

HPPH7011 Mind and Body: Descartes and Wittgenstein

Assignment 1

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Question 3: Evaluate the suggestion that ‘antipathy to the body’ has played a decisive role in generating distorted pictures of the person.

Introduction

Although *homo sapiens* has existed for approximately 200,000 years, ‘the human body has had a more or less constant natural, anatomical construction’ throughout this time (Garrison, 2010, p. 1). Critically, although previous limitations in technology and science have hindered much of our understanding about our ourselves, there has been an ongoing philosophical meditation about the body, and what relation, if any, it has to the person (Smith & Jones, 1997). As we shall come to see, this meditation has at times shifted, often influenced by our material (mis)understanding, and ability to mitigate the negative aspects of flesh and environment, or not, as the case has often been. Helping us understand more about this issue, I will ‘*evaluate the suggestion that ‘antipathy to the body’ has played a decisive role in generating distorted pictures of the person.*’ In so doing, this essay will wrestle with the notion that we are never free from our material experiences, nor our inclination to embrace our philosophical proclivities, which can easily be at odds with each other, and skew how we view ourselves, the universe, and what constitutes knowledge (Cheney & Seyfarth, 2008).

Trying to briefly understand the person, there are three main contested philosophical perspectives, which have been debated over the past few thousand years, including, the person as: (1) a soul/mind inhabiting a material body, (2) a material body, or (3) a human being (Cockburn, 2001). As we might imagine, these three positions are hardly metaphysical mirrors of each other, with each view leaving the individual subject to the impact of different oscillating social, religious, and cultural forces. Importantly, philosophical ruminations rarely exist in a socio-cultural vacuum, as they can be shaped by our nature of being and environment, with such factors potentially guiding how we approach ourselves (Hallowell, 1960). Critically, I am not suggesting that philosophy as an endeavour is forever tainted in this regard, but rather that we should be mindful of these elements, as how much our philosophising is influenced, remains debatable.

Overviewing the global tradition of knowledge, it seems fair to say that we have struggled with how to conceptualise the body in relation to the person (Porter, 2003). The rather obvious question is of course, why? While I might suggest that this is nothing more than the consequence of living in a dynamic universe, where death, disease, and decay pervade everyday life, and leave us grasping for philosophical ‘solutions’ to background the challenges of being, I believe that such thinking is, in part, myopic. If, for example, we undertake even a cursory reading of the philosophical, and indeed, other academic literatures, we quickly come to see that although degradation of the self can catalyse negative bodily views, that there are also deeper metaphysical issues at play, which must be drawn out (Thompson, 2010).

Not surprisingly, this essay does not intend to fully capture all historic debates about the body in relation to the person. Instead, I will only focus on the Western tradition of knowledge and will make no distinction over different types of bodies, i.e., sexed, gendered, and aged etc. Furthermore, when I refer to a person, I mean human. As an additional note, it must be said that reflecting on past theorising can be a fraught task, requiring not only historic sensitivity for why certain views arose, but making a commitment to examining philosophical statements in their own right (Bynum, 1995). In other words, accepting the view that all philosophical claims are embedded within specific cultures, times, and beliefs etc., but that, ultimately, the truth of the claim is what matters, at least if it is to have philosophical value (Kirk, 1983).

Drawing this introduction to a close, the next section starts to answer the question driving this essay and examines ‘what is the person?’ before considering how we can re-embrace our physical selves in ‘the challenge of rehabilitating the body’. Finally, this essay will be drawn to an end in the ‘discussion and conclusions’.

What is the person?

While we all experience mortal life through our bodies, it is clear that we have a complex relationship with our physicality. To help understand this issue, this section explores why this is the case, and how our experience of flesh continually skews our perception of what it is to be a person. Problematically, though, trying to make sense of this issue is no small task, as we have thousands of years’ worth of accounts, but with little of it systematised for how we have viewed the relationship between the body and person. This is not to suggest that scholars such as Porter (2003) have not attempted to tackle this burgeoning field, or even that they did not

