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The Threatening Body

When man's own experience of himself is seen in a certain way, he perceives the nature of his body as thing-like and soul-moved, which presupposes necessity and dissolves the unity of existence which emerges from the world and results in *forgetting* equally his body and his soul. This occurs when something in *himself strikes* man in such a way that he begins to reflect *upon* himself. . . . As long as we are healthy, nothing strikes us *about* ourselves. However, when our well-being is disturbed, one notices one's own body.

F. J. J. Buytendijk, *Prolegomena to an Anthropological Physiology*

In the previous chapter I have discussed the relationship of the "rational mind" to the phenomenon of bodily disappearance. The tacit nature of certain regions and activities of the body helps support their attribution to an incorporeal mentality. In this chapter, I will discuss the correlative notion of body that arises and its experiential supports.

It is no doubt clear that the Cartesian concept of the body cannot be equated with that which I have been employing throughout this work. I have discussed the lived body as a seat of vitality, action, and thought. Yet precisely to the degree that human capabilities are attributed to an immaterial mind, the notion of "body" must be concomitantly restricted. If reason, for example, is located within an ethereal mind, then the body will be regarded as devoid of higher cognition. It comes to be identified primarily with mindless passions or passive automaticities. Relegated to but one term of a duality, the "body" that remains is but a partial body, defined in terms of a restricted range of abilities.

Moreover, within this duality of which the human being is composed, the body has tended to play the role of secondary or inessential element. For Descartes, as for Plato before him, the true self is often (though not always) identified primarily with the mind or soul.¹ As he writes in *The Discourse*, "this 'me,' that is to say, the soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from body."² Conceived of as the locus of subjectivity, it is the soul to which the first-person predicate is applied. "I am a thinking thing," Descartes writes, whereas "I *possess* a body with which I am very intimately conjoined."³ This scheme reinforces the partiality of the notion of body being employed. Those attributes most definitive of the subject are withheld from corporeality. Body comes to play the role of the Other.

This dualism has not merely an ontological but a valuational dimension. (I will thus refer to this as an "onto-valuational" dualism.) Within the Western philosophical tradition the body has often been regarded as a force of negativity, an obstacle to the soul's attempt to secure knowledge, virtue, or eternal life. This is by no means always the case. For every idealist elevation of sheer mentality, another philosopher awaits to revalue the corporeal sphere. In differing ways this is true of Aristotle in reply to Plato, Marx in reply to Hegel, Merleau-Ponty in reply to Sartre. However, this is precisely a tradition of *reply*. A certain devaluation of the body, either in the form of neglect, deprecation, or outright condemnation, has formed an ongoing theme in our intellectual history to which all those who disagree must begin in response.

This largely negative treatment of the body has by now been frequently commented upon and often regarded as an unfortunate cultural idiosyncrasy. This is indeed somewhat true. Such a distrust of embodiment is by no means a universal phenomenon. To fully understand its ascendancy within our culture would necessitate a careful examination of the specific social and historical contexts out of which it developed, including a consideration of salient political, economic, technological, religious, and gender relations.

However, I wish to suggest in this work that our imagery of the body can be understood not only in reference to the cultural projects at play but as an articulation of certain phenomenological possibilities and predispositions arising out of the lived body. Just as the notion of immaterial reason is made possible by the structure of bodily disappearance, the sense of the body as threat is, I will argue, suggested by the phenomenon of dys-appearance. As discussed in chapter 3, the body, forgotten in its seamless functioning, comes to thematic attention particularly at times of breakdown or problematic operation. That the notion of "body" then becomes philosophically associated with dysfunction and Otherness is not a purely contingent matter. Lived experience has already laid the groundwork with its natural bias of attention toward the negative.

I will attempt to make this point in relation to three 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. I will first examine the epistemological framework wherein, as the locus of limited and fallible sense perception, the body has been attacked as a primary source of deception. Next, I will turn to a discourse of morals characterized by a distrust of bodily passions. Finally, I will discuss the medico-theological identification of the body with disease and death. In each case, I will trace out the

role played by dys-appearance in encouraging such negativistic portrayals.

This suspicion of embodiment has had a long and variegated history, surfacing, for example, in the Platonism of ancient Greece and Augustinian strains of medieval Christianity, as well as in the works of many other philosophers and periods. A comprehensive survey of this history would lead far beyond the scope of this work. Thus I will continue to use Descartes as a focal example. This may appear more farfetched than his employment in reference to the immateriality of mind. For Descartes seems precisely to remove the body from its historic negative associations. No longer located primarily within the sphere of moral/existential concern, the body is installed within the "neutral" discourse of objective science and metaphysics. It is measurable *res extensa*, not the figure of lust or suffering that dominated previous discussion.

While there is certainly truth here, this interpretation conceals as much as it reveals. The Cartesian project does not so much expunge traditional identifications as transmute and displace them. As I will explore, the body remains for Descartes a place of error, though the emphasis is somewhat shifted from its ethical to its epistemic delusions. Considerations of bodily decay and death form the avowed context of all his work, if not the explicit focus of his texts. While inaugurating the modern concept of the body, Descartes continually relies upon a series of previous Graeco-Christian associations. He is thus valuable both as exemplifying certain long-standing historical themes and as a figure who discloses those twists peculiar to modernity.

Error

Epistemological concerns are at the center of much of the Cartesian project. Descartes inquires as to how we can achieve truth and certainty in our investigations of the world. He finds the answer in the human mind itself. In the *Discourse on Method* and the *Meditations*, Descartes suggests that it is the indubitability of one's own thinking that yields the first certainty on which all other truths must rest. Informed by the "light of nature," able to apprehend clearly and distinctly the existence of God and propositions of logic and mathematics, the mind can then progress to more specific forms of knowledge. In the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* Descartes had already sketched out the deductive procedures through which we may advance from indubitable propositions to the securing of new truths. It is via the proper use of the rational

intellect that truth is revealed and ascertained. And, as has been discussed, that intellect is an immaterial thing.

