To knit the knot: embodied mind in John Donne's "The Ecstasy"

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Abstract

For John Donne's "The Ecstasy", cognitive ecology offers a new approach to the divide between Platonism and Aristotelianism in the poem, presenting a continuum between body and soul rather than an opposition or equivalence. In this essay, I argue that Donne charts a continuum of body and soul through a chain of metaphors, knitting together an ecstasy that is both outside and beside the self. One can neither conceive of nor experience such an ecstasy without employing embodied metaphors, metaphors that enable the conceptual movement within the poem. Strictly speaking, souls cannot move, speak, mix, or descend: all these actions are embodied concepts that use human motor-schema to map out abstract notions. The soul's movement occurs in a conceptual space carved out through this chaotic change and exchange of embodied metaphors. This movement of the soul through the body, via the body, knits the "knot, which makes us man".

So must pure lovers' souls descend
T' affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great prince in prison lies.
John Donne, "The Ecstasy" 65–8

> Our sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially upon our bodies, especially our sensorimotor apparatus, which enables us to perceive, move, and manipulate, and the detailed structures of our brains, which have been shaped by both evolution and experience.
> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*[1]

While John Donne's poetry exemplifies the metaphysical conceit, his poems also possess a metaphorical fluidity, one that challenges stable categories through a progression of metaphors. Unlike poems such as "The Flea" and "The Bait", Donne's "The Ecstasy" has no strong, central metaphor that ties the lines of the poem together. Here, movement is the point: the movement from metaphor to metaphor, from body to soul, from lover to lover. The rapidly shifting metaphors of the poem both describe and enact ecstasy, the movement of the human mind beyond and beside itself. "To knit/That subtle knot, which makes us man", Donne traces the movement from body to soul and back again, intervening in the Platonic and Aristotelian debate over the relationship between the body and the soul (63–4). Critics such as Helen Gardner and Ramie Targoff concentrate on how Donne's poem defines the body and the soul ontologically, but Donne's emphasis is on the knitting rather than the knot. Donne's poem is not concerned with the knot, with ontological categories; instead, it seeks to show the process whereby the body and the soul intertwine.

Helen Gardner's reading of "The Ecstasy" centres on lines 65–8, quoted above. Gardner writes: "Donne is contrasting the Platonic view of the soul imprisoned in the flesh with the Aristotelian conception of the union of the soul and body in man. A prince is no prince if he does not rule his kingdom and a kingdom without a prince is chaos. Prince and kingdom need each other and are indeed inconceivable without each other".[2] Gardner reads the negative image of Donne's metaphor, claiming that the proper relationship of soul to body is not "a great prince in prison" but a great prince ruling over his kingdom.[3] But the dominant metaphor of "The Ecstasy" is not the prince. This image shows up rather late in the poem, and as Donne's sacred and erotic verse shows, at times the body rules, at other times the soul. The metaphor of the prince is only one of the multiple perspectives Donne presents, perspectives ranging from optics to alchemy.[4] Donne transcends the limitations of the body/soul binary by refusing to settle on one metaphysical conceit for the experience of ecstasy, instead presenting a continuum of a self that is both "this and that" (36). Donne offers not one but a series of overlapping metaphors that illustrate the overlap between the body and the mind and the extension of the mind into the body's environment.

In "The Ecstasy", Donne uses the word soul fifteen times, using mind only once, presumably to rhyme with "refined" (20, 22). While one may distinguish between different meanings of soul and mind in the early modern period, here I am interested only in the overlap of the two concepts, using the soul of Donne's poem and the mind of cognitive science interchangeably. In this essay, I will equivocate between the terms mind and soul because, for my current purposes, the overlap between them is far greater than the dissonance. Any hard distinction between the two terms comes from contemporary discourse rather than from classical or early modern philosophy. For instance, both Aristotle and Descartes use the word soul when discussing human thought (in *De Anima* and *Discourse on the Method*, respectively). Much of my critical language will come from cognitive science, which makes a great deal out of minds but does not discuss souls very often.[5] Yet when cognitive science talks of minds, in does so in ways analogous to early modern descriptions of the soul. While soul may connote immortality, intangibility, and the quest for the pineal gland, it also denotes "the principle of intelligence, thought, or action in a person", as well as "the seat of a person's emotions, feelings, or thoughts".[6] Indeed, when Donne describes the soul in his sermons, he writes, "As the three Persons of the *Trinity* created us, so we have, in our one soul, a *threefold impression* of that image, and, as Saint *Bernard* calls it, *A trinity from the Trinity*, in those *three faculties* of the soul, the *Understanding*, the *Will*, and the *Memory*".[7] Humanity, Donne explains, is made in the three-fold cognitive image of God, with the powers of understanding, will, and memory. Donne defines the soul through mental abilities and ties those abilities to God. In a similar vein, Edward Popham anatomizes the soul in his 1619 *A Looking-glasse for the Soule*:

> While it doth revive the body, it is the Soule; when it willeth or chooseth any thing, it may (though improperly) be called the Minde: While it knoweth any thing, it may be called (though improperly againe) the Understanding: While it judgeth, some have tearmed it Reason: While it doth breathe or contemplate, a Spirit: While it calls any thing to minde, the Memorie: While it thinketh any thing (though more grosely) the Sence. But to speake of the Soule as it is, it is an immateriall substance, and Reason, Memory, Sence, &c. are the severall faculties and divers opperations thereof.[8]

