

7-31-2011

## Re-Humanizing Descartes

Alison Simmons  
*Harvard University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil\\_ex](http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex)

 Part of the [History of Philosophy Commons](#), [Metaphysics Commons](#), and the [Philosophy of Mind Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Simmons, Alison (2011) "Re-Humanizing Descartes," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 41 : No. 1 , Article 2.  
Available at: [http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil\\_ex/vol41/iss1/2](http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol41/iss1/2)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophic Exchange by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact [kmyers@brockport.edu](mailto:kmyers@brockport.edu).



The College at  
**BROCKPORT**  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



*Alison Simmons*

# Re-Humanizing Descartes

Alison Simmons

## I. Descartes' Troubles

Descartes has a bad reputation in the academy. Academics use the word “Cartesian” in much the way one uses the word “Jesuitical”: if an idea is described as “Cartesian” you can be pretty sure you don’t want to be associated with it. So what did Descartes say that is so objectionable? There are, I think, two Cartesian theses that are largely responsible for the bad reputation, one metaphysical and one epistemological. The metaphysical thesis is mind-body dualism, viz., the claim that mind and body are separate things that can exist apart from each other so that if the body dies the mind can go right on existing without it (perhaps rejoicing in its liberation), and if the mind were to retreat the body would continue to exist just as before. The suspect epistemological thesis is the thesis that the mind can and should seek knowledge that is Objective (capital “O”), adopting, as Thomas Nagel puts it, the “view from nowhere” or, as Bernard Williams puts it, the “absolute conception of reality.”<sup>1</sup> What’s so bad about dualism and the quest for Objectivity? In short: they are de-humanizing. For together the suspect theses suggest a goal of disembodied minds seeking to understand the world from no particular point of view. And that is nothing like our own human experience. We are not, we want to say, minds that wear our bodies like an uncomfortable pair of jeans; we are bodily through and through. Moreover, we can’t and shouldn’t try to attain a view of the world from nowhere; we are, after all, decidedly somewhere (namely, where our bodies are), and where we are matters to what we believe and do. *Cartesian* philosophy, it seems, is not a *human* philosophy.

My aim here is to re-humanize Descartes. I’m not going to deny that he was a dualist (he was). And I’m not going to claim that Descartes had no interest in Objectivity (he clearly did). But I am going to claim that this is only part of the Cartesian story. What’s more, it’s the part of the story without human beings, and so it should be no surprise that it’s de-humanizing. Until recently there has been relatively little attention paid to what Descartes actually says about human beings.<sup>2</sup> This oversight is understandable: Descartes himself puts off giving an account of human beings repeatedly in his works, and whenever he turns to the topic he struggles. Still, when we take a closer look at what Descartes does say, the theses of dualism and Objectivity are cast in a new light.

My aim is not simply to set the record straight and salvage Descartes’ reputation. I also want to make a methodological point. I just mentioned that Descartes repeatedly puts off the topic of the human being and that when turns to

it he struggles. Here is what I have in mind. Descartes' early work, *L'Homme* (*The Treatise on Man*), introduces fictional creatures that are meant to illuminate the nature of real human beings. It opens as follows: "These men will be composed, as we are, of a soul and a body. First I must describe the body on its own; then the soul, again on its own; and finally I must show how these two natures would have to be joined and united in order to constitute men who resemble us" (AT XI 119-120, CSM I 99).<sup>3</sup> The work breaks off (either because lost or never finished) before any treatment of the mind on its own or its relation to body in the human being. The *Meditations on First Philosophy* doesn't get to the nature of human beings until half way through Meditation 6, and his treatment there is as brief as it is puzzling. In the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes throws up his hands at giving a full account of human beings, writing:

I would not add anything further to this fourth part of the *Principles of Philosophy* if, as I originally planned, I was going on to write two further parts—a fifth part on living things, i.e., animals and plants, and a sixth part on man. But I am not yet completely clear about all the matters which I would like to deal with there, and I do not know whether I shall ever have enough free time to complete these sections. So, to avoid delaying the publication of the first four parts any longer... I shall here add a few observations concerning the objects of the senses. (AT VIII-A 315, CSM I, 279)

Descartes somehow gets pushed up against the wall when it comes to giving an account of human beings. But (and here's the methodological point) it's often precisely when a philosopher is pressed against the wall that he does some of his most interesting and creative work. I think that's true of Descartes on the human being. I am therefore going to jump right into the mess, and ask how Descartes' reflections on human beings (messy as they may be) might change the way we think about his more familiar commitments to dualism and the quest for Objectivity.

