The thesis proposes an interpretative reading of René Descartes’ work *Meditations on First Philosophy*. This reading is called the unificationist reading and it is contrasted with a tradition of reading *The Meditations* with an epistemological attitude. These opposing views are called the justificationist reading based on their emphasis on justifications of beliefs. The unificationist reading instead emphasizes a metaphysical approach to *The Meditations* and is based on Joseph Almog’s reading of Descartes. The reading aims to unify those parts of Descartes’ theory that would in the justificationist tradition lead to strict dualisms and distinctions inside the theory.

Almog has presented his reading of Descartes in a series of lecture courses held in Helsinki in 2013. In addition to these courses, class notes, class meetings and correspondence, Edwin Curley’s and John Carriero’s substantial works on Descartes’ are used to present the unificationist view. Interpretation of *The Meditations* with the help of these works is the main method for contrasting the unificationist and the justificationist view.

The benefits of abandoning the epistemological attitude and the justificationist view are shown in the cases of the unity of man and of God. The justificationist reading leads to a strict dualism of mind and body as separate entities whereas the adoption of the unificationist view enables Descartes’ idea of men to be units of one (substance). It is shown that Descartes in fact seems to support a unified concept of men and his metaphysical distinction of mind and body does not seem to apply in the case of men. Furthermore, Descartes’ arguments for the existence of God seem circular or vague when considered within the justificationist tradition. The so-called ontological argument is taken under consideration and shown how it can be interpreted differently within the unificationist reading. The unificationist reading gives God the greatest importance in Descartes’ theory whereas the justificationist tradition sometimes denies God having any or only little importance in *The Meditations* and this is shown to adduce several issues.

It is shown how adopting the unificationist view Descartes’ philosophy appears its integral entirety. The unificationist view leads to a global theory of existence instead of a scattered collection of justified beliefs concerning existence.
A Unificationist Reading of Descartes' Meditations

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1. INTRODUCTION

René Descartes (1596-1650) is an undisputable classic of the history of philosophy. His philosophical work has influenced many thinkers and remains to have a great impact on contemporary philosophy. Descartes’ most significant works in philosophy include Discours de la méthode (Discourse on the Method, 1637), Meditationes de prima philosophia (Meditations on First Philosophy, 1641), Principia philosophiae (Principles of Philosophy, 1641) and Les passions de l’âme (Passions of the Soul, 1649) along with his extensive correspondence with many influential academics of his time. These letters were first published as a collection on 1657 under the name Correspondance by Descartes’ editor Claude Clerselier. Today the most cited collection of the correspondence is Anthony Kenny’s work Philosophical Letters (1970) which includes Descartes’ correspondence with such academics and philosophy enthusiasts as philosopher, theologian and mathematician Marin Mersenne, Princess Elizabeth, philosopher Henricus Regius, philosopher Isaac Beeckman and doctor of medicine Vopiscus Fortunatus Plempius.

This thesis concentrates on The Meditations. The book is written prosaically and with great clarity. This can be both a strength and a weakness. Strength because it is easy to read and yet it deals with the most fundamental philosophical issues. As such it is suitable for beginners as a first original philosophy book. However, Descartes effortlessly uses metaphors and common language to address the issues at hand and the deeper meaning is easily lost in the effortlessness. Regardless of the common language and clarity, one has to be particularly careful not to rush through the work as it is often only after careful contemplation Descartes’ simple looking passages and arguments reveal their true meaning. In addition, many times Descartes’ arguments are ambiguous and can be read in several different ways. Some of these ambiguities he explains and clarifies later in Philosophical Letters and Principles and some remain disputable. Whenever the matter at hand is better explained in one of these books I will regard them in addition to The Meditations.
The reading which I will present in this thesis on *The Meditations* is based on Joseph Almog’s ideas. Almog has written two books on Descartes: *Cogito?* (2002) and *What am I?* (2005). However, the reading presented in this thesis is not from neither of his books and for this reason I have not used them as sources (apart from a couple of quotes). I have not learned Almog’s reading of Descartes through these books as it is not fully presented in them, but instead through his lecture courses held in Helsinki in fall 2013 (*The unification of Thinking and Being - From Descartes to Berkeley*) and in spring 2013 (*The dual Descartes--Unitarianism vs. dualism in his treatment of man vs. God, mind vs. body*) as well as our correspondence alongside the class meetings. Almog is currently present teaching philosophy in the University of Turku.

The reading of *The Meditations* in this thesis is based on Almog’s reading but I will mainly present it without referring to him directly. I will call the reading “the unificationist reading”. In addition to this, Almog has sometimes called his reading “the objectual reading”, “globalism” or “being-theory” which I will mention every now and then when it is best describing the position at hand. I have used Edwin Curley’s book on Spinoza (*Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza’s Ethics*, 1988) for presenting Cartesian metaphysics and John Carriero’s substantial work on *The Meditations* (*Between Two Worlds: A Reading of Descartes Meditations*, 2009) for scrutinizing *The Meditations*. These two books serve as the main sources of reference for this thesis. With the help of Curley’s and Carriero’s insightful treatment I will be able to present the main ideas of the unificationist reading regardless of the fact that they are not published anywhere in literature.

The reading is somewhat radical. It differs from the commonly known text book readings of Descartes. It is particularly difficult to present a reading which has never been explicitly established. However, with some work and effort I believe the reading’s main ideas clearly transmit from Curley’s and Carriero’s works – and especially through *The Meditations* themselves. The main methods of this thesis are interpretation and analysis.

The unificationist reading will be set as opposed to the several text book readings which I will refer to as “the justificationist” reading.
takes Descartes to be primarily interested in epistemological issues, proof for certain knowledge and justifications for beliefs, whereas the unificationist reading emphasizes Descartes’ interest in metaphysics (being and existence), unified world view and the metaphysical importance of God in his theory. These two different approaches will be challenged together throughout the thesis. The main goal is to show how some of the most famous features of Descartes’ philosophy, such as metaphysical dualism and epistemological skepticism, can in fact be seen in a very different light. The switch from justifications to metaphysical theory of being brings about big changes on how we might see Descartes and his philosophy.

In chapter II I will present Descartes’ most basic metaphysical concepts following Curley’s work: substance, mode and attribute, their properties and special features. Already at this point some disputable characters of Descartes’ work will be presented. Chapter III is about Descartes’ concept of nature as whole. God, man and the union of soul and body will be examined. In chapter IV I will examine Descartes’ idea of God in more detail and explain Almog’s approach to it. Chapter V will mostly follow Carriero’s treatment of The Meditations and regards Descartes’ “epistemology” and the concept of ideas and perceiving clearly and distinctly. This chapter shows how these concepts also in fact touch metaphysical field in Descartes’ theory. In chapter VI Almog’s reading will further be explained through examining Descartes’ ideas of thinking, perception and imagination. In this chapter I will present some of my correspondence with Almog to demonstrate his view as explicitly a possible. Finally, in chapter VII some concluding remarks will be submitted.

It is important to acknowledge that at the time of writing The Meditations Descartes did not know anything about Kant, Hume or contemporary epistemology. Sometimes the more professional we are in some field the less we remember to read classical works on their own right, outside of the canon. This can easily lead to reading things into the works that are not necessarily present. In addition, sometimes we read philosophical texts through a contemporary lens and wish to apply to them the same language and vocabulary available now, which is often not appropriate if one genuinely attempts to understand the work at hand. It
is perhaps convenient and natural to label and categorize Descartes’ discoveries in the light of contemporary philosophy, such as that of mind and body as metaphysical dualism without asking: what does it exactly mean for a man to have both mind and body together in one being? What does it mean for God to be the total cause of everything? What does it mean to have clear and distinct perceptions? Among others these questions will be addressed in this thesis and with attempt to shed a new bright light on Descartes’ philosophy. The unificationist reading aims to unify some parts of Descartes’ theory which have been taken to represent distinct arguments.

*The Meditations* consists of six meditations and a brief synopsis of them. In Meditation I Descartes introduces the famous evil demon argument to demonstrate the possibility of making mistakes even with the simplest looking thoughts (arguments, propositions, beliefs). The first Meditations is subtitled *What can be called into doubt*. In the second Meditation Descartes asserts that he necessarily exists and that he is a thinking thing. The second Meditation is subtitled *The nature of the human mind and how it is better known than the body*. In the third Meditation, subtitled *The Existence God* Descartes introduces God and the nature of ideas. The fourth Meditation goes on with God in more detail and is subtitled *Truth and falsity*. The fifth Meditation, *The essence of material things, and the existence of God considered a second time*, is about the material world and God. Finally, in the sixth Meditation Descartes talks about the co-existence of soul and body in the case of humans and is subtitled *The existence of material things, and the real distinction between mind and body*.

A few comments on the notation is in order. I will refer to *The Meditations* as CSM II and to *Principles* as CSM I. This is an established method in Descartes research and refers to the works’ translators Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch. The numbers I or II refer to the volume number. Descartes’ letters in Anthony Kenny’s book will be referred to as AT (Adam and Tannery) or AM (Adam and Milhaud) depending on each letter’s original editors. In addition, whenever referring to one and a same quote repeatedly for several times in a same chapter I will use the letter $q$ in front of the citation to indicate the quote it is referring to.
For example, if I have quoted *The Meditations* on page 30 and repeat to refer to the quote in the text it will appear as qCSM II, 30.
2. BASICS: DESCARTES’ METAPHYSICS

In his book *Behind The Geometrical Method: A reading Of Spinoza’s Ethics* Edwin Curley (1988) seeks to give a thorough understanding of Spinoza’s *Ethics* by unveiling Spinoza’s complex Euclidean presentation and by trying to show what is actually said in the work when using common prosaic presentation instead of Spinoza’s often painstakingly complex geometrical one. In doing so, Curley compares Spinoza to the works of Descartes and Hobbes, not only because these thinkers directly inspired and influenced Spinoza but also, in Descartes’ case, because he sees a great similarity between their thinking.

The similarity he sees is essential to the interpretation presented in this thesis for two reasons. First, instead of being epistemological, Curley’s treatment of Descartes is *metaphysical* in a very pure manner. Curley rigorously scrutinizes very basic yet fundamental concepts of metaphysics, such as substance, attribute, mode, God, mind and body, without reading into it any extra attempt to modernize Descartes’ work in the light of contemporary epistemology, as is too often done. Instead, Curley takes Descartes’ metaphysical theory of the world very seriously and does not depreciate Descartes’ posture even when it may seem “incomprehensible” in the light of today’s discoveries in philosophy and science.

The second reason to introduce Curley’s Descartes reading in detail is that when he analyses Descartes’ metaphysics by comparing it with Spinoza’s he comes to many conclusions which support the reading I will present in this essay on *The Meditations*. The view which presented in this thesis, the unificationist reading, seems to have several confluenes with Curley’s reading. However, the confluenes may not be direct or represent straightforward equivalence, rather the view I have will get its backbone from Curley’s careful analysis on Descartes’ metaphysical concepts. On several occasions Curley comes to the conclusion that Descartes’ seemingly detailed and systematic scrutiny on whatever under analysis on time being, is in fact, best understood when seeing “the big picture” standing behind it. Curley has exceptional insight on Descartes when it comes to bringing together distinct parts of Descartes’ theory, albeit it has not been the main goal in
his book on Spinoza. The way Curley glues together the separated fields of Descartes’ theory in order to present the bigger picture, makes him a type of unifier. It is precisely this type of unificationist stance, as opposed to a view I call justificationist (or epistemologist), which presentation will be the main goal of this chapter and thesis.

