

Descartes, Individualism, and the Fetal Subject

My sap runs through you and lends you
its soul.
—Sauvage

The premises of the hatching of indi-
vidualism glimmer in the foreshadow-
ing steps taken by those great man-
midwives of personal interiority and
self-consciousness—first Montaigne

and then Descartes, whose dazzling
intuition of the *cogito*, which estab-
lished the human being as a radically
autonomous and separate thinking
subject, has been pertinently identified
as a symbol of Western metaphysical
individualism.
—Laurent

*F*etal iconography is no longer the exclusive domain of anti-abortion propaganda. During the last two decades, the human fetus has become a familiar icon in popular culture, appearing in magazines subscribed to by millions of American families, starring in feature films, and sold alongside plastic cockroaches in the sorts of gag stores germane to college towns (Sofia; Stabile). More seriously, in granting the fetus center stage, ultrasound tests and websites featuring embryonic development alter the way in which women and men think about pregnancy, while the rise of fetology as a medical specialty presents new decisions and obligations for the women in whom fetal “patients” develop (Casper; Duden). Feminists are coming to terms with the ubiquitous fetus; they are increasingly recognizing that it stands for a particular conception of personhood to which abortion politics gives the most pointed expression.

In the political and legal institutions of the United States and of all other Western democracies, people are held accountable for their actions as individuals; they are eligible for rights as individuals, and they merit political representation as individuals. Individuation is what

distinguishes one person from another and what, as a result, guarantees one's political identity, or so reasons the moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum in her apologia of liberalism.

“What does it really mean,” she asks, “to make the individual the basic unit for political thought?” It means, first of all, that liberalism responds sharply to the basic fact that each person has a course from birth to death that is not precisely the same as that of any other person; that each person is one and not more than one, that each feels pain in his or her own body, that the food given to A does not arrive in the stomach of B. (62)

Assigning rights to individuals is the only way, Nussbaum argues, to ensure equality among them; when political representation devolves to an aggregate, such as the family, the interests of one individual—usually the father—prevail, often to the detriment of others in the family, especially women.

The commonsensical $1 = 1$, person-equals-individual calculation nevertheless ignores the web of dependencies that composes human society as well as the power differentials that differing degrees of dependency create. In *The Price of Motherhood*, Ann Crittenden reveals how the dependency of a child increases parents'—inordinately mothers'—dependency on others, and how American law turns a blind eye to the cost of parenting on the grounds that child-bearing and child-rearing are private matters, individual choices, individual responsibilities.

A fetus abstracted from the maternal viscera and represented as an autonomous person has wide appeal precisely because it denies the messy realities of human interdependency and affirms the self-evidence of the individual. While wielders of fetal gore are easily bracketed as extremists, the fiction of a self-contained, self-sufficient fetus expresses the values of mainstream America. The galaxy-roaming fetuses conjured in Lennart Nilsson's *Life Magazine* feature (April 30, 1965) and in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey* erase the past and speak to the future; they symbolize the human potential for autonomy and self-determination. Imagining the most dependent human entity as an autonomous being is a form of escapism that has consequences for others. A fetus fetish is not just a personal idiosyncrasy; it exonerates one from social responsibility. Lavishing goodwill on fetuses allows one to profess equal opportunity for all without having to think about the dramatic variation in opportunities that greet newborn children, much less about the burden that those children's

dependency represents for those who raise them. In turn, the fetus-turned-icon participates in the indoctrination of the ideology of individualism that Horace Kallen in 1933 called an “American way of life.”¹

Women therefore have good reason to be concerned about the pro-liferation of lonely fetuses, for such representations obfuscate the ways in which fetal dependency on the mother, which continues on well after birth, creates differences in men’s and women’s possibilities for autonomy. Yet lacking a validated vocabulary through which to represent this dependency and its costs, feminists turn to the available, tried and true discourse of individual rights: the right to privacy, the right to equality, the right to choose. After all, the political gains women have made in Western democracies have been the fruit of their vindication of rights as individuals. Abortion politics nonetheless demonstrate the boomerang effect the doctrine of individual rights can have, since neither a pregnant woman nor a fetus really fits the profile of an individual, at least not according to Nussbaum’s criteria of physiological individuation. In pregnancy, food given to A *does* arrive in the stomach of B, and pain inflicted on a pregnant woman’s body can reverberate onto the fetal body. For tactical reasons, both pro-choice and pro-life advocates ignore fetal dependency and speak on behalf of discrete individuals. On the one hand, the pro-life camp has nothing to gain by bringing the mother into the picture; her story and rationale could only attenuate the absolute moral certitude to which they lay claim. On the other hand, front-line pro-choice activists fear that any talk of the fetus might be taken as a concession to the pro-life crusade. Nussbaum’s individualism typifies the liberal feminist avoidance of the fetus. In measuring the span of personhood “from birth to death,” she implicitly establishes parturition as the threshold between nonperson and person (62). This distinction appears disingenuous from several standpoints: scientific (are preemies so different from fetuses of an equivalent age?); psychological (many women mourn miscarriages as they would the death of a child); and ethical (are the social and psychological factors that play into late-term abortions and the disposal of newborns in garbage cans really so different from one another?). Most of all, linking the beginning of personhood to a particular physiological development—whether parturition or heartbeats—occults the basic resemblance between fetuses and young children, who both depend on someone else for everything; indeed, for the breast-fed infant, the food consumed by A *still* arrives in the stomach of B.

Predictably, gross contradictions ensue when fetal dependency on the pregnant woman is translated into the language of individualism.

Legally, fetal dependency is construed either as an invisible extension of one individual (the pregnant woman) or as a fortuitous, almost arbitrary, connection between two individuals. In its 1973 legalization of abortion, the Supreme Court ruled that whether a woman is an individual entitled to rights or whether her claims might be limited by the interests of another individual hinges on the moment of fetal “viability” (Poovey 244). As soon as the fetal body *can be* individuated from the body of the pregnant woman and survive, the fetus is an individual eligible for rights. Feminists rightly object to the notion of viability: whether or not the fetus *can* survive on its own (with intense medical support as a surrogate), it is not actually doing so, and whatever fetal viability might mean medically, politically, it diminishes the rights of women. Liberal feminists do not, however, dispute the philosophical grounds that lie behind the Supreme Court’s judgment. Their adherence to birth as a dividing line crystallizes individuation as the primary condition of personhood. The danger of granting so much importance to birth (and thus to individuation) is already evident in *Roe v. Wade*: it is surprisingly easy to discount birth as the determining moment of individuation. To be sure, representations of the unborn as sovereign individuals who rival their female hosts in claims to legal rights, patients’ rights, and salvation usually involve some distortion. Nevertheless, if feminists agree that rights devolve to she who has been individuated, anti-abortion activists need only minimize birth as the liminal event that distinguishes the individual from the nonindividual in order to make the case for fetal rights.

A vicious circle emerges: the liberal feminist argument that the fetus is not eligible for rights because it is not born (i.e., because it is not individuated) reinforces the individualism that dismisses fetal dependency as a mere contingency. Dismayed by this outcome, many feminist scholars are calling for a change in thinking about the fetus. Lynn Morgan and Meredith Michaels urge feminists to “recuperate the fetus” in their introduction to a volume of essays entitled *Fetal Subjects, Feminist Positions*. Recuperating the fetus, they explain, means to acknowledge the prominence of fetuses in the “public landscape” and “to explore [. . .] the practices, institutions and discourses that have brought fetuses into the center of reproductive politics”; it entails encouraging “feminist dialogue about fetuses” and revealing that the relation between the pregnant woman and the fetus is “culturally and historically produced” and therefore variable (2–5). Feminist philosophy has contributed mightily to reorienting scholarly attitudes toward the fetus, particularly in its attempt to demonstrate

that relations with others are not peripheral to personhood, but constitutive of it. Representative of this current, Susan Brison claims that autonomy itself is “a function of dependency on others” (28).² Within this understanding of personhood, pregnancy emerges as just one permutation—albeit an extreme one—of the relations that enmesh various life courses in varying degrees at different moments. Michaels and Morgan, however, prefer to subordinate abstract philosophical queries such as “when does personhood begin?” and “what constitutes personhood?” to contextual considerations: “Rather than engage these questions on their own terms, we hope to shed light on why these questions get asked, and how they get answered, by attending [. . .] to the cultural contexts in which they arise” (5).

