

## I, Human

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**Abstract:** Descartes's dualism faces two classic objections. The *Interaction Problem* asks how mind and body can causally interact given their heterogeneous natures. The *Union Problem* is about how joining a mind to a human body can result in a mind-body union, i.e. a human being. I argue that Descartes faces a third problem. Descartes's dualism seems to imply that only the mind is a self or 'I'. And yet, he holds that the human being is an 'I' too. I call this the *Human Self Problem*, and suggest a way that Descartes can resolve it.

**Key Words:** Descartes, self, dualism, mind-body problems, embodiment, subject, sensory representation

### Introduction

Descartes argues that mind and body are really distinct substances, capable of existing apart from one another. Mind is 'a thinking, non-extended thing', whereas body is 'a non-thinking, extended thing' (AT VII 78/CSM II 54). Descartes's dualism raises two classic problems. First, it seems to undermine the possibility of mind-body interaction.<sup>1</sup> If the mind is non-extended, how can it set the body in motion when someone intentionally waves her hand? Call this the *Interaction Problem*. Second, it is unclear how joining a mind to a human body can generate a mind-body union or unity, i.e. what Descartes calls a human being.<sup>2</sup> Call this the *Union Problem*. I argue that Descartes faces a third problem, which has not been explicitly formulated in the secondary literature.

Suppose that someone is thinking about a palm tree. We may distinguish: (a) the subject of this thought, (b) the thought itself, and (c) the object or content of this thought, namely, the

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<sup>1</sup> Ryle (1949), Radner (1971), Williams (1978, 287), Watson (1987), and Richardson (1982). Rozemond (1999) and Schmaltz (2008) discuss various interaction problems in Descartes. Nadler (2011) discusses these problems in the Cartesian tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Broughton and Mattern (1978), Richardson (1982), Cottingham (1985), Hoffman (1986), Rodis-Lewis (1990, 1998), Schmaltz (1992a), Chappell (1994), Voss (1994), Rozemond (1998), Shapiro (2003a), Brown (2007), and Kaufman (2008).

palm tree.<sup>3</sup> The subject of this thought is the one to whom the thought discloses, presents, or exhibits its object or content, who grasps or is acquainted with the palm tree by means of the thought. In Schmitter's apt phrase, the subject is the one 'for whom the representation is a representation' (Schmitter 1994, 33). Descartes holds that a necessary condition on being a self or 'I' is to be a subject, with thoughts representing to one's point of view. The third problem, then, is that Descartes suggests that thoughts represent exclusively to the mind, and, hence, that the mind is the only subject, self or 'I'. And yet, he also maintains that you and I are human beings, composed of mind *and* body. As Descartes writes to Elizabeth, 'everyone thus knows that he is a single person with both body and thought' (AT III 694/CSMK 228). I call this tension the *Human Self Problem*. Other commentators recognize Descartes's insistence that you and I are human beings.<sup>4</sup> But they have not paid enough attention to the implications of this view: namely, if the human being is a self or 'I', then it has got to be a subject with a point of view.<sup>5</sup>

This paper is divided into two main parts. In the first part, I provide textual evidence for attributing the *Human Self Problem* to Descartes. I work slowly through this puzzle, because I want to unearth a number of presuppositions lying behind it, and because I want to pry apart concepts not typically distinguished — namely, 'self', 'subject', 'thinking substance', 'mind,' and 'human being'. In the second part, I provide textual evidence that sensory thoughts represent *to* the human being, and, hence, that the human being as a whole is a subject. Any adequate

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<sup>3</sup> Although the term 'subject' can be used synonymously with 'substance' — as in the 'subject of properties' or the 'subject of inherence' — I will use the term 'subject' in a distinctively cognitive or representational sense, according to which a subject is the one to whom representations exhibit their objects. This usage is anachronistic, since Descartes uses 'subject' as a synonym for 'substance' (AT VII 161/CSM II 114 and AT VII 175-6/CSM II 124). But Descartes uses the concept of a representing subject at key points in the text, even if he does not have a dedicated term for it apart from the first-person pronouns 'I' or 'me'.

<sup>4</sup> Baier (1981), Alanen (1989, 402), Voss (1994, 276-277), Rozemond (1998, 159), Almog (2002, vii-ix), Skirry (2005, 140-141), Carriero (2009, 81-97), Thiel (2011, 37), Shapiro (2013, 239-240), Brown (2014), and Boyle (2016, 20-21).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Schmitter (1994).

solution to the *Human Self Problem* needs to respect this feature of the texts. I consider and reject a trialist account of the human being's subject-hood. And then I sketch my alternative. I argue for teasing apart the concepts of 'subject' and 'thinking substance'. Whereas the majority of commentators assume that thoughts exclusively represent to the substance modify, viz. the mind, I argue that Descartes's human being is a subject to whom sensory thoughts represent their contents, though not a substance modified by these thoughts.<sup>6</sup>

## Part I: The Human Self Problem

### 1. Being Someone

I use the term 'self' as a common noun to refer to whomsoever can be referred to by an appropriate use of the first-person pronoun 'I' (*ego, je*) and related expressions like 'me' (*me, moi*) and 'myself' (*me, moi-meme*).<sup>7</sup> A self is a person rather than a mere thing, an 'I' rather than an 'it', someone rather than something.<sup>8</sup> Although Descartes does not write about 'the self' or 'selfhood' in the abstract, we may reconstruct his views by looking at what he says about the 'I' in the *Meditations* and related texts.<sup>9</sup> As Shapiro observes, 'there is quite a lot packed into that "I"' (Shapiro 2013, 226).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Commentators who assume that thoughts represent exclusively to the mind include Chappell (1986, 191), MacKenzie (1989, 180), Simmons (1999, 348), and Ott (2017, \*\*\*). Schmitter (1994) is again an important exception.

<sup>7</sup> I follow Sellars (1970-1, 5) in connecting the term 'self' to the first-person pronoun. Someone might object to this framing of the problem, since many of Descartes's works — including the *Meditations* — were written in Latin, which typically indicates the first-person using the verb form rather than the first-person pronoun 'I'. As Shapiro demonstrates, however, Descartes goes out of his way to use the Latin first-person pronoun '*ego*' in *Meditation 2* to 'emphasize the first person and so to point to a self' (Shapiro 2013, 228). Moreover, other forms of the first-person pronoun — like '*me*' and '*mei*' are all over the texts. We might also add that the term 'self' should be understood to refer to the grammatical subject of verbs conjugated in the first-person like '*cogito*' and '*ambulo*'.

<sup>8</sup> See Carriero (2009, 89-90) for the 'I' vs. 'it' formulation of this contrast.

<sup>9</sup> We cannot assume that the meditator of the *Meditations* is identical to the historical Descartes, as Cunning (2010) convincingly argues. Rather, the 'I' of the *Meditations* is supposed to represent a perspective that anyone can adopt. For ease of exposition, however, I will often gloss over this distinction.

