

RECONSIDERING DESCARTES'S NOTION OF THE MIND-BODY
UNION

ABSTRACT. This paper examines Descartes's third primary notion and the distinction between different kinds of knowledge based on different and mutually irreducible primary notions. It discusses the application of the notions of clearness and distinctness to the domain of knowledge based on that of mind-body union. It argues that the consequences of the distinctions Descartes is making with regard to our knowledge of the human mind and nature are rather different from those that have been attributed to Descartes due to the influential Rylean picture of Cartesian mind-body dualism.

1.

The view of man which in contemporary philosophy of mind has become associated with "Cartesian dualism" is that of an immaterial soul or mind placed in a material (extended) body functioning according to the mechanical laws of nature. The true man, in this analogy, is identified neither with the body nor with the composite of body and mind, but with the mind alone – a mind that can, mysteriously, control the mechanically working body and also be influenced by its movements.¹ This Rylean version of Cartesian dualism has not much in common with the view Descartes actually defended, and could, I have argued, be called the "Myth of the Cartesian Myth".² Far from endorsing a Platonistic view of man as that of a pure mind or thinking thing accidentally united to a body, Descartes insists that human nature can only be understood in terms of a real, or, as he also calls it, substantial union of the mind and the body.³ This notion of a real union of the mind and the body is not introduced *ad hoc* to account for the unintelligible mind-body interaction but represents Descartes's mature view of the human person as a conscious *and* embodied agent.⁴ It is said to be a *primitive*, irreducible notion, and it covers important features of human experience and action such as sensations, passions and voluntary movements which are not intelligible in terms of the notions of extension or thought alone. As a primitive or primary notion it is, presumably, on a par with the simple and irreducible notions of extension and thought, each of which Descartes takes to be a conceptual precondition for distinct

domains of scientia or knowledge the objects of which cannot be conceived or accounted for in terms pertaining to any other domain of knowledge. I am not here concerned with the metaphysical problem of the nature of the mind-body union as a composite of two distinct substances. Instead, I want to consider some of the epistemological and methodological implications of Descartes's distinction between these three different simple notions, which because of the influential Cartesian myth have remained largely unnoticed in the contemporary debate. I will discuss, in particular, the knowledge or understanding involved in the third primary notion, and the ways in which it differs from the rational and properly scientific knowledge limited to the other two primary notions. Let us first look at Descartes's version of dualism and his answer to objections against his view of human nature.

2.

Descartes, in his early writings on man, made use of what looks like a “ghost-in-the-machine” analogy. Thus, in giving his first crude accounts of the interaction between the rational soul and the body, he compares the body to a mechanically working statue of earth, the movements of which are controlled and regulated by the immaterial soul. In his later works he elaborates on this “para-mechanical” metaphor when giving a more detailed explanation of the mind-body interaction through the movements of the pineal gland and the animal spirits.⁵ But it is important to realize that those are and remain metaphors for Descartes – mechanical accounts of something which as he clearly saw at a later stage could *not* be adequately represented or described by means of any mechanical or para-mechanical model.⁶ And although Descartes, when proving the mind-body distinction, does describe the mind as completely independent from the body, in Platonist terms,⁷ he nevertheless rejected, explicitly, the Platonist view of man as a pure mind accidentally united to the body embedded in the above metaphor. The mind-body union is a substantial union, a union described in Aristotelian-Thomistic terms as a composite of form and matter.⁸ But transposed into the framework of Descartes's radical dualism, this traditional notion of an immaterial form inhering in a material body seems to be totally unintelligible.⁹ When faced with this difficulty,¹⁰ Descartes invariably replied that the union of the mind and the body *cannot* be explained by more clear and distinct ideas, but that it need in fact not be explained at all, because as a “primary notion” it should be plain to everyone.¹¹

Can this answer be taken seriously? The mind and body, as Descartes defines them, can be clearly and distinctly conceived only when considered

separately from each other. But then they cannot without absurdity also be conceived as united, for this would be to conceive them at the same time as two different and one single thing, which, as Descartes admits, is impossible.¹²

While Descartes recognized the difficulty, he did not give up the notion of a real union between two radically different natures, each of which is intelligible only apart from this union. Instead he drew a distinction between different objects of knowledge, and insisted that the mind-body union, though it cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived by pure understanding, is nevertheless very clearly perceived by the senses, in daily experience. It belongs to those self-evident things "which we can only make obscure when we try to explain them in terms of others."¹³

But sensory experience, when not banished altogether, plays a very restricted role in Cartesian science of nature built, primarily, on clear and distinct concepts of the intellect and mathematical imagination. The question therefore is what value, if any, Descartes can accord to the senses and everyday experience as reliable sources of knowledge of the mind-body union. Can there be any *knowledge* properly speaking of things that can be perceived through the senses only? Is Descartes's criticism of Aristotelian philosophy of nature not due, primarily, to his mistrust of sensory experience and his confidence in the superiority of the pure intellect and mathematical reasoning as means to a true knowledge of nature?

