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Death to Death

Descartes, Living Bodies, and the Concept of Death

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Abstract

Descartes' philosophy is instructive in revealing and resolving a puzzle about death. Specifically, it is the puzzle of carving a concept of death out from an ontologically sparse metaphysics of matter that does not provide a clear and obvious grounding for a concept of life. As I argue in this paper, we ultimately find resolution to this puzzle in Descartes' philosophy once we realize that we should stop looking for the nature of death in his metaphysics of matter; it does not exist there, and it has no grounding there. In reality, death is nothing to no thing for Descartes. Furthermore, I recommend that Descartes' lesson applies to attempts in the contemporary scholarship of the philosophy of death to analyze death as a materialist concept and, in doing so, it stands to dissolve the debate between the survivalist and annihilationist positions on post-death survival.

1. Introduction

The philosophy of René Descartes stands at an intersection of attitudes in contemporary discussions on the nature of life and death. On one hand, the soul is given very little significance in these discussions. When it does come up in the literature, the comments against it are often swift and damning;¹ when it is not addressed outright, its denial is still often implied.² So it is that Descartes' conception of the immortal soul is largely ignored or rebuked by contemporary scholars, and his philosophy of substance dualism that grounds it is widely rebuffed by those who reject the nature, existence, and mere suggestion of the soul as distinct from the body.

On the other hand, just as a silence about souls is now standard in the scholarship of the philosophy of death, so too is the explanation: materialism.³

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¹ For example, see Baker (2001), p. 178, or Pojman (1992), p. 159.

² For example, the rejection of the soul is implied by the termination thesis. For more on this thesis itself, see Feldman (1992), chapter 6, and (2000).

³ DiSilvestro (2012), p. 481, p. 497. Although DiSilvestro does incorporate the soul into his

In this respect, contemporary philosophy of life and death owes much to Descartes. He is one of the most renowned and celebrated contributors to the modern materialistic approach to nature, and that recognition includes his significant influence on the rise of the mechanical concept of the human body.⁴ This concept is that of the human body as a machine, whereby every part, function, and change is because of the matter and lawful motion of the body as simply that: body. According to Descartes, there is nothing more to account for about the human body's physiology because there is nothing more to the human body; the soul—as per his dualism—is an entirely separate substance. Simply put, substance dualism affords Descartes his conception of the human body—or, more accurately, all living bodies—as complex material machines.⁵ This is at the bedrock of his status as “the founder of modern materialism”⁶ and of materialism of life more particularly. And yet, Descartes' analysis of the concepts of life and death are given little attention by modern materialists. However, if they were given their due consideration in contemporary scholarship, an important and relevant lesson would come to light.

2. Aim of This Paper

Despite a widespread acceptance of materialism, contemporary philosophers struggle to analyze the concepts of life and death. It is with an eye to Descartes' legacy concerning the mechanization of nature, that I set out in this paper to examine what happens to the concept of death when materialism banishes souls from the picture. Specifically, the question that concerns me is this: What is the nature of death for a material, complex, living body? In other words—words consistent with a puzzle within Descartes' philosophy—the question is: What is the death of a living machine?

At issue in my examination of this question is a puzzle of accounting for the concept of death within a materialist metaphysics. In particular, it is the puzzle of carving out a concept of death from an ontologically sparse metaphysics of matter that does not provide a clear and obvious grounding for a concept of life.

examination of quality of life assessments in medical decision-making, he acknowledges that it is a rare move to include the soul in contemporary death scholarship and, in doing so, directly confronts the paucity of souls in the literature.

⁴ King (1978), p. 23.

⁵ Bedau (2008), p. 456.

⁶ Easton (2011), p. 203.

As I argue in this paper, the puzzle is ultimately resolved in Descartes' philosophy by the recognition that we should stop looking for the concept of death in a metaphysics of matter; it does not exist there. In reality, death is *nothing* to no *thing* for Descartes.

As I further aim to show in this paper, Descartes' lesson of dissolving the concept of death applies directly to certain problems and debates in contemporary scholarship on the nature of death.⁷ To that end, I begin this paper with those problems and debates in order to set the scene for the relevance and resolution that Descartes provides. I return to those same issues after laying out my analysis and argument of Descartes' concept of death as an extrinsic denomination.

3. The Enigma of a Materialist Conceptual Analysis of Death

In his book *Confrontations with the Reaper*, Fred Feldman makes a compelling case for the difficulty of defining death. In particular, Feldman attempts to provide a materialist biological conceptual analysis of death, but is ultimately unsuccessful. As he specifies, a materialist conception is one that does not explain death by anything more than matter because there is nothing more to mortal things than matter. He writes, “[I]n the materialist conception, life and death are properties of material objects. Living zygotes, fetuses, human beings, and human corpses are equally material objects. The vital differences among these things are primarily due to their structures and capacities. At bottom, however, we are all just material objects.”⁸ As such, Feldman does not distinguish among different types of matter for different types of living things; rather, he treats all matter as the same material stuff, be it the stuff that composes a human being, a bird, a tree, or any other thing. On a related note, Feldman contends that there is only a single concept of what death is for every and all things that die. He refers to this as the biological concept of death.⁹

In that Feldman seeks a materialist and biological account of death as a conceptual analysis of death, it means that he investigates the very nature of death and not the criterion (or criteria) of death. To highlight that distinction and

⁷ I borrow this terminology from Hutchin's argument for Descartes' "dissolution of life" (2016).