The term “unifier” in Curley’s case is meant to illustrate his way of analyzing parts of Descartes’ theory, carefully point by point, and still managing to see how they all represent Descartes’ more general world view, even when they seem beyond helplessly disconnected. Spinoza’s monistic view of the world as one has inevitably influenced Curley’s reading of Descartes but I believe this has only done great justice to Descartes. Curley really seems to believe that even when taken as purely metaphysical, not epistemological, Descartes’ theory has been misunderstood in many respects. In order to understand all this, one must start with the very basics of Descartes’ metaphysical theory.

2.1 Substance, mode and attribute

Curley starts his Descartes analysis by giving a general description of the world as Descartes conceived it. In this world view, everything there is consists of a great many substances, which are divided into two main kinds: material and immaterial. Material substances contain all bodies, and immaterial substances contain all minds, including the divine mind of God. Each of these substances is finite by their nature, only the divine mind is infinite, subject to no limitations or defects. The reason Descartes calls these, minds and bodies, substances, is that they all have some measure of independent existence. (Curley 1988, 7). So each substance is either material or immaterial and finite or infinite by their nature. Moreover, what makes a thing substance is its independent existence.

It is not, however, that the substances are independent in a causal way. It is indeed true that my body depends on great many things, such as food, drink and air. But logically it does not depend on any of these things; that is, for Descartes, we can conceive of its existing without any of these other things existing. Similarly is the
case with minds and all finite substances. (Curley 1988, 7). At this point, Descartes definition of a substance is based on a logical remark; that we can conceive of its existing without any other existence. The independence condition for a substance is purely logical.

However, not everything about the substances is independent. Bodies have certain sizes and shapes and we cannot conceive a body at all without it having a certain size and shape. Similarly, minds contain certain thoughts which cannot be conceived without being thoughts of some mind. These entities, sizes and shapes and thoughts are dependent and are what Descartes calls modes of the substances (they depend on). As we have two kinds of substances, so we have two kinds of modes. The mode of material substances is extension and the mode of immaterial substances is thinking. (Curley 1988, 7-8). The idea is that my body won’t cease to be my body nor cease to exist if its size and shape change but it will surely cease to exist if it ceases to be extended. So the independence condition, when taken out of the purely logical context, seems to loosen a great deal.

Similarly, a mind does not depend on any type of thoughts, they can be whatever kind, but a mind ceases to be a mind if it ceases to think. So thought and extension have special statuses for Descartes, as they are the fundamental properties of minds and bodies. Descartes calls thought the principal attribute of mind and extension the principal attribute of body. (Curley1988, 7.) In real world, substances must have some modes as their principal attributes (thinking or extension) or they become nothings.

It certainly seems odd that Descartes holds that by definition a substance must exist independently in order to even be a substance, yet it seems clear that in order to exist, to be any substance at all, it is dependent on its principal attribute. This seems to be a paradox. I believe I understand the confusion here by making a distinction between what Descartes means by a substance’s logical independence and that of real world’s instances. I believe Descartes, when describing a substance, was building a general structure for the abstract concept of substance as it is understood by the mind but when it comes to actual instances of substances there are some necessary add-ons in order for them to exist, or actualize, as it were. However, it is not perhaps enough to merely understand and sympathize
why there seems to be a contradiction. Luckily Curley finds further concrete explanation for this by comparing Descartes’ concept of substance to that of Spinoza, and from what Descartes says in *Principles*. The contradiction is explained away by making a further distinction between modes and attributes.

### 2.2 Accidental and fundamental properties

Whereas in Descartes’ metaphysics there are, at least by logical definition, many substances, in Spinoza’s there is only one, the infinite substance of God. In addition, for Spinoza God has infinitely many attributes of which he identifies two: thought and extension.

By substance Spinoza understands “what is in itself and is conceived through itself” and by attribute he understands “what the intellect perceives of substance, as constituting its essence”. Curley believes that Descartes would not disagree with Spinoza’s definition of substance, since he himself has a similar one in *Principles*: “By substance we can understand nothing other than a thing which so exists that it needs no other thing in order to exist.” Moreover, Curley believes Descartes would not object to Spinoza’s definition of attribute either since he, again, offers a similar account himself: “each substance has one principal property, which constitutes its nature and essence and to which all its properties are referred.” (Curley 1988, 11-12.) The concepts of a substance and an attribute are very similar to Descartes and Spinoza, the same even, one can say. However, why does Descartes hold that a substance is independent yet it *needs* an attribute? What would Spinoza say about this?

Curley notes that in one of his demonstrations, Spinoza, in fact, seems to identify substance with its attributes. The quote is from *Ethics*, first book, proposition 4, demonstration:

…Therefore, there is nothing outside the intellect through which a number of things can be distinguished except substances, or what is the same, their attributes, and their affections.

(Curley 1988, 12-13.)
This seems puzzling both in the case of Spinoza and Descartes. Descartes would not confuse the attribute of extension with the extended thing which has the attribute as he makes the logical distinction of the substance as independent from its attribute, and Spinoza holds that there is only one substance but infinitely many attributes, so the identification of a substance and an attribute would imply a numerical imbalance. However, Curley sees that there is an explanation to be found from Descartes. (Curley 1988, 13.) In Principles, Descartes says:

There is a distinction of reason between a substance and an attribute of substance without which the substance itself cannot be understood … This is recognized from the fact that we cannot form a clear and distinct idea of that substance if we exclude that attribute from it… Thought and extension can be considered as constituting the natures of thinking and corporeal substance; and then they must not be conceived otherwise than a thinking substance itself and extended substance itself, i.e., as mind and body…we understand extended substance or thinking substance more easily than we understand substance alone , i.e., than when we omit the fact that it is thinking or is extended. For there is some difficulty abstracting the notion of substance from the notions of thought and extension, which differ from substance only by reason…Thought and extension can also be taken as modes of substance, insofar as one and the same mind can have many different thoughts, and insofar as one and the same body, though retaining the same quantity, can be extended in many different ways…then (thought and extension) are distinguished modally from substance…

(CSM I, 62-64.)

Making a modal distinction between a mode of thought and the thinking thing implies that the thinking thing can be understood without the mode but making a distinction of reason between thought as an attribute and the substance which has that attribute, implies that the substance cannot be understood without that attribute. (Curley 1988, 14). What this means I take is that insofar as we think of thought and extension as essentially descriptive features of a substance; belonging to it essentially, “making it”, as it were, they cannot be distinguished from it. The distinction would be absurd since we could not conceive any substance without its primary attribute! A body that is not, essentially, extended is no body at all. However, when thought and extension are taken as modes, almost as accidents, of substances they can and will be distinguished from the substance they belong to. As long as the substance “remains” the substance that it is, say, a body it can have
whatever shape as its mode but the attribute of extension will belong it immutably as long as it is existing. Here is Curley’s summary:

I take it that Descartes’ view here is this: at a certain level of generality we can make a distinction between a thing, or substance, and its properties; when I ascribe a mode to an extended thing – say that the table is three feet long – there is some content to the distinction between the mode and the thing whose mode it is, because we can have some conception of what the thing (the table) would be without that property…but when the property in question is a fundamental a property as an attribute, we cannot conceive of what the thing would be like without that property; to try to suppose a world in which the table had become a mind, a thinking, non-extended substance, would be to try to suppose something unintelligible.

(Curley 1988, 14.)

If we would try to imagine a table as not having extension, would it not be the same as if it has ceased to exist and been replaced by mind? In order to conceive of a table, or any body at all, we need it to be extended. The attempt to conceive of a substance without its primary attribute is empty. It is not just that we cannot conceive of it, as if this was s statement about the limitations of human mind; it is a comment about the intrinsic nature of that thing, the substance. (Curley 1988, 15.) In other words, what Descartes means by a substance and its attribute is that when the attribute, extension for example, is understood as modes of that substance, they are distinct and the same substance remains independently without that mode but when the attribute is understood as fundamental, constituting the substance, they are the same thing: a thinking-substance or an extended-substance. It would be impossible, or as Descartes moderately says “there is some difficulty”, to abstract the notion of substance from its primary attribute. So far it seems that there two kinds of things in Descartes’ world: thinking-things and extended-things and they both have some measure of independence. After this analysis, the concept of substance becomes more or less redundant, as, as we saw, the definition of a substance is nothing more than a logical abstraction which cannot even be understood directly, without the help of an attribute. It should be sufficient to say at this point that there are things that are thinking and there things that are extended.
2.3 Identification of extended substance(s)

So far we have learned with a help from Curley’s presentation that Descartes’ concept of substance is to have one principal attribute and that it is, essential to the substance in a way that without it the substance would not be. In the case of bodies, the attribute is extension and similarly, in the case of minds, it is thinking. Let’s take a closer look at extended substances alone. Because they are extended we must be able to locate them and differentiate them from one another. A question of identification must be thus raised. How can we differentiate between two or more substances? What if two substances have the same attribute, extension for example, as well as exactly the same modes (shape, size etc.)? What makes the substances separate? Is it merely their different place in space?

In the case of material things, if the modes of the substance; size, shape, colour etc. are merely accidental, meaning that they are not fundamental for the substance, what is it that makes the substance stable and immutable throughout its possible changes in the modes? For we all agree by common sense that when the modes change, the substance surely remains the same. In Meditation II Descartes lays out the famous wax passage:

Let us take, for example, this piece of wax. It has just been taken from the honeycomb; it has not yet quite lost the taste of the honey; it retains some of the scent of the flowers from which it was gathered; its colour, shape and size are plain to see; it is hard, cold and can be handled without difficulty; if you rap it with your knuckle it makes a sound. In short, it has everything which appears necessary to enable a body to be known as distinctly as possible. But even as I speak, I put the wax by the fire, and look: the residual taste is eliminated, the smell goes away, the colour changes, the shape is lost, the size increases; it becomes liquid and hot; you can hardly touch it, and if you strike it, it no longer makes a sound. But does the same wax remain? It must be admitted that it does; no one denies it, no one thinks otherwise. So what was in the wax that I understood with such distinctness? Evidently none of the features which I arrived at by means of the
senses; for whatever came under taste, smell, sight, touch or hearing
has now altered – yet the wax remains.¹

(CSM II, 20).

As Curley points out, common sense might want to say that two substances are
distinguished from one another because of their different locations in space. But
this is not a solution either because, according to Descartes, the distinction
between a body and the space it occupies is not a real one. “The same extension
which constitutes the nature of body constitutes the nature of the space which it is
said to occupy.” (Curley 1988, 18.) Curley means that Descartes,
straightforwardly, identifies the body and the space it occupies.² A substance
cannot be distinguished from (its) space, so the differentiation between two
substances cannot be based on their locations in space. The answer to the question
of the identification between two or more substances must lie elsewhere. Or does
it?

Since the answer is not in the space which a substance occupies, and if what
constitutes a substance are its modes and its primary attribute, then it seems that
we cannot distinguish between two different extended substances because there is
no way at all to conceive of two substances which share the attribute of extension
and have the exact same modes. So if there are extended substances at all, there
must be only one! (Curley, 1988, 18). How is it that Descartes, who is known for
his theory of many substances of which some are extended and some are not, now
has led us to a theory of only one extended substance? As Curley points out: “this
line of reasoning may help to explain why Descartes sometimes suggests that
there is only one extended substance, the whole of physical nature” (Curley 1988,
18). Indeed, in the Synopsis for the Meditations Descartes says:” ...we need to
recognize that body, taken in the general sense, is a substance, so that it too never
perishes” (CSM II, 10.) This is where God comes into the picture.

¹This frequently quoted wax-passage has often been taken to represent Descartes’
skepticism. It has been argued that here Descartes tries to prove the unreliability of the
senses and emphasize the epistemological superiority of rational thinking. As we can
understand now in the light of substance-identification, it can be seen in a very different,
metaphysical light.

