DESCARTES AND DUALISM

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FAILURES?

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Foreword: Failures?

"Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Samuel Beckett's words are now legendary. There seems to be no crisis, setback or adversity from which it is impossible to learn. Failure carries its counterpart – success – within. Listen to the countless biographical radio programmes about fiascos that turn to triumphs, Google for failures, see how self-help books are structured. Perhaps it has always been this way – or is this a consequence of our era's accelerating demands for success, growth, advancement and evolution?

The American historian Scott A. Sandage, who researched the cultural history of failure in the US, claims that failure has become personal since the mid-nineteenth century – you don't just fail, you are a failure. He even talks of a nation of winners and losers, in which everyone is either the one or the other. Failure is thus a constant and shadowy companion to the American dream, an ever-present component of the American experience. Sandage links this to several factors, including modern society's perpetual evaluation and our time's statistical exposure of private lives. In the nineteenth century, the

innovation of statistics collection seemed to reveal in real time previously hidden – or at least obscured – connections relating to the population and society. In the US, this also coincided with the credit institutes' division of the populace into those who were creditworthy and others – which is to say, losers. In addition, Sandage sees a link with the rise of meritocracy. The statistics demonstrated, incontrovertibly, that the masses were nothing other than mediocre.[1]

Sweden is also a nation of mediocrity, just like every other nation, and here too – even if we are not as influenced by the idea of an American dream – mediocrity is associated with a lack of success, rather than a normal distribution. There are people who believe that we are now living in an age of perfectionism, placing sky-high expectations on ourselves. Nothing other than flawless will do, and everything that doesn't make it is pretty much a failure. These growing demands for ultimate excellence are regarded by the Public Health Agency of Sweden as one reason for the current rise in mental illness.[2] The same trend seems to be occurring in the rest of the West, and perfectionism is said to have increased since the 1980s.[3] In his most recent book, the British psychologist and researcher Thomas Curran writes of a hidden epidemic that is haunting the modern, capitalist Western world, where the tougher demands we wrestle with mean that we are increasingly likely to fail – and are particularly

likely to dread this failure.[4] That fear inhibits us, Curran claims.

Our contemporary individualism, enthusiasm for evaluation and constant searching for something that is occasionally vague but better – yes, "more perfect" – makes us ever-more vulnerable to failure. However, in itself, of course, failure is nothing new. Quite the opposite, setbacks and adversity are part and parcel of being human.

Mistakes, errors and a lack of success have, for centuries, comprised the very foundation of science and research as we know it. Trial and error. We could even claim that, fundamentally, science is about daring to get things wrong and then learning from your mistakes. A researcher makes predictions and finds regularities, patterns and laws in what appears to be chaos. The periodic table and the discoveries of Newton, Linnaeus and Einstein are just a few examples; new theories replace old ones, errors are found, and systems improved or discarded. Faults and troubleshooting are part of the process, and what the Enlightenment, modernity, progress, was all about was this: taming and mastery through rules, predictions and – yes – finding mistakes.

We are now seeing indications that fewer scientific breakthroughs are occurring – at least if by breakthrough we mean scientific achievements that move our knowledge in a completely new direction. This is happening despite our faith in research and all the global resources invested

in it.[5] Is the lack of breakthroughs a failure of our times? And, if so, is it our fear of failure that makes us less bold and thus less likely to explore new directions?

We could ask ourselves whether anyone now believes in progress and the future in the way that people did in the 1960s. In this way, we live in a darker world – or are we just less naïve? And there are fiascos, for individuals and for societies, that are difficult to learn from, and where the lesson is perhaps just to put it all behind you and move on.

Still, if we swept all those fiascos under the rug, if all our setbacks were hidden and forgotten, we would not have made any progress. We are somewhere between these extremities, daring to see the mistake for the shambles it is, sometimes with no lesson to be learned, and to use it. In this essay collection, six researchers from the humanities and social sciences take a closer look at failure and the unintended consequences of success.

They range from what the constant evaluations of modern life do to us, to medical advances that inadvertently change the perception of the body and create illegal markets. In this essay, philosopher Cecilia Sjöholm writes about failure from the perspective of René Descartes – can a philosopher be held responsible for his ideas' future consequences?

Almost everything we do has unintended consequences, and it is far from obvious what constitutes a failure – particularly when little time has passed. According to Walter

Benjamin, the angel of history sees the past as a long chain of catastrophes, while being propelled back-first into the future on a storm called progress.

Someone who continues to read Samuel Beckett's famous lines on having another go, soon realises that he is not delivering an optimistic call for success, but rather a pitch-black description of failure:

> Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good. Go for good. Where neither for good. Good and all.[6]

Jenny Björkman

Notes

1. Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.

2. Public Health Agency of Sweden, "Varför har den psykiska ohälsan ökat bland barn och unga i Sverige?", Solna: Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2018, www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/publicerat-material/publikationsarkiv/v/varfor-har-den-psykiska-ohalsan-okat-bland-barn-och-unga-i-sverige/. See also "Young people drowning in a rising tide of perfectionism", *The Conversation* 5 February 2019, https://theconversation.com/young-people-drowning-in-a-rising-tide-of-perfectionism-110343.

3. Thomas Curran & Andrew P. Hill, "Perfectionism is increasing over time: A meta-analysis of birth cohort differences from 1989 to

2016", *Psychological Bulletin* vol. 145, no. 4, 2019, pp. 410–429.