⁸ Feldman (1992), p. 112.

⁹ Feldman (1992), pp. 19-20. In his own words: "I do not believe that there is a special concept of death applicable only to people. I do not believe that the word 'died' has a sense for which it would be a necessary truth that if a thing dies, then it must have been a person" (p. 20).

clarify his target, Feldman specifies that an *analysis of death*

1. purports to tell us what death is;
2. must apply equally to anything that can die;
3. is necessarily true, if true at all, and there cannot be even so much as a *possible* falsifying instance;
4. is eternally true, if true at all; and
5. is a success if it is true – even if no one adopts it.¹⁰

Further to the distinction that Feldman draws between a conceptual analysis and criterion, he explains that “the analytical project has a sort of conceptual priority over the criterial project.”¹¹ Essentially, to define death by its criteria is to assume what death is, but what is that?

As a starting point for the conceptual project of defining death, Feldman works from a definition of death that he calls “the standard analysis” and which he presents as follows:

x dies at t = df. x ceases to be alive at t¹²

Unpacking this with the above-outlined components of a conceptual analysis, the standard analysis of death tells us that death necessarily, always, and for all mortal things *is* the cessation of life—whether we think so or not—though it seems safe to agree with Feldman that it is “standard” to think so. Simply put, the standard analysis of death is the view that death *just is* the end of life. However, in its simplicity, the standard analysis is doomed to criticisms; Feldman elaborates on one of them by systematically hashing out a number of counterexamples in which organisms cease to be alive without dying. Despite his attempts to reinforce the standard analysis against a falsifying case, he is ultimately unsuccessful, and while there is an argument to be made that the flaw in Feldman’s way of assessing the standard analysis of death is that he assumes that the counterexamples are, in fact, counterexamples, there nevertheless is a

¹⁰ Feldman (1992), p. 17. See also Gervais (1987) and (1989). For example, the debate over whether death occurs at the cessation of brain activity or cardio-circulatory activity is a debate over two criteria rather than two concepts of death, since not all living things that die have brains or hearts and lungs.

¹¹ Feldman (1992), p. 18. See also Gervais (1989), p. 18. In addition, Bedau [(2008), p. 468] makes a complementary case for the prioritization of the concept of life over life’s criteria.

¹² Feldman (1992), p. 62.

deeper problem with the standard analysis that is not so easy to dispatch with. It is the problem of analyzing the concept of life.

A successful analysis must not make use of any obscure or circular terms, which, in the case of the standard analysis of death, puts the attention on the term “alive.” If it is obscure, then it will “import” that obscurity into the standard analysis and, indeed, any analysis of death in which it appears.¹³ So, what is life? Feldman calls life “enigmatic,” and he is not alone in his assessment.¹⁴ Given that, there are grounds to criticize the standard analysis for its burden-shifting opacity; it trades the mystery of death for the perplexing nature of life.¹⁵ To quote Feldman: “The Reaper remains mysterious.”¹⁶ Whether we approach a concept of death directly or via the concept of life, death is an enigma—“it is impossible to formulate a fully satisfactory philosophy analysis of the concept of death.”¹⁷

However, despite that conclusion, Feldman is willing to commit to a materialist conceptual scheme about death and to contend that death involves the breakdown of the complex, well organized, constantly changing physical systems of living things.¹⁸ In a particularly notable section of his book, he argues from that materialist concept to the conclusion that living things typically survive their deaths. Feldman is a self-proclaimed “survivalist” (specifically, a corpse survivalist) who argues that one survives death so long as one’s biological identity is left intact.¹⁹ In making this argument, Feldman is a key contributor to the debate between the annihilation thesis and the survival thesis, which also includes arguments from (and counter-arguments against) Jay Rosenberg, a “terminator,” who argues that one’s death is the cessation of one’s existence.²⁰

¹³ Feldman (1992), p. 56.

¹⁴ Ibid. See also Bedau (2008), p. 466.

¹⁵ Feldman (1992), p. 20.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 71.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 125.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 106-7, p. 112. Feldman’s materialist concept of death lays the foundation for his corpse survivalist thesis, according to which death is not the annihilation of a formerly living thing; the thing survives so long as its corpse remains intact.

¹⁹ See Feldman (1992), chapters 6 and 7, and Feldman (2000).

²⁰ See Rosenberg (1998), chapter 1.

4. A Materialist Conception of Death

Jay Rosenberg's account of death starts from the position of the standard analysis. As he writes in his book *Thinking Clearly about Death*, "Death is the end of life. More particularly, death is the loss of life. To understand the nature of death—what death is—then, we need to understand the nature of what life is."²¹ So, once again an analysis of death leads to an analysis of life. Nevertheless, the enigma remains.

