

THE PROBLEM OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE THINKING
SUBSTANCE IN THE MEDITATIONS AND IN THE OBJECTIONS
AND REPLIES OF RENE DESCARTES

El problema del conocimiento de la sustancia
pensante en las *Meditaciones* y en las *Objecciones*
y *Respuestas* de René Descartes

VINÍCIUS FRANÇA FREITAS*

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil
ffvinicius@yahoo.com.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8304-4732>

ANA CLÁUDIA TEODORO SOUSA**

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil
teodoro.claudia.ana@hotmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2187-6725>

Suggested citation: França Freitas, Vinícius & Teodoro Sousa, Ana Cláudia (2024). The problem of the knowledge of the thinking substance in the Meditations and in the Objections and Replies of Rene Descartes. *Sophia, Colección de Filosofía de la Educación*, (37), pp. 125-152.

* Bachelor of Philosophy, Master of Philosophy, PhD in Philosophy. He is currently a Postdoctoral Resident (PNPD/CAPES) in the Postgraduate Program in Philosophy of the Federal University of Minas Gerais. He coordinates the meetings of the Group of Modern Skepticism (CPNq) in the Philosophy Department of the same institution and co-edits the journal *Estudios Hum(e)anos* (ISSN 2177-1006). He is a research associate at the Hume UFMG/CNPq Group and PHARE/Université Paris I Pant-héon-Sorbonne, France. His studies focus on the history area of modern philosophy, with emphasis on empiricism, philosophy of common sense and theories of consciousness, working mainly on the thought of authors of the rationalist and empiricist tradition of the 17th and 18th centuries. He has teaching experience in primary and higher education (undergraduate and graduate).

** She has a degree in Philosophy and has done research in the areas of modern philosophy, philosophy of science and aesthetics and philosophy of art. She holds a master's degree in modern philosophy and is a doctoral student at the same institution (as of 2020). In her master's degree she worked on the influence of skepticism on Cartesian philosophy and as a doctoral student she researches continuities and breaks within Descartes' thought, with emphasis on the writings of the philosopher's youth. She participates in the Group of Modern Skepticism (UFMG), the Ibero-American Descartes Network and the Genesis of Modern Thought and a translation project of Descartes' co-correspondence. She has experience in the history of modern philosophy, with emphasis on Cartesian philosophy, epistemology, skepticism and metaphysics.

Abstract

In this article, the hypothesis that Descartes does not clearly articulate the knowledge of the thinking substance in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* and in *Objections and Replies* is developed. It is argued that such exposition is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the status of Cartesian philosophy at the time of writing the Meditations, particularly to grasp Descartes' conception of the knowledge of the thinking substance in the years 1641 and 1642. As known, knowledge of the thinking substance is a fundamental element in Descartes' philosophy. Firstly, Descartes' two modes of presenting knowledge of the thinking substance in the Meditations are examined, highlighting the issues each entails. Secondly, drawing from the Objections and Replies—especially the fifth and seventh—criticisms from Pierre Gassendi and Pierre Bourdin regarding the knowledge of the thinking substance are presented. Both Gassendi and Bourdin emphasize that the text of the Meditations does not sufficiently clarify how the thinking substance is known. They question the possibility of such knowledge, pointing out the ambiguity and obscurity of Cartesian responses. It is concluded that in the Meditations, Descartes confronts an insurmountable gap between the ontology of substance and its knowledge, which prompts him to further develop and clarify his theory in later writings.

126



Keywords

Knowledge, metaphysics, thinking substance, mind, soul, René Descartes.

Resumen

En este artículo se desarrolla la hipótesis de que el conocimiento de la sustancia pensante en las *Meditaciones sobre la filosofía primera* y en *Objeciones y Respuestas* no es claramente explicitado por René Descartes. Se entiende que tal exposición es necesaria para una comprensión integral del estatus de la filosofía cartesiana en el momento de redactar las *Meditaciones* y, principalmente, para asimilar cómo concebía Descartes el conocimiento de la sustancia pensante en los años 1641 y 1642. El conocimiento de la sustancia pensante es, como se sabe, un elemento fundamental para toda la filosofía cartesiana. Para ello, se recurre, primeramente, a los dos modos en que Descartes presenta el conocimiento de la sustancia pensante en las *Meditaciones*, destacando los problemas que cada uno de estos conlleva. Posteriormente, a partir de las *Objeciones y Respuestas* —principalmente la quinta y la séptima— se presenta las críticas de Pierre Gassendi y Pierre Bourdin sobre el conocimiento de la sustancia pensante. Tanto Gassendi como Bourdin subrayan que el texto de *Meditaciones* no es suficiente para esclarecer de qué manera la sustancia pensante es conocida. En este sentido, Gassendi y Bourdin cuestionan la posibilidad de este conocimiento, destacando la ambigüedad y oscuridad de las respuestas cartesianas. Se concluye que en las *Meditaciones*, Descartes enfrenta una brecha insalvable entre la ontología de la sustancia y su conocimiento, lo que lo llevará a desarrollar y explicar mejor su teoría en escritos posteriores.

Palabras clave

Conocimiento, metafísica, sustancia pensante, mente, alma, René Descartes.

Introduction

This article analyzes how René Descartes (1596-1650) addresses the problem of knowledge of the thinking substance, focusing on two texts: *Meditations on the first philosophy* (2004)¹ and the compilation known as *Objections and Answers* (1904). It is not intended to discuss the process of discovering one's existence as a thinking thing in the meditative itinerary,

nor is the result of an intuition or a syllogistic process discovered. It is assumed that the process leading to the knowledge of one's existence is not problematic. The aim is to discuss, more specifically, an epistemological problem: how does Descartes explain the knowledge of the nature of what exists, how is it possible to know the essence of the self that performs the activity of thinking,² would the philosopher be able to explain the knowledge of the nature of the substance beyond its modes, qualities and attributes?

Initially (section 1), the hypothesis is that Descartes does not offer, in the text of the *Meditations*, a clear answer to the questions proposed above. This hypothesis is based on obscure and contradictory statements by the philosopher: (1.1) Descartes (2004) is unclear as to how the thinking substance might be apprehended by the intellect (pp. 49-63); (1.2) Descartes suggests that the self can be grasped by an ability to "perceive," yet it is unclear what the object of that ability is (p. 103); (1.3) Descartes seems to suggest, at least in one passage, that the apprehension of the thinking substance does not depend on knowledge of its modes (p. 169). An understanding that seems to conflict with other passages in the text of the *Meditations* (pp. 89, 91).

Next (paragraph 2), a hypothesis is presented that, in the text of the *Objections and Answers*, two questions proposed by Pièrre Gassendi (1592-1655) and Pièrre Bourdin (1595-1653) on the knowledge of the thinking substance in the meditative itinerary are not adequately answered (Descartes, 1904, pp. 266, 275, 328-331). First: (2.1) it is argued that the philosopher does not satisfactorily explain what this thinking substance is (Descartes, 1973, p. 256). It is believed that this difficulty can be identified, for example, from their contradictory statements in the text of the *Objections and Answers*, on what their objectives would be in the *Meditations*. In some cases, Descartes says that he does not intend to know the nature of the thinking substance, having merely demonstrated that its essence is not extensive (1973, p. 256). On other occasions, the philosopher states that this knowledge is possible from the consideration of its attribute (1904, pp. 487, 491, 518). Secondly: (2.2) it is argued that Descartes does not clarify how the thinking substance could be known clearly and distinctly (1973, p. 257; 1904, p. 518). The arguments put forward by the philosopher – for example, concerning the number of known properties of this substance (1973, p. 257) – appear not to satisfy the demands of his objectors in this regard.

