

5. Other bodies, other minds

Descartes' thinking about the human body is conducted almost exclusively from the first person point of view: from the perspective of his experience of *himself*. His arguments to demonstrate that there is a clean divide between 'mind' and 'body', and that the real person is the mind, are presented in the form of reflections about *himself*. For example, the first premise of one of his arguments is: 'I can doubt that *I* have a body' (my italics). This is not to say that he thinks that the argument will only work in his own case. The point is rather that what he presents is the model of an argument that each of us must go through for ourselves, reconstructing it, so to speak, from our own perspective. Thus, my first premise will not be 'I can doubt that Descartes has a body'; but, rather, 'I can doubt that *I* (Cockburn) have a body'. This emphasis on the first person perspective seems to be essential to the apparent force of the argument. For while it may seem quite clear to me that I can doubt that *I* have a body, it is likely to seem a good bit less clear to me that I can doubt that my good friend Jack has a body. Perhaps I *can* doubt it; but few are going to take it to be the transparently obvious truth that Descartes clearly takes his own first premise to be.

Leder's discussion of Descartes follows him in giving central place to the first person point of view: that is to say, when I read Leder, as when I read Descartes, I am asked to reflect on my experience of *myself*.

Up to this point, then, our considerations have given central place to the individual's experience of his or her *own* body. I want now to turn to a consideration of my experience of *others*. While Descartes' discussion clearly has implications for our thought about others, these implications have a very limited place in his discussion. I believe that this shift in viewpoint can be helpful in casting the body in a very different light.

The body as machine / the person as machine

Descartes has argued that the human body is a machine; though it is a machine with, as we might express it, a rational soul at the helm. The latter point ensures that not everything that flows from the human body can be explained entirely in physical – bodily, mechanistic – terms: some bodily movement have in their causal ancestry the willing of the immaterial soul that inhabits the body. Nevertheless, Descartes defends the view that a huge range of the motions of our bodies – a much wider range than had traditionally been assumed – have entirely bodily causes. Now one question that this may lead us to ask is: does Descartes have any grounds for his assumption that there are some movements of our bodies that do *not* have exclusively bodily causes? Another way to ask what is essentially the same question is this: does Descartes have any reason for supposing that there could not be a man-made machine that behaves in exactly the same way as those human bodies that we assume to be animated by an immaterial soul? Well, he thinks he does. He offers his reasons in Part V of his *Discourse on*

Method. Please now read the first part of this, and when you have done so, make a note of what you think of his reasoning.

[I]f any such machines [ones not animated by an immaterial soul] bore a resemblance to our bodies and imitated our actions as closely as possible for all practical purposes, we should still have two very certain means of recognizing that they were not real men. The first is that they could never use words, or put together other signs, as we do in order to declare our thoughts to others. For we can certainly conceive of a machine so constructed that it utters words, and even utters words which correspond to bodily actions causing a change in its organs (e.g. if you touch it in one spot it asks what you want of it, if you touch it in another it cries out that you are hurting it, and so on). But it is not conceivable that such a machine should produce different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer to whatever is said in its presence, as the dullest of men can do. Secondly, even though such machines might do some things as well as we do them, or perhaps even better, they would inevitably fail in others, which would reveal that they were acting not through understanding but only from the disposition of their organs. For whereas reason is a universal instrument which can be used in all kinds of situations, these organs need some particular disposition for each particular action; hence it is for all practical purposes impossible for a machine to have enough different organs to make it act in all the contingencies of life in the way in which our reason makes us act.

[Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, extract from Part V]

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Here is what Spinoza, a near contemporary who was strongly critical of Descartes' understanding of the body and its relation to the mind, thought of it:

For indeed, no one has yet determined what the Body can do, i.e., experience has not yet taught anyone what the Body can do from the laws of nature alone, insofar as nature is only considered to be corporeal, and what the body can do only if it is determined by the Mind. For no one has yet come to know the structure of the Body so accurately that he could explain all its functions--not to mention that many things are observed in the lower Animals that far surpass human ingenuity, and that sleepwalkers do a great many things in their sleep that they would not dare to awake. This shows well enough that the Body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature, can do many things which its Mind wonders at.

