Questioning Descartes Disembodied Mind

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I. CARTESIAN EMBODIED MIND

The dominant opinion about Descartes is that he was a strict Dualist, setting soul[1] and body entirely apart. Stigmatized as the one to coin the mind-body divide and blamed for a lot of the misconceptions regarding the functioning of the mind that have ensued, Descartes' own view on the autonomy of the mind from the body is not as firm as most commonly claimed. This paper aims to uncover a more nuanced understanding of Descartes' dualist perspective on the mind and the body by exploring what he calls *special modes of thinking*; the faculties of the *imagination* and *sense perception*.

We will argue that key to understanding Descartes's account of an embodied human mind is an understanding of the *experience* of the unity of mind and body through the senses and the imagination. Furthermore it will be the senses that help dispel doubt in the Meditations, bringing the meditator closer to the certainty he set out to find. Thus, contrary to common belief, for Descartes it is the union of mind-body through the experience of sensation that brings us closer to certainly, not the intellect alone.

To support the above arguments we will necessarily have to focus on the *Meditations on First Philosophy* and only touch on other publications, such as the *Passions of the Soul, Principles of Philosophy* or his correspondence letters, acknowledging that an in depth assessment of these topics would require a much more extensive sampling.

1.1 The role of doubt in the mind-body divide

In the Meditations Descartes embarks on a quest to put all his beliefs into doubt in order to uncover that of which he can be certain. In so doing, he questions what is real and what is not, or even if there is an external world deemed to be *real*. Through the process of radical doubt he undergoes in the First Meditation Descartes discovers that he must even doubt whether he has a body, given that he could be dreaming of it or have an illusion created by an *evil deceiver*. He claims that perception of certain experiences appear to be very similar in waking and in dreaming, rendering it plausible that a dream could appear as genuine reality. [2]

However, while he initially doubts the existence of the body and the external world, he perceives himself having a *clear and distinct* idea of himself as thinking – as contemplating and meditating the situation. This gives him grounds to assert that the mind is a *thinking thing;* an immaterial substance whose essence is thought[3]and as such is different from the physical body which he is doubting. Thus on the one hand we have *modes of thought*, which belong to the mind: understanding, imagination, memory, will, volition, sensation, etc., on the other are the *modes of extension*, which belong to the body: position, shapes, and motion of the parts.[4] Descartes's radical doubt appears to be a trigger of the mind-body divide. Paradoxically, as we will try to explore in this paper, it is the senses that come to the rescue to expel doubt, bringing us close to the certainty Descartes set out to find.

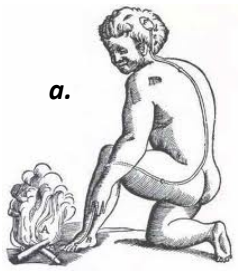
By the Sixth Meditation, he is also able to assert the existence of an external world and of his body. Indeed, the argument for the existence of bodies in the last meditation demonstrates that, unless God is the deceiver, one cannot have sensations and passions without having a body, even though the corporeal world is separate from that of the mind.

> "*So I do not see how God could be understood to be anything but a deceiver if the ideas were transmitted from a source other than corporeal things. It follows that corporeal things exist*"[5]

The distinction between mind and body as argued in Sixth Meditation appears to be as follows: I have a clear and distinct idea of myself as a thinking non-extended thing, and a clear and distinct idea of body as an extended and non-thinking thing; the soul's modes of thought are not quantifiable or divisible whereas the body's modes of extension can be quantified and divided. However, as we will see in what follows, there are indications in both the *Meditations* and the *Passions* (as well as other texts that we will not be able to cover here) that his position on the independent-ness of the mind from the body is not as clear as assumed.

1.2 Mind-body interactionism

a.



Although extended discussion of the metaphysical split between mind and body does not appear until the *Meditations*, in his *Treatise on Man* Descartes already outlined

these views and provided the first articulation of mind-body interactionism.[6] However Descartes' account on the role of the mind and the body across his publications is often mixed and at times contradictory. While it is clear that he believed human beings to be composed of both a material body and an immaterial non-physical mind, he also acknowledged that based on our experience we have evidence that the two can interact: the body can affect the mind and the mind can affect the body.

