**Could Sensation be a Bodily Act?**

Back in the 1960’s, the scientists at the MIT Artificial Intelligence lab created a simple robot designed to mimic the behavior of a living organism. Although inorganic, it was equipped with sensors and programed so that it would be able to detect that presence of solid physical objects and learn to avoid them. It was thus capable of learning the layout of the furniture in the office in which it was kept and using this acquired pattern to navigate its environment. If the furniture was moved or replaced, the robot’s programing allowed it to acquire the pattern of the new layout and quickly master the available movement pathways through its environment. Additionally, it was given an internal sensor that indicated when its battery was running low, at which point the robot was programed to plug itself into the wall and recharge its battery until the power sensor switched off. After this, it would unplug itself and go its merry, if aimless, way.

Much more sophisticated robots are possible today, ones that can simulate many more of the functions of living organisms. Even this simple robot, however, can be credited with a fairly close analogue of the animal visual system. Because it has sensors, it is capable of being affected by various wavelengths of light and interpreting patterns of such wavelengths as either open space or as potential obstructions, and adjusting its behavioral output in light of the input provided by its sensors. Those sensors themselves, in turn, are directly affected by the external stimuli, and undergo a change of state as a consequence, which in turn provides information about the robot’s environment which is processed in its CPU and used to generate an appropriate output as defined by its programming: to move around obstructions and into open space in order that its otherwise purposeless ramble through its environment is not impeded.

It would be quite natural to use visual language and intentional description to describe its activity: the robot wants to keep moving, it desires to avoid obstructions, it sees potential obstructions and therefore changes course in order to avoid them, and so on. We might even give the robot a name and use that name when ascribing a putative mental state to the robot: “Fred sees the desk...Fred desires to avoid a collision with the desk...Fred therefore changes course in order to get around the desk.”

Even today, however, most of us would be disinclined to attach any literal meaning to any of this talk. Fred the robot simulates an organism with a visual system, receiving inputs in the form of light-waves by means of its visual sensors (its “eyes” if you will), causing a change of state in those in those senses which the robot then interprets and uses to adjust its behavior in accordance with its programming. Its visual system recapitulates, in an artifact, a simplified version of the bodily-based visual system that we find in animals, including human beings. Yet despite this, few of us are likely to say that the robot actually *sees*. This, of course, is not to deny that the robot is affected by light-waves in such a manner that it subsequently acquires information about the external world that it uses to navigate its environment in accordance with its internal programming. It most certainly is, just as modern science tells us we are as well when we engage in what we typically call seeing. It’s just that there something more to what we call seeing in the literal sense, something that we think is lacking in the case of the robot. The same, it seems to me, holds for chess-playing computers and mechanical brains as envisaged by the current US “brain-mapping” and EU Human Brain projects, even if these should prove to be successful.[[1]](#footnote-2)

What is this difference? Most of us, I think, would unhesitatingly respond that seeing, in the literal sense, involves *consciousness*, in this case, awareness of visual content, something of which the robot is incapable. While we would all agree that what the robot does is functionally equivalent to what we do when we see, few if any of us not already in the grips of a theory are likely to ascribe sensory awareness or the power of visual perception to the robot. It is simply an automaton, a clever imitation or simulacrum of a being that can see, merely the sizzle without the steak. Consciousness is the steak and something that each human being knows with extrinsic certainty that he or she possesses and enjoys in his or her own case from the first person perspective. This evident fact about what goes on when we see persuades us that this is something that, no matter how completely or closely some artificial, mechanical device imitates the bodily processes that occur in living perceivers, does not constitute literal seeing unless it is accompanied by a particular kind of contentful conscious awareness. Of course, if we want to define seeing functionally as simply whatever mediates external stimulation by light-waves (input) and subsequent observable behavior (output) in a being capable of processing, interpreting, and reacting to that sort of stimulation no one can stop us. In that case, Fred the robot does, in fact, see just as we do. Yet those of us not in the grips of some prior theory are likely to protest that seeing, as we experience it, is more than just this and that this functional definition of seeing, while perhaps useful for some purposes, simply leaves out of account what is most important and distinctive about seeing, both as experience and as experienced by us.

