

**WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF
DESCARTES'S *MEDITATION SIX*?¹**

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I argue that Descartes considered his theory that the body is an innervated machine – in which the soul is situated – to be his most original contribution to philosophy. His ambition to prove the immortality of the soul was very poorly realized, a predictable outcome, insofar as his aims were ethical, not theological. His dualism accordingly requires reassessment.

I

One way to read Descartes's *Meditations* is this: Descartes was concerned to prove the existence of God and of a soul distinct from the body and capable of surviving it. To that end, he provided four different arguments for the existence of God in *Meditations Three* and *Five*, and arguments first for the conceptual and then for the actual independence of mind and body at the start of *Meditation Six*. The remainder of *Meditation Six*, on this reading, is noise – a basically irrelevant discussion of physiology, similar to the other basically irrelevant discussion of the heart in the *Discourse on Method*. Its gratuitous detail was occasioned on this view by Descartes's realization that, having perfectly distinguished the soul from the body, he would be faced with objections from critics wanting to know how two separate, ontologically distinct substances could causally interact. Descartes never manages to

¹ The author is indebted to Steffen Ducheyne and an anonymous referee for their suggestions.

answer them and *Meditation Six* offers only a disappointingly negative thesis: mind and body are not related as a pilot to his ship.

Here are some reasons to think this can't be the right interpretation of *Meditation Six*, or indeed of the *Meditations* taken as a whole. First, this interpretation of the role of the discussion of the nerves and brain sheds no light on the comparably long discussion of the heart at the end of the *Discourse*. Second, it sheds no light on the place of the *Meditations* in Descartes's oeuvre: the surprising occurrence of a metaphysico-theological work after a set of publications (and suppressed publications) in natural philosophy dealing with topics from cosmology and meteorology to the physiology of vision. As Anne Bitbol-Hesperies observes, "It was Cartesian anthropology, grounded in a mechanistic definition of life, that gave rise to reactions among the first readers."² Some of Descartes's closest friends, like Henry Regius, wondered what he had in mind with this new, metaphysical style of publication.³ Third, the *Meditations* are a short, but architectonically complex text with scarcely a superfluous line in them, at least up through the first half of *Meditations Six*. How likely is it that Descartes lost control of his material just at the end? Fourth, Descartes's claim in his Preface that his purpose in writing the *Meditations* was to prove the immortality of the soul by philosophical means does not match up with his text. As virtually every 17th century critic of the text pointed out, Descartes failed to draw a single inference about the immortality of the soul in the *Meditations*, and this distinguished him markedly from the run of 17th century metaphysicians. But if Descartes thereby revealed that he did not care very much about the immortality of the soul, what did he care about? Some commentators have acknowledged Descartes's empirical interests and have made a gesture towards acknowledging the importance of the physiology of *Meditation Six* by arguing as follows: Descartes valued mathematical physics, which deals with extension and motion, over the Baconian sciences that employ our sense to study qualitatively differentiated things. *Meditation Six* shows why the senses are conducive to the preservation of life and health in us and in the animals but have no

² Bitbol-Hesperies, 1999: 372.

³ Wilson, 2000.

epistemological value.⁴ If the lesson to be taken away from the *Meditations* is, however, that science is best approached by abstraction from experience, why didn't Descartes just say so, or give some examples from mechanics?

In light of these interpretive difficulties, the following hypothesis is worth a trial: The climax of the *Meditations* is the account of the human being as an innervated fleshly structure linked to the world of material objects in an adaptive and functional way. It was this theory of the human body in the world, drawing on the basic concepts of Alexandrian experimental physiology,⁵ that Descartes considered to be his special, original contribution to philosophy. The *Meditations* is accordingly a work of psycho-physiological theodicy, in which the mind discovers its own competency and then goes on to discover the competency of its own body. Descartes uses the leverage of the Augustinian-Platonic tradition of incorporealism to overthrow some central theological doctrines: that sin is intrinsic to human nature, that the body is basically an encumbrance to the ideal form of human life, and that death will liberate the human soul for a magnificent intellectual future. The existence of errors - epistemological, perceptual, and, by implication, moral - is explained in a way consistent with the thesis that the body is an optimized *machine*. The Fall of Man is, by implication, a myth. This has implications for ethics. *Meditation Six* thus supplies the groundwork for the *Passions of the Soul*, with the study of morality representing, according to Descartes, the "ultimate level of wisdom" and requiring "a complete knowledge of the other sciences," especially medicine and mechanics (AT⁶ IXB: 14).

How is this accomplished? Descartes first discovers in *Meditation Four* that the human mind is not a defective instrument. Then he finds in

⁴ Hatfield, 1986: 61; see also Garber, 2001.

⁵ See esp. von Staden, 2000.

