

The Case Against Avatars
Kevin S. Decker
Eastern Washington University
kdecker@ewu.edu

*Look, you're supposed to be winning the hearts and minds of the natives.
Isn't that the whole point of your little puppet show? If you look like them,
if you talk like them, they'll trust you?*

--Administrator Parker Selfridge, *Avatar*

A practical man, Jake Sully defines himself by his commitments—but who is he? What is Jake's “essential self”? This crucial question of identity at the heart of *Avatar* is complicated, I think, by Sully's lies to himself and to the Na'vi. It may also be complicated by the deeper issue of what constitutes a person's authentic identity: as a Marine, for example, Sully swears his unswerving allegiance to the “Jarhead Clan” but secretly his sympathies begin to fall in with the Na'vi. Eytukan, the Omaticaya clan's leader, takes Jake into the community even as he tells his wife, “We must understand these Sky People if we are to drive them out.” The issue of identity, like that of free will, has had a distinctive status in philosophy in that it poses questions that are inextricably both ethical and metaphysical. *Avatar* gives us excellent illustrations of this.

The film focuses on two sets of actors, the Na'vi and the human Marines (including Sully). Each group stands at opposite ends of a possible spectrum of attitudes toward the integration of nature and personality. At one end of this continuum lie the Na'vi, who as analogues to sources of Earth aboriginal wisdom, exhibit beliefs that have stem from either the idea from theology of “oneing” (“the living experience of the ultimate unity of the human spirit, the biosphere and the cosmos”¹), or what philosopher of mind Jennifer Hornsby calls non-scientistic “naïve naturalism,”² or perhaps both. Beyond CGI magic, the Na'vi are impressive for their graceful living and vital ties with

their physical and spiritual ecology, factors that demonstrate an awe-inspiring level of integration between organisms and their environment.

On the other hand, the background to *Avatar* makes it clear that the Earth left behind by humans is a dystopic wasteland stripped of its beauty and natural resources. We don't have to be Marxists to see that the term "alienation" applies to the relationship of these future humans and the debilitated nature of their homeworld. Further, Jake's alienation from his own body is shown each time he unceremoniously hauls his useless legs into his Avatar link unit.

This spectrum of the integration of personality and nature is also reflected in two ways in which personal identity as comprised of mind, body, or both are depicted in the films. The successes of the technology that Grace and Jake Sully use to inhabit avatar bodies (called *uniltirantokx*, or "dreamwalker bodies" in James Cameron's notes) depends on a fairly common-sense, dualistic view of personal identity that seems to have come directly from the pages of John Locke's *Essay*. However, this view contrasts sharply with what I will defend as a more philosophically sophisticated position based in the phenomenology of the lived body. I hope to show that this view can be found in most of the Na'vi practices and attitudes toward their ecology. If this view, rather than the Lockean one is correct, then there are good reasons not only to challenge some of the movie plot's more important presuppositions, but also to make us leery of the possibility that personal identity could be successfully transferred from host to host as is done so often in *Avatar*.

The continuity of the self: your future is in his hands³

Here are a few comments about the common sense, dualistic view of personal identity. I think it is not an overgeneralization to say that nearly every philosopher who considered this issue shared a basic metaphysical assumption, at least up until Locke. Despite its ancient roots, I call this a “common-sense” view because many people even today hold to this assumption about the self. In *Philosophy in the Flesh*, cognitive scientists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson identify this shared conjecture as the “Folk Theory of Essences.”⁴ It goes something like this: “Every entity has an ‘essence’ or ‘nature,’ that is, a collection of properties that make it the kind of thing it is and is the causal source of its natural behavior.”⁵ For humans, this essence includes the extra, added ingredient of “subjectivity.” Take the case of the savage, panther-like thanator, one of the first Pandoran creatures that Jake meets up close and personal, as an illustration. This creature seems to be genetically coded for violent, predatory behavior, so to see one nuzzling up to Jake for his attention would make us say that it was “acting against its nature.” Lakoff and Johnson continue, “We have in our conceptual systems a very general metaphor in which our Essence is part of our Subject—our subjective consciousness, our locus of thought, judgment, and will. Thus, who we essentially are is associated with how we think, what judgments we make, and how we choose to act.”⁶ Accepting this metaphor makes it extremely comfortable to also subscribe to a dualism of mind and body in which, to paraphrase Descartes, I “am” my essential locus of thought, judgment and will, but I merely “have” a body. It also makes possible a robust understanding of how reflection on our essential self, with some socialization in the background, can produce a basic moral sense of authenticity or inauthenticity. This is

because our concept of who we essentially are is often incompatible with what we in fact actually do. Of course, the metaphysical and moral applications of the “Essential Self” metaphor to Christian philosophy are clear and hardly need to be spelled out. To bring the story up to the time of Locke, all we need mention is that identity-preserving mind or spirit, the seat of faith and reason, should be identified as a separate *substance* from the body.

