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Descartes and the Immortality of the Soul

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I. Introduction

In the history of philosophy there is a long tradition of deriving the soul's immortality from its simplicity, a tradition that goes as far back as Plato's *Phaedo*. Something that is simple, according to this line of thinking, cannot go out of existence by natural processes because natural ceasing-to-be always happens as a result of decomposition. Consequently, if one can establish the simplicity of the human soul, one can be confident of its incorruptibility, as the Aristotelian scholastics often put the point, or natural immortality: God, of course, can cause its demise by withdrawing his concurrence, which during the early modern period and before was widely deemed necessary for the existence of creatures. Matter, on the other hand, was widely regarded as inherently composite and so divisible and corruptible, and of course, our natural death involves the demise of the human body. Consequently, there is a rich tradition of arguments for the simplicity of the human soul, and from there on to its immateriality and incorruptibility.

The argument from simplicity has its roots in Plato, who argued in the *Phaedo* that the soul is immortal because simple. Later philosophers employed an argument for the soul's simplicity from the claim that the subject of the mental must be simple because the unity of consciousness requires this. This argument suggested that in a composite subject the contents of our mental states would be distributed over the parts of the subject in a way that is incompatible with the fact that we connect contents in our thinking in various ways. Its best-known presentation occurs in Kant's Second Paralogism. Kant rejected the argument while expressing respect for it—he gave it the honorific title of

^{FN:1} ‘the Achilles of all dialectical inferences in the pure doctrine of the soul’.¹ I will follow Kant’s terminology and speak of the ‘Achilles Argument’. During the early modern period this argument enjoyed considerable popularity. It was often offered in terms of consciousness, but other terms for mental phenomena were used and a range of mental phenomena was cited to support the argument.² The argument tends to appear in the writings of philosophers with a Platonist bent, or so it seems to me. Within Aristotelian scholasticism, to my knowledge, the argument does not appear.

Descartes did not use the Achilles Argument, but he did hold that the human soul is simple. Indeed, his treatment of the simplicity of the soul occupies a rather different place in his thinking than it did in the Achilles Argument. In this paper I aim to sort out just how the simplicity of the soul figures in Descartes’s treatment of the mind. First, Descartes’s main argument for dualism did not focus on the simplicity of the soul to establish its immateriality. That argument derives dualism from the clear and distinct perceptions of mind as thinking and unextended, body as extended and non-thinking.³ Descartes does also argue for dualism from the claim that the mind is indivisible, body divisible, but this is a subsidiary argument. Furthermore, when Descartes focuses on the simplicity of the mind, he is generally concerned with the interaction and union of mind and body rather than the intrinsic nature of the soul or mind and its difference from the body. Second, the Achilles Argument derives the immortality of the soul from the simplicity that distinguishes it from body. Descartes did not claim to establish that the soul or mind is immortal (although he had claimed he did in the subtitle of the first edition of the *Meditations*), but in the Synopsis to the *Meditations* he does offer a sketch of how he would establish the immortality of the soul. It is tempting to see this sketch as an

¹ For Kant’s statement of the argument, see *Critique of Pure Reason* A 352. For discussion of the history of this argument see Ben Lazare Mijuscovic, *The Achilles of Rational Arguments* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), and for more detailed discussion of its occurrence in various philosophers, see Tom Lennon and Robert Stainton (eds), *The Achilles of Rationalist Psychology* (Dordrecht: Springer Verlag, 2008). The argument can be found as early as Plotinus (See *Enneads IV.7*, trans. A. H. Armstrong, Loeb Classics, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967). For discussion see Devin Henry, ‘The Neoplatonic Achilles’, in *The Achilles of Rationalist Psychology*.

² For instance, Leibniz thought the subject of *perception* must be simple and Leibniz did not think that all perceptions are conscious. Leibniz was remarkably quiet about why he thought perceptions must belong to simple subjects. For an argument see his early *The Confession of Nature against Atheists* of 1669, in Leroy E. Loemker (ed.), *Leibniz, Philosophical Papers and Letters* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969), p. 113; and in C. I. Gerhardt (ed.), *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz* (7 vols, Berlin: Wiedmann, 1875–90; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1978), vol. iv, pp. 109–10. Bayle argued that the subject of sense perception must be simple. For Bayle, see *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, trans. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), article ‘Leucippus’, p. 130.

³ Yet another defence can be found in the well-known discussion of the difference of humans from animals and machines in the *Discourse on the Method* (AT VI 55–60: CSM I 139–41).

argument from the soul's indivisibility, which distinguishes it from matter, but things are more complicated. The argument begins with a consideration of the nature of substance, then it turns to the simplicity that distinguishes the soul from the body.⁴ Furthermore, understanding of this line of argument benefits more from examination of its relationship to an approach to the immortality of the soul common in the Aristotelian scholastic tradition than by relating it to the Platonist argument from the simplicity of the soul. A result of my discussion will be that on several accounts Descartes's treatment of the soul's simplicity betrays his intense engagement with Aristotelian scholasticism. I choose the term 'engagement' deliberately: I will discuss how in some ways his statements of its simplicity are aimed to express disagreements with the scholastics, but other statements are expressions of agreement.

Scholastic Aristotelian conceptions of the human soul are characterized by an attempt to combine two rather different ideas. One of these is the conception of the soul as a spiritual substance that can exist without the body, and so is capable of an afterlife. On the other hand the scholastics accepted Aristotelian hylomorphism, and saw human beings as composites of matter and form. They referred to such forms as substantial forms, the kinds of forms that with prime matter constitute substances. They saw such forms as substances by contrast with accidents, but incomplete substances. Their ontology also contained accidental forms, forms like whiteness, which constitute accidents that belong to substances as opposed to being entities that constitute substances.