When objections are raised by Gassendi[7] as to how they could possibly interact given their heterogeneity- material and divisible on one side and immaterial and indivisible on the other-Descartes asserts that their distinctness does not impede interaction. For him this interaction exists because it can be perceived by everyday experience; physical sensations such as pain, hunger and thirst, can show that the mind is joined and profoundly intermingled with the body. And while these are still "*confused modes of thinking*" they are nonetheless indispensable for the well-being of the mind.

> "*For the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part; and to this extent they are sufficiently clear and distinct*"[8]

The conception of the mind developed by Descartes in the Sixth Meditation is overshadowed by the notion that dominates the earlier parts of the Meditations. But it is important to distinguish the two. By the end of the Second Meditation, Descartes claims that he can only know with certainty that the mind - as an essentially thinking thing- exists, and that should the body exist it is essentially extended and non-thinking. At this point he seems committed to the conclusion that self and mind are the same thing and completely independent of his or any other body. However, in the Sixth Meditation Descartes puts forth a different account, one that considers the embodied mind- reuniting the mind to the body.

> "*I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit*"[9]

Descartes warns us that this union of body and mind still produces confused modes of thought, not the clear and distinct ones that he is after. But the recognition of this union is nonetheless

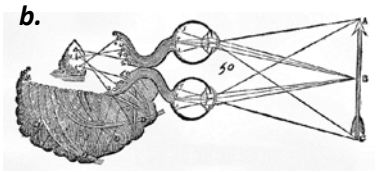
important and all too often overlooked in favor of stressing his separation of the mind as immaterial and the body as material. However by his own admission, in the Meditations Descartes does not yet address how this interaction actually happens. As we will see, this is developed further in the *Passions of the Soul*.

In the *Principles of Philosophy* we can see an equally conflicting account when Descartes again brings up the unity of the body and the mind after just having reiterated his belief in their separateness. He mentions that "*we also experience within ourselves certain other things which must not be referred either to the mind alone or to the body alone*" that arise from "the *intimate union of our mind with the body"*[10] These things we '*experience within ourselves*' are classified in three categories; first, the basic appetites such as hunger and thirst; second, emotions or passions of the mind, such as anger, joy, sadness and love; and lastly, sensations such as pain and pleasure. Whenever he discusses mind-body interactionism, Descartes relies on notions of experience as something that we *feel*. So he is alluding to the fact that our feeling of certain sensations provide proof of the interaction between the mind and the body.

1.3 Mind-body in the Passion of the Soul

The Passions of the Soul contains Descartes' most extensive account of causal mind-body interactionism. In this text he expressly and repeatedly states that a human being consists of both body and soul, and acknowledges the integrated functions of the mind and body; "*we are not aware of any subject which acts more directly upon our soul than the body to which it is joined*"[11] further "*the soul is really joined to the whole body*" and "*related solely to the whole assemblage of the body's organs*."[12] In fact, the writings collected as *The Passions of the Soul* emerged in large part to provide an answer to the question of how the immaterial mind could possibly cause anything in a material body, and vice-versa.[13]

Descartes initially answers this by emphasizing that the mind and body form a genuine and inexplicable union; the body causing the soul to have feelings and passions and the soul causing the body to move. To solve the dilemma of how this actually happens he hypothesized that there must be a single place inside the brain where all the sensory information is



assembled before it is finally relayed to the immaterial mind. His best candidate for the soul's contact with the body was a particular part of the brain which he identified as the *pineal gland;*[14] a small gland in the center of the brain that he erroneously believed was unique to human beings and the only part of the brain to be a single structure, rather than one duplicated on both the left and right halves of the brain.

The interaction between the body and soul for Descartes is conducted by very small blood particles he called *animal spirits*. The soul is able to cause movement of the animal spirits in the pineal gland which travel through the body and cause the reactions which were willed by the soul; the body can affect the soul as a passion and the soul can move the body, as an action of the soul: "*what is a passion in the soul is usually an action in the body*" [15] In other words, through movement the body makes visible that which the mind generates through thought.