Certainly, history is a precious resource in the fetal recuperation effort, insofar as it allows us to see more clearly what is at stake in the present through the study of the past. Decrying “the relentless presentism of cultural studies,” Karen Newman, for instance, refutes the notion that the fetal individual emerged *ex nihilo* from late-twentieth-century anti-abortion propaganda (2). She reveals instead the long-standing complicity between liberal individualism and scientific visualizations of the fetus as an individual from the seventeenth century forward.⁵ “The autonomous human child represented in midwifery manuals, obstetrical atlases, anatomical sculpture, modern medical dictionaries is independent of the woman’s body, whole and undivided, always male, and virtually never dissected, opened, wounded, or permeable; it is the image par excellence of rights-bearing Enlightenment Man ferociously rendered in the fabled state of nature” (67). Newman reveals the enormity of the task facing women wishing to recuperate the fetus. When individualism is measured in centuries, countering it looks very daunting indeed. That is why Newman remains extremely circumspect about how her findings might alter the tenor of abortion politics in the present. Like most feminist scholars dealing with the abortion issue, she sets her sights on the *longue durée*, on the understanding that abortion politics will not change until prevailing notions of personhood do.⁴

My contribution to the fetal recuperation effort is no more likely to furnish pro-choice poster slogans than the scholarship that has inspired it. Nevertheless, I believe that if a paradigm shift in conceptions of personhood is really what feminists are calling for, then at the same time as we continue, provisionally, to use the vocabulary of liberal individualism sanctioned by the institutions in which we participate as political subjects, we should question the very foundations on which we have built the case

for women's rights. To that end, I will challenge a truism in the feminist critique of individualism.

René Descartes (1596–1650) styled his work as the cornerstone of a new way of thinking about personhood, and it is not without reason that feminists have taken him at his word. Descartes argued that thought is the essence of the ego, a claim that can be taken to mean that neither the body nor relations with others constitute a person in any significant way. Accordingly, feminists identify Descartes (or more often, “Cartesian dualism” or “a Cartesian observing subject”) as the origin and/or essence of the individualism they combat (Morgan, “Fetal” 49; Newman 115). Epitomizing this practice, Susan Bordo blames “the Cartesian masculinization of thought” for a “father of himself fantasy” in which proving one's existence through the *cogito* doubles as an act of self-creation that relegates Mother Nature and a mother's nurture to the peripheries of personhood (9, 105). Linda Martin Alcoff concludes a 2000 review essay on recent work in feminist philosophy by transposing Bordo's complaint to a disciplinary level: “The real problem [for feminist philosophy],” she claims, “is the stranglehold of the Cartesian hubris that would make of philosophy a self-enclosed sport without need of empirical input, cultural self-awareness, or practical relevance” (879).

Given their grievances, few feminists would be surprised to learn that Descartes explicitly extended what he had identified as the evidence of his existence—thought and especially consciousness of thought—to the fetus. Here, apparently, is not only justification for the general suspicion in which feminists hold Descartes, but more fundamentally, confirmation of the feminist intuition that personhood conceived without regard to embodiment or sociability facilitates the invention of a fetal subject. But appearances, as Descartes so often insisted, can be deceiving. A fuller interpretation of Descartes's view of personhood emerges on close consideration of the texts and contexts in and from which he conceived his fetal subject. While at first Descartes portrays the fetus as a disembodied mind (as feminists would expect), in the end, the fetus helps him to make a point that many feminists disregard or dismiss in his work: namely, that in a living person, mind and body form a single substance. Descartes not only illustrates the mind's dependency on the body when he maintains that the fetal mind is wholly preoccupied with the sensations devolving from its uterine environment; he also implicitly acknowledges fetal dependency on the maternal body. Insofar as Descartes uses the fetus to illustrate the union of mind and body, and through this union, the fetus's dependency

on the body of its female host, I will argue that Descartes's longstanding reputation as inveterate dualist and "man-midwife" of individualism has been exaggerated. Paradoxically, Descartes's efforts to rationalize fetal thought and consciousness illustrate the corporeality of the mind common to fetuses and philosophers and demonstrate that for better or for worse, dependency cannot be discounted as mere contingency.

Dualism and Individualism

When feminists associate Descartes's philosophy with the political ideology of individualism, they invariably target his dualist metaphysics. These he expresses in greatest detail in the *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (*Meditations on First Philosophy*) (1641), a series of deductions narrated in the first person.⁵ Reduced to its barest bones, the sequence that feminists single out as having had the most fateful consequences for the development of a political philosophy or ideology of the individual goes as follows. The *ego* deduces that "I am a thing that thinks, or a substance of which all the essence or nature is to think." As its own "substance" (or "thing that exists in such a way that it had need only of itself to exist"), the *ego* is "entirely and truly distinct from my body, and can exist without it" (AT 9, pt. 1: 62).⁶ Since the body is what ensures the *ego*'s access to what is outside of the mind, the *ego* has no ascertainable connection to the world or to other people. "You must recall," Descartes reminds one of his correspondents, "that you are speaking here to a mind that is so detached from corporeal things that it does not even know if there were ever any men before it" (AT 7: 361). To the extent that, at least in the *Meditations*, the *ego* purports to have existed prior to or outside of human bonds, Judith Butler, for instance, rightly observes that Descartes presents the bodily and social components of human existence as dispensable add-ons to an inviolate core that is the mind (27–28; Poovey 241).

In the sixth and final Meditation, however, Descartes somewhat casually introduces a snag to this compact sequence of deductions. After having gone to great pains to deduce the real distinction of mind and body, he makes an about face and says that the mind and the body are intimately conjoined: "Nature teaches me by these feelings of pain, hunger, thirst, etc. that I am not just lodged in my body, like a pilot in his ship, but more than that, I am so very closely joined to it and so confounded and mixed in with it, that I compose a single whole with it" (AT 9, pt. 1: 64). Descartes apparently saw nothing contradictory about asserting the mind's separateness

from the body and its union with it. Especially after his death, his loyal followers strove to rationalize the paradox that he blithely advanced. They concentrated their efforts on resolving the pesky issue of interaction: How could the mind initiate motion in the body, when they were substances whose essential modes (or characteristics), thought and extension, were incommensurable? Given that no Cartesian ever managed to satisfactorily put Descartes's Humpty-Dumpty back together after he had so carefully disassembled it, it is not without reason that a number of his contemporaries disregarded his gesture toward the corporeality of the mind as a disingenuous and unsubstantiated concession to common sense.

