

Routledge Handbook of Bodily Awareness

Not a Sailor in His Ship: Descartes on Bodily Awareness

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Abstract: Despite his reputation for neglecting the body, Descartes develops a systematic account of bodily awareness. He holds that in bodily awareness each of us feels intimately connected to our body. We experience this body as inescapable, as infused with bodily sensations and volitions, and as a special object of concern. This multifaceted experience plays an ambivalent role in Descartes's philosophy. Bodily awareness is epistemically dangerous. It tempts us to falsely judge that we cannot exist apart from our bodies. But bodily awareness isn't all bad for Descartes. It helps us stay alive. Descartes also appeals to bodily awareness as a corrective to overly disembodied conceptions of the self.

1. Introduction

Despite his reputation for ignoring the bodily side of our nature, Descartes recognizes that each of us feels anchored to a human body. In *Meditation 6*, he contrasts a person's experience of her body with a sailor's experience of his ship:

Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely

joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form one thing [*unum quid*]. If this were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken. Similarly, when the body needed food or drink, I should have an explicit understanding of the fact, instead of having confused sensations of hunger and thirst. For these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain, and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body. (*M6*, AT VII 81/*CSM* II 56)

A sailor's life and livelihood may depend on his ship. But when he looks at it, he sees his vessel as something separate from himself. The situation with our bodies is different. Each of us feels "very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with" our bodies.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will use "bodily awareness" to refer to the distinctive first-personal awareness of our bodies that Descartes evokes in this passage. Bodily awareness provides information about one's own body in particular, whereas the five familiar external senses provide information about one's own body *and* other material things. In *Passions* I.23-24, for example, Descartes distinguishes "the perceptions we refer to our body," i.e. bodily awareness, and "the perceptions we refer to objects outside us," i.e. the five familiar external senses (AT XI 346-7/*CSM* I 337). Thus construed, bodily awareness includes the "internal senses" that monitor the body's needs (*Principles* IV.190, AT VIII A 316/*CSM* I 280), sensations of pleasure and pain (*Treatise on Man*, AT XI 144/*CSM* I 103), as well as proprioceptive and

kinesthetic sensations that inform us about the configuration and movements of our limbs (*Optics*, AT VI 135/CSM I 169; *Treatise on Man*, AT XI 160-2, 181).

Descartes analyzes the representational content of bodily awareness by distinguishing various strands in the feeling of being *joined* to a particular body or, in other words, in the feeling of *having* a body. He argues that we experience the body (a) as inescapable, (b) as suffused with bodily sensations and volition, and (c) as a special object of concern.

Bodily awareness plays an ambivalent role in Descartes's system. He argues that it is a potential source of error that can lead us to falsely judge that our connection to our bodies is tighter than it really is: namely, that we cannot exist without them. But bodily awareness isn't all bad for Descartes. It helps us stay alive by convincing us that our bodies are worth caring for. Descartes also appeals to bodily awareness as a corrective to overly disembodied conceptions of the self. When critics like Antoine Arnauld and Princess Elisabeth complain that Descartes goes too far in separating the self from the body, Descartes appeals to bodily awareness to argue that the Cartesian self is in fact embodied.

2. The Contents of Bodily Awareness

Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* opens with skeptical arguments designed to draw our minds away from the senses. Descartes appeals to sensory fallibility, madness, dreams, a deceiving God and an evil demon to undermine our sense-based beliefs about ourselves and

the world around us. Beliefs about our bodies, and especially our relation to them, receive special scrutiny. Descartes raises doubts about the state and structure of our bodies—for example, about the belief that “my eyes are open, that I am moving my hand and stretching out my hands,” or that I “have such hands or such a body at all”—by arguing that we might be dreaming that our bodies are different than they really are (*M1*, AT VII 19/CSM II 13). This chain of skeptical arguments culminates with the radical possibility that we lack a body of any kind. At the close of *Meditation 1*, Descartes resolves to consider himself “as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things,” at least until he can prove otherwise (*M1*, AT VII 22/CSM II 150).

