

3. Descartes and his body

Early in *Meditation VI* Descartes offers a summary of what he used to believe about himself and his body. This is how the summary starts: ‘So first, I sensed that I had a head, hands, feet, and other members that comprised this body which I viewed as part of me, or perhaps even as the whole of me’ [p 49]. Three paragraphs later, having presented one of the arguments that we have looked at, he reaches the conclusion that: ‘I (that is, my mind, by which I am when I am) am entirely and truly distinct from my body, and can exist without it’ [p 51]. It seems fairly clear that Descartes takes himself to have shown that something he used to believe – namely, that his body is part of, or perhaps even the whole of, him – is false. I would like you now to read something that he says a little later about the relation between himself and his body: this is *Meditation VI*, p 53, the paragraph running from ‘By means of’ to ‘... mind with the body’. When you have done so, I would like you to make a note of your answer to the question: is Descartes here going back on his claim that he is something truly distinct from his body?

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Some of what Descartes says here seems clearly to involve some backtracking. For example, he writes: ‘I and the body constitute one single thing’. On the other hand, there are qualifying phrases that might lead one to hesitate: he says that he is ‘*so to speak*, commingled with’ his body, and refers to ‘*as it were*, the commingling of the mind with the body’ [my italics]. Is it uncharitable to read these remarks in the following way? While Descartes’ arguments firmly commit him to the view that he is something quite distinct from the body that he has always thought of as his, he recognises that, in purely experiential terms, this just does not feel right; and we see in this paragraph a struggle to reconcile his argument with his experience. My own view – you must decide for yourself – is that this is exactly what is going on here. And while the struggle runs right through the paragraph, the last word goes, perhaps, to his official view. In the final sentence he remarks that ‘these sensations of thirst, hunger, pain, and so on are nothing but certain confused modes of thinking’. What does Descartes think is confused about them? While he is not explicit on this point here, one possibility is this: while it inescapably feels to me as if the pain is in my foot, or the hunger is in my stomach, that is simply an illusion. The pain and the hunger, being conscious experiences, are really states of my mind; and the tendency – so difficult to shake off – to suppose that in some sense I am this bodily being is grounded, at least in part, in this delusive character of my experience of ‘bodily’ sensations.

I believe that we see a similar vacillation in Descartes’ thinking about the relation between mind and body at other points in his writings. In the Synopsis of the *Meditations* he writes: ‘The mind is proved to be really distinct from the body, even though the mind is shown to be so closely joined to the body that it forms a single unit with it’.¹ Is he struggling to have his cake and eat it? You might, in this connection, also want to look at paragraphs 30-2 of his essay *The Passions of the Soul*.

¹ Descartes, *Meditations*, p 10.

A central concern of this section of the module will be whether Descartes *can*, within his own terms, offer a coherent account of my relation to my own body. Before we approach this in a more detailed way, however, I must draw your attention to one further general feature of Descartes' view of the relation between his mind and his body. Please now read *Meditation VI*, pages 56-7: 'My second other sensation'.

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Descartes suggests here that there is physiological evidence that the mind is connected to the body at a particular point in the brain. While he does not offer details, his knowledge of physiology was quite sufficient for him to make the plausible suggestion that mind-body interaction takes place in what is known as the pineal gland: a small gland at the base of the brain. Considerations of the general form of those presented in the second of these paragraphs are still widely thought to demonstrate that the real person – the mind – is something distinct from the bodily human being; and that, for example, the pain that feels 'as if it occurred in the foot' is in fact located elsewhere: at the end of a causal chain that is initiated by damage to the foot. Modern views generally identify the mind – the place where all thought and feeling occurs – with the brain. For Descartes, by contrast, the mind is one step further on: a change in the brain *causes* a further change in a non-material mind.

I would like you now to read sections 1-17 of *The Passions of the Soul*. I will make one comment before you do so. There is a good bit of physiology in these sections; and the physiology is clearly a crucial influence on Descartes' thinking. It is worth noting that when Descartes makes observations concerning human physiology he is speaking from first hand knowledge. Descartes made detailed studies of human and animal anatomy, and, while some of his observations may strike the modern reader as slightly quaint, he was, in his time, working at the frontiers of current scientific understanding. We might add that the naivety, from our perspective, of some of Descartes' physiological imagery may have little bearing on the philosophical significance of his discussion. (If you suspect that confusions in his science *do* have an important impact on his picture of the person, make a note of how you think they do.)

