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The Cartesian Soul and the Paranormal

1. Imagination and the self

In Chapter 1 I presented Descartes' argument for the conclusion that he – that is, his mind – is entirely and truly distinct from his body in this way:

I can form a conception of myself – conjure up a picture of myself – as a being that doubts, imagines, desires and so on without including anything bodily in that picture. For example, I can imagine what it would be like to find myself having experiences just as if I was seeing this desk and computer screen, thinking about this philosophical problem, feeling emotions of anger, fear or joy, and vet not having a body. We can conclude, Descartes suggests, that the relation between him - that is, his mind - and his body is not like that between, for example, a smile and the face that the smile is on. The smile is not 'entirely and truly distinct' from the face; as we see when we recognize that we cannot form a clear and distinct idea of a smile quite independently of any idea of a face with a smile on it. In that sense, we do not know what it would be for there to be a smile without a face. By contrast, Descartes insists, he is quite clear what it would be for him to exist without a body. In that sense the real person is quite distinct from his or her body.

I considered the natural objection that one cannot move from claims about what we can imagine to conclusions about what is possible in reality. I responded by drawing a distinction between what is merely 'physically' impossible and what is 'logically' impossible: suggesting that it is the latter notion that is important for Descartes' conclusion,

and that the fact that we can imagine something *does* establish that it is logically possible. But those remarks may have been too quick.

Consider the question: does it follow from the fact that you can draw something that what you have drawn is possible in reality? One might reply that while in one sense of 'possible' it does not follow, in another sense of 'possible' it does. But now consider the picture on the Front cover of this book. Are we to say that the difficulty in the idea of a closed, continuously falling stream of water is 'merely physical'? That, clearly, does not do justice to the matter. The idea of such a stream is incoherent, in something like the sense in which the idea of a four-sided triangle is incoherent. Yet we have a picture of it! (If you are inclined to say that the difficulty is simply that water can't flow uphill think, and look, again.)

We might conclude: it does not follow from the fact that something can be drawn that it is, in any sense, possible in reality. Or we might express the point by saying that this is not really a picture of a closed, continuously falling stream of water; it is simply a picture that one might be tempted to describe in that way if one didn't think too hard about it. It does not much matter in which of these ways one expresses the point. Either way, it must be conceded that no sure guide to what is possible – even to what is logically possible – is to be found in what can be depicted on paper.

An exactly analogous point applies to the imagination. It does not follow from the fact that I can conjure up images that I am inclined to describe as 'me coming apart from my body' that those words are a coherent description of some possibility. The imagination provides no such short cut to substantial philosophical conclusions about what a person is. There is no escaping the hard work that some philosophers put us through here: the hard work, for example, that will be the substance of this book.

None of that is to say that Descartes' view of the person is *wrong*. It is to say, at most, that one of his arguments for that view is not valid. But the pull of Descartes' thinking is powerful. We can, I think, see its power in the attraction of certain forms of argument that are closely akin to Descartes': arguments that appeal, not to the possibility of *imagining* coming apart from my body, but to the experience some claim to have had of actually *having done so*. We must now turn to such arguments.

2. Dualism, science and out-of-body experiences

It is now widely assumed that the most crucial questions about what a person is are questions which are to be answered by appeal to empirical evidence. Descartes, it is suggested, went wrong in supposing that he could establish what he was simply by a process of philosophical reflection. It is hard scientific data, not a priori theorizing, that is needed if we are to discover what we are. It is, further, widely assumed, at least within certain quarters, that the empirical evidence points fairly unambiguously towards a 'materialist' account of the person. Scientific discoveries, it is said, now strongly suggest that all the phenomena of human life can be explained entirely in the terms employed by the physical sciences: that is to say, without postulating any non-material 'mind' or 'soul' of the kind that is central to Cartesianism. We should, then, conclude that a person simply is a complex physical organism.

We will be considering those arguments in later chapters. In this chapter I want to consider what we might call 'the other side' of the contemporary debate. It is suggested by some that proper attention to all the available data will not push us unambiguously towards the materialist camp. For, it is argued, there are well-established phenomena that cannot be explained in 'physical' terms. The relevant phenomena may be slightly elusive; and they are of a kind to which the current scientific temperament tends to be blind. But if we pay proper attention to them we may find ourselves forced to conclude that there is more to be said for the Cartesian picture than is generally acknowledged by the established scientific community. I want to consider these claims by focusing on one kind of phenomenon that is sometimes appealed to here: that of 'out-of-body experiences' (OBEs).

