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Are the Real Distinction and the Substantial Union of Mind and Body in Descartes in Contradiction? ¹

Descartes is often thought to contradict himself in maintaining both *the real distinction* and *the substantial union*² of mind and body.³ I will show these ideas may not be as contradictory as they are imagined to be.

Scholars have attempted to rescue Descartes from this alleged inconsistency. They have often resorted to a distinction between metaphysical theory and ordinary, practical life. The real distinction of mind and body, they say, is a metaphysical thesis while the mind-body union is an ordinary life experience. A contradiction consists in asserting P and $\neg P$ at the same time. But two assertions pertaining to different levels of discourse do not occur together. Therefore there is no conflict.⁴

My thesis is more persuasive: Descartes is immune to the alleged contradiction, even if the theses of real distinction and substantial union are held simultaneously. They do not imply contradiction. Descartes himself never admitted a contradiction in asserting them together. Although he admits to some conceptual difficulties in conceiving how the mind, a non-extensive substance, and the body, an extensive substance, could be unified, he shows no qualms in asserting their distinction *and* union at the same time. If there is a logical contradiction here, Descartes cannot be aided. If there is none, then neither those charging inconsistency nor Descartes' advocates are supported. Descartes can be rescued from a serious flaw if it can be demonstrated that there is no logical inconsistency. After showing this, I will further isolate the remaining difficulties and give an account of how these can be evaded as well. Finally, I will show the metaphysical import of Descartes's insight into human nature, relating it to a difference in mode.

¹ Based on Osamu Ueno, 'Descartes wa mujun shite iru ka : Shin-shin no jittaiteki kubetsu to goitsu', *Machikaneyama Ronso*, No.46, 2012, pp.1-18, and rewritten in English for the present version.

² The expression *union substantialis* appears in the *Replies to Fourth Set of Objections*, in the appendix to the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, A.T., VII, p.228.

³ At least in Japan, given that there are frequent references to 'contradiction' in introductions to popular editions of the works of Descartes in Japanese. Examples can be found in the introductions of Matao Noda in the *Sekai no meicho Descartes*, Chuokoronsha, Tokyo, 1967, p.57, and that of Keiichiro Kamino in the *Descartes: Seisatsu; Jonenron*, Chuokoron-shinsha, Tokyo, 2002, pp.6-7.

⁴ See for example Michio Kobayashi, *Descartes nyumon [Introduction to Descartes]*, Chikumashobo, Tokyo, 2006, p.186; Matao Noda, *Descartes to sono jidai [Descartes and his Time]*, Chikumashobo, Tokyo, 1971, pp.190-193.

1. A Contradiction?

The supposed contradiction between the real distinction and substantial union of body and mind may be based on a misunderstanding of what is meant by the real distinction (*distinctio realis*) that Descartes claims to exist here. This real distinction is often confused with the distinction made between the existences in separation of the two types of substances, namely *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. If this is what he means, Descartes will certainly face a verdict of contradiction in maintaining both real distinction and union, for this would imply that *A* and *B* exist separately from each other while also asserting that they are one. Some lines in the *Meditations* may yield such an impression.

It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and *can* exist without it.⁵

I am a thinking thing distinct from my body, and yet I am closely conjoined with it. This surely appears to be a contradiction. The last paragraph of the ‘Synopsis’, which precedes the six meditations proper, may aggravate such misgivings. It tells us, ‘The mind is proved to be really distinct from the body, but is shown, notwithstanding, to be so closely joined to it that the mind and the body make up a kind of unit’.⁶ Here union and real distinction are apparently affirmed to co-exist. How could Descartes be easy with such a seeming contradiction?

Let us note that whenever the real distinction between body and mind is spoken of, Descartes always adds a modal qualification of possibility. Observe the quotation above. He states that the mind is entirely distinct from the body and *can* exist without it (*absque illo posse existere*). This ‘*posse*’ is not chosen by chance. The modal expression ‘*posse*’ also appears in the preceding lines of the same paragraph. I quote:

I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since *they can be separated, at least by God (potest saltem a Deo seorsim poni)*.⁷

⁵ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Sixth Meditation, A.T. VII, p.78. The emphasis is mine.

⁶ Synopsis of the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. A.T. VII, p.15.

⁷ *Ibid.* The emphasis is mine.