Locke’s agnosticism about substance, combined with a theory of identity that is based on an empiricism of practices of accountability to self and others, rather than one of sense data (like Hume’s), breaks with this tradition.⁷ Locke’s empiricism has surprising results when we use it to judge the basis for believing in an Essential Self. The casual observer, armed only with the evidence of her senses, would not be able to see much in common between the human Jake Sully and the Na’vi Jake except a slight facial resemblance. A closer inspection of Na’vi Jake’s attitudes and behavior would reveal a greater number of continuities with his human “self,” but these kind of continuities could also be observed between family members, twins, married couples and close friends (identity must be more than skin deep, as it were!). And although Dr. Augustine knows that Jake’s Na’vi body has elements of Tom Sully’s genome (and by extension, much of Jake’s), this only establishes a kind of *biological* similarity between human and Na’vi bodies. Locke is interested in what gives human Jake and Na’vi Jake the same *personal identity*—in other words, the same Essential Self.

Locke’s many thought experiments about the transfer of personal identity between mental or physical substances should probably be considered one of the archetypal inspirations, not only for *Avatar*, but also for *Doctor Who*, *Surrogates*, and many other

artifacts of pop culture. Locke offer us this definition: “*person*...is a forensic term appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents capable of a law, and happiness and misery”⁸ In itself, this is a remarkable *ethical* claim, couched in terms of both juridical and utilitarian human capacities; it doesn’t, though, make a direct metaphysical claim about identity. Instead, Locke finds

This being premised to find wherein *personal identity* consists, we must consider what *person* stands for; which, I think, is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it.⁹

Locke would say that if Na’vi Jake remembers his experiences in his human body, and vice versa, then Jake’s personal identity extends across bodies. We might call the relationship between different “Jakes” at different times “psychological connectedness.”¹⁰ This kind of connectedness shows a continuity of behaviors and beliefs that persists despite a complete change of body—as when Na’vi Jake carries out the mission assigned to human Jake and when human Jake retains the affection for Neytiri he’s gained while in a different body in the jungles of Pandora. For Locke, *memory* is the necessary condition of personal identity, and personal identity is the necessary condition of “intelligent agents capable of law, and happiness and misery.” If we have no other metaphysical argument to convince us that there are individual persons, then at least empiricism about practices of praising and blaming implies a quasi-transcendental argument, one parallel to Kant’s argument from the unalterable fact of moral obligation in the *Groundwork*.

This ethical dimension is crucial to linking Locke’s views with the moral messages about identity and responsibility in *Avatar*. It seems clear that having the countenance and abilities of a Na’vi makes Jake’s ruse possible, but it would be absurd to

say that it is merely the avatar body responsible for his deceptions (compare this to another cautionary tale about identity and morals, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). “In this *personal identity*,” Locke tells us, “is founded all the right and justice of reward and punishment; happiness and misery being that for which everyone is concerned for *himself*, not mattering what becomes of any substance, not joined to, or affected with that consciousness.”¹¹

But this view, unaltered by current psychological understanding of the mind and physical understanding of the brain and nervous system, enjoys very little traction today in the age of cognitive science. Locke’s “simple” memory theory had one of its first detractors in Bishop Butler, who wrote, “One should really think it self-evident that consciousness of personal identity presupposes, and therefore cannot constitute, personal identity, any more than knowledge, in any case, can constitute truth, which it presupposes.”¹² While Butler’s objection violates the spirit of the empiricist maxim that Locke uses, for example, to confess his agnosticism about the nature of substance, Locke’s own version of the simple memory theory can fall prey to the same kinds of attacks that Locke made on substance-based theories of personal identity in his famous thought experiments.