What Descartes opposed in Aristotelian philosophy of nature was however not so much its reliance on the senses as its uncritical use thereof, and, notably, the anthropomorphism resulting from the application of notions belonging to common sense psychology in the account of physical events. The paradigm of such notions is that of an immaterial form or "substantial quality", e.g., heaviness, which is supposed to inform a physical body and thereby explain its (natural) motions. Such notions are derived from our own experience as conscious agents pursuing certain ends. Although we understand them clearly enough in attributing them to ourselves or to conscious beings generally, these notions become occult and unintelligible when extended to the description of changes in physical nature. To meet Descartes's requirements of clearness and distinctness, scientific explanations should be in strictly mathematical and mechanistic terms. Sense qualities and related notions cannot be translated into quantitative notions – they cannot be expressed, unambiguously, in mathematical terms. They are purely subjective modes of thought, and not, as the scholastics mistakenly assumed, real properties of external, corporeal things.¹⁴ But although Descartes rejects the use of such notions in the scientific account of nature, considering them as obscure and unreliable, he does not, interestingly,

reject them altogether. *Qua* modes of thought they have a cognitive value and use of their own, but this use, as will be seen, is unscientific, or rather, non-scientific. If the Aristotelian notion of a soul informing a physical body, for instance, is obscure when applied to explain changes of physical bodies, we understand it well enough when restricting it to our human experience as conscious beings and agents from which it is derived. But it belongs primarily to this human context and has no application outside this domain.¹⁵

The moral to be drawn from this, I believe, is twofold: not only are notions such as “real qualities” or “qualitative forms” to be excluded from scientific explanations, but the very phenomena they apply to elude, by their nature, scientific explanation. This is also a consequence that Descartes is aware of: there is no room in the Cartesian tree of science for a scientific or rational psychology accounting for the laws of our mental life as embodied, human persons. There is only a science of the human body on the one hand, and a metaphysical knowledge of the rational mind or soul on the other.¹⁶ To qualify as an object of physics in Descartes’s sense of the word, the human body must be considered as a piece of mere mechanically moved extended matter. Important aspects of human nature and experience are hereby left outside the scope of scientific explanations. But is this to say that those other aspects cannot be the objects of any distinct knowledge or *scientia* at all?¹⁷

3.

Descartes, in the *Principles*, divides the objects of our perception into two main classes: intellectual things pertaining to the mind or thinking substances, and material things pertaining to body or extended substances. In addition to these we are said also “to experience within ourselves [*in nobis experimur*] certain other things which must not be referred either to the mind or to the body alone” which arise “from the close and intimate union of our mind with the body”. The list includes appetites such as hunger, thirst, emotions, passions (anger, joy, sadness, love, etc.) and sensations (pain, pleasure, smells, tastes, sounds and so on (AT VIII-1, 23, HR I, 238.)).¹⁸

All three categories of things, hence, are objects of perception in Descartes’s wide sense of the word: they belong to what falls under our perception [*perceptionem nostram*] (AT VIII-1, 22).¹⁹ But are they all objects of knowledge in the same sense of the word? Can they all be perceived with the clearness and distinctness required of true knowledge?²⁰ In modern philosophy of mind the things listed above have been construed as

“private” mental objects which, on the view attributed to Descartes, can be studied and known through introspection, by the mind’s inward gaze on its own states.²¹ Does Descartes not, in fact, claim that they can be clearly and distinctly known, as modes of thought, by the conscious mind attending to its own thoughts?

There is a sense, of course, in which any thought, in Descartes’s wide sense of the word, is clearly known and indubitable. This however is not to say that all thoughts are known with equal clearness and distinctness, or that they all would have, if not actually, at least potentially, some kind of epistemological transparency.²² Sense perceptions (sensations) and emotions are described as ‘confused’ modes of thought; they depend on the intimate union between mind and body (AT VII, 81, HR I, 192) and belong to the class of thoughts which can be very clear without however being distinct. A perception is clear, for Descartes, when it is present and manifest to the attentive mind, like, for instance, a sensation of pain – it is *distinct* when “so separated and delineated from all others that it contains absolutely nothing except what is clear”, as e.g., mathematical propositions (“ $2 + 2 = 4$ ”) and other self-evident rational principles or common notions (*Principles*, I, par. 45, AT VIII, 21–22, HR I, 237). While pure thoughts of the intellect – those innate notions the mind can discover, as it were, within itself – can be both clear and distinct when attended to in the appropriate way, sensations and emotions belong to the class of thoughts which are adventitious and which, though they can be very clearly perceived, are never, in the same way, distinctly perceived. They are clear only when “we carefully avoid making any judgement about them beyond what is exactly contained in our perception and what we are inwardly conscious of” (*Principles* I, 66, AT VIII, 32, HR, I, 248.). But what in this case is exactly contained in our thought is not something we can describe or define. We can, at best, recognize it, and distinguish, say, a sensation of pain from one of pleasure, or a shattering of blue from another, but if pressed on what exactly is contained in the thought Descartes, I presume, would conclude with Leibniz that it is “un je ne sais quoi”.²³

