

Pasnau on the Material-Immaterial Divide in Early Modern Philosophy
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Bob Pasnau's *Metaphysical Themes: 1274-1671* offers rich coverage of a long, and particularly fascinating period in the history of philosophy. The book contains a mixture of broad claims about the period and detailed discussion of particular philosophers on particular issues. Pasnau focuses on developments in Aristotelian scholastic and early modern views of the nature of substance, in particular, material substance (p. 5). He sees as central an important change with respect to the view what kinds of composition material substances have. The scholastics recognized what he refers to as “metaphysical parts”, constituents into which bodies are analyzed and which are not themselves bodies. The main ones are prime matter and substantial form. Material substances also have “integral parts”, parts of bodies that are again bodies, as opposed to matter and form (pp. 7-9). The early moderns did away with metaphysical parts and only recognized integral parts. On this view bodies have what Pasnau calls “corpuscular structure”. He is surely right to see this as a very important change.

Mostly he leaves aside matters about immaterial substances, but he devotes a separate chapter to the material-immaterial divide, and his treatment of that issue is the focus of my comments. Pasnau writes the following:

The material-immaterial divide is problematic for us moderns in a way it never was for scholastic authors. Although we still readily speak of materialists and dualists, it has become very hard to know what that distinction amounts to. For the scholastics, the situation is relatively

straightforward: material entities can be marked off as those that either contain or are by nature dependent on prime matter. Belonging to the first group are composite substance and their integral parts, and aggregates of composite substances. In the second group are material forms, substantial or accidental. Immaterial entities either exist independently of matter (God and angels) or at least are naturally able to do so (human souls) (p. 323)

So Pasnau thinks that the distinction has been more problematic "for us, moderns" since Descartes.¹ I will leave aside "us" in the sense of 20th/21st century philosophers, and focus on the early moderns.

The question what the material-immaterial divide amounts to is, of course, a good one, and it is a question for which it is important to attend to the differences between specific periods: views of what counts as material or immaterial shift over time. As the above quote suggests, Pasnau is quite critical of the early modern period on this issue and he conveys the sense that things were better in the middle ages. The tenor of my remarks is to defend my period against his criticism. (Perhaps we are both guilty of "period chauvinism"!) I will argue that the early moderns did not make it harder to draw the line between the material and the immaterial, and that there is more continuity on this issue than Pasnau allows. Furthermore, I will suggest that they were better able to give content to the distinction than the scholastics did. And I will defend the period against Pasnau's scepticism about early modern prospects of arguing for the immateriality of the soul

¹ I will not worry about the question whether the terms (im) material or (in) corporeal are more appropriate.

or mind. Pasnau explores the early modern treatment of immaterial substances through examination of special types of extension some early moderns granted immaterial substances and that distinguish them from entities with corpuscular structure. While that issue is a very interesting one, I will contend that it was not central to the early modern understanding of the nature of the immaterial. Instead I will propose that the early moderns widely saw indivisibility as distinctive of the mental. Bodies, by contrast, are divisible because they have corpuscular structure. So the notion of corpuscular structure, so important to Pasnau's narrative, is central to the material-immaterial divide, but not in the way his focus on types of extension suggests.

1 The Material-Immaterial Divide

Is Pasnau right that the scholastic way of dividing the material from the immaterial in terms of dependence on prime matter is superior to anything the early moderns have to offer? I will focus on substantial forms and souls in scholasticism and souls or minds in the early moderns. Within scholasticism souls are species of substantial forms. I want to begin with raising questions about how helpful the scholastic criterion of immateriality for substantial forms, the independence from prime matter, is to understanding the material-immaterial divide. It is a *relational* characteristic: it does not tell us *what each form is in and of itself* that explains why it can or cannot exist without matter. What about its intrinsic nature makes it the case that it can exist without matter? Aquinas and others argued for the capacity for separate existence of the human soul on the basis

of an analysis of intellectual activity, which was supposed to result in the conclusion that the soul acts *per se*, by itself, without the body, in intellectual activity. But is that *constitutive* of the soul's distinctive nature? Or is it rather that the soul has to be a certain kind of entity so that it can act and exist *per se*? I would have thought that a real account of what it is to be immaterial would explain the latter, so that this view about the intellect does not yet tell me what the nature of the soul is *qua* immaterial entity. So I find that this way of distinguishing between rational souls and other substantial forms leaves an important question unanswered.

