

## Self and Self-Consciousness: Aristotelian Ontology and Cartesian Duality

Andrea Christofidou, *Worcester College*

I have said that the soul is not more than the body, And I have said  
that the body is not more than the soul, And nothing, no God, is  
greater to one than one's self is (Walt Whitman "Song of Myself").

For the most part, discussions in the *Philosophy of Mind* of Aristotle's ontology in his *Peri Psyches*<sup>1</sup> centre on his notion of *psyche* and tend to leave to one side his notion of *noûs* (Book III v). Even when the latter is not ignored it is often considered, especially by philosophers of physicalist persuasions, to be an "embarrassment," even prompting the wish that "he had never written this chapter."<sup>2</sup> What I find problematic is not the discussions of *psyche*, but the anti-Cartesian conclusions drawn on the basis of such discussions in the absence of an account of Aristotle's conception of *noûs*. It is this conception that I shall explore.

In what follows, I shall not translate the Greek terms "*psyche*" and "*nous*." The reason is not simply that there is no felicitous translation in English; it concerns the question of one's ontological commitments, a question that is just as relevant to a metaphysical outlook that recognises only physical reality as it is to one that recognises essentially distinct kinds of reality. "*Psyche*," especially as used by Aristotle, cannot be taken to mean what we, and Descartes,<sup>3</sup> mean by "soul" or "mind"; it has a much narrower scope than the latter and a much wider scope than the former. Such translations tend to lead philosophers into arguing that Aristotle's conception is anti-Cartesian or shows that dualism fails to explain the relation between soul and body. Even leaving aside questions of dualism, Aristotle's assignment of *psyche* to plants indicates the breadth of his concept; he not only maintains

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1. All references to Aristotle's *Peri Psyches* will be given in the text.

2. Wilkes (1992), 111 and 125, respectively).

3. Descartes is fully aware that Aristotle uses the term "*psyche*" to apply to plants. In the *Second Set of Replies* he says: "the word 'soul' [*anima*] is ambiguous and is often applied to something corporeal" (AT VII 161 *Definition VI*). All references to Descartes' work will be given in the text.

Plato's wide extension of the concept but expands its intension to cover the faculty of nutrition. It also reminds us that he suggests at the beginning of his enquiry that *psyche* is in a sense the principle of life (*arche ton zoon*); it applies to everything that distinguishes living from non-living (*apsycha*) things. It is in fact not clear that "*psyche*" had one clear-cut meaning even when Plato and Aristotle were writing, and Aristotle spends much time discussing the various conceptions available concerning the essential nature of *psyche*. The term "*noûs*" has a much narrower sense than our term "mind," although it might not be too misleading to translate it as "rational thinking mind," "reason or intellect," but I shall not.

### I. Preliminary Considerations

In exploring Aristotle's notion of *noûs*, it is not my intention to attempt a scholarly exegesis or discussion. I shall defend the thesis that the grounds of *what it is to be*, not simply a conscious creature, but a self-conscious subject are shared by Aristotle and Descartes, and that the relationship between self-consciousness, Aristotelian ontology, and Cartesian duality is far closer than it has been thought to be by a number of philosophers in recent years.<sup>4</sup> I take Aristotle's concern with "*to ti en einai*" (the what it is to be) to be metaphysically prior to any other questions that arise, not only in the metaphysics of the self, but also in the philosophy of the mind.

S. Marc Cohen is not alone in arguing that "anyone who finds contemporary relevance in Aristotle's theory (in *Peri Psyches*) will have to come to terms with Burnyeat's argument"<sup>5</sup> that "all we can do with the Aristotelian philosophy of mind [. . . is to] junk it."<sup>6</sup> The reason given for this is that "although Aristotle has a non-Cartesian conception of the soul," we no longer share his conception of matter: "*we* are stuck with a more or less Cartesian conception of the physical" and therefore "*we* are stuck with the mind-body problem as Descartes

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4. There is, of course, a significant difference between Aristotle and Descartes; Descartes removed Aristotelian forms and by abandoning *hylomorphism*, he effected an important ontological shift and a metaphysical turn. His rejection does not affect my thesis since Aristotle excludes *noûs* from *hylomorphism*.

5. Marc Cohen (1992, 57).

6. Burnyeat (1992, 26).

created it, inevitably and rightly so.”<sup>7</sup> Burnyeat’s argument is one with which philosophers, especially of physicalist and functionalist complexions, are wrestling; it centres on Aristotle’s theory of *psyche* and theory of perception (understood in an expanded sense), which are, it is argued, bound up with Aristotle’s conception of the biological side of living beings. Given that Burnyeat’s challenge is not directed at Aristotle’s conception of *noûs*, it seems to me that it does not affect my enquiry. We might want to dispense with (some of) Aristotle’s conceptions and explanations, but at least some of “the things whose real nature” (I i 402a15) he wanted to explain and understand we still want to explain and understand since they are perennial and ahistorical: they include the rational thinking *noûs* and, correlatively, the self-conscious rational subject. Aristotle’s enquiry, understood in a wider sense, “may actually result in a distinctive and illuminating perspective on issues in the philosophy of mind.”<sup>8</sup> Before taking this up, I shall consider some controversies that arise from recent discussions.

## II. Physicalism and the Body Problem

It is becoming evident to a number of philosophers that, despite its immense dominance and influence for over half a century, physicalism<sup>9</sup> in any of its varieties is unable to account for the nature and reality of the mind or consciousness, and thus is ultimately untenable. Since I have discussed this problem elsewhere<sup>10</sup> I shall turn to the question concerning the nature of body.

*Prima facie*, physicalism should be on firmer ground regarding the nature of body. A standard argument here is that every empirical particular is either physical or composed of microphysical parts, governed by microphysical laws which in turn govern the behaviour of the wholes. The compositionality thesis establishes a hierarchy of different levels of thing, and a hierarchy of special sciences with their special laws. For the physicalist, such a thesis must cover every

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7. Burnyeat (1992, 26).

8. Irwin (1991, 56).

9. I use the term “physicalism” to cover a variety of views, all of which are monistic at the level of particulars, including functionalism, non-reductive physicalism, and varieties of non-physicalism even if they hold non-physical properties (a notion that is in fact unclear) to be irreducible.

10. See Christofidou (2007, 515–542).

inanimate particular, every human body and every human being (even if it has irreducible non-physical properties). The body is a configuration of a portion of matter with a genuine material unity characteristic of particulars of its kind.

Despite this *prima facie* attractiveness, there has been increasing unease and dissatisfaction with physicalism's account of the body. There are, broadly, two approaches on offer. Philosophers familiar with the phenomenological tradition are challenging the physicalist account of the body by drawing upon this tradition's distinction between body as a material thing (*Körper*) and the body as a living entity (*Leib*), and arguing that it is the latter that is appropriate to our understanding of the human body.<sup>11</sup> From these considerations, an argument is drawn to the effect that such a distinction will close the gap between mind and body; that it will undermine, indeed, dissolve, the traditional Cartesian mind-body problem because the distinction between the living body and body challenges the metaphysically distinct categories of mind and body.

