

# *Does Descartes' Metaphysics Allow For Out of Body & Near Death Experiences?*

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## *Abstract*

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Descartes offers an argument for a real distinction between the mind and body. He also demonstrates strong reasons for the substantial union of mind and body. This is known as substance dualism. I will briefly present and grant that he has demonstrated these two sufficiently and will then subject the Cartesian understanding of the soul and body to philosophical pressure of the very special kind.

Veridical perception is a truthful or genuine observation of reality that can possibly occur outside the physical body. I will specifically focus on two types of these veridical perceptions; namely visual and auditory. I will then offer two types of arguments where veridical perception can be empirically verified and corroborated; these will be in the form of an out of body experience (OBE) and a near-death-experience (NDE). These two cases entail that some form of consciousness leaves the physical body; in the former the body is alive, in that of the later, the body and brain are both clinically dead. Finally, I will give an explanation of how Descartes' metaphysics allows for the possibility of both phenomena.

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## *1 Introduction*

This paper will make a contribution to the branch of philosophy associated with the philosophy of mind. A major topic in the philosophy of mind is the mind-body problem. Essentially, this is concerned with how the mind and body interact, are distinct, or can form a union with one another. Philosophers have disagreed over these points, which concern their ability to explain certain phenomena observed in nature. Two prominent views in this disagreement are known as monism and substance dualism. This paper will primarily concern itself with the later view.

The tactical aim of this paper will be to represent the Cartesian understanding of substance dualism, with regards to human beings, then subject it to philosophical pressure concerning the phenomena of out of body experiences (OBE's) and near death experience's (NDE's). I will then interact with Descartes' literature in more detail to see

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if it can provide sufficient explanations to these examples. Finally, I will conclude that his metaphysics does indeed allow for both these phenomena.

## 2 *The Cartesian Landscape*

### 2.1 *Descartes' View of Mind & Body; Distinction and Union*

In an attempt to resist hyperbolic doubt (1<sup>st</sup> meditation), Descartes methodologically introspects and gives a metaphysical account of human beings, in the form of six meditations. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> -5<sup>th</sup> meditation he gives us a metaphysical groundwork for the mind and body, and in the 6<sup>th</sup> meditation he gives us the distinction between the two. Here's how. If we were to construct a *logical* flow, he first establishes the existence of the "I", and then it's essence as a thinking thing. This is the *Cogito*; it is here that we get the foundational principles for this [I think, therefore I am]. Then he establishes the essence of body in the 5<sup>th</sup> meditation. Afterwards, he establishes the criteria for clearness and distinctness principle in the 4<sup>th</sup> meditation. He then uses this as a principle in the formulation of his argument in the 6<sup>th</sup> meditation as such:

#### *The Real Distinction Argument*

1. Everything I clearly and distinctly perceive is true.
  2. If I clearly and distinctly perceive x apart from y, then they are really distinct and capable of separation (at least by God, or as we will see, by other ways).
  3. I clearly and distinctly perceive myself as a thinking, non-extended thing apart from body, an extended, non-thinking thing.
- Therefore, I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.

Now we get the implications about union of mind and body. This is different in kind from the distinctness proof because it does not rely on clarity and distinctness; it relies on nature and experience to know that it's the case. An analogy of this type of union between the mind and the body was expressed as such, "Nature teaches me, but these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, and so on, that 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."<sup>2</sup>

Here's a summary of the metaphysics that Descartes has provided us with, with respect to human beings:

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<sup>2</sup> John Cottingham, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Vol. 2* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 56.

- a. Metaphysics of mind; I am a thinking thing *res cogitans* or “non-extended”). If a mind exists it necessarily must be thinking. From this we have sensations, perceptions, and understandings.
- b. Metaphysics of body; I am a non-thinking thing, *res extensa* or “extended thing”). If a body exists it necessarily must be extended. From this we have size, shape, motion, and rest.
- c. Mind/Body Composite; I am a contingent union of mind and body, which is a combination of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. From this we have sensations, passions, and appetites<sup>3</sup>.

