ABSTRACT. Elizabeth Anscombe and Anthony Kenny disagree on whether or not it is possible to doubt the existence of one’s own body. Anscombe believes that such doubt makes sense while Kenny argues that it could make sense only if one supposed that he had become a bodyless Cartesian ego. To resolve the issue I explore the knowledge one acquires of himself, and thus the manner in which such knowledge might be weakened into doubt. Siding with Anscombe, I argue that under the conditions of sensory deprivation some very basic questions asked of oneself such as, "Which body?" cannot be answered. Without such answers, one can be uncertain about his own body. Such uncertainty, however, is to be explained by the autonomy of the relevant 'I-thoughts' and not because one had become a Cartesian ego.

I intend to show that under the conditions of sensory deprivation it makes sense for one to doubt that, at that moment, he has a body. I will argue further that the acceptability of such a doubt does not depend on assuming that one has become a bodyless Cartesian ego. The particulars of the argument will derive from defending this belief, as initially conceived by Elizabeth Anscombe, against an attack made by Anthony Kenny.1 Before I get to them, however, I would like to state what I take to be the main concepts and issues involved.

The issue turns on one’s understanding of the nature of first person expressions of self-consciousness—the so called, ‘I-thoughts’. What is most important about them is that they are, in themselves, logically autonomous and complete. To speak of a thought as autonomous in this special sense is to deny two things that are commonly part of the logic of thoughts. Typically the occurrence of a thought points to a person who is thinking it—i.e., the thought’s subject. These thoughts of self-consciousness are, however, understandable and intelligible without any reference, implicit or otherwise, to anything as their subject. Since I have elaborated on the "subjectlessness" of these concepts in another paper, I will not dwell on it here. This paper is about the second part of the autonomy thesis, namely, what I choose to call the "objectlessness" of these thoughts. The object of a thought—i.e., what that thought is about, is commonly something other than the thought itself. As it may be a thought of the sky or a thought of a car, and as the sky and a car are distinct from the thoughts about them, such thoughts may be said to have ulterior objects. Thoughts of self-consciousness...
are, in this sense, objectless, because they are, by hypothesis, reflexive, and are of themselves. "Objectless" is, perhaps, not the happiest of terms since the ideas are clearly about something, namely, the ideas themselves and their content. The point is that there is nothing outside of this content such as an experience for these ideas to be about. I will explain the mechanism by which such reflexive ideas have content in the absence of an "ulterior object".

Basic to an understanding of this mechanism is the recognition that there are two ways in which one may be said to think about himself. First, one may think about himself in just the manner in which he thinks about any other object. For example, I might think of all of the things that are currently touching my desk. The list would include, all in the same logical category, some paper, a pencil, myself and a computer. One would thus be thinking about himself as an object, i.e., objectively. Such a perspective generates experiences in which one is aware of the objects around him and of himself in relation to them. This is to think of oneself as he might appear to others, from the "outside", so to speak, as an observer. Because thoughts of this sort are not reflexive their objects are always ulterior to the thought itself. Consequently the thought and its object are conceptually distinct.

Also because they are of one's experiences of things distinct from his thinking, e.g., seeing a chair, touching a desk, etc., they are logically incomplete if they do not have at least an implicit reference to oneself as subject. Here think of Descartes' argument using the wax example at the end of the Second Meditation.

For if I judge that the wax exists from the fact that I see this wax, it is much clearer that I myself exist because of this same fact that I see it.

There is, however, a second way in which one may think about himself. He may think about, for example, his actions in a manner said to be self-conscious. A part of what we normally mean when we say that someone is having an experience is that he is directly aware of it. This direct awareness is "thinking of oneself" from the "inside", not as an observer but as a participant. From this subjective standpoint I could, for example, speak of the cold, smooth feeling that I have in both of my forearms as I lean upon my desk. These experiences have a logic that distinguishes them from the preceding objective ones. Specifically, Descartes' argument does not work. These thoughts cannot contain even an implicit reference to oneself as subject while retaining their character as something about which one is immediately aware.