In referring to the actions of the body and passions of the soul as being the same thing he is suggesting the possibility of a metaphysical oneness between the two, at least in terms of their functioning. Some label this as *interactionist dualism* instead of the substance dualism with which Descartes' is usually tagged. But it is still not clear how, and what, could possibly have an immaterial manifestation through a passion and at the same time a material manifestation through action. This we shall see emerges through 'special modes of thought' that Descartes identifies at the end of the Meditations.

In the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes is seeking a conception of mind-body unity compatible with his dualism. Although he gives no satisfactory account of how the interaction between the soul and those small bodily *animal spirits* really works[16], by localizing the soul's contact with body in the pineal gland, he is raising important questions regarding the relationship of the mind to the brain and nervous system, that are still a topic of fervent debate today.

II. THINKING AND THE SENSES

2.1 Cartesian thought

There is no doubt that for Descartes thought is primordial. But his conception of thought is much broader and encompassing than the word alone reflects:

> "*By the term 'thought', I understand everything which we are aware of as happening within us, in so far as we have awareness of it. Hence, thinking is to be identified here not merely with understanding, willing and imagining, but also with sensory awareness*"[17]

Indeed for Descartes thought is anything one is *aware* or *conscious* of, and while this awareness is still non-bodily, it does include sensory awareness of bodily activities. In other words it is our *sensations*. But sensation in Descartes is still to be understood as non-bodily. For him, it is the mind that has the sensation of, for instance, walking or seeing, since he observed that one could have awareness of a bodily activity even during sleep, when there is no activity itself only the sensation or awareness of it. Thus it is the *awareness* of such activity, rather than the activity itself, in other words, the *thought* of the activity. But this thought is once again not just about thinking. The *thinking thing* of the second meditation doesn't just think as may be commonly understood; it is a "*thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.*"[18]

From this list of faculties encompassed under thought, Descartes distinguishes the imagination and sense-perception as two 'special modes of thinking'. They are unique because even though considered a mode of thought they fulfill the dual role of being bodily as well as mental processes. Descartes' more detailed account of these two faculties illustrate his acceptance of the mind-body union as well as his ambivalence; while he still claims that humans can exist without these faculties, these faculties cannot exist without the 'essence of man', in other words the intellect: "*there is an intellectual act included in their essential definition*" but at the same time "*cannot be understood apart from some substance for them to inhere in*" [19]The intellectual and corporeal component of these two modes of thinking have their home in the physical part of the body mentioned earlier, the pineal gland.

2.2 The role of the imagination

Interestingly the *thinking thing* that emerges from radical doubt in the First Meditation as essentially mind-oriented, when united with the body gains faculties it would otherwise not have; the *imagination* and *sensation* emerge only when the body is 'intermingled' with the soul.

Imagining for Descartes is an intellectual faculty that depends on both the mind and the body; it is a special way of thinking about material things: "*For when I give more attentive consideration to what imagination is, it seems to be nothing else but an application of the cognitive faculty to a body which is intimately present to it.*"[20] However his account of the imagination in the *Meditations* and in the *Passions* is often confusing and difficult to accommodate into Descartes' official dualistic conception. From the *Meditations* one might initially come away with a very negative account of the imagination and sense perception, as faculties that fail to provide the truth, since for Descartes the knowledge of things belongs to the inspection of the mind alone not to sensation or imagination. In support of this idea he gives the example of a piece of wax which is observed in its solid and liquid form, pointing out the difficulties of relying on the senses of the physical body to understand the true nature of the wax.[21]

However, the imagination is the faculty that leads the meditator to create the fictional device of the evil demon who devotes all his cunning into deceiving him, and in so doing actually brings him to the first certainty: *cogito ergo sum*. Furthermore together with sense perception, the imagination illustrates Descartes' understanding of the interconnectedness of the mind and the body, as a faculty that needs the body as well as the intellect. The imagination does not seem to perceive the truth but it does bring us close to that which is 'clear and distinct'. It acts as a bridge, taking the meditator from doubt to truth.

Throughout his career Descartes attributed a key role to the imagination in mathematical and physical thinking. In his last work, the *Passions of the Soul,* he allowed it a notable function in the mastery of the passions. He notes that an effective way of countering an undesirable passion is to imagine a new and different state of affairs. The act of imagining

causes brain events, and so can serve as a voluntary, if indirect means to change the course of the animal spirits and eliminate the causes of some undesirable passion. More generally, entertaining any thought at all, especially a clear and distinct thought carries an affective dimension that will in turn prompt movements in the imagination and the passions. The long-term consequence of such voluntary imaginative practice is to reshape our internal bodily *dispositions* so that they produce specific passions under the appropriate, rationally endorsed circumstances.