The senses then remain mostly offstage until their reevaluation in *Meditation 6*. Descartes begins this process by reviewing (a) what he previously perceived by the senses and thus believed to be true, (b) the skeptical considerations for doubting these beliefs, and (c) what he should now believe about these matters (*M6*, AT VII 74/CSM II 51). Descartes’s first example of something “perceived by the senses” is an experience of having a body:

First of all, then, I sensed that **I had a head** [*sensi me habere caput*], **hands, feet, and other limbs** making up the body which I regarded as part of my self or perhaps even as my whole self. (*M6*, AT VII 74/CSM II 51-52, emphasis added)

Descartes’s claim that we experience ourselves as *having* a body is a placeholder for a proper account, since he has not yet specified what *kind* of having, possession, or ownership is

relevant. Ownership comes in different flavors. When I am carrying my severed hand to the hospital after a terrible accident, I have a hand in a very different sense than when it was still attached to the rest of my body. On its own, the claim that I have, own, or possess a body carries little information: it suggests that I stand in some kind of special relation to the body in question, without specifying the relevant relation.ⁱ So what kind of ownership does bodily awareness represent? Fortunately, Descartes further specifies the experience of having a body a few lines down. He writes:

As for the body which by some special right I called “mine,” I judged [*arbitrar*] not without reason that this body, more than any other, belonged to me. For I could never be separated from it, as I could from other bodies; and I felt all my appetites and emotions in, and on account of, this body; and finally, I was aware of pain and pleasurable tickling in parts of this body, but not in other bodies external to it. (*M6*, AT VII 76/CSM II 52)

Descartes’s language in this passage (“*arbitrar*”) can misleadingly suggest that bodily awareness does not itself represent our possession of a body, but rather inclines us to form a judgment to this effect. On this reading, the content “I have a body” would *not* occur at the level of sensory experience, but only at the level of judgment or belief.ⁱⁱ That is the wrong way to read this passage, however, as Descartes has already noted that we perceive by the senses that we have “a head, hands, feet, and other limbs making up the body.” Instead, Descartes is breaking down the sensory experience of having a body into its constituent elements: namely, (a) the body’s

apparent *inescapability*, (b) feeling appetites, emotions, pleasure and pain *in* the body, and (c) feeling appetites, emotions, etc. *on account of* the body. Let's consider each of these in turn.

(a) Inescapability

The body's apparent inescapability is one aspect of the experience of having a body. "I could never be separated from [the body I call 'mine']," Descartes notes, "as I could from other bodies" (*M6*, AT VII 76/CSM II 52). Whereas the sailor can avert his gaze and walk away from his ship, that isn't an option with our bodies. We are always aware of them. As Descartes tells Arnauld in the *Fourth Replies*, "we experience *constantly* through our senses" that we are "closely conjoined with the body" (AT VII 228-229/CSM II 160). Descartes suggests, for example, that when we focus our gaze on external objects, we feel ourselves squinting and turning our heads to get a better view (*Treatise on Man*, AT XI 161). When we reach out to grasp a mug, we feel the way the mug presses against our skin and the way we must shape our hand to hold it (*Treatise on Man*, AT XI 159).

The body's constant presence is only one aspect of the body's apparent inescapability, however. Another is that we don't experience *any* distance between ourselves and our bodies. In bodily awareness, we experience our bodies up close and personal: so close, in fact, that we couldn't get any closer.

Contrast the sailor. Suppose that our sailor never leaves his ship. He works and sleeps on its deck. Its sails are the first thing he sees in the morning and the last thing he sees at night. The creak of the rigging and the smells of the wood are always in the background; he is sensitive to their slightest change. In this scenario, the ship is a constant presence in the sailor's experience. Seagulls, porpoises, rocks, reefs, and other ships come and go; the sailor's ship is his constant companion. Nevertheless, when the sailor looks at this ship, he sees distance between himself and his ship. He invariably sees the ship's mast and sail, for example, at some distance from his visual point of view. Not so in bodily awareness: we don't feel our bodies as being any distance away from us.

