

CHAPTER II

Cartesian selves

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I

What is Descartes' account of self? Within contemporary philosophical discussions of personal identity it is altogether common to invoke a 'Cartesian' notion of the self, which is, not surprisingly, attributed to Descartes. On this view, the Cartesian self is nothing other than that immaterial substance constituting a thinking thing, and we are the same self over time just insofar as we remain the same immaterial thinking substance.¹ Contemporary philosophers either inveigh against this substance account of self so as to better motivate an alternative psychologistic account of personal identity or they staunchly defend the notion.² In this chapter, I aim to problematize this reading of Descartes. I do not want to deny that Descartes maintains that the self is a thinking substance. Indeed, in section III I will outline the textual basis of this reading.

Descartes himself does not offer a well-theorized account of the self and its identity over time. We are given little other than the first-person narrator of the *Meditations* as the basis ascertaining his views on these matters. Nonetheless, there is quite a lot packed into that 'I'. The narrative structure of the *Meditations*, and the way in which its central character develops both intellectually and morally within it, can give us some insight into just what Descartes takes to be involved not only in being a thinking thing but also in continuing as the same thinking thing over time. I aim to highlight two features that go unremarked by both detractors and defenders of the Cartesian self, and indeed by most commentators: the psychological continuity afforded by memory and conformity to a norm. With these two features in mind we are left with a much more complex story about Cartesian selves.

¹ In what follows I refer to this view as 'the standard reading'.

² See for instance: Evans (1982); Foster (1991); Cassam (1997); and Rudder Baker (2011).

II

Let me first consider some other key features of the substance account of self often assigned to Descartes. First, the self on this view is disembodied. Insofar as the self is an immaterial thinking substance, it is separable and so really distinct from extended substance or bodies. As the self is independent of the body with which it is united during a human life, our continued existence is also independent of the existence of this body. Second, if the self is disembodied in this way, it would seem that it is also doomed to isolation. There is no prospect for distinct selves to engage in direct interpersonal exchanges, for it is not clear how one thinking substance can communicate with another thinking substance in an unmediated way. Indeed, it is not clear how one thinking substance can even recognize that there is any other thinking substance out there.³

Critics of the 'Cartesian' self take these features to be devastating shortfalls of the account, but it also has at least two well-recognized advantages. Theological considerations of salvation, damnation, and resurrection demand a soul that can exist without a body and whose identity as the same soul does not depend on the body. The standard reading of the Cartesian self as an immaterial thinking substance allows for an easy assimilation of this self and the soul of the theologians. Second, and less often remarked, taking the self as an immaterial thinking substance effectively strips it of qualities associated with body, and in particular of any sex. What we are – our selves – is thus not essentially male or female, and equally, our faculty of reason admits of no sex-based differentiation. Men and women are equally capable of rational thought. This insight provides the fulcrum on which arguments for women's education and ultimately for political equality of men and women pivot. It is a question whether a revised understanding of Descartes' account of the self can preserve these advantages.

III

The standard reading of the Cartesian self has a clear textual basis in the Second Meditation. Therein the meditator emerges from the radical

³ At best, the self might be able to draw an inference from certain bodily signs, especially the use of language, that there is another self in another body. The two selves could then potentially communicate with each other indirectly through the mediation of their respective bodies. But it is hard to imagine just what would ground the initial inference from bodily signs to the existence of a self. Might we not just as easily conclude that parrots have selves just like our own?

doubt of the First Meditation to assert that “this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind” (7: 25, 2: 17). Immediately, the question arises of “what this ‘I’ is, that now necessarily exists” (7: 25, 2: 17). It is natural to take this question to be about the nature of self, and below I will show that this presumption is warranted. But first consider the answer:

I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing [*res*] that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or reason – words whose meaning I have been ignorant of until now. But for all that I am a thing [*res*] which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of a thing [*res*]? As I have just said – a thinking thing. (7: 27, 2: 18)

A paragraph later the conclusion is repeated: “But what then am I? A thing that thinks [*Res cogitans*]” (7: 28, 2: 19). This ‘I’ is a thing, a *res*, and *res* is the term Descartes uses to refer to substances in the *Meditations*. Moreover, this thing is thinking and non-extended as made explicit in the Sixth Meditation (7: 78, 2: 54); it is an immaterial thinking substance.