According to Rosenberg, life is a condition that belongs to material bodies that have an intricate, complexly nested, organic structure of elements.²² Delving deeper into this organic nature of living things, Rosenberg explains that "The distinction between 'organic' and 'inorganic' matter ... is not the distinction between two distinct *kinds of stuffs* but rather the distinction between two ways in which stuffs of the same kinds—atoms of various elements—can be *arranged or structured*."²³ As such, living organisms and inorganic objects do not differ on account of what they are made out of, but rather, on how that matter is arranged. However, noting that a living organism and a non-living fresh corpse can have very similar material constituents and structural arrangements, Rosenberg concludes that the essential difference between the structures of living and non-living things is in what the former can *do* that the latter cannot *do*.²⁴ Specifically, a living organism, unlike a corpse, has "the ability, capacity, or capability to *preserve* its intricate material organization through ongoing (physical, chemical) transactions with its environment."²⁵ In short, living organisms are what Rosenberg calls "syntropic."²⁶

Rosenberg's definition of death meets the metaphysical mark of strict materialism in that he explicitly rejects any nonphysical explanation for the syntropic capacity of organisms, denouncing any explanatory appeal to things such as "souls" or "minds" in order to make sense of the world. To that point,

²¹ Ibid, p. 159.

²² Ibid, p. 160.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 160-1.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 161.

²⁶ Rosenberg defines a "syntropic thing" as a physical thing that is able to "preserve its initial organization and structure or even tend in the direction of greater and more intricate arrangements of constituent elements" while undergoing "continuous causal interaction with its environment" ([1998], p. 162). Rosenberg contrasts this with "entropic" things, which lose their structure and organization (p. 162). He classifies living organisms as the former and rocks and corpses as the latter (p. 162).

Rosenberg writes,

It is a classical failing and confusion in human history that we so frequently attempt to account for a striking or impressive features of the things we encounter by, in essence, postulating some special entity (a ‘nonphysical’ ‘soul’ or ‘mind,’ an ‘*élan vital*,’ or something equally mysterious) to ‘explain’ it. We attempt to turn *abilities* which we cannot otherwise account for into *things* or stuffs or forces—about which we can then say, however, *only* that they are the mysterious something, whatever it is, that accounts for the abilities.²⁷

Instead, according to Rosenberg:

[T]he abilities, capacities, and competences of a thing are properly to be accounted for, not by the mysterious presence of some mysterious and extraordinary constituent thing or stuff, but by the way in which the perfectly ordinary constituent things or stuffs which compose the talented original are structured or arranged—by the *organization* and *modes of functioning or operations* of perfectly ordinary material constituents. It is the shape of an airplane’s wings, for example, which accounts for its ability to get off the ground—not some antigravitational materials or an ‘aeronautical soul’ which ‘strives for the heights.’²⁸

It is against this soulless, materialist backdrop that Rosenberg explains what death is: “It is not ‘the separation of the soul from the body.’ It is the *loss of syntropic capacity or ability*—the loss of a (purely physical) ability to *do* something.”²⁹ To put it plainly: death is a body’s loss of the soulless, purely mechanical capacity for self-preservation. Just a page later in his book, Rosenberg qualifies this account: “Death is the loss of syntropic capacity or ability. More precisely, an organism dies when it loses its power to preserve and sustain its self-organizing organization *permanently* and *irreversibly*.”³⁰ When that occurs, a change of a natural kind takes place: the living thing ceases to

²⁷ Ibid, p. 161.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 162.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 163.

exist and a corpse comes into existence.³¹ There is no surviving death.

At this point, one may pause, reminded of Feldman's attempts to patch and protect the standard analysis against counterexamples. Among those ultimately unsuccessful attempts, Feldman considers Rosenberg's account that death is the permanent and irreversible cessation of life, and then proceeds to draw up a case to illustrate what is "surely" wrong about it, namely that permanence and irreversibility are not sufficient for death; the physical impossibility of revitalization is necessary as well.³² With that, the burden shifts again, and we are back to death's mystery.

Yet, rather than then tread down this path of puzzles over the enigma of death as the end of life, I propose a different—but, in fact, old—puzzle with the materialist analysis of the concept of death. That is the puzzle of Descartes' conception of death.

5. Descartes on Death

Of the many philosophical thoughts that Descartes is famous for, he is not well known for his thoughts on death. Nevertheless, one does not have to go any further than the *Meditations on First Philosophy* to discover some of those thoughts, starting with the fact that the book was first published in 1641 with the subtitle "in which are demonstrated the existence of God and the immortality of the soul." One year later, it was published with the new subtitle "in which are demonstrated the existence of God and the distinction between the human soul and the body," which is more accurate given that Descartes does not, in fact, properly argue for the soul's immortality in the *Meditations*, but it is also not entirely unrelated to that originally stated objective.

Descartes explains in the Synopsis to the *Meditations* that his demonstration of the soul's and body's distinctness is the foundation for a proof of the immortality of the soul. That demonstration of the real distinction between soul and body occurs in the Sixth Meditation when Descartes argues that the meditating "I" is a thinking, non-extended thing that is capable of being separated from its extended, non-thinking body, and, thus, can exist without it.³³

³¹ Ibid, pp. 182-3.

³² Feldman (1992), p. 65.

³³ *Meditations*, CSM II, p. 54; AT 7:78. The abbreviations used to refer to Descartes' writings are: CSM I & II = *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volumes I & II*; CSMK = *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: The Correspondences*; AT = *Oeuvres de Descartes*.