Finally (section 3), it is proposed that the difficulties and ambiguities encountered in relation to the knowledge of the thinking substance in the itinerary of the *Meditations* occur because Descartes finds the un-

bridgeable gap between being and knowledge. Epistemologically, knowledge of the substance is possible from modes and attributes. Ontologically, the substance appears as a thing that exists by itself and therefore only exists beyond human understanding, meaning that it cannot be known. Consequently, it is possible to explain in which domain knowledge of the thinking substance is feasible and to clarify some of the ambiguities present in *Meditations* and in *Objections and Answers*.

Knowledge of the thinking substance in the itinerary of the Meditations

128



A preliminary discussion of substances³ begins in meditation II, whose own title, “On the Nature of the Human Mind: Which Is Better Known Than the Body” (Descartes, 2004, p. 41), suggests Descartes’ positive epistemological commitment to the knowledge of the nature of that which carries out the activity of thought, which will then be defined as “substance”.⁴ From the radical doubt that ends the previous meditation, the first discoveries are made.⁵

First, Descartes (2004) states that the meditator is something that actually exists (pp. 43-45, 49). This something is a thinking thing (p. 49) which contains modes in itself (p. 51). Descartes, then, states that it is possible to know the thinking thing “in a way that is not only much truer, much more certain, but also much more distinct and evident” (p. 61) than anything extensive.

In meditation III, the philosopher intends to establish the knowledge of his existence by clarifying what he understands by that thinking thing. In his opinion, the thinking thing has within itself ways of thinking that are true (pp. 69-71). In addition, there is a clear and distinct perception that highlights the existence of the thinking thing (pp. 71, 85). This idea of thinking substance is known to have duration and number, as well as being something maximally different from extensive things (p. 89). Finally, in Meditation VI, Descartes acknowledges that the thinking thing is indivisible (pp. 183-185) and that thought is its essence (p. 169).⁶

From now on Descartes’ way of explaining knowledge of the thinking substance is problematized.

The intellectual apprehension of the thinking substance

Descartes observes that the apprehension of substances is not sensitive or imaginative, but intellectual (Descartes, 2004, p. 63). This would be even

more evident when it comes to the knowledge of the thinking substance. However, this intellectual process is not clearly explained by the philosopher. There seems to be a more explicit effort on Descartes' part to explain how a large object, as in the example of the piece of wax, could be known intellectually (pp. 55–59). The same is not true of the mind. The thinking thing, not yet defined as substance during meditation II, is known by the consciousness of thought itself, the only attribute that cannot be separated from the meditator (p. 49). Supposedly, understanding as evident that this consciousness can only be made effective from the existence of a thing that thinks, the philosopher merely states, without explaining in detail, that because the extensive object can be known intellectually, it is reiterated that knowledge of the nature of the mind occurs in a similar way. In the author's words:

If the perception of wax seemed more different to me, after having known it not only by sight or touch, but for many causes, *how much more clearly do I know it now, since all the reasons that can help the perception of wax or any other body also proves, and better, the nature of my mind?* (p. 61) (emphasis added).



Although Descartes inferred that self-knowledge as a thinking thing was evident to his reader, this is not the case. It remains to be questioned whether to recognize intellectually the existence of thought is to know immediately and not problematically the subject of knowledge. More than that, it is necessary to investigate how the intellectual knowledge of the extensive thing can better demonstrate the knowledge of the thinking thing.

The ability to perceive

On more than one occasion, Descartes acknowledges that there is a faculty of “perceiving oneself,” an ability to “turn the tip of the mind toward oneself.” The philosopher states that:

Only because He created me, must we believe, and much, that He made me in some way in His image and likeness and that I perceived this resemblance, in which is contained the idea of God, *by the same faculty by which I perceive myself, that is, that by turning the tip of my mind to myself I do not simply understand that I am an imperfect thing, incomplete and dependent on something else, that aspires indefinitely to ever greater and better things* (Descartes, 2004, p. 103) (italics added).

However, the Cartesian text does not clearly indicate what exactly the object of this capacity to perceive is. It is therefore necessary to as-

sume what that object would be. Two possible objects are conjectured here for this to be perceived. First, it is possible for this object to translate into the self as a thinking substance that is beyond its modes and attributes, that is, the self as a subject of mental operations. Second, the object can be understood as the self as a set of its particularities, that is, the self as the set of its modes, attributes, memories, tastes, principles, etc.

In the first case, the object of perception would be the thinking substance whose knowledge is acquired during the meditative itinerary—called by interpreters such as Martial Guérout (1953, p. 58) “*pure intelligence*” (*pure intelligence*) or “*pure self*” (*moi pur*). The pure self would correspond to the abstracted substance of each and every predicate, mode, or attribute. If this case were to be admitted, it would have to be accepted that the substance is emancipated from its qualities. Thus, as Jean Laporte (1988) states, the thinking substance would be an indeterminate entity, accessible to the intellect only insofar as it is a structure that receives attributes and modes, i.e. a “subject of inheritance” (p. 178). If the object of perception is the pure self, the explanation of the knowledge of the thinking substance is indeed problematic. A substance thus understood would be “stripped of any property” (pp. 178-179) and, in principle, would be known to the intellect only as a verbal entity or mere abstraction.

In the second case, Descartes would have in mind the concrete self, that self acquired through the recognition of his ways of thinking, his essential attribute, memories, passions, etc. —called by Guérout (1953) the “concrete personal self” (*moi personal concret*) or the “individual self” (*moi individuel*) (pp. 54, 58)⁷—. This self, apparently, could be identified with the personal identity that half a century later would be the subject of detailed study by authors such as, for example, John Locke (1632-1704). It should be noted, however, that to explain the origin of personal identity is not necessarily to explain the knowledge of the thinking substance, at least not as an entity that reveals itself beyond the knowledge of its qualities. The preservation of personal identity, at least from a Lockean perspective, independent of this substance that houses all its attributes, whether material or immaterial, simple or compound. As Locke explains (1694/1999), “it would not be two people, by temporary distance or alteration of substance, nor would a man be two men because today he wore different clothes than yesterday, regardless of whether he slept much or little” (pp. 444-445). If knowledge of the thinking substance occurs analogously to self-awareness, proposed by Locke, then it is necessary to admit that there would be no direct knowledge of the substance in Cartesian doctrine. One could only know particularities that, by determination of



judgment—and not of comprehension—would be deliberate as constituting a subject.

Although it is not very clear how knowledge of the thinking substance would be produced in Lockean terms, analysis of the wax chunk present in meditation II can clarify this point (Descartes, 2004, pp. 55-63). The subsistence of wax, “the identity maintained as permanence through duration and its changes,” explains Beyssade (1997, p. 20), is perceived by the meditator as constant in his understanding. Descartes states that despite all the physical and chemical changes that wax undergoes, “it must be confessed that [wax] remains, no one denies it, no one thinks otherwise” (Descartes, 2004, p. 55).

Considering that, like the thinking, wax will also be identified as a substance, it is possible to confer the same knowable procedure on both cases. Descartes (2004, p. 89) states that it is possible to translate the idea of substance into the extensive thing. Considering that the thinking substance is known only by its qualities—although the understanding recognizes that there is something that subsists before all variations—it can be concluded that the object of the faculty of perception is the concrete self. This self is known by identifying its constancy as a single entity beyond the modifications of its qualities. From this perspective, Descartes would not, it seems, explain how the nature of the thinking substance is known. It would be necessary, in fact, to argue against an understanding such as Lockean that it is not possible, based on knowledge of personal identity, to know the substance to which this particular self refers.

As a result, two distinct problems arise. First, Descartes, speaking of the capacity to perceive, does not clarify whether this act is directed at the pure self or the concrete self, thus existing at least two possible objects to perceive. Second, at least initially, neither object would offer a direct, intelligible knowledge of the thinking substance. It is therefore believed that the faculty of perception would not resolve the epistemological question concerning knowledge of the thinking substance in the text of the *Meditations*.

