Pas de deux: Stepping Out of the Mind-Body Prison

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Much discussion of the relationship between the mind and the body has occurred since
the time of Plato. Plato’s *Phaedo* takes place just before Socrates is condemned to death by
suicide but appropriately, just as he is about to die, Socrates launches into discussion on the mind
and the body. Throughout this dialogue, Plato holds the body in much contempt. Socrates claims
that philosophers in general are more in tune and more in touch with the mind than they are with
the body. Asking us to emulate them, he states that intellectuals are trying to free their soul from
their body. The latter, indeed, shackles and deceives the soul:

Now how about the acquisition of wisdom? Is the body a hindrance, or is it not, if you
use it as an accessory in the search? What I mean is, do sight and hearing provide men
with any true knowledge, or are even the poets always trying to tell us something like
this, that nothing that we hear or see is accurate? And yet if *these* bodily senses are not
accurate or reliable, the others are hardly likely to be—for all the others are inferior, I
suppose, to these…When, then, does the soul attain to truth...When it tries to investigate
anything with the help of the body, the body quite clearly deceives it.¹

In the quotation above, Socrates conveys his mistrust for the body because of its blind reliance
on senses and the sensory experience. He claims that despite the poets keen intellects they are
often blind sighted by the senses. Socrates generalizes that all senses are unreliable and possess
varying degrees of falsehood. When the mind tries to understand the environment through the
help of the body, it can do so through an imperfect and faulty body. As a dancer, I would have to
argue with Socrates. The acquisition of knowledge is in fact the product of sensory exploration
of and by the body. I propose that it is only through these disparaged senses that “truth” is

transmitted to the mind. It is because of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste that the human being is propelled into life. From the moment we are conceived, we are first sensing, then thinking our way through life. I would never dare say that there is a disconnection between the mind and the body, but rather recognize the unique, tightly interwoven system of corporeal truth and cerebral contemplation.

For Socrates, the struggle to separate the mind from the body will provide man with ultimate purification. It is important that this dialogue should come to fruition upon the deathbed of Socrates. Socrates considers death the ultimate separation of the mind and the body. Surely, his argument maybe tainted by the fear of death but this in no way invalidates his argument. From the beginning, he has viewed the body as a mere distraction. He claims that philosophers should practice attaining a cerebral mastery to the point of becoming “more dead than alive.”

Even though his argument is made more urgent by his imminent death, this has been an ongoing debate in his works. It is at the very moment of death that man can only reach purity and at no other point during his life. Plato takes this to an extreme wish for death more than life. I ask what is so purifying about this separation? Is the point of life, then, its end?

In conversation with Simias and Cebees, his disciples, Socrates states, “he who should try to track down each item of reality, alone by itself, in its pure essences, by using pure thought […] disregarding, so far as was possible, eyes, ears, and practically all the body, on the ground that is caused confusion […] would not allow the soul to acquire truth and wisdom.” How is it then, that the purest of thoughts are achieved by the soul without the use of the body? If it is the mind that learns how to interpret information, how can it do so without absorbing any

\[\text{\textsuperscript{2} Ibid. 79.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{3} Ibid. 81.}\]
information from the outside world? I question Socrates’ desire to become a purely cerebral being, living outside of reality? Could we not argue, rather, that the body is concrete and stable while the mind is purely interpretative and unsound? Socrates claims in the quotation above that only the mind can achieve “pure thought.” I question the nature and creation of “pure thought.” How can such a thing exist? And if it does, how does it come to live without the help of the body’s information?

Socrates continues to highlight the mystical and divine qualities of the mind, as opposed to the constantly decaying body. He discusses the invisibility of the soul, a rejection of the divine and eternal. The body, as is constantly decaying, is thus deemed mortal:

And philosophy sees that the body-prison in its cunning works through desires contriving to make the prisoner aid and abet his own imprisonment as much as possible […] philosophy […] gently soothes and tries to free them, pointing out that the evidence of the eyes and of the ears and of the other organs of sense is thoroughly misleading […] it encourages the soul to gather itself up into itself, all alone, and to put trust in nothing but itself- to trust only such realities as it may discern in their essential nature by its own essential nature.⁵

I find the use of the word “sees” a deceiving choice to describe the action of philosophy in relation to the “body-prison”- another misleading choice of words. How is it that “philosophy sees?” Can the mind interpret the exterior world by use of similar corporeal senses? Could perception be a more accurate portrayal of the cognitive process? It is in this “body-prison” that philosophy learns to soothe and free the mind from the body. Again, philosophy seems to be

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⁴ Ibid. 81.
⁵ Ibid. 105.
taking on more physical than metaphysical action in achieving her goal. According to Socrates, the soul should withdraw within itself in order to be able to decipher reality through its own pure mechanisms. I question, though, the viability of such a strategy. To exist in the world is to move and be moved by the sensory experiences around us. How is it that the soul can internally withdraw and still be successful in its interpretations? If the soul were to withdraw and neglect the body, it needs something against which to compare its “essential nature.” The mind was not born, or reincarnated with previous knowledge of the world. It depended on the onset cues from the body.

Plato is not altogether consistent regarding matters of physical, corporeal existence. Later in the dialogue, Socrates introduces the idea of physical philosophy to Cebes. He states, “and is it the blood that we do our thinking with, or the air or the fire? Or is it none of these, but the brain which provides the sensations of hearing and seeing and smelling— and did memory and opinion come from these, and from memory and opinion (when it had acquired stability) did knowledge come into being?” The scientific advances of knowledge make clean that sensation comes from the senses, and not from the mind. It is in the mind that we learn to perceive, interpret, and analyze our world. John Dewey comes particularly useful in this debate. The attainment of knowledge is only possible with the acquisition and mastery of our senses.

As the perfect advocate of the sensory experience of life, John Dewey can be pitted against Plato. An American philosopher active in the early 1930s, Dewey wrote extensively about the place of art in experience. In the second chapter of “Art as Experience,” he introduces

6 Ibid. 121.
the idea of sensuality and its role in society today, a diametrically opposed view from that of Socrates. I quote:

We undergo sensations as mechanical stimuli or as irritated stimulations, without having a sense of the reality that is in them and behind them: in much of our experience our different senses do not unite to tell a common and enlarged story. We see without feeling, we hear, but only a second-hand report [...] Prestige goes to those who use their minds without participation of the body and who act vicariously through control of the bodies and labor of others.  

It is because of external stimuli that we have been conditioned to use our senses superficially without the “reality that is in them and behind them.” Man has become such an intellectual beast, that the corporeal nature of his body has almost become a foreign experience. Our senses have grown estranged from each other and from the mind. Dewey claims that, “prestige goes to those who use their minds without participation of the body.” It is certainly a feat for man, and a current practice for philosophers, to live merely in the mind without taking stock of the body’s sensory interpretation of the world around them. By “thinking” our surroundings in an ethereal manner, Socrates hopes for superior results than were he to rely on the senses. But how can man be thrust into society without sensory experience? It is not a matter of condemning the powers of the mind, but of wondering what reality would “look” like without man’s sensory experience. Perhaps no more than a figment of the mind’s imagination.

Dewey fights against the “Philosopher” stating later that is it the philosophers and psychologists who have, “been so obsessed with the problem of knowledge that they have treated ‘sensations’ as mere elements of knowledge.”\(^8\) Clearly, it is the desire to be superhuman, to be divine, to be eternal, that drives the philosophers. The world in which they are living would appear to be merely an imaginative state, never becoming a palpable reality. Dewey states:

The senses are the organs through which the live creature participates directly in the on-goings of the world about him. In this participation the varied wonder and splendor of this world are made actual for him in the qualities he experiences […] it can not be opposed to ‘intellect,’ for mind is the means by which participation is rendered fruitful through sense […] and put to further service in the intercourse of the live creature with his surroundings.\(^9\)

It is through our experience of the senses that we are provided a sense of our environment. Dewey also states that it is the power of the mind, that helps the senses come to life. It is through the mental interpretation of bodily information that man can fully experience his surroundings. Dewey is convincing in his recognition of the world in which he lives. To him, experiencing the world is another way of creating it.

As stated by Plato, the soul should internally withdraw in order to be liberated from the “body-prison” in which it is held captive. The soul can function more successfully if it is based on pure internal states. Dewey continues to defend the sensorial experience of life when he states that “oppositions of mind and body, soul and matter, spirit and flesh all have their origin, fundamentally, in fear of what life may- bring forth. They are marks of contraction and

\(^8\) Ibid. 22.
\(^9\) Ibid. 22.
withdrawal."\textsuperscript{10} Dewey fights against this notion. He states that this internalization of the world is neither merely a withdrawal from the world, but one induced by the fear of the world. Plato is perhaps frightened, and perhaps rightfully so, of what the world can bring, of what the world can destroy, and what it can create?

These thinkers maintain different arguments on the subject of the mind/body dichotomy. But their stances all include the instance of death. Does the soul live on past the body? If so, does it find another being in which to situate itself? Was the soul created first, before human beings, and thus possesses more knowledge than the body? If reincarnation is a certainty, then isn’t the soul immortal? If it has been alive longer and survives longer than the body, shouldn’t it possess more control over the mortality of the body? According to Socrates the soul carries previous knowledge with it while entering and using different bodies through its life. The soul recollects, through learning the first time, information through its existence in its present body. Perhaps this is what is meant by this peculiarly restricting term? Does the body merely become a vessel for the soul? Does this recollection of information operate over a lifetime, thus giving control to the soul and not to the body?

Upon death, separation of the soul and body occurs. At this juncture, the soul does not lose its knowledge, Socrates says, but it recollects it in the new body. If the soul were to enter a new body with no previous knowledge, it would have to be taught to interpret its surroundings through sensory information. If the soul does not lose its previous knowledge, then perhaps it is through the senses that this soul must recollect. Whether dead or alive, whether philosopher or mortal, it is through the five senses that man lives and breathes.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid. 23.
Chapter 1: René Descartes: Human Experience as a “Thinking Thing”

René Descartes provides a more detailed and scientific description of Plato’s “body-prison.” Most notably known for his *Meditations* and his *Discourse of Method*, Descartes is typically grouped with philosophers such as Spinoza and Leibniz, both proponents of rationalism. Other philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Hume, are typically considered of the empiricist school of thought and pitted against René Descartes. Throughout his *Meditations*, Descartes goes as far as denying the existence of his senses and his body, claiming that through thinking alone, he can prove his existence. He later changes his point of view and states that sensing occurs only with the use and possession of a body, of a corporeal being, but he never relinquishes his idea of man as a “thinking thing.”

Descartes’ impetus for his writings surrounding reality, falsity, and sensuality, is thus illuminated: within Meditation I, he states, “of course, whatever I have so far accepted as supremely true I have learned either from the senses or through the senses. But I have occasionally caught the senses deceiving me […] about what is small or far away.” It is here that Descartes admits that through sensual interpretation, one experiences the reality of the world around him. But it is important to note, that perhaps the senses are not as honest as once originally thought. There are times when one sees something that appears different at a closer view, or hears a noise that was not originally produced. I would have to admit that even though the senses can mislead us, I offer that true deception still occurs in the mind and not through the senses. Descartes admits that he is “like a prisoner who happens to enjoy the illusion of freedom in his dreams, begins to suspect that he is asleep, fears being awakened, and deliberately let’s the

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enticing illusions slip unchallenged.”\(^3\) I think it is deceiving to put faith into someone who wishes to live in the illusionary world of the imagination, where reality is comprised of visions and aspirations, where reality inhabits the figments of the imagination, where nothing actually real exists.

It is within *Meditation II* where one sees his overall denial of his corporeal existence. He is a major advocate and believer of living the internalized mental life, to which Plato also subscribes. It is stated in the beginning that Descartes believes, “therefore I suppose that everything I see is false. I believe that none of what my deceitful memory represents ever existed. I have no senses whatever. Body, shape, extension, movement, and place are all chimeras. What then will be true? Perhaps just the single fact that nothing is certain.”\(^4\) Within this citation, even though Descartes advocates in a certain way the “body-prison” of Plato, he seems to disagree with one aspect. Descartes believes that the mind or the soul doesn’t carry over truthful information from a past life. He is stating that he doesn’t believe what his “deceitful memory” holds, nor does he trust his senses. He merely trusts the sole fact that nothing is certain. The use of the word “deceitful” as a descriptor of “memory” is striking. It seems also counterintuitive for Descartes to think his mind as untrustworthy, even though it is the senses that he mistrusts even more. Like Plato, he too uses the word “see” in describing his perception of the world. I question if he is referring to everything he physically sees or emotionally perceives? The word “chimeras” fits in Descartes description of what it is he is hesitant about trusting. A chimera is a horrific creature of the imagination that consists of many distinct animal

\[^3\] Ibid. 17.  
\[^4\] Ibid. 17.
body parts. A chimera embodies the intellectual deceit that Descartes feels in conjunction with his distrust of the physical and distinct elements of the body.

In relation to the sensorial interpretation of life, Descartes too, questions the sensory experience in relation to the intellectual one. He states:

But I have already denied that I have any senses and any body. Still I hesitate; for what follows from this? Am I so tied to a body and to the senses that I cannot exist without them […] Since I now do not have a body, these are surely nothing but fictions. What about sensing? Surely this too does not take place without a body; and I seemed to have sensed in my dreams many things that I later realized I did not sense. What about thinking? Here I make my discovery: thought exists; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am; I exist- this is certain […] Yet I am a true thing and am truly existing; but what kind of thing? I have said it already: a thinking thing.  

He struggles with the notion of sensing and thinking. For Descartes, accepting the presence of the senses ties him to corporeality, which he perceives as deceitful and untrustworthy. Descartes, like Plato, is stifled by this notion of living and existing in such a “body-prison.” I question, though, in this passage whether Descartes believes that “thinking” and “sensing” could be interchangeable? He claims that the senses are tied to a body, and yet thought is the proof of his existence, not his ability to sense. But does the body define existence? Is he marrying these two highly distinct actions together? I think Descartes clearly states here that although the senses live within the corporeal confines of the body, it is through thinking and thinking alone that man

5 Ibid. 18-19.
exists. How can one not wonder, though, whether it is through man’s mental experience of life or man’s sensorial interpretation by which one can define existence?