<sup>10</sup> As will emerge below, I am sympathetic to Shapiro's insistence on 'the irreducibly psychological dimension' of Descartes's 'conception of the self' (Shapiro 2013, 239). But my reading differs from Shapiro's in at least two respects. First, whereas Shapiro focuses on diachronic issues about the self's identity over time, I focus on

The *Human Self Problem* begins with the claim that a necessary condition on being a self is occupying the subject-position in the sense defined above. An ‘I’ is a subject to whom thoughts represent or exhibit their contents. For short:

(1) If a being is a self or ‘I’, then it is a subject.

This constraint is silent on what sort of being can occupy the subject-position. It merely situates the self vis-à-vis its thoughts.<sup>11</sup> Descartes commits himself to (1) in *Meditation 2*. At this point in the *Meditations*, Descartes knows that an ‘I’ exists, but he lacks ‘a sufficient understanding of what this “I” is’ (AT VII 25/CSM II 17). After reviewing his former sense-based beliefs about himself, and paring away anything dubitable, he concludes that thinking is necessary for the existence of the self or ‘I’:

Thinking? At last I have discovered it — thought; this alone is inseparable from me. I am, I exist — that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. At present I am not admitting anything except what is necessarily true. I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks... a thinking thing. (AT VII 27/CSM II 18)

At this point in his investigation, Descartes does not rule out the possibility that he is identical to a human body or some other material thing. ‘[M]ay it not perhaps be the case that these very things which I am supposing to be nothing,’ Descartes wonders, ‘because they are unknown to me, are in reality identical with the ‘I’ of which I am aware? I do not know, and for the moment I shall not argue the point...’ (AT VII 27/CSM II 18).<sup>12</sup> He does not take a stand on whether he is

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synchronic issues of the self’s limits at a time, and, more specifically, whether the Cartesian self’s limits encompass both mind and body. Shapiro (2013, 239-240) hints at the synchronic problem towards the end of her paper without developing it. Second, whereas Shapiro argues that the Cartesian self is a substance, I think we need to abandon this commitment to give an adequate account of the embodied, human self.

<sup>11</sup> I use ‘thought’ in the broad Cartesian sense to refer to any kind of mental state, including intellectual thoughts, volitions, imagination, and sensory perceptions (AT VII 28/CSM II 19). Since my focus is on representation, I will often bracket the volitional side of the Cartesian mind, focusing on what Descartes calls ‘ideas’ or ‘perceptions’, which may be sensory, imaginative, or intellectual (AT VII 37/CSM II 26).

<sup>12</sup> See also AT VII 59/CSM II 41, AT VII 175 /CSM II 123, and AT VIIIA 9/CSM I 196-7.

a substance, a mode, or something else.<sup>13</sup> Rather, in claiming that he is a ‘thinking thing’ (*res cogitans*) he commits himself only to the cautious claim that he is someone related to his thoughts as their subject, which present various contents for his consideration (AT VII 25-6/CSM II 17). Kosman puts this point beautifully:

In the Second Meditation, the narrator is made certain of the existence of the existence of his subjective self in the sense I’ve suggested, as correlative to the objective [i.e. represented] world. What is disclosed to the narrator (and reader) in these first two meditations is thus the minimal structure of experience: on the one hand a world, which is revealed to be only a-world-for-me and thus to collapse into objectivity [i.e. representation], and on the other hand the pole of subjectivity, in which is revealed the existence of the subject as the principle of the for-me aspect of the world-for-me... (Kosman 1986, 36)<sup>14</sup>

Descartes’s use of the first-person to mark the subject-position provides additional evidence for a tight connection between self and subject. At key points in *Meditation 2*, Descartes employs the redundant Latin first-person pronoun ‘ego’ to emphasize that there is *someone* underlying his various thoughts.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in *Meditation 3*, Descartes describes ideas not merely as representing or exhibiting objects, but as representing their objects ‘to me’ (AT VII 40/CSM II 30).<sup>16</sup>

## 2. Subjects and Substances

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<sup>13</sup> This claim is controversial. Shapiro (2013, 228), for example, argues that Descartes’s pointed use of the term ‘*res*’ in *Meditation 2* to describe himself, along with the fact that the self continues to be numerically the same beneath the float of its passing thoughts, shows that Descartes is already assuming that the ‘I’ is a substance (though perhaps not an immaterial one). This reading fits uneasily with Descartes’s agnosticism about whether he is identical to a human body or a vapor permeating his limbs, however. I am more sympathetic to Carriero’s suggestion that, in calling himself a ‘*res*’ in *Meditation 2*, Descartes just means to say that he has some kind of ontological status (Carriero 93 and 96-97). Additionally, there are systematic reasons for denying that Descartes simply assumes that the thinking thing of *Meditation 2* is a substance. For Descartes, being a substance requires independence from all other created things (AT VIII A 24/CSM I 210). But when Descartes concludes that he is a thinking thing in *Meditation 2*, he has not yet shown that he has the requisite kind of independence. To this, Shapiro might respond that Descartes is getting ahead of himself, and helping himself to conclusions that he establishes only later. But that strikes me as uncharitable. See Schechtman (2016) for insightful discussion of Descartes’s account of substance in terms of independence.

<sup>14</sup> See also Matthews (1992) and Longuenesse (2008) for insightful discussion of the ‘I’ in *Meditation 2*.

<sup>15</sup> As Shapiro (2013, 228) emphasizes. See also AT VIII A 7/CSM II 195.

<sup>16</sup> See Chappell (1986, 191). See also AT VII 44/CSM II 30, AT VII 234/CSM II 164, and AT VII 385/CSM II 264.

Picking out the self as ‘the subject of thoughts’ does not tell us what its metaphysical nature is, anymore than picking out a house by saying ‘it is the one at the end of the street’ tells us how many bedrooms it has. Both are merely relative specifications. Descartes often suggests, however, that only a thinking substance is fit to play the role of subject. As I use these terms, a *subject* is someone to whom thoughts represent their contents. A *thinking substance*, in contrast, is a substance with thoughts as states or modes.<sup>17</sup> These two concepts correspond to different ways of having or relating to thoughts. A subject grasps or is acquainted with the objects of its thoughts (like a palm tree, the sun, or the number two), whereas a thinking substance provides metaphysical support for its thoughts, holding them in existence. The proposal, then, is that Descartes welds these concepts together by endorsing:

(2) If a being is a subject, then it is a thinking substance.

Thoughts represent *to* the substance they *modify*. This claim is not trivial. ‘Representing to’ is a cognitive or intentional relation, ‘modification’ a metaphysical one, and it is by no means obvious that they should line up in the way (2) suggests.