The body, on the other hand, is conceived of as that which naturally inclines us to error. This is not to say that the body is an unavoidable cause thereof. As a passive machine, devoid of fundamental agency, the body does not have the power to deceive the careful mind. Hence, the direct cause of error is the faculty of will when it exceeds the reach of the understanding.⁴ Insofar as the mature mind is trained to suspend decision prior to the achievement of clear and distinct apprehension, error can in all cases be avoided.

Nevertheless, the body constitutes the primary force that clouds the intellect and seduces the will to err. This begins from birth, before the powers of the human mind are developed enough to counter the ill effects of its union with the body:

Indeed in our early years, our mind was so immersed in the body, that it knew nothing distinctly, although it perceived much sufficiently clearly; and because it even then formed many judgments, numerous prejudices were contracted from which the majority of us can hardly ever hope to become free.⁵

We come to believe through the force of bodily sensations that things outside of us have not only magnitude, figure, and movement, but taste, smell, color, and other such qualities that arise only within the subject. In *The Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes labels this childhood prejudice the principal cause of error, noting that it continues to exert its power even after we reach the age of maturity.⁶ Moreover, as a result of its corporeal associations, the mind finds it extremely difficult to engage in intellection purified of the senses or imagination.⁷ The consequence is further deception; we not only misconstrue the nature of material objects but tend to disbelieve in the existence of immaterials.

Thus, according to Descartes, the human will and intellect are always engaged in a rearguard action against an ever present deceiver. Mistakes are not so much a matter of the mind positively choosing to err as failing to undo the distortions that the body has introduced. To uncover truth is to forcibly bring this body to heel:

I shall now close my eyes, I shall stop my ears, I shall call away all my senses, I shall efface even from my thoughts all the images of corporeal things, or at least (for that is hardly possible) I shall esteem them as vain and false.⁸

It is true that by the end of the *Meditations*, Descartes recognizes a certain circumscribed validity to bodily perceptions. Because God is

fundamentally nondeceptive, Descartes is sure that the perceived world is not a complete illusion and external bodies do exist. Moreover, he has reached assurance that "my senses more frequently indicate to me truth than falsehood respecting the things which concern that which is beneficial to the body."⁹ Sense perceptions were placed within us to signify what is useful or harmful to us as composite beings and are mostly reliable within this pragmatic context.¹⁰ However, in relation to the truth that principally interests Descartes, that is, scientific truth concerning the essence of external objects, "they can teach me nothing but what is most obscure and confused."¹¹ As did Plato before him, Descartes refers to the body as a "prison"¹² within this epistemological context, that which exerts "an obstructive effect on the soul . . . always a hindrance to the mind in its thinking."¹³

Error and Dys-appearance

If I seek to know what time of day it is I gauge the light outside my window or glance at a clock. How many people are in the room? I look around. What kind of plant have we here? I gaze at it, smell, touch it, turn it to examine the underside. On the face of it, it would seem that my body and its sensorimotor powers constitute the principal means whereby I know the world.

Why then does Descartes focus upon the body as a place of epistemological obstruction? This cannot be understood without reference to developments in early modern science. The Copernican assertion that the earth goes around the sun had reversed the naive testimony of the senses and replaced their authority with that of mathematics. The power of mathematics to reveal truth unavailable to immediate perception was further confirmed by the work of Galileo and Kepler. It is within this ambience that Descartes comes to regard material reality as *res extensa*, a substance wholly reducible to its geometrical properties. If this is true, the panoply of colors, smells, tastes, and sounds revealed by our body is a shadow dance, a seductive deception.

Many works have focused on these historical roots of Cartesianism.¹⁴ However, such historical developments can only bring to the fore, intensify, or diminish possibilities latent in the lived body itself. I wish to investigate those structures of embodiment which render possible and give experiential support to the Cartesian view. Primary among these is the operation of dys-appearance; we are made aware of our body precisely at times of dysfunction. As I will try to show, such dysfunctional moments inaugurate and channel Cartesian reflection on the body.

To make this point I will turn to Descartes's own account of those events which led to his philosophical reading of the body. The *Medita-*

tions, if its structure is taken seriously, is not just a work of logical argumentation but provides a rich phenomenology of personal experience. In the *Sixth Meditation*, Descartes informs us that initially he naively trusted what his body told him:

But afterwards many experiences little by little destroyed all the faith which I had rested in my senses; for I from time to time observed that those towers which from afar appeared to me to be round, more closely observed seemed square, and that colossal statues raised on the summit of these towers, appeared as quite tiny statues when viewed from the bottom; and so in an infinitude of other cases I found error in judgments founded on the external senses.¹⁵

It is helpful to examine the phenomenological structure of such occurrences. Ordinarily, as I move through the world there is a seamless continuity of my perspectives; I see constant objects through a variety of shifting perceptual profiles. I need not thematize the intricate spatiotemporal synthesis my body accomplishes at each moment. It is the taken-for-granted that enables me to focus outward. The body is still taken for granted by Descartes in the prephilosophical stage that corresponds to such experiences. However, reflection on embodiment is compelled by the moment of dys-appearance when the body is away, apart, from its own previous states or norms of ordinary functioning. In chapter 3, I discussed the self-divergence involved in vital disturbances such as pain and illness. Yet here it is precisely one's body *as perceiver* that diverges from its own previous state. Descartes's present perspective reveals the illusory nature of what he earlier thought he saw, e.g., the square tower that first appeared round. This problematic divergence, calling into question corporeal functioning, drives one to reflect back upon the body.