Again, no one knows how, or by what means, the Mind moves the body, nor how many degrees of

motion it can give the body, nor with what speed it can move it. So it follows that when men say that this or that action of the Body arises from the Mind, which has dominion over the Body, they do not know what they are saying, and they do nothing but confess, in fine-sounding words, that they are ignorant of the true cause of that action, and that they do not wonder at it.¹

On the face of it, Spinoza is surely right. We may be tempted to add: subsequent scientific investigation of the human body has filled in some of the gaps in our knowledge in a way such as to suggest that all of its movements *can* be explained in terms of ‘the laws of nature alone, insofar as nature is only considered to be corporeal’. Well, it is possible that we should view with caution some of the grander claims of the sciences. For all that, there does seem to be a real question here concerning Descartes’ grounds for *his* position.

Descartes himself must take some of the responsibility for the assumption, which has had a powerful grip on subsequent thought, that *everything* that happens can be explained entirely in terms of physical science. That, of course, was not at all his intention. For all that, in showing, as he did, that much of what had seemed, to previous thinkers, to be immune to physical explanation was not in fact so, he helped to open a floodgate in the search for scientific / physical explanations, and to generate a worldview in which it was an unquestioned article of faith that they are always there to be found.

Suppose that science did give us substantial grounds for the view that all of the movements of the human body have entirely physical causes. Where would that leave Descartes? Perhaps more important: where would that leave the mind? What conclusions about the status of mental states – thoughts, emotions, sensations, and so on - do you think it would, in those circumstances, be right to draw? Make a note of any possibilities that occur to you.

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One possible conclusion, which has been explored by a number of thinkers, is this. While people do have mental states, and while these are, as Descartes argues, states of a non-material mind, none of a person’s mental states has any effects in the physical world. Thus, every movement of a human body is to be explained entirely in physical terms: and that is to say, without any reference to the thoughts, decisions, and so on that we normally suppose are among their causes. This means that, while people do get angry, decide to go to the cinema, and so on, they would behave exactly as they do now even if they did not.

That, for fairly obvious reasons, has seemed to most people to be a rather unattractive option. The views that have come to

¹ Spinoza, *Ethics* Part 3 Prop 2 Note.

dominate philosophical, and popular, thinking are of a different form. The core idea is this. It could be true *both* that every movement of the human body has entirely physical causes, *and* that mental states are among the causes of some of the movements of the human body, on one condition: if mental states are themselves physical states. The last 50 years of philosophical thinking about people have been dominated by the attempt to find an acceptable version of the view that, to express it in its most basic form, mental states are brain states.

That approach has at its centre a certain form of challenge to Descartes' understanding of the mind. We will not, however, be following that path in this module². In the remaining sections we will, rather, be considering a line of thought that has at its centre a challenge to Descartes' understanding of *the body*.

Other minds

The issue at which we have just been looking is connected with Descartes' notorious views on non-human animals. His remarks on machines at which we looked a moment ago are immediately followed by a discussion of 'the difference between man and beast':

Now in just these two ways we can also know the difference between man and beast. For it is quite remarkable that there are no men so dull-witted or stupid - and this includes even madmen - that they are incapable of arranging various words together and forming an utterance from them in order to make their thoughts understood; whereas there is no other animal, however perfect and well-endowed it may be, that can do the like. This does not happen because they lack the necessary organs, for we see that magpies and parrots can utter words as we do, and yet they cannot speak as we do: that is, they cannot show that they are thinking what they are saying. On the other hand, men born deaf and dumb, and thus deprived of speech-organs as much as the beasts or even more so, normally invent their own signs to make themselves understood by those who, being regularly in their company, have the time to learn their language. This shows not merely that the beasts have less reason than men, but that they have no reason at all. For it patently requires very little reason to be able to speak; and since as much inequality can be observed among the animals of a given species as among human beings, and some animals are more easily trained than others, it would be incredible that a superior specimen of the monkey or parrot species should not be able to speak as well as the stupidest child - or at least as well as a child with a defective brain - if their souls were not completely different in nature from ours. And we must