Although this paves the way to an argument for the immortality of the soul, Descartes acknowledges that he does not complete the argument in the *Meditations*: “because the premisses [*sic*] which lead to the conclusion that the soul is immortal depend on an account of the whole of physics.”³⁴ In particular, we need to know more about the generation and corruption of substances in order to know that the soul is immortal. Descartes continues,

First, we need to know that absolutely all substances, or things which must be created by God in order to exist, are by their nature incorruptible and cannot ever cease to exist unless they are reduced to nothingness by God’s denying his concurrence to them. Secondly, we need to recognize that body, taken in the general sense, is a substance, so that it too never perishes. But the human body, in so far as it differs from other bodies, is simply made up of a certain configuration of limbs and other accidents of this sort; whereas the human mind is not made up of any accidents in this way, but is a pure substance. For even if all the accidents of the mind change, so that it has different objects of the understanding and different desires and sensations, it does not on that account become a different mind; whereas a human body loses its identity merely as a result of a change in the shape of some of its parts.³⁵

From there, he claims, the argument is complete: “And it follows from this that while the body can very easily perish, the mind is immortal by its very nature.”³⁶ This is a very rich passage for understanding Descartes on death. Not only does it complete the argument for the immortality of the soul, it reveals some of the crucial pieces of the puzzle about the death of the body. In keeping with my aim concerning the materialist account of death, I will put Descartes’ argument for the immortality of the soul to the side, focusing here and now on the puzzle that is his concept of the body’s death.

Concerning Descartes’ conception of the death of the body, the passage from the Synopsis to the *Meditations* reveals that death befalls particular composite bodies and not body in general. For Descartes, body in general (i.e., bodily substance or corporeal substance at large) is a plenum of created,

³⁴ Synopsis to the *Meditations*, CSM II, p. 10; AT 7:13-14.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 10; AT 7:14.

³⁶ Ibid.

extended, non-thinking substance that makes up the entire material world.³⁷ There is no variation in the material world; all matter is extension, i.e., length, breadth, and depth. Furthermore, all material change is consistent with that extended nature. So, while body in general is changeable into innumerable size, shapes, and motions, none of those changes destroy it. It is still the same material substance persisting through changing modes of extension in the same way that a soul, i.e., an immaterial substance, persists through changing thoughts. In reality, both of the substances in Descartes' metaphysical dualism are naturally indestructible; no natural change destroys either. Simply put, this is because any natural change is in keeping with the substance's nature. As Descartes writes in the passage from the Synopsis quoted above, first, all substances are by their natures incorruptible, and second, "body, taken in the general sense, is a substance, so that it too never perishes."³⁸

However, while there is no natural annihilation and death of bodily substance, Descartes goes on to explain in the rest of the Synopsis passage that a human body *qua* a particular body does perish and die, and that occurs as a result of natural change to the shape and parts of the "certain configuration of limbs and other accidents"³⁹ that make it up. In other words, death is the decomposition of a living body. It is the loss of that particular body's structural integrity. The puzzling question, then, is how that differs from the decomposition of a non-living body. What distinguishes living things from non-living things in Descartes' philosophy such that the former really does live and die, and the latter does not?

In order to appreciate this puzzle over Descartes' conception of death, we must understand certain aspects of Descartes' philosophy and, in particular, his natural philosophy. Central to Descartes' natural philosophy is his mechanical model of nature. In turn, central to that mechanization of nature is his adamant rejection of explanatory appeals to the presence or powers of immaterial forces to account for the changes and activities that occur in living bodies. He drives that point through in *Treatise on Man*, where he describes numerous operations of the human body as if the body was "nothing but a statue or machine."⁴⁰ From this he then concludes, "In order to explain these functions, then, it is not

³⁷ See *Principles of Philosophy* II.22, CSM I, p. 232; AT 8A:52-53.

³⁸ Synopsis, CSM II, p. 10; AT 7:14.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 99; AT 11:120.

necessary to conceive of this machine as having any vegetative or sensitive soul or other principle of movement and life, apart from its blood and its spirits, which are agitated by the heat of the fire burning continuously in its heart – a fire which has the same nature as all the fires that occur in inanimate bodies.”⁴¹

Descartes’ rejection of non-material causes in the material world follows from his metaphysics of soul-body dualism. Once Descartes severs ties between soul and body, he is left to explain and account for the entire material world solely in terms of the sizes, shapes, and motions of extended matter. So it is that Descartes’ descriptions of the functions of organic bodies often include comparisons to the operations of artificial machines. However, his frequent analogies between the parts and operations of the human body and the parts and operations of artificial machines are no mere illustrative shortcuts. Fundamentally, organic bodies and artificial machines are made out of the same material substance and change in size, shape, and motion in accordance with the same laws of nature.⁴² Without recourse to souls, substantial forms, or non-material essences, Descartes describes the death of an organic body in the same terms that a mechanic describes the breakdown of a machine:

[L]et us note that death never occurs through the absence of the soul, but only because one of the principal parts of the body decays. And let us recognize that the difference between the body of a living man and that of a dead man is just like the difference between, on the one hand, a watch or other automaton (that is, a self-moving machine) when it is wound up and contains in itself the corporeal principle of the movements for which it is designed, together with everything else required for its operation; and, on the other hand, the same watch or machine when it is broken and the principle of its movement ceases to be active.⁴³

The soul is not the cause of death just as it is not the cause of a living body’s activities. Rather, the life and death of an organic body are mechanical events in a complex, composite machine. So it is that Descartes compares the death of a living body to the destruction of a watch: both events are the result of matter in

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 108; AT 11:202.

