

## 1. Introduction

This module focuses on the treatment of mind and body in two Western philosophers: Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1953). We will begin, however, with some historical background. In a fascinating recent book, *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, Roy Porter discusses attitudes towards the body in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Chapter 2 of this book, entitled 'Religion and the Soul', reviews the treatment of the body in the ancient Greek philosophers and early Christian thinking. I would like you to read this now. I should stress that the aim of this reading is not that you should acquire any detailed knowledge of particular thinkers, or of particular stages in the development of ideas concerning the body over this period. The aim is rather to give you a general sense of the differing views, and the conflicts between those views, that form the historical background to modern Western thinking about the body. Please now read straight through Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, Chapter 2, making a brief note of any ideas that you find particularly striking.

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As with so much of Western philosophy, the key positions were outlined and explored by the Greek philosophers of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. On the one hand, we have Plato (428-347 BC) making a sharp distinction between body and soul; on the other, we have Aristotle (384-322 BC) insisting on the essential unity of the person, body and soul forming an indissoluble bond. These two views are mirrored, very roughly, in the two modern philosophers on whom we will be focusing. I should, however, stress that the mirroring will, as I say, be very rough. This is in part because, as one might expect, my one sentence summary of the views of Plato and Aristotle, first, is hardly self-explanatory, and, second, passes over significant ambiguities in the thought of those philosophers. As Porter notes, Plato was torn between, on the one hand, a view that regards the body as the seat of all that is base in human life, the soul being a rational constraining force that struggles to hold the body in check, and, on the other, a more even handed view according to which the body is not a straightforward villain and the battles between reason and desire by which we may be tormented are struggles *within* the soul. As Porter also notes, while speaking of a 'passive intellect' that is inseparable from the body, Aristotle also speaks of a rational soul that is 'divine, immortal, detached from the body'.

The contrast between Plato and Aristotle, along with the internal complexities in the thought of each of them, are, as Porter outlines, reflected in early Christian thinking: Plato and Aristotle being, indeed, enormously powerful influences on Christianity at different periods. While Porter's presentation requires, I think, no comment from me, there is one point that I would like to highlight. On p 38 Porter writes: 'The Church's teachings were further complicated, moreover, because from the earliest Fathers body and soul were not thought of merely as literal objects but metaphorical – in other words, flesh and spirit, denoting degenerate and pure impulses respectively'. I take the situation to be roughly this. Soul and body were originally thought of as distinct objects in a literal sense: the soul being where, for example, silent prayer takes place, and the body being that which participates in eating and sexual activity. Many came to the view that, at least

by and large, those things that take place in the soul are good, whilst those that take place in the body are degenerate. As a result of this, the word 'soul' (or 'spirit') picked up strong positive connotations, and the word 'body' (or 'flesh') strong negative ones; and a point was eventually reached at which the positive or negative connotations became the core meaning of the terms. For example, to describe a desire or activity as 'bodily' was not, as in earlier times, to identify the part of the person – body rather than soul – in which it takes place, but simply a way of saying that it was base. I suspect that something close to these usages are, in some form, still live features of our vocabulary.

### *Bodily conditions*

We will, in a moment, jump to the 17<sup>th</sup> century AD. But first, I would like you to reflect on certain states and activities and to consider how you would place them within the general categories at which we have been looking. The conditions I want you to consider are these: lust, anger, gazing in wonder at the Mona Lisa. With each, I would like you to make a note of your answer to the question: is this a bodily – or, as we might say, a physical – condition?

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I can imagine quite a few different possible reactions to this question. Perhaps you threw up your hands in despair, wondering what on earth I was on about. Perhaps you said that, since people simply are bodies, all of these are clearly conditions of the body. Again, perhaps you felt that lust was clearly bodily and gazing in wonder at the Mona Lisa was fairly clearly not. Whether or not you gave this last answer, I would like you to pause again and to make a note of what might be said for or against it.

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What is there to be said for the suggestion that lust is bodily? Well, it is, perhaps, closely linked with certain distinctive physical sensations and bodily changes; it is, one might say, *directed towards* a body; and it is a desire for a form of activity that, in a straightforward sense, involves the body. Now how clearly do these features mark it off from gazing in wonder at the Mona Lisa? Well, first, it might be suggested, with some plausibility, that the latter is less bound up with distinctive physical sensations and bodily changes. On the other hand, there are, perhaps, shivers down the spine and tears in the eyes. Again, while it might seem slightly unnatural to describe what my gaze is directed towards as a 'body', it might be replied that the crucial point is that it – the painting – is unambiguously a *physical* thing. Finally, while gazing might be thought to be a pretty passive form of activity, it is clearly *bodily* in the sense that it involves directing part of my body – my eyes – in a certain direction.

So: *are* there grounds for saying that the one condition is bodily while the other is not? Might we have to conclude that any tendency we feel to classify them in this way reflects a tendency, that I noted above, to use terms such as 'bodily', not so much to mark out the particular part of the person involved in some activity, but, rather, to mark our judgement that what we are speaking of belongs to a relatively 'base' part of our nature?

So much, for the moment, about lust and art. What about anger? I would like you now to make a note of reasons that occur to you for or against the claim that anger is a bodily condition.

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Suppose that someone in a position of authority over me says something that, against my better judgement, makes me explode with anger. I go red in the face, my body shakes, my voice rises to a bellow, my heart beats furiously and I lurch towards him in a threatening fashion. Plenty of bodily stuff there! On the other hand, someone might say that the anger itself is something quite distinct from all of that: it is the inner feelings that his remark induced in me, and that is clearly something non-bodily. The pull in this direction might be reinforced by a consideration of what we might speak of as calmer, more reflective, cases of anger. I am very angry about some new piece of government legislation; I think it is a quite dreadful shift in policy. Perhaps when I first learned of it there were some bodily symptoms of the form mentioned above. But, three weeks later, I go about my normal business with no such bodily symptoms; yet I am still very angry.

The emotions in general are, in certain traditions, thought of as essentially bodily conditions. That idea tends to be linked with the suggestion that emotion is essentially in conflict with reason: it leads us away from acting in the ways that are dictated by the cool guidance of reason. The linking of these ideas may be reinforced by powerful imagery that has, I suspect, deep roots in our thinking. For example, the body, being a material thing, is subject to the force of gravity and so has a tendency to drag us down; the seat of reason, the soul, being non-material, is not subject to gravity and so may rise above earthly concerns. (And we all know in which directions Heaven and Hell lie!)

Whether or not you are inclined to accept a view of the emotions as essentially conditions to be struggled against, we are, I think, left with a question that I raised in connection with lust. Might it be that the tendency of some to classify the emotions as 'bodily' reflects a use of the term 'bodily', not so much to mark out the particular part of the person involved in emotion, but, rather, to mark the judgement that emotion is a relatively 'base' part of our nature: something to be struggled against, and, if possible, overcome by reason?

When thinking about the 'body' it is, I believe, crucial to keep in mind the complex range of associations that may be carried by the term. We have, so far, only scratched the surface of these, and we will have to return to the issue. For the importance of being aware of these associations does not lie in some purely historical interest: it may be that such associations infect our thinking about the body today in ways of which we are often less than fully aware.