

4. The Threatening Body

In his book, *The Absent Body*, published in 1990, the philosopher Drew Leder seeks to identify the source, first, of the idea that my body is no part of what I really am, and, second, of the idea that it is an alien and threatening force. He seeks to locate the origin of these ideas in a way that does nothing to *justify* them. Indeed, his account of how these ideas arise would, if roughly correct, suggest that they are seriously confused.

The Absent Body

A central topic of Leder's book is a phenomenon that he speaks of as 'bodily disappearance'. He focuses on the striking way in which, when all is going well, my body tends not to feature in my experience. This lack of awareness of my own body has a number of faces. First, I do not generally *see* much of my body, and there is a good deal of it – some of the back, and almost all of the head (including, in particular, the eyes) - that I never see directly:

As Merleau-Ponty writes, "my body as given to me by sight is broken at the height of the shoulders and terminates in a tactile-muscular object". Nor can I rectify this deficiency by simply shifting position to get a better view. While this strategy works with external objects, the body naturally limits attempts to get a new angle upon it. Wherever I go to gaze at it, it comes with me as itself the source of the gaze. ... My eyes themselves never appear within their visual field except indirectly via reflective surfaces.¹

Another dimension of bodily disappearance relates to the structure of attention involved in action. Leder quotes Paul Ricoeur:

Actually, when I act I am not concerned with my body. I say rather that the action "traverses" my body. I am concerned less with my body than with the product of the action: the hanged picture, the strike of the hammer on the head of a nail.²

When things are going smoothly, and I am fully engaged in what I am doing, the focus of my attention is on the object – for example, the nail - that I am trying to manipulate, not on my hands with which I manipulate it. (I find this phenomenon particularly striking in cases in which attention is focused on a distant point: consider, for example, the expert darts player whose attention, as he is poised to throw the dart, is wholly focused on the treble 20.) The point, it should be stressed, relates specifically to cases in which I am completely 'at home' in my activity. Things stand quite differently with, for example, the novice who struggles to arrange his fingers on the frets of the guitar in the way needed to produce a particular chord. As Leder notes, it is when I have mastered a particular skill that my body disappears from my experience (op.cit. p31).

¹ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body*, p 12

² Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. Erazim Kohak (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1966), p 210. Quoted by Leder, pp 18-19

I will mention just one more example of bodily disappearance: this time involving emotion. Leder again quotes Ricoeur:

When I am moved by emotion, I do not think of my body at all. ...
Being afraid does not mean feeling my body shake or my heart beat; it is
to experience the world as something to shun, as an impalpable
presence.³

I may judge that *another* is terrified on the basis of the look on his face and the way his hand shakes. But one who is consumed with terror of, say, a tiger is one whose attention is totally taken up with the tiger. To the extent that a person notices her shaking body or thumping heart she is not *consumed* with terror.

These are three forms of what Leder characterizes as ‘bodily disappearance’: three ways in which my own body may drop out of my experience. Leder suggests that these ways in which my body may be absent from my experience help to explain the pull of Descartes’ idea - which we saw in his arguments for mind-body dualism – that I can readily conceive of myself as existing without a body. It should be stressed that Leder presents these phenomena as part of the explanation of why we may be tempted by Descartes’ arguments. That is quite different from suggesting that they show that Descartes’ arguments may, after all, be good arguments. One way to see this is this. Leder stresses various ways in which *my body* may be absent from my experience. But, on the face of it, we might equally say that in these cases *I* am absent from my experience. If that is correct, the examples can do nothing to support the distinction that Descartes’ wants to draw between *I* and *my body*. You might like to look back at the three examples and ask yourself whether the way I have suggested they can be described is correct.

The Threatening Body

We looked, in the Introduction, at the way in which much Platonic-Christian thinking is dominated by hostility towards the body: by, in Leder’s phrase, ‘a distrust of embodiment’. While such hostility is not particularly obvious in Descartes’ work, Leder argues that a perception of the body, not simply as something *distinct from* the real self, but as a *threat* to that self is a fundamental drive behind much of his thought. We have seen a sense in which there may be truth in that. In chapter 5 of his book, however, Leder seeks to press matters further, identifying, in features of the individual’s experience of his or her own body, the roots of the idea of the body as a threat.

In the opening section of this chapter Leder presents the thesis that he will be defending. His suggestion is that my experience is marked, not only by bodily disappearance, but also by what he calls ‘bodily dys-appearance’. While his play on language can be confusing (especially to the extent that you tend to give inner vocalisation to what you read), the phenomenon to which Leder is drawing attention here is this. Just as I may be unaware of my own body when things are going smoothly, I may be particularly *aware* of it when things go wrong: it is in cases of *dysfunction* that my body makes an *appearance* in my experience.