Descartes’s use of the expression ‘thinking thing’ to both (i) indicate the subject of *Meditation 2*, and (ii) as a term for thinking substance suggests that he runs these concepts together.<sup>18</sup> In the *Third Replies*, Descartes assumes that the ‘thinking thing’ is ‘a thing or substance’ (AT VII 174/CSM II 174). A few lines further down, he assimilates the relationship between thinker and thought to the relationship between substance and mode:

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<sup>17</sup> Let me clarify some of Descartes’s terminology. A *substance* is an independently existing being (AT VIII A 24/CSM I 210). A *mode* is a state or aspect of a substance, and depends on the substance for its existence (AT VIII A 29/CSM I 214). A ball of wax, for example, is a substance. Its spherical shape is a mode. In addition to the one infinite substance (God), Descartes explicitly recognizes two kinds of finite substances: minds and bodies.

<sup>18</sup> See Hatfield (2003, 105) and Shapiro (2013, 228-230).

it is certain that a thought cannot exist without a thinking thing [*re cogitante*]; and in general no act or accident can exist without a substance for it to belong to (AT VII 175-6/CSM II 124)

In the *Fifth Replies*, he uses the expressions ‘thinking thing’ (*res cogitans*) and ‘thinking substance’ (*substantiam cogitantem*) interchangeably (*O/R 5*, AT VII 355/CSM II 245). Although Descartes leaves the precise metaphysical status of the ‘thinking thing’ undetermined in *Meditation 2*, these passages suggest that we are dealing with a substance. As Hatfield writes, ‘in speaking of a thinking thing, [Descartes] intends to posit a substance’ (Hatfield 2003, 105).<sup>19</sup>

Given Descartes’s view that selfhood requires being a subject, with thoughts representing to one’s point of view, and given the view that thoughts represent to the substance they modify, it follows that only a thinking substance can be a self or ‘I’.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Thinking Substances and Minds

The key move in the previous section was the claim that thoughts *represent to* the substance they *modify*. This claim is independent from any particular view about what kind of substance is capable of being modified by thoughts. A materialist, for example, might endorse this claim, and yet nevertheless argue that it is really the brain that is modified by thoughts, and, hence, that the brain is the subject to whom they represent. Descartes argues, however, that the mind is the only thinking substance. Whereas I use ‘thinking substance’ to refer to a substance with thoughts as modes or states, I use ‘mind’ as a term for a finite substance whose unique principal attribute or defining property is thought, such that all of its modes are conceived

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<sup>19</sup> See also Alquié (1974, 104) and Shapiro (2013, 228).

<sup>20</sup> Descartes would thus seem to commit himself to the Boethian definition of a person as a substance of a rational nature. See Thiel (2011, 28-30, & 35-36) for helpful discussion of this historical background.

through this attribute.<sup>21</sup> In other words, I use ‘mind’ as a term for an immaterial thinking substance. Descartes’s view, then, seems to be that:

(3) If a being is a thinking substance, then it is a mind.

Although this attribution might seem obviously correct, some commentators deny it. These commentators argue for a ‘trialist’ reading, according to which the human being is a third kind of substance modified by sensations. Given Descartes’s view that sensations are species of thought (AT VII 28-9/CSM II 19), these commentators posit a thinking substance that is *not* a mind.<sup>22</sup> I will say more about trialism below. But there is plenty of textual evidence that trialism is false and that the mind is the only thinking substance. In the *Third Replies*, Descartes argues that modes of thought inhere exclusively in the mind:

there are other acts which we call ‘acts of thought’, such as understanding, willing, imagining, having sensory perceptions, and so on: these all fall under the common concept of thought or perception or consciousness, and we call the substance in which they inhere a ‘thinking thing’ or a ‘mind’. (AT VII 176/CSM II 124)<sup>23</sup>

Descartes, then, seems to collapse the concepts of ‘subject’, ‘thinking substance’, and ‘mind’, using the blanket term ‘thinking thing’ to cover them all.

Let me sum up. A being is a self or ‘I’ only if it is a subject, i.e. if there are thoughts representing to its point of view. But thoughts exclusively represent to the substance they modify. So the only possible subject is a substance modified by thoughts, and only the mind fits that description. This result gives rise to the *Human Self Problem*, however, since there are also

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<sup>21</sup> Each finite substance has a *principal attribute* that constitutes its nature or essence: thought in the case of minds, extension in the case of bodies (AT VIII A 25/CSM I 210). All of a substance’s modes must be understood in terms of its principal attribute. We cannot conceive of the wax’s spherical shape, for instance, except in terms of extension.

<sup>22</sup> See Schmaltz (1992a) for an ingenious account of how sensations could modify the human being, and yet nevertheless count as thoughts.

<sup>23</sup> AT VII 169-170/CSM II 119; AT VII 223/CSM II 157; and AT VIII A 25/CSM I 210-211.



many passages where Descartes suggests that the human being — i.e. the composite that results from uniting a mind to a human being — is an ‘I’ too.<sup>24</sup> And this brings us to the next section.

#### 4. Descartes’s Human Self

In *Meditation 6*, Descartes distances himself from the view that he stands in a merely instrumental relation to his body, arguing that he is not related to his body as a pilot in a ship (AT VII 81/CSM II 56).<sup>25</sup> In the next paragraph, he identifies his ‘whole self’ with the combination of mind and body:

the fact that some of the perceptions are agreeable to me while others are disagreeable makes it quite certain that **my body, or rather my whole self, in so far as I am composed of body and mind** [*meum corpus, sive potius me totum, quatenus ex corpore & mente sum compositus*], can be affected by the various beneficial or harmful bodies which surround it. (AT VII 81/CSM II 56, emphasis mine)

This passage suggests that Descartes endorses:

(4) The human being is a self or ‘I’.

The human being as a whole, with face, fingers and toes included, is a person rather than a thing, an ‘I’ rather than an ‘it’, *someone* rather than a mere *something*.

Descartes’s use of the first-person pronoun to refer to the human being provides additional evidence for (4). As many recent commentators have pointed out, Descartes distinguishes two senses of the first-person.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes he uses ‘I’ to refer to the mind, and

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<sup>24</sup> I follow Descartes in using the expression ‘human being’ to refer to the entity that is generated when a mind is ‘closely joined and intermingled’ with a human body. This new entity is a unified whole (*unum quid*) that includes a mind and human body as parts (AT VII 56/CSM II 81). There are many passages where Descartes claims that uniting a mind to a body generates a human being or mind-body composite: AT X 411/CSM I 39-40, AT XI 119/CSM I 99, AT VII 81/CSM II 56, AT VII 83/CSM II 57, AT VII 88/CSM II 61, AT VII 444/CSM II 299, AT VIIIA 29/CSM I 213, AT VIIIA 41/CSM I 224, AT VIIIB 351/CSM I 299, AT III 460/CSMK 200. Voss (1994) provides an extensive catalogue of these passages.

<sup>25</sup> See also AT VII 227-228/CSM II 160.