Recently, however, historians of philosophy suggest that Descartes's reputation as the author of a disembodied mind and solitary *ego* results from a misreading, not of the *Meditations*, certainly, but of the place of the *Meditations* in the ensemble of his corpus. "By treating the *Meditations on First Philosophy* as Descartes's philosophical testament," writes Susan James, "scholars have created a one-sided interpretation of Cartesianism in which the division between body and soul is overemphasized and sometimes misunderstood" (106). Catherine Wilson argues "that it is a matter of historical contingency that Descartes's name became associated with an idealistic philosophy founded upon a metaphysics of two substances" (659).⁷ In her analysis, Descartes's extended foray into metaphysics "constituted an interlude" in a research program devoted principally to rationalizing medicine. He composed the *Meditations* because he realized he needed to reassure his readers regarding the orthodoxy of his researches if he wanted to continue to pursue them with impunity. Briefly, he had to show that his mechanist physics did not make him a free-thinking materialist—hence his proof of God's existence and demonstration of the mind's distinctness from the body. The latter deduction was as close as he could come, he explains in a letter preceding the publication of the *Meditations*, to satisfying the Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul.⁸ Having fulfilled these theological conditions "to his satisfaction," Wilson observes, "he returned to his researches [. . .] on those subjects on which [he] thought he had something truly original to say" (659). Beyond the fact that Descartes was unable to explain mind/body interaction, Wilson argues that at bottom, the question simply did not interest him: "[H]is indifference to what [every succeeding generation of philosophical readers] saw as a major problem for 'Cartesianism' is fully intelligible in light of the fact that Cartesian metaphysics [. . .] was not an expression of Descartes's intellectual belief and commitments" (676). Descartes's failure

to explain the union of the soul and body in light of his argument for their radical difference should not, in other words, be taken to mean that he did not believe in their union. On the contrary, he took this union so much for granted that, as he admits in a letter to Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, the contemporary who most insistently challenged him on the subject, “I said almost nothing about [the question of union in the *Meditations*], and only strove to make [their distinction] understood” (AT 3: 664–65).

For Descartes, it was obvious that soul and body formed a single compound, so obvious, in fact, that we cannot grasp their union through metaphysical reflection but can only intuit it through our daily experiences and exchanges (AT 3: 691–92). He made the mistake of assuming that it would be obvious to his readers as well. The extent to which he miscalculated first became evident in the objections he received to the *Meditations*. In hopes that the approbation of key theologians would protect his work from censure, Descartes enlisted his friend, Marin Mersenne (1588–1648), mathematician, priest in the order of the Minims, and host of a scientific academy modeled on the borderless *res publica litteraria*, to solicit objections that would be published along with his responses to them in the first edition of the *Meditations*. The goal was not to seek corrections, but to clarify in what ways the *Meditations* were already orthodox, if any doubt remained in the minds of his readers. Mersenne soon expanded the circle of objectors to include prominent philosophers, so that Descartes might also demonstrate the infallibility of his system. His plan met with mitigated success because instead of curtailing criticism, the responses engendered new objections. It was specifically around the postulate of fetal consciousness that resistance to his dualist metaphysics crystallized. If the nature of the mind’s union with the body was obvious to him, it was not to others, and the controversy surrounding the fetus brought this discrepancy to light. Consequently, it was in the name of a conscious fetus that Descartes endeavored to rationalize what to readers ever after would seem like a proverbial case of wanting to have one’s cake and eat it too: that the mind that was distinct from the body also formed a single substance with it. Descartes’s fetal subject was no more convincing than his explanation of mind/body union; it would, in fact, remain something of an embarrassment to subsequent Cartesians. Yet, convincing or not, it is important that Descartes used the fetus to make a point about thought in general: rather than epitomizing the mind’s independence from the body, fetal consciousness as Descartes construed it presented an extreme version of the corporeality that characterized all human minds.

Conceiving Fetal Consciousness

An obstinate member of the hydra that grew out of the *Meditations*, the fetus reared its head for the first time in the fourth objections composed by Antoine Arnauld (1612–1694) in the spring of 1641. The eminent theologian of Port Royal objects to Descartes’s assertion that “nothing can be in him, insofar as he is a thing that thinks, of which he is not conscious” (AT 9, pt. 1: 167). He adds, “[B]ut who doesn’t see that there can be several things in the mind, of which the mind itself has no consciousness? For example, the mind of a child in the mother’s womb has the virtue or faculty of thinking, but doesn’t have consciousness of it” (AT 9, pt. 1: 167). It would not be unusual for Descartes to attribute the *capacity* to think to the unborn. Scholastic natural philosophers held, following Aristotle, that the embryo acquired a vegetative soul upon conception, a sensitive soul several days later, and a rational soul on the fortieth day of gestation in the case of a male or the ninetieth day for a female, thus achieving the potential to think sometime during the first trimester. Descartes’s contemporaries, Thomas Feyens (1567–1631) and Daniel Sennert (1572–1637), professors of medicine at Louvain and Wittenberg, postulated an even earlier capacity for thought. Rejecting Aristotle’s theory of delayed animation, they argued that the rational soul comes into being immediately after conception (Roger 104–06). Arnauld recognizes, however, that the foundation of Descartes’s search for truth resides not in the *ability* to think, but in the *act* and *consciousness* of thinking. Those trained in scholastic natural philosophy, including Descartes, were taught to distinguish between potentiality and actuality, between the capacity to become and the enactment of that capacity (James 31). Arnauld doubts that his correspondent will dare to assert that the fetus actually thinks, much less that the fetus is conscious of doing so, for in replacing potential fetal thought with actual, self-conscious thought, Descartes would bestow a new identity on the intrauterine entity.

What Arnauld calls “the child within the womb” refers to a potential child, a being in the process of becoming a child, in keeping with the teleological view of the unborn that had been the hallmark of Christian thinking on the question of abortion since the second century. Attacking the pagan view that the fetus is a part of the woman until birth, just as a fruit is a part of a tree until it falls, in his *Apologetics*, the Christian apologist Tertullian (160–240) affirms that *homo est, et qui futurus est*: “He also is a man who is about to be one. Even every fruit already exists in its seed” (qtd. in Connery 41). But in canon law and in private

penitential literature from the fourth century to the Renaissance, abortion of the preanimate fetus was generally not punished as homicide, indicating that what was to be a man was not, after all, equivalent to a man (Connery 22–141). Conversely, although the Latin *fœtus* approaches the current meaning of a biological entity in seventeenth-century embryological treatises, the term is rarely, if ever, used in moral or philosophical deliberations.⁹ Designating “Fetus” as a “medical term,” Furetière notes that those with pretenses to scientific expertise (“les curieux”) conserve fetuses in bottles of *eau-de-vie* (“Foetus”).¹⁰ The biological curiosity and the moral being stem from different ontologies, or at the very least, from different discourses; doctors seek to explain the processes of generation; theologians, to define the spiritual status of the being in the womb.¹¹ Terminologically, Descartes perpetuates the discursive distinction. On the one hand, he deals strictly with physical development in *De la formation du fœtus*, published posthumously by Claude Clerselier (1614–1684) along with *L’Homme de René Descartes* (1664).¹² On the other hand, he refers to the “child in the mother’s womb” in responding to Arnauld. Yet the effect of Descartes’s fetal philosophy—and indeed, what was so shocking about it—was that it compelled the reader to join the biological thing and the future person together, to consider the unborn child as a physiological entity, the thing floating in *eau-de-vie*, as a human being.

Arnauld’s question puts Descartes in a tricky position. He must either make the implausible argument that the being within the womb is actually—not potentially—a person from the moment of conception, or he must admit an exception to his claim that thought is continuous. Descartes’s method tolerates no exceptions (AT 6: 18); he opts for implausibility: “I don’t doubt that the mind, as soon as it is infused into a child’s body, begins to think, and that from that moment he [the child] knows that he is thinking” (AT 9, pt. 1: 190). This is the account of the fetus that feminists would fully expect from the dualist Descartes. He ignores the body and as a result, completely elides fetal dependency. Descartes refers to “the mind” as if it preexisted infusion into the fetal body. He moreover conflates the mind and the child to the exclusion of the body. The body only enters into Descartes’s initial account of fetal thought as the faulty secretary of the fetus’s mental activity. The fetus does not remember what it thought, he explains, “because the species of his thoughts do not remain imprinted on his memory” (AT 9, pt. 1: 190).¹⁵

Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655), a proponent of Epicurean ethics, whose mistrust of speculative systems was to make him one of Descartes’s

most outspoken opponents, scoffed at Descartes's fetal subject; for him, the ridiculous notion of a thinking fetus revealed everything that was wrong with Descartes's dualism. In the fifth objections, first published in the *Disquisitio metaphysica seu dubitationes et instantiae adversus renati cartesiani metaphysicam et responsa* (1643),¹⁴ Gassendi rephrases Arnauld's question: if you want to persuade your readers that you constantly think, he tells Descartes, you must convince them that you thought *in utero*. Mocking Descartes's recourse to fetal amnesia, Gassendi urges him to "remember" how "obscure, light, and almost inexistent" his thought was during gestation. How, he wonders, can Descartes be so sure of what he does not remember: "What proof do you have [. . .] that you were thinking during that time?" (124). Descartes impatiently evokes everyday experience to point out that absent-mindedness is a defect familiar to adults and thus, no doubt, attributable to fetuses: "[A]nd what marvel is there in that we do not remember the thoughts we had in our mothers' womb [. . .], since we do not even remember several thoughts that we know very well to have had as adults?" (126). But Gassendi is not convinced. The only reason that Descartes argues for a thinking fetus, he contends, is that the *cogito* necessitates it. "It is certainly not a real experience that you bring to bear, but your definition itself, according to which you present the Mind as a thinking substance [. . .]. It is thus something which you admit without reason, without necessity other than your way of defining by actuality, and not by the faculty of acting" (128).

Descartes stands accused of making a specious point to buttress a shaky system. While it is true that Descartes would probably have preferred not to enter into discussions of fetal consciousness and amnesia, Gassendi is unfair when he accuses his opponent of subterfuge. His visceral response to Descartes's fetal subject both encapsulates and results from a reductive interpretation of the *Meditations*. Apostrophizing Descartes as "*O mens (O mind)*," Gassendi disregards Descartes's affirmation of the union of mind and body. To be sure, Descartes speaks of union only in cursory and almost casual fashion in the sixth meditation. Yet it is also true that he emphatically reiterates this point in his response to Arnauld, where he says that mind and body, taken independently, "are incomplete substances, when considered with respect to the man they compose" (AT 9, pt. 1: 176–77). This is the very response in which Descartes first asserts that the fetus thinks and to which Gassendi reacts so vehemently. Gassendi's acerbic intervention prompted Descartes to bring these separate arguments—for fetal thought, for mind/body union—together. In his next

response, his letter “ad Hyperaspistem” (an anonymous interlocutor who was probably a friend of Gassendi), his argumentation takes a significant turn.¹⁵ He abandons the argument for the incompetence of fetal memory and in its place nuances his controversial assertion that the fetus actually thinks. More precisely, he describes for the first time what kind of thought goes on in the fetus and what the resulting consciousness consists in.

Taking his cue from Gassendi, Descartes tells “Hyperaspistes” that in the fetus, physical sensations completely overwhelm the fetal mind. Referring to the “embryo” rather than to the “child within the womb,” Gassendi had insisted upon the physical existence of the unformed fetus:

[I]f the embryo thinks of something, it hardly seems that it could be of the sky, the earth, light; nor of its own body, its soul, or anything else [. . .] inside or outside its swathes; but at most the abundance or lack of food, the comfort or discomfort of its position, and a few rare things of this sort mostly concerned with touch. (Disquisitio 130)

Descartes appropriates Gassendi’s speculations on the content of fetal thought and, for the first time with respect to the fetus, brings up the mind’s “union” with the body:

There is nothing more reasonable than to think that the mind newly joined to the body of a child, is occupied only in feeling or in perceiving confusedly the ideas of pain, ticklishness, hot, cold [. . .] that result from the union [. . .] of the mind with the body. And yet, he nonetheless has in him the ideas of God, of himself, and of all of the truths said to be self-evident [. . .] for he doesn’t acquire them later as he gets older. And I don’t doubt that if he were delivered from the body’s ties, he would find them in himself. (AT 3: 424)

There is nothing extraordinary about a fetus that thinks, insofar as the mind is corporeal in everyone. Even in adults, Descartes remarks to Arnauld, it is because of “this tight bond of the mind and the body, which we experience every day, [that] we cannot easily discover, without deep meditation, the real distinction that is between them” (AT 9, pt. 1: 177). Just as Descartes is not saying that his body is a mere appendage to his essence, the mind, neither is he suggesting that the fetus can clearly and distinctly deduce the mind’s distinctness from the body or intuit its essence as *ego*. To the contrary, the fetal *ego* is patently incapable of distinguishing itself

from the confused “ideas of pain, ticklishness, hot, cold.” But it is precisely through these basic sensory perceptions, Descartes argues, that the fetus can be said to have a kind of self-awareness. The passions and perceptions that hinder the fetus’s access to ideas of itself, of God, and so on serve as the basis for a more primary form of consciousness. In the second meditation, Descartes states that the intuition of existence can take any sort of thought as its basis, including bodily perceptions as well as metaphysical meditation (AT 9, pt. 1: 22). The difference between consciousness that comes through bodily perception and consciousness that comes through metaphysical meditation is that while the latter provides clear evidence of the essence of the *ego*, the former entails only a foggy awareness of self as mind/body compound. Fetal consciousness, in this account, boils down to a vague cognizance of whatever sensations the mind of a fetus immersed in, connected to, and dependent on the body of another might register.

Explaining Union

We have come a long way from Descartes’s bold reply to Arnauld, in which he asserted that “the mind, as soon as it is infused into a child’s body, begins to think, and [. . .] from that moment he [the child] knows that he is thinking” (AT 9, pt. 1: 190). Instead of eclipsing the unformed fetal body, Descartes now foregrounds it. Rather than downplaying dependency, he magnifies it. Descartes’s impatience with Gassendi—whom he addresses in turn as “O Flesh”—suggests that this is what he “meant” all along but did not explain because it was so obvious to him. The discussion surrounding the fetal subject thus performed an important function for Descartes. Gassendi’s and “Hyperaspistes”’s reactions to it crystallized a problem. They made him realize that his assumption of mind/body union was not as obvious as he had thought. And the problem presented a solution. Postulating a thinking fetus handily provided him with a striking example of how complete that union could be. Indeed, although Descartes only ever dealt with the issue of fetal thought when pressed by an interlocutor, the fetal subject and the assertion of mind/body union would henceforth go hand in hand in Descartes’s work. In the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), Descartes describes infancy (which may include the fetus—it is not clear) in very much the same terms as he describes the fetus to Gassendi.

In the first years of life, [. . .] the mind was so closely tied to the body that it could only focus on whatever stimulated impressions

in it, without considering whether these impressions were caused by things existing outside of it; it simply felt pain when the body was [inconvenienced] or pleasure when it received utility. Or if they were so light that the body neither suffered nor took enjoyment from them, it had feelings like those that we call taste, smell, sound, heat, cold, light, color, and other such things. (AT 9, pt. 2: 59)

Descartes had first shocked his readers by identifying the fetus as a thinking entity. Although he never retracted his audacious extension of personhood to the fetus, he did nuance this assertion in a way that not only made the notion of fetal consciousness more plausible but also attenuated stark interpretations of his dualism. The fetal mind and the adult mind are similar, not only because both are constantly thinking but also because both are corporeal. The difference between the corporeality of the adult mind and that of the fetus was one of degree.