Knowledge of modes and attributes and knowledge of the thinking substance

Finally, it is necessary to point out some contradictory passages about the role of knowledge of modes and attributes for the knowledge of the thinking substance in *Meditations*. Initially, we observed textual evidence suggesting that knowledge of the thinking substance would depend on

consciousness⁸ of its modes. In this sense, Descartes (2004) affirms that “other [thoughts], in truth, have, in addition, certain other forms, such as when I want, fear, affirm, deny, and in them [in the modes of substance] *I always learn something as a subject of my thought*” (p. 75) (italics added). This passage seems to reveal that Descartes understands that each of the mental operations—each mode of thought—is accompanied by knowledge of what operates it, i.e. of the subject of the thought activity. Another passage seems to indicate the same understanding by stating that the modes are the suits through which the substance appears:

However, the other things that go into the formation of the ideas of corporeal things, namely extension, figure, situation, and movement, are not formally contained in me, because I am but a thinking thing. But, as they are only certain modes of substance and *as suits with which the substance appears to us and I*, I am, nevertheless, substance, it seems that they may be contained eminently in me (p. 91) (italics added).

While in this passage Descartes refers to the modes of the extensive substance, it does not seem problematic to assume that the same can be said of the thinking substance: its operations are the suits through which it might be known.

However, there are at least two passages in the text of the *Meditations* that directly contradict the reading presented above. First, in meditation III, Descartes (2004) expressly identifies substance as “a thing capable of existing by itself” (p. 89) and states that it, as a thinking thing, is also a substance. Later, in Meditation VI, the philosopher states that:

Furthermore, I find in myself faculties such as those of imagining and feeling, *whose ways of thinking are special, and I can understand myself, without them, clearly and distinctly as a whole*, but, conversely, I cannot understand these faculties without me, that is, without the intelligent substance in which they reside (p. 169) (italics added).

The excerpts cited are explicit about the possibility of knowing oneself, regardless of the attributes and ways in which the thinking substance would appear.

The ambivalence of the notion of substance in the text of the *Meditations*, therefore, hinders the intellectual explanation of the knowledge of the thinking substance. To guide the debate, it is beneficial to invoke interpretations such as those of Ethel Rocha (2006), Beyssade (1997) and Pierre Aubenque (1999). These authors, in general, understand that the knowledge of the thinking substance is produced from an inferential pro-



cess, namely, the thinking substance would be inferred from the knowledge of its attribute and/or its modes. Rocha argues that the Cartesian substance cannot be known as a subject of inheritance, that is, a subject devoid of properties in which these are inherent, but not constitutive” (2006, p. 103). For the author, since substance and essential attribute present only a distinction of reason, knowledge of the thinking substance is given by knowledge of its essential attribute: thought (pp. 91-95). Similarly, Beyssade argues that Descartes “posits the independence of substance from other things in nature and states that the attribute of thinking is not, for the self, a mode separable from its substantiality” (1997, p. 16). Therefore, like Rocha, Beyssade believes that the cognoscented subject is only perceived by his qualities, modes and attributes (p. 24). Aubenque (1999, p. 91), in turn, affirms that what can be clearly and distinctly known about the thinking substance is its attribute.

The position of Rocha, Beyssade and Aubenque that the substance is only known through its attribute is in accordance with the definition V offered by Descartes in the “Geometric Exposition” present in the “Second Answers”. There Descartes (1973) states that “we have no other idea of substance taken precisely, except that it is a thing in which there exists formally or eminently, that which we conceive or that which is objectively in some of our ideas” (p. 235). However, this reading poses at least three major difficulties. First, the thinking substance would not be independent, but would need the essential attribute to subsist.⁹ Then, it is necessary to clarify how knowledge of the essence implies knowledge of existence. Finally, if the substance is fully identified with its attribute, it is necessary to answer why Descartes felt the need to extrapolate what he really knows and invoke a merely logical or verbal entity. Even Aubenque (1999, p. 87) recognizes that it would not be possible to resort to the notion of intuition as a source of knowledge of the substance in this case, since intuition focuses on the properties of the substance and not on it itself. It follows that the substance cannot be known objectively by itself, but only by its attribute.

In opposition to these interpreters is the reading of those who argue that Descartes believed in the existence of a substantial entity beyond the conception of a “subject of attribution”, as is the case with the interpretations of David S. Scarrow (1972), Laporte (1988) and Marco Antônio Valentim (2009). Scarrow’s reading is based on the assumption that, within Cartesian philosophy, knowledge of the self would be only indirect, through its modes and attributes, not direct. According to Scarrow, “Descartes repeatedly suggests that substance is something we do

not perceive and that it hides behind the attributes and properties we perceive,” for such a reason, “that attributes and properties belong to a substance is something we infer, not something we perceive” (1972, p. 20). In the same sense, Laporte argues that neglecting the distinction between substance and attribute is also neglecting the ways of being, taking away from the substance what guarantees its substantiality, i.e. the possibility of existing independently. The essential attribute, in this sense, although it represents the thing for the understanding, only reveals the essence of the substance, not its existence. Existence is a property that can only be objectively out of understanding and, for this reason, for Laporte, the existence of substance in Cartesian philosophy always remains extra *intellectum*, including the notion of thinking substance (1988, p. 191). While it is possible to know the essence of the thinking substance from its main attribute, the existence of the thinking substance is always outside the limits of human knowledge due to the finitude of human nature. Similarly, Valentim (2009) states that if:

On the one hand, Descartes is perhaps the first philosopher to recognize objectivity as a way of being, on the other, this recognition is always accompanied in his metaphysics by the awareness that the objective being is distinguished precisely by its ontological relativity to be substantial (p. 215).

In other words, while the thinking substance appears as the epistemological justification of all Cartesian doctrine, its objective knowledge is not possible given the finitude of human understanding, which cannot go beyond clear and distinct knowledge of the substance’s essence, bearing in mind that essence and existence are not equivalent.

The reading that proposes that the thinking substance is distinct from its modes and attributes also has at least three difficulties. First, to justify this disquisition, interpreters do not appeal to the main text of the *Meditations*, selecting instead passages from the *Principles of Philosophy* and *Objections and Answers* (Laporte, 1988; Scarrow, 1972; Valentim, 2009), which is consistent with our reading that the text of the *Meditations* is not clear about it. Secondly, this interpretation fails to clarify how knowledge of the objectively given substance is possible, in view of knowledge of its modes and attributes, since there is no identification between substance, mode, and attribute. Finally, Descartes (2004, pp. 35-107) follows the meditative itinerary in which reason itself is threatened by the hypothesis of the supreme deceiver. Reason can infer, from the premise that thought requires a thinker, that the individual who thinks



exists. However, the deceiver makes this belief unworkable, since his power is so great that he is able to deceive even in very simple reasoning activities, such as adding up small amounts¹⁰ (pp. 73–75). In this sense, the judgment of a substance that is beyond the knowledge of its modes could also be a misleading judgment, projected by a completely powerful and evil entity. Consequently, Descartes could only assert knowledge of the substance after the end of meditation III, in which the hypothesis of the Evil Genius is refuted by the existence of the true God (pp. 103–105).

If the hypothesis pointed out by Laporte (1988), Valentim (2009) and Scarrow (1972) were correct, then there is a possible explanation for the difficulty encountered by Descartes in revealing what he conceived as knowledge of the thinking substance, since knowledge would only occur in an essential and non-existential field. On the other hand, it would be necessary to clarify the above difficulties and, more than that, explain why Descartes insists that knowledge of the thinking substance occurs in existential terms and, consequently, provides the basis of intelligibility for his entire epistemology.

The hypothesis raised in this section states, therefore, that the text of the *Meditations* does not make clear how the meditator is able to know the nature of the thinking substance. Some interpretative possibilities were presented and, apparently, all of them can be problematized.



