Mind-Body Union and the Limits of Cartesian Metaphysics

Alison Simmons
Harvard University

Human beings pose a problem for Descartes’ metaphysics. Descartes is, of course, a substance dualist: mind and body are “really distinct” substances that can exist apart from each other. Each has its own “principal attribute” that exhausts its nature: minds are all and only thinking things; bodies are all and only extended things. God and angels are examples of Cartesian minds existing on their own. Rocks, robots, finches, and ferns are examples of Cartesian bodies existing on their own. Human beings pose a problem because we clearly have both minds and bodies, and yet we don’t seem to be merely aggregates of the two: I seem to be something that both thinks and is extended, not something that has a part that thinks and a part that is extended. What, then, is the metaphysical status of the human being?

1. Descartes uses the terms “mind” (mens and esprit) and “soul” (anima and âme) more or less interchangeably. I follow Descartes’ declared preference for the term “mind” (Second Replies, AT VII 161 and Fifth Replies, AT VII 356), though many of the passages I quote employ the term “soul.” It is worth noting that most of Descartes’ readers would not have understood the terms to be interchangeable. Aristotelian readers would have taken “mind” to refer to the intellectual faculty of the human soul, and “soul” to refer to the principle of life that, in human beings, encompasses not only the intellectual faculty but also the sensitive, locomotive, and nutritive faculties. For helpful discussions of the change in conception of mind and soul, see Fowler 1999, James 2000, and Rozemond 2006.

2. See, for example, Discourse 4, AT VI 33; Dedicatory letter to the Sorbonne in Meditations, AT VII 6; Meditation 6, AT VII 78; Second Replies, AT VII 169-170; and Principles I.60, AT VIII 28-29.

3. Thus, for example: “each substance has one principal property that constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred” (Principles I.53, AT VIII 25, italics mine). For a helpful discussion of Descartes’ “principal attribute” conception substance, see Rozemond 1998, chapter 1. Dan Garber argues in Garber 2013 that Descartes develops this theory of substance only in response to materialist objections to the dualism presented in the Meditations. This developmental question should not impact the claims I make here, as most of the texts I rely on are written late in Descartes’ career.

4. Descartes is certainly not the only philosopher in the period to face a problem concerning the metaphysical status of the human being. In the theological context of the period, most philosophers faced a version of it: in 1513, the Fifth Lateran Council, which Descartes references at AT VII 3,
This question has attracted a lot of scholarly attention and many proposed answers over the years. I begin by arguing negatively that we cannot, in fact, give a proper metaphysical account of the human being within bounds of Descartes’ metaphysics. More to the point, I argue that this is Descartes’ considered view. The reason we cannot is really quite simple: we do not have a clear and distinct intellectual idea of the mind-body union that Descartes takes to be constitutive of the human being. Where we have no clear and distinct intellectual idea, Descartes thinks we should withhold judgment at least for the purpose of doing metaphysics. I am not suggesting that human beings do not exist in the Cartesian world, or that we can’t know whether they do, or that we can’t say anything about them. Descartes takes us to have decisive evidence that human beings exist and that they are mind-body unions of some sort. But we have no way to understand just how mind and body unite to form a human being or, for that matter, how they causally interact. And so, I will argue, they fall outside the domain of any humanly possible metaphysics. For us there will always be an element of mystery to these things.

That may seem a bitter pill to swallow, since it acknowledges a profound limitation to Cartesian metaphysics. I will argue positively, however, that while the human being falls beyond our intellectual grasp, it does not fall beyond our epistemic grasp altogether. While we do not understand the mind-body union that constitutes us as human beings, Descartes does allow that we sense it, and in particular that we feel it: our access to our humanity comes not through the intellect but through the senses, and in particular through the internal senses—through such phenomena as proprioception, kinesthesis, bodily sensations like tickles and pains, appetites like hunger and thirst, and passions like admiration and fear. That may seem like chasing down the bitter pill with pickle juice: since when does Descartes advocate “sense it” or “feel it” as a promising epistemic strategy? I agree with a handful of scholars who insist that Descartes means us to take seriously the suggestion that we do not understand but rather sense our humanity. Getting a handle on this sensory cognition is critical to our forming a full picture of Descartes’ conception of the human being. I part ways with my fellow travelers in my reading of just what it means for us to sense our humanity and of its implications for a Cartesian study of the human being. As I read the texts, Descartes’ position is that we have an internal-sense access to ourselves as mind-body unions that provides a rich phenomenology of embodiment that is of both theoretical and practical interest to a Cartesian study of human nature. I find central

declared as true propositions to be defended by Christian philosophers both that the human soul is united in a per se unity with the body to form a single thing (thus reaffirming the verdict of the 1311-1312 Council of Vienne) and that it has a separate substantiality so that it can survive the death of the body. Making sense of the metaphysics of the human being was therefore no easy task for any Christian philosopher wanting to avoid a charge of heresy. Philosophers inspired by Plato struggled to account for the unity of the human being while those inspired by Aristotle struggled with the soul’s separability and immortality. For an excellent discussion of the theological context for this issue and Descartes’ struggle with it, see Fowler 1999, chapter 3.

5. I survey this literature at the end of Section I.

6. This is the dramatic conclusion of Voss 1994: “man has disappeared from the Cartesian universe” (p. 300).

7. I am making an assumption here that there is a strong connection between clear and distinct intellectual ideas and metaphysics in Descartes. I will spell this out in Section III.A.
elements of this internal-sense phenomenology in precisely those passages that scholars have mined for clues to a Cartesian metaphysics of the mind-body union and interaction, such as the famous "sailor in his ship" passages, the infamous heaviness analogy, and Descartes’ puzzling suggestion that the mind is "co-extended with" and "whole in the whole and whole in the part of" the body.10 If I’m right, these texts are meant to redirect us from metaphysics to phenomenology, from a study of mind and matter to a study of the embodied human being.11

I. Preliminaries: what, exactly, is the problem?
A couple of substantive preliminaries about Descartes’ dualism are in order. These are claims that I am not going to argue for here, but that should help to make it clear why the human being poses a genuine puzzle for Cartesian metaphysics in the first place. These claims are familiar to Descartes scholars, but despite the scholarly attention they have received, they have failed to make much of an impact on the general understanding of Descartes’ dualism. I therefore review them.

First, the real distinction between mind and body that Descartes made so (in)famous is popularly taken to be a strong metaphysical thesis: the human mind and body are separate entities. In fact, the real distinction is a good deal weaker than that. To say that the human mind and body are really distinct is not to say that they are separable; more specifically, it is to say that they can exist without the body; and similarly the body can exist apart from the mind” (AT VII 425; the 19 January 1642 letter to Gibieuf, AT III 477-78; and the June 1642 letter to Regius, AT III 567).

That the real distinction is a matter not of separation but of separability is widely accepted by Descartes scholars, though there is some dispute about just what this separability amounts to (see Rozemond 1998, chapters 3-12 and Rozemond 2011).12 The modal character of the real distinction is on display in the conclusion of the real distinction argument in Meditation 6: “I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it” (AT VII 78, italics mine). Consider also the definition of real distinction in the Second Replies: “two substances are said to be really distinct when each of them can exist apart from each other” (AT VII 162, italics mine). That the separability depends on the power of God is clear in Descartes’ reconstruction of the real distinction argument in the Second Replies: “Therefore the mind can, at least through the power of God, exist without the body; and similarly the body can exist apart from the mind” (AT VII 170, italics mine; see also Sixth Replies, AT VII 425; Principles 1.60, AT VIII 29; the 19 January 1642 letter to Gibieuf, AT III 477-78; and the June 1642 letter to Regius, AT III 567).

That the real distinction is a matter not of separation but of separability is widely accepted by Descartes scholars, though there is some dispute about just what this separability amounts to (see Hoffman 2002) and about whether separability constitutes the real distinction or is merely a sign of it (see Rozemond 1998, chapters 3-12 and Rozemond 2011).

12. The modal character of the real distinction is on display in the conclusion of the real distinction argument in Meditation 6: “I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it” (AT VII 78, italics mine). Consider also the definition of real distinction in the Second Replies: “two substances are said to be really distinct when each of them can exist apart from each other” (AT VII 162, italics mine). That the separability depends on the power of God is clear in Descartes’ reconstruction of the real distinction argument in the Second Replies: “Therefore the mind can, at least through the power of God, exist without the body; and similarly the body can exist apart from the mind” (AT VII 170, italics mine; see also Sixth Replies, AT VII 425; Principles 1.60, AT VIII 29; the 19 January 1642 letter to Gibieuf, AT III 477-78; and the June 1642 letter to Regius, AT III 567).

13. AT VII 203. The Platonic doctrine was theologically suspect for a number of reasons, many of which turn on Church doctrines that seem to require that the body be understood to be an essential part of our human nature; those doctrines include creation, the nature of Christ, the nature and subject of virtue and sin, and bodily resurrection. For discussion see Fowler 1999, chapters 3-12 and Rozemond 2011.

14. Despite distancing himself from the Platonic view here in the Second Replies to Arnauld, Descartes invokes Platonic imagery in the Fifth Replies to Gassendi: “so long as it is joined to the body, the mind uses it as an instrument to perform the operations which occupy most of its time” (AT VII 354). In his August 1641 letter to the anonymous Gassendist, ‘Hyperaspistes,” he again invokes a Platonic image, this time of the body’s serving as a “prison”
does not take the real distinction to pose a threat to our integrity (in this life) as single things whose nature includes both mind and body. We’ll see why in a moment.

The second preliminary is this: when sundered from the body, the mind is almost unrecognizable. The sundered Cartesian mind is pure intellect and will: it has no sensations or appetites or passions of the sort that comprise the bulk of our embodied mental lives as human beings. It is more or less an angel. It is this angelic conception of mind as pure intellect that is at work in the real distinction argument. That is what we are to conceive when we conceive mind on its own. And that is what we are supposed to be able to conceive as capable of existing apart from body—not the whole of our conscious mental lives. The sundered body, for its part, amounts to a complicated machine, to the soul (AT III 424). In these latter discussions, however, the issue at stake is whether the mind has any capacity to operate independently of the body, and so Descartes is stressing the independence of purely intellectual thought by contrasting it with the dependence of sensory thought on the body. See Voss 1994, however, for further passages that might be read in a Platonic light.

15. I focus on the cognitive faculties of the mind, largely ignoring the will, because that is where the difference between the embodied and separated mind lies. That Descartes restricts the cognitive life of the separated mind to the pure intellect is clear from his August 1649 letter to More (AT V 402). It is also implied by his claims that the pure intellect is the only cognitive faculty that does not involve the brain (Fifth Replies, AT VII 358) and that sensation and imagination are inessential to the mind (Meditation 6, AT VII 73 and 78 and the 19 January 1642 letter to Gibieuf, AT III 479).

16. I say “more or less” because while the separated human mind and an angelic mind resemble each other in having only purely intellectual thought there may be important differences between them. Burman reports Descartes to have said that angels have “many more perfections than our mind, or have perfection of a higher degree” (AT V 157). Perhaps the separated human mind retains a capacity for sensation (actualized by union with a body) that the angel lacks (see Rozemond 1998, p. 189 and Des Chene 2001, p. 141). It’s hard to know how far to push the similarity between the two separated minds, since Descartes is manifestly uneasy guessing at the nature of the angels (see his August 1649 letter to More, AT V 402). The later Cartesian, Pierre-Sylvain Régis, by contrast, is confident that human minds and angelic minds differ in kind (for discussion, see Schmaltz 2002, chapter 4).


and while it arguably suffers a less dramatic change than the mind on separation, it does suffer some changes: in addition to changes in the configuration of its parts that are required for separation, it loses a certain unity or indivisibility that Descartes grants the ensouled human body and it arguably loses its claim to be described as healthy or ill, which also seems to be restricted to the ensouled human body. Cartesian dualism, then, is starker than we popularly imagine: it is a dualism of angels and machines. And this brings me to my final preliminary.

There is one metaphysical account of the human being that can be ruled out immediately, viz., the aggregate view: simply pair a Cartesian mind and a Cartesian body and, voilà, you have a human being. The problem with the aggregate view isn’t just that it is unsatisfying to us since it makes our minds and body seem too disjointed or that it runs up against Church orthodoxy. The problem is that it’s missing...
too many of the things that are most distinctive of our human nature: sensations, appetites, and passions. What mind-body aggregation yields is an angel or pure intellect in a machine, one that understands the mechanism of the machine and perhaps can move its parts through volition. While there was some precedent in the period for depicting human beings as angels in animal bodies, and while a couple of commentators have charged Descartes with this form of “angelism,” Descartes himself insists that a real human being is nothing like an angel in a machine. He takes the presence of sensations, appetites and passions to be decisive evidence that the human being consists in some kind of a union of mind and body, and not in a mere aggregation of them. Thus if God started his creative project with Cartesian minds and Cartesian bodies, he must have engaged in some metaphysical chemistry to get human beings on the planet. Or perhaps God didn’t create human beings out of pre-existing minds and bodies, but simply created human beings as entities from which he can extract angel-like minds and machine-like bodies. I’m not going to pronounce on God’s creative practices. Either way, it seems clear that human beings, by Descartes lights, are more than aggregates of Cartesian minds and bodies; they are unions of them. That is likely why Descartes brushes off Arnauld’s charge of Platonism.