⁴² As for the source and laws of the motion of matter, Descartes attributes them to God, whose perfection entails immutability and consistency in the laws (*Principles* II.36, CSM I, p. 240; AT 8A:62).

⁴³ *Passions of the Soul* I.6, CSM I, p. 329; AT 11:330-1.

lawful motion. Yet surely—one may want to insist—a human body *really* does die, whereas a watch does not for the watch was never really alive, and thus never really ceased to live.

6. Descartes on Life

The answer to the question, “What is Descartes’ conception of death?” lies in wait of an answer to the question, “What is Descartes’ conception of life?” Indeed, as a natural philosopher and life scientist, Descartes had a deep interest in life phenomena.⁴⁴ He wrote extensively on the functions of organic bodies and had a great interest in medicine, even professing that the aim of his studies was the preservation of health.⁴⁵ The difficulty with the question of what his concept of life is, as Ann Wilbur MacKenzie has correctly pointed out, is that Descartes did not provide a systematic and general analysis of what it is for something to be alive.⁴⁶ What is more, attempts to construct a concept out of his philosophy come up short.

Take Descartes’ most explicit statement on life. In *Passions of the Soul*, he claims that the heat in the heart is the internal source of life and that death is that heat’s extinction.⁴⁷ However, Descartes also claims that heat—which he calls “a fire without light”⁴⁸—is no different in its material substance and lawful motion than any other heat. In that case, the life source in a human body is no different than the motive source in a steam engine or any number of other artificial machines. Hence, the heat in the heart does not differentiate between living and non-living complex bodies. Furthermore, if the distinction is secured by the fact that heat is *in the heart* of living bodies, then plants are not alive. So the puzzle of Descartes’ conception of death deepens without a clear and obvious analysis of life. Motion from an internal heat source is too broad to distinguish living and non-living things, and motion from the heat of the heart is too narrow.

According to Fred Ablondi, the difference for Descartes is in the complexity that living things have—and only living things have—on account of being

⁴⁴ See Detlefsen (2016).

⁴⁵ October 1645, CSMK, p. 275; AT 4:328.

⁴⁶ MacKenzie (1975), pp. 2-3.

⁴⁷ *Passions* I.8, CSM I, p. 331; AT 11:333. See also 5 February 1649, CSMK, p. 366; AT 5:278.

⁴⁸ *Discourse on the Method*, CSM I, p. 134; AT 6:46. In following, he explains that this heat has a “nature...no different from that of the fire which heats hay when it has been stored before it is dry, or which causes new wine to seethe when it is left to ferment from the crushed grapes.”

created by “the hands of God.”⁴⁹ Indeed, it easily seems that Descartes’ conception of life is as simple as origin: artificial, non-living machines are man-made, while living bodies are God-made. Yet that will not do, for God created complex bodies that are not living; thus, the distinction between living and non-living bodies is not secured by origin.⁵⁰ However, Ablondi has a response to that problem. He emphasizes the complexity of living bodies as one that only God can create, and reasons that the living bodies have a complexity that is special in “kind” from non-living bodies.⁵¹

The Synopsis passage quoted above confirms that Descartes conceives of death as a change in kind, that is, as a change from a particular living body composed of extended parts configured in a certain way. In that passage, he describes it as a loss of identity, which suggests that it is the destruction of an individual, a unity. To that point, consider as well Descartes’ description of the human body from the *Passions of the Soul*: “For the body is a unity which is in a sense indivisible because of the arrangement of its organs, these being so related to one another that the removal of any one of them renders the whole body defective.”⁵²

Descartes’ comparison of living bodies and machine bodies provides insight into what bodily unity amounts to for him. A watch, for example, is unified on account of the configuration of its parts that are properly arranged when they fulfill the function of telling time. Until that moment when all the parts come together and tell time, there is no watch, and if those parts were to fall apart, there is no watch; there are parts in both scenarios, but no unified body that is a watch. Following Descartes’ comparison along that point, a living body is a unity of the parts and structures that a body ought to have in order to function as alive. That function unifies, individuates, and is the standard of life and death for living bodies just as the time-telling function of a watch unifies, individuates, and is the standard for whether watches are well-functioning or broken.⁵³ Put thusly, being a living body is a question of functioning as one.

Along this line, MacKenzie renders Descartes’ analysis of life as follows: “x is alive if and only if x has an arrangement of parts which (together with motion)

⁴⁹ Ablondi (1998) quotes Descartes’ use of this phrase in *Discourse on Method* (CSM I, p. 139; AT 6:56) and *Treatise on Man* (CSM I, p. 99; AT 11:120).

⁵⁰ Detlefsen (2016), p. 148.

⁵¹ Ablondi (1998), p. 184.

⁵² CSM I, p. 339; AT 11:351.

