THE UNION OF MIND AND BODY IN THE CARTESIAN DUALISM

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ABSTRACT

The crucial problem in Descartes' concept of human being could be formulated as follows: How two really distinct things, mind and body, can somehow generate another thing, human being, which is itself a unity, that is, a genuine individual or an ens per se. By ens per se Descartes means a substance. In Aristotle, substance is linked to the composition of form and matter. Form is a substance, while matter is an accident. In Thomas Aquinas, ens per se cannot have a plurality of actual constituents. The contrary of an ens per se is ens per accidens, that is, if the union is accidental to at least one of the components.

Here, what I want to elaborate is whether there is in Descartes' philosophy a notion of the union of mind and body which gives a satisfactory account of the unity of human being, an account according to which a human being has an intuitive claim being one thing, and not merely two things conjoined. Or, whether in Descartes the unity of human being is understood as ens per se or ens per accidens. If the union of body is ens per se, it follows that a human being is a genuine individual.¹

That Descartes considers a human being to be a genuine individual is an underappreciated fact among commentators. To take an extreme case, in a recent article, Fred Sommers alleges that "a Cartesian person is a non-individual, since it is composed of a mind and a body," and he leaves the impression that it is Descartes' intention to characterize human beings as non-individuals.² Etienne Gilson also asserts that because of the distinction between mind and body Descartes has a difficulty to explain human's individuality. He says that "Medieval philosophy distinguished the body and soul less really than Descartes, in that they did not make two complete substances, and this is why they had less difficulty than Descartes in uniting them."³

**Human's Composition of Body and Mind**

Many philosophers believe that human is a being composed of mind and body. This view involves two claims. One is that mind is something
distinct from the body. The other is that the mind and the body form a unity which is a human. Some philosophers have emphasized the former claim, while others have emphasized the latter.

Plato and Augustine emphasized the distinction between soul and body. That the soul is something distinct from the body, they believed to be apparent from the fact that what the soul knows best, it knows without the aid of any bodily operations. If the soul can know without the aid of the body, then the soul is neither a part nor an aspect of the body. On the contrary, it is an incorporeal thing, which is independent of and thus separable from the body.

On the other hand, Aristotle and Aquinas insisted upon the unity of human, because otherwise phenomena such as sensation and voluntary movement, which involve the operation of both soul and body, could not be explained. They reconciled the dualism of soul and body to the unity of man by saying that the body and the soul are united as matter (materi) to form (forma). The soul, as the substantial form of the body, is what makes the body an actually living organism.

One who adopts the theory that the soul and the body are independent entities is faced with the task of explaining the phenomena which make the unity of man plausible. Augustine explained the phenomena of sensation and voluntary movement in terms of the soul’s action upon the body. According to his conception of the causal situation, the inferior cannot act upon the superior. Thus, if two unequal things are in a causal relation, the cause is the one which is superior and the effect the one which is inferior. The superiority of one thing is judge on the basis of its relative simplicity. Since the soul is simpler than the body, it is superior to the body. Thus, in all cases in which the soul and the body are in a causal relation, it is the soul which acts upon the body. This includes the case of sensation, for sensation occurs only when the soul "directs the sense to the sensible thing and keeps the vision itself fixed upon it."

Descartes’ Dualism

Like Plato and Augustine, Descartes emphasizes the dualism of mind and body. If matter or body is not something really distinct from mind, then the new science, which offers only mechanistic explanations, would not give
an exhaustive account of the physical world. Similarly, if the mind were not something really distinct from matter, then the religious doctrine of personal immortality would be untenable. By mind Descartes means that which corresponds to the power of knowing that everyone has.

The power of knowing, according to its various functions, is sometimes called pure understanding, sometimes imagination, sometimes memory, sometimes sensation; but, properly speaking, it is called mind when it forms new ideas in the imagination [phantasia], or when it applies itself to those which are already traced there.

The body is defined as that which is different from mind.

I conceive fully what a body is (that is, I conceive body as a complete thing), when I think only that it is a thing, which is extended, shaped, mobile, etc., while I deny of it all the things which belong to the nature of mind.

