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DISCUSSION

DESCARTES'S WATCH ANALOGY

Paul Hoffman

In earlier articles I have advocated a hylomorphic interpretation of Descartes's account of the union of mind and body.¹ Opponents of the hylomorphic interpretation have pointed to Descartes's watch analogy in article 6 of *The Passions of the Soul* as providing decisive evidence on their behalf. In her book *Descartes's Dualism*, Marleen Rozemond asserts that in that article Descartes 'goes out of his way to deny that there is an important difference between a body united with the soul and one that is not' and she concludes that the passage is 'very un-Aristotelian'.² In a recent article, Robert Pasnau has argued that the passage provides decisive evidence that Descartes did not put his claim that the mind or soul is the substantial form of the body to any serious philosophical use.³ Pasnau asserts that the passage seems impossible to reconcile with the view that Descartes takes seriously his remarks to Mesland that a human body remains numerically the same so long as it is joined to the same soul (AT IV 166; CSMK 242-3).⁴ However, if the identity of the human body does not depend on its being united to the mind, then that shows that Descartes does not take seriously his claim that the mind is a substantial form. Pasnau, like Rozemond, says that Descartes 'is going out of his way' to dismiss hylomorphism.⁵

Here is the watch analogy:

Therefore, so that we may avoid this error, let us consider that death never occurs through the fault of the soul, but only because one of the principal parts

¹'The Unity of Descartes's Man', *The Philosophical Review*, 95 (1986) No. 3: 339–70 and 'Cartesian Composites', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 32 (1999) No. 2: 251–70.

²Marleen Rozemond, *Descartes's Dualism* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1998) 163.

³Robert Pasnau, 'Form, Substance, and Mechanism', *The Philosophical Review*, 113 (2004) No. 1: 57.

⁴AT=*Oeuvres de Descartes*, edited by Ch. Adam and P. Tannery (revised edition, Paris: Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964–76; CSM=*The Philosophical Writings of Decartes*, Vols. I & II, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); CSMK=*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. III, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991); V=*The Passions of the Soul*, translated and annotated by Stephen Voss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989).

⁵See 'Form, Substance, and Mechanism', p. 57.

of the body disintegrates. And let us judge that the body of a living man differs from that of a dead man as much as a watch or other automaton (that is, other self-moving machine), when it is wound and contains the bodily principle of the movements for which it is constructed, along with everything required for its actions, [differs from] the same watch or other machine when it is broken and the principle of its movement ceases to act.

(AT XI 330–1, V 21)

Contrary to Rozemond, it simply is not true that Descartes asserts in this passage that there is no important difference between a body united to a soul and one that is not. He compares the difference between the body of a living man and the body of a dead man to the difference between a working watch and a broken watch, but he does not say or suggest that the difference is unimportant. Indeed he clearly thinks it is important, because he believes that the soul departs precisely because the part of the body that is the principle of the body's movements has ceased to act, as he tells us in the immediately preceding article:

on seeing that all dead bodies become devoid of heat and then movement, people have imagined that it was the absence of the soul that made the movements and the heat cease. And so they have groundlessly believed that our natural heat and all the movements of our body depended on the soul – whereas people ought to think, on the contrary, that the soul departs when someone dies only because that heat ceases and the organs used to move the body disintegrate.

(AT XI 330, V 21)

In a more recent article, Rozemond explains what she finds un-Aristotelian about the watch analogy.⁶ First, she notes that '[f]or the hylomorphist the soul is the form of the organic body by being its principle of life'. I understand her objection to be that it is essential to hylomorphism that the soul be regarded as the source of the life. Since Descartes is giving up the view that the soul is the source of life, his view cannot be a hylomorphic view. But this is a mistake. What is essential to hylomorphism is that the form actualize the matter in some robust sense. It is not generally the case that forms are required to give life to matter in order to actualize it, otherwise there could be no hylomorphic account of a bronze sphere or an axe or fire; so the fact that Descartes rejects the view that the soul is the source of life of the body does not count against his holding a hylomorphic account of their relation. Descartes himself makes a very similar point in the *Replies to the Fifth Objections*:

Thus, primitive man probably did not distinguish between, on the one hand, the principle by which we are nourished and grow and accomplish without any

⁶Marleen Rozemond, 'Descartes, Mind – Body Union, and Hylomorphism', *Philosophical Topics*, 31 (2003) Nos 1 and 2: 363.

thought all the other operations which we have in common with the brutes, and, on the other hand, the principle in virtue of which we think. He therefore used the single term 'soul' to apply to both; and when he subsequently noticed that thought was distinct from nutrition, he called the element which thinks 'mind', and believed it to be the principal part of the soul. I, by contrast, realizing that the principle by which we are nourished is wholly different – different in kind – from that in virtue of which we think, have said that the term 'soul', when it is used to refer to both these principles, is ambiguous. If we are to take 'soul' in its special sense, as meaning the 'first actuality' or 'principal form of man', then the term must be understood to apply only to the principle in virtue of which we think; and to avoid ambiguity I have as far as possible used the term 'mind' for this.