The modal qualification '*posse*' can by no means be dispensed with here. If I apprehend *A* clearly and distinctly apart from *B*, it is *possible* that God can cause *A* to exist without *B* and *B* without *A*. Thus, it is clear that, according to Descartes, the possibility of separation is the condition of real distinction. *A* can be really distinct from *B* if and only if we apprehend clearly and distinctly that *A can* exist without *B* and, consequently, that *A and B can be made* to exist in separation, at least through the omnipotence of God.

Note that once we have taken the modal qualification seriously, the alleged contradiction disappears, at least in a logical sense. The proposition that simply contradicts '*A can* exist without *B*', which is the condition for real distinction, is '*A cannot* exist without *B*'. However, the thesis of union, stating that '*A and B are* closely conjoined' does not logically imply '*A cannot* exist without *B*'. No matter how closely they are conjoined, one cannot logically conclude that it is *impossible* for them to exist apart. It is *possible*, at least through Divine omnipotence. By the same token, the proposition that simply contradicts the thesis of union is '*A and B are not* closely conjoined'. The real distinction does not imply this, for, from '*A and B can* exist in separation' one cannot legitimately conclude '*A and B cannot* be closely conjoined', and even less can one conclude that '*A and B are not* conjoined closely'. Thus there is no contradiction between '*A and B can* exist in separation', which is the condition of real distinction, and '*A and B are* closely conjoined', which is the thesis of union. *Real distinction* and *union* are not in logical conflict.

2. Real Distinction and Modal Qualification

I hypothesize that the modal qualification shown above is crucial for understanding Descartes' thesis of *real distinction* and his nonchalance in the face of the apparent contradiction between real distinction and substantial union. The modal qualification can also be discerned in his work *Principles of Philosophy*, which is written in a more systematic style. Let us have a look at the definition of real distinction given there:

Strictly speaking, a real distinction exists only between two or more substances; and we can perceive that two substances are really distinct simply from the fact that we can clearly and distinctly understand one apart from the other. For when we come to know God, we are certain that he can bring about anything of which we have a distinct understanding... And even if we suppose that God has joined some corporeal substance to such a thinking substance so closely that they cannot be more closely conjoined, thus compounding them into a unity, they nonetheless remain really distinct. For no matter how closely God may have united them, the power which he previously had of separating them, or keeping one in being without the other, is something he could not lay aside; and things which God has the power to separate, or

to keep in being separately, are really distinct.⁸

The epistemological condition for real distinction is the same as that seen in the *Meditations*. We can perceive that two substances *A* and *B* are really distinct simply from the fact that we can clearly and distinctly understand *A* apart from *B*. However, here a question arises. Is the mere fact of our perception, however clear and distinct it may be, sufficient to assure us of a real distinction? Could it not be that there is only one substance *C* in reality, which we abstract into two different aspects *A* and *B*, which can be understood apart from each other? Why could this not be the case?⁹ The modal qualification for which we resort to the omnipotence of God is requisite for eliminating this suspicion. If *A* and *B* can exist numerically in separation, or, at least, if God can bring this about, it is impossible that they are one and the same thing *C*; in other words, they must be two distinct substances in reality. This is ontologically true. This truth holds even when *A* and *B*, the mind and the body, are closely conjoined, for ‘no matter how closely God may have united them, the power which he previously had of separating them, or keeping one in being without the other, is something he could not lay aside’. The modal qualification is indispensable because the possibility of separation is the ontological condition *sine qua non* for the real distinction. Thus, he concludes, ‘things which God has the power to separate, or to keep in being separately, are really distinct’. Descartes declines, however, to inform us exactly what this power of separation is. ‘The question of what kind of power is required to bring about such a separation does not affect the judgement that the two things are distinct’.¹⁰ He is content to simply think that if God could not effect all that of which we have a distinct idea, he must be deceiving us, which is absurd. For this reason, the proof of the real distinction of the mind and the body must be preceded by proofs on God and truth.¹¹

3. Evading the Remaining Difficulties

Thus, logically speaking, there is no contradiction in asserting the real distinction of mind and body *as well as* their union. However, it is true that some conceptual difficulties remain. Namely, how can the mind, a non-extended thing, and the body, an extended thing, be a

⁸ *Principles of Philosophy*, I, 69.

⁹ A question raised by Arnaud. See *the Fourth Set of Objections* in the appendix to the *Meditations*, A.T. VII, pp.201-203.

¹⁰ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Sixth Meditation, A.T., VII, p.78.

