

## Descartes and Other Minds

Anita Avramides

### RESUMEN

La distinción de Descartes entre substancia material y substancia pensante da lugar a un problema tanto sobre nuestro conocimiento del mundo exterior como sobre el conocimiento de otras mentes. Sorprendentemente, Descartes dice poco sobre esta segunda cuestión. En la Segunda Meditación escribe sobre nuestro juicio (único) de que las figuras que se ven a través de su ventana son hombres y no autómatas. En este artículo se argumenta que pensar en el juicio como una operación de este modo equivale a pasar por alto el hecho de que, dada la metafísica cartesiana, nuestro juicio es susceptible aquí de un doble error. Puede ser erróneo respecto de que la figura que está ante mí sea un ser humano; y puede ser erróneo respecto de que la figura que está ante mí tenga una mente. Se sugiere que una de las razones de que Descartes pase por alto la posibilidad de este doble error es su supuesto de que todos y sólo los animales, de entre todos los seres corpóreos, tienen mentes. Se argumenta también que la sugerencia de que Descartes pasó por alto esta posibilidad de un doble error está apoyada por su propuesta, en el *Discurso V*, de una “prueba del hombre real”: el uso del lenguaje por parte del otro.

### ABSTRACT

Descartes's distinction between material and thinking substance gives rise to a question both about our knowledge of the external world and about our knowledge of another mind. Descartes says surprisingly little about this second question. In the Second Meditation he writes of our (single) judgement that the figures outside his window are men and not automatic machines. It is argued in this paper that to think of judgement as operating in this way is to overlook the fact that, given the Cartesian metaphysics, our judgement here is susceptible of double error. I may be in error that the figure before me is a human being; and I may be in error that the figure before me has a mind. It is suggested that one reason for Descartes overlooking the possibility of this double error is his assumption that, of corporeal beings, all and only human animals have minds. It is also argued that the suggestion that Descartes overlooks the possibility of a double error here is supported by his proposal, in *Discourse V*, of a “test of a real man”: the other's use of language.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The following passage from Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* could be taken to set the stage for a problem both concerning our knowledge of the

world of objects and concerning our knowledge of other minds:

Because each of us is conscious that he thinks, and that in thinking he can shut himself off from all other substances, either thinking or extended, we may conclude that each of us, similarly regarded, is really distinct from every other thinking substance. And even if we suppose that God had united a body to a soul so closely that it was impossible to bring them together more closely, and made a single thing out of the two, they would remain really distinct one from the other notwithstanding. [Descartes (1969), p. 244.]

Commenting on the Cartesian metaphysics, Donald Davidson has written,

If there is a logical or epistemic barrier between the mind and nature, it not only prevents us from seeing out, it also blocks a view from the outside in. [Davidson (1991), p. 154.]

What Davidson is pointing out is that the Cartesian problem of our knowledge of the world of objects is matched by a problem of our knowledge of other minds. One of the best known attempts to solve the problem of other minds is to invoke an argument from analogy. Argument by analogy is a plausible response to the Cartesian metaphysics. It is interesting that it was not Descartes' response. Indeed, on the matter of other minds Descartes is mostly silent. There are, however, two well-known passages – one in the Second Meditation and the other from the *Discourse on Method* – where Descartes writes in such a way as to suggest his thinking on this subject. And so far as it is possible to tell from such scant evidence, it does not appear that Descartes was inclined to the argument from analogy<sup>1</sup>. In what follows I shall suggest an interpretation of the two afore-mentioned paragraphs and indicate a way of thinking about other minds that might be taken to follow. One must be careful not to base too much on so little. Nevertheless, given the difficulties the Cartesian metaphysics encounters over 'other minds', it is hardly surprising that philosophers should try to see what Descartes himself might have had to say on the subject.

## II. THE ROLE OF INTUITION

Descartes begins the Second Meditation drowning in a sea of doubt, searching for his Archimedian point, which he finds in the *cogito*. He concludes that of himself he may be certain. One consequence of this conclusion is that we can each be more certain of the nature of our own

mind than we can be of the nature of any corporeal body. Descartes acknowledges the counterintuitive nature of this conclusion, and he writes,

Nevertheless it still seems to me, and I cannot prevent myself from thinking, that corporeal things, whose images are framed by thought, which are tested by the senses, are much more distinctly known than that obscure part of me which does not come under the imagination. [Descartes (1969), p. 153.]

Despite how things seem, however, Descartes sets out to prove that mind is better known than body. To this end he asks us to consider a piece of wax. He notes the qualities of the wax, and then considers how these change when the wax approaches the fire. These changes notwithstanding, we would say that we have before us the same piece of wax. The question is how we come to this conclusion given that all the information which the senses yield has undergone alteration in the fire. Concerning this he writes,

We must then grant that I could not even understand through the imagination what this piece of wax is, and that it is my mind alone which perceives it. I say this piece of wax in particular, for as to wax in general it is yet clearer... But what must particularly be observed is that its perception is neither an act of vision, nor of touch, nor of imagination, and has never been such although it may have appeared formerly to be so, but only an intuition of the mind... [Descartes (1969), p. 155.]

