

Culture, Embodiment, and the Senses

Tuesday, 27 September 2005

Reading

- Descartes, “Discourse on the Method,” in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. 1*, pp. 111-151.
 - Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*,” ch. 11, “A Passion for Reasoning,” pp. 244-252.
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The **Cartesian dualism** is so entrenched in the Western world view (e.g. medicine).

☞ feelings as a gloss for sensory experience

☞ we **can't trust our senses** – truth may be *beyond* what is readily perceived

☞ **valorization of order/knowledge**, a systematic approach

☞ individual is able to do without input or contact with material world (e.g. as Descartes secluded himself for 9 years)

☞ yet Descartes later asks for collaborators – here's a question about the pursuit of knowledge

Damasio argues that there is an interaction among the social environment, the embodied person, and biological elements. This he names as Descartes' error – he argues against the Cartesian tenet of division between experience and knowledge.

Background

Descartes time, 1637 – period of change in the world of scholarship, a move to locate study and the production of knowledge in institutions

Plato had talked about symbolic forms on the abstract plane – a template for the material world, such that *abstract* ideas informed the understanding of the *material* world.

Aristotle favored an empirical method from which one would *derive* the abstract.

Kuriyama talked about *pneuma* and external wind – similar to a spirit wind in the body. Christianity animated the inner spirit as an extension from God.

The Catholic Church was a dominant force in the conception of the world – it was the *one* institution with so much power and control. During the Renaissance, there was a shift against the backdrop of the Church, a push to question theology and explore the natural world, e.g. Galileo in 1632.

Descartes is best known for **dualism – the radical separation of mind/body** (Christian roots, e.g. the soul). He systematically studied this.

Secular humanism revived this debate, this questioning of the theology. Emphasis was on examining the natural world – Descartes was a pivotal point in this movement.

2 approaches to world conception:

- ◆ **rationalist** – knowledge produced based on forms and abstract ideas – truth is beyond reality and should be approached through rational reflection
- ◆ **empiricist** – Aristotelian tradition that collected and experimented and trusted the senses, asking *what constitutes truth?*

Descartes' was an example of early **cultural relativism** – knowledge can be different but not necessarily less valuable in other cultures. He proposed that we re-learn everything from the start.

Is it necessary to study formally in an academy? He challenged the traditions and norms of his contemporaries, saying that one didn't need the input of others, that **self-reflection** was sufficient.

It was taken for granted that the Church was truth in and of itself. Descartes separates theology and takes the questioning of religion off the table, instead focusing on the secular aspects. Nothing was holding him back from studying the body (related to how he separated the soul from the material body).

Descartes' 4 precepts to solve problems (p. 120) – a logically rigorous system

- never accept truth without evidence
- divide problems into parts
- approach in an orderly manner (simple to complex)
- be extensive, leave nothing out

moral code (p. 122)

- obey laws/customs
- firm in action and opinion
- master the self and desires
- devote life to reason

Descartes caught between different **systems of institutional knowledge** – church vs. science.

His idea was that it was possible to separate feelings out from the equation, so a **rational state** meant no suffering. This ambivalence was important because you shouldn't allow tradition to blind you to truth. Instead of building on pre-existent foundations, his choice was to start anew.

Descartes accepts the **reality of God** – the soul precedes the body. We have the capacity to think even though we are imperfect, so therefore has to be something *more* perfect (i.e. a god).

Senses deceive – what we think is the material world may not be true

“Cogito ergo sum” – Descartes famous quotation – Western tradition to think **life is experience**, separating the soul from the body. The body is a mechanism with function, but the things that animate it don't reside permanently in it.

Doubt was important to the scientific method – we never know **what was truly real**. Greater pertinence was associated with ‘to know’ rather than ‘to doubt.’ There must be something more perfect since a more perfect nature imbued him with the idea, hence the existence of God.

The tradition was to locate illness *in* the body without socio-environmental influence. Nowadays we understand the impact of post-traumatic stress syndrome. But psychosomatic illness is still sometimes “illegitimate” because it may be without an organic cause. Here we can see the trend of **medicalization** and **biologicalization** that roots social distress *in the body*.

In part IV, Descartes discusses the anatomy of the heart. He also makes a distinction between humans, animals, and plants. The heart is portrayed as the heat chamber with animal spirits allowing movement of the heat, which travels through the blood and allows for bodily function.

- *What is the nature of the energy that animates the body?*
- *Is there a relation between states of waking and dreaming?*

With Descartes analysis we have a **mechanistic view of the body** – the soul is separate.

- *What, then, does that allow you to do [to the body] in terms of science since soul is separate?*

The West approaches the sensory experience by glorifying reason. Recall how Damasio instead argued that reason cannot be separated from feeling.