

Descartes's Concept of Mind

In the sixth of his *Meditations*

on *First Philosophy*, Descartes famously wrote that "Nature... 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 a unit." Unlike the pure mental acts of intellection and volition, which are not in any way dependent on the body, sensation, as well as perception, imagination and emotion or passion, owe their existence to the union of the

mind with the body. This special and mysterious mind-body union or "intermingling"

is part of what distinguishes the mental life of human beings from that of angelic beings; for while angels possess intellection and volition, they do not

suffer sensations or emotions — not even when, on earthly missions to communicate

messages to humans, they borrow unused bodies in which to house themselves

temporarily for the journey. As Descartes explained in a letter to Regius, written in January 1642, "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."

In other words, unlike real men, embodied angels *are* like sailors in ships, inspecting but never *feeling* what goes on in their bodies. If an embodied angel were to brush up against some nettles it would not feel stinging

sensations, but would simply perceive the chain of motions that the

nettles had
initiated in its body.

One of the outstanding issues in
Descartes scholarship is how to understand what Descartes meant by the
"substantial
union" or "intermingling" of mind and body, since he said so
little about it. Of particular concern is whether the union in question is
consistent with his rigid substance dualism. After all, given his view that
mind and body are distinct (types of) substances, and his view that
human
beings and embodied angels are both composed of these same two
distinct
substances, one naturally wonders how is it that embodied human minds
manage to
be so different from embodied angelic minds. How can two distinct
substances
intermingle to form a "close and intimate union" in humans, producing
a sensory-rich phenomenology of conscious experience and emotion
(vision, taste
and smell; anger, fear and love), which is absent from the more austere
intellectual embodied angelic mind? (Some may be reminded of Wim
Wenders' film *Wings
of Desire*, in which an angel faces the dilemma of immortality without
sensuous experience or a mortal life overflowing with it. He desires to
experience
human feelings and sensations so strongly that he chooses the latter and
his
first course of action with his new mortal coil is to drink a cup of black
coffee.) Is the union simply a matter of a divinely ordained
correspondence —
whether causal or occasional — between bodily states and conscious
mental

experiences, set up for the welfare and benefit of mankind's material life on earth, as some commentators have argued? In other words, is the problem of the union just the classic problem of the interaction between mind and body, taught to all philosophy undergraduates? Or is there more to it than that, such as a vestige of the Aristotelian scholastic hylomorphism Descartes vigorously attacked, whereby the mind or soul is the *form* of the living body, as other commentators urge? Or, more pessimistically, is Descartes's "primitive notion" of "union" rather simply a lapse into obscurity borne of his own bafflement over the exact nature of the relation between the human mind and the human body?

In *Descartes's Concept of Mind*, Lilli Alanen proposes, for the most part, to set aside this deeply problematic and contentious ontological issue and to focus on that aspect of Descartes's theory of embodiment that concerns the nature of the embodied human mind itself. Forget for a moment how exactly Descartes thought the human mind becomes embodied. When it is embodied, during our earthy lifetime, what is it like, according to Descartes? For too long, Alanen thinks, philosophers, especially those working in the Anglo-American tradition, have concentrated on Descartes's view of the mind as essentially epistemically transparent to introspection, immaterial, and primarily ratiocinative. But, towards the end of his life,

inspired by his correspondence with the brilliant Princess Elizabeth, he devoted much attention to the affective side of mental life that is produced by the union of mind and body, and in his last published work, *The Passions of the Soul*, he discussed in detail his views on the psycho-physiological nature of embodied human experience. Here we find Descartes discussing the whole range of passions that constitute the human condition: veneration and scorn, love and hatred, hope, anxiety, jealousy, remorse, pride, shame, disgust, respect, wonder, astonishment, laughter, joy, sighs and listlessness — to mention but a few — as well as central issues concerning the will and reason's mastery of the emotions. Alanen believes that Ryle's picture of "Descartes' myth" of the "ghost in the machine" is itself a myth (an opinion expressed several years ago by Gordon Baker and Katherine J. Morris in their combative *Descartes' Dualism*) and a distortion of the true Descartes, who holds the human being to be an "*ens per se*" rather than an "*ens per accidens*," that is, a genuine unity, a real individual thing in its own right, and not merely a composite or couple of mind and body (as an embodied angel presumably is). It is Alanen's aim to detail Descartes's anthropology of the human being, for which it is essential to examine his views on what he considered to be those "confused modes of thought," sensation and emotion, which lacked that "clarity and distinctness" characteristic of pure intellection and volition, and which are produced by the mysterious intermingling of the mind and the body.

Alanen begins, in the first chapter, by outlining the unintegrated mechanistic physiology and cognitive psychology found in Descartes's earliest writings (the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, in particular); then, in chapter two, she turns to his mature view of the mind as embodied and his views on the knowledge of the embodied mind. Of particular interest here is Alanen's discussion of Descartes's claim that the union of body and mind is the third simple and primitive metaphysical notion alongside *thought* and *extension*, the respective "principal attributes" of mind and matter. Unlike these latter two notions, which can be clearly and distinctly known by the intellect (aided perhaps by the imagination), the mind-body union cannot be an object of true knowledge but only experienced. The emotions and sensations, the products of the union, are thus "confused" modes of thought. Each of us is intimately acquainted with the union and its confused mental products, and thus it has a common sense character rather than a scientific one. Alanen argues convincingly that, for Descartes, "thought and extension are technical notions, serving specific epistemological and scientific purposes, whereas the notion we have of ourselves as human persons is a non-technical, natural notion that cannot be explained in terms of these technical notions (p.74). We cannot *conceive* it, clearly and distinctly, but only *experience* it as embodied agents in the world. Somewhat less convincingly, she suggests that this conceptual

