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Mind, Body, and Morality

New Perspectives on
Descartes and Spinoza

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and Frans Svensson

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1 Introduction

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1 Introduction

Martina Reuter and Frans Svensson

In twentieth-century philosophy, René Descartes was generally considered a substance dualist, whose attempts to refute skepticism remained haunted by a metaphysics of the “ghost in the machine” and by an epistemology unable to reach past the “veil of ideas”. This picture was guided by the century’s own philosophical interests in questions of knowledge and certainty, and it dominated presentations of Descartes in introductions to the history of philosophy, as well as discussions of his views in advanced research in the philosophy of mind and in early modern philosophy.

Towards the turn of the millennium, however, this picture of Descartes’ philosophy was seriously challenged. One of the game changers was Lilli Alanen’s refutation of what she named the “Myth of the Cartesian Myth” (Alanen 1989, 1996, 2003). Alanen showed that Gilbert Ryle’s claim about Cartesian persons as “ghosts in machines” was based on a misinterpretation. Descartes does not identify the person with an immaterial soul trapped in a mechanical body, but rather with the mind-body union, which he names a “primitive notion”. Considered as a third primitive notion, the mind-body union gains independence to the extent that it cannot be reduced to either of the two primitive notions of thought and extended matter. Most scholars still agree, however, that it does not quite gain the independence of being a third substance and it remains far from clear what kind of metaphysical status that the third primitive notion should be granted and how it can be known.

Alanen approaches these questions from an epistemological point of view and argues that even though the mind-body union cannot be known with the same certainty as the mind or the body taken separately, it can be known as the locus of our daily experiences. In her criticism of Ryle’s Cartesian myth, Alanen uses Ryle’s own distinction between knowledge—that and knowledge-how and argues that the knowledge we can have of the mind-body union is characteristically of the latter, knowledge-how kind. The metaphysical questions involved here have been thoroughly discussed by Marleen Rozemond (1998), who examines the nature of Descartes’ dualism and his notion of the mind-body union in relation

to positions defended in its seventeenth-century philosophical context. More recently, Deborah Brown has argued that the metaphysical nature of the mind-body union can best be understood by considering the dual nature of the passions, which consist in being both bodily processes and thoughts. She examines Descartes' reference to the actions in the body and passions in the soul as being *une mesme chose*, one and the same thing, and shows how this notion of identity helps him avoid an occasionalist understanding of the mind-body union (Brown 2006).

In addition to a vitalized interest in the Cartesian mind-body union, this new turn in Descartes scholarship has also raised and led to the reconsideration of several other philosophical questions. The rejection of Descartes as a “ghost in the machine” metaphysical dualist has gone hand in hand with a rejection of the claim that his epistemology cannot get beyond the “veil of ideas”. Descartes distinguishes between ideas understood as thought-acts and ideas understood as the content of thoughts, and he claims that when understood in the latter sense an idea exists in the mind by its “objective reality”. This objective reality is connected to a “formal reality”, which is a causally prior and more perfect mode of existence and which causes objective existence in the mind.

Several scholars have investigated the connection between objective and formal reality and argued that Descartes is in fact not stuck with a conception of ideas as purely mental objects without any necessary relation to other modes of existence. This approach has involved taking into account Descartes’ scholastic predecessors in order to explicate the terminology of objective and formal reality, and to understand exactly how he thinks that cognition is determined by reality. For example, John Carriero has convincingly argued that there is, in Descartes’ view, a determination of structure, which connects ideas and reality. Carriero claims that “for Descartes, as for the Aristotelian tradition, ideas are best thought of as vehicles through which some reality or structure (i.e., some ‘nature, or essence, or form’) comes to exist in the mind and is made available to cognition” (Carriero 2009, 19; see also Normore 1986; Alanen 1994; Brown 2007).