⁶ NOTE FROM THE EDITOR: "AT" refers to Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.) (1964), *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Paris, Vrin; "CSMK" refers to John Cottingham, Robert Stoothof, Dugald Murdoch, and A. Kenny (eds.) (1985-1991), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. I-III, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Meditation Six that the human mind usually needs a body to think and always needs a body to experience. Then he establishes that the body is not a defective instrument either. There is nothing in our constitutions that does not “bear witness to the power and goodness of God.” (AT VII: 87-8). However, the bodily machine must operate, as a clock does, according to certain laws of nature that cannot be suspended or adjusted. The operation of any machine is constrained by certain features of the corporeal world, including the tendency for its parts to wear out, get tangled, develop obstructions, and for the whole to run out of fuel. The need for physical connectors between the distal parts of the body and that part of the brain that is in direct communication with the mind leaves living thinking machines vulnerable to both error and misfortune. It follows that the passions suffered by the soul are no more harmful as such than other experiences, though some are disagreeable and dangerous to others. With further investigation, we can come to an understanding of the underlying mechanisms involved and intervene to make adjustments, wherever our weaknesses cause excessive trouble and grief—or perhaps accept their inevitability, it being understood that God is the source of this inevitability.⁷

This ethical doctrine, only superficially allied with Stoicism, is founded in the functional theory of the passions. It even has room for Descartes’s unusual antistoical defence of “even disordered love” in a 1647 Letter to Chanut. (AT IV: 614). Morality, in Descartes’s view, no more requires repression of the passions generally than health requires repression of the vital functions generally. Descartes, in other words, considers the experiences - sensations, conscious perceptions, and emotions - of living embodied human beings to be of capital importance. The doctrines of *Meditation Six* leave it unclear whether disembodied sensory experiences on the part of persons who have died and whose brains accordingly no longer work—even if such experiences are logically possible—are consistent with God’s goodness and providence. They certainly would not, unlike our ordinary experiences, manifest God’s goodness and providence.

⁷ See Descartes’s qualified commendation of Epicurean tranquility to the Princess Elizabeth in the Letter to Elizabeth, 18 August, 1645 (AT IV: 275ff, CSMK III: 261, as well as the final chapter of Boros, 2001).

But how could these results be consistent with Descartes's stated intention to prove the immortality of the soul? For it would be absurd to claim that Descartes was committed to, or anywhere asserts, or could have agreed to the mortalist proposition that *the human soul ceases to exist with the death of the human body*. He most certainly was not committed to that proposition and would not have asserted it even if he had believed it. Cartesian arguments were routinely cited after his death as exemplary proofs for the incorporeality and immortality of the soul. Nevertheless, their popularity had faded considerably by the end of the 17th century. Moreover, there is a sense in which the fate of the soul after death was an eventuality Descartes did not care about and did not think relevant to the establishment of a practical philosophy. In this respect, he differed from Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, and Kant, each of whom was unconvinced by dualism, though each took the question of immortality very seriously indeed and considered it to be of central ethical importance.

II

In the *Principles of Philosophy*, published three years after the *Meditations*, Descartes offered an account of the self-formation of the world indebted to Lucretius's Epicurean poem *De Rerum Natura*. The heavens, and plants and animals, come to be from "a chaos as confused and muddled as any the poets could describe" (AT IXB: 34) merely by God's establishing laws and setting matter in motion. Pretending to be advancing a fiction, Descartes described the formation of our vortex, that is, our planetary system, by chance, claiming that, by the operation of the laws of nature, "matter must successively assume all the forms of which it is capable [...]" He explained how, from an initial isotropic distribution of particles of matter of equal size, all the features of what he called the visible world, would eventually emerge (AT IXB: 99ff). All visible form is a result of the congregation of particles. Descartes dispensed not only with the direct creative action of God but with the formative forces of Renaissance natural philosophy. There is no difference in principle between the generation of inanimate patterned objects, whether vortices or snowflakes, and the generation of animate patterned objects. The baby is mechanically formed in the womb from a

mixture of seminal fluids (AT II: 525). The animal-machine that results is capable of all the manifestations of life, including warmth, movement, communication, and reactivity (AT XI: 201-2).

The possibility of natural formation inevitably suggested the necessity of natural dissolution. Descartes officially rejected the Epicurean conclusion that every object is susceptible of dissolution and that nothing lasts except the totality of particles of which the universe is made. According to the *Meditations*, the human soul is potentially at least, an exception to the doctrine of universal dissolution. But did Descartes provide any clear and convincing arguments for personal immortality? In his prefatory *Letter to the Sorbonne* giving his rationale for writing and publishing his *Meditations*, he observed that "[S]ome [people] have even had the audacity to assert that, as far as human reasoning goes, there are persuasive grounds for holding that the soul dies along with the body [...] But in its eighth session the Lateran Council held under Leo X condemned those who take this position, and expressly enjoined Christian philosophers to refute their arguments and use all their powers to establish the truth; so I have not hesitated to attempt this task as well." (AT VII: 3).⁸ He assured the reader that:

I have always thought that two topics - namely God and the soul - are prime examples of subjects where demonstrative proofs ought to be given with the aid of philosophy rather than theology. For us who are believers, it is enough to accept on faith that the human soul does not die with the body, and that God exists; but in the case of unbelievers, it seems that there is no religion, and practically no