Descartes explains this aspect of the body's inescapability in terms of the different spatial frames of reference employed by bodily awareness and visual experience. Bodily awareness and visual experience both represent their objects vis-à-vis the self, but in different ways. Bodily awareness represents its objects—the parts of one's body—as *co-located* with the self or subject, whereas visual experience represents its objects as *located some distance away from* the self. When I feel pain in the foot, for example, I do not experience any separation between myself and the painful foot. I feel like I am right there in the foot. When I look down and see my foot, in contrast, I see my foot as some distance away *from me*. In the visual case, I experience separation between me and the foot—a separation that vanishes as soon as I close my eyes and focus on the foot.

Descartes alludes to this aspect of bodily awareness by comparing the mind's embodiment to Scholastic notions of heaviness. In the *Sixth Replies*, he writes:

I saw that the heaviness, while remaining coextensive with the heavy body, could exercise all its power in any one part of the body, because if the body were hung from a rope attached to any part of it, it would still pull the rope down with all its power, just as if all the heaviness existed in the part actually touching the rope instead of being scattered through the remaining parts. *This is exactly the way in which I now understand the mind to be coextensive with the body, whole in the whole and whole in any of its parts.* (O/R 6, AT VII 442/CSM II 298, emphasis added)

Descartes is making the phenomenological claim in this passage that the mind experiences itself as “coextensive with” the body. Put first-personally, I feel as if I were co-located with my body, in the whole body and in each of its parts.

Visual experience, in contrast, represents objects as located some distance away from me or my visual point of view. As Descartes writes in the *Optics*:

As regards position, i.e. the orientation of each part of an object relative to our body, we perceive it by means of our eyes exactly as we do by means of our hands. . . . Thus it is ordained by nature to enable the soul not only to know the place occupied by each part of the body it animates relative to all the others, but also to shift attention from these

places to any of those lying on the straight lines which we can imagine to be drawn from the extremity of each part and extended to infinity. (AT VI 134-5/CSM I 169)

We see an object's location—like an apple held at arm's length—in terms of an egocentric frame of reference centered on ourselves.ⁱⁱⁱ

This difference between bodily awareness and visual experience explains why we can never be separated from our bodies as we can from other material things. No matter how far or fast we run, we will feel ourselves to be co-located with our bodies. In contrast, no matter how close a sailor gets to his ship, he will see the ship as located some distance and direction away from him, even if it's just a matter of inches.

Someone might object that in cases of out-of-body experiences—as when someone seems to see their body from the outside—the body's apparent inescapability breaks down. I'm not so sure about that. An out-of-body experience is presumably a visual experience. As both Simmons (2003, pp. 404-10) and Brown (2006, pp. 68-70) have argued, however, Descartes holds that visual experience presupposes bodily awareness. Someone's visual experience of an object's position, for example, incorporates proprioceptive awareness of the orientation of their head and the movements of their eyes. Someone having an out-of-body-experience would presumably have such bodily feelings and, hence, would experience themselves as having a body of some kind or another.

(b) Suffused with Sensations and Volitions

Another strand in the experience of *having* a body is feeling hunger, thirst, emotions, pleasure and pain as occurring *in* the body. When someone stubs their toe, for example, the pain they feel does not seem to occur in a disembodied mind—in a thought bubble, for example, floating above their head. Instead, the pain seems to occur *in the foot*. As Descartes writes, “I felt all my appetites and emotions in . . . this body; and finally, I was aware of pain and pleasurable tickling in parts of this body, but not in other bodies external to it” (*M6*, AT VII 76/CSM II 52). In *Passions* I.24, Descartes refers to “the perceptions we refer to our body or to certain parts of it”: these include “hunger, thirst, and other natural appetites,” but also “pain, heat and the other states we feel as being in our limbs, and not as being in other objects outside us” (AT XI 346-7/CSM I 337). He reiterates the point about pain in the *Principles*:

For, although we do not suppose that pleasure and pain exist outside us, we generally regard them not as being in the mind alone, or in our perception, but as being in the hand or foot or in some other part of our body. But the fact that we feel a pain as it were in our foot does not make it certain that the pain exists out mind, in the foot, any more than the fact that we see light as it were in the sun, makes it certain the light exists outside us, in the sun. (*Principles* I.67, AT VIII A 32-3/CSM I 216-7)

The sailor again provides a helpful contrast. We feel aches and pains in our bodies; the sailor does not feel his ship’s hull or keel ache.

