

Individualism and Descartes

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RESUMEN

Se da por sentado generalmente que Descartes ha sido uno de los proponentes principales de la doctrina del individualismo de lo mental. En este artículo argumento que podría ser aconsejable que los estudiosos de Descartes y los modernos filósofos de la mente fuesen ligeramente menos temerarios. Sostengo que aquellos pasajes del *corpus* cartesiano que se citan tradicionalmente en apoyo del individualismo, no deberían considerarse como evidencia concluyente del compromiso de Descartes con esa doctrina. Los pasajes relevantes, o bien son neutrales con respecto al debate del individualismo o, en algunos casos, admiten una reinterpretación razonablemente digerible desde una posición anti-individualista. Mi posición es, por lo tanto, que necesitaríamos alguna argumentación y un análisis textual más substanciales que los que se encuentran en las publicaciones contemporáneas sobre Descartes, antes de atribuirle una posición individualista.

ABSTRACT

Descartes is generally presumed to have been one of the foremost proponents of the doctrine of individualism of the mental. In this paper, I argue that it may be advisable for Descartes scholars and modern philosophers of mind to be slightly less presumptuous. My claim is that those passages from the Cartesian corpus which are traditionally cited in support of individualism should not be taken as conclusive evidence of Descartes' commitment to that doctrine. The relevant passages are either neutral with respect to the individualism debate or, in some cases, admit of reasonably palatable reinterpretation from an anti-individualistic standpoint. It is, therefore, my contention that we should require more substantial argument and textual analysis than that which is found in the contemporary literature before attributing individualism to Descartes.

I

Contemporary writers in the philosophy of mind frequently identify Descartes as a proponent (indeed as the foremost proponent) of the doctrine of individualism of the mental¹. These writers typically take Descartes' individualism to be a fairly obvious entailment or implication of some of his foundational beliefs regarding the mental properties of individuals and the re-

relationships which those properties bear to the external world. While this supposedly Cartesian doctrine is the product of inference and interpretation on the part of philosophers who are generations distant from Descartes (he did not explicitly address the issue as it was not a topic of inquiry at that time), it has until recently been generally assumed that its attribution to him was not a matter worthy of investigation. In this paper, however, I shall attempt to raise some concerns as to whether contemporary thinkers are justified in claiming Descartes as an advocate of individualism.

Individualism is the thesis that the content of a mental state is fixed solely in virtue of states internal to the agent of whom the mental state is predicated (or to the mind of that agent). A more robust and detailed description of the individualist doctrine (one which I could scarcely hope to improve upon) has been presented by Burge (1986), pp. 118-19:

B: individualism is the view that an individual person or animal's mental state and event kinds – including the individual's intentional or representational kinds – can in principle be individuated in complete independence of the natures of empirical objects, properties, or relations (excepting those in the individual's own body, on materialist and functionalist views) – and similarly do not depend essentially on the natures of the minds or activities of other (non divine) individuals. The mental natures of all an individual's mental states and events are such that there is no necessary or other deep individuating relation between the individual's being in states, or undergoing events, with those natures, and the nature of the individual's physical and social environments.

The Cartesian doctrines which appear to play the crucial role in the misattribution (or, at least, *unwarranted* attribution) of individualism to Descartes are: 1) first-person privileged access to one's mental states, 2) the possibility of an agent's being radically wrong about the external world (as exemplified by the demon hypothesis from Meditation One) and, 3) mind/body distinction.

The central project of this paper is the presentation of an argument that 1), 2), and 3) do not jointly entail **B**. If **B** is not entailed by any Cartesian doctrine(s) [and 1), 2), and 3] appear to be the most likely candidates for the job), then we must be cautious in our ascription of **B** (or any close cousin) to Descartes. For to go ahead with the ascription in the absence of such an entailment relation would be no less presumptuous than would be the ascription of modern day Democratic Party ideology to Franklin D. Roosevelt. If I am correct, we must remain agnostic with respect to Descartes' position concerning individualism (and FDR's position concerning universal health-care coverage). I shall present the case that the text containing the relevant doctrines offers insufficient warrant for the conclusion that Descartes was an individualist regarding the mental.

