

7. Bodily contact

Introduction

I have spoken a good bit about the impact of science on our thinking about the body. Now those considerations are not wholly distinct from another central theme of this module: the idea of the body as something to be contrasted with the self in that it is the seat of alien and destructive forces with which the true self is, if it is alert, in constant battle. The connection between these ideas – the idea of the body as the subject of science, and that of the body as the seat of destructive forces – lies in medicine. In section 4 we looked at the following proposal: the idea of a fundamental contrast between the self and the body may be generated by the way in which my body typically makes prominent appearances in my experience at times at which, in one way or another, it is a disruptive force: at times of dysfunction. These, of course, are the times at which the scientific probing of the body that is characteristic of modern medicine is commonly thought to be called for.

I am tempted to say that the image of the body as an alien and destructive force is, at least from a certain point of view, grotesquely unfair. It is one instance of a more general, and rather unattractive, tendency to overlook things that are fundamental to our lives while everything is operating smoothly and to complain bitterly about them, as if they were nothing but trouble, when, through their dysfunction, they surface in our attention: rather like the dove who, noticing that the air can be a resistance to its flight, supposes that he would fly much better without it.¹

To combat this unfortunate philosophical tendency, we might, at this point, explore the positive faces of the individual's own body in his or her own life in the hope of undermining the suggestion that it is clear that my body is something with which *I* am to be contrasted. In this module, however, we will follow a slightly different course. I want to pursue, instead, the place that the bodily has in our relations with each other. We looked in section 5 at a path down which we may be drawn by Descartes' image of the body as machine, with its associated strong contrast between the self and the bodily being. The body seems then to be something that separates us from each other: a wall behind which the other lies, her thoughts and feelings, even when she is completely open with me, being at best something that I have to infer from her bodily behaviour. With that, it is, I suggested, far from clear that the argument from analogy can provide what will be needed here. I want now to give a more positive turn to this: to suggest that a more faithful characterisation of the place of the bodily in our relations with each other may cast it in a much more favourable light.

Human relations

The human body – the total human form – plays a role in my relations with others that is at least as fundamental as, though very different from, for example, the role that the bodily form of a car plays in my dealings with it. I will illustrate what I have in mind here with a number of examples.

Consider first the kind of importance that the physical presence of another can have for us: and, in particular, the way in which it can be a comfort to us. In a distressing or

¹ An image effectively used in another context by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant.

dangerous situation the presence of someone I know well can be an enormous help; and in a way that cannot be reduced to any confidence I may feel that she will find a way out of the difficulty: I might rather have her with me even though she might, in *that* sense, be more likely to be able to help if she were somewhere else. In a sufficiently alien environment the presence of *any* other human being can be a help in a comparable way. Again, the *contact* with another involved in saying 'Hello', or in the exchange of a smile or of some remarks about the weather, is important to virtually everyone in one way or another. The importance of contact of these forms is not unrelated to the variety of ways in which *physical* contact with others is enormously important to most of us. The young child's need for physical contact with his mother is perhaps, in a certain way, as basic as his need for food. The mother's need for contact with her child is of a related, though different, form. Different again, though on a spectrum with these, are the various ways in which physical contact between adults can be of importance. While contact that has an explicitly sexual dimension is, of course, pretty central here – and while such forms of contact have occupied a central place in the traditional denigration of the bodily – it is not sharply demarcated from other forms of physical contact that matter to most of us.

A person who was completely indifferent to any of the forms of contact with others that I have mentioned would be a person in whose life there was nothing remotely akin to at least some of the things most have in mind when they speak of love or friendship. It is characteristic of caring for another that one wants to be with her. In most cases, if one cares for another one wants to see her: I am thinking here of, for example, the pleasure that a parent takes in watching her child absorbed in some activity. In many cases, one's caring for another takes a form in which a desire for physical contact with her, a desire to hug her for example, is of central importance. Physical contact, except in its most ritualised or functional forms, is generally a form of close personal contact. (It is true that in this society many, perhaps the majority, of our relationships with others involve little physical *contact*; but to say that is not, by any means, to say that within those relationships it is a matter of *indifference* whether or not we make physical contact. Such contact would, we might say, be *too* personal.)

I have spoken of the way in which the physical presence of another, the sight of another, and physical contact with another matter to us. I want now to turn to another aspect of this: one that will, perhaps, bring more clearly into focus the importance that particular details of the human form have in our relations with each other. I will be concerned now with the role that the other's bodily form may play in our response to her state at a particular time: in our response to her pain, joy or anger. To recognise the richness of this role is to recognise the depth of the difficulty in the idea that we could ascribe these states to a being that had nothing resembling the human form; and to recognise *that* is to recognise one of the serious distortions introduced by the idea that the real person is something distinct from the bodily human being.

