

DESCARTES' DUALISM

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PREFACE

E. H. Gombrich tells a story to show 'the fate of exotic creatures in the illustrated books of the last few centuries before the advent of photography'. Dürer's famous woodcut of a rhinoceros depicted a bizarre creature apparently covered in armoured plating, complete with spikes and rivets (a veritable *bête-machine*). In 1790, over 250 years after the publication of that woodcut, James Bruce described it as 'wonderfully ill-executed in all its parts', and he held it to be 'the origin of all the monstrous forms under which that animal has been painted ever since'. His preferred engraving, 'designed from the life', is also covered in armour plates, though the rivets and spikes are somewhat reduced in number and size.¹ Whether due to a philosophical Dürer (perhaps more than one) or to the 'preconceived prejudices and inattention' to which Bruce ascribed the faults of later depictions of the rhinoceros, twentieth-century 'engravings' of Descartes' conception of the human being, even those 'designed from the life', have much the same character as Bruce's engraving.

Our principal target in this book is the 'preconceived prejudices' of twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophers. (We frequently use the word 'modern' as shorthand for 'twentieth-century Anglo-American'. We hope this term is neither confusing nor offensive in these 'post-modern' times; but abbreviations are ugly and 'twentieth-century Anglo-American' is, as Austin would have said, rather a mouthful.) This is what underlies both our inclusion of references to philosophers of mind like Daniel Dennett and Paul Churchland and our exclusion of French and German commentaries on Descartes. (French and German commentators have, no doubt, 'preconceived prejudices' of their own, but these are not our concern here.)

One main modern prejudice relates to ways of seeing the mind and the body; another to ways of seeing different ways of seeing things. There is, for example, widespread agreement today that 'the mental' includes sensations and emotions while excluding virtues and vices. Correlatively, 'the bodily' excludes sensations and emotions (a pain in the foot isn't literally *in the foot*); indeed the body is little more than an ambulatory vat of chemicals that serves to keep the brain alive. But

there is also widespread agreement that the modern way of seeing the scope of the terms 'mental' and 'bodily' is, for the most part, the *right* way. If other ways of seeing things are acknowledged to have existed in the past, we thank God (and Descartes) that we have progressed since then.

We think that the first of these prejudices influences not just the authors of monographs on philosophy of mind but, rather more worryingly, the authors of modern scholarly commentaries on Descartes.² This tends to blind them to the very different conception of the scope of 'mental' and 'bodily' that, we argue, informs his work. But our greatest fear is that the second of these prejudices will lead readers of our book to conclude that, if our interpretation is correct, there is *less* to be learned from Descartes than even his severest critics had previously supposed. We think that there is *more* to be learned from him than is dreamt of in modern philosophy.

¹ E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (5th edn), London: Phaidon, 1977, 70–1.

² Obviously not all modern commentators share the first prejudice; it is to be found principally (although neither only nor universally) in those who are also by way of being philosophers of mind. Nor do all modern commentators share the second, although it is perhaps more widespread. We simply aim to pick out a type.

VII: 80–1; CSM II: 56). If Nature teaches me that I am not present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship when in fact I *am*, when I would surely have to conclude that God is a deceiver.

Another strategy is to suggest that the intended contrast with the sailor in his ship is to be drawn in some dimension other than causal interaction. Though in both instances the two entities are connected by two-way relations of efficient causation, there is something more involved in the substantial union of mind and body. What could this be but the ‘phenomenology of being embodied’, the what-it-is-like-to-be-a-human-being? ‘What Descartes is drawing attention to here is the peculiar phenomenology of sensation – its special subjective character as present to our consciousness’ (Cottingham 1986: 126).⁶⁷ This interpretation looks anachronistic, and by Cottingham’s own admission is hard to square with Descartes’ ‘Official Dualism’. The fact that the Legend is driven to adopt this desperate remedy might seem a powerful argument against ascribing to Descartes the Doctrine of Cartesian Interaction which generates the problem.

The Legend ‘sees’ the main elements of Cartesian Dualism in Descartes’ texts in the same way that Dürer’s successors ‘saw’ armour plating when they draw the rhinoceros ‘from the life’. Achieving a more faithful representation is less a matter of discovering something hitherto unknown than one of learning to see what is right in front of your own eyes and of having the courage to draw what you see.

Our hope is to catalyse a similar transformation of the impression made by Descartes’ thinking on modern readers. This is less a matter of adducing novel textual evidence than of probing more critically the exhibits already on display, of taking a wider look around at elements of his thinking already familiar to you, and of resisting the temptation to repress your doubts about the Legend as infantile. In this setting the Cartesian Legend’s ‘decisive evidence’ loses much of its probative force.

67 ‘The entire content of Descartes’s denial that he is a pilot in a ship is phenomenological’ (Williams 1978: 280); yet it is evident that the phrase ‘very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled’ is *equivalent* to the manifestly ‘metaphysical’ phrase ‘substantially united’ (AT VII: 228; CSM II: 160), and how are we to understand that?

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Cartesian Dualism is, for Anglo-American thinkers in the late twentieth century, a highly compelling vision: it is seen as a tempting, if deeply flawed, conception of the relation of the mind and the body. As we saw in Chapter 3, the direct textual evidence that Descartes propounded it is not compelling. In this chapter we take the argument two stages further. We show that Descartes’ own vision, although equally elegant and immensely exciting to his contemporaries, was entirely different. It was grounded in the most basic elements of the Aristotelian tradition of logic, metaphysics and psychology (even though it cut out many of the intricacies of medieval scholasticism). As a consequence, we argue, the leading ideas of Cartesian Dualism are entirely *at odds* with the very framework of Descartes’ thinking. In many cases, he would have condemned much now taken for granted (including a great deal which is ascribed to him by the Cartesian Legend) as ‘confused ideas’: ideas manifesting the very misconceptions at which he directed his philosophical therapy!

The heart of Cartesian Dualism was a simple and compelling vision. The same is true of Descartes’ Dualism, the (different) vision which we will elicit from his texts. We can summarize it in the following four maxims:

- 1 There are two and only two kinds of (finite) substances: corporeal things and thinking things (minds or rational souls).
- 2 The essence of the mind is thought, the essence of the body is extension.
- 3 Human bodies and their properties are objects of sense-perception. Minds and their properties cannot be objects of sense-perception.
- 4 Interaction between mind and body is ‘rationally unintelligible’; in a human being, a mind and a body are ‘substantially united’.

These four maxims are (or should be) uncontroversially part of Descartes’ doctrine. (That is no doubt all to the good, in a minimalist summary of his dualism!) But each of them has implications and refinements that are alien to modern thinkers and hence seldom noted now. The task of this chapter is to put flesh on the skeleton: to elucidate Descartes’ conception of the nature of the embodied soul and the ensouled body.