Descartes even emphasizes that body is the substance that immediately presupposes extension, like shape, local movement. It could be seen in these statements:

The substance which is immediately the subject of extension and of the accidents which presuppose extension, like shape, position, local movement, etc., is called Body.

The body is corporeal substance which is related to the local extension:

There are certain acts which we call corporeal, like size, shape, motion, and all the other things which cannot be conceived without local extension, and we call by the name body the substance in which they reside.

That the body is the corporeal substance is evident by itself:

If it is said, for example, that a body is a corporeal substance, without
at the same time defining what a corporeal substance is, these two words, *corporeal substance*, will not make us in any way more knowledgeable than the word *body*.

Therefore, the body is divisible:

Being extended, divisible, of a given shape, etc., are the forms or the attributes by means of which I know that substance which is called *body*.

It is God who makes body of man. God makes it from earth. The body is something like statue or machine.

I suppose (in this Treatise) that the body is nothing other than a statue or machine made of earth, which God forms expressly.

Descartes believes that function of the body coincides with its laws laid down by God him self.

God has made our body as a machine and has willed that it functions as a universal instrument; operating always in the same manner according to its own laws.

Descartes states that mind and body is different. Their difference is great so as to create the rough dualism of mind and body. They differ to each other by nature. By saying nature Descartes would means that such difference is created by God.

There is a great difference between the mind and the body, in that the body, by nature, is always divisible, and the mind is entirely indivisible.

Even the mind is not influenced by the corporeal substance:

The mind does not receive impressions from all parts of the body immediately, but only from the brain, or perhaps even from one of its smallest parts [i.e., the pineal gland].
In this following statement, assertively Descartes says that the mind is not body. This statement seems to be tautology, but it indicates that Descartes really distinguishes or separates body and mind in man.

Everything which can think is mind or is called mind. But, because body and mind are really distinct, that which is not body is mind.  

Descartes claims that he is the first man who elaborates this understanding:

No one before me, as far as I know, asserted that mind consisted in one thing alone, namely the faculty of thinking and the inward source [of “thinking”].

According to Descartes’ doctrine of the real distinction between mind and body, it is not merely the case that the mind and the body can exist apart. They are two substances which have entirely different natures. The nature of the body is extension and the nature of the mind thought, and there is nothing at all common to thought and extension. The mind and the body are not capable of the same sorts of modifications. The mind is capable only of modifications of thought, and the body only of modifications of extension.

Like Augustine, Descartes seeks to explain the phenomena which make the unity of man plausible, by appealing to the notion of causal influence. In order to explain sense experience Descartes maintains that the body has causal influence upon the mind. In order to explain such phenomena as memory, imagination and voluntary movement, he maintains that the mind has causal influence upon the body.

For the Augustinian principle that the inferior cannot act upon the superior, Descartes substitutes the principle, manifest by natural light, that the cause must be adequate to the effect. The sense in which the cause must be adequate to its effect is expressed in two ways: The first axiom is "whatever reality or perfection exists in a thing exists formally or else eminently in its first and adequate cause." Regarding the first axiom he says more clearly in the following excerpt:
That there is nothing in the effect that has not existed in a similar or in some higher form in the cause, is a first principle than which none clearer can be entertained. The common truth 'from nothing, nothing comes' is identical with it. For, if we allow that there is something in the effect which did not exist in the cause, we must grant also that this something has been created from nothing; again the only reason why nothing cannot be the cause of a thing, is that in such a cause there would not be the same thing as existed in the effect.

The second axiom is said in the Third Meditation: "Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must at least be as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect." Like the first axiom, this axiom or statement is based upon the principle that something cannot come from nothing. What is produced in the effect must first exist in the cause. If the cause produced something in the effect which it did not first possess in itself and communicate to the effect, that thing would be produced from nothing. Thus, the cause must contain in itself so as to bring about in the effect. In order that the cause may contain in itself what it brings about in the effect, the cause and the effect must have something in common.

The Questions of Descartes' Dualism

The problem begins with the question of Gassendi with regards to the Meditations: How can the soul move the body, if the soul is not material, and how can it receive species of corporeal objects? Descartes answers that "the perplexity involved in these questions arises entirely from a false supposition that can by no manner of means be proved, namely, that if the soul and body are two substances of diverse nature that prevents them from being capable of acting on one another." This answer, however, is clearly unsatisfactory. For, as Descartes himself sees the causal situation, one substance cannot produce a modification in another substance which is of an entirely different nature.