A problem with Pasnau's discussion is that he freely mixes discussion of two different questions. One is the question of a mark of the material (or immaterial), a feature that all material (or immaterial) things share. The other one concerns the deeper question what it is to be a material (or immaterial) being, or what the nature or essence of such entities is. If he is simply interested in a mark of the immaterial, then the above criticism is not relevant. But in that case, a similar criterion can be advanced on behalf of the early moderns, *mutatis mutandis*. They could say that immaterial things exist independently of material ones and they do not have material characteristics. So the scholastics and the early moderns agree in seeing the immaterial as independent of their respective notions of matter. The big difference with the scholastics is then that since the early moderns abandon the notion of prime matter, they have a different notion of matter. For Descartes and

many others matter is a substance in its own right rather than a metaphysical constituent of a corporeal substance.²

But some of Pasnau's criticisms of the early moderns go beyond worries about a simple feature to mark off the material from the immaterial. About Descartes's claim that the mind is essentially thought he writes that it "contributes little to understanding *what it is to be immaterial*" (324, emphasis added). He notes that the scholastics too held that all and only immaterial substances think. This is true. But there is an important difference that, in my view, gives Descartes's view an advantage in terms of understanding immaterial beings. Descartes made thought the *entire* essence or nature of the human soul and identified the soul with the mind. For many scholastics, such as Aquinas and Descartes's immediate predecessor Francisco Suárez, the human soul was the principle of life and the mind, which is what thinks, was merely a part of the soul.³ Descartes used the terms soul and mind interchangeably, but preferred the term "mind". He explained the contrast with the Aristotelian view to Gassendi:

² An exception is Leibniz who denied that matter is a substance, but he does fall beyond the scope of Pasnau's book.

³ Other scholastics thought that the human being had an intellectual soul as well as a sensitive soul, and that the two are really distinct, thus, in my view, moving closer to a dualistic picture. (For discussion see Adams 1987 pp. 647-664), Perler forthcoming). Descartes's treatment of the issues at stake here is most easily understood when related to the "unitarian" view. For other issues, the "pluralist" picture is very useful. See Hoffman 1986.

Primitive man did not perhaps distinguish between, on one hand, the principle by which we are nourished, grow and accomplish without any thought all the other operations which we have in common with the brutes, and, on the other hand, that principle in virtue of which we think. He therefore used the single term “soul” to apply to both’. (AT VII 356/CSM II 246).⁴

He does not refer to the Aristotelians by name (he often abstains from doing so). His somewhat odd reference to “primitive man” indicates his conviction that the Aristotelian view was grounded in a pre-philosophical outlook. For Descartes these points about the notions of soul and mind were very important: as we all know, he conceived of the human body as a machine rather than an ensouled entity.

Pasnau notes Descartes’s restriction of the soul to thought, but does not acknowledge what I see as its importance to the present issue. The scholastics too thought that all and only immaterial beings think, he writes, and he claims that they too thought the essence of body is extension, citing various definitions of body in terms of extension (p. 324). But this ignores the radical change in world-view Descartes brought about in his view of substance: While on a hylomorphic view all bodies may be extended, their world is populated by a wide variety of kinds of substances with different essences constituted at least in part by their various substantial forms. For Descartes, there are just two kinds of substances with the

⁴ I use the standard method of referring to Descartes’s writings by volume and page number. AT stands for Descartes 1996, CSM for Descartes 1984-1991. The former provides the texts in the original languages, the latter translations.

familiar two kinds of essences. The fact that the scholastics too thought that bodies are extended or necessarily extended does not mean they thought their essences consist in extension, or to be precise, that their essences consist entirely in extension. After all, in this period the notion of essence did not merely consist in necessary properties. An essence necessarily belongs to its substance, but also it constitutes its nature in the sense of determining what kinds of qualities the substances can have.⁵ Within scholasticism corporeal substances include peach trees, roses, horses, cows, humans, which all have their own essences that determine what kind of qualities and behaviours they display. For Descartes there is only one kind of corporeal substance, its essence is just extension, its qualities are the modes of extension and similarly for mind. This is a far cry from the qualitatively and ontologically richly varied scholastic world.