When Descartes says that we feel pain “in,” the body, he does not simply mean that we experience pain to be spatially inside the body like a carton of milk in the refrigerator. Instead, we experience pain as *inhering in, modifying or qualifying* part of the body, in the way that shape is in a ball of wax. At the same time, we also experience pain as one of *our* states. When we feel pain, we experience *ourselves* as qualified by pain. As Descartes rhetorically asks in *Meditation 6*, “what could be more internal [*intimius*] than pain?” (*M6*, AT VII 77/CSM II 53). Nothing. How could I doubt that this pain is mine? I can’t. Putting these two features together, we experience pain as simultaneously being a state of the body *and* one of our states. We experience *ourselves* as having bodily states or features. In feeling a muscle ache, for example, I experience *myself* as having a bodily state with dimensions, locations, and an unpleasant edge. As Simmons (2008) points out, “[c]ases of phantom limb pain are no exception” (90). When an amputee feels pain where a limb used to be, they hallucinate themselves as having a bodily state where there is only empty air (*M6*, AT VII 77/CSM II 53).

This aspect of the phenomenology helps explain the feeling of being co-located with our bodies. If I experience myself as having bodily states, presumably I will experience myself as at least partly co-located with those states.^{iv}

To this point, I have focused on experiences where we are knocked about and buffeted by external objects. When I stub my toe and feel pain, I experience this painful bodily state as something that happens to me and against my will. I experience myself as *suffering* a bodily

change. As Descartes writes, “pain and other sensations come to us quite unexpectedly” (*Principles* II.2, AT VIII A 41/CSM I 224; see also *M6*, AT VII 79/CSM II 55). We also experience ourselves as embodied agents. When I voluntarily raise my arm, I feel like I am moving part of myself. I experience this bodily action as a case of self-motion.

Princess Elisabeth’s probing questions force Descartes to examine the phenomenology of voluntary movement. When Elisabeth asks Descartes to explain how an immaterial mind can move the body, he again appeals to the Scholastic conception of heaviness as a model:

I think we have hitherto confused the notion of the soul’s power to act on the body with the power one body has to act on another. We have attributed both powers not to the soul, for we did not yet know it, but to the various qualities of bodies such as heaviness, heat, etc. . . . For instance, when we suppose that heaviness is a real quality, of which all we know is that it has the power to move the body that possesses it towards the centre of the earth, we have no difficulty in conceiving how it moves this body or how it is joined to it. We never think that this motion is produced by a real contact between two surfaces, since we find, from our own inner experience, that we possess a notion that is ready-made for forming the conception in question. Yet I believe that we misuse this notion when we apply it to heaviness, which—as I hope to show in my *Physics*—is not anything really distinct from the body. For I believe that it was given us for the purpose of conceiving the manner in which the soul moves the body. (*Letter to Elizabeth*, 21 May 1643, AT III 667/CSMK III 219)

The way Scholastics mistakenly think about heaviness—as diffused throughout a heavy body and moving the body without pushing it—is the correct way of understanding the way the soul apparently moves the body. Descartes uses this analogy to characterize the phenomenology of bodily action. Whereas the sailor needs to push on a rudder to adjust the ship’s course or pull on the lines to trim the sails, I don’t need to push or pull anything to move my arm (unless it’s fallen asleep). Descartes also refers Elisabeth to the *Sixth Replies* for more detail, which we saw above (*O/R* 6, AT VII 442/*CSM* II 298). Just as we imagine heaviness’s force to be spread throughout the entire heavy body, I experience my force or will to be spread throughout my body. This force can be focused on a single point. When I wiggle my foot I experience my soul’s action—i.e. volition—as occurring in and modifying the foot.

The projection of volition results in an experiential fusion of volition and movement: namely, the experience of moving oneself alluded to earlier. Simmons puts this point beautifully: “I don’t experience my volition to take a step up the mountain as a separate event from my leg’s stepping motion. Volition and leg movement are, to the contrary, experientially united into a single event, an action: I experience myself as voluntarily taking a step” (Simmons 2017, p. 26).^v When I feel volition in my foot, I experience the foot’s motion as something that I do.