² If you wish to follow it, there are numerous recent introductions to the philosophy of mind from which you can choose. For a clear and persuasive presentation and defence of this approach I would particularly recommend: Peter Smith and O.R. Jones, *The Philosophy of Mind: an Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 1986)

not confuse speech with the natural movements which express passions and which can be imitated by machines as well as by animals. Nor should we think, like some of the ancients, that the beasts speak, although we do not understand their language. For if that were true, then since they have many organs that correspond to ours, they could make themselves understood by us as well as by their fellows. It is also a very remarkable fact that although many animals show more skill than we do in some of their actions, yet the same animals show none at all in many others; so what they do better does not prove that they have any intelligence, for if it did then they would have more intelligence than any of us and would excel us in everything. It proves rather that they have no intelligence at all, and that it is nature which acts in them according to the disposition of their organs. In the same way a clock, consisting only of wheels and springs, can count the hours and measure time more accurately than we can with all our wisdom.

[Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, extract from Part V]

I suspect that you may have found one or two things to object to in that! In other places Descartes is even more explicit in his insistence that non-human animals are simply automata: purely mechanical systems, lacking souls and, with that, lacking all thought and experience.³ Most of us will find this conclusion, or at least certain aspects of it, absurd. We might feel that if Descartes' philosophical position leads to the conclusion that, for example, dogs don't feel pain then there *must* be something seriously wrong in his thinking.

There is a slightly weaker conclusion that Descartes might have settled for. He might have argued simple that *we have no reason* to believe that dogs, or any other non-human animals, do feel pain. How do you think we should respond to this weaker claim?

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It is tempting to say that while it may be slightly less objectionable than Descartes' outright denial of experience in animals, it must still be wrong: we *obviously* have powerful reason to believe that dogs, cats, foxes and so on have feelings, including pain and a good many others. But now, if we do take this view, it is incumbent on us to say what those reasons are.

Here is the answer offered by a contemporary philosopher, Peter Singer:

Do animals other than human beings feel pain? How do we know? Well, how do we know if anyone, human or non-human, feels pain? We know that we ourselves can feel pain. We know this from the direct experience of pain that we have when, for instance,

³ For references, and a discussion of Descartes' motives for this position, see Bernard Williams, *Descartes* pp 282-7.

somebody presses a lighted cigarette against the back of our hand. But how do we know that anyone else feels pain?⁴

We know this, he suggests, through:

... an inference, but a perfectly reasonable one, based on observations of their behaviour in situations in which we would feel pain, and on the fact that we have every reason to assume that our friends are beings like us, with nervous systems like ours that can be assumed to function as ours do, and to produce similar feelings in similar circumstances.

Now we have exactly the same kind of reason to think that members of non-human species feel pain. For:

Nearly all the external signs which lead us to infer pain in other humans can be seen in other species, especially the species most closely related to us - other species of mammals, and birds. In addition, we know that these animals have nervous systems very like ours, which respond physiologically as ours do when the animal is in circumstances in which we would feel pain.

My guess is that you feel more sympathy with Singer's position than with Descartes' at this point. I want, however, to note something that they share. Both take it to be clear that I *need* a reason for thinking that any creature other than myself feels pain (or anything else.)

While it is true that (speaking of a person) we sometimes say things like 'I saw the anger in his face' or 'I heard the fear in his voice', for these writers such remarks can never be literally true. Remember that for Descartes I never, strictly speaking, see, hear, or touch another person. When I look at, or hold, another human being what I am in immediate contact with is, as we might put it, 'merely her body': the physical 'machine' with which the real person - that is, 'the mind' - is closely connected. Another author articulates the point in a slightly different image: 'We stand, as it were, behind the wall of the body, sheltered from the eyes of others in the recesses of our mind'.⁵ The image of the body as a wall fails to highlight the *movement* of the body, and so the way in which, as we might think of it, it may, as may a person's suit of clothes, reveal at the same time as it conceals. It does, however, bring home forcefully the idea that our interaction with others is

⁴ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Avon, 1978), pp 10-11.