The attacks of Gassendi and Bourdin

From now on, the problematization of Descartes' epistemological understandings of the thinking substance will continue. For this purpose, the *Objections and Answers* will be used. Some of Gassendi and Bourdin's more incisive criticisms focus precisely on Descartes' lack of clarity in explaining what the thinking substance would be and how it might be known. This section concludes by arguing that such objections are justified and that Descartes does not legitimately respond to them in his rebuttals.

What is the thinking substance?

Let us begin with some of Gassendi's considerations, which focus on the supposed Cartesian discovery of the thinking substance. When questioning the theses of meditation II, the objector points out, first of all, that Descartes would not explain what the activity of thinking carries out, although this is the main purpose of meditation II (Descartes, 1904, p. 265). Later, Gassendi states that saying "a thing that thinks" does not

clarify what is that something that performs the activity of thinking (p. 266). Given this, Gassendi concludes that the only positive result of meditation II would be to prove the meditator's own existence (p. 275). Gasendi adds, since no one questioned its existence, this discovery would be useless (p. 275).

The epicenter of Gassendi's objections is Descartes' inability to explain the nature of the thinking substance. In his reply, Descartes (1973, p. 255) seems to adopt the strategy of not responding directly to criticism, which is common in written responses to his most hostile and staunch empiricist critics, such as Gassendi and Bourdin. Instead, Descartes chooses to reiterate his position of meditation II, stating that when a large object is known, the thought itself is primarily known:

136



I am amazed that you confess that all the things I consider wax prove that I know clearly that I am, but not in what way I am or what my nature is, for one cannot be proved without the other. And I do not see what more you can ask about it, unless I tell you what is the smell and taste of the human spirit, or what salt, sulfur and mercury are composed of (p. 256).

Now, this response of Descartes seeks to emphasize that the knowledge of *thinking substance* as a thinking thing is not given by the senses, but by the intellect.¹¹ Gassendi, as an empiricist, has difficulty conceiving this idea. Descartes, in this way, continues his explanation to Gassendi by stating that "as for me, I never thought that to make a substance manifest, it would take more than to discover its various attributes; so that, the more attributes we know of a substance, the more perfectly we know its nature as well" (p. 257).

Descartes thus admits that substances are known by their modes and attributes. Just as wax is best known based on its different modes and attributes (Descartes, 2004, p. 61), there are many attributes and modes in the spirit that allow one to know the thinking substance. Descartes, aiming to make his position clear to his objector, lists such attributes:

One has the virtue of knowing the whiteness of the wax; another has the virtue of knowing its hardness; another, one can know the modification of that hardness or liquefaction, etc. [...]. From here it is clearly seen that there is nothing of which we know as many attributes as those of our spirit, for to the extent that we know them in other things, we can count as many in the spirit, due to the fact that it knows them; and therefore its nature is better known than that of anything else (Descartes, 1973, p. 257).

The above passage reinforces the interpretation that the substance is known based on its attributes. More specifically, Descartes makes it clear that the thinking substance is known from each of his acts of knowledge: not just himself, but anything else. In this sense, when Descartes lists how the piece of wax is known, it is also possible to know better the same mind that knows the piece of wax. It follows that the thinking substance is better known than any other substance, for whenever we know something, we know more perfectly the thinking substance that allows us to know that substance.

From these responses offered by Descartes to Gassendi, it is convenient to consider that Descartes understands the substance as a subject of inherence, i.e. a mere support of modes and accidents, as suggested by Beyssade (1997), Rocha (2006) and Aubenque (1999). The modes and attributes of this subject can be known and this would be appropriate to know the substance. This reading, however, raises numerous problems, as has been suggested in this article. The main one is that Descartes never addresses the question that knowing how to know the attributes is also knowing the substance. If we only knew the properties of a substance, would it really be possible to know the thing itself?

Some of Bourdin's objections also develop from the problem of knowing what the thinking substance really is. According to the objector, Descartes does not prove the nature of the thinking substance, having merely assumed—without proof—that the thinking substance is not extensive (Descartes, 1904, pp. 486–487). In this sense, Bourdin continues, Descartes would have assumed, without proof, that thought is a property of a non-extensive thing, and then supposedly discover that the thinking substance is an inextensive thing (p. 490). Bourdin, in this way, accuses Descartes of failing to demonstrate that thought is an exclusive attribute of the thinking substance (p. 490). More generally, Bourdin accuses Descartes of not demonstrating anything, because the meditator has always known what is fundamental, having merely affirmed what is already known (p. 501). Bourdin's objections, therefore, center on the difficulty of *finding clear explanations in the text of the Meditations* about what the thinking substance is and how it would be possible to know it. For Bourdin, Descartes does not construct a sound argument on these questions, but only makes baseless presuppositions about the incorporeal quality of the thinking substance and establishes the existence of thought banally.

In his responses, Descartes initially seems not to take Bourdin's criticism seriously. Indeed, the philosopher simply reaffirms, without presenting any argument, what was supposedly discovered in Meditation II

(p. 487). His stance, however, seems to change in relation to later critiques who insist that the text of the *Meditations* does not make clear what the thinking substance is. Descartes reiterates—echoing his response to Gassendi—that his goal is not to establish that he, the meditator, is a mind, nor to say that he is a soul.¹² These notions were certainly rejected by the doubt of meditation I and, in this sense, it would not be appropriate to confer undefined terminologies such as mind or soul on the thinking thing (p. 491). The intention, says Descartes, would be simply to establish that the substance that performs the activity of thinking is “a thing that thinks” (p. 491).

Descartes’ response to Bourdin is therefore not sufficient to clarify how the thinking substance can be known, just as it does not explain what the thinking substance is. Identifying the thinking substance with a thinking thing says nothing about the nature of what you think. Gassendi, in his objections, already notes the difficulty of the word *res*, *cosa*, in defining what the meditator is:

And so you lead us to your main result, that you are a thing that thinks, i.e. a thing that doubts, affirms, etc. To say in the first place that it is a thing, there is nothing known to say. This is a vague general word that applies to you only to anything in the whole world that is simply nothing. You are a “thing”; i.e. you are nothing, or, what is the same, you are something. But a stone is something and nothing, like a fly and everything else (p. 276).

Gassendi does not seem to understand that Descartes seeks to identify precisely an indeterminate entity by *thing*, since at the time of meditation II he still does not have sufficient resources and knowledge to identify such a thing as a substance, let alone as a mind or soul. (Descartes 2004, p. 51). Thought, the only characteristic of the thing, on the other hand, manages to reveal its nature. According to Descartes, it is a “thinking thing”, i.e. “a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wants, does not want, that also imagines and feels” and this would not be “certainly little [knowledge] if these things together belong to me” (p. 51). Likewise, it is the extension that determines an extensive entity and not the fact that it is a thing (pp. 169-171).

Thus, says Descartes, someone who has not traveled the itinerary of meditation I, who has not eliminated prejudices previously admitted as true, may not be able to recognize, with clarity and distinction, what he thinks (Descartes, 1904, p. 518). However, going through the stages of the meditative itinerary, on its own, although it allows us to understand the



meditator's own existence in the context of the hypothesis of the supreme deceiver,¹³ does not seem sufficient to lead to the complete knowledge of the thinking substance. The thinking substance is known to exist, but is the nature of what is known? If this is known, how does this knowledge arise? From the answers given to Gassendi and Bourdin, as presented in this section, it is evident that Descartes is unable to propose solutions to these questions (pp. 276, 491). The knowledge of the thinking substance remains a dark part of the itinerary of the *Meditations*, although the philosopher thinks that it is not so.

How can knowledge of the mind be clear and distinct?