<sup>26</sup> Baier (1981), Alanen (1989, 402), Bitpol-Hespériès (1996, 510-1), Carriero (2009, 89), Machamer and McGuire (2009, 233), Thiel (2011, 37), and Brown (2014).

sometimes to refer to the human being as a whole. In skeptical contexts where the existence of material things is in doubt, for example, Descartes uses the first-person to refer to the mind:

as regards my parents, even if everything I have ever believed about them is true, it is certainly not they who preserve me; and **in so far as I am a thinking thing** [*me quatenus sum res cogitans*], they did not even make me; they merely placed certain dispositions in the matter which I have always regarded as containing **me, or rather my mind, for that is all I now take myself to be** [*me, hoc est mentem, quam solam nunc pro me accipio*]. (AT VII 50/CSM II 35)<sup>27</sup>

In non-skeptical contexts, he uses the first-person to refer to the combination of mind and body:

[m]y sole concern here is what God has bestowed on **me as a composite of mind and body** [*mihi, ut composito ex mente & corpore*] (AT VII 82/CSM II 57)

And sometimes he employs both senses of ‘I’ in a single sentence:

my supposition there was that no other human beings were yet known to me, and moreover **I was considering myself not as consisting of mind and body but solely as a mind** [*necque meipsum ut constantem mente & corpore, sed ut mentem solam, considerarem*]. (AT VII 142-143/CSM II 102, emphasis mine)

in inquiring about what caused me, I was asking about myself, not **in so far as I consist of mind and body** [*mei, quatenus consto mente & corpore*], but **only and precisely in so far as I am a thinking thing** [*praecise tantum quatenus sum res cogitans*]. (AT VII 107/CSM II 77)

The crucial point, for our current purposes, is that Descartes’s use of the first-person to refer to the combination of mind and body entangles him in the *Human Self Problem*. If the human being is an appropriate referent of ‘I’, then it is a self.

Let me mention one final piece of textual evidence for (4) to finish setting up our puzzle.

When Gassendi suggests that Descartes regards himself ‘not as a whole man but as an inner or hidden component — the kind of component you previously considered the soul to be’ (AT VII 260/CSM II 181), Descartes vehemently disagrees:

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<sup>27</sup> See also AT VII 49/CSM II 34, AT VII 59/CSM II 41, AT VII 78/CSM II 54, AT VII 86/CSM II 5, AT VII 355/CSM II 245, AT X 518/CSM II 412, AT X 521/CSM II 414, AT VIIIA 40/CSM I 223, and AT V 357/CSMK III 378.

You then adopt a droll figure of speech and pretend to interrogate me as if I were present; and you address **me no longer as a whole human being but as a separated soul** [*me non amplius ut hominem integrum, sed ut animam separatam*], I think that you are indicating here that these objections of yours did not originate in the mind of a subtle philosopher but came from the flesh alone. (AT VII 352/CSM II 244, *emphasis mine*)

Descartes recoils from the view that he is ‘an inner or hidden component’ inside the human being, or that he is anything less than ‘a whole human being’ (*ibid.*). This reaction suggests that Descartes takes himself to be human.

We can now formulate the *Human Self Problem* more explicitly. Descartes seems to accept the following inconsistent set of claims:

- (1) If a being is a self or ‘I’, then it is a subject.
- (2) If a being is a subject, then it is a thinking substance.
- (3) If a being is a thinking substance, then it is a mind.
- (4) The human being is a self or ‘I’.<sup>28</sup>

The first claim says that being *someone*, rather than a mere *something*, requires having thoughts representing to one’s point of view. The second and third claims imply that only the mind satisfies this constraint. And yet, the fourth claim says that the human being — the composite of mind and body — is someone too. This is the *Human Self Problem* in a nutshell.

## II. Can Descartes Solve This Problem?

In the remainder of the paper, I argue that Descartes’s best option for solving this problem is to reject (2): the claim that thoughts invariably represent to the substance they modify. I argue for this conclusion via a process of elimination. In section five, I argue against

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<sup>28</sup> Strictly speaking, these claims are inconsistent only if we assume that the human being is not a mind. As I am using the term, however, a human being is a composite whole that includes both mind and body as parts, and presumably a whole is not identical to any *one* of its parts. As Brown writes, for example, ‘[w]e may wonder whether a whole is always *just* the sum of its parts or something more, but we generally tend to think that a whole is *at least* the sum of its parts’ (Brown 2014, 246). Sometimes commentators use the term ‘human being’ somewhat differently, to refer to the embodied mind. On this usage, (1)-(4) would not be inconsistent. I deal with this kind of reading in section five below.

deflationary solutions to the *Human Self Problem* that try to block the implication that the human being is a subject, by rejecting either (1) or (4). In section six, I consider a trialist solution, according to which the human being is the subject of sensory perceptions because it is the substance modified by them, thereby rejecting (3). Although the trialist is on the right track, I do not think we should abandon the traditional reading of Descartes as a dualist. Finally, in section seven, I consider and defend the only remaining option: rejecting (2), thereby driving a wedge between the concepts of ‘subject’ and ‘substance’. On my view, Descartes’s human being is a subject to whom sensory thoughts represent their contents, even though the mind is the substance of which these thoughts are modifications.

### **5. Deflationary Solutions: Reject Either (1) or (4)**

We might try to solve the *Human Self Problem* by blocking the implication that the human being is a subject, in which case the tension disappears. One option is to reject (4): the claim that the human being is a self or ‘I’. Someone might argue that when Descartes appears to call the human being an ‘I’, he is really just talking about the mind united to a human body. They might agree that uniting a mind to a human body generates a mind-body composite, and yet nevertheless insist that the first-person refers pronoun exclusively to one element in this composite: viz. the mind. On this proposal, the embodied mind is a self; the composite is not.<sup>29</sup> Another option is to reject (1): if a being is a self or ‘I’, then it is a subject. Someone might argue that Descartes’s use of the first-person pronoun to refer to the human being is not philosophically significant, and does not imply that the human being is a subject to whom thoughts represent. The first-person pronoun ‘I’ is just a piece of language, and Descartes is free to use it however he likes. The problem with both these attempts to solve the *Human Self Problem* is textual.

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Alanen (1989, 402-404), Voss (1994) and Shapiro (2013, 239-240). This kind of reading is often taken for granted in the secondary literature, without being defended or thematized.

Descartes frequently characterizes the human being, and not just the mind, as a subject to whom sensory ideas represent their contents.<sup>30</sup> An adequate solution to the *Human Self Problem* needs to respect this feature of the texts, and so rejecting either (1) or (4) will not really help.

The second half of *Meditation 6* contains many passages where Descartes suggests that sensory perceptions represent to the human being. Consider, again, the famous ‘pilot-in-a-ship’ passage:

Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body compose one thing. (AT VII 81/CSM II 56)

In this passage, the ‘I’ is the subject to whom the sensory teachings of nature are addressed, and, crucially, Descartes describes this subject as an intermingling of mind and body, i.e. a human being. A few lines further down, he continues:

the fact that some of the perceptions are agreeable to me while others are disagreeable makes it quite certain that my body, or, rather my whole self, in so far as I am composed of body and mind, can be affected by the various beneficial or harmful bodies which surround it. (AT VII 81/CSM II 56)

Again, the ‘I’ is the one to whom sensory perceptions are agreeable or disagreeable, and, hence, to whom these perceptions represent. Descartes argues that this ‘I’ is ‘composed of mind and body’ (*ibid.*).

