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Author(s): Donald Sievert

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DESCARTES'S SELF-DOUBT

I SHALL contend that even though Descartes is sometimes certain that he exists, he sometimes doubts that he exists. He believes that two kinds of things exist when he knows that he exists. On the one hand, what exist are occurrent acts of thinking. He knows that they exist because he “observes” them. On the other hand, he believes that what exists is a thinking substance. Such substances are not “observed.” They may be known to exist only by establishing that God does not deceive him about the belief that an act of thinking must be in a thinking substance. Thus Descartes’s claim to know that he, qua particular thinking substance, exists can be doubted prior to the proofs for the existence and goodness of God. Descartes does exhibit self-doubt in the third Meditation.

My strategy will be to provide an exposition of the view of the self¹ found in the “Synopsis” and again near the end of the *Meditations*. Following this, I shall discuss the doubt of the third Meditation. Initially I establish that in a specified sense Descartes *can* doubt that he exists. Then I show that he *does* doubt that he exists. Because my aim is primarily to highlight a particular reading of the text, I shall restrict most comments about several current and different interpretations to footnotes.²

¹ My use of “self” needs qualification. I use it in connection with the discussions about Descartes’s nature which are independent of his discussions about having a body. Descartes sometimes views himself as a union of mind and body, as he emphasizes in the sixth Meditation. That he can doubt that the union of mind and body exists prior to the proofs about God (because prior to them he does not know that bodies exist) is a different and uncontroversial feature of the *Meditations*. I am concerned with the view of himself as one who thinks.

² There are numerous important articles offering interpretations which leave little room for Descartes’s uneasiness and eventual self-doubt. See, e.g., James D. Carney, “*Cogito, Ergo Sum* and *Sum Res Cogitans*,” *Philosophical Review*, LXXI (1962), 494-496; Harry G. Frankfurt, “Descartes’s Discussion of His Existence in the Second Meditation,” *Philosophical Review*, LXXXV (1966), 329-356; Robert Grimm, “*Cogito, ergo sum.*,” *Theoria*, XXXI (1965), 159-173; Jaakko Hintikka, “*Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?*,”

I

In the "Synopsis" of the *Meditations*, Descartes explains why his discussion of self-knowledge is not complete until the sixth Meditation. He says that in the second Meditation he indicates a conception of the mind (or soul) but that it is not until the last Meditation that he shows that our conceptions of the mind and body "are true in the very way in which we think them" (*HR*, p. 140; all references are to the Haldane-Ross version of Descartes's texts and to the first volume unless otherwise indicated). The conception is that "the human mind is not. . . composed of any accidents, but is a pure substance. For although all the accidents of mind be changed, although, for instance, it think certain things, will others, perceive others, etc., despite all this it does not emerge from these changes another mind" (*HR*, p. 141). What Descartes attempts to show after the second Meditation is that our conception of the mind accords with what actually exists. Because Descartes himself says that his discussion of the self is not complete until the last Meditation, to emphasize the sixth Meditation discussion of the self is to be faithful to Descartes's own emphasis.

The main features of Descartes's view of the self are: (1) the self includes, and sometimes is identified with, an enduring substance, and a substance of a certain kind—namely, a thinking substance; (2) occurrent acts of thinking (for example, sudden rememberings, doubtings, believings, and so forth) are viewed as properties ("modes") of substance; (3) the acts of thinking are "found" or "observed"; and (4) Descartes "rightly concludes" that he knows that he is a thinking thing or substance provided he knows that God exists and is good.

Philosophical Review, LXXI (1962), 3-32 (hereafter referred to as *H-I*) and "Cogito, Ergo Sum as an Inference and a Performance," *Philosophical Review*, LXXII (1963), 487-496, (hereafter referred to as *H-II*). Each of these authors focuses on the certainty of Descartes's claims of self-knowledge. Carney and Grimm emphasize that Descartes's view of the self appeals to substances and properties and that Descartes must somehow justify this view. They do not, it seems to me, emphasize sufficiently the possibility and the actuality of doubt associated with this justification. E. B. Allaire, in "The Circle of Ideas and the Circularity of the *Meditations*," *Dialogue*, 2 (1966), 131-153, does so. The interpretation I advance relies in many ways on his reading.

Here is Descartes's briefest characterization of the self:

The mind is entirely indivisible. For, as a matter of fact, when I consider the mind, that is to say, myself inasmuch as I am only a thinking thing, I cannot distinguish in myself any parts, but apprehend myself to be clearly one and entire. . . . And the faculties of willing, feeling, conceiving, etc. cannot be properly speaking said to be its parts, for it is one and the same mind which employs itself in willing and in feeling and understanding [*HR*, p. 196].