Besides Gassendi's question, in her letter of May 6/16 and June 10/20, 1643, Princess Elizabeth asked Descartes how mind thinking and unextended, could interact with body, extended and unthinking. In his response Descartes appeals to the "primitive" notion of the union of mind
First I observe that there are in us certain primitive notions which are as it were models on which all our other knowledge is patterned. There are very few such notions. First, there are the most general ones, such as being, number, and duration, which apply to everything we can conceive. Then, as regards body in particular, we have only the notion of extension which entails the notions of shape and motion; and as regards soul in particular we have only the notion of thought, which includes the conceptions of the intellect and the inclinations of the will. Finally, as regards soul and body together, we have only the notion of their union, on which depends our notion of the soul’s power to move the body, and the body’s power to act on the soul and cause sensations and passions.  

Descartes tries to accommodate his principle that the cause must be adequate to the effect, by de-emphasizing his doctrine of the complete disparity between mind and body. The mind can cause changes in the body, and the body can cause changes in the mind, by virtue of the substantial union of mind and body.

Thus, Descartes’ notion of the union of mind and body arises in response to the problem of how the mind and the body can causally interact. Or, if two substances have different natures, how can there be a union of these substances which is itself a simple nature?

Descartes’ Belief of The Unity of Human Being

Descartes, however, believes that a human being is a unity. In this excerpt he gives a decisive example of how he himself unites with his own body:

Nature teaches me also by the sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, etc., that I am not only housed in my body, like a pilot in his ship, but, besides that, that I am conjoined very tightly and so mixed and mingled with it, that I compose a single whole with it.

Even the mind is imprinted in the body:
The mind, although really distinguished from the body, is nevertheless joined to it, and is touched by the traces [vestigia] which are imprinted in it.\textsuperscript{23}

The mind is not only imprinted, but also moves the body. This causal movement of the body can be seen in the daily experience:

For the fact that the mind, which is incorporeal, can make the body move, there is neither reasoning nor comparison derived from other things which could teach us; but experiences which are very certain and very evident make us recognize it every day.\textsuperscript{24}

Similarly, in the \textit{Passions of the Soul} he states:

The soul is truly joined to the whole body, and one cannot properly say that it is in some one of its parts to the exclusion of others.\textsuperscript{25}

In Article 31, he says that the soul exercises its functions in the body:

Although the soul is joined to the whole body, there is nevertheless in the body a certain part in which the soul exercises its functions more particularly than in all the others. And it is usually believed that this part is the brain, or perhaps the heart.\textsuperscript{26}

It is evident that for Descartes the body is united to the soul, since from experience when someone talks about the body, it refers to the body of man united with the soul, not the separated body in itself. This long excerpt can bring into light such a belief of Descartes:

I find that the word body is quite equivocal; for, when we speak of a body in general, we understand a determinate part of matter, and altogether of the quantity of which the universe is composed, so that one could not take away ever so little from that quantity, without our judging immediately that the body is smaller, and that it is no longer whole, nor change any particle of that matter, without our thinking that the body is no longer totally the same, or numerically the same. But, when we speak of the body of a man, we do not understand a
determinate part of matter, nor one which has a determinate size, but we merely understand all the matter which is, taken altogether, united with the soul of that man; in such a way that, even though that matter changes, and even though its quantity increases or diminishes, we still believe that it is the same body, numerically the same, as long as it remains joined and substantially united to the same soul.  

Again, he gives a decisive account of the unity of body and soul. He states that the soul is truly joined to the body:

The soul is truly joined to all the body, and it cannot be properly said to be in some one of these parts to the exclusion of the others, because the body is one, and in some fashion indivisible, because of the placement of its organs, which are all so related to one another that when one of them is taken away, that makes the whole body defective; and because the soul is of a nature which has no reference to extension, nor to dimensions, or other properties of the matter of which the body is composed, but simply to the whole union of its organs.