I insist on this familiar point because it matters to the material-immaterial divide. Descartes thought that getting rid of the traditional notion of the soul as the principle of life, and substituting for it the notion of the mind as the principle of thought made defending the immateriality of the human soul or mind easier. And there is a sense in which this is so. Scholastic defenses of the immateriality of the soul relied on an analysis of intellectual activity,⁶ but soul as principle of life is involved in many inherently material activities, nutritive and sensory activities that

⁵ This point is illustrated by the important notion of a *proprium*, a quality that necessarily belongs to a type of entity, but that is not part of its essence, as Pasnau notes elsewhere (p. 485n, .551, 658).

⁶ See for instance Aquinas AT I.75.2, Suárez, *De anima* I.IX (in Suárez 1856 v.3).

take place in the body. Get rid of all those, mechanize them and you get two nice results, Descartes thought.

(1) You are left just with that activity that supports the immateriality of the soul, resulting in a clear picture of the soul as an entirely immaterial entity that can exercise its functions without the body. Furthermore, there is a tension in the conception of a single human soul as both the principle of thought and hence as immaterial and capable of existing without the body and as the principle of activities that inherently require a body: it seems to make the soul both dependent and independent of body.⁷ Many other scholastics argued that the rational soul, the principle of intellectual activity, is really distinct from the sensitive soul, but this strikes me as putting significant strain on the notion of that soul as a substantial form of the body, and a significant step towards some sort of dualism.⁸

(2) You get rid of all sorts of souls and substantial forms that were not supposed to be immaterial according to the scholastics themselves. Those entities complicated matters by raising questions about just how to distinguish material and immaterial substantial forms. Descartes saw the category of substantial form and soul in the scholastics as a confusing hodgepodge, one that made it harder to defend the immateriality and immortality of the human soul.⁹ I think all this is behind the following comments he makes. In the *Discourse* he claims that human beings are

⁷ Aquinas visibly struggled with the issue. See ST I.76.1 ad 6. For more discussion see Rozemond 1998, 146-151.

⁸ For discussion see Adams 1987 and Perler forthcoming.

⁹ See also Rozemond 1998, p. 23 and pp. 40-48.

radically different from both machines and animals, and makes clear his position that animals are really just machines. He then writes:

When we know how much the beasts differ from us, we understand much better the arguments which prove that our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body, and consequently that it is not bound to die with it (*Discourse* AT VI 59/CSM I 141).

For those who allow for animal souls the problem is that they saw those souls as dependent on body and so it raises the question how exactly to distinguish animal souls from human souls. The more so when the human soul is seen as the principle of life and not just thought, and so the principle of bodily activities. And about the view that there are substantial forms everywhere:

[I]t is the view which affirms substantial forms which allows the easiest slide to the opinion of those who maintain that the human soul is corporeal and mortal. Yet if only the human soul is recognized as a substantial form while other such forms consist in the configuration and motion of parts, this very privileged status it has compared with other forms shows that its nature is quite different from theirs. And this difference in nature opens the easiest route to demonstrating its non-materiality and immortality ... (AT III 503/CSM III 207)¹⁰

In the background of this thought is the fact that an important role for a substantial form was to explain the characteristic qualities, activities, of the being it belongs

¹⁰ CSM mistranslates the second sentence saying: "if the soul is recognized as merely a substantial form", which obscures Descartes's point.

to.¹¹ But for Descartes, in nonhumans mechanistic qualities can fulfil this explanatory role. Only human beings have a substantial form, which is the principle of thought and immaterial.

