

# “ON THE BATTLEFIELD OF LIFE”: J. M. COETZEE’S *LIFE & TIMES* OF *MICHAEL K* IN THE LIGHT OF THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the relation between the mind and the body in J. M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* in terms of theories discussed in contemporary philosophy of mind. Although spiritual and bodily aspects are often described in the novel as separate, there is no strong ontological assumption that the spirit can exist independently from the body. References to the spiritual dimension mostly appear in the descriptions of characters’ subjective experiences and imagination. The analysis leads to the conclusion that the vision of the world in the novel oscillates between substance dualism and property dualism, but it is not entirely consistent with either of the philosophical views analysed.

## Key words

J. M. Coetzee; *Life & Times of Michael K*; mind; body; the mind-body problem; substance dualism; property dualism

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Recently, J. M. Coetzee’s works have been analysed in terms of their possible connections with debates in contemporary philosophy. In *The Wounded Animal. J. M. Coetzee & the Difficulty of Reality in Literature & Philosophy* (2009) Stephen Mulhall discusses Coetzee’s fiction with reference to the concepts of reason, language and imagination, with a special focus on ethical issues related to animals. In *The Slow Philosophy of J. M. Coetzee* (2016) Jan Wilm argues that Coetzee’s works can be described as reflexive and “philosophical” since the author’s writing abounds in techniques that increase the ambiguity of the text and slow down the process of reading. The volume of critical essays, entitled *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel. Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm (2017), comprises insightful interpretations of Coetzee’s works from multifarious perspectives, including ethics, philosophy of language, the concept of realism, psychoanalysis and postcolonial studies. In this article, I wish to analyze J. M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* from a specific philosophical perspective focused on the relation between the mind and the body. The philosophical theories concerning the mind-body problem may play an increasingly important role in the analysis of Coetzee’s works. There have been attempts to trace the Cartesian epistemological framework in his fiction on the example of *In the Heart of the Country* (Gaynesford 2017). Coetzee’s other novels, especially *Life & Times of Michael K*, also lend themselves to analysis in terms of the mind-body problem. The writer’s

interest in this question may be partly attributed to the significant influence of Beckett on his own writing, which is not only freely admitted by Coetzee himself (Coetzee 1992: 25), but also widely acknowledged and often discussed by scholars (e.g. Hayes 2010, Gaynesford 2017). Of course, there exists a substantial body of research on Cartesian motifs in Beckett's works (e.g. Kenner 1961; Cohn 1964; Fletcher 1965; McDonald 2007; Uhlmann 2006, Degani-Raz 2012). The impact of philosophical theories studied by Beckett – in particular Arnold Geulincx's philosophy (Uhlmann 2006; Coetzee 2017: 173) – is well-recognized in the literary criticism of his works. Some of the philosophical ideas which inspired Beckett may also be detected in Coetzee's writings.

The mind-body problem has not only philosophical but also theological ramifications. Not much is known about Coetzee's personal religious beliefs. If the information presented in his fictionalised autobiographies *Boyhood. Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997) and *Youth* (2003) is applicable to him, Coetzee comes from a family that did not practise religion. When he was asked by a teacher in a school in South African Worcester whether he was “a Christian<sup>1</sup> or a Roman Catholic or a Jew,” Coetzee opted for “Roman Catholic” (Head 2009: 4). It is suggested, however, that the response might not have been motivated by any true faith but rather by his fondness for ancient Roman civilisation, which at the time he mistakenly associated with “Roman Catholicism” (Coetzee 1997: 20, cf. Head 2009: 4). In fact, the protagonist in *Boyhood* is later described as “a non-Catholic” (Coetzee 1997: 147) who only pretended to be a member of the Catholic Church (Coetzee 1997: 136), whilst *Youth* presents him as someone who does not believe in God (Coetzee 2003: 3). Therefore, considering his biography, there are no sufficient reasons to attribute to Coetzee the endorsement of substance dualism that lies at the core of the Catholic – and, more broadly, Christian – religion<sup>3</sup>. Although characters in Coetzee's novels often use language that may be described as “suffused with ideas about souls and salvation” (Attridge 2004 in: Woessner 2017: 155), this seems to be unrelated to any “orthodox religious beliefs” (Attridge 2004: 180). Moreover, visions of the world, so far as they can be reconstructed from his novels, tend to diverge in different directions with regard to their stance on the mind-body problem.

This observation need not be surprising, considering Coetzee's insistence that fiction should not be treated as a set of coherent and cohesive statements about reality. In his seminal article “The Novel Today”, he advances the idea of “a novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history” (Coetzee 1988: 3). While discussing Coetzee's article, Carrol Clarkson emphasises his claim that fiction may offer a different, independent approach to issues analysed in other disciplines:

Fiction *breaks* new paths of thought, rather than following existing ones: ‘Storytelling [...] is not a way of making messages more – as they say – “effective”,’ Coetzee writes. ‘Storytelling is another, *an other mode of thinking.*’ (Coetzee 1988: 4 in: Clarkson 2017: 214; Clarkson's emphasis).

Although Coetzee's article refers predominantly to the relation between literature and history, which had poignant overtones in the South African context, it might be tempting to extend this approach to the relation between literature and philosophy. In his response to Gianni Vattimo, in "Gianni Vattimo – Temptations of realism: Comments on Paper Presented at UCT September 4, 2000", Coetzee described his interest in philosophy as "a magpie interest in stealing what I can from the mansions of philosophy for the adornment of my own constructions" (Woessner 2017: 146).

The existing literary scholarship on the impact of Cartesian dualism on Beckett's works and Beckett's influence on Coetzee's writing<sup>4</sup> (cf. Coetzee 2003: 155) gives grounds for the analysis of Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*<sup>5</sup> in terms of possible ramifications of the presentation of the relation between the mind and the body for the understanding of the novel. While acknowledging the novel's inherent indeterminacy, it may be illuminating to identify explicit and implicit references to the problem made in the text, and read them with reference to the main philosophical perspectives on the issue, especially the distinction between substance dualism and property dualism. It will be claimed that although some passages may be interpreted as congruent with substance dualism (cf. section 2) or property dualism (cf. section 3), ultimately the vision of the mind-body relation depicted in Coetzee's novel escapes clearly defined boundaries of either of these philosophical theories.