It is perhaps through dreams that he understands the world in a clearer manner. While imagining, one is contemplating a corporeal thing. What is perplexing in this discussion of dreams is that it is in this state that the senses could potentially be misleading. Descartes’ asserts that it is the senses that separate reality from dreaming. Since Descartes mistrusts the senses so openly, he proposes that any state dependent on the senses needs to be reexamined. In reality, dreaming of corporeal things is more truthful then the sensual reality of daily life. Descartes continues his musings with an example of “imagining” as “sensing.” He states, “properly speaking, this is what in me is called ‘sensing.’ But this, precisely so taken, is nothing other than thinking.”6 It is hard to understand Descartes’ line of inquiry with regards to the synonymous definitions of “sensing” and “thinking.” If sensing is of a corporeal nature and thinking is of an intellectual one, how can Descartes wed these incompatible terms? Is it true that when the body senses, it is in fact thinking, and when the mind is thinking, it is sensing? At first, I was highly aware of the differences between these terms, but I can understand Descartes’ coupling of these ideas if one is to think of the mind and body as truly interwoven. While I agree that the body’s version of thinking is sensing, I am unconvinced of the inverse; can the mind sense in lieu of thinking? Can these terms even be put together, or must they remain separate in describing the actions of the mind and the body.

Descartes describes his belief in the interchangeability of these terms when he states, “from these considerations I am beginning to know a little better what I am. But it still seems

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6 Ibid. 20.
(and I cannot resist believing) that corporeal things—whose images are formed by thought, and which the senses themselves examine—are much more distinctly known than this mysterious “I” which does not fall within the imagination.”\textsuperscript{7} It is through the power of thought that these corporeal images come to fruition in the mind’s eye. From what I gather is Descartes conclusion of his self perception, is that it is in the mind where physical and concrete objects can be perceived, but it is not within the mind’s power to fully comprehend the self as it is not a physical object. In a way, I can agree with Descartes in the sense that the perception of the self cannot be interpreted as a physical manifestation, thus perhaps man is actually a “thinking thing?”

It is within the famous passage depicting the physical changes of wax that we see Descartes’ argument for man as a “thinking thing” unfold. He describes the physical characteristics of a piece of wax as it remains in its original, physical form: hard, cold, smells of honey, and can emit sound if one were to knock on it. Next, he describes the physical changes that occur as he brings the wax closer to heat. If one is to take a clump of wax and change it by using heat, the wax changes its shape, yet Descartes questions, “does the same wax still remain?”\textsuperscript{8} It is less of a question of whether or not the wax exists, but whether or not it is perceived through the mind or the senses. Descartes writes:

Perhaps the wax was what I now think it is: namely that the wax itself never really was the sweetness of the honey, nor the fragrance of the flowers, nor the whiteness, nor the shape, nor the sound, but instead was a body that a short time ago manifested itself to me in these ways, and now does so in other ways […] I grasp that the wax is capable of

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid. 21.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid. 21.
innumerable changes of this sort, even though I am incapable of running through these innumerable changes by using my imagination. ⁹

Descartes is depicting that whatever the senses are transmitting are merely episodes or scenes of a whole picture or perception. Descartes states within the first sentence of the quotation above that he believes that the wax is wax, as he knows it, because he thinks about the wax. It too is a physical being, and as a corporeal being it is forever transforming. Despite its changing composition, the same wax remains because he conjures thoughts of it in his mind. In relation to both the mind and the body, it is man’s existence, both mental and physical, that are always in a constant state of change and transformation. Descartes believes that when the physical manifestations of the corporeal being change, these shifts are singular episodes of a sensory experience that is transmitted to the mind. The perception that we have of this change is the understanding of the thing as a whole, and not just the corporeal response of the senses. Descartes not only perceives the wax through the mind, but he infers that the same wax remains despite the difference in physical appearance. Descartes elucidates the fact that one’s experience of an object, say the wax, is a conglomeration of all the sensory experiences of the wax. But the wax cannot be identified necessarily as these sensory experiences. The wax is not the smell of honey, but rather the smell of honey is a part of the wax. This one characteristic is merely apart of the wax’s identity. But for Descartes, it is in the mind that he knows and understands the wax to be wax because of his previous knowledge of the wax. While undergoing physical changes, the identity of the wax remains the same despite its physically altered state.

⁹ Ibid. 22.
Writing in the early part of the 1700s, David Hume, a Scottish philosopher often pitted against Descartes, describes what his notions of identity are. Even though Hume writes during a different era than does Descartes, one can see a clear connection between these two philosophers regarding the formation of identity. It is within David Hume’s *Of Personal Identity*, that answers best Descartes’ question, “does the same wax remain?” Hume writes:

Our eyes cannot turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions […] though everyone must allow, that in a very few years both vegetables and animals endure a total change, yet we still attribute identity to them, while their form, size, and substance are entirely altered. An oak, that grows from a small plant to a large tree, is still the same oak, though there be not one particle of matter, or figure of its part the same.10

Both Hume and Descartes define identity as a conglomeration of perceptions and impressions. It is thought that these impressions remain the same over a lifetime, yet no impression is immutable. Hume notices that physical or emotional perceptions change from moment to moment. He identifies these varying perceptions as part of the growth of knowledge around a certain object, but not necessarily as the object’s identity. Hume states that there could be parts of these perceptions that are continuous. It is this continuity that could be considered the identity of the object. He is in accordance with Descartes in saying that our sensorial experience of life is a fragmented version of our total perception conceived by the mind. The identity of an object is not merely one sensorial interpretation but rather a multitude of varying sensory experiences. Hume states in the quotation above that an object undergoes many changes, yet that does not alter the identity of the object. It is through the mind where these associations are made between

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the original object and the changed object. For Hume, it is more important that one understands through the senses and the associations of the mind, that the same object exists despite the actual physical changes that occurred. Descartes’ claim is that the identity, as well as the physical characteristics, change with the shifting of the wax itself. Descartes is more interested by the notion that one can perceive the wax as wax through the mind’s original interpretation.

Within Descartes’ writings, one understands his notion of identity, but Hume presents us with a definition being, “identity is nothing really belonging to these different perceptions, and uniting them together; but is merely a quality, which we attribute to them, because of the union of their ideas in the imagination.”¹¹ One could compare Hume’s ideas with those of Descartes’ based on the notion of recognizing the identity of physical objects. For Hume, it is not important to understand or to know of what the original composition of the object was comprised. The mind and senses can together interpret these changes, yet the sameness or identity of the object remains. For Descartes, he believes that it is only through the mind that one can understand that, even though physical changes occur, the original and the changed object are the same. Because of Descartes’ mistrust of the senses, perhaps these changes, if perceived through the senses, would transmit errors to the mind? Descartes requires the mind and the body to be dissociated from one another particularly in understanding identity.

Yet for Descartes, once one knows and understands the identity of the object, that object is forever mentally recognized as such. Hume questions, “what then gives us so great a propension to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possessed of an invariable and uninterrupted existence through the whole course of our lives?”¹²

¹¹ Ibid. 260.
¹² Ibid. 253.
For Hume, it is hard to conceive and understand why and how a definite identity can be globally understood when constant change in the world is occurring both by the objects perceived and the perceivers of the objects. When Descartes questions, “does the same wax remain,” he is referring to the continuity of the identity of the wax. It makes sense logically that if something changes, its identity varies as well. But this is not the case. The same entity might be changed, but its identity remains the same. It is through the original perception of the object that the identity of the body is interpreted and perceived, and remains constant in the mind of the perceiver. Because of certain physical characteristics that are static within an object, one’s understanding of that object never changes. Once the original physical state of the structure is altered, it is through our knowledge of this previous state that one can pit this against the new interpretation and still conclude that the same wax remains.

Gabor Csepregi also ponders Descartes’ question about whether or not it is the mind, the body, or the senses that determine our existence most exactly. The Hungarian philosopher is writing in the later 20th century concerning the passive nature of the body in relation to the mind. Even though most of his work consists of academic articles concentrated on famous musicians, Csepregi later switches focus and concentrates on the body in his book, Le Corps Intelligent. In reference to Descartes’ description of the clump of wax, Gabor Csepregi states, “our body is eminently receptive; it possesses the capacity to be affected by itself and this self-affecting mechanism, the immediate passivity in which it proves itself through itself, constitutes the original reality of the living body that makes its opening to the world possible.”13 One can see a direct correlation with the ideas of Hume. It is the mental association of the object as itself that

gives that object its identity. If one makes the analogy of Descartes’ body of wax as synonymous with the body itself, then it becomes clear that the body is receptive with the outside world. It has the ability to change and be changed by itself and by external factors. According to Csepregi, the body is in ongoing dialogue with the environment. Its continuous receptivity with the world allows for constant change. Then how is one to define its identity?

In accordance with Hume, it is through these ever changing perceptions that one can define the identity of the body or object. Would one consider a body subjected to plastic surgery or amputation as the same original entity? Parts of the whole are missing; the particles that comprised the whole have changed. According to Hume, identity is not tied to the physicality of the body. With the changing of the objects themselves, the identity of that object remains the same. Csepregi claims that the body’s passivity and openness to the world provides opportunity for metamorphosis. The passivity of the body here can be seen as both a negative and positive quality of the human experience. In a negative sense, the passivity of the body leads to a deterioration of the boundaries between the physical realm of the body and the external world. The line between body and world is not distinctly drawn. This can now be understood in a positive light. The body then becomes this mechanism through which the mind (and the body) can fully absorb and interpret its surroundings. It allows for the human mind and the human body to be connected not only to themselves, but also to the world outside of this connection. In this case, the body becomes a filter through which to experience. Csepregi’s body passivity now becomes more of an admired quality than a shunned characteristic. Once the boundary between body and environment becomes blurred, the body has almost free-range to explore and absorb the world. In this case, can the identity and experience of the mind be tied to the physical changes and physical identity of the body? If the mind and the body are so tightly interwoven, is
there a separation between the physical and mental identities of a person, especially if this body passivity is “accomplished?” According to Descartes, these two entities live in such discord that a separation is inevitable and highly desired.

If Dewey were to interject, he would remind Descartes that “his experience is equally distorted, because nothing takes root in the mind when there is no balance between doing and receiving. Some decisive action is needed in order to establish contact with the realities of the world […]”\(^{14}\) What struck me about Dewey’s quotation is the phrase “doing and receiving.” Even though Dewey is discussing man’s relationship to art and his experiences of art, one can relate this idea to that of Descartes’ body of wax. The wax receives the heat and thus it becomes changed by it. But what exactly is the wax “doing?” What is the human body “doing and receiving?” Is it in constant balance with the mind? The external world? Is it the body that is constantly receiving and the mind that is constantly doing? Or is it the inverse? Does the body always do and the mind always receives? Are we ever truly in equilibrium? As stated earlier, Csepregi’s notion of the passivity of the body could be used as an example of Dewey’s “doing and receiving.” The body, seemingly passive to the world, is simultaneously receiving information through the senses, as well as transmitting and translating this information to the mind. Perhaps this is not exactly passive, as it is understood in general. But the notion of bodily passivity defies the boundaries and allows for the absorption of environmental information. To return to the idea of Descartes’ wax, this object could potentially be acting in the same manner, as does Csepregi’s notion of the body. Yet unlike Descartes, Dewey would doubt that one could perceive something merely through the powers of the mind. He would claim that it is through the physical changes of the wax that we perceive it in the first place. It is because of the body’s

\(^{14}\) Dewey. 47.
sensory perception of the wax that the mind attains the new information, and then it is through the mind that its characteristics and physical changes can be analyzed and interpreted. In turn, it is through Csepregi’s passivity of the body or unimpeded flow of the bodily senses that allow for us to mentally interpret the wax as wax.

The wax is “doing” as it is changing and the mind and the body are “receiving” the information that we then translate into the identity of the object. As he delves further into the Meditations, Descartes provides an example in favor of the mind’s interpretation of the external world. He states:

Whence I might conclude straightaway that I know the wax through the vision had by the eye, and not through an inspection on the part of the mind alone. But then were I perchance to look out my window and observe men crossing the square, I would ordinarily say I see the men themselves just as I say I see the wax. But what do I see aside from hats and clothes, which could conceal automata? Yet I judge them to be men. Thus what I thought I had seen with my eyes, I actually grasped solely with the faculty of judgment, which is in my mind.15

It is through the senses that information can be transmitted to the mind. Yet, could Descartes be correct in saying that we can judge through past experiences and notions? According to Plato’s Phaedo, the mind carries over experience and knowledge from past lives. Are the senses even important if we already have information about the world around us? Do we necessarily depend upon our senses to be able to live? Do Plato’s examples of the soul’s reincarnation play against the argument that the senses are the only way in which information is portrayed to the mind?

15 Descartes. 22.
Descartes harps again on the possibility of judgment resting solely in the mind of the body or the senses. How does one see this important distinction between “seeing” and “perceiving.” Descartes defines perception as “neither a seeing, nor a touching, nor an imagining […] rather it is an inspection.” 16 He writes, “for what was there in my initial perception that was distinct […] Even though there can be still an error in my judgment, nevertheless, I cannot perceive it thus without a human mind.” 17 If seeing is a purely physical act, then perceiving would be a cognitive process performed only after one has seen. Descartes is right in stating that he could not have perceived the wax as a physical, changing form “without a human mind.” I am struck by Descartes’ sudden admission that there could be more chance of error in judgment than in sensation. For Descartes, it is our preconceived societal notion learned through cultural transference that creates judgment within the mind. This error in judgment skews the perception of the object if one were to perceive an object through the mind alone. Perhaps Descartes is stating that the senses are capable of transmitting concrete and exact data to the mind, but it is in the mind where the errors occur? Descartes revisits his original perception of the wax wondering what is perceived through the mind, the body, or the senses?