Simply put, it is *explicit* that the nature of the distinction argument is of necessity and *implied* that the union is of contingency. So we have the metaphysics that Descartes is bound to, and it follows from this that if it’s the case that a human being is a body harnessed to a mind, except after death, the mind may continue to exist and function. In the sections that follow, I will demonstrate that certain cases like OBE’s and NDE’s seem to temporarily break this contingent union, of mind and body.

### ***3 Philosophical Pressure of a Unique Kind***

#### ***3.1 Veridical Perception: Visual and Auditory***

Veridical perception occurs when OBErs and NDErs apparently accurately perceive events in reality from a vantage point outside their physical bodies. “...events that are imperceptible from the vantage point of their physical bodies”<sup>4</sup>. I will specifically focus on accounts that involve visual and/or auditory veridical perception for the remainder of the paper. It will also be noted that these cases will *all* have features of corroboration. This was first mentioned, by the pioneer in the field, Raymond Moody, Ph.D., M.D., who started the investigative research into cases that dealt with NDE’s:

The question naturally arises whether any evidence of the reality of near-death experiences might be acquired independently of the descriptions of the experiences themselves. Many persons report being out of their bodies for extended periods and witnessing many events in the physical world during the interlude. Can any of these reports be checked out with other witnesses who were

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Dr. Patricia Easton for helping me understand firmly Descartes’ metaphysical commitments and to Dr. Stephen T. Davis for helping me with edits and revisions of similar drafts.

<sup>4</sup> See IANDS (International Association for Near-Death Studies) for more information.

known to be present, or with later confirming events, and thus be corroborated? In quite a few instances, the somewhat surprising answer to this question is “yes”.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.2 *Out of Body Experiences*

In the case of Miss’s Z, she experienced episodes where she would wake up 1-2 times a night from her sleep. Each time this happened she would be floating above her body near the ceiling of her bedroom, wide-awake. She did not really know what her OBE was or how to control it, so she sought help. Dr. Tart, a clinical psychologist, tested her in a sleep laboratory setting. He chose a 5 digit number from a book of random numbers (that he and he alone knew), 25132, wrote it on a flash card, and put it on a bookshelf high above her bed. He then told her that if she had an OBE, during her sleep that she was to look for the number (she had no idea where the number was or that it was 5 digits long). On the fourth night she woke up, had an OBE, and told him the number correctly. The odds of this are 1 in 100,000 for guessing the number correctly on the first try. This is an example of an OBE that demonstrates corroboration of visual veridical perception<sup>6</sup>. This is when the person<sup>7</sup> is alive and asleep. Next I will give more dramatic examples of OBE, where all the victims also experience NDE, and have temporary clinical, body and brain death.

### 3.3 *Near Death Experiences*

To be clear, all of the cases that follow maintain that death implies clinical death; this is where the heart stops and the brain is inactive, with no measurement on an EEG. Case 1: Pam Reynolds was diagnosed with a brain aneurysm and her neurosurgeon performed a rare surgery known as “hypothermic cardiac arrest” or “standstill”. “Pam’s body temperature was lowered to 60 degrees, her heartbeat and breathing were stopped, her brain waves were flattened, and all the blood was drained from her head. For all practical purposes, she was put to death”<sup>8</sup>. While she was temporarily dead she had an NDE that involved an OBE. She stated that she

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond A Moody, *Life after Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon--Survival of Bodily Death* (St. Simons Island, GA: Mockingbird Books, 1975), 94.

<sup>6</sup> Charles T. Tart. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 1968, vol. 62, no. 1, pp. 3-27.

<sup>7</sup> From this point on, I will use *person* interchangeably with Descartes’ using *human being*.