The passage emphasizes the simplicity or unity of the self. The self has no parts and hence ought not to be considered a complex of elements related in some way(s): it is not, *à la* Hume, an ordered series of states or events. Instead, the self is some kind of persisting element involved in all of a person's conscious psychological biography: that is, it is a constant in the part of one's history which includes one's mental acts.³ The view that these acts are part of the self is rejected, at least when "properly speaking." Nevertheless, they are connected with a single, persisting element (at least in the case of a single person). This connection is epistemologically important. It is employed in securing knowledge that such a persisting element exists.

Descartes offers two accounts of how one may know that one's substantial self exists. The first makes explicit what is only implicit in the second: one needs to know that God exists and is no deceiver prior to knowing that the persisting element exists. Both accounts make clear that Descartes considers the persisting element to be a thinking thing or substance. Here is the first account:

I know that all things which I apprehend clearly and distinctly can be created by God as I apprehend them. . . . Therefore, just because I know certainly that I exist, and that meanwhile I do not remark that any other thing necessarily pertains to my nature or essence, excepting

³ I use "mental acts" for what Ryle might be willing to call occurrent states of mind—e.g., my now remembering an appointment I have, my now thinking I had better call home, his long-awaited assent to a proposal, etc. Descartes mentions these, though he employs a different terminology, in *HR*, p. 159. He speaks of activities (of the mind) in Vol. II, p. 64.

that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing (or a substance whose whole essence or nature is to think) [*HR*, p. 190].

He reminds us that he is certain that he exists.⁴ He adds that because God can and does create things in such a way that my clear and distinct apprehensions (conceptions)⁵ of them accord with the way things are, and because he cannot clearly and distinctly conceive himself except as a thinking thing (substance), he may legitimately conclude that he is a thinking substance. Less technically: he cannot conceive of himself except as a thinking substance, and because he has good theological reason to accept such a view of the self, he may conclude that he is a thinking substance.⁶

The discussion continues and a second way of knowing that a thinking substance exists is introduced:

I further find in myself faculties employing modes of thinking peculiar to themselves, to wit, the faculties of imagination and feeling . . . which . . . cannot be . . . conceived apart from me, that is without an intelligent substance in which they reside for . . . in their formal concept, some kind of intellection is comprised from which I infer that they are distinct from me as its modes are from a thing. I *observe also* in me some other faculties . . . which cannot be conceived, any more than can the preceding, apart from substance to which they are attached, and consequently cannot exist without it [*HR*, p. 190; emphasis mine].

Here Descartes notes a distinction between one's mental acts and the persisting element—the thinking thing or substance—with

⁴ I shall have more to say about the nature and grounds of this certainty later.

⁵ Descartes often uses this pair of words interchangeably. And, at least sometimes, he uses “thinking thing” and “thinking substance” interchangeably as well.

⁶ There is a complex of issues surrounding Descartes's claims about *what* he is and his claims *that* he is. Often, he combines the claims by saying that he is a thinking thing. To say this is to say that he is a certain kind of thing as well as that he—i.e., something of that kind—exists. One of the complexities (which I touch on briefly later) of the second Meditation is Descartes's tendency to run these claims together. He worries simultaneously about what kind of thing he is and (the grounds for) his certainty that he is.

which he has identified the self. He also notes a relation between two kinds of things: no act can exist apart from a self. More accurately: he cannot *conceive* of acts except as connected with a self. He assumes (as the context makes clear) that a good God exists and thus concludes that *in fact* no act can exist apart from a self. This conclusion, coupled with the fact that he “observes” mental acts,⁷ enables him to conclude further that when he “observes” a mental act there is a thinking substance “in” which it exists. Thus an argument for the existence of a thinking substance is offered.

The gist of the argument is:

- (1) I “observe” occurrent mental acts.
- (2) I cannot conceive of them existing apart from a thinking substance.
- (3) If God is no deceiver, I may conclude that my inability to conceive of occurrent acts existing apart from a thinking substance accords with the fact that they cannot exist apart from such a substance.
- (4) Therefore, providing God is no deceiver, whenever I “observe” a mental act I may “rightly conclude” that there is a thinking substance “in” which those acts are or to which they are “attached”—that is, that I am a thinking thing or substance.

On such a view, Descartes’s claim that a thinking substance exists is the conclusion of an argument. Furthermore, it is the conclusion of an argument whose soundness depends on the soundness of earlier arguments for the existence and goodness of God.

⁷ Spelling out the nature of such “observation” (Descartes’s word!) is no small matter, as is spelling out what it means to say that Descartes is the one who observes his own mental acts. I suppose that Descartes means something like what others have meant by “introspection.” To say that it is Descartes who “observes” himself could mean that a second act, one of direct acquaintance or awareness and one which is “in” the same substance as the one which is “observed,” occurs. (Another possibility will be mentioned in discussing Hintikka later.) R. Chisholm, in “On the Observability of the Self,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XXX (1969), 7-21, discusses this issue and derives an argument for the observability of substances from it. Both his essay and replies appear in Paul Kurtz (ed.), *Language and Human Nature* (St. Louis, 1971).

