

# Part 7

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## Metaphysics: the question of fact, 1

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The thinking or the existence of the thought and the existence of my own self are one and the same.

Kant 1772: 75

### 7.1 Thin subjects

A *sesmet* is a subject of experience that is correctly judged to be a single thing or object when it's considered specifically as a subject of experience that is being considered specifically in its mental being. What does this amount to in reality, in the human case, and given that materialism is true?

In 2.15 (64–5) I distinguished two conceptions of the subject: the *thick* conception according to which

(i) human beings and other sentient creatures considered as a whole are subjects of experience,

and the *traditional inner* conception, according to which

(ii) a subject of experience is some sort of persisting inner locus of consciousness, an inner someone, an inner mental presence.

Having made the distinction, I chose to operate with a neutral conception of the subject, one that neither excluded nor favoured either the thick or the traditional conception. Now, however, I want to focus on a third conception, the *thin* conception, according to which

(iii) a subject of experience is something that exists only if experience exists of which it is the subject.

Both (i) and (ii) build in the standard view that a subject of experience can continue to exist even when it isn't having any experience—during periods of dreamless sleep, say,

or other possible gaps in the process of experience. (I'm going to assume that such gaps occur.) It's this that creates a need for the third, thin conception of the subject, which can be restated more strongly as

(iii) a subject of experience exists if and only if experience exists of which it is the subject since a subject of experience exists if experience exists (6.3).

A subject thinly conceived can't possibly have the same duration conditions as a persisting organism like a human being, given that there are gaps in the process of experience, so it will be 'inner', relative to any persisting organism

(iii) a subject of experience is an inner thing of some sort that exists if and only if experience exists of which it is the subject

although it can't have the same duration conditions as a traditional inner subject either, given that there are gaps in the process of consciousness.

As a materialist I take a subject thinly conceived to be literally inner, inner in a straightforwardly spatial sense. A thin subject is a synergy subject (273): the goings on that wholly constitute its existence and experience consist entirely (an 'adductive' point) of activity in the brain. But the property of a thin subject of experience that is crucial at present is simply that it can't exist without experiencing, and this is a property that is also possessed by Cartesian minds, so 'inner' can be understood loosely, in a way that allows it to cover such immaterial minds, should they exist.



### 7.3 Thin subjects: Descartes

The central feature of the thin conception of the subject is that it takes subjects of experience to be things that don't and can't exist in the absence of experience. It's hardly new in philosophy. Descartes, for one, endorses it. It's fundamental to his conception of the I or mind or soul or self or subject that it doesn't and can't exist in the absence of experience or consciousness or—in his terminology—'thinking' or 'thought' (*cogitatio*). A subject of experience that exists without experience existing—conscious mental process of which it is the subject—is as impossible for Descartes as a physical object existing without extension. So Cartesian minds are thin subjects, although they're far from transient, being possibly immortal. Leibniz also endorses thin subjects, taking them to be long-lived—naturally indestructible, and so does Spinoza, as I understand him, even as he holds that there is at bottom only one. So do Kant, and William James, and also, perhaps, Fichte and Nozick. Hume, as a genuine sceptic, doesn't commit himself, but he certainly doesn't think that any other positively contentful conception of the subject is available to an empiricist.

—Descartes is certainly committed to the view that the mind is always thinking, but he isn't committed to the extremely problematic view that all thinking is conscious or consciousness-involving, a matter of experience.

So some say, but they're surely wrong. Descartes says that the term 'thinking' applies 'to all that exists within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it. Thus all the operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination, and the sense are thoughts (thinkings)' (1641: 2.113). 'We cannot', he says, 'have any thought of which we are not aware at the very moment when it is in us' (1641: 2.181). 'By the term "thinking"', he says, 'I understand everything which we are aware of as happening within us [i.e. in the mind], insofar as we have awareness of it. Hence, *thinking* is to be identified here not merely with understanding, willing and imagining, but also with sensory awareness' (1644: 1.195) and emotion (see e.g. 1644: 2.281). 'Understanding, willing, imagining, having sensory perceptions ... all fall under the common concept of thinking or perception or consciousness' (1641: 2.124).

I think such quotations sufficiently show that Descartes does identify thinking with conscious experience, i.e. with experience, in my terms (5). He uses 'thinking' as an entirely general word for all experience—although he also uses it more narrowly at

certain points.<sup>9</sup> The clearest modern translation of ‘cogito, ergo sum’ is ‘I experience, therefore I am’. I’ll continue to use Descartes’s ‘thinking’, but it can always be replaced by ‘experiencing’.

Descartes, then, holds that the mind is always thinking—a view summarily rejected by Locke (‘every drowsy nod shakes their doctrine, who teach, that the soul is always thinking’ (*Essay*, 2.1.13)). But this is not the most striking feature of his position. By far the most striking and difficult feature of Descartes’s position is that he holds that there is nothing more to the mind, ontologically speaking, than experiencing, actual conscious mental process. Underlying his conviction about this is his most fundamental metaphysical view, which I mentioned in 6.15 and will now set out in more detail: the view that there’s no real distinction between a thing or object and its attributes or properties. The distinction between the notions of an attribute, like thinking/experiencing or extension, ‘and the notion of substance itself is’, as he says in *Principles*, 1.63, ‘a merely conceptual distinction’ (1644: 1.215). It’s a distinction that can be made in thought (a ‘distinction of reason’), not a ‘real’ distinction, where to say that there’s a real distinction between two things is simply to say that each can exist in reality without the other existing. For Descartes, there is, as Clarke says, ‘no real distinction ... between a thing and its properties’ (2003: 215). Nadler concurs: Descartes’s ‘considered position ... is that while there is a conceptual distinction between substance and attribute ... there is not a real distinction between them. Substance and attribute are in reality one and the same’ (2006: 57).

I think Descartes is right about this. It’s a point that appears to render vast tracts of recent analytic philosophy otiose, but the naturalness and availability of counterfactual speculations about how objects could be different from how they actually are give us no reason to doubt it, or so I argued in 6.15. I also argued that the ground of the lack of real distinction between a substance or object and its attributes or properties is identity. Descartes agrees: the attributes of a substance ‘are indeed identical with the substance’ (1648b: 15).

Some feel that the Cartesian notion of a ‘real distinction’ is musty or obscure, accompanied as it is by the notions of substance, attribute, and mode (or modification). But this isn’t so. The *real* in ‘real distinction’ simply means ‘in reality’, ‘in concrete reality’, ‘outside our thought’, as opposed to merely ‘in our thought’.<sup>10</sup> An *attribute* is a fundamental or general property; a *mode* is a particular way of possessing such a general property. Extension is an attribute, and being spherical or triangular is a specific mode of extension, a particular way of being extended. Experience or thinking is an attribute, and seeing Paris or hoping it will rain is a specific mode of experience or thinking. The fact that an attribute can’t possibly exist without existing in a certain mode (you can’t have

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. 1644: 2.209. It would be perverse to treat his use of ‘thought’ as evidence that he’s some sort of early eliminativist about sense-feeling experience.

<sup>10</sup> 1645/6: 3.280. I’m putting aside the fact that Descartes deeply mistrusted the notion of ‘substance’ (see especially Clarke 2003: esp. chs. 1, 8, 9). He preferred to use the word ‘thing’ (*res* and *choses* in Latin and French respectively) to indicate the properties of existence and individuality, although he also went along with common usage of ‘substance’.

extension without some particular mode of extension, e.g. triangularity or squareness or horse-shapedness) means that there is no more a real distinction between the existence of an object or substance considered at a given time and the existence of the particular modes that its attributes exemplify at that time—i.e. its properties considered as a whole—than there is between a substance and its attributes *tout court*. Its being, if I may permit myself the trope, is its being.

Consider the particular case of the self or mind or ‘thinking thing’. According to Descartes, there’s no real distinction between a thinking thing and its attribute of thinking. Neither can exist without the other, any more than a thing can exist without itself. The being of the one at any given time (and so always) is the being of the other. So when he states that the mind (‘soul’) or subject neither does nor can exist in the absence of actually occurring thinking—when he holds that thinking is an essential property of mind in this sense, a property it can never lack—this is not some sort of extra stipulation on his part, a special condition added to an already existing conception of the nature of the mind. The reason why a mind or self or subject in which no thinking is going on is as impossible as a physical object without extension is that mind or self or subject *is* thinking; it’s wholly and literally constituted of occurrent thinking. That is what *res cogitans*—a mind or self—is. It’s just—it just is—thinking, consciousness, experiencing. There is no real distinction between (i) the concrete existence of the attribute of thinking and (ii) the concrete existence of thinking ‘substance’. They’re identical. The point is already secured by Descartes’s commitment to the identity of substance and attribute, whatever problems it raises. (It’s not hard to understand why Leibniz feels the need to postulate ‘petites perceptions’, tiny little conscious states that one doesn’t notice, in order to try to defend it.)