<sup>8</sup> Janice Miner Holden, Bruce Greyson, and Debbie James, *The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation* (Praeger, 2009), 191–193.

experienced sensations but that they were not bodily sensations. She noticed that she was above her body looking down. She said that her body looked terrible, like a train wreck. She commented that her vision was brighter, focused, and more clear than normal vision. Some of the things that she perceived were that her head was shaved in a peculiar way that she thought they were going to take all of her hair off but they didn't. She saw a saw that they used on her that had interchangeable blades; it looked like an electric toothbrush and had a dent in it. She also heard the saw being used and also heard a female doctor complain that her veins and arteries were very small. "... her case is the one most widely recognized as containing, to date, the most detailed and objectively corroborated content, it points the most convincingly to the "reality" of NDE's and all that such reality implies".<sup>9</sup>

Case 2: Maria, who had a heart attack, then NDE, in which she floated above her room and outside the hospital, and saw a shoe on the outside ledge of a window of the third floor. She noticed the precise details of the shoe such that the little toe area was worn and one of the shoe positioned underneath the heel. This could have only been seen from the vantage point of being outside. Afterwards, she told her nurse Kimberly Clark, who was very skeptical about such things. Later Clark went to investigate for herself and found that the shoe was precisely as the way Maria described it. The only difference for Clark was that she had to see the shoe through a window. Clark concluded, "The only way she could have had such a perspective was if she had been floating right outside and at very close range to the tennis shoe. I retrieved the shoe and brought it back to Maria; it was very concrete evidence for me"<sup>10</sup>.

Case 3: There's another case of NDE, where a Russian scientist, George Rodonaia, was killed when a car hit him. His body was put in a morgue for three days. While in an OBE state, he observed in a nearby room that a baby was crying. He was able to communicate with this baby without words and somehow knew that this baby was crying persistently because he had a broken arm. When the Dr. pulled

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>10</sup> Kimberly Clark Sharp, *After the Light: What I Discovered on the Other Side of Life That Can Change Your World* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1995), 243.

his body out to conduct an autopsy, Rodonaia came back to life. Later, when Rodonaia returned to life, he told the infant's parents about the broken arm; an X-ray showed that the infant's arm was fractured.<sup>11</sup>

A famous pioneer in the studies of NDE's, that have OBE's, is Cardiologist Dr. van Lommel, M.D. In a recent conference, he has described patients that have had experiences such that a 6-year girl died by drowning in a swimming pool. She was later resuscitated; and she drew a detailed picture (while having an OBE) of the scenario around her body; people doing chest compressions on here from the side of her body. The common sense notion that follows from this is that children that young don't know what people doing chest compressions, even looks like<sup>12</sup>. He also describes a cases (NDE's with OBE's) in which woman who was color blind from birth was able to see colors for the first time and another woman named Vicky, that was born blind from birth, that was able to see for the first time. Above her body she visually recognized her wedding ring, something that she knew previously, only by touch. It was only then that she knew that it was *her* dead body she was looking at.<sup>13</sup>

Scientific research shows that in a NDE experience, it is possible for the existence of a disembodied person. Moreover, these six cases provide reasons to believe that veridical perception can exist outside of dead bodies and brains; this has been demonstrated by visual and auditory means of consciousness. It is also worthy to note that in all of the NDE cases that I've mentioned, none of the survivors had and sensations of pain while disembodied. However, there are possible defeaters to these examples.

It seems as though one could raise problems<sup>14</sup> for veridical perception in NDE's that have OBE's, by pointing to hallucination, delusion, and illusion. Hallucination is an

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<sup>11</sup> Melvin Morse and Paul Perry, *Transformed by the Light: The Powerful Effect of near-Death Experiences on People's Lives* (New York: Ivy Books : Ballantine Books, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> *Consciousness Beyond Life: The Science of the Near-Death Experience*, Reprint edition (HarperOne, 2011), 75.

