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Descartes and the Secularization of Modern Philosophy

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Abstract: This paper discusses two matters that are of enduring theological importance, especially today: (a) the cogito and (b) mind-body interaction. The former poses a problem for naturalism and the second gives us reason to reject the naturalist case against theism on the grounds that it involves non-physical causal power(s). The paper concludes with a note for Christian philosophers: We should be wary of Christian physicalists who charge that ‘dualism’ involves a radical bifurcation of person and body.

Descartes has been valorized for establishing a philosophical method independent of theology. For example, Hegel writes:

Descartes is in fact the true inaugurator of modern philosophy, which makes thinking into a principle. Here thinking in itself is distinguished from philosophical theology, which distances itself from thinking . . . The influence of this man on his time cannot be overestimated. He is a hero who embarked upon the subject entirely from scratch and established a new foundation for philosophy.¹

But Descartes’ methodology and his reflections about God are by no means thoroughly secular. In fact, his insistence upon the reliability of a provident, good God as an essential condition for the reliability of our reasoning is not unlike modern versions of epistemic arguments for theism (which, in various forms, have been advanced by C.S. Lewis, Alvin Plantinga, Richard Taylor, Richard Creel et al). There are many aspects of Cartesianism that have a bearing on theological anthropology.²

¹ Hegel, cited by Gary Steiner in “Rene Descartes,” *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, volume 3 (Cambridge, 2013), p.101.

² See Joshua Farris, *The Soul of Theological Anthropology: A Cartesian Exploration* (Routledge, 2017).

There are two matters that are of enduring theological importance, especially today: (a) the cogito and (b) mind-body interaction. The former poses a problem for naturalism and the second gives us reason to reject the naturalist case against theism on the grounds that it involves non-physical causal power(s).

(a) The certainty that each of us has of being a self, a substantial individual who endures over time, has been assailed by minions of philosophers, from Descartes' time to today. In my view, all these challenges are spurious. In the presentation at the 2019 American Academy of Religion conference, I highlighted efforts by Bertrand Russell, Moritz Schlick, and Daniel Dennett, to undermine the certainty of the cogito. Russell proposed that Descartes is only entitled to think "there is thinking," not "I think." Schlick proposes that Descartes should only claim that "This thing thinks," presumably pointing to oneself or one's body. Dennett famously claims that the self is a fiction, a center of narrative gravity. In reply, I claim that none of these alternatives are intelligible without assuming the reality and reliability of self-awareness. There cannot be thinking without a thinker, we would have no understanding of the use of indexicals like referring to "this thing" without knowing oneself and who or what the speaker is referring to, and you cannot have fiction without an author.³ I suggest that the reality of ourselves as substantial individuals over time is a vital step in making a case for substance dualism, and the plausibility of substance dualism is a challenge to secular naturalism.⁴

(b) From Princess Elisabeth in the 17th century to the typical philosophy of mind text today, Descartes' is routinely criticized for leaving mental-physical interaction unexplained. What is missing in this literature is a serious inquiry into the very nature of causation itself. John Locke, Thomas Reid, and others have contended that we have a far clearer idea of the nature of mental-to-mental causal relations than of the causal relations between mind-independent objects or events. In fact, none of the extant accounts of causation (in terms of covering laws, counterfactuals, Humean association-ism, the basic causal powers thesis by Harré, etc) are intelligible unless we rely on the clarity and cogency of our mental-mental causal relations. Reference to the causal role of gravitation, radiation, and so on, only make sense if we grasp the ideas causal role, gravitation, and so on, and understand their entailments.⁵ Recognizing both substance dualism and that our embodiment as persons involves mental-physical interaction is an important step in resisting a naturalist claim that causal interaction is limited to the physical world (the causal closure of the physical).

³ Elsewhere I have argued these points at length; for an excellent defense of Cartesian self-awareness see David Lund's *The Conscious Self* (Humanities Press, 2005).

⁴ See Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *Naturalism* (Eerdmans, 2008).

⁵ I have argued for the primacy of mental causation in *The Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism*, edited by J. Loose et al (Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), chapter three. See Daniel Garber's excellent essay, "Understanding Interaction: What Descartes should have told Elisabeth" in *Debates in Modern Philosophy*, edited by S. Duncan and A. LoLordo (Routledge, 2013), chapter three.

So, I suggest that there are two robust aspects of Cartesianism that can pose a problem for secular, especially naturalistic modern philosophy.

A note for Christian philosophers: I suggest we should be wary of Christian physicalists who charge that dualism involves a radical bifurcation of person and body. Trenton Merricks, for example, contends that dualism conflicts with ordinary experience as well as the Biblical portrait of Christ. Merricks claims that if dualism is true, he cannot kiss his wife (one can only kiss a body, but if dualism is true, his wife is an immaterial soul) and Christ did not walk on water (only his body did). On this point, Merricks (like Gilbert Ryle before him) fails to appreciate how substance dualism recognizes that in a healthy embodiment, the soul (or mind or person) and body function as a unity. Under healthy, happy conditions, one may kiss one's spouse, but this is contingent upon the unity of mind and body which, sadly, may be dysfunctional (did I really kiss my loving spouse this morning, when, unknown to me, she has always hated me and successfully divorced me yesterday?) I suggest that mind-body dualists should stress the natural integration of mind and body, albeit one that is contingent. An example of a current substance dualist who does not stress this integration of soul and body is Richard Swinburne. I am reluctant to raise the point here, as I find myself in agreement with Swinburne on almost 99% of his philosophical and theological positions. Consider, however, this passage from his brilliant, recent book *Are we Bodies or Souls?*

What is it to have a body? It is to have a chunk of matter through which one can make a difference to the physical world (for example, by opening a door by grasping it with one's hand and pulling), and through which one learns about the world (for example, by light impinging on one's eyes and sound waves impinging on one's ears, and one's nerves transmitting signals from eyes and ears to the brain) (pp.73, 74).

I actually accept the above portrait as important factors in our embodiment, but propose that the account needs to be enhanced to capture how (ideally) our bodies are no mere instrumentally vital chunks of matter, but that we ourselves are embodied in the world as a functional whole so that for us to make a difference in the world by (for example) physically embracing as friends is for we ourselves to embrace. In the interaction, we embrace each other, rather than our chunks of matter become intertwined.

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