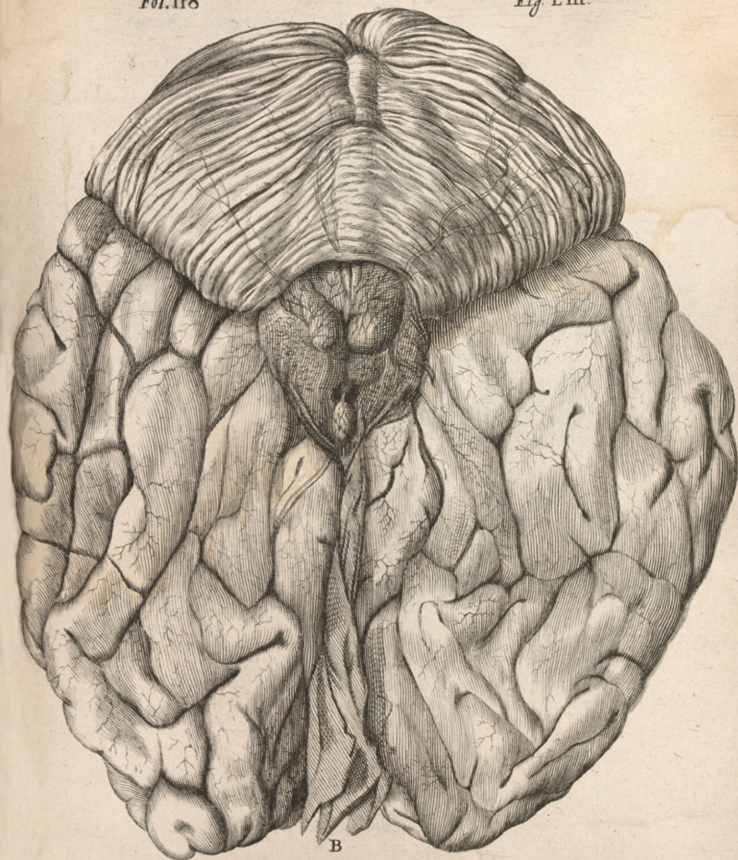
4. Thomas Curran, *The Perfection Trap: The Power of Good Enough in a World that Always Wants More*, London: Cornerstone Press, 2023.

5. Michael Park, Erin Leahey & Russell J. Funk, "Papers and patents are becoming less disruptive over time", *Nature* no. 613, 2023, pp. 138–144.

6. Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, 1983.

ERRARE HUMANUM EST

Fig. LIII.



The pineal gland as a communication centre?

Descartes stands in front of an animal head, which has been split into several parts. He carefully observes its interior. The eyes, the nose, the brain. He peers into the furthest regions of the brain. Something is missing. A little gland that can hardly be seen, but which all human brains seem to have – the pineal gland! Animals do not appear to have a pineal gland. That must mean something. The pineal gland, Descartes reasoned, must form the link between body and soul.

René Descartes (1596–1650) wrote about this gland in his final book, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649). The idea that a small organ in the brain forms the link between body and soul has left readers scratching their heads. Today, we ignore these passages because they are not relevant to Descartes' metaphysics, the establishment of cogito: I think, therefore I am. In the passages on the pineal gland, the greatest metaphysical genius since Aristotle appears not only to be a dubious pathologist (animals can indeed have pineal glands), but also an inconsistent philosopher – either soul and body are completely different forms of

← Illustration of the brain from René Descartes, *De homine*, 1662.

being, or they are not. A small organ is unlikely to solve a philosophical problem.

Descartes' thesis about the pineal gland functioning as a communications centre between body and soul is a failure, both scientifically and philosophically, although many seventeenth-century pathologists were sometimes right and sometimes wrong about human anatomy with no major consequences. As a philosophical failure, it appears to be worse. The pineal gland thesis was created to cover up a larger problem, one which many people would place among the biggest mistakes in the history of philosophy: Cartesian dualism, the separation of mind and body.

The thesis that the physical and the mental are ontologically distinct has had huge consequences, at least if we are to believe Descartes' critics – of whom there are many. Even among his contemporaries, there were protests – can we really talk about a strict division of body and soul? Isn't Descartes' metaphysics misguided and inadequate? In recent years, Cartesian dualism has come to symbolise a Western worldview, one described as hierarchical and polarising. In the Cartesian worldview, it is said, reason always triumphs over emotion, consciousness over the body, humans over nature, Western Enlightenment over colonised cultures, people without disabilities over those who have them, and so on. According to his critics, this worldview permeates science, culture and various ideologies in a way that has contributed to unsustainable de-

velopment. Contemporary critical thinking repeatedly mentions Cartesian dualism as one of the root causes of capitalism, colonialism, extractivism (the extraction and minimal processing of vast quantities of natural resources for export) and other isms. From this perspective, Cartesian dualism is a failure that has had global consequences.

But how guilty can a philosopher really be? Descartes could hardly have foreseen the consequences of the ideology that came to bear his name, an ideology that made his metaphysics appear a complete failure. He also tried, as honestly as he could, philosophically and scientifically, to examine the possible effects of an overly rigid dualism. Descartes has been described as the father of dualism, and as a binary thinker in times when the binary system is questioned and criticised. The other side of his philosophy – in which he wrestled with and tried to overcome the consequences of his own idea about dualism – is still too rarely commented upon. Descartes' attempts to formulate a route away from the mind-body dichotomy have long been ignored in the histories of philosophy and culture, with research only recently beginning to recognise this and to change the image of Descartes. He both recognised and tried to solve the problem, which was not a matter of changing the ontological definition of body and soul as different forms of being, rather about understanding how they could communicate – because they obviously do so in our everyday lives.

The pineal gland as a communication centre has never seemed a reasonable solution, and these days it seems absurd but, in Descartes' discussions of the problem itself, it becomes exciting for us too. In his treatise on the emotions, *The Passions of the Soul*, and in his correspondence with friends and critics, dualism becomes a problem that leads to strange moments of good fortune.