Descartes scholarship has often examined his thought in isolation from his historical background. Much good work has been done in this vein. At the same time, in recent decades serious attempts have been made to understand Descartes's thought in relation to its historical context. Aristotelian scholasticism is an important and prominent part of this background, but not all historians of philosophy relish venturing into its vast and complex expanses. Anthony Kenny is a rare scholar who has for a long time combined interest in Descartes with extensive and profound knowledge of Aristotelian scholasticism, in particular Aquinas. He has made important contributions both to Descartes scholarship and to the understanding of medieval philosophy. So it is with great pleasure that I contribute to this volume the following attempt to understand Descartes's tangling with immortality, simplicity, and Aristotelianism. I will

⁴ For the view that Descartes relies on the notion of substance, see Matthew Stuart, *Descartes's Extended Substances*, in Rocco J. Gennaro and Charles Huenemann (eds), *New Essays on the Rationalists* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Dan Kaufman, 'Cartesian Substances, Individual Bodies, and Corruptibility', unpublished manuscript. Other interpreters have held that Descartes argues that immortality derives from indivisibility. My interpretation will argue that both views contain an element of truth.

relate Descartes's views both to Aquinas, who was prominent in the teachings of the Jesuit who taught Descartes at La Flèche, and to Francisco Suárez. It is hard to know how much Suárez Descartes knew, but he was enormously influential in the period. His views reflected the developments in scholasticism since Aquinas and his temporal proximity to Descartes, as well as his tendency to offer extensive overviews of the state of opinions on any matter at hand, makes him an enormously useful source of getting a sense of the scholastic views that were around in Descartes's time.⁵

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2. The Divisibility Argument in the Sixth Meditation

Descartes states the argument as follows:

(1) For when I consider [the mind], or myself in so far as I am merely a thinking thing, I am unable to distinguish any parts within myself; I understand myself to be something quite single and whole [*integrum*]. (2) Although the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, I recognize that if a foot or arm or any other part of the body is cut off, nothing has thereby been taken away from the mind. (3) As for the faculties of willing, understanding, of sense perception and so on, these cannot be called parts of the mind, since it is one and the same mind that wills, and understands and has sensory perceptions. (AT VII 86: CSM II 59)⁶

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Our first order of business is to address a terminological point the significance of which is not clear to me: when Descartes addresses what looks like the issue of the simplicity of the soul, he does not use the term 'simplicity', rather he speaks of its 'indivisibility'. This is true, for instance, in the discussion of the divisibility argument for dualism both in the Sixth Meditation and in the Synopsis to the *Meditations*. Why doesn't Descartes use the term 'simple' and cognates?

One possible reason worth considering is that he wished to reserve the term simplicity for God. Philosophers before Descartes sometimes displayed reluctance to call the human soul simple by contrast with God. For instance, Suárez claimed that unlike God, the human soul is not simple. He held that the faculties of the soul are really distinct from the soul. One of the arguments he offered for this view was that the human soul is too imperfect to do everything itself; only God can carry out his operations without faculties distinct from

⁵ I will use Suárez's *Disputationes Metaphysicae* (*Opera omnia*, Paris: Vivès, 26 vols, vol. 25–6), which were published 1596, as well as his *De anima* (*Opera omnia*, Paris: Vivès, 26 vols, vol. 3) which was published posthumously in 1621, and edited by P. Alvarez, 1856.

⁶ I use the translations from CSM with occasional changes.

himself. Suárez took himself to be in agreement on the real distinction of the faculties of the soul from the soul with a number of philosophers, including Aquinas and the Thomists generally, Cajetan, Giles of Rome, and Ficino (*De anima* II.i.2). Aquinas had argued that the soul's powers are not identical with its essence; “‘to be’ and ‘to act’ are the same in God alone”.⁷ Suárez went so far as to say that the human soul, taken together with its faculties, is an aggregate, *unum per aggregationem*, thus seeming to depart starkly from a major tradition committed to its simplicity (*De anima* II.iii.10).⁸ Much earlier, Augustine had held that the soul is simple compared to bodies, but not, or less so, compared with God.⁹

But Descartes does not even use the term ‘simplicity’ for God when he discusses the same absence of composition in God. He argues that God does not consist of parts because being composed of parts is an imperfection (*Discourse*, AT VI 35: CSM I 128), since it is evidence of dependence, dependence of God on his parts.¹⁰ And so, he concludes, God is indivisible and undivided (AT VII 138: CSM II 99) and consequently not material.

Descartes does use the term ‘simple’ in a different type of context: he sometimes states that God’s *nature* is simple, and what he means there that it is not a collection of attributes: ‘the unity, simplicity or [*sive*] indivisibility of all the things that are in God is one of the main perfections that we understand to be in him’ (AT VII 50: CSM II 34, see also AT VII 137: CSM II 98: ‘we understand in God the immensity, unity, simplicity that comprehends all other attributes’). The use of the term ‘simple’ in this sense is not confined to God: in a discussion of dualism in *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* Descartes calls mind and body simple as opposed to composite beings (*entia*). The mind–body whole is a composite subject (AT VIIIB 350: CSM I 299). It is striking that he calls *both* mind and body simple beings, and so the sense of simplicity at issue is clearly different from the type of simplicity or indivisibility that distinguishes minds and God from bodies. The relevant difference is that a simple being only has one principal attribute, while a composite being, like the human

⁷ *Questions on the Soul*, qu. 12 (James Robb, trans. Marquette University Press, 1984), p. 156. See also *Summa Theologiae*, I, qu. 77, art. 1.

