

# The Immortality of the Soul in Descartes and Spinoza<sup>1</sup>

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In dedicating his *Meditations* to those “most wise and distinguished men” of the Sacred Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne, Descartes declares that he has always thought that the two questions about God and the soul were the chief ones which ought to be demonstrated with the help of philosophy rather than with that of theology.

For though it suffices for those of us who are faithful to believe by faith that God exists and that the human soul does not die with the body, it certainly does not seem possible to persuade infidels of any religion, or even of any moral virtue, unless those two things have first been proven by natural reason. Often this life offers greater rewards to vice than to virtue; so few would prefer the right to the useful if they did not fear God and expect another life.<sup>2</sup>

Descartes grants that we ought to believe that God exists because this is taught in sacred scripture, and that we ought to believe sacred scripture, because we have it from God. Still, he notes, we cannot propose that argument to infidels, because *they* would judge it to be circular. You know those infidels. Always making trouble.

I take it that Descartes is being ironic here. He is displacing onto the infidel a criticism which it would not be diplomatic for him to make himself. But I presume he recognizes that the infidels would be right if they dismissed that argument as circular.

Descartes does not offer a similar explanation for saying that we must try to prove the immortality of the soul by natural reason. Instead, he observes that some have been so bold as to say that human reasoning favors the mortality of the soul, and that it is by faith

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<sup>2</sup> Descartes, *Oeuvres*, ed. by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, vol. VII, p. 2. Cited hereafter as ‘AT.’

alone that they believe it does *not* die with the body. Believing something by faith does not mean here what it so often does in the fideism we encounter in our undergraduates: believing something without having any grounds for your belief. Rather it means believing something because you trust the teachings of scripture as the revealed word of God.

Descartes remarks that the Lateran Council of 1513 condemned fideism with respect to immortality, and enjoined Christian philosophers to rebut the arguments of the fideists, using all their powers to prove the truth. That injunction is no doubt sufficient to justify his project. Still, Descartes' treatment of fideism with respect to the existence of God might make us wonder whether it might not be equally circular to base a belief in immortality on faith. Of course, it's not patently circular to say: we ought to believe that the soul is immortal because this is taught in sacred scripture, and we ought to believe sacred scripture because we have it from God. But whether there is a circle beneath the surface here may depend on the nature and quality of our evidence for the existence of God.

Suppose our theist holds that the evidence for God's existence is mixed. Collectively, if not individually, she thinks, the traditional arguments for the God's existence make his existence probable; but even taken as stages in a cumulative argument they are inconclusive, and their cumulative force would be weakened considerably if we could not account for the occurrence of horrendous evils in a way consistent with the theistic hypothesis. Suppose, in fact, our theist thinks that without a satisfactory solution to the problem of evil the traditional arguments will not make it probable (i.e., more probable than not) that God exists.

Suppose further that our theist judges global solutions to the problem of evil, like the free will defense, to be ultimately unsatisfactory.<sup>3</sup> It will not, she thinks, suffice to justify the suffering of Ivan Karamazov's innocent children that their torment is a necessary condition for the existence of some greater good whose benefit accrues primarily to others: say, their tormentors' possessing the (unrealized) power to make a less sadistic choice. That

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<sup>3</sup> I intend my hypothetical theist to resemble Marilyn M. Adams in certain respects. See her *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, Cornell UP, 1999, esp. pp. 29-31..

might make the world overall a better place. But a satisfactory response to the problem of evil would have to attend, not merely to the results of a global cost/benefit calculation, but also to the way the costs and benefits are distributed. A satisfactory solution must suppose that something in the lives of *those very children* makes *their* lives worth living, in spite of the evils they suffer. Given the brevity and misery of their lives on earth, that solution must assume that they will have a life after this life, in which they will experience a good which will make their lives as a whole a great good to them, in spite of what they experience here.

On these assumptions about the merits of traditional theistic arguments, and of traditional theistic solutions to the problem of evil, infidels might after all accuse us of reasoning in a circle if we affirm the immortality of the soul as an act of faith. The infidels might say: according to you, we are assured that the soul is immortal because our scriptures affirm this; we are assured that what our scriptures affirm is true, because they are the word of God; we are assured that there is a God because certain rational arguments make his existence probable; and we are assured that these arguments make God's existence probable, all things considered, because the transcendent goods of the afterlife make the apparently pointless evils of this life justifiable.