The second approach draws upon Aristotle's *hylomorphism* – the thesis that every individual thing is a combination of matter (*hyle*) and form (*eidos* or *morphe*) – and often divides between those who think that an appeal to such a thesis will offer support to their physicalist positions<sup>12</sup> (trying on the way to deflate Burnyeat's challenge), and those who think that a return to an "Aristotelian ontology, based on a distinction between form and matter, presents a genuine, live alternative to modern physicalism."<sup>13</sup> But despite their opposing standpoints and motivations, these philosophers share the same commitment, which they also share with most of the philosophers who draw on the phenomenologist approach: an account of the living body, or of *hylomorphism* will undermine Cartesian dualism: "all the fire [is] aimed at the mind side of that dualism."<sup>14</sup>

It is worth pointing out that Descartes, too, distinguishes between body, in terms of the mathematics of extension and the principles of geometry and mechanics,<sup>15</sup> and the human body; he makes this clear,

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11. See Merleau-Ponty (1979, 139) and Danto (1999).

12. See, for example, Nussbaum and Putnam (1992, 27–56). See also Marc Cohen (1992, 61).

13. McGinn (2000, 315).

14. Burnyeat (1992, 16).

15. Descartes does not think that physics can be reduced to an intellectual construction of the material world by means of a priori reasoning from clear and evident

among other places, in the *Synopsis*. The *Real Distinction* is between the mind insofar as it is simply a thinking, non-extended thing, and “body [*corpus*] insofar as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing” (*Sixth Meditation* AT VII 78).<sup>16</sup> In two letters to Regius he argues: “the body has all the dispositions required to receive a soul, which it must have to be strictly a human body” (December 1641, AT III 461; CSMK: 200); “there is indeed a natural requirement, on the bodily side, of an appropriate positioning and arrangement of the various parts; but nevertheless the union is different from mere position and shape and the other purely corporeal modes, since it relates not just to the body but also to the soul, which is incorporeal” (January 1642, AT III (508); CSMK: 209).<sup>17</sup>

### III. Anti-Cartesianism

My primary concern is not with the nature of the body, but with the inferences drawn from considerations of its nature and from *hylomorphic* accounts, such as: “the priority that the Aristotelian gives to individual objects (compounds of form and matter) avoids the Cartesian mind-body problem.”<sup>18</sup> There is no need for close analysis to reveal that there is no valid inference from general considerations of objects (compounds of form and matter) to the mind-body problem, nor from the capacities and functions that pertain to living things to claims about human beings whose “behaviour [is] an autonomous response to a situation” and who “live self-consciously”; nor is the equation between “individual natural bodies – i.e. particular human

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notions alone. In fact, he ridicules those who ignore experience (see *Regulae* AT X 380). Nor does he think, contrary to what is often suggested, that “mathematical code-cracking” is all that physics is about.

16. It is thought that in Descartes’ writings there is an ambiguity between “body,” or *corpus* strictly speaking, and “the body,” the particular human body (see translators’ footnote 2, AT VII 78). I am not suggesting that Descartes thinks that the mind is really distinct only from body (*corpus*) but not from the human body; I am simply emphasising his distinction between the latter two notions.

17. It might be objected that Descartes is drafting for Regius a strategic response to help him avoid further controversies with the university authorities. This seems incorrect given the *Synopsis* and given that in both letters he objects to Regius’ view that “a human being is *an ens per accidens*” and not “a true *ens per se*” (a substantial unity; AT III 493; CSMK: 206; and AT III 460; CSMK: 200). See also Hoffman (1986).

18. McGinn (2000, 311, footnote 5).

beings”<sup>19</sup> legitimate, or justified by anything that Aristotle says or implies. These difficulties are compounded by the glossing over of important issues of *what it is to be* a self-conscious and autonomous human being, with claims such as: the capacities “that define the form of human beings introduce a kind of self-determination and degree of integration of response that is quite distinct from that which characterises the instinctual life of animals.”<sup>20</sup> We are not told what such capacities are or how and why self-determination is achieved in human beings, nor are we told why or in what sense such an “integration of response” is quite distinct from that “which characterises the instinctual life of animals.” Rather, a swift move is made to the conclusion that the “hierarchy of forms of living things can therefore be divided into three broad orders: the biological, the psychological and the rational” – a move qualified by the acknowledgement that “no explanation of the emergence of life and mind” has been offered. What is in question here is not an explanation of emergence but a discussion of Aristotle’s notion of *noûs*, which is precisely what distinguishes rational beings from animals, and which Aristotle intends to exclude from *hylomorphism*. Since no discussion (or even mention) of *noûs* is offered, it is not possible to draw the conclusion that the Aristotelian conception of form and matter avoids the Cartesian mind-body problem.

#### IV. Aristotle’s Notion of Psyche

Although the difficulties that surround Aristotle’s definitions of *psyche* are too well known to need a detailed discussion here, I think that it would not be intelligible to begin a discussion on *noûs* without some preliminary remarks on the subject. His conception of *psyche* draws upon his general considerations of the relationship between the form and the material composition of things of various kinds – of all non-living natural kinds, and all non-natural things or artefacts, such as hammers, statues and buildings.<sup>21</sup> This brief characterisation already indicates that it is a mistake to think that the “distinction between the living and the non-living [is] a distinction made by reference to

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19. McGinn (2000, 310 and 307, respectively).

20. McGinn (2000, 310; the next two quotations are also from page 310).

21. For Aristotle’s conception of matter see, for example, Fine (1992, 35–57).

form,”<sup>22</sup> and that it “may be seen as the Aristotelian alternative to the (problematic) distinction between the mental and the physical.” Aristotle’s *hylomorphism* may hold that the relation of *psyche* to body is that of form to matter, but it is his introduction of *psyche* that distinguishes the living from the non-living. And even with the introduction of *psyche* (as the “form” of a living body, not its matter) before we rush to compare or contrast it with the mental and the physical, we ought to be sure, as Aristotle clearly insists, what the natural living kind is with which we are concerned since being alive is not equivalent to being a living creature (that is, animal). Every living kind belongs either to the category of plant or to the category of animal; the latter is further subdivided (with varying degrees of complexity and ultimately of kind): an animal is either non-rational or rational.

At the opening of Book II, Aristotle argues that every natural body “which possesses life must be substance [*ousia*], and substance of the compound type. But since it is a body of a definite kind, *viz.*, having life, the body cannot be *psyche*, for the body is not something predicated of a subject, but rather is itself to be regarded as a subject, *i.e.*, as matter. So [*psyche*] must be substance in the sense of being the form of a natural body, which potentially has life” (II i 412a15–20).<sup>23</sup> He offers a general definition of *psyche* while recognising the problems involved in attempting such a definition: *psyche* is “the first actuality [*entelecheia*] of a natural body potentially possessing life [*soma physikon metechon zoes*]” (II i 412a25). By “first actuality” he is referring to the developed capacity for, or possession of life but not currently activated; in the same way that a person may have knowledge when asleep, so a body may possess *psyche* and hence be alive even though it may not be engaged in any movement.

As John Ackrill explains, Aristotle calls *psyche* “the *first* actuality precisely to make clear [. . .] that what he is trying to define is the life that a living creature has even when completely dormant, not active waking life – that would be the *second* actuality.”<sup>24</sup> The second actuality can be illustrated by the condition of a person having knowledge and exercising it; or again: “if the eye were a living creature, its [*psyche*] would be its vision; for this is the substance in the sense of formula of

22. McGinn (2000, 309, footnote 4).

23. For a diagnosis of a tension between Aristotle’s conception of body being potentially alive and his homonymy principle, see Ackrill (1972–73, 119–133).

