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Between the Mind and Body

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CIE Essay Contest

Between the Mind and Body

The texts that we have read this semester raise questions regarding the human body. Though we are all born with one, dealing with the fact that we have this body has been both a problem for humans but also an essential component of the human condition and identity. Is having a body an essential part of defining who we are? Or rather, does the being that we call “I” refer only to the immaterial soul? Could it be some combination of the two? In both *Between the World and Me*, as well as *A Discourse on the Method*, Coates and Descartes each wrestle with these questions. While Descartes argues that the mind and the body are two distinct things, Coates makes the case that neither the body nor the mind can exist without the other; their relationship and interactions are what make us human. Through viewing Descartes’ reasoning in light of the personal stories that Coates shares with us, we are able to better understand that having a body is essential to living a good human life. Though the mind is what houses the thoughts and feelings that compose who we are, the physical body is the medium through which these ideas are expressed and through which we are able to go about interacting with the world around us, which is an essential and deeply satisfying component of the human condition.

In *A Discourse on the Method*, Descartes argues that the mind and the body are two distinct things rather than something that intertwines to form one being. Though each of us has a physical body that carries our mind and immaterial soul, what makes us distinctly human lies within this immaterial part more than the other. The power of being able to “judge correctly and

distinguish the true from the false,” is something that is innate within each of us, though some people are better than others at exercising this knowledge (Descartes 5). Because this nature of ours resides “only in thinking,” it is not dependent on any material thing (Descartes 5). The mind is easier to know than the body because it “would not stop being everything it is even if the body were not to exist” (Descartes 29). In other words, if our bodies were to die, our minds would still live—we would still be able to hold thoughts and ideas, they just wouldn’t be able to be physically expressed in ways that the body can express them. However, it wouldn’t be possible for the mind to die while the body lives. Rather than a thinking, rational being, we would just be a mass of cells and organs with no ability to do anything at all. We would essentially exist as nothing. Because of this, Descartes believes that the being that we call “I” is entirely distinct from the body. Our thinking, feeling, soul or essence is distinct from this physical realm and is what defines who we are as humans. Through this rejection of the physical body, Descartes transcends the limits of the body. While we are always present in the body, the mind is a space through which we can explore other worlds. When reading a book, for example, we are physically present—turning the pages, reading the words with our eyes. In our minds, however, we are able to interact with the ideas and characters. The story feels so real that we become a part of it. The mind allows us to travel places our body cannot, and it is only through the rejection of these physical limitations of the body that Descartes is able to focus on the fascinating depths of the mind.

In *Between the World and Me*, Coates rejects the mind-body dualism for which Descartes argues. Unlike Descartes, Coates believes that to be human involves a more holistic view—that in order to be human, you cannot have either the mind or the body exist without the other. In

fact, Coates puts more emphasis on the physical body as something that defines who we are as humans and what rights we are given. In his book, Coates speaks to how it is his black body that places a barrier between the world and himself. Those that believe themselves to be white and superior express their beliefs through the destruction of the black body. White supremacy is something that “dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, and breaks teeth” (Coates 10). Though the body is something that usually is thought to protect us against things, it is, for Coates, something that is vulnerable and open to destruction, simply due to its color. Violence always falls upon the body, and often in the simplest and quickest ways. Coates is constantly having to watch his back and fears that his son will always have to carry this precariousness as well. In a sense, the purpose of Coates’ letter to his son is exactly this—to tell him that this responsibility will always hang over his son’s shoulders so long as the mountain of white supremacy exists, but also how to find ways to live freely within this physical restriction. To be human for Coates is to have not only the intellectual freedom to recognize this divide between him and the rest of the world, but it is to also have the physical freedoms of living within that world.

When viewing what Descartes argues about mind-body dualism in light of the physicality of the human body that Coates expresses, it becomes evident that Descartes, by saying that the immaterial soul being is more representative of the beings we call “I,” is missing a piece of the puzzle of what it means to be human. Having a physical body is something that is essential to leading a good life. While the thoughts and beliefs that we hold come from this internal and immaterial part of who we are, these ideas cannot be expressed without the presence of a body. The interactions with the world around us are things that can only be translated from the mind

through the body. Though it is great to hold these thoughts and ideas to ourselves, using them to interact with the world around us is ultimately how we can learn more about ourselves and form new beliefs. Though Coates certainly has the intellectual depths and freedoms to live comfortably, he struggles to do so because his body is constantly threatened. Stuck outside of the Dream, he is unable to lead a comfortable and “good” life because his physical body, which is so interconnected with the mind, is constantly being pushed around. In order to make this case for the interconnectedness of the mind and body, Coates uses both his mind and body. It is only the physical abuse that he endures that allows him to understand and grasp the importance of the body, which he reflects upon with his mind as expressed in the letter to his son.

Thus, when considered in light of Coates’ real-world struggle of coping with limited physical freedoms and the ways in which these unfreedoms define who Coates is, it is evident that Descartes, through defining who we are solely in terms of the immaterial essence of our soul/mind, is missing an essential piece of what it means to be human. Part of the problem here, however, lies in Descartes lack of “experience” with physical limitations. Though Coates, an african american male, has had to deal with the consequences and fears of oppression, Descartes, a white and wealthy male, was never oppressed. Descartes never had to hold onto the fear that someone could take his body at any moment—his body is something that was always his. It is the fact that Coates has had these fears and struggles that makes the body all the more special to him. Unlike Descartes, he has seen what it is like for violence to fall upon the body and to lose it as a result.

By looking at these two pieces intertextually, we can further understand that to have a body means that we have the opportunity for physical expression, as having a body is essentially

our minds' gateway to the outside world. It is what allows us to go about interacting with others. To have a body is to be able to express our freedoms—it is an extension of the wonders of what goes on inside of the mind and should be treated as such. The fact that we do indeed have bodies is something not to take for granted. Rather it is something to be made sure that does not get harmed, for harming the body is to infringe upon the freedoms of expression that we all should have. Our bodies are vulnerable and breakable but are nonetheless a part of who we are internally. It is when this part of who we are becomes threatened that we struggle to understand our place in comparison to the rest of the world. Having this notion of who we are without a divide between the world and ourselves is an essential part of the human condition. Being in this position of having a body not only allows us to understand how we are to live together, but also what should matter to each of us individually and where we are to go from here, keeping in mind the interconnectedness of both our bodies and minds.

Through examining the intertextual relationship between Descartes' *A Discourse on the Method* and Coates' *Between the World and Me*, we are able to better form a coherent view of who we are as humans—an interconnected, tightly-knit combination of both our immaterial souls and minds as well as the bodies in which they are housed. Though considered separate from the mind and “who we are” by some, the physical body is something that links our minds to the outside world around us. If not for this link that so tightly unites who we are both internally and externally, perhaps we would all be living in caves, denied a certain ability for expression that defines much of who we are and closes whatever we feel forms the barrier between the world and ourselves.

Works Cited

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