When I am horrified at another's suffering I may have difficulty in looking at her; in particular, I may have difficulty in looking into her face. The sight of intense suffering is difficult to stand. My distress on being directly confronted with the other, or my turning away from the sight of her, are ways in which my horror at her suffering characteristically finds expression. Similarly, the pleasure that we take in another's joy often involves, or is closely connected with, a pleasure that we find in observing the other; and, in particular, in observing her facial expression. The parent delights in the

expression on his child's face as she opens her presents. The expression on his child's face, the sound of her laughter, and so on do not simply play the role of *evidence*: are not simply grounds for supposing that the child is happy. For the particular way in which the parent is moved cannot be characterised independently of the pleasure that he takes in his child's manifestations of joy.

We see another face of this, perhaps, in the context of ideas of life after death: a context in which the idea of a deep and important contrast between a person and her body often comes to the fore. When reflecting on *my own* death it may not be too difficult to suppose that some form of non-bodily survival could give me everything that I want.² When we turn to the death of *others*, however, matters may be very different. For example, it may be that when a mother thinks of her dead child anything other than full *bodily* survival would fail to give her at all what she wants. A parent torn apart by the death of her child is, I take it, someone who, among other things, is horrified at the thought that she will never *see* him again. The idea that the child lives on will be dramatically less than the consolation that she seeks if it is added that: 'He is no longer a human being'.

Here is another aspect of the importance of the bodily in my relations with others. Another's pain does not present itself to me as *simply* something to be removed as quickly as possible. It presents itself to me as something in the face of which horror of a quite specific kind is in place. Further, the form of the horror that we generally associate with a clear recognition of another's suffering is one in which the sight of the other, and, in particular, of her facial expression, plays a crucial role. There would be no place for horror of just that form in connection with something that did not have anything resembling the human form, or if the person to whom I am responding was smiling serenely. Now consider someone whose reactions to the sufferings of others totally lacked this dimension. The groans and contorted face are of significance in so far as they are grounds for thinking that the other is in pain; but that is all. There is nothing disturbing *in* them. Thus, once he has recognised that the other is in severe pain the contorted face is neither here nor there. Could the picture of this individual be filled out in such a way that we would be able to see his reactions, not as crucially deficient, but as admirable in a certain way? I am not sure. I have simply wanted to cast doubt on the suggestion that this is *obviously* the ideal to which we should aspire. If you do still find this obvious, you might consider also the case of our response to another's joy. Consider, for example, a parent who does care about his child in the sense that he is pleased to hear that she is happy, yet who feels no inclination at all to observe or to share in her joy: seeing her laugh or laughing with her are nothing to him. It is with this case in mind that we should ask the question: could our responses to another's joy be what they are in all *important* respects even though the human bodily form, and anything remotely resembling it, was absent? That the other is of a certain bodily form *does* play a significant part in our reactions to her suffering and joy, and it is at the very least not obvious that this casts doubt on the purity of the response.

The emphasis in what I have said has been on ways in which my reaction to another's state may be closely bound up with the manner in which that state is manifested in her behaviour and facial expression. I must briefly mention a related, but different, way in

² At least, it may not be too difficult if my life is, as Plato and others have recommended, primarily a life of contemplation. The athlete may be rather less happy about it.

which the other's bodily form plays a crucial role in my reactions to her. Consider the following striking passage from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*:

But isn't it absurd to say of a body that it has pain? - And why does one feel an absurdity in that? In what sense is it true that my hand does not feel pain, but I in my hand?

What sort of issue is: is it the body that feels pain? - How is it to be decided? What makes it plausible to say that it is not the body? - Well, something like this: if someone has a pain in his hand, then the hand does not say so (unless it writes it) and one does not comfort the hand, but the sufferer: one looks into his face.³

While the passage raises a number of important issues what concerns me at the moment is the way in which Wittgenstein here links the question of what it is that can be said to feel pain with the question of what it is that one comforts; and the way in which he links *that* question with specific bodily features of the other that play a role in my comforting him. Wittgenstein gives a central place here to the face.⁴ What Wittgenstein is speaking of is, I think, distinct from the way in which the sight of the other's contorted features fills me with horror, and also from the way in which I might watch the other's face carefully for signs of an easing of his pain. One 'looks into his face' in sympathy. Indeed, we can say more specifically that one looks into his eyes. Other expressions of sympathy involve bodily contact - and so, in this society, are generally restricted to certain relationships or to extreme circumstances. I hold the other; and that involves putting my arm around, say, her shoulder, not her knees. I squeeze the other's hand, not her foot. Of course, bodily contact of any kind is better than none at all. Nevertheless, it does matter to us what kind of bodily contact we make, and so the particular bodily form that the other has is of importance in our reactions to her.