²The identification is from Principles II (CSM I, 230-23).
3. THE WHOLE OF NATURE

From the previous chapter we can see that for Descartes, the world does not constitute of scattered independent substances; minds and bodies and God, disconnectedly, but that, in the case of the extended world, “the body never perishes”. What this means is that it is one, a physical part of the infinite substance. Together all beings form the whole of nature. Moreover, the body, the whole of physical nature, is immutable in a general sense. The modes may change and some parts of the body die, but as God’s creation the totality of things never ceases to exist:

First, we need to know that absolutely all substances, or things which must be created by God in order to exist, are by their nature incorruptible and cannot ever cease to exist unless they are reduced to nothingness by God’s denying his concurrence to them.

(CSM II, 10).

There are individual bodies (and similarly minds) which have extension as their attribute (and whatever modes may be) but which are all constituting a body, or better; a material world, in a more general sense. In this way, all bodies are bodies of God; parts of the infinite substance which “never perishes”. This applies to human bodies as well. Consequently, we cannot conceive of ourselves without conceiving of God because our bodies are not “islands”, independent extended-things, but rather parts of the nature whole that is constituted by God:

But the mere fact that God created me is a very strong basis for believing that I am somehow made in his image and likeness, and that I perceive that likeness, which includes the idea of God, by the same faculty which enables me to perceive myself.

(CSM II, 35.)

At this point we do not yet know what this “I” is for Descartes. In the case of bodies, it is however evident that they are parts of the whole, the infinite substance of God, in a same manner as my finger is a part of my hand and my hand is a part of my body, together forming me, a human. Before going into the
discussion about “I”, about human beings, let’s examine a few more points about Descartes’ God.

3.1 God as extended

Because it seems that the material world is a unity for Descartes and it is made possible by God, it must be noticed that this seems to come close to the monistic God-substance of Spinoza. On Descartes’ definition of God, Curley takes even a further Spinozistic step by saying that “on the face of it, Descartes’ definition of God and Spinoza’s are equivalent” (Curley 1988, 23). This is so because Descartes’ definition of God is not merely constituted from or depended on a list of different attributes. In Meditation I Descartes gives one such list (CSM II,15) and in Meditation III he gives two more (CSM II, 28 & 31), each different from the preceding ones, omitting or adding some attributes. This variety of attribute listing suggests that Descartes, in defining God, was not after a complete enumerating list of God’s attributes. Instead, what is crucial for the definition is that Descartes identifies God as “a supremely perfect and infinite being” (CSM II, 31). This is enough to give Descartes a principle to decide which attributes might belong to the definition of God and which not, so it does not matter that his list of attributes is not exhaustive (Curley 1988, 22). God is supremely perfect and absolutely infinite being. Some attributes we can grasp, some we cannot.

...for whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive as being real and true, and implying any perfection, is wholly contained in it. It does not matter that I do not grasp the infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God which I cannot in any way grasp, and perhaps cannot even reach in my thought; for it is in the nature of the infinite not to be grasped by a finite being like myself. It is enough that I understand the infinite, and that I judge that all the attributes which I clearly perceive and know to imply some perfection – and perhaps countless others of which I am ignorant – are present in God...

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3In the first list of Meditation III, he adds eternity, infinitude and omniscience to the previous goodness and source of truth, omitting goodness; and in the second list he adds independence, omitting again goodness and now eternity as well.
(CSM II, 32).

Now, as a result from Curley’s claim that the definitions of God are equivalent for Descartes and Spinoza, an interesting problem arises. Descartes clearly says that God does not have extension as one his divine attributes because extension would imply divisibility and divisibility moreover implies destructibility which cannot belong to God as he is supremely perfect and understood as not lacking anything or implying any imperfection (Principles I, CSM I, 200-201). So if God is not extended because extension implies imperfection, this would again lead us towards a world of distinctions, where God is a part of an isolated, immaterial reality and extended things would disconnectedly belong to a different world.

Curley’s solution to this problem is interpretative. He seems to believe that Descartes made a logical misstep by defining God as non-extended. He gives three reasons why Descartes should have explicitly admitted that God is also extended.

First, Descartes’ definition of God involves that “whatever has any perfection in it must be contained in the idea of God”, and it is true that extension has some perfection in it as Descartes in fact says in Principles I (CSM I, 200-201). Extension does indeed contain some perfection, some degree of reality. Secondly, Descartes lists omnipresence as one of God’s attributes and if God is omnipresent we must attribute extension to him in order for him to be present in the extended world as well. Thirdly, we similarly must attribute extension to God in order to understand Him as a cause of everything. As having the attribute of thought, God can be the cause of modes of thought, and similarly, as having the attribute of extension, he can be the cause of modes of extension. He must have both attributes “for if one thing has nothing in common with another, it cannot be its cause.” (Curley 1988, 25-27).

Moreover, is the divisibility of an extended thing really an issue? Does divisibility in the case of God necessarily involve destructibility? Are the divided parts really distinct from each other in a sense that they are substances capable of existing apart from one another? Curley analyses Descartes’ wax example from Meditation II:
Can one portion of extension cease to exist while the others remain? How could a portion of extension cease to exist? We might imagine a piece of wax suddenly vanishing, leaving behind only what we naively call “empty space”. But in fact that space will likely be filled by air. And even if it’s not, the wax will leave behind the same space, the same portion of extension. And that’s all the wax really was, a portion of extension which was qualified in certain ways different from the portions of extension around it. So it would be more accurate to say that the wax has not disappeared, but rather that the portion of extension which it was has come to be differently qualified. One part of the extended substance cannot cease to exist while the others remain. I.e., the extended substance cannot be divisible in any sense which would imply destructibility.

(Curley 1988, 28.)

Even when extension is being divided it is not that it involves any defect in the extended thing, the whole of physical nature, because it is only one part of the extended substance which is the target of division, not the whole. I agree with Curley’s interpretation. Cartesian God must have both thinking and extension as attributes.

In addition to Curley’s points, I also want to add one reason why Descartes might seem to stress that God is not extended. The chapter in Principles where Descartes remarks that God is not corporeal can be interpreted to point out that God is not similar to us. God is different and does not have a corporeal extended status in a same manner as we do. The title of the chapter in Principles goes: God is not corporeal, and does not perceive through the senses as we do; and he does not will the evil of sin (CSM I, 200). As I take it there are two points in the title: 1) God is not a corporeal sensory perceiving entity as we are and 2) God is not a willing imperfect entity as we are. This can be taken to mean that Descartes wants to merely point out that God is different, and if he is extended, this extension is of very different nature than ours. It does not necessarily have to mean that God is absolutely and unquestionably a non-extended being. It is true that God is not a body, any body, but a perfect being.

Again, the fact that we perceive through the senses is for us a perfection of a kind; but all sense-perception involves being acted upon, and to be acted upon is to be dependent on something else. Hence it cannot in any way be supposed that God perceives by means of the senses, but only that he understands and wills. And even his understanding and willing does not happen, as in our case, by means
of operations that are in a certain sense distinct one from another; we must rather suppose that there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything. When I say “everything” I mean all things: for God does not will the evil of sin, which is not a thing.

(CSM I, 201.)

The way of dismissing the argument of Descartes’ God’s totality and likeness to Spinoza’s monistic God by referring to the one sentence where Descartes states that “God is not corporeal” is undermining Descartes’ theory and shows unwillingness to understand Descartes’ view in a larger scale.

This view gets its support not only from the arguments presented above but also when we try to understand The Meditations as a whole; what Descartes thinks about being human in the world. It must be remembered that in his book, Curley was mainly trying to understand Spinoza’s Ethics, not Descartes. In doing so, he found many possible explanations for questions concerning Spinoza and, simultaneously, shed a light to a deeper understanding of Descartes; that is, for Descartes there seems to be only one extended substance, that of the physical nature and not many, isolated substances as it is commonly interpreted. Descartes is perhaps not explicit about this but it certainly seems to make his theory more understandable, it makes sense of his idea of the world. As Curley points out:

…there certainly was a strong tendency in Descartes to say that there really is just one material substance, the whole of the physical world, and that the finite material things we ordinarily call substances are just modes of that one material substance. As I read Descartes, this tendency never reaches the point of being a fully explicit and adequately articulated doctrine, but it’s certainly there, and I think it may have well influenced Spinoza.

(Curley 1988, 32-33.)

So far we have been merely examining one of Descartes’ two attributes, that of extension (and briefly the special case of God). But as we know by what has been taught to us by the history books, Descartes asserts that in the case of humans, there are two; mind and body, as independent substances, somehow connected in one being, having the attributes of extension and thought. This position seems to be inevitably dualistic.
3.2 Thinking-substance and extended-substance together in the case of humans

I will start this chapter by considering the general view that philosophers and other academics alike might have on Descartes. In general in all philosophy textbooks or any introduction to philosophy or history books, Descartes is introduced as a dualist. Moreover, his evil demon demonstration from Meditation I and II as well as the distinction between mind and body are always presented. Descartes’ evil demon demonstration is taken to represent skepticism; the unreliability of the senses and the discovery of cogito: the one thing that cannot be placed under doubt. It is from this doubting when mind and body become distinct because the existence of body doesn’t pass the skeptical challenge of systematical doubting. There is only “I” as a thinking thing that we can know of certainty.

The evil demon passage is taken to go something like this: there is a God, but I am not yet aware whether he is good or evil; if he is evil, he might be a deceiver and I might be deceived all the time; even if I was being deceived all the time, there would still be something that is being deceived; that is, my thinking (being deceived); hence I am thinking so I must exist (as a thinking thing). And if I can now conceive of myself as existing as a thinking thing only, it is logically possible that there is nothing else apart from this thinking thing, that is, my mind. Yet because later on Descartes “proves” that the material world does also indeed exist and that God is not a deceiver but a supremely perfect being, we have now reached metaphysics of strict dualism as well as proof for God’s existence and of his particular characteristics. Furthermore, the proof for God’s existence is taken to be based on a fallacy and shown to be obviously erroneous as it is assumed to employ the so called Cartesian Circle, which is, as its name already suggests, a simple circular argument.

If we take it that for Descartes there really was two independent and distinct substances and that by the evil demon argument he has indeed proved this, it seems to me that after the first two Meditations, we could stop reading! For what follows seems not to make much sense. If there were independent minds and
independent bodies, capable of existing without one another; and that this idea really was what Descartes intended to prove, why would he write the additional four Meditations? This would have become, interpreted as we now have done in the light of “the familiar view”, clear already from the first two. I believe many readers in fact have stopped after the second Meditation, or at least have not read the following ones with enough seriousness.

Descartes does however, proceed with the meditating. In Meditation VI he goes back to talking about the mind and the body:

Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit. If it were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken. Similarly, when the body needed food or drink, I should have an explicit understanding of the fact, instead of having confused sensations of hunger and thirst. For these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body.

(CSM II, 56.)

“If it were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing” shows that Descartes refers to Meditations I and II and now acknowledges that he was perhaps too hasty to arrive at that conclusion before4. For in the case of men, the mind is always intermingled with the body; if not so, the body is a ship or a chair or a stone without a mind belonging to it, and similarly the mind without a body – well, it might be a logical possibility as demonstrated by the evil demon argument but again, in the case of humans mind and body are a unit, intermingling with one another.

Ever since Descartes published The Mediations, his readers have been more or less obsessed about how two things, material body and immaterial mind, can act on one another, having such different natures as one being extended and the other

4Or simply, for some reason, did not want to analyze the distinction/union further in the case of humans in general.
thinking. Descartes’ answers seem to be rather obscure at first sight, resting on some intuitive understanding of the union. Curley agrees:

When Descartes was pressed on this topic, as he was repeatedly, the best answer he seems to have been able to give was to say something like this: of course, it is difficult to understand how a non-extended thing can cause an extended thing to move; but experience assures us that it happens, so we must not doubt that; as for understanding how it happens, the best we can do is to say that we have a primitive concept of the union of the mind with body, of their constituting together one thing, and that it is in virtue of this union that the mind is able to act on the body and conversely; this notion of the substantial union is a primitive one, which cannot be satisfactorily explained…it is intelligible enough in its own right.