Of course, this just makes the problem more pressing: what is this mind-body union that constitutes us as human beings? And how does it fit into Descartes’ dualistic metaphysics? This is where Descartes’ commentators roll up their sleeves and get to work. Their many suggestions range from, at one extreme, the view that the mind-body union consists in there being an appropriate kind of causal connection or “institution of nature” between mind and body to, at the opposite extreme, the view that the mind-body union, and so the human being, constitutes a third kind of substance. There are

20. Jacques Maritain famously writes: “Cartesian dualism breaks man up into two complete substances, joined to one another no one knows how... an angel inhabiting a machine and directing it by means of the pineal gland” (Maritain 1932(1944), p. 179(275)). Stephen Voss argues that Descartes shifts his position a few times, but ultimately is stuck with angelism in his (failed) attempt to accommodate human beings in his metaphysics (see Voss 1994, pp. 274 and 297).

21. In the Discourse, he writes that in his previously written but unpublished Man, “I showed how it does not suffice for [the mind] to be lodged in the human body like a pilot in his ship, except perhaps to move its limbs, but that it must be more closely joined and united with the body in order to have, besides this power of movement, feelings and appetites like ours and so constitute a real man” (AT VI 59). See also Meditations 6, AT VII 81; Fourth Replies, AT VII 227-228; the August 1641 letter to Hyperaspistes, AT III 424; and the January 1642 letter to Regius, AT III 493.

22. A number of Descartes scholars have rightly attacked Ryle’s famous “ghost in the machine” reading of Cartesian dualism. For an extensive attack on his reading see Alanen 2003, chapter 2. Cottingham amusingly notes that even Ryle’s choice of “ghost” (rather than angel) is inept since a ghost (unlike an angel) has a bodily provenance and a “hankering after its former [corporeal] life” that an angel would not (Cottingham 2008, p. 30).

23. For examples of the causal connection reading, see Baker and Hacker 1996, chapter 4; Chappell 1994; Loeb 2005; and Wilson 1978, chapter 6. Some interpreters in this camp place precise restrictions on what kind of causal connection mind and body must have to constitute a union. Minna Koivuniemi and Ed Curley, for example, argue that it amounts to a mind and body that are so causally related that the body causes ideas in the mind that have a distinctive phenomenology, namely the affective phenomenology of bodily sensations (Koivuniemi and Curley 2015, pp. 88-94). Dominik Perler argues that it amounts to a mind and body that are so causally related that the body causes (or rather occasions) ideas in the mind that play a distinctive functional role in preserving the body (Perler 2016, p. 375). There are many versions of the trialist or “third substance” reading as well. Paul Hoffman and Justin Skirry argue that the Cartesian human being is an Aristotelian hylomorphic substance (see Hoffman 1986, 2002, and 2008 and Skirry 2005). Henri Gouhier and Tad Schmaltz argue that the Cartesian human being must be a third Cartesian substance with its own principal attribute and modes (Gouhier 1962, pp. 229-230 and 335-336, and Schmaltz 1992a, but cf. Schmaltz 2002, p. 177, for a retraction). Janet Broughton and Ruth Mattern argue that it is a compound substance and that the union is an attribute of the compound substance (Broughton and Mattern 1978). Martial Guéroult argues that the mind-body union is a kind of psychophysiological substance (the compound nature of which is unanalyzable) and that the whole human being is therefore constituted by three different substances that God assembles together, viz., mind, body, and mind-body union (see Guéroult 1968(1985), v. 2, pp. 123-127(97-100), 136-137(107-108), and 163(130)).
Establishing the negative claim and its consequences is the task of Sections II and III. This will require going over some territory that will be familiar to Descartes scholars, but I will give my own guided tour of it. I focus especially on the “third primitive notion” of mind and body that Descartes introduces in the correspondence with Elisabeth: what is it and how does it preclude a metaphysics of the human being? In Section IV, I turn to the more constructive task of what we can and should do with the primitive notion of mind-body union and how it contributes to our study of the human being more generally.

II. The Elisabethan starting point

II.A. The third primitive notion introduced

I take as my point of departure Descartes’ correspondence with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, which began in 1643, two years after the Meditations was first published. This is a rather late point of departure, but I think this is where Descartes starts to wrestle seriously with the issue of the mind-body union. He had been pressed on the issue a few times before, but until this point he has done little more than commit himself to the claim that human beings are unions of mind and body and offer up the presence of sensations, appetites, and passions as decisive evidence for it. He hasn’t really tried to explain and individuates that human body both synchronically and diachronically are bodily sensations (see Brown 2006, p. 6 and 2007, p. 280). While her reading may be consistent with Descartes’ metaphysics, so are some of the other interpretations on offer. Part of my point is that, absent a clear and distinct intellectual idea of the union, we aren’t in a position to adjudicate among them, and there is something else we can and should be doing when we want to study the human being.

26. He is pressed by Arnauld in the Fourth Objections (AT VII 203); by Gassendi in the Fifth Objections and the Disquisitio Metaphysica sive Dubitationes et Instantiae (AT VII 343-345 and Gassendi 1644, pp. 612-616); by the authors of the Sixth Objections (AT VII 413); by the anonymous Gassendist “Hyperaspistes” (AT III 411-412); and, perhaps most famously, by Regius, whose “Cartesian” treatment of the human being incurred the wrath of Voetius in Utrecht and prompted Descartes to restate his position (the exchange can be found throughout AT III and in Bos 2002).
it. So far, his descriptions of the union amount to hesitant metaphors, puzzling analogies, and technical terms borrowed from his scholastic predecessors: the mind and body are "as it were intermingled" (quasi perfomixtum)\textsuperscript{27} or "conjoined" (conjuncta, adjuncta, jointe)\textsuperscript{28} and somehow "compose" (componere, composer)\textsuperscript{29} a single human being; mind is to body as heaviness is to body\textsuperscript{30}; and the mind-body union is an ens per se not an ens per accident and a unio substantialis.\textsuperscript{31} Elisabeth, however, forces the issue and Descartes' response to her is revealing.

Having read the Meditations, Elisabeth presents Descartes with a puzzle: if mind is a purely thinking thing, and body a purely extended thing, then how does the mind move the body in an intentional action like reaching for a milkshake (AT III 661, my example)?\textsuperscript{32} Moving the

\textsuperscript{27} Meditation 6, AT VII 81; Sixth Replies, AT VII 437; and the August 1641 letter to Hyperaspistes, AT III 424.
\textsuperscript{28} Discourse V, AT VI 59; Meditation 6, AT VII 78 and 81; Fourth Replies, AT VII 228; Sixth Replies, AT VII 437 and 442; and the August 1641 letter to Hyperaspistes, AT III 424.
\textsuperscript{29} Man, AT XI 199; Discourse 5, AT VI 46; Meditation 6, AT VII 81, 82, 82-83, 85, and 88; Fourth Replies, AT VII 222; Sixth Replies, AT VII 423-425 and 444-445; the August 1641 letter to 'Hyperaspistes,'AT III 422; the mid-December 1641 letter to Regius, AT III 460; and the January 1642 letter to Regius, AT III 508.
\textsuperscript{30} Sixth Replies, AT VII 442. See also the August 1641 letter to "Hyperaspistes," where he invokes a comparison with "real qualities" of which heaviness is often used as an example (AT III 424-425).
\textsuperscript{31} Ens per se: December 1641 and January 1642 letters to Regius, AT III 460, 492-493, and 508. Unio substantialis: Fourth Replies, AT VII 219 and 228 and the January 1642 letter to Regius, AT III 493 and 508. Descartes also occasionally refers to the mind or soul as the “substantial form” of the human body as, for example, in the January 1642 letter to Regius (AT III 503 and 515). These expressions typically arise in contexts in which Descartes is concerned about theological controversy and is mindful of using terms acceptable to his opponents; just how to interpret them is a complicated matter. For discussion see, Fowler 1999, Brown 2007, Normore 2011, and Koivuniemi and Curley 2015.

\textsuperscript{32} Gassendi had already raised this worry in the Fifth Objections. Indeed he raised a series of questions about “how the corporeal can communicate with the incorporeal and of what relationship may be established between the two” (AT VII 345). Descartes’ reply to Gassendi, however, is simply to dismiss the objection.
First, I consider that there are in us certain primitive notions that are like originals on the pattern of which we form all our other knowledge. There are only very few of these notions...we have, for the body in particular, only the notion of extension, from which follow the notions of shape and movement; and for the soul alone, we have only that of thought, in which are included the perceptions of the understanding and the inclinations of the will; and finally, for the soul and the body together, we have only that of their union, on which depends [de laquelle depend] that of the power [la force] the soul has to move [mouvoir] the body and the body to act [d’agir] on the soul, in causing [causant] its sensations and passions. (AT III 665, italics mine) 33, 34

33. When Gassendi asks how mind and body can interact in the wake of Descartes’ Replies to the Fifth Objections, Descartes similarly replies: “These questions presuppose amongst other things an explanation of the union between the soul and the body, which I have not yet dealt with at all” (AT IX 213, italics mine).

34. There is some scholarly debate about whether this and other passages support the claim that, on Descartes’ view, mind-body interaction depends (metaphysically, explanatorily, conceptually, or otherwise) on mind-body union. Louis Loeb, for example, denies it, arguing that mind-body interaction constitutes the mind-body union, and therefore cannot depend on it in any interesting way (Loeb 1981, pp. 126-134). This passage is difficult to read along Loeb’s lines. Descartes introduces the mind-body union here to address Elisabeth’s question how mind can act on body, given that it can’t act on body in the way that bodies act on each other. Descartes takes the question seriously (it is a “question that one can ask me most properly in view of the writings I have published” (AT III 664)), and he invokes mind-body union in an effort to be responsive to it. But if mind-body union just consists in mind-body interaction, the reply is non-responsive: it amounts to saying, “mind can act on body because it can (because that’s what being united to the body amounts to).” Descartes introduces the union in an effort to help explain how that curious sort of interaction can occur—to help Elisabeth conceive “the power the soul has to move the body and the body has to act on the soul in causing its sensation and passions”—not to simply state that it does. (Whether it succeeds in doing so is another matter!)

Descartes also introduces the union to distinguish human mind-body interaction from angelic (pilot-in-a-ship style) mind-body interaction and, in particular, to explain why we have sensations and passions while the angel interacting with a body does not. Thus, for example: “[the mind] must be more closely joined and united with the body in order to have, besides this power of movement, feelings and appetites like ours and so constitute a real man” (Discourse 5, AT VI 59; see also the January 1642 letter to Regius, AT III 493). Sensations and passions ‘arise from’ and occur ‘because of’ the mind’s union with body (Meditation 6, AT VII 81; Sixth Replies, AT VII 437; and the August 1641 letter to Hyperaspistes, AT III 424). While one could try to read these passages as giving a kind of formal cause explanation (in human beings, bodily states give rise to sensations instead of intellec tions because that sort of interaction is just what makes something be a human being, i.e., a mind-body union), I think it is more natural to read Descartes as suggesting that union makes possible or underwrites, rather than is constituted by, a kind of interaction that results in sensations and passion.

35. There are, however, plenty of hints in earlier texts that the mind-body union requires a treatment of its own, above and beyond that of mind alone and body alone. In the opening of Man, Descartes says that to give a proper account of the human being he will need to explain first body alone, then mind alone, and then (as a further matter) the union of mind and body (AT XI 119-120); so far as we know he never managed to write the second and third parts. In Meditation 6, Descartes distinguishes three natures that belong to him as a human being: his nature insofar as it pertains to mind alone; his nature insofar as it pertains to body alone; and his nature insofar as it pertains to him as a combination (compositio) of the two (AT VII 82). The Principles, written around the same time as the letters to Elisabeth, contains an echo of the three primitive notions at 1.48, where Descartes recognizes a class of phenomena that “must not be referred either to the mind alone or to the body” but which “arise from the close and intimate union of our mind with the body” (AT VIII 23). Even in these texts, however, there is no mention of a “primitive notion” through which to conceive the union or its phenomena.
in the face of a really good objection from Elisabeth. Tempting as that interpretive option may be, I agree with a handful of other scholars that we should take the third primitive notion of mind and body seriously as representing Descartes’ considered view about our cognitive access to the mind-body union and, consequently, to any causal interaction between mind and body.36 What, then, is this primitive notion of the union?

We should not get distracted by Descartes’ use of the unusual term “notion” here. He uses “notion” interchangeably with “idea” in the correspondence with Elisabeth and elsewhere and I will too.37 Instead we should start by asking what Descartes means by describing these three notions or ideas as “primitive”? In what sense is the notion or idea of the union in particular primitive?

II.B. The third primitive notion: what makes it primitive?

