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Joseph Almog

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Dedicated to my parents, Lea and Joshua

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Preface

The title question is vintage Descartes. It makes its debut in his *Meditations on First Philosophy,* on the second page of Meditation II. I refer to it from now on as "the primal question." The text that follows is an attempt to trace Descartes's own answer(s) to this question.[1]

This book has been reconstructed, with minor alterations (footnotes, references, etc.), from a transcript made in a UCLA introductory class, locally known as Philosophy 7, which I have taught every year since coming to UCLA in 1984. The class is given to a large audience of freshmen and sophomores, up to 350 students. Most of them take the class as a "general education" requirement, and it is thus their first, and probably last, exposure to philosophy.

The idea to teach Descartes came to me by accident. In my first year of teaching at UCLA, I had to find some large-audience class to teach. I could not teach ethics or history introductions. By elimination, I was left with Philosophy 7, then a name without any connotation for me. One day I visited the class to get a sense of what it is like to teach it. The teacher, Rogers Albritton, was reading through Meditation II. I was spellbound

[1] In what follows, I have relied on *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes,* trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), vols. I and II. I refer to the two volumes as CSM I and CSM II. I also refer to *Descartes—Philosophical Letters,* ed. A. Kenny (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970). It is designated in what follows as PL.

and decided to imitate him, which was not very sage on my part, for Albritton is inimitable. But I have found Descartes.

In the first 10 years, the class consisted only of chapter 1 of this book—the proof of the mind-body real distinction. I took myself to be following Descartes's own methodology in Meditation II. Having raised the primal question, he answers it in the next sentence with the phrase "a man." But he goes on to dismiss this primal answer in the following way:

> But what is a man? Shall I say 'rational animal'? No; for then I should inquire what an animal is, what rationality is, and in this way one question would lead me down the slope to harder ones and I do not now have the time to waste on subtleties of this kind. (CSM II, 17)

He soon substitutes the primal question by surrogates—What is Mind? What is Body? It is thus that mind and body "grow capitals." The project as Descartes characterizes it technically is to prove their *real distinction*. The task is to prove that the mind and the body—any old mind and body and never mind whose (A *man's* mind? *This* man's mind?)—are (i) real subjects that (ii) are numerically distinct and (iii) *can exist* without the other. The point of the class for many years was to examine Descartes's proof. After 10 weeks, we would reach a happy end—Descartes's proof vindicated.

The happy end did not tell the full story. I felt that without going back to the primal *question,* we did not come full circle. Stronger yet, as long as we did not consider Descartes's original, quickly dismissed *answer* (i.e., what-I-am is a man, a human being), we would not get a full understanding of Descartes. Most discussions of Descartes and of his progeny—the doctrine of mind-body dualism—started with Mind and Body as the basic notions. They would add as a sort of appendix that somehow, out of these two primal elements, Descartes "composes" (sometimes, "constructs") a full-blooded man.

I knew in my bones that Descartes was not involved in such metaphysical engineering. This was a man who, in the dead of

night, bought cadavers in the "street of veal" so that their dissection would teach him about human nature. This was "my" Descartes: a dissector of human beings, in whose nature it is to be first alive and then to turn into such lifeless bodies. But to so ground Descartes in the human condition—the life and death of the human body—ran against much of the atmosphere that radiated from Cartesian studies. I had to keep Descartes out of my sight for some time.

The class, however, had to go on. And so, for a few years I introduced students to the question "What am I?"(or even better: "What makes someone one-of-us?"), using quite a different text—the movie *Blade Runner,* which has its own way of making the question vivid for beginners. But I knew my estrangement from Descartes was only temporary.

It was only around 1996, after teaching Descartes anew in a class in Sweden, that I came to see how he worked his way back to the primal question. I have convinced myself that the key to his methodology lies in his remarks to Princess Elizabeth, especially the last sentence of the following quotation:

> I supposed that your Highness still had in mind the arguments proving the distinction between the soul and the body, and I did not want to ask her to put them away in order to represent herself the notion of the union which everyone has in himself without philosophizing. Everyone feels that he is a single person with both body and thought so related by nature that the thought can move the body and feel the things which happen to it. (PL, 142)

Driven by these remarks, I have redesigned the class in recent years. It expounds Descartes as pursuing *the dual key project*: a real distinction in a real man. The challenge to the class in the final exam—a challenge reviewed in the Synopsis, which follows this preface—is to evaluate whether the real distinction argument has been successfully embedded in a framework that respects the integrity of the man as a real subject.

Running this class for more than 15 years led me to accumulate many debts. Iam grateful to the philosophy department of UCLA and to the university as a whole for supporting such an "exotic" general education course. In public education, where there is a will, there is a way.

Iam grateful to many past and present colleagues for discussions of this class and related metaphysical issues: Tyler Burge, Keith Donnellan, Kit Fine, Barbara Herman, Tony Martin, the late Warren Quinn, Abe Roth, Seana Shiffrin, Sean Kelsey, and Mike Thau. My fellow historians John Carriero and Calvin Normore have given this book a most thorough reading despite the fact that its author must have seemed to them an accidental tourist in the land of Descartes studies. I have learned much about the mind-body union from interacting in Vancouver with Catherine Wilson and in Uppsala with Lilli Alanen. This class also owes much to extremely dedicated teaching assistants who struggled in creative ways to make the material sensible to students: Andrew Hsu, Michael Thompson, Torin Alter, Keith Kaiser, Erin Eaker, and Dominik Sklenar. Finally, throughout the process, I found Peter Ohlin of Oxford University Press a deft and supportive editor.