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<sup>30</sup> I use the terms ‘sensation’, ‘sensory perception’, ‘sensory thought’, and ‘sensory representation’ more or less interchangeably. For the equivalence of ‘sensory perception’ and ‘sensation’, see AT VIII A 32/CSM I 216 and AT VIII A 316/CSM I 280. There is a rich debate in the secondary literature about whether sensations genuinely represent colors and other sensible qualities for Descartes, or whether our visual experience of yellow, say, is properly analyzed in terms of a mere yellow sensation or quale (i.e. a blank affection of the mind that does not point to anything outside itself). For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that sensations are representational in so far as they make some kind of content available to a subject, though I will remain neutral on the precise nature of what this content includes or how it is fixed. My reading just needs sensations to have some objective reality or other such that this content is a candidate for being represented to someone. See, for example, AT VII 43/CSM II 30. Commentators who defend non-representational accounts of sensible quality perception include MacKenzie (1989 and 1990), Nelson (1996), and Keating (1999). Commentators defending representational accounts, in contrast, include Bolton (1986), Alanen (1994), Wilson (1990), Hoffman (1996), Simmons (1999), Pessin (2007), and De Rosa (2010).

The human being appears as subject in Descartes's frequent claims that the senses represent objects in so far as they can benefit or harm us. In one of the culminating passages of *Meditation 6*, he writes:

when **we** need drink, there arises a certain dryness in the throat; this sets in motion the nerves of the throat, which in turn move the inner parts of the brain. This motion produces in the mind a sensation of thirst, because the most useful for thing **for us** [*nobis*] to know about the whole business is that **we** need drink in order to stay healthy. And so it is in the other cases. (AT VII 88/CSM 61, emphasis mine)

The sensation of thirst allows 'us to know' that 'we need drink in order to stay healthy' (*ibid.*, emphasis mine). Here the knowing 'us' is identified with the 'we' who needs 'drink in order to stay healthy'. But this 'we' who needs drink has got to be the human being as a whole, since properties like sickness and health belong to the human being, rather than either the mind or body alone (AT VII 85/CSM II 59).<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the knowing 'us' — i.e. the subject for whom the sensation of thirst is a representation — is the human being as well. Descartes reiterates this point in a letter to More. '[O]ur senses do not always exhibit to us [*nobis exhibeant*] external bodies exactly as they are,' Descartes writes, 'but only insofar as they are related to us [*nos*] and can benefit or harm us' (AT V 271/CSMK III 362). Again, the 'us' to whom senses exhibit external bodies is the 'us' who can be benefited and harmed by external bodies: namely, the human being.<sup>32</sup>

Once we start looking for them, we find passages throughout Descartes's works where he describes the human being as a subject to whom thoughts represent. '[W]here knowledge of things is concerned, only two factors need to be considered,' Descartes writes in the early *Rules*

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Gueroult (1968), Hatfield (1992, 361-2), Des Chene (2001, 108-111), Simmons (2001, 61-63); and Detlefsen (2013, 154-155, and 162-165). Shapiro (2003b) and Brown (2012), in contrast, argue that Descartes has the resources to offer a purely mechanistic account of health. If sickness and health are properties of the human body, these passages would be even more surprising, in so far as they would then suggest that the body occupies the role of subject here.

<sup>32</sup> See also AT VII 234/CSM II 164, AT VIII A 41-42/CSM I 224, and AT XI 372/CSM I 349.

*for the Direction of the Mind*, ‘ourselves, namely, we who know, and the things which are the objects of knowledge’ (AT X 411/CSM I 39-40). We need to understand both the *knowing subjects* and the *objects known*, or, more generically, the *representing subjects* and the *objects represented*. ‘Turning now to the first factor,’ Descartes continues. ‘I should like to explain at this point what the human mind is, what the body is and how it is informed by the mind, what faculties within the composite whole promote knowledge of things, and what each particular faculty does; but I lack the space...’ (AT X 411/CSM I 39-40). When Descartes examines the ‘first factor’, i.e. the knowing or representing subject, he describes the ‘composite whole’, i.e. the human being, which implies that the human being *is* the knowing or representing subject in this context.

Descartes’s commitment to the human being’s subject-hood continues all the way to his last published work, the *Passions of the Soul*. ‘We shall not find [the passions] very difficult to understand,’ he claims, ‘if we bear in mind that anything we experience as being in us [*en nous*], and which we can also exist in wholly inanimate bodies, must be attributed only to our body’ (AT XI 329/CSM I 329). If there are things occurring or existing ‘in us’ (*en nous*) which are purely bodily events, like digestion and breathing, then we must be partly mechanical creatures, namely, human beings. Consider, then, the claim that ‘we experience [things] as being in us’ (*ibid.*). Given that the experienced ‘us’ refers to the human being, it follows that the experiencing ‘we’ refers to the human composite as well. And if the human being experiences things occurring in itself, then this experience presumably represents to the human being.<sup>33</sup>

These passages suggest that the human being has a point of view to whom sensory perceptions represent, and that Descartes endorses:

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<sup>33</sup> See also AT III 694/CSMK 228, AT VIIIA 23/CSM I 208, AT VI 46/CSM I 134, AT VII 230/CSM II 161-162, and AT XI 226/CSM I 315.

(5) The human being is a subject.

Descartes's endorsement of this claim is unsurprising in light of his views that (1) to be a self is to be a subject, and (4) the human being is a self. The passages we have been looking at simply draw out the implications of these commitments. In order to solve the *Human Self Problem*, then, we need to challenge the claim that the mind is the only subject in Descartes's system, by rejecting either:

(2) If a being is a subject, then it is a thinking substance.

Or,

(3) If a being is a thinking substance, then it is a mind.

Descartes would have a problem even if he never once used the first-person pronoun. Claims (2) and (3) entail that only the mind is a subject, which conflicts with (5): the claim that sensory thoughts represent *to* the human being as a whole. This problem is not just about how Descartes uses the first-person pronoun 'I', which is, after all, just a piece of language. This problem is about the sorts of beings who can be represented *to*. I prefer setting things up in terms of the 'I', however, since that is how Descartes typically indicates the subject of representation.

Scholarly discussions of sensory representation in Descartes typically focus on two main questions: (i) whether sensations are genuinely representational for him, and, (ii) assuming that they are, what they represent and how.<sup>34</sup> Much less attention has been paid to the subject at the receiving end of sensory representations. As I mentioned above, commentators often take for

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<sup>34</sup> Wilson (1990), Schmaltz (1992b), and Hoffman (1996) argue that sensations represent their causes, typically a mode of extension. Alanen (2003) argues that sensations represent affections of the mind-body union. Simmons (1999) defends a bio-functional account, on which the content of sensations is fixed by the functional role they play in preserving the mind-body union. De Rosa (2010), in contrast, defends an internalist or descriptivist account of sensory representation, according to which sensations represent in virtue of a latent intellectual content.



granted that the subject is the mind.<sup>35</sup> Resolving the *Human Self Problem* requires that we give up this piece of interpretive orthodoxy. We need to make the Cartesian turn away from the contents of sensory perception towards their subject. But this time our task is to explain how the human being can occupy this role.