That is what this text is about: Descartes' attempts to find descriptions for all that lies between the rational mind and physical sensation. The Descartes who tries to find the link between body and soul faces an abyss, for how do you find a connection that has already been lost? Descartes turns to the emotions. His search for their origin leads him to the very first stages of life, to the foetus – a stage that he believes also affects the adult person. From the experiences of the child, he deduces the depth of the human capacity to feel love and hate, to remember or forget, to reawaken or repress.

Why dualism?

So, what is Descartes' dualism all about? In brief, it primarily concerns the establishment of human capacities in two completely different spheres, one rational and intellectual, the other corporeal and without intelligence. In his *Discourse on Method* (1637) and *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes tried to answer the question of whether there is anything we can definitively know. He went about this methodically:

> I will regard the heavens, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things as nothing but the bedeviling hoaxes of my dreams, with which he [a deceitful God] lays snares for my credulity. I will regard myself as not having hands, or eyes, or flesh, or blood, or any senses, but as nevertheless falsely believing that I possess all these things. I will remain resolute and steadfast in this meditation…[1]

But there is one piece of knowledge that cannot be questioned. Using the simple formula *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), Descartes laid the foundations for modern metaphysics and, according to many, science. Here, he established two different forms of being: *res cogitans* and

res extensa. *Res cogitans* is the self that, using its intellect, can reflect upon itself, prove its own existence and find other certain truths, such as in mathematics. *Res extensa* is the extended body that occupies time and space. It is not only the human body, but also the natural world, the things and objects around us.

It goes without saying that one form dominates the other; that the body, which belongs to the *res extensa*, is subject to the intellect, the *res cogitans*. By extension, this means that sensory experience is of less value than rational deliberation, and that emotions have no bearing on how we create knowledge – but also that science is more valuable than art, that culture is more valuable than nature, Enlightenment more important than religion, and so on. At the top are Western metaphysics and science.

Descartes is thus considered to have created hierarchies of culture and science that have had far-reaching consequences, some of which I mentioned above.

Meditations aimed to establish a metaphysical truth, while *Discourse on Method* asserts the cogito (the self that thinks itself) as a certain basis for knowledge. The route there offered an extensive phenomenological investigation of the senses, perception and dreams However, many people have become attached to Descartes' image as a thinker squarely concerned with his own rational method, in every situation a technocratic philosopher. Brain researchers, such as Antonio Damasio, who works in Portugal and the

US, have called Descartes' dualism, his separation of emotions and intellect, a scientific error that, in turn, can be described as a problem of modernity. It is part of a complex of ideas in which our focus on rational capacity ignores emotional capacities, restricting our view of what a human being is. The same kind of criticism is voiced by many contemporary psychologists and psychiatrists, not least those who work using a holistic perspective: if we want to describe the whole person, and if we want to understand the way in which people interact with their environment, we cannot start from the dualism of Descartes.

In modern philosophy, Descartes' *Meditations* has provided inspiration through its ability to describe sensory life in such detail – while also being a prime target for criticism. For example, in the phenomenological tradition, with philosophers such as Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Descartes' amazing journey through forms of sensuality in *Meditations* has been praised, while his insistence that human knowledge must be described through two entirely different kinds of spheres has been rejected. Consciousness cannot be placed in the world, as Descartes describes it in *Meditations*, without already being in the world: "In the final analysis the Cartesian Cogito only has sense through my own Cogito", writes Merleau-Ponty. It can only be confirmed by my contact with my own existence – so my thoughts also touch that existence. In a new reading of *Meditations*, Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback

shows that thought and feeling are more intimately intertwined than Merleau-Ponty realised. For Merleau-Ponty, however, Descartes' method clearly establishes knowledge of the subject, although the method is wrong: the idea that there is a distinct difference between the activity of thought and the phenomena it touches is an illusion.[2]

Descartes, or perhaps rather the concept of Cartesian dualism, is often mentioned in association with the major crises that characterise our time, such as our inability to address climate change and environmental crises. According to this critique, the metaphysical idea of a thinking intellect has served to systematically separate humans from nature. Human consciousness has come to be regarded as something abstract and exceptional, which stands apart from nature. In this way, humanity has come to see itself as a species that does not need, and perhaps cannot even obtain, harmony with animals, nature, the climate or planetary health. At the same time, the engineering sciences have been unleashed with no thought for their consequences on the life of the planet, and with no consideration other than the short-term profit humans can make from their inventions. If this account is true, Cartesian dualism is responsible for a world utterly dominated by human impact, one where nature has been squeezed out.

The crises that have accompanied our separation from nature are also related to others that have been linked to

Cartesian dualism: the West's unjust exploitation of continents, lands and people. The dualistic approach that separates the capacity of thought and intellect on the one hand, and culture and nature on the other, has legitimised a power structure that has dominated for centuries. Here, nature is not the only thing to have been subjected to violent forms of appropriation and extraction. Through an ideological over-reliance on the intellect, the Western subject has also proclaimed itself the master of creation, while the populations of other continents have been regarded as barbarians, or perhaps only as ripe for domination and exploitation. Descartes' dualism can thus be placed in the narrative that legitimised colonialism.

Not does the guilt of Cartesian dualism end there; the West's unprecedented slaughter of defenceless animals has also been regarded as resulting from Descartes' philosophy, as it demonstrably established that animals have no soul. We can continue in this way in almost every area: school politicians who believe that learning is all about intellect and want to remove arts and sports from the curriculum, therapies that lack holistic perspectives… from this angle, dualism must be called an unprecedented philosophical failure. No other philosophical doctrine has been so unequivocally identified as the root cause of so many crises. But the question is how guilty Descartes is himself. Can one philosopher, a single man, cause such catastrophic trends? Descartes himself, with his indefatigable

curiosity, his strong need for solitude, his desire for love, his belief in dialogue and intellectual exchange, hardly deserves to be blamed for all that is painted in the complex of ideas known as Cartesian dualism.