Gassendi confesses surprise at the Cartesian thesis that the mind would be clearer and more distinctly known than extensive objects, since Descartes would not have explained what he thinks (Descartes, 1904, p. 267). In the example of the piece of wax, in Gassendi's opinion, the thinking substance would remain unknown (p. 275). Similarly, Bourdin, in an objection acknowledged by himself as his main critic, points out the strangeness in the abrupt transition of the knowledge of one's existence as a thinking thing to the acquisition of a clear and distinct knowledge of it (p. 504). The origin of clear and distinct knowledge of a thinking thing is not explained, says Bourdin, although the explanation of what he thinks is Descartes' main objective (p. 504). How can this concept be clear and distinct? (504–505).

The text of the *Meditations* does not present—at least explicitly—the explanation demanded by both objectors. Descartes, however, in his response to Gassendi, seems to have difficulty substantiating his understanding. What would make the mind better known than extensive bodies would be precisely the fact that it is possible to know more modes of the thinking substance than of the extensive substance. Furthermore, all known modes of the extended substance would also result in the knowledge of more modes of the thinking substance, which effect such knowledge:

Where it is clearly seen that there is nothing of which we know as many attributes as those of our spirit, because to the extent that we know them in other things, we can count as many in the spirit, by the fact that it knows them [*cf.* Descartes, 1973, p. 275], therefore, their nature is better known than that of anything else (Descartes, 1973, p. 257).

In response to Bourdin, specifically to the accusation that he would not explain the origin of the clear and distinct concept of the thinking thing (1904, p. 518), Descartes responds—continuing what was said to

Gassendi—that between the reason of knowing the thinking thing and its clear and distinct knowledge:

I listed all the properties of the thinking thing, namely that it comprises, desires, imagines, remembers, feels, etc.; as well as all other commonly known properties, which do not belong to its conception, to distinguish one from the other, which could only be desired after eliminating prejudices (p. 518).

The question of knowledge of modes and their relationship to knowledge of the substance will be discussed in more detail in the next section. For now, it is necessary to question the understanding of Descartes presented in the above passages. It is not clear how knowledge of a greater number of modes can make knowledge of substance clearer and more distinct,¹⁴ nor is it clear how the philosopher can state with certainty that he knows all the attributes of his mind (Descartes, 1973, p. 257; 1904, pp. 491, 518).

140



To illustrate the difficulty of Descartes' assertions, we appeal to the history of philosophy, more specifically, to the reflections of Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715), presented in *De la Recherche de la vérité* (2004),¹⁵ a philosopher widely influenced by Cartesianism (Solis Sotomayor, 2014, p. 63). One of the main Malebranchian theses in this regard states that modes are all that the subject can know about his spirit.¹⁶ However, even this knowledge is precarious. Two reasons for this epistemologically negative view apparently refer precisely to points mentioned by Descartes in the above-cited passages. On the one hand, for Malebranche, human beings ignore which modes belong or do not belong to their spirits. Much of humanity assumes that the sensitive qualities—colors, smells, flavors, etc.—are in extensive things, when in reality such sensations would be but modes of the thinking substance. Therefore, the spirit would be blind about itself. In the words of Malebranche (2004), “the soul is therefore so blind that it does not know itself and does not see that its own sensations belong to it” (p. 136). On the other hand, Malebranche (2004) considers it impossible for the human being to be able to know all the forms of what his spirit is capable of:

It is necessary [...] to agree that the capacity of the soul to receive different modifications is as great as its capacity to conceive. I mean that, just as the spirit cannot exhaust, nor comprehend all the ways that matter is capable, nor can it comprehend all the different modifications that the powerful hand of God can produce in the soul, even though it knew as clearly its capacity as that of matter (p. 163).

Knowledge of the spirit, therefore, can only encompass the smallest part of what it is, since “it is not enough, therefore, to know perfectly the soul, to know what we know of it by the inner sensation, since the consciousness we have of ourselves, perhaps, *shows us only the smallest part of our being*” (p. 207) (italics added).

In his responses to Bourdin, Descartes accuses him of facing a ghost, as if his attacks could not be directed at the theses of the *Meditations* (1904, pp. 511–512). Descartes states that the problems to which Bourdin refers do not appear in the text of his work, but arise from a misunderstanding on the part of his reader (p. 512). It is believed, however, that this accusation by Descartes would not be entirely legitimate. Bourdin and Gassendi seem to identify a real difficulty in the meditative itinerary (pp. 276, 386–490, 501). It is difficult to understand how Descartes could respond to the objection concerning clear and distinct knowledge of the thinking substance if, in the text of the *Meditations*, there are at least two contradictory explanations for this problem, neither of which eliminates the difficulties concerning knowledge of the thinking substance, as explained in the previous sections of this work. Would Descartes believe that substance is an entity independent of anything else and that it can exist on its own, or is it an entity that can only be known through its modes and attributes and that therefore depends on them?

The section concludes by pointing out that if, in fact, Descartes does not clarify how the thinking substance can be known in *Meditations*, objections such as those pointed out by Gassendi and Bourdin should be seriously considered. These are believed to be legitimate questions, given that Descartes’ reflections on the nature of the thinking substance appear to lack clarity. At times where the itinerary would provide a systematic explanation for this, as in Meditation II, Descartes (2004, pp. 49–51) quickly addresses the subject. Descartes’ attitude is to affirm as evident something that poses great interpretative difficulties, even after the process of cleansing the spirit of doubts (p. 49).

The relationship between the knowledge of modes and the knowledge of the thinking substance

This section focuses on the role of knowledge of modes and attributes for the knowledge of the thinking substance, from this quotation mentioned in the previous section:

As for me, I never thought that in order to manifest a substance, it was necessary to discover its various attributes [*nihil unquam aliud requiri putavi ad manifestandam substantiam, praeter varia ejus attributa*]; so that, the more attributes we know of a substance, the more perfectly we know its nature as well (Descartes, 1973, p. 257).

Descartes makes it clear that knowing a substance would be enough to know its attributes. According to the philosopher, the manifestation of the knowledge of substance would occur precisely through the apprehension of its various attributes. It would not be necessary to know anything beyond the attributes, for the substance is revealed in themselves, being nothing, beyond them. Likewise, in the “Fifth Answers”, Descartes explains to Gassendi that the concept of substance cannot be abstracted from the concept of its accidents:

142



Here, as is often the case elsewhere, you only show that you do not understand what you are trying to reprimand; because I did not abstract the concept [*abstraxi conceptum*] of the wax from the concept of its accidents [*accidentum conceptu*], but I wanted to show how its substance manifests itself by accidents and to what extent its perception, when it is clear and distinct [*reflexa et distinct*] and when an exact reflection made it manifest to us, it differs from the vulgar and confusing perception (p. 256).

It is important to mention that Descartes has in mind the extensive substance in that passage. However, it is believed that this extract can be used, without difficulty, to think about the case of knowledge of the thinking substance, since as noted above, when talking about substance, Descartes believes that its properties—at least as a substance—can be used invariably and, thus, it is possible to translate what is said about the extensive substance into the thinking substance (Descartes, 2004, pp. 89-91).

On the one hand, the passage cited above is important because it clarifies that the concept of substance is not abstracted from accidents (Descartes, 1973, p. 256). On the other hand, there are some suggestions in the passage that are not so clear. It is unclear whether accidents reveal the substance, as when Descartes states that “their substance is manifested by accidents” (p. 256) or whether, from accidents, there is a “reflexive and distinct perception” of the substance. In other words, to what extent can the attributes of a substance really reveal what that substance is, what is the status of knowledge of the substance that its attributes allow?

If “substance is manifested by accident” (Descartes, 1973, p. 256), as the first suggestion states, then how is it possible to know substance from its attributes? Is substance its attributes? If so, how can this conception be reconciled with the definition of substance as “something capable of existing on its own”? (Descartes, 2004, p. 89). Would not relying on an attribute (or attributes) make the substance a dependent entity? If a mode or attribute is, in itself, distinct and can exist by itself, why would Descartes need to invoke the notion of substance? Reflection on modes and attributes, therefore, does not seem sufficient—at least not without an explicit explanation—to elucidate the knowledge of the thinking substance.