Continuing his discussion of those experiences which first destroyed his perceptual faith, Descartes notes that he had found error:

not only in those [judgments] founded on the external senses, but even in those founded on the internal as well; for is there anything more intimate or more internal than pain? And yet I have learned from some persons whose arms or legs have been cut off, that they sometimes seemed to feel pain in the part which had been amputated, which made me think that I could not be quite certain that it was a certain member which pained me, even although I felt pain in it.¹⁶

We see dys-appearance again at work in forcing the body before our view. In the case of the phantom limb patient, the body is literally disrupted, dismembered in fact. Moreover, this physical disruption inaugurates an even deeper set of phenomenological divergences. The

coenesthetic experiences of a still-present limb differ from the evidences of amputation offered up by all the other senses. The habitual corporeal schema struggles with its novel, altered form. The inner experience of the patient conflicts with what all others see from without. This body becomes a field of spatial, temporal, functional, and intersubjective ruptures that lead inevitably to its thematization.

The body most comes into view at such times of disruption, presenting itself as a problem to be solved, whether on the plane of ordinary experience or philosophical reflection. This principle is etched on the Cartesian corpus—everywhere are disrupted bodies. For example, the *Meditations* commences with two more such bodies, that of the dreamer and that of the madman. In the former case, a problematic divergence exists between one's own corporeal states. Upon awakening one sees the illusory nature of all that was apprehended by the body asleep. One is led to reflect upon corporeality: "I am awake now and then I was dreaming." In the case of the madman it is an intersubjective rupture that brings the body to the fore. There is a divergence between what the sane person and the madman perceive, which calls into question the very conditions of perception. Descartes is thus led to reflect on the "violent vapors of black bile" coursing through the madman's cerebellum.¹⁷

Moreover, Descartes is struck by the ability of bodily disturbances not only to give rise to error but to cripple the very search for truth. As mentioned earlier, for Descartes the soul proceeds with intellectual thought entirely free from the body. Yet he cannot help but note the ability of body to hinder thought in situations of pain and fatigue¹⁸ or via "the bad disposition of the bodily organs."¹⁹ In such cases of dys-appearance, a corporeal presence thrusts itself undeniably into awareness. He concludes that the rational soul is simply unable to disassociate itself from "a brain which is too soft or damp, as in children, or otherwise ill tempered, as in those who are lethargic, apoplectic, or frenetic, or as in all of us when we are deeply asleep."²⁰ The soul can only detach itself from a certain sort of body, one calm, healthy, and awake.

This Cartesian epistemology might be termed a *motivated misreading*. That is, his conclusions are motivated by lived experience, albeit as misread into a reified ontology. The body draws his philosophical attention particularly at times of perceptual error, injury, madness, disease, fatigue, excessive passion, and pain. For it is at such times that the body opacifies, clearly exhibiting its role in experience. This skew of attention then encourages a dualist reading. For when dysfunctioning, the body seems most Other to the self, a force opposed to the understanding and

will. Moreover, this alien body surfaces as something negative and dis-valued. Onto-valuational dualism captures in a conceptual system what is first suggested by immediate experience.

Moreover, as discussed in chapter 3, it is these disruptive moments, not those times of unproblematic operation, that demand hermeneutic and practical strategies of repair. This further focuses attention on the dysfunctional. The delusions and limitations of the body must be isolated, studied, traced to their source, in order to facilitate practices of control. These failings thus become the center of discourse. Descartes thus gives disproportionate attention to diseased and deceptive bodies compared to his brief treatment of the positive.

This tendency toward a negative epistemics established by dys-appearance is reinforced by the complementary operation of bodily disappearance. While the body is highlighted in deceptive modes, it tends to be taken for granted at times of accurate perception. The revelatory power of the body rests precisely upon its self-effacement. Moreover, as has been discussed, this self-effacement is most marked in the case of abstract thought. Insofar as such thinking is regarded as the royal road to truth, this road seems to lead away from the body. When the body reclaims attention it is in the guise of an obstacle on the path: for example, the pain or fatigue that interferes with thought. Thus, for Descartes, as for Plato before him, a "disembodied" state is highly to be valued.

While experientially motivated, this interpretation remains a misreading. The body cannot be identified primarily with its episodes of dys-appearance and exiled from the domain of truth. 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. In fact, this general context is implicitly present within Descartes's examples, deconstructing his partialized epistemology from within. That is, each example of corporeal error is exposed precisely by the corrective action of the body. Descartes discovers his mistake regarding the shape of a tower only because his new, closer view reveals the truth. The error of the phantom limb patient, fooled by coenesthesias, is exposed by all the other senses combined. We know the falsity of the madman's perceptions by virtue of our own consensually-validated sight. It is when the truth of our surroundings floods in upon awakening that we realize the deceptive nature of our dreams. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

when an illusion dissipates, when an appearance suddenly breaks up, it is always for the profit of a new appearance which takes up again for its

own account the ontological function of the first. . . . The dis-illusion is the loss of one evidence only because it is the acquisition of *another evidence*.²¹

The experience of corporeal deception is possible only because the lived body, through its perceptual and symbolic powers, is an open horizon of further disclosure and truth. It is this wider context of embodiment as the place of knowledge that rests unacknowledged in the margins of the text.

This is no less true of the cultural context in which Descartes dwelled. One might refer, for example, to the Copernican rejection of Ptolemaic astronomy as inaugurating an episode of cultural dys-appearance. Attention came to be focused on the body-as-deceptive when it was realized that naive perception could so mislead. The sun does not go around the earth despite the testimony of our senses. Yet even here it is the embodied subject, not a purified mind, that corrects prior falsity. Admittedly, the fathers of modernity turned to mathematical science, not the senses, for truth. But as thinkers such as Husserl,²² Merleau-Ponty,²³ Kuhn,²⁴ and Heelan²⁵ have pointed out, science and mathematics have their own embodied roots in modes of measurement, perception, and instrumentation. Our body is not left behind in such "higher-level" pursuits. Rather its powers are extended and sublimated through the use of technologies, the rigor of experimental technique, and the restructuring of perception by novel paradigms.