Popham defines the soul as an "immateriall substance" that has the powers of "Minde", "Understanding", "Reason", "Spirit", "Memorie", and "Sence". In this definition, "Minde" is the faculty that "willeth or chooseth". Like Donne, Popham catalogues the cognitive faculties that the soul possesses. As Lianne Habinek notes, "Any simple identification of the soul with its capacities clearly discomfited Popham".[9] Yet whereas in cognitive science mind serves as the catchall term for cognition – again, not reducible to the sum of its parts – soul serves the same linguistic function in Donne and Popham.[10]

What is the relationship between the body and the soul? Ramie Targoff's *John Donne*, *Body and Soul* tackles this question directly, emphasizing Donne's anxiety over the resur- rection of the body: "However much Donne worries about the posthumous fate of the soul, he worries equally if not more about the posthumous fate of the body. When he frets about keeping his own soul in heaven, he also frets about keeping his own body in heaven".[11] It is easier for Donne to imagine the afterlife of the soul than of the body, for while an immortal soul fits neatly within the Platonic tradition, an immortal body seems to defy the very essence of bodies: their frailty, corporeality, and mortality.[12] Throughout his writing, Donne meditates upon Paul's words to the Corinthians: "There [are] also heauenly bodies, and earthly bodies: but the glory of the heauenly [is] one, and [the glory] of the earthly [is] another" (1 Cor 15.40, GNV).[13] How can it be appropriate to call that heavenly habitation a body? Or, in the language of cognitive science, how could it be appropriate to call both mortal and immortal life embodied? Donne asks this question in a sermon preached at Lincolns Inne: "The Apostle establishes a resurrection of the body, but yet not such a body as this is. It is the same body, and yet not such a body; which is a mysterious consideration, that it is the same body, and yet no such as it selfe, nor like any other body of the same substance. But, what kind of body then?"[14] The soul remains while the body is exchanged. Both before and after such a resurrection, the soul is incarnated in a body. In "The Ecstasy", Donne contemplates the relationship the soul has with its two bodies.

While the traditional positions in the body/soul debate are the Aristotelian and the Platonic, Targoff refuses to categorize the philosophical stance of "The Ecstasy" as either hylomorphic – T.S. Eliot and Herbert J.C. Grierson hold this position[15] – or Platonic, noting that while Donne certainly "reifies the categories of body and soul", the poem's "final lines celebrate the ultimate indistinguishability of spirit from flesh once the soul is reincarnated". Following Donne's logic, Targoff concludes, "We turn to our bodies. . .because we cannot love without them".[16]

> Donne was not what philosophers call a hylomorphist – someone who adheres to Aristotle's idea that bodies and souls cannot be severed from one another any more than the form of a sculpture can be separated from its bronze or an impression can be separated from its wax. He was a dualist, but he was a dualist who rejected the hierarchy of the soul over the body, a dualist who longed above all for the union, not the separation, of his two parts.[17]

Targoff situates Donne on shaky philosophical ground, caught between Platonism and Aristotelianism: she argues that Donne can no more do away with the division between body and soul than he can uplift one part over the other. Donne views the body and soul as distinct things, she says, but things that should be unified. Targoff embraces the conflicted nature of this relationship – prince and kingdom are distinct but reciprocally defining – while rejecting the hierarchy inherent in Gardner's negative metaphor. Targoff veers closer toward Lindsay A. Mann's argument that "Donne's prose makes clear that in this life there can be no perfect harmony between body and soul; but disharmony, and even disintegration, underline the need to work toward that harmony".[18] In an ironic turn, Platonism here is the reality, while Aristotelianism is the ideal harmony.

Targoff's search for a middle ground respects the metaphysical vigour of "The Ecstasy", but the classical categories of hylomorphism and dualism are too narrowly defined, too detached to represent the embodied experience of the relationship between body and soul that Donne depicts in his poem. Donne's shifting metaphors explore what cold categories cannot: a cultural moment when the classical form/matter debate of hylomorphism and dualism is about to give way to the new Cartesian paradigm, the mind/body split that will come to dominate discussions of human thought up through the cognitive turn of the past fifty years.[19] In their review of early modern scholasticism in the time of Descartes, Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene summarize the consensus position on hylomorphism before Descartes' intervention:

> Traditionally, matter and form are inseparable. All substances are informed matter. Form is associated with actuality and matter with potentiality: to be in actuality is to participate in a form and to have potentiality is to have a "power" of acting or undergoing something; in this conception of substance, matter has the potential for receiving forms, whether substantial or accidental. Forms are kinds, or universals, and matter provides the individual substance with its particularity.[20]

This language of hylomorphic debate resembles both Donne's verse and Targoff's description of Donne's "The Ecstasy" above. Distinguishing between hylomorphism and dualism does not account for the possible diversity of position among early modern hylomophists. The form/matter debate only begins when one decides whether form and matter are ontologically distinct or are inseparable properties of all things. For hylo- morphists, new questions arise: Can God create matter that exists without form?[21] Can form ever exist without matter, as in the case of rational souls?[22] Without weighing in on questions of ontology, Donne explores the relationship between form and matter in "The Ecstasy" of soul and body. Conversely, Descrates will shift the conversation to completely different ground, arguing that one can conceive of and discuss the soul as completely separate from the body. As Descartes argues in 1637 in *Discourse on the Method*, "Accordingly this 'I' – that is, the soul by which I am what I am – is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist".[23] For hylomorphism and dualism, the relationship between soul and body is a specific instance of the relationship between form and matter, a relationship that illuminates both halves of the equation. For Descartes' *Discourse*, it is a given that the soul needs no relationship to the body.