Parallel with a focus on new philosophical topics recent scholarship has also started to pay serious attention to parts of the Cartesian corpus that used to be overlooked. When interpreting e.g. Descartes’ *Meditations*, many philosophers have turned their attention away from the epistemological discussions in the First and Second Meditations to the discussion of free will in the Fourth Meditation and of the mind-body union in the Sixth. Reinterpretations of the *Meditations* have furthermore gone hand in hand with detailed studies of Descartes’ last published work, *The Passions of the Soul*, and of his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia. These studies have focused on Descartes’ psychology of the passions and also created a new interest in him as a moral philosopher.¹

In their correspondence, Descartes and Elisabeth develop a moral philosophy where the Stoic overcoming of the passions is replaced with an attempt to refine the passions in order to constitute the basis of a virtuous and happy life. In addition to the passions, Cartesian moral philosophy stresses the freedom of the will and defines virtue as the correct use of free will. Passion and will are brought together in Descartes' notion of generosity. Generosity is simultaneously a pleasurable passion, felt when one realizes that one has used one's free will correctly, and a virtue, which by calming vicious passions acts as "the key to all the other virtues" (CSM 1, 388; AT 11, 454). Just as in the case of reinterpreting Descartes' concept of *idea*, the new interest in his understanding of free will has also generated important comparative studies of Descartes' position and the positions of Scholastic philosophers, particularly in the Augustinian and Scotist traditions.

By focusing on Descartes' correspondence with Elisabeth, recent Descartes scholarship has also contributed to the rediscovery of women philosophers of the early modern period, and to the attempt to integrate their works into the philosophical canon.² Taking for granted the view of Cartesian persons as "ghosts in machines", some feminist philosophers and theorists in the twentieth century criticized Descartes for radicalizing mind-body dualism and thus strengthening a hierarchy between male characteristics associated with the mind and female characteristics associated with the body (e.g. Bordo 1987). The recent focus on the role of embodiment in Descartes' philosophy has challenged this feminist interpretation and drawn attention to the beneficial consequences that Cartesian philosophy has had on early-modern as well as more recent conceptions of gender (e.g. Clarke 1999; Heinämaa 2004; Reuter 2004; Shapiro 2008b).

In addition to raising new philosophical questions, introducing new interpretations of familiar parts of Descartes' corpus, and generating close studies of not so familiar parts of that corpus, the recent turn in Descartes scholarship has also had a broader effect on interpretations of early modern philosophy. First and foremost, the fresh interest in the metaphysical and epistemological puzzles implied by Descartes' mind-body union has given rise to new perspectives on Baruch Spinoza's attempt to solve the problems that, in his view, result from Cartesian dualism. Whereas twentieth-century scholarship in early modern philosophy tended to focus on the differences between Descartes and Spinoza, contrasting the substance dualism of the former with the monism of the latter, recent scholarship has shown greater interest in the similarities, particularly in the similarities between the philosophical questions the two thinkers tried to answer.

Given that Spinoza is a rationalist who adopts the ontological framework of substances, attributes, and modes, it is no wonder that Descartes has come to be regarded as Spinoza's most important predecessor. Moreover, a growing interest in Descartes' theory of the passions—and

particularly in the therapeutic aspects of this theory—connects the two thinkers on a new level: after all, Spinoza is the early modern rationalist who develops an extremely systematic and thorough theory of human emotions to show us how to control our passions (James 1997; LeBuffe 2010; Kisner 2011; Kisner and Youpa [eds.] 2014). However, Spinoza's theory of the passions and of what he takes to be the ultimate end of his philosophy, namely human salvation, builds on a specific ontology of human existence; an ontology that involves a number of tenets concerning essences, powers, individuality, and activity. Much of the arguably most progressive current scholarship focuses precisely on these issues,³ shedding new light on how finite human existence is to be understood in a system that so decidedly takes infinite divinity as its point of departure not only in the *Ethics* but also in earlier, previously less researched works.⁴

The present volume consists of fourteen chapters written by scholars who have contributed significantly to the new turn in Descartes and Spinoza scholarship outlined above. Here they present their most recent arguments. The volume is divided into three parts: the first focusing on different features of Cartesian persons; the second discussing different aspects of ideas, knowledge, and reality in Descartes and Spinoza; and the final part examining how the two philosophers conceptualize will, virtue, generosity, and love.