That this immaterial thinking substance is indeed a self is clear from the rhetoric of the Second Meditation. Within Latin grammar there is no need to utilize a separate first-person pronoun – the first person is indicated straightforwardly in the declension of the verb – but it is hard to move from the first-person verb form to a notion of self. ‘*Ego*’ is used rhetorically, to emphasize the first person and so to point to a self. Whereas within the First Meditation, *ego* appears but once, within the Second Meditation alone there are seventeen instances of the term, out of thirty-one instances in the whole of the work. And unsurprisingly it appears at precisely those points where the meditator is coming to recognize his nature as a thinking thing.⁴ The ‘I’ is thus a self, and recognized to be a thinking substance.

While the Second Meditation clearly establishes that the Cartesian self is a substance, the standard account of the Cartesian self maintains further that it is the self’s substantial nature that both individuates it as a particular self and that accounts for its persistence as the same self over time.⁵ The textual basis for this claim derives from Descartes’ answer to a query about whether the various doubts, affirmations, denials, willings, imaginings, and sensings on display in the beginning of the *Meditations*

⁴ See 7: 24, 2: 16; 7: 25, 2: 17.

⁵ A ‘self’ that has but a momentary or episodic existence is hardly a proper entity, let alone a self, at all. Hume relies on this point in *Treatise* 1.4.6, “Of Personal Identity,” in denying that he can find in any one perception in the stream experienced an idea of self and in searching for an account of how the fiction of self is construction. A similar point in Parfit (1971) has shaped much contemporary discussion of personal identity.

all belong to him (7: 28, 2: 19). It seems clear that each of these thoughts occurs at a different moment in time, and so the question of whether these thoughts belong to the same self is the same as the question of whether that self – that thinking substance – persists over time. The answer seems to be that it is indeed that same self that has had all these thoughts, because the thoughts are all modes of one and the same substance. So while thoughts of a thinking thing change over time, it remains the same substance and its being the same substance provides the conditions for its preserving its identity over changes of thought.

It is worth highlighting that little in this explanation of the identity of the Cartesian self over time depends on how the relation between substance and mode is understood. Descartes sometimes refers to modes as inhering in a substance (7: 78–79, 2: 74–75).⁶ The language of inherence can suggest that the condition of the identity of a thing with properties that change over time is just the sameness of the substance where these different properties combine.⁷ On this view, the substantial nature of the self explains how thoughts occurring at different times can belong to the same thing: they simply share the same locus of inherence: the same immaterial thinking substance.⁸ Alternatively, Descartes can also be understood to take inherence to be the relation between a particular determination (a mode) and the determinable (a substance) of which it is a determination. That is, a thinking thing is a determinable thing, something with the potential for thought, that is then determined to be the particular thing it is (a thing with the thoughts it has) in thinking the thoughts it does.⁹ On this view, too, the sameness of the substance, of the determinable, through the changing determinations of that thing over time provides the condition of the identity of that thinking thing.

To sum up, the standard account of the Cartesian self as a thinking substance seems completely uncontroversial. That account seems to be well founded in the text of the Second Meditation, by Descartes' pointed use of 'ego' to mark out an entity properly called a self, his identification of that entity as a *res cogitans*, and his accounting for the persistence of

⁶ See also: 8A: 25f., 1: 212f.

⁷ This account of the identity conditions of substances can be found in some scholastic accounts.

⁸ Of course, what allows us to identify a thinking substance as the same thinking substance is unclear on this account, since we are to think of a substance divested of its modes. Locke would seem to be criticizing this sort of account of the identity conditions of particular things insofar as he maintains that pure substance in general cannot serve as a principle of individuation for any kind of particular thing. Though some contemporary readers ascribe this sort of view to Descartes, it does not seem that Descartes himself holds it.

⁹ See Secada (2000) and (2005) for a defense and development of this view.

that entity as the same thing over different episodes of thought just by its being a *res* or substance.

IV

It is a central feature of the *Meditations* that they are meditations, and while this somewhat obvious aspect of the work was ignored for some time, over the past quarter-century commentators have not only recognized this dimension of the work but also brought it to bear on our understanding of the philosophical content contained in it.¹⁰ Within the meditational tradition that Descartes is drawing upon, the process of meditating is supposed to effect in the meditator some sort of progress: in the weaker conception of meditations, a meditator is to achieve some contentment by coming to a better self-understanding through meditation; on the stronger conception meditating is supposed to effect a transformative change in the meditator. While I am inclined to think that Descartes adopts the stronger conception of meditation, for the purposes of this chapter, it is only important that the meditator makes some sort of progress from the beginning to the end of the meditations.¹¹ In what follows I examine the role of memory in the meditator's intellectual progress and the normative dimension of her progress towards epistemic virtue. I suggest that a substance account of self masks the irreducibly psychological dimension of the way the meditator actually develops as a self, the same self, over the changes evidenced in the *Meditations*.