The imagination is limited to what is presented to the senses. It cannot comprehend what the wax is, it cannot comprehend the infinitude of possible changes which the wax may undergo. That the wax remains the same is something “the mind alone perceives”; it is something we understand. This intuition is part of our (human) perception of the wax. Descartes draws a firm line between the perception of animals and that of humans. The sensible modes of a body are perceived by both, but it is only humans that perceive the true nature of body. Descartes concludes this Second Meditation with the summary of his conclusion that mind is better known than body.

But finally here I am, having insensibly reverted to the point I desired, for, since it is not manifest to me that even bodies are not properly speaking known by the senses or by the faculty of imagination, but by the understanding alone, and since they are not known from the fact that they are seen or touched, but only because they are understood, I see clearly that there is nothing which is easier for me to know than my mind. [Descartes (1969), p. 157.]

Descartes notes that, although it is clear when we reflect upon it, we are apt to fall into error on this point. He suggests that an erroneous way

of thinking here is aided and abetted by the terms of ordinary language. We are, he writes,

almost deceived by ordinary language. For we say that we see the same wax, if it is present, and not that we simply judge that it is the same from its having the same colour and figure. From this I should conclude that I knew the wax by means of vision and not simply by the intuition of the mind, unless by chance I remember that when looking from a window and saying I see men who pass in the street, I really do not see them, but infer that what I see is men, just as I say that I see wax. And yet what do I see from the window but hats and coats which may cover automatic machines? Yet I judge these to be men. [Descartes (1969), p. 155.]

So language, which would appear to lead *away* from Descartes' conclusions concerning the role of understanding in perception, is shown to be deceptive. We say that we see men, when all we really see are hats and coats. This example is used by Descartes to reveal the lie which language masks. The point is that, on the basis of what we do see – in this case hats and coats – we judge that there are men in the street. In similar fashion we see the external forms and judge that we are seeing a piece of wax. Descartes writes,

But when I distinguish the wax from its external forms, and when, just as if I had taken from it its vestments, I consider it quite naked, it is certain that although some error may still be found in my judgement, I can nevertheless not perceive it thus without a human mind. [Descartes (1969), p. 156.]

As well as to show how language misleads us, it would appear that Descartes uses the comparison with the case of men to provide an appropriate metaphor for human perception. Just as men can be considered apart from their literal vestments, the piece of wax can be considered apart from its metaphorical vestments. The qualities which we see serve as vestments which obscure from us the true nature of the object. At this point, however, the comparison does look somewhat strained. Surely, in the case of men, further metaphorical vestments lie beneath the literal vestments. Yet to mention this would spoil the simplicity of Descartes point. What Descartes is after here is a use of language concerning perception which is clearly deceptive<sup>2</sup>.

The point about how language works is well taken, but surely, had Descartes been considering the perception of men in its own right he would not have wanted to suggest that we judge on the basis of the literal vestments worn by the figures that these are men. Clearly, when we see men without their hats and coats we are seeing them “naked” in a most superficial sense. Like the piece of wax, the men have “external forms” which can change while they, the men, remain the same. Let us see what

happens if we substitute “man” for “wax” in the above-quoted passage from the Second Meditation:

But when I distinguish the man from his external forms, and when, just as if I had taken from him his vestments, I consider him quite naked, it is certain that although some error may still be found in my judgement, I can nevertheless not perceive it thus without a human mind.

As with the piece of wax, Descartes is here concerned, not with the existence of the man, but with his nature. However, when we consider the passage so transposed, a certain ambiguity is immediately evident. Are we being asked to consider what makes a man a human being, or are we being asked to consider what makes a man a person – that is an individual with a mind? These two questions are explicitly prised apart by Locke, and fall naturally apart once one accepts the Cartesian metaphysics. Locke defines a person to be “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places” [Locke (1975), B. II, ch. xvii, ss. 8 & 9]. Locke contrasts the term “person” with that of a “man”, which he holds is the sign of “nothing else but of an animal of such a certain form”. The difference, for Locke, between a man – a human being – and a person turns on the presence or absence of a mind. Descartes' use of the term “man” is much less clear cut than Locke's<sup>3</sup>. At times he uses the term to refer to a compound of body and soul; at others he writes in such a way as to suggest that “man” is the name for a substantial union of body and soul. To my knowledge, Descartes never uses the term to refer, as Locke does, simply to a certain form of animal. For Descartes, a man – a human being – has both a body and a mind. There is much debate about the nature of the relationship between the body and mind of Descartes' man, but this debate is none of my concern. Whichever way Descartes is using the term, the suggestion in the passage under consideration is that a single intuition followed by a single judgement is all that is required in the perception of another man, and it is this that I am interested in here. What this overlooks is the fact that our judgement concerning others is susceptible of a double error: I may be in error that this is a human being (an animal of a certain form) and I may be in error that this is a person. And this, I suggest, is true whether or not mind and body form a substantial union. The reason, intuitively, is this: where mind and body are separable, it must be possible for the body to exist without the mind, and for mind to exist in some quite different body. This is precisely what Locke's distinction between a man and a person allows for. And this is what Descartes' talk of a single intuition does not allow for. It would appear that, in writing as he does about our perception of a man, Descartes is failing to acknowledge a consequence of his own

metaphysical framework<sup>4</sup>. In section V, below, I shall suggest a reason why Descartes may have been led to overlook the possibility of a double error in the case of others with minds. Before coming to this, I want further to consider the passage in the Second Meditation where Descartes writes of what we see from our windows when we judge that there are men that pass.

