**Thoughts and Experience**
*Origins of the modern concept of mind*

**Sean Crawford**
Susan James is professor of philosophy at Birkbeck College, London; she is the author of the book Passion and Action, which is a study of the emotions in 17th Century philosophy. In the first part of her book she discussions the Aristotelian background to 17th century debates about the emotions. I talked to Susan James in April 2004 and began by asking her quite generally about how the Aristotelian concept of the soul differs from the Cartesian concept of the mind.

**Susan James**
I think perhaps initially the most important think to think about is that for Aristotle and for Aristotelian philosophers such as Aquinas the soul was what made a thing alive. It was what made you a living thing. So that what concerned him was how to distinguish between living things and others and Aristotle had a way of doing this which appealed to two absolutely central notions, matter and form. His idea was that what individuated different types of things and made for example, a woodpecker a woodpecker, or a palm tree a palm tree, was that it had a distinctive form or soul as he called it which made it alive and gave it the kind of properties that it had but that soul couldn't exist by itself it had to exist joined up with, or inhering in, as they sometimes say, matter, a kind of stuff or substrate which in itself didn't have any properties. Now then once you'd got all that in place the idea was that you could distinguish different types of living things by giving them different kinds of forms or souls as it were, so the simplest living things, plants, had what Aristotle called a vegetative soul, that gave them two sets of powers, a set of powers to reproduce and also a set of powers to feed themselves, digest. When they moved up to animals they thought that animals also had those capacities but they have additional ones as well which belonged to a second tier of the soul so to speak, called the sensitive soul, and that accounts for powers to perceive, to feel sensations, to have feelings, to remember, that sort of thing. And then finally in human beings there's a third tier of the soul as well called the intellectual soul and that's the kind of soul that gives you the ability to make judgements, so in human beings you have all that lot together. Now when Descartes comes along he cuts the soul down quite drastically, so all the functions that Aristotelians have in the vegetative soul and the sensitive soul get allocated to the body. Descartes says things like digestion and reproduction and more contentiously things like sensing and remembering as well, are all bodily functions, they can all be explained in hydraulic terms by all sorts of complicated bodily mechanisms which he spells out, emphasising again and again that in these ways human beings are just a sort of very complicated machine, like a clock, but Descartes retains the idea of the soul for what the Aristotelians had called the intellectual soul. So all that's left in the soul is this human sort of capacity for reasoning but Descartes recasts that rather and he describes the capacity of the soul just as a capacity to think. So if we now try to think about the differences between these two notions of the soul they're pretty enormous really. On one account the soul is a very baggy messy sort of entity that's responsible for all sorts of important functions. On the Cartesian account its much narrower, its just responsible for our capacity to think. On one account the soul is what makes us alive, but on the Cartesian one being alive doesn't depend on having a soul, being alive depends on your body working in a certain way. Descartes says that what happens when you die is that your body stops working and then incidentally your soul also leaves the body. So those are two very important things and maybe one should add that Descartes argues that the soul is something that only humans have, only humans have this capacity to think. So that you get a completely different break between human beings and the rest of the natural world in place of a theory which was extremely continuous in the Aristotelian mould.

**Sean Crawford** One of the implications of what you've just referred to as Descartes narrowing of the mind down to what the Aristotelians called the intellectual soul is that it appears that animals don't have minds. For its not entirely clear that animals possess the higher cognitive functions associated with the intellectual soul and Descartes is often thought to have denied that animals have minds, but we usually think of sensation and perception as parts of the mind and animals certainly have perceptions and sensations, at least it certainly seems that they do, so does Descartes have a problem here?