⁸ Suárez’s claim is at first sight puzzling: it seems more intuitive to express the view that the soul’s faculties are really distinct from it by saying that while the soul in itself is simple, its faculties are accidents really distinct from it. But the context of Suárez’s statement is the question whether producing the soul’s powers takes an action over and above producing the soul itself. There is another sense in which for Suárez the soul, taken by itself, is simple. See the discussion of ‘holenmerism’ below.

⁹ For a discussion of the simplicity of the soul in medieval philosophy, see Henrik Lagerlund, ‘The Unity of the Soul and Contrary Appetites in Medieval Philosophy’, in Lennon and Stainton (eds), *The Achilles of Rationalist Psychology*, pp. 75–91. For discussion of Augustine on this issue see pp. 76–8.

¹⁰ For discussion of this idea in the scholastic tradition, see Marilyn Adams, *Ockham* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), ch. 21.

being, has more than one. What these contexts of the simplicity terminology seem to have in common is that they concern some sort of *qualitative* lack of composition. (And of course, Descartes frequently spoke of ‘simple natures’.) Following Descartes, from now on, I will speak of the indivisibility rather than the simplicity of the soul or mind when concerned with its nature as distinct from that of body.

Let us return now to the Divisibility Argument in the Sixth Meditation. It contains essentially 3 claims:

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- (1) The meditator cannot distinguish any parts in herself or her mind: she considers herself to be something ‘single and whole—*integram*’.¹¹
 - (2) Although the whole mind is united to the whole body, if a limb were to be cut off from his body, ‘nothing would thereby be taken away from his mind’.
 - (3) The faculties of the mind—will, intellect, sense perception—are not parts of the mind, because it is one and the same mind that wants, understands and senses—*una et eadem mens*. The French, it is worth noting, is more emphatic: *car le meme esprit s’emploie tout entier* . . . (AT IX 68).

I will consider (1) and (3) together. How should we understand Descartes’s denial that the mind has any parts? In his initial statement he offers no argument or clarification. The next two claims consider illustrations of the point, specific ways in which the soul or mind cannot be said to have parts.

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It should be clear that Descartes’s denial that the mind has parts is meant as a denial that it has really distinct parts. He allowed for three types of distinctions: In decreasing order of strength, the mind could in principle be subject to a *real*, a *modal*, or a *rational* distinction.¹² The idea that the mind is indivisible most naturally suggests an absence of really distinct parts. Descartes held that modal distinctions do apply to the mind: thoughts are modes of the mind, and earlier in the Sixth Meditation he describes its faculties of sensation and imagination

¹¹ CSM translate *integram* as ‘complete’, but I find that translation misleading given Descartes’s technical use of the term ‘complete’. See in particular his Fourth Replies, AT VII 222–7: CSM II 156–9).

¹² For Descartes’s theory of distinctions, see *Principles* I.60–2. For a rudimentary understanding of the theory the following will do for our purposes. When a and b can exist without one another, they are really distinct. For Descartes a real distinction only obtains between different substances. When a and b are modally distinct, one can exist without the other, but not vice versa. A rational distinction obtains between a and b when neither can exist without the other, and they are merely conceptually distinct. This account is rough and ready, because I do not think that questions about separability are constitutive of the different types of distinction, rather they are signs of the particular types of distinction. For discussion, see my *Descartes’s Dualism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 3–12.

as modes of the mind (AT VII 78; CSM II 54). Since the modal distinction is stronger than the distinction of reason, we can ignore the relevance of the latter here. So Descartes must be denying that the mind has really distinct parts, and in this regard for him the mind is different in nature from the body; in his explanation of the notion of real distinction at *Principles* I.60 Descartes illustrates that distinction with the claim that any body has really distinct parts.

The faculties of the mind are an obvious candidate for a source of real distinctions within the mind, given that a number of scholastics held that they are really distinct from the mind. So Descartes makes a point of denying that they are such a source 'since it is one and the same mind that wills, senses, and understands'. The claim echoes his claim in the Second Meditation where he wrote that 'It is the same "I" who doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions' (AT VII 28; CSM II 19).

Descartes's denial that the faculties of the mind are parts of it surely is meant to address the Aristotelian scholastics. But it would not be accurate to see it simply as an expression of disagreement with the scholastics in general, since among them there was debate about the nature of the distinction between the soul and its faculties. We saw that Suárez thought they are really distinct from the soul, and that he took himself to be agreeing with Aquinas and various Thomistae on this point, but he cites four different opinions on the matter (*De anima* II.i.2). Besides the view that the powers of the soul are really distinct from it, he cites the view that they are in no way distinct from the soul, which he attributes to Ockham; Scotus' view that they are formally distinct from the soul; the view that some powers are (sensitive and intellectual powers), others (vegetative powers) are not distinct from the soul, which Suárez attributes to Bonaventure and Durandus of St Pourçain.¹³ So Descartes's rejection of the idea that the faculties of the soul are parts of it really means that he rejects the view held by some scholastics that they are really distinct from the soul.¹⁴ He is taking a stance within a scholastic debate.

¹³ This last view may seem particularly surprising. When Suárez introduces it he explains with the following reasoning: vegetative powers produce substances and an accidental power can't do that.

¹⁴ At the same time there was a tendency among scholastics to think that there is a real distinction at work in the relations among the faculties at least when we experience conflicts between will and sensible appetite. This type of conflict was used as a ground for arguing that there must be two really distinct souls in humans, a rational and a sensitive soul, a view proposed, for instance, by Ockham, or else that even if there is just one soul in a human being the faculties of sensitive and rational appetite are really distinct, a view favoured by Suárez. Descartes's view is that the conflict in question is a conflict between body and soul rather than different souls or really distinct powers of the soul (*Passions* I.47).