## II. Metaphysics of the Cartesian Human Being

Let's start with dualism. As a substance dualist, Descartes is committed to there being what he calls a "real distinction" between mind and body, such that each can exist as a substance (or thing) in its own right apart from the other. Given dualism, it's easy to suppose that a human being, a creature with both mind and body, must simply be some sort of aggregate of the two. Specialists and non-specialists alike have had something to say about this portrait of the human being. Jonathan Bennett, a specialist, described the Cartesian human being for the readers of this journal as follows:

Descartes bequeathed to his successors what he and they thought to be a sharp, deep split between the mental and the material. He thought it was a split between things, with every thing belonging to one of the two kinds and no thing belonging to both. According to him, a human being is a pair, a duo, a mind and a body; or, more strictly, a human being is a mind that is tightly related to an animal body. The exact nature of that relation was one of the problems that Descartes never solved to his own satisfaction, let alone to anyone else's.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, however, the Cartesian human being is *not* a mere aggregate of mind and body forced to interact with each other like unfriendly roommates: it is not a pair (like a pair of socks) or a duo (like Sonny and Cher, or salt and pepper). A Cartesian human being is no more an aggregate of mind and body than a cake is an aggregate of flour, butter, sugar and eggs. Descartes insists that the human being is a *union* of mind and body in which mind and body are so *intermingled* that they form a *single* thing (AT VII 81, CSM II 56). You cannot generate a human being by taking one part mind and one part body and shaking them together a bit. Some metaphysical chemistry has to occur to get a human being, just as some physical chemistry has to occur to get a cake. Now I'm not going to pretend that Descartes' notion of a mind-body union is problem-free. It is full of problems, and I will gesture to them in what follows. What interests me is that Descartes felt the need to say that a human being is more than a mere aggregate of mind and a body, especially when he knew very well that this claim was going to be problematic for his metaphysics. Why take that troubling extra step?

It will help to look first at what an aggregate of mind and body would actually look like in the Cartesian context. The way to do that is to ask what a Cartesian mind is (on its own), and what a body is (on its own). Putting those together will give us the aggregate that I'm suggesting falls short of a human being.

What, then, is a Cartesian mind, considered on its own, divorced from the body? It is something like an angel: a pure intellect.<sup>5</sup> The mind on its own has no sensations, no passions: no itches, no tickles, no color experiences, no flavor sensations, no pain, no pleasure, no hunger, no thirst, no fear, no anger, no sadness, no love. This point is obscured by the tendency to treat *consciousness* as constitutive of the Cartesian mind. This all too frequent identification of mind with consciousness derives largely from the laundry list of things that Descartes includes among the mind's thoughts in the middle of Meditation 2 and again at the start of Meditation 3: "But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and senses" (AT VII 28, CSM II 28; see also AT VII 34, CSM II 24). What do all these things have in common? Consciousness is an obvious answer. So, the reasoning goes, the Cartesian mind must be at bottom a conscious

thing, where consciousness covers everything from pure intellection to pain sensations.<sup>6</sup> Earlier in Meditation 2, however, when Descartes first asks what his mind is, he describes it more narrowly: “a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason” (AT VII 27, CSM II 18). Interestingly, in the laundry list of thoughts that follow a few paragraphs later, imagining and sensing get tacked onto the more properly intellectual thoughts by a curiously hesitant “and also...” (*quoque*). A similar thing happens in Meditation 6. As Marleen Rozemond has argued, when Descartes argues for mind-body dualism in Meditation 6, the argument turns on the narrower conception of mind as pure intellect and it is only after the argument for dualism is concluded that Descartes turns to consider imagination and the senses, writing: “Besides this [i.e., besides intellect], I find in myself faculties for certain special modes of thinking, namely imagining and sensing” (AT VII 78, CSM II 54).<sup>7</sup> Imagining and sensing are included as last minute additions to the mind because they “include intellection in their essential definition” (AT VII 78, CSM II 54). The intellect is essential to something’s being a mind; imagining and sensing are optional. What is more, while intellection is included in the “essential definition” of imagining and sensing, it does not exhaust their nature. Indeed, imaging and sensing cannot be made sense of strictly in terms of mind. In the *Principles of Philosophy* Descartes tells us quite explicitly that sensations (and also passions) “must not be referred either to the mind alone or to the body alone... [but] arise...from the intimate union of our mind with the body” (AT VIII-A 23, CSM I 209). And again: “[sensations] do not come from [the mind] alone, and they cannot belong to it simply in virtue of its being a thinking thing; instead, they can belong to it only in virtue of its being joined to...the human body” (AT VIII-A 41, CSM I 224). He flat out tells Henry More: “the human mind separated from the body does not have sensations” (AT V 402, CSMK 380).<sup>8</sup> He says the same of the passions at *Passions of the Soul* II.137: they “belong to the soul only insofar as it is joined with the body” (AT XI 430, CSM I 376). The mind in and of itself has only purely intellectual thoughts. Now there are plenty of puzzles for the Descartes scholar to work out concerning the nature of the mind on its own, viz., the pure intellect: does it apprehend only universals or particulars too? Is its thought conceptual? Discursive? Tied up with language? The key for present purposes is that the mind on its own, as pure intellect, *does not have imagination, sensory experience or passions*, arguably among the most salient of human thoughts.

What about bodies? What are they like on their own, metaphysically divorced from mind? This side of the equation is a bit less contentious, since Descartes devotes the bulk of his work in physics (or natural philosophy) to describing mind-free bodies and their operations. Cartesian bodies are extended things, with parts of different sizes and shapes that move in various ways, and that impact each other in various ways. Consider *Principles* II.4: “the nature of matter or body considered in general consists...simply in its being something which is

extended in length, breath and depth” (AT VIII-A 42, CSM I 224). Here too there are plenty of puzzles to keep the Descartes scholar employed: How are bodies individuated? How many bodies are there in the Cartesian universe (one, infinitely many, something in between)? Is the force that moves bodies intrinsic or extrinsic to body? For present purposes what matters is that Cartesian bodies, considered independently of mind, are all and only extended things. They are, in short, machines (see *Principles* IV.188, AT VIII-A 315, CSM I 279).