I abstain from any judgment about the *actual* circularity of this argument. But it does seem to me that there is enough *appearance* of circularity here to make a philosophical proof of the immortality of the soul highly desirable.

Does Descartes in fact intend to provide such a proof in the *Meditations*? The text itself does not seem to contain the desired argument. The title page of the first edition advertised such an argument, proclaiming a work in which the existence of God *and the immortality of the soul* are demonstrated. But it appears that Descartes himself was not responsible for that title page, that it was composed by the overzealous Father Mersenne, who inferred too much from Descartes' dedicatory letter to the theologians at the Sorbonne. For the second edition the title page was changed, so that it promised only a proof of the

*distinction* between the soul and the body,<sup>4</sup> i.e., a proof that the soul *can* exist without the body, that its death *does not follow* from the destruction of the body. This is not to claim that the soul actually *does* survive the death of the body, much less that it *never* dies. It is only this more modest proposition that Descartes professes to establish in the *Meditations* themselves.

Descartes' Synopsis of the *Meditations* (AT VII, 13-14), however, does sketch a line of argument which might be deployed to get from the the real distinction of mind and body to the immortality of the mind or soul. It's only a sketch, which Descartes defers filling out, on the ground that a proper geometric proof of the immortality of the mind would require an explanation of the whole of physics. But it's very intriguing nonetheless.

The first and most important step in proving the immortality of the soul, Descartes says, is to form as clear a concept of the soul as possible, a concept completely distinct from any concept of body. (AT VII, 13) This is the work of the Second Meditation. Then it's necessary to know that all the things we understand clearly and distinctly are true, in the very way in which we understand them. This Descartes takes to be accomplished by the end of the Fourth Meditation. The next step is to have a distinct concept of corporeal nature. This is accomplished partly in the Second, partly in the Fifth, and partly in the Sixth Meditation. The final step – as far as the *Meditations* are concerned – is to show that all those things which we conceive clearly and distinctly as different substances, as we conceive both the mind and the body, are substances really distinct from one another. This Descartes claims to have done in the Sixth Meditation. If he is successful, he will at least have laid the groundwork for a proof of immortality; he will have shown that the mind does not have to die with the body, that the destruction of the body does not entail the destruction of the mind.

Before we consider how the proof of immortality might be completed, let's look at the way Descartes undertakes to lay the groundwork for it in the *Meditations*. Early in the

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<sup>4</sup> See Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia/Méditations métaphysiques*, intr. & notes by Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, Paris: J. Vrin, 1978, pp. ix-x.

Second Meditation, after he has established via the cogito argument *that* he exists, he asks “*What* am I, I who am so certain of my existence?” (AT VII, 25) Characteristically he tackles this question by reflecting on what he thought he was before he started philosophizing. This is Descartes’ procedure, to start from the beliefs of a hypothetical inquirer who is just beginning to philosophize, and then see what can and cannot be retained in those beliefs when they are subjected to radical doubt.<sup>5</sup> Because Descartes is seeking absolute certainty, any reason a skeptic might offer him for doubting, even if it is highly improbable, will count as a valid ground of doubt, so long as the ground proposed is not known to be false.<sup>6</sup>

His first answer to the question, “What am I?,” also characteristically, is a false start: I thought I was a man. True enough, no doubt, but what is a man? The beginner in philosophy has Aristotelian leanings. So his first thought is that a man is a rational animal? And what is that? What is it to be an animal? What is it to be rational? This line of thought, Descartes decides, leads only to questions more perplexing than those from which we started.

So he makes a fresh start. When I attend to the thoughts which used to come to me spontaneously and naturally, what I find is that I thought of myself as something which had a face, and hands, and arms, and all those things which go to make up a body, and might equally well be found in a corpse. In addition, I thought that I nourished myself, moved, sensed, and thought. All these actions I referred to the soul. But I did not notice what this soul was, and when I did think about it, I imagined it to be some very subtle material substance, like the wind, or fire, or air, which was spread throughout my body. The natural man, when he first reflects on the nature of the soul, is a kind of materialist.