They are, by hypothesis, reflexive and typically a part of ordinary experiences; i.e., a part of having such an experience is one's awareness of it as his own. If, for example, one has the ideas of coolness and smoothness, it is, of course, correct to point out that they came from the contact one's body had with the desk, but there is no ongoing need for the experience to continue in order for one to continue to reflect on it. Such reflection is reflexive and is, therefore, inconsistent with the type of reflection that is of something other than itself, e.g., a current experience of something. Because the ideas of self-consciousness are, in their natural state, autonomous, they are not rendered defective by the absence of any experiences for them to be about.
Kenny's disagreement with Anscombe focuses on the possibility of doubting the existence of one's own body. He believes that any use of the first person reflexive pronoun 'I' to refer to one's own body is empty. "I am this body" is without significance because, he thinks, there cannot even be an imaginary set of circumstances for which such an utterance would be false.5

Any circumstances which we could imagine which would suggest a divorce between the two (a first-person idea and the body that is the subject-matter of that idea!) would to the same extent call in question the sense of the 'I' in the 'I'-thoughts.

Anscombe, however, believes that propositions like "I am this body" say something. According to Kenny she believes, "... that content can be given to 'I'-thoughts [even] where there is no person identifiable as an actual or possible utterer of the thoughts".6 However, to suppose that there could be significant 'I'-thoughts thus detached from a body, is to suggest that they must be attached to something bodyless. Thus Kenny concludes that "... the thinker of these thoughts who is possible not this person with this body seem uncomfortably close to a Cartesian ego".7 He is then, in effect, giving the following argument. Anything that could disconnect one's bodily experiences from one's 'I-thoughts' enough to generate uncertainty about the existence of his body, would, ipso facto, cast doubt on the sense of that uncertainty and the meaningfulness of the ideas that constitute it.

Kenny believes that "... the sense of 'I' in the 'I'-thought..." will be undermined because the only suitable subject for such thoughts of bodylessness would be a Cartesian ego, and this would be absurd. I will not argue with Kenny on whether or not a Cartesian ego is absurd. What I will dispute is the need to talk about it.

This argument begins with an understanding of the case of sensory deprivation which Anscombe presents as follows.8

And now imagine that I got into a state of 'sensory deprivation'. Sight is cut off, and I am locally anesthetized everywhere, perhaps floated in a tank of tepid water; I am unable to speak, or to touch any part of my body with any other. Now I tell myself "I won't let this happen again". I the object meant by "I" is this body, this human being, then in these circumstances it won't be present to my senses; and how else can it be 'present to' me? But have I lost what I mean by "I"? Is that not present to me?

The answers to the three questions ending the quotation are, I believe: (1) There is no other way in which this body may be present to me. (2) I have not lost what I mean by "I". (3) It is still present to me. The fact that these are the correct answers will emerge by the end of the paper.
In remarking on this case Kenny claims that

In the normal case it is not by sensory experience that I know I have a body; the lack of sensory experience therefore does not prevent me knowing that I have a body, and does not prevent my 'I'-thoughts from being about that body. If I did render it uncertain whether I had a body it would, for the reasons given, render unclear the sense of 'I' in the 'I'-thoughts.

He believes that the case of deprivation is, from an epistemological standpoint, not all that out of the ordinary. Because we do not normally use sensory experience in the formation of the thoughts that we have of our own bodies, there is no reason to expect a change in those ideas, were we to be deprived of it. If, however, deprivation were somehow enough to make one doubt the truth of, "I am this body", it would also raise a question about the sense of any co-existent 'I'-thoughts. On the assumption that these thoughts must be attached to something, they could be detached from a body only if they were attached to something bodyless like a Cartesian ego.