(AT VII 356; CSM II 246)

Descartes is in effect arguing here that the two roles traditionally ascribed to the soul – that of being the source of life and that of being the principal form of man – are logically distinct, and moreover, that it is the mind, or the principle by which we think, that is the principal form of a human being. I argued before that since Descartes thinks the identity of the human body depends on its being united to the mind, the Cartesian mind does actualize the body in a sufficiently robust sense to support the hylomorphic interpretation.⁷

Rozemond's other reason for asserting that the watch analogy is un-Aristotelian is that there is a metaphysical and not merely a mechanical difference between a dead and a living body. I agree with Rozemond that Aquinas held such a view, but, as I will argue below, this was a matter of dispute among Scholastic Aristotelians.

Pasnau asserts that '[i]f a watch stands to working as the human body stands to being alive, then a broken watch should not be 'the same watch' – not if Descartes accepts that the soul is what gives the body its identity conditions'.⁸ Pasnau is correct that living is supposed to be analogous to working, but the conclusion he draws, that the broken watch would not then be the same watch as the working watch, simply does not follow. In order to arrive at that conclusion one would have to make the unstated further assumption that the human body is the same body if and only if it participates in the same life. While this is Locke's view, it is not Descartes's. Indeed, given that Descartes's aim in *The Passions* passage is to provide support for his view that the soul is not the source of life, then in order to maintain his view that the soul is the source of the identity of the human body, he has to reject this unstated further assumption on which Pasnau is relying; and there is decisive textual evidence that he does reject it.

In the letter to Mesland, Descartes notes that the term 'body' is ambiguous and he explains the identity conditions for each kind of body:

⁷See 'The Unity of Descartes's Man', 358–9.

⁸See 'Form, Substance, and Mechanism', p. 57.

First of all, I consider what exactly is the body of a man, and I find that this word 'body' is very ambiguous. When we speak of a body in general, we mean a determinate part of matter, a part of the quantity of which the universe is composed. In this sense, if the smallest amount of that quantity were removed, we would judge without more ado that the body was smaller and no longer complete; and if any particle of the matter were changed, we would at once think that the body was no longer quite the same, no longer numerically the same. But when we speak of the body of a man, we do not mean a determinate part of matter, or one that has a determinate size; we mean simply the whole of the matter which is united with the soul of that man. And so, even though that matter changes, and its quantity increases or decreases, we still believe that it is the same body, numerically the same body, so long as it remains joined and substantially united with the same soul.

(AT IV 166; CSMK 242–3)

Thus for Descartes the identity of a determinate part of matter is determined by its consisting of the same particles of matter, and the identity of the human body is determined not by its being alive, but by its being united to the soul. There is no body such that its identity conditions are determined by participating in the same life. Since a watch is nothing other than a determinate part of matter, a working watch could be the same determinate part of matter as a broken watch provided that it is constituted by exactly the same particles of matter as the broken watch. Therefore, there is no problem with Descartes's assertion that the working watch and the broken watch are the same.

In article 6 of *The Passions* Descartes does not say that the body of the living man is the same body as that of the dead man, nor does he deny it. However, since he identifies the working watch and the broken watch, he certainly suggests that he thinks the body of the living man is the same body as that of the dead man. Is this un-Aristotelian? Does it show that he is not committed to hylomorphism? Does it conflict with the Mesland letter?

As Marilyn Adams has documented, there was an important dispute among medieval Aristotelians whether a corpse is the same body as the body of the living man. Aquinas argued that it is not, because he held that a body remains numerically the same if and only if it is united to the same form, and that there could be only one form per substance. Other scholastic Aristotelians such as William Ockham and Duns Scotus disagreed, however, arguing for the identity of the living body and the corpse, because among other reasons, as Ockham and Richard Middleton alleged, identity provides the only plausible explanation of why a corpse would have the same accidents possessed by the living body, for example, colour and shape.⁹

⁹Marilyn Adams, *William Ockham* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) Vol. II, pp. 648–50.

Since the argument for the hylomorphic interpretation depends in part on the claim that Descartes's hylomorphism more nearly resembles that of Ockham and Scotus than that of Aquinas,¹⁰ one would expect him to side with them against Aquinas on the relation between the body of the living man and the corpse.

