Almog's Descartes

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Much of the case Joseph Almog attempts to build in his book *What Am I*?: *Descartes and the Mind-Body Problem*[1] rests on his interpretations of two passages from Descartes (and Arnauld). In what follows, I will argue that both of these interpretations are mistaken.[2] I will also argue that when correctly understood, these passages no longer support the arguments Almog bases upon them.

I

In the first chapter of *What Am I*?, Almog attempts to spell out Descartes' best route to the mind-body distinction, the thesis that the mind and body are substances that can exist without each other. The proof for the real distinction which Almog defends as Descartes' best hope is one which argues that it is possible for Descartes' mind (DM) to exist even if there were no bodies whatsoever, *and it is possible specifically because it is conceivable*. As such, the proof runs from conceivability to possibility, or, as Almog puts it, it appeals to the primacy of conceivability.[3]

It was to this proof and its dependence on the primacy of conceivability that Antoine Arnauld, in the Fourth Set of Objections to the *Meditations*, had proposed the following counter-example:

[1] Joseph Almog, *What Am I*?: *Descartes and the Mind-Body Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Future references will be cited in the text by page number.

[2] I understand that Almog is not trying to do the work of a historian of philosophy. That said, there is a responsibility when treating the work of a historical figure to strive to interpret the passages as the author had intended them, at least if one is attempting to arrive at what Descartes really said, and not what-I-would-have-said-if-I-were-Descartes. The subtitle of this work would indicate that it is Descartes' position for which we are searching.

[3] The sense of 'possible' which Almog supposes at work in the passages he examines from Descartes (and Arnauld) is a relatively weak one: to say that F is a possible property of x is to say that F figures into a consistent story about x.

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> Suppose someone knows for certain that the angle in a semi-circle is a right angle, and hence that the triangle formed by this angle and the diameter of the circle is right-angled. In spite of this, he may doubt, or even not yet have grasped for certain, that the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the squares of the other two sides; indeed, he may even deny this if he is misled by some fallacy… Now although the man in the example clearly and distinctly knows that the triangle is right-angled, he is wrong to think that the aforesaid relationship between the squares on the sides does not belong to the nature of the triangle. Similarly, although I clearly and distinctly know my nature to be something that thinks, may I, too, not perhaps be wrong in thinking that nothing else belongs to my nature apart from the fact that I am a thinking thing? Perhaps the fact that I am an extended thing may also belong to my nature. (CSM II, 141–3)[4]

So we have a man who is conceiving of a right triangle (T) while denying the Pythagorean theorem (P) of it; what Arnauld is asking is whether claiming to conceive DM without DB (Descartes' body) might not be an analogous instance. Making use of a more contemporary example, Almog asks whether what Descartes claims to accomplish in his proof from conceivability is akin to someone's claiming to conceive of water existing on a planet without oxygen. It can't really be water, but rather must be something else that she is conceiving to be in the rivers and coming out of the faucets, something which only *seems* to be water. If the cases are analogous, then it would not really be DM of which Descartes is conceiving to exist without DB, but something else, something similar to but other than DM, of which he is conceiving. Arnauld can agree with Descartes that whatever is really conceivable is really possible, but the triangle example signals his rejection of what Almog labels the real conceivability projection: what we seem to conceive of x, we really conceive of x. This is in contrast to Descartes, who according to Almog is committed to there being 'no gap between seeming to conceive and succeeding in doing so' (19).[5]

I think the message Arnauld intended to be taken from the triangle example was something different than Almog believes. The

[4] References to Descartes' writings are to *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols., trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny (vol. 3 only) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985–91).

[5] Another way to think of it is that for Arnauld, the primacy belongs to possibility: the way to avoid the threat posed by the triangle example is to claim that x is conceivable iff x is possible.