⁸ Mortalism, as it appeared to 17th-century philosophers, came in two main versions. The first was represented in Pomponazzi's *Tractatus de immortalitate animae* of 1516, which was placed on the Index. This Averroist treatise interpreted Aristotle as denying personal immortality and maintaining that the human soul was absorbed into the Active Intellect after death. Something of us lives on and perhaps continues to think, though it is difficult to say exactly what, and, since personal identity is obliterated, divine retribution and reward for the conduct of life are precluded. The second version, derived from the materialists Epicurus and Lucretius, was harsher in positing total annihilation of the mind and dispersal of its soul-atoms after the death of the body. It was well represented in the libertine culture of early 17th century Paris; see, for example, the texts of Théophile de Viau and Jacques Vallée des Barreaux in Adam, 1964.

moral virtue, that they can be persuaded to adopt until these two truths are proved to them by natural reason. (AT VII: 1-2)

Where demonstrating the existence of God was concerned, one can't say Descartes didn't try. He offered three arguments in *Meditation Three* intended to exclude the possibility that "God" names a mere idea concocted by the brain of a perishable body by showing that the thing that *has* ideas depends critically on God.⁹ (These are somewhat awkward arguments: one of them mentions his "parents", but since at this stage he doubts everything possible; the Meditator doesn't know that he has parents, only that he seems to have parents.) Then he returned to try to prove the existence of God more directly from the concept of God in *Meditation Five*, once the reliability of his intellect had been established. But with immortality, as one of the Objectors points out, Descartes didn't even *try*. Thus Mersenne:

You say not one word about the immortality of the human mind. Yet this is something you should have taken special care to prove and demonstrate, to counter those people, themselves unworthy of immortality, who utterly deny and even perhaps despise it, [...] It does not seem to follow from the fact that the mind is distinct from the body that it is incorruptible or immortal. What if its nature were limited by the duration of the life of the body, and God had endowed it with just so much strength and existence as to ensure that it came to an end with the death of the body? (AT VII: 127-8)

Arnauld, too, observed that there was no proof of the immortality of the soul, as opposed to its distinctness from the body, in *Meditation Six*:

⁹ The three arguments are: a) if the Meditator had derived his existence from himself, he would be God and not as imperfect as he in fact is; b) the Meditator does not have the power to maintain himself in existence, though he does in fact seem to remain in existence; and c) the idea of God within this (existing, persisting) thing could only have been caused by (a real) God. *Meditation Five* develops the *Meditation Three* point that "nothing more perfect than God, or even as perfect, can be thought of or imagined" into Descartes's version of the Ontological Argument.

[S]ince our distinguished author has undertaken to demonstrate the immortality of the soul, it may rightly be asked whether this evidently follows from the fact that the soul is distinct from the body. According to the principles of commonly accepted philosophy this by no means follows, since people ordinarily take it that the souls of brute animals are distinct from their bodies, but nevertheless perish along with them. (AT VII: 204-205)

Mortality was very much on the mind of all the Objectors. Thus Gassendi:

You can exist apart from your solid body – just as the vapour with its distinctive smell can exist [outside] the apple. [...] Indeed supposing you are some corporeal or tenuous substance, you would not be said to vanish wholly at your death or to pass into nothingness; you would be said to subsist by means of your dispersed parts. We would, however, have to say that, because of this dispersal, you would not continue to think, or be a thinking thing, a mind or a soul. (AT VII: 342-43)

The 6th set of Objectors reminded Descartes that:

Ecclesiastes says that “a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast” and that there is no one who knows “whether it goeth upward” (i.e. whether it is immortal) or whether, with the spirits of the bests, it “goeth downward” (i.e. perishes). (AT VII: 416)

III

At the start of *Mediation Six*, the Meditator still thinks it possible that he is a mind without a real body and that there are no corporeal things. Examining his reasoning processes about mathematical objects, he found earlier that they produce excellent results, even if there are no mathematical objects, not really. We can know truths about the true and immutable nature of the triangle, even if there are no extra-mental triangles. The Meditator can even prove the existence of God from reflection on the concept of God - though the trouble with the argument is that it works even if there is no God. His excellent facility with deductive reasoning in geometry implied the existence of a body closely

related to his mind (AT VII: 73; cf. *Treatise on Man* AT XI: 143, 176). When it understands, Descartes says, the mind turns towards itself. When it imagines, as it does in geometry, the mind “turns towards the body and looks at something in the body which conforms to an idea understood by the mind or perceived by the senses” (AT VII: 73).¹⁰

So, while I can do geometry whether or not triangles actually exist, as opposed to possessing true and immutable natures, it seems that I could not do geometry without my body. For, if I were a wholly incorporeal being, although I could understand ideas, I could not perceive or imagine the figures - the triangles, circles, and lines needed to construct proofs. Clearly, then, if we can acquire knowledge of physics, astronomy and medicine, we will need our bodies to do so. Some aspects of these sciences depend on the perception of material objects such as pendulums, billiard balls, planets, stars, and internal organs, and if we need our brains to visualize, assuredly we need our brains to see. The body provides content for the mind to work on.