Please now read these sections. While doing so, I would like you to mark, or make a note of, what seem to you to be the passages that articulate most clearly the key features of Descartes' view of the human body.

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My own selection of key passage is this:

1. Paragraph 3: in which Descartes insists that everything that occurs in a person is a feature either of the body or of the soul; and he offers a test by which we can determine into which class a particular state or action falls.
2. Paragraphs 5 and 6: in which he introduces the idea of the body as being a complex machine.
3. Paragraph 13: in which he argues that much of our bodily behaviour is produced by bodily mechanisms that completely bypass the mind or soul.

While it would be somewhat surprising if your selection of key passage was exactly the same as mine, I hope you can see why I attach particular importance to these ones. I will now comment on each in more detail.

Paragraph 3: body or soul

Descartes' test for whether a particular state or activity is a condition of the body or of the soul is this: anything that we ascribe to a person that might also be ascribed to a wholly inanimate body is a condition of the body; any condition that cannot be ascribed to a wholly inanimate body is a condition of the soul. For example, we say of a person that he weighs 12 stone and is 6 feet tall. Applying Descartes' test: since these are conditions that could equally be ascribed to an inanimate object, such as a bookcase, we can conclude that these are features of a person's body. By contrast, since we cannot say of any inanimate object that it is 'thinking about a philosophical problem', we can conclude that when we say of a person that she is thinking about a philosophical problem what we are speaking of is, not her body, but her soul.

I would like you now briefly to consider the question: are there examples of states or activities that might be thought to create a problem for Descartes' proposal that everything that takes place in a person is a feature *either* of her body *or* of her soul?

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It seems to me that there are many examples that at least *appear* to create a problem for Descartes here. Here are a few things we might say about a person that seem to resist a neat placing within Descartes' categories: 'He is washing the dishes', 'She is discussing a philosophical problem', 'He has a pain in his toe', 'He saw the mouse under the table', 'She trembled with rage'. Did you come up with similar examples? In none of these cases is it clear that, in Descartes' terms, what we are speaking of is, on the one hand, a condition of the body as opposed to the soul or, on the other, a condition of the soul as opposed to the body. As we might put it, again roughly in Descartes' terms, each of these statements seems to be a statement about the *compound* that consists of the mind and the body. For example, while, by Descartes' test, *trembling with rage* appears clearly to be a condition of the soul, it equally clearly has a bodily dimension.

Here is a further question. Do you think that these examples point to an insuperable difficulty for Descartes' neat body/soul divide? Take the statement: 'She is discussing a philosophical problem'. How might Descartes respond to the question: is this a statement about her body or about her soul?

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I guess that 'discussing a philosophical problem' fails Descartes' test for being an activity of the body: it is not something that an inanimate object could be said to do. It is an activity that clearly involves the mind or soul in some way. For all that, it clearly involves the body too: if I am discussing a philosophical problem I am *speaking*, and that involves movements of my mouth and tongue. So what is Descartes to say of this case? I think he might say this. When we say of someone that she is discussing a philosophical problem

our remark contains a hidden complexity. What it really comes to is something like this: 'She is having certain philosophical thoughts, and these are causing her body to move in the ways necessary for the production of the words that articulate those thoughts'. Thus, we are saying one thing about her soul, one thing about her body, and, further, making the claim that what is going on in her soul (the thoughts) is *causing* her body to move in these ways.

The objection was: there are some things that we say about people that seem to be neither claims about the body as opposed to the soul on the one hand, nor about the soul as opposed to the body on the other. The reply is: in all such cases the statement can be divided into a part that *is* about the body as opposed to the soul, and a part that *is* about the soul as opposed to the body (plus a part about a causal relation between these.) You might want to make a note of whether you think this reply will do the trick. We will return to the matter shortly.

Paragraphs 5 and 6: the body as machine

Paragraphs 5 and 6 introduce an idea that is of central importance in Descartes' understanding of the human body: the body is a machine, and one whose operations are much more independent of the soul than we might be inclined to suppose. One of the ways in which it is more independent - that which he stresses here - is this: the body is not dependent for its life on the presence in it of a soul. Certainly there is a close connection between the fact that a certain human body is alive and the fact that there is a soul present in it. But the connection is the reverse of what some have supposed: 'death never occurs through the absence of the soul, but only because one of the principal parts of the body decays'. The soul leaves because the body dies - rather than the other way round.