However, we have very limited knowledge and understanding of the Descartes who wrestled with dualism, although research has recently shown more interest in this. And, if you read Descartes' collected production, you will discover the opposite of a single-minded dualist: a philosopher with a constant desire to understand not only the capacity of reason and the secrets of mathematics, but also the phenomena of the world. Descartes was not only engaged with the problem of mind and body. He wrote about and investigated, through all his senses, the changes in the weather, the movements of music and the structure of matter. He delved into the secrets of how the inside and outside of the body are linked: just how should we understand the human ability to register the world through the senses and our complex inner workings that transport knowledge to the brain? And so, finally, Descartes wrote about the pleasure and necessity of understanding emotion. Feeling was what caused him to reflect on a possible link between mind and body – leading to the hypothesis about the pineal gland – but also to reflect on life, desire, urges and memories, to enter the universe that is undoubtedly a precursor of later ideas about the unconscious, that which we find in psychoanalysis.

The passions of the soul

Descartes tackles the emotions in *The Passions of the Soul*, a work that is in many ways different to his others, and which has an interesting history. It was written, according to Descartes, as a response to Elisabeth of Bohemia, a self-taught philosopher whose involved letters to Descartes were deeply challenging for him. Elisabeth came from a noble but hardly wealthy family. Her letters testify that, like so many other female philosophers of her time, she was expected to devote herself to social duties rather than philosophising. She found a kindred spirit in Descartes, someone who could truly engage in the kind of undisturbed thinking that she dreamed of. She was full of respect, but did not hide her light under a bushel. We could say that Elisabeth was the first person to identify Descartes' dualism as a failure; she opposed the division of soul and body in *Meditations* in her formulation of the 'interaction problem': "So I ask you please to tell me how the soul of a human being (it being only a thinking substance) can determine the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions".[3] If the

body and soul are entirely separated, there is nothing that can steer one or the other in any direction, stated Elisabeth.

Descartes was greatly impressed by her objections, but he also had several reasons of his own to search for a connection between mind and body. One was what we would now call phenomenological. Most of us feel that body and soul are connected, so why create a philosophy in which they are not united? The fact is that most people do not normally reflect on their actions and their habits. We live unreflectively, through the body, in a way that contradicts the idea of a strict separation between body and soul. Descartes also recognised this. In a famous letter to Elisabeth, he establishes that there are different kinds of knowledge: one metaphysical and conceptual, one that combines intellect and imagination, and a third that focuses on the union of body and soul on which we do not reflect in our daily lives.[4]

The Passions of the Soul (*Les Passions de l'âme*, 1649) thus belongs to the third category.[5] Here, Descartes explored the expression, purpose and genealogy of the emotions. It was his last book – on his arrival in Stockholm he had a copy with him for Queen Christina. The ideas of this treatise would primarily survive in the arts. Fifty years later, the French artist Charles Le Brun published a book in which he illustrated the catalogue of emotions presented by Descartes in a way that almost came to be used as a

manual for stage performances – this is what fear, admiration, love, hate and so on look like.[6]

Descartes' treatise is sensational in many ways, not only because he deliberately chooses to treat emotions as if they were a completely unfamiliar subject, "which no one before me has ever described", as he states in the introduction.[7] Above all, what he did was to avoid categorising emotions as good or bad, useful or not, from a moral perspective. Instead, he treated them in his capacity as a *physicien*, which can be translated as both a natural philosopher and physician. In doing so, he challenged the dominant philosophical school of his time, Stoicism, for which desires and other strong emotions needed to be processed. Descartes had no such purpose with his book; what he wanted was to understand, fundamentally, what emotions are and how they arise. He did not make himself a moral philosopher, rather a scientist.

"Passions" is not really a good translation. Descartes' book is not specifically about the strong emotions suggested by the word; the concept of the soul's passions can perhaps best be translated as "the emotions of the soul", although not emotions in a general, vague sense. The French title implies a work of thought; it refers to a category of emotions that is a physiological mystery for Descartes. Generally speaking, passions are something that we cannot produce by acts of the will. They are things that affect us through external or internal influences, by

seeing something outside ourselves which affects us, or we are perhaps haunted by our fantasies. Some of the passions Descartes describes would probably be better characterised as affects, such as physical feelings of fear, pain or pleasure. Descartes uses the ancient concept of animal spirits (*des esprits d'animaux*) to describe a flow within the body that links moods and ideas to bodily experiences and reactions. If we are scared, we want to run. If we feel pain or discomfort, we pull away. And if we can drink when we are thirsty, we feel pleasure.

However, there are also emotions that stem from the soul. We experience them as if they come from within, and they do not actually arise from external influences, like bodily affects. We cannot induce them, so to speak, and their function in our lives is not obvious. The passions of the soul include lust, anger, love, hate and wonder. Love and hate are the most fundamental, writes Descartes. This is a thesis that is not only based on speculation but, as we shall see, also on observation, not least of the relationship between mothers and young children.

