

## DESCARTES AND RATIONALISM

By Richard Strozzi-Heckler, PhD

© 2006-07 Strozzi Institute. All rights reserved.

In this paper we wish to begin to reveal and elucidate the phenomena of somatics and the discourse of somatic coaching. We don't say this is the final word on the subject, nor do we say that our interpretation is the "truth." We do claim, however, that somatic coaching brings together two separate discourses in a historically new way. This "new" way calls for a re-interpretation of what it means for human beings to live and learn in their bodies. To do this we will first review the conventional thinking in these matters and then bring forward an interpretation of an embodied life that renews possibilities for learning, action, and wisdom.

### Descartes and Rationalism

The contemporary interpretation of the body has its roots in the work of the French philosopher Rene Descartes. Writing in the 17th century, a time of interminable war, religious persecution, and a social order based on superstition, belief and magic, Descartes was convinced that it was possible to alleviate this chaos by providing certainty through rational means. Developing a theory of reality that could be defended by geometrical proofs and mathematical symbols, he sought to produce rational "truths" that were clear, distinct, and certain. His philosophy of Rationalism, which is often referred to as Cartesian thinking, was an effort to free people from theological dogma and medieval witchcraft through an objective, impersonal map of the world.

The triumph of his philosophy was two-fold: First, at a time when the only agreed upon solution to political and religious conflict was war and indiscriminate blood-letting, he made accessible to the leaders of his time the possibility of reasoning their way out of a seemingly endless quagmire of suffering. Second, his philosophy became the basis for the fundamental assumptions of scientific thought as we know them today. Equipped with a

mathematical and mechanical understanding of the universe, plus new instruments to validate their experiments, a generation of scientists guaranteed the proof of an objective, predictable world. Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Locke, and others of this century elucidated a scientific understanding of nature, the cosmos, human beings, and by deduction, the self.

This transformation of knowledge effectively moved the reins of power from the hands of the priests and church to that of the scientists and technology. In this new world view, the beliefs promulgated by the church for centuries were slowly replaced by the promises of science. We want to remember that Descartes acted within a historical context to create a new common sense to solve a crisis of his generation. What followed was one of the great intellectual revolutions of human history.

### **The Scientific Revolution**

The essential distinction in the rationalistic tradition is the division of the universe between matter, which is governed entirely by mechanical laws, and the mind, which comprises thinking, ideas, and will. In an intellectual turf war whose waves we're still riding, Descartes and his colleagues staked out mind, matter and science, which included the body, and the Church claimed spirit and religion. In this interpretation mind and body, spirit and matter, are two separate worlds that are only vaguely and mysteriously linked.

Once the notion of an inner animating principle was dismissed, a vigorous reductionistic and quantification of the material world began. With rationalism as its base, science claimed: First, that it was possible to view the world objectively: the experimenter did not influence the experiment, but could see the world through unbiased eyes. Second, the world consists of fixed, external objects that are independent of each other and can be objectively understood through a rationalistic process. In other words, reality has already been established, and it's our job to learn how to manipulate it. And thirdly, data from experimentation can provide objective facts about the world. The material world, which includes the body and nature, is like a huge clock and by understanding its mechanisms we can use it to our advantage.

### **The Cost of Rationalism**

Once we grasp this way of knowing we see its imprint in the intimate corners of our everyday life, as well as in our local and national institutions. As the most prestigious and persuasive model for reality, it accounts for almost all of the scientific and technological achievements of Western culture. Scientific reductionism has made it possible to build bridges, advance medicine, and expand global communications. Although they have produced extraordinary advances in our quality of life, these powers of manipulation have also come with a price. Freely applied to humans, culture, nature, and social policies, rationalistic thinking has stunted our emotional and spiritual literacy. With our educational institutions now firmly grounded in mathematical thinking, instrumental reason, and pseudo-scientific approaches, we now equate the human body with a machine and thinking with a computer. We employ reason and logic to determine our relationship with nature. We are so firmly entrenched in this way of seeing that our social scientists, economists, and world leaders have become indecisive and hesitant in taking action because of a concern that pragmatic application, regardless of how successful, won't match established theory. Despite the overwhelming evidence that we are draining the earth of its resources, we continue our exploitation with the faith that science will pull us out of the hole. Theory has become more important than action, domination more crucial than cooperation, and ideas more regarded than life.

### **Mind Body Dualism**

In the rationalistic tradition, the body is viewed as a collection of anatomical parts that are organized, guided, and kept in check by a central command post called the mind, which is separate from the body. In this separation of mind and body, excitement, desire, emotion, sensation and spirit are marginal phenomena in living our lives. The body is useful primarily in its capacity to serve the mind's ability for rationalistic thought. The body carries the mind around in order that it may do the important work. Aside from feeding, cleaning, and having it appear respectable, there's little need to attend to the body. When Descartes declared, "I think therefore I am," he removed the body from Western philosophy in one clean cut. He later expounded on this by saying emotions, feelings, and sensations happens to us, and we must learn to ignore or dominate them in service to what is rational. His position implies, for example,

that one can deny responsibility for any and all feelings, unless we have a good reason to have them.