### 1. "[T]he original soul you are": Approaches to the mind-body problem in philosophy

The protagonist of the novel, Michael K, is in his thirties. His old mother Anna K wants to set off from Cape Town to a farm in the district of Prince Albert, where she was born. Shortly after the mother and her son's departure from Cape Town, Anna K dies in a hospital, but Michael continues his journey and manages to hide from police patrols. He reaches an old farm in the countryside and survives in the mountains, but becomes malnourished and emaciated. When he comes back to a town, he is picked up by the police and detained in Jakkalsdriff work camp, from which he finally escapes and retreats to the countryside farm again. Michael manages to live on the vegetables he cultivates in a garden but due to exhaustion and malnutrition he becomes delirious. He is captured by soldiers who are searching for rebels and sent to Kenilworth rehabilitation camp. In the camp, he attracts the attention of a medical officer who tries to understand Michael's isolating behaviour and his identity and even writes to him in a letter "I am the only one who sees you for the original soul you are" (LTMK 151). Oblivious to war events going on in the country and the persuasions of the officer to become more communicative and cooperative, Michael escapes from the rehabilitation camp and returns to Cape Town.

Coetzee's works in general are seen as influenced by Kafka and Beckett (Attridge 2004: 2), but among Coetzee's novels *Life & Times of Michael K* is usually indicated as the one which might owe the most to these two writers (Vlies 2016: 193;

cf. Merivale 1996). On the one hand, the social and political atmosphere in the novel resembles Kafka's motifs of social coercion and an individual's struggle to escape it. *Life & Times of Michael K* is set in an imaginary future, in which citizens of South Africa are controlled through military and police coercion (Attridge 2004: 49) and subjected to the oppressions of apartheid, which resembles the political turmoil of the 1980s (Head 2009: 55). On the other hand, the vague description of the circumstances of Michael K's journey may be associated with Beckett's works, for instance with Molloy's incoherent account of his journey, or the uncertainty of the narrator in *The Unnamable* as to the destination of the soul in its afterlife wanderings (Beckett 1965; cf. Uhlmann 2006: 103–105). Vlies (2016: 193) quotes Michael's statement from part 1 "Now I am here, he thought. Or at least I am somewhere" (LTMK 52) as evoking the feeling of Beckettian uncertainty concerning characters' exact location; this spatial non-specificity in Beckett's prose was also observed by Coetzee (2017: 196–197; 200). These circumstances may justify the description of Michael K as "a character from a Beckett play who has stumbled into a Kafka novel" (McCrum 2003).

Philosophical theories are pertinent to the analysis of *Life & Times of Michael K* because the numerous references to the relation between the mind and the body in the novel may be interpreted as manifestations of a conflict between two philosophical approaches: substance dualism and property dualism. This philosophical question inherent in the novel may also be treated as illustrative of Beckett's impact on Coetzee's writing. In his essay "Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett", Coetzee perceives Beckett as "a philosophical dualist", i.e. a substance dualist (Kenner 1961; Coetzee 2017: 202). Coetzee (2017: 202) indicates dualistic beliefs as a source of the feeling of uneasiness and ludicrousness that characterises the human condition in Beckett's works. In his discussion on Beckettian dualism, Coetzee (2017: 203) ponders why Beckett did not opt for the "most appealing alternative, philosophical monism". Coetzee delves into the puzzle of dualism:

Like photographs of Kafka, photographs of Beckett show a man whose inner being shines like a cold star through the fleshly envelope. But soul can shine through flesh only if soul and flesh are one. If soul and flesh belong to distinct realms, and their conjunction is an everlasting mystery, then no photograph will ever tell the truth. (Coetzee 2017: 217)

Without resolving the dilemma, it will be helpful, for the purposes of further analysis, to elucidate philosophical concepts of dualism involved in the conundrum that preoccupied both Beckett and Coetzee.

In philosophy of mind, possible explanations of the relation between the mind and the body are discussed within the framework of the mind-body problem that touches upon the fundamental question concerning the essential nature of the mind and mental states together with their characteristic features. One of the oldest stances towards the mind-body problem is substance dualism. This type of dualism assumes the existence of two separate ontological substances, not identical to each other: the body and the soul. The two quintessential examples of substance dualism originated in the philosophies of Plato and Descartes.

In Plato's philosophy, humans consist of two parts: the body and the soul (Plato 2005: 275). It is assumed that the soul and the body can exist independently from each other (Plato 2005: 223). The separation of the soul from the body takes place in the moment of death (Plato 2005: 231). After death, the soul still exists with all its powers and intelligence (Plato 2005: 243). The souls of the dead survive in some other world, from which they later come back again to the world of the living (Plato 2005: 251). So the human soul exists before the birth and death of the human (Plato 2005: 253), because the soul is immortal, whereas the body is mortal (Plato 2005: 253, 279, 367). The soul is invisible (Plato 2005: 277). It can examine the external material world by means of the senses of the body, but the knowledge acquired in this way is unstable and unreliable. In contrast, when the soul relies on itself, it can grasp wisdom that is "everlasting" and "changeless" (Plato 2005: 277). If the soul concentrates too much on corporeal matters, desires, and pleasures so that it does not pay attention to anything else, it is difficult for the soul to disengage from the body. After death, a soul that was too attached to material life receives punishment for its former evil life (Plato 2005: 283, 285). It wanders alone shunned by other souls (Plato 2005: 373). By contrast, if engaged in philosophy, the soul may enter the path of deliverance and purification (Plato 2005: 287). Good souls after death find gods for their companions and guides (Plato 2005: 373).

The Platonic substance dualism differs in some aspects from the Cartesian one. In Descartes' philosophy, the body and the soul are distinct substances, because each "can be conceived distinctly and separately" from the other (Descartes 2006: 58). Yet, Descartes was not able to prove that the soul can be immortal, because "the immortality of the soul does not follow from its being really distinct from the body, since it still can be said that it has been made by God to be of such a nature that its duration comes to an end at the same time as the body's life comes to an end" (Descartes 2006: 90). Whether the soul exists after the death of the body was up to God to decide (Descartes 2006: 91).