Again, it is important to return to the sensual and corporeal nature of the body highlighted by Gabor Csepregi. He makes it a point to underline its passive and sensible qualities in writing, “it is our corporeal sensibility that permits us to open ourselves to these realities in an immediate and not reflexive manner.” 18 The word “permit” resonates with me because it describes Plato’s “body-prison” on such a different level. Here, Csepregi dictates a master and a slave in the mind/body relationship. The sensorial power is held within the body, and it is the body that gives

16 Ibid. 22.
17 Ibid. 23.
18 Csepregi. 59.
permission to the mind to interact with the environment immediately. According to Csepregi, as cited earlier, the passivity of the body holds power over the mind and its actions. It stuns me though, that Csepregi would use the words, “not reflexive” here to describe the body’s interaction with the world around it. I feel that the interaction between body and environment would be especially reflexive as the senses are felt first and then interpreted within the mind. But perhaps my interpretation of sensory experience is a more active one? The only reflex the body could have would be automatic. Perhaps automatic does not necessarily mean violent or active, but passive and immediate? But what if it doesn’t have to be? What if Csepregi is saying that we, as humans, have the mental power to chose how we immediately interact with our environment?

One cannot help being skeptical whether human beings really do have this choice of how one interacts with one’s environment. Here, I introduce Lucretius, a Roman poet and philosopher who is known mainly for his poetry and beliefs in Epicureanism during the century before the Common Era. It is in his epic philosophical poem “De la Nature,” where he begins by describing the function of vision as a mode of interpretation. He discusses what happens when one is looking at a far off city, and the square buildings appear to be round as Descartes describe earlier. Is this a deception of sight? Lucretius decides that it is not a distortion emanating from the eyes, but rather one of the light and of the environment. He states that the eyes do not know and understand the laws of nature, thus this distortion of the buildings appears because of the constantly changing atmosphere, light, and air. He later states, “in effect, nothing is more difficult than trying to separate the truth of things and their hypothesis to that which the mind adds its own stock […] you will see that the senses are the first to have given us the nation of
truth and the senses cannot be convinced of error.”¹⁹ This statement by Lucretius, for me, highlights the crux of the mind/body relationship. Lucretius thinks that the senses are our first interactions with the world. It is only through the senses that we receive information from the environment that, in turn, can be transmitted to the mind.

This information is not sophistic. Lucretius states that it is within the confines of the mind that this information can become skewed. We do not have power over our receiving information from the world, but we do have a hold over its interpretation. The mind has such a power of imagination, association, and memory, that when sensory information is relayed, there is an automatic subjectivity created within each individual. Gabor Csepregi remarks “the city of our childhood impregnates us with a decisive mark. We remain to never attach ourselves to these first impressions of a familiar and sometimes mysterious place for the reason of these strong emotional ties created by our tender childhoods.”²⁰ Subjectivity and human power of association is where distortion of the truth begins. Nostalgia, memory, and hope all bring to this place preexisting emotions that sway our spatial interpretation. I wonder whether there is an inaccuracy within the sensory system that automatically associates these places with these emotions, or if this occurs more in the mind? When one smells a scent in a new setting that was reminiscent of one’s childhood, one is immediately thrust into the past. This new place is already tainted with memory and expectation. Yet is it fair to state so boldly that this new place is “tainted?” This subjectivity is not where error occurs. Lucretius asks a little further whether “it is reason that will have a mission to contradict (the senses), she, who has left them, so entirely? We deceive

²⁰ Csepregi. 50.
ourselves, so, reason, in her entirety, is a lie.”\textsuperscript{21} For Lucretius, it is reason that distorts human interpretation of the world. Reason is a marriage. He highlights that if reason were to explain the distortion of the vision above, that she could only falsely justify this disillusion. It is reason that will change the interpretation of the senses, the fundamentals upon which human life rests. Reason is what taints the new place or new situation, not the memories associated with it.

Yet one can see a counterargument to the falsity of reason. During the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, Denis Diderot, broadens the discussion by bringing in questions of free will. He is a French writer and philosopher who is active around the same time as Hume. In his “Lettres sur les aveugles” he states, “Ah, Madame! That the morals of the blind are different from ours! That those of a deaf person differentiate still from those of a blind person, and that a being who would have a sense that nothing else that we would find our own morals imperfect, how many principles for them, that are nothing but absurdities for us, and vice versa.”\textsuperscript{22} In this quote, even though Diderot speaks of morality and Lucretius speaks of reason, both thickens interest. Reason and morality are indeed high functions of the mind. It shocks me that Diderot thinks that the blind have different morals from the rest of the human population. According to Lucretius and Diderot, the senses are our first encounters with the external world. It is because of our five senses that we firstly formulate our philosophic ideas about nature, moreover, our physical reactions to the world. What if one were missing one or more senses? Would this generate a different morality?

These quandaries lead me to turn to Oliver Sacks, the British neurologist and psychiatrist recognized for his books and teachings on neurological disorders and the changes that

\textsuperscript{21} Lucrèce. 196.  
subsequently occur in the brain. In Oliver Sacks’ article “The Mind’s Eye,” he introduces the experiential aspect of the life of a blind man and author, John Hull. Sacks speaks of a phenomenon called “deep blindness.”\(^{23}\) At this point in his blindness, Hull was unable to imagine mentally or visualize the world in which he once lived. Family members and landscapes became undistinguishable images in his mind. This extreme example of blindness helps portray not only Diderot’s idea of the relationship between senses and mind, but also those of many other philosophers. This case of “deep blindness” shows us just how dependent the mind is on the senses. Whether one believes in Descartes’ view that it is in the mind alone that one understands the identity of an object, or whether one agrees with Hume, that the identity of the object always remains the same despite its physical changes; one can hardly disagree with the notion of sensory dependence in this life. Once the mind is unable to maintain the stimulus transmitted through the senses, it losses its position in the world. In relation to Descartes’ questioning of reality, how would one understand reality without sight?

If someone is blind, he or she must use the other four senses available for interpreting and analyzing the world. Depending more heavily on the other four senses, he or she will possess a different interpretation of existence. Lucretius mentioned earlier that it is only through the senses that we receive information from the environment. And yet he believes that the senses are less likely and are almost incapable of correcting the other weaker senses. He writes, “consequently, the senses do not possess the modality with which to mutually control themselves. They cannot control themselves more until they each claim the same degree of confidence.”\(^{24}\) Is it clear that a person with all five senses uses them equally? Yet there are many who learn to compensate for

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\(^{24}\) Lucrèce. 196.
their lost sense or lost senses. Would one who possesses four or fewer senses actually interpret the world differently? Because one or more senses are lost, can this person still have a similar interpretation of the world if the other senses work harder? Sacks quotes Hull saying, “this is not a ‘compensation […]’ but a whole new order, a new mode of human being. With this he extricates himself from visual nostalgia, from the strain, or falsity, of trying to pass as ‘normal.’”25 Firstly, Hull describes the sensation of newness when learning how to attribute attention to his other four senses. Secondly, if Hull is presented in a new place, he is freed from previous associations and memory of which Csepregi speaks. When one enters a familiar place or situation, it is almost impossible to stifle the senses from reacting to the environment.

Sacks later writes, “what Hull described seemed to me an astounding example of how an individual deprived of one form of perception could totally reshape himself to a new center, a new identity.”26 Now I question how can this actual experience respond to Descartes problem of “does the same wax remains?” If we again think of Descartes’ wax as synonymous with the body of a human, can such a radical change exist? Is it important that his extreme change occurred because of the senses and not because of extreme changes in the mind? Hume would say that Sacks’ claim of the creation of a “new identity” is almost impossible. According to Hume, identity transpires despite the many on going and overlaying different perceptions. Does Hull experience a truly new self or identity? If one were to speak in terms of Descartes, Hull’s perceptions of things would always be able to be visually conjured. Once the image of an object is internalized by the mind, it remains there so that one can perceive it repeatedly. Are our senses used by the mind as constant reminders of the world around us? Does “deep blindness” result

25 Sacks. 2.
26 Ibid. 2.
because of a lack of a constant reminder, or does “deep blindness” result because of errors in the mind?

Let us push these thoughts further. Does a person who was born without one or more senses possess different powers of reasoning and interpretation than does a person who lost a sense later in life? Sacks states how, in fact, Hull’s experience was atypical. He received letters from many non-seeing individuals who claim that the opposite response happened to them after an accident. I quote from one of the letters how one man was “advised to switch from a visual to an auditory mode of adjustment” but in fact he had honed in on his “inner eye.” He continues to state how his mentally visual world is at times more accurate or even more intense than that of a typically seeing person. It was highly assumed that after a critical period after birth, the brain became inflexible. Earlier in the article Sacks introduces the idea of neural plasticity. Yet after one suffers a tragedy, the brain changes as the other senses learn to adapt and fill in for the lost sense.

Dewey’s position let’s us examine the inner and outer worlds of the blind and of the artist in relation to Sacks’ depiction. Dewey discusses the construction of an artist’s physical medium in his *Art as Experience*, claiming that if it is the imagination that is utilized the most in the making of the artwork. He states:

> The physical media may be ordered in imagination or in concrete material. In any case, the physical process develops imagination, while imagination is conceived in terms of concrete material. Only by progressive organization of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ material in

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27 Ibid. 4.
28 Ibid. 4.
organic connection with each other can anything be produced that is not a learned document or an illustration of something familiar.  

The physical objects being used permit the imagination to construct ideals of what can and cannot be done using this material. It is the imagination that can reach beyond the bounds of the physicality of the medium. Dewey introduces the idea of having both inner and outer material with which the artist can work. In some respects, the artist and the blind are very similar. Their worlds are much more expressive than those of typically seeing individuals because of their acute sensuality. The inner material discussed by both Dewey and by Sacks could correlate through the intensity of the inner life of the blind and of the artist, which is centralized in the imagination. The outer world of the artist consists of his or her medium, while the outer world of the blind is the objects in the world. Even though the blind are not necessarily creating works of art, it is through intense understanding of both the inner world and the outer world that beauty can be created or understood.

Yet despite the hypersensitive nature of the blind and of the artist, there is one significant difference noted by Dewey. He writes, “no matter how ardently the artist might desire it, he cannot divest himself, in his new perception, of meanings funded from his past intercourse with his surroundings, nor can he free himself from the influence they exert upon the substance and manner of his present seeing.”  

This statement shows that although the artist might wish to embark on a project with a tabula rasa mindset, the artist is affected primarily by his or her senses. Csepregi previously discussed how childhood memories of a specific place or area will inevitably taint or color the viewer’s experience of that place. He or she can never look at it

29 Dewey. 78.
30 Ibid. 93.
without associating his childhood with that location. Yet, according to Hull’s account, one who experiences “deep blindness” has the unique opportunity to experience again his or her life. To some extent, this non-seeing individual can reinterpret any place multiple times as the original vision or association of the place is lost. I wonder whether Descartes’ desire to be so intensely dissociated from his senses could provide equally valuable experiences? If one were able to achieve such a dichotomy between mind and body, could their experience of life be that much more intensely satisfying? Yet if such dissociation occurs, this individual potentially could lose the sensorial experiences of his or her childhood. Even though his or her memories and past experiences live in the mind, over time, they become distorted. As questioned earlier, are our senses merely constant reminders for our memories? Wouldn’t one lose his or her childhood memories if this dissociation became possible?

Dewey also discusses the impetus of the senses in this dichotomy in relationship to the artist. He begins questioning the role of the senses and presents two arguments. “According to one theory, esthetic expressiveness belongs to the direct sensuous qualities, what is added by suggestion only rendering the object more interesting but not becoming a part of its esthetic being. The other theory takes the opposite track, and imputes expressiveness wholly to associated material.” He later explains how what is perceived is directed by the senses, and it is the physical sense organs of the body that dictate the senses. Our perceptions of art or any experience depend on the direction of the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and skin. But if this is the case, how can these organs direct themselves? Could it be that they are directed by the mind? If the eyes see a quick flash, are they immediately drawn to this stimulus because of its dramatic

31 Ibid. 103.
and perhaps threatening nature? Or is it the mind that draws the eyes to the stimulus in order to figure out whether the body needs to defend itself from the interruption?

Dewey continues to express the opposing side of the argument and states that if “sense qualities have any expressiveness; it serves merely as an external vehicle by which other meanings are conveyed to us.”32 If one is to live with these external “feelers” that hold no expressivity, is what we perceive or what we see, always interpreted by the mind and the mind only? I question this notion because if this were true, not only would we all be “more dead than alive,” but we would have a much less interesting experience of life. If the senses do in fact react to their environment without directive from the mind, they perhaps have more autonomy than one would originally have thought. Yet I understand the need for italics for the word “any” in this argument, because the senses are, to some, just the devices through which all information passes. After information is transmitted through the senses and the body, it is the mind that can then directs the body to express and react to this information.

Dewey underscores the dichotomous nature of this debate on the senses acting as vehicles or entities of the body. He writes, “only when all means are diffused through one another does the whole suffuse the parts so as to constitute an experience that is unified through inclusion instead of by exclusion. This fact confirms the position of the previous chapter as regards the union of qualities.”33 Even though Dewey directly focuses on the effects of sensory interpretation on art, and the artistic experience, one can still relate his statement to a typical sensory situation. He states that it is nearly impossible to interpret a situation through the use of one sense in isolation. It is through all the parts of the artwork, for example, and through all the senses

32 Ibid. 105.
33 Ibid. 122.
together, that create an experience for the viewer. One cannot separate out the different parts of a sensory interpretation in order to understand it more fully, just as one cannot diffuse an experience into its separate senses. It is “through inclusion instead of by exclusion” of the senses that one experiences any situation or object. Previously quoted, Lucretius writes, “consequently, the senses do not possess the modality with which to mutually control themselves. They cannot control themselves until they each claim the same degree of confidence.”

Perhaps, in relation to Dewey, this statement could aid the argument that it is “through inclusion instead of by exclusion” of all the senses through which one experiences. For Lucretius, an experience is not complete until all the senses are registered by the mind. But to return to the idea of sensory loss, does this indicate a failure of interpretation in the mind of this individual? Is it solely through the compilation of the senses within the mind that one senses? And why does Lucretius believe that all five senses must be equal to interpret a given situation or object? Do we even utilize all of our senses equally? Or do we learn to favor some over others throughout our lives?