**Susan James**
Well, almost all or perhaps all, his contemporaries thought that he did. Nobody really bought this idea that animals don't have minds, if that is understood as animals don't feel anything at all. There is some ambiguity in Descartes' texts, I think, its difficult to see exactly whether he means that they have no sensations and no perceptions at all and they are just machines which he sometimes definitely says, or whether he thinks that the problem is that they can't have any sort or self-conscious reflection on their perceptions and sensations, although they can have those states. But either way it's a pretty strange theory if you think of a higher animal such as a horse, or a dog, let alone a monkey, and Descartes is in that way rather a strange philosopher, I think, he produces this very interesting and counter-intuitive sort of view. Then maybe related to that, its worth saying that when he talks about thinking in human beings he conceives it rather broadly, much more broadly than Aristotelians had conceived the kind of thinking that goes on in the intellectual soul. Thinking, Descartes thinks, has all sorts of different types, it includes reasoning and willing and perceiving and sensing and remembering and feeling emotions and so on. The point is that when various things happen in your body, like seeing something, I mean that's to say putting yourself in a certain physical relation to an object so that bodily changes go on, then your experience of that is of a certain sort of thought, in this case a perception, so a perception of a tree or something, and similarly when various things go on in your body your experience of those is of, shall we say, a feeling of pain, or a feeling of anger, Descartes wants to say that all those kinds of thoughts work across the divide between the body and the mind, but at the same time there are some kinds of thoughts which, as it were, go on in the mind alone and those are certain sorts of intellectual reasoning, moving your ideas around, understanding the connections between them and also willing, just as it were turn your attention to something or deciding that you will move your body in a certain way or something of that sort.

**Sean Crawford**
How well does that sit with the kind of things Descartes says in the meditations. What I'm thinking for example is he wants to say that its possible for an evil demon to deceive him into thinking he has a body even though he doesn't and so it seems that Descartes thinks that I could be having, lets not say perceptions because of course I can't actually see unless I have eyes, and if I don't have a body I can't actually see, but he seems to suggest that I could have what seems to me to be visual experiences even though I don't have a body, does that not indicate that visual experiences and say even the experiences of pain and things like that, really for him must occur in the mind, at least that part of sensation or perception, there is a kind of phenomenological part to them which must occur in the mind, the mind isn't simply for Descartes just pure intellectual reason.

**Susan James**
Absolutely. Now I think that's completely right and Descartes entertains the possibility that there could be a demon who deceived you into thinking that you were seeing a tree even though nothing at all existed outside your mind, there was no body let alone any tree, doesn't he, that's the idea and so he thinks it's sort of conceptually possibly to separate out the phenomenological thinking bit of a perception from the physical bodily process that goes into it normally. Of course at the end of the meditations he does reject the idea that he is being deceived, so he arrives at the conclusion that in fact what we've got are bodily processes and the accompanying experiences, trees, things going on in your actual body, things going on in your eyes and things going on in your mind as well. And that gives him this dreadful problem of connecting up what's going on in the body with what's going on in the mind. This is a problem I guess for Aristotelians as it is for Cartesians. Aristotelians have all sorts of incredibly complicated sort of conceptual apparatus for explaining how it is that for example sensations in the sensitive soul or perceptions or emotions or whatever can be appreciated by

the intellectual soul so that the intellectual soul can get some ideas of what's going on out there so to speak to get on and reason with, make judgements about, and Descartes has the same sort of problem, he's got all these hydraulic mechanical processes going on in the body and he's got to somehow explain how they're connected up to our thoughts, so for example my thought that I'm seeing a tree or my feeling that I'm really fed up today or whatever it is, and Descartes like the Aristotelians produces a rather arcane and wonderful theory which is the idea that there's a particular bit of the brain, the pineal gland, according to him, where movements in the body get, so to speak, translated into thoughts. So suppose that I see something very frightening, a wild boar in the forest, as happened to me very recently, so then all kinds of things go on in my body and these movements in my body get conveyed into my brain and the inside bits of my brain where the pineal gland is start shifting around in a particular way and those shifts so to speak result in my feeling of fear of the wild boar. However, of course for Descartes that cant be a simple causal relationship because what he's dealing with here is a relationship between two substances. Thomas Aquinas as we were saying earlier has this sort of tripartite notion of the soul that is, as it were, all mixed up with the body in a way and with the body's functions. Descartes makes a much sharper distinction between the body and the soul and that sharper distinction is reflected in the kind of entrelogical categories he uses because he says, look what we've got is two different kinds of stuff, two substances, and one of those is mind which has no spatial position, its just, I mean your soul isn't anywhere in particular, and the other one is body which has various physical characteristics like it takes up space and its parts can move around. So we have these two separate substances. Now then if we go back to the problem of how those substances connect Descartes difficulty is that he's got to explain how physical processes going on in the body movements and things like that, collisions can be translated into a thought which is a non-physical kind of a thing, it doesn't happen in any particular place, it isn't something that can be brought about causally by a movement. So he just says, well movements in the brain somehow correlate with, result in, or whatever, thoughts, and that's a big difficulty for him.