It is unlikely that Descartes means to say that the notion of the mind-body union is primitive in the sense of being unanalyzable, for the other primitive notions are clearly analyzable. The primitive notion of body as extension, for example, is analyzable into size, shape, motion, and the whole of Euclidean geometry, through which we learn its many properties.38 What he tells Elisabeth is this: “Being primitive, each notion can be understood only through itself” (AT III 666) and “not by comparison with any of the others” (AT III 691). Being primitive, then, means something like not analyzable in terms of the other primitive notions. We cannot analyze mind in terms of body, or body in terms of mind; nor can we analyze mind or body in terms of the union or the union in terms of mind and/or body.39 Okay, but what does that mean? At the very least, it means that the notions are not reducible to each other. Our primitive notion of the mind-body union is not reducible to any other ideas, including our clear and distinct primitive ideas of mind and body. (This gives us a further reason to reject the aggregate view of the human being, for conceiving the union as an aggregate of mind and body would be to reduce the idea of union to those of mind and body.) Our clear and distinct ideas of mind and body thus seem to be adequate for conceiving the real distinction between mind and body, but not for conceiving their union.

Descartes goes on to suggest that our ideas of mind and body are not only inadequate for conceiving the union but somehow inappropriate. Once one has the ideas of mind and body in place, he tells Elisabeth, the next job is to figure out “how to conceive those notions that pertain to the union of the soul with the body without those that pertain to the body alone or to the soul alone [sans celles qui appartiennent au corps seul, or à l’âme seule]” (AT III 666; italics mine). This takes things to

36. Henri Gouhier takes the third primitive notion to lead us to a positive Cartesian metaphysics of the union and interaction (Gouhier 1962, chapters 12-13). Dan Garber and Tad Schmaltz argue that Descartes ultimately fumbles the ball in trying to use it to explain the metaphysics of mind-body interaction (Garber 1983 and Schmaltz 1992a). Lili Alanen, Deborah Brown, and John Carriero are (rightly, in my view) more cautious about taking the primitive notion to lead us to a substantive metaphysical account of mind-body union and interaction (Alanen 1996, 2000, 2003, chapter 3 and 2008a; Brown 2006, pp. 12-15 and 2007; Carriero 2009, pp. 362-365). My differences with these latter three scholars emerge below.

37. In the correspondence he refers to these three primitive “ideas or notions” (AT III 691). Elsewhere, at Principles 1.47, he announces his intention to enumerate “all the simple notions which are the basic components of our thoughts” (AT VIII 22). In two 1641 letters (one to Mersenne and one to the abbot of Launay) he refers to “clear and distinct notions” of mind and body (AT III 395 and 420); and in an earlier 1640 letter to Mersenne he refers to a “primary notion” we have of free will (AT III 259).
Mind-Body Union and the Limits of Cartesian Metaphysics

But how could this be? How could we have competing, and equally primitive, ideas of the relation between mind and body? The answer, I propose, is that the third primitive notion is a different kind of idea from the other two. The primitive notions of mind and body that underwrite our apprehension of the real distinction are purely intellectual ideas innate to the human mind. We have no such idea of mind-body union. The primitive notion through which we conceive the union of mind and body, and consequently their interaction, is, as I document below, a sensory idea. In particular, I will argue, it is an idea of the internal senses. That is what makes the primitive notions independent of each other and what makes for the competing conceptions of their relation. I am not the first person to insist that the primitive notion of the mind-body union is a sensory idea, but my understanding of how its being sensory makes it primitive, of precisely what kind of sensory idea it is, and, most especially, of its consequences differ in significant ways from others, as I will explain. 41 First, however, let’s turn to the textual evidence that the primitive notion of union is a sensory idea.

II.C. The third primitive notion: textual evidence that it is sensory

Descartes says explicitly that the primitive notion of mind-body union is a sensory idea, but he doesn’t get around to it until after Elisabeth has struggled mightily but futilely to conceive how mind and body can causally interact employing the intellectual ideas of them that she drew from her reading of the Meditations. 42 Descartes’ initial suggestion and body as one thing in a way that contradicts or interferes with our conceiving it as two things, since causal relations typically involve two things and, chemistry aside, rarely transform those two things into one.


42. There are, however, plenty of hints in Meditation 6 that our access to mind-body union and interaction is sensory. Consider, for example: “I sensed [sensi] that I have a head, hands, feet, and other limbs that constitute this body that I regarded as part of me, or even more as if it were the whole
that she employ her primitive notion of the union clearly didn’t help her. When she apologetically replies that that she still doesn’t get it (and offers two further objections to the possibility of mind-body causal interaction), Descartes offers to “note the things I omitted” in the previous letter (AT III 691). He explains:

After distinguishing three kinds [genres] of ideas or primitive notions that are each known in their own particular way and not by comparison with one another...I should have explained the difference between these three kinds of notions and between the operations of the soul through which we have them, and to say how to render each of them familiar and easy to ourselves. (AT III 691)

He goes on to explain the “great difference” (une grande difference) between these three sorts of primitive notion as follows:

The soul is conceived only by the pure understanding (l’entendement) [i.e., the pure intellect], the body, that is to say, extension, shapes, and motions, can also be known by the understanding alone, but is much better known by the understanding aided by the imagination; 43 of me” (AT VII 74). This passage admittedly occurs in the context of the meditator rehearsing her pre-meditative sense-based beliefs as she prepares to re-evaluate them in the light of her cognitive exercises. As we’ll see below, however, this belief is by and large reinstated, sensory evidence and all, later in Meditation 6 (AT VII 80-81).

Descartes is curiously inconsistent about mathematical cognition. Most often he suggests, as he does here, that the imagination plays an important role in it (see also his 13 November 1639 letter to Mersenne, AT II 622). Even the meditator’s discovery of the essence of body in Meditation 5 is cast in terms of imagination: “I distinctly imagine [imaginer] quantity...or the extension of this quantity” (AT VII 63). Occasionally, however, he insists that the imagination has nothing to do with mathematical cognition: “one might perhaps believe that this whole science is most under the sway of our imagination since it considers only sizes, shapes, and movements. It is not at all grounded on its phantasms, but rather on the clear and distinct notion of our mind” (July 1641 letter to Mersenne, AT III 395).

This is a considerable omission! Poor Elisabeth has been banging her Meditations-trained intellect against the wall only to have Descartes tell her she has to stop using her intellect and start using her senses if she wants to conceive the union and interaction of mind and body. Descartes reinforces the point when he explains how to “render each of [the primitive notions] familiar and easy to ourselves”:

Metaphysical thoughts that exercise the pure understanding serve to render the notion of the soul familiar. The study of mathematics, which exercises principally the imagination in its consideration of shapes and movements, accustoms us to form very distinct notions of body. And lastly, it is in using only life and ordinary conversations and in abstaining from meditating and studying those things that exercise the imagination that we learn to conceive the union of the soul and the body. (AT III 692)

Elisabeth’s problem, apparently, is that she’s been doing too much Cartesian metaphysics. She has to stop using her intellect, stop philosophizing, and start going about her pre-philosophical sensory life in order to conceive the union and interaction of mind and body. Lest we think this is just a way to put Elisabeth off, and dodge a bullet, Descartes says much the same thing to Arnauld five years later: the mind’s ability to move the body depends on the union of mind and body, and this “is shown to us by no ratiocination or comparison with other things, but by the most certain and most evident everyday experience; for this is one of those self-evident [per se notis] things
We’re used to Descartes insisting that the senses get in the way of our intellectual pursuits. We’re not used to him saying the intellect gets in the way of our sensory pursuits. In the case of mind and body, our sensory experience impedes our intellectual apprehension of their real distinction. He writes to Arnauld: “the fact that the mind is closely conjoined with the body, which we experience continuously through the senses, results in our not being aware of real distinction between them unless we attentively meditate on the subject” (AT VII 228-229; italics mine). He thus constructs a set of meditations designed to withdraw the reader’s mind away from the senses and liberate her pure intellect so that she can conceive the real distinction. Most of Descartes’ interlocutors resist the real distinction. That is because, by Descartes’ lights, they are still so immersed in the senses that they cannot attain an intellectual vision of much of anything. In Elisabeth and Arnauld, however, Descartes meets a new kind of interlocutor. They have done their meditating; they know how to use their pure intellects; and they have no trouble grasping the real distinction. Their problem is that they have lost their access to the mind-body union. They are trying to understand intellectually what Descartes insists we can only feel sensorily. Martial Guéroult puts the point beautifully:

In order to access the [distinction], we must ‘close our eyes, plug our ears;’ in brief, ‘we must turn aside all our senses’; in order to access to the [union], we must, in some way, shut ourselves from pure understanding, ‘put aside clear and distinct ideas, and particularly the reasons that have proven the distinction of substances’ in order

Descartes himself diagnoses Elisabeth’s problem: “It was these [metaphysical] meditations that have made her [Majesty] find obscurity in the notion we have of their union” (AT III 693). She needs to get back in touch with her senses to get a clear view of it.

We owe Elisabeth and Arnauld a debt of gratitude for pushing Descartes to fill in this important but hitherto “omitted” (or perhaps simply underdeveloped?) point that our grasp of the mind-body distinction and our grasp of the mind-body union belong to different cognitive faculties and so involve different kinds of ideas. We understand the distinction between mind and body; we sensorily feel their union. And somehow the fact that the notion of the union is sensory makes it primitive. But how is that supposed to work? How does being sensory make it primitive and so independent of and contrary to the intellectual notions that underwrite the real distinction? And what’s the upshot?

II.D. The third primitive notion: does sensory mean bad?
The answer that probably first leaps to mind is that if the idea we have of mind-body union is sensory, then it is just a bad idea: it’s illusory or nonveridical or misrepresentational or otherwise deeply messed up. If that is right, then it’s useless. And if that’s right, then Descartes’ suggestion to Elisabeth that the third notion is sensory is basically an admission of defeat. “Primitive” is a euphemism for “you got me, I haven’t the foggiest idea, we really have no useful idea of the mind-body union.” That would be the wrong conclusion to draw. This not the place for an in-depth study of Descartes on the senses and sensory ideas, but a glance at the second half of Meditation 6 shows

44. When Frans Burman inquires how the mind and body are united, and how they casually interact, he reports Descartes to have replied: “This is very difficult to explain; but here our experience [experientia] suffices, since it is so clear on this point that it just cannot be denied. This is evident in the case of the passions, and so on” (16 April 1648, AT V 163).


46. Although Margaret Wilson’s seems to have been tempted by this view (Wilson 1978, pp. 204-223), specialists following her have generally tried to avoid this conclusion.
this line of thought to be shortsighted. Starting with the line, “But now, when I am beginning to know myself and the author of my origin better, I think I should not heedlessly admit everything that I seem to have from the senses but nor should they all be called into doubt” (AT VII 78), Descartes’ meditator undertakes what Gary Hatfield calls a “rehabilitation of the senses.”47 It is true, Descartes insists repeatedly that our senses mislead us about the natures of mind and body considered on their own. But he also claims that we misuse the senses when we use them this way, i.e., when we use them seeking metaphysical insight into the natures of things (AT VII 83). The senses have a different cognitive function: they are given to us to help us protect the body to which our mind is united, and thereby ourselves as human beings (AT VII 83). In this practical domain, Descartes goes on to write, the senses generally get at the truth of things: “in matters regarding the well-being of the body, all my sense report the truth much more frequently than not” (AT VII 89; italics mine).

This is not just a quirk of the Meditations. Descartes demonstrates a persistent interest in the practical matter of our physical and mental health throughout his corpus.48 He is also consistent in stating that the senses and passions, and not the intellect, are our primary cognitive guides here. “[T]he conduct of life depends entirely on the senses,” he writes in the opening passage of the Optics (AT VI 81). In matters of health, our own bodily sensations and gustatory desires are at least as important as any doctor’s reasoning (and perhaps more so):

48. The maintenance of health, he notes in Discourse 6, is “undoubtedly the chief good and the foundation of all the other goods in this life” (AT VI 62). He says the same thing in his May or June 1645 letter to Elisabeth (AT IV 220), in the Preface to the French edition of the Principles (AT IX-B 2) and in his 5 October 1657 and 4 December 1657 letters to Huygens (AT I 434 and 649). Amy Schmitter and Lisa Shapiro explore ways in which Descartes, in fact, subordinates metaphysical and theoretical inquiry to his interest in health and the proper conduct of life (see Schmitter 2002 and Shapiro 2008). Catherine Wilson boldly describes Descartes’ foray into metaphysics as an “interlude” between his early and later work in matters he most cared about: physiology and medicine (see Wilson 2000).