I will attempt to demonstrate that the argument from any one of the doctrines 1), 2), or 3) considered in isolation, to the ascription of individualist sentiments to Descartes is straightforwardly unsound. We shall see, however, that the doctrine of privileged access, when conjoined with either 2) or 3), could provide our adversaries with potent arguments that should not lightly be dismissed. In subsequent sections of this paper, however, I will seek to undermine 1), 2), and 3) on an individual basis as grounds for attributing individualism to Descartes. The assumption seems to be made so quickly and with so little reflection that it may be necessary to demonstrate the legitimacy of concerns about the constitution of this (perhaps) all too common inferential chain. What exactly makes so many philosophers think that Descartes is an individualist? It is an ancillary goal of this paper that it demonstrates (if nothing else) the necessity of argument and textual analysis before this and similar attributions can be made. In order to conduct this project, it will be instructive to present some indication of the pervasiveness of the offending interpretation. A few examples:

A fundamental element in the Cartesian conception of mind – one which figured crucially in the development of Cartesian skepticism – is the supposition that psychological states are *internal* states, i.e., that they are logically independent of the external world.

— Joseph Owens (1992), p. 89

Descartes is FAMOUSLY supposed to have allowed the following possibility: that my actual mental life should occur in a world containing no matter, a world whose only occupant, other than myself, is an evil genius who is trying his hardest to deceive me. In this situation, Descartes is held to have claimed, I would fall prey to large-scale deception: I would have the very thoughts and beliefs which I actually have, yet almost all of them would be false.

And later:

The received wisdom is that Cartesian possibilities are incompatible with externalism about content.

— R. M. Sainsbury (1991), p. 407 (emphasis mine) and p. 420

According to the Cartesian picture, our attitudes owe their intentional character – their ‘of-ness’ or ‘about-ness’ – exclusively to the intrinsic features of agents possessing them (or perhaps to the intrinsic features of the minds of such agents).

— John Heil (1992), p. 23

Similar references are to be found scattered throughout literature regarding the individualism/anti-individualism debate and contemporary work on the fixation of mental content. The offenders appear to have more than a few outposts on the philosophical landscape.

II

The Cartesian doctrine of privileged access might well be held up as an indicator of some type of individualistic principle. Given an agent's special authority regarding her own mental states, it may seem that the individuation of any mental state *M* is dependent only upon states internal to the agent *S* to whom *M* is attributable. If *S* has special authority regarding the identification of mental states internal to her (or to her mind), then her external environment plays no necessary role with respect to the individuation of mental content. Any state *M* is type-individuated by reference to properties to which *S* has special access. Let us take a look at one passage from Descartes which expresses the doctrine of privileged access and see if (by itself) this doctrine supports arguments such as the one briefly described above:

Is it not one and the same 'I' who is now doubting almost everything, who nonetheless understands some things, who affirms that this one thing is true, denies everything else, desires to know more, is unwilling to be deceived, imagines many things even involuntarily, and is aware of many things which apparently come from the senses? ARE NOT ALL THESE THINGS JUST AS TRUE AS THE FACT THAT I EXIST, even if I am asleep all the time, and even if he who created me is doing all he can to deceive me? Which of all these activities is distinct from my thinking? Which of them can be said to be separate from myself? THE FACT THAT IT IS I WHO AM DOUBTING AND UNDERSTANDING AND WILLING IS SO EVIDENT THAT I SEE NO WAY OF MAKING IT ANY CLEARER. But it is also the case that the 'I' who imagines is the same 'I'. For even if, as I have supposed, none of the objects of imagination are real, the power of imagination is something which really exists and is part of my thinking. Lastly, it is also the same 'I' who has sensory perceptions, or is aware of bodily things as it were through the senses. For example, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. YET I CERTAINLY SEEM TO SEE, TO HEAR, AND TO BE WARMED. THIS CANNOT BE FALSE; WHAT IS CALLED 'HAVING A SENSORY PERCEPTION' IS STRICTLY JUST THIS, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking. [Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch (1984) Vol. II – henceforward CSM –, p. 19 (emphasis mine).]

So Descartes knows authoritatively what is before his consciousness when he affirms a particular thing, denies another, etc. He is aware of the contents of his mind in a way which is not accessible to other persons (assuming that other persons exist). How is this claim relevant to the question at hand?