(2) Let us now turn to Descartes's claim that although the soul is united to the whole body, cutting off a limb won't result in the separation of a soul-part. We find this claim again in the *Passions of the Soul*:

But in order to understand all these things more perfectly, it is necessary to know that the soul is really joined to the whole body, and that we cannot properly say that it is in one of its parts to the exclusion of the others, because [the body] is one and in a sense indivisible, because of the disposition of its organs that relate to each other in such a way that when one of them is removed, it renders the entire body defective. And because [the soul] is of a nature that has no relation to extension or to dimensions or other properties of the matter of which the body is composed, but only to the entire organization [*assemblage*] of its organs. This is clear from the fact that we cannot at all conceive of half or a third of a soul or of the extension that it occupies, and that it does not become smaller when a part of the body is cut off, but it separates off entirely when the organization of its organs is dissolved. (*Passions* I.30)

Descartes here repeats the claim of the Sixth Meditation that cutting off a part of the body will not result in the loss of a part of the soul. He now uses this claim to argue that the soul is united to the whole body, which is in a sense indivisible. This notion of the whole body was absent from the Sixth Meditation. But in both texts Descartes supports the indivisibility of the mind by stating that cutting off a part of the body does not result in the loss of a part of the soul and that we cannot conceive of parts of the soul or mind. And so in both texts he is addressing the relation of the soul to the body in light of its indivisibility.

The claim that cutting off a limb won't result in the loss of a part of the soul can also be found in Suárez. The point of the claim is not to address the intrinsic nature of the soul, but rather to relate its nature to the body. Descartes's claim here is what he and many others often expressed by saying that 'the whole soul is whole in the whole body and whole in the parts'—*tota in tota et tota in qualibet parte* (see, for instance, Suárez, *De anima* I.xiv.9; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, qu. 76, art. 8; *Questions on the Soul*, qu. 10; Descartes, Sixth Replies, AT VII 442: CSM II 298; letter to Elizabeth of 21 May 1643, AT III 667: CSMK 219; and letter to Arnauld of 29 July 1648, AT V 222–3: CSMK 358). This is a notoriously enigmatic claim, which was labelled 'holenmerism' by Henry More.¹⁵ I won't offer a full discussion of this idea here,¹⁶ but the important points of the claim for our purposes are these.

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¹⁵ Henry More, *Manual of Metaphysics* (*Studien und Materialien zur Geschichte der Philosophie*, trans. Alexander Jacob, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1995), p. 98. This is a translation of More's *Enchiridion metaphysicum*.

¹⁶ For extensive discussion, see Ed Grant, *Much Ado about Nothing: Theories of Space and Vacuum from the Middle Ages to the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), and my 'Descartes, Mind–Body Union, and Holenmerism', *Philosophical Topics* 31 (2003), pp. 343–68.

Holenmerism was an attempt to analyse the relationship of a spiritual substance to body while preserving the simplicity and indivisibility of the spiritual substance. It was widely used in Aristotelian scholasticism, although it was not unique to that context; it was used previously by, for instance, Augustine. In scholasticism it was used in two contexts: (1) The action of a spiritual substance on the extended world—in particular the action of God on the material world. (2) The union of soul and body in a human being, which in Aristotelian scholasticism was understood as a hylomorphic substance, a composite of matter and form. In both cases the difficulty was to reconcile the presence of a spiritual substance in an extended body with the idea that the spiritual substance is not itself extended, in the sense in which matter was extended.

God can act anywhere in the physical world. According to many (but not all, for instance not Scotus), his doing so presupposes his presence in the location where he acts. But one would not want to say that God is present in virtue of one part of him being present in one part of the world, another part in another part of the world. If the spiritual substance were present in this way, as whole in whole and part in part, it would itself be extended and composite. But God cannot be composite; he has no parts and is absolutely simple. Whence the claim that it is not the case that God is present in each part of the material world in virtue of a part of him being present in a part of the material entity. Instead he is present in each part in his entirety: so he is whole in the whole and whole in the parts. And in this sense all spiritual substances are simple: God, angels, human souls.

The view that the human soul is whole in the whole body and whole in its parts was widespread. In scholastic Aristotelianism in the context of the union of body and soul the issue was how the soul as substantial form is present in the body: the issue here is not the action of the soul on the body, as Aquinas put it, its being the mover of the body, but its informing the body. Aquinas sharply distinguished the two: ‘If the soul were united to the body only as its mover, then one could say that it does not exist in each part of the body, only in one part and that through this part it moves the other parts’ (*Summa Theologiae* I, qu. 76, art. 8, see also *Questions on the Soul*, qu. 10).

Descartes’s claim that when one cuts off a limb, one does not thereby remove a part of the soul suggests that context rather than the issue of mind–body interaction.¹⁷ In arguing that the human rational soul is whole in the whole and whole in the parts, Suárez illustrates the point by claiming that when

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¹⁷ The scholastics used holenmerism for two purposes, but holenmerism was one idea for them. So Suárez offered an argument for holenmerism for God (when addressing God’s action on the physical

an arm is cut off the soul remains in the rest of the body in the same way, while it ceases to inform the part that is cut off. (*De anima* I.xiv.9, 10). Furthermore, the context of Descartes's claim suggests that holenmerism is here not meant to explain interaction. Right after the divisibility argument Descartes turns to interaction, and he claims it occurs only in one place in the body:

I notice that my mind is not affected immediately by all the parts of the body, but only by the brain, or perhaps even by only one very small part of it, that is, by that part where it is said the common sense is located. (AT VII 86: CSM II 59)

Indeed, Descartes uses the idea that the mind is indivisible to support this point about the location of interaction and he presents it as the reason he introduced the divisibility argument. And in the *Passions* we find the same: right after article 30, where he had expressed holenmerism, at the beginning of article 31 Descartes turns to his view that interaction takes place in a particular location: 'We need to know also that although the soul is joined to the whole body, nevertheless there is a certain part of the body where it exercises its functions more particularly than in all others'. He now identifies this part as 'a certain very small gland [*une certaine glande fort petite*]'. Here the soul exercises its functions 'immediately' from where it 'radiates [*rayonne*] throughout the rest of the body by means of the spirits, nerves and even the blood, which, participating in the impressions of the spirits, can carry them to all the other members' (*Passions* I.31, 34).