⁵³ See Hatfield (1992), p. 361.

enables *x* to execute a certain set of functions, *F*.”⁵⁴ As for exactly which life functions belong to the set of functions proper to living bodies, Descartes does not provide an exact list, and MacKenzie is left to speculate and suggests nutrition, growth, and generation.⁵⁵ To that list, Karen Detlefsen adds that the growth is of bodily transformation, not aggregation, as well as two more life functions: environmental responsiveness and self-maintenance.⁵⁶ The point to emphasize, however, is that whatever the life functions are, those functions unify the parts of the body into one living whole. In other words, so long as it functions as a *living* thing, it is *a* living thing. However, if a complex body does not have the composition for performing those functions, it is not a *living* body. Indeed, it is also not *a* body.

7. Descartes on Corpses

Death, for Descartes, is the end of life, and as we have just seen, the end of life is the cessation of a living body’s well-functioning and, hence, its functional unity. At death, a living body no longer has the complex configuration of parts to fulfill the life functions proper to living things: it ceases to be alive, it dies, and *it*—i.e., the kind of thing with a particular assortment of pieces of matter unified into an individual structure by the common purpose of its parts and structure—ceases to exist.

What exists after death is not the well-functioning unified body that lived. That perishes when a living body loses its functional identity on account of a defect in its composition and arrangement of parts. What remains after death is the matter that made up the formerly-living thing. That extension does not go out of existence, so what does it compose after death? Does the extension of the formerly-living body compose a new particular body? Specifically, is the corpse a kind of unified body?

There are many reasons within Descartes’ philosophy that lead to the conclusion that what exists after death is not *a* body, i.e., that corpses are not *things* in a metaphysically robust sense. For one, there are no longer life functions that individuate the corpse matter as a single composite body. For another, the matter that survives death is the same extended substance that

⁵⁴ MacKenzie (1975), p. 7.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 8.

⁵⁶ Detlefsen (2016), pp. 151-3.

composes the entire material universe, so a unique type of matter does not individuate it. For yet another, there is no soul or substantial form that informs and individuates the material of a corpse. And finally, the entire material universe is an expanse of extension. Where there is length, breadth, and depth—in short, where there is space, even so-called “empty” space—there is bodily substance. In Descartes’ words, “the nature of a body is exactly the same as that constituting the nature of a space.”⁵⁷ As a consequence, there are no vacuums or gaps that separate out the shape and motions of a corpse from the matter and modes of extension in general. Rather, the matter that once composed the organism is absorbed at death into the plenum of bodily substance in general. Nevertheless, Descartes does write of “dead bodies.”⁵⁸ Perhaps, then, *dead* is a functional kind like *living* is. However, it is not obvious that Descartes believes that it is, reserving his talk of “functions” and “uses” for living and non-living automata, which corpses are not.⁵⁹ Yet, a closer look at Descartes on functions reveals that, even then, it is still just talk. That is, for Descartes, functional kinds are not real kinds. That is to say that there is, properly speaking, no such thing as dead *or* living bodies for Descartes—at least not in a metaphysically robust sense.

8. Death as the Cessation of Extrinsically Denominated Functions

The puzzle of Descartes’ conception of death reaches greater perplexing depths in light of his remarks in the Sixth Meditation about the nature of a well-functioning body. It is a long, yet important passage, worth quoting at length.

[A] clock constructed with wheels and weights observes all the laws of its nature just as closely when it is badly made and tells the wrong time as when it completely fulfils the wishes of the clockmaker. In the same way, I might consider the body of a man as a kind of machine equipped with and made up of bones, nerves, muscles, veins, blood and skin in such a way that, even if there were no mind in it, it would still perform

⁵⁷ *Principles* II.11, CSM I, p. 227; AT 8A:46.

⁵⁸ For example, *Passions* I.5, CSM I, p. 329; AT 11:330.

⁵⁹ For an insightful analysis of the medical context of Descartes’ teleological language, see Distelzweig (2015).

all the same movements as it does in those cases where movement is not under the control of the will or, consequently, of the mind. I can easily see that if such a body suffers from dropsy, for example, and is affected by the dryness of the throat which normally produces in the mind the sensation of thirst, the resulting condition of the nerves and other parts will dispose the body to take a drink, with the result that the disease will be aggravated. Yet this is just as natural as the body's being stimulated by a similar dryness of the throat to take a drink, when there is no such illness and the drink is beneficial. Admittedly, when I consider the purpose of the clock, I may say that it is departing from its nature when it does not tell the right time; and similarly when I consider the mechanism of the human body, I may think that, in relation to the movements which normally occur in it, it too is deviating from its nature if the throat is dry when drinking is not beneficial to its continued health. But I am well aware that 'nature' as I have just used it has a very different significant from 'nature' in the other sense. As I have just used it, 'nature' is simply a label which depends on my thought; it is quite extraneous to the things to which it is applied, and depends simply on my comparison between the idea of a sick man and a badly-made clock, and the idea of a healthy man and a well-made clock. But by 'nature' in the other sense I understand something which is really to be found in the things themselves; in this sense, therefore, the term contains something of the truth.⁶⁰

In this passage, Descartes explains that the nature of a human body is the same as the nature of a clock. Specifically, both are, metaphysically speaking, really just matter in lawful motion. Now, we may *say* that the nature of a clock is to tell time and, accordingly, we may *say* that a clock functions well when it tells the time accurately. Likewise, a clock is broken when it does not; but in truth, the time-telling function of a clock is just a label that we ascribe to certain shapes and motions in the material world. As Descartes explains, the functional nature of a timepiece is nothing but an extrinsic denomination. The real, intrinsic nature of a clock is its metaphysical nature as an extended body; it is the material substance that composes a portion of the material universe that we call

⁶⁰ *Meditations*, CSM II, 58-9; AT 7:84-85.