Descartes is claiming that the mind can in fact produce a different bodily state of affairs through the vehicle of the imagination. The link mind-imagination-body is present in Descartes' *Passions*, proving once again that while distinct, the body has the capacity to affect the mind and the mind has the capacity to affect the body.

2.3 Sense perception and doubt

Sense perception is the other 'special mode of thinking' identified by Descartes in the Sixth Meditation, which he defines as an awareness of *bodily things* through the senses. Still part of the process of thinking; sensing occurs in virtue of perceiving, which is an operation of the intellect. Thus all sensations for Descartes require the use of the intellect but also an awareness of the body. Again, as with the imagination, his true position towards this mode of thought is not always consistent. In the Second Meditation Descartes discards the senses as a form of knowledge, providing proof through examples that they are unreliable and often deceiving, as he illustrates with the example of the piece of wax. Yet they play a significant, and indeed crucial, role in expelling doubt and nearing the certainty he is searching.

Extreme doubt is what puts into question the very existence of the senses, yet in the Sixth Meditation Descartes describes how he uses the senses as a way to dispel doubt. With the interference of the senses, he can indeed clear one of the most prominent reasons for doubt in the previous meditations (from which other doubts emerged), namely, the doubt of whether one is awake or asleep. Early in the meditations it was in large part the conflict of not knowing if he was awake or asleep that made him conclude that the mind did not need the body, even for

bodily things such as walking and seeing. But in the Sixth Meditation he asserts that memory and other sense perceptions, together with the intellect, can help distinguish which state the mind/body is in.

> "*the nature of man as a combination of mind and body is such that it is bound to mislead him from time to time. (…) all my senses report the truth much more frequently than not. Also I can always make use of more than one sense to investigate the same thing*" [22]

He concludes that he therefore need not fear being led astray by the senses, because there is this system of *self-check* where all the senses contribute to expel any error, or to correct the error if necessary. It is the assembly of the intellect, the senses and memory that help dispel all doubt, by first making it clear and distinct whether he is in a dream or wake state. It is not the intellect alone that dispels doubt and brings Descartes closer to the truth and certainty he is seeking, rather it is the interference of senses that make it possible to dispel doubt. He adds that the *exaggerated doubts* that he has had in the previous meditations "*should be dismissed as laughable*"[23]

A strictly Platonistic reading of Descartes sees the body as obstacle to reason. But while thought is primordial for Descartes and is certainly not defined by its relation to the body, there is still a recognition that thought requires the cooperation of the body with which it causally interacts, forming a system of coordinated functions. In other words, the *body-mind* whole emerges from the causal interaction between the component parts. Furthermore reasoning in science requires observation of events that occur in the world around us and in the study of these Descartes turns not inward to his own consciousness, but outwards, to his own practical experience, recognizing that many of the functions of the mind concern its relationship to the body and the world it inhabits.

Although his position towards the 'special modes of thinking' is at times faltering, the account that Descartes provides of the imagination and sense perception necessarily puts his strict Dualistic conception into question. Looking at it from the flipside, one can see Descartes appealing to sensation and the imagination as proof of the union of the mind and body.

III. CONTEMPORARY POSITION

3.1 Descartes and contemporary neuroscience

Findings in neuroscience that concern the mind-body problem do not support the common Cartesian dualist conception of the mind-body. In fact scientists have begun to approach consciousness in more Spinozist terms: as a complex and indivisible mind-brain-body system. Taken literally, "*I think therefore I am"* suggests that thinking, and awareness of thinking, is the real essence of man- it is that which explains our identity and existence. For neuroscientist Antonio Damasio[24] the opposite is true. His laboratory research seems to be confirming Spinoza's philosophical position where reason and emotion are linked together as a single substance. Even more radically he claims that thoughts and feelings are not primarily reactions to external events, quite the contrary, they are about the body, and emerge from bodily states.