If the world were populated by Cartesian minds and bodies, it would be populated by angels and machines. And if human beings were just aggregates or pairs or duos of mind and body, they would be angels in machines (just as Gilbert Ryle suspected<sup>9</sup>). De-humanizing indeed! But that is *exactly* what Descartes denies in Meditation 6 when he argues that the relationship between mind and body in the human being is not like the relationship between a pilot and his ship: “I am not merely present in my body as a pilot is present in a ship but...I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit [*unam quid*]” (AT VII 81, CSM II 56). What is Descartes’ argument for the claim that mind and body are more closely connected than a pilot and his ship? The fact that we experience sensations like hunger, thirst, or more generally pain and pleasure. These sensations, he insists, cannot be made sense of on the pilot-in-a-ship or, equivalently, the angel-in-a-machine model. Why not? Because sensations are not purely intellectual thoughts of the sort a pure intellect has. If we were angels in machines, pure intellects lodged in bodies, we would experience not sensations like hunger or thirst, but instead “an explicit understanding of the fact that the body needed food or drink” (AT VII 81, CSM II 56). We would have intellectual thoughts about the conditions of the machine we are inhabiting. But in fact we have no such thing. We have sensations of hunger and thirst. This, Descartes argues, implies a different (closer) relation between mind and body than mere inhabitation or aggregation. Descartes rehearses exactly the same argument in his correspondence with his wayward fan, Regius, who had been telling people that the human being is an *ens per accidens*, in effect a mere aggregate of mind and body or angel in a machine. Descartes corrects him as follows:

you should say that you believe that a human being is a true *ens per se*, and not an *ens per accidens*, and that the mind is united in a real and substantial manner to the body. You must say that they are united not by position or disposition, as you asserted in your last paper—for this too is open to objection and is in my opinion quite untrue—but by a true mode of union, as everyone agrees, though nobody explains what this amounts to, and so you need not do so either. You could do so, however, as I did in my *Metaphysics* [the *Meditations*], by saying that we perceive that sensations such as pain are not pure thoughts of a mind

distinct from a body, but confused perceptions of a mind really united to a body. For if an angel were in a human body, he would not have sensations as we do, but would simply perceive the motions which are caused by external objects, and in this way would differ from a real man..." (AT III 493, CSMK 206).<sup>10</sup>

Sensations, then, provide the evidence that the human being is not simply an aggregate of mind and body—an angel lodged in a bodily machine—but rather a peculiar metaphysical union of the two.

Saying that being human must involve a metaphysical union of mind and body is one thing. Making sense of it is another. Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia pressed Descartes on the nature of this union and Descartes offered the following infuriating response: "It does not seem to me that the human mind is capable of forming a very distinct conception of both the distinction between the soul and the body and their union; for to do this it is necessary to conceive them as a single thing and at the same time to conceive them as two things; and this is absurd" (AT III 493, CSMK 206). Indeed! That's simply to state the problem: having shown us so painstakingly how to conceive mind and body as two distinct things, it's difficult now to conceive them as united into a single thing. Remarkably, Descartes suggests that while the pure intellect cannot really conceive the union, "it is known very clearly by the senses" and that "it is in the ordinary course of life and conversation, and abstention from [philosophical] meditation...that teaches us how to conceive the union of the soul and the body" (AT III 692, CSMK 227). This is a serious concession on Descartes' rationalism: the senses rarely get the epistemic upper hand in Descartes, and yet here he says they do. Descartes realizes that mind and body must somehow be related in a way that goes beyond mere aggregation to yield a genuine human being, even if the intellect can't quite wrap itself around the idea.

Many able scholars have gone to great lengths to make sense of the metaphysics of the mind-body union. At one extreme, Paul Hoffman and John Cottingham argue that the human being is a third kind of substance so that Descartes is really a trialist and not a dualist; at the other extreme, Vere Chappell argues that the union just amounts to there being a causal relation between mind and body; and there are many suggestions in between.<sup>11</sup> In the end, I do not think Descartes had a worked out metaphysics of the union. If he had, he would have done more than offer the metaphor of intermingling (*permixtione*) and a baffling comparison of the relation of mind to body with the *accidentia realia* of his predecessors' theories.<sup>12</sup> He rests content with our knowing *that there is one* (we, after all, are the evidence) without our being able to *understand* (but only *sensorily experience*) it, as he insists to Elizabeth.