More recently, scholars have commented on Descartes' attempts to find different forms of mediation between body and soul in *The Passions of the Soul*. As Finnish philosopher Lilli Alanen has shown, Descartes' passions can be seen as the moods of the mind, which in turn interact with the body. Descartes' project is not really about finding a philosophical link between mind and body, says

Alanen. Instead, he tries to describe how people's histories determines the way in which feelings and emotions are created and received, depending on their different experiences. This is also a philosophical statement – the way that emotion becomes unique and personal.[8]

Others have pointed out that the gap between mind and body is far from the only dualism Descartes worked with. The American philosopher and Descartes scholar Paul Hoffman has described Descartes' philosophy as a kind of continuous borderland, where he works on simultaneously describing the same thing from two different sides.[9] Here, dualism becomes an issue of perspective. Perhaps the most important dualism in *The Passions of the Soul* is not that between body and soul, but rather between passivity and agency. Affects and emotions are derived from a combination of physical and mental sources – what matters is how they affect us, and what we do with them. Fear, for example, can both provoke an impulse to flee (and thus use the body) while at the same time we avoid what we are afraid of (more or less deliberately). But sometimes when we are afraid, we can also find that we want both to flee and to stay and fight. So what determines how we react?

The movements and convulsions of consciousness thus involve a close connection with the body, where one is hardly separable from the other, but it is precisely because of these close connections that a certain philosophical

borderland is necessary – and on the one hand we seem to be able to side with the mind, on the other with the body…

Still, Descartes' borderland in *The Passions of the Soul* does not aim to create a metaphysical distinction. Instead, it is about exploring what we can influence and how. And this is where the question of morality also arises, but in a different way to that in the Stoic tradition. What Descartes is interested in is not, like the Stoics, to ask whether and if so how affects and emotions can be modified; he wants to know how they arise, and how they influence the way we act and think.

The captain of the ship

In this discussion, Descartes returns to an old philosophical image: that of the captain and the ship. Does consciousness captain the ship that is a person, is it capable of mastering and processing emotions? Or is a person a ship that rides the waves of emotional storms, unable to do anything unless the captain takes over the helm? The way that Descartes uses this metaphor in *The Passions of the Soul* is a clear indication of his approach; unlike the Stoics, who tried to overcome the conflict between body and soul, Descartes explored the potential for them to cooperate. As Descartes wrote in a letter to his friend Mersenne: passion is literally a movement. The body and the soul touch each other.

The metaphor of the captain and the ship is also found in Aristotle's *On the Soul*. It is apparent that body and soul are connected, Aristotle writes, but the question is "whether the soul may not be the actuality of its body in the sense in which the sailor is the actuality of the ship".[10] This image is continued by Seneca, Plotinus, Ficino, Pico della Mirandola and many others, and is used to discuss whether the intellect can serve as the captain of the ship that is a person, establishing control over their emotions and actions. It is thus a clearly dualistic metaphor, perhaps a type of founding metaphor for dualism, if we are to look at emotions and intellect, but it also deals with how mind and body are linked, and why. In one sense, the image is about who or what controls human life, where the body seems to be disconnected from the will and power of the mind – but it is also about why the captain, the intellect, is needed at all. Apart from ensuring that the ship always reaches port, it may seem as if the captain has no more exciting function on his own: it is the body that sees, hears, feels and so on. If Descartes had followed Cartesian dualism, he would have argued that reason is a captain who rules the emotions with a strong hand. Yet in *Meditations*, the metaphor of the captain and the ship is used to point to a kind of phenomenological experience of unity between body and mind, as we are able to actually experience it. Some feelings are natural, like pain, hunger and thirst; these cannot be controlled. Then the self is not

in the body like the sailor in his ship. Instead, the self is "most tightly joined and, so to speak, commingled with it, so much so that I and the body constitute one single thing".[11] As Maurice Merleau-Ponty has stated, Descartes makes it clear that the influence goes both ways: the soul is not the sailor in his ship, but nor is the body a machine, even if it has its own dynamic principles. It is a bundle of sensory, affective and emotional experiences. So, the distinction between body and mind is actually not particularly clear. For example, we can experience desire as something physical, aroused by looks, smells, touches: sensory experiences that are distinctly corporeal. However, the spiritual experience cannot be separated from the physical – from past experiences and memories. The body is not just a ship without a captain. It can preserve the memory of sensations and experiences that seem to remain within us, affecting us in a manner not unlike that of thoughts. Descartes chose to call such sensations and experiences "confused thoughts".

Return to childhood

Cogito is a failure – as even Descartes' contemporary opponents said. The French theologian Antoine Arnauld described the problem in his correspondence. The definition of cogito is "I think, therefore I am". Therefore a cogito, a reflective consciousness, cannot think that it does not think. So what about a foetus? It has a soul, writes Arnauld, but it does not reflect upon it. So what is it? Pierre Gassendi, a friend of Descartes, claimed that it is impossible to determine the moment at which consciousness is, so to speak, blown into the body. Do we think "while we are still in the womb? Or from birth? A child's ability to think must be poor, almost non-existent."[12] And Elisabeth of Bohemia maintained that "it appears as if human souls can exist without thought – for example in the mother's womb and in great fainting spells".[13]

But Descartes protests against a foetus lacking awareness:

> I do not doubt that the mind starts to think as soon as it is implanted in the body of a child, and that the child is immediately aware of its thoughts, even if it does not

> subsequently remember this because these thoughts do not remain in the memory.[14]

In other words, the foetus thinks. Humans, both inside and outside the womb, "always think", according to Descartes.[15] The child is a kind of floating consciousness before and after birth but, naturally, says Descartes, not without humour, a foetus cannot "meditate on metaphysics".[16] However, this is not because the foetus cannot do so in principle, rather that children are so attentive to their physical needs that they have difficulty disregarding them – which the cogito can. When we observe small children, we see that our first thoughts appear as needs, claims Descartes, so observing that children simply cannot be dualists:

> a consciousness that has recently been conjoined with a child's body is fully occupied by in some diffuse sense perceiving or feeling ideas about pain, desire, heat, cold and other such ideas that arise from its union and entanglement with the body.[17]

In this passage, which comes from the famous "Letter to Hyperaspistes" (actually addressed to Gassendi), Descartes describes what he means by "confused thoughts". The child's thoughts are, quite simply, its needs. As Descartes explains in an interview with theologian Frans Burman: the child's consciousness is "overflowing with

corporality".[18] So does a child's consciousness function more poorly than an adult's, asks Gassendi. No, responds Descartes. Nor can philosophers usually differentiate between body and soul.[19] They remain in the "confused thought" – excepting himself. The Descartes who created cogito created a metaphysical distinction, and thus pure and free thought.