Descartes, however, has reasons of his own to conclude that sensations and emotions are, generally, confused thoughts. Their status, in fact, is peculiar: as modes of thought they are states of the mind, and belong, ontologically, to the mind. They are however accidental modes of the mind caused by the body, and as such they belong, causally and functionally, to the mind-body union.²⁴ They cannot, therefore, be known or understood without being referred to this union.²⁵ To say that they have to be referred to the mind-body union is not, as I understand it, to take this notion to be another principal attribute of which the psycho-physical relations would be

the specific modes.²⁶ The notion of the mind-body union does refer to and applies uniquely to human nature – a third sort of entity, which is constituted by this union or composition of two distinct substances, but it is not itself a third kind of substance having a specific essence or attribute. Each of the two substances composing it can be known distinctly *only* through its main attribute (cf. *Principles* I, art. 53–54), and this, precisely, is what makes this notion so problematic. Important aspects of human nature – everything that counts as depending on the mind or the intellect alone, can be clearly and distinctly known through the attribute of thinking – others again, depending on the body alone, can be understood as modes of extension. But there is no third attribute in addition to these two by which the manner in which they are united and interact could be clearly and distinctly conceived. On the contrary, there is no way, Descartes says, of understanding the interaction between what falls under these two distinct and incompatible attributes – “all this is unintelligible” (*Principles* IV, 198, AT VIII-1 322, HR I, 289). The only context in which body-dependent thoughts are said to be both clearly and distinctly perceived, is when regarded “merely as sensations or thoughts” (*Principles* I, 68, AT VIII-1 33, HR I, 248), that is to say, when considered as modes of thinking, *not* as modes of the body or the mind-body composite. If, then, from the point of view of our understanding and knowledge, these phenomena have to be referred to the union, which in itself is not an object of clear and distinct perception but a given of inner experience, it is because they are themselves merely a matter of inner experience, not of distinct knowledge or perception. What are experienced, in sensation or action, are not, however, the psychophysical relations, but their effects. We “experience the various sensations as they are produced in the soul” (AT VIII-1, 322, HR I, 289) – not by what or how they are produced. If we are good Cartesians we ought to know – without understanding how – that they are produced by local motions in the body, and also that nothing “reaches the brain from the external sense organs except motions of this kind” (*id. loc.*). We are hence entitled to infer that there is a close relationship between the sensations we experience and local motions in the brain – that relationship, however, is not and cannot itself be experienced or understood.

Sensations, in this sense, are inherently confused: the human mind cannot perceive all the causes of the sensations or emotions affecting it, nor does it have the conceptual resources for representing, in a clear and distinct manner, the interaction between thoughts and mechanical movements of matter. We have no other notion for conceiving the interaction than that of a substantial union, but this is a primary notion given in inner experience which cannot as such provide any explanation of this fact. The confusion

involved in the thoughts depending on the union is not, it should be stressed, one that could be clarified by conceptual analysis.²⁷ Nor is it one that could be removed by empirical research, by brain physiology for instance. It is rather a *distinctive* feature of the human mind, tied to its limited and imperfect nature as an *embodied* mind. A pure, rational mind, say that of an angel, could, if it were accidentally placed in a particular body, conceive all the movements in the body very clearly and distinctly, without being in any way moved or affected by these motions, and without having sensations or appetites like those of true human beings.²⁸ It would not feel any pain when the body is hurt, but would “perceive this wound by the understanding only, just as the sailor perceives by the sight when something is damaged in his vessel”. Likewise, when the body needs drink or food, a pure mind or intellect would “clearly understand this fact without being warned by confused feelings of hunger and thirst”.²⁹

The mind-body union constituting human nature is presented in the *Meditations* as a fact of experience, something that our nature is said to teach us. It is instituted by nature in such a way that certain movements in the body “produce” certain (confused) thoughts “in the mind”, informing it thereby of the states and needs of the body (that the mind, were it not for these obscure feelings, might otherwise forget). In spite of their confused and obscure nature, the thoughts caused by bodily movements (sensations and passions) always have “some truth” in them, and to this extent they have a proper and important function: they serve the preservation and welfare of the body.³⁰ It is not only our material well-being which depends on them, but they are also, for Descartes, our principal source of contentment, because all good and evil depends on the passions, the most confused and confusing thoughts, “so that persons whom the passions can move most deeply are capable of enjoying the sweetest pleasures in this life” (AT XI, 488, HR I, 427). But these thoughts, I want to insist, cannot be rendered more clear than they are as actually experienced, nor are they intelligible outside the context of the mind-body union and those natural purposes for which they have been instituted. This means that there is no direct, privileged access by introspection to a large part of the contents of the human mind.³¹ The methodological consequences of Descartes’s view of man are hence very different from what they are taken to be in the influential two-story myth associated with Cartesian dualism. Let me try to indicate briefly what I take the consequences of Descartes’s view to be.

4.

Descartes says more about different kinds of knowledge and how they are related in his correspondence with Elizabeth. As a primary notion, that of the mind-body union is irreducible: like that of the mind and that of the body, it is, Descartes says, “known in its proper manner and not by comparison with any other” (To Elizabeth 28 June 1643, AT III, 690 K, 140). The primary notions, as I understand them, represent three independent and incomparable levels or kinds of knowledge, differing from each other not only through their objects and aims, but also through the manners in which they are perceived and the terms in which they are described.