1. Cartesian Persons

The first part consists of three chapters, which examine different metaphysical and epistemological questions raised by the Cartesian notions of mind, body, and mind-body union. In the first chapter, Deborah Brown engages in a close dialogue with Lilli Alanen's interpretation of Descartes on mind-body unity. Brown asks whether Descartes' notion of mind-body unity belongs among his metaphysical notions or is to be viewed within the bounds of a purely phenomenological inquiry. Scholars tend in their treatments of this question towards one of two extremes, embracing either a strong metaphysical reading according to which the union is a third kind of substance or a wholly non-metaphysical perspective on the union. Brown rejects trialist interpretations of Descartes' account of the union, but argues for the view that not only does the union have a metaphysical status, it occupies a place of primacy in Descartes' philosophy. Following her interpretation of Alanen's position, Brown focuses on the union as a normative domain of inquiry, where questions of what we experience, of whether we should so experience and of how we should interpret our experiences come into play. In this reading, the metaphysical status of everyday experience comes into particular focus.

In the next chapter, Martina Reuter discusses the proto-feminist potential of Descartes' philosophy. She approaches the mind, the body,

and the mind-body union from an epistemological perspective and asks what can be known about gender through these three primitive notions respectively. In the first section Reuter examines how the primitive notion of the mind considered in itself strengthens the idea that “the mind has no sex”, which we find already in Augustine and which was further developed within a Cartesian framework by François Poulin de la Barre. Next Reuter focuses on the notion of the body and analyzes what Descartes has to say about gender in his anatomical writings. Reuter is particularly interested in the little known posthumously published notes *Primae cogitationes circa generationem animalium*, where Descartes discusses the development of the fetus, including its gender. Here he assumes a difference between the native intelligence of men and women, which seems to contradict his claim that reason is equal in all humans, but Reuter argues that his views are reconcilable when we distinguish those modes of thought that depend on the mind alone from those that depend on the body. In the final section Reuter examines what we can know about gender through the notion of the mind-body union. She argues that when conceived as part of the union, the experience of gender is a hybrid of mind and body, which is irreducible to either the non-gendered mind or the body and its anatomical features. Reuter points out that it is particularly the irreducibility of the three primitive notions which contributes to the complexity of our understanding of what it is to be a gendered being.

Finally, Mikko Yrjönsuuri provides a new interpretation of Descartes' account of non-embodied vision, or of the experience of seeing at the early stage of the *Meditations*, when the meditator is in denial of having a body. Yrjönsuuri argues that Descartes' account must be seen in the light of traditional theories of vision where vision was taken to be a crucially bodily activity. If we accept that Descartes saw vision in the vein of his predecessors as a process that cannot take place without body, the relation of sensory perception to the mind needs to be re-evaluated. The same goes in fact for all bodily cognitive processes. Yrjönsuuri shows that even in sensory perception, the human distinction lies in judgemental responsibility in the evaluation of what the eyes see. In addition to the *Meditations*, his interpretation relies on the *Optics* and other minor texts where Descartes considers the way in which we judge distances on the basis of visual information given through the curved inner surface of the back of the eye. Yrjönsuuri draws the general conclusion that to have a mind, according to Descartes, is not primarily to be capable of passive experience, but to have genuine agency.

2. Ideas, Knowledge, and Reality

The second part consists of chapters by Peter Myrdal and Arto Repo, John Carriero, Olli Koistinen, Karolina Hübner, Lisa Shapiro, and