(Curley 1988, 57.)

This somewhat vague explanation for the union of mind and body is, of course, in direct controversy with Descartes’ “strict” definition of and distinction between two separate, independent substances. For how is it that two distinct substances, capable of existing on their own right, might now somehow need each other in order to create one and to exist in the case of men? Descartes’ answering attempts are hardly satisfactory for philosophers seeking exhaustive explanations. However, it seems that Descartes did not feel the need to give such exhaustive answers either. He does make the distinction between the two substances initially but when he talks about the special case of men, it seems that the distinction is not primary at all. Yet for his commentators and readers this ambivalence has been painstakingly crucial and weighty. As I take it, the answer to this confusing mess lies again in understanding the big picture, as was the case with the paradoxical looking situation with substances and their attributes. Descartes really asserts that the union of mind and body in the case of men is more essential and primary than any abstract distinction between two different substances. He seems to be so convinced by this that he allows us to completely abandon his initial definition a substance if that is what it takes for us to understand the nature of being human.

5Remember the case of the definition of a substance and its attribute discussed in chapter 2.3. The controversy here is very similar.
In his letter to Princess Elizabeth, Descartes even encourages her to attribute matter and extension to the soul if she was puzzled with the union of mind and body, “for that is simply to conceive it as united to the body” (AT, 143).

The immaterial substance, soul or mind, having an attribute of thought was the other one of the two distinct, independent substances. And now Descartes says that we can feel free to attribute matter and extension to it. This point, as I take it, means that we can do pretty much whatever we want with the substances if it helps us to see the main point: conceiving of mind and body as a unit. Descartes seems to think that we can understand the union of mind and body by experience; it is so obvious that it doesn’t need exhaustive proving.

But what I really want to say is that, in some sense, I and my body are one. That is why I have the concern for it that I do and why I have the awareness of it that I have. That is the metaphysical truth Descartes was trying to express…

(Curley 1988, 58.)

It must be addressed that “I and my body” sounds dualistic. The language we have makes it difficult to even talk about these matters without making it seem dualistic (Curley 1988, 59). However, if we really try we can push through this and see what Descartes really means with the mind-body union. Instead of trying so hard to figure out how two distinct, separate, capable of existing on their own right substances can co-exist in one “package” we can simplify the picture. That is, for Descartes, yes, there are minds and bodies that are different from each other but these minds and bodies together form units of one and, furthermore, the bodies together form the whole of physical nature, again, a one thing.

The fact that my mind and my body are different is, in a way, ultimately the same as to say that thinking is different from sitting. We can spend a lot of time analyzing the differences and similarities between these two different activities but ultimately what we should do is to give importance to the “I” who is capable of thinking and sitting. What is “I” like and what kind of a world “I” is in?

6And this is truly groundbreaking compared to what has been said in the first two Meditations
3.3 The union of mind and body as a unity

On 20 June, Princess Elizabeth replied to Descartes that she didn’t understand how an immaterial substance move a material one, whereas she found it easier to understand how it would be possible to attribute matter and extension to the immaterial substance (AT, 140). Descartes replied on June 28 that she, in fact, is free to do so (AT, 143) as it doesn’t change the position of the union of mind and body; it might even help to understand it better. In the letter, Descartes reminds Elizabeth that in his earlier letter he distinguished between three different primitive ideas or notions, “each of which is known in its own proper manner and not by comparison with any other: i.e. the notion of soul, the notion of body, and the notion of union between soul and body” (AT 140).

Furthermore, we conceive of these three primitive ideas differently. The soul can be conceived only by pure intellect and the body can be conceived by pure intellect as well, but much better so when the intellect is aided by imagination. And finally, the union of the soul and the body can be known only obscurely by intellect or intellect aided by imagination but it can be known very clearly by the senses. (AT, 141). Again, here Descartes explains the knowledge of the union by everyday experience. Moreover, he says that people who never philosophize (unlike Elizabeth) have no difficulty understanding the union and only metaphysical thoughts which “exercise the intellect” makes us conceive of bodies and souls distinctively (AT, 141).

But it is the ordinary course of life and conversation, and abstention from meditation and from the study of the things which exercise the imagination, that teaches us how to conceive the union of the soul and the body.

(AT, 141.)

Conceiving the union of mind and body, which is the same as conceiving them as a single thing (AT, 141) in this every day, “ordinary course of life” manner is not depreciated by Descartes, albeit being a metaphysician. In fact, the case is quite the opposite:

I am almost afraid that your Highness will think that I am not speaking seriously…I can say with truth that the chief rule I have
always observed in my studies, which I think has been the most useful
to me in acquiring what knowledge I have, has been never to spend
more than a few hours a day in the thoughts which occupy the
imagination and a few hours a year on those which occupy the pure
intellect…

(AT, 141-142.)

Descartes thinks that, in spite of only a few hours a year, it is extremely important
and necessary to have understood, once in a lifetime, the principles of
metaphysics, since it is by them we come to the knowledge of God. He also gives
practical advice for balancing metaphysical meditation and knowledge gained
from it with ordinary thinking and studying: it should be done in a way that the
knowledge gained from metaphysical meditation should be kept in memory, and
then, “to employ the rest of one’s study time thoughts in which the intellect co-
operates with the imagination and the senses”. (AT, 143). In other words,
metaphysical knowledge is useful even when it is not actively being scrutinized;
possessing it gives insight to matters that need only the co-operation of the
intellect with imagination and senses.

I pointed out earlier that I believe that Descartes’ readers have been too
enthusiastic puzzling with the distinction of the substances and the problem of
their interaction. In his letter to Elizabeth, Descartes seems to agree: “I think it is
those meditations rather than thoughts requiring less attention that have made
your Highness find obscurity in our notion of their union” (AT, 142).

It seems that Descartes wants to encourage us to use common sensical, “everyday
life” thinking according to which mind and body both inseparably belong to every
individual, making each individual a single thing. It is true, that after carrying out
a careful metaphysical contemplation we can distinguish between two
independent substances by their properties and arrive at a logical distinction
between their independent existences. However, in order to understand human
existence this logical distinction does not apply, at least not in a strict manner.

The existence of men depend on the very special unit containing mind and body. It
is not reducible to a separate substances of mind and body except on a very
abstract or logical level. In Meditation II Descartes asks himself the question
“what am I?” and replies: “a thing that thinks” (CSM II, 19). This thinking has a
body, or better, is a body. Every man, every thinking thing, consists of a material body and a non-material mind but this does not entail metaphysical dualism in a strict manner. The distinction is logical but in a real world among real men mind and body become one regardless of the possibility of distinguishing between them at the level of abstract language. Indeed, Descartes’ letter to Elizabeth reveals that Descartes is willing to give up his distinction of two substances in the case of men, in order to see the unities that men ultimately are.
4. GOD AS A UNIFIER

It seems that we have attained a whole different picture Descartes. He doesn’t come out as an epistemologist trying to prove his existence by the cogito argument, nor does he want to create metaphysics of distinctions. Why is it so important for Descartes that we see the union of mind and body as a single thing? Why does he persist on a system of minds, bodies and God, if ultimately there are no real distinctions between different beings?

Remember that for Descartes God is the infinite, supremely perfect being, and as we saw God must be both extended and thinking: God is thinking-being as well as an extended-being. Furthermore, remember that Descartes said that he “is made in God’s image”. The union of mind and body, or better the unity, or as Descartes says “a single thing”, can best be understood as a reflection, as it were, of God. Because God is omnipresent and omniscience, I am extended and thinking; because God is extended and thinking, I am what I am because of what God is.

In The Meditations Descartes starts with “I”, examining the special case of humans before examining God. We have now done similarly. However, I believe it could easily be done the other way around, starting with God. In fact, had Descartes started with God instead of cogito it could have turned out to be more efficient. After establishing God, Descartes could have perhaps make his remarks on individual existence more understandable – at least following the unificationist reading. Starting with cogito and the evil demon demonstration induces reaction towards epistemological skepticism in the reader. Had Descartes first placed God on the metaphysical map, the worry of the existence of individuals would, perhaps, not have arisen as easily. However, I will follow Descartes and examine God next.

Examining God in detail will now allow us to gain deeper understanding about what we already know about being human, having a mind-body union as a unified being. In Descartes’ system in order to fully understand being human requires detailed understanding of God, what it means to be in his image. God is crucially
important to existence in Descartes’ theory and it would be very different to exist as a mind-body unit in a world without God.

4.1 Global Existence

Let’s start by asking a question of the extended world. What does it ultimately mean for a thing to be extended; for a substance to have an attribute? As we saw earlier in the case of material substances, if they were not extended, they would not be, they would not exist at all; and mutatis mutandis with thinking and immaterial substances.

To recap, let’s look at the quote from Curley:

I take it that Descartes’ view here is this: at a certain level of generality we can make a distinction between a thing, or substance, and its properties; when I ascribe a mode to an extended thing – say that the table is three feet long – there is some content to the distinction between the mode and the thing whose mode it is, because we can have some conception of what the thing (the table) would be without that property...but when the property in question is a fundamental a property as an attribute, we cannot conceive of what the thing would be like without that property; to try to suppose a world in which the table had become a mind, a thinking, non-extended substance, would be to try to suppose something unintelligible.

(Curley 1988, 14.)

It seems that in the case of (material) substances we have attained some kind of identification between extending and existing. At this point I see a confluence between Curley’s point and Almog’s interpretation. Almog avoids, and sometimes even refuses, to talk about attributes and substances. For him, what is most significant in Descartes’ metaphysics is Thinking and Existence. In his lecture courses, Almog has called his Descartes reading by the name of Globalism as well as The Objective Reading.

First of all, I want to make clear that since these readings have not been presented in literature, I cannot put any of the following text in Almog’s name. I can merely interpret what was discussed in his classes and use the general line of thought of
the lectures. Almog has, however, read this chapter and given his permission to refer to these ideas as originally coming from him.

So, in order to exist, a thing must have a fundamental property. Every thing is always extended or thinking. But as we saw, the existence of minds as pure thinking things is rather problematic and we can attribute extension to them as it helps us to conceive the union of the mind and the body which makes the unity of man. So the “either extension or thinking” canvas becomes blurred. If there is no “either or” in the case of minds, it could be that this applies to bodies as well.

What is thinking? It should by definition belong to minds, not bodies like chairs or stones, but as we saw, we are free to attribute extension to minds; so could we also attribute thinking to bodies? Perhaps bodies are always essentially connected to thinking as well.

According to Almog’s interpretation, they are connected and the connection is made possible by God. God is the infinite substance who “must have both thinking and extension as attributes” (as we saw on above); as his modes of being. So up to the point we understand God as being a “Being-thinking” and a “Being-extending” as well as having all the attributes listed by Descartes, such as omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, supreme goodness and so on. Almog takes a further step and reduces Descartes’ God as Thinking-Being. Whatever there is in the world is a part of this infinite Thinking-Being (substance).

The attribute of omnipresence means that God is everywhere; every act of extending; being an extended body, means that the body is being part of the existence of God. Moreover, every act of thinking is thinking of God. God is Being-Thinking and everything there is in the world are parts of this Being-Thinking substance. We don’t have to divide things into being-extending and being-thinking as they are always parts of both as being part of God. This is the picture following from Almog’s interpretation. Bodies are always connected to thinking because God is always thinking. In this way, Almog makes an

7Note that from the preceding Curley quote it does not follow that a thinking chair would be “unintelligible” per se, it would only become such if it were a non-extended AND a thinking object
identification between thinking and being, through God. There is no being without thinking because they are both parts of a single thing. God is Being-Thinking, and every being is part of it as well as every thinking is part of It = every being is thinking.