### III. MEN VS. AUTOMATA

Yet what do I see from the window but hats and coats which may cover automatic machines? Yet I judge these to be men.

The contrast Descartes offers at this point is between men and automatic machines. In keeping with the question I raised at the end of the previous section, we may be inclined to ask whether it is human beings or persons – that is individuals with minds – which are being contrasted with automatic machines. Furthermore, we may wonder why Descartes chooses to contrast men with automata only, and not animals such as monkeys or dogs on hind legs. That Descartes draws the distinction in the way that he does can be explained by two further features of his philosophy. Descartes held the following two theses:

- (i) There is a distinction in kind between men and all other living creatures.
- (ii) There is no distinction in kind between living creatures and mere mechanisms.

As a result of these two theses Descartes could hold:

- (iii) All non-human animals are *bête-machines*.

Gareth Mathews has written that, in holding these three propositions to be true Descartes was making an important – and conscious – break with the past [Cfr. Mathews (1977)]. Consider Descartes' Reply to Objection V:

Thus because probably men in the earliest times did not distinguish in us that principle in virtue of which we are nourished, grow, and perform those operations which are common to us with the brutes apart from any thought, from that by which we think they called both by the single name soul... But I, perceiving that the principle by which we are nourished is wholly distinct from that by means of which we think, have declared that the name *soul* when used for both is equivocal... I consider the mind not as a part of the soul but as the whole of that soul which thinks. [Descartes (1969), p. 210.]

Descartes here makes it clear that he wishes to introduce a firm distinction between those functions which man shares with the lower animals, such as growth and nourishment, and that which is distinctively human, thought. He wants to restrict the term “mind” to cover this thinking part of man. According to Descartes, mind is “the whole of the soul which thinks”. There is to be no more equivocation: mind is soul. As a result, the lower animals who grow, are nourished, and move in various ways are considered by Descartes to have no soul, it having been established that they have no mind. Despite the fact that they have no mind, or soul, these lower animals may yet be considered alive. Bodies are alive, and this is a fact independent of the possession of a mind or a soul. That some bodies are in possession of a mind or soul is something extra, and something which is divinely ordered. Once the having of a soul has been divorced from the living body, the way is clear to thinking of the body as a machine. This is Descartes' view of *all* bodies – including the human body taken as devoid of mind. Thus, Descartes writes in his *Treatise of Man* [quoted by Matthews (1977), pp. 17-8.]

I desire you to consider, further, that all the functions that I have attributed to this machine, such as *a*) the digestion of food; *b*) the beating of the heart and the arteries; *c*) the nourishment and growth of the members... I desire you to consider... that these functions... follow naturally in this machine entirely from the disposition of the organs – no more or less than do the organs of a clock or other automaton, from the arrangement of its counterweights and wheels.

Descartes here makes clear that some machines are living things. The ancient distinction between living creatures and mere mechanisms is firmly rejected. Having established that all bodies are machines, Descartes makes the following claim in the *Discourse on Method*:

If there had been such machines, possessing the organs and outward form of a monkey or some other animal without reason, we should not have had any means of ascertaining that they were not of the same nature as those animals. [Descartes (1969), p. 116.]

*Prima facie* this would appear to be an epistemological thesis. There lies behind it, however, an accompanying metaphysical thesis. According to Descartes, animals without minds are *bête-machines* [See, however, Cottingham (1978)]. Since an animal such as a monkey has no mind, by Descartes lights, there is nothing which distinguishes a monkey from a machine. This is Descartes' official position. There is evidence, however,

of a certain agnosticism on this matter in a letter to More where Descartes writes,

Though I regard it as established that we can't prove that there is any thought in animals, I do not think it is thereby proved that there is not, once the human mind does not reach into their hearts. [Descartes (1970), p. 244.]

This letter may help explain why in the *Discourse* Descartes makes only an epistemological claim regarding machine monkeys. It is also important to note in connection with this letter that Descartes is here explicitly acknowledging, what is anyway clear, that one human mind cannot directly experience the mind of another. It is because of this that want of thought cannot be “proved” in the case of animals. As we shall soon see, Descartes believes that things are very different in the case of animals with reason. I conclude that when in the Second Meditation Descartes contrasts men with automatic machines, he is, in effect, contrasting a body to which God has conjoined a mind with a mindless body.

Drawing on the passage from the *Treatise on Man*, the following can serve as Descartes' definition of an automaton:

(A) An automaton is a body whose functions – no matter how sophisticated – can be seen to follow from the arrangements of its parts.

In so far as non-human animals are mindless bodies, or *bête-machines*, it is clear that Descartes has subsumed such cases under the category of automata. Monkeys and dogs on hind legs are among the automata which one rules out when one judges that there are indeed men beneath the hats and coats. This follows from the fact that, for Descartes, a soul-less living body is an automaton. So when we gaze from our windows into the street we judge that the figures we see are men and not *bête-machines*. But what about the possibility that these figures are *homme-machines*? According to principle (A) an automaton may be a mindless living human body. Should God choose not to unite a mind with a human body, would this body not then fall into the category of automaton and, thus, something which must be distinguished from a man? If so, then, when we judge we must judge that these figures are men and neither *bête-machine* nor *homme-machine*. Furthermore, it may be thought that we must judge that these figures that walk the streets are men produced by God and not mindless robots produced in the workshops of men.

