]. But when an adult feels something, and simultaneously perceives that he has not felt it before, I call this second perception *reflection*, and attribute it to intellect alone, in spite of its being so linked to sensation that the two occur together and appear to be indistinguishable from each other" (AT V 221, CSMK 357). Simple thoughts involving "pain, pleasure, heat, cold, and other similar ideas" (AT V 149, CSMK 189-190) are presumably rare, maybe minds have them only as their very earliest thoughts when they are implanted in a body (AT VII 247, CSM II 171-172). What Descartes here calls second perception adds complexity in terms of what is presented to the mind.<sup>26</sup> The second perception is evaluative of the first simple perception and it results in the content being presented in a conceptualized form. In this example the mind experiences what the first perception represents as something new. The feature that concerns us here is that the second perception enables the mind to experience itself, because the second perception presents as relative to the perceiver whatever it is that the first simple perception represents. In this example the mind experiences what the first perception represents as something new to *him*.

Granted that content of ideas is what we experience, simple direct thoughts do not seem to necessarily involve presentation of the subject of experience. It is only as a result of the second perception, which doesn't appear to us as distinct from the first, that the content is altered so that we do experience ourselves as its subject. This can happen in many ways. When we see qualities as it were in objects, we see them relative to us (AT VI 437, CSM II 295). Although what is present to the subject is the content of ideas, the content appears to the subject as an external object, when

---

<sup>25</sup> See Simmons (2012, 6 fn. 21) for a suggestion to this end.

<sup>26</sup> Lähtenmäki 2007, 186.

“seeing a colour, for example, we suppose we were seeing a thing located outside us [...]” (AT VIIIA 32, CSM I 216). All our imaginations, sensations, and feelings comprise perceptions that are accompanied by calculations about distances between objects and projections of qualities onto them. When we will or fear something, we perceive the object as willed or feared (AT III 295, CSMK 172). For anything to appear as within a certain distance or as an object of volition, the subject has to take herself as distinct from the object as the subject to whom the object is present. Admittedly, Descartes offers no details about *how* exactly we should conceive the alterations of the content of thought to happen, but it seems safe to take it as his view *that* they do happen and that they result in presenting the subject as part of the given thought.<sup>27</sup>

We may now make three observations. The first is that not all thoughts necessarily involve self-presentation. The second is that when they do the subject of experience of purely intellectual thoughts as well as sensory thoughts is the mind. This is why even when I explicitly and carefully attend to my sensory thought and succeed in singling out the subject of experience so that I perceive its nature clearly and distinctly, I am left with the same subject of experience as I started with when I did not know enough of its essence, only that “I was something.” The third is that regarding the subject’s experience *of itself* either as a thinking thing or as embodied, mind and body are on an equal footing: there are not two distinct ways of self-presence, direct and ideational, but the subject’s presence to itself is always a matter of presentation by an idea.

## 5. Conclusion

Great majority of thoughts in which we experience ourselves as subjects have sensory origin. On the one hand, we have seen that Descartes thinks of the experience of embodiment arising from the union of mind and body as unavoidable and useful. This commitment strongly speaks for accepting a notion of an embodied Cartesian self. On the other hand, he notes that it is exactly this experience that disposes us to *judge* wrongly that we, as the subjects of experience of sensory thoughts, are *metaphysically* bodies and does not think that is useful at all. It is one of our preconceived opinions of which we should rid ourselves by subjecting it to the scrutiny of radical doubt. Through radical doubt we can arrive at clear and distinct grasp of our essence insofar as we are thinkers: “it seems that the only way of freeing ourselves from these opinions is to make the effort, once in the course of our life, to doubt everything which we find to contain even the smallest suspicion of certainty” (AT VIIIA 5, CSM I 193). The idea that I, as a subject of experience, is bodily will not survive the radical doubt.

---

<sup>27</sup> Simmons (2012, 19) has a thoughtful analysis of the automatic judgments with respect to their status as acts of thought. Although they are mental goings-on and as such we should be aware of them in light of Descartes’ denial of non-conscious thought, they do not in fact qualify as non-conscious, since they manifest themselves in the overall phenomenology of our thoughts. Were they absent, the phenomenology would be different.

A perception is “‘clear’ when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility” (AT VIIIA 22, CSM I 209). Descartes considers “a perception ‘distinct’ if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear” (*ibid.*). Many of our sensory thoughts qualify for clarity, but distinctness seems unachievable. Applying the criteria of clarity and distinctness to my perception of myself as the subject of a thought, I will have to keep away from attributing to myself all and any of the bodily features that the sensory thought presents to me as if my features. This is difficult, for “protracted and repeated study is required to eradicate the lifelong habit of confusing things related to the intellect with corporeal things” (AT VII 131, CSM II94).