24. Ackrill (1972–73, 126).

the eye" (II i 412b20). If vision or sight were removed, the eye would only be an eye in a homonymous sense. He continues: "neither [*psyche*] nor certain parts of it, if it has parts, can be separated from the body" (II i 413a4–5), and hence, it is unclear that the relation between *psyche* and the body bears the same relation as sailor to ship. But separability needs careful consideration<sup>25</sup> (it is primarily an ontological thesis; two substances are separable in thought and in existence, but it does not follow that they are metaphysically distinct in kind; it is the latter that entails dualism). *Psyche* and body are in a sense separable; the matter that now constitutes the right kind of body (whose identity depends on its being *empsychon*), linked with *psyche* to compose a living entity, existed before the union and will exist after the union ceases.<sup>26</sup> Should the living entity die, the body would cease to exist, except homonymously. The body cannot be the actuality of *psyche*; it is *psyche* that is the actuality of the living body. *Psyche* "is substance in the sense of formula; *i.e.*, the essence of such-and-such a body" (II i 412b10–11) but it is neither reducible to nor identical with the body (II ii 414a15–20).

*Psyche* does not have parts, although it has different faculties – "theoretically different" but not separable (II ii 413b30). Everything that is alive must have *psyche*. Plants and animals from the lowest to the highest possess it; man has no exclusive claim upon it. The difference between plants and animals, and in turn between animals and man, lies not in the possession of *psyche* but in the *kind* of faculties of *psyche* possessed, in a hierarchical order (although this is not as simple as it seems at first<sup>27</sup>), making their hierarchical structure internal to their explanation. Aristotle distinguishes at least six main faculties of *psyche*. Plants possess only the simplest kind of faculties, those of nutrition and reproduction, and exhibit both growth and decay. Lower animals have, in addition, the faculties of sensation and appetite; the sense of touch is present in all animals, including human beings; it is "the first essential

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25. Some argue that in the case of emotions, perceptions, sensations, matter and form are separable in thought, but inseparable in existence, while others defend the thesis that in such cases form is essentially enmattered and cannot be defined except by reference to matter; in this latter sense, form and matter are inseparable both in thought and in existence. I am grateful to David Charles for pointing this out to me; see also his manuscript on "Aristotle's Psychological Theory."

26. On whether there can be form without matter, see Lowe (1999, 1–22).

27. The concern here is also connected with the question of whether there are many kinds of *psyche* or one kind for all – a question that is beyond the scope of this paper.



factor of sensation” (II ii 413b5). Perception is something that “all living creatures have a share in” even if they lack belief and reason (III iii 427b8–11). Although certain animals have only some of the five forms of sense perception, Aristotle argues (and Descartes would agree) that sensation is the first characteristic that distinguishes living things such as plants from living creatures such as animals (how far down the phylogenetic tree we must go is of no consequence here).<sup>28</sup> The discussion suggests that the move from the domain of living plants to the domain of living creatures is not simply achievable by the addition of sensation in a pyramidal structure marked only by a difference in degree rather than kind; it is achievable by a transformation into sentience: in terms of our contemporary conception, sensation presupposes consciousness<sup>29</sup> and consciousness presupposes a sentient creature capable of experience (however rudimentary). As Gareth Evans argues, an explanation of what makes information processes conscious states depends on an explanation of *what it is* for an entity *to be* a subject of experience.<sup>30</sup>

Next, according to Aristotle, come the faculties of locomotion and imagination (*phantasia*), but not all animals have imagination, even though “imagination always implies perception” (III iii 427b15–20); at least some of the animals that move have imagination although they have no reasoning power. Imagination is not sensation, nor is it any one of the faculties which are always right, such as knowledge, for imagination can be false (III iii 428a15–20); nor is it opinion which

28. Descartes, like Aristotle, argues “that brutes have what is commonly called ‘life’, and a corporeal soul and organic sensation” (*Sixth Set of Replies*, AT VII 426). And in his letter to More (5, February 1649) he states that he holds “that animals lack thought [. . . and he is only] speaking of thought, and not of life, or sensation” (AT V 278; CSMK: 366).

29. In recent debates in the philosophy of mind, some philosophers deny any intrinsic nature to conscious states, arguing that what makes any state conscious is its being accompanied by a thought, a second-order thought (SOT), which is itself not conscious, to the effect that one is in that first-order state. An obvious problem is that we are not continually thinking about our conscious states, nor is the idea of accompaniment cogent. For example, beliefs can be accompanied by feelings and passions, but these are accidental and cannot make non-beliefs into beliefs. Introducing dispositional accounts of SOT will not help since no disposition can explain what makes a conscious state conscious; if anything, the direction is the other way. The motivation for the SOT thesis is that it will open the way for a physicalist explanation of consciousness. Would it open the way, or change the subject? In fact SOT must be committed to denying that very young children and non-rational animals have perceptions, suffer pain, trauma, or shock.

30. Evans (1982, 158).

implies belief since belief can be accompanied by conviction and conviction involves rational discourse. We can begin to see how reason enters the picture and becomes indispensable in the case of rational beings since in persuading either oneself (in a silent dialectical conversation within one's thinking mind) or other people, one has to give reasons.<sup>31</sup> As Descartes stresses in the *Fifth Set of Replies*: "the powers of understanding and imagining do not differ merely in degree but are two quite different kinds of mental operation" (AT VII 385). Ultimately, Aristotle tells us: "imagination must be a movement produced by sensation actively operating" (III iii 429a5).

Descartes also points out that animals have a will (which can provide a basis for their capacity of self-movement, the explanation of which Aristotle considered to be one of the tasks of his enquiry): "they have the power of not being forced or constrained" (Letter to [Mesland] 2, May 1644, AT IV 117; CSMK: 234) even if they cannot be said to be free (at least not in terms of Descartes' conception of the highest grade of freedom) since animals lack reason (*Second Set of Replies* AT VII 134). Aristotle, too, argues that animals lack *noûs* and hence cannot think (III iii 429a35–38) nor be *akratic* (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1147b4–5).

Of all animals, man alone possesses – in addition to all other faculties of *psyche* – a rational thinking mind or *noûs*. It is *noûs* which is especially distinctive of man. What comes last and is most rare, Aristotle says, is reasoning: "For those perishable creatures which have reasoning power have all the other powers as well, but not all those which have any one of them have [*noûs*] reasoning power" (II iii 415a8–10). The natural kind to which human beings belong is that of the rational thinking kind, and thus, what ultimately constitutes the essence of a human being is reason or rationality (although not all rational beings need be human). Aristotle's investigations into the similarities and differences between the various kinds of animal helped to confirm his belief that man is not simply a conscious animal but a rational self-conscious subject. Self-consciousness, as I shall argue in VII, presupposes a subject not only of experience but also of thought, and hence, human beings are distinguished by self-consciousness – by having the capacity to be aware of themselves *as* themselves, to perceive and think of themselves *as* being in one state or another, to praise or blame themselves, and so on.

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31. See Sorabji (1992, 200); see also Sorabji (1993, 37–38).