For Donne's poem, the necessity of that relationship appears from the etymological angle as well as the

philosophical one. While Donne's poem is often linked to the "out of body" ecstasies of the mystical tradition – a late Greek meaning glossed by the OED as "withdrawal of the soul from the body, mystic or prophetic trance" – such a definition of "ecstasy" was not the primary one when Donne was writing his poem.[24] The primary and earliest definition of "ecstasy" in English is "the state of being 'beside oneself', thrown into a frenzy or a stupor, with anxiety, astonishment, fear, or passion".[25] While the mystical, Greek sense of the term is by no means outside of Donne's lexicon, one would be remiss to set aside the primary definition of the word, as the word "out" can imply a severed or divorced connection while "beside" implies nearness, a continued relationship in local space. An "out of body" experience involves a very different spatial schema and relationship between the body and soul than an experience of being "beside oneself". In the former, the self escapes the body altogether – like a prince from prison – while in the latter, the self is beside the self: the self (and mind) expands beyond the body but is still contiguous with the body.

This contiguity arises through sense perception, particularly through sense used as a means of communication and recognition. The soul has no access to the outside world save through the sensual powers employed via the body: sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. Furthermore, the soul has no access to other souls save through the five senses. The senses are both embodied and *ensouled*, for they mark the overlap between human cognition and the material world in which that cognition is embedded and extended. Donne argues for the necessity of the body for cognition – "So must pure lovers' souls descend/T' affections, and to faculties,/Which sense may reach and apprehend" (65–7) – and that ecstatic, transcendent experience is just that: the lifting up of the body into the soul, the sanctification, if you will, of mere matter into the stuff of thought, love, and faith. Just as "The Ecstasy" begins with the lovers holding hands and looking into one another's eyes (touch and sight both being powers of the body rather than the soul), only to later move on to more abstract metaphors – alchemy, the celestial spheres, and book binding – so the soul both emerges from and returns to the body in the ecstatic movement. Sense is the operative term in this passage, for it is through sense perception that the body/soul both perceives things and conceives ideas. In these lines, "sense may reach and apprehend" the "affections" and the "faculties", sense may both grasp and comprehend these powers: embodied metaphors that illuminate the way the brain maps out concepts onto physical experience. Sense is the knot that knits the soul to the body, both leaving and returning.[26]

This embodied notion of sense, of the soul stretching out beyond the body through the senses, can apply both to the pre- and post- resurrection body. As Michael Schoenfeldt argues:

> Donne thinks and feels through the body, anchoring his inveterate fears, desires, hopes, and persuasions in a decidedly corporeal language. What emerges from such an exploration of Donne is not a consistent vision of the soul-body relationship, but rather a consistently rigorous investigation of the ontological and lyric possibilities of their various models of contiguity.[27]

"The Ecstasy" is one such model of contiguity, mapping out the knot between body and soul both in terms of the terrestrial, human body and of the immortal, cognitive body characterized by the space of thought. The relationship between the body and the soul (or mind) lies at the heart of "The Ecstasy", and by applying the (re)discoveries of cognitive science rather than reinforcing the mind/body dichotomy of post-Cartesian philosophy and science, one can see how Donne traces "that subtle knot, which makes us man" through embodied metaphors (64).

According to cognitive science, the relationship between body and mind is a cornerstone of human thought: one cannot conceive of the world without utilizing the framework physical experience offers.

> Reason is not disembodied, as the tradition has largely held, but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience. This is not just the innocuous and obvious claim that we need a body to reason; rather, it is the striking claim that the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment. The same neural and cognitive mechanisms that allow us to perceive and move around also create our conceptual systems and modes of reason.[28]

This is Lakoff and Johnson's embodied realism: the assertion that the body is not merely the vehicle of the mind (as if the mind, like a passenger, could wholly exit that vehicle and still remain itself), but is rather the necessary partner of the mind. One should take note of the brain here, both as a fact and as a metaphor. Take the brain from the body and you have both a dead body and – to contemporary scientific understanding – a dead mind. More importantly, a brain without a body cannot perceive the world, move through the world, or interact with the world. According to embodied realism, the same things apply to the mind. Not only does one need a body to interact with and perceive the world, one also needs a body to understand that world. (And for Donne, the world to come demands a new incarnation, a resurrected body.) Abstract notions of things such as time, causality, agency, and identity are built from the ground up upon physical metaphors gleaned from embodied experience. From everyday conversation to metaphysical philosophy (and poetry), language and thought are primarily metaphorical: "The fact that abstract thought is mostly metaphorical means that answers to philosophical questions have always been, and always will be, mostly metaphorical".[29] Many of the metaphors we use to process the world around us are embodied metaphors, structured upon the experience of living in a physical world.[30] For cognitive theorists like Lakoff and Johnson, to be human is to have a union between mind and body, to act and think in a physical world. Embodied metaphors act as textual reminders of this union. They are signs of the history of embodied thought, revealing how concepts are rooted in physical experience. Tracing these embodied metaphors in a poem allows the reader to see how ideas in the poem utilize physical space, transcending the mind by colonizing the human body and the space around that body. A mind divorced from the body is no longer a mind one would define as human. "The Ecstasy" dodges the question of definition, instead highlighting the necessary relationship between body and soul, the path the soul takes from the body to the world and back again.