The mind and, generally, purely intellectual things can be conceived only through the concept of thought, by the pure intellect. It is, in other words, known only by metaphysical meditation and rational analysis. The body and, generally, extension can be clearly and distinctly conceived only by the pure intellect or by the pure intellect aided by the imagination (i.e., geometry). The mind-body union and things pertaining to it can, Descartes writes, “be known only obscurely by the pure intellect or by the intellect aided by the imagination, but it can be known very clearly through the senses” (To Elizabeth, 28 June 1643, AT III, 693, K, 141.). True knowledge or science, Descartes insists, requires that these notions should be carefully separated and applied to their proper objects only: we go wrong if we rely on our senses in trying to determine the properties of physical things, as we go wrong in using quantitative methods (mathematical calculations) or metaphysical investigations to clarify or explain our feelings, sensations, and motivations.

Most of the thoughts of our embodied, human mind depend on the mind-body union and belong, differently from the pure thoughts caused by the intellect alone, to the third primitive notion. But what positive *knowledge*, if any, can we have of these phenomena, apart from being more or less clearly aware of them as present or past states of consciousness or inner experience?

Some commentators have suggested that clearness and distinctness, for Descartes, are relative to the different ways of knowing: what counts as clear and distinct knowledge in the domain of senses cannot be translated into clear and distinct concepts of reason. We would have different paradigms of clearness and distinctness, and also of intelligibility.³² I do agree that what is experienced cannot as such be translated into clear and distinct concepts of the intellect, but I think it is misleading to talk of *different* paradigms of clearness and distinctness here – such a distinction would in fact be rather problematic for the Cartesian enterprise. Descartes,

admittedly, does not spend much time on explaining these notions, and his use of them is not always consistent. Yet I do think he uses them, at least in speaking of sense experience, consistently enough to suggest that distinctness is a quality reserved to thoughts the content of which is determined or structured enough to be conceptualized, and which can, therefore, be fully described and analyzed.³³ Clearness again, as we have seen, is a question of presence, of how well or vividly and how attentively the idea is perceived or entertained. An idea can be very clear and manifest without being distinct – the converse, of course, is not possible. Both clearness and distinctness are matters of degree: the more attributes or properties of a thing we perceive clearly, the more distinct is our idea of it. Now in what sense could sensory perceptions be both clear *and* distinct? Sensations, as we have seen, are modes of thought. A mode, generally, is perceived as well, that is, I take it, as clearly and distinctly as it can be perceived, when regarded as a mode of the thing to which it belongs (*Principles* I, 65, AT VIII-1, 32, HR I, 246–247). Shapes and motions belong to corporeal things, colours, pains, heaviness, feelings, etc., to minds, though the latter because of the bad habits and prejudices of the untutored mind are often referred, mistakenly, to external things (*Principles* I, 66, AT VIII-1, 32, HR I, 247). Yet sensations, affections and appetites can be *clearly* known, as such, “provided we take great care in our judgements concerning them to include no more than what is strictly contained in our perception – no more than that of which we have inner awareness”.³⁴ Gouhier notes that the French translation sometimes renders *clare* by *distinct*, but that this latter term is used by Descartes only once in the following context:

In order to distinguish what is clear in this connection from what is obscure, we must be very careful to note that pain and colour and so on are clearly and distinctly perceived when they are regarded merely as sensations or thoughts. (*Principles*, art. 68, AT VIII-1, 33, HR I, 248)³⁵

Distinctness, here, can consist in nothing else than the regarding of an actual sensation or experience as a mode of thought. But this is not another kind of distinctness differing from the one described above, and which constitutes the norm for rational thoughts. Distinctness, here as before, means that nothing is added to or subtracted from what is actually clearly perceived – it can also consist in the recognition that what is actually perceived is not very clear (obscure) or that it is confused, i.e., that the content of an actual, clearly perceived sensation is not itself clearly and distinctly perceived.³⁶

How could sense experience, given its inherent confusion, be taken as a starting point or presupposition for knowledge? Because of this difficulty most of Descartes's commentators and critics have rejected his answer

to Princess Elisabeth as totally unsatisfactory. Descartes, it is claimed, offers an unexplained and unexplainable notion as an explanation for an unintelligible fact of experience (the mind-body interaction).³⁷ But it is, to repeat, a mistake to consider the third primitive notion as an *explanation* of this fact.³⁸ Descartes's point, precisely, is that the experience it covers or expresses need not and cannot be explained.