The attribution to Aristotle of a conception of self-consciousness in this general sense, covering both perception and thinking and not simply intellectual awareness, can gain support from his discussion in Book III ii in which he raises the *aporia* (the puzzle) of whether it is “by sight itself” that “we can perceive that we see and hear [. . .] or by some other sense. But then the same sense must perceive both sight and colour, the object of sight. So that either two senses perceive the same object, or sight perceives itself.” If we suppose that there is a further sense perceiving sight, “either the process will go on *ad infinitum*, or a sense must perceive itself.” And he concludes, “we may assume that this occurs with the first sense” (425b15–20). It would not be inappropriate to say that this can be seen as Aristotle’s enquiry into self-consciousness and his recognition of the difficulties involved in any account of self-awareness – reflexive awareness of one’s thoughts, perceptions, and so on. That he takes such an enquiry seriously can be seen not only in Book III iv where he turns his attention to intellectual self-reflection, but also in his other works,<sup>32</sup> including the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he discusses the life of reason and intellectual contemplation available to human beings, and raises the question of what it is that gives value to our life (IX ix 1170 a25–b10).<sup>33</sup>

#### V. Aristotle on the Immateriality of *Noûs*

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the difficulties that surround Aristotle’s conception of *noûs* are enormous and unresolved. What seems clear is that there is not a single account that can be given about *noûs*, at least not one “which will make sense of *noûs* apart from its deep connections to the entire philosophical–scientific picture Aristotle wants to draw.”<sup>34</sup> But for my purposes here perhaps it should not be too contentious to suppose that any considerations of Aristotle’s conception of *noûs* must centre on two fundamental questions that need to be taken seriously if one is to argue that an Aristotelian ontology avoids the problem of mind–body interaction, or can liberate us from the bonds of Cartesian duality. First, what is the essence or nature of *noûs*? Second, what is the relationship of *noûs* to the rest of *psyche* and the body?

32. See, for example, his *Metaphysics* XII ix, *Eudemian Ethics* VII xii, *De Sensu* I.

33. See Charles (1999, 205–223).

34. Kosman (1992, 356).

Aristotle begins his examination of the nature of *noûs* by drawing an analogy between reason and sensation, and suggests that, just as the form of the objects is impressed on our senses, so in reasoning and thinking the intelligible (*noeton*) form is impressed on *noûs*. But that sense perception and thinking are not alike “in their impassivity [*apatheia*] is obvious if we consider the sense organs and sensation” (III iv 429a30). The sense organs can be destroyed when exposed to too much stimulus from their objects; unlike them, not only is *noûs* not destroyed by too much contact with the intelligible forms, it also is led to apprehend them better. The argument in support for the disparity is that the various faculties of sense perception are “not apart from the body, whereas *noûs* is separable [. . .] moreover *noûs* is [. . .] capable of thinking itself” (III iv 429b5–10). He proceeds by distinguishing between two powers of *noûs*: passivity and activity or, as I should put it, *noûs* in its passive capacity (*dynamis*) and *noûs* in its active employment (*energeia*). In the literature, this distinction is standardly referred to as passive *noûs* (*noûs pathetikos*), and active *noûs* (*noûs poietikos*) – I shall follow the latter formulations for ease of reference.

Passive *noûs* is like a blank tablet upon which the intelligible forms are impressed: “It has been well said that [*psyche*] is the place of forms, except that this does not apply to [*psyche*] as a whole, but only in its thinking capacity, and the [intelligible] forms occupy it not actually but only potentially” (III iv 429a25–30). Passive *noûs* is said to be connected with the other faculties of *psyche* and is perishable, in accordance with Aristotle’s general belief in the mortality of *psyche*, for it is that part of *psyche* which knows the intelligible forms and receives ideas, but which cannot think without active *noûs*.

Active *noûs* can be seen as comparable to Descartes’ notion in the *Sixth Meditation* where he considers what is essential to the mind *insofar as* it is thinking *qua* thinking mind, and distinguishes between thinking on the one hand, and imagination, sensation, and sensory perception on the other (AT VII 72–3 & 78–9).<sup>35</sup> Descartes, however, holds that “whatever we find in the mind is simply one of the various modes of thinking [that is,] imagination, sensation and will are intelligible only

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35. Descartes’ use of “thinking” in the *Second Meditation* is very broad – all modes of thought are considered to be a kind of cogitation, since he is not making any judgements about what he does not know at that stage. In the *Sixth Meditation*, his use of “thinking” is much narrower, for although imagination, sensory perception and sensation are modes of thought and cannot exist without the mind, they are also dependent on the human (or animal) body.

in a thinking thing [even if] it is possible to understand [. . .] thought without imagination or sensation, and so on” (*Principles* I 53).<sup>36</sup> Here we find Descartes, in his innovative way, initiating a conception of the *unity* of *self-consciousness* integrating the senses and the intellect, a unity that would be perhaps difficult to attribute to Aristotle given his sharp dualism between *psyche* and active *noûs*, although Aristotle, as early as Book I and later in Book III, alludes to – and indeed sees it as a requirement that there be – some principle of unity (of consciousness) in terms of *psyche*.<sup>37</sup>

Charles Kahn argues that Aristotle would have recognised “self-awareness as an act of *aisthesis*, our ‘perceiving that we think’, and hence as an essentially embodied act.” Thus, “for all the incorporeality of *noûs*, Aristotle cannot be a Cartesian dualist.”<sup>38</sup> But this seeming incompatibility is not hard to dispel (without suggesting that there are no difficulties in Aristotle’s discussion). Descartes would agree that self-awareness as an act of *aisthesis* is an essentially embodied act: “I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but [. . .] I am very closely joined, and [. . .] intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unity” (*Sixth Meditation* AT VII 81); if this were not so, I should simply “have an explicit understanding of the fact” when, for example, the body is hurt and I would feel no pain, but this is not the case. Kahn’s account seems consistent with Aristotle’s passive *noûs*, as can be seen from his reference to memory and the use of *phantasms* in ordinary thinking, but it cannot be consistent with Aristotle’s active *noûs*, and hence with *noetic* self-awareness – that is, with *noûs*’s intellectual perception or contemplation of the intelligible (*ta noeta*).

Kahn further argues that “for Aristotle it is *aisthesis*, not *noûs* as such, that carries out most of the activity of the Cartesian *cogito* as defined in Meditation II” which, according to Kahn, is defined as an exercise in “*intellectio pura*.”<sup>39</sup> But pure intellection is what Descartes understands by thinking *qua* thinking in the *Sixth* not the *Second*

36. Since he does not deny that animals have sensations, perceptions, and a will, thinking thing must be here contrasted with corporeal things. (See *Third Set of Objections and Replies*, AT VII 176).

37. This suggests that it is not the case that Aristotle has no word as general as Descartes’ “consciousness,” as is often argued, but perhaps not as general as a *unity* of self-consciousness, since both philosophers would agree that non-rational animals are conscious creatures.