The demon argument of *Meditation Two* presented the claim that something can be imagined *as* a disembodied mind and as having normal human experiences - all the kinds of experience we normally have in the course of a day or week: perceptions of solid, coloured objects, painful and pleasant sensations, odd dreams, fleeting or fixed emotions, visual memories and anticipations. This claim was never explicitly retracted in the course of the *Meditations*. Nevertheless, from a logical point of view, the assumption was discharged in Descartes’s *reductio ad absurdum* of the Evil Genius hypothesis.

For, God is perfect - God does not deceive - perceptual experience *would be* deceptive if caused by something other than corporeal substance. Since a perfect God and not a Demon exists, disembodied normal human experience that deceptively seems to depend on causal interaction with corporeal things is not possible for us. The Meditator realised that his sensory imagination was not essential to him, as his capacity for nonimagistic pure understanding was (AT VII: 73), and that sensory perception must be inessential as well. Yet *Meditation Six* flatly contradicts the supposition that God has made minds that express only

¹⁰ Cf. Descartes, *Optics*, Discourse Six, AT VI: 141: “[I]t is the soul which sees, and not the eye, and it does not see directly, but only by means of the brain.”

the essence of the human mind and that also have normal human experiences.

But couldn't God have made minds that did not need to turn towards something outside them in order to have experiences? Can't we imagine a pure incorporeal mind that, instead of being causally related to, or having its states correlated with, states of the brain, has them causally related to, or correlated with certain states of the world?

We don't know why God didn't arrange things in this way in the first place. To be sure, such a system of "direct perception" would not give us any obvious means to remember or imagine, since there would be no obvious candidate for the generator of the object the mind turns to when remembering and imagining, the world itself being in a different state. All we know is that God is good and uses brains for perception, emotion, and sensation, as well as memory and imagination. And if brains - and the system of automatic movements they mediate - came to exist "by nature" by slow, law-governed processes, which, having been instituted by God, are good, it's easily conceivable that God found it simple and elegant when creating humans to adjoin experiences to brain states rather than to world states.

But isn't the soul, one might wonder, a thing that, right to the end of the *Meditations*, "doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is unwilling, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions" (AT VII: 28)? No: the Meditator discovers in *Meditation Six* that the soul doesn't do all these things unaided. The body is necessary, though not of course sufficient, for imagination and sensory experience. The position of *Meditation Six* is consistent with Descartes's reply to Henry More's question in 1649 whether angels have sense perception and are corporeal.

The human mind separated from the body does not have sense-perception strictly so-called; but it is not clear by natural reason alone whether angels are created like minds distinct from bodies, or like minds united to bodies. I never decide about questions on which I have no certain reasons, and I never allow room for conjectures. (AT V: 402)

Note that Descartes did not, in this context, take the *Meditation Two* position that sense perception does not imply the presence of a body. He rather suggested that if angels perceive it is because they are "like" minds united to bodies, even if they are incorporeal.

But what about after death? God, or an angel, could supply nonessential content to the mind after the death of the body, enabling us to continue to remember, feel, imagine, and do geometry after our bodies crumble away. God could revive us from death as disembodied experiencers, with imaginary bodies for that matter, ensuring that we understood clearly and distinctly that our bodies were unreal, removing the demonic, deceptive features of disembodied experience. But only faith and not philosophy, which draws conclusions on the basis of clear and distinct ideas and their entailments, gives us any reason to think that we will be given new bodies in order to have experiences, or will make do with imaginary bodies or no bodies at all.¹¹ If the argument of the *Meditations* can be said to reveal an assurance by God that we are *now* embodied perceivers and that there is no Demon, it is powerless to reveal an assurance by God that after death we will continue to experience and that there will still be no Demon. Absent this assurance, it is possible that, in a post-mortem existence, a self would neither remember events, objects, and former passions, nor have new experiences, nor be able to reason geometrically. The self would still think, for Descartes acknowledges the possibility of non-imagistic thinking, but it would be nothing like the kind of thinking we are used to.¹² That Descartes believed that post-mortem experience would be diminished in this fashion even if mental life was enhanced in some other way is suggested by the Letter to Silhon in which he refers to the “primary, unearned, and certain awareness” he has of himself, and of the still greater capacity of a

¹¹ Descartes claims that the permanence of corporeal substance and the Resurrection of the body are matters of faith (AT V: 53).

¹² The letter of condolence to Huygens of 1642 (AT III: 598) might be taken as suggesting that Descartes believed that our intellectual memory will persist and will enable us to remember the past and recognize our relatives. The passage is hard to reconcile with the claim (AT IV: 114) that the memory of material things (including the appearance of persons) depends on traces in the brain and memory of intellectual things on traces in the mind. I am indebted to Kurt Smith for pointing this out.

future disembodied mind of “receiving intuitive knowledge from God.”¹³ Perhaps Descartes meant to stress here only the mind’s adaptation to the intuitive knowledge he so prized.