I here side with Henri Gouhier and those who like Gouhier have stressed the pre-philosophical character of the notion of the substantial union and the experience falling under it. In taking over this scholastic notion Descartes should not be seen as trying to incorporate a piece of the old philosophy into the new one, because what Descartes, Gouhier writes, "retains from scholastic philosophy is precisely what has nothing philosophical", namely the (brute) fact of interaction as we constantly experience it and understand without being philosophers, as when reaching, intentionally, out for bread when we feel hungry, and similar things.³⁹ But although he insists that the immediate experience of interaction that he calls the "psycho-physiology", necessarily escapes scientific account, Gouhier still thinks that Descartes's theory leaves room for a science of the relations between mental and bodily states.⁴⁰ It is not clear to me what that 'positive science' would be. What we can have is a scientific (physiological) account of bodily changes and movements concomitant to mental states – of the kind offered in the *Passions of the Soul*. But it is difficult to see how there could be a positive science of lawful correlations between kinds of mental states and bodily states, if, as I take to be the case, the descriptions of the former are independent of and irreducible to descriptions of the latter, and depend on mutually independent primary notions. Descartes's dualism is what Davidson has called an anomalous dualism.⁴¹

But doesn't Decartes also give, in the third part of the *Passions of the Soul*, a systematic classification of the mental states caused by bodily movements? Here at least, we would seem to have the outline of a genuine science – not of course in Descartes's or the contemporary sense of a physical science – but in the broad Cartesian sense of *scientia* as used in Descartes's early *Rules*. This classification depends, to a large extent, directly on the third primitive notion, because the passions are defined as functions of the needs and ends of the human being as a composite of mind and body, and the principles of classification hence all take as their starting point this composite considered as a whole. The third primitive notion should therefore, Jean-Marie Beyssade argues, be seen as constituting the origin or presupposition ("*modèle ou origine*") "of a science corresponding, in the Cartesian system, to the nature of man".⁴² While this may be true, it surely is to stretch the notion of science very far. Because we

are here in the domain of mere beliefs, which hopefully are well justified because of the strong natural inclination we have to take them for granted, but they can never attain the certainty of the truths of science based on intuition and deduction from self-evident notions. Descartes does offer a systematic classification of passions based on an analysis of their effects and pragmatic functions with regard to the composite of mind and body that they serve. But the classification is given neither as exhaustive nor definitive, and while Descartes clearly believes it is useful for practical, moral purposes, in trying to master the passions, it is far from satisfying the rigor of a strictly scientific classification. Moreover, it just is a classification: a definition and grouping together of various kinds of emotional states accompanying bodily movements based on assumptions about their utility and value.

Given the inherent confusion of body-dependent emotions, which never occur in a pure form and which cannot be easily sorted out or distinguished from each other, introspection cannot take us very far.⁴³ Physiology, on the other hand, does not tell us anything about the mental states themselves. If this classification is taken as the basis or starting point of a "*vera scientia*", it is thus one with a very limited scope. It surely has nothing to do with what we would mean by a scientific psychology. Because of its practical and pragmatic orientation it is also far from being an anticipation of a phenomenology of emotions. This is not to say that it has no value, but that its function and value is rather on the side of practical wisdom (*sapientia*) than that of theoretical science (*scientia*).

5.

Because of its experiential, pre-philosophical character, the third primitive notion can hence not be said to give us a separate kind of knowledge differing from that obtained through the other two primitive notions by the evidence on which it is based (the evidence of senses as opposed to rational argument or mathematical demonstration). It is not, I want to argue, comparable to knowledge in the sense of a system of certain or well-justified beliefs at all. Rather, the domain of the third primitive notion is that of the awareness and know-how exercised in daily experience and action (know-how as opposed to know-that). To "know" or "understand" a mental state is to have it, to be in that state, as to understand the mind-body interaction or the abilities intentional action involves is just to do things, to move one's limbs, to have sensations, and to act. (Cf. note 47 below.) We can describe these phenomena in ordinary language, in terms of commonsense psychology, but we cannot account for or explain such

experiences in scientific terms. It is only *qua* actually experienced that they are self-evident or indubitable. I therefore think Descartes should be taken quite seriously when asking Princess Elizabeth to abstain from meditations and mathematical exercises to turn instead back to daily life and ordinary conversation, in order to learn how to conceive the mind-body union (To Elizabeth, 28 June 1643, AT II, 693, K, 141.).

This should not be seen merely as an attempt to explain away a difficulty that Descartes was incapable of solving in a satisfactory manner. Rather, it expresses the important insight that the notion we have of the union of the mind and body belongs primarily to commonsense psychology which, as such, cannot be rendered clearer by any further logical or scientific analysis. It is not a philosophical or scientific concept, but a nontechnical notion, one that “everyone has in himself without philosophizing”.⁴⁴ Thought and extension, as Descartes defines them, are technical notions, serving specific epistemological and scientific purposes. The notion that we have of ourselves as human, conscious and corporeal persons is a non-technical, natural notion that cannot be defined or explained in terms of these technical notions. While the latter are clear and distinct to the philosopher, the former is not, because its meaning can only be understood in the context of ordinary language and the non-philosophical, extra-scientific purposes that it serves. Like other concepts of ordinary language it is, we might say, logically primitive: it cannot be translated into technical (philosophical or scientific) terms without losing its original meaning.