In the recent past, materialism has dominated the philosophy of mind. However, after a long and difficult campaign, many prominent philosophers have at last conceded the irreducibility of *qualia,* previously known as sense-data, traditionally constituted by sensory contents such as shape, color, sounds, tastes, smells, textures, and bodily sensations such as pain. Even hard-core reductive materialists like Jaegwon Kim have reluctantly concluded that *qualia* are not reducible to properties of brain states or any other physical thing - a conclusion already reached by Wilfred Sellars in 1960, who predicted at that time that sense-data would never be reduced to brain states or their properties.[[2]](#footnote-3) The long list of contemporary philosophers of mind who have conceded this includes John Searle, Thomas Nagel, and David Chalmers. All of these figures continue to endorse naturalism and fight shy of substance dualism. Indeed, it seems that any sort of alternative is worth exploring rather than admit that Descartes was right all along: property dualism, panpsychism, emergentism, constitutionalism, neutral monism, etc., etc., have all found proponents in recent years, while substance dualism remains the *bête noir* of all but a small minority of recent philosophers.

Among those who stand with the majority against the few lonely proponents of dualism are philosophers of the roughly Aristotelian and Thomist stripe, who despite their adherence to, or at least tolerance of, traditional religious belief (at least insofar as the fact that a view is compatible with the truth of theism does not in and of itself provide a conclusive ground for rejecting it) insist that they are implacably opposed to dualism.[[3]](#footnote-4) Indeed, they not only oppose Substance Dualism, but also blame it for every evil of modern thought, such as solipsism, skepticism, the decline of religion and traditional sexual morality, along with the attendant evils this has spawned.[[4]](#footnote-5) In opposition to Cartesian substance dualism, Aristotelians and Thomists have opposed their own view, traditionally called *Hylomorphism*. According to this view, to the extent that I understand it, soul and body are not two substances, but rather a single substance constituted by both soul and body standing to each other as (Aristotelian) matter and form. This substance, the human organism, is essentially a body, but a body that possesses a particular kind of soul as its substantial form, one that endows that body with a rational nature. Further, while some of those powers are immaterial insofar as they do not depend on any bodily organ in order to exist or occur, the soul itself is dependent on the body both for its existence and its operation[[5]](#footnote-6). Although Aristotle entertains that notion that one part of the soul (the agent intellect) could survive the death of the body, both Aristotle and Thomas insist that the survival of the soul is not the survival of the person, so that when the body dies so does the person. For this reason Aquinas insists, in his commentary to *1 Corinthians*, that the hope for eternal life requires the bodily resurrection of the dead and, indeed, that one receive numerically the same body at the resurrection as one had at the point of death[[6]](#footnote-7) This is because matter is the principle of individuation for finite substances, so that my being the same person after the resurrection as I was when I died absolutely requires the material continuity of my body - a belief enforced as a matter of discipline among Catholics prior to Vatican II, who were forbidden to cremate the dead in order to facilitate the bodily resurrection at the last trumpet.

There are many point of contact and convergence between certain versions of Hylemorphism, such as that defended by, e.g. James D. Madden and the form of substance dualism I have embraced and defended in Descartes’ name. In some cases, for example, the difference between my version of dualism and Madden’s seems to be a verbal one. Madden insists, for example, that the soul is not a substance because it cannot exercise its characteristic activity independently of the body; he thus calls it a “subsistent entity” rather than a substance. However, *every* finite substance (as opposed to God, the Infinite Substance) is extrinsically dependent on conditions and circumstances external to itself in order to exercise its characteristic activities. Existence and essence, matter and form, are always separable in finite things at least in principle. The same holds for the soul and body of the human being as well. As such, if the soul’s dependence on the body is sufficient to deny the title substance to it, the same will hold for the human body (whether understood as a material thing or as an organism) and indeed for all finite substances. In that case, either there are no finite substances at all, merely “subsistent entities,” or it is not required in order to be a finite substance that one be capable (as God is) of exercising its characteristic activity independently of any extrinsic conditions. I prefer to say that the soul and the body are finite substances, independent in existence but dependent on each other in operation, and that these two finite substances jointly constitute a single, compound substance - a human organism - standing to one another in that unity as substantial form to matter without in any way compromising their status as finite substances possessing contrary natures and separate acts of existence. This, in turn, makes it possible for the substantial soul to survive the death of the body and to serve as the principle of personal identity for resurrected human beings, even if the resurrected body is not materially identical to the body we had at the point of death.

