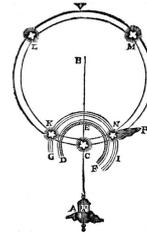


Les Archives du

Séminaire Descartes

*Nouvelles recherches sur le cartésianisme
et la philosophie moderne*



Samedi 14 décembre 2013, ENS

Descartes et la pensée de la chair, autour de l'ouvrage de Jean-Luc Marion : *Sur la pensée passive de Descartes* (PUF, 2013)

Daniel GARBER

It is an honor and a pleasure to be here today to discuss this remarkable new book by JLM. It is not a surprise to have a new and wonderful book by Marion. That has happened with remarkable frequency. But it is a special pleasure to me that he has returned to Descartes, the philosopher with whom he was most closely associated when we first met in the mid-1980s. As usual, in this new book, Marion allows us to see familiar texts through a new lens, through a metaphysical prism, as it were, and shows us the variety of colors that lie hidden in texts that we have read time and again.

In this new book, Marion is focusing on human mind and its passivity, that is, its capacity for sensation. And what he shows us is that the passivity of the human mind brings along with it something else, the human body, or better, my body, *meum corpus*. Being united with a body is a condition of the passivity of mind, Marion argues: without my body, I am not me, a human mind. [211]

Marion is interested in the mind as it is united with its body, what Anglophone philosophers call the “embodied mind”. And he is interested in drawing out the consequences of this for mind, for body and for their composite. There are important questions that one can raise on both sides of the divide, about mind and about body. Most strikingly about mind, I wonder what Marion’s reading means for the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. The human soul certainly survives the death of the body in one sense. But if Marion is right, what survives is not fully human for Descartes: it lacks passivity, it lacks sensation, properties characteristic of us as human beings. But I won’t pursue that line of discussion. My main interest is less in the mind than in the body, mine and others. What interests me especially is how Marion’s reading of Descartes understands the special body that is my flesh,

meum corpus, the body united with my mind, and how that special body is related to the world of other bodies in which it finds itself.

In the book, Marion makes a number of very important claims about my mind and my body, *meum corpus*, *ma chair*. Marion claims that the existence of my body and its union with mind is assumed from the beginning of the metaphysical project of the *Meditations*, and never really called into question. In particular, he argues, in a very surprising way, the existence of my body is presupposed in the proof for the existence of the external world in Meditation VI. And so, in that way, the existence of *other* bodies presupposes the existence of *my* body. In this way, the doubt in the *Meditations* doesn't extend to my body, but only to other bodies. Furthermore, he argues, there are important ways in which my body stands outside the laws of nature that govern other bodies: my body is, as Spinoza might say, *imperium in imperium*. Furthermore, he claims, my body, insofar as it is joined to my mind, is indivisible, and, in fact, it seems, non-extended: "*ce corps [c'est-à-dire, meum corpus] doit s'interpréter lui-même selon les naturae simplicissimae intellectuelles et non pas matérielles, sans recourir à l'étendue, la figure et le mouvement.*" [160] Finally, my body detached from my mind will remain a substance, but « sans unité parce que sans union à un *mens*." [212] In short, Marion makes a radical distinction between my body and body in general: by virtue of being united with my mind, my body is has a special status that differentiates it from all other bodies in the material world.

I don't want to challenge Marion's thesis about the passivity of mind, or about the special role that my body plays in the phenomenology of mind. But I wonder if he isn't drawing too sharp a distinction between my body and the rest of the material world. For Descartes, is my body that different from the rest of the material world?

Let me begin with the question of the laws of nature: is my body exempt from the laws of nature? Yes, and no. Marion cites my discussion of mind and body and the laws of nature in his book. [141-143] There is a standard view about Descartes that most commentators get from Leibniz. Descartes, of course, held that the quantity of motion in the world is conserved by God, as part of his conservation of the world as a whole through his doctrine of continual recreation. Now, if mind can act on body through volition, as when I raise my arm or throw a ball, it would seem that the action of mind could change the total quantity of motion in the world, and thus cause a violation of that conservation principle. And so, Leibniz claims, Descartes held that mind can act on body only by changing the direction of motion in the world, but not by changing the speed of bodies. Since Descartes' conservation law doesn't involve direction but only the magnitude of speed, this would allow mind to act on body without violating the conservation principle. But, Leibniz argued, Descartes' conservation law is wrong in that respect: what is conserved is a physical magnitude that

includes direction as well as speed. Leibniz claims that this argues for the superiority of pre-established harmony, which doesn't require any violation of any law of nature. But Leibniz's interpretation of Descartes was wrong: Descartes never held any such theory about how mind acts on body. For Descartes, it does not matter if the action of mind on body through volition causes a change in the quantity of motion. The laws of nature for Descartes are a consequence of God's action of the world through his activity as a *causa secundum esse*, a cause that sustains the world from moment to moment. Because God is immutable, he maintains the same quantity of motion. But human minds are also causes of motion in the world for God. However, we are not *causae secundum esse*: we do not sustain bodies and motion. Furthermore, we are not immutable. So there is no reason why my body cannot add motion to the world.