"The Ecstasy" begins with relationship, two lovers reclining on a bank, holding hands and staring into each other's eyes:

> So to' intergraft our hands, as yet
> Was all the means to make us one,
> And pictures in our eyes to get
> Was all our propogation. (9–12)

Although Donne's poem extends beyond this moment of emotional – rather than strictly physical – intimacy, it never leaves this image behind. Donne offers up this recursive image, "pictures in our eyes", to emphasize the complex interaction between body and soul. The lovers see one another (mechanical, embodied perception), but due to the reflective wonder of eyes, they also see that they see. Because the lovers are reflected in each other's eyes, each lover can quite literally see (physically) that the other lover both sees (perceives) them, and can see (mentally) that the other lover sees (conceives) them.[31] The object of love, their entire, ecstatic mental state, appears as a picture in their eyes. This mutual recognition between the lovers acts as the first link in the poem's ecstatic chain, an embodied experience that grounds the communion of souls. Donne's metaphorical fluidity points to the way abstract concepts are built upon embodied experience: sense perception, spatial awareness, and physical movement. Through the rapid progression of metaphors Donne offers in "The Ecstasy", Donne creates a space of images, laying the road for the soul to both move beyond and to return to the body. Just as the lovers' knowledge and emotion are rooted in their shared sight, so too the entirely ecstatic experience is rooted in the body yet extends beyond it.

The opening of the poem places mutual recognition – the intimate, shared eye contact of the lovers – above both sex and language as a means of communication. The handholding is, so far, "all the means to make us one", for there is no sexual unification of one flesh here. Language, too, is inadequate to create such a connection, for the lovers do not speak: "All day, the same our postures were,/And we said nothing, all the day" (19–20). These postures preserve the line of sight – and therefore of communication – between the lovers as they recognize each other: "Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread/Our eyes, upon one double string" (7–8). This mutual recognition – in the sense of acknowledgement rather than remembrance – occurs in a physical space.[32] Donne describes visual

perception metaphorically – sight as a string – and as such creates an imaginative space between the lovers where their souls can commune. From this first step, Donne uses embodied metaphors of physical movement to describe the abstract union of souls, anchoring this union in material language.[33]

In stanza four the space becomes a battlefield "'twixt two equal armies" where the souls meet "to advance their state", both seeking parley and moving on to a greater state of existence: not a different state, for presumably the armies of the bodies remain on either side of this field, while the princely souls alone meet in the middle, and thus the armies expand to encompass both their original locations and the new middle ground of peaceful communication (13, 15). Instead, this is a wider, more expansive state, an ecstatic moment of standing beside oneself, both here and there; Donne can say "our souls negotiate there" while "we like sepulchral statues lay" (17–8). Here Donne identifies their bodies in the first person, marking the soul by the possessive. Donne reverses this language late in the poem – "They [our bodies] are ours, though they are not we [the souls]" (51) – because, short of metaphor, it is difficult to extend the first- person to two things at once (body and soul) without grouping them together, the move Donne struggles with throughout "The Ecstasy". This shift in pronouns over the course of the poem – from the "we" of bodies (17–8) to the "we" of souls (51) – knits together body and soul, offering descriptive language where the self is the body, then the soul, and back again, weaving together a series of subjective positions.

Mind and body "interinanimate" in "The Ecstasy", overlapping and extending into one another's space (42). This interinanimation lends itself to the perspectives of cognitive ecology, a group of allied cognitive theories championed by Evelyn Tribble and John Sutton: "Cognitive ecologies are the multidimensional contexts in which we remember, feel, think, sense, communicate, imagine, and act, often collaboratively, on the fly, and in rich ongoing interaction with our environments".[34] According to cognitive ecology, the human mind is embodied, embedded, and extended: embodied in metaphorical language that is shaped by material experience; embedded in material and cultural contexts; and extended into the environments one lives within. For instance, Andy Clark argues that the mind is not merely structured by the body and by the experiences of the body; the mind can also reach out into the world. This theory of extended mind suggests that the human mind is not bound by the brain and that thought can extend beyond the human body and into the environment.

> To embrace the extended mind is in no way to question the basic materialist vision of mind as emerging fully and without residue from physical goings-on. Any added strangeness flows merely from the fact that some of the relevant goings-on, if an extended mind story is correct, do not stay neatly in the brain. They do not even stay neatly within the biological body. On the contrary, they prove perfectly (and productively) able to span brain, body, and world.[35]

Edwin Hutchins offers the example of navigation on a U.S. Navy ship, which he tracks in *Cognition in the Wild*.[36] Hutchins analyzes how a ship's crew determines the ship's current position and how they plot a new course. Before the advent of global positioning systems, a ship's position had to be triangulated based upon compass readings of at least three landmarks, which would be cross-referenced with a nautical map to attempt to pinpoint the position. This triangulation requires spotters to take the compass readings, crew members to relay the readings, and a navigator to plot the readings on the map. The triangulation also requires, of course, the tools used to accomplish such tasks: compasses, maps, slide rulers, intercoms, pencils. No single human brain on board a ship calculates the ship's current position: instead, a crew of minds and tools coordinate to navigate. Thinking extends out into the environment of the crew, and cognitive tasks such as memory, mathematical calculation, and communication are subcontracted, in a sense, to that environment. If the mind is that which thinks, where does the mind begin and end on a ship? In a mundane sense, a ship's crew experiences an everyday ecstasy, their minds extending into the tools and spaces around them.

Within such an extended space, the lovers' souls communicate, but Donne does not pursue the metaphor of parley. He assures his reader that "soul's language" does not involve words: or, at least no words that a normal bystander could "understand" (22). Since negotiation is by necessity a linguistic affair, it seems that Donne drops

this particular metaphor of communication for another. Alchemy enters the poem at line 21 – "so by love refined" – and remains for at least another twenty lines. Here love is that which refines, that which produces a "new concoction" that is "far purer" than any that came before (27 – 8), a process that "these mixed souls doth mix again,/And makes both one, each this and that" (34–5). Alchemy is an apt metaphor for communication here, as it suggests the purity and higher nature of its final products, a final nature composed of opposites and contradictions brought into unity, "both one, each this and that". Yet this concoction is more an amplification than a transformation:

A single violet transplant
The strength, the colour, and the size,
(All which before was poor, and scant,)
Redoubles still, and multiplies. (37–40)

That stuff "which before was poor" still is itself, but now it is one. The lovers are not being pared away; they are being paired together: redoubled, multiplied, expanded. This is an ecstasy that stands beside itself.

