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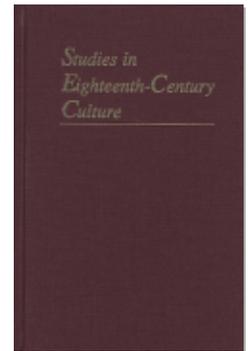
A Tissue of False Memories

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# A Tissue of False Memories

SARAH ELLENZWEIG

Traditionally defined historical fields—like eighteenth-century studies—can be charged fairly with an under-developed relationship to theory and to certain kinds of conceptual abstraction. Yet it is also the case (though less frequently acknowledged) that on the theory side of things, an overly crude sense of the past leads to ill informed assumptions and prejudices about history. A crude sense of the past hampers our capacity to understand, as Thomas Pfau puts it, “how ideas and conceptions actually develop over time—viz., as a long, if uneven dialectical progression.”<sup>1</sup> In telescoping historical time, in other words, we fail to understand both the past *and contemporary realities* as well as we might.<sup>2</sup>

I will explore this problematic by examining the rhetoric of the “new materialism” and the way it positions itself in relation to history. New materialism’s recent bid for our attention centers on a key claim about the ontology of matter: that we understand it better now than philosophers did in the past. As the story goes, the “Cartesian-Newtonian” legacy erroneously understood matter to be mere extended stuff—uniform, passive, and inert—and thus always in need of something outside itself to render it active.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, new materialist writing celebrates their “discovery” of matter’s self-active nature *as an explicitly polemical correction to history*. Since so much of new materialism relies on this supersessionist reading of the history of philosophy, it seems to me that those of us who work in the fields designated as “old” should weigh in. We should weigh in not only about

what early moderns thought about matter, but also about the larger question of present theory's relationship to a deeper historical-intellectual context. Might that deeper context provide us with a perspective on the blind spots of our own time?

Early modern matter theory, whatever that might have been, functions as a straw-man for new materialism, a paper tiger against which today's theoretical advances are allowed far too easy a triumph. Part of the problem here is that new materialists do not appear especially interested in actually reading the diverse writings of someone like Descartes. They are satisfied, instead, with relying on standard clichés about dualism, many of which have been generated by theory itself.<sup>4</sup> For theory, Descartes has long been an enemy, since he was one of the first to usher in the age of "reason" that appears to have led to so many retrograde social-political constructs, including most recently, human exceptionalism. It is not remarkable, then, to see Descartes invoked once again as part of a story about a reactionary past.

The more interesting aspect of this story speaks to this forum's concern with the problem of intention. Though we typically place Descartes the metaphysician among the champions of free will, his physics always suggested a more deterministic view of the natural order.<sup>5</sup> Once again, Descartes' legacy is far more complicated than new materialism has allowed. My concern here, however, is less with how Descartes understood intention, than with how we, as scholars of the Enlightenment, understand intention in the history of ideas. Foucault tried to teach us that authors of a theory, tradition, or discipline create "a possibility for something other than their discourse, yet something belonging to what they founded."<sup>6</sup> One need not spend a lot of time investigating the reception of Cartesianism during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to discover the pertinancy of Foucault's insight. What Ronald Meeke calls the "law of unintended consequences" was exactly what many seventeenth-century readers of Descartes worried about.<sup>7</sup> To anyone getting his Descartes from today's theory, it is surprising to learn that many contemporaries thought that Descartes's mechanistic account of matter failed to register matter's passivity strongly enough. Once body and matter were separated from spirit in the Cartesian sense, they threatened to become sufficient explanatory models, and thus, more than merely passive and inert substances.<sup>8</sup>

The important and unexpected point here is that Descartes' dualist separation of immaterial mind and material body, which modern theory made notorious, in practice permitted the distinction between natural and supernatural to achieve a new and sharper kind of ontological resonance. In distinguishing body from an immaterial principle, Cartesian dualism left body precariously independent, precariously autonomous.<sup>9</sup> Descartes may

not have envisioned this, or intended that his dualism would lead to the rise of the body as an autonomous entity (indeed, I think it is fair to say that he most decidedly did not). But his lack of intention should not prevent us from appreciating (without ideological distortion) the historical complexity of his legacy and of its afterlives.