Descartes referred to the soul as "the mind" (Descartes 2006: 95). It was endowed with the faculty of thinking and reasoning (Descartes 2006: 102). The "I" – the "Cartesian ego" – was equated with the mind understood as "a thing that thinks" (Descartes 2006: 15). The process of thinking guarantees that the subject exists, which is captured in Descartes' assertions: "I am therefore precisely nothing but a thinking thing; that is, a mind, or intellect, or understanding, or reason" (Descartes 2006: 15) and "I think, therefore I am – to the extent that I am a mind and an act of thinking" (Descartes 2006: 53). The "I" ceases to exist when it ceases to think (Descartes 2006: 15). Whilst the knowledge formed through the use of corporeal senses is unreliable, things grasped clearly and distinctly "solely with the faculty of judgment" characteristic for the mind are certain (Descartes 2006: 17–18), which corresponds to Plato's philosophy.

Descartes believed that the soul conceived of as a separate substance could interact with the body in the pineal gland. In Cartesian philosophy, the pineal gland was surrounded by the cerebral fluid in which the animal spirits floated. The animal spirits were constituted by "the smallest and most agitated [particles]" of the blood, which became separated from less fine parts of the blood (Descartes

2003: 20–21, Descartes 1989: 24). Descartes, who introduced a clear distinction between the body and the soul, decided that animal spirits were part of the body. He described them as very small material bodies that moved very fast (Descartes 1989: 24).

The location of the pineal gland near the centre of the cerebral ventricles enabled both the pineal gland and animal spirits in the ventricles to exert their influence on each other (Descartes 1989: 36). The soul and animal spirits were capable of pushing the pineal gland in various, often opposite, directions, so that many diverse feelings, wills and desires were generated (Descartes 1989: 38; 1989: 44–46). Descartes believed that the pineal gland was the only place where the soul could exert a direct influence on the body (Descartes 1989: 36–37).

Although substance dualism is still supported in some circles, contemporary philosophy often considers other possibilities, among them property dualism. This theory states that conscious beings consist of one substance (nowadays usually believed to be physical) that has two kinds of properties: physical and mental. In contrast to other theories such as reductive physicalism, property dualism supports the claim that “the mental properties of persons are significantly independent of, or in some other way distinct from, the physical properties of persons” (Zimmerman 2010: 120). Property dualism in its contemporary form “typically maintains that the human brain possesses both mental and physical properties but that these properties are distinct and mutually irreducible” (Lowe 2009: 1019).

The earliest versions of property dualism include the philosophy of Descartes’ contemporary – Baruch Spinoza, at least under some interpretations of his thought (Lowe 2009: 1019). Spinoza believed that there is only one substance that encompasses everything that exists (Spinoza 2017, Part I, Proposition XXX). Substance can have different attributes, among them thought and extension. Particular modes of thought are multifarious ideas (Spinoza 2017, Part II, Proposition V). Particular modes of extension are various things (Spinoza 2017, Part II, Prop. VII). So the modes of the attribute of thought are mental and the modes of the attribute of extension are physical. Spinoza’s theory differed from the Cartesian one in accepting that the same substance can possess both mental and physical properties (Lowe 2009: 1019).

The fact that property dualism distinguishes two kinds of properties is the reason why this stance is classified as a kind of dualism. However, property dualism departs from substance dualism and resembles physicalism in its claim that there is only one substance on the ontological level. Consequently, property dualism is ontologically a monistic theory (Zimmerman 2010: 120). It is different from physicalism in the sense that the latter need not be committed to the acceptance of the independent status of mental properties. Physicalism in contemporary philosophy of mind is understood as an ontological claim to the effect that reality is constituted by physical entities and forces (Stoljar 2015 sec. 1). Physicalism generally claims that the reality is physical or “is necessitated by the physical” (Stoljar 2010: 16), so there is only physical substance and no non-physical beings, i.e. no spiritual beings. Only one variety of physicalism – the so-called non-reductive physicalism – can accept property dualism’s claim that mental and physical properties are independent of each other. In fact, property dualism may



assume a form compatible with this weak version of physicalism, which rejects the possibility of reducing all mental properties to physical properties, although it still treats them as properties of one physical substance. Nonetheless, property dualism does not support the strong physicalist thesis that mental properties are entirely reducible to physical properties, which is accepted by the so-called reductive physicalism (cf. Stoljar 2010: 161–162; 2015 sec. 7).

## 2. “A soul stirring its wings”: Substance dualism in J. M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K*

A superficial reading of the novel, especially of its first half, may leave an impression that the vision of the world presented in *Life & Times of Michael K* is consistent with substance dualism. Indeed, some passages could be interpreted as compatible with a strict dualistic division into the mind and the body as two ontologically separate substances. For instance, after an exhaustive journey through the mountains and his dismal stay at Jakkalsdriff camp, Michael rejoices in his existence despite extreme physical emaciation. The “deep joy in his physical being” makes him feel as though he were something more than merely a physical body, i.e. as though he had a soul: “His step was so light that he barely touched the earth. It seemed possible to fly; it seemed possible to be both body and spirit” (LTMK 101–102). Similarly, in the moments of extreme fatigue and “shivering with cold” during his stay at the farm, Michael also felt as though he were a being of spiritual nature. Eating poorly and hiding away from people made him feel “like [...] a ghost” (LTMK 120).

In passages that imply a division between the mind and the body, the novel gravitates towards treating the body and its needs as a source of pain, sorrow and torment. This attitude is also revealed in the description of the experiences of Michael’s mother in the hospital she had visited just before they set off on a journey. She suffered from breathlessness and itchiness of her legs, which made it difficult for her to “control the urge to scratch” (LTMK 5). The medical institution is even compared to a place where the soul can purify itself through suffering. When Michael’s mother was released from the hospital, she felt relieved that she “was escaping this purgatory” (LTMK 5).