**Sean Crawford**
So, we've talked a bit about how Descartes' views differ from the older Aristotelian tradition and in particular we know that the rise of modern science brought about the replacement of the Aristotelian hylomorphic metaphysics with the new Cartesian mechanistic one and we have a dualist metaphysics replacing the earlier tripartite view of the soul, so that there's quite a radical break with tradition, but what I'm wondering is whether or not there was anything of significance to the philosophy of mind that remained from the older Aristotelian tradition and that continued to exert an influence throughout the later scientific period, did anything like that actually remain?

**Susan James**
I think it did, I mean the first thing is that Aristotelianism has a very long life its not as though mechanism just arrives and Aristotelianism is dead, so not only do they coexist for a while but also there's a lot of backing and filling between them because each has its strengths and weaknesses. One thing that is common and stays in place really, though of course gets reworked is this distinction between passion and action. This is important to Aristotle because he uses it to distinguish things that you do, actions, or things that are done, causes, from things that happen, things that are done to things, effects, and things that are done to you, things that come outside to you, and one of the important applications of that idea in Aristotelian philosophy and also much more widely is the thought that emotions are things that happen to you, that's why they are called passions, they sort of come over you and they're contrasted with, for example volitions, willings, things that you actually do. That distinction, I think remains in place and continues to play a very important part in early modern philosophy. Another thing of course that's very important for mechanism is that it has the problem of explaining all sorts of complicated processes including large chunks of mental ones, like all the bodily parts of our sensations and perceptions and so on in physical terms, and quite a lot of 17$^{th}$ century philosophers when they wonder to themselves can physical motions of bits of matter bumping into one another really explain all these complicated natural processes that we have, and all these complicated features of our thinking, then they conclude, no they can't. And so that leads some of them to think that the material world must be imbued with a sort of souledness, if you like, there must be some kind of soul-like feature of parts of the material world and in that way they merge the very sharp distinction that

somebody like Descartes has forged between body and matter and move back to something a little more like and Aristotelian theory where the functions of the soul are sort of located around the body and there's at least a question as to whether the soul is really separate from the body or whether its just mingled in with it which is a huge debate within scholastic philosophy. So that's a second thing and I suppose that another question that worries them is whether a Cartesian has really got a good enough theory of individuation of what it is that makes an individual thing and so that in somebody like Leibniz for instance you find the move back to Aristotelianism there.

**Sean Crawford**
You mentioned the passions and that the emotions were a kind of passion. The emotions are currently receiving a lot of attention from philosophers, psychologists and neuro-scientists. Have the emotions always been a focus of attention in thinking about the mind?

**Susan James**
Well, I think mainly, but not always. In the 19th century when psychology and philosophy first get distinguished from each other and psychology becomes a separate field then it seems to me that philosophers tend to start concentrating more on the cognitive aspects of the mind and less on the emotional ones. This is all a bit approximate but that's roughly true I think, and I think that's true for a large part of the 20th century too, particularly within the analytical tradition that the emotions really get lost and they get swallowed up in a very baggy messy sort of notion of a desire as the thing that motivates us to action. So this recent revival of interest in the emotions really goes back to a way of thinking that was dominant as far as I can see throughout the philosophical tradition more or less until the end of the 18th century in one guise or another. For those philosophers, for earlier philosophers, I think it was important because for them philosophy was very much to do with the problem of how to live well and the question of how to live well was amongst other things the question about how to manage your emotions or passions, and remember particularly if you were still inclined to think of your passions as sort of coming at you from outside then how you resisted them or controlled them, or diverted them, or whatever, was a fundamental set of questions and once you had that set of questions in place then I suppose the question of what these things were and how they fitted into the mind, did they belong in the body, did they belong in the mind, what on earth were they? All those sorts of questions were very important as well.