Regardless of his personal beliefs, Descartes was eager to respond to the criticism that he had not proved the immortality of the soul by merely showing it to be distinct from the body. To Mersenne’s accusation, he replied, “I admit I cannot refute what you say. Human reason is inadequate to judge matters that depend on the free will of God”. But substances are not observed or known to perish, so the mind “insofar as it can be known by natural philosophy” is immortal (AT VII: 153-4).

To Gassendi, he said that Gassendi’s advancement of materialistic counter-hypotheses was “tedious and repetitious” (AT VII: 386). This was fair criticism. Throughout the *Objections*, Gassendi, rather than following Descartes’s argument, simply pushed his own Epicurean agenda, insisting that Descartes hadn’t shown materialism to be incoherent.

To the Sixth Set of Objectors, who quoted Ecclesiastes to him to suggest that the Bible was somewhat ambiguous on the promise of eternal life, Descartes said that it was not his job to comment on Scriptural passages (AT VII: 428), but he conceded that it was after all only faith that enabled us to know that the soul will ascend “above” (AT VII: 431).

The reader might think that Descartes was being overly modest in his *Replies* and making unnecessary concessions. Didn’t his argument for the distinctness of mind and body in *Mediation Six* give strong reasons for supposing the soul to be immortal? For, since God could have created my mind in such a way that it does not depend on any body, isn’t it reasonable to infer that I can continue to exist when my body crumbles into dust?

The point that I can continue to exist when my body is no longer an integral thing, however, hardly constitutes an argument for the immortality of the soul. To interpret it as such, a merely modal “can” has to be read as the “can do” of achievement, as when I conclude from

¹³ Descartes, Letter to Silhon, March or April 1648, AT V: 137-8; CSMK III: 331.

looking at my watch that, if I leave now, I *can* make it to the train station to catch my train, i.e., I am going to make it, not just that in some possible world I make my train.

Analogously, trees “can” exist without soil. In some possible worlds they do, which, if the concepts of “tree” and “soil” were interdependent, they could not. But, in fact, *trees* by and large do depend on soil, and if there were no soil in our world we should have different sorts of trees or possibly no trees at all. I am not justified in concluding that, because a tree can exist without soil, the tree in my garden will continue to exist if I remove all the soil from its roots. No one can vouch for the safety of my tree in the absence of soil. And it seems that I cannot be assured of the safety of my mind in this world in the absence of my body.

Gassendi made essentially this objection: “real separation is impossible no matter how much the mind may separate them [...]” (AT VII: 323). Descartes’s earlier response to a similar point from Caterus was that he understood both mind and body so completely as to be sure that there existed a “real distinction” (AT VII:121). But even if the mind is *not* identical with the body, I cannot infer from this nonidentity that my world contains immortal immaterial human minds, not only mortal immaterial ones. If I know that the mind “can” exist without the body, I know that in some worlds it does. But that doesn’t give me information about this world. Do I have evidence that I am in the sort of world where minds never perish? Or do I have evidence that I am in the sort of world where they always do?

Descartes seemed to appreciate that immortality did not follow from distinctness or independence, admitting that he did not in fact say one word about immortality in the *Meditations*. (Indeed, if it is possible to discover truths about the true and immutable nature of triangle whether or not triangles exist, one might suppose that it is entirely possible to discover truths about the true and immutable natures of God and the soul, whether or not there is a God and there are souls.) But he did advance some further arguments. In his Reply to Mersenne he said:

[T]he final death of the body depends solely on a division or change of shape. Now we have no convincing evidence or precedent to suggest that the death or annihilation of a substance like the mind must result from such a trivial cause as a change in shape...Indeed, we do not even have any convincing evidence or

precedent to suggest that any substance can perish. And this entitles us to conclude that the mind, in so far as it can be known by natural philosophy, is immortal. (AT VII: 153)

A similar argument was introduced into the summary of the *Meditations* later placed at the beginning of the work. Descartes stated there that

absolutely all substances [...] are by their very nature incorruptible and cannot ever be reduced to nothing except by God's denying his concurrence to them". He then explained that "if all the accidents of the mind change so that it has different objects of the understanding and different desires and sensations, it does not on that account become a different mind; whereas a human body loses its identity merely as a result of a change in the shape of some of its parts. (AT VII: 14)

Note that distinctness and separateness did not enter into this accessory argument for immortality. This argument did not develop the theme of *Meditation Six*. Rather, it reduced to this:

My mind is a substance. All substances (as opposed to accidental configurations) are naturally imperishable. So, my mind is immortal.

Certainly, if I can know that I live in a world in which substances are imperishable and that my mind is a substance, I can conclude that I am immortal. But how do I know I live in the sort of world in which substances are all imperishable? A substance is capable of independent existence, but can we not imagine that in some worlds there are some things capable of independent existence that exist only for an interval?