However, there is no space here to consider all of these points of contact, divergence, and contrast. In this paper, I wish to consider just one difference between Hylomorphism and substance dualism, one that I consider both substantive and crucially importance in deciding the case between these two views. This is the Aristotelian-Thomist thesis that, abstract thought aside, all of the functions we assign to the human mind - sensation, perception, memory, imagination, and so on - are bodily acts or activities, such that (apparently) the conscious contents of those acts - sensations, perceptions, episodes of personal memory, imaginative flights of fancy involving mental images, and so on - are the contents of bodily states rather than mental ones. Hylomorphism, as these writers and others describe it, deny that what we ordinarily call mental contents occur or exist in an immaterial consciousness constituted independently of the body as a result of some causal process occurring in the body and terminating in the affection of the immaterial mind. Instead, they deny that these contents are mental at all, insisting that they are states, features, or properties of the body or of bodily structures, such as our sense-organs. This view deserves consideration; in what follows, for ease of exposition I shall concentrate mostly on cases of visual sensation, although what I say about those sensations should be easily applicable to the other cases under consideration as well.

The Hylomorphic view instantly evokes an obvious question: What does it mean to say that sensations (etc.) are bodily states, i.e. in what manner do bodily states constitute or contain sensations as elements? Surely there is more to this than merely that the sense-organs of the body are affected by and changed as result of the causal influence of external bodies. The same, after all, holds of Fred the Robot, and most of us will deny that these changes in Fred’s “visual system” constitute sensation in the same sense that it applies to us. Nor will it do, I think, to evade this problem simply by asserting that Fred is an artifact, or made of metal, or not alive, or has no soul, and thus fails to be analogous to the human case. We need an account of why these differences are relevant differences, if they are, and what makes sensation in our case relevantly different from what happens in Fred’s case. This is not obvious, and so needs to be explained. Hylomorphists, however, seem reluctant to answer this question or to provide any account of what it means to say that sensation is a bodily act.

Further, it seems that any such account must accommodate the phenomenological facts about sensation that are evident to us from everyday experience. Our experience of sensation involves an occurrent awareness of colors, shapes, smells, tastes, textures, sounds, heat and cold, pleasure and pain, tickles and itches, etc. as contents of acts of sensation. If acts of sensation are bodily acts, then the sensory contents or *qualia* we experience in everyday sense experience have to be the contents of those bodily acts, i.e. what we are immediately and occurrently aware of when we sense. It is not immediately clear how this can be the case, as some brief historical remarks easily illustrate.

According to the literalist interpretation of Aristotle’s view of color perception, for example, seeing takes place in the eye and thus that visual sensation is a state of the bodily organ itself. According to Aristotle, the eye contains a transparent fluid capable of taking on the visual forms of external bodies. When I am externally affected by a red object, then the fluid in the eyeball becomes red, and this is the redness that we see.[[7]](#footnote-8) Of course, we now know as a matter of fact that nothing like this happens in the eye when we sense the color red. This is just as well, since no theory of this sort has the ghost of a chance of providing a satisfactory account of the broad range of phenomena of which we are aware in visual experience.

Similar remarks apply to the suggestion that, in visual perception, what we are aware of are retinal images produced by light rays on the back of the eye. Such images do apparently exist, and if one were looking for some feature of the eye as it operates in the production of visual experience, this seems a natural candidate. However, there seems good reason to doubt that this is the case. For example, if the impulses traveling from the eye up the optic nerve to the brain are blocked or impeded, then no sensation takes place, despite the presence of a retinal image in the eye. The eye does not see by itself, and the impulses travel toward the brain, rather than from the brain to the eye, suggesting that stimulation of the eye is only the first stage of the visual process and not the act of seeing itself. At any rate, the presence of stimulation and the formation of a retinal image in the eye are hardly sufficient for visual sensation. Neither does it seem to be necessary. It is well known that visual experiences (as well as memories, etc.) can be produced by direct stimulation of the brain, entirely bypassing the standard visual system and the eye altogether. In principle, this suggests that a technology may someday be possible that will allow at least some blind people to have visual experience - to literally *see* - despite not having functioning eyes. In that case, it would hardly be credible to suggest that visual sensation for such persons is a bodily state of the eye.

The immediately foregoing suggests that visual sensation is a bodily act of the brain rather than the eye. In that case, sensory contents as we experience them would have to be contents of brain states and in some manner contained in such states. The difficulty, however, is that there is nothing in the brain that is even remotely like sensory contents as we experience them. While Malebranche may have entertained the idea that my visual sensation of a square involves some process by means of which the outline of a square becomes etched on the surface of my brain, we know better now. We will look in vain for any colors, shapes, or other visual contents as we experience them existing in the brain tissue, no matter how much we dissect or examine that brain tissue. Indeed, brain states are remarkable insofar as they appear altogether to lack qualitative contents of any kind. My sensory acts, however, clearly do have such contents, so it seems difficult to understand how any brain state could be a sensory bodily state.