“a clock.” However, that extrinsically determined portion of matter is not really directed at the goal of telling the time.⁶¹ In reality, it is nothing but matter that moves in accordance with the laws of motion. While we may *think* that the structure and movements of a working clock function well, and that the structure and movements of a broken clock malfunction, in essence there is no difference. In accordance with their bodily nature, a broken clock obeys the same laws of motion as a working clock. So it is with the health of a human body. According to Descartes, we may *say* that the human body is healthy or sick when it does not function the way that it should. Likewise, we may *say* that it is alive and running well, or is dying and breaking down, or is broken down and dead, but the functional nature implied in these claims is nothing but a label that we ascribe to the human body. In reality, the human body—like a clock—is matter in lawful motion. There is no particular size, shape, or speed of motion that the material substance of the human body ought to take; there are no functions that it ought to perform, and there are no life functions that properly belong to it. The measure of the human body’s well-functioning, well-being, malfunctions, and so on, is a standard of our creation and not a nature that belongs to it intrinsically.⁶² The human body, too, is nothing but matter that moves in accordance with the laws of motion, and it obeys those laws whether it is moving in a way that we call healthy or sick, or what we call alive or dead.

Thus, for Descartes, *living* is not a real functional kind for bodies. In other words, life is not an intrinsic denomination of bodies. Rather, the intrinsic denomination of bodies—*all* bodies—is extension. That is true of what we call living bodies and what we call corpses. Consequently, death is not a change in real kind. Rather, life and death are just our labels for classifying bodies.⁶³ They are not concepts that pick out anything within a metaphysics of matter in lawful

⁶¹ Detlefsen (2016), p. 161.

⁶² Detlefsen disagrees and argues that wholly material Cartesian bodies can have derivative natures that include internal ends; however, she also recognizes metaphysical and epistemological hurdles to this interpretation of Descartes’ conception of living bodies ([2016], see pp. 154-163).

⁶³ Manning acknowledges but also challenges the reading of “extrinsic denominations” as arbitrary and extraneous labels, calling it a “serious misinterpretation” ([2013], p. 252). Through an enlightening analysis of the Meditation Six passage on extrinsic denominations and the human body’s health, Manning argues that the human body’s corruptible nature is *not* without foundation (p. 252). The foundation, Manning contends, is the intrinsically denominated “nature” of the human being as composite of mind and body (pp. 258-9). However, the fact that the soul is part of the ontology that grounds extrinsic denominations on Manning’s interpretation is sufficient to exclude his interpretation as a foundation for the concept of life within an austere materialist metaphysics and to serve the purpose of this paper.

motion. There simply is no grounding for them in such a metaphysics.

Such is the ultimate outcome of the puzzle over Descartes' conception of death: there is no death. His metaphysics of matter precludes that any body ever really dies, for to die is to cease to live, and no body ever really lives. In a recent paper, Barnaby Hutchins makes this point thusly: "There is nowhere in Descartes' ontology for a concept of life to reside."⁶⁴ As the Sixth Meditation passage reveals, the life functions are merely ascribed by us to certain complex bodies, which means that, in fact, living bodies are not really individual bodies with life functions proper to them at all. Instead, the functional unity of their parts is based on natures and purposes that we assign to the material world. For Descartes, there are no true living bodies; thus, there are no living bodies that truly die.

9. Descartes' Lesson

In order to appreciate how Descartes' puzzle and resulting conception of the death of a living body-machine pertains to the contemporary attempts at defining death, consider these points of agreement between Descartes and Rosenberg. First, for both, there is no difference in the "stuff" that comprises a living body and the "stuff" that comprises any other body. Bodies are simply material things. Second, Descartes—like Rosenberg—rejects the presence or powers of souls in order to explain the operations of living bodies. Third, both conceive of death as the cessation of life functions.

Putting these considerations about Descartes' philosophy together, the lesson about defining death is this: in a single substance materialist ontology, no living thing really dies because no thing is ever really *a living thing* in the first place. It is a lesson to accompany Descartes' legacy for his mechanistic philosophy of nature. That makes it a legacy that Rosenberg—or, more generally, anyone who analyzes death within a materialist framework—should agree with or, at the very least, seriously contemplate before assuming that the puzzle over the concept of death is death's enigmatic nature, as opposed to its ontologically baseless non-nature.

For example, the debate over the possibility of surviving death would end

⁶⁴ Hutchins (2016), p. 157. Hutchins argues that MacKenzie, Ablondi, and Detlefsen are wrong to attempt to reduce Descartes' concept of life because it is rather the case that Descartes "dissolves" or eliminates the concept of life.

very quickly on the point that there is no living thing in the first place, for then there is no *thing* that either terminates at death or survives death. Yet both sides of that debate tend to focus on the question of the identity of the corpse. Survivalists argue that the corpse is identical to the formerly-living biological organism, whereas terminators argue that the corpse is a new thing that came from the formerly living biological organism, but both sides simply accept—without question—that some living, material, composite, biological being exists prior to death. Nevertheless, the debate would very well come to an end if there were no argument to resist Descartes' lesson that nothing happens to a living thing when it dies because the living thing never existed.