In line 45, Donne shifts the metaphor once again, invoking atomic theory and characterizing the "new soul" as "th' atomies of which we grow. . .whom no change can invade" (45–8).[37] The vast space wherein the lovers' souls have mixed has not contracted but rather has become so pure and unified throughout that every atom of the new substance is the same and is now beyond the invasion of change. The lovers become a single mind, a cognitive system in the terms of extended mind: a monistic unit, a single hylomorphic being. But the poem does not end here. Instead, it proceeds to a pointed reminder of the metaphoric journey of expansion seen so far:

But O alas, so long, so far
Our bodies why do we forbear?
They are ours, though they are not we, we are
The intelligences, they the sphere. (49–52)

This newly mixed "abler soul" (43) – the transformed perspective of this "we" – looks back upon the body, reviewing the movement of the metaphysical conceit and speaking from a position outside and beside their bodies. Having struggled for a dozen stanzas to map out the communication – and communion – of souls through embodied metaphors, Donne returns at last to the body itself, recognizing that it, too, is part of "th'atomies of which we grow" (47). Donne moves swiftly through several metaphors of mixture, describing the body and soul relationship in terms of metal alloys (56), heavenly influence upon man (57), and humoral theory (61), settling at last upon a negative image, asserting that without a proper understanding of the relationship between body and soul, the soul is bound by the body, a "great prince in prison"(68). This relationship, it seems, is built upon embodied experience: "So must pure lovers' souls *descend*/T' affections, and to faculties,/Which sense may *reach* and *apprehend*" (65–7, emphasis mine). Sight – mutual recognition – began this ecstasy. The physical experiences of the body, such as emotion and perception, are necessary for the kind of soul-expanding experience Donne describes.

Like Proteus or Dionysus, Donne's metaphors shift shape quickly and deftly, moving from sight to parley to alchemy to atomism. Yet Donne has not left behind these metaphors. Donne's language continually looks to the previous stages. In the midst of alchemical language, the lovers speak to the bystander of line 21, though they "said nothing, all the day" (20)), and they both "see" and "saw not": "(We said) and tell us what we love,/We see by this, it was not sex,/We see, we saw not what did move" (30–2). Sight is enough to initiate this journey, but not enough by itself to complete it. Language begins the communication, but words alone do not say enough. Donne steps quickly back and forth between these images. His metaphors involve dynamic change, knitting together the mind and the body. The conceptual movement is the point: Donne's metaphors both move away from and back to the body to ecstatically expand the scope of the human, to map out the meeting place of lovers' souls. "The Ecstasy" turns on the sublime realization that body and soul – like the identities of the lovers – are both "this and

that", combined in the material and metaphysical realms.[38]

For "The Ecstasy", cognitive ecology offers a new approach to the divide between Platonism and Aristotelianism that critics like Helen Gardner and Ramie Targoff see in the poem, presenting a continuum between body and soul rather than an opposition or equivalence. Contrary to Judah Stampfer, who asserts that the poem reaffirms dualism – "A knotting of body and soul into one man is not attempted" – I argue that it is the connection between body and soul that concerns Donne, not the categorization of the two.[39] Donne charts this continuum of body and soul through the chain of metaphors in "The Ecstasy", knitting together an ecstasy that is both outside the self and beside the self. Cognitive science allows one to describe the chain of metaphors Donne uses to describe the relationship of body and soul.[40] One can neither conceive of nor experience such an ecstasy without employing embodied metaphors, metaphors that enable the conceptual movement within the poem, the movement that goes nowhere, beginning and ending with the lovers upon the bank. The poem both leaves and returns, tracking the path and the expansion of the soul as it ecstatically moves beyond the body while never severing the knot that binds. The movement in the poem is explicitly not physical – the lovers never move or speak – but Donne depicts it in physical terms: the souls of the lovers follow the path of sight, communicating, intertwining, and ultimately mixing together until they form one atom, then descending and returning to their bodies. Strictly speaking, souls cannot move, speak, mix, or descend: all these actions are embodied concepts, using human motor-schema to map out abstract notions. The soul's movement occurs in a conceptual space carved out through this chaotic change and exchange of embodied metaphors. This movement of the soul through the body, via the body, knits the "knot, which makes us man" (64).

Donne, like many of his contemporaries, affirms a relationship between cognition and the body that Cartesianism overshadows.[41] Montaigne, for instance, emphasizes the duty of the introspective individual to reconnect body and soul:

> Those who want to split up our two principal parts [body and soul] and sequester them from each other are wrong. On the contrary, we must couple and join them together again. We must order the soul not to draw aside and entertain itself apart, not to scorn and abandon the body (nor can it do so except by some counterfeit monkey trick), but to rally to the body, embrace it, cherish it, assist it, control it, advise it, set it right and bring it back when it goes astray.[42]

The separation of body and soul is a counterfeit, an illusion that must be remedied, a mistake of over-categorization. Note that the "we" of Montaigne's exhortation is neither body nor soul but some centre of self that exists outside the two and reflects upon them. Montaigne is grappling with the very problem he speaks of, the same that Donne tackles: where is this we? Does this "we" speak from the body, the soul, both, neither?

