

He began with the following reminder about himself: 'As though I were not a man who habitually sleeps at night and has the same impressions (or even wilder ones) in sleep as these [mad]men do when awake!' The reminder is that he goes to sleep and dreams. But then he continues: 'When I reflect more carefully on this, I am bewildered; and my very bewilderment confirms the idea of my being asleep.' This provides Descartes with that challenge to his former opinions that he was looking for: he may be only dreaming that he sees and hears. It is the next sentence, however, that approaches our present problem: 'Well, suppose I am dreaming, and these particulars, that I open my eyes, shake my head, put out my hand, are incorrect; suppose even that I have no such hand, no such body. . . .'¹ Here we have the beginning of an answer to our question: with the supposition that he is dreaming Descartes sees a place to enter a wedge between himself and his body, a wedge that is driven further in the remaining *Meditations*. But there is a difficulty here. Descartes begins by reminding himself that he is 'a man who habitually sleeps at night' and dreams, and he adds that these dreams occur while 'I am undressed and lying in bed'. This is Descartes' beginning and the point at which we must grasp what he says. There is no difficulty, of course, in understanding at least a part of this. People go to bed, usually undressed; they sleep, calmly or restlessly, and they dream. Dreams, of course, are what people tell when they wake up or perhaps write in a diary or keep to themselves. So a dreamer here (and this includes Descartes) is a human being: he gets dressed and undressed, sleeps on a bed or

¹ *Descartes: Philosophical Writings* (Edinburgh, 1954), eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and P. T. Geach.

pallet, tells dreams while eating breakfast, and so on. If this is what we are to understand by Descartes' opening remark, we need not put up resistance yet. But then comes the wedge: 'suppose even that I have no such hand, no such body'. Here we must call a halt. We were to think of Descartes as a man who, undressed and in bed, often dreams. It was only with that understanding that we were able to take his first step with him. Does this still stand? If so, what is this 'body' that he now supposes himself not to have? Can he, without this 'body', sleep, either calmly or restlessly, and dream? Or has Descartes unwittingly contradicted himself here? Has he appealed to the possibility of dreaming only to take back something that the very possibility of dreaming itself requires? This does appear to be the case. But if that is so, then we can go no further with him. Either we are to think of him—and he is to think of himself—as a man who, undressed and in bed, often dreams, and then we understand him, or he takes this back and wipes out all he has said. And this holds for the remaining *Meditations*, for everything that Descartes goes on to say in the *Meditations* is said under the supposition that he may be dreaming. Whatever sort of philosophical doubts this may raise, there is at least one thing certain; if he should ask himself 'What am I?', he can answer that he is a man who sleeps, undressed and in bed, and often dreams. To take back this beginning is to take back everything.

So the wedge that Descartes would drive between himself and his body is never really driven. Or rather, no place is found for the wedge to enter. For it is not that we understand about Descartes *and his body*. We understand only about Descartes, that philosopher who habitually undressed and went to bed at night and whose dreams, by his own testimony, were sometimes wilder than the fantasies of madmen. But this is not to say that we understand only about his body. No, to say that we understand only about Descartes is to say neither more nor less than we mean, for no place has been found yet for the word 'body'—at least not in the special sense (if it is a sense) that Descartes requires. This is a point we tend to forget. Descartes introduced a highly extraordinary use of the word 'body'. He has to be understood to be using it always in the context of his distinction between *himself* and his body. So his use of the word is not at all like these: 'His body was covered with mosquito bites', 'His body was found at

the bottom of the cliff', 'He has a strong body but no brains', and so on. In saying such things as these we do not use 'body' as the one side of a Cartesian distinction. We are not saying, for instance, 'His body, but not his mind, was covered with mosquito bites'. That would be utter nonsense. If I say that someone's body was covered with mosquito bites, I could also say 'He was covered, etc.' The word 'body' comes in here as part of the emphasis: not just his ankles and wrists, but his back and stomach, too. Again, in speaking of a corpse we can say either 'His body was found, etc.' or 'He was found dead, etc.' The word 'body' in the first of these is used to make the contrast between dead and alive. No special ontology need come in here. As for the third sentence in the above list, it might be found in a requested letter of recommendation, and from it we should take the warning that the man can do heavy work but should not be expected to go at his work with much intelligence. In these and in other ordinary cases our understanding of the word 'body' is tied to particular contexts to a variety of particular distinctions of the kind just illustrated, and none of these provides a place to drive a conceptual wedge between Descartes and his body. But once again, this should not lead us to conclude: Then Descartes was *only* a body. For what distinction would that be making? It was not, after all, a corpse that wrote the *Meditations*.

There is a bit of a clue, in what Descartes says, to how he may have failed to realize that he was introducing an extraordinary use of the word 'body'. He says: 'suppose even that I have no hand, no such body', and thus it looks as though he supposed that 'hand' and 'body' are words of the same sort or that 'hand' and 'body' are related as 'shirt' and 'clothing' are, so that one could work up from supposing that you had no hand, no foot, etc. to supposing that you had no body, as you might work up from supposing you had no shirt, no coat, etc. to supposing that you had no clothing. This would perhaps be encouraged by the fact that we do use both the expressions 'my whole body' and 'my whole suit of clothing', and we also say 'He lost a hand' as well as 'He lost a shirt'. But the parallel fails just where it is crucial for Descartes. I could understand, given a certain context, a man's believing that he had no right hand, that he was a one-armed man, but I can make no sense of a man's believing that he has no body, that he has never had a body. I might have occasion to worry about a child

being born with no hands, but there is no occasion to worry about a child being born with no body. And this is not merely because bodies are required for birth. Bodies are not born; they are stillborn. What are born are babies, human beings.

We may summarize our results as follows: Descartes' use of the word 'body' presupposes that he has driven his wedge, that he has provided the right sort of contrast between I and 'my body', but on the other hand there seems to be no place for his wedge to be driven unless his use of the word 'body' is itself presupposed, and these requirements are incompatible. (If anyone should wonder about the locution 'my body' and ask what the body belongs to if not the mind, he need only remind himself of the locution 'my mind'.)¹

¹ Frank Ebersole once remarked in another context that philosophers often talk of people as if they were speaking of zombies, which the dictionary describes as corpses that, by sorcery, are made to move and act as if alive. At the time I did not appreciate the significance of this remark, but very likely it did something to focus my thoughts for the present essay. (See also the excellent chapter on human actions in Ebersole's book, *Things We Know* (Eugene, Oregon, 1967), pp. 282-304)