Intellectual progress: the role of memory

The meditator clearly makes intellectual progress over the course of the *Meditations*. She begins from a position in which she recognizes reasons for doubting all her former beliefs and from there slowly claws back the prospect of knowledge until she can claim that “the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable” (7: 89, 2: 6r). Along the way, the meditator comes to recognize a set of truths – that she exists

¹⁰ Hatfield (1986); Kosman (2006); Rorty (1986); Shapiro (2005); Wee (2006); and Carriero (2009). ✓

¹¹ Much of the discussion that follows can actually be deployed as part of an argument that Descartes holds a stronger conception of meditation. Nonetheless, even if we think that Descartes' meditator only has an improved self-understanding through his meditations, considering how that self-understanding is achieved and what it comes to can serve to unsettle the common reading of the Cartesian account of self.

insofar as she is thinking, and so that she is a thinking thing; that God exists as the cause of her existence *qua* thinking thing, and of her idea of God; that she will avoid error in affirming only those ideas perceived clearly and distinctly, and withholding judgment on others; that material things are essentially extended and non-thinking; and that she is a true union of mind and body. Though I will return to this last truth later in this chapter, I will generally not be concerned here with understanding the content of these truths or with the lines of reasoning through which the meditator arrives at them. Rather I want to highlight the role memory plays in the meditator's intellectual progress. For in five of the six meditations remembering drives the meditator's reasoning forward.

In a certain way the *Meditations* begin with the meditator's recalling what she took to be true and juxtaposing those beliefs with her current doubts. And indeed, once the meditator has concluded her skeptical arguments, she "must make an effort to remember" that all her beliefs can be called into doubt. Nonetheless, the meditator's memory of her former beliefs threatens to get the better of her in her project to arrive at certainty, overwhelming her memory of her more recent conclusions (7: 22, 2: 15). However, it is also memory that helps her move forward to emerge from radical doubt. For the Second Meditation begins from the meditator's memory of the findings of the First (7: 23–4, 2: 16). From this renewed view of her skeptical conclusions, the meditator moves to recognize that first truth, that which must be the case whether the basis for her doubts is true or false. The Third Meditation in turn begins with the recollection of both the doubts of the First and the insight of the Second, and the meditation moves forward from a recognition of a tension between the positions of each of these previous meditations. The meditator begins by reviewing the discovery that she is a thing that thinks, "that is, a thing that doubts, affirms, denies, understands a few things, is ignorant of many things, is willing, is unwilling, and also which imagines and has sensory perceptions" (7: 34, 2: 24), and remarks that the certainty of this truth might well signal a general rule for arriving at certainty: if I perceive an idea clearly and distinctly, then it must be true. But the validity of this rule is undermined by the memory of the First Meditation's skeptical arguments. She notes: "Yet I previously accepted as wholly certain and evident many things which I afterwards realized were doubtful" (7: 35, 2: 24), and in particular the worry that God might be a deceiver threatens the stability of the rule. It is not the simple fact that she recalls raising the doubt that God is a deceiver in the First, it is the impact that this recollection has on the stability of her recalled result of the Second Meditation

and the tension between the two moments of recollection, that moves her forward in the rest of the Third Meditation to prove that God exists and is not a deceiver.¹²

Before looking at the role of memory in the subsequent meditations, it is worth noting an interesting feature of the meditator's recollection here of her prior conclusions. Though the reconstruction of her skeptical arguments certainly tracks those in the First Meditation, some points do get highlighted here that were not in the First. For instance, the meditator couches the final skeptical argument of the First Meditation, that which undermines the validity of those truths we take to be self-evident, as a concern about her *nature*, a term not invoked in the First Meditation.¹³ Equally, though the Third Meditation enumeration of the modes proper to a thinking thing resembles the list proffered in the Second Meditation, they are not identical. (Compare 7: 34, 2: 24 and 7: 28, 2: 19.) And further, the meditator introduces a whole taxonomy of ideas and asserts that she has been taught by nature that her ideas resemble those things outside her from which they are derived, as if these were assumed from the outset, and the example used to illustrate this point – her idea of herself sitting by the fire – is the same one as in the First Meditation. Yet neither a resemblance thesis nor a taxonomy of ideas was ever there articulated.