At one point, Lee and George seem to suggest that brain states could be the bodily states with which sensation is associated and that the difference between our awareness of these states from a first person point of view is simply a different way of being aware of the bodily brain state than that available from the third person point of view.[[8]](#footnote-9) What the scientist sees is thus identical with what I experience visually. However, an obvious difficulty with such a suggestion is that what I experience as visual content is nothing at all like a brain state as observed from outside by a scientist. Given that what the scientist sees, measures, and examines is the “real” brain state whereas my visual contents are merely subjective qualitative events in consciousness, it is difficult to see how those contents constitute an awareness of the brain state *as such*. After all, I am immediately aware of my visual contents, but not, it seems, of any of my brain states. If I were, then I would not need the third person point of view in order to do neurology; I could simply read off the nature of the brain from my own subjective states. To the contrary, however, no matter how hard I concentrate on my visual contents, they never efface themselves in favor of something that looks like a brain state as externally perceived and understood from the third person point of view. At best, it seems that I am *indirectly* aware of the brain state, and in a manner that is compatible with my having no idea that I even have brain or brain-states. Indeed, given these facts there seems little reason to suppose that I am in *any* way aware of my brain states by means of my visual contents and much more likely that those contents are ontologically distinct from such states, even though perhaps causally dependent on them for their occurrence.

In this context, it is common to appeal to cases of referential opacity in order to explain how this underlying identity is possible. For example, it might be suggested that when Medea first sees Orestes she sees a man but does not know that this man is her brother. (Indeed, we may suppose that she does not even know that she has a brother.) However, since the man she sees is Orestes, and Orestes is her brother, in seeing Orestes she also sees her brother, since these two are identically the same man. On this scenario, it is thought that my visual contents and some bodily state, such as a brain state, could be identical even if I could not know that this was the case. The analogy here is disputable, however, since we can easily classify Orestes and “Medea’s brother” under a common neutral category by means of which we can make the relevant identity claim: both are the same *man*. In the case of my visual contents and one of my brain states, however, there is no neutral category by means of which I can categorize these two things without begging the question. If I say that they are the same state, for example, the next question becomes “What state?” The only answer seems to be “the same brain state.” This answer soon leads to the collapse of Hylemorphism into one or another view to which it was supposed to provide an alternative.

Since my sensory contents are not the contents of my brain state (which so far as science from the third person perspective is concerned has no experiential contents at all) we are forced to conceive of the relation between those contents and my brain state along the lines of theories that Hylemorphists insist are different from and inferior to their own. For example, if we try to say that my sensory contents and the external scientific view are simply two global perspectives on the same thing which is neither a subjective mental content nor a brain state, we are back to Spinoza’s double aspect theory or Russell’s neutral monism. If we attempt to say that the sensory contents we experience are one set of properties of the brain state whereas the properties available to the scientist from the third person perspective are another set of properties of the same thing, then we appear to be back to property dualism: there is one thing to which (as Sir Peter Strawson put it years ago) to which both mental and physical predicates apply, but about which nothing further can be said about that thing’s nature that explains how these two sets of properties can inhere in the same thing. If we identify that same thing with the brain state and regard its physical properties as inherent and its sensory qualities as emergent from and strongly supervenient on the brain state *as such* we are back to emergentism. If we treat emergence as the expression of some capacity universally present in matter than only occurs under certain conditions, we are back to panpsychism. If we deny any relevant causal powers to those mental contents, then our view collapses into epiphenomenalism. And so on. These moves have already been tried and successfully critiqued by Hylomorphists like Madden.[[9]](#footnote-10) From here, there seem only two possible ways left to go - reductive materialism of some kind or Cartesian dualism.

II

Despite their protestations to the contrary, Madden, Lee, George, and Hylomorphists generally are closer in spirit, though not perhaps in what they actually hold, to reductive materialists than they are to substance dualists. In the first place, Hylomorphists are ready to concede to reductive materialists that the entirety of our mental lives other than abstract, conceptual thought are somehow exhausted by bodily states and impossible without them. In the second place, they have a natural antipathy to regarding consciousness and its features as centrally important to philosophy of mind and psychology. Indeed, another thing that they blame Descartes for is bringing consciousness to the fore in philosophy, something that they claim leads to methodological solipsism, skepticism, and idealism.[[10]](#footnote-11) These charges carry much less weight now than they did a century ago, so perhaps it is time for us to reconsider the case for the immateriality of the mental - all the mental, not just (what reductive materialists will not concede) abstract thought. In articulating that case, I will once again focus on sensory contents (sense-data or *qualia*) as my primary example.