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<sup>5</sup> On Descartes’ procedure in the *Meditations*, see my “Analysis in the *Meditations*: the Quest for Clear and Distinct Ideas,” in *Essays on Descartes’ Meditations*, ed. A. Rorty, U California P, 1986

<sup>6</sup> This is a simplification. It states the epistemic requirement for a valid ground of doubt. But a valid ground of doubt must also satisfy an explanatory requirement: it must offer an explanation, even if only hypothetically, for my being deceived. It’s the explanatory requirement which enables the Cartesian procedure to produce some positive results, since a valid ground of doubt must entail that I think. For more on these themes, see my *Descartes Against the Sceptics*, Harvard UP, 1978.

The method of doubt helps me to go beyond this prephilosophic conception of the soul to a clearer conception. What is there in that conception of soul which survives radical doubt? Because I have found reasonable, if somewhat metaphysical, grounds for doubting the existence of the material world, I have rejected my former belief in things material, not merely suspending judgment about them, but denying their existence. So to the extent that my prephilosophic conception of the soul attributed material properties to the soul, or properties which presuppose the existence of material objects, my prephilosophic conception of the self/soul must be rejected. Of course I do not have the head, torso and limbs I thought I had. But neither do I move, or nourish myself, or perceive objects through my senses, or do anything else which requires the existence of a body.

But I do think. I affirm some things, deny others, suspend judgment about still others. I cannot deny these mental activities to my soul. For any ground I might entertain as possibly throwing doubt on the fact of my thinking, no matter how permissive I am in permitting extravagant hypotheses to count as grounds of doubt, will entail that I am thinking. Even if all my present experience is a dream, even if an omnipotent demon is deceiving me, I must have some beliefs if I am to be deceived.

Even sensation, so long as I conceive it as a process of pure thought, and not as a process which necessarily involves the body, is something I cannot deny myself. It seems to me that I see a light. I am deceived, by a demon, perhaps. In any case, there is no light. And I have no physical organs which are capable of processing light signals and relaying them to the brain. Those things *can* be denied, and since they *can* be denied, they *must* be denied. But *that it seems to me I see a light* I cannot deny. And this *seeming to me* is what sensation is, strictly speaking.

This is what it is to have a clear and distinct idea of the soul: to recognize that there are some things which I cannot deny to the soul, and others which I can. And when I achieve clarity and distinctness in my conception of the soul, I understand it as a thinking thing, and nothing more. It *may be* something more. But if it has any properties which do not presuppose thought, they are not revealed in my clear and distinct conception of it.

The process of clarifying my prephilosophic conception of body is similar. There are no bodies, of course. That is, in the Second Meditation the existence of bodies is not yet established, and therefore to be rejected until a proof of their existence can be found. But in the last few paragraphs of the Second Meditation Descartes lets loose his natural instinct to believe in their existence, so that he can consider what their nature would be if they did exist. Suppose some body exists, say, this piece of wax. What does its nature consist in? I.e., what properties do we find ourselves compelled to ascribe to it? What properties do we find that it might lack while still remaining in existence as the particular material object it is?

In the thought-experiment where the wax is brought closer to the fire, all of its sensible properties – its size, shape, hardness, color, smell, etc. – change, yet the wax remains. What is there in the wax which remains constant through this change? Descartes identifies three things: extension, flexibility, and mutability. Two of these are second-order properties, which presuppose the existence of some first-order property, and one of those second-order properties is simply a special case of the other. To be flexible is to be changeable with respect to shape (and size, perhaps). The only first-order property Descartes identifies in the wax is extension. So that is what he takes the wax to be: an extended thing, whose essential nature is to be a geometrical object, and whose essential nature, as Descartes conceives it, does not involve anything pertaining to thought. The thought-experiment with the wax leads him from a confused and obscure conception of the wax to one which is clear and distinct.

Descartes has more to say about the nature of body than that, but I think that will be sufficient for now to enable us to see how the argument for the real distinction goes. The Synopsis of the *Meditations* says that the contribution of the Fourth Meditation is to prove that all the things we clearly and distinctly understand are true, in the very way we understand them. I take it that what this talk of *the truth* of clear and distinct intellectual perceptions means in this case is that, if I have a clear and distinct perception of something, then it is at least logically possible that it exist in the way I understand it as possibly existing.