⁵ Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, II, 8. The quote continues: 'but when we wish to reveal ourselves we come forth, with speech as the gateway, in order to show our inner selves'. You might ask yourself whether there are any grounds for supposing that speech is a 'gateway' if, as Gregory the Great implies, none of our other behaviour is.

never the unmediated contact that we may take it, at the best of times, to be.

What Singer presents briefly in the last of the above quoted remarks is what is known as *the argument from analogy*. It is by analogy with my experience of myself – my experience of the connections between by own mental states and bodily behaviour – that I can conclude, on the basis of the behaviour that I observe, that another has mental states roughly like my own. While the argument is most often introduced in the context of justifying a belief in other *human* minds, it is, Singer suggests, just as effective in establishing that many non-human creatures have feelings.

Assessing the argument from analogy

But can the argument from analogy provide what we need here? I am supposed to conclude from the fact that I see other bodies like mine, which behave much as mine does, that behind these bodies lie other minds which have experiences similar to those of which I am immediately aware in my own case. Now a first thing to note here is that no other body, even within the human realm, is *exactly* like mine. So we need to ask: how similar, and in what respects, must another body be to mine if that similarity is to form a legitimate basis for this analogical reasoning?

It might be said that the answer to this question is obvious. It is quite clear that the *size* of the other body is pretty irrelevant, that its colour is completely irrelevant, that certain features of its structure – for example, those that distinguish the sexes – cast no doubt on whether the other body is relevantly like mine, and so on. On the other side, it might be said that it is quite obvious that other features of the structure – for example, what is inside its skull – are potentially of great relevance.

Please pause for a moment and ask yourself what we should make of that response.

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I think a first point to note here is this. The core of the argument from analogy is an appeal to the fact that some of the bodies that I see around me are 'like mine'. *That* is what justifies me in believing that connected with these bodies are minds, which have experiences similar to my own. Now as soon as that is said there seems to be no avoiding the conclusion that the *more* like mine another body is the *better* is the justification that I have for my belief. Thus, *my* grounds for thinking that black women have a mental life like my own are less secure than are my grounds for thinking that white men do. And my grounds for thinking that dogs feel pain are considerably less secure than are my grounds for thinking that other human beings do. Now there will, no doubt, be argument there about just how great the bodily similarities are in the various different cases. My point at the moment is simply that Singer's use of the argument from analogy at this point is potentially disastrous. *If* we need the argument from analogy to justify our beliefs about the mental life of others then there is, it

seems, room for legitimate disagreement in cases in which most of us would think there is no such room: room, for example, for legitimate disagreement about whether dogs feel pain.

Now it might be thought that the situation can be saved by an appeal to the idea that certain bodily similarities and differences are obviously relevant and others obviously irrelevant. But in what sense are the distinctions here 'obvious'? Well, this much can be said: attaching importance to certain similarities but not to others is something that comes naturally to us, or that we are drilled into. But the whole point of the argument from analogy is to move us beyond a simple appeal to the fact that certain ways of thinking about and responding to others come naturally to us. It is supposed to show us that we are *justified* in ascribing a mental life to certain beings. If, then, it is to be worth anything at all it must show us that we are *justified* in regarding some bodily similarities and differences as relevant and others as irrelevant. But how is that to be done?

Again, I would like you to pause, and to make a note of anything you feel might be said in response to this question.

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Suppose that we were confronted with the kind of case in which we might, in practice, feel a need for the argument from analogy: a case, say, in which someone (Descartes perhaps!) seriously doubts whether dogs feel pain. It will be no use at this point appealing to the fact that it is 'just obvious' that it is quite irrelevant that dogs differ from us in having four legs and a tail, ears and noses up to six inches long, and so on. I am not denying that this *is* obvious: it is obvious to me at any rate, and I hope to you. My point is rather that it is obvious to me *because* it is obvious to me that dogs feel pain. One who, looking at a dog in (as I would say) obvious agony, seriously questions whether it is in pain, will also wonder whether number of legs, length of nose, and so on might not be relevant differences.