The first thing to note is that sensations are *things we experience* and which are known to us exclusively as such. While neurophysiologists can correlate sensations (or rather, *reports* of sensation uttered by supposedly conscious subjects) with events or states occurring in the brain, even exhaustive examination of these states down to the micro level reveals nothing special about these states, and no reason at all why these states or events should be accompanied by sensation or any conscious experience, let alone be such that my awareness of these sensations should be direct, immediate, and when clear and distinct, incorrigible for me as descriptions of my current experiential state. In this regard, brain states and events are no different than any other physical event, state, or process such as thermonuclear reaction occurring in a star, a chemical reaction involving *aqua regia*, or the melting of ice by sunlight. Indeed, without the (in the nature of the case unverifiable) reports of conscious subjects, brain scientists would search in vain for any traces of mentality in the brain. A Martian scientist with complete knowledge of the brain *qua* material thing or *qua* physical object but no direct contact with human beings would never even so much as suspect that there was such a thing as conscious experience going on in human beings. Like Descartes, who believed that animals were mere automatons without consciousness, he would explain all of our behavior (including our verbal behavior) using mechanistic physics and see no reason to think that there was anything left out by such an account. Our protests to the contrary would impress him no more than would those of a computer programmed to assert that it was conscious whenever the question was put to it. He in our case, like we in the case of the computer, will suppose that we need to go with what can be justified from the neutral, third person point of view of external observation rather than postulate superfluous additional entities that play no ineliminable role in explaining anything simply in order to provide some in principle unobservable referent for talk about our putative “inner states.”

Yet - and yet – we each of us *know* with extrinsic certainty that we are conscious from the first-person point of view that we cannot but occupy in every waking moment. Further, the third person point of view is not an alternative to this, since we can occupy that point of view only by voluntarily constituting and taking it up within the perspective of lived experience, which is both irreducibly “first-personal” in character and inescapable so long as we continue to be self-conscious rational subjects. More than this, the third-person perspective is one that *we* each of us artificially constitute within the first-person perspective that we never cease to occupy and can never transcend. While there may be powerful incentives for us ignore or “bracket” consciousness in the realm of theoretical inquiry as somehow irrelevant or merely distracting, we cannot succeed in doing so while at the same time remaining conscious of what we are doing. Whatever progress we think that we may be making in solving the problems of mind and cognition will only be an illusion rooted in an act of Sartrean bad faith and self-deception.

If we do take consciousness seriously, however, we will have to leave natural science behind as our guide. As I have already noted, from the third-person point of view of neutral external observation, there is absolutely no evidence for even so much as the existence of consciousness. From that point of view, the only access to consciousness is constituted by reflection on the fact that the scientist him- or herself is a necessarily a conscious subject if he or she occupies *any* point of view at all on anything, even the brain.[[11]](#footnote-12) While a curious forgetfulness can lull the scientist into forgetting this, and thus making absurd claims about the relation of brain and mind, this is to an extent both predictable and forgivable, inasmuch as adverting to and dwelling upon that fact would make it all too obvious that the self, understood as a self-conscious rational subject, will always slip the surly bonds of any naturalistic entanglement.[[12]](#footnote-13)

But if the third person perspective is little help to us in understanding sensation as we experience it, where ought we to turn to find such a perspective? It seems that we can do no better than to turn inward, with Plato, Augustine, and Descartes, and allow ourselves to be led by introspection, first to a phenomenological examination of conscious experience and, on the basis of that data, to a metaphysics of mind arrived at using something like Kant’ transcendental method, which in this case is very closely analogous to the sort of explanatory inference employed by scientists when they postulate theoretical entities. When we do this, I suggest, we are very quickly confronted with the theoretical need to posit the substantial self or soul as a simple, immaterial substance that is not only the substantial form of the human organism, but also conscious mind, the principle of selfhood, and the foundation for personhood. However, there is no room to go into all of this here. Let me simply illustrate how this works in the case of sensation.

Although there are many external and bodily conditions for the occurrence of sensation, we have no inkling of it in or as part of any bodily state, including states of the brain. We encounter sensation as experienced first in, and only in, consciousness as the qualitative content of a mental state. It is natural to suppose that, since these *qualia* or sense-data - the colors, shapes, tastes, smells, and textures of things, the sounds we hear, the heat and cold, pleasure and pain, itches and tickles we feel, and so on - are irreducibly non-physical as we experience them, that the experiencing subject is likewise an immaterial substance whose states and acts contain those *qualia* as contents. This, of course, is the dualist view. According to dualism, the substantial soul that has become conscious is a mind, the subject of experience. This subject possesses capacities and powers of its own the activation and exercise of which give rise to mental states and acts. These states and acts being themselves states and acts of an immaterial substance, seem a natural home for non-physical contents such as sensory *qualia*.