¹¹ Cf. the Replies to Fourth Set: ‘...[T]his is why everything I wrote on the subject of God and truth in the Third, Fourth and Fifth Meditations contributes to the conclusion that there is a real distinction between the mind and the body, which I finally established in the Sixth Meditation’. A.T., VII, p.226.

substantial unity, and how do they act on each other? It would appear there is little hope of creating a clear picture here. Descartes himself was not reluctant to admit such difficulties to Princess Elisabeth. Here I paraphrase his response.¹² Everyone knows that he has a body and has a power to act on it by means of a *primitive notion* of the mind-body union. As this notion is based solely on sensual evidence, it is useless, or even detrimental, to resort to intellectual understanding or imagination to create a clear picture of it. It is simply a mistake to demand such an explanatory picture of what we already know.

This may sound like sophistry, but I believe it to be the best, most direct answer. Recall that the question concerning the power that can bring about the separation of the mind and the body does not affect the judgement of their real distinction. It is probable that the question concerning the power that is required to conjoin the mind and the body cannot affect our primitive belief in their union. Our belief in having a body is thus true, even if we do not grasp how it is possible. Otherwise God would be deceiving us. After all, concealment of God's power is not deception, for it is not our business to grasp it in totality. 'By "God" I mean the very being the idea of whom is within me, that is, the possessor of all the perfections which I cannot grasp, but can somehow reach in my thought, who is subject to no defects whatsoever'.¹³ If this is Descartes' true thought, it is not surprising that he easily admitted conceptual difficulties in the depiction of the union of mind and body. Difficulties are evaded, rather than eliminated. The primitive belief in the mind-body union remains true, and with its testimony of passion and action, it enables the philosopher to reinterpret the union in terms of an interaction between two distinct substances.

4. Being Descartes in the World

However, there remains another difficulty: this one is highly metaphysical. A human person is composed of a mind and a body. Being a human in this world is not a simple concept in a philosophy that must undergo universal doubt. Descartes must make sense of being himself, sitting before the fireplace, in terms of the unity of two substances that have a real distinction. Our last section addresses the difficulty of intrapersonal unity.

In the reply to the Princess Elisabeth, the philosopher approaches this difficulty. It would seem, he says, that the human mind cannot conceive of the mind as really distinct from the body as well as existing in union with it, conceiving both ideas very clearly, and both at the same time. 'That is because this requires to conceive them as one single thing, and at

¹² Letter to Elisabeth, 21 May 1643, A.T., III, pp.665-666.

¹³ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Third Meditation, A.T., VII, p.52.

the same time, as two things, which is contradictory'.¹⁴ Descartes is clear about this. It is contradictory to conceive a man, composed of two distinct substances, as one identical thing. So the matter must be otherwise: but how can this be conceived otherwise?

Descartes' correspondence with Henricus Regius, a Cartesian in Utrecht, may give us a clue to help us solve this problem. One of Regius' students at Utrecht University claimed one day in a disputation that the mind and the body are two distinct substances, joined together in an accidental union (*unum per accidens*). Thus began the so-called Utrecht Dispute, where Regius and, consequently, Descartes himself, were attacked by Voetius, a leading theologian at Utrecht University. Voetius accused Regius of teaching a new philosophy that would undermine religious creeds by denying the scholastic substantial forms that had long been held to explain the substantial unity of human beings. Descartes' advice to Regius, who was preparing his defence for a debate, was to refrain from using the expression 'a being by chance' (*ens per accidens*) to mean that a human being is made up of two things that are distinct in reality, because such a usage was unfamiliar to the scholastics. Instead, he advises, 'you should give out that you believe that a human being is a true being by itself (*ens per se*), and not an *ens per accidens*, and that the mind is united in a real and substantial manner to the body'.¹⁵ Taking this advice, Regius came to assert the contrary to what he had previously stated, namely that the union of the mind and the body is so substantial that the one cannot exist without the other. Learning this, Descartes was 'completely astounded and saddened'.

Why is it necessary for you to mix metaphysical and theological matters in your writings, given that you cannot touch upon such things without falling into some error or other? At first, in considering the mind as a distinct substance from the body, you write that a man is an *ens per accidens*; but then, when you observe that the mind and the body are closely united in the same man, you take the former to be only a *mode of the body*. The latter error is far worse than the former.¹⁶

Regius seems to have been faced with a dilemma. If he stated for the sake of real distinction that a human being is an *ens per accidens*, he will use an inappropriate expression to denote the unity of a human being. If he says, in order to emphasize the substantial union, that a human being is an *ens per se*, this is an error 'worse than the former', reducing the mind to a sort of mode of the body. The right answer must be somewhere between these.