inexplicability

need not necessarily be seen as a failure to give a scientific account of the union, because "his doctrine of three primary notions can be welcomed as a

healthy admission of the inability of metaphysics and physical science to account for every thing we experience and have to deal with, and thereby also a

recognition of the role and value of other equally important domains of properly human experience" (p.77). No doubt there are certain aspects of human nature that are better understood through literature and art, say, than

from cognitive science; but it is not at all clear that the mind-body problem

can be taken to be one of them. Descartes's failure, and the failure of contemporary physicalist theories of mind, to account for the phenomenal character

of conscious experience, indicate, to my mind, the need rather for a radical

conceptual innovation in philosophy and science themselves.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 deal with

various aspects of Descartes's broad notion of thought (which for him was not

restricted to ratiocination but included sensation and emotion), such as consciousness, language, the intentionality of thought and sensation, and the

issue of animal mentality. With respect to the latter, Alanen argues, quite correctly, against such commentators as Zeno Vendler and Norman Malcolm, that,

while Descartes may well have equivocated on the notions of 'thought' and 'sensation'

and their cognates, and this contributed to his notorious denial that animals

have thoughts or sensations, the equivocation in question was not a matter of sliding between "propositional" and "non-propositional" thought. Descartes certainly did not equate all thought with propositional thought and then deny any thought at all (including sensations) to animals because they cannot entertain propositions. This anachronistic and rather wooden interpretation is a product of reading too much twentieth-century philosophy of language into Descartes. In a well-known passage in the Sixth Replies to Objections to the *Meditations*, Descartes distinguishes among three "grades" of sensory response, only the third of which can be taken to be "propositional" (because it consists of perceptual judgments about external objects). The second grade consists in what we might now call the conscious or phenomenal or subjective experience associated with sensory perception, which clearly need not be, and, *pace* currently fashionable "representationalist" theories of phenomenal consciousness, probably is not, propositional in structure. Though Alanen does not venture to say in what the alleged equivocation consists, it is pretty clear, I think, that Descartes does not equivocate between two sense of 'sensation' so much as deliberately distinguish between two sides to sensation: a material side, which is a mode of extended animal bodies, and a mental side, which is a mode of thought. Embodied humans have both; non-human animals have only the former, which can be explained purely mechanistically, as can all modes of extension. As he wrote in a letter to Mersenne, on 11 June 1640, "I do not explain the feeling of pain without reference to the soul. For in my view

pain

exists only in the understanding. What I do explain is all the external movements which accompany this feeling in us; in animals it is these movements

alone which occur, and not pain in the strict sense ...". This is not quite the end of the matter, of course, for the picture Descartes draws is further complicated by his definition of thought as "everything which we are aware

of as happening within us, in so far as we have awareness of it" (*Principles of Philosophy* I.9); and the fact, if it is one, that this kind of self-consciousness cannot be attributed to animals.

The last two chapters, 6 and 7,

which are the most novel in the book, concentrate on issues often neglected by

other commentators: Descartes's view of the passions or emotions — which, as Alanen

observes, "more than any other thoughts... testify to our embodied condition"

(p. 165) — as well as his conception of the will and the role of reason in the exercise of virtue and the control of the passions. Some of the specific topics

covered include: the context and novelty of Descartes's approach to the passions, the function and classification of the passions, the mastery of the

passions, reason versus passions, conflicts of soul and will, Descartes's notion of a free will, moral agency and moral therapy, and generosity as a virtue and a passion. Throughout there are many informative comparisons of Descartes's

views with those of the Stoics, Platonists, Aristotelians and Thomists, as well

as those of William James.

As I mentioned, Alanen says she will not attempt to discuss the nature of the union relation. But who, after all, could resist saying something about it, especially in such a book as this?

She says she wants to "insist on the institution of the mind-body union," which somehow "goes beyond the interactionist view." But how, exactly, does it go beyond it? All we are offered is the following: "Since the mind-body union, and hence the human body, has ends and goods of its own,

sensations and other phenomena depending on this union presuppose this finality

and cannot be constituted by mere causal interaction between independently

describable bodily and mental states" (p. 69). But why not? God has managed to construct embodied angels in such a way that does not require them

to have confused modes of thought, such as pain. So why did God take the

further step of "intermingling" us with our bodies? Why does the fulfilment of our ends and goods demand an intermingling? Alanen's tantalizing ideas cry

out for further development. The only other lament I have is the lack of a bibliography, which, in a book that contains nearly a hundred pages of substantial footnotes where citations are referenced in full only the first time they occur, makes chasing down references more difficult than they might

otherwise be. These minor shortcomings aside, there can be no doubt that Alanen,

drawing on the best of both English and French scholarship, does a wonderful job

of articulating a comprehensive vision of Descartes's metaphysical, epistemological and ethical views on the embodied mind. *Descartes's*

Concept

of Mind is a rigorous and imaginative work, and a worthy corrective to the popular image of Descartes's philosophy of mind as narrowly concerned only with the indubitably known immaterial mind of the solitary meditator.

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