To suppose that some bodily state, act, or process contains these *qualia* as conscious contents is difficult to countenance. First of all, if the body is substance that consciously senses, then the body must be a conscious subject in its own right. Yet the body is a material thing and our current best scientific understanding of what that means is that the body is a physical object. That means that all the states, acts, and processes occurring in 4the body are material, and very likely fundamentally grounded in the physical level of analysis for material things. This means, in turn, that some physically-grounded state, act, or process in the body contains non-physical *qualia* as its contents. As I have noted, there seems to no evidence for this claim to be derived from the third-person point of view of external observation; if we were limited to that perspective alone, we would have no inkling that there was any such thing as sensation at all. Neither do we have any evidence to support such a claim from the first-person perspective provided by consciousness. Consciousness appears to be non-physical throughout, an intentional field of awareness with 3D-space and A-series time as forms of intuition in which structured, unified sets of sensory *qualia* become constituted as phenomenal objects, putative representations of external objects. Despite the best efforts of philosophers and scientists to show otherwise, we still lack any significant reason to doubt any of this.

Not only is there no evidence for the Hylomorphist view of sensation, it is difficult even to conceive of its being true. In order for the body to be a conscious subject, it would have to be the case that matter is capable of being conscious and entertaining sensory *qualia* just as we experience them. In turn, these *qualia* would have to be somehow contained in bodily states, acts, or processes, all of which are material and perhaps ultimately physical in nature. I submit that there is no natural way to understand how this could be the case and, to date, Hylomorphists have done little to enlighten us on this topic. Indeed, the problem of how matter could think and be aware of non-physical mental contents is, for the Hylomorphist, the interaction problem as it afflicts that particular theory. Every theory of mind, no matter what its content, breaks down at precisely the point where it tries to provide a precise model of the relation between conscious experience and the bodily processes with which they are associated.

As such, we have to balk when Hylomorphists like Madden claim that there is no interaction problem for their view, since they claim that the human organism is just one substance, not two.[[13]](#footnote-14) That is because it appears that Madden holds the view (and so, perhaps to other contemporary Hylomorphists - proponents of “animalism”) that *neither* the soul nor the body is a substance. [[14]](#footnote-15) In that case, we need to draw a distinction between the body (qua material thing/physical object), which is not a substance, and the body *qua* organism (living thing or living body) which is a substance. Materialists, of course, deny this - for materialists, the living body is nothing over and above the body *qua* material thing/physical object, so that Hylemorphists are distinguished from this position so far forth.[[15]](#footnote-16) Even so, the same problem arises as to how it is that these two non-substantial parts are related to one another in the production both of the vital operations of the organism and in the production of consciousness and selfhood. This sounds like the interaction problem to me, or at any rate the cognate problem for the Hylomorphist. Nothing that I have read in the writings of contemporary Hylomorphists even seems to recognize this problem, let alone attempt to provide an answer to it. The mystery of mind remains, and another question arises in its place: where Hylemorphism is concerned, is there in fact any view here at all? It is to that question I now turn.

III

Gertrude Stein once described her hometown (Oakland, California) by saying, “There is no there there.” For many years now I have had the same opinion about Hylomorphism. Descartes was my introduction to philosophy as a teenager. Although I have always been a theist, this alone does not explain my commitment to substance dualism. There are more than a few respectable, and respected, theistic philosophers who are materialists about mind. I have always had too strong a sense of myself as a self-conscious rational subject to find materialism plausible enough to take seriously and have always suspected (though I cannot prove) that those who do are motivated by other commitments (such as ideological atheism) that have nothing directly to do with the philosophy of mind. At the same time, being convinced in my youth by Reid and others that Cartesianism leads to skepticism, I tried to find my way out of the Cartesian problematic. I availed myself of Berkeleyan idealism, then ordinary language philosophy, then became a proponent of direct realism, all to no avail. Arthur Lovejoy and Laurence Bonjour persuaded me that some sort of Representationalism had to be true, and this led me ineluctably back to the Cartesian problematic and ultimately to the conviction that the Cartesian solution to the challenge of skepticism was first, defensible and second, the only truly satisfying response to that challenge.[[16]](#footnote-17)