bring great insights, but rather that there are still large gaps in our understanding. Fundamentally, the problem with looking at the ancient world is that the earliest recordings were often proto-historic, meaning that accounts of the body were usually derived through sensory information mixed with imagination, which certainly fails the objective test of what we consider history today (Bauer, 2004). Having said this, these limited accounts paint an intriguing view of the person, often with varying degrees of consciousness, and frequently subjected to the whims of supernatural actors (Herodotos, 2008; Homer, 2003). Critically, such beliefs have hardly evaporated today, and are still prevalent amongst large swathes of the global population, who typically struggle with the notion of a person being separate from the influence of otherworldly forces (Evans-Pritchard, 2002). It is of course possible, and indeed likely, that a limited understanding of the natural world predisposes individuals to pre-theorised concepts of the person, and beliefs that we are subject to the control of a supernatural other (Wilson, 1969). When we consider that much of the world still sits outside of secular-materialist knowledge, this might go some way to explaining why the body is often rejected as the person as we will come to see (Pew, 2015, 2019).

Turning our attention more towards dualistic notions of the person, which still holds much sway in many cultures, the body can be taken as a vehicle for the soul/mind, akin to ‘the myth of Phaedrus, in which the souls of...humans are compared to charioteers riding in chariots’ (Finamore, 1985, p. 2). Unfortunately, this ontological perspective has historically denigrated the body, typically juxtaposing a ‘good’ mind/soul being trapped in ‘bad’ flesh. This is highlighted by Porphyry (2010, p. 3) who argued: ‘Plotinus the philosopher of our times, seemed ashamed of being in the body’, and as such, viewed his physicality as a corrupting force on his better natured soul. Digging deeper into Porphyry’s (1987, p. 24) comments we come to a clearer understanding of what the person is within dualism:

‘...I am in reality not this person who can be touched or perceived by any of the senses, but that which is furthest removed from the body, the colourless and formless essence which can by no means be touched by hands, but is grasped by the mind alone’.

For the dualist, and in this case the Neoplatonist, the person is immaterial and is simply waiting to transcend mortal life to achieve freedom. Giving more detail of these aspects, Plato (2009, p. 81) said:

‘The soul is most like the divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always the same as itself, whereas the body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, soluble and never consistently the same.’

It is of course very tempting to consider ourselves in this way, as it allows us to claim a quasi-perfect sense of self, tainted only by our bodies, and just as importantly, leaving us with the potential for life after our bodies die (Smith & Jones, 1997). But, if we consider flesh as a corrupting and imprisoning force, we might reflect on whether annihilating the body is a reasonable solution to our ‘suffering’ on Earth? (Diogenes, 2012). In other words, is murder or suicide a form of liberation? Not surprisingly, this extreme form of dualist bodily rejection has been condemned socially, legally, and within a myriad of religions for thousands of years (Alexander, 2020a, 2020b; Durkheim, 2002).

Bearing in mind the long relationship the West has had with Christianity, even if just culturally (Moffat & Yoo, 2019), we cannot easily disregard the influence of this religion on how the person has been viewed philosophically. It might be argued however, that it depends on what type of Christianity we mean, as those drawing on the Old Testament seem more likely to take a neutral stance to flesh and physicality, whereas those embracing the New Testament and deeper aspects of ancient Greek philosophy have been keener to take a negative view of the body as a corrupting influence on the mind/soul (Bauer, 1957; Nwanguma, 2020). The low regard within Christianity for the body is captured by the comments of St. Augustine (2003, p. 423), who said:

‘When we shall have reached that peace, this mortal life shall give place to one that is eternal, and our body shall be no more this animal body which by its corruption weighs down the soul, but a spiritual body feeling no want, and in all its members subjected to the will.’

Broadly speaking, the influence of Christianity has long influenced our philosophical understanding of the body and person, and due to conflicts within Scripture, left many struggling to understand whether the real person is material, immaterial, or hylomorphic (Lincoln, 2013). Troublingly, such religious views have often created a cultural undercurrent that the body is a source of sin, continually threatening to degrade the mind/soul (Porter, 2003).

It is of course worth considering whether the problem is not so much the body, but rather the material in general that is the source of corruption. While there is no simple answer to this question, this notion has been popular within a myriad of dualistic systems, which either claim that matter is evil, or argue that its lack of spatiotemporal stability within a cosmic timescale epistemologically distorts our ability to know ourselves and the world around us (O'Meara, 1993). Problematically, this view has greatly hindered our understanding of the material universe, and suggests that we should reject sensory experiences, and focus instead on the mind and/or soul's ability to generate intelligible knowledge (Armstrong, 1967). We thus come to see the material body and universe being positioned below the divine nature of the intelligible (Porphyry, 1989). For those taking this approach, there is certainly an element of the Manichean, and the desire to split reality into a binary of good and evil (Augustine, 2003).