When we read the text, however, it does not appear that Descartes had so many possibilities in mind by the term “automatic machine”. Consider first the difference between the soul-less machine produced in God's workshop and that produced in the workshop of man. Descartes does believe there is a difference



here: God's machines are "incomparably better arranged", and possess movements which are "much more admirable, than any of those which can be invented by man". [Descartes (1969), p. 116.] Presumably, so long as the figures we see from our window are of the more admirably arranged kind, we can ignore the possibility that they are produced in the workshops of man. What, however, about the possibility of a God-produced *homme-machine*? That God could produce such machines, there is no doubt. That God has in fact produced such machines, Descartes appears not to believe<sup>5</sup>. I shall be saying more about this in section V, below. The conclusion of this section is that, when Descartes considers the judgement that the figures beneath the hats and coats are men and not automata the contrast he intends is between men and non-human animals, that is, between living bodies with which God has chosen to unite a mind and living bodies with which he has not.

Once we understand that non-human animals are, for Descartes, the automata with which men are being contrasted, it should come as less of a surprise that he draws no distinction between being a human being and being a person. It is clear that Descartes held that all automata lack a mind. It is also becoming clear that Descartes believed that all men, that is human beings, have been endowed by God with a mind. Proceeding with these two assumptions in place, there was no need for Descartes to distinguish between men (that is, human beings or animals of a certain form) and persons (that is, individuals with minds). Furthermore, with these two assumptions in place Descartes need only hold that a single intuition will suffice in the perception of men.

#### IV. THE TEST OF A REAL MAN

In section II I suggested that, in his considerations concerning perception and the nature of knowledge, Descartes could just as well have used the example of a man as the example he does use, that of a piece of wax. However, should he have chosen to use this example, Descartes would have had to add that, as well as wearing literal vestments, men should also be understood to wear more metaphorical vestments, "external forms" comparable with the forms of the piece of wax. In section III I concluded that, unlike Locke, Descartes did not see the need to distinguish between a human being and a person. Both were comprehended under his term "man". In the light of this, the following becomes an interesting question: what, precisely, are the external forms of a man?

Let us consider first what these forms are in the case of the piece of wax. In the Second Meditation Descartes mentions the smell, the colour, the figure and the size of the piece of wax. It is these that are transformed when the wax is placed in the fire. These forms include both primary and secondary qualities of the wax. If we turn now to the case of a man, it is tempting similarly to list his figure, size, col-

our, smell, and taste as among his external forms. It would seem that, if Locke's distinction between a human being and a person is in place, then these qualities may serve as the external forms of a human being. Things are not so straightforward for Descartes who, as we have seen, does not draw this distinction. In the case of Descartes' man, what is it that we perceive when we judge that what is before us is a man and not an automaton?

I suggest that we can find an answer to this question in the *Discourse on Method*, part V. Having claimed that there is no means of ascertaining a distinction between inanimate machines and a monkey or other animal without reason, Descartes writes,

On the other hand, if there were machines which bore a resemblance to our body and imitated our actions as far as it was morally possible to do so, we should always have two very certain tests by which to recognize that, for all that, they were not real men. [Descartes (1969), p. 116.]

The first test of a real man is this: a real man uses language. Descartes considers the possibility that *l'homme machine* may emit responses of a verbal sort to various acts of ours, but it can never “arrange its speech in various ways, in order to reply appropriately to everything that may be said in its presence”. The second test overlaps with this first: reason is, claims Descartes, a universal and versatile instrument which can serve any contingency. By comparison, a creature lacking reason will need to have its organs specially adapted to every particular action. The result is that, although a machine may be immeasurably better than us in some respects, it will fall short of our abilities in others. True reason allows for adaptability and flexibility.

This passage in the *Discourse* is more clearly concerned with the issue of our knowledge of other men than is the passage in the Second Meditation which I discussed in section II. As I said earlier, the passage in the *Meditations* is primarily concerned to draw our attention to the way we use language, and how misleading this can be. In addition I speculated that Descartes found it useful to compare the metaphorical vestments – the external forms – of the piece of wax to the literal vestments worn by the men in the street. However, that passage also raises in our minds the question, what are the metaphorical vestments of a man? I suggest that we read the above-quoted passage from the *Discourse* as revealing what Descartes takes the external forms of a man to be. What he calls the test of a real man can be taken to be the external vestments or forms of a real man. If we do understand Descartes' tests in this way, it is clear that Descartes is not here referring to the external forms of a human being alone. Descartes' man has a mind.

If we do take this passage from the *Discourse* as revealing of the external forms of a man, we find once again that Descartes has collapsed any distinction

between a human being and a person. What Descartes offers is a single test, and it is the test of a man<sup>6</sup>. By writing in this way of a single test, Descartes appears to leave out the real possibility that a non-human animal may possess reason; correspondingly, Descartes appears also to rule out the real possibility that a human animal may lack reason. The following passage from Locke's *Essay* would find no place in Descartes' writings:

whosoever should see a creature of his own shape and make, though it had no more reason than a cat or a parrot would call him still a man, or whoever should hear a cat or a parrot discourse, reason and philosophize, would call or think it nothing but a cat or a parrot; and say the one was a dull irrational man, and the other a very intelligent parrot. [Locke (1975), B. II, ch. xxvii, s. 8.]