At this point, one can paradoxically see a correlation between the ideas of both Dewey and Descartes. Descartes believes as well in the comprehensive sensory experience when encountering a situation or object. Perhaps it is through the entire sensory experience that one interprets a situation and not through a parsing out of the different sensory experiences. To return once again to Dewey, we see again his disbelief in the singular sensory perception. He writes:

The mistake lies in supposing that only certain special things- those attached just to eye, ear, etc.- can be qualitatively and immediately experienced. Were it true that only qualities coming to us through sense-organs in isolation are directly experienced, then, of

34 Lucrèce. 196.
course, all relational material would be superadded by an association that is extraneous-
or according to some theorists, by a ‘synthetic’ action of thought.\(^{35}\) Like Descartes, he holds similar views on singular sensory experiences versus sensory experiences as a whole. Information accumulated through the senses alone cannot produce or portray enough information to underscore a full situation. Yet it is through the senses that one can interpret his or her surroundings. Both philosophers agree in stating that the powers of the mind become superfluous in the rendering of the external world. Here, I do not use the word “superfluous” in a negative sense, but in the sense that the mind’s interpretation is added over the experiences and information of the senses.

One example of this lies within Sacks’ article, when he speaks of Sabriye Tenberken, a woman who has practically been blind since birth. She travels around the world trying to bring awareness of the non-seeing population, yet experiences the world differently than most other blind individuals. She has what is known as synesthesia. Synesthesia is described as when one sense or sensory experience leads to the excitement of a different sense. From this arousal, the boundary between senses is broken down even further than those of typical individuals. Tenberken writes, “numbers and words have instantly triggered colors in me […] the number 4 for example (is) gold. Five is light green. Nine is vermilion.”\(^{36}\) She continues to describe her experiences with synesthesia to have intensified because of her worsening and now complete blindness. Tenberken can still visually conjure images and pictures in her mind, but they are now, even though picturesque, very distorted from the original scene. Perhaps the word “image” or “picture” has a more varied definition than originally thought? Again, to return to Descartes’

\(^{35}\) Dewey. 124.  
\(^{36}\) Sacks. 5.
notion of what is real, can one state that Tenberken’s experience is straightforward or real? Are our “mind’s eyes” more truthful than those of our senses?

Tenberken’s experience makes one question even more deeply our reliance on our sensory experiences. As stated earlier, one sense cannot be interpreted in isolation, that all senses work in tandem to create the experience of our external worlds. What, then, is a true sensory experience of the eye or nose if they all work in conjunction with each other? Is synesthesia not just a disorder, but rather a more intense way of experiencing sensually what is already there? What if synesthesia is seen not as a disorder, but perhaps a different way of experiencing?

With regards to the shifting between a mental or sensual interpretation of the world, Descartes expresses interpretations generated by thought as more reliable than our senses. He also describes that sensations are merely those things that reflect external objects, and possess no powers of expressivity. Our thoughts and our dreams, for Descartes, emanate from God. Throughout his *Meditations*, he renders God as the image of perfection. Descartes writes in the fourth part of his *Meditations*, “after having taken notice that one can, in the same way, imagine oneself in being asleep, that one has another body, and one sees other stars and another earth, without there being nothing. Because where does one think that thoughts that come when we dream are more so false than the others, having seen so often that they are not less alive and expressed?”

I propose that it is our senses that interpret our exterior world, and after, it is our thoughts, imaginations, and even at times our souls, that interpret the information of the body. It is because of the body that one can assume and associate certain sensations of the world that

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37 Descartes. 41.
allows our thoughts to be bizarre and imaginative. One cannot think first and then sense second. We are primarily sensorial beings.

Yet, Descartes begins his fourth meditation with the idea that we are both sensory and thinking beings. But he describes himself, and all mankind, as being dependant upon the existence of God. He says that it is God that has given him the power to discern between the true and the false. But I question if one could make these distinctions through sensory learning? It is because of our movements through the world that gives us the experience of the actual, not internal, world. It is as a result of movement that one perceives what is right and what it wrong. One could not learn the difference if one was to never make mistakes, or if one was to remain living only in the world of the mind. I do not state that it is only through the body and bodily errors that one discerns between verity and falsehood: one, by all means, needs to utilize the mind. It is through the imperfections of the body and the imperfections of the mind that one can differentiate between the two. But I return to the fourth part of the Meditations where Descartes muses that if one dreams or if one thinks of otherworldly things, what is the true reality? It is only through sensory interpretation that situates us in our reality.

Yet Dewey has another take on what Descartes is saying, sounding uncannily in sync. Dewey boldly states, “some philosophers have put forth the idea that esthetic effect or beauty is a kind of ethereal essence which, in accommodation to flesh, is compelled to use external sensuous material as vehicle. The doctrine implies that were not the soul imprisoned in the body, pictures would exist without colors, music without sounds, and literature without words.”\(^{38}\) How can a philosopher of art agree in such a way with the rigid ways of Descartes? In my opinion, Dewey’s

\(^{38}\) Dewey. 207.
strong belief in Plato’s body-prison petrifies any chance of mentally and artistically breaking away from the confines of the body. Even though I have stated that the mind and the body are forever related, the way in which Plato, and now Dewey, depict this relationship is interlocked with fear of the imagination. The soul is not resident to the body, but is inhabitant. The soul, also according to Plato, lives and reincarnates itself within many different bodies over generations. Is Dewey agreeing with Plato in stating that the preferred state of being is to be ultimately “more dead than alive?” How could pictures exist without colors if the soul were to be freed? Is this the newfound belief of both Plato and Dewey of the imagination? Are they relating the soul with any abstraction in art and creativity?

In referring back to the issue of blindness, how does the soul of a non-seeing individual interpret the statement made by Dewey? Earlier in his essay, Dewey states that it is mainly through the eyes and the ears that one experiences the medium of a piece of artwork. It is through sight of color that one interprets the existential reality of the painting, or through sound that one interprets the essences of a concerto. How does the interpretation of the soul of the blind fit into Dewey’s theory? Is the soul of a blind man merely an inhabitant, resident, or shackled prisoner of the body? According to Dewey, is it when the soul that is freed from the chains of the body, that it can see the colors of a painting without ever really seeing the colors. Does this allude to the fact that the blind are soulless?
Chapter 2: Jean Racine’s Phèdre: The Power of Physical Expression

The text of Phèdre by Jean Racine can help to strengthen the discussion of the inescapable nature of corporeal experience. Jean Racine is a French dramatist of the 17th century whose genius had so much to do with poetry as with psychology. Within this play, we see the protagonist, Phèdre, consumed by her passion for her stepson Hippolyte. In the absence of her husband, she professes her love to Hippolyte, who, is in love with Aricia. Throughout this play the passions of Phèdre ultimately lead to a suicide precipitated by the inevitable triumph of body over mind and passion over reason.

It is within this text that the connection between emotional output and internal comprehension is particularly revealed. The use of the eyes as mediators between emotions is striking. One can see how the eyes allow the audience to sense the emotions of the characters, more specifically Phèdre. It is through the eyes that feelings are transmitted from one person to the next. Hippolyte says, “Je vois de votre amour l’effet prodigieux. / Tout mort qu’il est, Thésée est présent à vos yeux; / Toujours de son amour votre âme est embrasée.” (“Yes, I see / The palpable effect of your great love: / Theseus, though dead, is present to your eyes: / Your heart still smolders with its love for him.”)¹ The eyes do not only show the expressions of the soul, but they also underscore the involvement of the other senses while simultaneously highlighting the effects of these emotions. With the language of the eyes, the truth is hard to hide. Despite the death of Thésée, the eyes of Phèdre still hold their love for him, and yet they still act as a physical container for the emotions felt.

Not only do the eyes impart the emotions of the individual, they react involuntarily and autonomously. This is highlighted when Ismène says, “Ses yeux qui vainement voulaient vous éviter, / Déjà pleins de langueur, ne pouvaient vous quitter. / Le nom d’amant peut-être offense son courage; / Mais il en a les yeux, s’il n’en a le langage.” (“His eyes, / Which vainly tried to turn away from you, / Were anchored fast in languor, could not move! / He may not like it said he is in love; / He has the looks of it, if not the tongue!”)² The eyes are described through possessive and direct actions of the verbs “tried” and “turn away.” The word “vainly” describes the power with which the eyes could act themselves for themselves. We grasp from this citation that hard as we try to hide our emotions the truth rests in our eyes. Ismène concludes that “he (Hippolyte) has the looks of it.” His desire to control his affect can only go that far.

Not only does this citation highlight the power of the eyes, but it also subtly refers us back to the workings of Cartesian dualism. Phèdre is introduced in this play as a character who is trying to control her emotional love for her stepson Hippolyte while her body betrays the physical symptoms of her distress. She exclaims, “Tu vas ouïr le comble des horreurs. / J’aime […] A ce nom fatal, je tremble, je frissonne, J’aime […]” (“Now hear / The crowning horror. Yes, I love- I shake / I tremble at his very name- I love […]”)³ Whilst she tries to hide her true emotions, her body uncovers her shameful story much before even one word is uttered. Her mind has kept her secret for so long that expelling it from her mind seems impossible, so her body reacts. In frustration of wanting to keep her secret, her body literally falls apart. What is noteworthy here is the use of the word “crowning.” For Phèdre, “crowning” describes the swelling “horror” which she is about to reveal. In a more modern context, the word “crowning”

² Ibid. 64,65.
³ Ibid. 48,49.
refers to ornamentation or merely attention surrounding the head mainly with the birth of a child. Perhaps Racine here uses this word to highlight the emotional and heady aspect of Cartesian dualism. In using this word, Racine highlights how Phèdre failed to maintain the split between the mind and the body. Her body reacted to the overwhelming emotions shackled in the mind for too long.

This is where Bernadette Höfer’s text, *Psychosomatic Disorders in Seventeenth Century French Literature*, becomes fundamental. She introduces her chapter on *Phèdre* by stating that the despair prominent within this play is in reaction to external sources. Höfer depicts both Phèdre and Hippolyte in a state of reaction to the external triggers of morality and love. She then underscores the physical manifestations of these mental imbalances. Höfer writes, “for Phèdre and Hippolyte, there is a *rift* between affect and representation because of their repression of the desiring body, which nonetheless returns in the form of the suffering body speaking its own language.”

Phèdre’s undying love and passion for Hippolyte affects her body. Her physical being could no longer contend with such an emotional response. She submits and expels her emotions through the body. In the release of tears, she reestablishes a modicum of order within her person.

Throughout her discussion, Höfer introduces the idea of the “rift” or the split between the mind and the body. What distinguishes her discussion from that of Descartes is her use of “affect and representation.” “Affect” is more often associated with the psychological structures of emotions and the change in emotion while “representation” here conveys the physical body.

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Höfer highlights the effects of repression of the body. Not only does Cartesian dualism resurface, but this notion is furthermore discredited through the relentless action of the desiring body. This is highlighted by Höfer’s statement about “the suffering body speaking its own language.” Phèdre and later Hippolyte both try to hide their emotional passions. Implicitly, Racine highlights that these characters are trying to create a separation between the mind and the body. And yet, because of this rift, the body will inevitably speak its own language. Racine understood this idea, which is why he deliberately used the word “voluntary.” Phèdre, after having disclosed her love to Hippolyte, exclaims, “Que dis-je? Cet aveu que je te viens de faire, / Cet aveu si honteux, le crois-tu volontaire? (“Can you believe that this / Confession I have just made to you-this / So shameful declaration I have made / Is voluntary? [...] Here is my heart.”) Racine deliberately uses the word “volontaire” to highlight just how involuntary the relationship of the body is to the mind. The body reacts to her emotions despite her wish to contain them. When Phèdre cries unwillingly before Oenone, the essence of her secret is revealed. No amount of reason can control the yearnings of the amorous body.

In continuing this discussion, it is not irrelevant that Elaine Scarry’s text *The Body in Pain* would enter this conversation. Scarry discusses an individual tortured by another individual and how physical pain overpowers the emotional relationship. She writes, “so, for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiable present is it that ‘having pain’ may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to ‘have certainty.’” In my understanding of Scarry’s use of the words “have certainty” she expresses that the way in which an individual can

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9 Ibid. 86,87.
understand that he or she is living, is through physical discomfort. This is not such a peculiar concept. In thinking back to Plato who believed that our world should be contained within the confines of the mind, how would this individual comprehend that he or she is alive if his or her existence merely occurred as memories and thoughts?

What is so significant about Scarry’s ideas about pain and Racine’s understanding of language is that it is through the body, the actual physical being, that all these emotional elements surface. In her writing, Scarry quotes Virginia Woolf’s comparing the English language to physical body language. Woolf describes how the English language is more often used in describing plays or writing novels, not in articulating one’s corporeal pain. What is unique about physical discomfort or physical restriction is how it is in fact only understood by the sufferer. Scarry writes, “physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.” Scarry believes and proposes that the power of physical expression of the mental world is so much greater than that of the intellectual world of language. There are no words one can use to describe one’s pain expect through primal screams and cries. These physical responses “actively destroy” language. What Racine so innovatively does in Phèdre is omit the raw description of Phèdre’s pain, but rather he shows us her discomfort enacting it instead through her writhing body.

Writing in the 17th century, Jean Racine’s text proved to be quite revolutionary. Through his text one can fully understand how the body can overpower the mind. What Racine is ultimately and more subtly describing is the blindness and dysfunction wrought within the idea

6 Ibid. 324.
of Cartesian dualism. In the last citation, “Yes, I love- I shake / I tremble at his very name- I love” Racine brings to light the idea that the body, with no regards to the mind, reacts involuntarily and almost of its own regard. Here Phèdre states, “Je l’ai perdu: […] la rougeur me couvre le visage: / Je te laisse trop voir mes honteuses douleurs; / Et mes yeux, malgré moi, se remplissent de pleurs.” (“I’ve lost it. And my face is burning red; / I blush, for I have let you see too clear / My shameful grief. Against my will my eyes / Fill up with tears.”) When Phèdre exclaims, “I’ve lost it,” is she referring to the emotional aspect that she has lost control over, or is she hinting at the physical symptoms of shame that she cannot control? In reading this citation again from an anti-Cartesian standpoint, this “I” refers directly to her uncontrollable physical symptoms. Phèdre points to her blushing and the fact that her eyes well up with tears against her will as she has been “seen” by Oenone.