The second suggestion, which emerges from accidents as a reflexive and distinct perception of substance (Descartes, 1973, 256), deserves further consideration. Descartes adds in this passage, without explaining, the notion of “reflective perception.” What kind of thoughtful act does the philosopher refer to? It is believed that he may have been considering one of two possibilities. The first refers to a rational act of reflection, for example, that of inferring, from modes and attributes, the existence of something in which they exist. The second refers to a reflexive perception—in the case of the thinking substance—that accompanies each particular act of thought that allows one to know oneself. This last possibility of interpretation, in which it is established that any act of thought necessarily implies the knowledge of oneself, seems consistent with what was said in a passage of meditation III cited in the first section of the article, when the meditator says that in every mental operation “I always grasp something as a subject of my thought” (Descartes, 2004, p. 75).

Once again, the history of philosophy is invoked as an attempt to understand this mental process by which, according to Descartes, it would be possible to know the mental substance through reflection. In the chapter “On Identity and Diversity,” Locke observes that every mental act is accompanied by self-awareness:

It will be difficult for us to determine the extent to which consciousness is linked to an individual agent in such a way that another probably cannot have it until we know what kind of action it is that cannot be performed without the company of a *reflex act of perception* and the way they are concretized by the thinking substances, which cannot think without being aware of it (Locke, 1694/1999, pp. 446-447) (italics added).

In this way, Locke manages to determine that the condition of self-knowledge is precisely the awareness of particular mental states (pp. 442–443). By perceiving an idea, the self knows itself through this act, so that

mental operations cannot be performed without the presence of what Locke calls “the reflexive act of perception” (pp. 446–447). It is important to note, however, that the English philosopher does not have in mind the knowledge of the thinking substance, but of the person. In the currently proposed reading possibility, Descartes, in turn, would have the thinking substance itself in mind.

Looking back to the above passage (Descartes, 1973, 256), it can be understood that the condition of the knowledge of the thinking substance would be the awareness of particular mental states, i.e. the knowledge of their modes and attributes. While one thinks, it is impossible not to grasp the thinking substance. Therefore, attributes could reveal it. In this way, the thinking substance could be known through modes and attributes. However, as mentioned above, it is critical to answer whether knowing the modes and attributes would actually be knowing the substance. Consequently, it is necessary to clarify whether, in the Cartesian conception, *the substance is determined by its properties*—its modes and attributes—or whether it is *a subject of inheritance, devoid of properties, and which is beyond its modes and attributes*. The problem discussed in this article arises exactly at this point, since none of the solutions manage to clarify how the thinking substance can actually be known.

In the case where we infer existence from modes and attributes, as Descartes states in the “Seventh Objections” (1904, p. 518), we have the reading suggested by Rocha (2006), Aubenque (1999) and Beysade (1997), which was analyzed in the first section (“Knowledge of modes and attributes and knowledge of the thinking substance”). This reading suggests that the substance could only exist based on its modes and attributes. However, this implies that the substance depends on its modes and attributes, just as these depend on a subject to exist. Afterwards, it would not be clear how the thinking substance would be known based on its modes and attributes: either it is something beyond its properties, and for such a reason it would not be possible to know it in fact; or it is its modes and attributes, and thus it is not clear why Descartes would have resorted to another notion to classify this entity. To support such an interpretation, his followers must, without delay, resort to different explanations that Descartes provides in later writings, such as the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) and the *Notae in programma* (1648). In these writings, Descartes explains the difference between the real, modal and reason distinctions, further stating that all substances are composed of a single essential attribute, which is responsible for fully determining the nature of the substance (Descartes, 1905, pp. 26-32, 342-369). It is neces-



sary to emphasize that these clarifications are not found in the text of the *Meditations* or in the set of *Objections and Answers*. For this reason, it is not possible to argue, based on them, that Descartes understood that clear and distinct knowledge of the thinking substance was possible, or that the philosopher explained how such knowledge would occur. Assuming this position, clear and distinct knowledge of substance is always forbidden: either because it is the result of judgment or inference—which occurs before the supreme deceiver hypothesis is suppressed—or because there would indeed be no substance beyond the modes and attributes that are clearly understood.

The second case, that a reflective perception accompanies each act of thought and allows self-knowledge, also causes problems. The main thing is that the thinking substance, known as something that accompanies each of the modes of thought, is an entity that cannot be objectively known. However, this position seems better founded because it does not appeal to the identification between attributes (and/or modes) and substance, something that Descartes apparently does not support. Laporte (1988) is probably the most notable proponent of this interpretation. In the interpreter's eyes, Descartes understands that knowledge of the essence of the thinking substance is, in fact, clear and distinct. Their paths and attributes are known. Thought, as the essence of substance, exists and is clearly perceived through intellectual intuition. It is also possible to distinguish clearly what constitutes the thinking substance from what does not constitute its essence. From this certain and evident knowledge, it becomes possible to have the idea of an entity that keeps in itself such properties (pp. 178-179, 190). However, accepting this interpretation, we must accept that the thinking substance is not clear or different for the human spirit, as understood by Laporte himself:

The substance, in its intrinsic reality, always remains *extra intellectum*. What! Even the thinking substance? — Apparently, Descartes's formulas do not allow exceptions. —But does *Cogito ergo sum* “immediately” reveal the substance of thought to us? Yes, in a sense, but not entirely reducible to thought. If the two terms were exactly the same, why would Descartes insist so much on maintaining, to designate the soul, the expression he thinks? And does the necessary connection that ergo makes between the two terms not have as a counterpart the distinction between them based on an *in re* basis? Let us not forget that *Cogito* brings into play not only thought, but a reflection on thought (p. 191).

Given this conception, substance cannot be fully identified with its attributes and modes. On the contrary, substance is an entity beyond

its properties and can exist by itself. However, all that the human intellect can perceive clearly and distinctly are the attributes and modes of a substance. The substance falls outside the realm of human knowledge (pp. 191–192). In other words, Laporte argues that there is access to the thinking substance to the extent that it is revealed to our epistemological capacity, although it does not exist objectively and effectively in its attribute—even if we understand thought as the essential and principal attribute of this substance. Therefore, objective existence could only occur outside of comprehension.

As meditation VI reveals to us, the faculty of knowledge that exists in the human being is finite and limited.¹⁷ Descartes makes it clear that “man being a limited thing, he has only limited perfection” and, therefore, the human being cannot know everything (Descartes, 2004, p. 181). Thus, while meditation II explains that knowledge of thought and its modalities is within the reach of understanding (p. 51), as well as the ideas that represent the world (p. 177–179), objective realities—things—are not known. We grasp ideas and not things (p. 179). Only then does thought come to the thing. And what is the thinking substance? One thing he thinks, *res cogitans* (p. 51).

As much as Descartes attempts to unite the domains of being and knowledge, there is an insurmountable gap between the thing itself and thought. Consequently, knowledge of the thinking substance is not clearly explained in the *Meditations*, precisely because Descartes deals with this gap. Sometimes it refers to the knowledge of the substance, sometimes to its ontological status. Faced with this ambiguity in the treatment of substance, it is possible to better understand why Descartes reveals himself pressured by the questions that arise around the knowledge of the thinking substance: it is possible to attain a clear and distinct knowledge of the substance’s essence, but not of its existence. Knowing and being are not the same, despite being similar. In *Meditations and Objections and Answers*, however, Descartes is unable to explain this distinction clearly and, therefore, philosophical discussion ends up guided by the difficulty of his empiricist critics in recognizing the distance between the evidence of thought and the evidence and the ontological treatment of the thinking substance.