Descartes thus turned what had first appeared to be a significant liability to his advantage. By 1644, this conceptual pair—the assertion of the intuitive nature of mind/body union and the insistence on the extreme corporeality of fetal thought—was recurring like a formula in his work. He seemed to have found it convenient, and he seems to have been confident of its invulnerability to any new objections, such as those brought to him in a 1648 interview with the young Dutch student Francis Burman. Burman recorded the interview in which we can observe once again the connection between the consequences of the mind’s embodiment and the assertion of fetal consciousness. First, Descartes states the obvious fact of mind/body union: “There is nothing more difficult to explain [than mind/body union], but experience suffices here and is so clear that there is no way to contradict it.” Then comes the discussion of fetal thought. Following the example of Gassendi and “Hyperaspistes,” Burman presses the philosopher on his claim that “the mind must always be thinking, even in the child [in the mother’s womb]” (Descartes, *Entretien* 15).¹⁶ Burman asks Descartes to justify his claim that the fetus cannot gain access to its innate ideas: had Descartes not stated that one can have several thoughts simultaneously? In effect, for Descartes, consciousness of thought does not entail a separate thought reflecting back on a previous thought, but the simultaneous intuition of being through thought. He explains this to Burman:

[T]o have consciousness is no doubt to think and reflect on the thought that we have, but it is false that that can’t happen as long

as a preceding thought remains, since [. . .] the soul can think of several things at once, and persevere in its thought, and reflect on its thoughts, whenever it wants, and thus have consciousness of each of them. (13)

Does it not follow, Burman inquires, that even if fetal consciousness is mired in bodily sensations, it still has the mental space, as it were, to consider its own and God's existence? "It can think of several things," he reminds his interlocutor (15). Descartes replies that some thoughts do indeed exclude others, such as the corporeal impressions that bombard the fetus's consciousness: "It can [think of several things at once], if one [thought] doesn't impede the other" (15).

Descartes rehearses the same argument—that one thought might impede another—when Burman asks him to address the most important of innate ideas: "Since we have an innate idea of God and of ourselves, would not the mind of this child thus have an actual idea of God?" (15). What Burman is pushing Descartes to clarify here is how his portrayal of the fetus's inherent but ultimately inaccessible ideas differs from the scholastic concept of potentiality. The scholastics had attributed all kinds of potential powers to the fetus, and Burman understands that Descartes must not be seen as retreating to this convenient explanation. Descartes's first response demonstrates his cautiousness with respect to Catholic doctrine: "[I]t would be bold to affirm [that the fetus has an actual idea of God], since we don't have sufficient proof of it." But he goes on to insist on the overwhelming corporeality of fetal thought. In the fetus, Descartes replies, "the body acts so much on the soul, that it is an impediment for it" (15). In other words, it is not that innate ideas lie latent, waiting for their time to come to blossom, as in stoic epistemology, in which *semina scientia* or "the seeds of knowledge" require external stimulation in order to flourish (see Horowitz). Instead, fetal ideas compete at all times with overwhelming sensory impressions, with the net effect being that they can be completely drowned out. It is therefore entirely plausible that the fetus would have an idea of God without being able to gain access to it.

The Mother and Beyond

So far, I have shown how Descartes privileged the notion of fetal consciousness in order to illustrate what it means to say that we know intuitively that mind and body are one. In other words, I have highlighted

Descartes's use of the fetus to counter a reductive interpretation of dualism that continues to inform the suspicion with which feminists regard his philosophy. The *ego* of the second Meditation, stripped of body and context, should not overshadow a notion of personhood that is far more consistent in Descartes's work: that of a single substance comprised of mind and body in which the smallest corporeal stimulus inflects the realm of the *res cogitans*. Yet the question remains: Did Descartes introduce any hint of community along with this body? Is it possible to claim not only that the Cartesian subject qua disembodied mind results from a partial reading of Descartes but also that the Cartesian mind/body composite contains an ethical dimension? Can we, in other words, go so far as to put a relational spin on the Cartesian subject? Turning now to Descartes's correspondence with Elizabeth of Bohemia and the work that resulted from that exchange, I will show that, for Descartes, the fact of being embedded in a body entails the connection of the mind to a human community and that our sense of connection to or separation from others is contingent upon the passions and thus fluctuates over time. In this fluctuation, one bond stands out for its enduring effects. The fetus's corporeal response to the nourishment that it receives from the mother will forever after participate in the passion of love. Thus we shall see that Descartes characterizes the fetus's physical dependency on the mother as a kind of blueprint for the passion of love, a passion in which the individual sees him- or herself as a part of a larger whole.

When I last addressed Descartes's ambitions within the Republic of Letters, the philosopher was drafting his *Meditations* and responses to objections in Latin for the express readership of a group of suspicious, but hopefully persuadable, priests. Despite his efforts, Descartes never did get doctors of the Sorbonne to condone his work. One significant result of his disillusionment with the Jesuits' closed-mindedness was his own growing openness to other types of interlocutors. When the ecclesiastical approval he had so assiduously courted continued to elude him, Descartes sought moral support and intellectual sustenance elsewhere. His most prized correspondent was Elizabeth of Bohemia. Elizabeth was indeed the ideal interlocutor. Not only did she greatly admire the philosopher; she also asked hard questions that showed how well she had understood him. Certainly, the most important of these was the question of the nature and mode of the mind's union with the body. She pressed Descartes to explain to her how two substances, the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*, could be joined; she also inquired about the practical and moral consequences of

this union. She wondered in particular how an understanding of mind/body interaction could be deployed to lead a happier life. Their exchange quickly turned to the passions, both because the body and soul conspired together to produce passions, and because Elizabeth suffered from the passions as a result of political and familial turmoil. Initially prescribing a stoic remedy for Elizabeth's melancholy, Descartes exhorted her to think positively, and he recommended that they both read Seneca's *De vita beata*. Very quickly, however, Descartes, like Elizabeth, grew impatient with the sage's mind-over-matter response to the passions. Their shared dissatisfaction with the stoic ethos led to Descartes's authorship of a treatise on the passions, his last published work.

Les Passions de l'âme was for a long time seen as a second-rate work written to please a princess (D'Arcy 6–8). The treatise is less than systematic and somewhat unwieldy, and it does not explain the question that inspired it: namely, how the body and soul are joined. Instead, it maintains an epistemological duality corresponding to the two realms of our being. We can deduce that the mind is a distinct substance through rational reflection. But we know through experience and by intuition that we are made up of a body and a mind together (Laporte 233; Moriarty 74). Our experience of the passions contributes to this intuitive knowledge of ourselves as a mind/body composite, because the passions, as Descartes defines them, are double: they are “perceptions, or feelings, or emotions of the soul that we relate to the soul in particular and that are caused, sustained, and reinforced by some movement of the animal spirits” (AT 11: 349). Learning how the passions function can help us, not to suppress or transcend them, but to “tame” them—that is, to enhance those that are profitable and pleasurable to us and to limit those that harm us. Descartes's failure to provide a direct account of the mind's connection to the body in *Les Passions de l'âme* may be seen, then, not as an oversight, but simply as a consequence of the different ways in which we come to know different things. Moreover, his supervision of the publication of the treatise, even after he had vowed to make no more books, indicates that he had no significant reservations about it (D'Arcy 5–6). We are therefore entitled to consider *Les Passions de l'âme* as the culminating piece of Descartes's opus and, as such, to use it to shed light on the rest of his work (Levi 264). I use it to qualify the image in the *Discours de la méthode* of the lone cogitator huddled, like a fetus, in a stove-heated room.