**Sean Crawford**
Is it possible, according to Descartes, that the disembodied mind could have the experience of fearing a wolf?

**Susan James**
I don't think that the disembodied mind could experience the wolf or be afraid of it because it looks as though that particular emotional response depends on perception or any way on memory and Descartes locates quite a lot of memory in the body as well. However, he does seem to think that a disembodied mind has certain, or is capable of having certain sorts of emotions and that arises from the fact that he like many other philosophers takes it that the experience of thinking is itself an emotional one and furthermore a tremendously pleasurable one, a terrific amount of philosophical self-justification goes on here, that there's really nothing so wonderful as philosophical thinking which the mind can do by itself. So, Descartes calls these feelings intellectual emotions or something like that and he thinks that they can feel very like the sort of emotions that we have when we're embodied, at least he seems to imply that, but they are not passions as he calls it, they are not affects or passions like our ordinary loves and fears and hates and whatnot, because they don't have the same sort of causal process that creates them.

**Sean Crawford**
So if the intellectual or rational emotions as opposed to the passions or I think sometimes he calls them the sensual emotions, those intellectual emotions they arise entirely within the mind or within the soul? Whereas the passions, do they always have to arise from the body?

**Susan James**
Yes, that does seem to be what he's saying that most of our passions, all our ordinary passions depend on our being embodied and they are part of our embodied response to the world, whereas you can imagine a disembodied mind which would be capable of having these intellectual emotions all on its own and presumably since Descartes thinks that the soul is immortal, I mean presumably that's part of what its like for the soul to survive after death.

**Sean Crawford**
Yes, and so presumably angels for example, will have intellectual or rational emotions?

**Susan James**
Yes, yes, that's right, that seems to be a direct implication, though Descartes doesn't actually engage in the huge debate that there is about angels.

**Sean Crawford**
Descartes says that certain states cannot be referred to the body alone or the soul alone. Sensation, perception and emotion involve the intermingling of the mind and the body and its this intermingling that generates sensation, perception and emotion but of course the problem is that he does have a rigid substance dualism, so take sensation for example the feeling of pain or the visual experience that I'm having right now, that has to either be part of the mind or the body, it has to be referred to the body alone or the soul alone, even if its normally brought about by the body, it has to eventually occur in the mind, doesn't Descartes have to accept that and so the upshot simply is that for Descartes the mind does expand to include a lot more than was there previously or that previous philosophers had thought, there is a sort of phenomenological sensual element in the mind.

**Susan James**
Yes, its perfectly true that Descartes takes over a whole lot of qualities which Aristotelians had put in the sensitive soul and he puts them in the mind along with the qualities of the intellectual soul and just calls them all different kinds of thoughts and he himself was very proud of this invention of his, I mean of this idea that what the soul does is to think and so you can, as it were, put all these different sorts of states in one box and of course that's remained terribly important for us, we still have the idea that this whole mishmash of different sorts of state all fit into this box called the mental. Now, about the states that as it were cross the boundary, one might think of it like this that Descartes is trying to produce a programme which, a scientific programme, which is as powerful as possible, so he's got this kind of mechanist science and he's trying to push it to the limits. So he comes up with these really wonderfully imaginative mechanical explanations of all sorts of bodily processes and he pushes it as far as he can with things like sensations and perceptions and emotions. He wants to give as much of a physical explanation of them as he can, but then he has to acknowledge this boundary and so he's got to have some things that, he's got to allow rather, that there are some things which as it were straddle the boundary, they turn up on both sides but he allows that without thinking that there's a causal connection between them and without really trying to explain the relationship and that poses a further problem, one can think of philosophers of the next generation, take somebody like Spinoza for instance, who think yes, alright that seems right, there's a physical element to this and a mental element to this and now lets really try and use that thought to produce a different kind of dualism.

**Sean Crawford**
Susan James, thank you very much indeed.