Descartes did not want to make distinctions between extension and thinking or man and God when he was talking about being in the world (of God). That world is not a collection of different, separate things but a unity, made together by God. Similarly, mind and body of a man constitutes a unity, connected to the rest of the world by God.

This interpretation takes God as the most important thing in Descartes’ theory and, very importantly, starts from God. It is the opposite for the view according to which Descartes first proves his existence and then, separately, proves the existence of other things and of God. How could it follow from “I exist” that other things exist or that God exists? It does not. “I exist” is an island. There is no logical step from “I exist” to any other existence. There may be other local islands, other “I exists” but surely their existence is not entailed in the “I exist”. The existence of God as Being-Thinking glues all existence together in a way that the local island existence interpretation is incapable of doing. God makes any existence global existence, instead of several “I exist”- loci.

4.2 What if there was no God?

Because God is so essential that without it, Descartes’ Meditations would seem to be perhaps not much more than a collection of justifications for different beliefs and metaphysics of distinctions and dualisms, it seems truly incredible that many philosophers consider Descartes’ God as merely a misstep in his theory. Some thinkers insist on abandoning the Cartesian God once and for all and try to “make sense” of The Meditations without taking God seriously. For example, in his paper Descartes, the Cartesian Circle, and Epistemology Without God, Michael Della Rocca (2005) argues that:
I will show that Descartes does take important steps toward seeing how to do epistemology without God and that, most surprisingly, he does this precisely in his response to the problem posed by the Cartesian Circle. The divorce between God and epistemology is not complete or, I will admit, successful, but it is present, and it reveals that Descartes not only fully appreciates the nature of the skeptical problem he has raised, but also grasps the insight that one cannot fruitfully bring in God in any straightforward way to do any epistemological hard work.

(Della Rocca 2005, 2.)

Della Rocca wants to show that Descartes wanted to do “serious” epistemology and wants to save Descartes’ embarrassing attempt to bring God into the picture. It seems that Della Rocca wants to do epistemology with The Meditations in a way that would be “legal” in contemporary philosophy.

It would have been better, so the story goes, for Descartes not to have appealed to God, to a deus ex machina, to solve his (Descartes’) philosophical problems. It would have been better had Descartes faced the skeptical problem head on or at least admitted that it cannot be solved, rather than bringing God on the stage so ineffectually. If only, so the story ends, Descartes had seen the point that later philosophers, e.g. Hume and Kant, were to appreciate so well: one cannot legitimately accord God any pivotal philosophical role in one’s epistemology.

(Della Rocca, 2005, 1.)

In the article, Della Rocca treats The Meditations very technically, showing step by step how we can scrutinize them purely epistemologically by showing that in some respects Descartes was an epistemological externalist, that is, in his theory justifications depend on additional factors that are external to a person; and that in doing such epistemology Descartes takes steps toward epistemology without god (Della Rocca 2005, 1). Della Rocca concludes:

…we can see in Descartes crucial steps toward a view that makes God irrelevant to epistemology. In this way, Descartes is a surprising and important precursor of the kind of God-detached epistemology that one will find in different ways in Hume and Kant and so much of later epistemology.

(Della Rocca 2005, 30.)

In this manner, Della Rocca has showed how we can make Descartes’ Meditations “presentable” in the light of the interests of contemporary philosophy. But as I see
it, this is merely a camouflage. I will not go into the details of the article as its contents are not are not very interesting for the purposes of this essay. However, the ending words are:

I should state for the record that I do not think that any of this works. Rationalist that I am, I am, in general, no fan of the kind of incomprehensible and exceptional status that Descartes accrues to God. But Descartes clearly is a fan of such things, and his sophisticated attempt to employ such a strategy throughout his metaphysics and epistemology deserves to be understood and taken seriously.

(Della Rocca 2005, 30.)

Della Rocca admits that his epistemological scrutiny of the Meditations without God does not probably even “work” and it is not something that Descartes would have approved of as he, indeed, gives God an exceptional status. It is precisely this “incomprehensibleness” of the special status of God that has driven many philosophers to depreciate the whole matter of God and induced them to push Descartes into the mold of contemporary philosophy, as “post-Kant and post-Hume”, allowing them to read the Meditations analytically and technically; argument by argument, without necessarily trying to understand the big picture of Descartes’ objective.

God is extremely important to this big picture. In fact, it is so important that we can start reading the Meditations from God, as Almog encourages us to do. His reading starts from God instead of the cogito (I exist) Descartes presents in Meditation I. The idea is to avoid the problems arising from piece-by-piece justifications starting from the individual existence. As was said above, this would lead to several issues concerning the wholeness of the existing world. In the end, Descartes would have proved that there are several “I think, I exist” –substances and, then somehow, God as an infinite substance. This would seem to introduce a rather basic epistemological method (yet groundbreaking) for justifications for beliefs but seems hardly a meaningful ground for metaphysics of the whole, which I believe was really important for Descartes.
4.3 Starting from God

I have contrasted the views of the “epistemologists” and the “unifiers”. The unifiers, including Almog, should give the most importance to God and start the whole reading of *The Meditations* with it. So let’s now do so.

From the fact that I cannot think of a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that a mountain and valley exist anywhere, but simply that a mountain and a valley, whether they exist or not, are mutually inseparable. But from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and hence that he really exists. It is not that my thought makes it so, or imposes any necessity on any thing; on the contrary, it is the necessity of the thing itself, namely the existence of God, which determines my thinking in this respect.

(CSM II, 46.)

Is this proving God’s existence? If we look at it like Della Rocca or any faithful epistemologist, then in a way yes it is, and it seems “incomprehensible” in the way Della Rocca describes it to be because God seems to have a very special yet unsatisfactorily explained status: He exists necessarily. This seems to be a poor argument, if an argument at all. If we analyze it as a separate argument on its own we will arrive at The Cartesian Circle or the ontological argument.

However, there is another way of understanding the quote. I believe, following the unificationist position, that Descartes’ point is that whatever we may want to say about God, defend or question His existence, it doesn’t change the necessity of His existence. It is the necessity of *God’s existence that determines our thinking*, not the opposite way. When we meditate among metaphysical truths there is no way for Descartes we could find things to be otherwise; that God didn’t necessarily exist, and the sufficient reason for this conclusion is God’s existence; He makes us conceive of it. And this is the *starting point* of Descartes’ theory.

However, the quote (qCSM II, 46) seems to employ the ontological argument. I am not going to go into the vast discussion in literature about the ontological argument that Descartes’s God remarks in several parts of the *Meditations* are supposed to form. It is true that in the above quote we can see “an ontological argument” as if we cannot think of God without existing (that is, lacking a
perfection) he must then exist, and this would be arguing from essence to
existence. However, Koistinen (2014) notices that Descartes immediately tries to
correct the impression of the ontological argument right after it appears, as if he
(Descartes) was considering the obvious objections (Koistinen 2014, 231). When
Descartes says that it is the necessity of God’s existence that determines his
thinking he steps away from the ontological arguing where God’s existence should
follow from his essence. As Koistinen puts it:

When Descartes offers the ontological argument, it seems that most
his labor is to focus our attention on the idea of God and what it
reveals about God’s essence, and the way in which existence is
supposed to follow from that essence is left almost as an exercise for
the reader.

(Koistinen 2014, 231.)

While noticing Descartes’ reluctance to give importance to the ontological
argument, I believe Koistinen doesn’t dismiss strongly enough the arguing from
essence to existence. If we started to examine solely the ontological argument here
(qCSM 46), Descartes’ point would get lost. It is the existence, not essence of God
that is remarkable about Him, and it is not that Descartes was proving here God’s
existence from His essence, he is already taking God’s existence as given and
describes essence on the side. Descartes believes that we can understand God’s
existence directly from describing God, almost as it were, from a mentioning of
God.

Of course, the emphasis on the idea of God is understandable if
Descartes thinks that by attending to it we would simultaneously see
God as existent, but why should Descartes think this? I cannot give a
complete answer…

(Koistinen 2014, 231).

Perhaps there is no satisfactory way of giving a complete answer. But I believe it
is greatly due to this passage, this line of thought and posture of Descartes which
convinces Almog to start with God instead of substances, attributes, essences or
cogitos. It is God’s existence that determines our thinking and conceiving of Him,
as well as other thinking; other minds and bodies and everything else in the world.
Descartes was not trying to prove God’s existence from His essence in order to
convince us that God really exists but rather stated that God exists and, by the
way, from His existence we can see that it follows that His essence is like this and He has these attributes. In a way, this is a type of *existentialism*, not essentialism. Existence precedes essence. So the starting point (God’s existence) remains.

Further support for this view may be found from the Fifth Meditation where Descartes argues that it is admittedly not necessary for him to ever think of God, but whenever he so chooses to do it is necessary that he attributes all perfections to Him, even if he does not that time enumerate them or list them individually (CSM II, 47). I take it that this can be interpreted to mean that Descartes believes that when God is being thought of, it already means that he exists and not that we should first figure out what God is like and then learn that he must exist. We don’t even have to think of any God’s attributes and still Descartes holds on to the same argument, that is, that God exists. This suggests that he certainly did not want to argue from essence to existence but rather the opposite. Furthermore, this arguing is more like describing a way of some immediate seeing and instantaneously understanding the nature of the thing; the existence of God.

Moreover, Descartes argues that he *after supposing that God exists* he “plainly sees that it is necessary that he has existed from eternity and will abide for eternity” (CSM II, 47). Again, an attribute is being argued from God’s existence, not the other way around, and it is based on “plain seeing”. When I picture a triangle in my mind, while I picture it, or see it, I am not actively thinking that a triangle must necessarily be a polygon that has three edges and three vertices. But when I attend to thinking about it even for a brief moment, it becomes clear that this must, in fact, be necessarily true about any triangle, there is just no other way. If I am able to picture a triangle at all, I must also be able to see this effortlessly. This does not suggest that a triangle must exist anywhere but it shows what is necessary true about triangles.

This shows how the seeing-understanding works when thinking of God, but, to be very clear, it is not an argument to show that from God’s essence we can understand his existence. It is true that for Descartes, existence belongs to God’s essence but it is not that we learn the existence from the essence. Furthermore, because God is special, Descartes notes that: “apart from God, there is nothing else of which I am capable of thinking such that existence belongs to its essence”
(CSM II, 47). So Descartes notices the common counter-argument for the ontological argument according to which we could attribute existence to any “perfect being” and hence that this being must then exist. Descartes comments on it in order to make the analogous argument impossible as it would ultimately make his God remarks rather redundant since this would be disregarding the special status of God.

4.4 Consequences for starting from God

Descartes says that “it is the necessity of the thing itself, namely the existence of God, which determines my thinking in this respect” (qCSM II, 46). In his book *Cogito?: Descartes and Thinking the World*, Almog (2008) a comments the relation between thinking and the existence of God: “regardless of what-x-is, Descartes said: I think of x; if I think of x, then x exists; therefore x exists” (Almog 2008, 65). And:

...as a consequence of this analysis, it follows that God himself is: if He is in my mind, has the secondary mode of being, He is tout court, has the primary mode of being. In my view, this is the full Cartesian argument. By this I do not mean to depreciate Descartes’ point. To the contrary—its simplicity makes it all the more remarkable.

(Almog 2008, 53.)