Before commenting on the argument, it is noteworthy that Descartes himself provides a formulation quite close to the above:

Substance cannot be first discovered merely from the fact that it is a thing that exists, for *that fact alone is not observed* by us. We may, however, easily discover it by means of any one of its attributes because it is a common notion that nothing is possessed of no attributes, properties, or qualities. For this reason, when we perceive any attribute, we therefore *conclude* that some existing thing or substance to which it may be attributed, is necessarily present [*Principles of Philosophy*, *HR*, p. 240; emphasis mine].

Here, too, Descartes distinguishes between things or substances which have attributes, and attributes, and says that although we can not observe substances, we can know that they exist when we observe attributes, properties, or qualities. The basis for such knowledge is the “common notion” that every attribute is in a substance.⁸ Knowledge that substances exist, he implies, requires inference. Prior to this passage, Descartes has argued that God exists and that He is not a deceiver and, specifically, that God would not deceive us about the relevant clear and distinct conceptions and, what seems to amount to the same thing, “common notions” (*HR*, pp. 231-232, 238-239). The passage thus supports the interpretation advanced here. Others do so as well (see, for example, *HR*, II, 63-64 and 98).

Some elaboration and explanation will be useful in relating this interpretation to others and to other things that Descartes says. He is maintaining, I submit, that self-knowledge may be viewed as partly a matter of “observation.” We do “observe”

⁸ Notice that an operative assumption is that qualities are “in” substances. My interpretation involves the suggestion that acts (which include ideas) are (complexes of) qualities. If one believes that every quality is a quality of something, and if one construes the belief in terms of qualities being in substances, then one sees how easy it is to insist that if one knows that a quality exists, one knows that a substance exists. One has, in effect, built the notion of being in a substance into the notion of being a quality. For places in which the tendency is manifest in Descartes, see *HR*, II, 64, 98. Chisholm, in the essay cited in the previous footnote, does something very similar. Combining the notions as indicated is probably one of the contributing causes to Descartes’s “certainty” that he qua thinking substance exists prior to knowledge of God. I say more about this shortly.

(our own) acts. In so far as such acts are instances of thinking, we may be sure that thinking exists when we “observe” acts. The claim that we “observe” acts may be what leads Descartes to claim sometimes that he can know that he exists regardless of whether the deceiving genius exists (*HR*, pp. 150, 153, 158-159), that what assures him of the truth of his assertion that he exists is the perception of that which he asserts (*HR*, p. 158) and that he knows that he exists by a kind of mental vision (*HR*, II, 38). As we saw, *part* of Descartes’s argument that he exists is the claim that he “observes” (his own) mental acts.⁹

Descartes leaves no doubt that he also sometimes explicitly views self-knowledge as involving inference. In response to Gassendi’s suggestion that actions other than thinking may suffice for self-knowledge, he says:

When you say that *I could have inferred the same conclusion from any of my other actions*, you wander far from the truth, because there is none of my activities of which I am wholly certain . . . save thinking alone. For example you have no right to make the inference: *I walk, hence I exist*, except in so far as our awareness of walking is a thought; it is of this alone that the inference holds good. . . . Hence from the fact that I think that I walk I can very well infer the existence of the mind which so thinks, but not of the body which walks. So it is also in all other cases [*HR*, II, 207].

I take Descartes to be saying that the only activities of which he is certain are those of thinking. The claim that he is walking is doubtful (because it is doubtful that bodies exist prior to proofs about God). The claim that *a thought* that he walks occurs is not doubtful, however and, Descartes says, it is in so far as there is a thought that the inference that he exists “holds good.”¹⁰ The

⁹ In effect, Descartes suggests that there would be an “existential inconsistency” involved in his correctly reporting that he “observes” an act of thinking and denying that what he so “observes” exists. This relates to Hintikka’s remarks about thinking activities cited later.

¹⁰ Notice that Descartes says that the inference that his mind exists “holds good” when he has a thought. This has interesting implications. One is that he is saying he may infer that he exists from the occurrence of a thought. Another is that the subject matter of the thought—i.e., what the thought is about—is irrelevant. The thought that I walk functions as well as any thought as far as the

inference is from the existence of a thought to the existence of a mind which has thoughts. Thus I submit that Descartes, at least sometimes, views self-knowledge as a matter of inference involving moving from claims about the occurrence of thoughts (or ideas) to claims about the existence of a thinking substance. Yet inference, for Descartes, carries with it the risk of doubt.