Moral Error

My discussion of bodily error would be incomplete if confined to the epistemological realm. For Descartes is also concerned to account for and remedy *moral* error. As his moral psychology is far less developed than his epistemology and metaphysics I will give this topic briefer treatment. However, it opens a door to a theme of great import: the moral condemnation of the body. In the Western tradition, particularly as shaped by Platonism and Christianity, there has been an abiding distrust of bodily passions and desires. Here too, I will suggest, the phenomenon of dys-appearance plays its formative role.

It is in *The Passions of the Soul* that Descartes systematically addresses the place of the body vis-à-vis the good life. For a "passion" of the soul, in Descartes's primary usage, is a feeling or emotion principally caused, maintained, and fortified by the body.²⁶ Descartes's moral characterization of the passions closely parallels his epistemology of the senses. Just as sense perceptions yield a certain pragmatic truth concerning what is beneficial to us as embodied beings, so do the passions:

their natural use is to incite the soul to consent and contribute to the actions which may serve to maintain the body, or to render it in some manner more perfect.²⁷

However, as with the senses, this natural utility comes hand in hand with a tendency to deceive. First, there are many things hurtful to the body that cause no sadness or even produce joy, and conversely, many beneficial things that seem to us distasteful.²⁸ Thus, the passions may lead us to act against our better interests. Second, even if they are properly aligned, the passions still mislead via their power of exaggeration:

they almost always cause the good things, as well as the evil, to seem much greater and more important than they are; so that they incite us to seek after the one and flee from the others with more ardour and care than is desirable.²⁹

Finally, corporeal passions tend to involve fleeting pleasures and pains, not the more durable goods of the soul.³⁰ For all such reasons, the prism of body-based emotion distorts the true nature and import of objects in our life. The body leads us astray regarding how best to live, just as it does concerning scientific truth.

Thus, in the ethical no less than the epistemological sphere, Descartes searches for pragmatic strategies to overcome a problematic body. As he recognizes, one cannot simply will away a passion given its strong physical base.³¹ However, just as one can suspend judgment vis-à-vis the senses until proper understanding is reached, so action can be suspended in the face of strong emotion. He advises restraint until the initial passion has quieted,³² or we have carefully considered reasons that oppose our bias.³³ Eventually, through reflection on counterarguments and examples one can even change one's emotions themselves.³⁴ Through such mechanisms, "there is no soul so feeble that it cannot, if well directed, acquire an absolute power over its passions."³⁵

Descartes was not an antiemotionalist or as extreme as certain of his religious predecessors. He regards the passions as "all good in their nature," insofar as evil uses and excesses are avoided.³⁶ Many are pleasurable, can incite within us positive thoughts, and even act to fortify our virtues.³⁷ However, this proper utility is realized only under the direction and mastery of the soul. Reason must continually monitor the reactive tendencies to which the body is heir and counteract its deceptive pulls. Virtue thus involves "a firm and constant resolution to carry out whatever reason recommends without being diverted by passion or appetite."³⁸ The body is again entrapped primarily within a negative discourse.

DYS-APPEARANCE AND THE PASSIONS

To understand one experiential source for this moral distrust of body, I will briefly turn to the corporeal structure of emotion. I have previously discussed the notion of the *microchiasm* in relation to the brain; this organ constitutes an anatomical intertwining of surface and depth, sensorimotor and visceral characteristics, recapitulating the chiasmatic structure of the body at large. The same is true of the emotions on a functional level. On the one hand, they are an aspect of our ecstatic relatedness to world. We always experience our environment through a particular mood.³⁹ The world is perceived very differently depending on whether one is overjoyed or depressed. Moreover, emotion inaugurates our motor projects, propelling us toward desired goals.^{40*} This is reflected in the common etymological root shared by the words *motion* and *emotion*. Yet, while guiding our sensorimotor engagements, emotionality is also rooted in the visceral. Our passions often relate directly or indirectly to visceral needs for food, warmth, sexuality, rest, etc. Moreover, it is in the secretion of hormones, the realignment of visceral processes, that strong emotions find their register. For example, fear, like rage, relies on a glandular flood of adrenaline and the increased sympathetic tone of the autonomic nervous system, transforming patterns of blood flow, body temperature, cardiac and respiratory function. As Descartes notes, such physical changes predispose not only the body but the soul itself for flight.⁴¹ That is, our visceral states help shape our perceptions and desires.

As I earlier discussed, the visceral body always recedes to a certain degree from the personal will. The visceral exhibits an "I must" and "I cannot"; I am compelled by organic needs and functions in a manner over which I have no direct control. This is one source, though not the only one, of the passivity of soul captured in the term "passion." As Descartes recounts, once an emotion holds sway I cannot simply will it away. I cannot, for example, shut off an adrenaline-charged fear in the same way in which I can shut my eyes. Descartes thus counsels indirect strategies of delay, restraint, imagery, and self-persuasion. As discussed in chapter 2, the relations of personalized to visceral self are always characterized by such indirection.

Hence, our emotional life exhibits certain aspects of depth disappearance, that mode of absence characteristic of the visceral. In this case, depth disappearance is manifested specifically in the area of control; the emotions, at least for most of us, escape to a degree from our willful command. The same is true of passionate desires, such as those of a sex-

ual nature. Sexuality too is a microchiasm: while a mode of sensorimotor relation to the world, it exhibits a visceral autonomy. The arising of desire and its enactment in complex physiological changes including lubrication, erection, orgasm, and ejaculation, are never fully under the control of the egoic self. As Augustine laments of lust:

Sometimes the impulse is an unwanted intruder, sometimes it abandons the eager lover, and desire cools off in the body while it is at boiling heat in the mind.⁴²

This depth disappearance of emotions and desires can lead in turn to dys-appearance.^{43*} Somewhat involuntary in nature, our passions can surface as a disruptive force hindering our projects. Lust can overwhelm our intellectual commitments and moral scruples. We may be paralyzed by fear or consumed by an unwanted anger. Just as the body is remembered when pain or sickness interferes with our intentions, so too when powerful passions rebel. At such times the body dys-appears, surfacing as an alien or threatening thing. For Augustine, this rebelliousness represents a physical imprint of original sin; in punishment for Adam's disobedience to God, God implanted lust within us, rendering our flesh disobedient to our will.⁴⁴

It is not only the visceral dimension of passion but the complexity of human appetite in general that gives rise to dys-appearance. Cravings of one sort may battle with those that pull us in an opposite direction. Passions of the moment can conflict with long-term goods. As such, the desiring body can begin to crumble and self-diverge, as does the organic body in illness. We thematize the body at such problematic times in a way we need not do when we are unified.