A Cartesian immaterial mind is quite unlike an immaterial mind as traditionally conceived, because an immaterial soul is traditionally conceived of as some sort of locus of experiencing that isn’t itself wholly constituted of experiencing.<sup>11</sup> The existence of a Cartesian mind, by contrast, is wholly a matter of occurrent experiencing, conceived of as some sort of inherently active phenomenon, and so obviously can’t exist when there isn’t any experiencing going on. In the *Principles* Descartes talks of ‘our soul or our thinking’ as if the two terms were strictly interchangeable (1644: 1.184). Later he writes, seemingly unequivocally, that ‘thinking’, in being the essential attribute of thinking substance, ‘must be considered as nothing else than thinking substance itself . . . , that is, as mind’ (1644: 1.215). In his *Notes against a Certain Broadsheet*, in which he reiterates his official doctrine that there’s a real distinction between mind and body in the face of

<sup>11</sup> It isn’t wholly constituted of experiencing even if it is always host to experiencing—even if experiencing is one of its essential properties. In fact, this conception of the immaterial mind is about as traditional as Christmas. It’s common now, but among modern philosophers, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz all reject it. So does Berkeley, for his own special reasons (see *Principles*, § 139); so does Hume, for his, in a passage (*Treatise*, 165/252) quite wrongly thought to involve the denial of the existence even of short-lived subjects (see G. Strawson 2001: 70, 78–80, and 2011a). Of the members of the two great rationalist and empiricist triumvirates, only Locke makes use of it, and he himself is, at bottom, a materialist who has no difficulty with the idea that the material mind can continue to exist in the absence of occurrent experience.

Regius's most unwelcome exposure of his baseline view,<sup>12</sup> he treats being a thing (*res*) and being an attribute as effectively the same, saying of the attributes of extension and thinking 'that the one is not a mode of the other but is a *thing*, or *attribute of a thing*, which can subsist without the other'.<sup>13</sup> Questioned on the point by Burman, he confirms that his view is that 'the attributes [of a substance], when considered collectively, are indeed identical with the substance'.<sup>14</sup>

Contrary quotations can be found—at one point in his conversations with Burman Descartes speaks of substance as a 'substrate'—but his basic commitment is quite clear.<sup>15</sup> When Descartes seems equivocal, or says things that seem incompatible with his view as stated here, it's important to remember that he is anxious not to rouse the Church and the philosophers of the Schools by expressly denying the existence of entities to whose existence they are committed ('I do not deny that ...' is a recurring phrase). 'I wish above all that you would never propose any new opinions', he wrote to Regius in 1642,

but, while retaining all the old ones in name, only offer new arguments. No one could object to that, and anyone who understands your new arguments properly will conclude immediately from them what you mean. Thus, why did you need to reject substantial forms and real qualities explicitly?<sup>16</sup>

Leibniz makes the same move thirty years later:

a metaphysics should be written with accurate definitions and demonstrations, but nothing should be demonstrated in it apart from that which does not clash too much with received opinions. For in that way this metaphysics can be accepted; and once it has been approved, then, if people examine it more deeply later, they themselves will draw the necessary consequences.<sup>17</sup>

The trick, for Descartes, as for Leibniz, is to do one's philosophy using the conventional terminology as far as possible, without making any real substantive appeal to any dubious entities it recognizes, trusting that one's intelligent readers will see that this is what one has done.

It's plain, in any case, that Descartes doesn't endorse one standard (Lockean) picture of the immaterial mind or self, for according to this picture, P1 in Figure 7.2, there is

<sup>12</sup> His true baseline view, taken up by Spinoza, is agnosticism on the question of whether there is, knowably, a real distinction between thinking and extendedness. See n. 21 below.

<sup>13</sup> 1648a: 1.299; my emphasis picks out two expressions that are offered as equivalent.

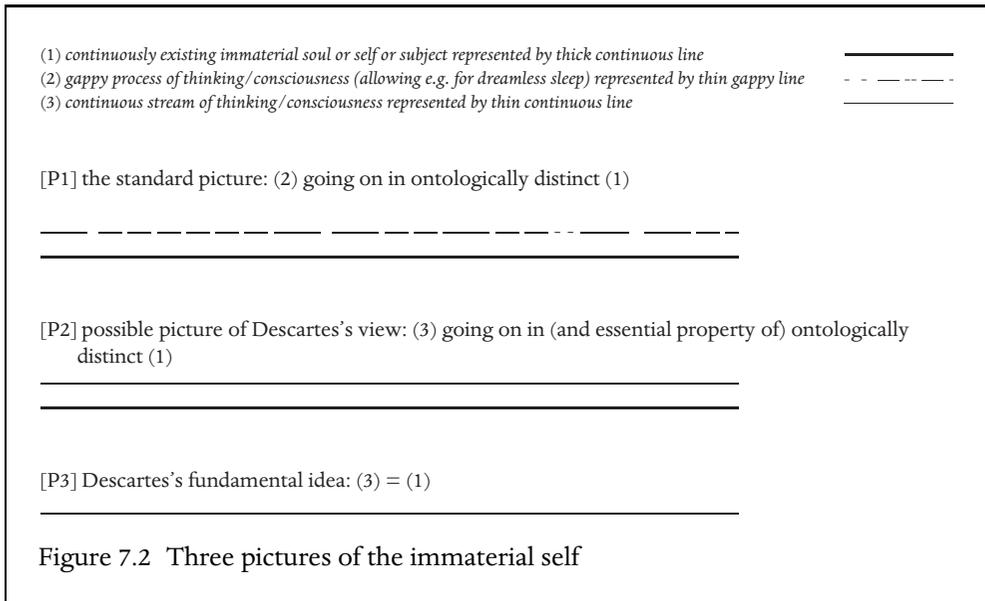
<sup>14</sup> 1648b: 15. Note that while Kant's elastic balls example (81) succeeds against the 'rational psychologists', it has no force against Descartes, because it utterly misrepresents his fundamental metaphysics. It posits unbroken continuity of the attribute of consciousness carried successively by many different substances. On Descartes's view, however, unbroken continuity of consciousness is already a sufficient condition of there being a single continuing mental substance, because it's the same thing as there being a single continuing mental substance. (How this point interacts with Descartes's identification of continuity of existence with continual 'creation afresh'—see p. 402 below—I leave to be considered.)

<sup>15</sup> Descartes 1648b: 17; the matter is usefully adjudicated by Cottingham (1976: 17, 77–9).

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Clarke 2006: 224, who has an excellent discussion of the matter; see also Descartes 1619–50: 205. Descartes had particular reason to ask Regius to be more circumspect because Regius was publicly identified with the Cartesian cause.

<sup>17</sup> Leibniz 1676: 95. Most strikingly, Leibniz writes these words after breaking off in mid-sentence—in fact mid-word—a train of thought that is leading him into a Spinozism he can't possibly officially endorse. See Stewart 2006: 193. See also Mercer and Sleigh 1995: 71; Rutherford 1995: 155–9, 163.

(i) some sort of immaterial mind-substance or mind-stuff that is (ii) the *ground* or *bearer* of conscious mental process, and that (iii) can continue to exist even when there isn't any conscious mental process going on, and that therefore (iv) has some nature other than conscious mental process.<sup>18</sup> Everyone agrees that Descartes rejects (iii), in holding that



a mind or subject must always be thinking, but his claim that 'each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature or essence ... and thinking constitutes the nature of thinking substance' (1644: 1.210) is often read as if it allowed, as in P2, (iv) that the mind has *some* other necessary manner of being that is not occurrent thinking (experience). This reading is extremely problematic, however, because to claim that something Y constitutes the nature of something X is to claim that nothing else does.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> If we suppose, rather, that the standard picture is P2, and incorporate the view that experiencing is an essential property of immaterial mind-stuff, we drop (iii) while retaining (iv). Note that it's (iv) that raises the doubt mentioned earlier (265) about whether immaterial minds as ordinarily understood, as opposed to Cartesian immaterial minds, can properly possess the property *single-as-mental*. The problem is that it seems that their singleness is fundamentally secured, both synchronically and diachronically, by the singleness of their substance, where this, so far, is something that is not itself guaranteed to be intrinsically mental in nature. In philosophy we habituate to the purely negative word 'immaterial' in such a way that we tend to take it that anything called 'immaterial' is guaranteed to be something (wholly?) intrinsically mental in nature, but the word simply doesn't warrant this (see G. Strawson 1994: 114–20). I'm not going to press the point, though; most will be inclined to think that an immaterial mind as ordinarily understood (or equally a neural 'brain system', put forward as a candidate for being the self) does indeed possess the property *single-as-mental* in the required way, just in being the 'seat' of memory, character, conscious experience, and so on.

<sup>19</sup> The point is not undermined by the fact that X may be said to have other essential but non-qualitative, non-nature-constituting attributes like duration and existence, or ultimate dependence on God (see Descartes 1644: 1.200, 211–12).

It is also, of course, very problematic to reject (iv). For the moment, though, it seems plain that Descartes rejects all of (ii)–(iv). What’s more, he accepts (i), which employs a word—‘substance’—of which he has, as already noted, an extremely low opinion, only inasmuch as he takes it that there is no real distinction between ‘the thing ... we call ... a substance’ (1641: 2.166) and its attributes. His picture is P3: the continuously existing immaterial mind or self or subject just is the continuous stream of thinking/consciousness.

—Impossible. Replying to Arnauld, Descartes agrees that episodes of thinking like ‘understanding, willing, doubting etc. are ... attributes which must inhere in something if they are to exist; and we call the thing in which they inhere a substance’ (1641: 2.166). Replying to Hobbes, he notes that ‘a thought cannot exist without a thinking thing’, and that if confusion has arisen in the interpretation of his position, it’s because ‘“thought” is sometimes taken to refer to the act, sometimes to the faculty of thought, and sometimes to the thing which possesses the faculty’. The implication of this last quotation seems clear: all these three references are references to distinct things, so that there is a *thing* or *substance* which possesses certain *faculties* and accordingly performs certain sorts of *acts*; and Descartes further insists that he does not ‘deny that I, who am thinking, am distinct from my thought, in the way in which a thing is distinct from a mode’ (1641: 2.143–5).