Descartes meant to contrast organized bodies (including traditional Aristotelian substances) with *substantia*. An orange, a temple, a human body, decays over time and is resolved into its elements. But the corporeal substance underlying the particles of which all things are composed is eternal, or at least imperishable. Descartes did not claim to have demonstrated the truth of this conservation principle. But suppose we allow that Descartes knew in the 17th century that the entire mass of corporeal substance was imperishable and that God, infinite incorporeal substance, was imperishable too. This might be thought to provide good

inductive evidence - 2 out of 3 substances investigated are known, whether by reason or by faith, to be imperishable - that each individual mental substance is imperishable as well. But if human bodies disintegrate into the parts of which they are composed after a certain number of years and recombine to form new objects, why shouldn't human thoughts and experiences as well? Why should I suppose that I will remain a coherent bundle of memories, thoughts, dispositions etc? Perhaps they will fall apart, scatter, and recombine to make another personality. Mental substance might be imperishable without the contents of my individual mind being so.

Now, for Descartes, perceptions, thoughts, and memories were not constituents or parts of mental substances, i.e. of the individual minds, but modes that inhered in mental substance. It seems that Descartes conceived each mind as equivalent to all of extended matter. Extended matter can assume various forms without ever being annihilated, and so, in his view, could each mind. This conclusion was not very favourable for theology. For (recall the implicit objection Locke will make in the *Essay* Bk. II Ch. 21 to metaphysical, substance-based vs. experiential conceptions of identity), if each mind is like an entire world that can pass into qualitatively different states while its substance persists, where is the personality required for divine reward and punishment?

Perhaps some answer to this query could be given in the form of a hypothesis of mental stability. While the various parts of the universe are constantly being reshuffled and recombining, giving rise to different things and relations, to qualitatively new worlds, minds tend to preserve their contents. But how do I know that I am a substance anyway, not some kind of insubstantial thing - a mere *res*, which is a mode perhaps, and not a *substantia*; a thinking sort of mode which is imagined as incorporeal?

Descartes gave no argument for the substantiality of the mind. In *Meditation Three* he asserted, "With regard to the clear and distinct elements in my ideas of corporeal things, it appears that I could have borrowed some of these from my idea of myself, namely substance, duration, number and anything else of this kind. For example, I think that a stone is a substance, or is a thing capable of existing independently, and I also think that I am a substance" (AT VII: 44). A few lines later, however, he decided that he *was* a substance. He referred to "the fact that I am a substance." But no such fact was established in his text.

The best reconstruction we can give of Descartes's gesture towards an immortality proof is perhaps this:

Mind and body *can* exist independently: there is no contradiction in supposing that there exists a bodiless mind. Since they can exist independently, and since there is no particular *reason* why my mind should cease to exist when my body ceases to exist, my mind (invoking something like the principle of sufficient reason) *must* continue to exist when my body becomes dust.

But now another difficulty looms. Don't I in fact have a number of reasons to believe that my mind will cease to exist when my body does? I have noticed, for example, that my mind doesn't work as well (and this applies to abstract and nonimagistic thinking insofar as I am capable of it) when I am very tired or have had a lot of wine to drink.

When that observation was put to him by Gassendi, Descartes pretended that it was banal and irrelevant. He insisted that familiar experiences of mental impairment did not provide evidence that the mind depended for its existence and integrity on the body, but only that the body could interfere with the optimal functioning of the mind. He said that the view that the formation of thoughts is due to the brain was "not based on any positive argument" but rather on the experience of being obstructed by the body:

It is just as if someone had had his legs [pointlessly and] permanently shackled from infancy; he would think that the shackles were part of his body and that he needed them for walking (AT VII: 96).

This would be the wrong inference on that person's part. However, if we observed that a person had had his legs shackled from infancy, we would probably be justified in concluding that he did need them for walking. If I were pointlessly attached to a body from infancy, I might wrongly infer that I needed it for thinking. But why should I suppose that this bad and arbitrary fate of being pointlessly attached to a body from infancy has befallen me?

I would have reason to believe that I am safe as a thinking person from dissolution regardless of what happens to my body if I knew that I was

pointlessly attached to a body and had formed the wrong inference about needing it. I would also have reason to believe that I was safe if I had good reason to believe that there was a point to my being temporarily attached to a body, but only temporarily, i.e., that permanent attachment would be pointless. If I have reason to believe that God originally fashioned me as a creature composed of two temporarily interacting substances but that his plans call for their eventual separation, I need not fear for my mind. Unfortunately, Descartes tells us, we have no insight into God's plans (AT VII: 61).

Compare Descartes's fecklessness about immortality with the earnestness with which his contemporaries and successors treat this issue. Spinoza was perhaps mysterious about the connection between virtue and immortality, but immortality was certainly asserted and its basis explained. Locke took immortality seriously enough to make the idea of it the basis of his theory of moral motivation. Leibniz took it seriously enough to posit naturally immortal monads in the place of material atoms. Kant made immortality a required postulate of reason. But Descartes was very little concerned with the hereafter, addressing the topic only in defensive contexts when he was accused of having said too little. Despite his bold announcement to the contrary in his Preface, Descartes did not really have his eye firmly on proving the immortality of the human soul in a sense useful to theologians. We have to conclude that, on this question, he remained at best close to the Aristotelian position.¹⁴ The main theses of *Meditation Six* were incompatible with the thesis that we can remember our past deeds, take pleasure in heavenly surroundings, or suffer the torments of the fires of hell, after death.