If Descartes had no real philosophical solution to the famous mind-body problem, he was lucid enough to admit the difficulty and to recognize the limits of the knowledge that can be acquired in terms of clear and distinct rational concepts.⁴⁵ This insight, I believe, is not merely a negative one. I differ here from those who see Descartes’s recourse to a specific third primitive notion as an expression of the failure to account for human nature within a dualistic framework.⁴⁶ It can be seen, instead, as a recognition of the limits of rational knowledge and explanation and also, at the same time, of the importance of daily experience, intercourse and action too often neglected by philosophers.⁴⁷ This life-experience has its own practical and pragmatic value and cannot, as such, be replaced by any other kind of knowledge, nor should it be measured by other standards than its own, by how well, for instance, it contributes to our adaption to and enjoyment of life.⁴⁸ The notion of a mind or consciousness united to a physical body may be incoherent and unsatisfactory when judged by philosophical and scientific standards. But that need not bother us as long as this and related concepts have a use and meaning in those extra-scientific contexts where they are ordinarily applied.⁴⁹ What is important is to recognize that they

cannot be torn out of that context and that their use in scientific explanation leads to absurdities.⁵⁰

Whether one considers Descartes's account of human nature in terms of a third primitive notion as a failure or not for his dualism depends in part on what credit and value one is willing to accord scientific explanations in this domain. Those who are more skeptical with regard to physicalist pretensions to give a full explanation of all phenomena in the universe by reducing them to mechanical events accountable for, if not in practice at least in principle, in terms of physical laws, need not consider it a failure. Instead one could welcome Descartes's distinction between three different primary notions and domains of knowledge as a recognition of independent levels of description and explanation with purposes and standards of their own each of which are equally legitimate in their proper domain, but none of which has any ontological or epistemological primacy as compared to the others. Descartes's notion of the human person as a union of mind and body may be incoherent and unsatisfactory – his insistence that human experience requires a specific, *primary* notion however expresses the important insight that the terms in which we describe and account for it in daily life (those of common sense psychology so much debated in cognitive science) are not reducible to terms used in the successful account of either physical nature or purely intelligible matters.

NOTES

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¹ This is the view labelled the myth or the dogma of the "ghost in the machine" by Gilbert Ryle in *The Concept of Mind* (Ryle 1949), pp. 115-116.

² See my 'Descartes's Dualism and the Philosophy of Mind' (Alanen 1989), pp. 391 ff. For recent criticisms of this reading see: Annette Baier, 'Cartesian Persons' (Baier 1981), reprinted in *Postures of the Mind* (Baier 1985), pp. 74–92; Robert C. Richardson, 'The "Scandal" of Cartesian Interactionism' (Richardson 1982); Alan Donagan, 'The Worst Excess of Cartesian Dualism' (Donagan 1986), and Marjorie Grene, *Descartes* (Grene 1985). But see also the discussion in Margaret Wilson, *Descartes* (Wilson 1978a) and 'Cartesian Dualism' (Wilson 1978b).

³ For references, see note 5 below.

⁴ Descartes's use of Aristotelian terms and formulas in accounting for the mind-body union is amply documented in the works of French scholars – it has also been explained and

interpreted in various ways. See, e.g.: Étienne Gilson's commentary in Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (Gilson 1925/1967), pp. 431 ff.; Gilson, *Étude sur le rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système de Descartes* (Gilson 1930/1975), pp. 245 ff.; O. Hamelin, *Le système de Descartes* (Hamelin 1911), pp. 278 ff.; M. Guéroult, *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons*, vol. 2 (Guéroult 1968); and H. Gouhier, *La pensée métaphysique de Descartes* (Gouhier 1962), Chapters 12 and 13, in particular pp. 345 ff.

⁵ See: *de l'Homme*, AT IX, 119 ff.; *The Passions of the Soul*, AT XI, 51 passim.; *The Discourse on the Method*, AT VI, 46–56; *The Dioptrics*, AT VI, 109 ff.; *The Principles*, IV, AT VIII, 315 ff.; and 'La description du corps humain', AT XI, 223–229. Whenever possible, a double reference is given to the texts of Descartes – one to the Charles Adam and Paul Tannery edition of *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Descartes 1897–1913), referred to in this essay as AT, and one to the standard English translation by E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (Descartes 1911/1978), referred to here as HR, and to Anthony Kenny's *Descartes, Philosophical Letters* (Descartes 1970), referred to here as K.

⁶ In 1648, Descartes writes to Arnauld: "That the mind, which is incorporeal, can set the body in motion – this is something which is shown to us *not by any reasoning or comparison with other matters*, but by the surest and plainest everyday experience. It is one of those self-evident things which we only make obscure when we try to explain them in terms of others." *To Arnauld*, 29 July 1648, AT V, 222.; K 235 (my emphasis). Cf. also *To Elizabeth*, 21 May 1643, AT III, 664, K, 138.

⁷ E.g., the well-known passage from the *Discourse*, AT VI, 32–33; HR I, 101.

⁸ See, e.g., AT VII, 228, HR II, 102; *To Regius*, January 1642, AT III, 493, K 127–130; *Principles* IV, par. 189, AT VIII, 315, HR I, 289; *Passions* I, art. 30, AT XI, 351, HR I, 345. Cf. Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, 'Le domaine propre de l'homme chez les Cartésiens' (Rodis-Lewis 1971) and *L'Oeuvre de Descartes* (Rodis-Lewis 1971), vol. 1, pp. 351–365, and the literature cited in note 4 above.