Descartes's moral discourse no less than his epistemology is shaped by this attentional skew. While acknowledging the salutary nature of much of our passionate life, Descartes focuses upon ways of understanding and overcoming its moments of hindrance. It is these moments, not times when the body is tacit and ego-congruent, that demand attention, interpretation, and control. This is reflected in the very genesis of *The Passions of the Soul*; Descartes's text grew out of a correspondence with Elizabeth, who, driven by emotional distress and poor health, inquired as to how mastery of the passions could be achieved.⁴⁵

To clarify this phenomenological point, I will focus upon the example of fear. In preparing for a challenge, I may find myself overcome by this contrary emotion. Prior to its advent I have no need to thematize the body. Consideration of my obligations is undertaken in a calm and rational fashion. At such times no strong bodily agitations, no racing pulse, or

heaving heart forces the body before my view. Herein lies another phenomenological motivation, to be added to those in the previous chapter, for the Platonic-Cartesian sense of rationality as disembodied. In that relatively emotionless state considered most characteristic of "reason," the body experientially disappears.

Moreover, the body disappears insofar as it remains aligned with my egoic will. That is, before the onset of fear I am more or less able to take my body for granted. It is that from which I will actualize my goals without the need of explicit self-reflection or self-control. The virtuous, the compliant body calls for no particular attention.

This is no longer the case when fear erupts, throwing an obstacle in the path of my will. A physicality that moments before was invisible now asserts itself via sweating palms, a nervous twitch, a choking voice, an almost irresistible urge to run. Though it is congruent with my overall values and long-term interests to press on, my body, as it were, has another idea. It emerges as away, apart, from my desired state and from my experienced sense of self.

Such phenomena thus lend their support to onto-valuational dualism. That is, they can be schematized, as they are by Descartes, as a battle between the soul and the recalcitrant body. Descartes rejects the notion that the soul wars with itself, for it "has not in itself any diversity of parts."⁴⁶ Rather, it is "the body, to which alone we must attribute every thing which can be observed in us that is opposed to our reason." He pictures the pineal gland as the site of strife, "thrust to one side by the soul, and to the other by the animal spirits." An experiential sense of inner division is thus translated into metaphysical dualism.^{47*}

Death

In addition to its treatment within the contexts of epistemology and ethics, Descartes also addresses the body as the biological/existential scene of life. That is, the body constitutes the precondition of human vitality, the place of youth and aging, health and illness. Yet just as the body is associated with hindrance vis-à-vis knowledge and right action, so too within this vital realm. Largely taken for granted as the place of life, well-being, and growth, Descartes addresses the body as the scene of decay, disease, and most especially, death.

Indeed, I will suggest that the figure of the mortal body is not only a crucial motivator of Descartes's work but central to his methodology and metaphysics. Only with this recognition will the full significance of dys-appearance emerge.

Descartes's Motivation

I will begin by examining those considerations which, according to Descartes, impelled his far-reaching quest for knowledge. In Descartes's prefatory note to the *Meditations*, he presents this study as having two major goals. The first is to provide proof of God's existence, while the second involves introducing philosophical grounds for the belief "that the human soul does not perish with the body."⁴⁸ Descartes's famous proof of the distinctness of mind and body is meant to stand in service to the latter goal. As he wrote in the earlier *Discourse on Method*:

As a matter of fact, when one comes to know how greatly they differ, we understand much better the reasons which go to prove that our soul is in its nature entirely independent of body, and in consequence that it is not liable to die with it. And then, inasmuch as we observe no other causes capable of destroying it, we are naturally inclined to judge that it is immortal.⁴⁹

In a letter to Huygens, Descartes makes clear that this proof held a personal significance. While asserting the belief that souls outlast their bodies and pass on to a "sweeter and more tranquil life," he confesses that theological teachings alone fail to persuade. He, like most men, needs the testimony of natural reasons.⁵⁰

Thus, Descartes's metaphysical explorations are partially motivated by the existential threat posed by the perishable body. The *Meditations* is a text inaugurated not only by a confrontation with error but with death.⁵¹ Some have argued that Descartes's avowed interest in theological matters, such as the immortality of the soul, was but a smoke-screen designed to permit his scientific investigations to proceed unhampered by the Church. I am not in agreement with such a position. Biographical material, such as the above letter to Huygens, suggests the sincerity of his concerns. However, even if such a position were true it would not undermine the point at hand. For a preoccupation with the body as diseased and dying is central to Descartes's scientific projects as well.

Descartes concludes the *Discourse on Method* by laying out the program of his future work:

But I will just say that I have resolved not to employ the time which remains to me in life in any other matter than in endeavouring to acquire some knowledge of nature, which shall be of such a kind that it will enable us to arrive at rules for Medicine more assured than those which have as yet been attained.⁵²

Descartes argues that the preservation of health is in fact the governing aim of scientific investigation, because health is "the chief blessing and the foundation of all other blessings in this life."⁵³ While maintaining a rather low opinion of the medicine of his day, he is sanguine about the results a true science could yield. We could be freed from "an infinitude of maladies" and possibly of the "infirmities of age" through the proper knowledge of causes and treatments.⁵⁴ Though at various points in his career, Descartes concedes that he was far from bringing such ends to fruition,⁵⁵ he never abandoned his therapeutic goal. Some ten years after the writing of the *Discourse* he reasserts that "the preservation of health has always been the principal end of my studies."⁵⁶ It is with reference to this project that he begins the *Description of the Human Body*, on which he was at work shortly before his death.⁵⁷