What’s more important for our purposes is that Locke seems very sure that personal identity isn’t dependent upon being “in” a particular body or, perhaps on “having” a body at all. When Locke claims that “nothing but consciousness can unite remote existences into the same person, the identity of substance will not do it,”¹³ he is saying that our Essential Self is not *necessarily* lodged in any particular framework. As later computationalists have advanced, the consciousness necessary for an Essential Self

is like a program that can be run on a PC, Mac, or UNIX system—any platform that can sustain my consciousness will ensure the continued existence of my personal identity. So according to Locke’s many *Avatar*-like body switching scenarios in the *Essay*, a switch of the same consciousness between platforms does not imply that the consciousness is interrupted—like a serious bump on the noggin will do in producing amnesia. But can this be correct? Can it be plausibly shown that the body provides a necessary condition for reflective consciousness, and by extension, memory? I think it can be phenomenologically shown that not only the *type* of thing—the “lived human body,” but that each *token* body, our “avatar” all our public interactions, is necessary in this way. This is not the sort of fundamental explanation the reductive physicalist might hope for, but for the purpose of this conference that draws so heavily on popular culture, it does have the benefit of squaring with Na’vi tribal wisdom.

The body and the self: nothing on earth could come between them

In *Avatar*, the presuppositions about personal identity that ground the linkage process between humans and avatar bodies seems to follow Locke’s insights quite faithfully. For one thing, when the psychically “empty” Na’vi forms are about to be decanted from their amnio tanks, no one worries about whether or not an *existing person* will be displaced when Jake or Norm “move in.” The assumption reinforces Locke’s idea that a living body, at least understood as a material substance, need not carry a particular mind (or any mind at all!) with it.¹⁴ Human-to-avatar transfers seem to support Locke’s view that moving from one body to another does not affect this consciousness in any way that violates personal identity. But these presuppositions are actually quite questionable.

Although Locke's moral thinking is confused, he seems to see legal and ethical significance in the term person, a significance that confers juridical and moral status on certain beings. If we knew that elective body swapping, putting our brains in a vat, etc. interrupt or end the psychological connectedness of consciousness persons, then there is at least one good reason not to elect for this. In the rest of this paper, I confront the question of whether or not a swap of bodies, if possible, would leave psychological connectedness and personal identity pretty much as they were before the transfer.

Locke seems to be right that consciousness and the memory of past states of consciousness—which provides us with an inner sense of psychological connectedness—is key to our Essential Self. This, however, is not enough. There are a number of good reasons to reject the shared Cartesian-Lockean presumption of “a rigid distinction between mind and body coupled with the presumption that we know the mind better than the body.”¹⁵ Many of these reasons begin with naturalistic insights from empirical psychology into the significance of habits and motor reflexes as evidence that the body is also a necessary basis for our natural behaviors.¹⁶ Existential phenomenology goes farther even than this to show that the experience of *the body as a whole*—that is, “being embodied” in general and also having the *particular* body we do is an inextricable element of our consciousness. This way of talking about the Essential Self challenges the thought experiments of Locke and *Avatar* alike by asking us to compare the depiction of body-swapping on screen with how we experience the operations of mind and body from our first-person perspective of the “what it's like” of being embodied.

The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty stands as a robust alternative to Locke. Merleau-Ponty held that third person, totalizing theories, while distinctly powerful

instrumentalities, were unable to provide accurate and complete descriptions of our “phenomenal field,” the lived and immediate experience of our thinking, our movement, and our world. He is suspicious of the approach that frames mental and physical capacities in terms of elegant unities and logical principles of identity and the excluded middle, and perhaps this approach has to be counted as one of the numerous residues in early modern natural philosophy of scholastic thinking (the basis for Locke’s training at Oxford). In his criticism of dualism, Merleau-Ponty indirectly locates the central problem with body-swapping scenario like *Avatar*’s or Locke’s. These thought experiments start with the demand that “I regard my body, which is my point of view upon the world, as one of the objects of that world.”¹⁷ This is not so much a spectator view of knowledge as a spectator view of *identity*. But if our body provides our point of view, it can’t be just another, because it is the very condition by which we sense all objects. A key determinant of our experience of objects (including the bodies of others) is the possibility of their absence. Evidence seems to indicate that bodies, to the contrary, are the loci of experience and can’t be missed. Norm Spellman, despite 520 hours of field time using the link units, sees himself as merely his avatar body’s “driver.” Perhaps this is because he has cultivated a scientist’s objectivity about swapping bodies; and in some ways this speaks to one of Merleau-Ponty’s wider points: humans begin to feel essentially alienated from their bodies when “science understands everything, including living, feeling, and thinking bodies, as nothing more than a set of physical elements connected by causal relations. As a result, even the human body becomes pure exteriority, a mere collection of parts outside of parts, interacting with one another according to scientific laws.”¹⁸ With this in mind, perhaps Jake Sully has this in common

with each of us: we have a much more intimate connection to our bodies than Locke's thinking or Dr. Augustine's research would have it, at least if this embodied perspective has any merit.