I think that, in a certain sense, Kenny is right when he says that we do not normally use sensations to say things about our body. What I have in mind when I say this, is a doctrine found in The Philosophical Investigations and used also by Anscombe in her book Intention as well as in this article.10

Wittgenstein considers the proposition that "My kinesthetic sensations advise me of the movement and position of my limbs". If this thesis were correct, I would know that, for example, my legs are crossed because I would be aware of certain sensations. These sensations presumably emanate from the limbs in question, and are characteristic of the position the limbs in question happen to be in at the moment of their emanation. So, because I am aware of sensations Sa, Sb, and Sc, and on the basis of that awareness, I am able to say correctly that my legs are crossed. If asked, "How do you know that they are crossed?", I would answer, "Because of sensations Sa, Sb, and Sc".

This is an epistemological view about the nature of the knowledge that one has of his body posture under perfectly normal conditions. It tells us that because such knowledge rests on data, it is evidentiary. Put simply, however, there are no sensations of that sort that function in that way. Kinesthetic sensations of this kind are a philosophical fiction. The philosophical fact is that under normal conditions, we know directly, and not on the basis of any evidence or data, the position that our body is in. The issue between Kenny and Anscombe arises only after one rejects this theory of kinesthetic sensations and accepts that such knowledge is non-evidentiary. If we agree that we do not normally use any bodily sensations in the formation of these thoughts, as both Kenny and Anscombe do, then how could it be, as Anscombe says, that sensory deprivation has an adverse impact on them?

This is not, however, the whole of the topic of kinesthetic sensations. The doctrine that has been rejected is an evidential one. Let me quote the relevant passage from The Investigations.11
I may be able to tell the direction from which a sound comes only because it affects one ear more strongly than the other, but I don't feel this in my ears; yet it has this effect: I know the direction from which the sound comes; for instance, I look in that direction.

What Wittgenstein is acknowledging is a physiological fact. It is a causal claim whose truth is compatible with the falsity of the evidential version. Because sound strikes one ear more forcefully than it does the other, I am able to say correctly (know) the direction from which it has come. What is still not true is that my claim, "The train is over there" has been made on the basis of my having detected a stronger sound with, say, my left ear. But it is only this evidential thesis that is false. The physiological claim is true, and it is its truth that Kenny does not allow for. When he says that "... the lack of sensory experience does not prevent me knowing that I have a body..." he is, in one very important respect, wrong. Although its lack does not deprive me of the evidence I need, it does strip me of the ability to directly know things about my body.

The question, "How do you know?", is, in this setting, ambiguous. If it is a request for evidence or justification then, in the normal case, it is to be rejected. However, it may also be a request for an elaboration of the causal conditions necessary to the claim in question, and it is in this sense that it is relevant to the argument. The summary answer to this interpretation is, "Because I am normal". Here it is not a matter of evidence or truth. This answer indicates that the causal conditions needed to make such a claim have been satisfied. It cites one's credentials as a normal person which provide him, in turn, with the authority to speak in this manner. Of course, having the appropriate credentials and authority does not mean that what one says will thereby be true. One's authority can be misused. But it does mean that, on the one hand, one has established himself as a person who can legitimately make such direct, non-observational claims. As such it establishes a privileged access between oneself and his body. On the other hand, it also means that if one is not physically normal, then, depending on the nature of the abnormality, he may lack this ability and therefore lose the authority that he had.