Once again, biographical material bears testimony to the personal nature of Descartes's concern. A sickly youth, condemned by doctors to die young,⁵⁸ Descartes sought in later life to postpone death beyond what was considered humanly possible. In 1637 he writes to Huygens:

The fact that my hair is turning gray warns me that I should spend all my time trying to set back the process. That is what I am working on now, and I hope my efforts will succeed even though I lack sufficient experimentation.⁵⁹

In later letters he expresses hopes of living to more than a hundred years through maintaining proper habits, taking great pains to protect his health, and utilizing his medical knowledge.⁶⁰ Ultimately, all such efforts did not prevent a fatal encounter with pneumonia. This was even something of a joke at the time; a Belgian newspaper reported, "In Sweden a fool has just died who used to say that he could live as long as he wanted."⁶¹ If his medical studies were of little avail in postponing death, his metaphysics may at least have provided the assurance that he sought. Clerselier recounts how, two days before he died, wracked with fever and convinced the end was near, Descartes spoke thusly: "My soul, you have been a captive for a long time; now the hour has come when you must leave your prison, this body; you must bear this separation with joy and courage."⁶²

Thus it is possible to discover a hidden unity of motivation between Descartes's metaphysical and scientific investigations: that is, the threat posed by sickness and death. The dualism of the *Meditations* provides Descartes with a two-sided response. In proving that the body is a mechanical, mathematical entity, free of all soul attributes, he lays the groundwork for a modern scientific medicine. In this way he hopes to discover ways to indefinitely prolong embodied life. But such a life can-

not go on forever. Hence, the necessity of proving the immaterial nature of the rational soul, and thereby its immortality. Body and soul, science and theology: Descartes's schema serves to combat death on all fronts.

Mortality and Dys-appearance

In this way, dys-appearance again plays a role in provoking Cartesian discourse. As the place of health and life, embodiment can be forgotten. Viscerality sustains us according to the tacit "it can," while the sensorimotor self is directed ecstatically toward its world of involvements. The body-as-living generally functions as the horizon within which everything else is disclosed, not as an object of scrutiny. Yet when illness or mortality loom before us, this body is brought into sharp relief. As discussed in chapter 3, one is seized in an immediate way by physical pain and dysfunction. Moreover, the body can dys-appear not only as the scene of actual but potential disruption. Descartes's grey hairs, foretelling his mortality, are enough to stimulate redoubled investigations. Though none of us has ever experienced our death, it ever seeds our body, waiting to blossom. It is foretold from within by episodes of pain, injury, and illness, by the body's gradual changes and loss of function with age. And in death lies the ultimate mode of dys-appearance. The body in its aspect as that-which-must-die can constitute a threat to all of one's goals. It can sever or transform all relations, bring all projects to a halt, threaten one's very existence as an "I." This body thus emerges as an ego-alien force that demands thematization. That is not to say that one cannot come to terms with death or even affirm it. Yet this is always the result of an interpretive process and often a profound existential struggle. The body-as-mortal poses a core problematic that cries out for hermeneutic and pragmatic therapies.

Descartes's scientific and metaphysical work is just such a therapy. He seeks a way to overcome bodily illness and aging and to prove that death cannot capture the soul. Just as he sought a treatment for the deceptiveness of the senses and the passions, so for the body's fragility. In all three cases, the human intellect not only discovers the solution but finds that it itself, *is* the solution. It is intellectual reason that overcomes sense deception and masters the pull of the passions. Similarly, it is reason that forms the core of the soul destined to outlive the perishable body. Descartes here valorizes reason in a metaphysical-theological mode, hearkening back to the Platonic tradition. Yet Descartes also inaugurates a modern age where reason is valorized in a scientific, technological form. It becomes the instrument for conquering nature, expunging disease, vastly increasing the human lifespan. This mode of transcendence employs moves that draw upon but also transform earlier

discursive strategies. In order to explore this point I will turn my attention from Descartes's motivation to his scientific methodology and correlative metaphysics. Here too can be found the hidden operation of disease, death, and dys-appearance.

Descartes's Method and Metaphysics

In the *Meditations* Descartes supports his theory of pineal gland mind-body interactionism via evidence provided by phantom limb amputees, dropsy victims, the cerebrally disordered, sufferers of sensory loss and referred pain.⁶³ This illustrates what I would term the *analytic* role of dys-appearance. The tacit synergy of the bodily field conceals the operation of individual parts and organs. Yet this synergy is what injury and disease disrupt, performing a natural analytic function. The dysfunctioning body first stands out as separate from its world; similarly, discrete mechanisms stand out from the body gestalt by virtue of their particular dysfunctions. Hence, the modern scientist still studies normal physiology through experimental lesions, the information provided by disease states, and the disruptions created by artificial laboratory conditions. The normal is understood via the pathological, for therein the body is made to dys-appear.^{64*}

For Descartes, clues gathered from the body discomforted and diseased were assimilated to a general knowledge structure resting upon the body as dead. At certain periods, Descartes had a habit of almost daily visits to butcher shops, engaging in a careful examination and dissection of animal organs.⁶⁵ Such work continued for at least eleven years, informing the large section of Descartes's corpus involved with medical physiology: *The Treatise of Man, Description of the Human Body, The Passions of the Soul, Dioptrics*, as well as a significant section of the *Discourse on Method*.

One's methodology of investigation is inevitably intertwined with one's model of the real; a certain manner of questioning the world supports and solidifies a particular worldview, just as a worldview suggests the research strategies to be employed. Hence, Descartes's extensive utilization of dissection implies a central role for death in his metaphysics of embodiment.

The antecedent for this is already to be found in historical associations of the living body with death. Plato refers to the Orphic equation of *soma* and *sema*—the body thought of as a tomb for the soul.⁶⁶ For Augustine, as for many other medieval thinkers, the body, when taken strictly by itself, is understood as something devoid of animation, psychological predicates, or feeling.⁶⁷ Only soul provides the infusion of life; the body alone is something like a corpse.