<sup>13</sup> The Mystery of Perception During Near Death Experiences - Pim van Lommel, 2013, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avyUsPgluQ0&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avyUsPgluQ0&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

<sup>14</sup> A controversial radio interview of the well known Dr. Patricia Churchland recently on Jan. 28, 2014 showed that she mis-quoted Dr. Pim van Lommel as a NDE researcher, in reference to a neurobiological explanation of NDE's in her new book, *Touching a Nerve; The Self as Brain* (2013). Dr.

experience of perception that has no basis in reality. An example of this would be a psychosis. A delusion is an incorrect assessment of a correct perception. An illusion is a misapprehensive or misleading image in reality. In all of these, a functioning brain is a necessary condition. More simply, you can't have any of these unless you have a living, functioning brain. That concern has been eliminated in these cases by the fact that they all involved clinical heart and brain death, but that they also all had corroborative efforts to reveal that the veridical perception was in fact true. Contemporary philosopher Richard Swinburne has coined the principle of testimony and credulity. It maintains that testimony is such that we should believe, unless there is a good reason not to. Credulity is such that we should believe, unless the subject was unreliable, the perceptions were shown to be false, evidence that experience suggests did not exist, or if the experience can be accounted for in another way. In other words this patient's perception of reality was genuine. So, it seems for now that we have blunted the worry of hallucination, delusion, and illusion. We also now have the principle of testimony and credulity, coupled with the corroboration of independent eyewitnesses for these cases; this seems to count as substantial evidence. Thus, the accounts of veridical perception (visual and auditory) in the cases above hold.

The philosophical significance that follows from these cases, is that while functioning eyeballs, optic nerves, ears, auditory systems, functioning brains and functioning bodies seem like *sufficient* conditions for visual and auditory veridical perceptions, they are not even *necessary*. It is also worthy to note that in all of the NDE cases that I've mentioned, none of the survivors had any sensations of pain while disembodied. This can be accommodated by the fact that when the contingent union breaks, the person temporarily loses the ability to have bodily sensations (see c. in section 2.1).

In the beginning of this paper, monism was mentioned. Physicalism and materialism are types of monism; fundamentally this means reality consists in one type of

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Pim van Lommel clearly *does not* believe this; he has explicitly stated that physical explanations of NDE's can only take you so far. She gave no explanation, to date, for her mis-quote. This I find as questionable behavior for a professional philosopher and one can certainly wonder if she did this to promote her *materialist* worldview. I leave the readers to decide for themselves. The transcripts and radio interview are found here <http://www.skeptiko.com/237-patricia-churchland-sandbagged-by-near-death-experience/>

thing. Physicalism is a metaphysical thesis that says that everything in reality is physical and can be *described* and explained in physical terms. Materialism, its close brother<sup>15</sup>, maintains that *nothing* in reality exists except matter; everything, including thoughts, feelings, and minds can all be explained in terms of matter and physical phenomena. This being the case, it seems like physicalism and materialism fail in the case of Miss Z; this is because she had a conscious episode *outside* of her physical body during the clinical setting in which she was tested. What this means, is that the materialist is going to have to practice metaphysical gymnastics because she had veridical perception of seeing numbers on top of a book shelf, while she was asleep (her eyes were closed). But, even if it were possible for the materialist to offer explanation for this, they certainly can't for the cases of veridical perception in the NDE examples. Therefore, if the cases of NDE's are true, then it follows *prima facie* that physicalism and materialism are false; the metaphysical thesis of monism cannot account for the phenomena<sup>16</sup>. Why? Because, they don't have the ontological recourses to explain conscious perception outside the physical body (dead or alive).

Descartes' substance dualism, previously defined, seems to have the metaphysics to account for these phenomena. This is because it can account for the mind being distinct from the body and also for the possibility of that union being broken. In the next section, we will look a little deeper into Descartes' work to see if it can now account for the phenomena of veridical perception in OBE's and NDE's.

## **4 An Explanation of the Phenomena**

### **4.1 Death: The Breaking of the Union**

From the Descartes' *Passions* we see that death of the body is such that, "Thus is has been believed, without justification, that our natural heat and all the movements of our bodies depend on the soul<sup>17</sup>; whereas we ought to hold, on the contrary, that the soul takes leave when we die only because this heat ceases and the organs which bring about

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<sup>15</sup> Some philosophers maintain that materialism and physicalism are synonymous with one another.