The analogy that Descartes draws here between a live human body and a functioning watch or other self-moving machine is further developed at a number of points in his writings. Here are some other striking examples:

I suppose the body to be nothing but a statue or machine made of earth.... We see clocks, artificial fountains, mills, and other such machines which, although only man-made, have the power to move of their own accord in many different ways. But I am supposing this machine [ie a human body] to be made by the hands of God, and so I think you may reasonably think it capable of a greater variety of movements than I could possibly imagine in it, and of exhibiting more artistry than I could possibly ascribe to it. [*Treatise on Man*, first page]

Now in the same proportion as the animal spirits enter the cavities of the brain, they pass from there into the pores of its substance, and from these pores into the nerves. And depending on the varying amounts which enter (or merely tend to enter) some nerves more than others, the spirits have the power to change the shape of the muscles in which the nerves are embedded, and by this means to move all the limbs. Similarly you may have observed in the grottos and fountains in the royal gardens that the mere force with which the water is driven as it emerges from its source is sufficient to move various machines, and even to make them play certain

instruments or utter certain words depending on the various arrangements of the pipes through which the water is conducted.

Indeed, one may compare the nerves of the machine I am describing with the pipes in the works of these fountains, its muscles and tendons with the various devices and springs which serve to set them in motion, its animal spirits with the water which drives them, the heart with the source of the water, and the cavities of the brain with the storage tanks. Moreover, breathing and other such activities which are normal and natural to this machine, and which depend on the flow of the spirits, are like the movements of a clock or mill, which the normal flow of water can render continuous. [*Treatise on Man*, first page]

This will not seem at all strange to those who know how many kinds of automatons, or moving machines, the skill of man can construct with the use of very few parts, in comparison with the great multitude of bones, muscles, nerves, arteries, veins and all the other parts that are in the body of any animal. For they will regard this body as a machine which, having been made by the hands of God, is incomparably better ordered than any machine that can be devised by man, and contains in itself movements more wonderful than those in any such machine. [*Discourse on Method*, Part V]

It is clear that Descartes is enormously impressed by the intricacies of the physiology of the human body. He is impressed, too, by what he sees as a close analogy between the mechanical underpinnings of the movements of the hands of a clock, or water displays of a fountain, and the physiological underpinnings of the movements of a living human body; and he is struck by just how much of the latter might also be the product of purely mechanical causes. It is clear from these and other passages that he is writing in opposition to a tendency to suppose that much of the basic functioning of the human body is too remarkable to have purely mechanical underpinnings. We might, for example, think that breathing - the way in which one breath follows another with just the rhythm required to sustain the body in life - is a phenomenon of a kind that could never be sustained by purely mechanical means. However, a little knowledge of the intricacies of the human body, combined with an awareness of what man made machines can do, should make us think again: should make us concede that the human body might itself be a machine. When we remember that it is a machine made by God – that the artistry that constructed these mechanisms is of a quite different order from that which constructed the mechanisms of the clock – our doubts should be laid to rest.

Paragraph 13: movements that are independent of the soul

Descartes insists, then, that the body is a machine. That, of course, is, for him, very different from suggesting that a *person* is a machine: for Descartes has argued that the person – that which I refer to when I use the word ‘I’ – is something quite different from the body. In another passage Descartes highlights the way in which the person is related to the body through a further development of the fountain analogy:

And finally, when a rational soul is present in this machine it will have its principal seat in the brain, and reside there like the fountain-keeper who

must be stationed at the tanks to which the fountain's pipes return if he wants to produce, or prevent, or change their movements in some way . .

The fountain is constructed by men, just as the human body is constructed by God. But further, while it is true that once the fountain is created and set in motion most of the movements of water in it can be explained in purely mechanical terms, there are occasions on which some movement is to be explained, in part, by reference to an action of the fountain-keeper: for example, the sudden increase in the height of a jet of water is the result of the fountain-keeper's turning of a valve. Similarly, some of the movements of a human body are to be explained, in part, by reference to an action of the rational soul that is present in it. Examples that are very important to Descartes include sophisticated actions, and those movements of my mouth and tongue that are involved in speech. Descartes does, however, suggest that the range of bodily movements that have purely mechanical causes may be rather broader than we might initially suppose. He gives an example, which you might like to look at again, in the second half of paragraph 13 of *The Passions of the Soul*. He gives another example in the following passage:

Now a very large number of the motions occurring inside us do not depend in any way on the mind. These include heartbeat, digestion, nutrition, respiration when we are asleep, and also such waking actions as walking, singing and the like, when these occur without the mind attending to them. When people take a fall, and stick out their hands so as to protect their head, it is not reason that instructs them to do this; it is simply that the sight of the impending fall reaches the brain and sends the animal spirits into the nerves in the manner necessary to produce this movement even without any mental volition, just as it would be produced in a machine. And since our own experience reliably informs us that this is so, why should we be so amazed that the 'light reflected from the body of a wolf onto the eyes of a sheep' should equally be capable of arousing the movements of flight in the sheep?²

I will not comment on these examples. I will, instead, close my discussion of this point with two questions that I would like you to think about before reading on. First: having gone this far, does Descartes have adequate grounds for resisting the suggestion that it is possible that *all* the behaviour of a human body might be the product of mechanistic processes without any input from an immaterial soul? And second: do you see any hints here concerning the view that Descartes might take of the behaviour of non-human animals? We will return to these questions.

Emotion and the body

We must look now at Paragraphs 33-50 of *The Passions of the Soul*. Before asking you to read this I will make two general comments. First, we must note a point that is presupposed, rather than explicitly stated, in these paragraphs. We cannot say of an

² Descartes, *Reply to Fourth Set of Objections*

inanimate object, such as a table, that it is angry or afraid; and so, by Descartes' test in paragraph 3, the anger or fear that a person undergoes is a state, not of his body, but of his soul. As we might put this: an emotion, being something that I *feel*, is a condition of my soul. My second comment is this. A crucial task in reading these paragraphs is to maintain, wherever it is possible, a clear distinction between, on the one hand, what may strike us as cranky physiology and, on the other, what is independent of that in a way such that it can be of live philosophical interest to us today. With this in mind, I would like you now to read these paragraphs, making a note of anything in what Descartes says that strikes you, on the one hand, as particularly insightful, or, on the other, as particularly confused. I would like you also to reflect on, and make a note of your answer to, the question: does Descartes, in these sections, present emotion as *the* fundamental obstacle to living a good life?

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I am now going to offer my own summary of these paragraphs, focusing on points that are particularly relevant to the question that I asked you to consider. You may find other strands of Descartes' discussion as significant and interesting as those on which I focus (or more so).³ You may also judge that my summary misrepresents Descartes' views in certain ways. My aim in offering this summary is not to tell you what to make of Descartes' text; it is, rather, to draw attention to certain aspects of it on which I would like you to reflect, and to offer a reading by which – whether through agreement or disagreement – you may sharpen your own reading. Here, then, is my summary:

In a case in which I see some animal approaching me, the light reflected from its body has an effect on my eyes, which, by a causal route running through the optic nerve, affects the pineal gland. This change in the pineal gland, in turn, affects the soul in a way such that it has a visual experience of the shape of the animal (35); and with that, depending on my previous experience, a feeling of fear may be aroused in the soul.⁴ The physical changes in the pineal gland that give rise to the perception and the feeling also have further *physical* effects: immediately on the nerves, these in turn leading to the movements of the legs required for fleeing (36). Note that on this account the feeling of fear in the soul *plays no role* in producing the bodily behaviour of fleeing (38). It does, however, lead the soul to want to do (for example, flee) the very thing that the body does as the result of purely physical causes (40). What emotion I feel is entirely dependent on the physical condition of the body; thus, I cannot change what I feel simply by willing that I feel something else: for example, I cannot stop feeling afraid by simply deciding not to (41, 45, 46). There are, however, two kinds of control that I – or, at least, a strong

³ For example, my summary will not mention Descartes' important remarks about *action*: in particular, in paragraphs 44 and 50. For an interesting, but highly critical, discussion of Descartes' treatment of action see Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1978), ch 10, especially pages 290-2.

⁴ Descartes supposes that whenever the soul sees something there is, in the pineal gland, a *physical* image of the thing seen: an image, that is, that might be observed by a surgeon who opens the person's skull. This, to us perhaps rather eccentric proposal, is of little importance to Descartes' view of the emotions. What is crucial is to keep a clear distinction between the physical – bodily – stages, and the non-physical stages in the soul, of the processes Descartes discusses.

soul – does have here. First, by thinking clearly about my situation – by, for example, a cool assessment that the danger is not really so great (45), or that death is not really such a great evil (cf 48) – I may dissipate the feeling of fear. And second, without dissipating the fear, a strong will can overcome the bodily forces that are inclining me to run away (46). We are inclined to suppose that there are sometimes conflicts between a lower and a higher part of the soul: as, for example, when ‘my fear inclines me to run’ while reason dictates that I should hold my ground. In reality, however, what is going on is quite different. There is no conflict within the soul. For, as we have seen, it is not in fact the *fear* that inclines me to run, but certain physical mechanisms that operate quite independently of the feeling of fear. The battle is, in reality, between the soul and the body; and the battle ground is the pineal gland: the rational soul, in willing that I (or rather, my body) stand my ground, pushes the gland in one direction, while bodily mechanisms push it in a contrary direction that will lead to my body fleeing (47).⁵

I asked you to consider the question: does Descartes, in these sections, present emotion as *the* fundamental obstacle to living a good life? If you did not make a note of your answer to this question, or want to add to it, please do so before reading on.