Does that mean that my body, *meum corpus* stands outside of the laws of nature? In a way, yes: there can be violations of the principle of the conservation of motion in my body. But, at the same time, it doesn't exempt my body from other laws. If you defenestrate my body, even if it is united with my mind, it will fall, just as if you drop a stone. And it will collide with the ground as well, and suffer the consequences in just the same way as my corpse would. Which is to say, my body is exempt from the laws of nature in only the most limited way: I can violate the conservation of quantity of motion when I exercise a volition. But in every other respect, even when united with my mind, my body must obey the same laws that every other body does.

While there is a sense in which it is true to say that my body stands outside the laws of nature, I don't think that there is any sense in which my body is not extended. The crucial text here, which is the ground of Marion's claim, is *Passions de l'âme* § 30. It is in full on your handout, along with the brief passage from Marion's book where he makes this claim. [In this draft PA 30 is at the end of the ms.] This is what Marion writes:

On ne niera pas qu'il serait absurde de prétendre « concevoir la moitié ou le tiers d'une âme, ni quelle étendue elle occupe ». Or le corps des passions (*meum corpus*, « le corps d'un homme ») « n'a aucun rapport à l'étendue, ni aux dimensions, ou autres propriétés de la matière dont le corps est composé, mais seulement à tout l'assemblage des organes », c'est-à-dire, à la disposition de l'organisme permettant à la *cogitatio* de penser passivement ; autrement dit, ce corps doit s'interpréter lui-même selon les *naturae simplicissimae* intellectuelles et non pas matérielles, sans recourir à l'étendue, la figure et le mouvement. [159-60]

Marion is certainly right to claim that my body is unified : « ...il [c'est-à-dire mon corps] est un et en quelque façon indivisible... » [PA 30] But even when united with my mind, my body, *meum corpus* is still extended. What about the

text that Marion cites that seems to say the contrary? The full passage from the sentence Marion cites is this: « ...à cause qu'elle est d'une nature qui n'a aucun rapport à l'étendue ni aux dimensions ou autres propriétés de la matière dont le corps est composé... » It is quite clear here that when he talks about something « ...d'une nature qui n'a aucun rapport à l'étendue ni aux dimensions » he is referring to the *soul*, and *not* to the *body*: “elle” and not “il”. Here is how I read the argument of *Passions de l'âme* 30. Descartes is explaining the sense in which the soul is joined to the body as a whole. He notes first that my body is « un et en quelque façon indivisible à raison de la disposition de ses organes ». That is to say, because I am made up of organs, nerves, blood vessels, which act in consort with one another and form a complex and interconnected system, my body, *meum corpus* is a kind of physical unity. (I should note here that this sense in which my body is a unity is exactly the same sense in which every living animal body is a unity as well: all living animal bodies, human or not, are mechanically unified in this sense.) Descartes then notes that the *soul* « n'a aucun rapport à l'étendue ni aux dimensions ». And so, he concludes, the soul must be related not to this or that part, but only to the totality of the mechanical unity that is the body, « à tout l'assemblage de ses organes ». It is the *mechanical unity* of my extended body that enables Descartes to say that the soul is united to the body as a whole. And though unified, my body, *meum corpus* remains extended, even when united with my soul.

I have offered two arguments for thinking that my body, *meum corpus* is closer to being like other bodies than Marion wants to hold. Though in a way exempt from Descartes' conservation principle, it is only exempt from it in the process of voluntary motion; in every other respect, my body is subject to the same laws of nature that plants, animals, and stones are. And secondly, though my body is a unity, it is still extended and shares all of the other properties with other bodies. But my problem with Marion's reading goes deeper: in emphasizing the difference between my body and other bodies, I think Marion ignores a central theme in Descartes' thought, particularly his biological and medical thought, which is grounded on the conviction that human bodies—including my body—are just like every other physical body.

In the *Traité de l'homme*, Descartes gives an account of the human body, its structure, and how it performs its vital functions (except for thought) in an entirely mechanical way, without any need for a soul. This is how he describes the project in part V of the *Discours de la méthode*:

...je me contentai de supposer que Dieu formât le corps d'un homme, entièrement semblable à l'un des nôtres, tant en la figure extérieure de ses membres qu'en la conformation intérieure de ses organes, sans le composer d'autre matière que de celle que j'avais décrite, et sans mettre en lui, au

commencement, aucune âme raisonnable, ni aucune autre chose pour y servir d'âme végétante ou sensitive, sinon qu'il excitât en son cœur un de ces feux sans lumière ... Car examinant les fonctions, qui pouvaient en suite de cela être en ce corps, j'y trouvais exactement toutes celles qui peuvent être en nous sans que nous y pensions, ni par conséquent que notre âme ... y contribue, et qui sont toutes les mêmes en quoi on peut dire que les animaux sans raison nous ressemblent... [AT VI 45-46]

This, then, is the project of *L'homme* : to show that virtually all of the vital functions of the human body that were thought to require either vegetative or sensitive souls can be explained entirely mechanically, through the disposition of the parts of the body. That is to say, he wants to substitute Cartesian mechanism for Aristotelian vitalism in our understanding of the human body and its vital functions. This is a project that continues throughout Descartes' career, culminating in the unfinished *Description du corps humain* and the projected fifth and sixth parts of the *Principia philosophiae*.