In some passages of the novel in which Michael is the focaliser, bodily experiences are described as though they were examined by a Cartesian subject. Michael is identified as a separate being that interacts with his material body but is of different, i.e. of spiritual, nature. Sometimes Michael describes his body as a separate part that belongs to him but functions on its own. This conceptualisation of the subject is symptomatic of Cartesian dualism, in which the mind and the body are separate substances subject to different rules, although they interact and influence each other. In Coetzee’s novel, the interaction demonstrates some autonomy of each part. For example, the body can tremble without the mind’s control although the latter can detect changes in the body. Michael, referred to as “K” and treated as an individual substance, can feel that “his whole body”, understood as the other substance, begins to tremble (LTMK 52–53).

A similar Cartesian perspective on the mind in the interaction with the body is revealed in the passage when Michael feels the beating of his own heart. His bodily processes are examined by Michael as though they happened in some other reality; he examines them as though he were a ghost reaching out to the material substance of his body:

He could feel the processes of his body slowing down. You are forgetting to breathe, he would say to himself, and yet lie without breathing. He raised a hand heavy as lead and put it over his heart: far away, as if in another country, he felt a languid stretching and closing. (LTMK 118)

The interpretation of these passages as exemplifying the idea of the Cartesian subject agrees with Parry's description of Michael K as "the exemplar of a mind turned inward" (Parry 1996: 46). The Cartesian subject focuses on his internal spiritual experiences and detects changes in the body as they come from the external physical world.

Similarly, the Cartesian treatment of the soul is adopted by the medical officer who takes care of Michael in Kenilworth rehabilitation camp. The medical officer has a concept of the soul as a separate entity, but he refers to customary descriptions of the soul and the body as interacting and influencing each other. This conceptualisation of the interactions between the mind and the body, which can influence each other, is emblematic of the Cartesian framework:

We are given an old racetrack and a quantity of barbed wire and told to effect a change in men's souls. Not being experts on the soul but assuming cautiously that it has some connection with the body, we set our captives to doing pushups and marching back and forth. (LTMK 134)

The medical officer compares Michael to a rabbit hidden in the carcass of an ox, which evokes the traditional image of the soul entrapped in the human body: "You were like a bunny-rabbit sewn up in the carcass of an ox, suffocating no doubt, but starving too, amid all those basketfuls of meat, for the true food" (LTMK 164). The officer resorts to metaphorical descriptions to stress Michael's unique character. While emphasising the peculiarity of his patient, the officer describes the relation between the will and the body in a way that preserves the Cartesian distinction between the mind and the body. It should be admitted, however, that the separateness of Michael's body from his mind is sometimes described in a reversed way when compared with the traditional Cartesian characterisation of the two: it appears that it is Michael's body that may be closer to the mystical and the supernatural than his mind. The officer states that Michael's body has unusual characteristics, resulting from Michael's different mode of life, presumably also different values and a peculiar worldview. This uniqueness is captured by the metaphor of Michael's need of "a different type of food". The medical officer draws a distinction between Michael's will that acquiesced to the change of circumstances in Michael's life when he stayed in the rehabilitation camp, and Michael's body that craves for a different life and a different kind of



food. The officer explains Michael's lack of appetite through the inherent difference between the two constituents of the human:

I slowly began to understand the truth: that you were crying secretly, unknown to your conscious self (forgive the term), for a different kind of food, food that no camp could supply. Your will remained pliant but your body was crying to be fed its own food, and only that. Now I had been taught that the body contains no ambivalence. The body, I had been taught, wants only to live. Suicide, I had understood, is an act not of the body against itself but of the will against the body. Yet here I beheld a body that was going to die rather than change its nature.<sup>6</sup> (LTMK 163–164)

The officer treats Michael's strangeness as an abnormality that should be cured but it cannot be changed. This different type of food that Michael needs is here referred to as biblical manna from the sky (LTMK 150–151). By using the metaphor of the manna, the medical officer implies that Michael's problems are of existential nature. In his opinion, Michael's aversion to food in the camp is related to his preference for social isolation and hermitic existence, which are made impossible due to the dismal and brutal reality of the civil war. The officer is inclined to think of Michael as of a person "spoiled forever by the taste of manna" (LTMK 151).

Metaphors are also used to indicate a special bond or understanding that the medical officer believes to have with his patient. The officer stresses his conviction that he is the only one capable of noticing Michael's true nature, which this time, in contrast to what might have been suggested by the earlier metaphors, is identified with Michael's "soul":

Listen to me, Michaels. I am the only one who can save you. I am the only one who sees you for the original soul you are. I am the only one who cares for you. I alone see you as neither a soft case for a soft camp nor a hard case for a hard camp but a human soul above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history, a soul stirring its wings within that stiff sarcophagus, murmuring behind that clownish mask. (LTMK 151)

These descriptions of Michael appear to refer directly to the classical Cartesian distinction between the mind and the body. However, they are in principle metaphorical so they need not be interpreted literally as a straightforward expression of the medical officer's beliefs as to the objective existence of the spiritual dimension.

Descriptions of human beings as consisting of the spirit and the body are also characteristic for passages in the novel that imply some sort of spiritual existence after death. This attitude is noticeable in references to Michael's dead mother. When Michael is escorted by children on his way to Seweweekspoort, he is asked about his mother's ashes which he carries in a box. After a thorough examination of the ashes by the children, Michael recollects the moments of his

mother's death. He can see in his mind's eye the image of his mother in flames during the cremation, imagining a burning halo around her head. The image suggests that his mother might have become a spirit who survived her death. This interpretation is supported by Michael's belief that his mother "didn't feel anything" in the moment of her death because "she was already spirit by then" (LTMK 48).

It seems that Michael's attitude stands in opposition to the medical staff who worked in the hospital where his mother died and was cremated. They acted as though his mother was just a body, so they exhibited a physicalist approach towards death. Michael is disgruntled by what he perceives as the staff's lack of reverence towards his mother's corpse. When it is thrown into the fire and later brought out in the form of ashes, Michael is upset by the medical workers' reference to the remnants as "his mother" and their instructions to "take her away" because "she was no good" to them (LTMK 136). Michael feels as though the medical workers concentrated only on the material aspect of human life. Humans matter only as long as they live, function properly, and are of some use to society. When they die, they cease to be of any interest to other people who cannot exploit them any longer. Michael appears to resent this approach to life and treats material reality as only one aspect of human life, the other being the spiritual dimension.