Whatever mystery still shrouds the mind-body union, it transforms Cartesian



dualism in several ways. I argued above that a Cartesian dualism of pure or separated minds and bodies is a dualism of angels and machines. The union of mind and body transforms things dramatically. We now have minds (angels), bodies (machines), and human beings. While I do not think the union introduces a third kind of substance into the picture, Descartes does say that it introduces a new *nature* into the picture, *human nature*, which bodies and minds alone do not have. In Meditation 6 he writes:

I am [here] taking nature to be something more limited than the totality of things bestowed on me by God. For this [the totality of things bestowed on me by God] includes many things that belong to the mind alone...but at this stage I am not speaking of these matters. It also includes much that relates to the body alone, but I am not speaking of these matters either. My sole concern here is with what God has bestowed on me as a combination of mind and body [that is, as a human being]. (AT VII 82, CSM II 57)

This human nature that Descartes speaks of (in opposition to his bodily extended nature and his mental intellectual nature) is a *sensory and passionate nature*. This nature teaches him many things: that he has a body, that it has certain limits, that when he feels a pain there is something wrong with his body, that other bodies can impact him for good or ill, and so on (AT VII 81, CSM II 56). I'll look at the epistemological character of this sensory and passionate human nature below. For now I simply want to underscore what may sound surprising: that *according to Descartes*, human nature is a sensory and passionate nature. (One might be tempted to interject here and say, "yes, but didn't Descartes think that this is a *bad thing* to be overcome?" I'll argue in the next section that the answer to this question is a resounding "no.")

This sensory and passionate human nature that emerges with the mind-body union suggests that *united* minds and bodies have properties that *separated* minds and bodies do not have; minds and bodies are transformed by the union. The body, for its part, changes in two ways. First, its individuation conditions change. Bodies on their own are individuated by their quantity in the Cartesian scheme of things.<sup>13</sup> Human bodies, by contrast, are individuated by the soul to which they are united, with the result that a given human body can undergo many changes in its quantity (as the man grows, ages, loses limbs, etc.) while remaining numerically the same body throughout. Here is Descartes on the distinction:

The word body is very ambiguous. When we speak of a body in general, we mean a determinate part of matter, a part or quantity of which the universe is composed. In this sense, if the smallest amount of that

quantity were removed we would judge without more ado that the body was smaller and no longer complete; and if any particle of the matter were changed, we would think that the body is at once no longer the same, no longer numerically the same. But when we speak of the body of a man, we do not mean a determinate part of matter, or one that has a determinate size; we mean the whole of the matter that is united with the soul of that man. And so, even though that matter changes, and its quantity increases or decreases, we still believe that it is the same body, numerically the same body, so long as it remained joined and substantially united with the same soul.<sup>14</sup>

As a surprising consequence, Descartes is prepared to say that while body on its own is by its very nature infinitely divisible, the *human* body is an important sense indivisible:

I do not think that there is any particle of our body, which remains numerically the same for a single moment although our body, qua human body, remains always numerically the same so long as it is united with the same soul. In that sense, it can even be called indivisible; because if an arm or a leg of a man is amputated, we think that this is only in the first sense of 'body' that his body is divided—we do not think that a man who has lost an arm or a leg is less a man than any other.<sup>15</sup>

Body, then, is transformed from a mass of extended divisible stuff to something with functional and even numerical unity, into a *human* body, when it is united with a mind.<sup>16</sup>

The second way in which body changes through its union with mind is that it acquires properties it does not have on its own. These new properties include health and illness. In the Cartesian context, bodies on their own are hunks of extended stuff with parts that are governed by the laws of motion. Human bodies are organisms that have a functional integrity that needs to be maintained for the human being to remain alive, and so some of its states are healthy and others ill. Suppose I slip while hiking and tear a ligament in my foot. Insofar as the foot is a hunk of extended stuff, there is nothing *wrong* with it, any more than there is anything *wrong* when a rock tumbling down the hillside breaks in two: its parts are just following the laws of motion. But insofar as the foot is part of human body that relies on its feet to get around, there is something genuinely wrong with it—it counts as injured.<sup>17</sup>

As for the mind, it too is transformed by the union. As an embodied mind it is subject to a range of thoughts it is not subject to as a mind on its own. As I pointed out above, sensations, imaginings, and passions are thoughts that only the

embodied mind enjoys (or suffers or endures). What's more, they bear the mark of embodiment. Sensory ideas and imaginings are imagistic—phenomenologically they take up space, so that I can, with noticeable effort, scan the sides of a triangle that is seen or imagined in a way that I cannot scan the sides of a triangle that is simply understood to be a three-sided planar figure.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, everything the senses and imagination represent (be it color or shape or pain), they represent as *modifications of body*. They cannot, as it happens, represent *immaterial* things or anything *as immaterial*. Even the passions, which Descartes insists we “refer” to the soul, are nevertheless experienced as taking place in the body; fear, e.g., is experienced as taking place in the heart.<sup>19</sup> The embodied mind is thus capable of forms of representation that are quite alien to the separated mind, and these forms of representation all implicate the body not just in their causal etiology but in their phenomenology.

That our sensory and passionate experience is at its core an embodied experience is not, then, an anti-Cartesian point, as it is sometime portrayed, but rather a decidedly Cartesian point. In his book *Descartes' Error*, Antonio Damasio bemoans Descartes' “abyssal separation between body and mind...the suggestion that reasoning, and moral judgment, and the suffering that comes from physical pain or emotional upheaval might exist separately from the body.”<sup>20</sup> The error here is Damasio's, for while some forms of reasoning might take place in a disembodied Cartesian mind, Descartes is quite emphatic about the *thoroughly embodied* nature of our physical and emotional suffering and pleasure.<sup>21</sup>

