14.1.

In 1674, Malebranche remarked that “it can be said with some assurance that the difference between the mind and the body has been known with sufficient clarity for only a few years” (*Search after Truth*, p. xl). The remark pays homage to Descartes, and his account of mind as essentially thought, body as essentially extension. To be sure, neither of these claims is entirely original with Descartes. In Thomas Aquinas, for instance, we meet the claim that bodies are those substances “in which one finds three dimensions” (*Summa theol.* 1a 18.2c) – a claim that he clearly regards as commonplace, and as following the lead of both Aristotle and Augustine.¹ Augustine seems attracted as well to the idea that the mind’s essence is thought. For he attacks the materialists of his day for identifying the mind with various corporeal elements and mixtures, when in fact that essence is right in front of them: “when the mind knows itself it knows its substance, and when it is certain of itself it is certain of its substance. But it is certain of itself,” Augustine writes, inasmuch as it is certain that it thinks, wills, doubts, and so forth. The mind is therefore not a body, but a thing that thinks (*De trinitate* X.x.16).

The similarities between Descartes and Augustine are striking² – it is no wonder that Malebranche cites Augustine as the one who “explained the properties of the soul and the body better than all those who preceded him

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¹ See, respectively, *De caelo* I 1, 268a20–23 and *De trinitate* X.vii.9. I will consider the details of Augustine’s account in §V.
² For discussion, see Matthews (1992), ch. 4, Menn (1998), 251–61.
and who have followed him until our own time” (Search, pp. xxxix–xl).

Readers who have set out to explore this conception of the mind–body distinction have tended to focus their attention on the thesis that the essence of mind is thought. It is natural that this should be so, since the thesis is alleged to be extremely powerful: according to both Augustine and Descartes, it entails that the mind is not a body. Despite the allure of that purported result, I am going to set it aside in this paper. Here my interest lies in understanding what sort of distinction is at issue when the dualist claims that minds are not bodily – or when the materialist says that they are. To understand this, it is little help to know that the mind is essentially a thinking thing, because that goes nowhere toward defining the conditions under which the mind would or would not count as a body. The competing claims of dualists and materialists can be meaningful only if we have some sense of what sort of thing a body is, and consequently some sense of the conditions under which a thing would count as nonbodily.

Today, in despair of saying anything substantive about what characterizes body, materialists tend to invoke the bare authority of physics, arguing that the corporeal is whatever entities are or would be acknowledged in physics. (Hence the wide currency of “physicalism” in place of ‘materialism.’) The obvious problem with this move is that it cannot rely on the ontology of current physics, since that is no doubt incomplete and faulty in some respects. Instead, such a physicalist must appeal to the ideal ontology of a completed physics. Once this step is taken, however, it becomes obvious that we have no idea what we are talking about. For all the physicist has told us, anything might be recognized by physicists of the next millennium, including Cartesian minds, Leibnizian monads, or even ectoplasm. For all we know, physics might prove the dualist right. Yet if we define the physical as whatever the physicists will accept, then it becomes impossible by definition for physics to vindicate dualism. That result seems unacceptable. It may be that there is something about the nature of dualism that makes it unsusceptible to verification (or falsification) through physics. Surely, though, we should try to understand why this is so, rather than stipulating it by definition.

Toward this end, I want to consider whether any more substantive account can be given of the distinction between the bodily and the nonbodily. If Descartes and earlier authors are correct in thinking that body is essentially extended, then we might have some hope of making sense of the debate between dualists and materialists. The difficulty with taking this proposal seriously today is that it seems to have been disproved by recent developments in physics, developments that suggest extension is not an essential feature of bodies. Despite these findings, I want to argue that the extension criterion is more interesting – and more complicated – than is generally