<sup>16</sup> George Berkeley's *Idealism* becomes a live option here as well because his view denies the existence of the "material" world altogether. I will not advance this view here any further but it worthy of mention.

<sup>17</sup> For Descartes, the thinking thing (mind) is a mode of the substance, which is the soul.



bodily movement decay.”<sup>18</sup> Here is the difference between a living body and a dead body:

So as to avoid this error, let us note that “death never occurs through the absence of the soul, but only because one of the principal parts of the body decays. And let us recognize that the difference between the body of a living man and that of a dead man is just like the difference between, on the one hand, a watch or other automaton (that is, a self-moving machine) when it is wound up and contains in itself the corporeal principle of the movements for which it is designed, together with everything else required for its operation; and, on the other hand, the same watch or machine when it is broken and the principle of its movement ceases to be active.”<sup>19</sup>

We can see that Descartes says when the body dies, the soul leaves the body. This is when the body (automaton) is damaged and can no longer function properly. It follows from this that the contingent union is broken. From the case of Miss Z, we have the ontological recourses from section 2.1; he gives us the mind (unextended) and body (extended) and the contingent union. For the OBE’s in the NDE cases, we see that the union is only temporarily broken. The soul, in all of these cases has entered back in to the physical body (automaton), provided that cardiac defibrillation<sup>20</sup> is possible. It is also worthy to note that in the case of Rodonaia, his body was kept refrigerated in the morgue for three days and it was possible for his body to restart because it had not underwent significant decay yet. Hence, the automaton could still be used.

A question worth raising is how does the soul, once temporarily disembodied; know to go back to *its* body? Once can demonstrate this even further by imagining a clinical setting where two patients, Andy and Eddie, die at the same time and are eventually brought back to life with the aid of cardiac support. Could Andy’s soul come back to Eddie’s body? Descartes only briefly states in the *Passions* that, “... it is easy to believe that the souls which God puts into our bodies, are not all equally noble and

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<sup>18</sup> René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Vol. 1* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 329.

<sup>19</sup> René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Vol. 3: The Correspondence* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 329–330.

<sup>20</sup> Used to restart the heart; in the form of CPR, and can also be aided with an AED monitor.

strong...”<sup>21</sup> This seems to suggest that it is simply not possible for Andy’s soul to go to Eddie’s body because God did not form Andy’s soul to Eddie’s body. He simply put Andy’s soul into Andy’s body and this is a metaphysical primitive, which means it is not further analyzable.

#### **4.2 Intellectual Verses Bodily Memory**

Now I will list textual evidence in which Descartes makes a distinction between intellectual verses bodily memory. This will enable us to understand how veridical perception is possible outside of the physical body:

*To Mersenne, 1 April 1640:*

“But it seems to me that others would not have the great facility which they have in imagining an infinity of things which they have never seen, if their souls were not joined to some part of the brain that was very well equipped to receive all kinds of new impressions, and consequently every ill equipped to preserve them... But besides this memory, which depends on the body, I believe there is also another one, entirely intellectual, which depends on the soul alone”<sup>22</sup>

*To Mersenne, 6 August 1640:*

“Moreover, in addition to the corporeal memory, whose impressions can be explained by these folds in the brain, I believe that there is also in our intellect another sort of memory, which is altogether spiritual, and is not found in animals. It is this that we mainly use.”<sup>23</sup>

*To Hyperaspistes, August 1641:*

“The mind, though really distinct from the body, is none the less joined to it, and is affected by traces impressed on it, and is able to impress new traces on its own account...”<sup>24</sup>

*To Huygens, 10 October 1642:*

Descartes mentions death, in regards to the ones he loves, and then mentions his own death that will eventually come, “It consists in the consideration of the nature of our souls. I think I know very clearly that they last longer than our bodies, and are destined by nature for pleasures and felicities much greater than those we enjoy in this world...”