MIND-BODY UNION AND THE LIMITS OF CARTESIAN METAPHYSICS

perhaps if doctors would only allow people the food and drink they frequently desire when they are ill, they would often be restored to health far more satisfactorily than they are by means of all those unpleasant medicines…[N]ature works to effect her own recovery; with her perfect awareness of herself, she knows better than the doctor who is on the outside…We always know whether a food has agreed with us or not, and hence we can always learn for the future whether or not we should have the same food again, and whether we should eat in the same way and in the same order.49

The passions, for their part, help us negotiate the environment by “disposing the soul to will the things that nature deems useful for us, and to persist in that volition” (Passions II.52, AT XI 372).50 Descartes may be a rationalist metaphysician, but he’s a kind of empiricist when it comes to the practical conduct of our human lives. It is true that the senses and passions may need some rational guidance and governing even in these practical matters; Descartes won’t give them free reign.51 But they provide the primary cognitive materials for any reasoning about how to act, materials that the intellect is quite unable to procure on its own.52

49. Conversation with Burman, AT V 179. For further discussion of Descartes’ “psychosomatics” see Des Chene 2000.
50. See also Passions I.40, AT XI 359 and II.137, AT XI 430.
51. For that matter, the intellect in turn needs the senses for most of its theoretical endeavors. The senses may interfere with its metaphysical pursuits, but they are needed for the sciences that rest on those metaphysical foundations (see, e.g., Discourse 6, AT VI 65 and Principles L47, AT VIII 100-101). Neither faculty, it seems, can go it entirely alone. As he says to Elisabeth, it’s best to employ the most of one’s “study time to thought in which the intellect co-operates with the imagination and the senses” (AT III 695). On the complicated relationship between the purely intellectual and the empirical in Cartesian physics, and between metaphysics and physics more generally, see Clarke 1982; Garber 1992; Gaukroger 2002; and Hatfield 1985 and 1988.
52. See Simmons 2008.
The fact that the primitive notion of mind-body union is sensory suggests that its primary cognitive function lies in this practical domain of navigating ourselves through the world (and not in giving us insight into the metaphysics of union) and that, taken in this context, it is a perfectly good representation (that we put to bad use when we try to use it to do metaphysics). It is not, therefore, primitive by way of being a bad idea.

II.E. The third primitive notion: does sensory mean obscure and confused?

So maybe, being sensory, the primitive notion of mind-body union is not simply a bad idea, but surely it’s at least an obscure and/or confused idea. Aren’t all sensory ideas obscure and/or confused by their very nature? Isn’t that what distinguishes them from intellectual, i.e., clear and distinct, ideas? If that’s right, then maybe what makes the sensory notion of the union primitive alongside the intellectual notions of mind and body is that it is somehow irredeemably obscure and/or confused. Being obscure and confused need not mean worthless; obscure and confused ideas might be good enough for the practical purpose of getting around in the world. We just shouldn’t try to do too much with them, e.g., try to discern the essential natures of things from them. This is a popular view, even among scholars most charitable to Descartes’ primitive sensory notion of the mind-body union.

While I think the negative upshot of this reading is right (viz., the third primitive notion is epistemically useful for everyday life but should not be used for doing metaphysics), I think it misidentifies what is special about the sensory nature of the third primitive notion and, as a result, fails to illuminate just how and why it plays a critical role in our everyday lives.

Descartes does at various times invoke the language of obscurity and confusion to describe sensory ideas (and passions). In his exchange with Regius, for instance, he writes: “sensations such as pain and confusion to describe sensory ideas (and passions). In his role in our everyday lives, and, as a result, fails to illuminate just how and why it plays a critical role in our everyday lives.

Similarly, he describes sensations of hunger, thirst, and pain as “confused modes of thinking” in Meditation 6 (AT VII 81) and the passions as “perceptions that the close alliance between the soul and the body render confused and obscure” in the Passions (L.28, AT XI 350). In treating the topic of material falsity, he again describes sensory ideas as “obscure and confused” (Fourth Replies, AT VII 233; see also Meditation 3, AT VII 44).

I am grateful to Elliot Paul for several discussions with me on this topic, and for sharing some of his unpublished work on it.

Descartes defines clarity and distinctness at Principles I.45 in terms of perceptions rather than ideas, but I think the difference doesn’t matter. I take ‘idea’ and ‘perception’ to pick out two aspects of a single first-order mental state, viz., its objectual content or objective being and its status as a conscious mode of a thinking subject or formal being, respectively (though ‘idea’ itself can be used for each too, as in AT VII 8). Thus to perceive an idea (of x) and to have an idea (of x) and to have a perception (of x) typically amount to the same thing. Perception and idea will come apart only when we use “idea” to pick out a first-order mental state that is itself the introspective object of a higher-order ‘perception’ of it, as happens, e.g., when we engage in explicit intellectual reflection on the nature of a sensory idea or the contents of an intellectual idea.

This: “it is not without some difficulty and fatigue that our mind is able to attend to anything; and it’s hardest of all for it to attend to things that are presented by neither the senses nor even the imagination [i.e., to what is presented only by the pure intellect]” (Principles I.73, AT VIII 37, italics mine).
therefore more likely than sensory ideas to be obscure. Intellectual ideas can also be confused. Distinctness requires that an idea be clearly differentiated “from all other perceptions” (Principles I.45, AT VIII 22). That’s a tall order for any idea, which is why “it turns out that most people have nothing but confused perceptions throughout their entire lives” (Principles I.73, AT VIII 37). It’s not that an intellectual idea has never passed through the minds of these people (they are innate after all). It’s rather that they are typically mixed up with either sensory ideas (as when I understand that the wax persists through the melting process but am focused on its sensory qualities) or other intellectual ideas (as when I lose track of the relationship between God’s intellect and will, or think that finitude is conceptually prior to infinitude, or conceive sin as something that God might will). While some select philosophers may perceive intellectual ideas clearly and distinctly, most of us do not. And so, in Meditation 6, Descartes suggests that before he got serious about meditating, “the ideas perceived by the senses were much more lively and vivid and even, in their own way, more distinct than any of those which I deliberately formed through meditating or which I found impressed on my memory” (AT VII 75). If obscurity and confusion are just a much features of intellectual ideas as sensory ideas, then they can’t serve to distinguish the two in any deep way or explain the primitiveness of the primitive sensory notion of the mind-body union.

Now, I’ve been talking as though ideas are clear (or obscure) and distinct (or confused) when they are perceived in this way or that, i.e., when they are strongly present to the mind (or not) and clearly differentiated to the mind (or not). But perhaps there is something intrinsically obscure and/or confused about the sensory ideas that sets them apart from intellectual ideas, even if I can somehow perceive them or have them in mind clearly (when I’m awake and have had my morning coffee or when they attract my attention) and perhaps even distinctly (when, say, I engage in careful higher-order intellectual reflection on their nature so that they present themselves sufficiently separated from all other ones). I don’t think that’s right either. Let’s set obscurity aside, since most scholars in this camp take sensory ideas to be clear but intrinsically confused. The problem is that Descartes casts distinctness/confusedness as an extrinsic feature of Cartesian ideas. Principles I.45 reads: “That perception is distinct which, along with being clear, is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear” (AT VIII 22, italics mine). A perception (or idea) is distinct if it is sufficiently distinguished from other perceptions (or ideas); it is confused if it is mixed up with other perceptions. Might some ideas, and in particular sensory ideas like pains and color sensations, be by their very nature complex collections of ideas all mixed up or con-fused together (as Leibniz would later suggest)? Principles I.46 suggests the confusion lies outside the sensation: “when someone senses a great pain, the perception he has of the pain is indeed maximally clear, but it is not always distinct; for commonly people confound it with an obscure judgment of the nature of something they suppose to exist in the painful part that resembles

58. Thus: ‘As for these common notions, there is no doubt that they can be perceived clearly and distinctly...[but] they are not equally perceived by everyone. This is not, I think, because the cognitive faculty of one man extends wider than another, but because these common notions are in conflict with the preconceived opinions of some people who, as a result, cannot easily grasp them. But the very same notions are perceived most clearly by others who are free from such preconceived opinions’ (Principles I.50, AT VIII 24, italics mine). Here are two examples of obscurely and confusedly perceived intellectual ideas. First: “There isn’t anything in all of these things that is not manifest by the natural light, for one who is diligently attending. But because, when I pay less attention, and images of sensible things blind my mental vision, it is not so easy for me to remember why the idea of a thing more perfect than me necessarily proceeds from something that is in reality more perfect than me” (Meditation 3, AT VII 47-48, italics mine). Second: “In the case of a right-angled triangle, the fact that the square on the base is equal to the square on the other two sides is not so readily apparent as the fact that the base subtends the largest angle” (Meditation 5, AT VII 69, italics mine).

59. That Descartes does not take the third primitive notion to be intrinsically obscure is suggested in a passage quoted above: “It was these [metaphysical] meditations that have made her [Majesty] find obscurity in the notion we have of their union” (28 June 1643 letter to Elisabeth, AT III 693, italics mine).
the pain that they clearly perceive” (AT VIII 22, italics mine). There is no suggestion here that the pain itself is confused, much less by its very nature confused (it is, he says, “not always distinct”), but only that we tend to confuse it with a bad judgment, resulting in an overall perceptual experience that is confused. I don’t see, then, that obscurity or confusion can be what sets the sensory notion of union apart from the intellectual notions of mind and body.\footnote{60}

Even if I’m wrong, and sensory ideas are somehow intrinsically confused by contrast with intellectual ideas, this reading doesn’t go very far to explain why or how the sensory notion of mind-body union is primitive. I assume that on this reading an intrinsically confused sensory idea is supposed to be a mixture of intellectual ideas. (What else would they be a confusion of?) They are just so strongly intermixed that we cannot separate or “distinctify”\footnote{61} the component parts. On the face of it, this is implausible: it’s hard to see how any amount of juxtaposing or con-fusing intellectual ideas will result in a sensory idea, rather than simply a confused intellectual idea. It also makes the primitiveness of the sensory notion of mind-body union mysterious: on this reading the third primitive notion is, in the end, composed of the first two primitive notions (and so not independent of them after all), and it’s hard to see why the first two don’t effectively provide an unraveling or distinctification of the third (in which case there is nothing really primitive about it). Finally, insofar as distinctness seems a matter of degree (ideas are more or less distinguished from each other), this reading doesn’t do justice to Descartes’ suggestion that sensory and intellectual ideas are different not in degree but in kind.\footnote{62} Obscurity and confusedness, then, simply do not help to illuminate the primitiveness of the third primitive notion.

\subsection*{II.F. The third primitive notion: sensory means a different way of representing}

What, then, makes sensory and intellectual ideas different in kind, and so primitive with respect to each other? In short: they are fundamentally different ways of representing or conceiving things. First, the senses represent the world imagistically while the intellect represents it non-imagistically.\footnote{63} In this, sensory ideas wear their bodily heritage on their sleeve: they offer a phenomenally extended representation of their object that the intellect does not.\footnote{64} The difference is illustrated in the famous pentagon-chiliagon passage of Meditation 6. The pure intellect simply understands that a pentagon is a five-sided planar figure and a chiliagon is a thousand-sided figure. The sense-based imagination, by contrast, represents the pentagon “as if [it] were present before me” and by “applying my mind to the five sides and the area contained with them” in a way that “requires a peculiar effort of mind that is not required for understanding” (AT VII 72-73); it is incapable of representing the chiliagon in this way, or at least in a way that is identifiably different from any other myriagon. As we imagine shapes in a phenomenally

\footnote{60} Why, then, does Descartes persistently use the language of (obscenity and) confusion in conjunction with the sensory experiences that result from the mind-body union? I think the answer is that he is not being careful in these passages to distinguish what in the Sixth Replies he identifies as the second grade of sense (the sensory ideas immediately produced in the mind by the body) and the third grade of sense (the judgments we routinely make in response to them), but instead has in mind sensory experience as a whole (second and third grades combined), which is confused and which creates problems for Cartesian metaphysics, which is at issue in these passages. It is notable that in passages where Descartes is clearly identifying second-grade sensory ideas on their own, he does not use the language of (obscenity and) confusion (e.g., Sixth Replies, AT VII 436-438 and Principles I.48, AT VIII 23).

\footnote{61} I borrow this term from Alan Nelson.

\footnote{62} The senses and sense-based imagination are linked with images in many passages (Man, AT XI 177; Optics 4, AT VI 113-14; Passions I.35, AT XI 355-356; Discourse 4, AT VI 37; Second Replies, AT VII 160; Fifth Replies, AT VII 385 and 389, and the July 1641 letter to Mersenne, AT III 392-395). Descartes most often notes that the senses and imagination involve corporeal images on the pineal gland, but it is those corporeal images on the pineal gland that, one way or another, give rise to ideas in the mind that are phenomenologically extended in the way he describes at AT VII 72-73.

\footnote{63} See Fifth Replies, AT VII 584-585.

\footnote{64} Taste is a possible exception here, unless tastes are experienced to extend throughout the mouth; but insofar as taste sensations are linked with other sensory ideas, such as the sight and smell of an extended cup of coffee, they certainly come to be experienced as belonging to a spatially extended object.
Mind-Body Union and the Limits of Cartesian Metaphysics

That engages in self-motion. And that, I suggest, is why we cannot conceive both the distinction and union of mind and body at once, but must toggle between them.

II.G. The third primitive notion: an idea of the internal senses

In the correspondence with Elisabeth, Descartes describes the primitive notion of union simply as sensory. Elsewhere he distinguishes the external senses from the internal senses. The external senses include vision, audition, olfaction, gustation, and touch. The internal senses include what we would now call nociception (the perception of bodily aches, burns, strains, pains, and the like), proprioception, and kinesthesis, along with appetites like hunger and thirst and emotions like desire and sadness. Although very few commentators have suggested it, the primitive notion of mind-body union must be an idea of the internal senses.

It is true that, by Descartes’ lights, the existence of any sensory idea, internal or external, provides indirect evidence to infer that the mind and body are united and not merely aggregated. Precisely because sensory ideas are different in kind from intellectual perceptions in the ways described above, we can infer from their presence that the mind is united to its body, for otherwise it would not feel pain but perceive the damage the body has sustained, and thus be like an angel inhabiting a machine that has only an intellectual understanding of extended way, so too we see colors spread out on surfaces, feel pain shooting down the leg, and feel the passion of fear “as if it were in the heart” (Passions I.36, AT XI 357).