(c) A Special Object of Concern

Finally, the experience of having a body includes the feeling that one’s body has a special kind of importance or value. Descartes hints at this aspect of bodily awareness in the “special right”

passage when he writes that “I felt all my appetites and emotions in, *and on account of*, this body” (M6, AT VII 76/CSM II 52, emphasis added). I feel thirst when my body needs drink, hunger when it needs food. I don’t feel thirsty when anyone else’s body needs drink. As Descartes writes a few pages later in *Meditation 6*: “[t]here is nothing that my own nature teaches me more vividly than that I have a body, which is damaged when I feel pain, which needs food and drink when I am hungry or thirsty, and so on” (M6, AT VII 80/CSM II 56).

My feelings of hunger and thirst are not merely correlated with my body’s needs, however. These feelings represent my body’s needs *as* my own. When my body needs food, hunger represents *me* as needing food. When my body needs drink, thirst represents *me* as needing to drink. From the perspective of these feelings, my happiness and well-being are wrapped up with the body’s good. These feelings insist that I am well only when my body is well. This point emerges more clearly in *Passions* II.94. Descartes argues that pleasure represents the “body’s healthy condition and strength . . . as a good which belongs [to the soul] in so far as it is united with the body,” whereas pain “presents [bodily damage and weakness] as evils which are always unpleasant to the soul” (AT XI 399/CSM I 362). It might seem too obvious to be worth saying that my well-being depends on and is partly constituted by my body’s. But Descartes spends much of the *Meditations* arguing that we are metaphysically distinct from our bodies. These arguments raise the possibility that the body’s needs are irrelevant to our true interests. Descartes emphasizes that it *feels* like our body matters, regardless of whether it really does.

Contrast, again, the sailor. His life and livelihood are wrapped up with his ship. He lies awake at night fretting about his ship. Does it need another coat of varnish? Will it need new rigging this season? And yet, when the sailor looks at his ship, he does not see the ship's needs as his own. When he notices that something in his ship is broken, he does not see this damage as good or bad for him. Instead, he forms a judgment to this effect, either immediately or through a process of reasoning. Sight does not demand concern for its objects the way bodily awareness does. The sailor, as Simmons puts it, must "opt in to concern for his ship" (Simmons 2017, p. 29).^{vi}

3. The Ambivalent Status of Bodily Awareness

Bodily awareness plays an ambivalent role in Descartes's philosophy. On the one hand, Descartes argues that the senses, including bodily awareness, are epistemically dangerous. They are sources of error and false judgment. The five familiar external senses suggest a false and confused understanding of "the essential nature of the bodies located outside us" (*M6*, AT VII 83/CSM II 57). They represent material things as colorful, smelly, tasty, loud, hot and cold, and so on, whereas material things, according to Descartes, are mathematical or geometrical objects stripped of any such qualities. Bodily awareness can lead to similar errors by blurring the distinction between mind and matter. Feeling pain in the foot, for example, misleadingly suggests that matter can feel pain (which it can't for Descartes).

Bodily awareness also leads to errors about ourselves. It can lead to false judgments about *our* relation to matter. Descartes worries that bodily awareness will lead us to judge that we are identical to our bodies and, hence, cannot exist without them. As Descartes explains in *Meditation 6*, the feeling of having a body can lead me to regard this body “as part of myself, or perhaps even as my whole self” (M6, AT VII 74/CSM II 54, emphasis added). Descartes’s analysis of bodily awareness explains why this judgment is so tempting. Given that I can never seem to get away from my body, I might confuse constant conjunction with necessary connection and conclude that I cannot exist without my body and, perhaps, that I just *am* my body. Similarly, the experience of having bodily states—as in the case of pain—invites the conclusion that a person is identical to her body.

Understandable as it may be, the false judgment that my body is “my whole self” interferes with our ability to recognize our nature and even our existence. If I am material through and through, then I cannot exist apart from matter. Hence, this false judgment conflicts with Descartes’s signature metaphysical position that “I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it” (*Meditation 6*, AT VII 78/CSM II 54).