While many of the discussions about the body have been in relation to the soul, Descartes' (2008) radical form of dualism, triggered the 'death of the soul', at least in a philosophical and increasingly scientific sense (Porter, 2003, p. 3). By Descartes turning to the mind, philosophers, and indeed many other scholars, were invited to explore the person through the lens of mind. Curiously, even though the body was again backgrounded through this dualist system, the immaterial mind usurped the immaterial soul as the true person (Skirry, 2019). Critically though, Cartesian dualism rapidly facilitated an ongoing exploration of 'who am I?' which continues today, albeit, often with less consideration of God than Descartes afforded. Discussing this, Porter (2003, p. 7) said:

'Cartesian dualism claimed that reason reveals that man is perfectly unique beneath the heavens: he alone, under God, has a conscious mind (*res cogitans*), he alone can *know himself* and so understand the meaning of things'.

Although scientific endeavours continually challenge Cartesian beliefs in an immaterial self, and as an evolutionary distinct part of the natural world, the body is still investigated as a 'machine', and the notion of the mind as the person still resonates. Within itself, these latter aspects are proving difficult to eradicate from our cultures, and still enmesh scholarly thinking within disciplines such as psychology. Unsurprisingly, this has had a profound impact on how we behave towards non-human animal bodies, and just as importantly, has maintained a common religious belief that we will continue to exist after our physical body dies.

The challenge of rehabilitating the body

Having overviewed various forms of antipathy towards the body, I will now examine, what, if anything, might be done to rectify this skewed perception. In so doing, consideration will be made not only of some of the key challenges and potential benefits from re-embracing our physicality, but also issues of the mind itself. Critically, rehabilitation is taken to mean the rejection of dualism, and a hylomorphic recontextualisation of mind and body, as Thompson (2010, p. ix) argued: ‘Where there is life there is mind and mind in its most articulated forms belongs to life’. Importantly, this is not mind in an immaterial, spiritual, or metaphoric sense but rather mind generated through physical interactions with our environment, in line with our scientific understanding of what is possible within the material universe, and therefore, the body. However, were it not the case that the term mind is so entrenched within popular culture, it might be preferable to dispense with the linguistic notion of mind altogether, and instead, focus on terminology such as cognitive processes and function. Beyond the semantics of mind, which are of course important, the benefit of considering the mind as sensorimotor cognition, is the ability to sidestep several troublesome questions, including:

‘What precisely is meant by talk of a ‘non-bodily component’? Where are such things to be found? What are they made of? How are they supposed to interact with our bodies? Are we unique among the animals for having them? When and how did they emerge onto the evolutionary scene?’ (Smith and Jones, 1997, p. 16).

Importantly, though, this more Aristotelian stance does not remove all metaphysical problems, as instead, we are left exploring biologically based cognition, and addressing how unique humans are in their mental lives in relation to other species. Within itself, such questions are more amenable to investigation from the cognitive sciences, with a potential to elucidate secular-material structure and function (Thompson, 2010). More socially, and indeed morally, this may be a difficult path to traverse though, as our common ancestry, and similarity with other non-humans may challenge many of our preferred notions of ourselves, and undermine our supposed species supremacy (Darwin, 2011). Furthermore, the conclusions we draw from taking a cognitive approach to the embodied person might also undermine the ongoing popular belief that life continues after the death of our bodies (Pew, 2015, 2019).

Fundamentally, as humans, we have a curious, complex, and often poorly theorised relationship with our bodies. This issue is of course compounded by the physical difficulties of experiencing our bodies on a day-to-day level, as Leder (1990, p. 1) discussed:

‘Yes this bodily presence is of a highly paradoxical nature. While in one sense the body is the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives, it is also essentially characterised by absence.’