That a human is an *ens per accidens* seems to be an inevitable consequence of the real distinction that implies the separability of the mind and the body. Nevertheless Descartes declines to say so outright. Instead, he states that a human being is an *ens per se*, and that

¹⁴ Letter to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643, A.T., III, p.693.

¹⁵ Letter to Regius, January 1642, A.T., III, pp.492-493.

¹⁶ Letter to Regius, July 1645, A.T., IV, p.250.

the mind is united 'in a real and substantial manner to the body'. In a word, this is 'a true man'. Many scholars find it impossible to reconcile these two claims,¹⁷ and if they are in fact inconsistent, the philosopher himself is inconsistent. I believe, however, the contrary is true. Descartes has a coherent position, albeit a paradoxical one.

On the one hand, he admits that his own being himself is a contingent matter. Since the mind *can* exist without the body, there is no necessity that his mind should be in the union with such and such body in order to create the human being Descartes. On the other hand, he will admit that *in this actual world* his mind has no other possibility than to be conjoined with this body to form Descartes, for such is the unchangeable reality God has created. These two thoughts could be meant to exist at the same time. Let us suppose a mind *M* conjoined in union with a body *B*. Being conjoined with *B* is contingent for *M*, because there is at least a possible world where *M* exists without *B*. As we saw above, this is what the real distinction means. Now, let us call *u* the property that *M* has of being conjoined with *B* in world *W*. Note that *u* is a property indexed to world *W*. Then, having the property *u* in *W* pertains to the essence of *M*. For, because it holds in every possible world that *W* includes *M* having the property *u*, it is impossible that *M* existing in *W* does not have property *u*. Now let us suppose that *W* is our actual world. Then for *M*, as far as it exists in this world, no other possibility is given than to be conjoined with *B*.¹⁸ Descartes could have asserted without detriment to the real distinction that his mind being conjoined with his body to form Descartes *in this world* is not at all contingent. It is not contradictory to qualify the mind-body union as *substantial*, for it pertains to the essence of an actually existing mind to be conjoined with a specific body, to compose a specific man in this world.

It is true that Descartes is not explicit about what he thinks concerning this dilemma. But our interpretation explains his obstinate resistance to Regius' remaining within an either-or choice. The unity of a man composed of a mind and a body permits a twofold interpretation. It is contingent in nature, yet something more than what Regius terms an *ens per accidens*, and it is nonetheless something less than an *ens per se*, understood as a single substance. A 'true man' can thus consist in a union containing this *difference* within itself, and this would explain why Descartes resists every attempt to reduce this combination to a third substance *per se* while qualifying the union as substantial.

¹⁷ F. Alquié, denying the interpretation of J. Laprote who takes the mind-body union to be a substance, agrees with E. Gilson who finds it impossible to affirm the substantiality of a man and the substantiality of the mind and the body at the same time. See Ferdinand Alquié, *La découverte métaphysique de l'homme chez Descartes*, deuxième édition, PUF, 1966, p.308.

¹⁸ This simply is another way of saying that every world is the world it is. The idea of a world-indexed property comes from Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1974, pp.62-64.

Conclusion

We now have a good reason why Descartes, admitting some conceptual difficulties, did not admit there was a contradiction in asserting *real distinction* and *substantial union* at the same time. As I have shown elsewhere,¹⁹ the Cartesian Cogito was the discovery of a fundamental fixed point of actuality. His universal doubt reveals that however uncertain our belief in the world may be, one constant remains: ‘*Ego sum, ego existo,*’ which remains necessarily true.²⁰ It is this constant that anchors the world to actuality, and not the other way around. In other words, a *res cogitans* pronouncing ‘I am, I exist’ is essentially destined to have the property of being conjoined with a specific body in an actual world. So a man composed of two really distinct substances is more than a mere *ens per accidens*, and yet less than a mere *ens per se*. It is not a plain object that can be considered as numerically identical to itself. If this is what Descartes intended, he will be acquitted of the false charge of self-contradiction, which consists in conceiving two things as one single thing. Considering the metaphysical insight into human nature we have drawn from his writings, we may say that Cartesian dualism still deserves serious reflection.

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¹⁹ Osamu Ueno, ‘The Certainty of the Cogito: A Modal Perspective,’ *Philosophia OSAKA*, no. 1, 2006, pp.1-11. (http://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/11094/6324/1/po_01_001.pdf)

²⁰ Cf. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Third Meditation, A.T., VII, p.25.