Surely, Descartes' claim to be in this special position (infallible indicator or designator) with respect to the identification of his mental states should not be taken as supporting the doctrine of individualism. Descartes' special access to his mental states is entirely independent of the determination of the content fixation of those states². The question: *What intrinsic or extrinsic features or relational properties of state M determine M's content?* may be answered independently of the question: *Does the agent to whom M is attributable stand in some special authoritative relation to M?* For example, one might think that my belief that Nixon was President could not have the content that it does had Nixon not existed, and still hold that I am in a special authoritative position with regard to knowing whether I am currently entertaining (or explicitly representing, or activating, or whatever) that belief. An analogy might be helpful in clarifying this point.

Consider the case of boiling water. In order that water boil (i.e. attain a particular state), it must be in the presence of a particular quantity of kinetic energy, under the proper sort of atmospheric pressure, etc. The state of the water is individuated (at least partially) in virtue of features of its external environment. If the kinetic energy/atmospheric pressure relationship did not fall within the required parameters, then the water would not be in the state designated as "boiling"³. These external facts have little if anything to do with whether or not the action of the water molecules is an infallible indicator of the presence of this particular state (i.e. boiling). That is, it is an independent question whether or not the action of the water molecules (i.e. "bubbling" in a particular way) infallibly indicates something pertaining to the water's internal states (let us suppose that the action does infallibly indicate the state). Certainly, a full-blooded anti-individualist could hold that she is in the same sort of special position with respect to her mental states which Descartes supposes himself to be in with respect to his. So, this move on the part of our opposition would quite simply be a non-starter. Let us investigate a similar move with respect to our second Cartesian doctrine before looking at the argument from the conjunction of 1) and 2).

III

It might be argued that individualism falls out of the Cartesian skeptical hypotheses which demonstrate the possibility of an agent's being radically mistaken about the nature of the external world. If we accept as coherent the proposition that an evil demon might be the cause of all of our mental states (i.e. that the external world consists of nothing more than the evil demon), then we must allow the logical possibility that the causal antecedents of all of our mental states are very different than we believe them to be. Essentially, we must allow that:

For any agent S and any mental state M attributable to S, the actual causal antecedent C_a of M may be radically different than the causal antecedent C_s which S supposes to obtain.

If Descartes allows radically different causal antecedents to produce the same mental state M, then does he not thereby indicate that he takes M's content to be determined irrespective of external cause? The determination of mental content irrespective of external environment surely constitutes some form of individualism. Hence, Descartes is an individualist as has been assumed all along. Is it any wonder that there has been so little in the way of explicit attempts to prove this thesis? "Proving" that Descartes is an individualist is as much a waste of time as would be "proving" that he is a theist!

I think that the preceding argument from the Cartesian skeptical hypotheses actually has little if any independent potency with respect to determining Descartes' position on the individualist/anti-individualist debate. Anti-individualistic arguments from Putnam (1973 and elsewhere), Burge (1979, 1988 and elsewhere), and others employ very similar tactics in demonstrating that the content of mental states is not determined without reference to the agent's external environment. It is not uncommon for anti-individualists to present counterfactual circumstances in which one's external environment is different than one supposes it to be⁴. Putnam, for example, asks us to consider a world in which the substance referred to as "water" is actually the chemical compound XYZ (and not H₂O though it exhibits the same observable properties as does H₂O). He then proceeds to argue that the inhabitants of that world can have no thoughts (beliefs, desires, etc.) about water. In such a world, one's thoughts would be about XYZ. The point here is that the supposition of the possibility of an external world that is radically different than we suppose it to be can be deployed on either side of the individualism debate. The fact that Descartes presents such a possibility does not commit him to individualism.

The inference to individualism is the result of an ambiguity about what is meant by the claim that one could have "the same" mental state M regardless of antecedent cause. If all that is meant by calling states M_1 and M_2 "the same" is that they are phenomenologically indistinguishable from the perspective of the agent to whom they are attributable, then the inference to individualism is unwarranted⁵. My belief that *Abraham Lincoln was assassinated* could be "the same" in this narrow sense even in a world in which Lincoln never existed and this bit of "historical record" is nothing more than an elaborate ruse. It is not clear that one could argue from phenomenological indistinguishability to sameness of content without begging the question at issue in the individualism/anti-individualism debate. We can not, therefore, make an individualist of Descartes in virtue of his attributing this narrow sameness to his

mental states in both the actual world and the evil demon counterfactual world. Let us see if there is a more robust sense of sameness being expressed in the relevant passage:

I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes and sounds and all external things are merely delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgment. [CSM (1984) Vol. II, p. 15.]