¹⁴ Aristotle establishes that anger, courage, appetite and sensation generally are all affections of the complex of soul and body. If thinking is a form of imagination, he decides, it too requires a body. Memory and love both cease when the body decays in old age; only thought "as an independent substance implanted within us" is incapable of being destroyed (*De anima*, Bk 1: 403a3 ff.).

IV

One might think that there is more room for disembodied experience - not just disembodied “thought” - in Descartes’s theory of the mind than I am allowing. Critics might protest as follows:

Objection 1: Conscious awareness of sensory features, colours, etc. distinguishes men from animals. Immortality also distinguishes men from animals. So, if the soul is immortal, it must, according to Descartes, have conscious experience of sensory features, colours, etc.

Response. This is a nonsequitur. If we knew only that men had conscious experiences and were immortal, and that animals did not and were not, we could not infer anything about the post-mortem experiences of men.

Objection 2: Clearly, mechanical organization is insufficient in Descartes’s view for conscious awareness. Since a soul is required, conscious sensory awareness must be a distinctively human trait and will persist.

Response. This is again a nonsequitur. A soul may be necessary for full sensory awareness, but a body is still necessary too, divine intervention excluded.

Objection 3. Descartes specifically describes sensory awareness in the *Principles* as a form of thought. “As often happens during sleep, it is possible for me to think I am seeing or walking, though my eyes are closed and I am not moving about; such thoughts might even be possible if I had no body at all” (AT VIII A: 7-8). So immortality, if it involves the survival of the mind without the body, could be perceptually rich and full.

Response: Descartes does not state that sensory thoughts must occur in disembodied beings. He states that they “might” be “possible”. He has conceded that God could arrange for disembodied minds to experience; however, this would not be a continuation of the ordinary Cartesian way of experiencing.

It is worth remarking in this connexion that the thesis that disembodied minds would not have sensory experiences and memories unless God furnished them with hallucinations is not equivalent to the

thesis that embodied animals have experiences. A suitably organized body, as noted above, seems to be necessary for experience in Descartes's system, but not sufficient. Yet one wonders whether Descartes's moral-intellectual system would have been seriously damaged if he had allowed that animals had conscious sensory experiences, but that, lacking a rational soul, they were unable to *think*, and capable only of the most stereotyped and emotion-driven actions. Such a position seems more consistent with his claim that sensations are useful for the maintenance of life. For why should humans need conscious sensations if animals can get along with unconscious reflexes? Rationality seems to imply consciousness; in reasoning we attend to an inner object. Perhaps the use of language also implies consciousness; if so, "zombies" could not use language as we do any more than persons in a coma can. But consciousness does not imply rationality and language. Ascribing consciousness to animals would not have necessitated ascribing reason and language-competence to them.

Descartes presumably denied that unensouled animals could have experiences like our human experiences not because he thought that would have wrongly implied that they possessed rationality and language, but because his aim was to defend a mechanical account of life. To defend that account, he had to concede there was much that matter could not do. He began with an "explanatory gap" – his mechanical theory could explain behaviour, but not language, *or* rationality, *or* awareness. He saw that animals need not be ascribed language and rationality. Then he found uses, secular and theological, for the thesis that animals lack awareness, as well as lacking language and rationality. If they lack awareness, they cannot experience pain, have no moral standing, and can be treated any old way.

His personal conviction on this latter score may not however have been perfectly firm.¹⁵ Descartes cited certain observations that distinguish men from other animals. The relatively inflexible patterns of animal behaviour and animal communication contrast with the responsiveness to new demands of rational agents with their open-ended syntactic and semantic capacities. But, Descartes never presented

¹⁵ Baker and Morris (1996: 91-100) claim that Descartes did allow for animal awareness, though their arguments have not so far enjoyed broad acceptance.

behavioural evidence that animals are not conscious, i.e., that being an animal is like being a person in a coma who nevertheless manages to live, move, and interact with the world in an unconscious state: a zombie. Indeed, no observational evidence would point clearly to animals being zombies. Descartes's lesser certainty about awareness, by contrast with rationality, was perhaps reflected in his twice describing animal experience as similar to absent-minded human experience. In a Letter to Plempius of 3 October 1637, Descartes said that animals are like inattentive people who are not concentrating on or thinking about what they are doing. They see not "as we do when we are aware that we see, but only as we do when our mind is elsewhere." (AT I: 459-60). In a Letter to the Marquess of Newcastle of 23 November 1646, he says:

It often happens that we walk or eat without thinking at all about what we are doing; and similarly, without using our reason, we reject things which are harmful for us, and parry the blows aimed at us. Indeed, even if we expressly willed not to put our hands in front of our head when we fall, we could not prevent ourselves. I consider also that if we had no thought then we would walk, as the animals do, without having learnt to. [...] In fact, none of our external actions can show anyone who examines it that our body is not just a self-moving machine but contains a soul with thoughts. (AT IV: 570ff.)