I will return to why these differences between the meditator's original thoughts and her recollections of them are significant, but let me resume the summary of the central role of memory in the *Meditations*. The Fourth Meditation too begins with recollection of what has come before (7: 52–53, 2: 37). With her conclusion that God exists and is not a deceiver fresh in her mind, the meditator can finally properly understand the general rule put forward provisionally at the beginning of the Third and, with this understanding, can affirm its validity: that we cannot err if we affirm only those ideas perceived clearly and distinctly. The Fifth Meditation is more forward-directed, looking to “the most pressing task [of] try[ing] to escape from the doubts into which I fell a few days ago, and see whether

¹² Though I am not interested here in the role memory plays in the arguments of the *Meditations*, it is worth noting that a distinction between current attention and memory has been taken to help Descartes avoid arguments of circularity in his initial proof of the existence of God. Descartes, in response to Arnauld in the Replies to Fourth Objections, is the first to introduce this line. (See 7: 245–46, 2: 171.) Descartes is here drawing on what he has written both in the Fifth Meditation (7: 69–70, 2: 48), and in the Replies to Second Objections (7: 158–59, 2: 112), where he acknowledges that doubt can undermine the confidence we have in our memory of having perceived a truth clearly and distinctly, provided we have not yet validated our rational faculties. See Doney (1955) and Frankfurt (1962) for the beginnings of the more recent discussions.

¹³ See 7: 36, 2: 25. Newman (1994) notes the changes in the meditator's conception of his nature.

any certainty can be achieved regarding material objects” (7: 63, 2: 44), and in the Sixth Meditation again the meditator begins by setting a forward course: “It remains for me to examine whether material things exist” (7: 71, 2: 50). However, after the false start of looking to the imagination for proof of the existence of bodies, the meditator once again turns to his memory (7: 74, 2: 51). What we might expect is a review of the First Meditation, and we do get that in a certain sense. Nonetheless, the differences between this Sixth Meditation synopsis and the First Meditation are striking, much more than are the subtle differences already noted in the Third. The paradigm examples of sensory perception here are those of our own body and of how external bodies affect our body “in favorable and unfavorable ways.” While the former figure in a small way in the First Meditation, the latter, along with the sensations of “hunger, thirst, and other such appetites, and also of physical propensities towards cheerfulness, sadness, anger and similar emotions” the meditator goes on to mention, do not (7: 74, 2: 52). Equally, she focuses here on her sensations coming to her without her consent, but this feature is mentioned only in passing in the Third Meditation, and it does not seem that there is any earlier mention of the special way in which her body is her own, something highlighted in this part of the Sixth Meditation. Indeed in light of this reconstruction of her previous beliefs about the senses, the meditator raises a new skeptical argument about our sensory knowledge – the argument from cases of phantom limbs.

It should be clear that memory is central to the meditator’s intellectual development in the *Meditations*. Recalling past mistakes motivates the meditator to move forward to try to find at least one thing that is certain. Recalling what she has found to be certain allows her to leverage that initial knowledge to further certainties. Recollection of her chain of reasoning enables her to resolve the problem she posed for herself – her skeptical doubts. Memory thus serves both to chart her next steps and to unify her thoughts. Any account of the Cartesian self must be able to explain this role of memory. However, it must also be able to explain the very peculiar way that memory works in the *Meditations*. For at two crucial moments – the beginning of the Third Meditation and the first part of the Sixth Meditation – the meditator takes herself to be remembering what has come before when in fact she reconceives her prior results in ways that importantly move the argument of the work forward.

Taking the Cartesian self to consist of a thinking substance faces a challenge in accounting for memory and the unifying role it plays in the *Meditations*. An initially plausible line of approach involves taking

memory to be a mode of a thinking substance, so let me consider each of the possible understandings of the relation between substance and mode in a thinking thing outlined in the previous section.¹⁴ On the first option, the meditator's changing thoughts are to be understood as modes bound together by their co-location, in the same substance. How could this view account for memory of a thought? As a first pass, we might think of a memory simply as the persistence of the modification that is the prior thought. However, it cannot be that we continue to have that prior thought before us all along, for then there would be no difference between an occurrent thought and a memory. Rather, the view must be something like this: there is a sense in which the prior thought persists, but it does so in such a way that we do not attend to it. Memory involves a renewed attention to the prior idea. This line has some promise in that it reflects the work of memory in the *Meditations*. The meditator does not simply remember that she reached a conclusion earlier. In remembering her prior conclusions, she brings that prior conclusion to mind once again. That is, she is once again aware of that idea, attending to it.¹⁵ This renewed awareness moves the argument forward, just as much as does the content of which the meditator is aware. Despite its drawing attention to this feature of memory, it is not clear how a substance as simply the locus where thoughts are bound together can do the work that is needed to make good on this feature of memory, for we also require an explanation of how we come to have renewed awareness of our prior conclusions. A substance which simply serves as the site of co-location would not seem to have resources to provide that explanation.