This false judgment also interferes with a person’s ability to recognize their own existence with certainty. As Paul (2018, pp. 1107-9) argues, the *cogito* yields certainty of our existence only when we have purged our self-conception of any trace of matter. In *Principles* I.12, Descartes explains that someone “may have put the certainty of their own existence before that of anything else,” and yet fail to grasp their existence with absolute or metaphysical certainty,

because “they failed to realize that they should have taken ‘themselves’ in this context to mean their minds alone. They were inclined instead to take ‘themselves’ to mean only their bodies—the bodies which they saw with their eyes and touched with the hands, and to which they incorrectly attributed the power of sense-perception” (AT VIII A 9/CSM I 196-7). If I take myself to be a material thing, then I can indirectly doubt that I exist by doubting that *any* material things exist. Descartes gestures at this skeptical line of thought in the opening paragraphs of *Meditation 2*:

Am I not so bound up with a body and with senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? (M2, AT VII 25/CSM II 17)

Descartes answers with a resounding *no*: “if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed” (M2, AT VII 25/CSM II 17). He can reach this conclusion with absolute certainty, however, only because he is no longer conceiving of himself as “bound up with a body and with senses.” He has freed himself from the self-conception suggested by bodily awareness.

On the other hand, bodily awareness isn’t all bad. Given Descartes’s theological commitments, it *can’t* be. At the final stage of the reevaluation of the senses in *Meditation 6*, Descartes argues that since a non-deceiving God created us with our sensory faculties, the senses must contain “some truth” (M6, AT VII 80/CSM II 56). This divine guarantee applies to bodily awareness as

much as sight or touch. More generally, if the senses were given to us by God, then they must be good for something.

Descartes argues that the senses are good for helping us stay alive. They help us preserve our bodies:

For the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part; and to this extent they are sufficiently clear and distinct. (*M6*, AT VII 83/*CSM II* 57-8)

This account of the proper function of the senses applies to bodily awareness. Bodily awareness is for self-preservation. While not many philosophers these days appeal to God when theorizing about the senses, evolution provides an alternative route to this conclusion. Given that our sensory faculties evolved, they presumably helped us survive to this point.

A word of clarification is in order. In the context of Descartes's philosophy, "survival" and "staying alive" refer to the continuation of the mind's connection to the body. This connection holds so long as the body is in good working order. When the human body finally breaks down, the connection to the mind is severed. Descartes identifies this separation as "death" (*Passions* I.6, AT XI 330-1/*CSM I* 329-30). Hence, we stay alive by preserving our bodies. In light of Descartes's view that you and I can exist apart from our bodies, however, we need to

distinguish life from continued existence. For Descartes, there is existence but no life after death.

One question, then, is *how* bodily awareness contributes to the preservation of life. First, let's consider the body's apparent inescapability. As I argued above, bodily awareness represents its objects—viz. body parts—as co-located with the self, whereas sight represents its objects as located some distance from the self. The feeling of co-location allows us to act *with* and *through* our body. Brown (2006) argues that experiencing ourselves as co-located with and in our bodies is *necessary* for action by comparing the situation of an embodied, human agent to that of an angelic mind tasked with playing puppet-master to a human body. She writes:

What would it be, for example, for the angel to move its body to the right or to the left? To the right or left of what? Surely not to the right or left of it, for it has no perspective from which objects can be right or left. Of its body? But from which orientation? Front? Back? Which is the front or back of the angel's body, from the angel's point of view?

(Brown 2006, p. 80)

Bodily awareness spares us the angel's impossible task. Second, we experience the body as suffused with bodily sensations and volitions. We gain a sense of our boundaries from feeling pleasure and pain throughout our limbs. These feelings teach us where we end and the external world begins, thereby delineating the appropriate target of our sensory self-concern. This function is especially important given that Descartes's homogeneous account of the physical world blurs the distinctions between individual material things. Third, we experience the body as a special object of concern. Pleasure, pain, hunger and thirst incline us to care for the body

by representing its needs as our own. When my body needs food, hunger represents *me* as needing food. When my body is damaged, pain represents *me* as damaged or in a bad way. Bodily awareness makes things personal.