Does the proposition that “all external things are merely delusions” or that there is no sky, air, earth, etc. entail anything at all about the sameness of content of Descartes' mental states in any “wider” sense than phenomenological indistinguishability? It seems not (at least not in any sense favorable to individualists). A modern day anti-individualist could have written the preceding passage en route to the conclusion that in such a world one can have no beliefs about sky, air or earth⁶. By itself the argument from the demon hypothesis can not lead to our opponents' conclusion⁷. If it is conjoined with the Cartesian doctrine of privileged access, however, the debate becomes a great deal more interesting.

IV

The presence of both doctrines 1) and 2) probably accounts more directly for the unfortunate conclusion than any other principles extracted from Descartes' published works. The argument to this conclusion apparently proceeds roughly as follows:

Descartes believed that:

- i) An individual has privileged (infallible) access to her mental states.
- ii) Premise i) is true even in counterfactual worlds in which the individual is radically mistaken about her environment.
- iii) Premises i) and ii) entail the individual's having privileged access to what her mental states would be in any counterfactual world.

So,

- iv) Given iii), an agent's environment plays no necessary role in the individuation of the content of her mental states.

So,

- v) Mental content is individuated on individualistic grounds.

I believe that there are a number of problems with this argument. First of all, there is some question as to whether Descartes took the relevant counterfactual worlds to be coherent⁸. I should like to set this consideration aside, however, in order to pursue a problem which, I believe, undermines the argument in a more thoroughly irrecoverable manner. I would like to suggest that there is insufficient evidence that Descartes believed premise iii). It is fairly clear that the passage most responsible for the assumption of iii) is one which has already been mentioned in a previous section of this paper:

For example, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking.

The assumption appears to be that since Descartes (the character of the *Meditations* if not the author of that work) claims that it "cannot be false" (even in the demon world) that he seems to see light, hear noise, etc., it follows that he is authoritative about the content of his mental states regardless of the possibility of his being radically wrong about the external environment. Let us, however, look at a passage from hard-core anti-individualist Tyler Burge (1986), pp. 123-4:

I think it true...that in some of the Cartesian situations in which our actual thoughts about the empirical world would be mistaken, we would not be thinking the thoughts we actually are thinking... We are authoritative about some of our actual thoughts about the empirical world; and we can imagine those very thoughts being quite mistaken. Moreover, whatever our thoughts would be if the counterfactual situation were to obtain, we would be authoritative about some of them. But we are not authoritative about what our thoughts about the empirical world would be if the counterfactual cases were actual. That is a philosophical issue, not a matter of what one's present mental events actually are. Although it may be settled by special, 'a priori' means, it is not an issue over which anyone has first-person (singular) authority.

What Burge points out is that privileged access to one's mental states does not extend to provide authoritativeness across counterfactual worlds. The principle might be expressed (roughly) as follows:

A: S's having privileged access to her mental states in the actual world *w* (where her beliefs are largely true) does *not* entail S's having privileged access to what her mental states would be in any counterfactual world *w'* in which the external environment is radically different than it is supposed by S to be in the actual world.

There is then no straightforward entailment relation which would force Descartes to hold iii) in virtue of his holding i) and ii). Again Burge (1986), pp. 122-3 offers a perspicuous explanation of why this is so:

It is a well-known point that in considering counterfactual situations we hold constant the interpretation of the language whose sentences we are evaluating in the counterfactual situations. It is quite possible to consider the truth or falsity of interpreted sentences even in counterfactual situations where those sentences could not be used or understood. Similarly for our thoughts when we are considering the Cartesian situations. We hold our thoughts constant. We consider situations in which the thoughts that we have would be false. And we concede that we could in principle be mistaken in thinking that the world is not arranged in one of the ways that would make our thoughts radically false. We do not ask how our thoughts' being false in certain ways would affect our thinking them. To ask what language or what thoughts would be possible if the world were in a given counterfactual state is to raise a question different from those raised in the Cartesian thought experiments.