Furthermore, I wish to question an assumption that underlies Pasnau's objection that Descartes's claim that the essence of the mind is thought "contributes little to understanding what it is to be immaterial" (pp. 324, 348). The comment comes in a discussion where Pasnau seems to run together questions about a mere mark of the immaterial with questions about what it is to be immaterial. Pasnau's criticism seems to address the second question. But Descartes's claim that the essence of the mind is thought does not really address what it is to be immaterial. It is not what *constitutes* immateriality for him. Rather, he *argued for* the claim that the mind is immaterial. And that presupposes a view of what it is to be immaterial. Immateriality is a negative notion: it is the denial of being material and so it should be understood in terms of what a philosopher thinks it is to be material.

Descartes did hold that thought is sufficient for something to be a complete thing, a substance, and this was crucial in his most prominent argument for dualism.¹² In this sense, unlike the scholastic view that, as Pasnau has it, simply sees an immaterial substantial form as one that does not depend on matter, Descartes has a positive account of what constitutes the nature of an immaterial substance: its

¹¹ See Suárez *Disputationes metaphysicae* XV.I.7, 8 (in Suárez 1856 v. 25), Descartes, AT III 506/CSM III 208).

¹² See Rozemond 1998, pp. 12-22.

nature consists in thought.¹³ But this is a different point from saying that thinking *constitutes what it is for* something to be *immaterial*.

Finally, Pasnau speaks sceptically of the possibility of an early modern argument for the immateriality of the mind (pp. 348-9). But there is this consideration: what argument for dualism in the history of philosophy has received more attention from “us moderns”, that is, in the 20th and 21st centuries-- than Descartes’s? Indeed, the argument provoked from Sidney Shoemaker, no dualist by any means, the remark that it appeals to a “tiny dualist faction” in his soul!¹⁴

2 Extension

Pasnau concentrates on the notion of extension to examine the early modern material – immaterial divide. He does so in a distinctive way: he points out that a much neglected aspect of Descartes’s thought, and not only Descartes’s, was that he attributed a special type of extension to immaterial beings. And Pasnau pursues the idea that this is the way to understand the early modern conception of thinking

¹³ Pasnau himself indicates a reason why this route is problematic for the scholastics when he writes that they “tend to conceive of thought as conceptually removed from soul twice over (as activity of the intellect, which is in turn a power of the soul)” (p. 324). On that view, it is hard to see what the soul in and of itself is. Pasnau’s comment is most applicable to those scholastics, such as Aquinas and Suárez, who thought the soul is really distinct from its powers (but Pasnau and I may disagree about this). See also n. 21 below.

¹⁴ Shoemaker 1983, p. 235.

beings as immaterial. This focus contributes to Pasnau's pessimism about the period. The scholastics, he writes, had a way of explaining the connection between immateriality and the mental. But he is sceptical about a strategy of relying on the idea that "true" extension is incompatible with thought and that immaterial thinking substances must have a special type of extension (p. 348). Referring to such special types of extension in Henry More and Descartes, he writes, "What for instance does penetrability have to do with thought? What does holenmerism? Some authors during our period do try to make a case for holenmeric structure as what enables the unity of consciousness, but this is not an idea Descartes develops." (p. 348). And he thinks the failings of this approach explain Locke's view that there might be thinking matter. (p. 349) We will see in a moment what "holenmerism" refers to. Pasnau's remarks are grounded in a discussion of Descartes and More. I will focus on Descartes, who endorsed holenmerism, the type of extension Pasnau particularly pursues.

Pasnau is right that the idea that mental substances are in some sense extended deserves much more attention than it has received.¹⁵ I also agree that such a type of extension is unpromising as a way of understanding the material-immaterial divide. But I do not think that this idea is the best way to approach the material-immaterial divide in early modern philosophy, because: (1) In Descartes, and more generally, the point of a special type of extension was not to explain what it is to be an immaterial substance, nor was it used to argue for the immateriality of the soul or mind. (2) It's not clear to me how widespread the view that the mind is

¹⁵ For discussion see Pasnau 2007, Reid 2003 and 2008, Rozemond 2003.

in some sense extended was in the early modern period. But a clearly very common view held that immaterial substances are *indivisible*, an idea that was more directly connected to the notion of corpuscular structure. So if the question is how *the early moderns generally* drew the distinction between the material and the immaterial, divisibility is a much better avenue for investigation. I will explore this idea in the next section, where we will also see that it was central to an argument Pasnau was looking for but did not find: an argument why matter can't think that is grounded in the idea that matter has corpuscular structure.