On the surface, Descartes seems to make a radical break with this tradition. Reconceiving the soul as intellectual mind, he explicitly disassociates it from the animal or vegetative life-soul of the ancients.⁶⁸ He regards the body's own mechanical processes as the cause of physiological vitality. As Descartes writes to Henry More, "I do not deny life to animals, since I regard it as consisting simply in the heat of the heart."⁶⁹ Nor is the cessation of life caused by the departure of soul:

death never comes to pass by reason of the soul, but only because some one of the principal parts of the body decays: and we may judge that the body of a living man differs from that of a dead man just as does a watch or other automaton (i.e. a machine that moves of itself), when it is wound up and contains in itself the corporeal principle of those movements for which it is designed along with all that is requisite for its action, from the same watch or other machine when it is broken and when the principle of its movement ceases to act.⁷⁰

Descartes thus defies custom by locating the principle of life directly in the body, not the soul. Yet, what appears a reversal of tradition is in fact but a transmutation. For this concession of life to the body is only made possible by a deeper concession to death. As the above quote indicates, the body's so-called life is modeled according to the workings of an inanimate machine. The body can constitute the place of life only because life itself has been fundamentally reconceived according to the lifeless. As Descartes concludes the *Treatise of Man*, "the fire which burns continually in its heart . . . is of no other nature than all those fires that occur in inanimate bodies."⁷¹ Without the soul's presence, the body would remain an operative machine, but one devoid of any truly experiential life. Dissection of the corpse can provide a method of studying the live body only because the latter is itself a sort of animated corpse.^{72*}

Moreover, this image of embodiment closely relates to Descartes's overarching ontology of the physical world. As Carolyn Merchant discusses, mechanism effects something like "the death of nature."⁷³ The Aristotelian ascription of telos to the natural world and the neo-Platonic attribution of occult sympathies and antipathies are equally expunged by the Cartesian worldview. No longer is nature conceived of as fundamentally subjective and alive. It is simply *res extensa*, a plenum of passive matter moved by the operation of mechanical forces. The human soul is a small corner of experience dwelling within this vast inanimate universe. The modeling of the human body on the corpse is part and parcel of this larger shift to the primacy of the lifeless within modern cosmology.

Hans Jonas has argued an important and intriguing thesis: that the corpse actually played a central role in inaugurating mechanism's ontology of death. For animism dominated earlier conceptions of nature; life abounds in our immediate province with plants, animals, earth, wind, and water all in motion and seemingly saturated with psyche. Only the phenomenon of death poses an ongoing challenge to this ontology of life.

The "unto dust shalt thou return" which every corpse calls out to the living, the finality of the state which its decay opposes to the transience of life, must have first and ever again forced "matter" as bare and lifeless into the reluctant human view, and it never ceased to renew the challenge which panvitalist creed, in the funeral cult, could appease but not silence. Whether and when this contradiction came to a crisis depended on historical circumstances with which the "death" motif had to ally itself so that at some time it could overwhelm the "life motif." But when this happened, the naive monism broke up into a dualism, with whose growth the traits of the bewildering sight from which it had started—the sight of the corpse—could progressively spread over the face of the physical All. Death in fact conquered external reality.⁷⁴

In my terms, the body-in-death dys-appears as something alien. The corpse is no longer the instrument of subjectivity but lies inert, recalcitrant, the very model of passivity and opposition. It becomes emblematic of a different order of being. To understand the experiences that help give rise to Cartesian dualism, it is thus necessary to turn to a phenomenology of the corpse.

The Corpse

As previously mentioned, my own corpse is experienced in an anticipatory fashion, residing implicitly within my living body. Exhaustion reminds me of the sheer weight of my limbs; an X ray reveals my skeleton to vision; accidents remind me of my exquisite vulnerability; in aging, I perceive the loss of faculties and skills. These reminders of death constitute a force of dys-appearance, recalling me to my embodied state. The corpse is always approaching from within.

However, it is also that which never arrives. Where I am as a living, experiencing body, the corpse is not, and vice versa. Though I can imagine what I will look like in my coffin, this is not a sight I can see with my eyes. As such, the body-as-dead partakes of certain aspects of depth disappearance; that is, it necessarily withdraws from the egoic self. Specifically, the corpse exhibits a temporal mode of depth disappearance, as do the sleeping and prenatal body previously discussed. The association of death with sleep found in the art and mythology of many cultures expresses this

phenomenological commonality; both bodies withdraw from sensorimotor engagement with the world. And just as the embryonic body always precedes the advent of one's vision, so the corpse always follows its departure. The corpse is the temporal mode of depth disappearance belonging to the future, a constantly approaching future that yet ever recedes, a necessary terminus at which the "I" cannot arrive.

Thus Socrates, when asked by Crito how he wishes to be buried, laughs at this paradoxical question.

He thinks that I am the one whom he will see presently lying dead, and he asks how he is to bury me! . . . you must assure him that when I am dead I shall not stay, but depart and be gone. That will help Crito to bear it more easily, and keep him from being distressed on my account when he sees my body being burned or buried, as if something dreadful were happening to me, or from saying at the funeral that it is Socrates whom he is laying out or carrying to the grave or burying.⁷⁵

When the corpse is there, Socrates is not. A meditation on this corpse approaching from within inaugurates and orients the *Phaedo*.

Yet this is not the primary figure of the corpse operative in Cartesian method. For Descartes it is the corpse as object of dissection that provides the key to scientific knowledge. That is, while Socrates refers to his *own* corpse in the anticipatory mode, Descartes dwells upon the actualized corpse of the *Other*.