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<sup>21</sup> Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 388.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 145–146.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 190.

and we shall still remember the past; for we have, in my view, an intellectual memory which is certainly independent of the body.<sup>25</sup>

*To [Mesland], 2 May 1644:*

“As for memory, I think that the memory of material things depends on the traces which remain in the brain after an image has been imprinted on it; and that the memory of intellectual things depends on some other traces which remain in the mind itself. But the later are of a wholly different kind from the former...”<sup>26</sup>

These passages support that there is some kind of memory that does not depend on the brain or body for it to obtain. It is in this sense that I think Descartes’ theory of substance dualism can accommodate the phenomena of OBE’s and NDE’s; in virtue of intellectual memory. Simply put, the person is thinking and perceiving during a temporary NDE and has memory of it when entering back into the body. Once again, this is an ontological recourse provided to us by our souls in section 2.1, concerning the metaphysics of the mind and body.

### ***4.3 Clear and Distinct Perception***

A good question can now be raised. Can the veridical perception seen in OBE’s (case of Miss Z) and NDE’s with OBE’s (the six NDE cases that were listed in section 3.3) be clear and distinct for Descartes? We see in, *Principles of Philosophy: Part 1: Article 45*, what is meant by clear and distinct perception, “I call a perception ‘clear’ when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind – just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception ‘distinct’ if, as well as being clear, it is so sharp separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear.”<sup>27</sup> OBE’s and NDE’s contain veridical auditory and visual perceptions that are clear and distinct according to this definition. I don’t see any problems with Descartes here. Here’s why. In the beginning of the paper, I described Descartes’ project in the meditations. He makes it clear that from meditation 1 – 5 we only have the thinking “I” with is capable of intellectual intuition. We don’t even have the body or the real distinction of the mind and body until the 6<sup>th</sup> meditation (it is only here that we

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 207–208.

finally have the embodied thinker). Therefore, the thinking “I” in meditation 1-5 is consistent with the thinking “I” in OBE’s and NDE’s with OBE’s for Descartes. This means that the disembodied person (the thinking “I”) has clear and distinct perception, which is a necessary condition for intellectual memory. What does this mean? Clarity and distinctness is very serious to Descartes because there are not many instances of this in ones life. Thus, this means that the veridical perception that one receives disembodied is very serious evidence (it’s foundational for him). We can see the reason why for this in section 2.1, because he uses this principle in order to give us the proof for the distinction of mind and body, in the human person!

#### **4.4 Disembodied Souls**

Now we can raise the last and what seems like a very important question. Does Descartes agree that the human person can exist disembodied?

*Conversation with Burman, 16 April 1648:*

[Descartes]...But the mind cannot ever be without thought; it can of course be without this or that thought, but it cannot be without some thought. In the same way, the body cannot, even for a moment, be without extension.

[Burman] But even if traces are not imprinted on the brain, so that there is no bodily memory, there still exists an intellectual memory, as is undoubtedly the case with angels or disembodied souls, for example. And this intellectual memory ought to enable the mind to remember its thoughts.

[Descartes] I do not refuse to admit intellectual memory: it does exist.

Not only does Descartes give us an affirmative answer to the question. His metaphysics of the human person is also consistent with his conclusion.

## **5 Conclusion**

It is now that we are in the position to answer our original question. Descartes’ metaphysics does indeed allow for OBE’s and NDE’s with OBE’s. I have offered cases as evidence to show that it is possible for the human person to obtain disembodied veridical perception, whether alive or clinically dead; clear and distinct veridical perception. This implies that the contingent union of the human person can be broken or undone, and then re-established. Hence, for Descartes the human body (automaton) was

an amazing piece of machinery. It is with this mindset that one might finally be able to appreciate what he said in his *Discourse on Method*, “For they will regard this body as a machine which, having been made by the hands of God, is incomparably better ordered than any machine that can be devised by man, and contains in itself movements more wonderful than those in any such machine”<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 139.

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