³ Ricoeur op cit p 271. Quoted by Leder, p 21

Please now read the first section of Drew Leder, *The Absent Body*, pp 126-8. Don't worry if there are passages that you find a bit of a struggle. At the moment, all that is needed is that you have a general sense of the form that Leder's argument will take.

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Leder tells us that he is going to discuss three negative images of embodiment that have played a central role in the Western tradition: 'These are, respectively, the body understood as the scene of epistemological error, moral error, and mortality' (127). In each case he will illustrate the negative imagery through the place that it has in Descartes' thinking. We will take his discussion of each negative image in turn.

(i) Epistemological Error

'Epistemology' is the study of questions concerning whether, and how, it is possible for us to achieve knowledge and certainty about the world. Leder's discussion here has three phases: 1. He suggests that Descartes has a picture according to which the body is a seriously disrupting force in our attempts to acquire knowledge (128 'Epistemological concerns -130 '... mind in its thinking'). 2. He offers an explanation of how Descartes came by this picture (130 'If I seek'-132 '... healthy, and awake'). 3. He suggests that while the picture does have a basis in our experience, it involves a misreading of that experience (132 'This Cartesian epistemology' - 134 '.... by novel paradigms.') Please now read this section of Leder's chapter (128-34).

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In an earlier chapter, Leder gives the following illustration of the appearance of the body – as an alien presence – in dysfunction:

In pain, the body or a certain part of the body emerges as an *alien presence*. The sensory insistence of pain draws the corporeal out of self-concealment, rendering it thematic. No event more radically and inescapably reminds us of our bodily presence. Yet at the same time pain effects a certain alienation. White and Sweet report that their patients almost universally describe their pain as an "it", separate from the "I". The painful body is often experienced as something foreign to the self. (ibid. p 76)

Here is another example:

I am ordinarily oblivious to the act of sight until I see something that strikes me as impossible. Then I "rub my eyes", "pinch myself", that is, check my own perceptual conditions. When the world at large becomes strangely blurred I remember to go for an eye exam. As long as perception presents no problem my body disappears. But in situations of questionable or blocked perception, I am called to reflect back upon bodily states. (ibid. p 85)

Leder gives others examples in the section you have just read: examples, that is, of ways in which, in my experience of the world, I become aware of my own body in circumstances in which things are *going wrong*. Thus, I may come to associate my body with *breakdowns* in a proper awareness of the world; and so to think of it as an alien and disruptive presence in my search for knowledge. We might add that this way of thinking of the body may be reinforced by a certain combination of tendencies among those, such as philosophers and pure mathematicians, whose intellectual pursuits are significantly abstract, in the sense of being relatively independent of sense experience: the tendencies, on the one hand, to think of their favoured pursuits as *the* proper business of human beings, and, on the other, to think of the body – in, for example, its pain or fatigue – as an external source of disruption.

Leder's own assessment of this temptation to think of the body as an obstacle in my pursuit of knowledge is this: it is, as we might express it, utterly unfair to regard the body in this way, and the line of thought that leads some to this view involves a kind of incoherence. Leder writes: 'We are reminded of the body at times of hindrance only because a rupture has occurred in a more general, though tacit, context of operation: the body as the means whereby world is disclosed' (133). It is precisely because my body is so fundamental to my having knowledge of the world that knowledge is disrupted when my body fails to function properly. To conclude from the fact that the bodily mechanisms involved in perception sometimes fail to function properly that the body is an obstacle to knowledge is as absurd as Well, I will leave it to you to think of a suitable analogy; and, with that, to decide whether Leder's point is decisive.

(ii) Moral error

Leder discusses under this heading Descartes' relatively negative view of emotion, and the source of this negative assessment in our experience of emotion. Since his discussion draws primarily on *The Passions of the Soul* much of it should be fairly familiar to you. One word of warning, however, may be helpful. Leder speaks here of a traditional Western 'distrust of bodily passions and desires' (134). Now there *are* strands in this tradition that represent the emotions as essentially bodily conditions. Is it not clear, however, that on Descartes' view emotions are conditions, not of the body, but of the *soul*? (After all, remember the title of the essay on emotion.) And if that is correct, one might think, any hostility to the body that is to be found in Descartes must be kept firmly distinct from his distrust of the emotions. I would like you to pause for a second, and to ask yourself whether that would be a good thought.