A considerable number of people have had experiences in which it has seemed to them that, for a period, they left their body. There are a variety of circumstances in which people report having had such experiences. One of the most striking, and most closely investigated, are those in which a person has been 'close to death'. An individual who, for a period, showed (more or less) no behavioural or physiological signs of life, on being resuscitated reports having left her body while 'unconscious'. She insists that she observed the room, or indeed some other place, from a position external to her body. Furthermore, people who have had this experience are, it is claimed, sometimes able to give accurate reports of events that were taking place while they were apparently unconscious and that could not have been observed from the point where their body was at the time. This, it is suggested, provides corroboration of their reports. It is not simply that it seemed to her as if she left her body: as it might seem to someone in a dream. We have real independent evidence that the person did leave her body and observe the world from a point external to it. And that is to say, we

have real empirical evidence that, as Descartes maintained, a person is something distinct from his or her body.

I want to suggest that, at the very least, a considerable amount of work needs to be done at a number of points if it is to be shown that phenomena of this kind bear on our picture of ourselves in anything like the ways suggested. I should stress that I will not be calling into question any of the empirical data appealed to. My suggestion will, rather, be that enormous care is needed in taking even a first step beyond that data. Our thinking here is, I will suggest, coloured by a certain imagery of which we need to be suspicious.

A feature of the phenomenon that impresses some commentators is the fact that these people report having had thoughts, feelings, visual sensations, and so on while in a state in which they showed no physiological signs of life. I will set to one side here any worries that we might have about whether they could, in offering these reports, be suffering from some delusion of memory. I will assume, that is, that the person did have some form of experience while, for example, her brain scan was flat. What bearing would this surprising fact have on our understanding of what we are? One thing it might show is that what we experience at a particular time is not totally dependent on the state of our brain at that time. While that will, no doubt, come as a surprise to many, we need to draw a sharp distinction between *this* question – the question of what my consciousness is dependent on – and the question of what I am: the question, that is, of what it is that is conscious. Consider an analogy. We normally assume that how well a car goes is crucially dependent on the state of the engine. Suppose, however, that we were presented with startling evidence strongly suggesting that the performance of a car could be affected by influences of a kind that are totally alien to contemporary science. Would such a discovery do anything at all to suggest that my car is not that familiar thing with four wheels, a roof, and so on? Would it support the idea that it is possible for my car to live on after the disintegration of the extended, tangible thing parked outside? This, I take it, is obvious nonsense.

Now on the face of it, it is the same with people. It is one thing to ask what a person's states are dependent on. That is a question for science. It is quite another to ask what those states are states of; to ask, that is, what it is that thinks, sees, is happy or sad and so on. Whether the answer to the first question is 'the brain' or something quite different is totally irrelevant to the second question. Neither way will it affect the suggestion that it is the human being that thinks, sees and so on. OBEs cannot in this way give any support to the idea that the

person – the 'real me' – is something distinct from this extended, tangible being.

But what of the accurate reports, which it is claimed some are able to offer, of what was happening at the time in places not observable from the bed where the human being was lying? Do these not demonstrate that the individual 'left her body' for a period; and so that the 'real person' is something quite distinct from this bodily being?

This would be moving a bit too rapidly. The facts so far described are quite consistent with the suggestion that the patient was able to give these reports as a result of signals picked up while she was located where she appeared to be: namely, in bed. Now it might be objected that this talk of 'signals' does not really do justice to the way in which the individual's perspective on the world was for a period from a point external to her body. It is not merely that she knows what was happening, say, next door. For a period she saw things from a point in the next-door room; or, at least, it now seems to her that she did. Does not this strongly suggest that part of the patient was 'outside her body' for that period?

Well, even if we agree that it does suggest this the argument would still require a further step in order to get us to the conclusion that what left the body was the 'real person'. If my eyes were on the ends of long stalks I could observe what was going on next door. I would, no doubt, when particularly absorbed in what I was seeing, half think of myself as being in that room; or perhaps even, momentarily, come to believe that that was where I was. None of this would put any pressure on us to say that I really was next door: it was one small part of me, not me, that was next door.