Perhaps the alternative way of understanding the relation between substance and mode can do better. On this view, a substance is a determinable and modes are determinations of that substance. As a determinable, the thinking substance constituting the self is more than a simple locus for modes, but has the power of actualizing one thought or another. It

¹⁴ Despite this line seeming initially plausible, it is worth noting that Descartes never lists memory, or remembering, as a mode of thinking substance (in contrast with willing, doubting, understanding, imagining, sensing, and so on). This might seem to indicate that he takes memory to be an essentially bodily matter – there is discussion of the role of brain traces in recollection (11: 177f., 1: 106f.; 6: 55, 1: 139) and the bodily memory of a lute player (3: 48, 3: 146), for instance. The instances of what I am calling memory here, however, are clearly intellectual. Descartes does suggest that memory figures in geometrical deductions in the Fifth Meditation (7: 69–70, 2: 48) and in the *Principles* (8A: 9, 1: 197), and explicitly countenances a distinct intellectual memory that “depends on the soul alone” (3: 48, 3: 146).

¹⁵ Indeed, that memory involves this awareness is critical for our confidence in the conclusions of geometrical proofs as discussed in the Fifth Meditation (7: 69–70, 2: 48) and *Principles* (8A, 9, 1: 197).

can thus explain how thoughts can come into awareness anew. Memory, on this view, would consist in a re-actualization of a thought that, though once actualized, has become potential again. But it would also seem on this view that prior thoughts do not persist in actuality once we are no longer aware of them. And this leaves the view with a bit of a puzzle. For the determination of substance to actualize anew its prior thoughts must come from be caused either externally or internally. Since it is intellectual memory that is involved, rather than bodily memory (see note 4), that determination is presumed not be caused externally. However, if thinking substance is to determine itself to actualize prior thoughts, then it would seem to require some access to those prior thoughts that have returned to potentiality. It is not clear what this access could consist in.

There is, however, a more pressing issue particular to the context of the *Meditations*. It is hard to see how either conception of the relation between a substance and its modes can accommodate the meditator's inaccuracies or embellishments of memory. Recall that in the Third Meditation, and especially in the Sixth Meditation, the meditator's memory of her past reasoning and conclusions seems to involve somewhat creative retellings of her past intellectual activity. Recollection thus seems to be modeled *not* as a simple reactualization or retrieval of past thoughts. To address this concern, while preserving the standard reading, one might try to understand memory as a second-order thought: a memory would be an actualization of a new thought, one with a prior idea as its object. Such an account might be able to account for the meditator's embellishments, but then it would seem that these would have to be couched as misrepresentations of the original thought. Seeing memory in this way does not adequately reflect the role of memory in the *Meditations*. Memory as exercised in the work, *especially* when embellished, drives the argument forward and as such can hardly be false.

Memory, as exercised in the *Meditations*, brings to awareness anew thoughts the meditator had previously. This remembering is not a matter of simple retrieval or reactivation of the prior thought, for the work of memory invokes a prior thought while at the same time reshaping it in important ways. This reshaping is a kind of appropriation rather than a second-order thought about the prior thought. How is this reshaping of a prior thought a kind of appropriation? In remembering, the meditator's renewed awareness also serves to bring past thoughts to mind in such a way as to move the meditator forward in his reasoning, but it does so by affecting the meditator's awareness of his present thoughts; that present awareness shapes the thoughts the meditator will go on to have. Thus,

through this appropriation, there is a constructive element in the mediator's memory. Memory unifies the mediator's thoughts by effecting a continuity of the awareness of those thoughts. And in providing this unity, memory further helps make the mediator the thinking thing – that is, the self – she is.

What then are we to make of the standard view of the Cartesian self? It seems incontrovertible that Descartes takes the self to be a thinking substance. But what makes that substance the same substance at different times? I am suggesting that the mediator's memory involves a kind of appropriation of his prior thoughts, and that these acts of memory serve to constitute the mediator as the same thing over time. For what is central to thinking is awareness, being the subject of thinking. In memory, episodes of awareness are linked together, not in virtue of their being discrete experiences of the same thinking thing but rather in virtue of the way the character of the awareness is itself in part constituted by its previous experiences of itself as a subject. In this way, there is an irreducibly psychological dimension to what makes the mediator the same self at different times.

