

Dissociation from bodily engagement

The significance for Descartes of mind-body dualism is connected with his idea that clear thinking requires that I overcome the impact on my thought of bodily-based experience. Here are three illustrations of what is involved in this:

1. In discussing the sense in which I am not, or at any rate do not seem to be, lodged in my body as is the sailor in his ship, Descartes draws attention to the sense in which sensations are *felt in the body*: for example, in my hand. One might think this should be an embarrassment for him in that it upsets his neat divide between the 'mental' and the 'physical'. But it becomes clear that he is not going to let it upset his philosophical scheme when, in the same paragraph, he calls sensations of thirst, hunger and pain '*confused modes of thinking*'. Remember that, as Descartes uses the term, 'thinking' covers anything that is immediately present to consciousness. But it might also be said that physical sensations involve a thought in a more normal sense. For example, I *feel* a pain as in my foot: in feeling the pain I cannot but think of it as in my foot. There are not two things here: first, the particular qualitative feel of pain, and second, a judgement that it is in my foot. (As there might be two things: a particular qualitative feel of a sensation, plus a judgement, based on that feel, that I have a slipped disc.) In experiencing a pain in my foot, we can't separate the feeling from the judgement. This is the sense in which physical sensations resist a neat placing within Descartes' scheme – in which everything has got to be a state *either* of 'mind' *or* of 'body'. Sensations meet Descartes' test for being states of mind; but our normal conception of them places them firmly in the body. Descartes' response to this is to argue that our normal conception plainly involves a muddle. Pain is a 'confused mode of thinking': it is 'confused' in that it involves the idea of physical location that is plainly incoherent – for a pain is not in the body at all (cf *Principles* I.67. In I.68-9 he says that a little reflection will show that we don't really have any understanding of how a pain could be in a foot – but he doesn't actually provide the reasoning that is supposed to show this.)

2. Descartes suggests that similar illusions arise in other cases: in particular, in all sense perception (cf *Passions* 23). External objects have an effect on my body; which, by means of a causal chain running through my brain, produce a sensation in the soul. Now, 'we refer these sensations to the subjects we suppose to be their causes in such a way that we think that we see the torch itself and hear the bell, and not that we have sensory perception merely of movements coming from these objects'. Note that Descartes seems to hold that we actually perceive some events in the physical world: certain movements in the pineal gland, which he thinks of little physical pictures. This is a pretty quirky view. However, the point I want to stress is this: sense perception inescapably (for us) involves the confused idea that I am directly aware of, for example, the tree. What is more, there is another confusion closely linked with that. For I am inclined to suppose that objects have in them all the properties that I perceive: to suppose, for example, that there is something in the body that resembles the idea of heat or colour that it cause in me (cf *Principles* I.66). So long as we take it to be clear that in sense perception we have direct knowledge of objects, we won't take seriously the possibility that some of the properties we 'perceive' are not really in the object as we perceive them. Once we realise that we don't, we can stand back and ask: what do I need to postulate in bodies in order to explain the sense experience that I have? (And the answer turns out to be: we don't have to postulate colours, temperature, taste and smell as we perceive them.)

3. Descartes writes: ‘the passions [emotions] are to be numbered among the perceptions which the close alliance between the soul and the body renders confused and obscure’ (*Passions* 28). Others (for example, the Stoics) viewed the passions as embodying implicit opinions about the goodness or badness of what they were directed towards ie emotional reactions involve a recognition of features of situations. I *perceive* the other – through my anger - as hostile. I perceive the action – through my indignation (or guilt) – as intrinsically wicked, and (perhaps) deserving of punishment. In emotional states we experience particular things as good or bad in certain ways. Now Descartes suggests this is a muddle. When I experience a situation through the passions I am experiencing it in a confused way. To experience it as it is I need to achieve a state of mind free of emotion. And if I can’t do that, I can still make sure that I don’t go wrong in my *judgements* by bracketing out the influence of the emotion EG While I can’t help experiencing your action as wicked (or feeling guilty about what I myself am doing) I can, by clear thinking, resist *judging* that it is wicked. (An analogy would be a case in which, while I can’t help experiencing one line as longer than another, I can resist judging that it is.)