There would be no contradiction involved in its existing in the way I understand it to exist.<sup>7</sup> One thing the Sixth Meditation contributes is the reflection that if it is logically possible for something to exist in a certain way, then God is capable of creating it in that way. This makes logical possibility a sufficient condition of God's being able to create it.<sup>8</sup>

My clear and distinct conception of the mind as a thinking, non-extended thing entails that it is logically possible for it to exist as I conceive it to exist. Similarly, my clear and distinct conception of the body as an extended, non-thinking thing entails that it is logically possible for it too to exist as I conceive it. The logical possibility of these things existing in these ways entails that if there is a God, an omnipotent being, then there is something more than a mere logical possibility of their existing as I conceive them. If there is a God, then there is a power capable of realizing these logical possibilities. Suppose we introduce here a notion of real, or metaphysical possibility, understanding an entity to be *really* possible if and only if it is not merely logically possible, but genuinely capable of coming into existence, because there is a power sufficient to bring it into existence. If God does not exist, then the mere logical possibility of something's existing is no guarantee that it *really can* exist. But if God exists, then logical possibility does guarantee real possibility: it is *really* possible for the mind to exist apart from the body, and *really* possible for the body to exist without the mind. And to say this is to say that my mind and my body are *really distinct*, they are substances each of which is capable of existing apart from the other. (VII, 162) So if God exists, mind and body are really distinct.

On this interpretation of Descartes' argument, the proof of the real distinction of mind and body does depend on the proof of the existence of God. But I do not think the argument is circular in the way I earlier suggested that an argument for immortality might be circular. First of all, Descartes does not think his arguments for the existence of God are merely probabilistic. His preferred argument, the ontological argument, purports to be as demonstrative as any mathematical proof. And he also seems to think of the causal

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<sup>7</sup> Descartes makes this connection between clear and distinct perception and the absence of contradiction in the first paragraph of the Sixth Meditation, AT VII, 71.



arguments in the Third Meditation as demonstrative. So he does not think of establishing God's existence as a matter of weighing the positive evidence against the negative and seeing which is stronger. If these arguments accomplish what they are supposed to, then any probabilistic argument *against* the existence of God must be fallacious.

More crucially, though, Descartes' solution to the problem of evil, to the extent that he has one, does not assume the immortality of the soul. His solution is of the global variety, which does not require that evil be defeated in the life of each individual who is suffering evil. It's a global solution, but as I read Descartes, he does not ultimately rely on the free will defense to relieve God of responsibility for evil. The emphasis on human freedom in the Fourth Meditation might suggest otherwise. But in the end, I think his solution is what I call a holistic one, which demands that we not be concerned about individuals who are in some way imperfect, but consider only the value of the whole.

That's rather abstract. Let me make it more concrete. Descartes does not treat the problem of evil in its full generality. He is concerned only with what we might call epistemological evil, human error. So he has nothing to say, really, about the problem of apparently pointless suffering. Throughout most of the Fourth Meditation his solution to the problem of error seems to be that God is not responsible for our errors, we are. We do not have indeterminist freedom with respect to the things we perceive clearly and distinctly. When I perceive clearly and distinctly that I exist, I cannot help but judge that proposition to be true. So if I were deceived about my clear and distinct perceptions, God would be a deceiver. But when I am making a judgment about something I do not perceive clearly and distinctly, I do have ability to judge otherwise. It may be very difficult for me, in the First Meditation, to suspend judgment about the proposition that there are bodies. The reasons which incline me to affirm the existence of bodies are very powerful. But when I reflect on other reasons, which may undermine my reasons for affirmation, say the dream argument, I find that I can, if only for short periods of time, doubt the existence of bodies. If I err in

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<sup>8</sup> Not that it is a necessary condition. That, I take it, would conflict with the doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths. On that doctrine, see my "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," *Philosophical Review*, 1984, 93: 569-597

making a judgment about things I do not perceive clearly and distinctly, that's my fault, not God's.