Descartes's general pattern of doubt is the questioning of alleged relations between what he observes and what he does not observe. He does not doubt, and cannot imagine doubting, the existence of what he observes at a given moment. Doubt arises when inference is introduced, when he judges or infers that what he observes is related to something else. Of central concern to Descartes is justifying inferences from the occurrence of "observed" ideas to the existence of things "represented by" ideas. He says in the third Meditation:

Now as to what concerns ideas, if we consider them only in themselves and do not relate them to anything else beyond themselves, they cannot properly speaking be false. . . . Thus there remains no more than the judgments which we make, in which I must take the greatest care not to deceive myself. But the principal error and the commonest which we may meet with in them, consists in judging that the ideas which are in me are similar or conformable to the things which are outside me; for without doubt if I considered the ideas only as certain modes of my thoughts, without trying to relate them to anything beyond, they could scarcely give me material for error [*HR*, pp. 159-160].

In this passage, Descartes initially mentions possible error involving judging that ideas conform to things outside himself. He goes on to show, however that error, and therefore doubt, is possible when we try to relate ideas to *anything* beyond certain modes of his thoughts. Interestingly enough, in the third Meditation Descartes also mentions the idea of himself "which repre-

inference that a mind exists goes. Hence Descartes's argument for the existence of his mind is not so closely tied to thoughts about his own existence as Hintikka suggests. In fact, most of the examples of the kinds of thoughts which provide Descartes with the certainty that he exists are about things other than his own existence. The mere fact that he was persuaded of something, or that he was deceived about something—anything whatsoever—assures his existence (*HR*, pp. 150, 157).

sents me to myself" (*HR*, p. 164) and the idea of himself as the idea of substance (*HR*, p. 166). Doubt about the conformity of his idea of himself to something else, such as a thinking substance, is presumably an instance of the kind of possible error or doubt in question. Doubt about the existence of a thinking substance, if one "observes" not it but only an idea or property of it, is therefore possible in principle.

Descartes believes that he cannot be mistaken about what he "observes." Hence not even the demon can deceive him about knowing that an act he is "observing" exists. He can be certain that (his) mental acts exist when and because he "observes" them. Such perceptual metaphors and the knowledge they involve do not suffice for knowledge of the self qua thinking substance, however. Knowing that an act (or idea of a thinking substance) exists because one "observes" it is one thing; knowing that an act belongs to *some* thinking substance or other (or that the idea of a thinking substance actually represents such a substance) is another, though related, thing. (It is tantamount to knowing that every act is in *a* substance.) Knowing that a particular act belongs to a particular substance (or that the idea of a thinking substance represents a particular thinking substance) is yet a third thing.¹¹ Each involves a kind of self-knowledge. Yet only the last involves the kind of knowledge he ultimately seeks in the sixth Meditation—namely, knowledge that a particular thinking substance exists. Descartes seems not to have distinguished these three pieces of knowledge sharply enough.¹² For what is of concern

¹¹ Descartes must show not only that all of "his" acts are in some substance but that they are all in a single substance.

¹² Lichtenberg apparently urged that instead of saying "I think" we ought to say "it thinks." One way to construe his dictum is to say that someone like Descartes can establish, at most, that where there is an act there is *a* thinking substance. That is, one can know only that an act is in some substance or other and not in a particular substance. Schlick and Strawson mention linguistic variants of this thesis: one ought not (and perhaps cannot) assert that I think unless one is prepared to assert also that she thinks, he thinks, etc. If one is not so prepared, then one ought to say, at most, that it thinks in "one's own case."

Wittgenstein took the dictum to express that "no Ego is involved in thinking." He thereby suggests another interpretation—viz., that instead of saying "I think" one ought to say "there is a thought." (Strawson and Schlick, though in different ways, accept this version.) This second interpretation involves a

here, it is worth noting the distinctions and some of their implications.

One implication, one's ability to be certain that a mental act exists regardless of whether the demon exists, was mentioned above. Another is that, even if Descartes cannot help *believing* that acts are in thinking substances, he does not claim to *know* that this belief is true until after he has established God's existence and goodness.¹³ As we saw, God's goodness is what assures that some such clear and distinct conception is true. Therefore, prior to knowing that God exists and is no deceiver, Descartes cannot know that acts are in substances (much less that a particular act is in a particular substance). He *can* know that acts exist independently of knowledge of God; he *cannot* know that he, a thinking substance, exists independently of that knowledge. Thus, to

rejection not only of the claim that where there is an act there is some particular thinking substance, but of the claim that where there is an act there is any substance at all. Descartes, I am suggesting, is sure only that there is a thought—i.e., an act of thinking—at one stage of his argument. In effect, he allows that prior to knowledge of God he can *know*, when he thinks, that “there is a thought” is true and not that “I, a thinking substance (an Ego) exists” is true.