38. Kahn (1992, 363).

39. Kahn (1992, 364 and 363). The reference he cites for “*intellectio pura*” is to the *Sixth Meditation*, yet he continues to place this notion in the context of his discussion of the

*Meditation*. In the *Second*, the “I” or the self is characterised as: “A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions” (ATVII 28); “it is I who am doubting and understanding and willing [. . .] it is also the case that the ‘I’ who imagines is the same ‘I’ [. . .] it is also the same ‘I’ who has sensory perceptions, or is aware of bodily things as it were through the senses” (AT VII 29).<sup>40</sup>

As early as Book I, Aristotle describes *noûs* as a complete and independent substance, “*ousia tis ousa*,” and imperishable (iv 408 a18–20). Anticipating what he will explain later, he says that although “in the case of [*noûs*] and the thinking faculty [*theoretikis dynamis*] nothing is yet clear, it seems to be a distinct kind [*genos heteron*] of [*psyche*] and it alone admits of being separated, as the immortal from the perishable” (II ii 413b25–28). Active *noûs* is different even from, and more noble (*timioteron*) than, passive *noûs*. Active *noûs* activates the intelligible forms, thinks, reasons and judges. The essence of active *noûs* is metaphysically distinct from the essence of *psyche* and of the body, and since it is clearly separable it is presumably substantial. Thus, in terms of the metaphysically distinct natures of active *noûs* and *qua* thinking mind, I see no incompatibility between Aristotle’s dualism and Descartes’.

This also deflates claims such as: “from Aristotle’s point of view [. . .] Descartes’ conception of the mind is fundamentally mistaken [. . .] because it presupposes that a natural body [. . .] could not possibly be able to think,” and that “one readily sees how Aristotle’s conception is diametrically opposed to the Cartesian view.”<sup>41</sup> As we have seen, Aristotle explicitly argues that neither *psyche* nor even passive *noûs* could possibly think without active *noûs*, so how could he be committed to the thesis that a natural body could think?

Let us turn to the second question – the question concerning the relationship between *noûs* and the rest of *psyche* and the body. Unlike passive *noûs*, active *noûs* is essentially separable not only from the rest

*cogito*. We cannot take what Descartes argues in the context of and with reference to the *Second Meditation* as definitive – see also footnotes 35, and 56.

40. In the *Second Meditation* his arguments are based on an “order corresponding to [his] own perceptions”; in the *Sixth*, his metaphysical arguments are based on “an order corresponding to the actual truth of the matter.” (*Preface* AT VII 8) Descartes follows “the order of reasoning” not “the order of the subject-matter”; the latter, he argues, “is good only for those whose reasoning is disjointed, and who can say [in a single place] as much about one difficulty as about another” (Letter to Mersenne 24, December 1640, AT III 266–7; CSMK: 163–164).

41. Frede, M. (1992, 94 and 97, respectively).

of *psyche* but also from the body; it is inconceivable that active *noûs* be mixed with the natural living body. It is “unmixed, since it is essentially an activity” (III v 430a15–20); that is, it is necessary that active *noûs* “since it thinks all things, should be uncontaminated [. . .] in order that it may be in control, that is, that it may know [. . .] it is unreasonable to suppose that it is mixed with the body; for in that case it would become somehow qualitative, e.g., hot or cold, or would even have some organ, as the sensitive faculty has; but in fact it has none” (III iv 429a19–27). Unlike passive *noûs*, active *noûs* is not comparable to any of the other faculties of *psyche*, and does not depend on and does not involve the use of a bodily organ.

This is one of the most difficult sections in Aristotle’s *Peri Psyches*. It is at the heart not only of the question concerning the relationship of active *noûs* to the body and the rest of *psyche*, but also of how to grasp what its rôle is meant to be: is it part of the *psyche* such that it is separable and not merely separate from *psyche*, or is it (as Anaxagoras says) a principle of the rational order of the world, a cosmic principle – if it is eternal and impassive, is it divine and not human? If the latter, it would appear that active *noûs* would not be involved in an account of what it is to be a self-conscious being, at least not in the way I am suggesting.<sup>42</sup> On this thesis, human beings have only passive *noûs* which comprehends the intelligible forms and receives ideas, whereas active *noûs* actualises the intelligible forms. Drawing on the analogy with light to which Aristotle appeals, we could argue that “in a sense light makes potential into actual colours” (III v 430a15), so in a sense active *noûs* activates what is potentially into actually intelligible, and thus not part of the *psyche*, any more than light is part of the sense organ of sight. In the case of vision, however, Aristotle thinks “that the organ of sight is not only acted upon by its object, but acts reciprocally upon it [. . .] it sets up an active process” (*On Dreams* II 459b25–35). It seems that he must argue that passive *noûs* is not only acted upon by the intelligible forms illuminated by active *noûs* but acts reciprocally upon them, sets up an active process. But there are no indications that passive *noûs* can act or set up an active process; these involve active *noûs*.

Aristotle raises a number of *aporiai* which cannot possibly be addressed here, except to say that in Book III iv he suggests that

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42. I thank David Charles for this point.

whatever the answers might be, we need first to get clear about the nature of “that part of the [*psyche*] that is called *noûs*” that has no *entelechia* (actuality, 429b30), or *energeia* (activity, 429a24) before it thinks. As we saw earlier, he distinguishes between two powers of *noûs* (a two-tier *noûs*) rather than between two kinds of *noûs*. *Noûs* in its active employment “makes all things” (not “all” *simpliciter* as it is prefixed by “*hekasto genei*,” “particular kinds”): “this is a kind of positive state like light” (III v 430a15). Just as light helps us to see the colour of an object, so active *noûs* generates the understanding of true knowledge. Does this ease the uncertainty concerning the question whether or not active *noûs* is a cosmic principle? Illustrating by means of analogies is hardly establishing a thesis. What is certain is that the issues are complex, often obscure, and that there is no agreement among scholars through the centuries; despite a prodigious amount of debate it seems that no one has yet been able to fully grasp or make full sense of them. For present purposes, one thing seems clear: we cannot avoid the question about the relation active *noûs* has to *psyche*, to the rest of the body, and now it appears to passive *noûs*.

Aristotle has not explained what the relation is (except perhaps as that of the ruler and the ruled) nor how active *noûs* might be present in man *qua* rational being and yet not involve the use of a bodily organ. It is not, it seems, that he is unaware of the lack of explanation of that relation; rather, he does not think that such a relation is intelligible since it would imply a contamination of the intellectual activity of *noûs* by the activities of *psyche* and the material body.<sup>43</sup> Be that as it may, that relationship has remained an intractable problem – something that must surely be borne in mind when contemporary philosophers arrive at the conclusion that, unlike Cartesian duality, Aristotelian ontology does not have the problem of interaction. In light of these difficulties, and given that active *noûs* is metaphysically distinct not only from the body but also from the rest of *psyche*, it is hard, if not impossible, to see how Aristotle’s “real advantage [ . . . ] is to be exempt from the Cartesian curse of mind-body opposition.”<sup>44</sup>

Not only is this one of the most difficult sections in Aristotle’s work, it is also here more than anywhere else that we find a tension

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43. “Aristotle must have hoped that his conception of *phantasia* would help to overcome that awkwardness”; but the link *phantasia* is meant to provide “remains firmly confined to the sensory side” Dorothea Frede (1992, 294).

44. Kahn (1992, 359).



between what is referred to as a naturalistic conception and a Platonic tendency in Aristotle. Aristotle may have a number of reasons (methodological, theoretical) for wanting to reject the Platonic Theory of Forms and the Platonic conception of the soul, but when he comes to the most crucial part of his enquiry, to his conception of man as a rational self-conscious subject distinct from the rest of the animal kingdom, he is unable, if not unwilling, to reject fully the Platonic conception of the soul that is akin (*syngenes*) to the eternal and immutable (*Republic* X 611e).