## 6. Trialism: Reject (3)

Trialism promises an elegant account of the human being's status as a subject to whom sensory perceptions represent. Trialism, as I am using the term, holds that (i) the human being is a third kind of substance distinct from mind and body that is (ii) modified by sensations.<sup>36</sup> In *Principles* II.3, for example, Descartes argues that bodily sensations like pleasure, pain, hunger

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<sup>35</sup> MacKenzie, for example, has 'no doubt' that sensory representation is always to the mind: 'All of the examples of representation Descartes uses to illustrate sense in humans have this structure: X represents Y to Z by virtue of some background system S. Furthermore, *I have no doubt about my specific assignments of mind and of the whole causal nexus for Z- and S-slot respectively*. The assignment of values for the X- and Y-slots, however, require more discussion' (MacKenzie 1989, 180, emphasis mine; see also MacKenzie 1990, 130-1). Simmons 'stipulate[s] that a mental state is representational if it acquaints *the mind* with something existing in extramental reality' (Simmons 1999, 348, emphasis mine). Simmons reiterates this point in her entry on representation in the *Descartes Lexicon*: 'mental states make objects, facts, and states of affairs *present to the mind*' (Simmons \*\*\*\*, emphasis mine). De Rosa similarly claims that 'in Descartes's case, representation is primarily *presentation* of an object to the mind insofar as *representing something* consists in putting the mind in *cognitive* contact with extra-mental reality' (De Rosa 2010, 13). See also Chappell (1986, 191). Schmitter (1994) again is an important exception.

<sup>36</sup> Cottingham introduces the term 'trialism' for the claim that the human being is a third kind of finite substance, though he rejects it as a reading of Descartes (Cottingham 1985). Cottingham's reading of Descartes posits three kinds of *attribute* or *ontological category*, but not three kinds of substance. Defenders of trialism include Broughton and Mattern (1978), Gueroult (1968), Richardson (1982), Hoffman (1986), Garber (1992, 90-92), Schmaltz (1992a), and Skirry (2005), though see Schmaltz (2008, 139-140) for a retraction. Trialism is typically presented as a solution to the *Union Problem*, but can be developed to solve the *Human Self Problem* as well. Although proponents of trialism agree that the human being is a third kind of substance — an independent being that is neither mind nor body, but a combination of both — they disagree about the right model for understanding this third kind of substance. Hoffman (1986), for example, argues that the human being is a hylomorphic substance on the Scholastic Aristotelian model, according to which the mind and human body are related as substantial form to matter. The main evidence for this version of trialism is Descartes's willingness to describe the mind as the 'form' of the body (AT X 411/CSM I 40 and AT VIII A 315/CSM I 279), and sometimes even its 'substantial form' (AT III 503/CSMK 207, AT III 505/CSMK 208, and AT VII 356/CSM II 246). Rozemond (1998, esp. ch.5) criticizes Hoffman's account of Descartes's relation to his Scholastic predecessors. Schmaltz (1992a), in contrast, takes the Cartesian theory of substance developed in *Principles* I.53 as his model, according to which each kind of finite substance is defined by a principal attribute (*Principles* I.53, AT VIII A 25/CSM I 210). Schmaltz then argues that the human being is a substance whose principal attribute is union. The central text for Schmaltz's version of trialism is Descartes's claim to Elizabeth that we are in possession of a 'primitive notion' of union, in addition to notions of the two main principal attributes, thought and extension (AT III 665/CSMK III 218). To be clear, Descartes does *not* say that our primitive notion of union is a primitive notion of a *principal attribute*. He just says that we have a primitive notion of the union, whatever the union may be. Schmaltz (1992a) infers that the union is supposed to be a principal attribute on the grounds that two of Descartes's other primitive notions are of principle attributes.

and thirst ‘are to be referred [*referri*] only to that very conjunction of the human body with the mind’ (AT VIII A 41/CSM I 224). The claim that bodily sensations are ‘to be referred’ to the conjunction could mean that these sensations modify the human composite (*ibid.*). Given that sensations are a species of thought for Descartes, this implies that a human being is a *thinking* substance, which is tantamount to rejecting (3). According to the trialist, Descartes recognizes not one, but two kinds of thinking substance: the mind *and* the human being

The trialist can then argue that the human being is a subject for exactly the same reason as the mind: they are both subjects to whom thoughts represent their contents, because they are both substances modified by thoughts. In a bit more detail, the trialist can hold onto the principle that thoughts represent to the substance they modify, with the crucial twist that different kinds of thoughts modify different kinds of substance. Intellectual thoughts about math, God, and essences modify and hence represent to the mind, while sensory perceptions of one’s surroundings and the state of one’s own body modify and hence represent to the human being as a whole (AT VIII A 23/CSM I 208-9).<sup>37</sup> When I stub my toe, for example, the sensation of pain that I feel modifies and hence represents to my mind and body together. Similarly, when I squint to look at a palm tree, my visual experience modifies and hence represents to the combination of mind and body. If they adopt this solution, the trialist will face difficult questions about how to integrate the intellectual and sensory thoughts into a single mental life. But that is going to be a problem on any reading of Descartes.

The trialist solution, in sum, teases apart the concepts of ‘thinking substance’ and ‘mind’, while leaving intact the connection between the concepts of ‘subject’ and ‘thinking substance’. The trialist agrees with (2): if a being is a subject, then it is a thinking substance. But she rejects

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<sup>37</sup> See also AT III 665/CSMK III 218.

(3): if a being is a thinking substance, then it is a mind. On this elaboration of the reading, trialism is not simply a view about the metaphysical status of the entity that results from combining a mind with a human being. It is a view about the subject of sensory representation, a point not typically emphasized by trialism's defenders.

Trialism's ability to solve the *Human Self Problem* counts in its favor. But this solution comes at too high a price. As is well-known in the secondary literature, there are many objections to trialist readings of Descartes. A full discussion of these critiques is beyond the scope of the current paper. But here are a few.<sup>38</sup> First, Descartes never describes the human being as a substance (Rozemond 1998, 165). Second, in his most explicit statement of his ontological commitments in the *Principles*, he is clear that there are only two kinds of finite substance: minds and bodies, and only the former is a thinking substance.<sup>39</sup> This makes the rejection of (3) especially hard to swallow. Third, if the mind-body composite has a principal attribute of its own, then the composite would be really distinct from mind and body (Rozemond 1998, 201). But how can a composite be really distinct from its parts? We would need to imagine a situation where all the pieces of a cake are taken away, and yet the cake mysteriously remains.<sup>40</sup> Fourth, whatever the ontological status of the human being, whether substance or not, Descartes insists that thoughts exclusively modify the mind. We have already seen this passage before, but it is worth revisiting:

there are other acts which we call 'acts of thought', such as understanding, willing, imagining, having sensory perceptions, and so on: these all fall under the common

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<sup>38</sup> For more extensive discussion of these critiques, see Chappell (1994), Voss (1994), Rozemond (1998, chs. 5 & 6), and Kaufman (2008).