The greatest influence over my metaphysical formation, if anything could be so called, has come from three philosophers: the inspiring pedagogue Rogers Albritton; Saul Kripke in his book *Naming and Necessity,* a sort of modern-day *Meditations,* whose luminous language is responsible for the way we do metaphysics (and that, in this positivist age, we do it at all); finally, there are the daily interactions, for two decades, with my teacher, David Kaplan.

The last word before the reader confronts the text proper regards the fundamental *limits* of the present book. Though I enjoyed the years of teaching Descartes and the mind-body problem, I feel something is amiss with my work on both.

Regarding Descartes, my readings of his work are far from "complete." For one example, the leading interpretation I offer in chapters 2 and 3, what I call *integrative dualism,* ignores

Descartes's seeming promise to leave room for the immortality of the soul. For another such example, many of my historian friends have pushed me to trace the thread between Descartes and his medieval predecessors. Some (not the same) have argued I should connect him with his rationalist successors, e.g., Kant. Now, at times, Descartes does use the metaphysical language of the medievals. Also, Descartes does have moods in which he speaks in a very intellectualized, abstract way about our ideas and our reason. But what always struck me is how perceptual, indeed *sensuous,* a philosopher he is. His explanations of the workings of human beings are strikingly graphic, be they of the circulatory system and the pineal gland or be they, as in his *Passions of the Soul,* of emotional states such as love and admiration. Throughout, I view him like a gardener touching his beloved flowers delicately, as he sketches them on a piece of paper. With this picture in mind, I have elected to keep Descartes a philosopher-by-nose rather than a late medievalist or an early rationalist. Iam sure this makes the Descartes that follows substantially incomplete.

What applies to the Descartes that follows applies even more so to what I say about the mind-body problem in general. By this last, I refer to a casting of the problem in modern (twenty-first century) terms, using concepts from the philosophy of language, (modal) logic and other such "technology." The incompleteness runs deeper here. There is on the one hand a sense of local progress on this or that "technical issue." But it is coupled with a deeper feeling of not getting to the bottom of the real problem. I track a like-minded recognition of this kind of "technical sublimation" in the writings of Tom Nagel. Without drafting his writings to support the present discomfort, let me explain my own reservations.

By "local progress" on technical issues, I mean something like this. In research lectures (though not in the aforementioned classes), I project some ideas from what I call Descartes's integrative dualism to the modern version of the dispute between materialists and neo-Cartesian dualists, of whom I take Saul

Kripke to be the leading expounder. It is thus that I have come to think, perhaps against Kripke, that we need not assert the *real possibility* of mentality (say, my state of pain) without a brain state, or the possibility of a brain state (say, the firing of such and such brain fibers) without the corresponding mental state of pain. I, for one, would see the two—the physical and mental (type of) states—as bound by modal necessity; stronger yet, I see them as interconnected by *their very nature*. Related to this is the sense I express in chapter 3 that there is no ground under the various brain-body-swap scenarios fantasized about in the contemporary personal identity literature. Nor do I see critics of materialism (like myself) needed to accept the possibility of so-called zombies (beings with our kind of physical brain structure but no mental experiences). All of these imagined possibilities are illusory and not required in a defense of (i) the numerical distinctness of the mind (and its states) from the body (and its states) and of (ii) what I describe in the book as the *categorical* difference of matters physical (or physical-functional) from any thing mental.

So much I feel I can argue for. Nonetheless, there remains the abovementioned *malaise*. I do not think that such local improvements have provided me with a clear *language* with which to teach what is the mind-body *problem*. The substance language of Descartes—do we have here one or two things (subjects, substances)?—is one philosophical language we all use to talk about the problem; the modern reference to mental and physical *properties* (or for that matter, kinds of states) is another such language. I believe that within these languages, we can make useful moves, ascertain what premises need to be asserted by a given position, what items are identical with what, and what depends on what. All of this leaves the discomfort where it was, the feeling that these "technical" philosophical languages do not get to the bottom of the problem. I often say to the students: many complain that when it comes to the mind-body problem, we have a fundamental question and no clear answers;

for me, it is the other way round: we have many clear answers but no fundamental question.

Perhaps we are overly wedded to the standard philosophical languages. At one point in his correspondence with Princess Elizabeth, Descartes, after he himself so ingeniously used the standard philosophical languages of his time, says to her that to understand the mind-body union, one needs to bracket away metaphysical analysis and fall back on "ordinary life and conversation." Well, I tried. Such is the aforementioned graphic language of the movie *Blade Runner*. Recently, I have so deployed in teaching the language of an imaginative novel, *The Golden Compass* (by Philip Pullman). The author there connects in a most beguiling way each person—seemingly a kind-mate of you and me—with what he calls his (her) *daemon*. Such graphic aids are invaluable but one still feels the problem has not been *articulated*.

The philosopher by nose he was, I do think that Descartes smelled things right—the insight that is needed will come not from, but in spite of, technical philosophical languages, by attending to our "ordinary life and conversation."At this time, I don't know how to do it.

Saint Jean Du Gard, France

July 2000

J. A.

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Contents