Holenmerism is certainly a very puzzling view, but it helps to see its point if we consider the contrast between the human soul and other types of forms, which are not present in bodies in that same way. Suárez argued that the soul of a worm or of a plant is in its body whole in the whole and part in the parts, and such souls are divisible. Their divisibility is evident from the fact that if we cut up a worm, both parts continue to wriggle. Similarly, when we cut off a branch from a plant, we may be able to graft it onto another one, or stick it into water to grow roots. These examples show that in some cases life continues in both parts of a substance that has been cut up, and so the soul is present in both (see Suárez, *De anima*, I.xiii.2, 3). But Suárez takes this to mean that the soul in these organisms has parts which informed the parts of the organisms and which now explain why the separated parts of the organism continue to live.¹⁸

world) on the basis that holenmerism applies to the human soul, where it was defended on the ground of its status as substantial form of the body (*Disputationes Metaphysicae* XXX.vii.44).

¹⁸ For discussion see Dennis Des Chene, *Life's Form: Late Aristotelian Conceptions of the Soul* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), ch. 9.

While Descartes does not use holenmerism to address mind–body interaction in the Sixth Meditation, he does do so elsewhere, in particular in discussions of the action of mind on the body with which it is united so as to make a human being. The clearest text is the Sixth Replies, where he argues that a certain notion of heaviness derives from the notion of the soul:

I also saw that while heaviness remains extended throughout the heavy body, it could exercise its whole force in any part of it; for if the body were hung from a rope attached to any of its parts, it would pull the rope down with all its heaviness, just as if this heaviness was only in the part touching the rope instead of also being spread through the other parts. This is exactly the way in which I now understand the mind to be co-extended with the body: whole in the whole, and whole in any of its parts. (AT VII 441–2: CSM II 297–8, see also the letter to Elisabeth of 21 May 1643, AT III 667: CSMK 219 and a letter to Arnauld of 29 July 1648, AT V 222–3: CSMK 358)

This use of holenmerism is not obviously consistent with Descartes's repeated claim that interaction occurs in one part of the body, the pineal gland. It would take us too far afield to address this issue here, however.¹⁹ What is noteworthy for our purposes is that this is another context in which Descartes addresses, albeit not in those terms, the indivisibility and simplicity of the human soul, and he does so when concerned with its relationship to the body.

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Descartes may seem to be implying agreement with the hylomorphism of the scholastics in suggesting that the human soul or mind is whole in the whole and whole in the parts of the human body. But Descartes was a dualist, not a hylomorphist. Of course, some disagree with the denial of hylomorphism on Descartes's behalf, most notably Paul Hoffman.²⁰ But it is important to note that holenmerism was not unique to Aristotelian scholasticism: it was used by Augustine and Plotinus, and Suárez and Aquinas both cite Augustine as holding the view: 'in his *sed contra* Aquinas wrote: 'But on the other hand, Augustine said in *De Trinitate* VI, that the soul is in any body both whole in the whole and whole in any of its parts'.²¹ So its appearance in Descartes does not necessarily indicate acceptance of hylomorphism. Furthermore, when addressing the union of soul and body, holenmerism was employed by the Aristotelian scholastics to address precisely that feature of the human soul that

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¹⁹ But see my 'Descartes, Mind–Body Union, and Holenmerism'.

²⁰ See in particular his 'The Union of Descartes's Man', *Philosophical Review* (1986), pp. 356–8, but also 'Cartesian Composites,' *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 37/2 (1999), pp. 251–70. 'Descartes's Theory of Distinction', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 44/1 (2002), pp. 57–78. 'Descartes's Watch Analogy', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15/3 (2007), pp. 561–7.

²¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, qu. 77, art. 8. See Augustine, *De Trinitate* VI.8, 210–11.

strains against its status as a substantial form, namely its character as a spiritual substance.²²

(3) It is noteworthy that Descartes's divisibility argument is dominated by concerns about the mind's relation to the body. First, the context of the argument in the Sixth Meditation is Descartes's discussion of the interaction of mind and body in view of his explanation for why the body sometimes sends the wrong signal to the mind about goings on internal to it. Descartes's explanation appeals to the fact that the soul is simple and so united to the body only in one place, receiving information from the rest of the body indirectly. So the reason Descartes gives for offering the divisibility argument is not in the first place a desire to establish its immateriality.²³ Second, the point of holo-merism here as elsewhere is to address the union with the body: cutting off a limb won't remove a part of the soul. So the passage is striking for its focus on the relationship of the mind to the body. And Descartes's use of holo-merism in the context of the action of mind on body elsewhere is another instance of his addressing the issues of the indivisibility of the soul in the context of its relationship to the body.

3. The Immortality of the Soul

The Synopsis to the *Meditations* is one of the most prominent texts about the immortality of the soul in Descartes. His treatment of the issue there displays a striking contrast to the Platonistic history of arguing for the immortality of the soul from its simplicity. First, Descartes presents both of his arguments for dualism from the Sixth Meditation and writes that he does not establish the soul's immortality in the *Meditations*—although as is well known the title of the first edition of the *Meditations* claimed the work does accomplish this. The arguments for dualism, he explains, only give us *hope* of an afterlife: their conclusion ensures that the demise of the body does not entail the demise of the mind or soul. So at this point he pointedly refuses to derive the soul's (natural) immortality from the indivisibility that distinguishes it from body. Then he says that he does not offer an argument for immortality in the *Meditations*, because 'the premises from which the very immortality of the soul can be derived

²² For more discussion, see Kenny, *Aquinas on Mind* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), chs 11 and 12, and my *Descartes's Dualism*, ch. 5.