Second, the senses represent qualitatively or as different in kind features of the world that the intellect represents only quantitatively or perhaps geometrically or as different in degree. For example, whereas the intellect might represent the surface of a body as having a certain geometrical microstructure that puts a certain degree of rotational spin on the light that hits it, vision represents the surface as red, green, or purple. Whereas the intellect represents fibers of the foot increasing in motion or rupturing, the internal senses represent the foot as warm or in pain (see, e.g., Meditation 6, AT VII 88).

Third, the senses represent evaluatively and motivationally, viz., as pleasant/unpleasant or good/bad, what the intellect represents only descriptively, viz., as extended in this way or that. Not only are pains and titillations represented to us as unpleasant and pleasant, thus inciting us to avoid the things inducing the pain and pursue the things that induce titillation, but so too the ideas of colors, odors, sounds, and even colors are, by Descartes’ lights, represented as intrinsically pleasant or unpleasant and so as action guiding (see, e.g., Meditation 6, AT VII 81 and Man, AT XI 146-151 and 158). The intellect trained on the same parts of the world would represent only modes of extension, which are not in themselves pleasing or displeasing, good or bad, to-be-pursued or to-be-avoided.

It is because sensory ideas are fundamentally different in kind from intellectual ideas that the sensory notion of union is primitive: it is not simply a confusion of our primitive intellectual ideas of mind and body; it is a different way of representing them altogether. And while the pure intellect cannot represent mind and body except as two distinct substances (at least not clearly and distinctly), viz., thinking substance and extended substance, the senses cannot represent them except as “a unity of some sort” (AT VII 445), viz, as an extended sentient being.
its own and other bodies and not a sensory grasp of them.\textsuperscript{68} But only the internal senses represent the mind-body union to us. And that is because while all the senses represent bodies to us, only the internal senses represent a particular body to me as mine or as me, i.e., as a body with which I am united and form a single thing. Neither the intellect nor the external senses can do that.

The evidence for this is on display in Meditation 6. When the meditator rehearses her pre-theoretical reasons for thinking she is embodied, it is appetites, emotions, and bodily sensations that she puts forward as grounding her belief (AT VII 76). When she later reinstates the belief that she is embodied, it is pain, hunger, and thirst that provide the evidence: “Through these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, etc., nature also teaches me that I am present in my body not merely as a sailor is present in his ship, but rather that I am very closely joined and as it were intermingled with it, so that I compose a single thing with it” (AT VII 81, italics mine). It is not simply the fact that she senses rather than understands the body that convinces her that she’s “intermingled” with it. After all, as smart as the sailor may be, his fundamental cognitive relation to his ship is sensory too: he “perceives through vision if something in the ship is broken” (AT VII 81). The critical difference between the meditator and the sailor is that that the sailor observes through vision what the meditator feels through an internal sensation. I’ll say more about this below, but one critical difference between observing and feeling is the difference between object and subject. By contrast with both the external senses and the pure intellect, which represent bodies as objects distinct from me, the internal senses represent body “from the inside,” that is as a subject rather than as an object. They represent this hand as part of me, the thinking, willing, acting subject. In so doing, they represent this body as united with, as one with, my mind.\textsuperscript{69}

Descartes is surely right about this. There is not much about the experience of simply seeing my arm to suggest that I am united to it in a way that I am not united to yours; it’s proprioceptive and kinesthetic feelings that pick out this arm as mine.\textsuperscript{70} Nor is there much about the experience of hearing my knees crunch when I do squats at the gym to suggest they are mine not yours (simply hearing the crunch, I might hope that they are yours!); but the ache and occasional sharp pain I feel in them tells me that (alas) they are mine, that all is not well in them, and that I should do something to take care of them. It is thus the special province of the internal senses to represent to us our own intimate embodiment.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{68} January 1642 letter to Regius, AT III 493 and Meditation 6, AT VII 81.

\textsuperscript{69} For more on the ability of the internal senses to represent a body as subject, see Chamberlain 2014 and 2016 and Simmons 2008.

\textsuperscript{70} It’s true that I see my arm more often than I see yours, but that doesn’t seem especially significant. I see the back of my husband’s head a lot more than I see my own, but that doesn’t lure me into thinking that I’m united to the back of his head rather than the one I feel resting on my pillow.

\textsuperscript{71} In their recent paper on the mind-body union, Minna Koivuniemi and Ed Curley also place great importance on internal-sense phenomenology for Descartes’ account of the mind-body union, including the Meditation 6 sailor-in-his-ship passage (Koivuniemi and Curley 2015, section 2). Their reading is subtle and inspires mine in many ways. They, however, put the internal-sense phenomenology to metaphysical use: internal-sense phenomenology is partly constitutive of mind-body union; what it is for a mind and body to be united is for them to causally interact with each other in such a way that the interaction gives rise to this peculiar internal-sense phenomenology. I, by contrast, put the internal-sense phenomenology to epistemological use: it constitutes our best epistemic access to something the ultimate metaphysical nature of which remains inaccessible to us. To my mind, then, they target exactly the right thing in the text and put it to exactly the wrong use.

Why favor the epistemological reading? First, both the correspondence with Elisabeth and the correspondence with Arnauld suggest that our sensory experience constitutes our best cognitive means of access to the union; there is no suggestion here that our sensory experience constitutes the union, even in part. Second, Descartes frequently writes that our sensations (inner and outer) arise from (exorti, oriri) the union of mind and body (see Meditation 6, AT VII 81; Sixth Replies, AT VII 437; and the August 1641 letter to Hyperaspistes, AT III 424). Since on Koivuniemi and Curley’s metaphysical view our inner sensations partly constitute that union, it’s hard to see how they could arise from it, as a consequence of it. Third, as we’ve seen, there is supposed to be something conceptually primitive about the mind-body union, but on the metaphysical reading it seems we can analyze the union in terms of the two other primitive notions, viz., mind (with its internal-sense phenomenology, assuming, as this reading must, that the phenomenology doesn’t presuppose a conception of the union) and body,
III. Mind-Body Union and Descartes’ metaphysics

III.A. The Bad News: The Limits of Descartes’ metaphysics

What are the consequences of taking seriously Descartes’ suggestion to Elisabeth that our access to the mind-body union is through the internal senses? Let’s start with the bad news. As I’ve been forecasting, it means we cannot hope to construct a proper Cartesian metaphysics of the mind-body union. Why? Not because our idea of the mind-body union is a defective idea or an intrinsically confused idea, but because it is, strictly speaking, an unintelligible idea: being sensory, it gives us a feel for the union or an experience of the union, and it presents to us the fact of the union, but it does not give us an understanding of its nature or essence, or, consequently, a means for explaining the fact.

plus a causal relation. Perhaps the third primitive notion is supposed to give us the causal relation that partly constitutes the union? But, and this is my fourth concern, several texts indicate that mind-body union is explanatorily or conceptually prior to mind-body interaction (see above, Section II.A and fn. 34). On the metaphysical reading, by contrast, mind-body interaction must be explanatorily prior to the union: it constitutes one component of the union and produces the other component (the distinctive internal-sense phenomenology). The metaphysical reading thus seems to me to put the cart before the horse.

Deborah Brown puts internal-sense phenomenology to a complex mix of epistemological and metaphysical uses: it is the means by which we know the union, but that is because the body component of the union is itself a mind-dependent entity, viz., that ever-changing portion of res extensa non-rigidly picked out by a mind’s internal-sense experience; the senses thus provide access to the union because they do the work of determining the boundaries of one half of it.

72. The senses actually get us to the fact of the union in two ways: directly, if I’m right, through the third primitive notion and indirectly through reflection on the fact that sensations and passions are mental states that disembodied minds and minds in-but-not-united-to bodies would not have.

73. For a parallel, consider that our senses and imagination give us images of the wax, but not an understanding of its essence or nature, which comes only through the “mind alone” or intellect (Meditation 2, AT VII 31-32).

74. That Descartes takes a general interest in explaining the facts, or in what the tradition called the reasoned fact, is evident from his complaining of Galileo that “he sets out the facts as they are (quod ita sit) but doesn’t explain why they are as they are (cur ita sit), as I do by my principles” (AT II 433). The quotation concerns physics, where Descartes thinks he has the first Descartes’ metaphysics is a matter of understanding, and so, as John Carriero aptly puts it, it is “the office of the intellect.” It is through intellectual ideas that we apprehend the nature and essences of things and, through conceptual analysis, determine their status as substance or mode and explain how and why they have the kind of properties that can and cannot have. That is why Descartes constructs his Meditations (“my metaphysics,” as he calls it), as a set of exercises designed to help his readers to withdraw from the senses and imagination and turn toward “objects of the intellect” (Meditation 4, AT VII 53). In so doing we unearth and analyze three intellectual ideas that are at the center of Cartesian metaphysics: the mind, God, and body. We do not uncover an intellectual idea of the union in the Meditations, or anywhere in the Cartesian corpus. But if we lack that intellectual idea, we are not going to be able to construct a metaphysics of the union: we will not know its essence; we will not know what category of thing it falls under (simple substance? compound substance? mode? relation?); we will not understand how mind and body unite to form a single thing (is it the mind “holenmerically” distributed throughout the union? There is no reason to think he wouldn’t want the cur ita sit in this case as well.

75. Carriero 2009, p. 406. Descartes explicitly connects the study of metaphysics with the intellect (and disconnects it from the senses and imagination) in the Letter to the Sorbonne, AT VII 4, Second Replies, AT 357, his 13 November 1639 letter to Mersenne, AT II 622, and his 28 June 1643 letter to Elisabeth, AT III 605.

76. See his 25 November 1630, 27 February 1637, 25 December 1639, and 30 September 1640 letters to Mersenne, AT I 182, AT I 350, AT II 622, and AT III 190-192. See also his 22 February 1638 letter to [Vatier], AT I 564, and his 9 March 1638 letter to Huygens, AT II 661.

77. See also Letter to the Sorbonne, AT VII 4; Synopsis, AT VII 12; and Third Replies, AT VII 172.

78. Body is a tricky case since, as I noted in fn. 43, Descartes waffles on whether it is something the essence of which is best known by the intellect or the imagination (or the two together). The soul and God, i.e., immaterial things, are the traditional objects of metaphysics. Insofar as the essence of body is known by the intellect (as it is according to Principles II.4), it is drawn into the realm of Cartesian metaphysics.
ALISON SIMMONS

Mind-Body Union and the Limits of Cartesian Metaphysics

between mental states and pineal gland states are. But just how the causal commerce is supposed to work between them is something we’ll only ever feel and never understand. 84

An obvious consequence of all this is that we cannot not hope to

84. Louis Loeb (2005) argues that, on Descartes’ view, there is nothing more to mind-body interaction than empirically discoverable psycho-physiological correlations, and so there is nothing more to know or understand. There is, in particular, no need to ask how the interaction occurs, or what might ground or explain those correlations. (Loeb allows that there is more explaining to do in physics, i.e., the study of nature, than identifying the correlations between types of physical events, but since [according to Loeb’s reading] mental states fall outside the scope of nature, their relations to body require no further explanation.) While there is good evidence that Descartes doesn’t think, as many have supposed, that the heterogeneity between mind and body precludes or poses a special problem to their causally interacting (see, e.g., his reply to Gassendi in the 1647 French edition of the Meditations, AT IX-A 213), he does seem to acknowledge that there is more work to be done to explain it than merely citing the psycho-physiological correlations, and he seems to recognize that there are some explanatory hurdles to be overcome in both mind-to-body and body-to-mind causal interaction. His reply to Elisabeth is a case in point. Elisabeth raises a puzzle about how mind can act on body, given that it can’t be through contact. Far from replying that there is nothing to know other than that there are in fact regular correlations between volitions and bodily movements, he takes up the question how to conceive how this sort of causal interaction transpires, insisting that she take care not to conceive it along the lines of body-body interaction (AT III 666). It is precisely here that he claims that she would need to conceive the mind-body union in order to know how to conceive the power (force) by which the mind moves the body. A second case in point is Descartes’ suggestion that there are other forms of mind-body interaction than the one at work in human beings: angels can interact with bodies; in so doing they have an intellectual understanding of its particular modes rather than sensations and passions (see references in fn. 68). The difference, Descartes suggests, is due to the union ‘and intermingling’ of mind and body in the human case. Again, the union is doing some explanatory work accounting for the sort of interaction mind and body the occurs in the human case. Rozemond 1999 and Schmaltz 2008 offer extensive discussions of what more there is to explain about mind-body interaction. They are a bit more optimistic than I am that Descartes can offer an account of the how lurking at the heart of mind-body interaction. In the end, I think Descartes recognizes that there is more to be explained, but takes us not to have the cognitive resources to do the explaining. I thus share with Loeb the view that all we can do is observe the psycho-physiological correlations (and, I will add in Sections IV.A and IV.C, engage in a phenomenology of the interaction), but I share with Schmaltz and Rozemond the view that, on Descartes’ view, that can’t be the end of the story: I assume that Descartes thinks that God is in

the body? is it the substantial form of the body? is it only causally connected to the body?); and we will not know how and why it has the properties it does (e.g., the psycho-physiological correspondences) insofar as they are entailed by the essence of the thing. And that, I suggest, is why we find Descartes resorting to the hedging phrases and metaphors I mentioned earlier when he describes the union in metaphysical contexts like the Meditations—e.g., mind and body are “as it were intermixed [quasi permixtum]” (AT VII 81); that’s the best we can do so long as we lack an intellectual idea of its nature or essence. The bad news doesn’t stop there. Not only can we not construct a proper, i.e., purely intellectual, metaphysics of union; we also can’t construct one of mind-body interaction. If conceiving mind-body interaction depends on our conceiving mind-body union,79 and our conception of the union is irreducibly sensory, then so too our conception of mind-body interaction must be sensory: we feel it, but cannot understand it.80 But, again, metaphysics requires understanding. Descartes scholars have devoted considerable energy to reconstructing a Cartesian metaphysics of mind-body interaction. Some have tried to reconstruct an account based on Cartesian first principles;81 others have tried to construct one based on Descartes’ comments about the primitive notion of union.82 If I’m right, this project is misguided, or at least by Descartes’ lights it is misguided. We may be in a position to know some of the general constraints on mind-body interaction: something cannot come from nothing in the exchange, for instance.83 And we can know empirically what the psycho-physiological correspondences depend on.