<sup>39</sup> AT VIII A 23/CSM I 208; and AT VIII A 25-26/CSM I 210-211.

<sup>40</sup> The trialist might respond that the composite is really distinct from its parts in the same way as the ship of Theseus: namely, that the composite can survive the replacement of any of its parts. This reply is dangerous for the trialist, however, since it suggests that the human being can survive both mind *and* body transplants, whereas we might have thought that the human being includes its particular mind as an essential part.

concept of thought or perception or consciousness, *and we call the substance in which they inhere a 'thinking thing' or a 'mind'*. (AT VII 176/CSM II 124, emphasis mine)<sup>41</sup>

These sorts of passages make it difficult to accept that sensory thoughts represent to the human being as a whole because they modify it.

An avowed trialist is unlikely to be moved by these familiar critiques, and my purpose here is not to convince anyone to give up their trialism. The point of rehearsing these critiques, rather, is to remind ourselves of the costs associated with trialism to motivate developing a non-trialist solution to the *Human Self Problem*. The trialist is on the right track. I agree that we should resolve the *Human Self Problem* by showing how the human being can play the role of subject. But given the many familiar critiques of the trialist reading, it would be nice to have an alternative account of the human being's subject-hood compatible with the traditional reading of Descartes as a dualist. The question, then, is whether we can solve the *Human Self Problem* without turning the human being into just another thinking substance.

### **7. Direct and Indirect Subjects of Representation: Reject (2)**

If the human being is a subject to whom sensory thoughts represent, but is not a thinking substance of which these thoughts are modifications, then it follows that the human being is a subject without being a thinking substance. I suggest we embrace this consequence as the most promising solution for the *Human Self Problem*. Contra the trialist, this approach insists that minds are the only thinking substances. But it rejects the claim that thoughts exclusively represent to the substance they modify, thereby abandoning (2): if a being is a subject, then it is a thinking substance.

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<sup>41</sup> AT VII 169-170/CSM II 119, AT VII 223/CSM II 157, AT VII 437/CSM II 294, and AT VIIIA 25/CSM I 210-211. See Rozemond (1998, 184-187) for more extensive discussion than possible here.

The challenge for this solution, of course, is to explain how the human being can be a subject without being a thinking substance. We can make some initial progress by distinguishing two senses of subject. Philosophers sometimes distinguish the direct and indirect objects of representation. When someone looks at a portrait of Anne Boleyn, for example, her visual experience directly represents a pattern of paint on canvas, and then as a result indirectly represents Anne Boleyn. In this situation, the pattern of paint is the direct object, Anne Boleyn the indirect object. We may draw a parallel distinction between direct and indirect subjects of representation. Suppose, for example, that a spy is acting on behalf of the King of Spain in the English court, having been instructed to be ‘the eyes and ears’ for Spain.<sup>42</sup> In this situation, when the spy is snooping around the English palace and comes across the portrait of Anne Boleyn, the spy’s visual experience directly represents to the spy, and as a result indirectly represents to the King of Spain, since the spy is seeing for the King and on his behalf. The spy is the direct subject here, the King of Spain the indirect subject.

My proposal is that a similar structure obtains inside the human being. When someone — a human being — looks at the painting, her visual experience directly represents the painting to her mind in virtue of being a modification of mind, and then as a result indirectly represents the painting to the combination of her mind and body, i.e. the human being. The mind sees for the human being and on its behalf, just like the spy for the King of Spain. ‘[T]he proper purpose of sensory perception’ is *not* to serve the mind’s needs, as Descartes argues in *Meditation 6*, but, rather, ‘to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part’ (AT VII 83/CSM II 57).<sup>43</sup> The mind, then, is the direct subject, the human being the

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<sup>42</sup> I adapt this example from Simmons (2015).

<sup>43</sup> AT VIII-A 41-42/CSM I 224 and AT V 271/CSMK III 362. See Simmons (1999, 2001) for helpful discussion of the senses’ biological function.

indirect subject. Sensory thoughts represent to the human being in virtue of representing to the mind.

Thus, I am happy to concede that thoughts always directly represent to substance they modify, viz. the mind. But sensory thoughts also indirectly represent to the human being as a whole, without modifying it. In other words, my proposal is that Descartes accepts:

(2a) If a being is a direct subject, then it is a thinking substance.

But he rejects:

(2b) If a being is an indirect subject, then it is a thinking substance.

This proposal allows Descartes to consistently hold that the human being is a subject to whom sensory thoughts represent, without giving up his dualist view that the mind is the only substance modified by thoughts.

This solution to the *Human Self Problem* is admittedly schematic. To properly underwrite Descartes's view that the human being is a subject we would need to spell out a notion of 'indirect representation-to' on his behalf. Just as there are difficult philosophical questions about how the direct objects of representation relate to their indirect object, there are parallel difficult questions about the relation between the direct and indirect subjects of sensory representation. How does looking at a pattern of paint put one in touch with Anne Boleyn? And how does directly representing something to the mind result in indirect representation to the human being of which the mind is a part?

Unfortunately, the existing secondary literature on the union offers little help. Many commentators defend non-trialist readings of the sense in which sensory thoughts may be 'referred' or 'attributed' to the human being. Some commentators argue that sensory thoughts should be 'referred' to the composite because they result from the causal interaction of mind and

body.<sup>44</sup> Rozemond (1998, ch. 6), in contrast, argues that sensations depend on the composite in a more robust sense, in that the mind's capacity for sensation essentially depends on its union with the body, so that a disembodied mind would be incapable of sensing.<sup>45</sup> Carriero (2009, 89) argues that sensory perceptions, and, indeed, thoughts more generally, should be predicated of the human being as a whole in virtue of the fact that the human being contains the mind as a part.<sup>46</sup> The problem with these readings, for our current purposes, is that they analyze the attribution of thoughts to the human being in decidedly non-cognitive or non-representational terms, so that these readings are silent on whether and how the human is related to these thoughts as a subject, whether directly or indirectly. Consider, for example, the interactionist view that the human being as a whole 'has' sensory thoughts in so far as these thoughts arise from the causal interaction of mind and body. The bare claim that sensory perceptions are caused by the interaction between the parts of the human being does not suffice for the human composite's status as a subject, since, in general, thoughts do not represent to their causes. A burning sensation, for example, does not mean anything to the fire that causes it.<sup>47</sup>

Existing non-realist readings offer various metaphysical accounts of the sense in which the human being 'has' sensory thoughts, not in terms of modification, but in metaphysical terms nonetheless, like causation, metaphysical dependence, or mereological relations. For the

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<sup>44</sup> Wilson (1978, 211) and Chappell (1994).