²³ This strikes me as somewhat puzzling, and it is not clear what to think of Descartes's attitude to the argument. He does claim that it is sufficient by itself to establish that conclusion, and moreover, in the Synopsis he notes that it establishes that the natures of mind and body are not merely different, but opposite.

depend on an explanation of the whole of physics' (AT VII 13–14: CSM II 10). This is an extraordinary claim: why would establishing the immortality of the soul require a discussion of physics? Why couldn't one simply focus on the nature of the soul? In particular, given that this pronouncement immediately follows his claim that the real distinction is confirmed by the argument that mind is indivisible, body is divisible, one would expect him to do exactly this by focusing on the mind's indivisibility. But he does not do so. Here is what he says instead:

... [T]he premises that lead to the conclusion that the soul is immortal depend on an account of the whole of physics. This is required for two reasons. First, we need to know that absolutely all substances, or [*sive*] things that must be created by God in order to exist, are by their nature incorruptible and cannot ever cease to exist unless they are reduced to nothingness by God's denying his concurrence to them. Secondly, we need to recognize that body, taken in general, is a substance, so that it too never perishes. But the human body in so far as it differs from other bodies, is simply made up of a certain configuration of limbs and other accidents of this sort, whereas the human mind is not made up of any accidents in this way, but is a pure substance... (AT VII 13–14: CSM II 10)

So we find ourselves with two very remarkable results:

(1) Rather than deriving the immortality of the soul from its indivisibility, Descartes seems to derive it from the fact that it is a pure substance. Pure substances only go out of existence as a result of God withdrawing his concurrence. And this is not peculiar to mental substances: body in general is also pure substance and so similarly does not go out of existence except as a result of God withdrawing his concurrence. By contrast, the tradition of the Achilles Argument does not derive immortality from the soul's status as substance; rather it contends that mind or soul is simple and so incorruptible, and this distinguishes it from body. At the same time Descartes suggests that there is a notion of the human body, as a type of body that is corruptible, while there is no corresponding sense in which a mind can be said to be corruptible. I will set this last idea aside for now, but will return to it at the end of the present section.

(2) In order to establish the conclusion that the soul is immortal Descartes thinks he needs all of physics. The reasons he offers are that the argument requires that: (a) all (pure) substances are by their nature incorruptible; (b) we need to understand that body in general is pure substance and so also does not cease to exist, while the human body is a configuration of modes, and easily goes out of existence. But there is no corresponding sense of the human mind as made up of modes.

These two reasons call for an explanation. I wish to pursue the following line of thought.²⁴ The reason Descartes thought he needed all of physics was that he thought he needed to show he could do physics without substantial forms and that getting rid of substantial forms paves the way for recognizing the immortality of the soul. Here is how that is relevant.

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A kindred line of thought can be found in the *Discourse on the Method*. Descartes there argued that it is easier to see that the human soul is immortal if we recognize that animals are just machines. The reason is that on that view there are no souls in animals, and that removes one obstacle to recognizing human immortality: the obstacle that arises from the difficulty of establishing that human souls are different enough from animal souls so that we can see that human souls are, but animal souls are not immortal. So here Descartes indicates that his commitment to the very wide scope of mechanistic explanation helps support the immortality of the human soul.

Descartes makes a similar connection between immortality of the human soul and the rejection of substantial forms in a letter to Regius:

[F]rom the opinion that affirms substantial forms it is very easy to slip into the opinion of those who say that the human soul is corporeal and mortal; when it is acknowledged that [the human soul] alone is a substantial form, and that the others consists of the configuration and motion of parts, this very privileged status it has over the others shows that it differs from them in nature, and this difference in nature opens a very easy road to showing its immateriality and immortality, as can be seen in the recently published *Meditations on First Philosophy*. (AT III 503: CSMK 207–8)

So Descartes claims that a rejection of substantial forms (except for the case of the human soul) generates support for the immateriality and immortality of the human soul. Substantial forms generally must be supplanted by configurations of modes. This is what in fact Descartes proposes for the human body in the Synopsis: it is a configuration of limbs and other modes rather than a composite of matter and form—although what specifically is at stake in this passage in terms of the function of the modes is different from what is at stake in the letter to Regius, as we will see in a moment.²⁵

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So we can see that Descartes thought there was a connection between rejecting substantial forms and supporting the immortality of the human soul.

²⁴ This line of thought springs from a suggestion made to me by Jeff McDonough. Jeff suggested that Descartes thought he needed to do all of physics because he thought he needed to show that he could deal with life without substantial forms. I am broadening the point to the idea that Descartes thought he could do all of natural philosophy without substantial forms.

²⁵ I discuss Descartes's rejection of substantial forms more fully in my *Descartes's Dualism*, ch. 4. For more discussion of this letter to Regius see in particular pp. 123–33.

Furthermore, he writes in this letter that there are two main arguments against them, and they connect directly to his discussion in the Synopsis:

The arguments or physical proofs, which we think would force a truth-loving mind to abandon substantial forms, are mainly the following *a priori* or metaphysical ones. It is contradictory [*repugnet*] that a substance should come into existence without being created from nothing by God; but we see that every day many so-called substantial forms come into existence from nothing; and yet the people who think they are substances do not believe that they are created by God; therefore their view is mistaken. This is confirmed by the example of the soul, which is the true substantial form of the human being. For the soul is thought to be immediately created by God for no other reason than that it is a substance. Furthermore, since other substantial forms are not thought to be created in this way, but as only educed from the potency of matter, they should not be regarded as substances. It is clear from this also that it is not those who deny substantial forms, but those who affirm them who ‘can be driven by solid arguments to become beasts or atheists’. (AT III 505: CSMK 208)

So in this letter Descartes offers a view of substance—which is the conception of pure substance of the Synopsis—according to which a substance is created *de novo* by God. He directs this view as a ‘metaphysical or theological’ argument against substantial forms: substantial forms are thought to be substances but they are not regarded as created by God, and this is inconsistent, on the conception of substance Descartes favours.