During this period I longed for an alternative to dualist interactionism and strongly considered Hylomorphism as an alternative account of the relation of mind and body. Finding myself incapable of giving up either the existence or immateriality of consciousness, I found this extremely difficult to do. However, I tried Hylomorphism for a while – after all, I am an old fashioned sort of Catholic and therefore supposed to take the views of Aquinas seriously – and it left an indelible mark on my mind. In the end, however, I could not find any rest in Hylomorphism. No matter how I tried to understand it, it could not hold its ground as a distinct position. When pressed at any point, the view naturally collapses into some other, and which view it collapses into seems to depend on the point at which it is being pushed. I suspect that this is because the formula *cum* mantra “The soul is the form of the body” admits of just about any interpretation – it all depends on what you suppose mean by “soul,” “body,” and so on. The view that appears to be a new, insightful way of formulating the mind/body relation in a way that avoids the mind/body problem either collapses into some other view or becomes hopelessly obscure. There is no there there. Nevertheless, I see great value in what Hylomorphists are trying to do and have attempted to accommodate substance dualism to many of their insights.[[17]](#footnote-18) In some cases, I think that the difference between Hylemorphism and Dualism are merely verbal, and since Hylomorphism cannot hold its ground anyway, if we want to engineer its collapse we ought to collapse it into dualism, which after is (or ought to be recognized) as the default position in the discussion of the mind/body problem.[[18]](#footnote-19)

Even so, I find myself in fundamental disagreement with Hylomorphists about the immateriality of all conscious states, including sensation. Pasnau says that according to Aquinas, “…sensation is a wholly bodily process,” a view that he thinks a modern materialist “could readily welcome.” He goes on to explain this as follows: “That is, Aquinas thinks of sensation as an operation consisting entirely of various bodily parts undergoing change in various ways. There is no further, nonbodily or spiritual operation involved. Aquinas is what I call a semimaterialist, in that he believes some intentional states, and some forms of conscious experience, can have explanations that are, in our modern sense, wholly physical.”[[19]](#footnote-20) Again, this is all very confusing. Sensation, as a form of conscious experience, is occurrent awareness of sensory *qualia* or sense-data, which do not seem to be physical in any useful sense of the term, either modern or ancient. Such awareness is not plausibly thought of as direct or immediate awareness of any bodily state, let alone of the movements of bodily parts in our sense organs as such*.* Neither, then, can my sensation of redness be somehow identical with (i.e. *nothing but*) a series of physical changes in the eye. We have already rejected the literalist interpretation of Aristotle’s account of color perception as empirically false, and noted that there is nothing for us to put in its place. So far as I can see there is simply nothing at all to be made out of the Hylomorphist view on this point. At most, we could sensibly mean only that sensory awareness is dependent for its existence and quality on such changes, but this, of course, is just the old mind-body problem again: what exactly *is* the relation between conscious experience and the bodily changes with which it is associated? To date, neither Aquinas nor any other Hylemorphist has given any better answer than that given by Descartes. This does not mean that such an answer is not possible, or that Hylemorphism is ineluctably false. That is just how it seems to me at the current time after many years of study and reflection. Nevertheless, I await correction on any points in which I may have been in error.