In ruling out the use of evidence, the key phrase is "under normal conditions". The point is not to rule it out as a matter of principle, but to indicate that its use is not a part of a normal operation. Consider a case of partial deprivation, which is like Anscombe's only not as extensive. Let us imagine that it is only one's legs that have received the local anesthetic and that everything else is unaffected. Under these condition one's legs are not normal, so that with respect to them, one does not have the ability and authority to make the claims that he would otherwise have. This does not mean that he must remain silent for it is under just these circumstances that evidence comes into play. One would have to find out whether or not his legs were crossed, and he could do this quite easily in the same way anyone else would, e.g., by looking. Because the anesthesia has deprived him of his normal ability, his position vis-a-vis his own body becomes that of a spectator. His body, or a portion of it, has become just another object to be seen and touched in the same manner in which other objects are.
This is, however, preliminary to the case of full sensory deprivation. Here the local anesthesia has been applied throughout one's body; none of the senses work, and one is unable to speak. Kenny claims that under these conditions I, nevertheless, know that I have a body, and that my 'I'-thoughts may still be about that body. Although he makes it sound like business as usual, there certainly have been some basic changes. Because one is no longer able to have any physical experiences, he has lost the normal ability to directly assert facts about his bodily posture. That ability was causally dependent upon a properly functioning nervous system. One cannot fall back on observation as he could in the previous case of partial deprivation, since, by hypothesis, that has been eliminated as well. This means that one has no awareness or experience of his own body.

Before the onset of deprivation, the question, "How do you know?", had two possible answers: (1) "Because I am normal", or, (2) "Because I have observed". Now neither of these are possible. This does not mean, as Kenny correctly notes, that I cannot have 'I'-thoughts or that they cannot be about my body. I have not been rendered unconscious, so there is nothing to prevent me from thinking about anything I choose, including my body. What has been taken from me is my ability to think about myself in the same way in which I think about other objects, namely, in terms of my experiences of them. What I am prevented from having are thoughts about specific states of my body, which I can determine to be true. I may have the thought, 'my legs are crossed', and I may have it at the exact moment at which they are in fact crossed. But under these circumstances, I cannot claim to know it since I cannot connect the thought with any awareness I have of what it is about, namely, my body. It would be, at best, a mere coincidence that I had the thought at the moment at which it was true, and that is not enough to support a knowledge claim.

As an abstract, objective fact whose truth is to be established independently of one's experiences, it is, of course, correct to say that one must have a body in order to have any thoughts at all. But for all that, the body that I 'know' that I must have is one which, for the moment at least, provides me with no information or experiences. Although logic may compel me to accept, "I have a body", it does nothing in the least to answer the next question, "Which body?" I remain, therefore, in doubt about my body because I am unable to respond to the above question with the only answer that could make sense, namely, "This body", or, what would be the same, "My body". My previous ability to talk about my body has deteriorated into the recognition of the need for a body.

At this point, skepticism about one's own body would be quite reasonable. "This body" has become an expression with no first person, present tense use. Not only am I unable to assert the present existence of my body, I am unable to deny it as well. As a demonstrative expression, "this body" must be used in the presence of its referent which, as said or thought by me of myself, would normally mean either a direct or indirect bodily experience. "This body" is to be unpacked in terms of things that I might do and experiences that I might ordinarily have. For example, I might say "this body" while swinging a tennis racket or looking in the mirror while shaving. But under the conditions of deprivation I have none of the experiences which could normally serve as reasons or grounds for some belief about the state of my body. Although I know
that, as an abstract claim, "I have a body" must be true, I am in the very puzzling position of not knowing anything at all about it.

Because I no longer have any experiences, I have lost the privileged access to my body that I formerly had. Like an observer, I am now dependent on finding out about it. But, unlike him, there is no way in which I can do that because my senses have been neutralized.

Only abstract generalities or recollections from the past are available to me. Although I could deny, for example, that my body was in a particular position, "I know I'm not in a lotus", I could not say this because I knew the position my body was in but only because of my general inability to put it into that one. Neither do I believe that knowing how to restore things to normal is enough to remove the oddity. Whatever might happen in the future when the anesthesia wears off or whatever was the case in the past, the current fact is that I do not know if I now have my body. Even though I might correctly believe that in the future my doubt will be resolved, the fact remains that now it is well founded. Not having any of the experiences which normally constitute one's awareness of his own body brings us right to the point about which Kenny is fearful: "... the thinker of these thoughts who is possibly not this person with this body", and that, he says, "seems uncomfortably similar to a Cartesian ego".

