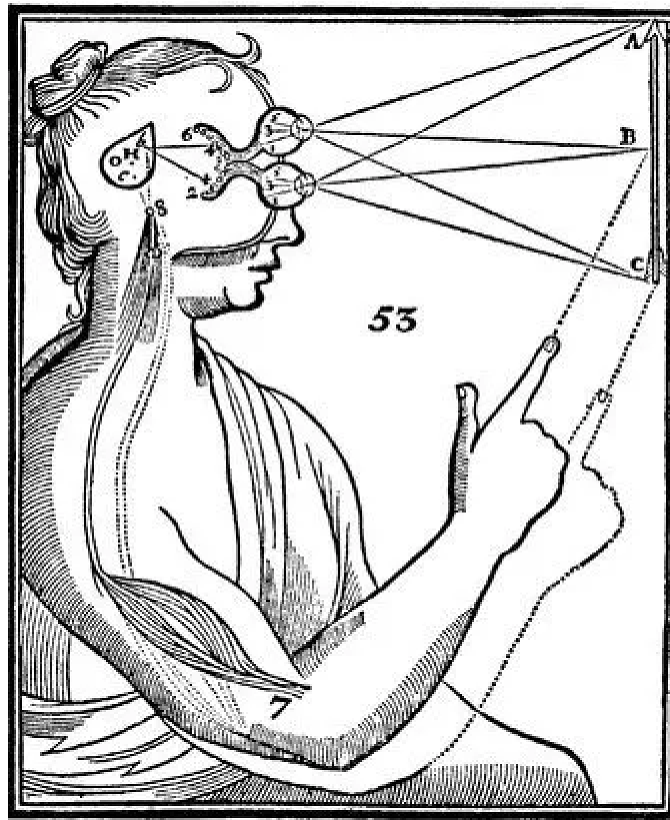
THE MECHANICAL PHILOSOPHY



Diana Rose Newby //

Thirty-two disembodied brains are injected with a blood substitute. Hours after its host body's death, each brain begins showing signs of life.

If this sounds like the stuff of science fiction, it's not without good reason. Last month's news that a Yale University research team had revived cellular function in the brains of dead pigs tapped a vein of body horror in cultural circulation at least since Mary Shelley's 1818 publication of *Frankenstein*.

The senior author of the study was quick, however, to quell both paranoid invocations of zombie apocalypse and objections to the research on ethical grounds. Nenad Sestan, professor of neuroscience at Yale, has insisted that "this is not a living brain, but a cellularly active brain" (CBC Radio). What exactly Sestan meant by "living" was made more clear in remarks from Stephen Latham, director of the Yale Interdisciplinary Center for Bioethics, who served as bioethicist on the Yale research team:

> *"I want to make clear that the organized electrical activity that would be correlated with any kind of consciousness was never detected in the course of the research"* (CBC Radio).

Both Sestan's and Latham's comments, as well as the study's findings, arguably raise more questions than they satisfactorily resolve. As other bioethicists have pointed out in ongoing discussions since the findings were released, this research requires that we "reconsider the definition of death" (Resnick). At the same time, I would add, it demands that we reconsider our definition of life.

Are we only “living” when we have the capacity for “consciousness”? Sestan and Latham seem to take this equivalence for granted. Yet more than a century of scientific research and philosophy has been dedicated to complicating the mind/body dualism on which their thinking is premised.

Early 20th-century developments in modern physics, for instance, were interpreted by many as a direct challenge to the Cartesian opposition of a vital, living mind to the dead, inert matter of the body—a dichotomy long held as the foundation of Western science. In particular, Albert Einstein’s general theory of relativity, first published in 1916, prompted widespread rethinking of this presumed dualism. As British mathematician Bertrand Russell put it at the time, “the physicists” were “making ‘matter’ less and less material,” and the “’stuff’ of the world” was no longer clearly divisible into discrete categories of “mental” and “material” (5, 6).

Rather, according to British metaphysicist Sir Arthur Eddington, who summarized Einstein’s findings for the English-speaking world, mentality and materiality appeared to be one and the same. “All through the physical world,” he wrote, runs “the stuff of our consciousness” (182). What Eddington, Russell and others of their ilk were advocating was a fundamentally monist understanding of the nature of reality: a view of all matter as inherently ‘minded’ to greater or lesser degrees.

Monism was by no means a modern invention, but the century following the publication of Einstein’s theory saw a notable surge of investment in non-dualist science and philosophy. Eminent in this current of thought was the work of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), whose theory of being does away with the categories of mind and matter altogether. For Deleuze and those he has influenced, life is “pure immanence”: it is inherent to the substance of which everything is made, and to be made of this substance to be continually *becoming*—always in motion, always a life (29).

A Deleuzian theory of immanent life has not just ontological but important ethical implications. If we see mind and body as different extensions of the same substance, and the substance itself as universal, then it becomes impossible to create hierarchies of being that privilege conscious ideality over non-conscious materiality (hierarchies that unfailingly rank the human over and above not just the material and the vegetal but also animal life).

And if we see this universal substance as always already alive, imbued with innate vitality, then it becomes untenable to distinguish between a “cellularly active” and a “living brain.” The ongoing metabolic activity in the tissue of these brains can be viewed, I argue, as a marker for immanent life. Such a view necessitates a radical re-thinking of the ableist and anthropocentric assumption that consciousness constitutes life. This re-thinking, in turn, makes possible an ethical reorientation that newly privileges the passive, the immobile and even the apparently dead as forms of becoming in their own right.

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