The last quotation doesn’t support your claim; if anything it supports mine. The other two seem more promising at first, but they don’t undermine the attribution of P3 to Descartes, who for reasons of caution, and as just remarked, makes a point of continuing to use accepted terminology even though it plays no active role in his position. P3 can’t be understood to incorporate any standard substance/property distinction, for while Descartes grants, as you note, that ‘we *call* the thing in which [mental attributes] inhere a substance’, he doesn’t think that the notion of substance has any meaning or intelligible reference or explanatory force whatever, in so far as a substance is supposed to be something that is in any way distinct from its attributes or properties.<sup>20</sup> It’s just a ‘dummy’ word, a peace-keeping word. He says that ‘the attributes [of a substance], when considered collectively, are indeed identical with the substance’ (1648b: 15). The *res cogitans* is just the *cogitans*; the force of the *res* is to indicate the *real existence* of the *cogitans*. It’s only in so far as we accept to employ the language of ‘inherence’ and ‘substance’, and therefore accept to speak of thought and extension as ‘inhering in a substance’, that we must—given the way in which the properties of thought and extension are on his official view *essentially* mutually repellent—say that there are two substances. But the word ‘substance’, again, is doing no work, and towards the end of his life Descartes—the indefatigable dissector of brains, in every other pore of his philosophy a materialist—admits in effect, and as he should, that he doesn’t know enough about the nature of matter to be sure of this repulsion.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See again Clarke 2003: chs. 1, 8, 9. Descartes rightly rejects a widespread (but not universal) assumption of his times and ours.

<sup>21</sup> In 1648 Descartes conceded to Burman, contrary to his official position, that (in Clarke’s words) ‘we cannot claim to have adequate knowledge of anything, including even bodies, and ... are obliged to work within the limitations of our concepts even if we recognize those limits’ (Clarke 2006: 385). It follows from this that we can’t definitively rule out the possible

There is of course an extremely serious difficulty in the radical position as so far characterized.<sup>22</sup> This is the difficulty of finding a ground or ‘place of residence’, a manner of real existence, for mental faculties or capacities like will and understanding, for innate ideas, and for what Descartes calls ‘intellectual memory’.<sup>23</sup> Where can they be lodged, given the rejection of (iv)—the idea that the thinking subject is, metaphysically, nothing other than experiential process? Descartes doesn’t really believe in faculties as entities, holding that ‘the term “faculty” denotes nothing but a potency’ (1648a: 1.305), but potencies or powers also seem to need a place of residence (a manner of real existence) of a sort that seems hard—impossible—to supply if all one has to hand at any time is experiential process with the particular content that it has at that time.

The difficulty seems somewhat less serious for those who believe that Descartes’s use of ‘thinking’ extends to non-experiential goings-on; but Cartesian thinking can’t be non-conscious or non-experiential in any way. It’s true that an individual *cogitans*—an individual, persisting, uninterrupted, thinking-process—is something inherently active and powerful in some manner; it’s not in any sense a mere streaming of passive content (the passive-content conception of experiential goings-on may be the first that comes to the present-day philosophical mind). But to say that the process involves powers is not to say much, because anything that exists at all, and that therefore has categorical properties, *ipso facto* has powers, according to the argument in 6.15, and there still appears to be a very difficult question about how any conscious-experience *cogitans* process can possibly involve the sorts of powers we associate with a human mind—will, understanding, memory, possession of concepts, innate or not, and so on. How can this categorical being—this conscious-experience process with the content that it has—constitute what one might call the *power being* of a mind? This is the problem of ontic depth signalled on page 331. Somehow or other, Descartes has to find room for a mind or self or subject with sufficient ontic or ‘modal’ depth while denying that it consists of anything other than conscious mental process whose whole being is manifest in consciousness.

This last requirement seems to sink his position, unless Leibniz can help.<sup>24</sup> And even if it doesn’t sink Descartes’s position, it seems to sink mine. For if I want to argue that selves are thin subjects, I must either find room for a subject or self with sufficient ontic depth given only the resources of thin subjects, transient synergies of neural process-stuff, or

corporeality of mind, a view that was of course in circulation at the time (see also Clarke 2003: 258; G. Strawson 2006b: 214). For a great discussion of ‘adequate’ as opposed to ‘inadequate’ knowledge, and the associated but different distinction between ‘complete’ and ‘incomplete’ knowledge, see Yablo 1990: 158–77. The same distinctions and claims are in play, in a muddier form, in current discussion of the mind–body problem (e.g. in the debate about ‘a posteriori physicalism’), which is condemned by historical ignorance to spend a great deal of time laboriously retreading ancient ground.

<sup>22</sup> I discuss it in G. Strawson 1994: 136–44. On the attribution to Descartes, compare Priestley, who, discussing Mamertus, finds ‘in some of his expressions the peculiar opinions of Descartes. For he says, the soul is not different from the *thoughts*, that the soul is never without *thought*, because it is all *thought*’ (1777–82: 362; Mamertus died c. 475). Compare also Dainton’s ‘minimal subject’, whose existence, in what Dainton terms the ‘Cartesian nightmare’, consists of absolutely nothing but a stream of consciousness (2008a: 249–51).

<sup>23</sup> Intellectual memory is memory that can’t on Descartes’s official theory be stored in the brain along with autobiographical memory, memory of contingent facts, memory of particular mathematical truths that one has worked out, and so on (see e.g. Descartes 1640: 146).

<sup>24</sup> Its difficulty helps to explain why Descartes’s position has been so consistently misunderstood.

else agree that selves are indeed ‘creatures of the surface’, entities with no great ontic depth who can’t possibly be said to know French or algebra in any rich dispositional sense, although they have experience indistinguishable from the experience that thick, whole-human-being subjects are correctly said to have when they have experience that has the character it does because they know French or algebra.

For the moment I’ll say only that I take the creatures-of-the-surface view to be a real option. Note that the word ‘self’ may drive the demand for ontic depth more strongly than the word ‘subject’. ‘Subject’ is a great deal less exigent, to my ear, and it may be that some of the associations of the word ‘self’ are putting an unnecessary drag on the discussion. My concern with the self is simply a concern with the subject of experience conceived as something that isn’t the same thing as the whole human being, and I can do without the word ‘self’, which one can always read as short for ‘subject of experience conceived as something that is not the same thing as the whole human being’. I could have called this book *Subjects* rather than *Selves*.

#### 7.4 [ $e = s = c$ ] (1)

What is to be done? Consider the distinction between

(i) a particular individual experience  $e$ , a clearly temporally bounded experientially unitary period of experience lasting from  $t_1$  to  $t_2$ ,

(ii) the thin subject  $s$  of  $e$ ,

and

(iii) the experiential content  $c$  of  $e$  conceived of as something concrete and occurrent, as the ‘what-it’s-likeness’ that actually occurs between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ .<sup>25</sup>

Here we seem to have three really distinct (in Descartes’s technical sense) things. It appears, though, that Descartes thinks that the thin-subject *res cogitans* just is the process of consciousness itself, that the *res cogitans*, the thin-subject self, is not really distinct from its experience at any given time, i.e. that

[1] [ $s = e$ ].

And that’s not all, for the experience is on his view nothing ontically over and above its experiential character or being. It contains nothing hidden, i.e. nothing over and above what is manifest, i.e. nothing over and above its total experiential content; this is its whole being. In which case

[2] [ $e = c$ ].

[1] and [2] deliver the seemingly extraordinary conclusion that the (thin-subject) self is nothing other than the experiential content

[3] [ $s = c$ ]

<sup>25</sup> By ‘content’ I mean, as usual, ‘narrow’ content, purely ‘internal’ content, ‘experiential’ content, ‘phenomenological’ content—whatever you want to call the thing whose existence is the most certain of all things and which includes cognitive experience—conscious entertainings of thoughts—as much as sensory experience (2.8).

—that, in sum,

[4] [ $e = s = c$ ].

I'll call this the *Experience/Subject/Content Identity Thesis*—the [ $e = s = c$ ] *thesis* for short. It seems a strange view, at least at first; but it does appear that Descartes holds it in some form, given that he holds that substance and attribute are one and the same. I'm not surprised by this, because I think it may be right (see 8.8–8.10), and Descartes is usually right on fundamentals. Kant also endorses [1], whatever his position on [2], when he writes that 'the thinking or the existence of the thought and the existence of my own self are one and the same', subscribing thereby to the thin conception of the subject, which is entailed by [1].<sup>26</sup>

Two points before the [ $e = s = c$ ] thesis is dismissed as ridiculous, both in itself and as an account of Descartes's conception of the nature of mind. The first is small and oblique, but may be useful for some. It's still commonly held in present-day analytic philosophy that in the case of any given particular experience  $e$ , neither  $e$ 's subject,  $s$ , nor  $e$  itself is part of the experiential content of  $e$  (whether the content is construed internalistically or externalistically). This may be thought to show that [4] can't possibly be true even if all the other difficulties that it raises can be somehow overcome. This view about the content of experience is, however, thoroughly disputable. As for  $e$ , there's a crucial sense, arguably first recorded by Aristotle, in which  $e$  is itself essentially, constitutively, and unparadoxically, part of its own content.<sup>27</sup> So too, there's a crucial sense in which  $s$  is essentially, constitutively, part of the experiential content of  $e$ , part of what is given to  $s$  in the having of  $e$ , even when  $s$ 's attention is wholly focused on the external environment (a tree, say) and not at all on itself.<sup>28</sup> Both these claims need careful exposition, though. They lie at the heart of the answer to the question of what consciousness or experience is, but they don't in themselves get us any closer to the bluntly metaphysical triple identity claim, and may even be thought to hinder an approach. At the same time, they may help to remove one kind of bad basis for thinking that it can't possibly be true.