For the metaphysicist Descartes, childhood was primarily a time in which prejudices about the world and its nature were established. *Meditations* was about finding a way beyond these prejudices and discovering another type of knowledge, but his reflections about the child in his correspondence and *The Passions of the Soul* show that Descartes also wrestled with the dualism he had created. On the one hand he sought to create the pure subject, without body. On the other, he found – in the child – so much body that it was difficult to ignore.

Perhaps Descartes' bold ideas about the thinking foetus were associated with him, as a philosopher, largely analysing his own perceptions, memories and feelings, including those from his childhood. He shares this method with Freud, among others. That he has written so much about the world of children has also been given a psychological interpretation, indicating personal trauma – his mother died when he was very young.

However, for Descartes, childhood was not primarily a personal story. It was a natural part of human anatomy, as

shown in the *Treatise on Man*, on which Descartes worked during the 1630s, but remained unfinished. It was first published posthumously, and includes a detailed description of the interior of the human body, vividly presented using amazing illustrations.[20] Here, Descartes uses dissection as his method. The actual physical dissection was of a sheep, but the operation was used to demonstrate that life starts in the womb. The aim was to shine a light on that which is obviously human – the ability to think and feel. Descartes was enthusiastic about dissecting the innards, not only to gain insight into the composition of the internal organs; what he wanted to find, beyond the shell of the body, was the underlying secret: how and why humans think as we do. Descartes turned to the physical, corporeal interior to see something that was entirely incorporeal, in the hope of finding signs of existing transitions and actual links between body and soul. As he describes it, in a letter to his friend Mersenne, in 1632:

> I have already written of the vital functions [in humans] – digestion, heartbeats, distribution of nutrition etcetera – and of the five senses. I am now dissecting the heads of various animals, to help explain what imagination, memories etcetera consist of.[21]

Descartes finding the pineal gland was thus no coincidence; it was the result of diligent work, using the scientific method to answer a question that had been left to

theologians and moral philosophers: how are the body and soul connected?

The child shows that there are clear links between the two at the start of life. As a person forms, from a fertilised egg to birth, invisible threads appear to bind together the soul and the body. In the womb, the child and the mother are in symbiosis through “the outer skin called the ‘after-birth’, that surrounds the child before it is born”.[22] Emotions can pass from the mother to the child through the womb because the foetus’ body, like the child’s, according to Descartes, is more permeable than an adult body. The sensory impressions experienced by a mother, yes, even in her imagination, can make an impression of the foetus’ body in the womb – a little like a pre-birth tattoo.[23] The child’s mental life is thus not determined by either body or soul, but by both – it is in complete symbiosis with its mother, both before and after birth.

The passions of the soul will therefore create a bridge between the two substances, the body and the soul. Descartes wanted to fill the gap that Elisabeth identified, the one that made dualism a mistake. Without letting it affect cogito, Descartes attempted to modify the dualistic approach. Emotions demonstrate that there are connections, in various ways, but how do emotions arise? Descartes discusses this in his correspondence with Pierre Chanut, the French ambassador in Stockholm. Via Chanut, Descartes receives a question from Queen Christina:

what emotion is "worst if it is immeasurable or abused, love or hate"?[24] For Descartes, it is love:

> In love, a mysterious heat is experienced around the heart, and an amount of blood gathers in the lungs that makes us open our arms to embrace something, and this makes the soul willingly conjoin with that object that presents itself to it.[25]

What Descartes describes is the instinct to unite with the object we love.[26] But this is not just a desire that is satisfied with a dream of union. In his long poem, *Vom Schnee*, the German poet Durs Grünbein described a fantastic scene in which Christina and Descartes meet in the cold dawn light of Stockholm's Royal Palace and discuss love. It is, says Descartes,

> die noble Sorge und der dunkle Trieb,
> Ein Hochgefühl, und ein Verlangen, kaum zu stillen.
> So generös das eine, nährt das andre Eifersucht und Geiz.
> Ein Alibi für alle, das ist Liebe, und ein Grund, warum
> Die Welt ist, wie sie ist – zerrissen, böse, unregiert.[27]

The lines testify to the driven obsession that love also arouses – an almost evil and demanding obsession that Descartes tries to understand.

Descartes traces the origin of love to the desire felt by a baby as it is nourished; suckling wakes a strong love of the mother. This is not a purely spiritual experience. The spirits

of life flow from the brain to the muscles, shaking the body so that the heart is ignited, "so that the spirits of life flow even more abundantly".[28] We humans love experiencing this inner flow.

But sometimes the opposite happens: the child feels hatred, or sadness. As Descartes writes to Elisabeth of Bohemia: "the first subject of sadness some people had at the beginning of their lives was that they did not receive enough food, and that others first felt sadness when the food they received was harmful to them".[29] Love goes back to the moment we are born, Descartes writes in another letter to Elisabeth.[30] In this way, the needs of the young child will also affect the adult. Descartes talks of these needs as "thoughts". The thinking foetus is therefore not a little cogito, but a bundle of love and hate, in which the physical and the psychological are intertwined.