Let me sum up: the Cartesian human being is a union (not an aggregate) of mind and body; as such the human being has a nature that is different from that of mind alone or body alone or a mere aggregate of the two; and as members in the union, mind and body are themselves transformed by taking on properties they do not have on their own. None of this undermines Descartes' dualism, but it does complicate it a good deal. It remains the case that the mind and body of the human being *can* exist apart from each other. But that's all Cartesian dualism is committed to, viz., the *modal* claim that mind and body *can* exist apart from each other (i.e., can be separated by God). Descartes does *not* say that mind and body *do* exist apart from each other in the human being. And it's clear from the material I've discussed that they do not. But if and when our minds and bodies are separated, they will undergo significant changes, effectively turning into an angel and a mere machine. This separation of mind and body that dualism allows for is indeed de-humanizing. But now the de-humanizing is appropriate: for this separation comes at death, when the *human being ceases to be*.<sup>22</sup>

### III. Epistemology of the Cartesian Human Being

What about Cartesian Objectivity? Perhaps Descartes admits we have a deeply sensory and passionate nature, but doesn't he then insist that we should *overcome* this nature in our search after truth and aim at a conception of the world that is wholly intellectual, where that suggests a conception that is disinterested, impartial and aperspectival? The details of this standard reading are cashed out at follows. The intellect is Descartes' epistemological hero, and the senses and passions are cast as villains, or at least trouble-makers. It's the intellect that achieves the standard of Objectivity, or the view from nowhere, while the senses are mired in subjectivity, partiality, and perspectivism. Through the intellect we can achieve "clear and distinct perception" about the essences of things, which has the epistemic virtues of being indubitable, certain, and true. The senses, by contrast, give us only "obscure" and/or "confused" perception of things and thereby stand as obstacles to our search after truth: their deliverances are dubitable, uncertain, and typically false.<sup>23</sup> The passions are no better: they "agitate and disturb" (*Passions* I.28, AT XI 350, CSM I 339) the contemplating mind, and they "almost always cause the goods they represent, as well as the evils, to appear much greater and more important than they are" (*Passions* II.138, AT XI 431, CSM I 377). In our search after truth, we must cast off the distorting influence of the senses and passions with a battery of skeptical arguments and, through careful meditation, discover the angelic intellect within. This does seem a rather inhuman conception of our epistemological predicament.

Once again, there is some truth to this story. Descartes does indeed think we are capable of having purely intellectual thought that gets at the essences of things in an objective (impartial, aperspectival) kind of way. And this purely intellectual thought is indeed supposed to occur independent of the senses, which get in the way: "knowing the truth about things outside us belongs to the mind alone [i.e., the intellect] and not to the composite of mind and body [and so to the senses]" (Meditation 6, AT VII 82-83, CSM II 57) and "we perceive nothing as it is in itself by the senses alone" (*Principles* II.AT VIII-A 37, CSM I 220; see also AT VI 40, CSM I 131). Descartes thus separates the business of the intellect from the senses. And that explains the battery of skeptical arguments in Meditation 1 that are designed to "lead the mind away from the senses" (AT VII 12, CSM II 9) and "prepare my readers' minds for the study of things which are related to intellect" (AT VII 172, CSM II 121). But as with Dualism in the previous sections, that's not the end of the story. Listen to one more admonishment of the senses: "we misuse [the senses] by treating them as reliable touchstones for immediate judgments about the essential nature of the bodies located outside us" (AT VII 83, CSM II 57-58). We *misuse* the senses. He elsewhere compares this misuse to "trying to use one's eyes in order to hear sounds or smell odors" (AT

VI 37, CSM I 129). The senses aren't up to the job of discerning the essences of things. But, and this is the important point, they aren't supposed to be. In the cognitive economy of the Cartesian human mind, sensations and passions have their own job to do. They arise not only *from* the mind-body union but also *for* the mind-body union. This is a critical part of the story that tends to be overlooked by apologists and critics alike, and it's something I want to explore a bit here.

Cartesian human beings, I argued above, are mind-body unions (in some strong sense), and they have an interest in their own continued existence as mind-body unions. In order for the union to survive, however, the body must be kept intact and in good working order: its functional integrity must be preserved. Now the human body is constantly impacted by other bodies in its environment, and impacted in ways that affect its well-being. The embodied human mind must therefore dedicate a good deal of its cognitive labor to monitoring and protecting its body if it is to remain united to it. In order to do that, the mind needs to know not simply how things stand in the world (much less what the essences of things are), but how they stand *relative to its body* and especially *relative to its body's continued fitness*. This is where the senses come in. They provide the mind with an unabashedly self-interested, even narcissistic, view of the corporeal world: they "show us external bodies [not] exactly as they are, but only insofar as they are related to us and can benefit or harm us" (letter to More, 5 February 1649, AT V 271, CSMK 362; see also *Principles* II.3, AT VIII-A 41-42, CSM I 224; Meditation 6, AT VII 83, CSM II 57; and *Passions* II.52, AT XI 372, CSM I 349). Sensations may not contribute to the intellect's search after truth, where that means the search for an Objective conception of the universe; but that's because they are busy doing something else, *viz.*, contributing to the human being's self-preservation by informing the mind of what the corporeal world is like insofar as it may impact its body for good or ill.