It would appear that Locke is here leaving it open that a human animal should lack reason, while at the same time leaving it open that a non-human animal should possess reason. If we take it that with his tests of a real man Descartes is giving us tests of a human being with reason, we can see that Descartes leaves no room for such possibilities as Locke envisages. Descartes' tests of a real man appear to pass over any independent tests of a human being without a mind. It is as if Descartes intends the one test to incorporate the other. Such an incorporation would be plausible if the following were held to be true: if a mind is embodied at all, it is embodied in a human form. In the following section I shall offer evidence that this is indeed something Descartes believed.

#### V. ALL AND ONLY HUMAN ANIMALS HAVE MINDS

In sections III and IV I examined the contrast, introduced by Descartes, between real men and automata. I came to the conclusion that Descartes was primarily concerned to differentiate between a living (non-human) animal body and a creature with reason. Furthermore, I explained that Descartes held that only human animals have minds and suggested that Descartes held that all human animals have minds. From now on I shall refer to this as Descartes' foundational assumption and I shall formulate it thus:

(FA) Of corporeal beings, all and only human animals have minds.

In the previous section I suggested that it is this assumption which can explain why Descartes does not think it necessary to distinguish human beings from persons. I suggested also that the acceptance of (FA) makes it possible for Descartes to hold that the true nature of a man is discernable in a single judgement. In this section I shall offer some direct textual evidence that Descartes held (FA).

I shall begin with the claim that only human animals have minds. Even in Descartes' own time his claim that human animals are uniquely different came under attack. For example, in his *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, Montaigne writes of the sophistication of animal behaviour; this was used by some to challenge Descartes' claim that human animals alone exhibit behaviour of a particularly sophisticated kind. But Descartes never denies that some animals exhibit extreme dexterity of behaviour in certain situations. He believes, however, that this observation is offset by another: that non-human animals manifest virtually no dexterity in other situations. If these animals were possessed of genuine intelligence we would not observe this asymmetry in their behaviour. It is from these two observations that Descartes concludes:

It is nature which acts in them according to the disposition of their organs, just as a clock, which is composed of wheels and weights is able to tell the hours and measure the time more correctly than we can do in all our wisdom. [Descartes (1969), p. 117.]

Further to this Descartes writes in a letter to the Earl of Newcastle:

If they thought as we do, they [non-human animals] would have an immortal soul as we do as well, which is not likely because there is no reason at all to believe it of some animals without believing it of them all, and several of them, such as oysters, sponges, etc. are too imperfect for us to be able to believe that of them. [Letter quoted by Gunderson (1971), p. 16.]

Non-human animals do not have souls because, if we were to believe it of some, we would have to believe it of all – even the lowliest forms of animal life. It is not at all clear why Descartes held this, since surely he need only hold that we have reason to believe non-human animals have souls if they exhibit the behavioural complexity which forms one of Descartes' test. Nevertheless, there is evidence that Descartes was driven by theological and moral considerations to deny souls (that is, minds) to all non-human animals<sup>7</sup>. At the very end of part V of the *Discourse* Descartes writes:

For next to the error of those who deny God, which I think I have already sufficiently refuted, there is none which is more effectual in leading feeble spirits from the straight path of virtue, than to imagine that the soul of the brute is of the same nature as our own, and that in consequence, after this life we have nothing to fear or to hope for, any more than the flies and ants.

Descartes concludes:

When one comes to know how greatly they differ [that is, the soul of man and the brute], we understand much better the reasons which go to prove that our soul is in its nature entirely independent of body, and in consequence that it is not liable to die with it. [Descartes (1969), p. 118.]

Of the idea of non-human animal immortality Descartes is dismissive. In a letter to More he writes,

it is less probable that worms, gnats, caterpillars and the rest of the animals should possess an immortal soul, than that they should move in the way machines move<sup>8</sup>.

These issues introduce a complexity of their own which is not the direct concern of this paper. Obscure as his reasons may be for holding that, of corporeal beings, only human animals have minds, that Descartes held this to be true cannot be in doubt by the time one finishes reading the *Discourse*.

Similarly, there is equally clear evidence that Descartes believed that *all* human animals have minds. In the passage of the *Discourse* where Descartes introduces his tests of real men he writes, that a machine does not arrange its speech in a way appropriate to every situation and contingency “as even the lowest type of men can do”. Further to this, and in the same letter to the Earl of Newcastle quoted above, Descartes writes,

there is no man so imperfect that he does not make use of them [that is, signs].

And in a letter to Henry More Descartes writes,

For language is the one certain indication of the latent cognition in a body, and all men use it, even the most stupid and mentally deranged, and those deprived of their tongue and vocal organs, whereas not a single brute speaks, and consequently this we may take to be the true difference between man and beast.

Finally, returning to the *Discourse* we find Descartes writing:

For it is a remarkable fact that there are none so depraved and stupid, without even excepting idiots, that they cannot arrange different words together, forming of them a statement by which they make known their thoughts... [Descartes (1969), pp. 116-7.]