Wittgenstein reports and endorses Lichtenberg's dictum according to Moore's “Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930-33” in G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (New York, 1959), p. 309. Schlick's discussion is in “Meaning and Verification” in *Readings in Philosophical Analysis* (New York, 1949), pp. 146-170. Strawson's views are in his “Persons” chapter in *Individuals* (London, 1959). He comments directly on the Lichtenberg dictum in a footnote on p. 95. For a discussion of Strawson's position, see my “Strawson on Persons,” *The Modern Schoolman*, XLVIII (1971), 237-262, and “How Well Can One Get to Know a Strawsonian Person?”, in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XXXIV. (1974), 515-527.

¹³ There is even a sense in which Descartes can be said to profess, continually, certainty about his substantial self. He sometimes assumes certain beliefs are true at one time and then calls them into question at a later stage of his argument. E.g., he questions the claims of physics while assuming the truth of those of arithmetic and geometry. Subsequently he doubts arithmetical and geometrical claims. Even after raising the doubt about those claims, he tells us at the end of the first and early in the third Meditation how difficult it is to sustain the doubt. I construe such comments psychologically, as Descartes urges us to do at the end of the first Meditation: as a matter of psychological fact, it is difficult to doubt arithmetic and geometry continually, even after legitimate grounds for doubt have been raised. I suggest that the belief that (“observed”) acts are in substances is one which may be doubted but which is difficult to doubt, again as a matter of psychological fact. Not surprisingly, therefore, Descartes does not find it easy to doubt his own existence.

put it differently, prior to knowledge of God's existence and goodness there is a possibility for doubt about his own existence: he may doubt that his acts reside in a thinking substance. (That Descartes does raise this doubt is established below.)

Needless to say, I do not want to deny or fail to acknowledge that Descartes does claim (rightly, I think, within his system) to have *some* certainty regarding himself prior to the proofs about God. On the contrary, the "observation" of mental acts provides justification of *some* of Descartes's expressions of certainty about himself. Doubts about a thinking substance are, however, compatible with the "observation" and the attendant knowledge of acts. The reason is that knowledge that acts exist is only part of what is involved in knowing that the substantial self exists. Because the doubt about thinking substance and the knowledge about acts are about different matters, both can be present without contradiction.

The interpretation advanced here explains Descartes's seemingly contradictory characterizations of his knowledge that he is a thinking thing. Sometimes, as we have seen, he implies that inference is involved. At other times, he appears to reject inference¹⁴ and uses perceptual metaphors in describing such knowledge. Both sorts of characterizations have a place if my reading is correct. On the one hand, Descartes can know that thinking occurs because he "observes" acts of thinking; such knowledge is

¹⁴ Descartes, in *HR*, II, 38, denies that one "deduces existence from thought by a syllogism" and thus *seems* to reject the view that self-knowledge involves inference. I find the passage very difficult. Hintikka in *H-II* and Weinberg in his "*Cogito, Ergo Sum: Some Reflections on Mr. Hintikka's Article*," *Philosophical Review*, LXXI (1962), 483-491, even disagree about the referent of "it" in crucial sentences. I think one thing is clear in the passage: a *specific* inference pattern, one involving Everything that thinks is, or exists as a major premise, is rejected. Whether Descartes employs "I think, hence I am, or exist" as part of an inference remains unclear. He seems to want to say of it that its truth is known by "a simple act of mental vision." This could mean either that he "observes" an act of thinking and thereby knows it exists or that he clearly and distinctly conceives that an act of thinking must be in a thinking substance. I see no way of deciding between the two. It is unfortunate that Descartes does not introduce in this context his categories of property and substance. Were he to do so, and thereby make clear precisely what it is he is claiming exists, one could decide between the alternatives.

not inferential. On the other hand, because he denies that we “observe” the substance to which such acts are believed to “belong,” inference of the sort sketched earlier is needed. Descartes sometimes directs us away from the inferential pattern toward the “observation” pattern; at other times, he relies on the inferential pattern.

Finally, I want to deal with what appears to be a serious difficulty with the interpretation being advanced here. Descartes tends to employ “I think, therefore I exist” rather than “A thought exists, therefore I exist.” One might argue that because he asserts “I think, therefore I exist” he is presupposing that the referent of “I” exists when he asserts “I think.” One might also claim that this preference for “I think, therefore I exist” shows that he is not appealing to “A thought exists, therefore I exist” and, in turn, that he is not appealing to the inference-pattern I have indicated. I maintain that he does make such appeals and that the significance of Descartes’s employing “I think” rather than “A thought exists” is, in this context, minor. Combining these points enables one to maintain, in addition and against one line of criticism, that Descartes’s appeal to inference for self-knowledge is non-trivial.