For Damasio, the mind is embodied in the literal sense of the word, not just embrained. He stresses the crucial role of bodily sensation in reason and decision making, suggesting that certain aspects of emotion and feeling are in fact indispensable for rationality and that feelings are not as intangible as usually presumed. "*Emotions, feelings, and biological regulations all play a role in human reason. The lowly orders of our organism are in the loop of high reason*"[25] His studies of patients with pre-frontal cortical injuries, whose emotions have been impaired, have provided him with empirical evidence that according to him contradict Cartesian mind-body dualism, what he terms as "*Descartes' error*":

> "*This is Descartes' error: the abyssal separation between body and mind, between the sizable, dimensioned, mechanically operated, infinitely divisible body stuff, in the one hand, and the unsizable, undimensioned, un-pushable, nondivisible mind stuff: the suggestion that reasoning, and moral judgment , and the suffering that comes from physical pain or emotional upheaval might exist separately from the body*"[26]

However some have questioned whether this erroneous notion of reason, detached from the functions of the body, is indeed Descartes' error, or whether it is ours for reading him in a certain way?[27] How can we say that Descartes was a strict dualist regarding the mind and the body when he claims that there are faculties that find their essence in the mind but that also need the body in order to exist?

3.2 The trialist interpretation of Descartes

Some might argue that the same way that this paper puts forth arguments in support of a Cartesian embodied mind, there are equally as compelling arguments, or possibly stronger, that support the opposite view. Indeed, there are numerous texts that support Descartes' strictly dualist perspective of the mind and the soul. That Descartes saw reason and feeling as two dichotomous attributes is undeniable; but it is equally undeniable that he identified certain faculties as needing both the mind and body, and existing only from the intermingling of the two, as we saw with the 'special modes' of the imagination and sense perception. So how do we reconcile these seemingly opposing views?

Some commentators have suggested that Descartes' view follows a trialist model rather than a dualist one. In this view, the union of body and soul form a third mode together with the mind and the body alone. Interpreters use the letter that Descartes wrote to Princess Elizabeth[28], where he presents the union of the body and soul as a third primitive notion, as proof of this trialist view. Sensations and the imagination would fall under this third notion. But even the trialist view has important nuances. Some scholars[29] have supported a substance trialist view which classifies the union mind-body as a third substance in its own right. There are indeed some passages in Descartes that might point in that direction: "*to conceive the union between two things is to conceive them as one single thing.*"[30] However, they see Descartes as sometimes vacillating, changing his mind, and making mistakes in parts of his philosophical writings in order to fully justify their view, which admittedly, puts Descartes entire dualist project into question.

John Cottingham,[31]on the other hand, supports an attributive trialism, which he sees as still compatible with Descartes' substance dualism. As Cottingham explains, in the letter to Elizabeth, Descartes puts forth what he sees as an attributive trialistic perspective of the mind-body, where human beings are still composed of two substances, mind and body, but these have distinctive attributes (such as the imagination, sensations, passions, emotions) which form a third category irreducible to thought or extension alone. To quote Descartes:

> "*as regards the soul and the body together, we have only the notion of their union, on which depends our notion of the soul's power to move the body, and the body's power to act on the soul and cause its sensations and passions*"[32]

Cottingham emphasizes that Descartes uses the term *notion*, not substance, thus he is not espousing substance trialism as other commentators have,[33] but rather a model of trialism that is still consistent with Descartes' ontological dualism. "*The appeal to sensation as proof of the union between the mind and the body is a recurring theme in Descartes. We know the distinction between mind and body, Descartes suggests to Elizabeth, but we 'feel' their union*."[34]

From what has been developed in this paper, this view seems to be a successful way to explain the emergence of the imagination and sense perception as special modes of thinking, and explains, to some degree, the inconsistencies in Descartes' thought as he grapples with an account of a unified mind-body that is still consistent with his dualist project.

3.3 Closing remarks

The aim of this paper has not been to prove or disprove any of Descartes arguments, but rather to look at aspects of his philosophy which are not often considered when discussing the "Cartesian dualist" perspective, in order to offer a more nuanced view, which takes into account the interconnectedness of the mind and the body. It tries to point a way towards solving the seemingly incompatible dualist and interactionist notions of the mind-body presented by Descartes's himself.