Descartes recognizes that animals such as parrots and magpies “utter words just like ourselves”, nevertheless he concludes that they “cannot speak as we do, that is, so as to give evidence that they think of what they say”. [Descartes (1969), p. 117.] Despite the fact that, on this issue, he

appear to be more prone to assertion than argument, we can, nevertheless, conclude that Descartes believes that all human animals have minds.

#### VI. DESCARTES' OPTIMISM

I have been arguing that Descartes appears to hold that when we judge that a figure is a real man there is a single judgement at work, and that that judgement encompasses both the judgment that the figure is a human being (an animal of a certain form) and that the figure is a person. I suggested that, because Descartes does not believe that God conjoined a mind or soul with any other than a human animal, there is no need for him to write of a double judgement here.

I want now to consider the error to which our judgement is subject when it judges that there is a real man. The error is that which Descartes reviews in the First Meditation: these figures – these men – may be the product of the malicious demon. As we have seen, Descartes holds that, in these circumstances, we are liable to a single error. Contrary to this, I have argued that, given the Cartesian metaphysics, we are liable to a double error: on the one hand the malicious demon may deceive me that the figure before me – the body before me – exists, on the other hand the malicious demon may choose to deceive me only about the existence of a mind in this figure.

This, of course, is the classic problem of other minds. An acknowledgment of this possibility would have required that Descartes distinguish two distinct judgements where, in fact, he acknowledges only one. Once again we can see Descartes' foundational assumption at work, this time blinding him to a quite serious problem about other minds<sup>9</sup>.

Yet it might be argued that Descartes does not need to acknowledge the possibility of a double error here as he believes we can have an absolute assurance that men (that is, human animals with minds) exist. Let me quickly review how we come by this assurance.

In the *Discourse*, just after Descartes introduces the two tests of a real man, he writes the following:

For while reason is a universal instrument which can serve for all contingencies, [the organs of machines] have need of some special adaptation for every particular action. From this it follows that it is morally impossible that there should be sufficient diversity in any machine to allow it to act in all the events of life in the same way as our reason causes is to act. [Descartes (1969), p. 116.]

To understand what Descartes is saying here we need to understand what he means by the phrase “morally impossible”. In the *Principles*

Descartes employs the phrase “moral certainty” and he defines it thus: moral certainty is “certainty which suffices for the conduct of life” [Descartes (1969), p. 301]. Extrapolating from this we can understand by the phrase “moral impossibility”, practical impossibility<sup>10</sup>. The phrase had a certain currency in Descartes' day and was sometimes employed in connection with the argument from design in the following manner: there are some things which may be the way they are – with all the intricate workmanship involved – as the result of pure chance; it is, however, highly unlikely (that is, morally impossible) that this should be so. A parallel consideration would be this: a monkey may sit down at a typewriter and type out the entire Gutenberg Bible<sup>11</sup>. This is not impossible to conceive, but it is morally impossible – or highly unlikely – that it should occur. Descartes' example of the behaviour of a machine is similar to this: although it is conceivable that a machine should act with such diversity in all the events of life, it is highly unlikely – morally impossible – that it do so.

Thus, in the passage quoted above from the *Discourse*, Descartes is professing a certain sort of impossibility – a moral impossibility – while at the same time allowing for the logical possibility that a non-human animal may possess a soul. And of course, he would have been just as alive to the logical possibility that a human body might lack a soul. Now, if these are logical possibilities, the question arises how we know that another figure is a man (or that the human animal has a soul). In his penultimate *Principle of Philosophy* Descartes writes:

And further there are some, even among natural things, which we judge to be absolutely, and more than morally, certain [‘of which we judge that it is impossible that the thing should be other than as we think it’, French version]. This certainty is founded on the metaphysical ground that as God is supremely good and cannot err, the faculty which He had given us of distinguishing truth from falsehood, cannot be fallacious so long as we use it aright, and distinctly perceive anything by it. Of this nature are mathematical reasoning, the knowledge that material things exist, and the evidence of all clear reasoning that is carried on about them. [Descartes (1969), pp. 301-2.]

Where in this knowledge does Descartes fit our knowledge of other men? The absence of any explicit reference in the text to other men is indeed notable. We can, however, be fairly sure that in an expanded list of those things of which we can be absolutely certain Descartes would have included our knowledge that other men exist. And, as with the rest of our knowledge, our certainty here is founded upon the existence of a non-deceiving God who has given us the faculty for distinguishing truth from falsehood which “cannot be fallacious so long as we use it aright, and distinctly perceive anything by it”. Thus a moral certainty is converted into an absolute certainty.

Descartes is, thus, optimistic in the face of the sceptic. And if Descartes' proof of the existence of a world of bodies works, then our knowledge of the existence of other men would appear to follow. But Descartes' proof does not work. And once we see that it does not work, we have to accept that we are left with (at least) two problems: how we can be said to know the existence of bodies external to ourselves, and how we can be said to know the existence of other minds? We are liable to two very different kinds of error in our judgement concerning other men.

However, I also want to suggest that Descartes runs into a problem over other minds even given his own system of knowledge. That his system has this problem is obscured only by the acceptance of what I earlier called his foundational assumption: that, of corporeal beings, all and only human animals have minds. Only with this assumption in place can Descartes avoid a problem about other minds. To see this let us return to examine how it is that Descartes thinks we come by our absolute certainty that material things – and, hence other men – exist.