If we apply principle A to the case of Descartes in the *Meditations*, we see that no authoritativeness claim beyond ii) pertains to him. The authoritativeness claim is made with regard to his actual world as he *considers the possibility* that he is radically mistaken about the empirical structure of that world. Given that individualism was not a topic familiar to Descartes, it seems unreasonable to assume that this passage would have been carefully worded so as to account for all of the considerations relevant to that debate. Had anti-individualistic challenges been raised at the time, Descartes might well have noted their force and been inclined to reformulate the relevant parts of his philosophical writings. The attribution of any doctrine to a historical figure who predated the explicit emergence of that doctrine is an endeavor that requires a fair measure of caution and, perhaps, a pinch of skepticism.

Our opponents, however, will point out that, entailment relations aside, Descartes explicitly claims that he could have the same mental states even if the demon world were actualized. The question is not whether he is *forced* to hold iii) in virtue of holding i) and ii), the question is simply whether or not he *does* hold iii) at all. He quite clearly does and we may, therefore, conclude that he believes v) to be true. I believe, however, that the assumption that he holds iii) is a product of the equivocation regarding “sameness” of mental states discussed in the preceding section of this paper. We cannot extract a claim of sameness of content – in any sense other than the narrow one (phenomenological indistinguishability) explicated in the preceding section – from the relevant passage in the Second Meditation. His explicit claim is not identical to iii) and (as has been demonstrated) does not entail iii). Any at-

tribution of iii) to Descartes is, therefore, unwarranted in the absence of independent argument.

V

We may now move on to the argument from the doctrine of the mind/body distinction to individualism as one of its entailments. Descartes held that the mental was one of two primitive and distinct classes of metaphysical substrate. The mind of any particular individual is an instance of one type of substrate whereas her body is an instance of the other type (the physical). Descartes articulates this doctrine in passages too numerous to mention, but probably does so most famously in the sixth of his *Meditations*:

It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it. [CSM (1984), Vol. II, p. 54.]

We need now investigate the claim that the proponent of such a distinction between mind and body is committed to individualism.

Descartes believes that the mind, the essence of the person, can exist and have thoughts independently of interaction with the body (or, presumably, even the existence of the body). Given a mind isolated in this manner from any external environment it seems clear that the content of its various states or modes must be determined by factors which are independent of anything not internal to it. Hence, the Cartesian doctrine of mind/body distinction leads us, in a fairly straightforward way, to individualism of the mental. So the argument goes.

It is important to be careful about the assertion that the mind can exist independently of the body. This is *not* tantamount to a claim that the mind can exist, in the sort of state we otherwise suppose, in utter independence from anything external to it. It is not even a claim that Descartes' mind and its actual constituents (i.e. mental states with contents like those which Descartes supposed to exist) can exist in the absence of his body. The possibility of the existence of the mind in the absence of the body with which it is supposed to be specially associated does not entail the possibility of the mind existing in an indistinguishable state under conditions radically different with respect to its external environment. The possibility that Descartes' mind could exist without his body entails nothing at all about preservation of his mental content in the counterfactual circumstance⁹.

Our opposition will note that this is all well and good, but the question is not whether an individual can have *the same* contentful states in the absence of the physical realm, but the relevant question concerns whether an individual can have contentful states *at all* under those circumstances. If the answer is affirmative, then the determination of content is purely internal to the mind of that individual. Though our opposition might make such a claim, I think that the conditional should be rejected. Even if one could have contentful mental states in the absence of any external *physical* realm, it does not follow that one could have contentful states in the absence of any external realm at all.

First, it is worth noting that Descartes has not made the claim that his mind could exist as a thinking thing independently of ever having encountered the physical realm. He has not even made the claim that the mind would persist after the annihilation of the physical realm. In the passage cited, he may be doing nothing more than encouraging the reader to relinquish her presupposition of the identification of self with body (or with some complex of mind and body). But let us dispense with this preliminary debate over what sort of counterfactuals are supported by the Cartesian mind/body distinction and grant our opposition its forwardmost advance with respect to mental/physical independence. Let us grant that Descartes held that his mind could exist with contentful states even without there ever having existed any physical realm. Surely, no fair-minded opponent could ask for a greater advantage. After all, any further concession would amount to an attribution to Descartes of explicitly individualist principles. If there is still no entailment of individualism by even *this* interpretation of the passage in question, then we may, with confidence, declare ourselves victorious in this battle (though not yet the war). If we find such an entailment then we shall concede the field.