Valtteri Viljanen, who approach questions of ideas, knowledge, passions, and reality in Descartes and Spinoza. Myrdal and Repo begin by exploring some key issues within Descartes' theory of cognition and its vulnerability to the so-called “veil of ideas” problem. They take as their starting point the interpretation developed by John Carriero (2009), according to which Descartes is part of a tradition of theorizing about human cognition that starts from the idea that we are in principle capable of articulating or grasping the basic order of reality. One important element of Carriero's interpretation, Myrdal and Repo argue, is that Descartes' notion of idea is to be understood along the lines of the Aristotelian doctrine of formal identity between cognizer and cognized. While they are sympathetic to this new approach to Descartes, they argue that retaining the doctrine of formal identity faces some difficulties, given the novel conception of the structure of reality defended by Descartes. They propose that Descartes needs an alternative account of what it is for a cognizer to be determined by reality. Attending to some important differences between the innate ideas of extension and God, Myrdal and Repo conclude that Descartes may not have a fully worked-out account of his own. Considering some of the problems inherent in his view can, however, shed light on the, from our contemporary perspective, peculiar role both Spinoza and Leibniz give to God in accounting for cognition.

In chapter 6, Carriero examines the cognitive role Spinoza gives to the imagination and asks how it differs from the two higher forms of cognition, reason and intuition. He takes as his starting point some remarks made by Lilli Alanen (2011) to the effect that much of what is found at what Spinoza terms the lowest level of cognition—i.e., imagination—is “certain” and “beyond doubt”. Some imaginative cognition would, it seems, count as knowledge in any ordinary sense of the term. How, then, do the two higher forms of cognition, reason and intuition, differ from imagination? Carriero argues that they differ in that the two higher forms of cognition involve essence and understanding. He explores Spinoza's conception of essence and understanding—and through that, the Spinozistic view of *scientia*—by reflecting on Spinoza's plenum physics. Special attention is given to how the logic of what Spinoza calls “common notions”, based on invariance of structure, differs from a more traditional logic of universals, based on general kinds and particulars belonging to those kinds.

Next, Koistinen examines the question whether Spinoza, who explicitly criticizes Descartes on mind and body, offers a viable alternative to what he took Descartes' position to be. In the first section, Koistinen presents Spinoza's basic conception of causation which seems to lead to a rather strange position, parallelism, about the relationship between mind and body. In the second section, the aim is to show that Spinoza's philosophy of mind and especially his conception of the mind and ideas should be rethought. Koistinen argues that in Spinoza there is room for an infinity

of genuine thinking subjects which are not reducible to bundles of ideas. His reading may seem vulnerable to Karolina Hübner's forthcoming criticism of dependency readings of Spinoza, but Koistinen argues that Hübner's perceptive criticism does not, in the end, pose a problem for the interpretation that he defends. In the fourth section, Spinoza's view that ideas can be caused only by other ideas is given an alternative reading to those where ideas are seen as full-fledged modes causing other ideas on the model of causation in the extended world.

Hübner's own chapter argues that for Spinoza thought as such is inferential: to think is to grasp the consequences or implications of what is being represented. She shows that approaching Spinoza's epistemology through this inferential framework allows us to see many *prima facie* disparate epistemological doctrines—bearing on understanding, truth, adequacy, mental causality, and the difference between intellect and imagination—as part of a single, unified account. Finally, Hübner argues, a focus on inference illuminates what it means for ideas to enter into causal relations and thereby being able to mirror nature in the mind.

In chapters 9 and 10 Shapiro and Viljanen investigate different aspects of Spinoza's understanding of the relation between activity and passivity. One of the consequences of Spinoza's identification of God and nature is the problem of understanding if and how finite things such as human beings are to be distinguished from God. One way to tackle this problem is to try to identify who Spinoza takes to be the *thinking subject*, i.e. the thinker of the ideas Spinoza discusses in the *Ethics*. Shapiro examines the larger question of the status of the individual as it moves towards freedom from the bondage of the passions by examining the smaller and preliminary question of what it is for us individuals to represent ourselves. The chapter proceeds in three steps: Shapiro first looks at the primary affect of desire, which Spinoza initially defines as a consciousness of appetite, and elucidates in what this form of self-consciousness consists. In the second section Shapiro turns to pride and *acquiescentia in se ipso* and distinguish them as varieties of consciousness of self. Clarifying the distinction between these two raises further questions concerning the nature of the Spinozist individual subject: Is our own representation of ourselves sufficient to constitute us as individuals persisting over time? What happens to our self-representations as we learn more about Nature and situate ourselves within it? Are there limits to our abilities to represent ourselves as individuals? Addressing these questions, Shapiro argues, can shed light on the way towards freedom and to true *acquiescentia in se ipso* in Spinoza's philosophy.