This is precisely what makes Descartes a kind of early psychoanalyst. Early psychoanalytic theories also associate bodily affects with the emergence of mental faculties. Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* make it clear that the first experience of desire comes with the mother's breast: "the child's first and most vital activity, his sucking at his mother's breast or at substitutes for it, that must have familiarized him with this pleasure [which the child has experienced and continues to seek]. The child's lips, in our view, behave like an erotogenic

zone, and no doubt stimulation by the warm flow of milk is the cause of the pleasurable sensation."[31]

The Austrian psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, who developed the highly influential object relations theory, also states that the mother is the first object of love.[32] Like Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, Descartes describes how psychological life originates in the service of the body.[33]

Thoughts thus create traces in a child's consciousness that remain in their adult life.[34] But the opposite can also happen: memories can be repressed. As children, we are governed by needs that we tend to forget as adults. Our bodies are exposed to both pain and pleasure: we depend on nourishment, love, care and more, but as adults, we have difficulty remembering this vulnerability: "no trace of these thoughts is imprinted on the brain", Descartes says in his conversations with Frans Burman.[35] But at the same time, needs trigger the consciousness, creating folds. The memories disappear, but their traces remain. This means that memories of the child's bodily needs will remain later in life, but unconsciously, without clear inner images. Vague feelings are all that is left. An adult will carry these feelings without understanding their origin. In this way, the human subject – even if a cogito can declare its own existence – can never achieve full self-knowledge.

The fact that we forget – repress – plays an important role in how Descartes describes the subject. This is because we are affected by emotions, reacting to traces that

already exist, but we do not know where they come from.[36] Emotions are always linked to traces of a childhood prehistory, which in turn can be linked to other traces. Descartes thus describes memory as a kind of associative machine. The cause of emotions like love and hate is not in the external world, but within us. Freud describes similar mechanisms of memory in the last chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He also explains the associative flows between memories by saying that emotions literally leave traces, without them necessarily being linked to specific representations or inner images. These memory traces can be remnants of images, but also of emotions.[37]

For Descartes, memory works in a similar way; emotions and memory representations can function independently of each other, but also be linked in new ways: "the same actions are not always linked to the same thoughts", he writes.[38] In addition, Descartes imagines that the body can have its own memories – corporeal memories. In this way, memories are described as a flow between mind and body.[39]

Descartes also provides examples of how such a flow has a more concrete effect on our emotional life, such as why we fall in love with a particular person, rather than just anyone.[40] The question was posed by Ambassador Chanut in an exchange with Queen Christina, and later to Descartes himself. He gave a surprising answer: love, in any case, is not inspired by beauty. We do not fall in love with

a person just because they are beautiful. Instead, we fall in love with something that is slightly wrong, that is different. As when he fell in love: "When I was a child, I fell in love with a girl of my own age who had a squint", writes Descartes. "This made me relive the same feelings every time I saw eyes like hers, but I have no idea why this is so." The memory of love physically remained in the body and was awakened every time Descartes saw a girl or woman with a squint. The philosopher writes that "when we love someone without knowing why, it may be because they bear a resemblance to a former object of love, even if we do not know what it is".[41] So when we feel desire, it is due to our history. We are drawn to the shadows in our prehistory. The objects that arouse our feelings do so for specific reasons – but we can never really understand how.[42] In his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud wrote about desire in a similar way: "The finding of an object is thus in fact a re-finding of it."[43]

Thus, for Descartes, our emotions will always be linked to infantile life.[44] This is why thoughts mixed with emotions will be vague in their nature. They are simply difficult to understand. Love eludes conscious attempts to understand because it will forever be linked to those vague experiences of bodily needs that were initially present in the child.[45]

Philosophy's greatest failure?

So where does Descartes failure really lie? In creating dualism or being unable to overcome it? Perhaps both – but what is interesting is the paths he takes to both save his dualism and to move past it.

Descartes was hardly the founder of the ideology commonly known as Cartesian dualism, so is not guilty of creating the undue hierarchies in the Western way of thinking that have resulted from it. Instead, he actually opened up as many unknown dimensions as he could – by investigating not only human bodies but also himself.

Descartes' many long descents into the life of the young child – and into his own childhood – are not well known, or at least not widely cited in the history of philosophy. But today we can see new dimensions in how he wrestled with dualism, especially if we consider how he observes the vulnerability and needs of the child, which do not simply become theological discussions about when life begins or how the divine spirit touches the body. What Descartes calls soul becomes something we might now more accurately call mental life. Descartes not only opened the way

for phenomenology and neuroscience – through the holes in his metaphysics – he also gave us the embryo of psychoanalysis.

Rather than simply being a dualist, Descartes has contributed to a complex understanding of what being a human subject entails. The confused thoughts of childhood are the precursor of the repression of adult life, and the subject's inability to ever become permeable to itself. Here, we face a completely new kind of mystery: the subject that is impermeable to itself is also bottomless. Cogito grabs hold of itself, so to speak, by establishing its own existence. But the mental life's subject, that of emotions, memories and drives which Descartes investigates in *The Passions of the Soul* is never established with the scientific certainty he seeks. The pineal gland, which I mentioned at the beginning of the text, is presented as the mysterious link between body and soul that Elisabeth of Bohemia asked for. And when Descartes searches for the origin of emotions in the life of the child, he does not find a clear dualistic structure of body and soul, but rather indistinct combinations.