We have done this by exploring three areas, each corresponding to a section of the paper; the first part, looks at the relationship between doubt and the mind-body divide to show that it is the senses (a notion that needs the body as well as the mind) that help expel doubt and bring the meditator closer to the certainly he was aiming for; the second part, looks at thought and Descartes's special modes of thinking to support and explain his conception of mind-body interactionism; the last part of the paper, looks at the mind-body divide within the contemporary context, exposing the difficulty in accepting a strict substance dualism in the light

of today's knowledge in neuroscience, as well as from some of Descartes's own accounts regarding the intermingling of the mind and the body.

To conclude, we have seen how having been reduced in the Second Meditation to a "*thinking thing*" who knows only that it thinks and exists, the mind in the Sixth Meditation, while still incorporeal, is reunited to the body through sensation and its experiences are no longer disembodied. Why this union between the body and the soul in the Sixth Meditation is mostly missed or de-emphasized is still quite mysterious. A possible reason could be that it is indeed hard to simultaneously accept a clear distinction between the mind and body as well as the conception of their union, as Descartes is asking us to do. However, Cottingham's *attributive trialism* mentioned above gives us a way of conceptualizing how this could indeed be possible.

The relationship of the mind to the body is arguably one of the central issues in the Philosophy of Mind, on which Descartes has had a deep influence. And while thought for Descartes is strictly a matter of the soul it is nonetheless an encompassing soul interconnected to the body through sensation and the imagination.

NOTES

[1] Since Descartes equated the mind with the soul, I am using those terms interchangeably in this paper.
[2] First Mediation, CSM II, p13
[3] Descartes, R. (1641) Meditations on First Philosophy, in The Philosophical Writings of René Descartes, trans. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, vol. 2, pp. 1-62.
[4] Book 1, page 216
[5] Sixth Mediation, CSM II, p51
[6] Treatise of Man, CSM I
[7] letter to Clerselier from Jan 12 1646 where Descartes responds to the Counter-Objections made by Gassendi. CSM II, p275
[8] Sixth Mediation, CSM II, P57
[9] Ibid.
[10] Principles of Philosophy, CSM I, p208-9
[11] Passions of the Soul, CSM I, p328
[12] Ibid., p339
[13] Pressed by Princess Elizabeth…."*the soul can be governed by the body given that they have nothing in common*" Translator's Preface to The Passions of the Soul. CSM II, p325
[14] his letter to Elisabeth of Bohemia, Princess Palatine
[15] Passions of the Soul, CSM I, p328
[16] As Cottingham puts it, this is a slightly mistaken view of the electro-chemical changes in the cerebral cortex
[17] Principles of Philosophy, CSM I, p195
[18] Second Meditation, CSM II, p19
[19] Sixth Mediation, CSM II, p54
[20] Ibid., p50
[21] First Mediation, CSM II, example of the piece of wax melting, p20
[22] Ibid., p61
[23] Ibid.
[24] currently professor at University of Southern California and a recognized leader in neuroscience
[25] Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. Introduction (p2 of intro)
[26] Ibid p249-50
[27] Deborah J. Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind,* p58
[28] Letter to Princess Elizabeth, 21 May 1643, CSM III, p218
[29] "*Daniel Garber and Tad Shmaltz propose that Descartes changed his mind from a dualistic view*" *Descartes's Dualism* by Marleen Rozemond, p192
[30] Letter to Princess Elizabeth, 28 June 1643, CSM III, p227
[31] John Cottingham, "*Cartesian Trialism"* in *Cartesian Reflections*, Chapter 9
[32] Letter to Princess Elizabeth, 21 May 1643, CSM III, p218
[33] Martial Gueroult is seen to support this view. John Cottingham*, Cartesian Reflections*, p34
[34] John Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections*, p34

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Illustration Credits

a. Illustration of mind-body interactionism. He describes how the physical sensation of the foot touching the fire gets communicated to the mind, first by a pulling of the fibre cc, which in turn frees the 'animal spirits' in the brain cavity. *Treatise on Man*, p102: p.2

b. Illustration Descartes uses to show how ideas are formed. He describes how the '*spirits'* travel through the optic tubes to reach the central gland. *Treatise on Man*, p102: p.5