The general point here, then, is this. We need some kind of basis for picking out certain bodily features as relevant, and others as irrelevant, to the question of whether another has a mental life. One possible basis - that which I take it we employ in practice - will appeal to the fact that creatures that obviously feel pain have bodily features that we lack (for example, four legs) or lack bodily features that we have (for example, a human shaped mouth); from which we conclude that these features are irrelevant to the question of whether they feel pain. But this is precisely the *reverse* of the relationship that is required by the argument from analogy! What that argument requires is this: someone who as yet has no views about which creatures, other than himself, have a mind, feel pain, and so on could be shown that certain bodily features are linked with such mental features, while others are not. But what, in my experience of *myself*, could show me this?

Perhaps you have ideas about how that question might be answered. I will briefly mention just one further consideration that might have occurred to you. It is sometimes suggested that

scientific knowledge of neuro-physiology has a particularly central place in any serious effort to determine what sensations and so on should be ascribed to other species. Singer, for example, stresses the close similarities between the nervous systems of human and non-human species. Now one point to note here is that this appeal will only appear compelling to one who accepts that it is quite clear that *human beings* feel pain and so on. The research that establishes that certain features of the nervous system are closely linked with sensations such as pain only does so against the background of the assumption that at any rate the subjects of the physiological research are creatures that feel pain. While, then, this research might help to justify a step from 'Human beings feel pain' to 'Dogs feel pain', it cannot help with the step from 'I feel pain' to 'Other human beings feel pain'. For it to have any hope of justifying *that* step we would have to imagine someone performing complex neuro-physiological experiments on *himself*. And while what would be required here may not be impossible in principle, in practice the results might be rather less useful than we would hope. For if someone starts off with the conviction that he is the only being with a mental life he need not concede that any experiment of this form provides him with any grounds for changing his view. If it seems obvious to him that the human being writhing in front of him is not a creature in pain, despite the fact that his neuro-physiology has 'the relevant features', he will simply conclude that those features were not, on their own, quite the decisive mark of pain as his experience of his own case had led him to suppose. Perhaps what is crucial is the combination of that neuro-physiology with a certain precise balance of chemicals in his stomach.

Facial expression and movements of facial flesh

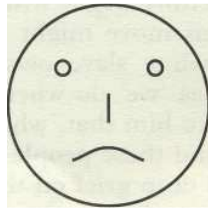
It might be objected that the fact that the argument from analogy will cut no ice with the crazy and corrupt people I have been imagining does not show that it is not a perfectly valid argument: one that will, quite rightly, convince any sane and open minded person that the human beings that she sees around her have a mental life like her own. But it must be remembered here that no 'sane and open minded' person needs convincing of *that*. And my point has been that the apparent force of the argument depends on an illusion created by this fact. It is suggested that the person who really cares about the truth needs the argument from analogy in order to *justify* a belief that, no doubt, she already holds. But the argument provides no justification at all if it in any way *depends on* the very thing that it is supposed to establish. I have suggested that it does precisely this. For our shared assumptions about which physical features are relevant and which irrelevant are *dependent on* our agreement about which other beings have feelings and which do not.

There is, I think, another, connected, illusion here. Consider another example. We are confronted with an extreme racist who insists that the black mother who grieves for her dead child does not really suffer as a white woman does. We might seek to convince the racist by some version of the argument from analogy.

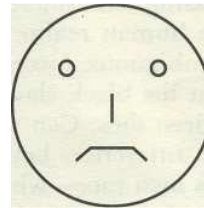
We point to the similarities in behaviour between the black woman and a white woman who has lost a child (perhaps including the behaviour of the racist, assuming that this is a woman who has lost a child, with whom we are arguing.) Might not our racist, if she is prepared to give proper attention to what she observes, be forced to agree that there are no important differences between the two patterns of behaviour: no differences, that is, that could justify an ascription of different forms or degrees of suffering to the two women?