But a rejection of substantial forms also undermines the Aristotelian conception of hylomorphic substances which do not come to be as a result of creation, but which are composites that come to be as a result of substantial forms coming to be through natural processes (they are ‘educed from matter’) and which can cease to be through natural processes. While Descartes’s explicit target in this ‘theological’ argument is the existence of such forms, it also undermines the hylomorphic composites they help constitute, and that is what is relevant to his discussion of immortality in the Synopsis, as we shall see in a moment.

Now why would this involve doing all of physics? In the same letter to Regius Descartes offers a second argument against substantial forms that answers this question:

The second proof is taken from the end or use of substantial forms; for they were introduced by the philosophers for no other reason than that through them they could account for the proper actions of natural things, of which this form is the principle and root, as we said in a previous thesis. But it is not possible to give an account of any natural action through these forms, because those who affirm them believe that they are obscure and that they do not understand them. (AT III 506: CSMK 208)

Descartes is referring to a central argument for substantial forms found among the scholastics. This argument contends that there must be substantial forms in natural substances because they are needed to explain the characteristic behaviour of particular types of substances. For instance, Suárez wrote:

The second principal argument for the existence of substantial form is gathered from various indications arising from accidents and operations of natural beings, which indicate that a substantial form underlies them. . . . For if water, for example, is heated, and later the external cause of the heat is removed, the water returns to its original coldness because of an intrinsic force, as experience attests. (Suárez, *Disputationes Metaphysicae* XV.i.8)

Descartes proposes that substantial forms cannot do this job, that his mechanistic modes can do it, so these forms are superfluous. But consequently his view of (pure) substance can be supported by showing that he could do physics just in terms of extension and its modes, without substantial forms. Doing so would support his abandonment of substantial forms and consequently of hylomorphic composite substances in favour of his simplified ontology of pure substances and modes.

There is no explicit mention of substantial forms in the Synopsis, but Descartes's explanation of how he would support the immortality of the soul bears the marks of their elimination. Recall that he offers two reasons why doing all of physics is required. One of these reasons lies in his conception of pure substance, the other is the distinction between body in general, which is pure substance, and the human body, and his claim that this distinction does not apply to the soul or mind. The ontology he proposes here contains souls on one hand, and on the other hand (1) extended stuff as material substance, (2) configurations of modes that generate individual bodies like the human body.²⁶ Extended stuff does not go out of existence during natural processes of change any more than the human soul does: it merely undergoes changes in modes. And when certain changes in configurations of modes occur in the human body, changes that are deadly, the human body ceases to be.

From an Aristotelian scholastic point of view both notions of body that Descartes proposes here are completely alien. First, the scholastics did not have a notion of body as pure substance in Descartes's sense. The only pure substances they recognized in this sense were spiritual substances—God, angels,

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²⁶ Descartes's claim that modes generate the human body should be handled gingerly. The Latin is *conflatum*: the best translation here is something like: 'brought about by combining'. The precise role of the modes deserves attention on account of the objection that modes are posterior to substances, and so cannot individuate them. It is only once a substance is constituted that it can have modes. Scotus and Spinoza are among those who would raise this objection. I am grateful to John Carriero for noting the relevance of this point.

and human souls—although the status of the human soul as spiritual substance as well as substantial form is complicated. For the scholastics, bodies, including human bodies, are composites of matter and form, and the separation of these two is what constitutes corruption and the natural ceasing-to-be of bodies. For the scholastics there also was no notion of the human body as a configuration of accidents: accidents inhere in a body, for instance the human body, that is a metaphysically prior composite of form and matter. In sum, Descartes expresses here in the Synopsis a view of body that is radically different from the Aristotelian scholastic view, and the crucial difference is his abandonment of substantial forms.²⁷

So I wish to propose that in the Synopsis Descartes says that doing all of physics supports the immortality of the soul because it results in an elimination of substantial forms, and this elimination makes it easier to recognize the immortality of the soul. The letter to Regius makes explicit that Descartes sees a connection between the elimination of substantial forms and the immortality of the soul, but the line of argument in the Synopsis is different from the letter to Regius in the following respect. In the letter Descartes had argued against substantial forms on two grounds: on the basis of a conception of substance as something that is created *de novo*, and on the ground that they are superfluous. Behind his cryptic remarks in the Synopsis, I suggest, is the following idea: Descartes is thinking that this conception of substance emerges from the elimination of substantial forms by doing physics, an enterprise that renders them superfluous. And the elimination of substantial forms supports the immortality of the human soul because this elimination removes the presence of entities that are confusing with regard to the question of ceasing-to-be: substantial forms were thought of as substances and yet able to cease to be through natural processes. That idea was present in the letter to Regius. Furthermore, as I noted before, while the letter to Regius is focused on rejecting substantial forms, the Synopsis really focuses on a different issue: the resulting rejection of hylomorphic substances. Consequently, Descartes rejects the possibility that a substance can go out of existence as a result of a separation

²⁷ AT VII 356: CSM II 246; AT III 503, 505: CSM III 207–8; and AT IV 346: CSM III 279. Obviously, this discussion touches on controversial issues about the status of individual material substances in Descartes. I can't enter into that discussion here. Unlike some interpreters, I do not think that there is only one material substance for Descartes, this strikes me as a misreading of the phrase 'matter in general'. His point about its incorruptibility, in my view, is that 'matter in general', that is, matter as such, can't decompose in the way a hylomorphic substance can. Like Locke later, Descartes distinguishes between a human body and the chunk of matter with which it coincides (although Locke and Descartes's notion of the human body different in important ways). For Descartes, the human body can cease to be since its identity depends on its modes.

of matter and form, which was the Aristotelian conception of the corruption, the natural ceasing-to-be, of substances.