If God is being thought of it means that He exists. Descartes says that it is the existence of God that makes it so, and makes us to think of it. God’s existence is the primary point, an Archimedean point, from which a theory of global existence follows. There is no longer the problem of individual existence (cogito) from which the problem of logical entailment of other existences would necessarily follow. Because God exists as an infinite substance, I exist, among other things. It is not a difficult trick that is being done here and should not be over analyzed to depreciate Descartes’ cogito passage or to over emphasize God over other things under analysis in The *Meditations*. The idea is simply to avoid the scattered world that would seem not much more than a playground or a gadget for the epistemologist to justify different beliefs. The main point is rather straightforward: if we take that Descartes first proves “I exist” as if it were an Archimedean point
of some sort⁸, and then, having proved “I exist” with an argument based on the idea of “what can be known of certainty”, and then further on an isolated ground proves that other things; the whole external world exists as well, and again furthermore proves that God exists, it is problematic because there is no way to “glue” this aggregate of existing things together in a meaningful way that would support Descartes’ ideas of the unity of man or the nature of God. Descartes’ theory would become an epistemologists’ series of justifications for different beliefs. However, if we start from God existing necessarily and this, the existence, making Descartes to have an idea of God (qCSM II, 46), and do this literally before cogito or talk of the external world, we have a metaphysician Descartes who sets forth a theory of global existence where everything is connected to each other in a manner that makes the logical entailment problem to the opposite: it is then necessary from “I exist” that other things exist as well.

Almog has called this change of order from I exist to God exists the gestalt switch. If we understand and read the Meditations starting from God instead of “I exist” it is such a radical change that the whole gestalt of the work becomes different. Despite of not being presented systematically in any article or book, this view has inspired many. In his book Between two worlds: A reading of Descartes's Meditations John Carriero (2009) acknowledges his colleague:

Joseph Almog was more often than not the first person to read a draft of a chapter and invariably provided philosophically rigorous and supportive feedback. He influenced my treatment of Descartes’s theory on sensation and my thinking about Descartes’s theory of the human being (although I believe we still disagree somewhat about the latter).

(Carriero 2009, xii.)

Almog’s way of reading the Meditations through the gestalt switch has influenced Carriero so much that his own treatment would not have been the same without it.

In his substantial book on the Meditations, Carriero presents a reading of the work

⁸Although, John Carriero (2009) believes the cogito discovery to actually be an Archimedean point (Carriero 2009, 4). However, he means it in a metaphysical way. For Carriero the cogito is an Archimedean point from which Descartes lever a systematic exploration of the being’s nature and allows the meditator to ask further questions such as what is the nature of this being. What I mean by an Archimedean point here is epistemological. More on Carriero see the following paragraphs.
which steps away from “the familiar reading”, similar to what I have been calling
the epistemologist/justificationist view. He believes the familiar view to be
unbalanced (Carriero 2009, 2).

For much of the twentieth century scholars tended to read the work
through an epistemological lens, with a focus on its handling of
skepticism, certainty, justification of belief, and knowledge.

(Carriero 2009, 2.)

Carriero’s reading is not as radical as that of Almog’s but it does abandon the
familiar epistemologist/justificationist view on a moderate level. This will be
examined further in the next chapter.
5. READING FROM EPISTEMOLOGY TO METAPHYSICS

In this chapter some epistemological questions will be raised. The epistemologist or justificationist view will be further questioned and some specific details of it scrutinized.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Carriero has been influenced by Almog’s unificationist view in which God is taken to be the first and most important part of Descartes’ theory. Carriero also asserts that the familiar view over emphasizes epistemological points, to the detriment of metaphysics. Indeed, Carriero feels very strongly about this. He describes the familiar epistemologist view:

The view I am attributing to Descartes clashes with a picture of him as a certain sort of epistemologist. Many are accustomed to thinking of a Cartesian idea as consisting of precisely whatever is made available to the mind…for the purposes of reflectively grounding our beliefs, so that the structure found in an idea is exhausted by whatever can be brought to explicit awareness. Sensory ideas come to be, as it were, the epistemological surfaces of a thing. This makes difficult the thought, at least suggested by language like “obscure” and “confused”, that sensory ideas should have a metaphysical backside, that is, contain some additional structure we cannot get at by contemplating the idea because that structure is present in the idea only obscurely or confusedly… I don’t think Descartes was interested in these epistemological surfaces.

(Carriero 2009, 20.)

In other words, after establishing that there is a mind, a cogito³, the familiar view takes that Descartes’ idea was that after careful attention the mind can see which things are true and which are “obscure” and hence to be dismissed as such. Because the senses are unreliable (CSM II, 12), bodies and other things of which we cannot conceive with the same pure method as the cogito become problematic and we should seek similar certainty regarding them as has been attained with cogito.

³Instead of mind, Carriero prefers to call it a being or a cogito being (Carriero 2009, 4).
However, as Carriero says, he does not believe that this was Descartes’ agenda. Instead, after establishing cogito, Descartes seeks to contemplate metaphysical questions such as: “what is the nature of this being? What is its origin? When does it understand well and judge properly? When it understands well and judges properly, what are the things to which its cognition relates it?” (Carriero 2009, 4). I think these questions are very natural. In the Meditations, Descartes is trying to understand the nature of being, not the preconditions for justifications for beliefs. He knows that he thinks and he knows that he is, and furthermore, wants to discover what it is to be a being that he is, and ultimately, what it is to be part of human kind. In Meditation II, he already knows much:

But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.

(CSM II, 19.)
A thing that thinks, a cogito being, possesses many properties that belong to it naturally. Doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, unwilling, imagining and having sensory perceptions are faculties of the mind. Furthermore, being a cogito being, a thing that thinks, naturally involves having a body, as we saw earlier:

But it is the ordinary course of life and conversation, and abstention from meditation and from the study of the things which exercise the imagination, that teaches us how to conceive the union of the soul and the body.

(AT, 141.)
When not meditating among metaphysical matters that exercise the intellect and imagination we see what it means to be a cogito being, to have a mind and body as a union. This “seeing” might be similar to that of seeing God’s existence. (As we saw earlier, Descartes believes that from the idea of God we can see His existence directly.) Understanding Descartes through the unificationist position, the most important thing following from this is that: God exists as Being-Thinking and I, as a part of God’s many creations, am a certain type of being: a thing that thinks and a thing that has both mind and body inseparably as a union, in the same manner as God has both Thinking and Being as His attributes.
What has been said directly above is what we can make of Descartes’ metaphysics following Almog’s reading, and abandoning the justificationist/epistemologist position. Almog’s theory has come a long way from the view in which Descartes is read as a “lawyer” trying to justify his beliefs and the unreliability of his senses, sometimes even with the abandonment of God, as was the case with Della Rocca’s article.

5.1 Perceiving clearly and distinctly

It should be clear by now that Descartes takes God’s existence to be very important and primary to any other existence. God’s existence is so primary to Descartes that it can be admissibly argued that it is almost given; it doesn’t need any elaborate proving. Descartes’ metaphysical theory is so dependent on God in such a way that without it it would all fall apart, piece by piece, since there could not be an “I” were it not the case that God really existed as he is, the creator everything. Moreover, the way Descartes understands God comes close to some intuitive or instantaneous seeing. Let’s now take a deeper look of what this seeing might be like.

I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.

(CSM II, 24.)

This general rule, a truth rule, points that whatever Descartes sees clearly and distinctly is true. These clear and distinct ideas have a truth relation to the world. The idea of God is clear and distinct.

And when I consider the fact that I have doubts, or that I am a thinking thing that is incomplete and dependent, then there arises in me a clear and distinct idea of a being who is independent and complete, that is, an idea of God.
(CSM II, 37.)

And because the idea of God is clear and distinct it is true:

And from the mere fact that there is such an idea within me, or that I who possess this idea exist, I clearly infer that God also exists, and that every single moment of my existence depends on him.

(CSM II, 37.)

However, as Carriero points out, the truth rule presented in qCSM II 24 seems to be only a hypothesis and does not imply total certainty: “so I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule...” (Carriero 2009, 129).\textsuperscript{10} Again, I do not think Descartes was primarily after a general epistemic rule for certainty about all kinds of different propositions, and again, the answer might lie in his conception of God. When we judge that we are seeing things clearly and distinctly, it would seem unlikely that they would not in fact represent truth since for Descartes God is not a deceiver. “To begin with, I recognize that it is impossible that God should ever deceive me” (CSM II, 27) and “it is clear enough from this that he cannot be a deceiver, since it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend on some defect” (CSM II, 35).

In fact, because God has created us, perhaps he has created some of our ideas as well. Perhaps some ideas are not coming to us from the outside or be created by ourselves but are already in us, as placed there by God, in the same manner as the mind has some cognitive faculties naturally belonging to it. Before we consider this line of thought let’s further examine what Descartes’ says about ideas.

5.2 The nature of ideas

For Descartes it is substantially a different thing to have an idea of a shoe than an idea of God. Different types of ideas vary by the way the mind has received them as well as by their relation to the world.

\textsuperscript{10}Carriero also thinks the truth rule is merely a hypothesis for several other reasons. See Carriero 2009, 129-132.
Among my ideas, some appear to be innate, some to be adventitious, and others to have been invented by me. My understanding of what a thing is, what truth is, and what thought is, seems to derive simply from my own nature. But my hearing a noise, as I do now, or seeing the sun, or feeling the fire, comes from things which are located outside me, or so I have hitherto judged. Lastly, sirens, hippogriffs and the like are my own invention.

(CSM II, 26.)

Descartes thus categorizes three different types of ideas and describes them more in his letter to Mersenne:

I use the word idea to mean everything which can be in our thought, and I distinguish three kinds. Some are adventitious, such as the idea we commonly have of the sun; others are constructed or made up, in which class we can put the idea which the astronomers construct of the sun by their reasoning; and others are innate, such as the idea of God, mind, body, triangle, and in general all those which represent true, immutable and eternal essences.

(AT, 103.)

In this manner, Descartes has two original categories of ideas, adventitious ideas and innate ideas and a third category which is constructed out of one or both of the original categories. This third category has no truth value as it concerns only fictive ideas which we invent or construct. In contrast, the original categories concern true or false ideas. The innate ideas make available to the mind true and immutable natures and as such should represent what is always true. The adventitious ideas import reality from the world but do so confusedly as the mind-body union sets certain limitations to this type of information and it can easily become “blurred”11. (Carriero 2009, 134).

Now, what does it mean for an idea of God to represent true and immutable nature and what does it mean for the idea to be innate? The true and immutable nature seem to be something that the innate ideas are directed to or what the innate ideas grasp, something eternal and, as it were, superlatively true by their essence.

The innate idea of God, nevertheless, is not innate in any way that would suggest merely an epistemic a priori relation between the mind and the world. Rather, it is

11This is again similar to the conception that Spinoza has on knowledge. Spinoza holds that all information the mind receives through the body is inadequate. See Ethics, second book.
innate because while creating the mind, God has placed the idea there, as was suggested above. The quote from the end of Meditation III is a bonafide punchline:

And indeed it is no surprise that God, in creating me, should have placed this idea in me to be, as it were, the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work – not that the mark need be anything distinct from the work itself.

(CSM II, 35.)

The innate idea of God is not something distinct from us. It is not received through the senses a posteriori, it is not known or rationalized a priori nor is it created or constructed by us. Neither is the case so that God would somehow spiritually send or put the idea in us and thus that it would be received by the human mind by some process. The idea is innate. Descartes holds that as made in God’s image we possess the idea of God naturally and that is what allows us to conceive of God clearly and distinctly. For Descartes having the idea of God is part of being human, in the same manner as having a mind and a body – there is no other way.

5.3 Objective artifice and objective reality in ideas

In the Synopsis for The Meditations Descartes talks about the idea of God which he presents in Meditation III:

So it may be that many obscurities remain…One such problem, among others, is how the idea of a supremely perfect being, which is in us, possesses so much objective reality that it can come only from a cause which is supremely perfect. In the Replies this is illustrated by the comparison of a very perfect machine, the idea of which is in the mind of some engineer. Just as the objective intricacy belonging to the idea must have some cause, namely the scientific knowledge of the engineer, or of someone else who passed the idea on to him, so the idea of God which is in us must have God himself as its cause.