I should stress that I am not, with this talk of 'eyes on stalks', offering an alternative explanation of 'out-of-body experiences': I am not suggesting that some form of immaterial eyes are going out on immaterial stalks. I am simply pointing out that we cannot just take it for granted – as the dualist appeal to OBEs appears to – that a person is situated at the point from which he or she sees the world.

Nevertheless, it might be said, a dualist view of persons can provide an explanation of the observed phenomena in a way in which no (remotely plausible) alternative view can. Thus, at least until we have an adequate explanation consistent with the view that the bodily being is the real person, these phenomena should be regarded as grounds for accepting the dualist view.

In responding to this argument I should concede first that I have no idea whatsoever how these phenomena might be explained. I spoke of

'signals' that the patient, in her bed, might be picking up. Let us suppose, however, that we have good reason for ruling out any such explanation; *nothing*, at least of the kind now recognized by physics, is passing from the relevant point in space to the patient in bed. We are left thinking either in terms of the transmission of something *not* recognized by physics, or in terms of action at a distance: what happens at one place (the event on which she is able to report) is affecting the patient even though there is no mechanism whatsoever that connects the events with the patient.

Let us now compare the paucity of my 'explanation' with how the dualist theory would explain such veridical OBE reports. We are perhaps inclined to see it like this: 'On the dualist theory I am something quite distinct from this body. This opens the possibility of explaining veridical OBE reports in terms of the fact that the individual left her body and observed the world from a position external to it.' Traditional philosophical dualism, of the kind associated with Descartes, does not, I think, leave room for such an explanation since it does not leave room for the idea that the 'real me' has any spatial location. Thus, Descartes writes: 'I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place...' (Descartes, 1637, p. 27). On this view, then, I cannot leave my body since I was never in it! I will not pursue the question of whether some other form of dualism could leave room for the idea that the 'real me' has spatial location, since I believe there are further problems.

Perhaps the most notorious objection to dualism concerns the question of the interaction between mind and body. To the extent that one holds that the 'real me' is something quite different in kind from this extended, solid entity, one appears to rule out the possibility of there being any intelligible mechanism that links what happens in the one substance with what happens in the other. Descartes, in my view rightly, was apparently quite unimpressed by this supposed objection to dualism. My point at the moment, however, is simply this. My 'explanation' of what is going on in OBEs spoke lamely of 'signals' or of 'action at a distance'. Now that is pretty lame; indeed, it might be said that it is hardly an explanation at all. But the dualist's 'explanation' of veridical OBE reports is going to contain a gap of exactly the same kind; for the dualist's 'explanation' of everything that people do and experience is going to contain a gap of this kind. Thus, in the explanation of any visual experience the dualist can only speak, equally lamely, of an event in the non-material mind somehow being brought about by a material object. We cannot, then, argue that the OBE phenomenon gives us reason to move towards a two-component picture of persons on these grounds: on grounds of explanatory adequacy.

One further point can be made here. The suggestion is that veridical OBE reports support some kind of dualism because dualism would allow us to explain the reports in terms of the fact that the individual was for a period located at the relevant place. Now, in normal circumstances we do, of course, take the fact that I was at a certain place at a certain time as explaining the knowledge that I have of what happened there. In a particular case, however, this would be no explanation at all if it were discovered that I had lost my eyes, ears and so on before going there. Would it, then, be an explanation if I had, temporarily, 'lost my body'?

3. A tension in our thought

In the previous section I threw every argument I could think of at the suggestion that 'out-of-body experiences' might provide some support for a dualist view of people. It is, I think, relatively easy to see how these arguments might be adapted to respond to analogous appeals to certain other paranormal phenomena. Now I should stress that my aim here is not to deny that there are paranormal phenomena; nor that they might show us some pretty interesting things. My interest is simply in what seem to me to be serious misunderstandings about what they might show us about what we are.

I have found that those who appeal to paranormal phenomena in the way that I have been criticizing are generally little impressed by the criticisms. This is, I think, in part a reflection of the huge prestige of science within our culture. It is taken to be obvious that the really important questions about what we are are to be settled by appeal to 'scientific' evidence; and so it is difficult to get a serious hearing for any attempt to suggest that the evidence may not be relevant in quite the wavs assumed.