Sight can be considered the most “mental” of the senses as most often our emotions and mental states are underscored by the body’s physicality and manifestation of these emotions. Within this play the characters see and are seen. Phèdre implores, “Insensée, où suis-je? et qu’ai-je dit? / Où laissé-je égarer mes voeux et mon esprit? / Je l’ai perdu: les Dieux m’en ont ravi l’usage. / Oenone, la rougeur me couvre le visage: / Je te laisse trop voir mes honteuses douleurs; / Et mes yeux, malgré moi, se remplissent de pleurs.” (“Where am I? Mad? / What have I said? Where, where have I let stray / My longings, and my self control? Oenone! / The Gods deprive me of the use of it. / I’ve lost it. And my face is burning red; / I blush, for I have let you see too clear / My shameful grief. Against my will my eyes / Fill up with tears.”) Grief, once expressed, snowballs into shame. This expression of grief is highlighted through Phèdre

7 Racine. 40,41.
8 Ibid. 40,41.
when she describes the blushing of her cheeks. She has been seen by the eyes of Oenone more clearly than through her own embarrassing grief. The eyes of Phèdre have a life of their own; they cry despite her best efforts. Her body can no longer contain her fear of madness. These eyes, having seen and been seen, release the bodily water like a purgation of the soul.

In returning to the break between Racine’s characters corporeal versus mental relationships, Höfer demonstrates pain as a link between mind and body. She writes:

Racine shows us a double mechanism: he presents the protagonists’ melancholy as a language manifest in the body that also expresses itself through the body, especially as a “mapping” of repressed desire. Hippolyte’s melancholy reveals itself physically and the secondary character read his internal disorder on this body.  

What does Höfer mean by the body’s own “language”? Does she mean that both the mind and the body possess their own separate discourses? “Language” makes manifest melancholy, a mental state weakening and wounding the body. Perhaps this is not entirely radical as, if there was one “language” or more over one entity of mind/body. Even though Höfer is highlighting the disconnections between the mind and the body, she uses the word “language” to connect them. She writes, “he (Racine) presents the protagonists’ melancholy as a language manifest in the body that also expresses itself through the body, especially as a “mapping” of repressed desire. Hippolyte’s melancholy also reveals itself physically and the secondary character read his internal disorder on this body.”

This emotional and mental state, according to Höfer, is represented in and through the body. It is surprising how palpable this notion appears, but it is nonetheless shocking. The expression of mental states is often associated with movements of art

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9 Höfer. 178.
10 Ibid. 178.
or speech unified through those movements of the body. To return to the notion of a “rift” between these two entities, it seems apparent that man cannot exist as “mind” or “body,” or “affect” or “representation” but rather as a combination of the two.

Phèdre’s despair reaches a dramatic climax, brought on awkwardly through her having repressed the connection between mind and body. Towards the end of the play Phèdre exclaims:

Ah! douleur non encore éprouvée! / A quel nouveau tourment je me suis réservée! / Tout ce que j’ai souffert, mes craintes, mes transports, / La fureur de mes feux, l’horreur de mes remords, / Et d’un refus cruel l’insupportable injure […] / La mort est la seul dieu que j’osais implorer. / J’attendais le moment où j’allais expirer; / Me nourrissant de fiel, de larmes abreuvée, / Encor dans mon malheur de trop près observée, / Je n’osais dans mes pleurs me noyer à loisir.

Ah, anguish as yet untried! What more? / For what new tortures am I still reserved? / All I have undergone, of ecstasies, / Of longings, fears, the horrors of remorse; / The intolerable shame of being spurned […] / Death was the only God whose aid I dared / Implore. I waited for the grave’s release. / Thirst quenched with tears, with gall for nourishment, / Still was my misery so closely watched / I dared not even drown myself in tears.11

At this point in the play, Phèdre has experienced in equal measure “longings and fears” but particularly as she tries to hide her love. Referring to the eyes and tears, they are again brought about by Racine to underscore the emotional connection the eyes possess to being. It is after feeling “so closely watched” that Phèdre wishes to call upon death as an ultimate means of

11 Racine. 134-137.
purification. This calling upon death refers directly back to Plato’s notion that upon death one reaches the ultimate purification of the soul as the mind and the body separate forever. For Phèdre the release of tears will do little to purify her incestuous soul; but suicide will play that role, bringing about complete body and soul annihilation.

Scarry writes, “every act of civilization is an act of transcending the body in a way consonant with the body’s needs […] one overcomes the body, projects oneself out beyond the body’s boundaries but in a way that expresses and fulfills the body’s needs for stable temperatures.”12 Scarry is certainly not proposing a separation between the mind and the body, though her discussion of the transcendence of the body might lead one to think so. The context of the word “transcendence” alludes even more to the connection of the mind and the body. Most ancient philosophers profess the hierarchy of the mind over the body. Scarry’s use of the word “transcendence” is not in accordance with these philosophers, but occurs as a response to them. She wishes to marry the mind with the body, reversing the hierarchy by endowing the body with the “transcendence” robbed from it.

Scarry’s text resonates deeply with that of Racine’s. If Phèdre had not experienced such intense physical pain as a result of emotional turmoil, would she have inhabited and staged her psychological existence as clearly as she had? Throughout this play she can only second-guess her love for Hippolyte because of the incestuous complications that arise out of it. It is her physical reaction and excruciating pain that lead her to understand the depth of her emotional turmoil. Death, depression, and destruction surely place Phèdre as one of neo-classicism’s boldest characters.

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12 Scarry. 326.
The concept of physical pain being the means through which an individual understands his or her existence proves to be a controversial one. Jean Racine’s text brilliantly overshadows Descartes’ desire to separate the mind from the body. Phèdre’s tortured existence ends as such, “Un poison que Médée apporta dans Athènes. / Déjà jusqu’à mon coeur le venin parvenu / Dans ce coeur expirant jette un froid inconnu; / Déjà je ne vois plus qu’à travers un nuage / Et le ciel et l’epoux que ma présence outrage; / Et la mort, à mes yeux dérobant la clarté, / Rend au jour, qu’ils souillaient, toute sa pureté.” (“A poison brought to Athens by Medea. / Already has the venom reached my heart; / This dying heart is filled with- icy cold! / Already only though a mist I see / The Heavens and the husband unto whom / My presence is an outrage. Death removes / The light from eyes which have defiled it, so-/ Restores to daylight all its purity.”) ¹³ Scarry’s belief that physical agony endows existence with certainty is played out in the most dramatic sense in Phèdre’s suicide. Her agonizing and tormented mind, body and soul alike force her to end her life. Strikingly, impending blindness is the first symptom of death. She can only see through a haze through the purifying cloud of blindness. Because they are first to atrophy, they ultimately restore power to her fallen being to wholeness.

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¹³ Racine. 168,169.
Chapter 3: William James on Understanding Body Knowledge

It is not surprising that William James, an American psychologist and philosopher writing in the late 1800s, would be introduced here as he has written extensively on this subject. William James does not focus upon an individual within society, but he more specifically focuses on the student within a learning environment rather than the individual understanding his or her existence. William James proposes that an individual, more specifically a student, be actively present and available in order to learn from his environment.

Throughout most of his *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; And to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*, William James discusses how teachers can affect and change the way students learn through a better use of psychology in tandem to physiology. He elegantly entwines the nature of the mind through the understanding of psychology with the instincts of the body to help illuminate the most effective ways of educating. According to Richard Shusterman’s *Body Consciousness*, James’ own personal background highly influenced his teachings as a philosopher preoccupied with the body. James’ revolutionary beliefs on teaching originate from his interest in the melding of anatomy and psychology. His somatic philosophy stemmed from his own practice and experimentation with his own body-mind connection, which he later revealed to the world of philosophy. He himself was his own teacher and student within this field. Through his experimentations he noted and later explored the notion that the student must be guided by interest in the subject at hand; if this were to fail, little information would latch onto the mind. James also preaches to students through his talk “Gospel on Meditation” on how to better receive the information transferred by the teachers.

Throughout the compilation of talks entitled *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; And to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*, James preaches about the psychology and physicality of education. He begins his talk “The Stream of Consciousness” by discussing these fields and their
inner workings. According to James, it is because of these fields of consciousness, that we as humans, can acquire knowledge. Throughout most of these talks, James speaks of intellectual growth through physical changes in the brain. He lists these fields of consciousness:

They certainly follow or accompany our brain states, and of course their special forms are determined by our past experiences and education [...] they contain sensations of our bodies and of the objects around us, memories or past experiences and thoughts of distant things, in most of our fields of consciousness there is a core of sensation that is very pronounced [...] The sensations are the centre or focus, the thoughts and feelings the margin, of your actually present conscious field.¹

It is these same fields of consciousness that help explain the deep connection between the mind and the body, and explain how sensory experiences hold an equal amount of power in propelling man through space and time. Perhaps the common notion that it is the structure of the mind that acquires new knowledge is somewhat false. He states above that the fields of consciousness are forms molded by our histories, past bodily sensations, and experiences in general.

What is perplexing though, is how James refers to these fields of consciousness as “special forms.” Perhaps the specialty of these fields highlights the structure of the mind? Here, James implicitly alludes to a slight hierarchical structure of the brain. He states that the field of consciousness “follow or accompany” the brain states. He next highlights that one’s past experiences and histories create the “forms” of these fields of consciousness. According to James’ logic, our past histories and experiences determine our fields of consciousness, our brain

¹ James, William. *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; And to Students on Some of Life's Ideals.* Memphis: General Books, 2010. Print. 7.
states, and by proximity, our perceptions. This notion and hierarchy is highlighted by James when he writes, “the sensations are the centre or focus, the thoughts and feelings the margin, of your actually present conscious field.” For many somaesthetic and body philosophers, the idea that the body holds less power in the mind/ body connection proves troublesome. But when discussing these fields of consciousness, one can see how the body, moreover the senses, are what propel our beings. James states above that the sensations one encounters on a daily basis occupy and guide most of our experiences. He highlights this hierarchy by using the adjective “special” in discussing these forms or structures of the mind.

In discussing these “special forms” of consciousness, James also writes above, “your actually present conscious field.” What is puzzling is the word “present.” James uses “present” to underline the temporality of one’s experience, as well as one’s conscious mind rather than one’s subconscious mind. Perhaps in one’s subconscious, the sensations fall behind ones thoughts and feelings in the hierarchy, while it is in the conscious where they reign? I think that by stressing this distinction, James not only demonstrates the essentiality of sensory experience, but he also purposefully sets up a way in which to discuss the play between the student and education. When learning from the teacher, the student’s sensory experiences of the present are what will eventually lead to changes within the brain states and thus the fields of consciousness.

An incongruity of the formulation of these fields lies in this section of James’ talk. If these fields are segregated to the mind, it seems strange that the centre or focus of the mind’s construction is dependant upon the body’s history of sensation. It is because of these physical memories that our sensations become the centre of these fields of consciousness. One would assume, from the view point of Descartes that our mental experiences and perceptions are built upon our mental interpretations and judgments of the world. But it is clearly shown through these
lectures by James just how dependent our mental life is upon the physical world. It is only from these histories that the mind can draw.

As a continuation of the discussion between sensory experience and its relationship to the mind, James reinforces this intricate and strong connection in his talk entitled “The Child as a Behaving Organism.” James reintroduces the arguments of Plato and other philosophers who look down on the senses. Unlike them, James never concretely categorizes the senses as either corporeal or mental functions, but he does discuss them as separate entities from the mind. He writes:

Our sensations are here to attract us or to deter us, our memories to warn or encourage us, our feelings to impel, and our thoughts to restrain our behavior, so that on the whole we may prosper and our days be long in the land […] no one believes more strongly than I do that what our senses know as ‘this world’ is only one portion of our mind’s total environment and object.  

Even though James is less commonly referred to as a body philosopher, here he embodies the essence of a true somaesthetcian. He explains that it is our senses that propel or hinder our experiences through life. But he does not separate out those experiences of the mind from those of the body so concretely. To James, it is also our memories, feelings, and thoughts that affect our behavior and allow us to live out our days. James writes, “so that […] our days be long in the land” in order to highlight the essential correlation of our sensations and the action of the mind. Even though James clearly underlines the fact that it is through sensing that one is propelled through life, the connection of the mind and body is fundamental to living out our days as

2 James. 10.
humans. Thus, he uses “feelings” and “memories” in an ambiguous fashion. Does he want to convey corporeal or mental “feelings” and “memories?” These two entities are typically associated with actions of the mind, but they can also relate to a body memory of a past experience or a feeling or sensation of the body. He then writes that “our thoughts […] restrain our behavior” in order to survive. Here “thoughts” describe a clear action of the mind. James either implicitly or explicitly sets up a hierarchy between the mind and the body. It is not unreasonable that James would imply here that if we just listened to our corporeal sensations, feelings, and memories, our experiences in this world would be chaotic and anarchistic. Are our bodies forever enslaved to the notions and beliefs of our thinking organ?

Previously, James stated that our sensations are the “centre” or “focus” of our conscious fields. It seems strange, or perhaps essential, that James alludes to this slight paradox. Perhaps he wishes to underscore the fact that the link between our sensory and mental processes is not so concrete. Yes, it seems accurate that our sensory absorption of the world deeply affects our conscious mind. But when James writes that our “thoughts […] restrain our behavior” he doesn’t necessarily take away from the importance of our sensory experience, but moreover, he highlights the importance of its connection with the mind. Whether or not our thoughts are present in our conscious or subconscious, they do, in fact, help “control” our sensory and bodily reactions to the world. Perhaps this is what James is alluding to in stating that our thoughts “control” our behaviors.