It must be stated, however, that Michael's beliefs in his mother's eternal life are not cogent but rather ambivalent. On the one hand, he constantly thinks about her ashes that he carries in the box, which are a material trace of her existence on earth. On the other hand, he often associates his mother with a spirit of some ethereal nature. For Michael, his mother "was in some sense in the box and in some sense not" (LTMK 57). He derived consolation from the thought that his mother could have survived her death as an immortal soul. If she became "a spirit released into the air", she could finally rest at peace, which was difficult for her when she "was nearer her natal earth" (LTMK 57).

Michael believes that other people can also survive the death of their bodies. He is under the impression that just before her death his mother was talking to some supernatural being, assumedly the ghost of his grandmother. During their last encounters, his mother had a distant look, as though she was looking not at Michael, but at someone who could be standing behind him: "her mother or the ghost of her mother" (LTMK 117). Nonetheless, it is not clear to him if his impression was correct. Even if his mother really believed she saw a ghost, it may have been merely a product of her imagination or a hallucination produced by her weary mind just before her death.

Throughout the novel, Michael is often described as a peculiar individual, distinct from other people and isolated from the society.<sup>7</sup> It is hinted that Michael's abnormality predisposes him to believe in the supernatural. His determination to live as a recluse encourages the reader to ascribe to the protagonist "visionary near-holiness" (Hayes 2010: 95). The medical officer refers to Michael's beliefs in ghosts when he describes him as an eccentric man, probably somewhat mentally deranged. When Michael was interrogated at Kenilworth rehabilitation camp, he "gazed up at the ceiling for a long while, like an old man consulting the spirits"

(LTMK 136). Michael is portrayed as a person who lost contact with the real world, which made it difficult for the medical staff to take care of him.

Michael's beliefs in the supernatural are not treated seriously by the people he meets but are interpreted mostly as a symptom of his mental deficiency. Michael's visions of his mother with the halo of burning hair around her head are treated as symptomatic of a mental disease or disorder that cannot be treated properly. The medical officer thinks that Michael's confused mental state might have originated from his submissiveness and uncritical emotional attachment towards his mother:

There is nothing we can do here to rehabilitate you from the vengeful mother with flaming hair who comes to you in your dreams. [...] I also think of her sitting on your shoulders, eating out your brains, glaring about triumphantly, the very embodiment of great Mother Death. [...] What do you see? Is it your mother in her circle of flaming hair grinning and beckoning to you with crooked finger to pass through the curtain of light and join her in the world beyond? Does that explain your indifference to life? (LTMK 149–150)

Michael is regarded as an eccentric being that does not fit in with the common world. The medical officer refers to him as “a poor helpless soul” to emphasise Michael's fragility and unfitness for the brutal reality of political upheaval happening in South Africa at that time (LTMK 141). The officer believes that Michael is lost in the world and should be confined to a mental institution. He thinks that such a person should not be “permitted to wander out on to the battlefield [...] of life” (LTMK 141). Instead, it would be better for Michael to be “shut away in an institution with high walls, stuffing cushions or watering the flower-beds” (LTMK 141).

The medical officer is convinced that Michael is not an ordinary person and this is why he should be treated differently from other patients. The officer treats Michael's departure from normality as a more probable explanation for his strange behaviour and strange beliefs than his alleged collaboration with insurgents. The officer describes Michael as being “in touch with things” other people cannot understand and treats his predisposition to “hear the call of the great good master and [...] obey” as though it was a symptom of delusions (LTMK 155). Michael's strangeness makes him prone to believe in things that are not treated seriously by other people. Michael's medical officer states that his patient would not recognize how outlandish his convictions are. The officer implies that Michael is likely to explain his situation by telling strange stories and referring to supernatural phenomena or imaginary places like “the Garden of Paradise” if he is asked by the police where he comes from (LTMK 155).

Michael is immune to other people's efforts to change his beliefs and behaviour. He concentrates on his own thoughts and feelings, which seem irrational to others. The medical officer describes Michael as completely indifferent to his environment and external circumstances, as a “hard little stone, barely aware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its interior life” (LTMK 135). Due to his

isolation, Michael is described by the medical officer as a being who is underdeveloped, both physically and mentally. This underdevelopment makes him both infantile and socially isolated, as an “unbearing, unborn creature” (LTMK 135).

Although Michael believes in ghosts and resembles one due to his gauntness, he lives in a world that does not seem to accept a spiritual dimension. Even if Michael were “an universal soul” or “a spirit invisible”, as the officer speculates, there would be no place for such beings in the real world (LTMK 151). The medical officer is convinced that Michael should have tried to hide from the police patrols, although he doubts if such complete isolation is possible to sustain on Earth:

You should have hidden, Michaels. [...] Did you think you were a spirit invisible, a visitor on our planet, a creature beyond the reach of the laws of nations? [...] The laws are made of iron, Michaels, I hope you are learning that. No matter how thin you make yourself, they will not relax. There is no home left for universal souls, except perhaps in Antarctica or on the high seas. (LTMK 151)

It must be stated that it is difficult to infer strong ontological consequences from the characters' manner of speaking. It is possible that the terms and phrases they use are simply rooted in a specific culturally accepted tradition of using certain concepts. Michael may call the ashes of his mother “his mother” due to the change of referent of the term “his mother” in the moment of her death – from this moment it may start to refer to the ashes of his mother after her cremation. From his point of view, it need not exclude the possibility that some spiritual part of his mother still exists in another dimension. On the other hand, this linguistic shift may be the result of inculcating in Michael a certain socially acceptable manner of speaking about human ashes, which need not entail any deeper ontological consequences: “He thought of his mother. She had asked him to bring her back to her birthplace and he had done so, though perhaps only by a trick of words” (LTMK 116). Presumably, his mother dreamt of reaching the farm to live there; she might not have cared so much about the location of her burial place. This is why Michael may feel that he brought her back to the farm only symbolically.