But I want briefly to draw attention to another factor that may be at work here. We are all, I think, tempted to interpret the reported phenomena in terms of the individual 'leaving her body'. Many will no doubt feel that it must be quite easy to meet the points I have made since, it will be said, this interpretation of the phenomena is so obviously the most natural one. Now I suspect that this feeling reflects, in part, a curious ease with which we slide between two quite different

pictures of what a person is. We can see this by focusing on one of the objections that I raised in the previous section.

Assume that we have strong evidence for the claim that for a period the individual's visual perspective on the world was from a point outside the physical body. My question is: should this lead us to say that for that period the person was (or it is likely that she was) situated at a point outside her body? To draw this conclusion we would need to have independent grounds for the following claim: people are (generally) situated at that point from which their visual perspective on the world is. Without this claim, the inference is quite unjustified. Do we have any grounds for it?

On the face of it we do. We might say that we have overwhelming grounds for the claim that - with the exception of cases involving mirrors, television and the like (which we will assume can be dealt with somehow) - people are always situated at that point from which their visual perspective on the world is. Now I think that is right. Leaving aside for the moment the phenomena we are dealing with - namely OBEs – this seems to be a very well-supported universal truth. But it is only a well-supported truth in so far as it is assumed that people are human beings. For what we seem to have strong evidence for is the claim that: human beings - these visible, tangible entities with arms and legs and heads – are always situated at that point from which their visual perspective on the world is. Now this is no use at all for the person who wants to use OBEs to establish some form of dualism. For the whole point of his argument is to challenge the claim that people are human beings: his conclusion is that the real person is something distinct from the bodily human being. That is: his conclusion is inconsistent with an assumption that he needs to make in order to reach it! Something has gone badly wrong.

So the question is now: if one thinks that the person is something distinct from the human being - as one must if one is going to claim that in these cases 'people do leave their bodies' - what grounds can one have for the claim that people are (generally) situated at that point from which their visual perspective on the world is? What one needs is the following: people are generally situated inside human beings. Assuming that we are dealing with a form of dualism within which this makes sense, it is not at all clear what could count as evidence for it. At any rate, until we are shown how this claim might be supported we appear to have no grounds at all for moving from the suggestion that 'the individual's perspective on the world was, for a period, from a point of view external to this body' to the idea that 'the individual

was, for that period, situated at that point'. The idea that the 'real person' is the crying, talking, sleeping, walking human being is quite untouched by these phenomena.

As I said. I think that we fail to see this because we slide between two quite different pictures of what a person is. We can only think that we have grounds for a claim that our argument needs - the claim that people are generally situated at that point from which their visual perspective on the world is - in so far as we picture the person as being the human being. But someone whose aim is to prove that the real person is something distinct from the visible, tangible human being can hardly use an argument that is only valid on the assumption that people are human beings. I say 'can hardly'. My suspicion is that this is precisely what most of us are inclined to do.

4. Value, science and the immaterial

My claim has not been that we do not have to draw from the reported phenomena the conclusions that commonly are drawn. It is, rather, that further work needs to be done at a number of points if it is to be shown that the phenomena give us any reason at all to draw these conclusions. The idea that they give us such a reason is, I have suggested, dependent on an illusion that I have tried to expose. Unfortunately, following an argument in which one can find no flaw (as I, no doubt optimistically, count on you finding no flaw in mine!) is, by itself, seldom sufficient to dispel an illusion: any more than measuring the lines in the Muller-Lyer illusion is, by itself, sufficient to destroy the illusion that one is longer than the other (see Figure 2.1). But perhaps the hold of the inferences which I am criticizing can be weakened by further reflection on the kind of *importance* that it might be supposed attaches to the debate about the Cartesian view of the self.

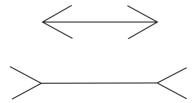


Figure 2.1 The Muller-Lyer illusion

Much of the interest in parapsychological phenomena is, I think, motivated by something like the following thought:

As soon as one grants that a person is an extended, tangible, observable being – a being that exists in the world of stones, trees and mountains – one is committing oneself to the view that the world as described by modern physics is *the* world. This has dramatic implications for our conception of ourselves. For example, it rules out the possibility of our thinking of ourselves as in any way responsible for what we do; what we do must be accepted as being the product of the impersonal mechanisms described by the physicist. More generally, the idea that we are fundamentally 'spiritual' beings – beings that have the kind of value traditionally associated with talk of 'the soul' – must be abandoned.