The rehabilitation of the bodily

It might be said that the human body has fared very badly in the philosophical / religious tradition documented by Porter (see Section 1 of this module) and crystallized by Descartes. It has fared badly in the sense that it has been treated as the locus of all that is base in human life, and, intertwined with that, as the locus of dysfunctions that stand in need of medical treatment. We may, then, regard the 'rehabilitation of the body' as a philosophical task of some importance; and the discussion in this section has been an attempt to contribute to that task. In highlighting, as I have tried to do, positive ways in which bodily form enters into our relations with others we may come to see the distortions in the image of our bodies as 'walls' by which we are separated from each other. We may come to see too the distortions in the image of our bodies as temptations - as, for example, in lust - that may draw us away from a proper attention to the other as a person. The equation of 'flesh', 'sex' and 'sin' is one that has played a central role in the denigration of the body in certain traditions.⁵ Now you may well feel that that equation is

³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 286

⁴ In another place Wittgenstein writes: 'The face is the soul of the body'. [Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 23]

⁵ Though it would, I think, be unfair to suggest that it plays any significant role in Descartes' thinking.

rather unfair on sex. However that may be, it is, I have tried to suggest, certainly unfair on 'flesh'. It is a disastrously lopsided, obsessively one-eyed, picture of human relationships that fuels such an equation.

I spoke, in the previous paragraph, of bodily form as 'entering into' our relations with others. It is possible that this way of expressing the matter fails to capture the all-pervasive bodily character of relations between human beings. It is not, I am inclined to say, as though we might 'peel off' the bodily character of such relations and be left with an image of relations not 'mediated by' the bodily: to which bodily interactions might then be added. Take away the bodily dimension and it is unclear what, if anything, is left.

Now those last remarks are hesitant, and deliberately so. For of course we do, or at least some of us do, have images of interactions between people of a form in which the bodily is wholly absent: the idea of telepathy, or of direct communion in a non-bodily after-life, might be examples of such images. I will make two brief comments on such images. First, the discussion of this section has been, in part, an attempt to discourage a tendency to think of our every day, bodily based, interactions as a poor relative of a more intimate contact that we might have in such 'direct, mind to mind communication'. And second, we need, I think, to treat such images of 'unmediated contact' with care. In particular, we need to be clear that we are not fooling ourselves: that we are not slipping some form of ghostly body into our image. While ghosts may be able to pass through solid walls, they – like angels, fairies, and other inhabitants of realms beyond the human – generally have faces and voices; and, with that, may interact with human beings in ways somewhat akin to those body-involving interactions that mark our normal relations with each other.

There is a further point here that may be related to those last remarks. When thinking about the role of the bodily in our interactions with each other, we have, I believe, a tendency to forget the role of the face and the voice. These are, perhaps, readily overlooked precisely *because*, being all pervasive, they may become, for us, an invisible background to our lives. But further, while acknowledging the role of the face and the voice we may fail fully to acknowledge their *bodily* character. Wittgenstein remarks in this connection:

The expression of soul in a face. One really needs to remember that a face with a soulful expression can be *painted*, in order to believe that it is merely shapes and colours that make this impression. It isn't to be believed, that it is merely the *eyes*--eyeball, lids, eyelashes etc.--of a human being, that one can be lost in the gaze of, into which one can look with astonishment and delight. And yet human eyes just do affect one like this.⁶

Wittgenstein is suggesting, I think, that we find it difficult to believe that bodily things – such as human, or animal, eyes – could be of such significance. With that, we are inclined to suppose that it is not really, as such, the *eyes*, for example, that have this astonishing impact on us. We are inclined to suppose that something non-bodily must be at work.⁷ I do not mean to suggest that we 'suppose' this in a completely thought out and conscious

⁶ Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol I, 267. In a quite different context Wittgenstein remarks: 'The purely corporeal can be uncanny' [*Culture and Value*, p 50].

⁷ You might recall here Temple, the autistic woman, who wondered whether the interactions between other children in which she found herself unable to take part might not be telepathy.

way; but, rather, that an image of something non-bodily doing the crucial work is at some level an influence on our thinking. That is to say: a contempt for the bodily – a limited picture of what is to be found there – may itself colour our understanding of what is going on in such cases in a way such as to blind us to the role of the bodily in them. We do not see the power of the bodily in our lives because we look at our lives with prior conceptions concerning what may be powerful forces within them.

Those last remarks are, essentially, psychological speculation. They are attempts to explain our tendency, when thinking in abstract terms of our lives with others, to overlook fundamental – bodily – dimensions of those lives. There are, however, difficulties of another kind here: difficulties that relate to the *word* ‘body’. We must now turn to these.