In this shift of perspective is found a clue to the modernist transmutation Descartes effects. The body has often been associated with disease, decay, and death from ancient to contemporary times. Yet for the Greeks and medievals this was a concern articulated primarily from the first-person perspective. There was an existential preoccupation with one's own finitude as mortal being. It is the death of the subject that was of concern. As has been discussed, this personal preoccupation with mortality is a motivating factor in Descartes's work. Yet his strategy for overcoming this first-person threat is precisely to capture the body fully in the third person. It is the body of the Other that Descartes anatomizes, his own body then reconstructed on such a model. As he writes in the *Meditations*:

In the first place, then, I considered myself as having a face, hands, arms, and all that system of members composed of bones and flesh *as seen in a corpse* which I designated by the name of body.⁷⁶

The corpse from the third-person point of view is the phenomenological opposite of that as viewed from the first person. Whereas my corpse is wrapped in an ineluctable absence, a withdrawal from self-

experience, the corpse of the Other thrusts itself into my view. There is a dys-appearance that renders all perspicuous. The Other's viscera, hidden within bodily depths during life, can now be opened up and explored. Depth disappearance is all but eradicated. So too is surface disappearance overcome. That is, ordinarily I do not thematize the Other's body *per se*; we exist in a cosubjectivity, directed outward to a common world. But death is precisely what severs (or renders problematic) this cosubjectivity, inaugurating the objectified relation. Whereas yesterday I cavorted with a living person, today I confront the physicality of the corpse. It lies there, strangely unmoving, unseeing flesh, no longer a play of absence and reference. Body *qua* body now emerges, freezing my gaze within its boundaries as the lived body never could.^{77*}

This figure of the third-person corpse has profoundly influenced the modern understanding of the body, coexisting uneasily with and in certain cases supplanting other ways of approaching embodiment. I will briefly illustrate this point in relation to modern medicine.

THE CORPSE AND MODERN MEDICINE

Descartes's reliance upon dissection exemplifies the epistemological power of dys-appearance. We can inspect a dead body in a way we cannot the living. Modern medicine, profoundly Cartesian in spirit, has continued to use the corpse as a methodological tool and a regulative ideal. Medical education begins with the cadaver, just as the clinical case ends with the pathoanatomical dissection. Death unveils the truths of the inner body and its diseases. As Foucault⁷⁸ and Engelhardt⁷⁹ describe, this visceral revelation has served to reorganize medical understanding as a whole. That is, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, classifications of disease shifted from a basis in the experienced symptoms of the patient to a system of definition according to the organic lesions found at death. Pathoanatomical findings were progressively regarded as more foundational and real than "epiphenomenal" symptoms. The growth of medical technology, another defining feature of modern medicine, was stimulated by this conceptual shift. Reiser recounts how doctors sought a variety of instruments that would allow direct perception of the living viscera just as dissection exposed them in the corpse. A nineteenth-century physician thus extols the merits of the stethoscope: "We anatomize by auscultation (if I may say so), while the patient is yet alive."⁸⁰

Along with this overcoming of depth disappearance, an eradication of surface disappearance is constitutive of the modern medico-scientific ideal. While the body remains a living *ecstasis* it is never fully caught in

the web of causal explanation. I may attempt to understand the movements of another by tracking internal chains of physiological events. Yet the lived body is that which always projects beyond such a perspective. Its movements are responses to a perceived world and a desired future, born of meaning, not just mechanical impingements. This bodily *ecstasis* constitutes an absence that undermines attempts to analyze the body and to predict and control its responses. Only the corpse seems to render such a project triumphant. The dead body is at last self-contained. It is a sheerly material and predictable thing.

Truth, understood in Heideggerian terms, is a process of simultaneous revealing-concealing. Aspects of world are disclosed only by virtue of obscuring others. While the epistemic revelation inherent in the dys-appearing corpse has subserved the powerful accomplishments of medical science, it has also brought about a kind of concealment. Key distortions are inevitably introduced when the dead body is taken as model for the living. This, I will now suggest, is one source of the reductionist and objectivist tendencies of modern Cartesian medicine.

As noted above, the lived body operates according to *gestalt* relations, each organ cooperating with one another, the senses synesthetically intertwining, movement permeating perception. Yet a reductionist rather than syncretic model of the body will be encouraged when the corpse becomes paradigmatic. For in death all the linkages of the lived body are disrupted. The body dissolves from an operational whole into discrete organs and tissues, which can be studied in isolation. This then fosters an atomistic concept of disease and therapeutic response. Such can be seen, for example, in the trend toward medical specialization, with a different practitioner for each individual organ.

Moreover, notions of embodiment based upon the corpse can lead to an objectivist, depersonalized medicine. The physician need not attend to the patient's intentionality when he or she is conceived of as physiological machine. As Merchant speaks of the "death of nature," here one might speak of the "death of the patient." Diagnosis and treatment seek to address the observed lesion, the quantified measurement, more than a person living in pain. The patient's own experience and subjective voice become inessential to the medical encounter. The experience many patients have of being ignored as a person, treated like a "thing," is not then just a matter of isolated insensitivity. It is symptomatic of a metaphysical position that has oriented modern medicine from the start. Just as medicine is beginning to acknowledge deficiencies in its atomistic understanding of illness and treatment, so too in its silencing of the patient's voice. When the patient is not treated as a living, desiring, suffering being, compliance is reduced, evidence is overlooked,

inappropriate treatments are prescribed, genuine healing gives way to "fixing the machine."⁸¹

This presence of the corpse at the heart of Western medicine exposes the paradox in Descartes's strategy. For Descartes, death becomes the very tool that safeguards life, the means whereby disease is comprehended and mastered. The terror of the body inaugurated by the approach of first-person death is countered by the figure of the third-person corpse. For this body yields up all its secrets to the scientist/physician. Moreover, the shift from the first- to the third-person perspective makes death a less threatening thing. Bodily death becomes not my death exactly, but modeled first and foremost on that of the Other.⁸² The true self cannot be threatened by the demise of that which from the start was mere mechanism. The dangerous body has been desubjectified, devitalized, demystified, by Cartesian science. The corporeal threat is, as far as possible, subdued.