In the reply to Gassendi cited earlier, Descartes distinguishes between the activity of walking and the thought that he walks. In connection with inferring the existence of a mind, he says that “it is of this [thought that I walk] alone that the inference holds good.” Thus he comes close, quite close, to saying that because a thought exists, he exists. I suspect that the reason this sort of formulation does not occur more often is that Descartes mixes our ordinary manner of expressing the occurrence of a thought (“I think”) with the manner appropriate when one uses language to highlight his ontological *and* epistemological commitments (“A thought exists”). (These commitments are his substance-property ontology and his denial that we “observe” substances.) Ordinary discourse encourages the use of “I think”; but his use of “I” is misleading because he does not “observe” the substance to which the word may be believed to refer. Briefly: for Descartes the ordinary syntax by which we express the occurrence of thinking is not a good guide to what is known *by* “*observation*” to

exist when one is thinking. Russell puts the point nicely when he says: "The word 'I' is really illegitimate [for] he ought to state his ultimate premise in the form 'there are thoughts.' The word 'I' is grammatically convenient, but does not describe a datum."¹⁵

If one accepts the preceding suggestion, another advantage of my reading results. It will no longer be correct to assert, as Hintikka does for example, that if one construes *cogito, ergo sum* as an inference it is trivial. In dealing with those passages having to do with knowledge of the mind in which Descartes appeals to inference, Hintikka transcribes "I think" as " $B(a)$." The latter represents that an existent individual, a , has the property or activity represented by " B ." He claims that the transition from " $B(a)$ " to the claim that a exists—namely, $(Ex)(x = a)$ —is trivial because a is assumed to exist in the assertion of " $B(a)$." I question his transcription; interestingly enough, he does so as well. (Incidentally, to question his transcription is to question his treatment of *cogito, ergo sum* as an inference.)

Hintikka's transcription represents a particular account of what is known to exist in cases of thinking according to Descartes. Hintikka presupposes that the syntax of ordinary language is a good guide to the syntax of transcriptions into notations which perspicuously reflect such an account. But once one introduces the distinction between our ordinary mode of discourse and one which more accurately reflects Descartes's ontology and epistemology, Hintikka's transcription is suspect because what is known to exist by "observation" is an act of thinking. It becomes more plausible to transcribe "I think" as an explicit existential claim that there is an act of thinking. The result is that the inference to which Descartes appeals is non-trivial. The claim that there is an act of thinking, when coupled with the claim that every act of thinking must be in a thinking substance, entitles one to conclude soundly and yet non-trivially (that is, without the "existential presupposition" that a substance exists) that there is a thinking substance. (This, I think, is the gist of what Descartes tells Gassendi.)

¹⁵ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London, 1961), p. 550. See also n. 12.

In his own way, Hintikka sometimes allows that using “I think” need only commit one to the occurrence of an act of thinking and not to a (thinking) substance. (This is tantamount to questioning the occurrence of “*a*” in his transcription.) He says: “The function of the word *cogito* in Descartes’s dictum is to refer to the thought-act through which the existential self-verifiability of ‘I exist’ manifests itself” (*H-I*, p. 16) and “The word *cogito*. . . refers to the ‘performance’ (to the act of thinking) through which the sentence ‘I exist’ may be said to verify itself” (*H-I*, p. 17). He emphasizes this gambit when he confronts the distinction between substances and properties and the issue of knowledge of substances in his second paper. He cites a passage in which Descartes says we do not directly apprehend substances; rather, we apprehend them in virtue of their being the subject of activities. Hintikka then says:

For even if our awareness of our mental activities is immediate, there must first be an activity of which one can be aware. I do not think it is therefore at all implausible to suggest that the activity *by means of which* we are aware of our own thinking is in the special case of the *cogito* insight the very same activity *of which* we are aware and which is the only way in which the essence of our mind manifests its existence [*H-II*, pp. 495-496].

In a footnote to the above he says: “In the case of a direct primary insight like the *Cogito* the object of thinking cannot be the thinking being or the mind as a substance, however, for this we cannot apprehend directly. Hence it can only be an activity of the mind.” I find several things noteworthy in Hintikka’s statements.

He suggests that “observation” (his word is “awareness”) of acts of thinking occurs in the case of the “*cogito* insight.” Hintikka explicitly asserts that “*cogito*,” and therefore “I think,” can be viewed as referring solely to the activity of thinking. Hence for him the use of “I” in “I think” does not presuppose the existence of a substance. Therefore his transcription of “I think” as “*B(a)*” is called into question. He allows for his “performance” interpretation what he does not allow for his inference interpretation, namely, that “I” need not be interpreted as referring to an individual substance. What he says about “I exist” is less clear.