Getting rid of substantial forms, for Descartes, means that we are left with just pure substances, which cannot cease to be by natural processes; all that is left is changes in configuration of modes. Even bodies cannot be corrupted in the Aristotelian sense any more, since they are no longer composites of matter and form. And in this sense ‘matter in general’ is pure substance and incorruptible.²⁸

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So it should now be clear how Descartes’s argument for immortality derives support from doing physics, and also why he focuses on the notion of pure substance. At this point, I wish to return to the connection with questions about indivisibility. First, as I noted, it is very striking that while Descartes does argue that the human soul is indivisible as opposed to the body, he does not rely on this sense of indivisibility in his sketch of an argument for its immortality, and instead employs his conception of pure substance. But there is a sense in which he does invoke a type of indivisibility, an Aristotelian type: pure substances are not composites of matter and form, they are created by God *de novo*. And this type of non-composition was important in Scholastic arguments for immortality. For instance, while in his argument for the incorruptibility of the human soul Aquinas did not focus on this idea, it did play a role in its argumentation. He argued that the human soul is incorruptible because it is a subsisting form and part of his reasoning is that it is not a composite of matter and form:

Corruption is entirely impossible not only for the [human soul] but for anything subsisting that is only a form. For it is manifest that whatever belongs to something intrinsically [*secundum se*] is inseparable from it. Being, however, belongs *per se* to form, which is act. Hence matter acquires actual being insofar as it acquires form. And this is how corruption happens to it, by form being separated from it. It is impossible, however, that form is separated from itself. Hence it is impossible that a subsisting form ceases to be. (*Summa Theologiae* I, qu. 75, art. 6)

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This is a difficult and very compressed argument, and I will not attempt a full explanation.²⁹ But the following ideas are central: first, the argument relies on the idea that being belongs to form (rather than matter). Second, the human soul is a subsisting form, that is, a form that has existence in and of itself and

²⁸ I do not think this means for Descartes that there is only one material substance. Rather his point is that matter in general cannot be corrupted in this sense. Any part of matter is incorruptible and pure substance in this sense, even though its configuration of modes may change, parts of matter are really distinct (see *Principles* I.60), and may be separated from each other in space.

²⁹ For discussion, see Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Mind*, esp. p. 142.

its existence does not depend on being a constituent of a composite substance or in virtue of being joined to something else. Third, the argument relies on the idea that the soul is not a composite of form and matter, but is just a form, and in that sense simple. Aquinas thinks he can use these ideas to argue that being is inseparable from the human soul. Suárez finds this argument obscure. He proposes that rather than focusing on the inseparability of being from a subsisting form it is better to focus on the simplicity of a subsisting form (*De anima*, I.x.23). So in this sense simplicity or indivisibility is important in this Aristotelian argument for the incorruptibility of the human soul, and that sense of indivisibility, we have seen, plays a role in Descartes's argument in the Synopsis.

Finally, let me return to the sense in which the soul is indivisible but the body is not that is at stake in the Divisibility Argument of the Sixth Meditation. This sense of indivisibility does play a role in Descartes's reasoning about immortality, albeit in perhaps a subsidiary way. Recall that he concludes his sketch of an argument for immortality as follows:

But the human body in so far as it differs from other bodies, is simply made up of a certain configuration of limbs and other accidents of this sort, whereas the human mind is not made up of any accidents in this way, but is a pure substance . . . From this it follows that the body perishes easily, but the mind is immortal by its very nature.

So while body and mind both as pure substances are incorruptible, there is a sense of body, the human body, that is corruptible, because it ceases to be when certain changes in modes occur. But there is no sense in which a human mind is individuated in virtue of a configuration of modes, so no corresponding ceasing-to-be of minds exists. But surely that difference results from the fact that body is divisible, but mind is not: as the argument in the Sixth Meditation explains, we can distinguish really distinct parts of bodies in virtue of their modes, but we cannot distinguish really distinct parts for minds.

4. Conclusion

There are several reasons why Descartes stands out with respect to a long tradition of thinking about the human soul as simple. While he addresses its simplicity, or as he preferred to say, its indivisibility on a variety of occasions, his focus is not on its intrinsic nature, or on the distinction with body, rather he raises the issue when concerned with the positive side of the relationship with body, its union and interaction with the human body. His main argument for dualism does not focus on its simplicity. He does offer an argument for



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dualism on the ground that the mind is indivisible, the body is divisible. But he introduces this argument ostensibly in order to address concerns about interaction. Furthermore, in the tradition of the Achilles Argument, the immortality of the human soul was derived directly from its simplicity. Descartes's sketch of an argument for immortality takes a different route. His remarks in the Synopsis are cryptic, in particular, his comment that the argument requires doing all of physics. I have argued that behind this remark lies his rejection of substantial forms and I have offered an explanation for why this rejection supports immortality in the way suggested by the remarks in the Synopsis. Descartes's suggestion for an argument for dualism, then, does not focus in the first instance in the indivisibility of the soul that distinguishes it from body. It begins with the rejection of hylomorphism, and a focus on a conception of pure substance as incorruptible. Both mind and 'matter in general' are such substances. But in the end, the argument does use a difference between mind and body with respect to indivisibility, a difference that is at the heart of the divisibility argument.



