
Reductionism, eliminativism, and the concept of life in Descartes' biology

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Abstract

Descartes is quite probably the archetypal reductionist of early-modern natural philosophy, and reductionism seems, at first glance, to be especially evident in his biology. He clearly *is* a reductionist about the operations of the body (where muscular movement, vision, the heartbeat, etc. are all reduced to corpuscular mechanics). He may even be a reductionist about the vegetative soul, whose functions he translates almost wholesale into his material account of the body. When it comes to life itself, however, I argue that Descartes is not a reductionist but a certain kind of eliminativist. That is, he does away with any conception of life, and the category is not to be found reflected in his material physiology. There is, though, a strand of secondary literature that looks for just such a reflection, and then attempts to reconstitute a Cartesian concept of life from it (in terms of cardiac heat (Aucante, Bitbol-Hespériès, Hall), necessary and sufficient life functions (Mackenzie), a special kind of organisation (Ablondi), etc.). I show that this is an illegitimate move by arguing that it comes from taking Descartes to be a reductionist about life. When he describes the functions of living bodies purely in terms of the micromechanics of material particles, this is not the same as reducing life itself to those particles; instead, he accounts for each of the functions associated with living bodies on a local level, while allowing any general notion of life to dissolve away.

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