What Descartes effectively does here is re-conceive the function of the senses: whereas his Aristotelian predecessors had depicted the senses as cognitive handmaids to the intellect, delivering up the raw materials for theoretical knowledge about the essences of things, Descartes conceives them as cognitive tools for survival. "Sensations," he writes in Meditation 6, "are, properly speaking, given to me by Nature in order to signify to the mind what things would be beneficial or harmful to the composite of which it is a part" (AT VII 83, CSM II 57). What's more, he writes, the senses do this reliably: "in matters regarding the well-being of the body, all my senses report the truth much more frequently than not" (AT VII 89, CSM II 61). The passions have a related function, for they are "given to the soul insofar as it is joined to the body, so that their natural function is to incite the soul to consent and contribute to the actions that can serve to preserve the body or make it more perfect" (*Passions* II.137, AT XI 430, CSM I 376; see also *Passions* II.1, AT XI 372, CSM I 349). What makes the senses and passions

so good for survival? Precisely their *lack* of Objectivity.

Let's see how this is supposed to work with a few examples. Take bodily sensations, which include both phenomena like pains, tickles, hunger and thirst and phenomena like haptic, proprioceptive and kinesthetic sensations (sensations of bodily positions and motions). Descartes sometimes calls bodily sensations "internal sensations" and with good reason: they give us a sense of our own bodies "from the inside" in a way that the observational senses (seeing, touching hearing, etc.) do not. These sensations are especially important to the task of self-preservation. First, it is precisely by experiencing bodily sensations that I'm able to identify this particular hunk of the corporeal world *as mine* or *as me*. With their "view from the inside," they confer a phenomenological sense of *ownership* or *self-identity* on the body in which they are felt to occur. When I step on a nail, I do not simply *observe* pain-in-a-foot but rather *feel* pain-in-my-foot or pain-in-a-part-of-me. And this is obviously important to self-preservation: perceiving the destruction of *a foot* is one thing (I can take an interest or not); feeling the destruction of *my foot* or *me*, on the other hand, commands my concern. Compare this to the intellect's representation of the situation: using the pure intellect alone, I would fail to single out any particular body as my body or as part of me, for the intellect represents all bodies as substances distinct from me, a mind. At most, the intellect might represent my body as one that has a unique causal effect on me (and that I can have a unique causal effect on in turn). It may, in other words, notice that events in this brain are regularly followed by sensations in me and vice versa. But there is nothing in the nature of that to suggest that this body belongs to me, or is a part of me. Indeed insofar as the intellect identifies this body as the persistent cause of its involuntary sensations, especially unpleasant ones, it might reasonably choose to assist in its destruction. The destruction might initially create a few extra unpleasant sensations, but in the long run this seems a small price to pay for freedom from any further annoyances. Here then we see the senses are able to do something the pure intellect cannot: identify a body as mine and report on its condition.

Consider next the gustatory and olfactory sensations of rotten eggs. In Meditation 6, Descartes notes that "from the fact that some [sensations] are agreeable to me and others disagreeable, it is quite certain that my body, or rather my whole self insofar as I am a composite of body and mind, can be affected by various beneficial and harmful bodies that surround it" (AT VII 81, CSM II 56). And indeed the taste and smell of rotten eggs lets me know in no uncertain terms that the eggs are not good for me. Now all that is out there in the eggs, according to Cartesian physics, is a hunk of extended stuff with a particular microstructure, one that, as it happens, is capable of having an effect on the microstructure of my body that would render it (qua human body with a certain functional integrity) ill. While gustatory and olfactory sensations represent the

eggs to me simply and impressively as *foul* and *to be avoided*, my intellect would represent the eggs as merely having a certain microstructure. In order to figure out that the eggs should not be eaten, the intellect would have to calculate the effect the eggs would have on my body. And it would have to recognize that that effect is a *bad* effect, or constitutes *illness*. Not only is this cumbersome (much more efficient to just have that foul smell and taste hit me), but it's not even clear that the intellect would be capable of recognizing the effect of the eggs *as bad* (from the Objective point of view, my body is just a hunk of extended stuff that is operating in a way that is perfectly consistent with the laws of motion—nothing *bad* about it). So not only do the senses provide a kind of *short hand* for what would be laborious calculations on the part of the intellect; they may even communicate a kind of information about the body that the intellect is incapable of (normative or evaluative information about its well-being). Subjectivity is of the essence here.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, consider spatial perception. It is tempting to think that even for a Cartesian our sensory perception of spatial properties like size and shape and location gets things “as they really are” in the world. But things are a little more complicated than that: Descartes rightly notes that our senses represent even the spatial features of bodies in a way that makes essential reference to the perceiver, and that doing so is essential to our survival.

Take shape perception. Vision informs me not simply what shape something is, but also how that shape is oriented with respect to me. And this is important. Simply knowing that the dining room table is rectangular will not help me walk around it. I need to know how it is oriented with respect to me if I am to avoid bruising myself. Similarly with the perception of location: simply knowing that the table is located at a certain position on some cosmic Cartesian coordinate system will not help me put a plate on it; I need to know where it is relative to where I am standing, plate in hand—where it is *from here*, e.g., about two feet away from me and off to my right. And these things vary from perceiver to perceiver: what is two feet off to my right may be five feet off to your left. Similar things are true of size perception: simply knowing that a bear is nine feet tall and three hundred pounds will not help me know what to do if I encounter one in the woods; I need to know that the bear is *bigger than me* in order to decide that I should flee. And I need to know that the bear is *coming right at me*, not simply that it is moving north-north-east, if I am to run in the right direction.