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point is that the man in that case, while certain *that* he is perceiving a right-angled triangle, does not possess a clear distinct understanding of right-angled triangles, for if he did, he would see that it is not possible for T to exist without P. Arnauld's objection to Descartes' argument thus is not that he (Descartes) is conceiving of *something other* than DM, but that *it is possible that he is not conceiving of DM clearly and distinctly, despite his feeling that he is*. That this was Arnauld's point is clear from his expressed worry that 'there is a danger that someone will suspect that my knowledge of myself as a thinking thing does not qualify as knowledge of a being of which I have a complete and adequate conception; it seems instead that I conceive of it only inadequately' (CSM II, 143). Note that Arnauld does not say that someone may accuse him of conceiving of something other than himself as a thinking thing (AM) when he claims he is conceiving of AM; what worries him is that someone will accuse him of not having a true understanding of AM and that he will not be able to give satisfactory assurance that he does. Again, Arnauld's point is not that the man in his example is conceiving of something other than a right triangle, that is, something other than T, when he claims to be conceiving T without P. Rather, the point is that due to an inadequate understanding of T, he thought he conceived something about T—that it lacked P—that he could not have conceived of T, as it is not possible. What we have, then, is not a case of a person conceiving of x' when he thinks he is conceiving of x; it is a case of having an obscure and confused conception of x which, as materially false, precipitates a false judgment (viz., that T can exist without P).

How does this effect Almog's argument? On his reading, what Descartes requires to adequately respond to Arnauld's challenge (that is, what Almog claims to be Arnauld's challenge) is what Almog calls a 'conceptual fix'. What he needs is a sign of some sort which assures him he is conceiving of x and not something that merely seems like x. To find this epistemological assurance, Almog suggests we turn to metaphysics: 'In the quest for natural constraints on what it takes to have a conceptual fix on a given object x, we look for metaphysically distinguished features of x' (29). Arnauld's proposal was to see if the putative x of which I am conceiving possesses all the necessary features which x's must have to be x's. But this will not do, as there are infinitely many necessary features of a given right-angled triangle or the number 4 that do not articulate what kind of subject they are (which is, after all, what we are trying to determine about the 'I'). For Descartes, the conceptual fix is provided by a complete idea, or better, a clear understand-

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ing of a complete thing. What is it to have an idea of a complete thing? Again, for Arnauld, it is when our story of *x* respects all of *x*'s necessary properties. For Descartes, this demands too much. But at the other extreme, we do not want a 'mere abstraction', what Almog refers to as fixing on the 'backside' of *x*.

So what will provide the happy medium? Almog's advice is that:

> we must remind ourselves that we are dealing with a *phenomenological* question: What captures best our sense that the story (conceiving) is still about the purported subject *x*? To this kind of question, we should not expect strict 'algorithmic' rules. We test various candidates and find out—by trial and error—what kind of features get our intuitions satisfied. Descartes' answer, as I read it, is this: We may very well subtract necessary features and still be speaking of the purported subject. But subtract what-*x*-is, and gone with it is *x* itself. (34).

One problem with this answer is that different peoples' intuitions will vary (consider what Nixon cannot lose and still be what-he-is), and we will then find ourselves in need of rules of some sort if we are to be sure we have succeeded in conceiving of *x*. But let us ignore this—let us say all of our intuitions agree. How can we use these intuitions to get the real distinction? According to Almog:

> DM is distinct from DB. How so? What-DM-is is a *thinking thing*; what-DB-is is an *extended thing*. Thus DM is *by what it is (nature, essentially) thinking*. DB is not. Hence, by the distinctness of discernables, DM and DB are two subjects… We secure the real distinction: Even if it is not really possible, it is logically consistent with what DM is, being a thinking thing, that is exists (i) without any extended thing or (ii) without the specific extended thing, DB. (38)

But on the reading of Arnauld's challenge for which I argued above, we are not home free—there's still the question: could not thinking necessarily involve extension, and I just do not see it because my idea of myself as a thinking thing is confused? On Almog's reading, the difference between what Arnauld is demanding and what Descartes is providing is that 'Descartes merely projects a coherent story that might well represent no real possibility. Whereas Arnauld insists on real possibility of disembodied existence for a real distinction between DM and DB, Descartes requires merely separation in a coherent story (model)' (38–9). But if this is so, does it get Descartes what Almog wants from him, namely, an answer to 'What am I?' Or is it just a coherent story about what I might be (but

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might necessarily *not* be—we cannot say for sure; the story is coherent, but possibly necessarily false)? Arnauld's point seems to remain: like the person who did not see that P belonged to T, perhaps we do not see that thinking requires extension even though we (think we can) conceive it independently of extension. We may be sure of *what* we are conceiving, but we cannot know if there is some F essential to what *x* is but which we do not recognize as a property of it. In sum, what Almog claims to have shown is how we can know we are conceiving of *x* and not merely something that seems to be *x*; what we need—the question which Arnauld's example raised—was how, *despite being certain that I am conceiving of x* (and not merely something that seems like *x*), I can know that I have a complete understanding of *x*, one which makes available to inspection any and all of *x*'s necessary properties.