Upon focusing on the control of our behaviors and habits, it is not surprising that Henri Bergson would comment and prolifcally write upon this topic. Henri Bergson, a 20th century French philosopher, writes on how involuntary gestures can help us to break free of our habits. Bergson, like James, is revolutionary in his thinking, and even goes as far as to state that
memory is a corporeal event and not a mental one. In an essay entitled “Bergson on Memory,” Keith Ansell-Pearson writes that Bergson believes, “normal function of memory is to utilize a past experience for present action (recognition), either through the automatic setting into motion of mechanism adapted to circumstances, or through an effort of the mind that seeks in the past conceptions best able to enter into the present situation.”\(^3\) The mind’s presence is not solely to prevent our chaotic and anarchistic sensations, but rather to keep our behaviors appropriate and regulated. By stating “through an effort of the mind” Bergson underscores the mind’s importance of bringing ones past sensations and experiences into the world. In some ways, it seems that both James and Bergson are saying that our thoughts act as filters to our physical reactions and sensory experiences in this world. James previously states that these are both essential to our survival. This is integral to understanding our body/mind connection and relationship. James decrees that the senses are responsible for our acquisition of experiences within this world of the present, while the mind is responsible for those, past and future. He does state that these senses take up a large portion of the mind’s environment. So are the senses now deemed as mental functions, or are they processes that must occur in the brain but originate elsewhere?

The elsewhere to which James refers is discussed in detail by Henri Bergson. Bergson is one such philosopher who speaks about the impact of sensory experience upon one’s mental experience of time. In discussing the boundaries of the past, present, and future, Bergson describes these events through “duration” of time. Ansell-Pearson, writes that for Bergson “memory is linked to creative duration and to sense.”\(^4\) Bergson describes how through the action of the body in the present, memories from the past are stored up. The past lives in the motor

\(^{4}\) Ibid. 62.
system of the body. And yet, memory, according to Bergson, is also considered to be the account of looking toward the future as well. Bergson discusses how the brain lives only in the present, and thus the past lives in the memory of the body. In some ways Bergson’s theory on memory can be tied with James’ notion that the senses are responsible for our experiences and knowledge. If one were to have never had any sensory experiences, one could not have a past life from which to draw experiences. According to both philosophers, the sensory experiences must be acted out through corporeal activity. Bergson goes one step further and states that these sensory experiences not only are carried out by the body, but also remain and live within the body and hold the memories of the past within this structure.

James highlights again how through senses we are how we acquire and access these memories and knowledge. James writes:

*No reception without reaction, no impression without correlative expression,*—this is the great maxim which the teacher ought never to forget. An impression which simply flows in at the pupil’s eyes or ears, and in no way modifies his active life, is an impression gone to waste. Is it physiologically incomplete […] Its *motor* consequences are what clinch it. Some effect due to it in the way of an activity must return to the mind on the form of the *sensation of having acted,* and connect itself with the impression. The most durable impressions are those on account of which we speak or act, or else are inwardly convulsed.  

The idea of passivity is illuminated when James writes, “an impression which simply flows in at the pupil’s eyes or ears.” Returning to his revolutionary nature and teachings, James writes that

5 James. 13.
for teachers, interest in the subject at hand is what paradoxically allows for the passivity and reception of the student. Once the impression is absorbed by the receptive body, it is then through action of the body that these impressions become ingrained in the student.

Whether or not the senses are explicitly active or passive is not the question, but rather how they are processed. And still “passivity” seems to be a counterintuitive choice of word to describe such an active process of learning. As Csepregi would state, when the body is passive, it has endless access to its deep internal pathways that would otherwise seem inaccessible if the body were to be rigid with boredom. For him, sensory information is processed more completely when the body remains passive and allows the sensory information to flow through the organism. When the body is passive, it is not being interfered with by mental tension or judgment. Frequently when the mind begins thinking too hard or feels threatened; the body reacts in an extremely physical way. Muscles clench and muscular pathways become twisted. So in following Csepregi’s train of thought, the body, and by extension the mind, must remain passive in order to allow its natural, corporeal processes to interpret and experience the world. In applying this theory to education, the student’s mental and physical realities should remain as neutral and uninhibited as possible in order to allow for learning.

And yet for James, learning is a receptive process between person and environment. One acts, the other reacts, one expresses, the other impresses. James states above that “an impression which simply flows in at the pupil’s eyes or ears, and in no way modifies his active life, is an impression gone to waste.” Surprisingly so, this statement spurs different reactions in the two thinkers. James thinks that if the body is passive, then the sensory experience of the impression

\[6\] Ibid. 13.
will not be remembered by the body. The body must be an active agent within the environment in order to learn. But what is noteworthy here is that James gives precedence to the body over the mind. These impressions that occur in the mind will stay locked in its prison unless they are physically acted upon by the body. Once this occurs, the sensations registered return to the mind. An action, a movement, a propulsion into the world has occurred.

This propulsion into the world is underscored by James’ use of the words “active life” in referring to the student’s processing of the information. If an impression is to be left on the student, the sensations felt must then be physically acted upon by the student. This occurs only in the present. But what does occur as part of the subconscious experience for the student? Does this word “active,” like the word “present” previously, hints at another meaning? The word “active” could instead focus more on the physical and corporeal nature of the word. There is no way that there could be a change in the student’s learning without a reception or reaction within the body. James highlights this when he writes, “it is physiologically incomplete” when the impression of the sensory world is not “activated” by the body. What is perplexing is the slight separation of the mind and the body that James perhaps implicitly and accidentally sets up. He neglects to mention or highlight the mental or psychological effects of this process. If, as stated by Descartes, a true separation of the mind and the body were to exist, then the process of sensory expression is two fold. James does, in fact, speak on this duality. One process is completed within the mind, the other within the body. If a sensory experience is had, is it not already completed in the mind? It is perhaps translated to the body to then be “physiologically” complete? I think that perhaps this was no mistake or accident on the part of James. James possibly constructed his explanation in such a way to emphasize the importance of the physical world and to distinguish himself from the ancient philosophers like Plato who despised the body.
and thought that the world was complete within the mind, James is showing us that this is not the case. James again also highlights that this relationship between the mind and the body is never exactly balanced, and that there are times when the mind is utilized more than the body and vice versa.

James continues to discuss this controversy of the mind and the body. He states that, “some effect due to it in the way of an activity must return to the mind on the form of the sensation of having acted, and connect itself with the impression. The most durable impressions are those on account of which we speak or act, or else are inwardly convulsed.” According to philosophers like Plato, life is relegated to the confines of the mind. In his *Phaedo*, Plato had written, “it (philosophy) encourages the soul to gather itself up into itself, all alone, and to put trust in nothing but itself- to trusts only such realities as it may discern in their essential nature by its own essential nature.” It is within the mind, and only the mind, that life, interpretation, judgment, and contemplation, coexist. For Plato, an impression of the exterior world would by pass the body and would be interpreted solely by the mind. Of course, the impression would have to pass through the body, but Plato only gives credence to the interpretation of the mind within this process. Here, Plato highlights the benefits and superiority acclaimed with having life “inwardly convulsed.”

In contrast, James sees the negative aspects of having a solely mental life. He describes that once the body understands an external impression, it then must perform an activity presently thereafter. It is only through having had a physical action of the body that the mind can understand and interpret the impression of the exterior world. After this activity is performed,

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7 Ibid. 13.
8 Socrates. 105.
James then states that it is registered by the mind in the form of a “sensation of having acted.” This is the only way for the impression to have a durable effect upon the being. What is interesting in this explanation is the role of the senses. In general, the senses are what introduce the impression to the being. It is also what marries the effect of the impression to the mind. It seems that the senses and the sensory system is what constantly propels and connects man’s experience in this world. The senses, moreover, are what help connect our physical and mental lives.

Not only do the senses connect our minds and bodies, but they are also an integral part of learning. James describes what he thinks is the essence of the brain-body connection in relationship to education. Dewey, Descartes, Csepregi and the others discuss the separation of the mind and the body or the mind and the senses. Yet James is showing us, how, through the vein of education, the senses and the mind can work in tandem with each other to produce a more educated student. For example, if a teacher in a dance class merely spoke the steps of a combination and never physically demonstrated the movements, this information would more or less “simply flows in at the pupil’s eyes or ears, and in no way modifies his active life.” Now if the teacher spoke while demonstrating the movements, this would provide a greater model from which to copy. This activity on behalf of the teacher is integrally but not wholly responsible for the education of the student. For the student to be able to form impressions, he or she must be interested in what the teacher is doing and saying. Thus by merely speaking at the students will not provide any opportunity for the student’s mind to latch onto what the professor is preaching. James has previously stated that, “no reception without reaction, no impression without
correlative expression,- this is the great maxim which the teacher ought never to forget."⁹ This being understood, James is saying that the teacher must spur a “reaction” and “expression” within the student. These terms are perhaps vague and meant to be left up for interpretation by the teacher. Whether or not this is the case, the teacher must learn not only how, but also what causes a reaction in the student in order for a lasting impression to be made.

Also, the role of the student then changes. He or she must not merely watch and listen to the directions and gestures presented, but he or she must mark or fully prepare the movements before the combination is performed. What proves to be a gray area in this scenario is the idea of “marking” a combination. When a mover, actor, or really any performer “marks,” or hints at the movement, he or she will end up with a messy result. While marking is a physical action of the body in response to an external stimulus, the body will only partially be able to perform the task at hand. When a dancer marks a combination, the arms are held limply copying the vague idea of the upper body, while the legs remain stationary. Sometimes, the dancers mark the movements of the legs with gestures of the arms. When the dancer goes to complete the combination, he or she will more or less either have forgotten the combination or only be able to perform the marked gestures. To some degree, this can provide successful results, but more often than not, it is a poor way in which to engage in James’ theory.

James’ stressing of the activity within this process is reminiscent of the idea presented early on by John Dewey’s “doing and receiving.” Dewey writes, “his experience is equally distorted, because nothing takes root in the mind when there is no balance between doing and receiving. Some decisive action is needed in order to establish contact with the realities of the

⁹ Ibid. 13.
world […]”\textsuperscript{10} Even though Dewey is highlighting the necessity of the balance of “doing and receiving” in reference to the being within its environment, it can still be applied to James’ theory on education. Bergson also highlights this point when writing, according to Ansell-Pearson, “the body is in the aggregate of the material world, an image that acts like all other images, receiving and giving back movement.”\textsuperscript{11} Within the last part of this statement, Bergson writes, “receiving and giving back movement.” Not only does this underscore Dewey’s notion of “doing and receiving” but it also highlights James’ theory. Whatever is to be learned whether through a professor or through the environment, the only way in which information and sensation will be transferred is through movement. In tandem with Dewey, Bergson agrees that nothing can be impressed upon a being unless the experience is lived out though the body. Even though this balance might not be present in a consistent manner throughout the being’s existence, it is still essential to its experiences in this life. The student must create a balance within the interaction of the mind and the body as stated previously by James.

But what happens if the student is handicapped and is deprived of some sensory experience, for example sight? Even though this individual can process auditory information of the surrounding world, how would this interplay between being and environment carry forth? Would the broken interpretation of the senses affect or change this process of acting on impressions? Would the manifestation of the world on the being be completely different or just slightly altered? James might posit here that if this individual had other ways in which to interact and “act” upon the environment, then these impressions could still manifest within the mind in a slightly different fashion. Perhaps the individual’s other four senses would be able to compensate

\textsuperscript{10} Dewey. 47.
\textsuperscript{11} Radstone. 65.
for the lost fifth. In this way, the individual could still react to the impression and then sensory experiences would still be transmitted back to the mind for comprehension? I think that if this is what James were to say, then these individuals deprived of a sense, merely interpret the world differently, but not all together in an faulty way.

What proves to be a problem here, though, would be on how to educate this individual. Again, James highlights the notion that the teacher must cause a “reaction” or “expression” within the student. But how is this to be achieved if the student’s sensory processing is different from those of the teacher? It proves to be a predicament, but not at all impossible as this student can still process things through touch and hearing. It is important for this teacher to be able to take into consideration ways in which to stimulate the other senses and not the predominantly “lost” sense as to avoid frustration on behalf of both parties. The teacher could use descriptors, (if the student has not been blind since birth) or music, or Braille, or many other means of sensory stimulation. This student proves not to be an exception to the method of education that James set up earlier.

It makes sense that if information were just merely to pass through the senses and into the brain, that little information would be attained. James states that it is through the action of the body that the mind can fully understand the impression of the senses and the information that has just passed through. The only way for the mind to retain information is through the action of the body. This proposition is compelling. If the impressions of the information or of the external environment are not repeated through the actions of the body, then they will remain internally “convulsed.” The choice of word “convulsed” is out of the ordinary. Through the use of this word, James states that if in fact there is a disruption within this process, and the impression were to remain merely stuck within the mind, then this information would stay as an agitation to
the being. What is appealing about the phrase “inwardly convulsed” is the notion that this “inwardly” could refer to either the mind or the body. If an impression is registered by the body and not acted upon, does it now theoretically live within the mind or the body? The word “convulsed” can be defined as “to affect with a succession of violent involuntary contractions of the muscles, so as to produce agitation of the limbs or whole body; to throw into convulsions.”12

The corporeal connotation of this word accurately and yet surprisingly shows how physical a reaction the body can, and would have, if this information of the impression were to remain in the body.

If an impression were to remain in the body, the muscular pathways within the architecture would change. In his lecture, *The Laws of Habit*, James states that it is through the plasticity of our nervous systems that one has the ability to retain, change, and modify our actions. He claims that despite the fact that we have bodies, the plasticity of our nervous systems explains why and how we have become such habitual creatures. As human beings, he explains, we have difficulty performing a task the first time, but after practicing the same notions, they become habit. Our nervous systems thus become so habituated to these practiced actions that they become habit. James states that our nervous systems have “grown” to act this way. This would imply that the body, mind and our nervous system might innately react and act in a different manner. James writes:

So far as we are thus mere bundles of habit, we are stereotyped creatures, imitators and copiers of our past selves. And since this, under any circumstances, is what we always tend to become, it follows first of all that the teachers prime concern should be to ingrain

into the pupil that assortment of habits that shall be most useful to him throughout life. Education is for behavior, and habits are the stuff of which behavior consists [...] the most of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their own proper work.  