While I cannot argue fully for this claim here, I am suggesting that Descartes' differences with the view that Locke lays out in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is more subtle than it is usually taken to be. Descartes still holds that what it is to be a self is to be a thinking substance, and in this regard Locke does seem to part company with him and maintain that this self does not depend on any one particular substance (though it does depend on some substance or another). However, both take it to be that it is “being the same consciousness that makes a Man be himself to himself” (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2.27.10), that is, that there is an irreducibly psychological dimension to a self's being the same self over time.

Progress towards epistemic virtue

In addition to developing intellectually, the mediator also undergoes a kind of epistemic moral development from the beginning to the end of the *Meditations*. While the received account of the ‘Cartesian’ self has had little to say about this, it is worth probing, for the role of this progress of the mediator can tell us a bit more about Descartes' conception of self.

To see that an epistemic moral development does figure in *Meditations* and how it does so, it is helpful to look first at the *Discourse on the Method for Rightly Conducting Reason*. The title of that work is suggestive of an

aim of cultivating in its readers an epistemic virtue, and in the opening paragraph of the work Descartes makes it clear that he is principally concerned with how we *use* our faculty of reason: “For it is not enough to have a good mind; the main thing is to apply it well” (6: 2, 1: 111). And as Part I of the *Discourse* continues, Descartes presents his own life and intellectual pursuits as a kind of morality tale, “a history or, if you prefer, a fable in which, among certain examples worthy of imitation, you will perhaps also find many others that would be right not to follow” (6: 4, 1: 112). The morality tale functions to cultivate epistemic virtue in an interesting way, for Descartes encourages his readers to take up a skeptical attitude towards his own choices rather than model themselves uncritically on his character. The idea seems to be that in adopting this critical perspective, readers must begin to use their reason; the exercise of reason implies its being directed towards the true, and the search for truth in turn leads to an articulation of rules for reasoning well so as to best achieve that end – according to Descartes, the method outlined in the Part II of the work. The *Discourse* is thus committed to the idea that human reason is governed by internal norms that we can discover and resolve to follow.

The *Meditations* is not framed in the same way as the *Discourse*; the work opens with a series of skeptical arguments rather than a morality tale. Nonetheless there are similarities between the two works. Just as in the *Discourse*, the *Meditations* is framed by the overarching end of the search for truth (7: 17, 2: 12).¹⁶ Moreover, the meditator tries not only to discover truths but also to cultivate those dispositions that will afford him those discoveries. The Fourth Meditation, where the meditator hits upon the method for avoiding error, makes this clear. At this point, he not only grasps what it is to use his will well (7: 59, 2: 41), he also recognizes that sometimes (indeed most times) he will not attend to that understanding. In those cases, he can still avoid error by cultivating in himself the *habit* of judging well (7: 62, 2: 43). The meditator thus aims not only to find certainty of belief, but also discovers norms of thought to ensure that certainty, and in light of that discovery strives to instill proper epistemic habits; such good habits, adopted, as his are, for the right reasons, constitute epistemic virtue.¹⁷

¹⁶ See also the way that the search for true beliefs explicitly informs the moves of the meditator in the other five meditations: (7: 24, 2: 16; 7: 36, 2: 25; 7: 53, 2: 37; and 7: 63, 2: 44).

¹⁷ Further evidence that the project of the *Meditations* is one of cultivating a virtue can be drawn from the language of the passions in that work. Elsewhere, I have called attention to the pervasiveness of the passions throughout the *Meditations* and suggested that in meditating, the

At the very least, the received view of the ‘Cartesian’ self makes no mention of any possibility for this kind of epistemic moral development, for a thinking thing’s cultivation of epistemic virtue. But notice the challenge of trying to make sense of a ‘Cartesian’ self that undergoes this cultivation of virtue. How is a meditator who is only a thinking substance to be understood as starting out with bad epistemic habits, but through reform ~~can acquire good ones~~? How are epistemic habits at all in concert with the standard view’s conception of a thinking thing?