References to ghosts are also sometimes just merely colloquial expressions, without any strong ontological presuppositions. This is apparent in Michael's thoughts about the old farm which he believed to have been his mother's family farm. When he finally reached the farm and saw a house built there, he realised that it was long abandoned by its former inhabitants. For Michael, “a home for ghosts” means just “an abandoned house” and, as a matter of fact, the state of the dilapidated house does not bother him at all (LTMK 98). In the same vein, “the soul” is also sometimes used as a simple synonym of the mind, without any strong ontological presuppositions. The soul seems to be treated as something that animals, too, may possess. This approach, which resists substance dualism in its traditional versions developed by Plato and Descartes, could be reconciled with physicalism. In a passage like the one below, “the soul” could therefore be replaced by a natural concept, such as an “instinct” or “genetic material”:

He also ate roots. He had no fear of being poisoned, for he seemed to know the difference between a benign bitterness and a malign one, as though he had once been an animal and the knowledge of good and bad plants had not died in his soul. (LTMK 102)

In some other passages, “a living soul” is used to refer customarily to “a person,” as in the description of the farm Michael stays on. When Michael is discovered by soldiers patrolling the area, they describe the place of his hideaway as a place in which “there wasn’t a living soul in miles” (LTMK 122). The absence of “a living soul” simply means that the area of the farm is a desolate place, not likely to be inhabited by people.

To recapitulate, although there are frequent seemingly dualistic descriptions in the novel, it may be argued that these descriptions do not necessarily imply genuine substance dualism in the philosophical sense. Phrases evoking dualistic divisions into the spirit and the body usually appear in situations when characters describe their own subjective experiences or ascribe dualistic beliefs to others. Beliefs in dualistic divisions are most frequently voiced by Michael in the first half of the novel, but they do not seem to be anchored within any consistent framework of ideas. Some dualistic descriptions which appear in the characters’ utterances appear to stem from the use of traditional metaphorical figures of speech and do not imply any deeper ontological convictions on the part of the characters. For these reasons, the references to substance dualism such as the ones above may be interpreted as superficial: they express characters’ feelings or conjectures but they may not be adequate manifestations of their actual vision of what the human being is.

### **3. “A genuine little man of earth”: Property dualism in *Life & Times of Michael K***

Despite frequent allusions to the concept of substance dualism, the novel often presents the world and humans as constituted by the physical substrate alone, which could lend support to ontologically monist theories in the interpretation of the text. The most straightforward feature of the novel’s world which is in line with ontological monism is the characters’ predominant treatment of bodily death as the final end of human existence. When Michael thinks of his own death, he equates it with the death of his body: “It came home to him that he might die, he or his body, it was the same thing, that he might lie here till the moss on the roof grew dark before his eyes, that his story might end with his bones growing white in this far-off place” (LTMK 69). Here, Michael seems to identify himself with his body. When he imagines his corpse he thinks of it as “the whole I”:

I am becoming smaller and harder and drier every day. If I were to die here, sitting in the mouth of my cave looking out over the plain with my knees under my chin, I would be dried out by the wind in a day, I would be preserved whole, like someone in the desert drowned in sand. (LTMK 67–68)

Michael thinks that after his death no trace of him will be left. In the second half of the novel, he also strongly believes it to be true in the case of his mother. After her death, when he brings her ashes to the abandoned farm, what is left of her is buried in the soil. Then her remains supposedly enter the cycle of constant changes in nature. The particles that constituted her body are now parts of grass: "There will be not a grain left bearing my marks, just as my mother has now, after her season in the earth, been washed clean, blown about, and drawn up into the leaves of grass" (LTMK 124). This belief in the final character of human death is also expressed by Michael in his conversation with the medical officer. Michael states that what was left of his mother is now part of nature and "makes the plants grow" (LTMK 130). He believes his mother did not survive her death in any other form than simple particles that became parts of plants. He also treats the crematorium where his mother was cremated as a place where humans vanish completely and are transformed into mere ashes:

So there is a place for burning, K thought. He imagined the old women from the ward fed one after another, eyes pinched against the heat, lips pinched, hands at their sides, into the fiery furnace. First the hair, in a halo of flame, then after a while everything else, to the last things, burning and crumbling. (LTMK 32)

Michael's appearance and behaviour described from his point of view and the perspective of the people he interacts with could also remind the reader of the view that the human being is a part of the natural world. Michael is frequently portrayed as resembling animals, or compares himself to animals. Even the name of his condition – a hare lip, which is instantly noticeable in his appearance – brings to mind an animal. This characteristic is depicted in the opening sentence of the novel: "The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare lip" (LTMK 1). During the time spent in the mountains Michael lies inactive in his hiding place, "living beyond the reach of calendar and clock in a blessedly neglected corner, half awake, half asleep", thinking of himself as "a lizard under a stone" (LTMK 116). The resemblance to a lizard is also observed by the medical officer when he notices his patient in the rehabilitation camp "sitting on the grass holding his face up to the sun like a lizard basking" (LTMK 132). In another episode, the medical officer compares Michael to a lizard in order to emphasise his strange and reserved attitude towards others: he describes him as moistening "his lips with his lizard-tongue" (LTMK 139). Sometimes Michael is compared to an animal because of his ugliness, which makes him look less human and more animalistic. For instance, the medical officer describes Michael's smile in the torchlight as "repulsive, sharklike" (LTMK 147). In the officer's eyes, Michael looks ugly in a way that makes him more like a strange creature than a normal human being. His bare head with "ears sticking out of his bare skull" seems to have some nonhuman qualities (LTMK 134).