PHILOSOPHERS’ IMPRINT

– 20 –

VOL. 17, NO. 14 (JULY 2017)
develop a purely a priori science or scientia of ourselves as human beings, something that is not, perhaps, all that surprising, though perhaps the fact that Descartes has an argument for it is surprising. Nor can we hope to develop even a metaphysically grounded science of the human being. Physics, while not an entirely a priori science for Descartes (perhaps only geometry can lay claim to that), at least has a metaphysical ground that is known through the intellectual idea of body that places constraints on the explanations the physicist gives of the empirically observed phenomena. We lack even that for our study of the human being. We can offer a metaphysically grounded science of ourselves insofar as we have bodies (treating ourselves as objects of physics) and perhaps we can offer a metaphysically grounded science of ourselves insofar as we have intellects (treating ourselves as objects of rational psychology), but we will always lack a metaphysically grounded science of ourselves insofar as we are human beings.

Cartesian metaphysics, then, is profoundly limited. Should this bother us? Only if we think Descartes had, or thought he had, or should or could have had, a fully systematic and comprehensive metaphysics grounded in clear and distinct intellectual ideas. In fact, Descartes doesn't pretend to have any such thing. We are, he reminds us often, finite minds with a limited number of innate intellectual ideas. We shouldn't expect a systematic and comprehensive metaphysics with those limited resources. Indeed, one explicit lesson of Meditation 4 was supposed to be that there are many instances "where I do not comprehend why or how certain things were made by [God]" (AT VII 55) and that "it is in the nature of a finite intellect to lack understanding of many things" (AT VII 60). Mind-body union (and interaction), I've argued, is one of those things. It is one of many. Here are some other things that fall outside the domain of Cartesian metaphysics, that is, things we cannot know with certainty based on clear and distinct intellectual ideas: the existence (by contrast with the essence) of the physical world; most of the particulars of the physical world that require observation and hypothesis; medicine; the existence of other minds; the existence of angels; the mysteries of Catholic doctrine that require faith; a comprehensive understanding of God. In the case of mind-body union and interaction, of course, the fact of their existence is not in question. We have ample evidence of them: the intellect can take the existence of sensations and passions as good evidence to infer the existence of the union and interaction, and the internal senses give only a first-person grasp on our own mind through consciousness. If the lack of agreement among Descartes scholars is any sign, Malebranche was right.

85. I use the term “a priori” here in a post-Cartesian sense to refer to something known through the intellect alone, independent of sensory input, through something like conceptual analysis. Descartes’ use of the term more often than not means demonstrating an effect from its cause (see, e.g., Second Replies, AT VII 155-156; the 10 May 1632 letter to Mersenne, AT I 250-252; the 20 December 1627 letter to Plemius, AT I 476-477; the 22 February 1638 letter to [Vatier], AT I 563-564; and the August 1641 letter to Hyperaspistes, AT III 422). The Cartesian a priori is typically going to be a priori in the more modern sense. The issue at stake here, however, is not simply how we know the effects of the cause, but how we know the nature of causation itself.

86. I say “maybe” because it is less clear what this would look like. Descartes’ physics, and his treatment of the human body insofar as it can be regarded as an object of physics, is something Descartes explicitly undertakes in his work. He does not undertake the construction of a rational psychology based on his clear and distinct idea of mind, or an extended treatment of the human mind insofar as it falls under it. What is more, Descartes’ conception of mind as a thinking thing is itself murky to scholars, who debate whether Cartesian thought consists in consciousness, or representation, or both, or something else altogether—intellecution, judgment, rationality. For a variety of views see Alalen 2003, Broughton 2008, Carriero 2009, Clarke 2003, Radner 1988, Rozemond 2006, and Simmons 2012. Malebranche famously insisted against Descartes that we are not capable of any a priori knowledge concerning the mind in the way we are capable of some a priori knowledge of body precisely because we lack a clear and distinct idea of the Cartesian mind and have imposed not simply limits on Cartesian metaphysics but an internal contradiction. Without a comparable intellectual conception of the mind-body union to work with, and so a metaphysical understanding of the unity involved, however, it would be difficult to establish that there is a flat out contradiction.

87. Not systematic is one thing. Internally incoherent or inconsistent is another. We might, with Elisabeth, think that mind-body union and interaction impose not simply limits on Cartesian metaphysics but an internal contradiction. Without a comparable intellectual conception of the mind-body union to work with, and so a metaphysical understanding of the unity involved, however, it would be difficult to establish that there is a flat out contradiction.
us an experience of it that “just cannot be denied” (AT V 163). Why, Descartes seems to think, should we need more than that?

III.B. The Good News: Beyond Cartesian metaphysics

Where does that leave us? Any theoretical study of ourselves qua human beings will have to be entirely empirical, based on observation and, in some areas, a good deal of hypothesis. There are two ways in which this might go, both of which are on display in Descartes’ career-long study of the human being, beginning with his 1629 manuscript, the Treatise on Man, and culminating in his last published work, the Passions of the Soul, Part 1 of which is subtitled “and incidentally the whole nature of man.”

The first way an empirical study of the human being might work is bountifully represented in Descartes’ Treatise on Man, Optics, Principles of Philosophy IV, and Passions of the Soul: human physiology, psychophysiology, and psychophysics. It is also well represented in the current scholarly literature, which explores not only the details but also the methodology of this Cartesian enterprise. Here Descartes explores the functional operations of the living human body and the hard-wired and learned correlations between mind and brain, and between mind and world, that enable us human beings to have a cognitive, and not merely mechanical, encounter with the world.

These empirical sciences may be impoverished insofar as they fail to shed light on the nature of the causal relations that underlie the psychophysiological and psychophysical correlations, but they are still of great theoretical interest. (If the status of neuroscience today is any indication, we seem to have a real hunger to know what brain states are correlated with what mental states!) They also promise to serve a practical end: the development of corrective lenses is one way Descartes proposes to put these empirical sciences to therapeutic use; his attempt to help Elisabeth relieve her physical pain through a kind of cognitive-behavioral therapy illustrates another such attempt.

This part of Descartes’ study of the human being does not make any obvious use of the third primitive notion; it treats the mind and body as separate domains that are correlated in empirically discoverable ways. It nevertheless presupposes the union of mind and body insofar as it targets precisely those states of mind that are a result of it, viz. sensations, imaginings, and passions.

Another way in which an empirical study of the human being might proceed, one that is less well represented in the literature, is through reflective phenomenology, i.e., an intellectual reflection on our embodied human experience, including inner sense experience, outer sense experience, imagination, the passions. Note that “intellectual reflection” here cannot mean a priori conceptual analysis. The senses, imagination, and passions do not offer up anything to the intellect suitable for conceptual analysis. They provide only an experience to analyze. The analysis here must be a careful description of what one finds in that experience. What makes this sort of project intellectual is that it involves reflection, or voluntary introspection, which Descartes explicitly attributes to the intellect (see the 29 June 1648 letter for Arnauld, AT V 221). Reflective phenomenology is not only a legitimate but also an important Cartesian intellectual enterprise. It is, in fact, a pre-requisite for the empirical psychophysiology and psychophysics I mentioned above, since through it we identify the features of our

88. The details of these empirical studies, it must be admitted, involve more hypothesis or downright conjecture than direct observation, but the empirical project these texts envision is powerful.


90. See fn. 84.

91. Descartes opens his Optics: “As all the conduct of our life depends on our senses, among which vision is the most universal and most noble, there is no doubt that inventions that serve to augment its power are among the most useful there can be” (AT VI 81).

92. See his letters of 8 July 1644, AT V 64-66 and May or June 1645, AT IV 218-222.
embodied mental life to be empirically correlated with distal and proximate physical causes.

Reflective phenomenology is also interesting in its own right. Cartesian human beings are different from Cartesian animals in having a cognitive, rather than a merely mechanical, encounter with the world around them. Reflective phenomenology helps us understand how that cognitive encounter works. The senses and passions are supposed to be the chief cognitive guides in our practical lives. But how do they do that? By representing things to us in the distinctive way that they do. A reflective phenomenology of the external senses promises to make explicit how vision, audition, olfaction, gustation, and touch represent external bodies “insofar as they are related to us and can benefit or harm us,” thus facilitating our interaction with them. A reflective phenomenology of the passions can show us how wonder draws our attention to salient things in the environment, while fear, love and the like incite the will to pursue or avoid things that may benefit or harm us. The third primitive notion is critical to this sort of study, for it provides the primary object of study: the embodied mind itself that is engaged in this practical enterprise of finding its way through the world. It must represent the relation between mind and body in a way that facilitates action too. How does it do that? Reflective phenomenology can tell us, and I begin to explore this project below.96

96. I therefore disagree with Lili Alanen’s conclusion that the mind-body union is not a domain of theoretical but only practical knowledge: it does not, she claims, involve a set of propositions to be known, but rather a collection of “abilities and skills” to be exercised in our practical lives (see Alanen 2003, pp. 72-77). While I think Alanen makes an important point that the primitive notion of mind-body union has its primary home in our practical rather than our theoretical lives, I see no reason to restrict it to the domain of practical knowledge. We can develop a theoretical body of knowledge by reflecting in an orderly way on the experiences, abilities, and skills that manifest themselves in our practical lives. The result may not amount to metaphysics or even, as Alanen convincingly argues, “vera scientia” (Alanen 1996, pp. 12-13 and 2003, pp. 76 ff.) or “natural philosophy” (Alanen 2008b, p. 421), but it affords us more than mere skill and know-how.

97. For some examples, see Meditation 6, AT VII 74-76 and 81 and Sixth Replies, AT VII 445. For related texts outside the Meditations, see Optics 6, AT VI 134-135; Principles I 67, AT VIII 32-33; Search After Truth, AT X 517; and Passions I 24, AT XI 346.
help us withdraw from, so long as we are “now concerned not with things involving action but merely things involving knowledge” of the intrinsic natures of things (AT VII 22). These phenomena are critical, however, to “things involving action,” viz., to our lives as embodied human agents, and to Descartes’ practical empiricism. Reflective phenomenology can shed some light on how and why.

In what follows, I focus on the correspondence with Elisabeth and Arnauld for two reasons. First, these are the interlocutors with whom Descartes is most forthcoming about the issues of mind-body union and interaction, as we’ve seen. Second, I want to cast a new light on some notoriously confounding passages from this correspondence. I start with the phenomenology of interaction rather than union in order to follow the chronology of the correspondence with Elisabeth.

IV. Toward a Cartesian phenomenology of embodiment

IV.A. Feeling the interaction: Agency and the heaviness analogy

Recall that the puzzle Elisabeth presented to Descartes was how to conceive the mind’s action on the body. Descartes tells her we are to conceive the mind’s action on body through our primitive sensory notion of union (AT III 665). In the same letter, he instructs Elisabeth to conceive the mind’s action on body on the model of heaviness (la pesanteur). To conceive the mind’s action on body through our primitive sensory notion of union is therefore like conceiving the operation of heaviness on a body. Five years later, Arnauld asks Descartes the same question about the mind’s action on body, and Descartes offers him much the same reply: think of it on the model of heaviness (gravitas).98

98. Gassendi raises the same question in his “Counter-Objections” to the Fifth Replies. In a curt tone that contrasts with his more generous responses to Elisabeth and Arnauld, Descartes once again insists that mind-body interaction presupposes mind-body union, that he hadn’t dealt with that topic in his published works, and that everyone who admits real qualities (like heaviness) possesses an idea of the mind’s action on body (AT IX 213). He makes the same move yet again in his August 1641 letter to “Hyperaspistes” (AT III 424).