As I mentioned above, these aspects of bodily awareness collectively dispose us to falsely judge that we *are* our bodies. This false judgment is itself a powerful tool in the senses' arsenal. It channels our self-interest—our selfishness and our tendency to put ourselves first, as well as our sheer desire to exist—towards the preservation of the body. Despite its epistemic hazards, this judgment is *useful*.

Thus far, I have suggested that bodily awareness is instrumentally good since it helps us stay alive. Bodily awareness might seem to be able to play *this* role even if its representations were largely illusory or false. Descartes, however, suggests that bodily awareness isn't merely a useful illusion, but also contains "some truth" (*M6*, AT VII 80/CSM II 56). To conclude this chapter, I will briefly explain what this truth is.

4. A Corrective to Disembodied Conceptions to the Self

When critics like Antoine Arnauld and Princess Elisabeth complain that Descartes divorces the self from the body, Descartes appeals to bodily awareness to argue that the Cartesian self is embodied. In the *Fourth Objections*, for example, Arnauld worries that Descartes's argument for the real distinction, i.e. the argument that we can exist in disembodied form, "proves too

much, and takes us back to the Platonic view (which M. Descartes nonetheless rejects) that nothing corporeal belongs to our essence, so that man is merely a rational soul and the body merely a vehicle for the soul—a view which gives rise to the definition of man as ‘a soul which makes use of a body’” (*O/R 4*, AT VII 203/CSM II 143). Descartes disagrees:

Nor do I see why this argument “proves too much.” For the fact that one thing can be separated from another by the power of God is the very least that can be asserted in order to establish that there is a real distinction between the two. Also, I thought I was very careful to guard against anyone inferring from this that man was simply “a soul which makes use of a body.” For in the Sixth Meditation, where I dealt with the distinction between the mind and the body, I also proved at the same time that the mind is substantially united with the body. And the arguments which I used to prove this are as strong as any I can remember ever having read. (*M6*, AT VII 227-8/CSM II 160)

Arnauld accuses Descartes of holding that “man”—or, better, the self—is “only ‘a soul which makes use of a body’” (*O/R 4*, AT VII 203/CSM II 143). Descartes rejects this accusation. He claims that his comparison to the pilot in a ship constitutes an argument “as strong as any I can remember ever having read” for the claim that the mind is substantially united with the body. Bodily awareness, in other words, definitively proves that we are mind-body unions.^{vii} We are composites of mind and body, at least in this life.^{viii} From this it follows that bodily awareness is true to the extent that the body *is* “part of myself” (*M6*, AT VII 74/CSM II 54). We fall into error if we take the part to be the whole, or if we take the bodily part of ourselves to be necessary for

our existence, as bodily awareness inclines us to do. Nevertheless, bodily awareness accurately reveals that we are partly bodies, even if only contingently so. Here lies the truth in the feeling that we are “closely joined and as it were intermingled” with our bodies.^{ix}

Further Readings

Alanen, L. (1996) ‘Reconsidering Descartes’s Notion of the Mind-Body Union’, *Synthese*, 106(1), pp. 3-20. (Alanen argues that the mind-body union eludes scientific explanation. Instead, our grasp of the third primitive notion of union is experiential and pre-philosophical: it consists in know-how rather than knowledge-that. Alanen lays the groundwork for subsequent investigations of the phenomenology of embodiment in Descartes.)

Brown, D. (2007) ‘Is Descartes’ Body A Mode of Mind?’, in Lagerlund, H. (ed.) *Forming The Mind: Essays on the Internal Senses and the Mind/Body Problem from Avicenna to the Medical Enlightenment*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, pp. 263-281. (Brown argues that a person’s body cannot exist apart from their mind, because a person’s body is defined as the body in which they feel bodily sensations, most notably pain. Brown argues that this “relational” account of a person’s body is nevertheless compatible with Descartes’s real distinction argument, since the parts of matter *composing* this body can exist apart from the mind.)