A pointed case against Descartes' lesson actually comes from a strikingly similar view. Here is Eric Olson's description of that view:

[There is a view] that strictly speaking there are no corpses, but only particles arranged corporeally: 'corpse eliminativism.' Talk of corpses is no more than a convenient fiction. Talk of corpses persisting through time is a fiction too. We can say that a corpse gets smaller when a hand falls off, or we can say that it becomes disconnected; but if there are no corpses, neither statement will be strictly true. They will be merely useful but loose ways of a situation that contains only particles.⁶⁵

Why not follow Descartes' lesson and extend the main thrust of "corpse eliminativism" to "living-body eliminativism"? Olson anticipates that suggestion and has this rebuttal: "Living organisms are metaphysically better behaved than nonliving things. That's why Aristotle and others combine something like the life account with the view that the only real composite objects are living organisms. (Van Inwagen, 1990, is a detailed defense of this view.)"⁶⁶ While a full defense of living-body eliminativism would go beyond the parameters of this paper in which the purpose has been to establish the history and relevance of the view, a couple of brief remarks on Olson's objection to living-body eliminativism are fitting. First, to appeal to Aristotle's conception of living beings is to reintroduce the natural teleology that Descartes intended to replace with his mechanical philosophy that is free of the souls and teleological

⁶⁵ Olson (2013), p. 94. See also van Inwagen (1990).

⁶⁶ Olson (2013), p. 94.

functions of Aristotelian physics.⁶⁷ Simply put, if one accepts Descartes' move to banish appeals to Aristotelian souls, final causes, and hylomorphic substances from natural philosophy, then one should be unmoved by Olson's appeal to Aristotle's conception of life as a point against living-body eliminativism. Of note in Descartes' favour is Feldman's conclusion upon his consideration of Aristotle's analysis of life that "[i]t seems clear, then, that Aristotle's version of the life-functional approach suffers from some serious problems,"⁶⁸ and Rosenberg's denouncement of the "classical failing" of postulating mysterious special entities as the only explanations for certain abilities.⁶⁹ So if not for Aristotle's reasons, what reasons are there for the view that the only real composite beings are living beings? As per Olson's notation, Peter van Inwagen does indeed provide a detailed and sustained defense of this view in his book *Material Beings*; however, that defense—and by van Inwagen's own admission, nonetheless—lacks strength. Van Inwagen relies largely on intuitions about certain puzzles and paradoxes involving material beings, and when he does attempt to prove by argument his thesis that the only real composite beings are living beings, he readily admits that the arguments he provides are "rather weak."⁷⁰ Notably, Descartes' philosophy factors into that argument in that van Inwagen appeals to Descartes' *cogito* to establish the existence of the self, albeit with a very different nature than what Descartes argues for. Van Inwagen adamantly denies the immateriality and simplicity of the Cartesian thinking thing, but nonetheless shares Descartes' intuition that the self exists as a single, unified thing. From there, van Inwagen gives no acknowledgement or thought to Descartes' problematization of a materialist concept of life before he proceeds to his statement "that what binds [the simples that compose me into a single being] is that their activities constitute *a life*" and, ultimately, to his question-begging conclusion that there are no composite material objects other than organisms.⁷¹

There is a longstanding philosophical tradition that associates being with living, but it is not easy to prove as much. As such, it is not easy to categorically reject Descartes' lesson of living-body eliminativism. However, the first step towards either rejecting it or defending it begins with acknowledging it. That has

⁶⁷ Garber (2002), p. 200. As Alison Simmons puts the point, "Descartes rejects the teleology of the Aristotelian tradition in no uncertain terms" (2001), p. 52.

⁶⁸ Feldman (1992), p. 31.

⁶⁹ Rosenberg (1998), p. 161. See p. 344 above.

⁷⁰ Van Inwagen (1990), p. 115.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 121, emphasis added.

been the purpose of this paper.

10. Conclusion

My goal here has not been to arrive at a final definition of death or to insist on a conception of death in order to settle debates about what happens at death. Rather, my purpose has been to show that these attempts need to consider the possibility that there may be no metaphysical foundation for a reality of life and death. On that point, Descartes' philosophy is instructive. As I have shown in this paper, if we follow through with Descartes' philosophy from the dualism of mind and body to the mechanization of life, death really is *nothing* to no *thing*. Moreover, I do not conclude that this realization is necessarily devastating. Among other things, it should not necessarily abolish any moral concerns about living and dying. However, what I do contend is that the ontology of functional unity must be accounted for in a conceptual analysis of death and, consequently, in what is at stake in the concept of death. Contemporary scholarship on the philosophy of death would do well to take notice of that lesson.⁷²

⁷² A previous draft of this paper was presented at the 2013 meeting of the Three Rivers Philosophy Conference at the University of South Carolina, and I thank the audience members for the valuable discussion and feedback; in particular, I am grateful for the written comments of Kathy Behrendt, Stephen Campbell, and Michael Nair-Collins following the conference.

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