Even at the moment of his most skeptical hypothesis concerning the external world (the articulation of the evil demon doubt), Descartes does not imagine his mind in the absence of external influence. The demon, though not physical, is nonetheless external to Descartes' mind and also responsible for its content¹⁰. If the possibility of something external to Descartes' mind is suggested as responsible for the individuation of his mental content even before he is certain of the existence of *anything* external to himself, then any hopes of extracting individualism from the mere independence of the mind from the body are hopelessly dashed. Surely, it is not allowable to attribute individualism to Descartes in virtue of a passage which *never* depicts his mind in any condition that is not dependent upon some entity *external* to it. Our opponent, however, may attempt to point to a passage (following on the heels of the evil demon doubt) which

expresses a still more radically independent conception of the mind from the external world:

Yet apart from everything I have just listed, how do I know that there is not something else which does not allow even the slightest occasion for doubt? Is there not a God, or whatever I may call him, who puts into me the thoughts I am now having? BUT WHY DO I THINK THIS, SINCE I MYSELF MAY PERHAPS BE THE AUTHOR OF THESE THOUGHTS? In that case am not I, at least, something? But I have just said that I have no senses and no body. This is the sticking point: what follows from this? Am I not so bound up with a body and with senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. [CSM (1984) Vol. II, p. 16 (emphasis mine).]

Here, our opponent may claim, there is a depiction of a mind absolutely in isolation. In this passage, Descartes slips into solipsism. If he finds this scenario intelligible, we may surely count him as an internalist. I think that there are a number of replies which may be deployed against this move. I shall set aside arguments that Descartes did not, in fact, find this scenario intelligible¹¹. Instead I will note again that the possibility of posing a counterfactual world in which one would have radically false beliefs about the world does not entail the possibility of having those same beliefs in that counterfactual world (as was explained in Section IV of this paper). We may not, therefore, conclude from Descartes' ability to think of a solipsistic world that he is, thereby, thinking of a world *in which* he would have contentful thoughts. It may well be that the solipsistic mind would have contentless phenomenal states. Descartes prefaces the passage in question with the suggestion that in such a world perhaps "nothing is certain" (presumably, this caveat extends even to the contentfulness of mental states). The doctrine of mind/body distinctness, in and of itself, does not commit Descartes to individualism of the mental.

VI

What of the conjunction of doctrines 1) and 3)? These two doctrines suggest that the individual's mind is authoritative concerning the content of its own mental states (at least in the actual world), and that the existence of the individual's body is not relevant to the authoritativeness of her access to her own mental states. Does this state of affairs not indicate a principle of individuation for mental states which makes no reference to anything external to the mind itself? Have we finally encountered irrefutable evidence for the claim that Descartes was an advocate of the doctrine of individualism of the mental? I think that we may finally be able to answer this question in the

mental? I think that we may finally be able to answer this question in the affirmative, but we shall do so in a way that will not be entirely satisfying to our opponents. In short, I think that we may conclude that Descartes was, in fact, an individualist with respect to what I have previously alluded to as the “phenomenological” character of mental states. It seems that he did take the individuation of one's mental states to be a function of internal features of the mind. Descartes took his mind (even in the actual world) to be an entity whose existence is independent of the physical realm. He also took his mind to be susceptible to various “modes” or states which it could distinguish each from another¹². It seems to follow then that the individuation of the modes of the mind can be accomplished independently of the external world (except, perhaps, for God). So, Descartes is an individualist with respect to the determination of phenomenological (or narrow) content – those appearances or representations to which he has immediate access. I am afraid, however, that nothing follows about his being an individualist in the full-blooded sense of the term without begging the question against the anti-individualist about what constitutes the “whole” content of a mental state¹³.

VII

Finally, it seems that this project may provide satisfaction to precisely neither side of the debate as to whether or not we may attribute the doctrine of individualism to Descartes (thus demonstrating the philosophical potency of its author). Our conclusion is that Descartes may well have been an individualist in what may amount to a fairly trivial sense (depending upon one's stance regarding the constituency of mental states), but could well have been something other than an individualist in the full-blooded (philosophically interesting) sense. I suppose that the charge of proving too much might be leveled against this paper. If the arguments herein are taken seriously, then we may be unsure about whether any philosopher prior to the 20th Century was an individualist! Such a charge, however, is not to be taken very seriously. If our evidence will support nothing more conclusive, then so be it. Perhaps there is no fact of the matter or, perhaps, the fact of the matter is undiscoverable. If, however, any historical figure advances principles which are equivalent to or entail the doctrine of individualism, then we may safely count that figure as an individualist. I suggest only that we take care that there is no taxonomization due to misrepresentation. If we are not careful, the harbors may soon be filled with tea¹⁴.