Now, in *L'homme*, Descartes assumes that he is just dealing with the machine of the body, and that the soul will be added later. But even when we consider the living human body, united with a soul, Descartes is quite clear that the vital functions are to be explained in this purely mechanical way. In the *Description* he writes:

...lorsque nous tâchons à connaître plus distinctement notre nature, nous pouvons voir que notre âme, en tant qu'elle est une substance distincte du corps, ne nous est connue que par cela seul qu'elle pense, c'est-à-dire, qu'elle entend, qu'elle veut, qu'elle imagine, qu'elle se ressouvient, et qu'elle sent, parce que toutes ces fonctions sont des espèces de pensées. Et que, puisque les autres fonctions que quelques-uns lui attribuent, comme de mouvoir le cœur et les artères, de digérer les viandes dans l'estomac, et semblables, qui ne contiennent en elles aucune pensée, ne sont que des mouvements corporels.... [AT XI 224-25]

He continues :

Il est vrai qu'on peut avoir de la difficulté à croire, que la seule disposition des organes soit suffisante pour produire en nous tous les mouvements qui ne se déterminent point par notre pensée; c'est pourquoi je tâcherai ici de le prouver, et d'expliquer tellement toute la machine de notre corps, que nous n'aurons pas plus de sujet de penser que c'est notre âme qui excite en lui les mouvements que nous n'expérimentons point être conduits par notre volonté, que nous en avons de juger qu'il y a une âme dans une horloge, qui fait qu'elle montre les heures. [AT XI 226]

This last comparison is important : the vital functions in the human body—in my body, *meum corpus*—are to be explained in exactly the same way that we explain the functioning of a clock.

Now, Marion might attempt to defend his position by distinguishing between *my* body, *meum corpus*, and the *human* body. It is *my* body that is special to me, that bears a special relation to my soul, and not just any other human body, even if it is connected to its own soul. But I'm skeptical that this will help very much. After all, even when my body is united with my soul, my vital functions—the functioning of my heart, my lungs, my stomach—will still be explained in an entirely mechanical way. In this way my body behaves like any other human body, indeed, like any other animal body, even when it is connected with my soul.

The project of explaining the functioning of the human body is one of Descartes' most important projects, and was from his early years up until the end of his life. And it is a project that depends crucially on the assumption that the human body—my body—is exactly like other bodies in the world. It is because my body is exactly like other bodies in the world that I can apply the laws of nature to explaining what goes on in it without appeal to the Aristotelian's principle of life, the vital soul. It is because of this that Descartes can treat the human body as a machine. The human soul is, of course, very important to Descartes: it is what gives us the capacity to think, to reason, and even to sense. It is what differentiates us from other animals and from inanimate nature. But it is also important to Descartes to show what we have in common with animals and especially with inanimate nature. This is central to his rejection of Aristotelian vitalism: the role of vegetative and sensitive souls in governing the vital functions. What is important for Descartes is that the human body, *while* it is a human body, that is *while* it is united with a mind to form a human being, can be treated as one body among others: though it is *meum corpus*, as a living body, it is of a piece with the rest of material nature. This is precisely the genius of Cartesian medicine.

Marion is right to press on the importance for Descartes of the union of the human mind with the human body—of my mind with my body. But I wonder if he separates my body too radically from the rest of nature. In doing so, he may press Descartes too far in the direction of the Aristotelian vitalism that he had so forcefully tried to reject. My body is important to me, and is for me different from all other bodies. But, at the same time, it is important to Descartes that it is also, at the same time, a body like all the others, a body that satisfies the laws of nature to the extent that we can explain its living functions without appeal to a soul or a form.

Passions de l'âme

ARTICLE 30.: *Que l'âme est unie à toutes les parties du corps conjointement.*

Mais pour entendre plus parfaitement toutes ces choses, il est besoin de savoir que l'âme est véritablement jointe à tout le corps, et qu'on ne peut pas proprement dire qu'elle soit en quelque'une de ses parties à l'exclusion des autres, à cause qu'il est un et en quelque façon indivisible, à raison de la disposition de ses organes qui se rapportent tellement tous l'un à l'autre que, lorsque quelqu'un d'eux est ôté, cela rend tout le corps défectueux : Et à cause qu'elle est d'une nature qui n'a aucun rapport à l'étendue ni aux dimensions ou autres propriétés de la matière dont le corps est composé, mais seulement à tout l'assemblage de ses organes. Comme il paraît de ce qu'on ne saurait aucunement concevoir la moitié ou le tiers d'une âme ni quelle étendue elle occupe, et qu'elle ne devient point plus petite de ce qu'on retranche quelque partie du corps, mais qu'elle s'en sépare entièrement lorsqu'on dissout l'assemblage de ses organes.