In all these cases – sensation, perception and emotion – the very close causal interdependence of mind and body goes with a deep tendency towards various confusions. The most immediate, and fundamental, one is this: I tempted to think that I *am* this bodily thing; whereas, in fact, I am simply something with which the real me is closely causally connected. An offshoot of that is that I suppose that I have knowledge of the world through my body. In particular, I am inclined to think – and our nature makes this tendency almost inevitable – that sense perception is a fundamental source of knowledge of the world: that the world is revealed to me through the senses.

Descartes’ aim, then, is to overcome what he sees as a systematic range of confusions in our view of the world: confusions that derive from our bodily based experience. As we grew up, there are all kinds of things that we just took on ‘as if they had been known by means of our senses’ [*Principles*, I.71]. Prior to philosophical reflection, we all take the world to be roughly as it presents itself to us through sense experience and emotional engagement. An example of this would be the tendency to suppose that the Sun goes round the Earth: since that’s the way looks. The role of reasoning is to enable us to stand back from the way things look and investigate how they really are: so as to correct the judgement that was made directly on the basis of sense experience. That is not to say that how the thing looks will play *no* role in my reaching conclusions about how it is. The fact that the Sun looks to me as though it is moving across the sky is one piece of evidence that I must take account of. But it is *just* a piece of evidence among others. I must beware of sliding directly from the appearance to the judgement that that is how things are.

I must, in this sense, think of *everything* that comes through the senses as possibly useful bits of evidence rather than as revealings of reality. I experience an object as red. Experiencing it in that way and judging it to be that way don’t, in normal life, come apart: *in* experiencing it that way I take myself to be having knowledge of how it is (in the absence of reasons for doubt.) That is a mistake. We must stand back from our experience: we must think of the appearances not as revealings of features of the object, but as one piece of evidence on which to base conclusions about the object.

Charles Taylor speaks of this as adopting an ‘instrumental stance’ to our bodily-based experience of the world (159). He bring out the point this way. Each of us has a

whole jumble of thoughts about the world. These include long standing beliefs (Paris is the capital of France, the Earth goes round the Sun), but also passing immediate reactions: reactions that may be embodied in emotions rather than verbally articulated eg I experience what he did as mean, or how she behaved as pushy. Now we must all acknowledge that some of these judgements are not 'trustworthy'. For example, it seems to me that he is a creepy character, but I remember that certain quite incidental facts may be responsible for its seeming so to me: perhaps he has the same hair colour and nose as a creepy guy I once knew. I guess we normally suppose that there is no formula for sorting out the untrustworthy judgements; we just have to be constantly on the look out. (Though there may be rules of thumb eg 'Watch out for hostile judgements of people from cultures you don't understand well'.) Descartes, however, offers a systematic procedure for picking out those that are not to be trusted: 'Don't count on any judgement that is dependent on the body in some way. Treat your inclination to form that judgement as simply one piece of evidence on which to base a conclusion'. I gave the example of experiencing an object as coloured. Similar points apply to experiencing the world through emotions. I normally experience his behaviour as pushy; or someone's behaviour as wicked: that is the light in which the other appears to me in my emotional response to them. But once I dissociate myself properly from this bodily-based way of experiencing the world, I will treat these as simply reactions on my part that must be placed in the evidential balance when trying to reach conclusions about what is out there.

It has been said that Descartes wishes to free us from a mingling of mind and matter. We might summarize the situation this way. The deep and systematic causal links between body and mind – links that, in one sense, make the relation between them more intimate than those between a sailor and his ship – predispose me to deep confusion. I need to stand back from my body: dissociate myself from it, and think of it as just one object that I encounter in the world. In that sense, I overcome a mingling of mind and matter. And when I do that, I will be able to overcome a mingling of mind and matter in another sense: a mingling of the two in my thoughts about *other* things. I will no longer judge the world out there to be the homely one housing all the colourful 'human' characteristics I had previously supposed. I will no longer judge objects to have colour, and so on, as I experience it. But also – in dissociating from my bodily-based emotions – I will no longer judge it to be a realm of goods and evils, or of objects with quasi-human goals (as in the Aristotelian scheme.) Stripped of features that I am tempted to read into it because of my bodily-based experience, the world will be revealed to me as a realm of extended, movable objects: a world that is fully describable in terms of Descartes' mathematical science.

It is in this way that Descartes' picture of the self – his dualism – is very closely interlinked with his account of how the world objectively is. This linked pair of philosophical images still has an enormously powerful hold.