## VI. Aristotle's Dualism

Rather than rejecting Plato's conception, Aristotle maintains that active *noûs* is not subject to change, it is not acted upon but acts upon; it "makes all things" – that is to say, it activates the intelligible forms. It "is separable, impassive and unmixed since it is essentially an activity" (III v 430a17). Aristotle is not offering a reductive thesis of active *noûs*, but giving an account of its essential nature as consisting in activity (in thinking), not in passivity and inertness (III v 430a19). It is a complete and independent substance "*ousia tis ousa*," and "this alone is immortal and everlasting [. . .] and without this nothing thinks" (III v 430a15). We do not remember that active *noûs* is immortal and everlasting, because passive *noûs* – which holds memory together – is perishable. Active *noûs* "does not think intermittently; when isolated it is its true self and nothing more [it knows itself truly in knowing *ta noeta*]" (III v 430a20–25).<sup>45</sup> In Plato's memorable passage in the *Phaedo*: "when [the soul] looks by itself, on its own, it goes in the other direction, to the pure, the eternal, the immortal, the unchanging, and, because of its affinity [*syngenes ousa*] with them, joins their company, whenever it is by itself and can do so" (79 d1–5).

A possible defence of the Platonic tendency in Aristotle is that he shares with Plato a highly theoretical notion of *noûs* that differs

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45. I am inclined to think that Aristotle is not committed to the thesis that active *noûs* is constantly thinking all things, though unconsciously (especially as unconscious thinking makes no sense), or that we can eventually think all things. I thank Richard Sorabji for bringing this to my attention. As I have argued elsewhere (Christofidou 2007), our striving for the attainment of *any* objective truths that can have absolute status of what *there is*, does not entail that we should thereby arrive at *every* objective truth – that we shall be able to attain the totality of truths. This is the true meaning of a finite understanding, as Descartes argues.

metaphysically from the body and *psyche*. And perhaps despite his attempt to give a naturalistic account of man, there remains a distinguishing line, a *real distinction* between those realities which could and those which could not be attributed to other animals, let alone to living bodies. This line is for Aristotle, as it is for Plato, between the metaphysically distinct thinking *noûs* on the one hand, and *psyche* and the body on the other. Aristotle may not be a direct precursor of Descartes, but the case for thinking that he is as much an immaterialist about active *noûs* as is Descartes is more convincing than the case for thinking that he is “less immaterialist than Descartes is about the mind.”<sup>46</sup>

It is reasonable to argue that the possession of *noûs* denotes what we understand by *what it is to be* a self-conscious subject. A conscious creature that had *psyche* and no *noûs* would be (as far as we know) unable not only to think of itself *as* itself, but to *perceive* itself *as* itself, to perceive itself *as* having perceptions, sensations, to perceive itself *as* located, even if it perceived its location and the surrounding world. Being a conscious creature does not entail being a self-conscious subject, something that Aristotle endorses in his *Metaphysics* (*APo* 100a1).

## VII. Self and Self-Consciousness

Our animal nature is not simply conjoined with the thinking mind as if it were a luxury that could be added or subtracted while leaving everything else intact. “Here the tempting error is to suppose that the crucial steps in the process are marked by a difference of degree rather than kind, that they represent a continuous series of stages of widening generality.”<sup>47</sup> As Descartes says: “human beings are made up of body and soul, not by the mere presence or proximity of one to the other, but by a true substantial union” (Letter to Regius, January 1642, AT III [508]; CSMK: 209). Thus, a significantly different story must be told about self-consciousness, about knowing, about *noûs*. Our animal nature is transformed by the aspect of self-consciousness which Descartes clearly saw in the inner unity of theoretical and practical

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46. Irwin (1991, 78).

47. Kahn (1992, 368). In terms of our sentience, it is unclear whether we suffer to a lesser or greater extent than other sentient conscious creatures.

reasoning, assigning no primacy or supremacy to either, and thus moving away from the voluntarism dominating Scholastic conceptions, which emphasised the supremacy of the will. Such a unity informs his conception of the self as both a thinking and an acting rational being. Descartes can be seen as initiating a new (perhaps in some respects reviving a classical) conception of a unified self: an autonomous and authoritative individual, that is, answerable to the universal validity of reason, equipped with the necessary abilities for responsiveness to good reasons and on the basis of which he can make judgements or inferences; an individual who is the locus of value and responsibility, one who can search after truth and the possibility of new metaphysics. Descartes sees such requirements as prerequisites for a philosophical enquiry, and sees the self as indispensable to our metaphysical concerns. His conception of a unified self, and in particular his assigning no primacy and no supremacy either to theoretical or to practical reasoning, was lost with the dichotomies brought about (or reintroduced) by subsequent philosophers.

It is his conception of selfhood that informs his conception of personhood – a conception that considers the “I” or the self, not as an appendage of personhood, but as its explanatory ground, a source of a unifying concept of personhood. A person, for Descartes, is neither a disembodied mind or ego, nor a physically or neurobiologically constituted particular; it is a substantial union of mind and the body, a union which is, he argues, basic and unanalysable.<sup>48</sup> If we follow his arguments we are brought to an understanding of *person* that rises above any disjunction – we arrive at an integrated, self-conscious rational and autonomous human being who is not simply subject to causal laws and the laws of motion, but is capable of determining itself to act *from* the recognition, or a clear conception of truth and goodness and the right principles and values.<sup>49</sup>

In most contemporary debates, the problem of the self or the “I” is either confounded with the question of personal identity, or considered to be a problem whose solution depends on our enquiries into the problem of self-knowledge, of self-ascription and epistemic asym-

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48. See especially his letters to Princess Elizabeth 28, June 1643, AT III 691; CSMK: 226, and 21, May 1643, AT III 665; CSMK: 218; see also the *Fourth Set of Replies* where he explicitly denies that man or person is simply a mind (AT VII 227–8).

49. I have argued elsewhere that a clear account of the immunity of “I” forces upon us no disjunction: neither an idealist, nor a physicalist conception of ourselves. Christofidou (2000).

metry, of self-reference and self-identification.<sup>50</sup> The premises from which the contemporary debate takes off are drawn from various turns that took place in the twentieth century, but it seems that “the decisive factor [. . .] is acceptance, motivated from several quarters, of what may be called the [. . .] Strawsonian picture, according to which the methodologically and ontologically primary item is not the ‘I’ of self-consciousness but the living, concrete, empirically determinate *person*, to which the self is conceived as annexed.”<sup>51</sup> Once the “I” or the self is relegated to the back seat and marginalised, the possibility of a mysterious or elusive self is open.<sup>52</sup> Dispensing with mysteries and elusiveness, it is tempting to conceive of the self as consisting in nothing but a series of interconnected psychophysical events, a construct out of memory put together by processes of association, as no more than a matter of decision or choice, or as nothing but a species of fiction. The “I,” in turn, is considered at best a merely indexical manner of speaking without any further reference to anything real and substantive, at worst as semantically unstable, or a shadow cast by grammar.

If we miss or misunderstand Descartes’ modal insight that the distinction between the self and the attribute of thought is a distinction of reason and not a real distinction, the motivation for reductive accounts of personhood, of fusions and fissions, is given credibility. Once that insight is missed, we acquiesce in the implication that the indispensability of the self is simply an illusion; consequently, the motivation for a physicalist’s account of consciousness gains impetus since the unity and integrity of the self and self-consciousness have been torn asunder.