The conceptual distinction between mind and body is a fruitful one, for one can certainly discuss thought and physical action separately. There is a limit to such discussion, however: as Merleau-Ponty notes in his preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, "The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible".[43] Within the field of cognitive neuroscience, Antonio Damasio argues that the stuff of thought – reason, judgment, and emotion – is rooted in the feeling of the body. Emotions, for example, are not purely mental states, but involve an awareness of the state of the body: "The essence of a feeling may not be an elusive mental quality attached to an object, but rather the direct perception of a specific landscape: that of the body".[44] Reason, too, emerges from the entirety of the brain, not simply the higher areas: "The apparatus of rationality, traditionally presumed to be *neo*cortical, does not seem to work without that of biological regulation, traditionally presumed to be *sub*cortical. Nature appears to have built the apparatus of rationality not just on top of the apparatus of biological regulation, but also *from* it and *with* it" (128). The mind uses every available resource for thought: the proprioceptive awareness of the state of the body; the lower-order portions of the brain; the experience of moving through and interacting with a physical world via a corporeal body.

Donne knits together these embodied experiences in “The Ecstasy”, clustering his images around the close relationship between body and soul. Until line 49, the lovers only hold hands, their souls performing all the intercourse required by love, and the poem seems to follow the Platonic ladder of love, seeking a higher way. Yet the turn at line 49 is drastic and seems to contain a note of mourning:

> But O alas, so long, so far
> Our bodies why do we forbear?
> They are ours, though they are not we, we are
> The intelligences, they the sphere.
> We owe them thanks, because they thus,
> Did us, to us, at first convey,
> Yielded their forces, sense, to us,
> Nor are dross to us, but allay. (49–56)

Here the body is something that has been neglected and nearly lost, an inferior but integral part of the lover. The meeting of souls could not come about without a first meeting of bodies, of persons in physical time and space. Turning to images of alchemy, Donne says that the body is not “dross to us, but allay”, not something to be separated from the pure mixture of love but an integral part, a portion that makes the alloy stronger. He reinforces this metaphor with astronomical language of the celestial spheres: while the “intelligences” are perhaps superior to the “sphere”, “heaven’s influence” must travel through the material “air” before affecting man (57–8). The “allay” and the “sphere” are necessary spaces for extension, just as the body is the necessary complement to the soul. The soul must descend to “affections” and “faculties” of the body, powers that the “sense” can “reach and apprehend” and through which interact with others and with the world at large, or the mind becomes merely “a great prince in prison” (67–9). In these lines, there is no space where the soul may exist apart from the body. The emotional effect the world has upon the lovers (“affections”), the ability of the lovers to act upon the world and upon each other (“faculties”), and the acquisition of information and experience from the world (“sense”) are all powers of the body and the soul. There is a cognitive dimension to these powers – passion, cognitive faculties, and perception – but the powers are enabled by the medium of the body. The body is the space where the stirrings of the soul become action in the world. Despite the power of the intelligences to move the celestial spheres, without these bodily powers all the will and reason of the soul come to naught.

Still, the soul must “descend” to these bodily powers – or, in the terms of extended mind, must return to its centre in the body and brain. The “subtle knot” the poem offers between soul and body is not just a solution for lovers, blending the lofty heights of Plato’s ladder with the corporeal and offering a holistic experience of love, body and soul. Nor is it an anatomical mystery. Lianne Habinek traces the resonances of the knot metaphor to seventeenth-century anatomy and “the rete mirabile, or the ‘wonderful net’ (sometimes ‘wonderful knot’), a network of minuscule arteries ostensibly located at the base of the human brain. Here was one possible location for the immortal, rational. . . soul and its faculties. . .to join with the body most fully”.[45] While Donne’s metaphor has such anatomical resonance, Habinek argues that it cannot be reduced to such: “Rather, it is the metaphor of the net or knot itself as a response to deeper concerns about how bodies and souls are joined together, about how human beings are made human, that underwrote both poetic and anatomical discourses and enabled the translation between them”.[46] Donne addresses these deeper concerns by anatomizing not the corporeal body but the body of thought, the overlap between corporeality and cognition and the extension of the mind into the environment.

This metaphorical movement ends where it began: “To our bodies turn we then” (69). Donne’s “turn” serves multiple functions. Fundamentally, it is yet another instance of embodied language, for to turn is to move physically. More specifically, this turn is a return, the journey finding its end at its beginning. Such a journey is necessarily circular, a third type of turn and a hint at the unity of body and soul within the poem. Reduplicating this sense of return, to turn is not simply to shift one’s body but to shift one’s face as well, to turn and look: the very physical position in which the lovers begin (and which they have never left), turning to face one another on the riverbank. Finally, to turn is to transform, to be – in Donne’s language – transmuted from one substance to

another. The new soul of the joined lovers transforms into their bodies, and the "we" of the soul (45, 69) again becomes the "we" of the embodied lovers (4, 76), now a book, a material reminder of the embodied union of body and soul: "Love's mysteries in souls do grow,/But yet the body is his book" (71–2). The book acts as a type of body, a testimony to the union of intellectual content and physical form. Just as a story cannot exist without manifesting physically in a book – or, in the case of oral poetry, by manifesting as a sound wave – so a soul cannot exist apart from the body.