<sup>45</sup> Actually, it is unclear that Rozemond's account underwrites the attribution of sensations to the human being as a whole, since, as she herself points out, Descartes sometimes says that sensations arise from the intermingling of the mind and part of the brain, rather than the human body as a whole (Rozemond 1998, 180). See, for example, AT VII 437/CSM II 295; and AT VIII A 316/CSM I 280.

<sup>46</sup> This proposal is, at the very least, incomplete, since the conjunction does not inherit all the properties of its constituents. The mind is devoid of parts, for example, whereas the union is not (AT VII 86/CSM II 59). See Voss (1994, 294-5) for critical discussion of the idea that the human being 'inherits' properties from its parts.

<sup>47</sup> Now, just as Wilson (1990) develops a causal account of the objects of sensory representation, it is possible that someone might formulate a parallel causal story of the human being's status as the indirect subject of these representations. But that story has not yet been told, and I suspect that it will not be an easy one to tell. See also Larmore (1980), Schmaltz (1992), and Hoffman (2002).

purposes of solving the *Human Self Problem*, however, we need a representational or cognitive sense in which the human being ‘has’ thoughts, such that the objective reality of these sensory thoughts is made available to the human being. To wrap up this section, I will briefly sketch my preferred account of the human being’s status as an indirect subject of sensory representation, though a full defense would take us beyond the scope of this paper.

As Simmons (1999, 2001) has shown, sensory perceptions do not simply arise from the union and intermingling of mind and body: they are also for the sake of the mind-body union. Sensory perceptions have the function or purpose of helping us survive as human beings, focusing on the Achilles heel of our humanity: the human body.<sup>48</sup> In *Meditation 6*, for example, Descartes argues that ‘sensory perceptions are given to me by nature’ to indicate ‘what things would be beneficial or harmful to the composite’ (AT VII 83/CSM II 57).<sup>49</sup> More specifically, God pairs types of motions of the pineal gland with the types of sensation that are optimally helpful for our survival as embodied beings:

any given movement occurring in the part of the brain that immediately affects the mind [i.e. the pineal gland] produces just one corresponding sensation; and hence the best system that could be devised is that it should produce the one sensation which, of all possible sensations, is most especially and most frequently conducive to the preservation of the healthy man. And experience shows that the sensations which nature has given us are all of this kind... (AT VII 87/CSM II 60)<sup>50</sup>

Sensory perceptions contribute to ‘the preservation of the healthy man’ by presenting a picture of the world suitable for action, so that we can successfully preserve ourselves in the dangerous world of *res extensa* (*ibid.*). A rotten smell keeps us away from food past its expiry date. Sensations of hunger and thirst encourage us to satisfy our body’s needs for nourishment and

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<sup>48</sup> The soul separates from the body when the body ceases to be in good working order, which implies that the way to preserve the composite is to preserve its bodily part (AT XI 330-331/CSM I 329-330).

<sup>49</sup> See also AT VIII-A 41-42/CSM I 224 and AT V 271/CSMK III 362.

<sup>50</sup> AT XI 143-4/CSM I 102-103, AT XI 147, AT VIIIA 318, and AT XI 399-400/CSM I 361-362.



drink. A burning sensation encourages us to remove our hand from a hot stove before it is burned to a crisp (AT VII 88/CSM II 60-61).

The claim that sensory perceptions have this kind of biological function can do important philosophical work. Some commentators, for example, leverage this claim to offer a solution to the *Union Problem*, by arguing that mind and body generate a mind-body union or unity, in virtue of forming a functionally organized system in which sensory perceptions play a vital role.<sup>51</sup> Simmons (1999) appeals to the biological function of sensory perceptions to give an account of their contents or objects, according to which sensory perceptions ‘represent things in the corporeal world not in virtue of resembling those things as they are in themselves, and not simply in virtue of being caused in the right way by those things, but in virtue of the role that they play in enabling us to interact with the world in a self-preserving way’ (Simmons 1999, 357). My proposal is that we can also appeal to biological function of sensory perception to give an account of the human being’s status as their indirect subject.

Sensory perceptions serve their biological function by providing action guidance. My proposal, then, has two main planks: (i) sensory perceptions indirectly represent to the being to whom they provide action guidance, and (ii) sensory perceptions provide action guidance to the human being, in virtue of directly representing to the mind. In other words, sensory perceptions exhibit their contents or objects directly to the mind, and then indirectly exhibit their contents to the human being as a whole, not simply in virtue of the causal role the human being plays in the production of these perceptions, and not simply in virtue of the human being’s incorporation of the mind as a proper part, but in virtue of the way the human being *uses* the information made

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<sup>51</sup> Commentators that defend the view that the human being is a functional or teleological unity include Rodis-Lewis (1990, 1998), Simmons (1999, 2001), Detlefsen (2013), and Perler (2016). Des Chene (2001, 132-140) and Brown (2012) provide insightful discussions of functions in Descartes.

available by these perceptions to successfully interact with bodies in its environment.<sup>52</sup> A burning sensation, for example, prompts the human being to remove her hand from a hot stove. A rotten smell keeps the human being away from expired food. When the mind experiences hunger and thirst, the human being as a whole gets up off the couch and moves towards the fridge. In each of these situations, the information that is directly represented to the mind gets taken up and used by the human being as a whole, so that this information counts as indirectly represented to the human being as well. Although more could be said here, something along these lines seems like the best way of vindicating Descartes's view that the human being, and not just the mind, is a self, subject, or 'I', while still respecting his substance dualism.

## **Conclusion**

The *Human Self Problem* arises if we interpret Descartes as running together the concepts of 'self', 'subject', 'thinking substance', and 'mind', while also treating the human being as a self. Trialism solves this problem by teasing apart the concepts of 'thinking substance' and 'mind', though at the cost of abandoning Descartes's substance dualism. According to the trialist, thoughts invariably represent to the substance they modify. But some thoughts modify and hence represent to the mind, other thoughts modify and hence represent to the human being. My preferred solution keeps Descartes a substance dualist, who holds that the only substance modified by thoughts is the mind. I suggest, instead, pulling apart the concepts of 'subject' and 'thinking substance'. I argue that 'representation-to' comes apart from 'modification-of' in the case of the human being. More specifically, I argue that the human being is the indirect subject

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<sup>52</sup> This proposal is inspired, in part, by MacKenzie's work on representation in Descartes. Of particular importance is her suggestion that Descartes uses 'an admittedly broad conception of representation,' such that 'the notion of "intentional presence" which arises from it is that of *usable information*' (MacKenzie 1989, 191). If a representation is something that makes information available for use, then it is natural to suppose that a subject of representation is someone who uses this information, which is basically what I am proposing.

to whom sensory thoughts represent, despite these thoughts modifying the mind. My reading walks a thin line between making the human being sufficiently mind-like for it to count as a self, without making the human being too much like the mind, thereby violating Descartes's dualism.<sup>53</sup>

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