Michael's body is also compared by the medical officer to an insect's, especially a stick-insect's.<sup>8</sup> The astonishing strength of Michael's grasp evokes in the officer



associations with an unexpected and unpleasant touch of an insect. When the officer was trying to grasp the patient's wrist, Michael "pulled away with surprising strength, waving an arm like an insect's claw" (LTMK 135). The medical officer also compares Michael to a stick-insect on the grounds that Michael is extraordinary both mentally and physically. The patient is so extremely skinny that his thin limbs resemble flimsy legs of an insect:

You are like a stick insect, Michaels, whose sole defence against a universe of predators is its bizarre shape. You are like a stick insect that has landed, God knows how, in the middle of a great wide flat bare concrete plain. You raise your slow fragile sticklegs one at a time, you inch about looking for something to merge with, and there is nothing. Why did you ever leave the bushes, Michaels? That was where you belonged. You should have stayed all your life clinging to a nondescript bush in a quiet corner of an obscure garden in a peaceful suburb, doing whatever it is that stick insects do to maintain life, nibbling a leaf here and there, eating the odd aphid, drinking dew. (LTMK 149–150)

Michael's general awkwardness and seeming helplessness is also the reason why he is compared by the medical officer to offspring of a cat, a duck, or some other bird. The officer assumes that keeping Michael alive is as difficult as "keeping the weakest pet duckling alive, or the runt of the cat's litter, or a fledgling expelled from the nest" (LTMK 142). This comparison emphasises how astonishing it is that Michael managed to survive despite his serious physical condition: firstly "thirty years in the shadows of the city" and then "a season footloose in the war zone", out of which he came out "intact" (LTMK 142).

Michael's animalistic features make him different from other people and make him unable to perform everyday activities. The medical officer compares Michael to a rat, a mouse and a lizard to show that the tasks carried out by other residents of the camp are completely unsuitable for Michael. He believes that forcing Michael to perform standard activities "would have been like trying to teach a rat or a mouse or [...] a lizard to bark and beg and catch a ball" (LTMK 163).

The medical officer also describes Michael as "a man of earth" to show that Michael was not fully socially adapted. Michael's connection with the wild nature reinforces the image of the protagonist's social isolation. The officer's naturalist description shows that Michael gives the impression of having stronger connections with the environment than with the society:

With Michaels it always seemed to me that someone had scuffled together a handful of dust, spat on it, and patted it into the shape of a rudimentary man, making one or two mistakes (the mouth, and without a doubt the contents of the head), omitting one or two details (the sex), but coming up nevertheless in the end with a genuine little man of earth, the kind of little man one sees in peasant art emerging into the world from between the squat thighs of its mother-host with fingers ready hooked and back ready bent for a life of burrowing, a creature that spends its waking life stooped

over the soil, that when at last its time comes digs its own grave and slips quietly in and draws the heavy earth over its head like a blanket and cracks a last smile and turns over and descends into sleep, home at last, while unnoticed as ever somewhere far away the grinding of the wheels of history continues. (LTMK 161)

Nonetheless, the medical officer in fact finds it difficult to grasp the true nature of his patient, which he admits in his imaginary dialogue with Michael: “[...] whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away [...]” (LTMK 166). His naturalistic description of Michael is problematized by the officer’s metaphorical expression of his conviction that Michael belongs to a different dimension: “[...] the only place where you belong [...] is off every map, no road leads to it that is merely a road, and only you know the way” (LTMK 166).

Michael himself also has an inclination to compare himself to some animals that live in soil: an earthworm and a mole (LTMK 182). These comparisons strengthen “K’s affinity with the landscape” or his identification with the earth (Marais 1996: 77). The protagonist may be even described as “a child of the earth”<sup>9</sup> (Weigl 2011: 83). Michael thinks that his union with the soil is strengthened by his profession as gardener. For Michael, being a gardener is in fact not merely wage-labour, but “a mode of life and existential principle” (Attwell 2015: 53). The main character believes he shares with a mole not only the physical activities of digging in the soil, but also the animal’s muteness: a mole also “does not tell stories because it lives in silence” (LTMK 182).

Likewise, when Michael tries to catch and kill one of the goats living on the farm he stays on, he finds similarities between animals and humans. He thinks of the animals as thinking creatures:

It was hard to believe that he had become this savage with the bared knife [...] the goats would trot off again, and to keep up his spirits he would have to say to himself: They have many thoughts, I have only one thought, my one thought will in the end be stronger than their many. (LTMK 52–53)

In this passage, the difference between the mental capabilities of the man and the animals seems to be portrayed as quantitative rather than qualitative: the supremacy of humans lies only in the human ability to concentrate one’s efforts and focus on a specific task at hand. The ability to pay attention to one specific goal makes it possible for Michael to defeat the goats. *Life & Times of Michael K* may be said to allude to the Darwinian theory of evolution that treats humans as members of the animal kingdom. Humans share both biological and psychological features with other animals and are closely related to other primates. On this ground, consciousness could be explained as a natural phenomenon in the sense that it characterises natural organisms constituted by a physical substance. That being the case, consciousness is a property of the material being, but does not have an independent ontological status. The emphasis on the similarities between humans and animals in the novel presents them as non-spiritual beings, which contrasts strongly with the theory of substance dualism. However, this treatment

of consciousness does not need to entail reductive physicalism that would assume that mental properties were reducible to physical properties. If they were actually reducible, then descriptions of mental properties of humans could be derived from and be replaceable by physical descriptions without any loss of information (cf. Stoljar 2010: 161–162). The tension may be resolved by property dualism that supports the existence of physical matter with two types of properties: mental and physical, irreducible to each other. It might explain Michael's frequent descriptions of his experiences in dualistic terms and the medical officer's dualistic vision of Michael as an insect-like body and an extraordinary person with unusual spiritual and mental qualities. It is also compatible with Michael's assertions about the end of his mother's life after her bodily death and his embracement of his own embodied physical nature, which is reflected in Michael's animalistic traits.

The theory of property dualism also helps to account for arguably the most striking features of Michael K: his originality and resilience or even obstinacy in the pursuit of his intention to live as he wants: as a gardener on a secluded farm in the countryside. The discussion of the role of the will in a political context with reference to *Life & Times of Michael K* was prompted by Nadine Gordimer's review "The Idea of Gardening". She criticised Coetzee's novel for its portrayal of the protagonist who focuses on gardening instead of being involved in the socio-political conflict in his country. Gordimer (1984: 6) described him as lacking "the energy of the will to resist evil" incarnated in the South African racial strife. Yet, despite his close affinity with nature and frequent animalistic comparisons, Michael still manifests his free will and resilience towards socially imposed norms or expectations. The frequent references to Michael K's inner world described metaphorically in spiritual terms do not depict him as a human who lacks individuality or free will, but rather as a self-conscious man, persistent in following his own path in life. As argued by Nicole Devarenne (2009: 634), turning to gardening and to the earth may be seen as "a willed engagement with the way politics inscribes the story of the individual's relationship with land, nature, earth – a desire to write a different kind of story about that relationship".