So, what can we learn from Descartes' mistake? Perhaps that the relationship between body and consciousness is multidimensional, still unable to be resolved through metaphysics or moral philosophy, theology or brain research. In his search for the connection between body and soul, Descartes opened up the universe of

dreams, memories and repression, in which the strong emotions of childhood never cease to demand attention. Beyond metaphysical dualism, he found a complex world of unconscious memories and desires that are alien to the rational subject. With his observations of the child, he thus staged a breathtaking paradox: a philosopher who is criticised for being too rational opened the doors to psychoanalysis, a doctrine criticised for being too irrational.

If there is anything to be learnt from this story, it is perhaps that there is also an answer to the question: how guilty can a philosopher be? Not very. Philosophy is not what colonises and dominates, exploits and uses. Cartesian dualism is a concept that has been used to criticise a certain view of the sovereignty of the human subject, and the way in which such a view has been abused. But for Descartes, the subject was never so sovereign, instead it was a composite figure, with cogito providing a basis for secure knowledge, while the passions revealed a whole new abyss.

So let us give Descartes restitution: few people have achieved so much through their failures.

Notes

1. "Meditation One" from René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998, p. 62.

2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald E. Landes, New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 389–390. See Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback on "Philosophical emotion: Descartes and the aesthetics of thought" and "Descartes's performative Cogito", in *Through the Eyes of Descartes: Seeing, Thinking, Writing*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2024, pp. 34–74. The book, co-authored with Cecilia Sjöholm, is the result of a research project funded by the Swedish Research council.

3. Letter from Elisabeth of Bohemia to Descartes, 6 May 1643, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, *The Correspondence Between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 62 Elisabeth uses the word *esprit* in the letter, but in a manner that corresponds to *esprit animaux*.

4. Descartes to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643, ibid., pp. 69–71.

5. René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, trans. Stephen Voss, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989.

6. Charles le Brun, *Sur L'Expression Générale et Particuliére*, Paris, 1698.

7. Descartes 1989, p. 328.

8. Lilli Alanen, *Descartes' Concept of Mind*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 172–178.

9. Paul Hoffman, *Essays on Descartes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 108–113.

10. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, trans. A. J. Smith. http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.2.ii.html.

11. "Meditation Six" from Descartes 1998, p. 98.

12. AT VII, p. 264.

13. Elisabeth to Descartes, 6 May 1643, *Correspondence*, p. 62.

14. AT IX, p. 190.

15. Letter to Hyperaspistes, August 1641, AT III, p. 423.

16. AT III, p. 424.

17. Ibid.

18. *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, trans. John Cottingham, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976, p. 8.

19. Descartes to De Launey, 22 July 1641, AT III, p. 420.

20. Latin edition: *De homine: Figuris et Latinitate donatus a Florentio Schuyl*, Leyden, 1662; French edition: *L'Homme de René Descartes et un Traitté de la formation du foetus du mesme autheur. Avec les remarques de Louys de La Forge,… sur le Traitté de l'homme de René Descartes et sur les figures par luy inventées*, Paris, 1664.

21. Descartes to Mersenne, December 1632, AT I, p. 263.

22. AT XI, p. 284.

23. AT X, p. 178.

24. Descartes to Chanut, 1 February 1647, AT IV, p. 601.

25. Ibid., p. 602.

26. AT XI, p. 387.

27. Durs Grünbein, *Vom Schnee*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2003, p. 126: "moral care and a shady drive, / A noble emotion and a barely stilled / desire. One is generous, the other jealous, mean. / Love is an alibi for all, reason to / Our world is as it is – uninhibited, disjointed, evil" (translated by Clare Barnes).

28. AT XI, p. 408.

29. Descartes to Elisabeth, May 1646, *Correspondence*, p. 136.

30. Ibid., p. 134–138.

31. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, ed. Angela Richards, London: Pelican, 1977, p. 98. https://ia601508.us.archive.org/12/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.65743/2015.65743.On-Sexuality-Three-Essays-On-The-Theory-Of-Sexuality-Vol-7_text.pdf.

32. Melanie Klein, "Love, guilt and reparation", in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works*, London: Virago, 1988, p. 306.

33. See Cecilia Sjöholm, "The thinking fetus: Descartes at the brink of psychoanalysis", *Emotions: History, Culture, Society* vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 234–258 (https://doi.org/10.1163/2208522X-02010129). See also Cavalcante Schuback & Sjöholm 2024.

34. AT III, p. 424.

35. Descartes 1976, p. 8.

36. Descartes to Elisabeth, May 1646, AT IV, p. 408.

37. Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on Sexuality", *Standard Edition* VII, ed. James Strachey, London: Hogarth, 1953, p. 222.

38. AT XI, p. 429.

39. Ibid., p. 362.

40. Chanut to Descartes, 11 May 1647, AT V, p. 21.

41. Descartes to Chanut, 6 June 1647, AT V, p. 57.

42. Ibid.

43. Freud 2002, p. 139.

44. Descartes to Chanut, 1 February 1647, AT IV, p. 605.

45. Ibid., p. 606.

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RJ 2024

Failures?

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The French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) is famous for dualism, in which body and mind are seen as opposites. Many people now believe he contributed to the overconfidence in Western reason that was the foundation of phenomena such as colonialism and the exploitation of natural resources. Should Descartes thus be held partly responsible for contemporary global crises – is his philosophy a historical failure?

In fact, in various ways, Descartes tried to solve the problems he saw in his own thesis, reflecting on emotions, life, desires, drives and memories in a way that is undoubtedly a precursor of psychoanalysis. Beyond the rational subject, he found a new psychological universe.

In 2024, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond publishes an essay collection under the title *Failures?*. Aesthetics researcher Cecilia Sjöholm writes about Descartes' dualism and shows how uncompromising curiosity always wins in the long run.

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