It is certainly true that Descartes emphasizes the real distinction between mind and body much more than the unity of a human being. He admits as much in a letter to Princess Elizabeth and gives a hint as to why:

There are two facts about the human soul on which depend all the things we can know of its nature. The first is that it thinks, the second is that it is united to the body and can act and be acted upon along with it. About the second I have said hardly anything; I have tried only to make the first well understood. For my principal aim was to prove the distinction between soul and body, and to this end only the first was useful, and the second might have been harmful.

In another letter, this time to Regius, he makes a very similar remark:

Many people make the mistake of thinking that the soul is not really distinct from the body than make the mistake of admitting their distinction and denying their substantial union, and in order to refute those who believe souls to be mortal it is more important to
teach the distinction of parts in man than to teach their union.\textsuperscript{30}

But to teach the distinction between mind and body is not to deny their union. Earlier in the same letter to Regius, Descartes advises him to say that he believes a human being is a true \textit{ens per se}:

And whenever the occasion arises, in public and in private, you should give out that you believe that a human being is a true \textit{ens per se}, and not \textit{ens per accidens}, and that the mind and the body are united in a real and substantial manner. You must say that they are united not by position or disposition, as you say in your last paper -- for this too is open to objection and, in my opinion, quite untrue -- but by a true mode of union, as everyone agrees, though nobody explains what this means and so you need not do so either.\textsuperscript{31}

These three passages from the letters to Princess Elizabeth and Regius give clear indication that Descartes does not call into question the Aristotelian and common view that a human being is a genuine unity, that is, an individual. There is other important evidence that Descartes believes a human being is an individual. In the \textit{Sixth Meditation} he asserts that he is not united to his body as a pilot to a ship, but is "closely joined and, as it were, mixed together with it, so that I make up one thing with it."\textsuperscript{32} Moreover, there are several passages in which he refers to the substantial union of mind and body (some are already mentioned above). By using the expression "substantial union" I take him to be pointing out not merely that the union is a union of two substances, which he does think is the case, but that the product of the union is itself a substance. Descartes uses the terms "substance", \textit{ens per se}, and "complete thing interchangeably, and all of them I take to be equivalent to my terms "individual" and "genuine unity."

There is a standard picture of the Cartesian created universe which perhaps contributes to the tendency to deny that Descartes conceives of a human being as a genuine individual. According to this picture, the Cartesian created universe is populated by a lot of minds, but only one extended substance, the entire extended world, of which individual bodies are merely modes.
We do not form two ideas in our imagination, one of body, and the other of extension, but a single idea, that of an extended body.\(^3\)

Such a picture makes it difficult to see how a human being could be a genuine individual. How could a substance, in this case a mind, be combined with a mode of another substance, in this case a human body, to form a genuine unity?

Martial Gueroult ascribes to Descartes a very strong notion of what it is to be a created substance in the strict sense, according to which only God can cause substances to come into or to go out of existence, and according to which substances can go out of existence only by annihilation.\(^34\) The key evidence in favor of Gueroult's interpretation is a famous passage from the Synopsis of the *Meditations*:

First, it must be known that absolutely all substances or things which must be created by God in order to exist, are by their nature incorruptible, nor can they ever cease to be unless they are reduced to nothing by God denying them His concurrence, and second, it must be noted that body, at least taken generally, is a substance and for that reason never perishes. But the human body differs from other bodies only insofar as it is composed of a certain configuration of members and other such accidents; while the human mind is not similarly composed out of any accidents, but is a pure substance; for although all its accidents are changed, so that it understands other things, wills others, senses others, etc., the mind does not for that reason become something else; however, the human body becomes something else from the sole fact that the shape of some one of its parts is changed; from which it follows that body very easily ceases to exist, whereas the mind by its nature is immortal.\(^35\)

In the Synopsis passage quoted above, Descartes suggests that entities which satisfy the conditions of the strong conception of created substance are not composed of parts or other similar accidents. Following his language in that passage, we can refer to such substances as pure substances. But even though bodies are composed of parts and so fall short of being pure substances -- we might call them impure substances -- they nevertheless should still be considered as full-fledged substances.
Therefore, contrary to the standard picture of the Cartesian created universe, Descartes, in constructing a human being, does not face the impossible task of generating a unity out of a substance and a mode of another substance. His task, which may seem equally impossible, is that of generating a unity out of two substances.