(1) As Pasnau points out, while Descartes held that the essence of body is extension, on various occasions he claimed that the mind, or God, is also extended, albeit in a different sense: without having *partes extra partes*. But Descartes makes very clear that this idea is not central to Descartes's conception of what it is to be an immaterial, thinking substance, and he does not use it to establish the immateriality of the mind.¹⁶ Instead, he offers the idea of a special type of extension to address the action of mind on body. When the Princess Elizabeth prods him on how to understand such action, he writes that she could conceive of the mind as extended in a sense, and he refers her to the Sixth Replies where he writes that the mind is "whole in the whole and whole in the parts". There too he presents the notion as relating to the action of mind on body. And he explains to Elizabeth that an investigation of mind-body interaction requires focus on the *union* of mind and body

¹⁶ It plays no role in his main argument for dualism. The notion does occur in his statement of the Divisibility Argument, although I do not believe it is central to that argument. See Rozemond forthcoming.

as opposed to an understanding of the nature of the mind itself. And he even sees these two undertakings as in tension: focus on the union might be “harmful” to recognizing the distinction of mind from body, as he points out on various occasions (AT III 665-667, 693/CSM III 218-219, 228-229/AT VII 442/CSM II 298).

The idea that the mind or soul is “whole in the whole and whole in the parts” had been widespread since at least Plotinus.¹⁷ On that view, an immaterial substance is really present in the physical world but in a sense that is different from the sense in which a body is. A body has *partes extra partes*, one part here, one part there. But a spiritual substance does not have such parts, yet a human soul is present throughout its body, God is present in the entire physical world. This presence is required to explain, for instance, how a spiritual substance can act on a body. So, this view proposes, a spiritual substance is present everywhere in its entirety, not one part here, one part there. Following Henry More, who criticized this notion as incoherent, I will refer to it as “holenmerism”.

Descartes and More have an interesting exchange about the extension of immaterial substances, where again it is clear that this special type of extension is not constitutive of immateriality:

For my part, in God and angels and in our mind I understand there to be no extension of substance, but only an extension of power. An angel can exercise power now on a greater and now on a lesser part of corporeal substance; but if there were no bodies, I could not conceive of any space with which an angel of God would be co-extended. (AT V 342/CSM III 372)

¹⁷ As Pasnau notes (p. 357). See also Grant 1981 for discussion.

Of course, for Descartes if there are no bodies, there is no space, because they are only conceptually distinct. But God and angels can exist without space and bodies existing, he suggests. In that case they would not be extended in any sense. So the type of extension he here attributes to God and angels does not constitute what it is for them to be immaterial. Rather it appears to be a feature that only obtains when there are bodies and is meant to address the action of spiritual substances on bodies.

It is worth noting that in the case of Descartes it is quite difficult to give content to his claim that the soul is extended throughout the body, given that (1) Descartes also claimed that interaction occurs at the pineal gland and (2) he was a mechanist about the human body.¹⁸ For a hylomorphist, there is a real sense in which the soul is present through the body as it accounts for manifestations of life ranging from sense perception to digestion, activities that take place in ensouled organs. But this is not so for Descartes.

Pasnau's discussion of the material-immaterial divide focuses on hylomorphism, the view we find in Descartes. But More came to reject hylomorphism, and he developed a different conception of the extension of spiritual substances.¹⁹ And while he did argue for the need to see such substances as extended from their capacity to act on body, his reasons for holding that immaterial substances are extended are broader: unlike Descartes, he held that *all* substances are extended,

¹⁸ For more discussion see Rozemond 2003, pp. 356-362. The case of God is different as he was supposed to be able to act on bodies anywhere directly.

¹⁹ See Reid 2003.

and so immaterial substances must be extended as well. But their type of extension must be different from that of bodies, because, like Descartes, More held that thinking can't belong to material substances. Spiritual substances, he writes, are impenetrable and indivisible (More 1995, 28.2, 3).