Descartes's primary task in elucidating the passions is to show how a corporeal state can inflect the perceptions of the soul or how a

state of mind can be continued, as it were, in the fabric of the body. All of this happens within an individual. As he says in a letter to Elizabeth, “Everyone experiences in himself that he is a single person that has a body and thought together” (AT 3: 694). It is nonetheless implicit in Descartes’s exposé that the passions make us ethical beings, for as Erec Koch points out in his analysis of the *Passions de l’âme*, love, generosity, and hate describe our responses to other people: “The subject-body is passionately shaped by contact with others, by socialization,” Koch writes of Descartes’s last work; “interaction with other subject-bodies enters into the play of forces and stimuli that act on the individual and provoke sensation and passion” (416). Not only do the passions result from interaction with others; they moreover affect how we think of *ourselves* with respect to others. Take love, for instance. Descartes writes that when we love, “we consider ourselves joined with that which we love: such that we imagine a whole, of which we think we are but one part, and that the thing we love is another [part]” (AT 11: 387). Descartes harkens back to the Greek myth of the androgyne; in this explanation of heterosexual desire, each one of us hankers after our other half to create a union of opposites. Interestingly, however, Descartes illustrates the phenomenon of feeling like a part of something else not by reference to heterosexual desire, but through the example of paternal love:

The love that a good father has for his children is so pure that he wants nothing from them and does not want to possess them anymore than he already does, nor to be joined to them more tightly than he already is: but considering them as other themselves [d’autres soi-même], he seeks their well-being as he seeks his own [comme le sien propre], or even with more care, because, representing to himself that they and he form a whole, of which he is not the best part, he often prefers their interests to his and does not fear harming himself to save them. (AT 11: 389)

To the feminist reader, Descartes’s portrait of the good *père de famille* may evoke the bourgeois sentimentality of a Greuze painting. Talking about a father without so much as a mention of a mother lends a paternalistic tone to the selfless love the philosopher describes. After all, how do we know that the father’s and the children’s understanding of their well-being coincides? This is Nussbaum’s point when, pointing to situations in which fathers do not have the interests of their children at heart (abuse, prostitution), she argues that political representation based on the individual is

the only one that can ensure justice for all (62–63).¹⁷ On the other hand, we would be no less suspicious had Descartes spoken about the good mother. Then he would be guilty of advocating maternal self-sacrifice, another Enlightenment value. But it is possible that these interpretations reflect our habits of mind more than what Descartes is actually saying. He is not advocating any form of political representation; nor is he talking about fathers in general, if we are to judge from what we know of his experience in that regard. Descartes's relation with his father has been described as "businesslike," and although the death of his daughter, Francine, caused him great suffering (she was only five), their relationship was at best intermittent since she was a secret—the result of an affair with a Dutch maid (Gaukroger 22, 353).

Biographical considerations aside, what is remarkable about this ideal form of love is the tension that Descartes maintains between, on the one hand, the father and children as individuals, and on the other, the father and children as parts of a whole. The father possesses his children in the sense that they are his children, but he recognizes that they are not his property, unlike the bourgeois legislators responsible for the *Code civil* (1804), the body of laws inspired by the ancient Roman emphasis on paternal authority (Pernoud 267–69, 374). They have interests, he has interests, but because he loves them, he filters his well-being through theirs. The tension between the individual and the aggregate is encapsulated in the locution "d'autres soi-même"—literally, "other themselves"—an oxymoron characterized by an irreconcilable juxtaposition of the singular and the plural, otherness and selfness. Starkly opposed to the feeling of being only one part of a whole that characterizes pure love is how we think of ourselves in relation to others when we hate. When we hate, "we consider ourselves alone as a whole, entirely separate from the thing for which we feel aversion" (AT 11: 387). In *Les Passions de l'âme*, individualistic and relational conceptions of personhood are subjective moods determined by passionate responses; they are situational, perspectival, and subject to change.

The father's love for his children exemplifies the relational end of a continuum of our perception of personhood as filtered through our experience of the passions. But it is the fetus's response to the nourishment that conditions the corporeal component of the passion of love:

[I]t seems to me that the first passions our soul had, when it first began to be joined to the body, must have resulted when the

blood, or another liquid that entered the heart, [proved to be] a nourishment more adapted than usual to sustaining the heat that is the principle of life; which caused the soul to join itself[. . .] to this nourishment, that is to say to love it. (AT 11: 407–8)

The fetus's joining with or love of nourishment causes the animal spirits to pour "from the brain to the muscles that pressed or agitated [these organs] towards the heart, to make them send more [of this nourishment]." Now Descartes does not say that the nourishing substance derives from the mother; he says that it comes from "the stomach and the intestines, [. . .] and also the liver and the lungs" (AT 11: 408). The fetus/infant is in any case not conscious of the mother; it has no concept of itself with respect to others; it cannot *know* that the nourishment that it loves comes from the stomach or the intestines, let alone through an umbilical cord that connects it to the mother's bloodstream.

Nevertheless, in concluding that "this same movement [of the animal spirits] has ever since always accompanied the passion of love," Descartes points toward the unfolding of a reciprocal relation between the intuition of self and the passion of love. It is in no way to distort Descartes's meaning to suggest that the infant learns very soon that the nourishment that it loves comes from someone, be it the mother or a wet nurse.¹⁸ In his responses to the objections to the *Meditations* and in the *Principles of Philosophy*, the fetus is instrumental in illustrating the corporeality of thought. In *Les Passions de l'âme*, the fetus takes on a historical role. The fetal response to nourishment stays with us as a residue inscribed in our bodies, resurfacing when we feel moved by the passion of love. The mother and/or eventually the surrogate wet nurse is implicit in the development of a passion in which we consider ourselves as part of a larger whole. She is the origin of the food with respect to which the fetus first experiences the physiological manifestations of the passion of love; and although Descartes does not mention her, it would be difficult to deny that his theory points to the mother or her surrogate as the infant's first love. We need not make Descartes out to be a developmental psychologist to see that his theory of the passions posits us as ethical beings from the very beginning. Good fathers who love their children were once fetuses dependent on their mothers for nourishment. Descartes sees continuity between the fetus and the adult it may eventually become. He also shows that the most elemental common denominator between the fetus and the adult it later becomes is the movement that accompanies the passion of love, the passion in which

we conceive of ourselves as a part of a larger whole that includes someone else. Indeed, I would venture to say that the fetus's connection to the mother, not the mythical androgyne, is the originary unit that informs Descartes's characterization of love.

Recuperating Descartes

By 1648, when the young Dutch student interviewed the internationally acclaimed philosopher, the cogitating fetus had become, along with his *animal-machine*, something of an Achilles' heel in Descartes's corpus. The Cartesians who took up the defense of Descartes after his death seemed all too willing to forget that their master had ever claimed that the fetus was conscious, even though they eagerly expounded explanations for other unresolved difficulties relating to the fetus.¹⁹ As far as I know, only one Cartesian ventured to defend Descartes on the question of the fetal subject. In a 1647 addition to his *De Notitia Dei Naturali*, the Cartesian sympathizer Adriaan Heereboord (1614–1661) added a new corollary to a disputation on innate knowledge of God that he had originally defended at Leiden University in 1643: those who ascribe to the “inane” and “stupid” idea that fetuses have an actual knowledge of God to *neoterici* are either ignorant or malignant and “fight their own shadow” (qtd. in Verbeek 62). But Heereboord never got a chance to defend Descartes, as the curators of Leiden University forbade professors to speak of Descartes's philosophy as the result of the bitter controversies it had engendered there.

Shadow-fighters became legion once Descartes was no longer around to emphasize the shadows that clouded the fetus's thinking. In 1675, a defender of Aristotelian natural philosophy, Jean-Baptiste de la Grange, offered a misleading summary of Descartes's “doctrine” of the cogitating fetus:

He supposes that it is the essence of the mind to be always thinking, or else to be unceasingly applied to the knowledge of something, which is very far from the truth and entirely contrary to experience. I would really like to know who told Descartes that our soul thinks as soon as it leaves the hands of God, and that it cannot not be thinking; maybe if he had left us just a little reason for such a new proposition so difficult to believe; if he had told us that he knew it by experience, and that he remembered that his soul thought when he was in his mother's womb: we might

then grant him that he is something that thinks, but as for the rest of mankind, this definition is hardly fitting. (15–16)

This Jesuit would certainly have been amused to know that it was the great defender of the Jansenists, Antoine Arnauld, who “told” Descartes that “our soul thinks as soon as it leaves the hands of God.” As it stands, La Grange’s mystification of the origin of Descartes’s idiosyncratic idea contributed to the caricature of the philosopher as an enthusiast, as one who mistook his own imaginings for divinely communicated truths. Echoing the sarcasm of Gassendi’s “*O mens*,” subsequent critics traced Descartes’s alleged enthusiasm right back to the womb. In the eighteenth century, as the vogue for Cartesianism waned with the rise of Newtonian physics, the conscious fetus was the first element of Descartes’s system to come under attack. In his *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733), François René Arouet de Voltaire (1694–1778) declares:

No one shall ever make me believe, that I think always; and I am as little inclin’d [. . .] to fancy that some Weeks after I was conceiv’d, I was a very learned Soul; knowing at that time a thousand Things which I forgot at my Birth; and possessing when in the Womb (tho’ to no Manner of Purpose) knowledge which I lost the instant I had occasion for it; and which I have never been able to recover perfectly. (99–100)

In mock bereavement of his wasted prenatal knowledge, Voltaire echoes Gassendi’s incredulous response to Descartes’s theory of fetal amnesia. Like Gassendi and La Grange, Voltaire gleefully insinuates that Descartes’s fetal philosophy defied the universal *bon sens* that he had promoted in the *Discours de la méthode*. He disingenuously pretends that Descartes had wanted to overlook the obvious fact of the unformed corporeal state of the fetus as well as its dependence on the mother. Voltaire misleadingly conflates Descartes’s careful account of the effects of mind/body union in the fetus with Platonic dualism, in which the impression of the soul into the body in effect obliterates a knowledge set that Descartes would have only attributed to angels.

As (mis)represented by La Grange and Voltaire, Descartes’s fetal subject would offer welcome ammunition to the religious right’s attempts to make the fetus into a rights-bearing individual. Indeed, if conservative American Christians were in the habit of reading early modern French philosophy, we can imagine that they would be delighted to discover that

they had a friend in Descartes (as interpreted by that impertinent atheist, Voltaire). Like Alain Laurent, who characterizes Descartes as an avatar of liberal individualism (in my second epigraph), they would see in Descartes a man ahead of his time. We can imagine what kind of billboards might result from this incongruous meeting of minds. In a new variation on the fetus-has-brain-waves-at-three-weeks theme, we could expect to see an ultrasound portrait of a fetus with a thought bubble “I think, therefore I am” floating above its head. In reply to “God’s” hand-stenciled claim to have known highway wayfarers before He formed them in the womb, one could imagine a pendant billboard featuring a kneeling fetus, translucent hands clasped in prayer with another thought bubble, perhaps in the shape of a heart: “I knew you too!”

At first glance, Descartes’s bold assertion that the fetus actually, not potentially, is conscious, thinks, and has an idea of God raises feminist hackles to orange levels. Pro-life fact(oid)s about fetal brain waves and heartbeats seem circumspect in comparison. Speculating on the dreadful consequences of a vulgarization of Descartes’s fetal philosophy, we welcome the comic relief provided by Voltaire’s ridicule of the notion of a wise and cogitating fetus. Yet this common sense, as comforting as it is, does not get us beyond the impasse that is the legacy of liberal individualism. Voltaire demolishes the idea (that he falsely ascribes to Descartes) that the fetus ruminates profound things by pointing out its difference from a born person. He pretends that Descartes forgets (or never knew) that the fetus is corporeally incomplete and physically dependent on another human being; he pretends that Descartes forgets, in other words, that the fetus is not an individual. We have already seen how easily this logic can be subverted to support the oxymoronic notion of a fetal individual. Indeed, we can imagine the charitable but condescending response to Voltaire’s devastating wit: “Poor Voltaire didn’t know better; studies now show that Descartes was right: fetuses are constantly thinking!”

Voltaire’s dismissal of the notion of a fetal subject is congenial to the liberal feminist position according to which the fetus is not an individual and hence is not eligible for rights. However, it presents problems with which we are by now well familiar. Through the miracles of science and medicine, even fetuses can lay claim to the status of individuals. By the same token, making individuation the defining condition of personhood masks the many forms of dependency that characterize human relations after birth and the inequality that results from this situation, effacing for instance the relative lack of autonomy that an infant’s dependency creates

on the woman who breastfeeds him or her. John Locke, whose empiricism Voltaire found far more palatable than Descartes's theory of innate ideas, portrays "the children of men" as naturally autonomous beings, completely eclipsing the mother and children's continued dependence on her (Newman 65).

Descartes's philosophy of mind—not the caricature that Voltaire made of it, but the one I have fleshed out here—points to a way to use the fetus to undermine the triumphal history of individualism and to highlight the relational dimension of our experience of personhood. In my analysis of Descartes's "fetal subject" I have stressed two points. First, I have shown that the postulate of a conscious, thinking fetus allowed Descartes to flesh out what he meant by a corporeal mind. The corporeality of fetal consciousness represents an extreme, but an extreme that helps elucidate the consequences of mind/body union for all humans. All of us experience thoughts of which we are more or less conscious as well as bodily states that do not just interrupt our train of thought but that shape the track that those thoughts take. If we accept that this corporeal mind is a more complete and therefore more accurate picture of the Cartesian subject than the lone cogitator of the *Discours* or the unmoored mind of the second Meditation, then we must also reconsider the contention that individualism finds its essence in Descartes. Indeed, it has been my wager here that depriving individualism of its alleged "man-midwife" will go further toward subverting an individualist ideology than simply reiterating this genealogy to bemoan it. Second, I have shown that for Descartes, the mind/body composite may be seen as an ethical being who perceives him- or herself in varying degrees of connection to others, depending on the passion that animates her or him. Descartes's contention that the fetus's physical response to nourishment is one that will recur each time the soul experiences the passion of love again posits the born person as the continuation of the fetus at the same time as it makes passionate response to others a primal aspect of personhood. The notion of personhood that emerges from *Les Passions de l'âme* is not so different from that described by Valerie Hartouni in her epilogue to *Fetal Subjects, Feminist Positions*:

Who or what is called "person" is something that is made possible by as well as produced and sustained in and through social relations or a dense array of discursive practices as well as processes. Who or what is called person is, among other things, a highly contingent historical formation; it is both the

site and source of ongoing cultural contests and always under construction as a self-evident fact of nature. (300)

To be sure, the prospect of a conscious fetus, no matter how corporeal its thoughts, no matter how it loves the nourishment it derives from the mother, is bound to strike some feminists as too dangerous a notion to warrant even philosophizing about. Voltaire's "reading" of Descartes certainly indicates that the potential for misrepresentation is huge. It demonstrates the extent to which ideas, like fetuses, take on radically different meanings when aborted from the matrices that sustain them. Yet there is not much to be gained by ignoring or dismissing these abstracted entities. Neither the fiction of the fetal individual nor the myth of the Cartesian disembodied mind is likely to disappear on its own. On the other hand, bringing to light the contexts in which ideas and fetuses thrive is not only intellectually honest; it is perhaps the most powerful means that feminist intellectuals have to combat an ideology that denies dependency as a variable but ubiquitous feature of personhood. Suspending the feminist hermeneutics of suspicion and taking the time to read our most entrenched enemies closely may unearth some unlikely allies. Too much is at stake to neglect them.

REBECCA WILKIN, Assistant Professor of French at Indiana University, brings a gender studies perspective to early modern intellectual history, with a particular emphasis on Descartes. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Representations* and *Studi francesi*. Her book *Women, Imagination, and the Search for Truth in Early Modern France* is forthcoming in Ashgate's Women and Gender in the Early Modern World series. In it, Wilkin considers the feminist potential of Cartesian philosophy with respect to the various intellectual traditions to which Descartes was heir, notably stoicism and skepticism.