Either it, too, refers solely to the activity of thinking, in which case it is verified by the awareness of such activities as his statements suggest, or else it refers to a substance. In the latter case he, like Descartes, simply assumes at certain points that an act of thinking cannot occur apart from a thinking substance. In either case, Hintikka concedes in effect that he has not adequately treated the issue of knowledge of substance. He says that the view that Descartes believes that "what we know directly is not the mind itself (the substance) but rather its *activities*" is one which is too complicated for him to take up in his article and which he hopes to return to on another occasion (*H-II*, p. 495). By implication, he thereby raises question once more about his transcription and, in turn, his treatment of *cogito, ergo sum* as an inference.

II

In the previous section, I tried to show that Descartes takes the claim that a thinking substance exists to be a conclusion to an argument. A premise of that argument involves an existential assertion—namely, the claim that acts of thinking exist. I want to employ this reading in explicating an important and puzzling passage from the third Meditation. The passage is important because it indicates that some knowledge is dependent on knowledge that a good God exists; it is puzzling because it suggests that self-knowledge is also dependent upon such theological knowledge.

Here is the passage:

When I direct my attention to things which I believe myself to perceive very clearly, I am so persuaded of their truth that I let myself break out into words such as these: Let who will deceive me, He can never cause me to be nothing while I think that I am, or some day cause it to be true that I have never been, it being true now to say that I am, or that two and three make more or less than five, or any such thing in which I see a manifest contradiction. And, certainly, since I have no reason to believe that there is a God who is a deceiver, and as I have not yet satisfied myself that there is a God at all, the reason for doubt

which depends on this opinion alone is very slight, and so to speak metaphysical. But in order to be able to altogether remove it, I must inquire whether there is a God . . . and if I find that there is a God, I must also inquire whether He may be a deceiver; for without a knowledge of these two truths I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything [*HR*, pp. 158-159].

Descartes begins by recapitulating part of what he has indicated earlier in the *Meditations*. His conviction of the truth of some claims is such that, even granting the existence of a deceiving demon for the sake of argument, he is “persuaded” of those claims. He then implies that the possible existence of a demon does raise doubt about the truth of those claims, though. Such doubt, unless backed up by positive evidence for the demon’s existence, is “very slight.” It must nevertheless be removed by excluding the possibility that the demon exists. A way to do this is to prove that there is a God who is not a deceiver. Thus there is a set of claims which Descartes is inclined to accept but which may be doubted if even the possibility of the demon remains. Proving that a good, nondeceiving God exists will effectively eliminate the doubt.

What are the claims about which Descartes is “persuaded” but which nonetheless may be doubted prior to the proofs about God? The two he unmistakably and explicitly mentions are that he exists while he thinks that he is and that two and three make (exactly) five! (Clearly, the latter is merely illustrative of a group of claims. My concern is just with the former.) Thus Descartes is saying that he is inclined to assert or believe that he exists while he thinks that he is, regardless of whether or not there is a demon. He claims, however, that such an assertion is justified, strictly speaking, only after he has eliminated the demon possibility.¹⁶

¹⁶ Note that Descartes is in effect questioning the criterion of clarity and distinctness which he would like to employ: he says the claims in question have to do with things he believes he perceives clearly and distinctly. Thus here he has a concern mentioned in part I: showing that God creates things in accord with the way we clearly and distinctly perceive them. Note also that insofar as Descartes views some self-knowledge as inferential, the doubt may be construed as being about particular inferences.

My point about the above passage can be put differently. At the end of the passage, Descartes says that without knowledge that God exists and is not a deceiver, he can never be certain of "anything." The extension of "anything" presumably includes the two claims mentioned earlier in the paragraph. (I do not think, however, the extension can be so broad as to include, literally, everything.) The extension of "anything" includes, then, the claim that Descartes exists while he thinks that he is. Descartes is thus claiming that he cannot be certain that he exists prior to proving his claims about God. Startling though this move may be in light of Descartes's various professions of certainty about his existence, the move's presence is unmistakable.

Descartes is saying that, although he is psychologically persuaded that he exists, there is doubt about such a claim. In short, he exhibits self-doubt.¹⁷ Yet how can he both affirm and doubt that he exists? I suggest that he thinks in terms of the argument sketched in the previous section. So doing, he can on the one hand insist throughout the second Meditation (and elsewhere) that there is a sense in which, regardless of the demon possibility, he can be certain that he exists: insofar as he considers himself in terms of the acts which he "observes," he can be certain that they exist whether or not there is a demon or a good God because

¹⁷ Frankfurt, *op. cit.*, pp. 351-353, takes the third Meditation passage seriously. But he directs one away from it by citing a passage from the *Replies* in which Descartes claims that

When I said that we could know nothing with certainty unless we were first aware that God existed, I announced in express terms that I referred *only* to the science apprehending such conclusions as can recur in memory without attending further to the proofs which led me to make them [*HR*, II, 38; emphasis Frankfurt's].