There are many paradoxes within this citation. James first of all comments that we are “stereotyped” beings. This alludes to a negative sense of being a creature of habit, so to speak. From generation to generation the same gestural, habitual, and social movements are taught in order to keep in touch with tradition, culture, and education. But what is paradoxical is that James states that this is the job of the educator. It is the teacher’s job to provide the student with the skills that will be “most helpful to him throughout life.” But what is contrasting here is how James states that we are merely “imitators [...] of our past selves.” This idea seems frustrating for James as highlighted with the slightly negative word “stereotyped.” If James does in fact wish for us to be “original creatures,” then why should the teachers preach these habits to their students? He continues to state that we have the ability to then “hand over” our lives to the world of automatism. But James seems to be against this notion of complete automatism because he then continues to state that this should be the case in order to allow our selves room for higher functions and higher thoughts.

For James, human action can be categorized as habitual, unconscious, or automatic. Once we have practiced one learned gesture, it becomes so ingrained in our bodies that we perform it without thinking. James states that most of what we have learned as habits should remain as

13 James. 22-23.
habits in order to free our minds for higher functions and for higher thought. The habits to which he refers are of quotidian nature and learned from an early age. For instance, walking up and down the stairs, brushing one’s teeth, or something as simple as waving hello. If these habits were not physically engrained in us at an early age, then we could not allow our bodies and minds to be free to assimilate movements and thoughts of higher function as our systems would be constantly fixated on these mundane movements. It is through the memory of the body that allows our minds to be freed of this responsibility. The body has such an incredible power of memory that ultimately allows us to have successful days on this land, as James would state it.

In discussing habit, what seems to capture the attention of James even more, is the dialectical arc between past and present that the body, more specifically the body memory, seems to capture. This notion is writ large in *In Search of Lost Time*, where Marcel Proust, 19th century French novelist, describes how a chance event can open up memory. He begins describing how:

In my absent-minded state I had failed to see a car which was coming towards me; the chauffeur gave a shout and I just had time to step out of the way, but as I moved sharply backwards I tripped against the uneven paving-stones in front of the coach-house. And at the moment when, recovering my balance, I put my foot on a stone which was slightly lower than its neighbor, all my discouragement vanished and in its place was that same happiness which at various epochs of my life had been given to me by the sight of trees which I had thought I recognized in the course of a drive near Balbec.14

What is immediately noticeable is Proust’s absorption with the flooding memories of the past into the realm of the future. That Proust outwardly states “in my absent-minded state” puts the

narrator automatically in a mentally vulnerable position. Does absent-mindedness correlate with a passive body? James would see this “absent-minded state” as a great environment for reception and reaction to the surroundings. This individual, of whom Proust speaks, accidentally runs out of the way of a moving carriage, he trips on uneven stones. When he recovers his step by placing his foot on a lower stone, his bodily nature registers a past sensation once familiar to him. Proust describes how through accidental gestures habit can be broken. Over time this sensation was perhaps lost or modified, but by sheer accident, and through a passive body, the memories of the trees return. James would say here that this is a great example of how the body is what hooks us onto our pasts. It is through the body’s reception of its environment that it can access its own memories and histories. Once the body has the capability of accessing this information, it can more easily recall or even change it.

Bergson further highlights the relationship between the notion of corporeality and experience, within his philosophical writings on memory. Bergson is one of the first philosophers to define memory as a corporeal event rather than as a mental one. According to Ansell-Pearson “Bergson posits that independent recollections cannot be preserved in the brain, which only store motor contrivances […].” To deconstruct this further, Bergson makes a distinction between contrivances and memory. Like James, Bergson sets up a slight hierarchy within the mind and the body. According to Bergson, these motor contrivances live in the brain. Such systems are what the mind remembers of the physical action or reaction to a specific event or environmental stimulus. It is by recalling on the present state of the brain that one can repeat these learned movements. And yet, according to Bergson, the memory and thus these experiences live within the body. In reference to the passage written by Proust, Bergson would

15 Radstone. 64.
highlight that it is because of his “absent-minded state” that the narrator was able to recall and recollect the past sensation created by falling off the stones. Bergson continually states that memory resides in the body. For Proust’s narrator, accidentally losing balance off the stones releases a body memory that his mind had long forgotten. It is because of this body memory that he was able to recall a long lost and yet familiar feeling. This sensation has lived in the past experiences of the body. To some degree, the body acts like an archive of our experience to be accessed within the present whether on purpose or by accident.

What is poignant about Proust’s narrator discovering the genealogy of sensation is that this memory that came back to him in a rush, and will almost never return to him in this same manner. Bergson writes, “essentially fugitive, they (memories) become only materialized by chance, either when an accidentally precise determination of our bodily attitude attracts them or when the very indetermination of that attitude leaves a clear field to the caprices of their manifestation.” Yes, the narrator physically tries to lose his balance from the stones, but because his attempts are calculated, the sensation remains locked behind the doors of the body memory. Even though the sensation and actual memory might return to him, the full rush of the experience will only return when the sensation is released by accident.

To link Bergson’s theory on physical memory to James’ theory on teaching, James claims that new habits can, in fact, be created. In describing the nervous system, James states, “new habits can be launched […] down among his nerve-cells and fibres the molecules are counting it, registering and string it up to be used against him when the next temptation comes. Nothing we ever do is, in strict scientific literalness, wiped out.” Such a statement is what perplexes and

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16 Ibid. 68.
yet fascinates me for many different reasons. I too believe that once these habits are formed, either mentally or corporeally, they can later be altered.

According not only to James but to Proust as well, the impressions that propel us through space and time do not always remain as internal impressions. Continuing Proust’s quotation, we read:

Every time that I merely repeated this physical movement, I achieved nothing, but if I succeeded, forgetting the Guermantes party, in recapturing what I had felt when I first placed my feet on the ground in this way, again the dazzling and indistinct vision fluttered near me […] the supposed snapshots taken by my memory, but which the sensation which I had once experienced as I stood upon the two uneven stones […] restored to me complete with all the other sensations linked on that day to that particular sensation […]”

To some degree, both James and Proust are debunking the credibility of the intellect in regards for the body. Proust uses words like “physical movement” “felt” and “sensation” which all highlight the different aspects and functions of the body. If he repeats the physical movement of replacing his feet, it dulls the new sensation. But it is in combination with imagining the memories that the movement elicited, that he then feels the sensation of his memory. When he writes about the vision “fluttering” about him, he conjures for the reader a sense of an out of body experience. Even though these visions of his past most definitely occur within the body, can one describe this as out of body or within mind? Within the next line Proust uses “snapshots” of his memory in contrast to the “sensation” of the experience. The former are short, succinct,

\[\text{\textsuperscript{18}}\] Proust. 210-211.
and perhaps independent episodes of the mind. The sensations depicted are continuous experiences of the body. Whether or not Proust purposefully highlighted the corporeal nature of these body memories or not, he highlights the power of the relationship between the passive body, accidental gestures, and the breaking of the quotidian.

When breaking new habits through accidental reaction or purposeful determination, both memory and body memory are altered. James writes:

Paths frequently and recently ploughed are those that lie most open, those which may be expected most easily to lead to results. The laws of our memory, as we find them, therefore are incidents of our associational constitution; and when we are emancipated from the flesh, it is conceivable that they may no longer continue to obtain.19

Here James underlines the importance of physical repetition when these brain paths are considered. In reference to Proust’s stone incident, his memory was jogged due to associational visions and actions. James uses the word “emancipated” here in reference to the body but not in a negative way. He states that once we leave the confines of the flesh, these associations may not occur. Yet it is due to these open pathways within the mind and the body that one can have a complete sensation, memory, or experience.

These pathways to which James refers are not always open. In order to discover and open them, the notion of Bodywork has recently become popular. Within the dance field, the need and desire to have these pathways opened and reconfigured is omnipresent. As a result of this need, new fields of study are being investigated, among them is Bodywork which is highlighted by Deane Juhan in Job’s Body. He describes “The Engram” as the way in which the body goes

19 James. 40.
about first recalling and then performing an action. In learning a new motor skill, a series of sensory engrams are established. Once these are created, one can learn to recall and repeat the engram when desired. Juhan interestingly states that the motion is supplied by the motor elements, and the sensory part of the nervous system controls the motion. Next, Juhan continues by stating that the engram itself is not all that is needed in fulfilling the impulse to move. Current sensations of one’s surroundings need to be taken into account. Each small change or detail affects the muscularity of the body. These engrams are, in fact, different from the reflexes one carries as members of the species. Each individual’s engrams are specific and specifically learned to fit each of the individual’s experiences. Once these new engrams are rehearsed by the individual, they begin to have a more stable nature. In describing the sensory engram, Juhan states that its location physiologically and anatomically is still unknown. 20

The notion of these engrams is what helps and has helped us to become such a complex species. To delve deeper in these engrams, I will focus on dance, more specifically, the modern and ballet dancer. In describing these engrams Juhan then states that once practiced or utilized enough times, the engram has the potential of becoming a “megareflex.” This means that once the action is triggered or begins, it follows through until the end of an engram series. Sensory feedback and volition have little to almost no role in the “megareflex.” 21 The reason I introduce this notion after speaking about William James is because it is an updated version of his notion of learning through acting. James describes this process as mainly occurring in the matter of the brain. He describes the process of teaching and learning in specific ways in order to enhance the

21 Ibid. 266.
student. Juhan finishes his idea by stating that these engrams have the potential to become so engrained in the body, in contrast to the mind, that they can occur unconsciously.

With this in mind, I would like to return to the engram’s relation to the dancer and explain its relevance to my personal experience. Growing up I began practicing ballet at the age of three. While I dabbled in other dance techniques, I mainly focused on ballet. I had different styles of training within the ballet field, mainly classical and Russian. When I entered college, while modern dance became my new focus, I still practice and love ballet. In the contemporary atmosphere of ballet at Bard College, a new emphasis was placed on perfecting and rearranging the alignment of the body in order to pursue dance from a proper and less laborious standpoint. After years of retraining my body, as it was originally poorly aligned, my dancing began to change. What intrigued me about this process is the altering of such old and physical habits. There are so many new practices in which scientists, dancers and physical therapists are discovering and engaging, in order to learn how to change unwanted physical habits. Some have learned the intricacies of the Alexander technique, while others use ideokinesis.

While Juhan focuses primarily on the physical reactions and changes of the body, this process is and can be mimicked within the brain. As these entities are so integrally intertwined, it makes sense that these processes would parallel each other. To return to James, in his talk on Memory, he discusses the actions of association in the mind in relation to the body. In reference to the power of the senses and their ability to break habits, James writes:

The laws of association govern, in fact, all the trains of our thinking which are not interrupted by sensations breaking on us from without. Whatever appears in the mind
must be introduced; and, when introduced, it is as the associate of something already there.\textsuperscript{22}

Here James reiterates that our mental knowledge is based on experiential data learned and remembered. He focuses on “trains of our thinking which are not interrupted by sensations breaking on us from without.” In making this distinction, James creates two categories of thinking. The first being a train of thought that is interrupted, and the second, a train of thought that remains uninterrupted. He fixates on those uninterrupted thoughts. He states, however, that all trains of thought are introduced by a physical sensation and thus produce relationships. These associations are the essence that allow for such an intricately developed relationship between the mind and the body. As an association is created, a body memory is also born. These connections are what lead Proust to rediscover the forgotten past in the present. Once these associations and memories between the body and the mind are physically reinforced, they become engrained within the body as these engrams and pathways.

As part of his comments on association, James alludes to those relations that are in fact interrupted by sensory experience. He does not elaborate upon this notion but it is nonetheless an important factor within this discussion. Are these associations then left within the body and mind to be forever “inwardly convulsed?” Or are these unfulfilled associations the negative straying of certain pathways? Perhaps the notion of have something been “inwardly convulsed” has a third meaning. This sense could allude to those pathways and associations that were begun, but were either left unfinished, or were completed in a detrimental fashion.

\textsuperscript{22} James. 40.
The notion of a detrimental pathway seems extreme and concrete. But James alleviates this idea in discussing the plasticity of these pathways. He writes:

It may occur here, just as in other gelatinous substances, that an impression will vibrate throughout the brain, and send waves into other parts of it. In cases of this sort, although the immediate impression may fade out quickly, it does modify the cerebral mass; for the paths it makes there may remain, and become so many avenues through which the impression may be reproduced if they ever get excited again [...]" 23

Here James’ speech seems to become more technical and clear cut. Once an impression passes through the senses and is absorbed by the body and then the mind, it is concretized within the brain. Once this is finalized, to reiterate, the body practices the impression through physical activity. Yet there are some paradoxes within this citation. James begins by stating that “in cases of this sort” which alludes to the fact that perhaps this process is merely one way among many in which the brain solidifies information. He immediately states thereafter that, “although the immediate impression may fade out quickly” which not only highlights the flexible properties of the brain, but also the fleeting quality of these impressions. It is absolutely a necessity for one to practice and engrain these impressions within our bodies and minds upon experiencing them. James underlines again the changing nature of the cerebral mass that accompanies the entrance of an impression. He also accentuates the connection of how an impression becomes an association. If an impression merely passes through the mind and the brain, it is most likely to remain as a fleeting experience. And yet if it is solidified and the cerebral mass within the brain is changed thoroughly, the impression becomes an association.

23 Ibid. 41.
After having established the fact that it is through acting upon sensory information that the mind best absorbs knowledge, James states that it is through the imitation of others that we “become conscious of…ourselves.” In his talk, *What the Native Reactions Are*, he describes that through emulation, the desire to copy another being, imitation arises. I find it captivating that James would state that it is through the imitation of others that one becomes conscious of his or herself. At first, it seems a bit oxymoronic in the sense that one, in theory, should understand him or herself through the internal workings of his or her mind. But perhaps one begins to learn about his or herself through the reception and reaction of other’s movements and embodiments of ideas? The mind receives an impression of a thought or sensation from watching someone, and then the body reacts to it. The person’s individual interpretation of the movement is how he or she becomes conscious of the self through others. Over time, these movements and gestures can learn to be modified, changed, or even enhanced.