It has been observed that animals resemble extremely emotional people. They lack our characteristic inhibitions, our remarkable ability to focus on inner objects and to refrain from overt action; often, we talk and reason rather than acting. In dreams, however, we are more like animals: we are aware, responsive, and emotional, but we do not reason or talk much. Why shouldn't being an animal be something like this? The addition of the human soul to a human body, on this view, would not give us *experiences* where we had none before, but rather improve our ability to ignore the solicitations of the environment and to conceptualize and verbalize about non-present things.

V

Setting all this in context, the *Meditations* is but one version of a more general phenomenon: the revival of pagan naturalism in the 17th century, a revival encompassing experimentation on animals, the revival of descriptive anatomy, a “mechanical” approach to explanation, and a dedicated search for remedies to postpone or prevent death. This revival was nevertheless conducted for the most part within the constraints and aspirations of Platonic-Christian providentialism and anti-materialism.

Descartes was in some respects a Platonist who believed the world was not ethically neutral but good because of its ultimate “creation” - its radical origination, as Leibniz would say, - by a benevolent and intelligent creator.¹⁶ When he wrote in this register, he discussed disembodied existence, the efficacy of immaterial causes, and the superiority of higher incorporeal things to lower material things generally. But when it came down to particulars, to the formation of the cosmos and plant and animal bodies, and to meteorological and embryological phenomena, Descartes wrote as a Democritean natural philosopher. His *Discourse on Method* ends with a plea for financial support for physiological experiments, and the long exposition of the mechanical basis for the activity of the heart and the circulation of the blood in Part V is not an irrelevancy but an example of the fruits of methodical investigation. When Descartes said in the Preface to his *Description of the Human Body*, “There is no more fruitful exercise than attempting to know ourselves” he was writing as a Democritean, not as a Platonist, for he continued: “I believe that we would have been able to find many very reliable rules, both for curing illness and for preventing it, and even for slowing down the aging process, if only we had spent enough effort getting to know the nature of our body, instead of attributing to the soul functions which depend solely on the body and on the disposition of its organs.”(AT X1: 223-4).

To conclude, if Descartes had written a *Preface to the Meditations* that was truthful, faithful to his firmest convictions, and philosophically consistent, the relevant section would have gone something like this:

¹⁶ See Hatfield, 1986. For an explicit defense of Cartesian Platonism, see Menn, 2002.

I cannot demonstrate the immortality of the human soul, and probably no philosopher can. Immortality is not logically impossible, but it wouldn't be what you are probably imagining it to be either. Perception, like sensation and emotion, is a registering by our minds of occurrences in our nerves and brain. If our minds endure after death, therefore, as far as the philosopher can tell, they will feel neither pain, nor pleasure, for they will no longer form a composite with our bodies. We will no longer see colours, touch objects, and hear sounds. We will not remember events of our past lives. We will be numb and inert. Animals will be, as both Aristotle and Lucretius thought, nothing after death, and we humans will be almost nothing - at most capable of imageless thought and intellectual memory. Of course, we can hope for more than this. Perhaps our bodies will be resurrected and reattached to our minds, so that we are restored to awareness of a world. But this is a matter of faith and cannot be philosophically demonstrated, whereas more important truths such as the excellence of our minds and bodies can be philosophically demonstrated. Be that as it may, we are not mere animals. Our language and rationality indicate that we are specially favoured by God. As to whether animals are conscious, I do not know. I avoid speculative philosophy. But everyone can appreciate that animals cannot carry on a conversation, and I seriously doubt that animals reason, for I can show how their behaviour is mediated by the brain to which their sensory organs report, without ascribing reasoning to them.

The Fathers of the Church were wrong to scorn the human body as a source of moral corruption and to suggest that it is a shell that we will happily cast off. We use the cerebral representations it forms for purposes as exalted as mathematics, and if we could not understand and trust proofs about the triangle, how should we understand and feel confident about proofs about invisible objects such as God?¹⁷ The body is sorely tried and tested. Yet it is a well-

¹⁷ The function of the Ontological Argument for the existence of God in *Meditation Five* cannot be to prove the existence of God; for if Descartes hasn't already done this in *Meditation Three*, his overall argument is in trouble. Why is it placed here? Its function may be to show off the excellent results obtained by

constructed machine, adapted to a complex world. We should therefore strive to preserve our lives and our health, and to engage our senses with scientific activities of all sorts. In any case, there is nothing to fear about life after death, because you certainly won't be able to experience pain. Admire God, who has given you a world to study, as well as to experience, and a mind equipped with language and reasoning powers, but leave off worrying about eternal rewards and punishments.

Of course Descartes could not have published such a *Preface*, not in France and not under his own name. Yet it was to communicate this very different message that he offered, without his heart being in the task, to prove the immortality of the soul.

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