So far we have a classic version of the free will defense, applied to the only kind of evil Descartes takes it on himself to discuss. But this is not, it seems to me, his final solution to the problem of epistemological evil. Toward the end of the Fourth Meditation Descartes recognizes that God could, in various ways, have created him free of error without depriving him of freedom: God might have given him clear and distinct perceptions of everything about which he would ever have to make a judgment; or he might have impressed it firmly on his memory that he ought never to make a judgment about anything he did not perceive clearly and distinctly. (AT VII, 61) So God could have brought it about that he never erred without compromising his freedom.<sup>9</sup>

If human freedom does not explain the occurrence of error, what does? At this point Descartes invokes what I have called a holistic approach: had God made him in such a way that he was exempt from error, *he* would have been more perfect than he is; but it does not follow that *the universe as a whole* would have been more perfect. Indeed, Descartes seems to think that the universe as a whole is better for having in it some beings who are prone to error, along with those other beings who are immune from error. The principle seems to be the one whose history Arthur Lovejoy traced in *The Great Chain of Being*: the more different kinds of thing there are in the world, the better the world, even if the addition to the world of different kinds of thing means that some of them are very imperfect compared with others. The variety displayed by the whole more than compensates for any imperfection in the parts.

I don't suggest that this holistic solution to the problem of evil is a very satisfying one. It may seem harmless enough so long as the only evil under consideration is error. I don't think you could extend it to cases of intense and pointless suffering without seeming indifferent to the well-being of the individuals whose afflictions you were trying to justify in

this way, or compromising the love God is supposed to have for his creatures. That is the characteristic defect of global solutions. But it is, I think, some advantage that Descartes' holistic solution does not require a prior acceptance of the immortality of the soul.

Let's review our situation. The *Meditations* offer a demonstration of the real distinction between mind and body, though not a demonstration of the immortality of the soul. The demonstration of the real distinction depends on Descartes' having a demonstration of the existence and veracity of God, but that demonstration does not presuppose a proof of the immortality of the soul. So far so good. Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that Descartes has in fact demonstrated the existence and veracity of God, and hence, the real distinction between mind and body. These are no small assumptions, but we must make them if we are to get on to the next stage of the argument, the one sketched in the Synopsis of the *Meditations*.

In the Synopsis Descartes calls attention to one distinction between mind and body which he might have used as the basis for an argument for immortality: as a thinking, non-extended substance, the mind is indivisible; to be divisible it would have to be extended; the body, on the other hand, whose essence consists in extension, is inherently divisible, in principle, if not in practice.<sup>10</sup> Now it might be argued – I believe it often was argued – that the body's susceptibility to destruction is a consequence of its divisibility. If it were not divisible, it would be indestructible. These considerations might lead us to infer that if Descartes is right about the essence of the mind, it will follow quite easily that the mind (or soul) is immortal, or as is sometimes said in these contexts, naturally immortal, meaning that it cannot be destroyed by any natural force, though it can, of course, be destroyed by an act of God.

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<sup>9</sup> This assumes, I think, that where we have clear and distinct ideas, a liberty of indifference is not required for freedom, but that a compatibilist account is appropriate there. I believe Descartes does assume this. Cf. AT VII, 57-59.

<sup>10</sup> Descartes had noted this in the Sixth Meditation, AT VII, 85-86, and he reminds us of it in the Synopsis, AT VII, 13.

It's a striking feature of the *Meditations*, one for which I have at present no explanation, that Descartes makes no appeal to this argument. No sooner has he remarked in the Synopsis on this difference between mind and body than he writes:

But I have not treated this matter further in this work, both because these arguments are enough to show that the death of the mind does not follow from the corruption of the body, and hence are enough to give mortals the hope of an afterlife, and secondly, because the premises from which the immortality of the mind can be inferred depend on an explanation of the whole of physics. (AT VII, 13)

This seems to me quite extraordinary, not merely because Descartes declines to avail himself of what might seem a simple and straightforward argument for immortality, but more importantly because the only substantial reason he offers for not providing any argument for immortality in the *Meditations* is that to do this he would need to work out *the whole of physics*. Why on earth should it be necessary to have a complete account of physics in order to know whether or not the soul is immortal?

What Descartes goes on to say in the Synopsis may provide us with some clues, but any answer to this question must be speculative. The first thing we must know, Descartes says, is that

Absolutely all substances, or things which must be created by God in order to exist, are by their nature incorruptible, and can never cease to exist unless God reduces them to nothing by denying them his concurrence. (AT VII, 14)

Things are getting curiouser and curiouser. You would think that ordinary material objects are clearly corruptible, and can cease to exist by purely natural means. After all, it is the corruptibility of one material thing, the human body, which gives rise to the problem of understanding how the human soul can survive its destruction.