Apparently on the basis of his discussion of Descartes and More (and Hobbes's materialism), Pasnau assumes that the view that immaterial substances are extended in some sense was very widespread.²⁰ But how common was this view? At the same time, More and Descartes, who both allow for some such extension, are part of a broader and very long tradition that makes a different notion central. It is the tradition of claiming that God, angels and minds do not have integral parts, in Pasnau's terms, they do not have *partes extra partes*, and they are indivisible. They do not have the kind of composition that is characteristic of corpuscular structure. This view was indeed very widely accepted in the early modern period. And those that attributed some sort of extension to immaterial substances also endorsed their indivisibility. So while Pasnau investigates holenmerism as the way to understand the material-immaterial divide in the early

²⁰ He writes that "no one wanted to take that route", that is, the route of denying all extension to immaterial substances (p. 345). While there certainly were others who attributed some sort of extension to immaterial substances, in particular, Samuel Clarke, this claim is too strong. Malebranche and Leibniz did not, Cudworth refused to take a stance (Cudworth 1678 p. 833). The question deserves more investigation. Jasper Reid, argues that the Cartesians did not hold that created spiritual substances (as opposed to God) are extended (Reid 2008).

modern period (pp. 345-349), I propose that a better way to do so is by way of the notion of indivisibility.

3 Indivisibility

The idea that “true” extension is incompatible with thought was a common argument for the immateriality of thinking things. Or rather, the argument relied on the idea that matter can’t think because it has parts, integral parts, in Pasnau’s words, and is divisible.²¹ And extension was held to include or entail this type of composition. Descartes offered the “Divisibility Argument” in Meditation VI:

²¹ It is important to note that the Divisibility Argument denied *a particular type of composition*, which comes with what Pasnau calls “integral parts”. This leaves open the possibility that the soul has what he calls metaphysical parts. This is illustrated by the example of Francisco Suárez, who held that the human soul is really distinct from its faculties, thus creating, in Pasnau’s terms, “metaphysical” complexity within the soul (*De anima* II.I). In this Suárez was in agreement with Aquinas, at least as the latter has usually been understood at least since Scotus (see, for instance, ST I.77.1). But at the same time Suárez held that the soul itself (as distinct from its faculties) is indivisible. (*De anima* I.xiii. For discussion see Rozemond 2012). For a different view of Suárez on the soul, see Shields 2012, who thinks that for Suárez the soul is nothing over and above a collection of faculties. For these issues see also Perler forthcoming.

[T]here is a great difference between the mind and the body, inasmuch as the body is by its very nature always divisible, while the mind is utterly indivisible... This one argument would be enough to show me that the mind is completely different from the body, even if I did not already know as much from other considerations. (AT VII 85-86/CSM II 59).

The notion of divisibility was clearly important to Descartes as a feature that distinguishes material from immaterial substances. And Descartes was not nearly alone or the first in doing so; the idea has its roots in Plato, in particular the *Phaedo*. In the early modern period, many thought the soul or mind's indivisibility is a crucial difference with body: to mention some examples, we find the view in More, Cudworth, Bayle, and a bit later (beyond the endpoint of Pasnau's book), Samuel Clarke (who agreed with More that the soul is extended), and of course Leibniz. Furthermore, within scholasticism too spiritual substances were widely held to be indivisible, and, as we saw, this is what motivated the widespread acceptance of hylomerism. By contrast with immaterial human souls, material souls and substantial forms were seen as divisible.²² In sum, the idea that material entities are inherently divisible, human souls or minds indivisible, is a common thread that cuts through the differences between a variety of views for much of the history of western philosophy and that includes Plotinus, scholastic hylomorphists, Descartes's dualism, More's conception of the soul as extended, Leibniz's monads.

²² Although at least some thought the case of the souls of higher animals was complicated. See Des Chene 2000, pp. 171-189.