(CSM II, 11.)

The idea of God as being in us was explained in the last chapter but this quote introduces a new interesting element. As Carriero points out, it seems that
Descartes implicitly recognizes “objective artifice” and “objective reality” as different notions (Carriero 2009, 187).

For example, he writes in the Second replies that the objective perfection or reality of an idea...no less than “the objective artifice (artificium) in the idea of a machine of very ingenious design, requires a cause”, implying that the two notions are different.

(Carriero 2009, 187.)

Objective intricacy or artifice seems to be a sort of complexity or richness of structure in the idea. A very fine complex idea contributes to complex artifacts such as the perfect machine. And for Descartes, both complex ideas of objective intricacy (the perfect machine) and simple ideas of objective reality (my shoe) require a cause in reality.

Now, let’s think of a television, for example. My idea of a television is that it is a box, which is often nowadays a very thin box, and on the surface of the box I can see moving picture that is somehow being transmitted to it. There is some particulate physics involved as well, that I know. But somebody who designed and made that that television has a much more complex idea of it. In a way it is the same one, we do share the same idea of the television, but he has a deeper understanding of how the television works and what is inside of it and so on. Now, does the television expert’s idea contain more objective intricacy than mine?

There are two possible answers to this questions. One possible answer is yes, the idea of an expert contains more objective intricacy than my idea because there is much more reality or perfection in his idea (his mind) than mine. (Carriero 2009, 187). However, I do not believe this would be Descartes’ answer.12

Other possible answer is no, it does not have more objective intricacy because the same reality to which the idea is directed is (represented) in my mind as well. (Carriero 2009, 187). We share the same reality in which the TV exists and of which the ideas are. Hence, both ideas, albeit differing in their richness, have the same amount objective intricacy because their cause, the television, has a constant amount of it in objective reality. The objectivity, objectual relation,13 does not change.

12Carriero agrees, but tentatively (Carriero 2009, 188).
My idea of the television is obscure, simple and confused\textsuperscript{14} whereas the expert’s complex idea is displayed much more clearly and distinctly. Carriero puts it well:

But all the same, in order for something with that much (even implicit or latent) complexity to get into my mind, there had to be a cause actually possessed of that much complexity. To be sure, the fact that the artifice is not manifestly available to me – that I am unable to discern it in my rather foggy idea of it – means that I will not be able to argue directly from the idea alone to its having a cause of a certain sort, but that does not change the fact that the idea does require such a cause.

(Carriero 2009, 188).

One might understand this further with the following example. When I think of Aristotle, have an idea of Aristotle, my idea is much more “rich in structure” than that of someone who has only heard that there was once a philosopher called Aristotle who lived in the Ancient Greece. I have read Aristotle’s books and learned something of his life so when I think of him, my idea contains more artifice but the objective artifice is the same in the case of my more complex idea than that of a layman. Even if Aristotle turned out to be a fictive person, the same relation remains as there would certainly still be a cause for this misunderstanding in the objective reality. We may both be unaware, myself and the layman, of what the actual cause of the idea is but it does not change the fact that there is such a cause.

Moreover, when we see things clearly and distinctly we come closer to the knowledge of their cause. The case of God is a prime example for this; Descartes holds that we see God clearly and distinctly and recognize God alone as the cause of this idea (qCSM II, 11).

What about the other things we have ideas of? It seems that we have attained a strictly causal relation between objective reality and ideas. Indeed, it is so according to what has been argued. However, the story does not end here for

\textsuperscript{13}Almog has called his reading of Descartes The Objectual Reading after this kind of objectual relation between the reality and ideas.

\textsuperscript{14}Notions frequently used by Descartes as opposed to clear and distinct.
Descartes. The causal system, again, needs a unifier from which the causal relations can originate.

5.4 God as the cause of all ideas

The idea of God is caused by God, it is innate in us. Moreover, the idea of “I” is caused by God (see below).

Again, to recap once more, it is not that Descartes proves that he exists, cogito, by the evil demon argument and then, separately, proves that God exists. He has an idea of “I” because and only because of God.

I say that the notion I have of the infinite is in me before that of the finite because, by the mere fact I conceive being, or that which is, without thinking whether it is finite or infinite, what I conceive is infinite being; but in order to conceive a finite being, I have to take away something from this general notion of being, which must accordingly be there first.

(AT, 254.)

It seems that the idea of God, as “stamped by the craftsman himself”, is always prior to the idea of any (finite) being. There has to be a “general notion of being”, that is, the notion of God, prior to any other idea.

It is important not to misunderstand this. The idea of the infinite, of God, being prior to any idea of the finite does not mean that whenever I think of something I must also think of God. I don’t have to be aware of the infinite all the time. It does not mean that we are unable to think of ourselves without noticing that the idea of the finite (ourselves) is a limited version of our idea of the infinite (God). As in, that we would have to go through a logical contemplation process every time we turn to thinking of ourselves. The order of discovery can even go from my idea of myself to my idea of God. (Carriero 2009, 191).This still does not change Descartes’ point, that is, God as the cause of the idea of any finite being (any being!).

Descartes understands that, yes, we might discover the idea of God by noticing the various perfections we find in ourselves and then “extend” them to the idea of
God. But this power to extend already presupposes that we originate from a being in which these perfections are actually infinite. (Carriero 2009, 192).

We have thus attained, a fairly simple, system of causality between ideas and reality. Descartes holds that, summa summarum, when I think of something it is because there is or was de facto the thing itself to impact my idea of it, downright causally and directly. And what makes this possible is God whose idea we possess before any other idea, whether we are aware of it or not. I say the system is simple because it is ultimately common sensical and reflects our intuitive understanding of how ideas are produced: there are things in the world that can be thought of and there is no need for any intermediary\(^{15}\) between the mind and the world in Descartes’ theory, in a *metaphysical* sense. It is as if these beings “laser” our minds.\(^{16}\) God as the cause of all ideas is perhaps not all that intuitive for a contemporary person but, as Descartes proposes, we do not have to be aware of it, we will come to the knowledge of it by metaphysical contemplation. As God is omniscience, it is necessary that he be *the cause of all thinking* as a Thinking-Being.

Moreover, our idea of God has so much objective intricacy that the idea itself must be brought about only by God. Nobody, no finite mind has that much “expertise” to be able to bring about the idea of God except God himself. As Carriero points out, this might be the reason why Descartes shows so much interest in the objective intricacy (Carriero 2009, 189).

Now, an epistemological question *can* still be raised. How, or by what kind of process, we receive ideas? Is it through the senses? What is the relation between the senses and thinking? As we will see, this seemingly epistemological stance will, in fact, reveal itself to be ultimately metaphysical for Descartes and, in addition, extremely important.

\(^{15}\)cf. Kant, for example.

\(^{16}\)As Almog has metaphorically called the relation.
6. THINKING IS PERCEPTION

Up to this point we have gone to much detail about Descartes’ conception of ideas, following Carriero’s work. Before that the existence and essence of God were discussed. It is now time to collect the fruit of this examination. What can we make of Descartes’ work?

In this chapter Descartes’ we will see what will follow from Descartes’ metaphysical system as suggested by the unificationist reading. The question about receiving ideas will lead us to see how all the distinctions (that were shown to be controversial if not downright false) discussed earlier in this essay will finally be glued together by showing what Descartes understands by knowing, thinking and perception and what follows from this.

Earlier I have shown how the distinctions, for example that of mind and body, can be overcome by a careful analysis and genuine attempt to understand Descartes’ world view. Similar attempt will now be carried out with the case of thinking and knowledge.

Some of the main ideas in this chapter are strongly Almog’s. To make this clear I will, with his permission, quote our correspondence. Almog believes that if we understand correctly what Descartes means by thinking, we will overcome the skeptical problems raised in Meditation I (the evil demon argument) as well as understand what is knowing for Descartes and, ultimately, what Descartes’ world is like.

Almog’s key claim is that for Descartes thinking is perception. This is to be literally so, all thinking, any “having an idea”, is strictly equivalent to perceiving. Regardless of the sound of it, this claim does not coincide with empiricism. It does not mean that whenever one thinks one does so because (sensory) perception intermediates it or “allows” it by any kind of process. In Descartes’ case, thinking as perception does not fundamentally involve the senses at all. It does not mean that when I think I think of something because I receive or have received that information through the senses and that there would be nothing more to it, that is,
that thinking would be perceiving as long as it means a relation between the mind and the word intermediated by the senses. In other words, it is not a claim about the epistemological process of the mind directly receiving ideas from the world nor is it a claim about the mind putting out something to receive ideas. It is not a claim about epistemology at all. This is an important point to address in order to make the claim understandable.

It is not easy to see how this, a theory of thinking, would not be epistemology and should not face the problems of skepticism and other common issues dealt with among epistemologists, but rather a metaphysical claim about how “being” functions. In fact, I believe I myself have been before so blinded by the epistemological tradition that I have found it insurmountable to make the important “switch” towards a metaphysical understanding of The Meditations. Earlier, before working with these topics, I was puzzling with Descartes’ concept of perception and approached to Almog, knowing him as the “Descartes unificationist”, hoping he could clear things for me. I wanted to ask him how thinking could be perception for Descartes as that to me sounded a lot like classical empiricism. Furthermore, I wondered, if thinking is perception how do we overcome the problems of false perception and true knowledge. I believed I had understood and adopted to the unificationalist reading but my letter revealed it to be untrue. Even though I thought I had understood the reading in most parts, the case of perception and thinking turned out to be too much, I could not separate them from epistemology. Regardless of my attempts to think outside of the box, I had taken the concepts of knowing, thinking and perception for granted, to automatically be the kind of entities they are said to be inside the justificationist tradition, the very tradition I had hoped to have left behind. Taking such key Cartesian concepts granted truly makes it impossible to think outside of any box. Almog’s reply was awakening:

…I seem to remember that at some level you do worry this way. Well, that’s not D, at least not how I (and lo, a larger number of people) read him. In Med I he indicates that IF you proceed with an internal theory of thinking about--as empiricist since Aristotle do—then you WILL run yourself aground with a gap between your internalities and world; IF you proceed by noting the qualitative indiscernibility of dream and madness and seeing veridically a tree in front of you, you will create a mind/world gap. There is and never was such gap. Ergo, you must
understand mind is world, a second mode of being. The language you, RC, use to cast the problem suggests you half start with the textbooks of empiricist epistemology. The Med I--as well III--is a reductio of the qualitative (so dear to empiricist philosophers). Indeed D thinks that even in so called sensation--of cold or of pain—it’s not the feel, the quality--that does the work. In sensation, the internal is not the key. Sensation is confused perception--you perceive all right albeit confusedly. Which brings us to the key--perception. And here too start right--perception is not internal image dissection. Images are not the key. That is ground zero. Don’t--a la Aristotle/Aquinas--think by images.

(Almog 2014, 12.12.)

As I now understand it, Almog wants to make clear that when Descartes talks about having ideas, clear and distinct perceptions or knowing something, they all ultimately refer to one thing: “cognizing” a being, without any intermediary middlemen, and most importantly, doing so avoiding the skeptical and other epistemologically relevant problems because that is not what Descartes primarily wants to deal with. The evil demon demonstration in Meditation I is merely to show what shall inevitably happen if we start with internal abilities as opposed to (outside) world of being. What is key here is “mind is world”, has the second mode of being when one has an idea of it.

6.1 Thinking -relation

Instead of battling with epistemological issues what Almog wants to argue by the claim “thinking is perception” is that for Descartes thinking is perceiving because whenever one thinks it is the same thing as to know that there is that thing that one thinks of, existing in the world and when one thinks of it there is no gap, no barrier, between the thing and the thinker, in any essential way, metaphysical or epistemological. When one thinks of something one has that thing in his mind as a second mode of being. There is thus no need for examination of any special internal processes that the mind might have neither, it is a pure objectual relation that we are looking at.