When Voltaire reflected back on Descartes from the heyday of Newtonianism, he shrewdly observed that Descartes's legacy had been to teach the men of his time to use his own weapons against him.<sup>10</sup> Earlier, Pierre Bayle made the same point in his article on *Rorarius* in his *Historical-Critical Dictionary*, while discussing the controversy over Descartes's assertion that animals were mere machines. For Bayle, this assertion mischievously leads Descartes's opponents to the realization that "one can defeat Descartes with his own arms, and show that he proves *too much*."<sup>11</sup> In other words, to say that animal souls are mortal is to open the door to the suspicion that human souls are equally so. On this view, over the *longue durée*, we have Descartes to thank for both the birth *and* for the demise of dualism. Meek's "law of unintended consequences" helps us to see this without shock. Perhaps reminding ourselves of the unintendedness of ideas and intellectual histories can help to dispel what Daniel Smail calls the "tissue of false memories" that too often distorts representations of earlier periods by later ones.<sup>12</sup>

Some recent arguments suggest that earlier historical fields have partially contributed to their isolation by privileging an arcane historicism. One proposed solution to this situation, in the larger and more politicized scheme of things, is to adopt a post-historicist openness to presentism in our research.<sup>13</sup> We do well to heed concern over hyper-specialization and intellectual narrowness. For today's humanities, broader and more rigorously cross-period and cross-disciplinary work is more and more vital. But when we open ourselves to presentism, let us also remember that presentist movements like new materialism cannot provide viable analyses of our current predicament without also cultivating a more nuanced sense of the past.

## NOTES

1. Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 38. See also Andrew Cole, “The Function of Theory at the Present Time,” *PMLA* 130.3 (2015): 809–18; Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1–24.

2. See Daniel Lord Smail, “History and the Telescoping of Time: A Disciplinary Forum: Introduction,” *French Historical Studies* 34.1 (2011): 1–6.

3. See, for example, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), esp. 7–10; Jane Bennett *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), vii–xvi.

4. As Pfau cautions, “we must learn to disentangle the performative character of modernity’s self-descriptions—which tend to create the intellectual discontinuities that they purport to have uncovered in the form of past ‘error’—from their truth value” (*Minding the Modern*, 39).

5. On Descartes and the problem of free will, see, for example, Vere Chappell, “Descartes’s Compatibilism,” in *Reason, Will and Sensation: Studies in Descartes’s Metaphysics*, ed. John Cottingham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 175–90; C.P. Ragland, *The Will to Reason: Theodicy and Freedom in Descartes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Anthony Kenny, “Descartes on the Will,” in *Cartesian Studies*, ed. R.J. Butler (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1972), 1–31; Joseph Keim Campbell, “Descartes on Spontaneity, Indifference, and Alternatives,” in *New Essays on the Rationalists*, ed. Rocco J. Gennaro and Charles Huenemann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 179–99.

6. Michel Foucault, “What Is An Author?” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 218.

7. Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). I thank Michael McKeon for this reference and for pointing me toward the significance of the unintendedness effect in the history of ideas.

8. The view that Cartesianism leads to materialism is in fact longstanding; for a useful overview, see Aram Vartanian, *Diderot and Descartes: A Study of Scientific Naturalism in the Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), esp. 3–46; also Sarah Ellenzweig, “Who’s Afraid of Inertia? The Cartesian-Newtonian Legacy Reconsidered,” in *Materialism and the New Politics of Ontology: History, Philosophy, Science*, ed. Sarah Ellenzweig and John H. Zammito (London: Routledge, 2017), 19–43.

9. For the view that Cartesian dualism (paradoxically) raised matter to a state of autonomy, see Vartanian, *Diderot and Descartes*, 10–11.

10. Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters*, ed. John Leigh and trans. Prudence L. Steiner (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), 50.

11. Pierre Bayle, "Rorarius," in *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, ed. and trans. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), 232; see also Peter Harrison, "Descartes on Animals," *Philosophical Quarterly* 42.167 (1992): 227.

12. Smail, "History and the Telescoping of Time," 4.

13. See the Manifesto of the V21 Collective: <http://v21collective.org/manifesto-of-the-v21-collective-ten-theses/>.