Although the sensory deprivation case does drive a wedge between first person ideas and the body of the person who has the ideas, it does not support the belief in a Cartesian ego. Rather it calls to our attention the difference between being self-conscious and being conscious of something. Under the circumstances of full deprivation we have lost consciousness not only of our body but of everything else as well. Since we are not unconscious we can continue to think. We are, thus, to conclude that thinking about something can exist independently from being conscious of it. We can think about anything, including an experience, without having it. For example, one may now think about an experience in the past in which he knew his legs were crossed. The only actual occurring experience connected with this would be the second-order one of the thinking itself. These thoughts that continue on it spite of deprivation do so only because they do not involve one's being aware of anything other than the thought itself. Although we speak of one's awareness of these thoughts, making it appear as though there was a distinction between the awareness and the thought, there is, in fact, just the reflexive thought. The consciousness that they manifest is, thus, reflexive self-consciousness. Unlike the consciousness that is of something, self-consciousness logically makes no reference to either a subject or an ulterior object. There is, of course, the empirical need for one's body to continue on, but not as a content of one's consciousness.

If one is worried about providing implicit support for the existence of a Cartesian ego, the most important point to remember about sensory deprivation is that it eliminates one's consciousness of his body and not his body. Local anesthesia blocks consciousness, it does not dissolve body tissue. So, it is one's awareness of his body and not his body itself that has been lost. Kenny is not clear on this. In remarking on the deprivation case, he says:
For If I no longer have a body, then I no longer exist, as Professor Anscombe explicitly concedes. And if I do not exist, then I cannot be making resolves either.

Sensory deprivation can, for the reasons given, lead one to conclude, "I do not know if I am this body". But this is vastly different from saying that I no longer have a body. A part of what is epistemologically provocative about this case is that, from one point of view, it entitles me to doubt the certainty of something which, from another view, is quite obviously true. Thus is not only highlights need for there to be objective reasons in support of a knowledge claim, but for me to have them if I am to be justified in making the claim. Someone could certainly make true statements about my body's current condition. That someone, however, could not be me.

The difference between Anscombe and Descartes should now be clear. For Descartes the possibility that I am not a body was genuine. For Anscombe it is merely an imaginary condition designed to serve several functions. First, it showed that even under normal circumstances our ability to directly say how things are with our body was causally dependent on a normal nervous system. Second, it showed, in the case of modified deprivation, how, when claims about one's own body posture cannot be made directly, they can indeed rest on observation. Finally, and most importantly, it showed that even if one were no longer conscious of any current facts about his body, he could, nevertheless, continue to have thoughts about it. The consciousness manifest in these thoughts is self-consciousness. What makes self-consciousness separable from consciousness is not its attachment to a bodyless Cartesian ego but its autonomy.

ENDNOTES


3 For the argument that shows this to be true, see, "Subjectlessness of Self-Consciousness", 673.

4 For an atypical example in which this awareness is missing from an experience, see Anscombe, 20, and "Subjectlessness", 676.


6 Kenny, 13.

7 Kenny, 13; Anscombe, 58.

8 Anscombe, 58.
9 Kenny, 12.


12 Kenny seizes upon this inability to speak as bringing with it the problems of a private language, about which Wittgenstein has warned us. I think that this is a mistake. The private language that was of concern to Wittgenstein was not one that resulted from having been temporarily struck dumb, as we have here. But Kenny's misplaced concern may be symptomatic of his larger confusion. If one were not temporarily struck dumb but rendered bodyless, then such concern would be on the mark. See Kenny, 8-9, 11. See infra. 16.

13 Kenny, 12.

14 Kenny, 13.

15 Locke's claim that "... thinking consists in being conscious that one thinks" applies to this class of thoughts. It does not apply to being conscious of something. What misleads Locke is that although being conscious of something is an act of consciousness it is not a reflexive act. It is consciousness of an object and not of itself.

16 Kenny, 11.