Reflecting on my own existence, it is worth saying that even though I have a body, or am my body, depending on how you view this matter, I am severely limited in how well I can understand my embodied self. In other words, I see through my eyes, rather than seeing my eyes, have no control of my genetic self, can rarely change my pharmacology, and am often left with large scale movements of my limbs and speech. In fact, in most of my daily activities, I rarely consider my body, as my wellbeing allows me to forget my body, whereas an emerging pathology quickly reminds me of my physicality. As a brief example, I recently awoke with severe pain, and although I am an anti-dualist, was keen to bracket my pain into something happening outside of the real me, ‘just in my body’. This, I suspect, might be one of the greatest challenges in rehabilitating the body, i.e., we are continually subjected to the trials and tribulations of life, and eventually die (Holmes, 2014). Against this backdrop, and irrespective of the truth of the matter, dualism continues to provide a means to view the body as something alien and damaging to our pain-free longevity. I might also suggest that for those enduring long-term suffering, that an immaterial self creates ongoing opportunities to imagine themselves beyond pain, uncontaminated by pathology.

Finally, it is possible that dualism, and antipathy towards the body are evolutionary traits, providing a simple folk philosophy for our species to cope with the tensions of being, albeit an arena of philosophy that has received much in-depth consideration (Zappala et al., 2022). If true, perhaps this issue can be resolved through our ongoing commitment to technoscientific innovation, by increasingly creating opportunities to live a ‘disembodied style of life’ through reducing the embodied burdens of daily living (Leder, 1990, p. 3). It is worth speculating that while advancements in science and medicine might reduce our distrust of our bodies, as we learn to mitigate pain, eradicate disease, and increase longevity, that we simply do not know how this ‘experiment’ will play out over the long run. For example, removing negative

experiences of the body might further dissolve our conscious awareness of it, perhaps driving us to consider that we are more our mind or soul.

Discussion and conclusions

Overviewing the past few thousand years of human existence, it is clear that there has been ongoing antipathy towards the body, which, as detailed in this essay, is hardly surprising when we consider that our bodies are continually exposed to the pathologies of life, and eventually must die. Irrespective of the increasing promises of science and medicine, these are, inescapable aspects of embodied living, at least at the present day. Within itself, our physicality has left us with ongoing tensions about our degradation and death, which might be evolutionary drivers to background the body through dualism, at least in a cultural sense (Cheney & Seyfarth, 2008). Of course, this is not to suggest that we are ‘trapped’ by our genes and lack the potential to elucidate a deeper metaphysical understanding of ourselves and the universe, but rather that being embodied influences how we meditate about reality (Evans-Pritchard, 2002). Problematically, this is far from an innocuous issue, as turning away from our bodies has created a myriad of issues, including hindering our scientific understanding of bodily structure and function, alongside slowing the rate of medical advancements and attempts to prolong life (Garrison, 2010). Furthermore, from a cultural perspective, many are still enmeshed within poorly theorised assumptions about the person, which frequently influence key social structures including how we legislate and practice medicine. A salient example of this being the current dualist misconception that it is possible to be ‘born in the wrong body’, resulting in medical transformations being used to reshape flesh to match the individual’s preferred notion of a mind/soul (Bettcher, 2014).

As we increasingly embrace scientific approaches to understanding our bodies, and just as importantly, the broader concept of the person, it is worth reflecting on the extent to which we can truly know ourselves via secular-materialism, and the degree to which we can mitigate our physical degradation. Trying to imagine a more advanced technoscientific future leads to an intriguing proposition, i.e., the possibility of living our everyday lives with little fear of sickness, ageing or death. Might, for example, such a future mitigate some of our antipathy towards the body? Particularly if we can better regulate our health and threat of demise? Critically though, while we have little understanding about the extent to which we can regulate and transform ourselves (Alberti, 2016), I am keen not to suggest that death and disease are the only factors driving negativity towards our bodies. For example, from a common global

perspective, scientific advancements in how we understand ourselves have done little to undermine the folk psychological and philosophical preference for dualism, and a belief that we really are something other than our bodies.

Finally, although it seems that we have a long way to go culturally with regards to developing a more integrated notion of the person in line with scientific advancements for the body, there are increasing opportunities to embed philosophical thinking within what we know about ourselves and the universe. As such, the challenge is how to integrate new scientific discoveries with the philosophical meditations from Plato, Porphyry, and Descartes etc., and clarify what is possible, and demonstrable. Although, perhaps obvious, a starting place may well be a better systematisation of the historic drivers for antipathy towards the body, and the potential to chronologically map different metaphysical perspectives with scientific understanding.

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