The second and much more important point is that Descartes's conception of the nature of mind bears a deep resemblance to his conception of the nature of matter. Everyone agrees that Descartes holds that matter is literally nothing other than extension

<sup>26</sup> 1772: 75. The quotation is from Kant's famous letter to Herz. There's no reason to think that he abandons this view in his critical philosophy, no reason to think that he takes the as-it-is-in-itself being of the self or subject of experience to be different from the as-it-is-in-itself being of experience itself.

<sup>27</sup> On Aristotle, see Caston 2002; see also the quotation from Gurwitsch on p. 27 above. 'The initial experience [thought] by means of which we become aware of something does not differ from the second experience by means of which we become aware that we were aware of it' (Descartes 1641: 2.382). 'Consciousness ... is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it: it being impossible for any one to perceive without perceiving that he does perceive' (Locke, *Essay* 2.27.9, using 'think' in the all-inclusive Cartesian fashion). What many philosophers have in mind, in making this sort of claim, is really nothing more than the subjective qualitative character or 'what-it's-likeness' of experience. The root idea is simply that experience is in some key sense 'self-intimating' or 'self-luminous'—to use phrases Ryle employed with disparaging intent (1949: 158–9).

<sup>28</sup> 'Whatever it is that I know, I know that I know by an implicit reflection that accompanies all my thoughts. Thus I know myself in knowing other things' (Arnauld 1683: 53). See also the quotations from Gurwitsch, Frankfurt, Lonergan, and Deikman (101, 176–7, 27), and Zahavi 2006: chs. 1–4.

(*res extensa*). To that extent it's hardly surprising that he holds that mind is literally nothing other than thinking or experiencing. What's surprising, perhaps, is that there has not been more discussion of what this amounts to.

Descartes's view about matter is often derided. One common objection is that there can be no difference, for him, between a cubic metre of deep space and a cubic metre of lead or cheese. What such objections show, though, is that Descartes doesn't conceive of extension in anything remotely like the way we do. He conceives of it more in the way Weinberg does when he proposes that all physical objects of the sort we take ourselves to have to do with are made of rips in spacetime, spacetime being itself a physical object, an essentially substantial something that is itself, in some immovable sense, the only thing there is (295). One might say that Descartes conceives of extension as something inherently powerful, an idea seemingly mirrored in the current conception of the 'quantum vacuum', and perhaps also in the idea that the 'dark energy' posited in current physical theory is identical with the existence of space (it is that which makes or keeps it 'roomy', so to speak).

Certainly Descartes agrees that there is, strictly speaking, only one material thing or substance, the spatially extended universe. It's a 'plenum', that is, it contains no vacuum (the definitional opposite of plenum), no place that isn't occupied by 'matter'. How could there be, given that extension is matter? Extension is itself something concrete, substantial. The universe is one big extended thing 'with different nubby gradients of texture'<sup>29</sup> at different places that amount to trees, people, railway lines, and so on—an idea which, once again, seems profoundly in accord with the spirit of present-day physics and cosmology.

Descartes never claims in parallel fashion that there is really only one *res cogitans*. Here there is a major structural difference between his notions of mind and matter. He assumes without argument that there are many irreducibly numerically distinct individual minds, as required by conventional Christian eschatology, without offering any sort of account of their identity and individuation conditions, claiming that 'each of us understands himself to be a thinking being and is capable in thought of excluding from himself every other substance'.<sup>30</sup> The deep similarity between his view of mind and his view of matter is simply that he holds that thinking—experiential process—is literally all there is to the former, just as he holds that extension is literally all there is to the former, and the present point is this. It's plain that we need to adjust our conception of extension quite radically if we want to acquire any sense of what Descartes thinks matter is; we need to adjust it to the point where it allows us to accommodate the fact

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Wilson, in correspondence. If, as some physicists believe, our spacetime is just one 'sheet' or 'brane' in a higher-dimensional space containing a plurality of branes which occasionally collide to produce a 'big bang', then we may as Barry Dainton points out (in correspondence) allow that there is a plurality of objects—the branes—while continuing to maintain that our universe is a single object. Alternatively, of course, we can stand further back, and continue to maintain that there is only one object.

<sup>30</sup> 1644: 1.213. Spinoza removed the structural difference between the notions of mind and matter when he systematized Descartes's philosophy without worrying about the local religious orthodoxy in his *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* (1663). He restored the idea—recurrent in the Western Greek-Judaic-Christian-Islamic tradition—that our minds are all aspects of one single universal mind.

that Descartes is fully realist about ordinary physical objects in every sense in which we are (although he denies that they're strictly speaking numerically distinct entities) while at the same time holding that the existence of matter is simply the existence of extension. The present and parallel suggestion is that if we want to approach a sense of what Descartes thinks a subject of experience is, we shouldn't be in the least surprised, but should rather expect, that we will need to adjust our conception of mind/experience/consciousness/thinking no less radically, to the point where it can accommodate the fact that Descartes is as realist about the existence of subjects of experience as we are, although he holds that there is nothing more to their existence than the existence of experience/consciousness/thinking, experiential process (for a further argument that this must be his view, see Strawson 1994: 126–7).

It seems, then, that we shouldn't quickly dismiss the attribution of the [ $e = s = c$ ] thesis to Descartes. Given that he holds that experience/consciousness/thinking (*res cogitans*) is all there is to the existence of mind, and hence to the existence of subject-of-experience-hood, his conception of experience/consciousness/thinking must be at least as rich as his conception of extension (*res extensa*) must be if it is to cover all the phenomena of the non-mental physical world in the way he thinks it does.

Does this help with the problem of ontic depth that arises for my account of Descartes's position and also for my own view? It's hard to see how; for whatever the nature of these riches, the mind or self or subject is still held to consist of nothing other than mental process, conscious mental process whose whole being is manifest in consciousness. And when we contemplate a given mind at a given time, it seems obvious that there just isn't any room, in the being of the conscious mental process we find at that time, for all the things we want attribute to the mind at that time—faculties or capacities of reason, will and imagination, concepts, innate or not, and so on. The very least we can do, it seems, is reject the thesis that the whole being of the mental process is manifest in consciousness, and allow that the *cogitans* that constitutes one's mind can include non-conscious mental process. But this is ruled out on Descartes's view.

Perhaps there is another way. Perhaps one can hold that although all mental process is necessarily conscious (and therefore subject-involving), there is conscious mental process which is part of what constitutes one's mind, and constitutes in particular its needed ontic depth, although—how to put it?—the conscious subject that one experiences oneself to be, and experiences as having the experiences one has, isn't conscious of it.

Does this idea make sense? One way to try to make sense of it is to suppose that one's mind (soul, subject, self) consists of more than one 'locus' of awareness. Suppose one uses 'top subject' as a name for the putative entity picked out at the end of the last paragraph—the conscious-subject-that-one-experiences-oneself-to-be-and-experiences-as-having-the-experiences-one-has, as it were. One can then express the idea by saying that there may be more to the full metaphysical reality of the subject of experience that one is than the top-subject-that-one-experiences-oneself-to-be. One can allow that experience whose whole being is fully manifest in consciousness occurs in loci of awareness, in the subject of experience that one is considered as a whole, other

than the top-subject locus of awareness. One can also allow, if one likes, that the top subject always has some sort of dim awareness of all the awareness that is, outside the top subject locus, fully manifest. (It must be fully manifest somewhere, for that is what constitutes its existence.)

This, I take it, is Leibniz's principal thought when he postulates tiny experiences or conscious mental goings-on (*petites perceptions*) that are partly constitutive of one's mind and whose whole being is by definition fully manifest in consciousness (hence fully manifest to some subject), although one, i.e. the 'top' subject, is not conscious, or is only dimly conscious, of their content. Some have said that Leibniz's 'petites perceptions' are wholly unconscious goings-on, but Leibniz doesn't believe in mental occurrences that involve no consciousness any more than Descartes does.

If this makes sense, it provides a means of greatly expanding the *c*, and hence the *e*, and hence the *s*—a vast increase in the categorical being, and hence the power being, of the human thin subject.<sup>31</sup> On one version, though, it requires one to hold that a human thin subject is somehow or other partly constituted by many subjects (perhaps along panpsychist lines), and it isn't enough to quieten doubts about how anything that consists of absolutely nothing but conscious mental process can have the whole mental power being of subjects of experience like ourselves. This isn't a problem for conventional (real) materialists, of course, because they take the mind—the mind-brain—to have non-experiential being in addition to experiential being, non-experiential neural being that provides all the ontic depth anyone could possibly want.

I think some such Leibnizian line of thought is the best option if one is attempting to solve Descartes's problem while retaining as many of his commitments as possible. It needs careful development, however—if it is to succeed, it mustn't disrupt the doctrine of the simplicity of the mind, to which both Descartes and Leibniz are committed—and this is not the place for it. Having put the [ $e = s = c$ ] kite up in the air, I'm going to let go of the string until 8.8.

<sup>31</sup> On one account, the human thin subject turns out to consist of a great deal more than the synergy of ultimates that directly constitutes the experience of the 'top' subject.