When Descartes claims that we can have absolute certainty in the existence of material things, he clearly does not mean to rule out the possibility of error. And some of our errors are not easily detectable. Nevertheless, Descartes maintains that a non-deceiving God would “not have permitted any falsity to exist in my opinion which He has not likewise given me the faculty of correcting”. [Descartes (1969), p. 191.] Thus, it may appear to the naked eye that a straight stick is bent when immersed in water; or the sun may appear to be a very small object when viewed in the sky. Yet God has given us the power to correct our errors here and to come by knowledge of the world. It is only where we do not have the power to discern our mistake, and where God has given us a very great inclination to believe, that we can take it that what we believe is true. And just as we have a very great inclination to believe in the existence of tables and rocks and trees, so we have a very great inclination to believe in the existence of other men. But now consider: those who have spent a great deal of time around non-human animals have an overwhelming inclination, in some cases at least, to attribute minds to them. And it is becoming less and less difficult to imagine situations where a man-made machine, a robot, will invoke a very strong inclination in us to believe that they have minds. Furthermore, there are some human ‘vegetables’ to whom we have no inclination whatever to attribute minds. Given these inclinations we must, by Descartes' own lights, either accept our inclinations at face value or we find some way of accounting for our mistake.

Perhaps Descartes believes that we have, in these cases, a way of correcting our error, a way reflected in the two tests of a real man which Descartes describes in the *Discourse*. It seems to me, however, that there are two problems with this suggestion. First of all, Descartes would have to drop



any reliance on the foundational assumption according to which, of corporeal beings, all and only human animals have minds. We must be clear that the correction of our inclinations is not the result of some highly questionable assumption on our part. Secondly, we need to be much clearer about how these tests are supposed to work. Descartes needs to say more about what, precisely, is to count as having a language, and what degree of complexity and adaptability it takes to qualify as a person. There is a real danger of reading Descartes as saying that only the behaviour that real men exhibit can serve as the test of a real man, and this is manifestly circular. Once we designed a non-circular test of a real man, we would need to accept that some individuals that appeared to be real men (who had the outward form of a human animal) were not in fact so (were in fact lacking in a mind); we would need also to accept that some individuals with the outward form of a non-human animal were in fact endowed with a mind.

It would appear that, whether we accept our inclinations concerning the presence or absence of mind at face value, or whether we subject them to the scrutiny of Descartes' tests, we must conclude that some non-human animals may be possessed of a mind while some human animals may not. Either way, we must dispense with the assumption that, of corporeal beings, all and only human animals have minds. And once we have done this we must accept as well that, when we look from our windows and see the hats and coats of the figures in the street, we must judge both that the individuals beneath the vestments are human animals *and* that they have minds. In other words, we must accept the Lockean distinction between a human being and a person.

Of course it would remain a logical possibility that a mind was not present even where the evidence of language was correctly observed. This just shows that we can never have a deductive proof that another body has a mind. Recall Descartes' letter to More quoted above in section III:

Though I regard it as established that we can't prove that there is any thought in animals, I do not think it is thereby proved that there is not, once the human mind does not reach into their hearts.

Descartes could similarly have written:

Though I regard it as established that there is thought in human animals, I do not think it is thereby proven that there is, once the human mind does not reach into their hearts.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that Descartes holds that, of corporeal beings, all and only human animals have minds. This thesis has the status in Descartes' work of a foundational assumption. With this assumption in place Descartes is able to elide the distinction between a human being and a person which Locke was to make much of. Furthermore, with this assumption in place, Descartes is able to hold that only a single act of understanding, and a single judgement, is required to establish that another is a real man. In this way Descartes is shielded from having to acknowledge that his metaphysical framework gives rise to a real problem concerning the minds of others. At the very least Descartes would have had to acknowledge that our knowledge of other minds does not simply follow from our knowledge of the world of bodies. That there are two different kinds of knowledge here that need to be accounted for separately is something acknowledged by Malebranche<sup>12</sup>. Locke, too, gives separate attention in his account of knowledge to our knowledge of bodies and our knowledge of other minds. What we find is that, once philosophers working within the Cartesian metaphysical framework acknowledge that our knowledge of other minds must be accounted for in a manner different to our knowledge of the world of bodies, the tendency is to move in the direction of an argument from analogy<sup>13</sup>. There is no evidence, however, that Descartes was tempted to move in this direction. There is even some reason to think that Descartes would have abjured such a move. The reason is this: those that argue by analogy to the existence of other minds, are content to accept that our knowledge here is merely probable. Locke holds that such is the degree of knowledge we are capable of attaining concerning things which are "such, that falling not under the reach of our senses, they are not capable of testimony". And Malebranche acknowledges that where our knowledge is by conjecture, we must accept that it is merely probable. Descartes is more optimistic than either Malebranche or Locke. There is every reason to believe that, as with our knowledge of the external world, Descartes would hold that we can attain absolute certainty concerning our knowledge of the mind of another.

*St. Hilda's College*  
*Oxford OX4 1DY, UK*  
*E-Mail: anita.avramides@st-hildas.oxford.ac.uk*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is also the conclusion reached by Mathews (1986).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that, although it is our language which is misleading, it is ultimately our judgement which is responsible for error, not our understanding. Cfr. The title of Principle XXXVIII of *The Principles of Philosophy I*, Pt. I: “That our errors are defects of our mode of action, but not of our nature...” [Descartes (1969), p. 234.]