This kind of argument will be of considerable importance in later chapters. But it is worth saying a little about it now.

The idea that value can seep into the world through the cracks in physics has a long history. A question that can and needs to be asked, quite independently of any investigation into whether there are such cracks, is this: why should it be thought that whatever seeps in through such cracks is of any value? Consider the question of responsibility. Suppose that we could accept that a person is essentially an 'immaterial' being. How would this help the idea that we are in some sense responsible for what we do? If the claim that something is 'immaterial' simply means that you cannot see it, touch it, weigh it, and so on, then it needs to be shown why an immaterial being should not be every bit as determined by 'impersonal mechanisms' as a material being can be. The rigid laws to which it is subject won't, perhaps, be those of the physicist; but there appears to be no reason to think that immaterial beings could not be subject to rigid laws. Again, there is, on the face of it, no reason to suppose that a being that cannot be seen or touched is likely to be more morally or religiously elevated, more worthy of respect, than one that can. The linking of the immaterial in that sense with the idea of 'spiritual' value stands in need of defence. If there is a difficulty in the idea that value is to be found in the normal world of stones, trees and human beings, it needs to be shown that exactly the same difficulty does not arise for the world which it is suggested is revealed to us by the paranormal.

But *is* there a difficulty in the idea that value is to be found in the world of extended, tangible, observable beings? Well, isn't this

much true:

The world as described by the natural scientist, and in particular by the physicist, is a world without value. We must, then, find gaps in the physicist's description if we are to leave any room for what is of value.

Now there may be nothing wrong with that thought in itself. To conclude, however, that we *must* turn to the paranormal if we are to find room for what is of value is to overlook the fact that 'finding a gap in another's description of a situation' can take a variety of forms. Consider a careful description of some great painting – for example, Leonardo da Vinci's Madonna of the Rocks - entirely in terms of the colour of paint at each point on the canvas; without, that is, any mention of what is in the painting. Most, I take it, will agree that this description leaves out the most important thing. Yet in its own terms it may contain no significant gap; there is no splash of red we can point to and say 'You didn't mention that'. We have, then, two quite different kinds of 'gap in a description' here. The kind of work needed to bring someone to see what his description leaves out will be quite different in the two cases. For example, a magnifying glass may be a help if someone has failed to mention a tiny patch of green in one corner, but is unlikely to be of much help to someone who simply cannot see the faces in the picture. (No doubt the latter deficiency is difficult to imagine in this case. We could think instead of a more abstract painting where for many there is a real difficulty in discerning the patterns.)

The parapsychologist I am speaking of insists that what is wrong with the claim that modern science gives us 'the fundamental truth about how things are' is the fact that the modern scientist systematically overlooks a certain kind of evidence. This parapsychologist does not question the claim (which no scientist need make) that what we might call 'the scientific method' is the method of determining the 'basic truth' about the world: that the world is that which is revealed to us by the most careful application of that method. Thus, he thinks that what we need is a bit of 'super-science' - an investigation into 'supernature' - if we are to tell the whole story about the world; and, in particular, about people. Now the point of my analogy with a painting is that we can hold that current science does not tell us the whole truth about what a person is without suggesting that there is a gap in the scientist's account that needs to be filled by taking note of a further piece of evidence. We might add that there is at least room for the view that any change in my picture of the world that could be brought about in that way – that is, by a simple confrontation with some new empirical data – could not be a change that goes 'deep' in an ethical sense. A person who speaks of human beings as objects of a certain kind of respect is, it might be said, separated by an enormous gulf from one who speaks of us as, for example, 'complex stimulus-response systems'. The work needed to 'correct' the latter view must, therefore, be of a quite different order.

An analogy for this last point might be found in the relation between the views of three people on capital punishment. One defends capital punishment on the grounds that: 'It is an effective deterrent.' Another rejects it on the grounds that: 'It is not an effective deterrent.' A third rejects it on the grounds that: 'The taking of human life is an act of such horror that it can never be justified in terms of its effectiveness in promoting some social purpose.' For the third, the empirical evidence appealed to by the others is wholly irrelevant. Precisely because of that, we might say that he is separated from the other two by a much deeper gulf than that which separates them from each other.