8.8 [ $e = s = c$ ] (2)

Consider, as before, an individual experience  $e$ , e.g. one occurring in the L-reality. Suppose, for simplicity, and generously, that it's a sharply delimited, uninterrupted, one-second-long experientially unitary period of experience lasting from  $t_1$  to  $t_2$  and preceded and followed by a period of complete unconsciousness on Louis's part. Call this event of *experience* ' $e$ ', call the thin/live *subject* of this experience ' $s$ ', and call the overall phenomenon of the occurrent, concretely existing, experiential *content* of this experience ' $c$ ' (here again mental content is internalistically understood). The question is: What is the relation between  $e$ ,  $s$ , and  $c$ ?

In 7.4 I considered the hypothesis that the relation is identity. On this view, it's not only true that

[1]  $s = e$

but also that

[2]  $e = c$

and hence that

[3]  $s = c$  (!)

and in sum that

[4]  $e = s = c$ .

I'm now going to defend [4]. It goes far beyond the claim that an experience *consists* of a (thin) subject entertaining (having, living) a content, i.e. the claim represented in 7.6 (352) first by

[5]  $e = s:c$

and then by

[6]  $e = s(c)$ .

I'll first propose that

[7]  $[e \leftrightarrow s \leftrightarrow c]$ ,

taking this to be a strong modal claim stating a necessary truth, and then argue that [7] is true because [4] is.

Let me begin with the identity claim made in 7.2 (333), the materialist claim that  $s$  is identical with a spatiotemporally bounded piece of physical process-stuff  $p^s$ , a collection of ultimates in a certain state of (synergetic) interaction:

[8]  $s = p^s$ .

This was put forward as, and remains, a 'simple' identity claim. That is, it's not a 'constitutive' identity claim, if a constitutive identity claim is understood to allow that the constituter can possibly exist in the absence of the constitutee, or conversely.  $s$  couldn't possibly have consisted of anything other than the particular synergy of process-stuff  $p^s$ , and  $p^s$  couldn't possibly have existed without  $s$  existing (7.2). The use of the word 'synergy' is designed as before to counter the staticist tendencies of our ordinary conception of objects. It is the *synergy* of process-stuff  $p^s$ , virtual particles and all, that constitutes—is— $s$ . One isn't thinking accurately about the piece of process-stuff (involving  $10^{12}$  ultimates, say) that wholly constitutes the entity  $|s = p^s|$ <sup>48</sup> if one is thinking of it in any way that allows it to be some sort of further fact about it that it's synergetic in the way that it is. The word 'ultimate' also invites an incorrectly staticist reading, and it needs to be borne in mind that each ultimate or u-field (in so far as they can be individuated) is itself a portion of synergetic process-stuff.

May we also say that

[9]  $e = p^e$

and

[10]  $c = p^c$ ?

Yes, for  $e$  and  $c$  are real concrete existents, like  $s$ , and are therefore, by the present materialist hypothesis, identical to some (dynamic, spatiotemporal) portion of process-stuff in the brain. [9] and [10] are also 'simple' identity claims, in the sense just explained, for neither  $e$  nor  $c$  could possibly have consisted of any ultimates (including virtual particles) other than the ones of which it does consist, or indeed of the same ultimates in any other sort of relation. Doubts based on counterfactuals are to come; note for now that it's very unclear that we can make sense of the idea that exactly the same synergy of ultimates might exist at any other time, given the massive involvement of the quantum vacuum in the existence of the synergy, if only because the actual temporal position of the quantum vacuum ultimates may be essential to their identity.

Many think that  $c$  is best understood as a property and not as an object. They may think the same about  $e$ , and indeed about  $s$ , the thin subject—at least when  $s$  is considered relative to Louis the human being. The distinction between object and property has no leverage against the triple identity claim, however, if there is anything to the argument of

<sup>48</sup> I introduce  $|s = p^s|$  as the name of an entity. ' $s = p^s$ ' states that  $s$  is identical with  $p^s$ .

6.15. I've argued for the respectability of thinking of  $s$  and  $e$  as objects, and  $c$ 's candidacy for being thought of as an object— $c$  being, recall, occurrent experiential content—is also in good shape, at least *prima facie*, given that it is (like any other concretely existing entity) a portion of process-stuff, a portion of process-stuff which we have good reason to think of as strongly unified, so far as we know its character.

I'll return to these issues. For the moment consider again the claim that

[7] [ $e \leftrightarrow s \leftrightarrow c$ ],

and for good measure the claim that

[11] [ $p^e \leftrightarrow p^s \leftrightarrow p^c$ ],

which is derivable from [7] given [8]–[10]. The double arrow ' $\leftrightarrow$ ' expresses a relation of metaphysical necessitation, as before; it has strong modal force. It is, however, not very informative. If [7] (or [11]) is true, it would be good to know more about what makes it true. It would be nice to know more about the metaphysics of the situation. I've suggested that [7] may be true because

[4] [ $e = s = c$ ],

but [4] seems as absurd as ever, and it may now be wondered whether even the much weaker

[7] [ $e \leftrightarrow s \leftrightarrow c$ ]

has been sufficiently established. So let me now take a step back and consider the components of [7]—

[7.1] [ $e \rightarrow s$ ]

[7.2] [ $s \rightarrow e$ ]

[7.3] [ $s \rightarrow c$ ]

[7.4] [ $c \rightarrow s$ ]

[7.5] [ $e \rightarrow c$ ]

[7.6] [ $c \rightarrow e$ ].

This will involve going over some points already discussed, but in a somewhat different light.

The old slogan 'ideas are logically private' (ideas being contents or experiences) secures both

[7.1] [ $e \rightarrow s$ ]

and

[7.4] [ $c \rightarrow s$ ].

If  $e$  did *per impossibile* have a different subject, it couldn't be  $e$ —it couldn't be the experience it is. There's a simple and immovable sense in which the identity of a particular experience is essentially tied to the subject whose experience it is, as remarked on page 87. I can't—logically—have your experience, nor can you have mine. Suppose you and I are live 'consciousness functions' in a single brain, and suppose we're having

qualitatively identical experiences because we're both somehow related to the same portion of brain activity. Even in this case there are two experiences numerically speaking—yours and mine.

The same holds for [7.4]. This particular bit of occurrent, living, experiential content couldn't have had a different subject from the subject for whom it is experiential content. You and I may again be live 'consciousness functions' in a single brain that are having qualitatively identical experiences because we are related to the same bit of brain activity. Even so, there are two distinct occurrences of experiential content, numerically speaking, if you and I are indeed two distinct subjects. There is yours, and there is mine. One of us could conceivably exist without the other, if you and I are indeed two distinct subjects.<sup>49</sup>

Given the similarity of the points I've made about [7.1] and [7.4], it may seem odd to distinguish  $e$  and  $c$  at all. True—but one has to do so as soon as one allows that the total existence of an experience involves the existence of a subject and an experiential content, and holds (so very naturally) that the subject is distinct from the content. For then one has to grant that the occurrent content is not identical with the experience. The only way to reject the distinction between  $e$  and  $c$  is to reject the distinction between them and  $s$ , and that is to accept [4].

With [7.1] and [7.4] secure, we can add

[7.6] [ $c \rightarrow e$ ].

This particular event of actually occurring experiential content, this particular bit of synergetic process-stuff  $p^c$ , couldn't have been the content of some patch of experience other than  $e$ . Perhaps the very same ultimates that are caught up in  $p^c$  could have been caught up in some other content occurrence at some time other than  $t_1-t_2$  (although this doesn't seem to be possible, given that  $p^c$  is essentially partly constituted by virtual ultimates). Perhaps they could have been caught up in a content occurrence qualitatively identical to  $p^c$ , every one of them in the same relative position in the new synergy. Even so, this synergetic process wouldn't have been  $c$ —or  $e$ ; it would have been a completely different entity.

The next component of [7]

[7.5] [ $e \rightarrow c$ ]

may seem no less secure. Plainly this very experience couldn't have had a different content and still have been the experience it is.

—Yes it could.  $e$  occurred, and it actually had content  $c$ , and it's true that it couldn't have come into existence at all without its existence involving the existence of content right from the start. Still, as soon as  $e$  has come into existence (in a necessarily content-involving way) we can get a referential grip on it that allows us to consider the possibility that its content might have been different from what it actually was without its actually ceasing to exist.

The same goes for the other two remaining components of [7], i.e. [7.2] [ $s \rightarrow e$ ] and [7.3] [ $s \rightarrow c$ ].  $s$  existed, and it actually had experience  $e$ , and it couldn't have come into existence at all

<sup>49</sup> Could we both be not only related to but partly constituted of the same bit of brain activity, as, perhaps, in the case of the craniopagus conjoined twins Krista and Tatiana Hogan? I would need to be convinced that we could not.

(by definition of a thin subject) without its existence involving the existence of experience from the start. But once it has come into existence, necessarily already having experience of some sort, we can get an identifying fix on it which allows us to suppose that its experience might thereafter have been different from what it was in fact, so that [7.2] is false—which is to suppose that the actual occurrent content of its experience might thereafter have been different from what it was, so that [7.3] is also false.

Suppose  $s$  and  $c$  begin to exist together at time  $t_1$ , in the L-reality, as of course they do and must, only for  $c$  to be cut short after 10 ms, at  $t_{1.1}$  and seamlessly replaced by content  $c^* \neq c$ , which lasts until  $t_2$ ? Surely in this case  $s$  continues with  $c^*$  and without  $c$ ? President Mandela would have continued to exist throughout 27 April, 1994 if he'd eaten a different breakfast from the one he did eat. So too  $s$  would have continued to exist—apart from  $c$ —in the case just described. Essentially the same sort of point holds even when we allow [5] that [ $e = s:c$ ], or, if you prefer, [6] that [ $e = s(c)$ ]. We can suppose that the  $|s:c|$  or  $|s(c)|$  entity begins to exist, but that  $c$  is then cut short—after a millisecond—to be seamlessly replaced by  $c^* \neq c$ . In this case  $s$  continues without  $c$ .