Donne turns finally to testimony:

> And if some lover, such as we,
> Have heard this dialogue of one,
> Let him still mark us, he shall see
> Small change, when we'are to bodies gone. (73–6)

Given the amorous content of the poem, it is small wonder that this testimony, when it comes, is a voyeuristic one. Like the physical poem in the reader's hands, the now-entwined bodies of the lovers are a thing to be heard – a "dialogue of one" (74) – a thing to be seen – "Let him still mark us" (75) – a "change" that is no change at all (76). The doubled senses of the embodied language continue in this passage. The primary sense of "mark" is to see and to recognize. In the context of the body as a text, however, mark also connotes the physical act of writing, reinforcing the idea that the embodied lovers are material objects imprinted with marks, marks that can be remarked upon. As with all the metaphors in this poem, this image, too, is in motion, as the voyeur who oversees their dialogue must "still mark", continuing to attend to their love (75). The repeated invocation of sight – "he shall see"– recalls the original "pictures" in the lovers' eyes, signs of both physical sight and of conceptual recognition (11). The voyeuristic lover not only sees the bodies of the lovers, he has now "heard" their ecstatic communication, a conversation that Donne time and time again reminds his reader involves not speech but the mutual recognition of the lovers, the locked gazes that form the embodied foundation to this conceptual stairway: the voyeur both hears and sees the ascent and descent of their souls because he physically sees their shared gaze and conceptually sees where that gaze leads. The voyeur understands the extension and the overlap of the minds of the lovers.

The body is the testimony that the voyeur will see "small change, when we'are to bodies gone" (76). The lovers have come full circle, and so this ecstatic movement – both the conceptual movement between lines 1 and 75, and the physical movement from handholding to sexual consummation in line 76 – is ultimately a "small change". Like the "turn" of line 69, this "change" marks the circular movement of the poem, the departure from and return to the body, and the metaphysical claim that although the soul may expand beyond the body, it cannot ultimately depart from that body (ecstasy as standing beside oneself). Materially and metaphysically, little changes during the poem: the lovers remain upon the bank, although their handholding may become something more carnal in the final line. What changes during these eighty lines is the understanding of the body and soul in the minds of the lovers and in the mind of the voyeuristic bystander (who may in fact be the reader). The bodies and the souls of the lovers were always what they were; by the poem's end, however, they are connected through a shared perception, a mutual recognition and in-sight into each other's hearts, a connection of souls made through the body, through the overlap and interpenetration of minds.

The final phrase "to bodies gone" testifies to the process of knitting together body and soul. Whether the lovers have turned back to their bodies to make love, fully embodying the emotion and intimacy of their ecstasy, or whether this line foreshadows their deaths and points to the physical absence of their mortal bodies, Donne asserts that the fact of the body is a "small change". Indeed, the "little death" stands behind these two readings, suggesting that they are mutually reinforcing rather than opposed. Both an earthly and a heavenly reading of this line points to the necessary presence of the body for how the soul interacts with and conceives of the world. The final image of the "death" of the lovers becomes a testimony or monument reminiscent of "The Canonization": "And by these hymns, all shall approve/Us canonized for love" (35–6). The joined lovers – together both in sex

and resurrection – become the sexual and religious promise of an embodied immortality: insofar as the soul endures, the body must as well, even as it sheds the dust of the Earth to become a "heavenly" body. Whether gone to death or to orgasmic ecstasy, the soul carries the body along. The body and soul are necessarily connected, and this "knot" involves the embodied experience of affections, faculties, and sense.

In the context of the seventeenth century, Donne's poem becomes a religious and a cognitive text, for it offers a hierarchical depiction of man that places authority in the soul but the faculties of interaction with the body. A soul without a body – or even a soul that disrespects and ignores the body – is one that is imprisoned, cut off from the world and from others, a prince imprisoned not by corporeality but by the lack thereof. The soul must descend to the body, true, but this descent is not a downfall: it is a return, the speaker's realization of the knot between body and soul. As Charles Mitchell argues, "In order for the soul to unite with the body, it must first separate itself from the body. The knot must first be untied in order to be tied: 'This Extasie doth unperplex' in the sense of 'untie', since *perplex* derives from the Latin *plectere*, 'to plait' or 'interweave'."[47] Mitchell goes on to argue that the speaker's return to the body in line 50 signifies a new union of body and soul via love; on the contrary, this union has existed throughout the poem, as the embodied metaphors reveal. What is new is the speaker's awareness of that union. The ramifications of this return ripple out beyond sexual love and speak to embodied human experience in Donne's work.

Donne's explorations of the knot can act as a keystone for reading moments of death and transition in his other poems. While poems such as "The Canonization" offer the image of death as a static, eternal memorial – "We'll build in sonnet pretty rooms" (32) – elsewhere Donne describes death as a transition from one embodied state to another. In "An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary", death is likened to the physical birth of the soul:

> For though the soul of man
>   Be got when man is made, 'tis born but then
> When man doth die.
>   Our body's as the womb, And as a midwife death directs it home. (451–4)

As the child lives in its mother's womb in one embodied state, only to be born into another, so the soul lives in the body as in a womb. Death – and resurrection – provides the soul with a new existence, a new body. One knot is cut, but another is tied. Donne's mourning for his wife's death, the refrain of the poem, also partakes of this imagery:

> She, she is dead; she's dead: when thou know'st this,
> Thou know'st how dry a cinder this world is.
> And learn'st thus much by our anatomy (427–9)

His wife, the world's animating soul, is dead, leaving the body of the world a dry cinder. The poem acts as an autopsy, not of a human body, but of the world, a world no longer inhabited by his wife. Donne traces the extended mind of his departed wife by tracing her absence in the world, gesturing toward a new, resurrected space where she (and he) can be embodied anew.

