

HOFFMAN ON PRINCIPAL ATTRIBUTES

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In Principles I. 53, Descartes states what appears to be an important metaphysical principle:

P1: Each substance has one principal property, which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred (AT VIII A 25; CSM I 210).¹

Marleen Rozemond calls this Descartes's "Attributes Premise", and it leads directly, as she points out, to Cartesian Dualism, the doctrine that a human mind and a human body, even when they belong to the same human being, are distinct substances (Rozemond forthcoming).

In a recent paper, however, Paul Hoffman has argued that it is a mistake to read this passage as endorsing the principle that no substance can have more than one principal attribute (Hoffman 1999: 269). (Note that 'property' and 'attribute' are equivalent terms for Descartes in this passage.) For there is a passage in the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* in which, according to Hoffman, Descartes states a different principle, and this passage, Hoffman says, "supersedes" the one in the *Principles*. Hoffman gives no reason for thinking that the one passage supersedes the other. It is true that the *Comments* were written later than the *Principles*, but that is hardly conclusive. The earlier passage might still be the one that expresses Descartes's considered and settled view, whereas the later passage might distort or misstate his true position.

As Hoffman himself translates it, the *Comments* passage runs as follows:

As for the attributes which constitute the natures of things, it cannot be said that those which are different, and such that the concept of the one is not contained in the concept of the other, are present together in one and the same subject; for that would be equivalent to saying that one and the same subject has two different natures - a statement that implies a contradiction, at least when it is a question of a simple subject ... rather than a composite one (AT VIII B 349-50; CSM I 298).

In this passage, Hoffman contends,

Descartes makes it clear that he believes even a simple subject can have two or more attributes of the sort that constitute the natures of things. This can happen when the concept of the one is contained in the concept of the other. So it can't be a basic metaphysical principle that no simple subject can have more than one attribute of the sort that constitute the natures of things.

Hoffman is claiming that, according to Descartes, the mere fact that two principal attributes are different does not suffice to prevent one and the same substance from having both of them.

¹My translations, except where noted, are taken from Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch (Descartes 1985-91).

To ensure that, an additional condition must be satisfied, namely that the concept of neither attribute be contained in the concept of the other. Hoffman is assuming, furthermore, that the additional condition can fail to be satisfied - that is, that the concept of the one attribute *can* contain the concept of the other - even though the two attributes in question are different.

In a passage in the *Comments* that immediately precedes the one Hoffman quotes, however, Descartes says that

There is a contradiction in [the] statement that [two principal] 'attributes are not opposites, but merely different'. For, when the question concerns attributes which constitute the essence of some substances, there can be no greater opposition between them than the fact that they are different; ... [to say] that the one attribute is different from the other, ... is tantamount to saying that the one attribute is not the other; but 'is' and 'is not' are contraries.

From this passage it is clear that, for Descartes, merely being different *does* suffice to prevent two principal attributes from being present in one and the same substance. For it would be a contradiction to say that that substance had both of these attributes.

It is also clear that the additional condition that Hoffman thinks is necessary to establish that two different principal attributes cannot be present in one and the same substance, namely, that the concept of the one not be contained in the concept of the other, *can not* fail to be satisfied. For if the concept of one attribute is contained in the concept of a different attribute, then it will not be a contradiction to say that the one is not the other. So in such a case the two attributes will not (both) be principal attributes, according to Descartes's characterization thereof: namely, that two different principal attributes are such that the one is not the other, where "is not" means "is a contrary of" the other.

To see this, take an example of two different attributes the concept of one of which is contained in the concept of the other, breadth and extension for example. These two cannot (both) be principal attributes, according to the criterion laid down in the passage I quoted from the *Comments*. They cannot (both) be principal attributes just because one of them can belong to the same substance that the other belongs to. Indeed, extension must belong to a substance if breadth does, although the converse does not hold (a straight line has extension but does not have breadth): that is why extension and breadth are different attributes, though logically related.

Notice that this reasoning does not rely on Principles I.53. It is based entirely on passages in the *Comments*, one of which Hoffman says 'supersedes' the earlier passage.

If this is right, then Hoffman's reading of the passage he quotes from the *Comments* must be mistaken. For there is little chance that Descartes changed his mind or forgot between the time he wrote that passage and the time he wrote the passage I quoted

The mistake in Hoffman's interpretation seems to result from a supposition that Descartes intended the clause "and such that the concept of the one is not contained in the concept of the other", to add a condition to the one just expressed, namely, that the two principal attributes in

question be "different". A more plausible understanding of the import of that clause is that it spells out the meaning of "different" in the preceding clause: "which are different" *in that* "the concept of the one is not contained in the concept of the other".

I conclude that Hoffman has given us no reason to think that Descartes abandoned the Attributes Principle as it is stated in Principles I. 53. Not only does the *Comments* passage he cites not conflict with - and a fortiori not "supersede" - the earlier passage; it actually reinforces it.

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REFERENCES

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