<sup>3</sup> Descartes' use of the term “man” is subjected to close scrutiny by Voss (1994). Voss suggests that Descartes use of this term progresses through three stages, the last of which Voss describes as man's disappearance from the Cartesian universe (p. 300). In the first stage (which Voss takes to include Descartes' work on the *Rules for the Direction of Mind*, *Treatise on Man*, the *Discourse*, and the *Meditations*), Descartes takes a man to be composed of a body and a soul. In the second stage (which Voss dates to 1641-42) Descartes writes in such a way as to suggest a substantial union between mind and body. Man would be the name for the substance generated by that union. The third and final stage (which Voss claims includes such writings as the *Principles of Philosophy* and the *Passions of the Soul*) finds Descartes ceasing to use the term “man” altogether. The passage under consideration in this section (as well as those that I will be discussing in section IV) falls firmly within stage one.

<sup>4</sup> In saying this I am well aware that, in the passage under discussion, Descartes is not specifically addressing that issue which has come to be known as the problem of other minds. (As I say in the text, Descartes is here primarily interested in examining the way our language may mislead us concerning how human perception works.) I have, nonetheless, two reasons for examining the passage in the way I do in the text. Firstly, it is natural to want to press Descartes on the issue of other minds – especially as it is plausibly argued that it was as a result of Descartes work on mind that a problem concerning other minds arises in the first place. Secondly, and no doubt connected to this first reason, philosophers have taken this passage as indicative of Descartes' position on the issue of other minds.

<sup>5</sup> The sort of *homme-machine* God could produce is described by Descartes in *The Treatise on Man*. It is interesting to note that in a footnote to the text Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch point out that when in the text Descartes refers to men he is referring to fictional men: “Their description is intended to cast light on the nature of real men in the same way that the description of a ‘new world’ in *The World...* is intended to cast light on the real world.” [Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch (1985), p. 99.]

<sup>6</sup> I say Descartes offers a single test despite the fact that he does mention two tests. My point is that both of Descartes' tests are tests for the same thing. In this sense, then, it is a single test. Also, as I noted in the text, Descartes' two tests are overlapping.

<sup>7</sup> This is also Gunderson's conclusion in Gunderson (1971), p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> This is quoted by Williams (1978), p. 287. Williams cites as a reason for Descartes' denial of souls to animals that, because souls are separable from body, the attribution of a soul to an animal means the possibility of animal immortality (the possibility only, as actual immortality depends upon God).

<sup>9</sup> Even if one leaves aside the machinations of an evil demon, once one acknowledges the Cartesian metaphysics of mind and body, it is possible to envisage a dream wherein a human body conducts its business in the absence of a mind.

<sup>10</sup> In their translation of the passage from the *Discourse* quoted above, Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch drop the phrase “morally impossible” altogether. In its place they write: “it is for all *practical purposes* impossible for a machine to have enough different organs to make it act in all the contingencies of life in the way in which our reason makes us act” (my italics). [Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch (1985), p. 140] In a footnote to their translation of the *Principles of Philosophy*, Part IV, article 205, Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch write that the French version of the first sentence of article 205 runs as follows, “...moral certainty is certainty which is sufficient to regulate our behaviour, or which measures up to the certainty we have on matters relating to the conduct of life which we never normally doubt, though we know that it is possible, absolutely speaking, that they may be false”. [(1985), p. 289.]

<sup>11</sup> I owe this example to Michael Ayers.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Nicholas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, Book III, Part 2, chapter 7, section 1. Malebranche here explicitly distinguishes four kinds of knowledge: knowledge of our own mind; knowledge of body; knowledge of other minds; and knowledge of God.

<sup>13</sup> I say “move in the direction of” advisedly. Malebranche argues only that our knowledge of other minds is by conjecture (cf. *The Search After Truth*, Book III, Part 2, chapter 7, section 5); and in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* we find the merest hints of an argument by analogy.

#### REFERENCES

- COTTINGHAM, J. (1978), “A Brute to the Brutes? Descartes' Treatment of Animals”, *Philosophy*, vol. 53, pp. 551-9.
- COTTINGHAM, J., STOOHOFF, R. and MURDOCH, D. (eds.) (1985), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. I, Cambridge University Press.
- DAVIDSON, D. (1991), “Three Varieties of Knowledge”, in Phillips Griffiths, A. (ed.), *A. J. Ayer: Memorial Essays*, Cambridge University Press, pp.153-66.
- DESCARTES (1969), *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. by E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, vol. I, Cambridge University Press.
- DESCARTES (1970), *Philosophical Letters*, trans. and ed. by A. Kenny, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- GUNDERSON, K. (1971), *Mentality and Machines*, New York, Doubleday.
- LOCKE, J. (1975), *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. with an introduction by P. Niddicht, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- MATHEWS, G. B. (1977), “Consciousness and Life”, *Philosophy*, vol. 52, pp.13-26.
- (1986), “Descartes and the Problem of Other Minds”, in Rorty, A. (ed.), *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- VOSS, S. (1994), “Descartes: The End of Anthropology”, in Cottingham, J. (ed.), *Reason, Will and Sensation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- WILLIAMS, B. (1978), *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books.