THE SLEEPING MUSICIAN.
ARISTOTLE'S VEGETATIVE SOUL AND RALPH CUDWORTH'S
PLASTIC NATURE

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Summary

While trying to invalidate Descartes' sharp division between matter and intellect as res extensa and res cogitans, Ralph Cudworth opposes physiology as mechanically conceived and replaces it with the concept of 'plastic nature'. This plastic nature is responsible for order and regularity as signs of the incorporeal principles guiding Cudworth's 'intellectual system of the universe,' at both the macrocosmic and microcosmic level. However, plastic nature is described just as a mark of the intellect in the entire corporeal world and not as a part or a faculty of the intellect itself. It is actually deprived of awareness and knowledge. Moreover, the human soul is not itself conscious of the activity of plastic nature within itself, within the soul. This complex account of plastic nature may be generated by Cudworth's attempt to harmonise such different sources as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, the Stoics, Galen, Harvey, Paracelsus and van Helmont while simultaneously trying to challenge Descartes' definition of being as cogitation and self-awareness. And Mosheim, Cudworth's later editor and translator into Latin, may have further cultivated the ambiguity of the concept of plastic nature.

Mechanical physiology and plastic nature. Two opposed concepts

In his True Intellectual System of the Universe (1678), Ralph Cudworth asserts that human souls are not always conscious of whatever they have in them, in the same way that a sleeping musician is not himself conscious of his musical skills and songs, which are nevertheless still somehow inside him. Thus, it should be possible for the soul to possess some vital energy without being expressly conscious of it. Otherwise, human souls in 'profound sleeps, lethargies and apoplexies' and also 'the embryos in the womb' would cease to have any being. Therefore, Cudworth's ostensible

assumption is that awareness is not essential to life. And in support of that, he presents two types of actions that humans perform ‘non-attendingly’. First, he explains that one cannot always tell how one’s brain is affected by different ‘motions and figurations’ in one’s ‘phantastic thoughts’, just as one is not aware of that ‘vital sympathy’ by which one’s soul is united to the body, but only of its effects. Second, he shows that sometimes one cannot even tell how one’s soul is affected by the different motions of one’s own body. To illustrate the first case, he gives the example of dreams, in which ‘cogitations’ and ‘coherent dialogues’ between the soul and other persons develop without the soul itself being aware of them, although the soul itself remains ‘the poet and inventor of the whole fable’. For the second case, his first example is that of respiration or ‘that motion of the diaphragma and other muscles’, of which the soul is not always conscious, especially while asleep. He follows this with the example of the motion of the heart, where he quotes Harvey, ‘that curious and diligent inquirer into nature’, against Descartes, who offers a mechanical explanation of the systole and diastole as caused by some ‘pulsific’, corporeal quality in the substance of the heart itself.

Mechanism is actually refuted, together with atheism, at the very beginning of Cudworth’s *True Intellectual System of the Universe*, not only in connection with the human body, but also with regard to the whole universe, and referring not only to Descartes, but to his ancient sources as well. This refutation of mechanism and of its ancient atomist antecedents is based not only on Platonic views (as one might expect from a ‘Cambridge Platonist’ like Cudworth), but also on those of Aristotle. Indeed, Cudworth tries to demonstrate the concordance between the Platonists and Aristotle in their refutation of atomism. He quotes Aristotle extensively in

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3 Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System* 160.
6 Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System* 161; cf. Lotti B., *Ralph Cudworth e l’idea di natura plastica* (Udine: 2004) 233: this *vis pulsifica* is actually an old Galenic and scholastic idea connected to the pulsation of the heart.
7 The Cambridge Platonists were fellows or students of two colleges in Cambridge: Christ’s and Emmanuel. Benjamin Whichcote (1609–1683), Henry More (1614–1687), Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688) and John Smith (1618–1652) formed the inner circle of the group. Other contemporaries associated with them were Nathaniel Culverwell (1619–1651) and Peter Sterry (1613–1672). Among their younger followers can be counted George Rust († 1670), John Norris (1657–1711) and Anne Conway (ca. 1630–1679). Two other kindred spirits could be Joseph Glanville (1638–1680) and Jeremy Taylor (1613–1667).