Notes

- 1 This is the title of Kallen's book, published, incidentally, by Live-right, Inc. The Catholic restorationist Joseph Marie, Comte de Maistre (1755–1821), coined the term *individualism* in 1820 in reaction to the Revolution's glorification of the individual and its atomizing effect on religion (Lukes 4). Steven Lukes gives an excellent semantic history of individualism with regard to national traditions and provides a useful overview of its various associations with Protestantism, social contract theory, and liberal economics. On the latter, see also Schatz.
- 2 Among the many feminist scholars who argue that individualism is inimical to women are Carol Gilligan and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. The anthropologist Lynn Morgan works to purify relationality of individualist residue. In "Fetal Relationality in Feminist Philosophy," she critiques Mary Anne Warren's defense of "the moral significance of birth" for grounding her relational framework on individualistic assumptions. Some of the new work on relationality aims to incorporate positive aspects of autonomy and individualism. See, for instance, *Relational*

- Autonomy*, a collection of essays edited by Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, as well as Nancy Chodorow's, "Toward a Relational Individualism."
- 5 Newman grounds philosophical constructs in quotidian contexts experienced by women. Obstetrics, she contends, "were one of the many discursive modes that contributed to Enlightenment conceptions of individualism" (44). Barbara Duden's work in *Disembodying Women* on eighteenth-century women's accounts of pregnancy suggests that even what we take to be absolutely empirical—the experience of our bodies—is conditioned by scientific, moral, and theoretical considerations of all sorts.
 - 4 "Critical thinking," Newman concludes, "is like plate tectonics: the earth moves ceaselessly, if almost always seemingly imperceptibly" (116).
 - 5 The *Meditationes de prima philosophia* were translated into French as the *Méditations métaphysiques* by Louis Charles Albert, Duc de Luynes (1620–1690) in 1647.
 - 6 Following the conventions of Descartes scholarship, all references to Descartes's *Oeuvres* are cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation AT (for the editors Charles Adam and Paul Tannery). Descartes's metaphysics led him to redefine the scholastic notion of the "individual." Before its incorporation into political discourse during the Enlightenment, *individual* was "a philosophical term," according to the *Dictionnaire universel* (1690) of Antoine Furetière ("Individu"). An individual unites indivisibility and individuality; he/she/it is numerically individuated from other individuals (*idem numero*) and comprised of incommunicable traits. While the definition of the individual as unit and unicity persisted from the medieval scholastics to the *Encyclopédie* (see Scott 5), Descartes challenged standard accounts of what comprised that unit when he contradicted the medieval theories of individuation taught at the prestigious Jesuit Collège de la Flèche. Thomas of Aquinas (1225–1274) and John Duns Scot (1266–1308) had located the principle of individuation in the amalgamation of form and matter. Accordingly, the human body either individuates the soul (Aquinas) or is the palpable sign of a pre-individuated soul (Scot). For neither philosopher could the soul be considered as an individual entity in the absence of the body (until death); this would confer upon humans the status of angels (Rodis-Lewis 35). By contrast, Descartes asserted that the body, in and of itself, is infinitely divisible, while the mind is an individual substance in its own right. "There is a great difference between the mind and the body, in that the body, by its nature, is always divisible, and the mind is entirely indivisible" (AT 9, pt. 1: 68). He reversed the scholastic formula: the body does not individuate the soul; the soul individuates the body. The human body is a single unit, "*idem numero*," while it stays joined and substantially united to the same soul" (AT 4: 166).
 - 7 See Rebecca Wilkin on the posthumous packaging of Descartes in "Figuring the Dead Descartes: Claude Clerselier's *Homme de René Descartes* (1664)," and François Azouvi's entertaining history of the chameleonic representation of Cartesian philosophy from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries.
 - 8 "As for your point that I didn't say a word about the immortality of the soul, you shouldn't be

- surprised, because I cannot show that God cannot annihilate it, but only that it is of an entirely distinct nature from that of the body, and thus that it is not naturally subject to dying with it" (AT 3: 265–66). That dualism was a response to a theological problem is also evident in the alteration of the title from the first to the second edition. The "Meditations of René Descartes on first philosophy, in which is proven the existence of God and the immortality of the soul" of 1641 becomes in 1642 "Meditations of René Descartes on first philosophy, in which is proven the existence of God and the distinction of the mind from the body."
- 9 Over a dozen embryological treatises were published in Europe during Descartes's lifetime, mostly emanating from Italy and all in Latin (Roger, *Les Sciences de la vie* 782–85).
 - 10 The association of bottled fetuses and scientific amateurism is an enduring trope in French literature. In *Madame Bovary* (1856), Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880) makes them a prominent feature of the storefront of that infamous medical imposter, M. Homais (391).
 - 11 Although sixteenth-century theologians largely accepted the theory of delayed animation, they emphasized the fetus's physical independence from the mother more than doctors did. In the 1530s, Johannes Velcurio (d. 1534) observes that theologians argued along with Aristotle that the fetus nourished itself through its own vegetative soul from the start. By contrast, doctors such as Jacopo Berengario de Carpi (1460–1530) and Alessandro Benedetti (1450–1512) believed, like Galen, that the mother's soul nourished and provided sensation to the embryo during its initial development (Nutton 143).
 - 12 Adam and Tannery believe that the original title of this digression was *De la formation de l'animal*; however, in his unpaginated preface to *L'Homme de René Descartes*, Clerselier affirms that Descartes had entitled it *De la formation du foetus*.
 - 15 Galenic humoral theory associated moisture with youth; an extremely moist fetal brain would be unable to retain the forms of thoughts, just as footsteps in wet mud rapidly lose their contours.
 - 14 Descartes had disparaged Gassendi's objections to the *Meditations* as consisting in superficial rhetoric and published only his reply to them (*Disquisitio* 14). Piqued by this slight, Gassendi published the entire debate in the *Disquisitio*: his objections, Descartes's replies to them, his counterreplies, and even the entire text of the *Meditations* in an appendix. Clerselier included Gassendi's (fifth) objections in the *Méditations métaphysiques* of 1647 but relegated them to the back of the volume.
 - 15 His anonymous objector pressed him on his extension of the *cogito* to the fetus in July 1641. Descartes addresses his reply to "Hyperaspistes," an allusion both to an identically titled letter by Erasmus in 1526, who was responding to a reply by Martin Luther, and to the final words of his opponent's letter. After refuting my objections, writes its anonymous author, "I don't see how anyone could henceforth object anything that you couldn't justly scorn, unless a new world were to spawn new adversaries [*novos Hyperaspistas*]" (AT 3: 412). By the time Descartes received the anonymous letter, he had already

written six sets of replies to objections, and its author was charitably offering him the chance to pronounce the emphatic final word. Descartes quickly drafted a reply in hopes of including it in the first edition of the *Meditations*, then in press in Paris (AT 3: 422). Descartes finished his response to “Hyperaspistes” too late for it to be included in the first edition of the *Meditatione*. Because Descartes suspected its addressee of ulterior motives (AT 3: 391–92), however, he renounced its inclusion in the augmented second edition of the *Meditations* (1642) published in Amsterdam. The letter appeared in 1659 in a posthumous edition of Descartes’s *Correspondance*, translated into French by Clerselier.

- 16 Adam and Tannery did not include Descartes’s *Entretien avec Burman* in their edition of the complete works.
- 17 Similarly, Montaigne emphasizes the disparity between how children and their fathers consider their relationship in his essay

“De l’affection des pères aux enfants,” where he argued that fathers would always love their children more than their children loved them because they saw their offspring as extensions of themselves, whereas children, resentful of the father’s authority and eager to obtain the goods that went with the name, conspired to kill their fathers (*Essais* 2: 67–69).

- 18 I am not going as far as Daniel Garber, who, in a chapter of *Descartes Embodied* (“Understanding Interaction: What Descartes Should Have Told Elizabeth”), critiques Descartes’s answer to Elizabeth’s question about the intelligibility of mind-body interaction and offers one that he thinks would have been more consistent with Descartes’s physics (168–88).
- 19 The Cartesian doctor Louis de la Forge (1632–1665) identifies the formation of birthmarks as a challenge to mechanism in his “Remarques” on Descartes’s treatise on man (335).

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