Scholars have wrestled mightily with this response.99 Some take it as evidence that Descartes is giving up the game and has nothing serious to say about mind-body interaction. Others take it seriously but try to use it to piece together a metaphysics of mental causation, showing, for instance, its provenance in the scholastic conception of angelic and/or divine action on body. I suggest, by contrast, that when Descartes tells Elisabeth and Arnauld that they should conceive the mind’s action on body on the model of heaviness, he is neither giving up nor explaining how it works metaphysically, but is directing them to what it feels like—to the phenomenology of agency.100

Elisabeth and Arnauld both profess an inability to conceive how an incorporeal mind can act on a corporeal body. Descartes thinks it can only be conceived through the primitive notion of mind-body union, which we now know to be a matter of every day internal sensation. Rather than simply tell his philosophically minded friends to stop doing philosophy and pay attention to their lived experience, he looks for a way to sneak up on it. It is in this spirit that he offers Elisabeth the analogy with heaviness. He explains his strategy to her after the fact. He gives her the analogy in the first letter, and when she understandably expresses puzzlement over it, he explains what he was up to:

Supposing that your Highness still had the reasons that prove the distinction between the soul and the body very present in her mind, and not wanting to ask her to undo them in order to represent to herself the notion of the union that each of us feels in himself all the time without


100. Here I am in agreement with Koivuniemi and Curley, who also read the heaviness analogy phenomenologically rather than metaphysically (Koivuniemi and Curley 2015, sections 5-6); as I mention above, they put this phenomenology to metaphysical use (as partly constitutive of the union) rather than as our best epistemic access to and experience of the union.
Alison Simmons

Mind-Body Union and the Limits of Cartesian Metaphysics

Allowing her to stay steeped in Cartesian metaphysics, he’s reaching for an analogy to guide her to what the rest of us naturally feel all the time. Similarly, having told Arnauld that the mind’s action on body is something we cannot arrive at through reasoning but experience every day, he offers “nevertheless” [tamen] to give him an analogy to help him conceive it, and the heaviness analogy follows (AT V 222). Thinking about heaviness, then, is supposed to help these intellectual overachievers get at the primitive notion of mind-body union that the rest of us simply feel every time we reach for a milkshake or stretch out our legs (which is really our best way of getting at it).

What do we learn about the phenomenology of embodiment from the analogy? For one thing, when people think about heaviness propelling a body toward the center of the earth, they effectively conceive it as acting on the body without any surface contact. That is, in part, what it is to conceive the action of the mind on the body to which it is united; that’s what we all feel first personally when we reach for a milkshake or stretch our legs, viz., agency without surface contact. I do not experience myself pushing my arm to reach the milkshake; once I form the volition to take sip of it, I simply feel myself reaching. The action might be effortful (if, say, my arthritis is acting up) but it nevertheless feels contactless. It’s true that Descartes thinks this is a misconception of how heaviness actually works on body: all purely bodily movement occurs through surface contact, as Elisabeth appreciated. But the misconception is informative because it involves the misapplication of our primitive sensory notion of mind-body union (through which we feel our mind’s action on our own body without impact or pushing) to something that is in fact purely bodily, and so properly understood through our primitive intellectual idea of body. That’s my reading. Now let’s look at the analogy as it appears in his original letter to Elisabeth and see if it fits the texts:

Allowing her to stay steeped in Cartesian metaphysics, he’s reaching for an analogy to guide her to what the rest of us naturally feel all the time. Similarly, having told Arnauld that the mind’s action on body is something we cannot arrive at through reasoning but experience every day, he offers “nevertheless” [tamen] to give him an analogy to help him conceive it, and the heaviness analogy follows (AT V 222). Thinking about heaviness, then, is supposed to help these intellectual overachievers get at the primitive notion of mind-body union that the rest of us simply feel every time we reach for a milkshake or stretch out our legs (which is really our best way of getting at it).

What do we learn about the phenomenology of embodiment from the analogy? For one thing, when people think about heaviness propelling a body toward the center of the earth, they effectively conceive it as acting on the body without any surface contact. That is, in part, what it is to conceive the action of the mind on the body to which it is united; that’s what we all feel first personally when we reach for a milkshake or stretch our legs, viz., agency without surface contact. I do not experience myself pushing my arm to reach the milkshake; once I form the volition to take sip of it, I simply feel myself reaching. The action might be effortful (if, say, my arthritis is acting up) but it nevertheless feels contactless. It’s true that Descartes thinks this is a misconception of how heaviness actually works on body: all purely bodily movement occurs through surface contact, as Elisabeth appreciated. But the misconception is informative because it involves the misapplication of our primitive sensory notion of mind-body union (through which we feel our mind’s action on our own body without impact or pushing) to something that is in fact purely bodily, and so properly understood through our primitive intellectual idea of body. That’s my reading. Now let’s look at the analogy as it appears in his original letter to Elisabeth and see if it fits the texts:

...in supposing that heaviness is a real quality, about which we have no knowledge other than that it has the power to move the body in which it exists toward the center of the earth, we have no trouble conceiving how it moves this body, nor how it is joined to it, and we do not at all think that this happens by a real touching of one surface against another, because we experience in ourselves that we have a particular notion for conceiving this [viz., the primitive notion of mind-body union]. And I believe that we use this notion badly in applying it to heaviness...for it was given to us to conceive the way in which the soul moves the body. (AT III 667-668, italics mine)

The mistake we make in thinking about heaviness in bodies is twofold: we apply a notion fitted for the mind-body union to a mere body, and we apply a sensory or experiential notion to something we are capable of understanding. Descartes is clear to Elisabeth that the representation of the mind’s action on body that we get through this primitive notion of union amounts to a way of feeling it rather than a way of understanding it: “Everyone feels [éprouver] that he is a single person with both body and thought that are of such a nature that the thought can move the body” (AT III 694; see also AT V 222). And we feel the mind to act on the body without surface contact. The response is almost certainly not going to satisfy Elisabeth or Arnauld, who are looking for a metaphysical explanation of how the interaction works, not a description of what it feels like. But it does help to flesh out Descartes’ primitive sensory notion: through the primitive notion of union we feel the mind’s acting on its own body without surface contact. Of course, if I want to act on another body, one that I’m not united to, I’m well aware that I have to get my body to make contact with it: to get the milkshake to my mouth, my hand has to make contact with the glass, and the straw with my mouth. In simply reaching my hand, however, the experience is of a contactless causal efficacy. The

ALISON SIMMONS

philosophizing...I made use of the aforementioned comparison with heaviness. (AT III 693-694)
contrast is striking when we pay attention to it and shows me that I have a very special relationship to this one particular body.

A related point about the phenomenology of the mind’s action on the body comes out in Descartes’ correspondence on this issue with Arnauld in 1648. Just before he insists to Arnauld that we experience the mind’s action on the body every day, and introduces the heaviness analogy in an effort to direct him to the experience, Descartes suggests that we experience the mind to act immediately on the part of the body we want to move, rather than mediate by way of first moving something else.\(^\text{101}\) In order to wiggle my toes, all I have to do (assuming my feet aren’t bound and my body is in good working order) is direct my attention to my toes and decide to move them. Again, it might take effort (if my toes are stiff or very cold) but it does not take volitional mediation: I don’t have to decide to move the tendons in my foot to wiggle the toes, or will the muscles in my legs to move the tendons in my foot to wiggle the toes, etc. My volition is directed straight to the toes.\(^\text{102}\) Nothing about this inner sensory experience suggests all the things that, on Descartes’ view, actually have to occur in the body in order for the toes to wiggle: animal spirits must be directed from the pineal gland into particular nerves all the way to the limb, where the muscles must contract; there is plenty of causal mediation going on in the body. Nor does it reveal to us how the mind sets those animal spirits in motion in the course of simply willing the toes to wiggle. Descartes chalks those things up to the appropriate configuration of the body and the nature of the mind-body union, which he concedes we do not understand. But he does insist in this passage that we are aware of the mind’s union with the body in experiences like wiggling our toes. “For otherwise,” he writes, “[the mind] would not incline its will to move the limbs” (AT V 222).

\(^\text{101}\) Koirunianiemi and Curley emphasize the phenomenological immediacy of mind-body interaction in Koirunianiemi and Curley 2015, section 6.

\(^\text{102}\) Descartes is well aware that the range of voluntary bodily motions is limited: I can’t simply will my pupils to dilate; I have to will to attend to something in the distance to get them to dilate (see Passions I.44, AT XI 362).

Mind-Body Union and the Limits of Cartesian Metaphysics

Why might feeling the mind’s action on body to be contactless and immediate facilitate our action in the world, even if it risks our misunderstanding the metaphysics of body-body interaction and the real distinction between mind and body? The lack of experienced surface contact is empowering. It infuses my bodily movements with a sense of agency. 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.\(^\text{103}\) The result is that I take myself to be not simply a mental agent acting on the world, but a bodily agent in the world, a world of other bodies situated around a bodily me (to my bodily left and bodily right, e.g.) that I can act on by making bodily contact with them.\(^\text{104}\) This is surely a critical first step to my survival as a mind-body union in a world of other bodies poised to make an impact on my bodily well-being. And this, of course, is exactly how we misconceive the heavy body: as an embodied agent acting on other bodies by making contact with them.

What about the phenomenological immediacy of mental causation? It is useful for much the same reason that Descartes thinks it’s useful for the body’s action on the mind to give rise to a sensation that indicates the condition of the distal rather than any more proximate bodily cause, even though it might mislead us about the nature of the sensory process. In the case of body-to-mind causation, it is more important to have my mind’s limited attention directed to my foot when it is damaged than to the lumbar region or pineal gland or anything.

\(^\text{103}\) I am indebted to Colin Chamberlain for discussion of this point. For his own treatment of it, see Chamberlain 2014.

\(^\text{104}\) If I experienced myself to make contact with my body, by contrast, not only would this create a strange bodily homunculus scenario (I’d have to already experience myself as extended, since, as Elisabeth noted, contact presupposes two extended things, so that my extended self would be making contact with my body), but I would experience myself to have agency on my body rather than in or through my body, just as I experience myself to have agency on any other foreign body.
“the mind can be called corporeal insofar as it is made to be united to the body” (AT V 223). One can easily imagine Elisabeth’s and Arnauld’s exasperation. Didn’t Descartes teach us to strip our idea of the mind of any trace of extension, matter, or corporeality? Wasn’t it Descartes who wrote: “I have a clear and distinct idea of myself insofar as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing” (AT VII 78, italics mine; see also AT VII 53)? Wasn’t it Descartes who insisted to the authors of the Sixth Replies: “I discovered nothing in [my idea of the mind on its own] that belonged to body” (AT VII 444, italics mine). And didn’t he write to Arnauld himself: “there is nothing in the concept of mind that pertains to body” (AT VII 225, italics mine) and “everything that pertains to body can be denied of [the mind]” (AT VII 227, italics mine)?

Yes. That was Descartes. But note that the idea of the mind as an unextended thing is a purely intellectual idea of mind on its own, i.e., an idea of the pure intellect by the pure intellect. The idea in question now is our sensory idea of the embodied mind. Descartes urges Elisabeth to “feel” it: “after having conceived [the mind’s union with body] properly, and having felt it in herself [éproué en soi-meme], it will be easy for her to consider [the way in which the mind is extended]” (AT III 694, italics mine). The primitive sensory notion attributes extension to the mind—not physical and real extension, of course, but phenomenological or experienced extension.

Unhappy with the heaviness analogy, Elisabeth politely insists that it would be easier to concede that the soul is extended and material than that an immaterial soul can move the body (AT III 685). Descartes’ response is startling. Contrary to all expectation, he encourages her to conceive the mind as extended: “I beg her to feel free to attribute this matter and this extension to the soul because that is simply to conceive it as united to the body” (AT III 694). He similarly writes to Arnauld:

IV.B. Feeling the union: Co-Extension

As anticipated, the heaviness analogy was not effective for Elisabeth. She’s a stubborn Cartesian rationalist looking for an explanation and understanding of the mind’s action on body, not a phenomenology of it. In his second letter to her, Descartes gives up on the heaviness analogy and takes a different tack in an attempt to draw her from metaphysics to phenomenology. First he simply tells her flat out that she has to stop philosophizing and start living if she wants to access the primitive idea of the union that will help her conceive the mind’s action on body. He goes on, however, to engage her response to the analogy, and here we unearth a bit more in the primitive sensory notion, in particular the way in which it represents the union itself that mind-body interaction presupposes. It involves conceiving (that is, feeling) the mind to be an extended subject.

Unhappy with the heaviness analogy, Elisabeth politely insists that it would be easier to concede that the soul is extended and material than that an immaterial soul can move the body (AT III 685). Descartes’ response is startling. Contrary to all expectation, he encourages her to conceive the mind as extended: “I beg her to feel free to attribute this matter and this extension to the soul because that is simply to conceive it as united to the body” (AT III 694). He similarly writes to Arnauld:

Referred pains would, I think, be classified among the “errors of nature” that Descartes discusses in Meditation 6.

105. Referred pains would, I think, be classified among the “errors of nature” that Descartes discusses in Meditation 6.

106. See also Passions I.50: “the soul is of such a nature that it has no relation to extension” (AT XI 351, italics mine).