Descartes’ conception of selfhood and his defence of the internal relation between reason and the highest grade of freedom enable us to trace the sources of, and understand *what it is to be*, a self-conscious rational and moral human being.<sup>53</sup> In fact, it is by exploring his notion of freedom that we can begin to appreciate and understand the

50. Among some of the exception are Taylor (1989), although he uses “self,” “person” and “subject” almost synonymously, and more recently, Sorabji (2006), who defends the irreducibility of the self and explores its nature through the ages.

51. Gardner (2004, 249).

52. Strawson, for example, argues that the criterionless self-ascription of experience gives rise to “the illusion of a purely inner and yet subject-referring use for ‘I’” Strawson (1966, 166). For a critique of such theses see Christofidou (2000).

53. I pursue these fundamental matters in Christofidou (in progress).

significance of Descartes' Real Distinction between the essential natures of mind and corporeality. The first formulation of the first certainty that *I exist* (*Second Meditation* AT VII 25), articulated just before what is traditionally considered as its first formulation,<sup>54</sup> involves both the theoretical and the active mode of thinking (i.e., willing). It is an affirmation by an active rational self capable of reason and reflection, and ready to try to defy the forces that suppress him and tumble him around (AT VII 24). The meditator acquires a clear conception of the *I* or the self as both a thinking and an acting being in the very act of trying to gain mastery over the distortions of an evil demon; such a conception cannot be pictorially represented (AT VII 29) or introspectively established. Neither his theoretical nor his practical stance is introspective; in fact, he rejects introspection or "inner sense" as unreliable (*Sixth Meditation* AT VII 76–77). The attribution to Descartes of the view that he sensorily intuits or introspectively encounters the self, or that he mistakes the unity of consciousness for the consciousness of unity, or that he conflates apperception with inner sense, has been a long-standing, entrenched and profound error in philosophy.

Descartes clearly saw (long before Kant) that the self and the unity of self-consciousness can be established neither by empirical associations or psychological connections or stream relations, nor by introspective inspection. His great ingenuity is that the self is established by an immediate (non-inferential) clear intuition,<sup>55</sup> not purely by a theoretical mode of reasoning (in terms of assertoric statements about what is thought), but in conjunction with an active mode or practical reasoning: the self or *I* is established as indubitably real at the very moment of defiance, whatever its ultimate nature.<sup>56</sup> He astutely recognised that the distinction between that which is itself a subject and that which is not, a distinction fundamental to a conception of oneself *as oneself*, is established in the act of defiance since the forces that suppress the self are not of his own making. This is evident not only

54. See also Schouls (1994).

55. Intuition in Descartes' sense is neither sensory nor intellectual in the sense that Kant attributes to God, but "the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason" (*Rule Three, Regulae* AT X 368).

56. The arguments in the *Second Meditation* are about how the thinking subject conceives of itself, what it can claim to know at that stage, as AT VII 27 makes absolutely clear; they do not offer metaphysical conclusions about the nature of the self. See Christofidou (2001).

from the inner unity of theoretical and practical reasoning, but also from the act of defiance, which manifests a rejection of acceptance of anything on external authority.<sup>57</sup>

Descartes' insight shows that any analytic claim alone (e.g., that thoughts require a thinker) would be unavailing, as it is made clear in the *Third Set of Objections and Replies* (AT VII 175–6); the question of the self and the unity of self-consciousness is a substantial one, and answering it a substantial task. These deeper metaphysical issues require another paper, but what can be suggested here is that the *Meditations* demonstrates that self-consciousness presupposes not only a thinking but an active subject, and the possibility of the unity of self-consciousness presupposes a synthesis of theoretical and practical reasoning (these conditions are reciprocal). It is this synthesis that can demonstrate the capacities a rational active subject must possess to be a candidate for knowing and judging. The subject must possess a system of principles and conceptual capacities under which the exercising of concepts can be possible. Starting with the power of grasping simple, self-evident truths (Aristotle's "indivisibles"), Descartes moves step by step to identify and distinguish the powers of the rational subject, powers of deliberation, discernment and discursive thought, of discretion and discrimination, of evaluation that presuppose a conception of values and responsibility. It is through the power of self-reflection that the subject is capable of becoming self-legislating or autonomous, of aspiring to the universal, to the true and the good as defended in the *Fourth Meditation*, a defence which demonstrates that for Descartes the space of self-consciousness is one of theoretical and practical unity, of truth, of freedom and responsibility as shown in acts of judgement.<sup>58</sup>

The self realises that whatever clear and distinct truths (apart from the self-evident truth "*I exist*") he can discover are not dependent on being grasped by him. His clear and distinct perceptions are demonstrative thoughts which correspond or are responsive to the essence of things; the assent to such truths involves no defiance but demonstrates the highest grade of freedom. Such perceptions are essence-involving thoughts whose truth conditions are independent of his grasping or

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57. I am grateful for discussions with Peter J. King, which enabled me to get clear about these difficult issues.

58. See Christofidou (2009).

making judgements; contrary to what is attributed to Descartes, he clearly states: “our mind is not the measure of reality or of truth; but certainly it should be the measure of what we assert or deny” (Letter to More 5, February 1649, ATV 274; CSMK: 364). It is the essence or necessity of things that constrains his thinking (AT VII 66) and it is no way up to him what to count as the nature of things, or persistence through time. No doubt, without the application of concepts there would be no knowledge and no understanding, but the applicability of our sortal concepts is not arbitrary but guided or constrained by the nature of things. In a Fregean sense, how the essence of things is presented in thought makes a difference to which thought it is since intentionality is not only directedness towards (the essence of) an object, but presents the (essence of the) object in a certain way. This is made clear in the *Third Meditation*. But such thought-directedness can be intelligible only if the connection with the *I* or the self is not severed. Descartes’ requirement (even if it conceals a variety of complex issues) is to begin the positive part of his enquiry, the path of discovery with demonstrative clear and distinct perceptions, not with sensations or sensory perceptions.

A standard account in contemporary debates draws upon the sceptical arguments in the *First Meditation* and presents the extent of the meditator’s inner space as self-standing or self-contained: “in effect Descartes recognizes how things seem to a subject as a case of how things are [. . . and faces] up to losing the external world with the inner for consolation [. . . and retreats to and accepts] the availability of infallible knowledge about the newly recognised inner region of reality.”<sup>59</sup>

In fact, Descartes argues completely the opposite – and he never claims infallibility (or irresistibility, or incorrigibility), only indubitability. In the *First Meditation* he says: “I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation; and, even if it is *not* in my power to *know any truth*, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods” (AT VII 23; italics added). In other words, he suspends judgement and neither accepts nor finds consolation in such seemings; on the contrary, the resulting instability in his beliefs provides a genuine ground for rational discomfort. And in the *Second* he repeats: “Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be

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59. McDowell (1998, 239). These attributions to Descartes abound in the literature.

warmed. This cannot be false [because *that* I seem to see, or hear, strictly speaking or *qua* ways of thinking] and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking" (AT VII 29) – and *that* I am thinking cannot be doubted, even if *what* I am seeing or hearing can (see AT VII 77). There is no picture of inner space in which one's seemings, or *what* one seems to see or hear, are accepted by Descartes as a case of how things are, or considered as indubitable or the basis of knowledge. The attributions to Descartes of such views are distortions through the lenses of modern theories.