Recognizing the irreducibly psychological dimension of Descartes’ account of self can help us make sense of the cultivation of epistemic virtue evidenced in the *Meditations*. On the reading that I have been suggesting, through the renewed attention of memory the self of the meditator is constructed. Prior thoughts are appropriated as the meditator’s own and inform his occurrent awareness, and that occurrent awareness in turn helps shape awareness in the future. The progress of the meditator towards epistemic virtue brings out that process of shaping our awareness, our capacity of thinking, is not unconstrained but rather is guided by norms of rationality. Insofar as our thinking is properly guided by reason, the construction of Descartes’ self is also constrained. To fully realize our selves as selves, we ought not to link up our thoughts at random, or by some sort of association. Rather, our attention ought to be renewed in memory to those thoughts that further us in our pursuit of the truth, and it is this aim that explains the shifts of emphasis and focus that characterize the meditator’s appropriation of prior thoughts. Equally, the movement forward in thought is also directed by these norms of rationality. The meditator’s awareness of his thoughts as his own, the focus of his memory, and his movement forward, that is, the meditator’s continuity as the same thinking thing over time, is constrained by the aim of reasoning well. The norms of rationality, serve to ensure that the episodes of thought that constitute a thinking thing are well integrated into something that can properly be called a self that persists over time.¹⁸

meditator regulates his passions, and in particular his desire for knowledge, as much as he develops a metaphysics and epistemology that can set him on course to achieve certainty (Shapiro [2005]). Efforts to regulate the passions are traditionally aligned with the cultivation of virtue, for that which guides the regulation of the passions is simply the human good. So, if that reading is indeed viable, then we can see that a concern with cultivating virtue pervades the *Meditations*, as much as it frames the work.

¹⁸ On this point, Descartes’ and Locke’s account of personal identity diverge from each other, for it does not seem that any epistemic norms are contained in Lockean consciousness in the way that I am suggesting they are for Descartes.

Thus, a consideration of the one self we are presented with – the meditator – exposes two features of Descartes’ conception of self not typically included in the account he is usually assigned. First, for the ‘I’ of the meditations, memory plays a central role in connecting the meditator’s thoughts at different moments in the *Meditations* with one another and moving the meditator to develop intellectually. Equally, the meditator’s intellectual development is intertwined with an epistemic moral development in which the ‘I’, through the cultivation of appropriate epistemic dispositions, comes to have a more virtuous epistemic character. The received view of the ‘Cartesian’ self fails to attend to either of these features, and so fails to note that there are some aspects of a proper Cartesian self that are irreducibly psychological.

v

Understanding Descartes’ conception of self as having this irreducibly psychological dimension can help address two other challenges that the standard reading of the Cartesian self faces. Recall that on the standard reading, the Cartesian self is disembodied. The meditator identifies himself as a thinking thing in the Second Meditation, and thinking things are really distinct from extended things, that is, from any body, and can exist independently of it. So, the story continues, if the Cartesian self is constituted by a thinking substance, it can exist without any body at all. Nonetheless, the Sixth Meditation presents a somewhat different view of the self. As the meditator reviews his previous conception of himself, he notes that he understood his self to comprise, at least in part, his body, and indeed, as he recalls, he was willing to countenance the idea that he – his self – consisted entirely of his body (7: 74, 2: 52). While it is clear that the reflections of the Second Meditation have undermined that former self-conception, the meditator still recognizes that his view that there is a body “which by some special right I call ‘mine’ ... had some justification” (7: 76, 2: 52). Once he has affirmed that mind and body are really distinct things and establishes that the material world exists as the cause of his sensations, he turns to retrieve the kernel of truth in his former self-conception, and remarks that “nature teaches him” that he is a mind “closely joined” with a body, “intermingled” so as to form a unit, so that there is one body that properly speaking belongs to him (7: 81, 2: 56). Moreover, he notes that “the fact that some of the [sensory] perceptions are agreeable to me while others are disagreeable makes it quite certain that my body, or rather *my whole self*, insofar as I am a combination

of body and mind, can be affected by the various beneficial or harmful bodies which surround it” (7: 81, 2: 56; emphasis added). The view of the self being put forward in the Sixth Meditation thus departs quite dramatically from the standard interpretation of the Cartesian self. There, the meditator expressly identifies her whole self as a union of mind and body, and it is that self that has the capacity to interact with the world around her, and to gain some knowledge of that world.

One might worry about how this conception of the self can be consistent with the contention of the Second Meditation that the self is just a thinking thing. The temptation can be to dismiss this remark as simply a *façon de parler*. Understanding Descartes’ conception of the self to have an irreducibly psychological dimension, however, can help both to explain this remark and to allow for it to be taken seriously. For we can understand the meditator’s mind’s union with her body as informing the meditator’s awareness in a similar way to that her prior thoughts inform her occurrent thinking. A mind united with its body experiences a whole new range of thoughts, passions, and sensations, a set of experiences which can only affect what and how we attend to things. The meditator’s awareness, then, becomes that of an embodied thinking thing, and in that respect it makes sense to speak of his ‘whole self’ as the union of mind and body.