Let us focus on similarities in facial expression - which I take it will be central to any such argument. What *kind* of similarities will be relevant here? The point of this question might be brought out by considering the following cartoon faces:

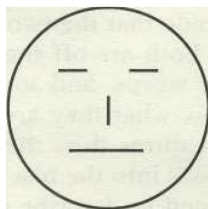
(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



We can ask: which pair of faces, a and b or c and d, are more similar to each other? The answer, I take it, is: that depends. The first pair of faces are clearly the more similar in terms of the expression on them. But the second are, perhaps, more similar in terms of patterns of ink on the page. Turning now to a pair of normal human faces we can say that there are (at least) two different kinds of similarity in terms of which we could compare them. We could compare them in terms of the similarity or difference between the expressions on them: both are smiling, or both contemptuous, faces. Alternatively, we could compare them in terms of the similarity or difference between the arrangement and movement of the flesh that make them up.

We normally spontaneously respond to another face in the light of the *expression* on it. I respond to it *as* a smiling face; for example, I respond with a smile. If you later ask me what the face was like I might be able to offer a very fine grained description in terms of the shade of emotion that was on it, and yet be able to say little about the arrangement of facial flesh in geometrical terms.

There is obviously a close relationship between the geometrical arrangement of facial flesh and the expression on the face. But the relationship is not of the following simple kind: if, and only if, the arrangement of flesh on two faces is very similar the expression on

the faces is very similar. For, as the above cartoon faces bring out, a very small change in the arrangement of flesh can transform the expression on a face; and I take it that faces with large differences at the level of arrangements of flesh can be very similar in terms of the expression on them.

Similar points arise with other forms of behaviour. For example, I might recognise straight off that what I heard in her voice was contempt, and yet be quite incapable of describing what I heard in terms of modulation of tone and so on in such a way that another could work out from my description that there was contempt to be heard in the voice.

These points are relevant to our attempts to reason with the extreme racist in this way. Suppose that we point out to her that the face of the grieving black woman is 'very similar' to that of the grieving white woman. We need to ask: what *kind* of similarity is at issue here? If she is the racist I have in mind we can hardly expect her to accept, at the start, that the faces are very similar at the level of expression. For she simply does not see deep grief in the black woman's face. Indeed, that is precisely the problem with her. We can, then, hardly appeal to the 'obvious similarity' at this level as a first step in reasoning her out of her position.

If the starting point of our argument is to be a claim that we can expect her to accept despite her deep-seated racism, the similarity to which we appeal will, it seems, have to be at the level of arrangements of facial flesh. Now will we find similarities of this kind between the faces of our two grieving women: similarities of a degree that might be sufficient to support an argument from analogy? I suppose that it depends on the case, and I have little idea how much we might reasonably hope for here. Let us imagine, however, that she does have to concede that there are close similarities of *this* kind between the two faces. Might she not reply that there is no reason to accept that similarities at *this* level provide any basis for the conclusion that the two women are undergoing similar emotional experiences? After all, it is not similarities and differences at *this* level that normally form the basis of our judgements about the emotions of others. We do not, in the normal course of things, regard the fact that two faces are very similar at *this* level as being reason for ascribing the same emotions to two people. (You might look back at my cartoon faces in order to see the force of this point.) Why, then, should our racist accept that such similarities carry the weight that we are trying to give them in this use of the argument from analogy?

Conclusion

This discussion of our knowledge of others started from the picture of the relation between a person and her body that is defended by Descartes. It is an implication of that picture that I never, strictly speaking, see, hear, or touch another person. When I look at, or hold, another human being what I am in immediate contact with is 'merely her body': the physical 'machine' with which the real person – that is, 'the mind' – is closely connected. This inevitably gives rise to the question: what grounds can I have for supposing that connected with this bodily machine that I

observe when I look at another is a mind? My suggestion has been, given this picture of the body, that is a question that has no satisfactory answer. If that is correct, we have good reason for asking whether there might not be some other way of understanding the human body. It is to this that we will now turn.

Reading

The argument of this section follows closely that offered in my 'Human Beings and Giant Squids'. For an alternative approach to our knowledge of others, one that follows ideas introduced by Wittgenstein, see my *Other Human Beings* chapter 4, and Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil* chapter 9. For an illuminating, and more wide ranging, discussion of our knowledge of others, and the difficulties that may be involved here, see Ilham Dilman, *Love and Human Separateness*.