Putting this in a nutshell: the senses represent the spatial properties of the world to us ego-centrally and perspectively.<sup>25</sup> They do *not* give us the view from nowhere, but decidedly the view from here. They thereby put us in a position to interact quickly and reliably with the objects in our environment. Descartes is not only aware of that fact, but takes it to be essential to sensory representation and to our survival. He takes it to be essential to our human condition.

How does all this cast a new light on the quest for Objectivity? I'm not saying that Descartes had no interest in Objectivity. I'm simply pointing out that this is only half the story. Descartes conceives a *division of labor* in the human mind, and while we might not like what he says about the intellect, we should at least take a very serious look at what he has to say about the senses and passions. Yes, the Cartesian intellect comes with a stock of innate intellectual ideas that represent to us the essences of things as they are in themselves (Objectively). It is thereby charged with the task of providing the intellectual foundations for the sciences, both the science of body (physics) and the science of mind (psychology).<sup>26</sup> Descartes spends a great deal of time detailing the ways in which our senses represent things subjectively, viz., ego-centrally, perspectively and in fully embodied fashion. But this is no *shortcoming* of senses. It is precisely what enables them to perform their function of helping us to stay alive in a world of bodies that are poised to promote our health or harm us.

#### IV. Conclusion

The aspects of Cartesianism I've called attention to, the mind-body union that constitutes the human being and the role of the senses and passions in serving as guardians of that union, are not the aspects of Cartesianism that are highlighted in textbooks. I do not highlight them when I teach Descartes in introductory level courses. Descartes *himself* does not highlight them. That is in part because he thinks these things should be obvious to us from our daily experience: "it is in the ordinary course of life and conversation, and abstention from [philosophy and mathematics], that teaches us how to conceive the union of mind and body...Everyone feels that he is a single person with both body and thought" (AT III 692-694, CSMK 227). In his philosophy he shines a light on things less familiar to us: dualism, because he thinks it is true that mind and body *can* exist apart (albeit in changed states); Objectivity because he thinks we *can* attain it in a limited domain (mathematics and metaphysics). But he also insists that these are things we should occupy ourselves with only "once in a lifetime" (Meditation 1, AT VII 17, CSM II 12) or at most "a few hours a year" (letter to Elizabeth, AT III 693, CSMK 227). He explains to Princess Elizabeth:

I believe that it is very necessary to have properly understood, once in a lifetime, the principle of metaphysics, since they are what gives us the knowledge of God and of our soul [and, of course, the conception of body that grounds Cartesian physics]...But I think also that it would be very harmful to occupy one's intellect frequently in meditating upon them, since this would impede it from devoting itself to the functions of the imagination and senses. (AT III 695, CSMK 228)



Meditating on these things once in a lifetime (or a few hours a year) is enough to guard against some of the prejudices we are susceptible to in our human condition, in particular prejudices that make people resist the possibility of immortality and, more important to Descartes, prejudices that make them resist the rising new science of his day (his included). The problem, then, is that Descartes was too successful. These “once in a lifetime” reflections stuck and we’ve left the Cartesian human being behind. I hope to have resurrected him and to have shown that the he is far richer and far more familiar to our experience than he is typically assumed to be. Descartes’ treatment of human being is recognizably *human* (even insightfully so) after all. It’s what Descartes did to *animals* that should cause us alarm. But that’s a topic for another day.<sup>27</sup>

*Harvard University*

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (New York: Penguin, 1978).
- <sup>2</sup> Those who have looked seriously at the Cartesian human being include Lilli Alanen, *Descartes's Concept of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Deborah Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Vere Chappell, "L'homme cartésien" in Jean-Marie Beyssade and Jean-Luc Marian, eds., *Descartes: objecter et responder* (Paris: Vrin, 1994): 403-426; John Cottingham, "Cartesian Trialism" *Mind* 94 (1985): 218-230; Martial Guérout, *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons* (Paris: Aubier, 1953); Paul Hoffman, *Essays on Descartes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, *L'individualité selon Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1950) and *L'anthropologie cartésienne* (Paris: PUF, 1990); Marleen Rozemond (*Descartes's Dualism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Justin Skirry, *Descartes and the Metaphysics of Human Nature* (New York: Continuum, 2005); and Stephen Voss, "Descartes: The End of Anthropology" in John Cottingham, ed., *Reason, Will, & Sensation: Studies in Descartes's Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 273-306.
- <sup>3</sup> In both the text and notes, I use "AT" to abbreviate Charles Adam and Paul Tannéry, eds., *Œuvres de Descartes*, nouvelle édition (Paris: J. Vrin, 1996), and citations are to volume and page number. Translations are (with some slight amendments) those found in J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny, trans. and eds., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-1991), which is abbreviated "CSM I," "CSM II" or "CSMK" depending on the volume.
- <sup>4</sup> Jonathan Bennett, "Minds and Brains in the 17th Century" *Philosophic Exchange* 24-25 (1993-94), 81.
- <sup>5</sup> It is also a will, but I'm going to set aside the volitional aspect of the Cartesian mind for present purposes.
- <sup>6</sup> See, for a classic example, Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), 51ff. This reading gets prima facie reinforcement from Descartes' two official definitions of thought, both of which make conspicuous reference to consciousness (see the Appendix to the Second Replies, AT VII 160, CSM II 113 and *Principles* I.9, AT VIII-A 7,

CSM I 195). On inspection, however, the definitions say not that thought is consciousness, but that thought is the principal *object* of consciousness, which leaves open the question what thought itself is.