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That question, you may have noticed, was basically a revision exercise; though there are slight complications as Descartes is, in fact, not, at least on the surface, entirely consistent here. For example, you may have noticed that he is prepared to speak of non-human animals as having emotions, even though he denies that they have souls. Now I am inclined to say that any inconsistency here does not go deep. The situation is this. When a person, on being confronted with a tiger, is, as we say, 'afraid' there is a certain characteristic *feeling* of fear: this being a condition of the soul. Descartes' official view is

that this feeling *is* the fear. However, there is a sense in which this *feeling* is not the most important thing that is going on when a person is afraid. For, as you will remember, it is not the *feeling* that leads me to run away from the tiger. The feeling is the result of certain physical processes in the brain; and it is these same physical processes that cause my body to behave as it does: for example, to run away. Thus, while on Descartes' official view the emotion is not itself a bodily condition, it is the body that is the real villain when, as we say, a person is carried away by emotion: when, for example, I run in panic, rather than do the rational thing, which is, perhaps, to stand stock still. For it is bodily processes that generate the feeling and make it resistant to alteration by rational thought; and it is bodily processes that are directly responsible for the – often disastrous – behavioural 'manifestations of emotion' (that is: what we, mistakenly, think of as behavioural effects of the emotion itself.)

There is one other point that I would like to stress before you read this section of Leder's discussion. This is that the traditional Western 'distrust of bodily passions and desires', which we find clearly articulated in Descartes, is by no means universal. Some philosophers have regarded the passions as embodying implicit opinions about the goodness or badness of things in the world. For example, I *perceive* the other, through my anger, as hostile; again, I perceive another's action, through my indignation (or, my own action, through my guilt), as intrinsically wicked, and (perhaps) deserving of punishment. In our emotions we experience particular things as good or bad in certain ways. Now up to this point Descartes need not disagree. The point of dispute is this: while others have regarded our emotions, or at least some of them, as involving a *recognition* of features of what confronts us, Descartes suggests that there is no *recognition* of anything here - when I experience a situation through an emotion I am experiencing it in a *confused* way. For Descartes, to experience a situation as it really is – as it is in itself - I need to achieve a state of mind free of emotion. And if I cannot do that – if, for example, the bodily underpinnings of my feelings of guilt are too powerful - I can, by 'bracketing out' the influence of the emotion, still make sure that I do not go wrong in my *judgements*: while, perhaps, I cannot help feeling guilty about something I have done, I may, through clear thinking, be able to resist *judging* that it is the sinful deed that I cannot help *feeling* it to be.

We must, I think, agree with Descartes that some of the ways in which we experience the world through our emotions are not trustworthy: it may be, for example, that the hostility that I have felt towards a particular man since my first encounter with him is the product of deep, unconscious, associations, operating, perhaps, at the level of physical processes in the brain. (He has just the hair colour and shape of nose of someone who treated me very badly in the distant past.) What is distinctive of Descartes' view is the way in which he offers us a systematic procedure for avoiding untrustworthy judgements of this kind: 'Don't align yourself with any judgement that is dependent in some way on bodily-based emotion'. It is this systematic distrust of the emotions that Leder seeks to explain.

Please now read pages 134 ('My discussion of') to 138 ('.... into metaphysical dualism') of Leder's chapter.

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Leder's discussion here follows roughly the same pattern as the section on epistemological error. He first presents a variety of ways in which Descartes maintains that emotion – the passions – are a systematic source of confusion: 'the prism of body-based emotion distorts the true nature and import of objects in our life', leading us astray in our reactions to the situations in which we find ourselves. Leder then goes on to offer a diagnosis of this view: to identify what it is in our experience of the emotions that leads Descartes to his strongly negative evaluation of them. His diagnosis is this: 'Just as the body is remembered when pain or sickness interferes with our intentions, so too when powerful passions rebel'. So long as my emotional state is in harmony with my rational assessment of my situation, it remains a background to my experience – a background of which I am barely aware. I characteristically become powerfully aware of an emotion within me when it is in conflict with the voice of reason: when it 'erupts, throwing an obstacle in the path of my will'. When thinking philosophically about the emotions, we have a tendency – an understandable but mistaken tendency – to give central place to those cases in which emotions feature prominently in our experience: these being precisely the cases in which they appear as a negative force, to be struggled against.

As before, Leder's diagnosis of Descartes' position does, if it is roughly correct, not only identify the roots of the position, but does so in a way that casts serious doubt on it.

(iii) Sickness and Death

Please now read the remainder of Leder's chapter: pp 138-48.