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24 Ibid. 13.
Conclusion: Dancer’s Perspective

It is the idea of identifying, changing, and enhancing the detrimental pathways of the mind and the body, which led me to delve into the separation and integration of the mind, body, and senses. Through my own personal experience of growing up in the dance field, I have not only intuitively encountered, but more over I have lived in close proximity to, many of the concepts discussed throughout this project. Instinctively, from the dance perspective, there is no separation between the mind and the body. From a young age, these two entities seemed married together as the expression of a being. Despite strict technical norms prescribed by ballet or hip hop, the body becomes the container through which emotions are innately expressed.

In the world of ballet and pointe work, little error or artistic license can be allowed in a phrase or a step. Most everything is already determined by centuries of tradition. Yet when introduced to modern dance technique my freshman year at Bard College, I learned that the way in which my body was trained, was anatomically incorrect. By having incorrect alignment, dancing was much more laborious than it needed to be. In both ballet and modern techniques, I began learning how to correct the detrimental pathways of my body in order to enhance my performance skills.

In ballet class, I was used to performing these steps in the same patterned way in which I learned them. My professor at Bard would show me how to do the same step in a more anatomically aligned fashion in order to not hurt myself through poor alignment. For example, in executing an arabesque, one lifts one’s leg behind one. In some areas of ballet training, like my own, the student is taught to lift the entirety of the leg by splaying out the hips. This means that the hips are not being placed on the same plane, but instead, the leg is being lifted higher, and is technically in a second position, rather than in an arabesque. The way in which the student can become anatomically aligned, while doing an arabesque, is by keeping the hips on the same
plane while lifting the leg to the back. This adjustment seems minuscule and banal, but in reality, not only does it change the line of the arabesque completely, but it prevents future injuries and twistings of the lower spine.

It took months to correct this alignment issue. The slightest change would proprioceptively feel different and completely wrong to the habits that my body had previously learned. In physically changing the pathway that my leg needed to achieve in executing an arabesque my proprioception was adjusted. The latter is one’s own particular spatial awareness. By slowly and very consciously changing the position and initiation of the arabesque, the proprioception of the placement of my leg was radically changed. It might not seem like such a significant alteration to an objective observer, but if one is to change a habit, that modification is disturbing.

In referring back to the ideas of James, not only must the student be physically at ease, but he or she must actively alter his or her automatic responses. Gestures, for James, can be classified as habitual, unconscious, or automatic. Automatic movements are ingrained in the body, while unconscious movements are so utterly ingrained in the body that one never thinks of them, even as movements or movement patterns. The habits of a dancer tend to originate from the unconscious categorization of movements. Through constant practice of the specific movements and steps, the dancer’s way of achieving these movements becomes second nature. What I found to be noteworthy about correcting these pathways is the arduous work it takes. Once the dancer understands and brings to the surface an unconscious and detrimental pathway, he or she can then begin to address the issue. Breaking out of a habit is more plausible at a ballet barre when assisted by its stationary security. But when in the center, without the comfort of this barre and with the added stress of moving through space, maintaining these corrections proves
almost impossible. By moving through space, one begins to understand the placement of the body in space.

Correcting these anatomical issues in ballet technique class is different from adjusting them in modern dance, where the technique of Body-Mind Centering is often employed. This technique, founded by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, highlights and harkens back to the developmental patterns of movements through which each human being passes from conception to toddlerhood. The idea behind Body-Mind Centering is re-patterning the body through an active practice. The patterns with which we were born are innately correct and anatomically functional. It is through tensions, anxieties, pressures, and habits that the body adopts negative pathways. These patterns are not just physical. They are deeply rooted within the structures of the mind as well. The idea of Body-Mind Centering is to return to these patterns in order to regain one’s wholeness as an individual.

The developmental patterns of BMC discussed in *Wisdom of the Body Moving* by Linda Hartley are breath, tactile, core-distal, head-tail, upper-lower, body side, cross lateral, and vestibular. These are not the only patterns that the body undergoes, but they are the major ones highlighted in class. Each pattern is connected to functions of the brain that are stimulated. Hartley writes, “we can make contact with the cells of specific tissues, fluids, organs, or glands, and experience the “mind” of each distinctly, through directing our attention to that level […] the “mind” of the cell, however, is a more neutral, potential, state of “being,” basic to the diverse

“doing” aspect of the specialization of the body systems’ cells.”\(^2\) In theory, redirecting mental tension and attention to these levels helps to create new pathways within the being. By highlighting Hartley’s use of the word “doing” we harken back to Dewey’s idea of “doing and receiving.” This concept incorporates the passivity of Csepregi and the activity of James in altering and educating the individual.

In practicing this “doing and receiving” the first pattern of BMC is just noticing where the breath is in the body. This helps connect the cells in the mind to those in the body through the common action of cellular breathing. After spending about one minute in this developmental pattern, one begins to notice the contact of the skin on the floor. By sensing such tactility, the areas of the brain, which are connected to corresponding emotional and behavioral intelligence, are stimulated. Next, one passes into the core- distal or otherwise known as the naval radiation pattern. One can achieve this by gathering all the limbs into a fetal-like position and then letting go by reaching far out into space. The core-distal structure begins to wake up and to integrate the limbs with the center of the body. Next, through integrating a continual flow of movement along the spine, the head-tail pattern connects the head to the tail (coccyx). This pattern promotes “control of vital visceral functions, e.g breathing, digestion, circulation by Medulla; establishing of vertical axis with Pons and Midbrain; Spinal Cord relays sensory and motor information to and from the brain and controls some primitive reflex.”\(^3\) By giving specific attention to each of these structures individually, this serves as a mechanism to wake them up and to “reset” the mind and the body. By using these patterns we are able to rejuvenate and actively enhance those positive pathways with which we were born.

\(^2\) Ibid. 11.
\(^3\) Ibid. 96.
The next pattern is upper-lower. This occurs when one roots the upper body alone meaning the head, trunk, and pelvis, to the floor while mobilizing the lower body. Once a minute has passed, one roots the lower body to the floor and then mobilizes the upper body. The term “mobilize” here is used in a very open ended and improvisational way. These patterns are used to wake up the body so the mover is free to mobilize in any way. This pattern serves to stimulate the Hypothalamus, which is the emotional and visceral center. The Thalamus also relays sensory information and regulates pain/pleasure reflexes. The “Nervous and Endocrine systems meet in (the) Ancient Forebrain (which is the) seat of perception.” In relation to the idea of sensory perception, pursuing these patterns serves to stimulate the cognitive processes of perception. But what is captivating is how these mental areas are stimulated through physical patterns and movement. How can philosophers of the mind understand his or her world solely through mental processes if it is truly through movement that one understands and perceives the world?

In waking up and stimulating the body, these patterns also help to unite its different systems. Body-side as a pattern helps the individual to connect the right side of the body as a collective unit and the left side as a separate unit. This pattern, in development, allows for the toddler to propel him or herself through space by crawling. As a mover, this is the first pattern through which the individual begins to experience the movement through space. The next pattern is contra-lateral. As a pattern, it functions to stimulate many more complex motor and perceptual functions. Among these functions are conscious learning, intelligence, and imagination. The mover, either stationary or mobile, will direct the limbs over one another in order to cross the midline of the body. In crossing the midline of the body, cognitive processes that cross the hemispheres are awakened and strengthened. And lastly, the vestibular pattern stimulates the ________________

4 Ibid. 96.
small areas of the inner ear. The mover will do any fast, spinning movement until he or she becomes dizzy. The vestibular system is responsible for situating oneself perceptually and proproceptively in the world. After getting very dizzy, it becomes harder for us to situate ourselves spatially. By purposefully engaging in this pattern, the individual can challenge and stimulate his or her sensory experience as most of our senses are connected to the vestibular system.  

Breaking these habits takes us back to the passivity and the activity through which the student can change and learn. In referencing back to Csepregi’s ideas of body passivity, one can understand through patterns like breath and touch how the body becomes this passive container of the surrounding environment. And yet one sees the activity of the body, in reference to James, in the patterns like contra-lateral and vestibular. The body must act upon the sensory information taken in from performing these patterns. The sensory information must also pass through the body and into the mind, and then return through the body to complete the full circuit of understanding ones sensory perceptions.

What is noteworthy about completing these patterns regularly is that even though the body is actively working, the pathways within the mind and the body become slowly changed. The idea of re-patterning these pathways is something that is deeply rooted in Dance/ Movement Therapy. Dance/ Movement Therapy is a therapeutic practice that firmly marries the emotional brain to the physical body. As an expressive outlet, individuals who practice DMT can learn how to better unite the mind and the body especially if this individual is dealing with a mental or physical disorder.

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5 See Footnote 1.
This introduction of DMT allows for discussion of the idea of balance between the mind and the body. The practice of Dance/Movement Therapy is not solely based upon these developmental patterns. There are several other techniques and ways in which to engage the mind with the body either through yoga, the Alexander technique, or even meditation. But what makes DMT especially essential to this discussion is the awakening of the senses through the propulsion of the body through space. To refer back to William James, he states that there is “no reception without reaction, no impression without correlative expression.” In educating a student, the physical act of repeating and speaking what he or she has learned reinforces the information. For a dance student, the active movement and practice of the movement, reinforces it within the body. What DMT references is the focus and calm utilized in relating the mind and the body. When miscommunications and dysfunctions within an individual become “inwardly convulsed,” due to tensions and fear, they begin to live in the individual. The mental discomfort is abstractly and often unconsciously expressed through the use of movement. The movement becomes symbolic for specific emotions relating or not to specific disorders and disabilities.

To relate a personal anecdote, I have dealt with problems of anxiety for many years. There are points in my life when anxiety consumes and paralyzes me. This dysfunction is perceived through some sensory interpretation that became “inwardly convulsed.” If this emotional experience of having anxiety is not expressed physically, the sensation builds and builds within my mind. This feeling does not just go away. To refer back to the actions of Phèdre, the body reacts no matter how much one tries to control it. This is why Dance/Movement Therapy is proven to be such a successful mode of therapy. Even though I have not been a patient of DMT per se, I have utilized dance as my own expressive outlet since the age of three. I

6 James. 13.
have found that when tough emotions or mental misinterpretations arise, my physical body has no choice but to react.

Many of my physical patterns have been learnt under the cloud of anxiety. Because I was living in an anguished mental state, I was unable to connect to the physicality of my body and to its correct function. Granted this also comes from poor dance training, but the mental state of anxiety disrupted by learning processes and left me with many negative mental and physical pathways. When I changed my mindset and became aware of how the emotion of anxiety manifested itself physically, I was able to change these pathways to more functional ones.

Even though I have been focusing on DMT, another method, the Alexander technique, is just as essential to this discussion. In Missy Vineyard’s *How You Stand, How You Move, How You Live*, one gets an overview of the Alexander Technique. Throughout this book, the unconscious patterns developed in our systems are often described as “sustained for months and years, the amygdala’s labors create maladaptive change in muscle activity that hampers how we move […] by means that are not fully understood, this input gradually produces a faulty conception of the body within the mind itself.”\(^\text{7}\) One can understand and see how these physical manifestations of emotions, such as anxiety and fear, can become so detrimental to our understanding of ourselves. What is telling of the body’s role in our lives is the phrase, “of the body within the mind itself.” This highlights the idea that the body has just as much power as the mind within the Cartesian dichotomy. In remedying these physical manifestations, the Alexander Technique acknowledges that, “bodily sensation plays a dual role. Since bodily sensations bring us self-awareness, this is the source of our potential for greater choice and control over our

behavior. But since this operates within us automatically, it never loses its power to trigger our amygdala, refueling our stereotyped behaviors.”

What is noteworthy about this technique is its recognition that body sensations rather than mental perceptions are what bring us to our awareness. As part of this technique, once one’s understanding of these faulty body sensations arise, correction becomes easier. In relationship to DMT and the developmental patterns, once these structures become functional, the connection between the mind and the body becomes whole. These internal battles that take over our existences are alleviated through the art of dance and through the physical propulsion of ourselves through space. We finally get to feel ourselves as sensing, emotional, physical beings.

In stark contrast to our understanding of this complete existence, I return again and finally, to the philosophers who sparked this conversation in the first place. Plato’s reverence of the “body-prison” is expressive of the rigid separation of the mind from the body. Descartes’ decree of relinquishing the senses once and for all is indicative of living in “pure thought,” happily disconnected from reality. Sabriye Tenberken’s life with blindness served as a counterpoint to this disconnect. Indeed, even cursed with the most disjointed of experiences, the mind and the body coexist here to give the blind man no less of a full version of body and mind turned one. Dewey has coyly debased the separatist discussions of Descartes and Plato when he professes that “prestige goes to those who use their minds without participation of the body.”

Applause would be doled out only to those select, "happy few," who scorn the body for the “higher” existence of a pristine and unencumbered mind.

How else, but through the excruciating and inevitable contamination of body by mind

8 Ibid. 89.
could Jean Racine’s Phèdre have had such a keen grasp on her compromised existence? As arduously and tenaciously as she tried to maintain this mind/body split, she was unable to attain such “prestige.” Her corporeal nature exudes the truth. The body is what ultimately connects us to our existences. Whether through Csepregi’s bodily passivity, or through James’ bodily activity, our senses are what continually re-introduce us to our unique worlds. Our sensorial systems absorb and interact consistently with our environments in order to relay information to our minds. This information can then be imprinted in the body and then returned to our surroundings through a comprehensive exchange.

The arguments of Descartes and Plato influenced every subsequent discussion about the mind-body prison. Nobody will ever deny the power and impact of such beliefs. But as a dancer, as a moving being through space and time, mind and body never remain separate entities for very long; the dancer's world can only be born of the subtle dialogue between movements felt, thought-out, and forgotten only to be remembered again.
Bibliography