What Jake as a human shares with Na'vi Jake is some similarities of genetic structure as well as a consciousness, transferred through electronic means, that maintains psychological connectedness despite changing bodily loci. Merleau-Ponty could point out that Jake's identity depends upon this consciousness, but that consciousness can't be adequately understood without seeing it as essentially embodied. Key to all this is Merleau-Ponty's idea of the *body schema*, or "a total awareness of my posture in the intersensory world."¹⁹ A body schema grounds a person's "active attunement to the world around" him. He writes:

A movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its "world," and to move one's body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call, which is made upon it independently of an representation. Motility, then, is not, as it were, a handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to that point in space of which we have formed a representation beforehand.²⁰

More importantly, a qualitatively rich and unique body schema proves to be a necessary condition for acts of consciousness, even the positing of self-consciousness. Again, I quote from Merleau-Ponty:

If a need was felt to introduce this new word ["body schema,"] it was in order to make it clear that the spatial and temporal unity, the inter-sensory or the sensori-motor unity of the body is, so to speak, *de jure*, that is not confined to contents actually and fortuitously associated in the course of our experience, that it is in some way anterior to them and makes their association possible.²¹

Keep these two passages in mind as you recall Jake's newfound sense of bodily freedom when he is first successfully uses Dr. Augustine's link system. When first linked

to the Na'vi body, Jake *immediately* has a sense of how it works. He doesn't seem particularly affected by the fact that he's now nine feet tall, breathes a different atmosphere and has a different metabolism. He takes his body for an unauthorized spin, pumping his legs in a way that has likely been denied to him since his spinal injury, and demonstrates instant agility in leaping and avoiding a soldier in an AMP suit. It's an incredible scene that most members of the audience found thrilling, since it is easy to identify with Jake, now liberated from a broken body.

But from the perspective of the phenomenology of the lived body, this turns of events is also implausible. Jake's avatar, like any body, is not a machine to be operated by skillful technique—like the aforementioned AMP suit—but a place at which the biological and personal “overlap and implicate each other.”²² The functions of an AMP suit are only fruitfully carried out when it is operated by driver, like Colonel Quaritch, who has a facility with the intelligibility underlying the design of its controls. The complex feedback cycles of the psychological, physical, and physiological systems of the living body are not like the one-way causality of operating one of the suits. According to Merleau-Ponty, bodily “reactions are not...a sequence of events; they carry within themselves an immanent intelligibility.”²³ Like Sartrean freedom, this intelligibility is something that cannot be escaped: to return to an earlier point, the usefulness of being an AMP “driver” is partially understood in our ability to leave the AMP suit behind when purposes beckon that it is not well-suited for (like taking a bath).

Because they are very much like “somatic *a priori*,” the body that cannot be left behind and the fundamental orientation that is a function of the body schema draw interest for most people only when pathologies arise in them. Merleau-Ponty interpreter

Lawrence Hass mentions examples of illness, travel, trauma, and toilet training; any case in which personality and biology conflict is sufficient for consideration.²⁴ Merleau-Ponty himself spends some time elaborating on these pathologies in the case of phantom-limb syndrome, but also famously discusses the case of “Schneider,” a patient with a shell splinter wound in the back of his head. His comments on the effects of Schneider’s head wound are lengthy, but it is clear that he wants to link this patient’s diverse problems with damage—equally physical, physiological, and mental—to Schneider’s deep sense of the posturing of his own body and “how it sits” in a world of objects. One passage is worth quoting here:

Although Schneider’s trouble affects motility and thought as well as perception, the fact remains that what it damages, particularly in the domain of thought, is his power of apprehending simultaneous wholes, and in the matter of motility, that...of taking a bird’s-eye view of movement and projecting it outside himself. It is then in some sense mental space and practical space which are destroyed or impaired, and the words themselves are a sufficient indication of the visual origin of the disturbance.²⁵

What we see, from experience, is that when the fragile overlap and mutual implication of the biological and the personal is disturbed, not only does liberation not occur, but a trauma of one sort of another *does* occur.