The second challenge concerns the apparent isolation of the individual that is the Cartesian self. It is certainly not difficult to see why one might be inclined to read Descartes in this way, for the meditator meditates in solitude, and it would seem that he is able to recognize and so constitute himself as himself all on his own, so long as he is granted his rationality. A more attentive reading of the work, however, does not sustain this interpretation. Annette Baier, in her “Cartesian Persons”¹⁹ draws attention to the various ways in which the Cartesian meditator depends on others. In the Third Meditation, the existence of God is established by the meditator’s remarking his dependence on God for his existence as a being with the idea of God, and his having the idea of God is crucial to the possibility of his recognizing and correcting his errors and so for his improvement. For the idea of an infinite and perfect being provides the standard through which the meditator can understand that which he lacks. The meditator cannot recognize the norms of rationality as norms on his own; he is dependent on another. This “dependency on another for standards of correctness,” Baier argues, extends ~~to~~ more generally to

¹⁹ Baier (1985).

Descartes' view of persons (Baier 1985, p. 79).²⁰ We can also see an engagement with others as integral to Descartes' own efforts in developing his first philosophy, and so his self-understanding. As already noted, in the *Discourse*, Descartes engages in conversations with his readers, much like those he describes himself as having with authors of the past in a complicated dynamic designed to cultivate well-directed rational faculty. The dynamic is alluded to at the outset of the *Meditations*, for we are presented with a meditator who was taught by others, in his childhood. As a final consideration on this issue, in Part VI of the *Discourse*, Descartes gestures towards the collective nature of the project of scientific inquiry. And this sociable aspect of the pursuit of knowledge is also alluded to in the *Meditations*, for Descartes did not originally publish the six meditations alone. They were circulated in advance to potential critics, who wrote up their objections, to which the author replied. These three elements were then packaged together in the original publication. Descartes as author of the work engages intimately with others, and defends and develops his thoughts through that engagement. We can see these interactions with others as importantly informing what the meditator is, his self, insofar as through our interactions with others we are introduced to the norms of rationality. It is through others that we come to be acquainted with different points of view from our own, and so to see that things might be otherwise. The possibility of choice in turn raises the problem of what the right choice is, whether it is a matter of practical action or of what to believe. Here others can help us in evaluating the options, to see more clearly what we have reason to do or to think.

VI

As we have seen, the Second Meditation provides compelling evidence that Descartes does take the meditator to be a substance, and it is easy to take the relation between a substance and its modes to explain the meditator's continuity as the same thing over the course of the *Meditations*. I have been offering a set of considerations that problematize this reading. The role of memory in unifying the meditator's thoughts through his meditations suggests that the meditator is constituted in part through his own awareness of his thoughts at different times. Similarly, the meditator's cultivation of epistemic habits suggests there are norms of rationality

²⁰ Baier focuses on the ways in which other persons figure in our learning of a language, a defining capacity of human beings for Descartes, as well as our representations of space and time.

guiding not only the meditator's project but also his self-constitution through memory. These considerations both involve taking the Cartesian self to be something that develops. This developmental aspect of the Cartesian self is further complicated by the impact of the mind's union with the body to form a 'whole self' and the way in which the *Meditations* is bracketed by the meditator's engagement with others, be it by his initial education on which the *Meditations* critically reflects, or by his engagement with interlocutors about the conclusions of his meditations. As an embodied social being, the meditator continues to develop as the thinking thing he is.

Can recognizing the nature of a self as comprising this irreducibly psychological dimension – awareness – realize those features that many of Descartes' contemporaries found so powerful: the theological advantages that were so central in the seventeenth century, and the sexlessness of cognitive capacities that had a significant impact on the promotion of women's education and political equality in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? With regard to the former consideration, I suggest that we look to Locke's defense of his account of persons, for Locke thinks that considering the self as consciousness makes better sense of the doctrine of resurrection than anything else, for what we are aware of constrains that for which we can be properly praised or blamed, or generally, that for which we can be held responsible. Equally, we should only be saved or damned for those actions for which we are properly responsible. With regard to the latter, on the reading I have been suggesting, while the particulars of our embodiment and social situation can inform our awareness, our capacity for thinking in a way that is guided by considerations of the true remains independent of those contingencies. Indeed, it is not difficult to see how one could argue from this point of view that institutions that inhibit women from their natural pursuit of truth are unjust.²¹

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