This idea played a very important role in arguments for the immateriality of the soul in the early modern period and there is currently an emerging literature on the Divisibility Argument.²³ This is in contrast, however, with Aristotelian scholasticism (to my knowledge); while one finds Aristotelian scholastics holding that the immaterial human soul is indivisible, they did not seem to rely on the Divisibility Argument to establish its immateriality. They instead relied on a different line of argument, which they derived from Aristotle, according to which the intellect can't belong to a material subject because it is capable of knowing all types of bodies and its capacity for knowing universals.²⁴

In an extensive and rich exchange with Anthony Collins, Samuel Clarke penned a nice, crisp version of the Divisibility Argument. The immateriality of the soul is demonstrable, he writes:

[F]rom the single consideration even of bare Sense and Consciousness it self. For, *Matter* being a divisible Substance, consisting always of separable, nay of actually separate and distinct parts, 'tis plain, that unless it were essentially Conscious, in which case every particle of Matter must consist of innumerable separate and distinct Consciousnesses, no System

²³ See Mijuskovic 1974, which is currently receiving renewed attention, and Lennon and Stainton 2008.

²⁴ See, for instance, Aquinas, ST I. 75.2. For references to some late scholastics see Rozemond 1998, p. 45.

of it in any possible Composition or Division, can be an individual Conscious Being (Clarke 1738, p. 730).²⁵

In the early modern period it was especially popular among the Cambridge Platonists.²⁶

So the idea of this line of argument is that a body has parts in a sense in which a thing that thinks can't; body has, in Pasnau's words, corpuscular structure. Clarke formulates the argument in terms of consciousness, others focused on sensory states, or spoke of thought. But *why* can't mental states belong to a composite subject? Statements of the Divisibility Argument in our period do not always come with clear answers to this question, but sometimes they offered very interesting ones. The most prominent answer is what we'd now call a "unity of consciousness" argument, which dates back to Plotinus, and which Kant discusses in the Second Paralogism, giving rise to the label "Achilles Argument". It can be found, for instance, in More, Bayle and in the following statement by Cudworth, who reports directly from Plotinus:

That which percieveth in us, must of necessity be One thing, and by One and the same Indivisible, perceive all; and that whether they be more things,

²⁵ I provide references to Clarke 1738 but recently the correspondence was republished. See Clarke and Collins 2011. For early modern sources writing in English I have preserved the original spelling and punctuation.

²⁶ The early moderns often stated that something that is extended is not merely divisible, but it has actual parts, as Leibniz held, for instance, and Samuel Clarke, as the above quote makes clear. For discussion see Holden 2004.

entring through several Organs of Sense, as the many Qualities of one Substance; or One Various and Multiform thing, entring through the same Organ; as the Countenance or Picture of a man. For it is not One thing in us, that perceives the Nose, another thing the Eyes, and another thing the Mouth; but it is one and the self same thing, that perceiveth all. And when one thing enters through the Eye, another through the Ear, these also must of necessity come all at last to one Indivisible, or else they could not be compared together, nor one of them affirmed to be different from another? The several Sentiments of them meeting no where together in One. He [Plotinus] concludes therefore, that this One thing in us, that sensibly perceives all things, may be resembled to the Centre of a Circle, and the several Senses, to Lines drawn from the Circumference, which all meet in that one Centre. Wherefore that which perceives and apprehends all things in us, must needs be Really One and the very same, that is, Unextended and Indivisible.

If the subject is not indivisible, we can't explain a crucial feature of sense perception.

On the most interesting scenario the argument foresees that

... one Part of the Soul must perceive one Part of the Object, and another, another; and nothing in It, the Whole Sensible: just as if I should have the sense of one thing, and you of another. Whereas it is plain by our Internal Sense, That it is One and the Self same thing in us, which perceives, both the Parts and the Whole (Cudworth 1678, 824-5).²⁷

²⁷ There are two other scenarios: only one part of the composite subject perceives, but then, given the infinite divisible of matter, the problem starts all over again. Or

This argument relies on the fact that we connect various sensory inputs, unite them within consciousness, whether within one sensory modality or between such modalities. And the argument contends that this requires that the sensing subject does not consist of integral parts, each of which would have a distinct and separate perception with no subject present to unify them. So the subject must be unextended and indivisible. I cannot offer a full discussion of this argument here. But to return to an earlier point, we can see now that in addition to Descartes's main argument for dualism, which continues to attract so much attention, the period has another, rich tradition of arguing for the immateriality of the thinking subject centred on the notion of indivisibility.