In short, what is missing in *Avatar*—and in most fiction in which the plot turns on the device of body-swapping—is a plausible story that tells us two things: how Jake’s consciousness is so easily detached from the body schema that is part-and-parcel of his human form, and how his consciousness so quickly finds itself with a new body schema in the Na’vi form. Merleau-Ponty takes great pains to suggest that awareness and attunement of living in and through a body image is an *achievement*, a journey without a fixed end point that is only successfully navigated by real-world practice and coping with

natural biological development (or, in some cases like Schneider's, loss). I'm suggesting that it would be philosophically more sound to show Jake at best extremely disorientated (as those who emerge from cryosleep are often depicted in sci-fi, only worse), or at worst, significantly traumatized after his first transfer.

Na'vi wisdom: an extreme taste of reality

While Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the Essential Self as the lived body seems to cut against the thinking behind *Avatar*'s linkage process, it is more partial to what we might call the folk psychology of the natives of Pandora. As an example, it seems plausible to interpret the ecologically inclusive practice of "Seeing" by the Na'vi as congenial to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of inner and outer, mental and material, as deeply intertwined. Na'vi animism, modeled upon Native American spiritualism, provides a sense of identity in which individual and communal, material and spiritual, are not only fundamentally left undistinguished; they are essentially integrated, so that when these are pulled apart, it is perceived as "brokenness" and not a mere detachment of separable wholes. Lenora Hatathlie Hill gives us a sense of this kind of intertwinement through a description of a Navajo ceremony upon the birth of a new child:

When the child is born, the afterbirth is taken and offered to a young tree or to a greasewood bush. The child becomes rooted in the Earth, and when it is born the roots are like a little string. Our rootedness to the Earth is like tying a string to yourself and the other end to your mother. The string thickens with each Offering, with each ceremony, each member of the member, each generation.²⁶

There is no fundamental difference here between the spiritual and the material elements that could justify saying that psychological connectedness of consciousness alone is significant for personal identity. The Na'vi relationship to the rest of the Pandoran

ecology supports similarly holistic and de-centered views. The discovery by Grace and Norm that rainforest trees on Pandora have an interconnecting root structure parallels what background materials for the script identify as the Omaticaya clan's reverence for the weaving loom, called *Eywa s'ilvi mas'kit nivi*, or "Eywa's wisdom is revealed to all of us."²⁷ Fauna on Pandora also express Merleau-Ponty's idea that "there is a logic of the world to which my body in its entirety conforms."²⁸ The Na'vi hair queue allows a level of immediate connection between natives and domesticable fauna like the direhorses and *ikran*, communication that would make even the Horse Whisperer blush. The neural connection established across the Na'vi "hair" queue and similar tendrils on animals is distinctive not just because it demonstrates an astounding level of biological compatibility across species (think of how difficult it is for our scientists to keep tissues in cross-species transplants from being rejected). It also establishes a *psychological* fusion across species, and this is truly incredible.²⁹ At least, this is one conclusion we could draw when Neytiri says, "*Ikran* is not horse. Once *shahaylu* is made, *ikran* will fly with only one Hunter in the whole life." I take this as meaning that there is no mere sharing between a Na'vi and an *ikran* in the *shahaylu* ("the bond") but something is fundamentally changed within the *ikran* by the process of intertwining queues.³⁰

Perhaps it might not be as easy to isolate the Essential Self, as Locke does, by focusing on consciousness to the exclusion of the body. This has an interesting consequence for the argument so far: the Folk Theory of Essences says that what determines a thing's natural behavior is its essence, and in the case of persons, John Locke identified this essence as consciousness. *Avatar* clearly portrays an individual's consciousness retaining personal identity even as it is switched between bodies. But

Merleau-Ponty's perspective on the deep interdependency of flesh and subjectivity implies that any attempt to separate a person's consciousness from their body, if this were even possible, would likely do violence to their body image; the possibility of developing a new one within the short period when we see Na'vi Jake awakening and when he hops to his feet is another question. I think that "violence" is an appropriate term here, since on the existential phenomenological account, a body-switch does not achieve a difficult separation between two substances; it extracts something from a body that has developed and been constituted largely by the opportunities for navigating the world that the particular body has produced. The body is not something to be shrugged off lightly.