The difficulties and confusion of his readers probably led Descartes to more explicitly configure the doctrine of knowledge of the thinking substance in later writings. Given this, we were also able to explain the preference of interpreters to consider the *Principles of Philosophy* as a key text to address this issue. The *Meditations* clearly reveal dark and confusing passages, which become even more confused when we address the answers formulated to their critics.¹⁸



Conclusions

Considering the doctrine of the *Meditations* and the explanations offered by Descartes to Gassendi and Bourdin *about the knowledge of the thinking substance, we can conclude that, in the text of 1641, Descartes fails to explain clearly how the knowledge of the res cogitans occurs.* The ambiguity arising from the comparison of extracts on the thinking substance occurs because Descartes does not clearly demarcate the epistemological and ontological scope. In trying to determine that knowledge of the thinking substance confers intelligibility to his entire epistemological project, the philosopher neglects the insurmountable explanation between essence and existence.

Substance, ontologically speaking, is independent and can exist by itself. It is precisely existence that distinguishes substance from its attributes (Laporte, 1988, p. 189). Finite substances are capable of existing independently of other substances and, consequently, of any mode, attribute, or property. Therefore, taking an Aristotelian position that the substance has its nature determined by its attributes and modes is incompatible with the ontological independence of the substance (Laporte, 1988, pp. 177–178; Glouberman, 1978). However, when it comes to the knowledge of substance, another element comes into play: human understanding. Given the finitude of understanding, it is not possible to extrapolate what is in thought and, therefore, epistemologically speaking, what can be known about the substance are its modes and attributes, whose knowledge is clear and distinct, revealing also the existence of a substance, even if it is not fully known.

From a Platonic conception, we can understand that Descartes believes that it is entirely possible to attain thought, but not that which exists in itself. Let us return here to one of the answers offered to Gassendi regarding the knowledge of the thinking substance:

I wanted to show how its substance manifests itself by accidents and to what extent its perception, when it is clear and distinct [*reflexa et distincta*] and when an exact reflection has made it manifest to us, differs from the vulgar and confusing perception (Descartes, 1973, p. 256) (italics added).

In that passage, Descartes explains that it is the attributes of the substance that can make it manifest to the human spirit and that is his intention. Going beyond this knowledge is impossible for understanding, however, given the clarity and distinction with which we know such

attributes; it is possible to find good reasons to accept the existence of the thinking substance. Margaret Wilson (2005, p. 88) considers that the conclusion that the mind is not transparent in itself would be to recognize that there is a certain deception of the mind itself. However, that is not the case. If Descartes says that everything in his mind is transparent, we emphasize that what is transparent is what is in the mind (Descartes, 1904, p. 107)—such as ideas, thoughts, etc.—and not the existence of the thinking substance. Descartes' theory suggests that the mind cannot be known as a concrete substance, i.e. as a complete existence. The essence of the mind remains intelligible to itself.

This distance between being and knowledge, far from being a problem for Cartesian philosophy, is constantly highlighted. In the “Second Answers,” for example, Descartes makes clear that the certainty present in the *Meditations* refers to human certainty, which confers a firm persuasion that cannot be suppressed (1973, pp. 222-223). For Descartes, the thinking substance, being something concrete, real—and not a mere abstraction made of its attributes—cannot be known ontologically by the intellect. Therefore, we believe that in *Meditations*—and in all Cartesian philosophy—the knowledge of the thinking substance is obscure: it cannot occur in ontological terms.

148



Notes

- 1 Originally published in 1641. The passages quoted here belong to the bilingual edition of the *Meditations* translated into Portuguese by Fausto Castilho.
- 2 Throughout the manuscript, the terms *res cogitans*, thinking substance, soul, mind, and I, are used interchangeably. These words are intended to designate what performs the activity of thinking and has thought as an essential attribute.
- 3 The clearest definition of substance is presented in the third meditation (Descartes, 2004, p. 89). While God is the infinite substance “that exists by itself,” the mind and body are finite substances that are only “capable of existing by themselves.” In the *Geometric Exposition* accompanying the responses to the second objections, Descartes (1973) presents his definition of substance: “Everything in which he resides immediately as in his subject, or by which there is something we conceive, i.e. any property, quality or attribute, of that which we have in us as a real idea, is called *Substance*. We have no other idea of substance taken with precision, except that it is a thing in which there is formally or eminently what we conceive, or what is objectively in some of our ideas, since natural light teaches us that nothing can have no real attribute” (p. 235). For an introduction to the subject of substance in *Meditations*, we suggest the works of Vere Chappell (2008, pp. 252-253, 257-259) and Jorge Secada (2006). For more critical works on the subject, we suggest the texts of Jean-Marie Beyssade (1997) and Anat Schechtman (2016), which address the problem of the coherence of the uses of the term “substance” in Cartesian works.

- 4 As an introduction to the discussion on the discovery of the thinking substance and its nature in the meditative itinerary, the classical work of Martial Guéroult (1953, pp. 53-62, 63-67) is suggested.
- 5 Regarding the discoveries made in the second meditation, the introductory work of Marleen Rozemond (2006, pp. 49-54) is suggested.
- 6 Note here the existence of a discussion, in secondary literature, on what stage of the meditative itinerary Descartes effectively demonstrated that thought is the essence. As to why this discovery is possible only in sixth meditation, Stephen Schiffer's article is suggested, especially the third and fourth sections (Schiffer, 1976, pp. 31-43).
- 7 Locke presents his theory of personal identity in the chapter "On identity and diversity" of the second edition of the *Essay on Human Understanding* (1694/1999). For the philosopher, consciousness produces personal identity. It is precisely in this return to oneself permitted by conscience, according to the philosopher, that a person discovers his identity (p. 443). A person discovers his own continuous existence, as "the same person," through the faculty of consciousness. Olaya *et al.* (2018) present an interesting discussion on how to know one's mind in Lockean philosophy.
- 8 In the meditative itinerary, Descartes relies on the activities of consciousness that are understood as true. In fact, the meditator develops the course of *Meditations* based on assumptions such as, for example, "I am aware of what I think," "I am aware of doubting" and "I am aware of perceiving clear and different ideas". To be conscious is to know something about one's own mental phenomena. For a detailed study of the notion of consciousness in Descartes, we suggest reading the work of Emmanuel Faye (2012).
- 9 This difficulty contains, in itself, another problem: while Descartes (2004) actually states in the second meditation that thought is an attribute of the soul and that "he alone cannot be separated from me" (p. 49), nowhere in *Meditations* thought is defined as an essential attribute of the thinking substance. This thesis will only be established in the *Principles*. Therefore, in the *Meditations* it is not clear that thought determines the nature of the substance and thus appears as a necessary and sufficient condition for a thing to exist and be known. In this sense, to make the doctrine of *Meditations* intelligible, these interpreters need to resort to other texts of the Cartesian *corpus*. Consequently, even if this reading thesis is supported, it would not yet eliminate the hypothesis that is raised in this article: in the Descartes *Meditations* it does not clarify to what extent we know the thinking substance.
- 10 It is recognized, however, that the question of the extent of the Cartesian doubt is subject to discussion. Are all the operations—for example, the senses, memory, and reason—and all the contents—for example, mathematical truths—of the mind at the end of the first meditation? Some argue that Descartes maintains confidence in the operations of reason and mathematical truths in the second meditation, merely questioning the reliability of the senses and memory (*cf.* Kennington 1971, p. 442; Grene 1999, p. 561; Larmore 2006; 2014, p. 54).
- 11 Still grappling with questions about the thinking substance, Descartes (1973) responds to Gassendi by stating that "I did not add that the spirit was not extensive to explain what it is like and to make its nature known, but to warn that those who think it is extensive are deceived" (p. 282). This passage, however, does not purport to indicate that Descartes' goal is not to explain what the thinking substance is, but only to emphasize that its essence is not composed of extension, which is indispensable for Descartes' dualistic doctrine to be established successfully. In this regard, the work of Rocha (2006) is suggested.