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Descartes appears to suggest, in paragraph 40, that emotion has an important constructive role in our lives: it reinforces, by leading the soul to want, useful actions, such as running away from dangerous animals, that the body will initiate of its own accord. This, however, has its downside, in that it is not *always* a good idea to run away from a dangerous animal: reasoned judgement may tell me that another tactic, such as walking calmly towards it, would be a better tactic. In such cases, the feeling of fear that inclines me to run is a positive hindrance (cf 46). Furthermore, emotions – for example, fear and ambition (cf 48) – are often in a certain form of conflict with each other in a way such as to render the soul ‘enslaved and miserable’. Closely linked with all of this is Descartes’ suggestion that the principle characteristic of the strong soul is its ability to conquer the passions (48, 50).

The overall judgement on emotion seems, then, to be pretty negative (though it may be important to note that the problems with emotion are, for the most part, unfortunate concomitants of their positive face noted in section 40.) Having said all that, however, it seems to me that it must be added that the biggest villain in Descartes’ plot is *the body*. It is physical processes within the body that cause and maintain the emotions that I feel on particular occasions, and that make these so resistant to my control. And it is these same physical processes – *not* the feeling of, for example, fear – that leads the body to act as it does: perhaps fleeing when reason tells me that the best thing to do is stand still. And so, as I stressed in my summary and as Descartes stresses in paragraph 47, it is a confusion to suppose that the fundamental conflicts in an individual life are conflicts *within* the soul:

⁵ It is important to remember here, and at other points, that when Descartes speaks of ‘spirits’ he is speaking of something bodily, and not (as the term might suggest to us) of immaterial events in the soul. As he says in paragraph 10: ‘For what I am calling “spirits” here are merely bodies: they have no property other than that of being extremely small bodies which move very quickly, like the jets of flame that come from a torch’.

between, for example, the will and the natural appetites of the soul, or between reason and emotion. The conflict is, rather, between the soul and the body. It operates at two levels. First, my considered judgement as to what it is appropriate to feel – for example, admiration, rather than the envy that I do in fact feel – is in conflict with *bodily* ‘spirits’ that produce the feeling of envy. And second, my considered judgement as to what it is appropriate to do – for example, stand still rather than flee – is in conflict with bodily mechanisms that are setting my legs in motion.

I noted in the Introduction that 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. This tension in Plato’s thinking is resolved in Descartes’. In his treatment of emotion in *The Passions of the Soul* we find a detailed articulation and defence of the view that the body is something distinct from the real self. The real self is a unified, rational, mind or soul lodged within the body: this being an external and alien force to be struggled against in my attempts to think clearly and to act as I should. As Descartes expresses it:

All the conflicts usually suppose to occur between the lower part of the soul, which we call “sensitive”, and the higher or “rational” part of the soul – or between the natural appetites and the will – consist simply in the opposition between the movements which the body (by means of its spirits) and the soul (by means of its will) tend to produce at the same time in the gland. For there is within us but one soul, and this soul has within it no diversity of parts It is to the body alone that we should attribute everything that can be observed in us to oppose our reason.⁶

In the next section of this module we will consider an attempt to explain how this strongly negative view of the body comes about.

Reading

There are helpful discussions of Descartes on the relation between mind and body in: L.E. Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume*, chapter 3; John Cottingham, *Descartes*, pp 119-32, Anthony Kenny, *Descartes*, chapter 10; and (more difficult) Bernard Williams, *Descartes*, chapter 10. For a more detailed treatment see M. Rozemond, *Descartes’s Dualism*. In addition to Wittgenstein, to whom we will be turning shortly, one of the most influential criticisms of Descartes’ understanding of this relation has been Gilbert Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind*; see chapter 1 of this for a summary, and rather polemical, statement of where Descartes goes wrong. If you would like to focus in particular on the emotions, two recent studies of particular relevance are: John Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics*; and Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*.

⁶ *Passions of the Soul*, paragraph 47.