The central goal in Spinoza's ethics is to express (as far as possible) our own essence in our actions, instead of letting them be dictated by one's passions. It is thus of crucial importance to have a clear grasp of how Spinoza understands activity and passivity. In his chapter, Viljanen takes a fresh look at the crucial second definition in the third part of the *Ethics*.

Here Spinoza states that: “we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause”, whereas we are passive “when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause”. As scholars have pointed out, however, it is unclear how we can be an adequate cause of an effect *outside us*, which clearly seems to involve other causal factors as well. The definition of passivity is also problematic. A patient is said to be “only a partial cause” of the passion despite the fact that the passion “follows from” the patient’s nature. This immediately raises the question: how can something follow from the patient’s nature so that the patient can nevertheless be considered only a *partial cause*? Viljanen begins by outlining 3d2 and situating it in the historical context formed by Descartes, Hobbes, and the Aristotelian tradition. Then he shows that the existing interpretations of Spinoza’s position do not solve the problem of activity and argue that unraveling the problem requires taking properly into account the distinction between immanent and transeunt causality. In relation to the definition of passivity, he argues that Spinoza’s geometry-inspired theory of *essence constitution* offers the key to understanding the nature of passions.

3. Will, Virtue, and Love

The last part of the volume brings together chapters by Tomas Ekenberg, Calvin Normore, Frans Svensson, Denis Kambouchner, and Lilli Alanen, about different aspects of Descartes’ and Spinoza’s moral philosophies. In the first, Ekenberg offers a reading of the Fourth Meditation in the light of Augustine’s *De Libero Arbitrio*. Ekenberg argues that the voluntarist account of cognition that Descartes presents in the Fourth Meditation can be made sense of against the background of the theodicy in Augustine’s work. If we read Descartes as sharing with Augustine (and the later medieval tradition) a certain teleological psychological framework, then we can help Descartes to respond to two common objections against voluntarist accounts of cognition: The first is an epistemological objection, according to which introducing the will in an account of judgment risks undermining the possibility of constructing a proper justificatory account of beliefs based on those judgments. The second is an empirical objection, according to which there seems to be ample evidence against our being able to believe any and all things at will. Ekenberg then considers various problems that his proposed reading gives rise to, including, for example, that Descartes himself in the introduction to the *Meditations* appears to object to interpreting the Fourth Meditation as involving discussions of morality, good, and evil, and also how his reading could be squared with Descartes’ attempts to respond to Arnauld’s challenges in the Replies.

Normore’s and Svensson’s chapters are thematically closely related. Normore argues that Descartes’ conception of *generosity* in Part III of

The Passions of the Soul, published in 1649, constitutes Descartes' solution to an apparent tension in his earlier account of the highest good of each individual. In his letter of 20 November 1647 to the Queen Christina of Sweden, Descartes suggests that the highest good of each individual is constituted only by "a firm will to do well"—i.e. in a firm resolution in the will to act as well as one knows how—"and the contentment which this produces" (CSMK, 324; AT 5, 82). Since each person, in Descartes' view, is free to use her or his will well or badly, it seems as if the highest good of each person is here in each person's own power, and not dependent on fortune. But in a letter to Elisabeth (letter of 4 August 1645), Descartes rather suggests that if it is uninformed by right or correct reason, a firm resolution to act as well as one knows how can lead us to pursue goods that are false, and in that case the contentment produced will not be solid. Here the highest good of each individual is, on the face of it, dependent on fortune: one's resolution to do the best one knows how need not always, it seems, result in one's doing what is *actually* best in the circumstances. In contrast to God, according to Descartes, we can never know for certain what the outcomes of our actions will be. So how, in Normore's view, does Cartesian generosity provide a solution to this conundrum? It does so, Normore argues, by entailing that the right or correct reason that must inform our firm resolution to do the best we know how, in order for that resolution to produce a contentment that is solid, is nothing but the insight that the firm and constant resolution to do the best we know how is *itself* what is right; that that is the only thing that is in our power, and therefore also the only thing worth aiming for in our conduct. Generosity cannot guarantee that we will acquire other goods as well. But it is sufficient for producing a solid contentment with what one has and what one does. Furthermore, while generosity, according to Normore, may not be as easy for some people to obtain as it is for others, it is nevertheless *possible* for each person to obtain.