II

The second passage critical to Almog's overall project is taken from a letter written from Descartes to the Jesuit Denis Mesland (9 February 1645). Its importance lies in the work it does in Almog's argument that the dualism which we can achieve as a result of the proof for the real distinction given in Chapter One and which we should prefer on account of its philosophical soundness is what he calls 'integrative dualism'. This dualism is in contrast to 'separatist dualism.' Separatist dualism requires that 'it is really possible for DM to exist without DB; in turn, it is really possible for DB to exist without DM. A real distinction requires the real possibility of separate existence' (61). Integrative dualism, on the other hand, respects above all the fact that 'we are dealing with a man's mind and body' (71). This emphasis on the priority of the union, the human being René Descartes (RD), leads the integrative dualist to deny that DM and RD are existentially distinct—existentially, they depend on each other. Constructing the argument that integrative dualism is preferable to separatist dualism leads Almog to investigate what Descartes understood the human body to be. It is in this context that the letter to Mesland is discussed.

The first relevant passage from the letter begins as follows:

> I consider what exactly is the body of a man, and I find that the word 'body' is very ambiguous. When we speak of a body in general we mean a determinant part of matter, a part of the quantity of which the universe is composed. In this sense, if the

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> smallest amount of that matter were removed, we would judge without more ado that the body was smaller and no longer complete; and if any particle of the matter were changed, we would at once think that the body was no longer quite the same, no longer numerically the same. (CSM III, 242–3)

Here we are given a purely volumetric account of the identity criterion for bodies: in a strict sense, if there is any change in the amount of matter present—a branch snapped from a tree or a feather lost by a bird—we have a new body before us. What matters on this account is the *quantity* of matter present. But this account is in contrast to a remark Descartes had made earlier in this same letter:

> [W]e can say that the Loire is the same river as it was ten years ago, although it is no longer the same water, and perhaps there is no longer a single part of the earth which surrounded that water. (CSM III, 242)

Here the criterion for identity of bodies seems to include a functional element and allows for a gradual replacement of matter over time. And if we turn to what Descartes writes in his *Principles of Philosophy*, we find a third account:

> By 'one body' or 'one piece of matter' I mean whatever is transferred at a given time, even though this may in fact consist of many parts which have different motions relative to each other. (CSM I, 233)

I think what is important to our present concern is that these passages do not reflect competing accounts of how bodies are individuated, but rather mark Descartes' recognition that different understandings of what counts as 'the same body' are needed for different contexts. In the strict sense, no body remains numerically the same if the amount of matter present increases or decreases. But we may not be concerned with this strict sense. If, for example, we agree to meet by this tree tomorrow, I will not be confused if I arrive to find that a leaf has fallen from the tree—I will still expect you to meet me at this spot, that is, by 'the same' tree by which we agreed to meet. It is this looser sense of 'the same' that Descartes has in mind in the passage about the Loire. In contrast, if we are doing physics, it is the technical understanding of 'the same body' in terms of motion which we need to observe.