Chamberlain, C. (2019) “‘The Body I Call ‘Mine’ ”: A Sense of Bodily Ownership in Descartes’, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 27(1), pp. 3-24. (I argue that Descartes recognizes a sense of

bodily ownership, such that the body sensorily appears to be *one's own* in bodily awareness. I provide extensive textual evidence that the sense of bodily ownership is genuinely sensory for Descartes and not simply a matter of judgment or belief. I argue that the sense of bodily ownership is a complex feeling grounded in various other aspects of bodily awareness: namely, the body's inescapability, the projection of sensations and volitions, and the special importance we experience our bodies as having.)

Curley, E. and Koivuniemi, M. (2015) 'Descartes on the Mind-Body Union: A Different Kind of Dualism', *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, VII, pp. 83-122. (Curley and Koivuniemi argue that the mind-body union consists in (1) the causal interaction between mind and body, and (2) the mind's experiential identification with the body. Whereas Simmons takes the mind's experience of embodiment to *reveal* the union, Curley and Koivuniemi argue that this experience partly *constitutes* the union.)

Simmons, A. (2017) 'Mind-Body Union and the Limits of Cartesian Metaphysics', *Philosophers' Imprint*, 17, pp. 1-36. (Simmons argues that a proper metaphysical understanding of the mind-body union is impossible for Descartes. Instead, the internal senses or bodily awareness provide us with our best grasp of the union. Simmons's phenomenological analysis of voluntary action is especially insightful.)

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ⁱ For further discussion of the ambiguity of ownership, see Chamberlain (2018, p. 515) and (2019, pp. 12-13).

ⁱⁱ Carriero (2009, p. 389) suggests a reading along these lines.

ⁱⁱⁱ Simmons (2003, pp. 399-400) and Brown (2006, pp. 68-70, 79-82) discuss the egocentric character of visual experience in Descartes.

^{iv} See Brown (2006, p. 82), Simmons (2008, pp. 90-2), and Curley and Koivuniemi (2015, pp. 90-2) for more on the phenomenology of bodily sensation. Brown (2007, pp. 280-1) argues that bodily sensations do not merely represent but *constitute* a body as mine.

^v See also Brown (2006, pp. 156-8) and Curley and Koivuniemi (2015, pp. 106-7).

^{vi} See also Carriero (2009, p. 394) and Curley and Koivuniemi (2015, p. 92). Interestingly, Descartes suggests that love can expand the scope of a person's special concern to include other people and things (*Passions* II. 82 AT XI 389/CSM I 357; see also *Letter to Princess Elizabeth, 15 September 1645*, AT IV 293/CSMK III 266). Brown (2006, pp. 159-63) and Brown and Normore (2019, ch. 7) discuss the flexibility of concern in Descartes.

^{vii} There is an enormous secondary literature about the ontological status of the mind-body union and, more specifically, whether it is a third kind of substance for Descartes. Descartes is clearer *that* we are mind-body unions than he is about the nature of the union.

^{viii} The qualification "in this life" is important since, as we saw above, Descartes holds that we *can* exist apart from our bodies. According to my reading of Descartes, he holds that we *actually* exist as mind-body unions or human beings, but that we *can* exist as minds separate from the body. Someone might object that my reading veers dangerously close to Regius's view, which Descartes rejects, that a human being is an *ens per accidens* (*Letter to Regius, December 1641*, AT III 460/CSMK III 200). But this doesn't follow. On my reading, the Cartesian self is accidentally human, but a human being is not an *ens per accidens*. In this life, when the Cartesian self exists as a human being, it exists as a robustly unified thing, as an *ens per se* or non-accidental unity. This, I think, is compatible with the Cartesian self being capable of existing in other ways, namely, as a disembodied mind (*ibid.*). See Brown and Normore (2019, pp. 174-8, and pp. 186-7) for more on the Regius correspondence and for what is required to be an *ens per se*, and Chamberlain (2020) for more on my account of the Cartesian self.

^{ix} I am grateful to Elliot Paul, the members of his undergraduate Descartes seminar at Queen's University in fall 2021, Adrian Alsmith, Denise Cadete, and an anonymous reviewer for their comments and advice on this chapter.