In sum, an experience could possibly have had a content other than the content it does have, a thin subject could have had an experience different from the experience it actually does have—experience with occurrent content different from the content it actually does have.

It's precisely these sorts of counterfactual proposals that are blocked on the present view. This isn't the same objection to the use of counterfactuals as the objection made in 6.15 (314). The point there is that the naturalness and legitimacy of counterfactual speculation don't touch the fact that there is no real distinction between an object and its properties. This is the specific claim that  $e$ ,  $s$ , and  $c$  are *counterfactually invariable relative to each other*—that

[7] [ $e \leftrightarrow s \leftrightarrow c$ ].

We can speculate counterfactually about  $e$ ,  $s$ , and  $c$  as much as we like, so long as we don't try to hold any one of them constant while varying any of the others. Their mutual counterfactual invariability is guaranteed, given the way I've introduced the terms, although they're clearly terms for conceptually distinct things. The identity of a piece of process-stuff is a strict function of its constituent ultimate process-parts. If one meddles in any way with any constituent ultimate process-part of  $|e = p^e|$  or  $|s = p^s|$  or  $|c = p^c|$ , one no longer has  $|e = p^e|$  or  $|s = p^s|$  or  $|c = p^c|$ .  $e$ ,  $s$ , and  $c$  can't survive any such change under counterfactual speculation, let alone change relative to each other. The sense in which [7] is secure is clear. It stands against a tide of contrary philosophical speculative habits, but the present task is not to defend a factual claim that stands in need of argument. It is, rather, to try to work out what must be the case *given* that [7] is correct.

What, then, is the relation between the three portions of process-stuff  $|e = p^e|$ ,  $|s = p^s|$ , and  $|c = p^c|$ ? It would be extremely surprising if the referential terms ' $e$ ', ' $s$ ', and ' $c$ ' all picked out portions of process-stuff with no overlapping parts at all. They must surely overlap to some extent. But how much?

The target suggestion is that there is perfect overlap. On this view, both the ' $\leftrightarrow$ ' signs in [7] can be replaced by the identity sign, giving

[4] [ $e = s = c$ ].

Without yet going this far, I've proposed that we can and should take one large step away from [7] and towards [4] by endorsing the thesis (favoured by James and many august others) that an experience *consists* of a (thin) subject entertaining—having, living—a content. We can represent this as before (352) by

[5]  $[e = s:c]$ .

Here the first ' $\leftrightarrow$ ' in [7] is replaced by the identity sign, this being an explanatory move, relative to [7]. The second is replaced by the colon ':' introduced in 7.6, which has some kind of strong intimacy-intimating function whose precise metaphysical force, over and above the strong modal ' $\leftrightarrow$ ', remains to be determined, so that this is only a potentially explanatory move.

The colon seems to serve a valuable purpose in representing an apparently irreducible respect in which experience involves a polarity—a polarity of subject and content. Is it certain, though, that we can know that this polarity involves some sort of genuine ontic plurality? This is the question raised on page 274. There is (again in Descartes's terms, as adapted and extended in 6.15) no more evident *conceptual* distinction than the distinction between the (thin) subject of an experience and the content of that experience, but it's already clear that there is no *real* distinction between them, i.e. a distinction of such a kind that they can possibly exist apart, and this raises the question of what, other than identity, could be the ground of the absence of any real distinctness.

—Stop now. The subject can't be the content. Even if there's some sense in which it's best to say that the subject of the experience is just the (necessary) subjectivity, the necessary subjectivity characteristic, of the experience, still the subjectivity can't, can't, surely, obviously, be the content.

That remains to be seen. In the meantime, it may be said again, as in 7.6, that the colon in [5] is too oppositional and egalitarian, and that we should rewrite [5] as

[6]  $[e = s(c)]$

the curved brackets introducing a clear asymmetry between  $s$  and  $c$  and also representing the fact that  $c$  is essentially something *for*  $s$  and essentially *belongs* to  $s$ . Perhaps we can go further, and take the brackets' embrace to represent the idea that  $c$  is somehow involved in  $s$  in such a way that its being is at least partly *constitutive* of the being of  $s$ . On this view  $c$  is, as it were, the body or flesh of  $s$ , without which  $s$  (the thin subject) cannot exist, and is nothing.  $s$ , we still feel, can't be the same as  $c$ , but it is as a thin subject nothing without  $c$ —not just utterly empty, but non-existent. The existence of  $s$  is the existence of  $p^s$ , a synergy of process-stuff, whatever else it is or is not; the existence of  $c$ , too, is, given materialism, nothing over and above the existence of some process-stuff,  $p^c$ . The question is this: What is the relation between  $p^s$  and  $p^c$ ? What is the relation between the process-stuff that is (wholly constitutive of) the being of  $s$  and the process-stuff that is (wholly constitutive of) the being of  $c$ ?

—This is very hard to follow. The only achievement of the colon and the curly brackets is to dramatize our uncertainty about the metaphysics of the relation between  $s$  and  $c$ . At the very

least, it would be better to use a neutral symbol, say 'R', to signify relation and rewrite [5] and [6] as ' $e = sRc$ '. The meaning of ' $=$ ', by contrast, is very clear.

True. ' $=$ ' has an agreeable clarity. It would be nice to have more of it—and perhaps [4], the triple identity, is not as crazy as it sounds. Obviously the neutral symbol 'R' doesn't rule out identity, and if [4] is in the end incoherent, it's worth examining where and how it hits incoherence.

The central strangeness is the identification of  $s$  and  $c$ . How can the subject be the content? How indeed? But perhaps the intense intuition that  $s$  can't be the same as  $c$  feeds off some elision or (all too common) blurring of the difference between contents considered as abstract particulars and contents considered as concrete, occurrent particulars; or perhaps it's fuelled by the false picture of the relation between an object and its properties. I think one needs to bring the question 'What is it, actually, for concrete, occurrent, live, experiential content to exist?' before one's mind again and again.

The polarity and non-identity of  $s$  and  $c$  is fundamental to our thought, but I've just proposed that  $c$  is in some way constitutive of the very existence of  $s$ , and now the converse proposal also seems apt. For what is  $c$ ?  $c$  is (so to say) *living content*. It is an actual occurrence of content that is (necessarily) an actual *entertaining* of content, an episode that necessarily involves there being 'what-it's-like-ness' in the world, and its very life and reality—its being something concrete and particular, rather than being an uninstantiated what-it's-like-ness type—just is its being lived, had, animated, by a subject. It's impossible for  $c$ —this very occurrence of experiential content—to exist without  $s$ —this very (thin) subject existing and being its 'animating principle', and as for  $s$  ...

—Repetition.

... as for  $s$  (we won't move if all you can hear is a wordy restatement of an abstract proposition you've already registered),  $s$  doesn't exist at all when  $e$  doesn't exist, the experience of which it is the subject, and  $e$  doesn't exist at all without  $c$ , its content, which is its very matter. If one reflects, it can begin to seem that there is after all no obvious asymmetry between  $s$  and  $c$  as regards their mutual dependence. The egalitarian implication of the colon symbol in ' $s:c$ '—the suggestion of (ontological) parity, commutativity, relational symmetry—may begin to look less problematic.

Suppose this is so. What remains to favour ':' over '='? Well, the colon, unlike the identity sign, continues to stand up for the apparently adamant fact that  $s$  and  $c$  must be *somehow* distinct, however intimate their relation of mutual dependence. They're plainly conceptually distinct, even if they're not really distinct in the technical sense, because they can't possibly exist apart, and it still seems that they can't possibly be the same single thing.

—It's obvious that you're going to go on to say that concrete particulars can't be absolutely unable to exist apart from each other unless they're the same thing. The trouble is that you're not extracting anything you haven't already put in. What's more, you've simply defined your favoured entities  $s$  and  $c$  (and  $e$ ) into this intense degree of metaphysical intimacy, and although you may not have meddled much with the notion of an *experience*, or the (already peculiar)

notion of *occurrent content* in doing so, you've had to bend the notion of a *subject of experience* way out of shape to get anywhere near where you think you are now.

Out of shape? I think that's terminological prejudice, for reasons given earlier. Why should the term 'subject of experience' have a dispositional reading, i.e. a reading that allows there to be a subject of experience when there's no experience? What's the *evidence* that a subject of experience continues to exist when there is no experience?

This is a silly question, because the matter under discussion isn't a matter of fact. That's the point of the question. It makes it vivid that it is indeed just a terminological decision—to say that subjects of experience are things that can continue to exist when there's no experience. Human beings do so continue, of course, and brains, and parts of brains that are capable of being recruited into experience-constituting and subject-constituting synergies; but I don't think subjects of experience do. That's my terminological decision. You don't disagree with me, on my terms. You simply choose to put things differently.

—I'll grant this, because [4] [ $e = s = c$ ] remains as absurd as ever. The experience *is* the subject? The subject *is* the content? Contents have *experience*? *Experiences* have experience? Experiences experience *themselves*? [5], the claim that [ $e = s:c$ ], may come to seem relatively tolerable once one has acclimatized to your odd thin use of 'subject'. It simply states that a particular experience occurrence is a particular subject-entertaining-a-content-occurrence, and that is certainly true, on the present terms. But why go on to the triple identity?