<sup>7</sup> Rozemond, *Descartes's Dualism*, ch. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Similarly, he writes to Gibieuf: "I do not see any difficulty in understanding on the one hand that the faculties of imagination and sensation belong to the soul, because they are species of thoughts, and on the other hand that they belong to the soul only insofar as it is joined to the body, because they are kinds of thoughts without which one can conceive the soul in all its purity" (AT III 479, CSMK 203).

<sup>9</sup> See Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

<sup>10</sup> The argument is given once again in the *Discourse on Method*: "I showed how it is not sufficient for [the soul] to be lodged in the human body like a helmsman in his ship...but that it must be more closely joined and united with the body in order to have...feelings and appetites like ours and so constitutes a real man" (AT VI 59, CSM I 141).

<sup>11</sup> See references in fn. 2.

<sup>12</sup> For the comparison to *accidentia realia*, see his letters to Hyperaspistes (AT III 424, CSMK 190) and Elizabeth (AT III 667 & 693, CSMK 219 & 228).

<sup>13</sup> See *Principles* I.64, AT VIII-A 31, CSM I 215.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Mesland, 9 February 1645, AT IV 166, CSMK 242-243.

<sup>15</sup> Letter to Mesland, 9 February 1645, AT IV 167, CSMK 243.

<sup>16</sup> The talk of "transformation" here is perhaps a bit strong. It is not, of course, as though the hunk of extended divisible stuff ceases to exist and a functionally unified body appears in its place. At any given moment some hunk of extended divisible stuff or other constitutes the human body. But the identity conditions of the hunk of extended divisible stuff and the human body are quite different, and the (in)dependence of each on mind is quite different. Deborah Brown makes a similar point in "Is Descartes' Body a Mode of Mind?" in Henrik Lagerlund, ed., *Forming the Mind: Essays on the Internal Senses and the Mind/Body Problem from Avicenna to the Medical Enlightenment* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007: 264).

- <sup>17</sup> The union thus brings teleology into Cartesian metaphysics, something Descartes tries to avoid in his physics. For a discussion of this point, see my “Sensible Ends: Latent Teleology in Descartes’ Account of Sensation,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39 (2001), 49-75. For a helpful discussion of the teleology of the body in particular, see Gary Hatfield, “Animals”, in Janet Broughton and John Carriero, eds., *A Companion to Descartes* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008): 404-425.
- <sup>18</sup> See Meditation 6, AT VII 72, CSM II 50-51; *Fifth Replies*, AT VII 385-87, CSM II 264; and the letter to Mersenne, July 1641, AT III 395, CSMK 186.
- <sup>19</sup> See *Passions of the Soul* I.36, AT XI 357, CSM I 342. For a recent and interesting reading of what Descartes might mean in saying that we “refer” the passions to the mind, see Deborah Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*.
- <sup>20</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 249-250.
- <sup>21</sup> Descartes does recognize a form of purely intellectual emotion of the sort experienced when contemplating God, which he argues is divorced from anything bodily just as pure intellection is divorced from anything bodily, but this curious phenomenon is not what Damasio seems to have in mind.
- <sup>22</sup> Although the Cartesian human being is at bottom a union of mind and body, Cartesian investigations into the human being may still reasonably adopt what Hatfield calls an “empirical dualism” between its physical and mental phenomena, a strategy that Descartes clearly adopts in the *Passions of the Soul* in which physical goings on in the human body are considered alongside the conscious passions that occur the mind. It simply needs to be kept in mind that the phenomena of this empirical dualism are those of the *enminded* body and *embodied* mind, i.e., phenomena arising from an underlying union of mind and body. On Descartes’ legacy of empirical dualism, see Gary Hatfield, “Remaking the science of mind: psychology as a natural science”, in C. Fox, R. Porter, and R. Wokler, eds., *Inventing Human Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 335-370.
- <sup>23</sup> The deliverances of the senses are true, he writes, only “occasionally and accidentally” (*Principles* II.3, AT VIII-A 42, CSM I 224).

- <sup>24</sup> For further discussion, see my “Guarding the Body: A Cartesian Phenomenology of Perception”, in Paul Hoffman, David Owen, and Gideon Yaffe, eds., *Contemporary Perspectives on Early Modern Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Vere Chappell* (Broadview Press, 2008), 81-113.
- <sup>25</sup> For further discussion, see my “Spatial Perception from a Cartesian Point of View” *Philosophical Topics* 31 (2003), 395-423.
- <sup>26</sup> Note, however, that neither Cartesian physics nor Cartesian psychology are conducted wholly a priori by the intellect. Even a shallow dive into the texts shows them to have a significant empirical component: they require observation, conjecture and experiment. The intellect simply provides the conceptual framework within which these sciences do their work.
- <sup>27</sup> I am grateful to the audiences at The College at Brockport and the Pforum Series at Pforzheimer House at Harvard for their helpful questions addressed to an earlier version of this paper. I am also grateful for comments from Sean Greenberg and the motivation for writing this from Luke Menand.