⁹ The difficulty, as Spinoza puts it in a famous remark, is to understand how a philosopher who would "affirm nothing which he did not perceive clearly and distinctly, and who so often had taken to task the scholastics for wishing to explain obscure things through occult qualities, could maintain a hypothesis, besides which occult qualities are commonplace. What does he understand, I ask, by the union of the mind and the body. What clear and distinct conception has he got of thought in most intimate union with a certain particle of extended matter?" *Ethica*, part V, preface (Spinoza 1982).

¹⁰ It was raised, notably, by Elizabeth and Gassendi: AT III, 660–661, and AT IX, 213, HR II, 201–202.

¹¹ AT III, 692–694, K, 141–142; AT V, 222, K, 235.

¹² AT III, 693, K, 142. The real "scandal" of Cartesian mind-body dualism, I take it, is this problem of the conceivability of the union, and not, as Richardson (1982) has shown, that of the interaction between the mind and the body. Cf. below Section 5, Note 45.

¹³ Cf. above Note 6, and *Principles* I, par. 48, AT VIII-1, 22–23, HR I, 238.

¹⁴ See *Reply to Objections VI*, AT VII, 442–443, HR II, 254–255; *To Regius*, January 1642, AT III, 503, 505; *Epistola ad P. Dinet*, AT VII, 587; *To Mersenne*, 26 April 1643, AT III, 648–649, K, 135; *To Elizabeth*, 21 May 1643, AT III, 664, K, 139; *To Arnauld*, 29 July 1648, AT V, 222–223, K, 235–236. Cf. Gouhier 1962, pp. 337 ff.

¹⁵ Cf. Gouhier 1962, pp. 349–50, and the references given there.

¹⁶ Descartes's only psychological treatise, *The Passions of the Soul*, is a treatise on the physiology of emotions, and Descartes is conscious of treating the subject from an entirely new point of view, as a "physicist". See the prefatory letter of 14 August to the *Passions*,

AT IX, 326.

¹⁷ According to the two-story picture that Ryle opposes, Cartesian dualism allows for a mechanistic science of the body on the one hand, and an independent parallel psychological science based on introspection, on the other, of the kind that Hume and his followers have endeavored to work out.

¹⁸ This same distinction, as will be seen below, is made more forcefully in the correspondence with Elizabeth.

¹⁹ The French translation uses 'notion' ('notion') and 'knowledge' ('connaissance') here for perception (AT IX-2, 45); Haldane and Ross follows the French in speaking of knowledge (HR I, 238).

²⁰ For Gouhier, the third primitive notion is "une connaissance comme les deux autres" (Gouhier 1962, p. 334). On the other hand, Gouhier rightly insists on the word *experience* constantly used in this connection (Gouhier 1962, pp. 335 ff., and the references given there). This, I think, marks an important difference between the different kinds of knowledge involved: while things pertaining to the mind and the body, considered separately, are objects of clear and distinct perception, those pertaining to the mind-body union are objects of experience which although clearly perceived are not distinctly conceived.

²¹ E.g., Ryle 1949, pp. 14–15, 154.

²² Not, at least, if this is taken to mean that we "somehow know our thoughts through and through, unproblematically", which Wilson has suggested is a characteristic of Cartesian thought (Wilson 1978a). But see also Wilson's reservations about Descartes's commitment to such a view in Wilson 1978a, pp. 153 ff.

²³ See Leibnitz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* (Leibnitz 1981), bk. 2, ch. 29, par. 4, p. 225. Descartes does not say that much about clearness and distinctness, but much of what Leibnitz says about these notions is, though not explicitly stated, at least, I believe, implicitly held by Descartes. For a good and helpful discussion of Leibnitz' view see Robert Brandom, 'Leibnitz and Degrees of Perception' (Brandom 1981), pp. 454 ff.

²⁴ They are in fact essential to or constitutive of the mind-body union. Cf. note 31 below.

²⁵ Cf. *Principles* I, 48, AT VIII-1, 22–23, HR I, 238; *Principles* I, 53, AT VIII-1, 25, HR I, 240; *Principles* I, 3, AT VIII-1, 41, HR I, 255.

²⁶ This reading is suggested by Gouhier 1962, p. 330.

²⁷ The suggestion that it is a mere conceptual confusion is made by Norman Malcolm in *Thought and Knowledge* (Malcolm 1977), p. 48.

²⁸ AT VI, 59, HR I, 118; *To Regius*, January 1642, AT III, 493, K, 127–128; *To More*, August 1649, AT V, 402, K, 256.

²⁹ AT VII, 59, HR I, 192–93. See also AT IX, 176–177, HR II, 102; and AT VIII-1, 22, 41, 317, HR I, 238, 255, 291.