17Thinking, seeing, having an idea, understanding, feeling, craving etcetera – whatever we might want to call the verb indicating mind’s action in different occasions.
Thinking about x is NOT having an intermediate entity --an idea really an imagistic content--that matches-resembles x. Thinking about x is x impacting you (your mind). When Descartes says--I have an idea of x, he means I am thinking of x viz. x has second mode of being in me.

(Almog 2014, 12.12.)

When one thinks of something it is because this something impacts one’s mind directly, albeit not in a way that would bring about questions about the mind’s abilities, processes or intermediate entities. What is important for Descartes is that beings (other bodies or minds) impact minds and when the mind thinks, has these beings as second modes of beings, the mind knows. However, knowing in this case and manner does not mean the usual. It is not the loaded package containing the issues of certainty and justifications. It simply infers that “x impacts my mind when I think of it”. Mind can know falsely as well, make mistakes with correspondence. According to Almog’s reading, x impacting one’s mind and mind having x as a second mode of being is extremely important in Descartes’ theory of being because it demonstrates the composition of Descartes’ metaphysical system.

In this light “I think, therefor I am” could be taken to mean that if I think I simply perceive existence: “I think, because I am now perceiving my existence”, not that my thinking would justify (a belief of) my existence. For Descartes there is no initial need for justification for belief of his existence and the evil demon argument shows that nothing, no doubting, can bring about the fact that he is still something, he exists:

But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so as long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.

(CSM II, 17.)

These classic and frequently quoted lines from Meditation II have now opened out in a new and different light. The unificationist view takes them indicate Descartes’

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18I think that even the word "relation” here is misleading as it suggests a process or a barrier of some kind. However, it would be hard to describe the position otherwise.
interest in existence and being, instead of representing epistemological skepticism as the justificationist view holds.

The question at the outset for D is not knowledge and surely not knowledge as epistemology of empiricism looks at it via knowing proposition P as justified true belief that P. D is not into belief and its warrant.

But more fundamentally the question is not knowing, but rather thinking about. When and if you'll think about the world--and specifically specific items thereof well--you'll know. To start with knowledge is to start with reading Med I in a skeptical way and worry we know not much and there’s a huge barrier to knowing.

(Almog 2014, 12.12.)

It is so that in the relation between mind and the object the mind does receive its content from the object impacting it but this is not similar to the concept of mind of the empiricist. It is no merely a passive receiver through a sensory process. For Descartes, mind is a receiver regardless of the origin of the impact. It is not always “the outside world” as was shown earlier in the case of the idea of God. As we saw, the nature of the idea of God is innate. Some ideas, like the idea of God, are built within but they are nevertheless received, meaning that they are not made by us or learned a posteriori. The same objectual relation remains between mind and the object regardless of the origin of the impact.

When x so impacts you, x is perceived by you. In this way, D uses continuously perception for non-imaged items—me (in cogito), wax (when you think of IT, it is not the image that makes you think of it), God, triangle, chiliagon. You may or may not en route form an image. What binds you to the object of thought is IT impacting you, your receiving it. Some such you receive from your very nature, as when we have innate build-up—as with God and math objects and myself and the very category of material objects (med VI). In none do we think by imagery. In all, we perceive because we--receive. Receive the object. In all we achieve clear and distinct--perception.

(Almog 2014, 12.12.)

It is thus that in the unificationist reading perceiving is receiving (not referring to sensory receiving or other phenomena of classical empiricism, to make it clear) and in the same manner all thinking is perceiving as well. This theory of thinking ultimately leads to a world view in which everything (including “I”) is constantly

19See CSM II, 52.
receiving and impacting one another. There are no barriers nor distinctions, no “island-existing”, but a unified world of connected being. It is not possible to separate oneself from the chain of receiving and impacting since the relation between my mind receiving x and x itself is direct (as x then has a second mode of being in my mind). Moreover, if one is one is part of the whole and there is thus no other way of being, no local separated being-s. This kind of global being as unified existence is the concluding state of Almog’s reading of Descartes. The reading is ultimately a theory of Being leading to global existence.

My existence is impacted by Aristotle’s existence when I think of him and thus we are both (me and Aristotle) implementing Existence (existence of God) at the very moment when I think of Aristotle. Almog’s idea is that humans are in God’s image and as such belong to God’s being, are included in it. Descartes’ God could exist (perhaps) without humans but humans could certainly not exist without God.

Descartes’ idea of thinking, perception and knowledge (knowing) is ultimately a matter of being and thus a metaphysical issue. It leads to a theory of global existence and as such is groundbreaking and different from any “text book” – readings of Descartes.

It cannot be emphasized enough how important it is to understand the switch from epistemology to Being (metaphysics) when reading Descartes. In order to understand Almog’s theory of Being one must first be able see Descartes without his followers and contemporary philosophy, without prejudices that often determine or at least guideline our thinking.

6.2 Imagination

The thinking –relation in Almog’s theory can be further understood by examining Descartes’ idea of the role of imagination. In Meditation VI he says:

Besides this, I consider that his power of imagining which is in me, differing as it does from the power of understanding, is not a necessary constituent of my own essence, that is, of the essence of my mind. For if I lacked it, I should undoubtedly remain the same
individual as I now am; from which it seems to follow that it depends on something distinct from myself.

(CSM II, 51.)

As Carriero interprets this passage, Descartes seems to think that imagination is not required for the essence of the mind (Carriero 2009, 371). We would essentially be the same with or without imagination. However what Carriero puzzles with is Descartes’ claim that since imagination is not a necessary constituent of essence it depends on something distinct of oneself (or seems to depend). Carriero points out that his ability to master algebra is surely not necessary for his essence but it would seem strange to say that it depends on something distinct from himself (Carriero 2009, 372). He takes Descartes’ point to be that imagination is something brand “new”, not fully explicable, and not just adding anything on something that is already existing in the mind (understanding, for example) (Carriero 2009, 272).

If imagination is not essential to mind and it is “something new” what is it then? It gets interesting when Descartes further describes imagination:

And I can easily understand that, if there does exist some body to which the mind is so joined that it can apply itself to contemplate it, as it were, whenever it pleases, then it may possible be this very body that enables me to imagine corporeal things. So the difference between this mode of thinking and pure understanding may simply be this: when the mind understands, it in some way turns towards itself and inspects one of the ideas which are within it; but when it imagines, it turns towards the body and looks at something in the body which conforms to an idea understood by the mind or perceived by the senses

(CSM II, 51.)

It seems now clear that Descartes holds that imagining depends on bodies, the outside world. As Carriero puts it, Descartes’ characterization of what imagining is “is nothing else but an application of the cognitive faculty to a body which is intimately present to it” (Carriero 2009, 373). He further adds that “we are engaged in substantive metaphysics about what imagining might be” (Carriero 2009, 373).

However, we do not need to talk about any cognitive faculties and how they might function. In fact, Descartes’ idea of imagination can be understood in a very
simple manner. Descartes points out that when I imagine something it is because
that thing makes it so, and following Almog’s theory it directly impacts my mind
and as such has a second mode of being in my mind. It is not as if I am *tabula
rasa* and when I see a tree I know have an image of this tree in my mind and am
free to imagine it whenever I please. It is not a matter of a cognitive faculty of
creating images, it is a pure objectual relation of being – a matter of ontological
interaction.

When Descartes says that imagination depends on something distinct from
oneself, I believe he means that imagination is *perceiving*, and that without
anything to perceive there would not be imagination. Behind this line of thought
lies a conception of the mind being independent, capable of existing on its own
right. However, this is not an issue as as we saw in chapter one, mind is a
substance and thus capable of existing on its own right by definition.

Imagination depending on things distinct from us supports Almog’s reading
according to which all thinking or “cognizing” is perception and reflects the
metaphysical system of global existence as opposed to local existence which
would lead to several issues concerning Descartes’ view of the world as a whole.
7. Conclusions and evaluation

If Descartes wanted to go through metaphysical meditations in order to justify different beliefs piece by piece in order to achieve knowledge he would have proved that he exists (cogito) and, separately, that God exists (Cartesian circle, ontological argument). Furthermore, he would have proved that two independent substances exist, and in the case of humans they exist together and their co-existence would ultimately remain unexplained as Descartes’ metaphorical comments do not follow the same standard of logic as in the case of cogito and God. What would this world be like? How does it coincide with Descartes’ ideas of the whole of nature and the unity of man? It seems that, according to the justificationist reading’s own demands, these additional concepts would not be plausible after a skeptical scrutinizing and the discovery of the cogito.

The reading proposed in this thesis suggests that a justificationist approach to The Meditations is not the only possible approach nor is it perhaps the best one neither if one wishes to understand Descartes’ texts in their wholeness. The unificationist reading aims to literally unify Descartes’ metaphysical units and takes God to be the starting point for this. Instead of examining Descartes’ God as a mere logical argument, the unificationist reading takes God literally: in Descartes’ theory God is the total cause of everything, all ideas, all thinking, all being. As such, God glues the metaphysical system of “island-cogitos” together and thus abolishes the most fundamental dualisms between different entities.

I have shown how some of the most famous passages and ideas of Descartes can be interpreted in a different light following the unificationist reading. The example of the wax (chapter 2.3), the whole of nature (3), God as extended (3.1), unity of man (3.3), global existence (4.1) and thinking as perception (6) all show parts of Descartes’ thinking that could not be understood following the justificationist reading solely, at least if one requires consistency. As we saw, Della Rocca realizes that doing epistemology without God in the case of Descartes would not even work and the importance Descartes gives to God should be taken seriously (Della Rocca 2005, 30). Still, it seems, not many are willing to do so.
As I have shown in this thesis, the unificationist theory proposes a switch from epistemology to metaphysics in reading Descartes’ *Meditations*. Such key concepts of the tradition of epistemology as thinking and perception are regarded as fundamentally metaphysical in the unificationist theory as they reflect the system of impact between beings (chapter 6). The justificationist reading is unable to explain this kind of impact and interaction due to a system of justifications of beliefs that take place in several different contexts.

Perhaps the most striking individual detail in this thesis is the showing how Descartes’ most famous posture, that of dualism of mind and body, can be questioned and with good reason. However, it remains questionable, not shown definitely otherwise. It is a disagreement between two views. The justificationist theory supporter can argue that Descartes explicitly makes a distinction between two separate substances and that their vaguely explained interaction in an individual denotes dualism in a very pure manner. However, the unificationist reading emphasizes Descartes’ assertion that a man is ultimately a single thing and mind and body inextricably constitute human being and thus can be separated only at a logical abstract level which does not apply in the case of being human. I believe the tension is ultimately a question of method: do we want to break down Descartes’ work in arguments and analyze them one by one or is *understanding* Descartes’ theory as a whole, even at the sake of sometimes not making sense of an individual argument, our object in reading *The Meditations*?

I believe it is for these reasons among others why Almog avoids using technical philosophical language. When he talks about Descartes he rarely mentions substances, attributes, fundamental properties, externalism and other concepts commonly addressed in the discussion on Descartes. All these philosophical concepts are charged and full of historical ambiguity which makes our reading easily biased and the initial, often simple, meaning behind the powerful words remains unrevealed.

This thesis is a problem setting for the two readings. I have explained the basic differences in the approaches and interpret *The Meditations* through them. However, the treatment is not exhaustive by any means. More comparative work is needed. I believe the contrast between the justificationist view and the
unificationist view is radical to the extent that, in the case of reading such a classic of the history of philosophy as Descartes, more research needs to be conducted. Perhaps an encompassing chronological presentation of *The Meditations* could work best in presenting and contrasting both of the readings.
References