To these three understandings we can add a fourth; as opposed to all other bodies, human bodies have their own distinct criterion for sameness. Again from the letter to Mesland:

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> But when we speak of the body of a man, we do not mean a determinate part of matter, or one that has a determinate size; we mean simply the whole of the matter which is united with the soul of that man. And so, even though the matter changes, and its quantity increases or decreases, we still believe it is the same body, numerically the same body, so long as it remains joined and substantially united with the same soul; and we think that this body is whole and entire so long as it has in itself all the dispositions required to preserve that union... I do not think that there is any particle of our body which remains numerically the same for a single moment, although our body, *qua* human body, remains always numerically the same so long as it is united to the same soul. In that sense, it can even be called indivisible; because if the arm or the leg of a man is amputated, we think that is only in the first sense of 'body' that his body is divided—we do not think that a man who has lost an arm or a leg is less a man than any other. Altogether then, provided that a body is united with the same rational soul, we always take it as the body of the same man, whatever matter it may be and whatever quantity or shape it may have; and we count it as the whole and entire body, provided that it needs no additional matter in order to remain joined to this soul. (CSM III, 242–3)

This reflects the ambiguity Descartes had noted in the first passage considered above: as opposed to the strict volumetric account, human bodies, not *qua* bodies but *qua* human bodies, can suffer the loss in the amount of matter of which they are composed and still be the same human body, as long as that body remains united to the same soul.

That these are not four competing criteria—that it is not that one is correct and the other three wrong—but rather reflect how given the context, what notion of sameness matters to us will change has implications for Almog's interpretation of the letter. On Almog's reading of these passages, Descartes presents us with two competing criteria for an object to remain what it is over time. One is the strict volumetric account according to which any change in the amount of matter constitutes a distinct, new being, while the other, the functional account, is 'a second conception' which 'lays out a substantially different metaphysics of objects in general' (76). The important difference which Almog sees between these two conceptions is that the former considers DB generically, simply as a body whose essence is extension (or, in Almog's terminology, what-it-is is an extended thing); the latter considers the kind of thing DB is, namely, the body of a man (or, what-it-is is a human body).

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Almog goes on to argue (the details need not concern us) that the generic conception of body, when coupled with a generic conception of mind, will not allow for endurance. Thus to get an enduring self we need to go with the conception which recognizes a 'full-blooded' or 'robust' essence of DB (and DM),[6] for there is, Almog tells us, 'no endurance without robust whatness' (90). Further, the dualism which fits this conception, inasmuch as it holds that 'the existence of the body is subordinated to that of the man' (78), is integrative dualism. The problem with this, however, is that it supposes that we need to choose between the accounts presented in the letter: it supposes that we must either adopt a generic—what I have called a volumetric—account or a full-blooded—what I have called functional—account which respects the kind of thing (human body, river, piece of wax[7]) that we are considering. But as I tried to show above, Descartes is not giving us an either/or. His point is that whether or not we are correct in claiming that we have the same body before us depends on the concerns we have. If my question concerns the physics of a body—how its elasticity, for example, will affect its movement following a collision of such and such a force—I would individuate the body in terms of motion. If talking with friends, I might very well adopt a functional, as opposed to the volumetric, account. For example, I will talk of my dog as the same dog I had yesterday, despite the fact that she received a haircut this morning. If the situation involves moral or legal issues—are you the same person who committed the crime—Descartes would have us go with the 'same soul-same body' account. (You could not claim that it was not you who committed the crime because you had a tooth pulled since the time that the crime occurred.) Once the letter is read in this way, we are no longer forced, for the reasons Almog claims, to accept the one account of sameness that supports integrative dualism. In other words, there may be grounds to accept integrative dualism, but it cannot be accepted as a Cartesian position on the basis of the letter to Mesland.

[6] Almog thinks that we need to have the same account for DB and DM lest we lose symmetry. I hold that we do not in fact have symmetry between mind and body; what breaks the symmetry is the fact that for Descartes body is indefinitely divisible while the mind is simple and incorruptible. But this point is not directly relevant to the present issue.

[7] Though not related to the present discussion, I do not think, *pace* Almog, that the wax example is meant to serve as a model for investigating what the mind is. There are three lessons which Descartes takes from the example of the piece of wax, but none of them are that we now have a method for discovering the essence of mind.

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Let me make clear that I understand that Almog is not attempting to offer '"the one and only interpretation"' (xviii), nor to speak for, as he puts it, the 'real' Descartes (ibid.). But at the same time, he does believe that his 'task is to understand Descartes' (90), which I take to mean understanding the views Descartes actually held. My claim is that one cannot argue on Descartes' behalf for the answer to the question 'What Am I?' which Almog gives, once the two passages examined here have been understood as their authors intended them to be.

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