Finally, it is worth noting that there is another, very different line of argument for the need for something beyond matter in the early modern period.²⁸ Both the early moderns and the Aristotelian scholastics held that thought required an immaterial entity. But various early moderns thought that this was not only so

each particle perceives the whole face, so that there is in fact a multitude of experiences of a whole single face in us. But, Cudworth writes, "we are Intimately Conscious to our selves, That we have but only One Sensation of One Object at the same time" (Cudworth 1678, p 825).

²⁸ Some of my examples lead me beyond the period officially covered by Pasnau's book, which ends at 1671. But the ideas at stake do not emerge only after this date. And although Pasnau limits himself to the period before 1671, his frequent talk of "the early moderns" does invite reflection on the richness of the intellectual landscape at least in the entire 17th century.

for thought. They thought that the kind or purely mechanical processes Descartes and others favoured in the period fail to explain much of nature, and so one needs to go beyond the material. The best known example is Leibniz, who argued that to explain force, genuine causal activity, and so even bodily motion, we need to go beyond matter and accept his active, mind-like, simple monads. For others, like Henry More and Ralph Cudworth, life, activity and the order of nature require going beyond matter. This induced Cudworth to introduce his “plastic natures”. He criticized the view that divides the world into extended and cogitative beings, and offered the following alternative:

Resisting or Antitypous Extension, and Life, (i.e. Internal Energy and Self-activity:) and then again that Life or Internal Self-activity, is to be subdivided into such as either acts with express Consciousness and Synaesthesia, or such as is without it; The Latter which is this Plastick Life of Nature (Cudworth 1678, p. 159)

This argument, of course, assumes a conception of matter that is radically different from the Aristotelian conception of prime matter, that is part of an overall very different framework with a different conception of what requires immateriality.

It is tempting to think that Descartes entirely set the tone for the early modern period and beyond in seeing only the mental as what requires immateriality. Our own discussions are in line with his approach when we debate whether the mental can be understood in terms of the physical, but do not wonder whether this is so for life, the order of nature and activity. That Cartesian focus is a

real difference between our day and the early modern period where many were not yet ready to follow his lead.

Conclusion

In sum, I have defended the early moderns against Pasnau's critical evaluation of their treatments of the distinction between the material and the immaterial. I have distinguished several issues that run through Pasnau's discussion, in particular, I have separated the question what is a mere mark of the immaterial, a feature that all and only immaterial beings have, from the question what goes beyond this and constitutes what it is to be immaterial. And I have discussed arguments for the immateriality of the subject of thought. Focusing on Descartes-- but the point applies widely-- I have argued that he did not hold that thought is constitutive of what is to be immaterial. He did hold that all and only immaterial beings think, and that the nature of an immaterial being consist in thought. But he and others argued for the view that thought requires an immaterial subject, and in doing so presuppose a conception of the immaterial. Immateriality is a negative notion, the absence of materiality. The idea that thought constitutes the nature of a substance is a claim what its positive nature consists on. And I have suggested that Descartes saw making the soul the principle of thought as opposed to life as giving him an advantage over the scholastics in the defense of the immateriality of the human soul.

Pasnau focuses on special types of extension in his discussion of the early modern material-immaterial divide. But I have argued that a better approach is to

turn to the notion of indivisibility. The early moderns widely saw it as part of what it means to be immaterial, and it was more widely accepted than the idea that immaterial substances enjoy some special type of extension. The notion of indivisibility is in fact intimately connected to the specific type of complexity that characterizes the notion of corpuscular structure that Pasnau makes so rightly central to his analysis.

Be that as it may, Pasnau's book is rich and thought-provoking. It ranges over admirable amounts of material and explores important, large questions about the centuries it covers. It is a stimulating contribution to an understanding of a marvellous period in the history of philosophy that too often is only dealt with piecemeal, in detailed analysis of specific authors and ideas.

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