I sometimes feel the same. But I suspect that [ $e = s = c$ ] is a deep truth. I think that the point that  $s$  and  $c$  stand in an intensely intimate relation given which they can't possibly exist apart—so that there is (in my augmented Cartesian terms) at most a conceptual distinction and no real distinction between them—is solid. As for the claim that if two concrete particulars aren't really distinct, and can't possibly exist apart, then they must be numerically identical—I take it, as in 6.15, that the burden of argument lies heavily on those who seek to deny it. This 'can't possibly' is very strong—so strong that it seems that only identity can guarantee it. And if this is right, then unless one can show a real distinction—a more than merely conceptual distinction—between  $s$  and  $c$  one will be driven to

[3] [ $s = c$ ]

even if [3], like [4], seems as crazy as ever.

So let me now formally re-endorse the principle first endorsed in 6.15—that if there is at most a conceptual distinction between two apparently distinct (concrete) particulars, if there's no real distinction between them, if they can't possibly exist apart, then they're not really two but only one. There's only one thing that is—of course—identical with itself. Caution suggests that we should ask one more time whether

[7.3] [ $s \rightarrow c$ ]

and

[7.4] [ $c \rightarrow s$ ]

are true, or whether  $s$  and  $c$  can possibly exist apart after all. But the answer No is contained in what has gone before. Certainly  $c$  can't possibly exist without  $s$ ; no actual, concrete, occurrent content, occurring at some particular place at some particular time, can possibly have any subject other than the subject it does have, whatever the subject's girth (thick, traditional inner, thin inner). This is [7.4], a point covered by the slogan that ideas are logically private. You want to reject the converse, [7.3], arguing that  $s$  and  $c$  can begin to exist together at time  $t_1$ ,  $c$  being cut short after 10 ms, at  $t_{1,1}$  and seamlessly replaced by  $c^* \neq c$ , which lasts until  $t_2$ , while  $s$  continues to exist. I reply that this is not so on my view, that  $c$  is the very body of  $s$  without which  $s$  cannot exist. In this story,  $s$  ceases to exist at  $t_{1,1}$  and a completely new subject comes into existence. One experience/subject-upsurging is cut short, another crosses the line into existence at the same moment, as depicted in Figure 8.3.

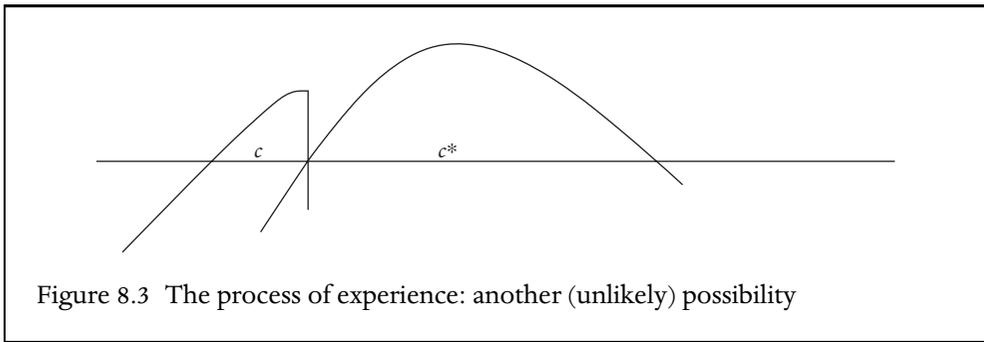


Figure 8.3 The process of experience: another (unlikely) possibility

Again the fact that certain sorts of counterfactual speculation run smoothly in everyday thought has no force. To appeal to this fact is simply to presuppose that  $s$  is substantially distinct from  $c$  in some way. It begs the question. One needs some independent reason to think that  $s$  is substantially distinct from  $c$ . But what gives one an independent fix on the identity of  $s$  that allows one to say such a thing?

—Fine. Just give me a reason for saying that  $s$  can't possibly exist without  $c$  that doesn't equally beg the question. It isn't enough for you to appeal to your definition of 'subject' according to which a subject exists in the L-reality only if experience exists in the L-reality. My proposal blocks that move with the phrase 'seamlessly replaced': there is no time between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  at which there is no experience in the L-reality.

I'll take back 'begs the question', but this reply fails, because it doesn't follow, from the fact that there is temporally seamless experience in the L-reality between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , that there's a single thin subject (371–2). My empirical bet about the human case remains the same as before: new experiences—and so new subjects—arise constantly as old ones die away, each such experience-and-subject being a primitive unity, a matter of a certain sort of upsurging of activity in and across neurons, each such upsurging effectively numerically distinct from the next (the identification of experience with neuronal activity is as always 'adductive'). I think that this is what the phenomenon of

there being a subject of experience actually consists in, in the human case. This is the reality that underlies all the subjective phenomena of continuity and flow in experience, such as they are, and the whole natural picture of the persisting inner self or subject.

What more can be said? I argued in 6.14 that we need to cultivate a realistically processual understanding of the nature of physical objects. This point combines with the account of the relation between an object and its properties given in 6.15 to remove (so I hope) any remaining felt strangeness in the claim that subjects—even thin subjects—are well thought of as objects, or are at least as well thought of as objects as any other things.

This may be one of those points at which it's helpful to put 'subjectivity' in place of 'subject', taking it as a constituent of a count noun such as 'an event or episode of subjectivity'. [7.3] is then the claim that the existence of *s* (this particular episode of subjectivity) is really nothing over and above the existence of *c* (this particular episode of occurrent living content). The existence of this subjectivity entails—indeed is—the existence of this occurrent content; the existence of this occurrent content entails—indeed is—the existence of this subjectivity. Neither is in any way ontologically distinct from the other.

Many, I think, will find this talk of 'subjectivity' far less unacceptable than talk of 'the subject'. But it's only the tremendous inertial force of the ordinary notion of what an object is, and so of what a subject-considered-as-an-object is, that makes many want to deny the existence of any such thing as *the* subject, even when the subject is supposed to be something fleeting, as here, and to throw up their hands at the further idea that the subject might have as much claim to be called an object as anything else in reality. In certain theoretical frames, the idea that the correct thing to say is that there is no subject, and certainly no *object*, only occurrent subjectivity or occurrent consciousness, seems an early, easy lesson of reflection, or meditation. An experience many find it natural to characterize as experience of the non-existence of the self or subject can seem inescapable in the present moment of meditation if it is practised with any success at all (the experience is reliable, even banal, as remarked in 4.4; it's entirely robust in the sense of experimental psychology, and occurs without delivering any particular spiritual benefits). In the present frame, however, this fact doesn't give any reason to think that the notion of the subject is in any way inappropriate in the description of reality, either in general or in the description of certain meditative states, for in the present frame it's a trivial (definitional) point that it is appropriate to speak of a subject whenever it is appropriate to speak of subjectivity: whenever there is experience, with its necessary *for*-ness. It is, more bluntly, a necessary truth that there is a subject whenever there is subjectivity.<sup>50</sup>

It's equally trivial, on the present terms, that there's an *object* that is a subject of experience whenever there's subjectivity. To think that the idea that subjects of experience are objects can be put in question by what meditation (say) reveals is simply to have an excessively *lumpen* and scientifically absurd picture of what objects are.

<sup>50</sup> This would be my—I take it conciliatory—reply to the doubts raised by Jim Stone (2005).

## 8.9 The purple pulse

I suppose I'm offering the triple identity as some sort of necessary truth. But let me now try briefly to present it quasi-empirically—'quempirically'—as if it were an empirical claim. Experience  $e$ , then, is (by materialist hypothesis) identical with a one-second-long synergy of process-stuff  $p^e$  ( $[e = p^e]$ );  $s$  is identical with a one-second-long synergy of process-stuff  $p^s$  ( $[s = p^s]$ ); and  $c$  is identical with a one-second-long synergy of process-stuff  $p^c$  ( $[c = p^c]$ ); and the proposal is that as a matter of fact

[12]  $[p^e = p^s = p^c]$

—that in any and all cases of experience the process-stuff that is the experience just is the process-stuff that is the subject, which in turn just is the process-stuff that is the content. We cannot section  $p^e$  into regions, a  $p^s$  region and a  $p^c$  region. In which case [4]  $[e = s = c]$ .

How might we establish this? Suppose that the art of mapping the neural direct constituters (not correlates) of consciousness has been perfected, and that we've picked out the synergy of process-stuff  $p^e$  that constitutes (is identical with)  $e$ . And suppose we find that we can somehow independently identify the subject synergy  $p^s$  that must exist given that  $e$  exists, and the content synergy  $p^c$  that must exist given that  $e$  exists. The present claim is that in this case we will find that  $p^s$  and  $p^c$  are the same, and that both are the same as  $p^e$ .

If we suppose instead that we can corral out a subject sub-synergy  $p^s$  of  $p^e$ , or a content sub-synergy  $p^c$  of  $p^e$ , neither  $p^c$  nor  $p^s$  being identical with  $p^e$ , then the claim is that  $p^s$  and  $p^c$  will still always be the same. This last supposition—about a subject/content sub-synergy—is directly contrary to [12], and so to [4], but it's worth pursuing a little for that reason.