This seems to force us to the surprising conclusion that ordinary material things, like the human body, are not really substances – this in spite of the fact that the real distinction which Descartes claims between mind and body implies that the body is a substance... and in spite of the fact that the human body would seem to satisfy the definition of substance

Descartes has just given: surely it is, on Descartes' view, a thing which must be created by God in order to exist.

Nevertheless, as the Synopsis continues, Descartes does draw that surprising conclusion. The second thing he says we need to know, to construct our proof of the immortality of the soul, is that

Body taken in general is a substance, and therefore, never perishes either; but the human body, insofar as it differs from other bodies, is only composed of a certain configuration of members and other accidents of this kind; the human mind, however, does not consist in this way of any accidents, but is a pure substance. For even if all its accidents are changed, so that it understands other things, wills other things, senses other things, etc., it does not on that account become another mind. But the human body becomes different simply from the fact that the shape of certain of its parts is changed. From this it follows that the body indeed perishes very easily, whereas the mind, by its very nature, is immortal. (AT VII, 14)

There seem to be a number of strange things here. First, there is the Spinozistic-sounding proposition that there is only one material substance, body taken in general, all particular bodies apparently being just a combination of accidents of one kind or another. This is certainly contrary to the way Descartes usually talks about material objects.

Then there is the claim that an apparently minor change in the accidents of the human body, specifically, a change in the shape of some of its parts, can cause the body to cease to be the same body. Is *any* change whatsoever in the human body enough to destroy its identity? Is this a peculiarity of the human body, or does it apply to bodies generally? If so, what of the wax, which Descartes said remained the same substance, in spite of quite dramatic changes in its accidents?

As strict as Descartes sounds when he is setting the conditions for the persistence of a body over time, he seems to be extraordinarily liberal about the conditions for the persistence of a mind over time. It looks as though a mind might remain numerically the same even though all of its particular thoughts had changed. That would contradict the

common intuition that some continuity of memory is required for personal identity. But if Descartes does not intend to be that liberal, he gives us no indication of what limits there might be to the amount a change a mind can sustain without losing its identity.

I cannot think that Descartes was oblivious to the questions this sketch of an argument for immortality might raise. I presume his sense of those difficulties explains why he deferred a full presentation of his argument to a later work, and why he thought it would be necessary for him to make his argument in the context of an explanation of the whole of physics. The contrast he wants to draw between the mind as a substance which is naturally immortal, and the body as a mere combination of accidents, whose identity over time is extremely fragile, would certainly require some fancy footwork to reconcile the claims he wants to make with those he has already made. So far as I can see, he never worked this out. That being so, I think we can only pronounce his attempt to prove the immortality of the soul extremely disappointing.

## II.

I must now pass to Spinoza, if I am to say anything useful about him at all in the time remaining to me, though as you will see, I have not quite finished with Descartes. But I approach this aspect of my subject with more than the usual diffidence, since it seems to me one of the most difficult topics in Spinoza, and I doubt my ability to say anything useful about it in any finite period of time.

Let me begin with a puzzling fact about Spinoza. As many of you will be aware, he was born into a Jewish family in Amsterdam, and raised in a community established there by refugees from the persecution of the Jews in Iberia toward the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. As he was growing up, he seems to have had a great interest in questions of theology, and to have devoted his energies to learning what he could from the rabbis of the Amsterdam Jewish community. There are reports that they considered him one of their best pupils, and hoped that he would become a rabbi. But he was not satisfied with the answers they gave to

his questions; he began to seek education outside the community, and was particularly attracted to the philosophy of Descartes.

By the time he was 23, Spinoza had been excommunicated from the synagogue for holding certain heretical views, the exact nature of which is something of a mystery. We owe our most credible information to the curiosity of the Inquisition, which seems to have retained an interest in the theological activities of the émigré community even after they were no longer the subjects of the kings of Spain or Portugal. Two years after the excommunication, a South American monk, Fr. Tomas Solano, visited Amsterdam, met Spinoza and talked with him, and then reported back to the authorities in Iberia about what he had learned. Fr. Solano reports that there were three doctrinal grounds for the excommunication: Spinoza is supposed to have held that God only exists philosophically, that the Jewish law is not the true law, and that the soul dies with the body.