In this separation of mind and body we have also separated ourselves from God, Nature, as well as other human beings. Spiritual fulfillment can be found only outside the realm of the body. Simply, consciousness is something apart from the body. This two-world view, which is a fundamental aspect of the Judeo-Christian tradition, stresses actions in this life that will reserve us a place in the life-after. The body, in this view, is seen as a hindrance to one's spiritual development. Sensual feelings and sexual desire are seen as one's moral downfall. It's mandatory, therefore, to immediately crush any feelings that arise in the body in order not to be distracted from our heaven-bound intentions. This marked the beginning of a concern for respectability and righteousness that gained influence over the next 250 years. This shows up now in our denial of the life of the body. We live in anxiety and fear of our feelings, desires, and emotions.

To see how we divide ourselves on a daily basis, consider a common scenario where a business team is meeting before delivering an important presentation. As they begin, the team leader notices that a key presenter is fidgeting with his tie, gripping the chair with white knuckles, and has a dry mouth. He is, in other words, noticing the emotional state of his partner. A state that will have a direct impact on how the presentation is delivered and received. Yet as they begin to focus on the content of their presentation, a transformation takes place. The team leader shifts his attention to scrutinizing the statistics, figures, assertions and opinions of the presenter as if they were separate from the mood he was just observing.

Because the point is so simple, it's easily lost. The body of the person that will speak the elements of the presentation is the same body as the person who is anxious about presenting. They're simply different manifestations of the same unity. But living in a two-world reality, we don't see what one world has to do with the other. In addition, we have no practice in speaking about such things. We're embarrassed about seeing emotions and awkward about how to interact with them. We wonder, "Are they relevant to the situation? Is it my job to address them? Has the person given me the authority to speak about his anxiety? Is it appropriate to bring our personal life into our professional life? Am I opening a Pandora's box?" These questions arise on a daily basis, whether we're conscious of them or not. Yet by not addressing these emotions, we

invite disaster not only for the presentation, but also for the health of the presenter. The coherence, clarity, and focus of the presentation will be negatively affected by the anxiety of the presenter as well as his connection to the audience. And the presenter opens himself to physical breakdowns, such as stress-related diseases caused by the unexamined tension. In addition, his identity as a speaker will be judged negatively, placing his career in jeopardy.

Consider a similar example from a different context. A patient enters his physician's office complaining of chest pains. The doctor engages him in a conversation about his symptoms. Observing his mannerisms, inflection, and gestures, he interprets his patient's emotional state, attitude, and mood. He notices his breathing, constricted chest, skin color, and tone of voice. Then as he approaches and begins his examination with stethoscope, thermometer, and blood pressure instruments, a shift occurs. His patient becomes a collection of unrelated objects—a heart beat, pulse rate, blood pressure, respiration, and so on—that he analyzes, quantifies, measures, and perhaps performs surgery on. The former qualities no longer seem relevant, and the patient is successfully divided in order to be treated in a proper Cartesian manner. The causes for the malady can be overlooked as the patient is reduced to symptoms and parts. Don't mistake this as a condemnation of standard medical practices; they're useful and necessary. But our lack of practice—in being with the living presence of feelings, moods, emotions, spirit and excitement—keeps people objectified and at a distance. The price we pay for this is isolation, stress-related diseases, an inability to coordinate successfully with others, poor job performance, and a culture of resignation and dissatisfaction.

The combination of extinguishing the voice of an embodied living spirit in humans and nature with our unexamined devotion to materialism has placed us in a position analogous to the one Descartes faced three hundred years ago. His antidote of rationalism, and the subsequent splitting of mind and body, applied to a crisis of certainty has now become the breakdown. People are again living in a time of uncertainty, confusion, and bewilderment. To only understand is no longer sufficient. To live the life someone else assigns us is no longer fulfilling. Material wealth does not guarantee a good life. Dominating Nature, and our nature, is poisoning our water, air and bodies. Somatic practices and a re-interpretation of what it means to live an embodied life challenges the dogma of rationalism and offers a possibility in which human beings can creatively transform themselves and the world.

While the physical scientists of the 17th and 18th century asked, “Where are we?” in the universe; and the social scientists of the 19th century inquired, “Who are we?” in our relationship to Nature and the unconscious; we’re now at a time of history when the question is, “How are we?” in our inter-connectedness and inter-dependence with life. How we organize ourselves muscularly, emotionally, socially, and spiritually in realizing our destiny as human beings is the task of somatic coaching.