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I become acutely aware of my body in times of pain and illness, and through the gradual loss of functions – the weight in my legs as I struggle up the hill, the tiresome after-effects of immoderate consumption of food or alcohol – that heralds old age and, ultimately, death. When, in such ways, my body forces itself on my awareness it presents itself as something deeply threatening to *me*. Descartes' scientific and metaphysical work, which has at its heart a valorizing of reason, offers a double response to the threat. First, we see reason, as understood by Descartes, in its purest form in the scientific-technological approach to the natural world; and 'the natural world', as here understood, includes the human body. The creature of flesh and blood is, in this vision, appropriately thought of as a physiological machine: a shift in attitude for which Descartes has some responsibility and which, Leder suggests, is a key step in the development of modern medicine.⁴ The first leg of reason's response to the threatening body lies, then, in its commitment to a modern scientific medicine that postpones the onset of bodily decline and death. The second leg lies in my identification of myself with the rational soul: this being something quite distinct from the body, and which may survive the body's inevitable death. As the point has been expressed:

A wretchedly foolish and selfish human creature thinks he has to do with his body and that it is still some part of himself and belonging to him even

⁴ If you would like to follow up this line of thought I suggest that you look at: Drew Leder, 'A Tale of Two Bodies: the Cartesian Corpse and the Lived Body', in Donn Welton (ed), *Body and Flesh* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

when he is out of it. A wiser mortal thinks his body no part of himself and belonging to him even when he is out of it. But a truly wise man thinks his body no part of himself nor belonging to him even whilst in it I (the real I) am not a certain figure, nor mass, nor hair, nor flesh, nor limbs, nor body; but mind, thought, intellect, reason.⁵

The above brief summary of Leder's discussion in this section leaves out important strands in what he says: in particular, his treatment of the corpse. You may judge my summary to be seriously lopsided in certain respects; and you may find Leder's argument less plausible than I do. I would urge you to make a note of any such reservations before you read on. The aim is not to secure your agreement, but to encourage your own critical reflection on these issues.

Descartes: Sin and Science

We have seen in Descartes a serious and systematic attempt to draw a clear line between mind and body: a line such that we can consider the merits of each, and, perhaps, conclude, as Descartes himself does, that the body is the source of all that is muddled and murky in our lives. While Descartes' emphasis here is more on 'error' than on 'sin', the idea of the body as something that drags me down, something to be resisted and ultimately transcended, retains a strong hold in his thinking.

Besides the careful, systematic character of Descartes' treatment of these issues, there is a further distinctive feature of his understanding of the body that was to play an enormously important role in subsequent thinking. This was the place that he gave to a scientific-technological approach to the natural world. We have seen the way in which Descartes, marvelling at the success of mathematical physics in yielding an understanding of the motions of the planets and at the wonderful intricacies of man made machines, came to think of the human body as a machine: came to the view that the *correct* way to think of a person's body is as a collection of parts and processes, which are related to each other in the same kinds of way in which the parts and processes within a watch or fountain are related to each other.

The body as the source, or seat, of confusion (or sin) / the body as machine. These two images of the body that we find in Descartes both encourage the drawing of a firm distinction between the person and her body. For, first, the idea of the body as something that drags me down, if it does not require, at least makes attractive the idea that *I* - the being that may be dragged down - am something other than the body, something that may struggle against its pull. And second, the idea of body as mechanism will, it seems, lead to a picture in which my every thought and action is as mechanistically determined as are the motions of the planets unless we maintain that *I* am something distinct from this body that I think of as mine.

We might add that the two images fit together rather nicely in a mutually reinforcing way. For while the one is the idea of the body as the seat of dysfunction in human life, the other is the idea of the body as a device whose functions are to be studied by the physiologist and whose dysfunctions are to be corrected by the doctor by the

⁵ Lord Shaftesbury; quoted by Porter op cit, p 136

manipulation of its parts: as the mechanic rectifies the dysfunctions of the clock or fountain by manipulating its parts. Dysfunction is, we might say, of the essence of the body, and so it is, above all, a proper object of medical research aimed at controlling its worst manifestations of dysfunction.

In this section, we have considered one attempt to explain how the body may come to be viewed in this way. The discussion has focused pretty exclusively on my experience of *myself*. In the next section we will look at the implications that such a view might have for my thought about *others*.

Reading

If you want to explore further the issues discussed in this section I suggest that you read more of Leder's book *The Absent Body*. (I have included at the end of the reading the start of Leder's next chapter: the first page and a half contains a summary that I find helpful.) In another interesting article - 'A Tale of Two Bodies: the Cartesian Corpse and the Lived Body' - Leder highlights the idea of the body as machine and links that with attitudes towards the body in modern medicine.