This is puzzling. In the earliest work we have from Spinoza it looks as though he is defending some doctrine of immortality. I refer here to the *Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being*, where there are two arguments for the immortality of the soul. And in his most definitive work, the *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that “the human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but something of it remains which is eternal.” (VP23) This is surprising, not merely because it seems to contradict what we think we know about the grounds for his excommunication, but also because it seems hard to reconcile with the philosophy of mind we find in the *Ethics*, according to which mind and body are one and the same thing, conceived in different ways. (IIP21S) You would think that if the mind and the body are one and the same thing, however differently they may be conceived, the destruction of the body would entail the destruction of the mind.

Now my normal way of trying to understand Spinoza, at least on topics like this, is to approach him via Descartes, not taking him to be merely an eccentric Cartesian, but rather seeing him as someone who was attracted by certain ideas in the Cartesian philosophy, and repelled by others, and who formed his own views largely by critical reflection on those of Descartes. Here is my best effort to explain how this works on this particular topic.

In Part II of the *Ethics* Spinoza states two axioms which have a particularly Cartesian resonance:

A2: Man thinks, or, to put it differently, we know that we think.

A4: We feel that a certain body, viz. our body, is affected in many ways.

In stating these axioms I have translated not just the Latin of the *Opera posthuma*, but also two glosses which Spinoza, or his contemporary translator, put on the Latin in the Dutch translation which appeared almost simultaneously with the *Opera posthuma*. I work on the assumption that if Spinoza himself is not responsible for those glosses, he at least had the opportunity to see and approve them.

The first of these assumptions restates a proposition which Spinoza took to be one of the foundations of the Cartesian philosophy: the existence of the self as a thinking thing. Spinoza gives it his own twist. He deliberately avoids stating it in the first person singular. The axiom is either that *man* thinks (as it is in the Latin) or that *we* think (as it is in the Dutch). One of the things Spinoza is *not* attracted to in Descartes is his methodological solipsism. We can start from the assumption that there is a plurality of thinking things.

But the second assumption is the one which is most crucial for our purposes: we feel that a certain body, *our* body, is affected in many ways. For the Spinoza scholar approaching him via Descartes, this inevitably calls to mind certain passages in the Sixth Meditation which I passed over in my exposition of Descartes, passages which do not sit easily with the argument for the real distinction, but which seem to me to provide a crucial bridge to Spinoza.

At the same time that Descartes insists on the separability of mind and body he also insists on their union. There is something very special about my relationship to this body which I call mine, and which I think of as being, in some sense, a part of myself. It's not just that I view the world from its perspective, apparently with the aid of its sense organs, or that I exercise a direct control over its movements, but can only control the movements of other bodies by moving this body. If that were all, then Ryle's accusation that the Cartesian



mind is a ghost in a machine might be just. But as a consequence of my relation to this body I experience certain bodily sensations – pleasure, pain, hunger, thirst, etc. – which are highly charged emotionally, and which give me strong reasons either to pursue them or to try to relieve them. It is these bodily sensations which convince me that my relation to the body is not merely an external one, that I am not, as Descartes puts it, present in my body as a sailor is present in his ship. (AT VII, 81) The sailor can know what is happening in his ship, and cause changes in the ship, but his relation to the ship is an external one; he does not feel pain when the ship is damaged, or hunger when it needs fuel. My relation to my body is so close, and I am, as it were, so mixed through it, that I compose one thing with it.

This talk of mixture, of course, is a metaphor, drawn from the world of corporeal things. If the soul is a non-extended substance, it cannot be literally true that it is mixed throughout the body. And it's not clear, in Descartes' philosophy, what literal truth might underlie and justify that metaphor. Spinoza does not use the metaphor, and I do not think he would find it an entirely happy one; but he does hold views about the metaphysics of mind and body which would explain why it is a tempting one.

The first thing, he says, which constitutes the actual being of a human mind is that it is an idea, a representation in thought, of a singular thing which actually exists; specifically, of something corporeal; and more specifically, of one of the modes which constitutes the human body.<sup>11</sup> Whatever else it may be, the human mind is first the idea of the human body. All its awareness of the world is mediated by its awareness of the states of its own body. But to put it that way is still to sound too dualistic. The mind's awareness of the world is in the first instance an awareness of a state of a particular body, an awareness which *is* that state of the body, but conceived now under the attribute of thought.