Reading the novel in terms of property dualism helps to accommodate the idea of Michael's individual will and account for his sense of selfhood, as far as it can be ascertained from his words and thoughts. Still, the novel gives some grounds for considering alternative views. Intuitively, substance dualism, which the narrative occasionally hints at, due to its Christian connotations may be easily reconciled with the belief in the human free will. In contrast, reductive physicalism faces frequent accusations of being allegedly incompatible with free will: if mental properties are fully reducible to physical properties, it does not leave any space for independent, autonomous acts of the will, irrespective of physical determination. Despite frequent references to his physicality, Michael cannot be reduced to his bodily aspects. By contrast, property dualism offers a way of reconciling these opposed views – it may acknowledge the existence of free will without the denial of the physical nature of the universe. If mental features are independent of physical properties and emerge out of the physical matter in a mysterious, inexplicable way, then thoughts, feelings, emotions and decisions

concerning actions are irreducible to properties of bodily processes. If they are not determined by the laws of physical forces, there is a space for free will.

#### **4. Conclusions: Oscillation between substance dualism and property dualism**

To conclude, it may be argued that *Life & Times of Michael K* can be interpreted as presenting the relation between the mind and the body in a way that oscillates between property dualism and substance dualism, but may not be conclusively compatible with either of these philosophical theories. In the novel, mental and bodily aspects are often described as separate but there is ultimately no strong ontological assumption that the spirit can exist independently from the body or that there is some form of existence after death. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, substance dualism is observable only in the descriptions of the characters' subjective experiences, which may be the effect of the characters' imagination or may be purely metaphorical. Humans and animals are frequently seen as exclusively physical beings, which conflicts with the theory of substance dualism. Yet, it has to be noted that such references coexist with those that seem compatible with property dualism – both Michael and the medical workers he interacts with in the novel describe humans – and sometimes also animals – as possessing two kinds of properties: physical and mental. Mental properties in the novel are separate from and irreducible to physical properties (which excludes reductive physicalist interpretations).

Also, it may be observed that the manifestations of the protagonist's beliefs about the mind-body relation seem to exhibit a certain pattern of transition. At the beginning of the novel, in the account of his thoughts about his dead mother, there is a prevalence of ideas compatible with substance dualism, but later his beliefs seem to evolve towards a stance which is more compatible with property dualism. This transition corresponds to Michael's overall sense of dejection and his disillusionment with life in the second half of the story. *Life & Times of Michael K* shows how the main character begins his journey with the hope for a better life in the countryside. However, as the novel progresses, his hope proves to be futile and his plans unfeasible: he does not manage to stay on the farm; he is forcibly taken away. He is disillusioned with the state of affairs but he does not plan to significantly change his life anymore. When he comes back to Cape Town at the end, he simply accepts what happens to him. Although he still considers the possibility of setting off to the farm once again, his plans are very minimalistic and in fact not likely to be realised. This disillusionment finds its reflection in the more frequent appearance of terms corresponding to property dualism in his reflections about the final end of his mother in the second part of the novel. Substance dualism is a more challenging approach: it presupposes the existence not only of the body, but also of the spirit as an independent substance (which makes it less plausible than ontologically monistic theories). Throughout the novel, Michael becomes more and more dependent on his body to the point of identification with his material being. The move towards property dualism, which is, in philo-

sophical terms, a less radical and less questionable stance, may be seen as a parallel to Michael's transition from his initial, ambitious plans of starting a new life on the farm, and generally a more active approach, to a resigned acceptance of his passive existence in Cape Town.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In the context, "Christian" most probably refers to Protestants or any other Christians except Catholics (Coetzee 1997: 18–21; Head 2009: 4).
- <sup>2</sup> See note 1.
- <sup>3</sup> Christian theology is often described as profoundly influenced by Neoplatonism that was developed from Plato's philosophy by Plotinus and others (cf. Wildberg 2011).
- <sup>4</sup> This inspiration also finds its reflection in Coetzee's four essays on Beckett: "The Young Samuel Beckett", "Samuel Beckett, *Watt*", "Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*", "Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett", which were published in the collection *Late Essays. 2006–2017* (Coetzee 2017).
- <sup>5</sup> In references henceforth abbreviated as LTMK.
- <sup>6</sup> This passage evokes the protagonist of Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* (cf. Lehmann-Haupt 1983; Merivale 1996: 167).
- <sup>7</sup> Michael's loneliness to a certain extent exemplifies Kafkaesque motifs in Coetzee's writing: apart from the protagonists of Kafka's short stories *A Hunger Artist* and *The Burrow*, Michael also resembles Joseph K from *The Trial* (Lehmann-Haupt 1983; Merivale 1996: 161–167; Weigl 2011: 83–88). Coetzee's close familiarity with Kafka's works is also illustrated by his essays. In "Time, Tense, and Aspect in Kafka's "The Burrow"", Coetzee (1992: 210–232) presented a linguistically-informed analysis of *The Burrow*, concentrating on its narrative structure and the conception of time. In "Translating Kafka", Coetzee (2001: 74–87) discussed linguistic problems in English translations of Kafka's works, including *The Trial*, with a special focus on *The Castle*. In the chapter "Audible palimpsests: Coetzee's Kafka", Merivale (1996: 161–167) analyses *The Life & Times of Michael K* with reference to Kafka's works, including *A Hunger Artist* and *The Burrow*, to highlight the intertextuality in Coetzee's novels. In his chapter "Life & Times of Michael K (1983)", Weigl discusses the novel's themes related to Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* and *The Burrow* in the South African context, concluding that "the conscious dialogue with the fiction of Franz Kafka" results in "an atmosphere of spiritual awareness about the ends of human life" (Weigl 2011: 88).
- <sup>8</sup> This comparison is sometimes associated with Kafka's influence on Coetzee (Lehmann-Haupt 1983; Attridge 2004: 51), especially Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (Kafka 1983).
- <sup>9</sup> This comparison is reminiscent of Kafka's short story *The Burrow* (Merivale 1996: 161–163).

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