Svensson, in turn, argues that we should distinguish between two forms of virtue in Descartes' ethics: between what Svensson calls *moral* virtue, on the one hand, and *perfect* virtue, on the other. The former consists merely in the correct use of free will, i.e. in "a firm and constant resolution [in the will] to carry out to the letter all the things which one judges to be best, and to employ all the power of one's mind in finding out what these are" (CSMK, 325; AT 5, 83), whereas perfect virtue consists in the combination of the correct use of free will and the knowledge that everything in our lives, with the exception of the use that we make of our free will, is determined for all eternity by Divine providence, and that the correct use of free will therefore guarantees that our lives will be as good or perfect overall as they can possibly be. In Svensson's reading, moral virtue constitutes the highest good of each individual, according to Descartes: it is the only good that is in each person's own power, and therefore also what each person ought to put up as the end or goal in all

of their conduct. But even though moral virtue is (at least in practice) necessary for living happily—or for enjoying a solid contentment with everything that one has and does—it is not sufficient for doing so. In addition, it is required that one has the knowledge that is part of perfect virtue. Perfect virtue *is* thus sufficient for living happily. However, since one's possession of the knowledge in question is, as all other goods besides moral virtue, not up to ourselves, perfect virtue—of which Cartesian generosity, according to Svensson, is one expression—is not in each person's own power. And neither, consequently, is happiness.

In the last two chapters of the volume, Kambouchner and Alanen examine Descartes' and Spinoza's views of love. Kambouchner devotes the first part of his chapter to showing that the view of love suggested by Spinoza at the end of the third part of the *Ethics* in fact comes much closer to the Cartesian view suggested in article 79 of *The Passions of the Soul* than scholars have usually recognized. He then proceeds to consider some of the possible differences that still remain between the two views. In particular, he pursues the following two questions: (1) Both Descartes and Spinoza make a distinction between two forms of love, *love as a passion* and *intellectual love*; but how could this distinction have the same sense for the two philosophers, given that for Descartes it is tied to the distinction between body and soul, which it is not for Spinoza? (2) Spinoza assimilates love to a form of joy, while Descartes considers love and joy as two different—even two primitive—passions; but how could one then identify Cartesian love with a Spinozian joy?

Alanen takes a new look at Descartes' notion of the mind-body union by discussing aspects of his moral psychology and ethics. In particular, the chapter discusses the role of the will in Descartes' account of passions, with a special focus on the case of love. Alanen offers a detailed examination of the Cartesian distinction between intellectual love and love as a passion, a distinction that is echoed in the one Spinoza makes between active and passive affects, and of Descartes' notion of joining oneself by will (or in volition) to the things that we love. She also shows how the examination of these things gives rise to important questions in relation to Descartes' view of the will, the self, and the mind-body union. Hereby the volume closes by turning back to some of the questions addressed by Deborah Brown in the first chapter.

Notes

1 See for example Marshall 1998; Brown 2006; Shapiro 2008a; Naaman-Zauderer 2010; Svensson 2015; Ragland 2016. (Further references can be found in e.g. Svensson's contribution to the present volume.)

2 On Elisabeth's contribution, see O'Neill 1999; Shapiro 1999; Tollesen 1999; Broad 2002; Alanen 2004; and for a recent collection of essays on the contributions of several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women philosophers, see Broad and Detlefsen (eds.) 2017.

- 3 See e.g. Della Rocca 2008; Garrett 2009; Viljanen 2011; Alanen 2012; Marshall 2013; Hübner 2016, 2017.
- 4 Melamed (ed.) 2015 is a particularly notable example of the heightened interest in Spinoza's early works.

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