Again, in "The Anniversary" Donne dwells on the separation of himself from his
beloved. As in "The Canonization", Donne conjures up a shared burial, but here moves on to a transition beyond death:

> Two graves must hide thine and my corse,
> If one might, death were no divorce,
> Alas, as well as other princes, we,
> (Who prince enough in one another be,)
> Must leave at last in death, these eyes, and ears,

Oft fed with true oaths, and with sweet salt tears;
But souls where nothing dwells but love
(All other thoughts being inmates) then shall prove
This, or a love increased there above,
When bodies to their graves, souls from their graves remove. (11–20)

The grave is a temporary state of embodiment, a threshold between mortal and immortal life. The word "inmates" suggests metaphors of the prince in prison, though the notes of the Oxford edition suggest the connotation "lodgers" rather than prisoners.[48] "Other thoughts", rather than being imprisoned in the soul or body, are temporary lodgers when compared to love, the true inhabitant of that dwelling. Donne depicts three sites of union in these lines: the lovers in life, "these eyes, and ears"; the lovers in one grave rather than two; and "a love increased there above" after the resurrection of their bodies.

By exploring this knitting of the knot between body and soul, Donne addresses seventeenth-century religious anxieties about the condition of the soul after death and the separation of the body and the soul. Cognitive science can help to articulate Donne's poetic insights, but Donne's insights also reflect onto contemporary science. As it is rooted in fields such as neuroscience, psychology, and philosophy, much of cognitive science focuses on a materialist, anthropomorphic perspective. By thinking through the knot in life, death, and resurrection, Donne reveals the way that thought can be embodied from any of multiple perspectives, and that the work of cognition need not solely be an activity of the human brain.

Notes

1. Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 17.
2. Gardner, *John Donne: the Elegies*, 265.
3. Mann, "'The Extasie' and 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,'" 68.
4. In notes on the "The Ecstasy," Robbins argues that images from alchemy and optics are fleeting rather than "dominant" metaphors in the poem. Robbins, *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, 172.
5. There is a subfield of cognitive religious studies, but as of yet conversations about the soul remain peripheral rather than central concerns of cognitive science as a whole. For an overview of cognitive religious studies, see: Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology*, Boyer, *Religion Explained*, and Tremlin, *Minds and Gods*.
6. "soul, n." 2.a., 3.a. *Oxford English Dictionary*.
7. Donne, "Sermon XX, Preached at Lincoln's Inne." Italics in original.
8. Edward Popham, *A Looking-glasse for the Soule*, Image 10-11.
9. Habinek, "Untying the 'Subtle Knot.'
10. For a thorough history of the debate between body and soul in seventeenth-century England, see Ezell, "Body and Soul."
11. Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul*, 15-6.
12. In the early modern period, belief in the mortality of the soul and its inseparability from the body was known as "mortalism." See Ezell, 604-5.
13. Barker, ed., *The Bible*, Geneva Translation. Brackets in original.
14. Donne, "Sermon XV, Preached at Lincoln's Inne," 120.
15. Targoff makes this point (56). See: Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Schuchard, 112; and Grierson, ed., *The Poems of John Donne*, vol. 2: xlvii.
16. Targoff, 57.
17. Ibid., 22.
18. Ibid., 68
19. For a history of the cognitive turn that emphasizes cognitive ecology—embodied, embedded, and extended thought—see Hutchins, "Cognitive Ecology," 705–715.
20. Ariew and Grene, "The Cartesian Destiny of Form and Matter," 301. See also Pasnau, "Human Nature."

21. Ariew and Grene, op. cit., 302.
22. Ibid., 304.
23. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, 127.
24. "ecstasy," etymology, *OED*.
25. "ecstasy, n1," *OED*.
26. Aristotelian theories of perception can also be framed in terms of hylomorphism. For a summary and rebuttal of this frame, see Roreitner, "Perception and Hylomorphism." See also Robbins, 172.
27. Schoenfeldt, "Thinking through the Body," 25-6.
28. Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 4.
29. Ibid., 7.
30. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.
31. Cognitive analyses of this dynamic, known as mindreading, include Goldman's *Simulating Minds* and Iacoboni's *Mirroring People*.
32. I am leaning heavily here on Cavell's notion of acknowledgement in "The Avoidance of Love."
33. For more on early modern optics, see Crane, *Losing Touch with Nature*.
34. Tribble and Sutton, "Cognitive Ecology as a Framework," 94.
35. Clark, "Curing Cognitive Hiccups," 164.
36. Hutchins' 1995 *Cognition in the Wild* was the first study in extended mind, also known as cognitive ecology. In her 2011 *Cognition in the Globe*, Tribble applies Hutchins' theory to Shakespearean drama, analyzing the way early modern theatrical productions utilized space and material objects as parts of the cognitive work of theatre.
37. For more on Donne and atomic theory, see Hirsch, "Donne's Atomies and Anatomies."
38. In *The Neural Sublime*, Richardson describes the sublime as the edge of cognitive limits, the moment when the mind balks at the complexity of what it comprehends.
39. Stampfer, *John Donne and the Metaphysical Gesture*, 135.
40. In *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England*, Schoenfeldt seeks to reconstruct early modern concepts of the body and the self via cultural and historical manifestations of humoral theory; I seek to reconstruct those same concepts through contemporary under- standings of cognitive faculties.
41. In *Descartes' Error*, Damasio describes the shadow of Cartesianism: "This is Descartes' error: the abyssal separation between body and mind, between the sizable, dimensioned, mechani- cally operated, infinitely divisible body stuff, on the one hand, and the unsizable, undimen- sioned, un-pushpullable, 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. Specifically: the separation of the most refined operations of mind from the structure and operation of a biological organism" (250). Here lies the middle ground between Plato and Aristotle, in overcoming that "abyssal separation."
42. Montaigne, "Of Presumption," 484-5.
43. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Smith, xvii.
44. Damasio, xviii.
45. Habinek, 242.
46. Ibid., 244.
47. Mitchell, "Donne's 'The Extasie,'" 97.
48. Carey, ed. *The Oxford Authors: John Donne*, n. 440.

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