1. For a brief description of these projects - with a total of over 4 billion dollars earmarked over the next ten years for their completion - see Andrea Lavazza and Howard Robinson, eds., *Contemporary Dualism: A Defense*, London, Routledge, 2013, 1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See Jaegwon Kim, *Physicalism, or Something Near Enough*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2005, 168-170. For Sellars, see his *Science, Perception, and Reality*, New York, Humanities Press, 1960, 98-105. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Actually, some Dualists claim to be Thomists as well; see Moreland and Ray, *Body and Soul*, Downers Grove, IL, IVP, 2000, 199-228, 231-232. On their view, the soul is a substance but the body is not. I find this view attractive and worthy of consideration but have chosen here to hew to the Cartesian rather than what these figures call the Thomist view, one significantly different from both the standard neo-Thomist view and the semi-materialism of Robert Pasnau. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See Robert P. George and Patrick Lee, *Body-Self Dualism in Contemporary Ethics and Politics*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008. Indeed, there is a long tradition within Thomism of blaming Descartes for all the errors of modern philosophy; we cannot bother to attempt to answer these claims here. While I will only lightly touch on these claims here, a full defense of a traditional account of the intrinsic value and dignity of the human person within a dualist context, see Moreland and Rae, 231-342. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. This seems to be the view of George and Lee, see op. cit. 74-81. However, other Hylomorphists, such as James D. Madden, take the soul to be naturally immortal though incapable of consciousness apart from the body, a view to which I subscribe; see his *Mind, Matter, and Nature*, Washington, DC, Catholic University of America Press, 2013, 270-272. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary to 1 Corinthians*, 15, Lecture 2, para 924 at the following online link: http://dhspriory.org/thomas/SS1Cor.htm#151 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. This is the view of Richard Sorabji in “Body and Soul in Aristotle,” *Philosophy* (49), 1974, 63-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Lee and George, op. cit., 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. See Madden, *Mind, Matter, and Nature*, 88-221. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. This attitude is evident in the dogmatic, dismissive approach to the problems of knowledge taken by neo-Thomists who, like the Eliminative Realists, find themselves having to deny obvious facts in order not to consider questions that discomfit them. See, for example, Etienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism & the Critique of Knowledge,* trans. Mark A. Wauck, San Francisco, CA, Ignatius Press, 1986, Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959 and, for a particularly crude presentation of this point of view, Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *Man’s Knowledge of Reality*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1956. Similar sentiments can be found in the writings of Ric Machuga. That is not to say that there is not much that is true and valuable in the works of these writers, but only to note that the simple refusal to acknowledge philosophical problems such as that of the nature of knowledge or consciousness will not make them go away. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. See my paper, “How is Neuroscience Possible?” - also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. As is argued by Raymond Tallis in his book *The Explicit Animal* (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1991) where he argues that the theoretical inquiry engaged in by scientists and other researchers, understood as some sort of rational activity that yields truth and knowledge about reality, is in itself a *reductio* of the naturalistic program that most of them subscribe to as that very truth to which our science leads. Tallis is a geriatric physician, not a philosopher, so his perspective is unique and interesting, as is his argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See Madden, *Mind, Matter, and Nature*, 275. Actually, it appears that Madden holds the view (and so, perhaps to other contemporary Hylemorphists - proponents of “animalism”) by claiming that neither the soul nor the body is a substance (op. cit.). In that case, we need to draw a distinction between the body (qua material thing/physical object), which is not a substance, and the body *qua* organism (living thing or living body) which is a substance. Materialists, of course, deny this - the living body is nothing over and above the body qua material thing/physical object. Even so, the same problem arises as to how it is that these two non-substantial parts are related to one another in the production both of the vital operations of the organism and in the production of consciousness and selfhood. This sounds like the interaction problem to me, *mutatis mutandis* as it affects the view in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Madden, *op. cit.* Actually, as I have already suggested, I think that there is merely a verbal difference between what Madden describes as Hylemorphism and my version of Cartesian dualism, which at one time I toyed with calling “Semi-Dualism” in a manner parallel to the “Semi-Materialism” that Robert Pasnau attributes to Aquinas - See Pasnau, *Aquinas on Human Nature*, London, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 57-65. It is to be noted that, while Pasnau articulates Aristotelian Hylemorphism as maintaining that the soul is not a separate substance and that sensation is a wholly bodily act, as he interprets the authentic Thomist view, i.e., the view of Thomas himself in his published writing, it is much more liberal with regard to abortion than is the official teaching of the Catholic Church today - see *op.cit.*, 100-120. More than this, Pasnau recommends the views of Aquinas as a useful correction to the Church’s “noxious social agenda” concerning abortion and sexual morality generally - see page 105. This will hardly be welcome news to (e.g.) Lee and George, who base their defense of the Church’s teachings on abortion and pro-life on the Hylemorphist conception of the person as essentially a body and only incidentally a conscious mind or self. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. See Hud Hudson, “I am not an Animal!” in Peter Van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman, eds., Persons: Human and Divine,” New York, Oxford University Press, 2007, 216-234; see especially 216-217 for a forthright statement of the materialist rejection of Hylomorphism (which Hudson here calls “Animalism”). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. See Arthur Lovejoy, *The Revolt against Dualism*, Chicago, IL, Open Court, 1930. Bonjour taught at the University of Washington where I was his occasional student. The solution I speak of is offered in my book, *The Proof of the External World*, Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. See my essays “Objections to Dualism” and “Is Dualism Immoral?” also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. See Tomas Bogardus, “Undefeated Dualism*,” Philosophical Studies*, 165, No. 2, 445-466. I have argued the same point in my unpublished manuscript on the Trinity, *Perspective and Personhood*, Chapter II. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. See Pasnau, op. cit., 59. Solving this problem, of course, is hardly the be-all and end-all of the philosophy of mind and there is much of value and interest in medieval philosophy mind detailed in Pasnau’s valuable book. It is well worth reading even if the philosophers of interest to him fall short on this particular point. I do note in passing that this view appears to be incompatible with Madden’s view of Aquinas, though perhaps not unwelcome in this respect to Lee and George. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)