³⁰ AT VII, 81, HR I 192–193; AT VII, 87–88, HR I, 197–198; AT XI, 430, HR I, 391. Cf. also *Principles* IV, par. 189, 197, AT VIII, 315, 197, HR I, 289, 294–295. I disagree with Norman Malcolm, who ascribes to Descartes the view that the mind-body union is contingent, and therefore considers the possibility of disembodied sensation the unavoidable consequence of Descartes's dualism. The connection between particular thoughts and particular bodily movements "causing" or accompanying them is contingent. But the fact that these thoughts are connected to bodily movements is however not contingent but essential to them as thoughts depending on the mind-body union, and hence essential to human nature. See Malcolm, *Problems of Mind: Descartes to Wittgenstein* (Malcolm 1971), pp. 5–6.

³¹ Cf. the references given in Note 44 below.

³² Gouhier 1962, p. 342; O. Hamelin, *Le système de Descartes* (Hamelin 1911), p. 279.

³³ Leibnitz reserves distinctness to thoughts which can be expressed discursively. See the literature quoted above in Note 23. Descartes's examples of distinct ideas do fit Leibnitz's characterization very well.

³⁴ . . . *qui quidem etiam clare percipi possunt, si accurate caveamus, ne quid amplius de iis judicemus, quam id praecise, quod in perceptione nostra continetur, & cujus intime conscii sumus. Principles I, par. 66, AT VIII-1, 32, HR I, 247. Cf. Principles I, par. 46, AT VIII-1, 22; and par. 68, AT VIII-1, 34. The Latin text speaks only of clear perception, where the French translation has clear and distinct knowledge *connaissance claire et distincte*, AT IX-2, 55.*

³⁵ Cf. Gouhier 1962, p. 340, n. 52.

³⁶ Gilson stresses that the notion of the mind-body union is not an idea of the same order as that of the mind and the body: the latter, he says, are innate ideas of the intellect or understanding, the former "une idée adventice de l'ordre de la sensibilité". The notion of the union is, Gilson argues, a "pseudo-idea": something that can be perceived only by the senses but not conceived by the intellect (Gilson 1930/1975, p. 249).

³⁷ For recent discussions see, e.g., Daisy Radner, 'Descartes' Notion of the Union of Mind and Body' (Radner 1971), and Janet Broughton and Ruth Mattern, 'Reinterpreting Descartes on the Notion of the Union of Mind and Body' (Broughton and Mattern 1978).

³⁸ Cf. Gouhier 1962, pp. 326 ff., Richardson 1982, and Donagan 1986, p. 316.

³⁹ Gouhier 1962, pp. 351–4, and Radner 1971.

⁴⁰ In Gouhier's words: "une science positive des rapports de l'âme et du corps". Cf. Gouhier 1962, p. 344.

⁴¹ Donald Davidson, 'Mental Events' in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Davidson 1980), p. 213.

⁴² See Jean-Marie Beyssade, 'La classification cartésienne des passions' (Beyssade 1983).

⁴³ See, e.g., Descartes's reservations concerning the possibility to clearly know and detail passions and emotional states in the correspondence with Elizabeth. Cf. also *To Chanut*, 1 February 1647, AT IV, 600 ff., K, 208–211, and 6 June 1647, AT V, 52, K, 224.

⁴⁴ Everyone can feel, without doing philosophy or fancy experiments, "that he is a single person with both body and thought so related by nature that the thought can move the body and feel the things which happen to it" (*To Elizabeth*, K, 142). Cf. *To Arnauld*, 29 July 1648, K, 235, quoted above in Note 8.

⁴⁵ The problem, I take it, is not that of the interaction but the conceivability of a substantial union between two entities which are known only through logically independent and incompatible notions (cf. Note 12 above). The difficulty here is mainly to understand how the notions of the mind and the body, or of thought and extension, as used in the philosophical discourse, are related to the terms 'mind' and 'body' or commonsense psychology and "ordinary language". Does it make any sense to suppose that we are talking of the same things here, conceived first as distinct, and then as united? If not, the very notion of a mind-body union seems fundamentally inadequate and misleading.

⁴⁶ Cf., for instance, John Cottingham, *Descartes* (Cottingham 1986), pp. 131–132.

⁴⁷ As Bob Brandom has pointed out to me, it is misleading to speak (as Descartes does) of knowledge here for the understanding of the phenomena pertaining to the third primitive notion seems to consist rather in the ability or abilities we exercise as agents and in the states of consciousness in which we are: in *being* agents and in *being* conscious of our actual states.

⁴⁸ Cf. *Meditation VI* and the analysis of the relevant passages offered by Martial Guéroult in *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons* vol. 2 (Guéroult 1968), pp. 55 ff. and 96–118.

⁴⁹ One should never, as Aristotle warned, try to seek more precision or clearness than what

the subject matter admits of. *Nicomachean Ethics*, I 3, 1094b.

⁵⁰ Cf. Norman Malcolm, who writes: "our attributions of attitudes, emotions, feelings to people only make sense in relation to their interests, concerns, engagements, family ties, work, health, rivalries – and make no sense at all as attributions to disembodied minds, or to brains or machines." David D. Armstrong and Norman Malcolm, *Consciousness and Causality* (Armstrong and Malcolm 1984), p. 101.

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