107. Descartes may have the same phenomenon in mind when he notes in Meditation 6 that “the whole mind seems [videatur] to be united to whole body” (AT VII 86).
feels itself to have must be distinguished from the physical extension that we understand to constitute the nature of body. The difference is not simply that one is phenomenological and the other physical. Phenomenological extension has importantly different properties from physical extension. For one thing, the embodied mind’s phenomenological extension is penetrable. The physical extension that constitutes the nature of body “has a determinate location such that it excludes all other bodily extension, but this is not the case for [the extension of thought]” (AT III 694-695). The embodied mind’s phenomenological extension is (experimentally) co-extensive with the body to which it is joined.

The phenomenological extension that we feel the embodied mind to have also differs from the extension we understand the body to have in having no fixed measure: it experientially shrinks and grows to accommodate whatever body it fills. This point comes out especially in the Sixth Replies, to which Descartes refers Elisabeth in his first attempt to help her conceive the mind-body union. Once again, heaviness is our model:

although I imagined heaviness to be spread through the whole body that is heavy, I still did not attribute to it the extension which constitutes the nature of a body; for the true extension of a body is such that all the parts exclude

108. Marleen Rozemond refers to what I’m calling the mind’s phenomenological extension as the mind’s “quasi-extension” in Rozemond 2003. She, however, takes the embodied mind’s “quasi-extension” to constitute a metaphysical thesis about the relationship between mind and body, where as I (along with Koivuniemi and Curley 2015) take it to constitute a phenomenological thesis. Rozemond briefly considers but rejects a phenomenological reading (pp. 358-359), ironically on the ground that it doesn’t given a real explanation of the mind’s action on body. (Her intuitions clearly run in line with Elisabeth’s.) I’ve been arguing that it is not supposed to give an explanation, and that he thinks we aren’t capable of producing one.

109. He makes the same point in the earlier August 1641 letter to “Hyperaspistes”: “The mind is co-extensive with an extended body even though it does not have any true extension, that is any extension through which it occupies a place and excludes any other thing from that place” (AT III 434).
suggestions metaphysically; but they are quite astute observations of our embodied phenomenology. As such, they illuminate the third primitive notion’s representation of the mind-body union.

It is also useful to us as embodied agents, even if it is occasionally annoying. In feeling myself to be present in my whole body I take ownership of it, or, better, come to identify with it. This body (this foot, this knee, this little finger) is mine or me (or part of me). And that’s important for at least two reasons. First, if I am to engage at all with the objects around me, I have to engage them through my body; telekenesis isn’t an option for creatures like us (perhaps it is for angels). If I want to enjoy the taste of a cookie, I have to get my hand into the cookie jar. And I have to change my reach as my body gets taller and my arm gets longer. By feeling myself to be present throughout my body I experience my body as subject of action rather than object that I act on or even tool that I act with (by acting on). I am grabbing the cookie insofar as I identify with the hand in the jar, insofar as the hand is subject rather than object. (I have a different relation to my anesthetized hand; even if I can manage to stuff it into the jar and manipulate the fingers to get a hold of the cookie, the anesthetized arm is an object that I act on or, at best, a tool that I use to get the cookie.) To be an embodied agent I need first to occupy my body as subject.

Feeling the mind to be co-extensive with or present in the body is also important because it makes me especially concerned to care for it. I care about my knees because I feel that they are mine or part of me, and I can’t help but care about myself. In my journey through the world, I therefore try to avoid bashing my knees into furniture and I nurse them when I clumsily do. I care about my friend’s knees too, of course, but I have to opt in to that concern, just as the sailor has to opt in to concern for his ship and an angel in a machine would have to opt in to concern for the machine. In the case of my own knees, the concern is hard-wired through feeling myself to extend into my knees; the only opting I can do is to try to opt out of the concern by taking up an ascetic or masochistic life.

The concern I have for my knees (and the rest of my body) comes in part from feeling that I extend into them, so that what happens to them happens to me. But the fact that I feel pain when things go wrong in them is, of course, important to attracting my concern and care too. As Malebranche later puts it, if we were to perceive only what’s really happening in the body when we suffered a wound, we might take delight in watching its destruction just as a prisoner might rejoice in the destruction of the prison walls. Pain, by contrast, demands my displeasure and action. (Taking this into account, it is perhaps worth noting that my concern for my friend’s knees may be more easily won than the sailor’s concern for his ship or the angel’s concern for its machine, since a good part of what makes me care for my friend’s knees is the desire that she not feel herself to be pained. I care if my favorite vase breaks, but not in the way that I care if my friend’s knees do.)

Margaret Wilson complained that Descartes’ co-extension thesis is “self-contradictory,” “incoherent” and “unintelligible.” As a metaphysical thesis she’s right; we can’t make any sense of it in conjunction with his substance dualism. As an observation about our embodied phenomenology, however, it illumines our experience as bodily subjects and our instinct to care for our bodies.

IV.C. Holenmerism: Mind as whole in the whole and whole in the part

The embodied mind’s phenomenological co-extension with the body interacts in interesting ways with its phenomenologically contactless and immediate action on the body. For just as the embodied mind feels itself to be co-extensive with larger and smaller bodies as we grow and shrink, so it feels itself to act in larger and smaller regions of the body.

at any given time. Returning yet again to the heaviness analogy in the *Sixth Replies*, Descartes writes:

Moreover, 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 if 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.* (AT VII 442, italics mine)

Descartes is invoking a familiar doctrine of the soul’s relation to the body as “whole in the whole and whole any of its part,” a doctrine that Henry More would later dub “holenmerism.” The analogy here raises plenty of questions, but this much we can say with confidence: Descartes thinks that the mind, while being somehow extended through the whole body, can act on just one limited part of it and be wholly present in that part when it does so. Thus not only does the mind accommodate itself to the changing physical dimensions of the body, but in acting on it, it can concentrate itself in a single part of it. Speaking literally or metaphysically, this is nonsense. The mind isn’t really extended at all. What is more, Descartes’ official line is that the mind acts immediately on only one part of the body in particular, viz., the pineal gland.115

But as far as our internal-sense experience is concerned, we feel the mind to be present in and act on *many* parts of the body and even, if we choose, on the whole body at once: I can wiggle just my toes or shake my whole body on the dance floor. In both cases I feel my mind

114. For an extensive discussion of holenmerism, including the sources for it in both the Aristotelian and Platonic traditions, see Rozemond 2003.

subject rather than object. As a bodily subject I am not divisible, but am one and the same subject, through growth and diminution of the body. To conceive mind-to-body interaction is to feel this body, through the internal senses, as agent. As a bodily agent I move voluntarily through the world as a whole, but I can concentrate my agency in a small bodily part. To conceive body-to-mind interaction is to feel this body, through the internal senses, as patient. As a bodily patient, I suffer pains and pleasures that make me take steps to care for my bodily self. To conceive mind-body union and interaction is conceive ourselves, through the internal senses, as human beings.

V. Conclusion

Elisabeth asks Descartes a metaphysical question: how do mind and body interact with each other? If I’m right, Descartes changes the topic from metaphysics to phenomenology. When she digs in her heels, he, incredibly, warns her that too much metaphysics is bad for one’s health:

although I believe that it is very necessary to have properly understood once in one’s life the principles of metaphysics, since these are what give us knowledge of God and of our soul, I also believe that it would be very harmful to occupy one’s intellect often in meditating upon them, since this would hamper it from devoting itself to the functions of the imagination and senses. (AT III 695)

It’s hard not to be disappointed, and vicariously insulted, by this response. I’ve suggested, however, that Descartes is not simply avoiding a question he can’t answer or patronizing the princess. He’s offering Elisabeth a serious twofold response to her question: (a) metaphysics has its limits and (b) there is more, and more of importance, to the study of the human being than metaphysics.

If the nature of mind-body union and interaction falls outside the limits of any humanly possible metaphysics, Descartes doesn’t seem to mind because their reality is not in question; nobody doubts that mind and body unite to form a single thing, a human being, and that they interact with each other. Metaphysics is needed for more controversial matters. That mind and body can exist separately from each other is in question. We need to do some metaphysics to settle this matter:

many more people make the mistake of supposing that the soul is not really distinct from the body than make the mistake of admitting the distinction between them but denying their substantial union, and in order to refute those who propose that souls are mortal, it is more important to teach the distinctness of parts in a human being than to teach their union. (January 1642 letter to Regius, AT III 508)

But metaphysics is not a full-time job. Meditating on metaphysics “once in one’s life” is enough to guard against some of the prejudices to which we are susceptible in our embodied human condition, in particular prejudices that make us resist the existence of God, the possibility of the mind’s separation from body, and, probably most important to Descartes, a conception of body as all and only extended to ground the new physics.116 As for mind-body union and interaction: if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.117

What about Descartes’ further suggestion that too much metaphysics is harmful to your health? He’s just pointing out what

116. In addition to the quotation above, the Meditations presents itself as a “once in a lifetime” metaphysical undertaking. Descartes is more generous to the enterprise in his 28 June 1643 letter to Elisabeth, suggesting metaphysics occupies his life perhaps a few hours per year (AT III 693).

117. One might argue, with Henri Gouhier, that Descartes himself broke it. Gouhier reasonably suggests that Descartes’ arguments for the real distinction between mind and body were so compelling that they actually called the union into question for his followers and that that is why we find people like Malebranche and Régis taking on the project of constructing a Cartesian ontology of the union where Descartes did not (see Gouhier 1962, pp. 321-328).
ALISON SIMMONS

Mind-Body Union and the Limits of Cartesian Metaphysics

References and Abbreviations


anyone who has worked on a philosophy paper knows: sustained intellectual thought can get in the way of one’s every day activities. You are so embroiled in your paper that you miss lunch and don’t realize that your leg has gone to sleep. You are so deep in thought as you walk to school (trying to figure out the conclusion of your paper) that you go the wrong direction or walk straight into a street sign.

While we are capable of purely intellectual thought, human beings are first and foremost agents navigating the world around them, and for this the senses and passions are the cognitive drivers. We are, or try to be, rational agents, and so the intellect guides and re-directs us in these efforts, but it takes it cues and must operate in conjunction with the senses and passions. Although some of us do manage to make a living at it, metaphysics is not the human mind’s chief concern in life. Living a good human life is.

Too much metaphysics is harmful to us as interpreters too. If I’m right, Descartes’ comments on the mind-body union should not be read as a strange and puzzling chapter in the book of Cartesian metaphysics. They should instead point us to a more comprehensive Cartesian study of human nature. This study may include a chapter on the metaphysics of dualism, but it includes a good deal more: empirical work in physiology, psychophysiology, and psychophysics. It also, I’ve argued, includes a reflective phenomenology that illuminates the cognitive effects of embodiment and the various ways in which they enable us to make decisions about how to navigate through the world. If Descartes’ metaphysical dualism presents our fate as thinking subjects after death, this reflective phenomenology presents our reality as embodied human agents in this life.118

This paper has been a long time in the works, and it has benefited from many generous critics. My first thanks goes to Minna Koivuniemi and Ed Curley. Working through a draft of their terrific paper, ‘A Kind of Dualism,’ inspired me, once and for all, to sort out my own thoughts about the mind-body union in Descartes. Minna and Ed, both actually and imaginatively, proved to be critical interlocutors for me. I presented versions of this paper to audiences at Princeton, Emory, the Harvard Divinity School, the University of Chicago, Temple, the Pacific APA 2014, and The Finnish-Hungarian Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy 2014. I’m grateful to these audiences for their engagement. I owe more particular thanks to John Bengson, Colin Chamberlain, Michael della Rocca, Roger Florka, Jeff McDonough, Elliot Paul, Alison Peterman, Marleen Rozemond, and Anat Schechtman for comments and discussion of this material. My very deepest thanks, however, must go to two anonymous reviewers for *Philosophers’ Imprint*, both of whom read the paper twice with extraordinary care and gave me extensive comments that were both extremely challenging and, ultimately, hugely helpful.

118. This paper has been a long time in the works, and it has benefited from many generous critics. My first thanks goes to Minna Koivuniemi and Ed Curley. Working through a draft of their terrific paper, ‘A Kind of Dualism,’ inspired me, once and for all, to sort out my own thoughts about the mind-body union in Descartes. Minna and Ed, both actually and imaginatively, proved to be critical interlocutors for me. I presented versions of this paper to audiences at Princeton, Emory, the Harvard Divinity School, the University of Chicago, Temple, the Pacific APA 2014, and The Finnish-Hungarian Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy 2014. I’m grateful to these audiences for their engagement. I owe more particular thanks to John Bengson, Colin Chamberlain, Michael della Rocca, Roger Florka, Jeff McDonough, Elliot Paul, Alison Peterman, Marleen Rozemond, and Anat Schechtman for comments and discussion of this material. My very deepest thanks, however, must go to two anonymous reviewers for *Philosophers’ Imprint*, both of whom read the paper twice with extraordinary care and gave me extensive comments that were both extremely challenging and, ultimately, hugely helpful.
Mind-Body Union and the Limits of Cartesian Metaphysics

J. Vrin. [AT] Cited by volume and page. Translations are my own by they have benefited from those in CSM and CSMK. Short titles for Descartes’ works are as follows: Discourse for Discourse on Method, Meditations for Meditations on First Philosophy, Passions for Passions of the Soul, Principles for Principles of Philosophy and Man for Treatise on Man.


ALISON SIMMONS

Mind-Body Union and the Limits of Cartesian Metaphysics