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NOTES

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I shall use the word “individualism” to refer to the doctrine (**B**) in question. I will ignore any subtleties typically taken to distinguish *internalism* from *individualism* and will treat the terms as though they were strictly synonymous.

² Consider Burge (1988): “Descartes also believed that he had ‘clear and distinct ideas’ of his thoughts. One might argue by analogy that, since one can “shut off” these thoughts from all corporeal substance, they are independent for their natures from physical bodies in the environment, and presumably from other thinkers. This line of argument implies that knowledge of one’s own thoughts guarantees the truth of individualism.

“The root mistake here has been familiar since Arnauld’s reply. It is that there is no reason to think that Descartes’s intuitions or self-knowledge give him sufficient clarity about the nature of mental events to justify him in claiming that their natures are independent of relations to physical objects.” – p. 651.

³ The relationship indicated here is intended to be a constitutive rather than a causal one.

⁴ Burge (1986): “The possibility that very different causal antecedents could issue in the same physical effects on the individual’s body, and perhaps even issue in the same phenomenological mental phenomena, is used as a component in my previous arguments against individualism.” – p. 121.

⁵ By “phenomenological indistinguishability” I mean essentially the same thing that Sainsbury (1991) means by “indistinguishable from within”: “The crucial element of Descartes’ speculation is that there is a range of possible alterations in the world about us which would not register on consciousness. Two very different situations can be ‘indistinguishable from within’ (for short, ‘indistinguishable_{fw}’): they would *appear* the same to the subject, and the subject could not detect a switch from one to the other.” – p. 408 (emphasis mine).

⁶ On an anti-individualistic reading the “deception” in this case would apply not to the falsity of beliefs but rather to the content of (for example) one’s “water” beliefs. Imagine that scientists had concocted an elaborate scheme to convince the rest of the world that H₂O exists when, in fact, the substance referred to as “water” is actually XYZ (whatever that would mean). Our “water” beliefs would be true, but those beliefs would be about XYZ and *not* H₂O.

⁷ Sainsbury (1991) argues that Descartes’ understanding of the demon hypothesis need not be taken as individualistic: “Suppose that in the actual situation I see a glass of water in front of me, and this episode possesses (no doubt among other contents) the content *it seems to me that there is a glass of water in front of me*. Then, the content *there is a glass of water in front of me* will be possessed by any subject with an indistinguishable_{fw} episode, for these episodes are alike in seemings, and to possess a content the subject must possess its components, including in this case *water*. Yet even the mild externalism under discussion entails that this cannot be guaranteed. For example, my twin’s indistinguishable episodes could not be credited with *water* contents.” – p. 420.

⁸ Burge (1992) gestures at an argument that Descartes finds the demon hypothesis unintelligible.

⁹ See note 2 (above). I think that this passage could be construed as antagonistic to the arguments both from privileged access and from mind/body independence. Burge (1988) does not seem to be terribly interested in distinguishing these issues in the passage in question.

¹⁰ Descartes' causal argument assures us that the idea of the evil demon could not have been the product of the human mind as the idea's objective reality surpasses the formal reality of the human mind. We may, therefore, put aside suggestions that the demon might be an *internal* feature of Descartes' mind which is responsible for the individuation of mental content.

¹¹ Burge (1992) – If the argument that the demon world is unintelligible succeeds then presumably, we have sufficient reason to reject this solipsistic scenario as similarly unintelligible.

¹² CSMK (1991), p. 280: “Thus love, hatred, affirmation, doubt, and so on are true modes in the mind”.

¹³ The distinction between “narrow” and “wide” content is a product of a segment of the anti-individualist camp. Hence, there is a sense in which at least some philosophers on each side agree that “narrow” content is fixed in virtue of individualistic principles. Descartes' advocacy of this particular (trivial) brand of “individualism” then is not sufficient to make him an individualist in the full-blooded sense.

¹⁴ I would like to thank Maria Paleologou, Brad McLerran, Monte Cook, and both Reinaldo Elugardo and Hugh Benson (who firmly dissent) for their helpful comments on this paper.

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