- 12 Bourdin, in his objections, distinguishes between the notions of mind and soul. This distinction is not thought to be relevant to the topic covered in this article.
- 13 Vinícius Freitas (2021, pp. 406-408) argues, in another article, that Descartes' procedure regarding the first discovery—the very existence of the meditator as a thinking thing—is consistent from an epistemological point of view.
- 14 It can be conjectured, based on rule VIII of *Rules for the Guidance of the Spirit*, that Descartes (1999) here intends to argue that “no knowledge can precede that of understanding, for upon it depends the knowledge of all else, and not the other way round” (p. 51) and not that the number of known attributes corresponds to a greater understanding of the substance. Regarding Gassendi's objection that knowledge of extensive objects could not lead to knowledge of the mind and Descartes' response, we recommend the works of Margaret Wilson (2005, pp. 81–88) and Ted Schmaltz (1992).
- 15 Originally published in 1674 (books I, II and III) and 1675 (books IV, V and VI). We use Plínio Smith's (2004) Portuguese translation of selected parts of the *Recherche*.
- 16 Knowledge of the modes of the thinking substance is produced by a mental process called by the philosopher “consciousness” (*conscience*) or “inner sensation” (*sentiment intérieur*). In his opinion, mental phenomena could only be felt, therefore, the intellectual apprehension of the self would not be possible. Malebranche repeatedly reinforces his epistemologically negative perspective on this knowledge. In this regard, we suggest reading the works of Jacques Paliard (1941), Tad M. Schmaltz (1992; 1996) and Stephan Nadler (2011).
- 17 Ana Sousa (2023) argues, in another article, that this conception is present in all the works written by Descartes, which would determine the entire Cartesian philosophical project.
- 18 Such darkness is truly contrary to the Cartesian spirit and its pedagogical doctrine (*cf.* Gutiérrez Pozo, 2023).

150



Bibliography

- AUBENQUE, Pierre
1999 La transformation cartésienne du concept aristotélicien de substance. *Enrahonar*, 87-93. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/enrahonar.1073>
- BEYSSADE, Jen-Marrie
1997 A teoria cartesiana da substância: equivocidade ou analogia? *Analytica*, 2(2), 11-36. <https://bit.ly/4cCMY4R>
- CHAPPELL, Vere
2008 Descartes on Substance. En Janet Broughton & John Carriero (eds.), *A Companion to Descartes* (pp. 251-270). Blackwell Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470696439.ch15>
- DESCARTES, René
1904 *Œuvres de Descartes: Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (vol. VII) (Charles Adams e Paul Tannery, eds.). Léopold Cerf.
1905 *Œuvres de Descartes: Principia Philosophiae* (vol. VII) (Charles Adams e Paul Tannery, eds.). Léopold Cerf.
1973 *Obra Escolhida* (J. Guinsburg e Bento Prado Júnior, trads.). Difel.

- 1999 *Regras para a Orientação do Espírito* (Maria Ermantina Galvão, trad.). Martins Fontes.
- 2004 *Meditações sobre filosofia primeira* (Fausto Castilho, trad.). UNICAMP.
- FAYE, Emmanuel
- 2012 Descartes e a consciência em La Recherche de la Verité par la Lumière Naturelle. *Educação e Filosofia*, 26(51), 145-162. <https://doi.org/10.14393/REVE-DFIL.issn.0102-6801.v26n51a2012-p145a162>
- FREITAS, Vinicius França
- 2021 The Epistemological Role of Consciousness in Descartes' Meditations. *Principia*, 25(3), 401-420. <https://doi.org/10.5007/1808-1711.2021.e75658>
- GRENE, Marjorie
- 1999 Descartes and Skepticism. *The Review of Metaphysics*, 52(3), 553-571. <https://bit.ly/4cDHNrw>
- GUÉROULT, Martial
- 1953 *Descartes selon l'Ordre des Raison. Parte I (L'Âme et Dieu)*. Aubier-Éditions Montaigne.
- GUTIÉRREZ POZO, Antonio
- 2023 Philosophical Approach to Paidocentric Pedagogy. *Sophia, Colección de Filosofía de la Educación*, (34), 153-172. <https://doi.org/10.17163/soph.n34.2023.05>
- KENNINGTON, Richard
- 1971 The Finitude of Descartes' Evil Genius. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 32(3), 441-446. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708359>
- LAPORTE, Jean
- 1988 *Le rationalisme de Descartes* (3ª ed.). PUF.
- LARMORE, Charles
- 2006 Descartes and Skepticism. En Stephen Gaukorerger (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations* (pp. 17-30). Blackwell Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470776476.ch2>
- 2014 The First Meditation: Skeptical Doubt and Certainty. En David Cunning (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes' Meditations* (pp. 48-67). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139088220.003>
- LOCKE, John
- 1694/1999 *Ensaio sobre o entendimento humano* (Eduardo Abranches de Soveral, trad.). Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.
- MALEBRANCHE, Nicholas
- 2004 *A busca da verdade: Textos escolhidos* (Plínio Junqueira Smith, trad.). Discurso Editorial.
- NADLER, Steven
- 2011 Consciousness Among the Cartesians. *Studia Leibnitiana*, 43(2), 132-144. <https://bit.ly/3W6Aziz>
- OBANDO OLAYA, Edwin, VILLAGRÁN VENEGAS, Norma & OBANDO OLAYA, Edson
- 2018 La redefinición del sujeto cognoscente: el acto de intelección en cuanto conocimiento. *Sophia, Colección de Filosofía de la Educación*, (25), 89-109. <https://doi.org/10.17163/soph.n25.2018.02>

- PALIARD, Jacques
1941 La connaissance par idee et la connaissance par sentiment chez Malebranche. *Les Études Philosophiques*, 15(1/2), 16-19. <https://bit.ly/3W1Z2qj>
- ROCHA, Ethel
2006 Dualismo, substância e atributo essencial no sistema cartesiano. *Analytica*, 10(2), 89-105. <https://bit.ly/4bl45GM>
- ROZEMOND, Marleen
2006 The Nature of the Mind. En Stephen Gaukoger (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations* (pp.48-66). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470776476.ch4>
- SCARROW, David
1972 Descartes on His Substance and His Essence. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 9(1), 18-28. <https://bit.ly/3VKkbnA>
- SCHECHTMAN, Anat
2016 Substance and Independence in Descartes. *Philosophical Review*, 125(2), 155-204. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-3453167>
- SCHIFFER, Stephen
1976 Descartes on His Essence. *The Philosophical Review*, 85(1), 21-43. <https://bit.ly/3zrhLXK>
- SCHMALTZ, Ted
1992 Descartes and Malebranche on Mind-Body Union. *The Philosophical Review*, 101(2), 281-325. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2185536>
1994 Malebranche on Descartes on Mind-Body Distinctness. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 32(4), 573-603. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.1994.0083>
- SOLÍS SOTOMAYOR, Luis Xavier
2014 Causas modales de la educación. *Sophia, Colección de Filosofía de la Educación*, (17), 61-76. <https://bit.ly/3ROUelG>
- SOUSA, Ana Cláudia Teodoro
2023 Entre a Certeza e a Dúvida: Descartes e o ceticismo de segundo grau. *Kriterion*, 64(155), 545-566. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0100-512X2023n1551acts>
- SECADA, Jorge
2006 The Doctrine of Substance. Stephen Gaukroger (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations* (pp.86-103). Blackwell Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470776476.ch5>
- VALENTIM, Marco Antônio
2009 Substância e Objeto: a Ontologia Cartesiana. *Analytica*, 13(2), 181-223. <https://bit.ly/3zpANJJ>
- WILSON, Margaret
2005 *Descartes*. Routledge.



Date of receipt: July 15, 2023
Date of review: September 15, 2023
Date of approval: November 15, 2023
Date of publication: July 15, 2024