Consider, then, the following quempirical challenge to the claim that if we could identify a subject sub-synergy  $p^s$  or a content sub-synergy  $p^c$  within an experience synergy  $p^e$  existing from  $t_1$  to  $t_2$ , then  $p^s$  and  $p^c$  would have to turn out to be the same thing. Suppose that there seem at first to be good intuitive reasons—simple spatial reasons, say—for distinguishing  $p^s$  from  $p^c$ . At  $t_0$ , say, one is considering the collection of ultimates,  $K$ , that will participate in the constituting of  $p^e$  from  $t_1$  to  $t_2$ .  $K$ , modelled in colour in two dimensions, has the shape of a blue crescent moon curled tightly to the side of an orange ball. There are little nodes on the crescent/ball boundary, and pathways for sensory inputs lead to the ball and only to the ball. At  $t_0$  sensory inputs flow into the ball. A flush of red suffuses rapidly across the ball and through the nodes into the crescent. Pulses of blue shoot out from the crescent through the nodes, and at  $t_1$  the whole crescent/ball complex pulses purple for two seconds—this is the existence of  $p^e$ —until  $t_2$ , when  $K$  precipitately loses its purple colour as neurons (or ultimates) constitutive of  $p^e$  become inactive with respect to  $s$ 's experience, or are rapidly recruited into other transient experience synergies.

The idea is that one might think it right to say that the purple-pulsing crescent is  $|s = p^s|$  while the purple-pulsing ball is  $|c = p^c|$ . But nothing in this story gives one good reason to suppose that  $|s = p^s|$  is ontologically distinct from  $|c = p^c|$ . For  $e$ , in this quempirical story, is purple-pulsing  $p^e$ . No (thin) subject exists in the  $K$ -reality before  $t_1$ , although there is a crescent formation; nor is there any occurrent experiential content in the  $K$ -reality before  $t_1$ , although there is an orange ball formation that has been suffused with red. Neither  $s$  nor  $c$  exists at all before the onset of purple at  $t_1$ . They begin together. The occurrent content  $c$  is the body of  $s$  without which  $s$  can't exist at all, and the subject  $s$  is the animation of  $c$  without which  $c$  can't exist at all. The crescent ball story supplies no reason to think that the crescent formation between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  is  $s$  while the ball formation is  $c$ .

How might we express the suggestion rejected on page 409—that  $s$  could continue to exist even if  $c$  were replaced by  $c^* \neq c$ ? It won't do to imagine that the red flush in the ball (material for an F-type experience, say) is annihilated and seamlessly replaced at  $t_{0.9}$  by a differently caused darker red flush (material for a G-type experience) before any empurplement occurs, for  $s$  does not yet exist at all in this story, and nor does  $c$ ; experience has not yet begun. We have to suppose instead that empurplement has taken place at  $t_1$  (experience has begun,  $s$  exists) and that the ball part of the purple process-stuff is then annihilated and seamlessly replaced by different (darker) process-stuff at  $t_{1.1}$ <sup>51</sup> while the crescent part of the process-stuff remains the same.

Suppose we admit this as a quempirical possibility. Is it a case in which  $s$  continues while  $c$  doesn't? No. For that in virtue of which  $e$  is a (thin) subject-involving entity is no more located in the crescent than in the ball. The subjectivity of the experience is undistanglably distributed across  $p^e$ . So  $s$  does not continue to exist with this replacement. This highly distributed conception of the location of subjectivity ('consciousness') is, I believe, the present consensus among the neurophysiologically informed about how experiences exist in the brain, both among those who are genuine or real realists about consciousness, and those, like Dennett, who aren't. On this view, there's simply no locus in the brain, however scattered, that is (a) the locus of the subject of experience and (b) distinct from the place where the neuronal activity in virtue of which the experience has the content it does is located.

### 8.10 $[e = s = c]$ (3)

I think this is enough. When we try to approach this part of reality, our categories of thought seem close to breaking point. The standard conception of the relation between

<sup>51</sup> We can allow for argument that the same ultimates may be involved: to constitute a numerically distinct portion of synergetic process-stuff, they need only be in a different state of activation.

a thing and its properties is locked into the terms ‘experience’, ‘subject of experience’, and ‘content’ in a way that makes it hard for us to grasp, let alone endorse, the proposed identity, even if the best current neurophysiology seems to support something like it. We can, it seems, pull  $c$  into line with  $e$  to get

[2] [ $e = c$ ]

as in the traditional misunderstanding of Hume (an experience is just content). And, jumping off from [5], the [ $e = s:c$ ] picture, or [6], the [ $e = s(c)$ ] picture, we can perhaps pull  $s$  into line with  $e$  to get

[1] [ $e = s$ ]

as in William James’s ‘the thoughts themselves are the thinkers’, Kant’s ‘the thinking or the existence of the thought and the existence of my own self are one and the same’, Hume’s ‘when my perceptions are remov’d for any time, as by sound sleep ... I ... may truly be said not to exist’, or Descartes’s ‘thinking must be considered as nothing else than thinking substance itself ..., that is, as mind’.<sup>52</sup> And when we have [1] and [2] we have

[4] [ $e = s = c$ ].

But as soon as we’ve pulled one of  $s$  or  $c$  into line—as soon as we’ve achieved some sort of grip on the proposal that one of  $s$  or  $c$  is identical with  $e$ —the other seems to pop out of line, deliquescing and recrystallizing as propertyish or aspectish. Suppose we’ve managed to set things out in such a way as to give some plausibility to the claim that the existence of the experience just is—is just—the existence of the subject, the thin subject that exists if and only if (not only *if*, but also *only if*) experience exists. In this case the content of the experience seems left out, and it seems we can get it back in only by thinking of it as an aspect or property or ‘modification’ of the subject—a retreat to [5] [ $e = s:c$ ] or [6] [ $e = s(c)$ ]. Suppose, alternatively, that we’ve drawn our intuitions closer to the thought that the experience just is—is just—the occurrent content, as in the old misunderstanding of Hume. In this case the subject of the experience seems left out, and it seems we can get it back in only by thinking of it as the necessary subjectivity of occurrent content:

[13] [ $e = c_s$ ]

as it were. It seems that we need to push either or  $s$  or  $c$  down in some way, because we can’t face [3] [ $s = c$ ].

But the subjectivity just is the subject—or so I have proposed. And the subject has the strong unity characteristic. It is (at the least) something whose claim to objecthood can’t be less than the claim of the episode of experience or the patch of occurrent experientially unified content. So [13] [ $e = c_s$ ] won’t do if it accords lesser status to  $s$ .

<sup>52</sup> James 1892: 191/83; Kant 1772: 75; Hume, *Treatise*, 165/252; Descartes 1644: 1.215.

## Identities and equivalences

[1]	$[s = e]$		
[2]	$[e = c]$		
[3]	$[s = c]$		
[4]	$[e = s = c]$		
[5]	$[e = s:c]$		
[6]	$[e = s(c)]$		
[7]	$[e \leftrightarrow s \leftrightarrow c]$	[7.1]	$[e \rightarrow s]$
		[7.2]	$[s \rightarrow e]$
		[7.3]	$[s \rightarrow c]$
		[7.4]	$[c \rightarrow s]$
		[7.5]	$[e \rightarrow c]$
		[7.6]	$[c \rightarrow e]$
[8]	$[s = p^s]$		
[9]	$[e = p^e]$		
[10]	$[c = p^c]$		
[11]	$[p^e \leftrightarrow p^s \leftrightarrow p^c]$		
[12]	$[p^e = p^s = p^c]$		
[13]	$[e = c_s]$		

I don't think we can reach [3] by any conventional way of thought. Even if we can reach either [1] or [2] individually, the way in which we reach it seems to block the way to the other. And yet I suspect that [4]  $[e = s = c]$  is true, and that similar wonders of identity apply in the case of all other physical objects, masked by the bad old picture of objects and their properties to which our minds keep defaulting. I think, in fact, that the case of the relation between an experience, the subject of the experience, and the content of the experience—the sheer difficulty of the triple identity—may be exemplary. We can perhaps get closer to apprehending the identity of a thing and its properties (the identity of its being and its being, the identity of its existence and its qualitative nature) in this case than in any other. Perhaps  $[e = s = c]$  gives us a glimmering of an extremely general metaphysical truth. It opens a small frosted window on to the nature of things in a way that nothing else can (the frosting is in the mind, not the glass, given that intellectual insight can bring us, however transiently, to transparency).

—All this time you've been avoiding an obvious, fatal objection. It's true on your terms that  $s$  can't exist without  $c$  and that  $c$  can't exist without  $s$ , but this fact is no more difficult than the fact that no object that has an essential property can exist without having that property.  $c$  is really just a *property* of  $s$ , and is on your terms (your thin conception of the subject) an essential property of  $s$ . That's why  $s$  and  $c$  are unbreakably locked. And this doesn't force us into any strange identity claim. You should stick to [5]  $[e = s:c]$ .

I used to think that [5] was the most that could be said. Now, though, I think that this objection draws any force it has from the reality-fogging inadequacy of the standard account of the relation between an object and its properties.

—I'll grant this for argument's sake (and because I'm worn out). I'll even grant that '*s*' and '*c*' name things that have as good a claim to be physical objects as anything else, so that the question of their identity can be posed. But an identity claim entails that the 'two' things that are said to be identical have all their properties in common (because they are, after all, only one thing). And *s* and *c* do not have all their properties in common. If one thing is certain, subjects experience things, and contents don't.

The triple identity claim is in flagrant conflict with ordinary thought and talk. If you're content to rely on them, they will secure your case (like baldness on page 314). My aim is to begin to reach beyond this sort of objection. *s* isn't a subject as conceived in your objection; *c* isn't a content as you conceive it. What we have is an experience *e*, a living content, a content-bodied subject *s/c*, a subject-animated content *c/s*: what we have is [ $e = s = c$ ]. A closer approach to [ $e = s = c$ ] requires a certain sort of intellectual discipline, or at least time.