This passage is accurate for the discussion of the *fifth* Meditation. Descartes has not hinted at the restriction, however, much less expressly announced it, in the *third* Meditation. The inference I have drawn on the basis of the third Meditation passage is, obviously, that in the second Meditation Descartes had not removed all doubt about his own existence since he had not yet offered his proofs about God.

In "Memory and the Cartesian Circle" (*Philosophical Review*, LXXI [1962], 504-511), Frankfurt argues persuasively that Descartes does not question memory as such and then use a nondeceiving God to validate it. But I disagree with his claim that "Descartes did not attempt to justify present clear and distinct perceptions" (p. 510). The reason has to do with ambiguity in the notion of clear and distinct perception. See Allaire, *op. cit.*

he “observes” them.¹⁸ On the other hand, in so far as he considers himself in terms of a thinking substance (something different from the acts which he “observes” and something itself “unobservable”), there is a need to justify his belief that (to put it briefly) where there is an act there is a thinking substance. This belief depends for its justification on knowledge that a good God exists. It is the justification of this belief which awaits the proofs about God. That is, Descartes may doubt that this belief is true (notwithstanding a psychological tendency to take it for granted) until he has offered those proofs. Doubting that this belief is true is a form of self-doubt: whether or not the belief that there is a thinking substance accords with the actual existence of such a substance is questioned. In turn, the soundness of the argument stated in the first section is questioned. Loosely speaking, Descartes is questioning that argument and its conclusion that a thinking substance exists.

The reading I am advancing has the advantages of both allowing for and reconciling the recurrent certainty about his own existence and the presence of self-doubt in the important and puzzling passage from the third Meditation. Or, what amounts to roughly the same thing, the reading allows for both Descartes’s

¹⁸ Regarding the second Meditation, taken by itself, I would argue that (a) Descartes is impressed by and wants to impress us by the existential knowledge, the existential certainty, provided by “observation” of acts; (b) he does not question the claim that acts are in thinking substance; and (c) he is not very precise regarding either precisely what exists when he asserts that he exists or the grounds for the assertion. I submit that if one approaches the second Meditation asking the question of what exactly is being said to exist when he says he exists, one finds no single, clear answer. Is it acts of thinking that exist? A thinking substance? Is he saying both exist?

I think there are a number of reasons for the absence of a clear answer. One is that Descartes is at least as interested in securing some kind or other of existential knowledge against the skeptical import of the first Meditation as in establishing his particular substantialist view. Another is the seductive, psychologically persuasive character of his belief that acts are in substances: it encourages him to suggest the existence of a thinking substance prior to the proofs for God. A third reason has to do with the fact that “thinking” is a word with different meanings for Descartes. Sometimes it refers to one kind of act, acts of thinking. At still other times, it is used to characterize the nature of the substance “in” which acts “reside.” To assert, as Descartes does in the second Meditation, that a thinking thing exists could mean, therefore, different things.

denials and assertions that self-knowledge involves inference. In addition, the reading is faithful to Descartes's claim in the "Synopsis" that it is not until the sixth Meditation that the discussion of self-knowledge is completed. He clearly and distinctly conceives himself to be a thinking substance. Yet it is not until the last Meditation that Descartes, having established that God is no deceiver, claims that thinking things exist in conformity to the way he clearly and distinctly conceives them.¹⁹ Therefore it is not until the last Meditation that he may say that he, a thinking substance, actually exists.²⁰

DONALD SIEVERT

University of Missouri

¹⁹ Husserl accuses Descartes of not doubting, and by implication of not justifying, his substance-property ontology. Descartes is alleged to believe that by retaining the ontology he has "rescued a little tag-end of the world." Husserl goes on to say that "Descartes introduced the apparently insignificant but actually fateful change whereby the ego becomes a *substantia cogitans*. . . . We remain aloof from all that. . . if we accept nothing here but what we find actually given. . . and if accordingly we assert nothing we ourselves do not "see." Descartes erred in this respect." See *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. by Dorion Cairns (The Hague, 1970), p. 24. Husserl thus asserts, correctly, that Descartes is anxious to preserve the substantialist view. He does not note Descartes's doubt about the latter, however, even though he implies that Descartes went astray by not restricting himself to a species of "observation." As we have seen, this going beyond what "observation" reveals ultimately engenders doubt in Descartes's own mind about the legitimacy of viewing the self as a *substantia cogitans*.

²⁰ I have benefited from the comments of a number of persons, including E. B. Allaire, S. Paulson, R. Sarnat, S. Schwarzschild, J. Walters, and the editors of this journal, in the writing and revising of this paper.