It follows from this metaphysics that the human mind is not a simple entity. It is, rather, as complex as the body which is its object. It consists of a multiplicity of representations of the body, in one-to-one correspondence with the states of the body they represent – or rather, a multiplicity of representations of the body which *are* the various

states of the body they represent, conceived now as modes of thought, rather than as modes of extension. (II P21S)

Nor is the human mind a substance. It is rather a collection of modes of thought whose identity over time as the same collection is a function of the identity over time of the collection of modes of extension which constitute the human body. The body can remain the same body over a period of time during which it changes, during which some of the modes of extension which constitute the body are replaced by others, so long as the relations of motion and rest which the parts have to one another remain more or less constant during that period of time.<sup>12</sup> The body has a certain tendency to maintain a constant ratio of the motions of its parts to one another. When it succeeds in doing that, it persists as one complex mode of extension. When it fails, it ceases to exist as that particular body.<sup>13</sup> Its success in maintaining that ratio is constantly threatened by surrounding bodies which may disturb the ratio. The mind's duration as the particular mind it is depends on its body's success in maintaining the ratio of motion and rest among its parts. Man, whether conceived as a thinking thing or as an extended thing, is a part of nature, constantly striving to maintain itself, but constantly at risk of being put out of existence by some stronger force in its environment.

This does not seem to be particularly promising soil in which to grow a theory of the immortality of the soul, and I do not in fact think it will support any very traditional theory of immortality. What survives the destruction of the body, for Spinoza, is not the mind as that complete complex entity which was the reflection in thought of its body and endured as the thing it was so long as the body endured as the thing it was. It is only a portion of the mind which Spinoza proclaims to be eternal.<sup>14</sup> That portion of the mind cannot retain any sense of itself as an individual existing over time, with those memories of its past which are essential to its continued identity as the same person. Continuity of memory is destroyed when the traces in the brain which record past experience are destroyed. What survives

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<sup>11</sup> *Ethics* II Props. 11-13.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the miniature physics which Spinoza introduces in Part II, after Prop. 13, and particularly the definition of an individual at II/99-100.

<sup>13</sup> The physiology is primitive here, but its implications are clear.

must be something quite impersonal, with which we cannot really identify, and about whose fate we cannot deeply care. Nor is it important that we should. Spinoza is opposed to the cartesian idea that we require the hope of reward and fear of punishment in the afterlife to motive a preference for the right over the useful. The reward of virtue is not blessedness in the world to come, but virtuous living itself (V P42).

When Spinoza told Fr. Solano about the heresies for which he was excommunicated, he stated his view about God in a way which we might think was designed to mitigate its offensiveness: God exists, he says, though only philosophically. Put less diplomatically: there is no God of the kind the Jewish and Christian traditions believe in, no personal creator who exercises a constant providence over his creatures. There is something which fulfills some of the functions God has in traditional theology: it is a first cause of all things, itself uncaused, eternal and immutable. As first cause, it requires no further cause, but is completely independent. But that first cause is an impersonal system of laws, in no way capable of loving the finite beings whose actions it causes, or of valuing their love for it; human love for God is typically confused about the nature of its object.

Had Spinoza worked out, in 1658, the views he later tried to articulate in the *Ethics*, then he might have said this to Fr. Solano: the soul is immortal, but only philosophically. That is: the soul does not persist as the particular thinking substance which traditional theology imagines existing, with all its thoughts, memories, passions and desires. What survives the death of the body is something much more abstract and impersonal: call it the intellectual love of God, that sense of joy which minds experience when they come to understand the system of laws which defines and gives structure to their lives. This love of God must, of course, be experienced by particular, finite individuals. But it need not be, and in fact will not be, experienced by any individual numerically identical with my self. There will be no such individual. My assurance that this love will continue to exist is grounded only in my knowledge of human nature, and of its inevitable striving to know things by the third kind of knowledge. That knowledge can be achieved, even if it is with difficulty. And when it is achieved, the intellectual love of God follows.

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<sup>14</sup> On the topics of this paragraph, see *Ethics* V PP21-23, and IV P39S.

This is a very austere conception of immortality, if it even deserves that name. I do not imagine that the prospect of such an immortality would be much consolation to someone afflicted with intense suffering, or to someone grieving the loss of a loved one. But for some of us, perhaps, it is enough.