With the realisation that whatever clear and distinct truths he can discover cannot be the totality of truths, given his finite understanding, the rational subject recognises that they must be placed in the context of something other than himself, something whose nature and reality must be independent of his conceptualisation and understanding. This has immediate implications: it enables the self to form a clear conception of the *possibility* of himself as an element of an objective order (and by implication, of the possibility of what it is to be one self-conscious active subject among others), and at the same time identify within himself a first-person perspective and identify it as his. The indisputable fact that only *his* perspective can express the self that he is does not entail that the subject's conception or the extent of his inner space is self-contained. It is a first-person perspective that invokes responsiveness to reasons and is primarily directed towards something that can be understood to be objectively possible before it is directed towards anything else. Reason aspires to objective validity and universality and "allows us to reach vastly beyond ourselves."<sup>60</sup> Evans argues: "just as our thoughts about ourselves [our 'I'-thoughts] require the intelligibility of [the] link with the world thought of 'objectively', so our 'objective' thought about the world also requires the intelligibility of [the] link."<sup>61</sup> Not even the evil demon can prevent the meditator from forming clear and distinct conceptions of the *intelligibility* of such links, and thus, there is nothing in his conception that does not conform to Evans's requirement. The Cartesian reflection and the extent of that inner space neither merely present nor invite us into "the perspective of consciousness."<sup>62</sup>

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60. Nagel (1997, 71).

61. Evans (1982, 212; see also 259).

62. Williams (1978, 100).



## VIII. Aristotelian Ontology and Cartesian Duality

Aristotle shares Plato's commitment to the following triadic conjunction: the thinking mind or *noûs* is metaphysically distinct from the rest of *psyche* and the body, it is separable from them, and it is immortal. Where does Descartes stand? He shares the first (but only to some extent, given the unity of self-consciousness) and the second conjunct, the separability of the mind, but not the third. For Descartes, the immortality of the mind remains a logical possibility. In his reply to Mersenne he concedes that when the body perishes it is possible that the mind "comes to an end simultaneously with the end of the body's life" (*Second Set of Replies* AT VII 153). He does not think that metaphysics can provide the relevant proof; indeed, the *Synopsis* makes clear that the argument for dualism does not allow the inference to immortality.<sup>63</sup>

If this is so, on what grounds do Plato and Aristotle uphold the immortality of the thinking mind (although perhaps with less certainty than the categorical mode of the statement suggests, and not it seems of *personal* immortality)? In the space available I can only make some tentative suggestions. Plato supposes that the thinking mind is *akin* to the eternal and immutable, it is that part of us that is the real self, the best expression of our true nature. Aristotle suggests that "in the case of things without matter that which thinks (*to nooûn*) and that which is thought (*to noumenon*) are the same" (III iv 430a4–5) – "without [active *noûs*] relinquishing its own determinate identity."<sup>64</sup> And again: "the thinking of indivisible objects of thought occurs among things concerning which there can be no falsehood" (III vi 430a25). Both philosophers are here concerned with the intelligible not the sensory. Epistemically, it appears that part of the explanatory background for their commitment is the view that a condition of the knowability of such truths is that the thinking mind must partake of those attributes. Aristotle might therefore be wrestling with the question of how it is possible for finite rational beings such as us to aspire to and to be able to grasp eternal truths; he finds that active *noûs* is that part in us that has universal validity and objectivity, it is the part that strives for the

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63. It may "have been the currency of the debate about the soul's *immortality* which caused Mersenne to add [those] words to the title of the first, Parisian, edition [. . . which] shows how Descartes's work could be reduced against the wishes of the author to the terms of a current debate, and its novelty and precision misrepresented." Maclean (2006) "Introduction" lvii–lviii.

64. For the complexities involved here, see Kosman (1992, 357).

possibility of metaphysical knowledge and hankers after truth in a non-relative sense. Aristotle's conception of active *noûs* can thus be seen as his (and Plato's) way of demonstrating that time-bound empirical truths do not exhaust the fabric of reality and intelligibility.

Descartes shares to some extent their commitments; unlike them, he did not try to defend the immortality of the mind by supposing any affinity with the eternal and immutable truths; instead, he suggested that it depended on "an account of the whole of physics" which required our knowing that substances, which depend on or need the concurrence of God in order to exist, are incorruptible and can only cease to be by God's annihilation (*Synopsis* AT VII 14). Descartes attempted (although did not expound the thesis as explicitly as he may have intended) to secure even the reality and immutability of eternal truth with reference to the infinite mind.<sup>65</sup>

## IX. Concluding Remarks

Philosophers of physicalist persuasions might continue to feel embarrassed, to wish that Aristotle had never written the chapter on *noûs*, or to think that it is an anomalous intrusion. Aristotle's ontology, however, neither ignores nor shows any reductive inclinations towards fundamental facts about *noûs*. His metaphysics, in turn, is concerned with the essential nature of things, something that functionalism with its functionally characterised systems and rôles cannot provide. It is the essential nature of things that can entail any rôles they might play, whereas such rôles can neither entail nor constitute the nature of things. If Aristotle had not written on *noûs* he would not have offered an enquiry into what it is to be a self-conscious rational human being, but only an enquiry into what it is to be a conscious animal. As Descartes argues: "It may be shown that animate brutes can perform all their operations without any thought, but this does not entitle anyone to infer that he does not himself think. [Someone may remain] stubbornly attached to the sentence 'Men and the brutes operate in the same way' [and] when it is pointed out to him that the brutes do not think, he actually prefers

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65. I explore the problem of the dependence of eternal truths on the infinite mind, in Christofidou (in progress). Aristotle too seems to hold that "God is the principle of both *ousia* and *noûs*, and finally of all the cognitive powers including perceptive" Kosman (1992, 357).

to deny his own thought, of which he cannot fail to be aware, rather than change his opinion [. . .] But I find it hard to accept that there are many people of this sort" (*Sixth Set of Replies* AT VII 427). Creatures with *psyche* alone would be unable to feel embarrassed that Aristotle wrote the chapter on *noûs* since embarrassment requires self-consciousness, not just consciousness, would be unable to attempt to deny or doubt their predicament. Doubt is both a rational activity and an act of humility manifested in one's resolute determination to scrutinise one's beliefs, basic assumptions, customs and habits; it is a rational undertaking that can set one in search after truth.

In terms of the existence and vastness of the universe, our neuro-physicality, our living bodies, are simply insignificant specks; whether the living body is understood in the phenomenological, the *hylomorphic*, or the Cartesian conception does not matter. What compensates for our neurophysical and bodily insignificance is the mind substantially united with the body, constituting an irreducible, embodied, rational, and autonomous human being as conceived and understood by Descartes, and even as conceived along the lines offered by Aristotle, lines whose primary concern is to offer a systematic account of and to do justice to our distinctive nature. It is because we are self-conscious rational and moral subjects, and not creatures in possession of *psyche* alone, that we are able to grapple with and attempt to understand both ourselves and the universe in which we find ourselves. Our search after truth and our striving towards the perfection that pertains to our kind, as Descartes saw, bear the marks of worthiness and significance and involve some of the deepest metaphysical issues with which we are ever likely to be confronted. To argue that the distinction between the living body and body is a powerful means of undermining Cartesian dualism, or that we are a series of interconnected psychophysical events, or physical particulars among physical particulars, is not only metaphysically flawed, it seems also to be an abdication of responsibility.<sup>66</sup>

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