I asked: Is there a difficulty in the idea that value is to be found in the world of extended, tangible, observable beings? One thing that stands in the way of clear thinking on this issue is the use we make of various contrasts: in particular, the 'material'/'immaterial' and 'body'/'mind' contrasts. Thus, the notion of the 'material' becomes connected in our thought with that of the 'materialistic' in the moral sense, with the idea of the world as described by the physicist, with the idea of what has mass, size and shape, with the idea of the observable, and perhaps others. The notion of the 'immaterial' is defined in our thought in terms of a contrast with that group of ideas. Powerful imagery helps to preserve such groupings of ideas in our minds. That which has no mass is free from the force of gravity and so is morally elevated. The body weighs us down, tying us to Earthly things: the pleasures of the flesh. Once one becomes aware of the role of this imagery, however, it should become clear that there is no reason to suppose that 'reality' carves up neatly along these lines. For example, the warm smile on her lips is, I take it, a feature of the world of extended, tangible, observable things. Does it figure in the physicist's description of the world? And what of the child's exclamation of joy on opening a birthday present, or the terror in the face of the man facing execution?

Examples of this kind will be of great importance to my argument in later stages of this book. Central to much of what I say will be the idea

that a person is a human being: a being of flesh and blood, with a face and arms and legs. Now it might be thought that my use of the term 'human being' here is just a fudge. Have I not got to admit that the view that I am opposing to Descartes' is that people are simply their bodies: complex lumps of matter? The term 'human being', it might be said, disguises the unpalatable side of this in so far as in certain contexts it carries connotations of a more elevated kind: as when we say 'He is a real human being'.

Well, suppose it is said that Bach's music is 'just a lot of noise'. I will leave it to you to consider what is the correct response to that suggestion. Now compare that with the claim that people are 'simply bodies'. If that means 'You can see them, touch them, and weigh them' that is one thing. But if it means, for example, 'There is no difference between being interested in her and being interested in her body', where the latter phrase is tied up with lust or doctors, it is quite another. The term 'body' does, in certain contexts, allow one to slide too easily from one to the other. I use the term 'human being' in order to discourage moves of just this kind. Of course, if one thinks such moves are quite legitimate one will have worries about my use of the term 'human being'; but grounds for these worries do need to be established.

Developments in various sciences over the last hundred years have had an enormous impact on popular conceptions of the kind of beings that we are. It can, no doubt, be said that it is largely as a result of such developments that a great many people now have a picture of the person within which there is no room for the kind of value associated with talk of 'the soul'. My central point in this section has been that to hold (if one does) that this is a loss - that there is a serious deficiency in such pictures – is not yet to commit oneself to a particular view of the kind of work needed to correct the deficiency. Those who pursue an interest in the paranormal with the idea that this *must* be the key to the 'spiritual' would do well to remember that their activities might be viewed in the light of the following analogy. Confronted with a description of The Madonna of the Rocks in terms of colour patches, and the insistence that 'that is all there is to it', a man protests that several patches with subtle shades have been left out of the description. This man may know that something very important is missing from the description; but he is looking for what is missing in quite the wrong dimension.

Of course, this analogy might be totally unfair. It does, however, need to be shown that it is. It does, that is, need to be shown that we should be looking to the empirical sciences – whether of conventional

or of less conventional forms – for answers to the most fundamental questions about ourselves and our relationship to the natural world. Much of this book will be an attempt to illustrate another form of argument that might be crucial to our questions here.

Further reading

Two books in which out-of-body experiences are appealed to in the way that I have been criticizing are Paul and Linda Badham, *Immortality or Extinction?* and David Lorimer, *Survival? Body, Mind and Death in the Light of Psychic Experience.* Such arguments are criticized in Antony Flew, *The Logic of Mortality,* chapter 10. The character of the relation between a 'scientific' and an 'everyday' picture of ourselves has an important place in Gilbert Ryle's thinking about these issues; see *The Concept of Mind,* and 'The World of Science and the Everyday World' in his *Dilemmas.*