Does the suggestion that the body of the living man is numerically the same as the body of the dead man conflict with the letter to Mesland? The body of the dead man could, at least for a short time, be constituted by the same determinate part of matter that constituted the body of the living man, and so it could be the same body in that sense of the term 'body' (I am assuming here that a part of the body could disintegrate without being separated from the rest of the body). The determinate part of matter that constitutes the human body is really on all fours with the watch. They are numerically the same provided they have the same particles. The difference between the determinate part of matter that is alive and that which is dead is simply that one has a principle of movement that is working and the other does not. So if by the phrase 'the body of the living man' Descartes is referring to the determinate part of matter that constitutes the human body, then there is no conflict with the Mesland letter.

It would seem somewhat more likely, however, that by the phrase 'body of the living man' Descartes is referring not to the determinate part of matter, but to the human body. In the Mesland letter, Descartes says that by the phrase 'body of a man' he does not mean the determinate part of matter, but rather 'the whole of the matter which is united to the soul of that man'. Does it not conflict with the Mesland letter for Descartes to suggest that a human body could be numerically the same with the body of a dead man? There is as yet no conflict, even if we read the Mesland letter as asserting that being united to the same soul is not only sufficient but also necessary for the identity of a human body. To be sure, it does follow on this reading of the Mesland letter that in the typical case a human body will be numerically different from the body that remains after death; but the reason they are numerically different is not that one is alive and the other is not. They are numerically different because the same soul cannot be attached to a dead body, except by a miracle:

The soul of Jesus Christ could not have remained naturally joined with each of these particles of bread and wine unless they were assembled with many others to make up all the organs of a human body necessary for life; but in the Sacrament it remains supernaturally joined with each of them even when they are separated.

(AT IV 168; CSMK 244)

¹⁰See 'The Unity of Descartes's Man', pp. 362–4.

Therefore, if God were by a miracle to join the soul to a dead body, that dead body would be the same human body as the body to which the soul was attached when it was alive. Thus it is perfectly consistent with the Mesland letter for Descartes to suggest in the watch analogy that we might consider a human body to be numerically identical with a corpse. Moreover, one can understand that Descartes would want to avoid being explicit about these sorts of complications about the identity of a human body in the first few articles of *The Passions*.

One might respond with the following argument that is articulated neither by Rozemond nor by Pasnau. The context of the watch analogy strongly suggests that Descartes is inviting us to think of the typical case in which there is no miracle and the soul has departed as it naturally does when the body ceases to function properly. In that case, according to the Mesland letter, the human body could not be identical to the body of the dead man; so Descartes must not really believe what he says in the Mesland letter, and thus he really is not committed to hylomorphism.

There are three responses to this argument worth noting, but it is the second and third that are the most important. First, consider the referent of the problematic phrase ‘the body of the dead man’. If the referent of that expression really does satisfy the description of being the body of the man, then according to the interpretation of the Mesland letter which makes it a necessary condition of being the body of a man that it be united to the soul of that man, it would still have to be united to the soul. One might then claim that Descartes is being especially crafty in his use of the expression ‘body of the dead man’ in the watch analogy, aiming to signal to his more acute readers that he is considering the atypical case in which God continues to keep the soul united to the body after death. This scenario seems far-fetched.

Second, one might argue that in the Mesland letter Descartes is only claiming that it is a sufficient condition for being the body of a man that the body be united to the soul. He is not claiming that it is a necessary condition. So the following sophisticated sort of view is consistent with what Descartes says in the letter to Mesland and in the watch analogy: a determinate part of matter that constituted a human body in virtue of being united to a soul will continue to be the same human body so long as it continues to exist as the same determinate part of matter. In other words, Descartes would be committed to the weaker view that it is sufficient for a determinate part of matter to be a human body that it have been a human body by virtue of having been united to the soul of the man. I do not see that such a view is anti-hylomorphic in any way. It is still true that the identity of the human body is determined by its relation to the soul, it is just that the relation is more subtle. The relation is understood to be that of having been united to the soul and does not require still being united to it.

Third, one might concede that there is a genuine tension between the Mesland letter and the watch analogy. In the Mesland letter, it might be

conceded, Descartes is committing himself to the view that the identity of the human body requires that it be united to the soul, but in the watch analogy he is giving this up to adopt the more sophisticated view described above according to which the whole of a determinate part of matter that was once united to a soul should still count as the same human body. What this tension reflects, however, is not a tension between accepting or denying hylomorphism. Instead it reflects a dispute within hylomorphism. In the letter to Mesland, interpreting it as placing a necessary condition on the identity of the human body, Descartes is claiming that the human body must be united to the soul, and thus in the typical case where there is no miracle, a corpse is not a human body. However, in the watch analogy he has relaxed the criterion for what is to be a human body and is allowing that the whole of a determinate part of matter that was once united to a soul should still count as the same human body. Again, I see nothing antihylomorphic in such a stance. Indeed the sophisticated view is consistent with the spirit and main thrust of the Mesland letter, according to which the identity of the human body is determined by its relation to the soul.

My conclusion is that proponents of the hylomorphic interpretation of Descartes have nothing to fear from the watch analogy.

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