Descartes’ firm denial of bodily features as constitutive of the thinking ‘I’ thus seems to be in serious tension with his acceptance that we are also mind-body unions. The tension is created if we understand him to divest also the *self* of bodily features. But if we understand him to warn against identifying the union with the thinking ‘I’ (which we tend to do), we can make room for an embodied Cartesian self. If the foregoing analysis is right, the unavoidable and useful experience of embodiment can be taken as characteristic of the Cartesian self. The line of thought in Descartes that I have attempted to spell out in this chapter is that our self-presence is always a matter of presentation by an idea and that the Cartesian self is constituted by what and who we take ourselves to be based on those ideas. In successful radical doubt we, as the psychological subject of ideas, can take ourselves as nothing but a thinking thing, but we may take ourselves as sitting on the sixth floor, hungry, amused, politically active, athletic, and what not. It is true that it is necessary for selves to be thinkers and there are no selves whose necessary feature is to be a politically active athlete. But some are, because the self is what a subject of experience takes itself to be by virtue of the experiences it has.<sup>28</sup> Some might think this makes the Cartesian self overly versatile, too Lockean. However, what we take ourselves to be is neither haphazard nor is it completely up to us to constitute ourselves. Rather, it seems that Descartes aims to secure enough versatility to allow for our personal histories.

## Bibliography

Alanen, Lilli, “Reconsidering Descartes’s Notion of the Mind-Body Union”, *Synthese* 106 (3) 1996, 3-20.

---

<sup>28</sup> See Brown 2019, 24–26 for a thoughtful account of Lilli Alanen’s “phenomenological holism” that brings together the interconnections between our sensations, passions, volitions, and actions and behaviors that ground our experience of selfhood.

Alanen Lilli, *Descartes's Concept of Mind*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 2003.

Alanen, Lilli, "Thought" in *The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon* (ed.) Lawrence Nolan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2016, 712-717.

Arnauld, Antoine, "New Objections to Descartes' Meditations," in *On True and False Ideas, New Objections to Descartes' Meditations* (trans.) Elmar J. Kremer, *Studies in the History of Philosophy* 7 (Lewiston, UK: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990a), 185-96.

Arnauld, Antoine, *On True and False Ideas* (ed.) Stephen Gaukroger (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press), 1990b.

Bolton, Martha Brandt, "Thinking: The Nature of Descartes' Mental Substance" in *Descartes' Meditations: A Critical Guide* (ed.) Karen Detlefsen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2013, 64-81.

Brown, Deborah, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2006.

Brown, Deborah & Normore Calvin, *Descartes' Ontology of Everyday Life*, forthcoming

Brown, Deborah, "The Metaphysics of Cartesian Persons" in *Mind, Body, and Morality. New Perspectives on Descartes and Spinoza* (ed.) Martina Reuter & Frans Svensson (New York: Routledge), 2019, 17-36.

Carriero, John, *Between Two Worlds, A Reading of Descartes's Meditations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2009.

Normore, Calvin, "Cartesian Unions", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* (XXXV), 2011, 223-239.

Gill, Christopher, "The Ancient Self: Issues and Approaches" in Remes, Pauliina & Sihvola, Juha (eds.) *Ancient Philosophy of Self* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 35-56.

Hatfield, Gary, "The Workings of the Intellect: Mind and Psychology" in *Logic and the Workings of the Mind: The Logic of Ideas and Faculty Psychology in Early Modern Philosophy*, Patricia Easton (ed.), North American Kant Society Publications 5 (Atascadero, California: Ridgeview Publishing, 1997), 21-45.

Hatfield, "The Cognitive Faculties" in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Daniel Garber & Michael Ayers, (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 953-1002.

Hatfield, Gary, *The Routledge Guidebook to Descartes' Meditations*, (London & New York: Routledge), 2014.

Hoffman, Paul, "The Unity of Man", *The Philosophical Review* (95) 1986, 339-370.

Koivuniemi, Minna & Curley, Edwin, "Descartes on the Mind-Body Union: A Different Kind of Dualism", *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 7, 2015, 83-122.

- Lähteenmäki, Vili, "Orders of Consciousness and Forms of Reflexivity in Descartes" in *Consciousness: From Perception to Reflection in the History of Philosophy* (eds.) Sara Heinämaa, Vili Lähteenmäki, and Pauliina Remes (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 177-201.
- Nadler, Steven, *Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy of Ideas* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 120–121.
- Rorty, Richard, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1979.
- Roxemond, Marleen, "Descartes, Mind-Body Union, and Holism", *Philosophical Topics* (31) 2003, 343-367.
- Secada, Jorge, *Cartesian Metaphysics. The Late Scholastic Origins of Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2000.
- Shapiro, Lisa "Descartes' *Passions of the Soul* and the Union of Soul and Body." *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* (85) 2003, 211-248.
- Simmons, Alison, "Cartesian Consciousness Reconsidered", *Philosopher's Imprint*, 2012, 1-21.
- Sorabji, Richard, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 2006
- Sorabji, Richard, "Graeco-Roman Varieties of Self", in *Ancient Philosophy of Self* Remes, Pauliina & Sihvola, Juha (eds.) (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 13-34.
- Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- Voss, Stephen, "Descartes: The End of Anthropology," in *Reason, Will and Sensation: Studies in Descartes's Metaphysics*, John Cottingham (ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 273-300.