It is clear that the issue as to whether Descartes' human being can claim to be a unity is not whether it satisfies the conditions of the strong conception of created substance. Accordingly, I am not referring to the strong conception when I say that he uses the term "substance" to mean a unity. Descartes thinks the substantial union of mind and body is incomprehensible from the point of view of our finite intellects, even though it is an indubitable fact made known by sensation and made possible by God's omnipotence.

Descartes could propose that a union of things generates a *per se* unity when that union is not accidental to at least one of the components. This would entail that a human being is an *ens per se*, provided that a human being is understood to be a composite of a mind and a human body, as opposed to being a composite of a mind and a determinate part of matter.

If the human body cannot exist without being united to the mind, it would seem to follow by his own criteria that mind and body are only modally distinct. I have argued elsewhere, however, that his account of real distinction does not require that mind and body can each exist out of real union with the other. Instead, what he does require for real distinction, namely, that each can exist without having the essential attribute of the other existing in it, is consistent with the claim that the body must be united to the mind in order to exist.

In a letter of December 1641, in which he is again coaching Regius, under fire for asserting that a human being is an *ens per accidens*, he advises him to say that it is not absolutely accidental to the mind that it be united to the body or to the body that it be united to the mind, and tells him not to deny that it is only due to a miracle that they can exist apart.

It may be objected that it is not accidental to the human body that it should be conjoined to the soul, but its very nature, since, when a body has all the dispositions required to receive the soul,
without which it is not a human body, it cannot, without a miracle, be that the soul is not united to it. Moreover, it may be objected that it is not accidental to the soul that it should be joined to the body, but it is only accidental to it that it should be separated from the body after death. All of this should not be denied, lest the theologians be offended again, but nevertheless, it ought to be responded that these things can on this account be said to be accidental, that considering the body alone, we clearly perceive nothing in it on account of which it demands to be united to the soul, as we perceive nothing in the soul on account of which it must be united to the body, which is why I said above that it is in a certain manner accidental, not that it is absolutely accidental.16

The other response to the objection that Descartes' human being is not an ens per se is found in the same letter to Regius. He advises Regius to say that something can be both an ens per se and an ens per accidens:

That which is an ens per se can be made per accidens, for mice are generated or made by accident from dirt, and yet are entia per se.37

A human being is an ens per se because

Body and soul, in relation to the whole human, are incomplete substances, and it follows from their being incomplete that what they constitute is an ens per se.38

A human being is an ens per accidens because

Considering the body alone, we clearly perceive nothing in it on account of which it demands to be united to the soul, as we perceive nothing in the soul on account of which it must be united to the body, which is why I said above that it is in a certain manner accidental, not that it is absolutely accidental.39

Conclusion

It is undeniable that Descartes sometimes mentions that body and mind are united, and sometimes emphasizes that human being consists of
mind and body. Descartes' view of the union of body and mind is obscure.\(^4\)
For example after a year he wrote to Regius that "the mind and the body are united in a real and substantial manner,"\(^3\) he said, "We affirm that a human being is made up of body and soul."\(^2\)

Therefore, the union of body and mind which constitutes a human being as a substance, in Descartes, cannot be concluded evidently as or an \textit{ens per se} or an \textit{ens per accidens}. We should remember that Descartes applies both \textit{ens per se} and \textit{ens per accidens} to the union of body and mind in human being. Human being is in one sense \textit{ens per se} and in another sense an \textit{ens per accidens}. By stating this, Descartes seems simply to avoid controversy. In \textit{ Replies to the Forth Objections} he asserts that a hand is both complete, when considered by itself, and incomplete, when referred to the whole body of which it a part, and he uses this example as an analogy to illustrate how mind and body are at once complete and incomplete.\(^6\) However, Descartes' philosophical account on the union of body and mind becomes a crucial point which creates a perennial unresolved problem of the mystery of human being.

\textbf{End Notes:}

8. \textit{ Replies}, II. IX, 125.
17. *Notes against a Program*, I. VIII 2, 347.
22. *Meditations*, VI. IX, 64.
39. Ibid., p. 122.
42. Ibid., p. 130.

Bibliography:

1. Aquinas, Thomas, De Trinitate, XI, 2 (5).