To return to the insights of Lakoff and Johnson, any useful understanding of what makes for our Essential Self today depends upon what we know about how our body senses, thinks, and moves, and this knowledge, in turn, relies on our best biological, psychological, and cultural theories as well as the existential phenomenologist's descriptions of embodied experience themselves. As more and more research in cognitive science begins to confirm and develop important phenomenological insights by Merleau-Ponty and others, the more the easy body swapping of *Avatar* seems dubious even in principle.³¹

¹ T.C. McLuhan, *The Way of the Earth: Encounters with Nature in Ancient and Contemporary Thought* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 15.

² Here is Hornsby's roundabout way of describing her position: "The assumed standard when it is *naturalism* that is defended is got from an idea of *nature*. And a particular assumption about the world of nature appears to go along with the use of 'naturalism' that has grown up in recent philosophy of mind—the assumption that the world for its part is a world free of norms, a world such as scientists describe.... But the particularly assumption about 'the world of nature' is not obligatory. And this is why there can be what I call *naïve* naturalism, distinguishable from the more usually defended versions. When it is allowed that not everything in nature is visible from the perspective adopted

by the naturalizer, we can see ourselves as inhabitants of a natural world without thinking that our talk about ourselves needs to be given special treatment to make this possible”; Hornsby, *Simple Mindedness: In Defense of Naïve Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 7-8.

³ In the never-ending effort to find interesting section headings that reward the reader paying close attention, the headings in this chapter are all advertising tag lines taken from other famous James Cameron productions. I won’t tell you which is which, but see if you can guess which section headings come from: *Titanic* (1997), *Strange Days* (1995), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), and *The Terminator* (1984).

⁴ Lakoff and Johnson are philosophers and cognitive scientists who attempt in their work to redescribe traditional philosophical problems in terms friendly to modern science’s study of the brain, body and neural system. Cognitive scientists often talk about “folk theories” as popular explanatory models that are “intuitively clear” and “make up a culture’s shared common sense.” They often contrast folk theories with what the latest research tells us about how we work. Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 352.

⁵ Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 363.

⁶ Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 282.

⁷ In particular, see *Essay*, Book II, sections 14 to 25.

⁸ Locke, *Essay*, 312.

⁹ Locke, *Essay*, 302.

¹⁰ The term is Derek Parfit’s, from his book *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 215. Thank you to George Dunn for the examples of psychological connectedness.

¹¹ Locke, *Essay*, 308.

¹² Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion*, quoted in Gideon Yaffe, “Locke on Ideas of Identity and Diversity,” *The Cambridge Companion to Locke’s “Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Lex Newman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 219.

¹³ Locke, *Essay*, 310.

¹⁴ *Avatar* sends mixed messages about this. For example, Norm and Dr. Cullimore note that the avatar bodies have “great muscle tone” as a result of the success of “proprioceptive sim[ulation]s.” These would presumably be “virtual exercises” in which spatial sense and movement is stimulated, but how could a creature devoid of a mind benefit from this? Although Descartes and Locke agree on much, one of the important points in this area in which they differ is Locke’s comment that, for all the limits of our ways of knowing, God may “superadd to matter a faculty of thinking”; *Essay* 480.

¹⁵ Robert Solomon, “General Introduction,” *Phenomenology and Existentialism* (Lanham: MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1972, 2001), 2.

¹⁶ The classic statement of the importance of the body in psychology that bridges the nineteenth-century German psychologists’ view with that of American pragmatism is John Dewey, “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” in *John Dewey: The Early Works, 1882-1898*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 96-109.

¹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (New York: Routledge, 2004), 83.

¹⁸ Gary Gutting, “Merleau-Ponty,” in *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 188-89.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Basic Writings*, 103.

²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Body, Motility, and Spatiality,” in Solomon, *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, 379.

²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), 114. One of Merleau-Ponty’s sustained criticisms of psychological association—that consciousness is linked to a body only through associating various deliverances of outer and inner sense—is found in *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fisher (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2008).

²² Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 86.

²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behavior*, 130.

²⁴ Hass, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, 87. How would we end up with a different conclusion from considering these potential cases of disturbed or damaged body schema, in contrast with, for example, split-brain cases (which according to Derek Parfit, got him into philosophy in the first place and play a significant part in Parfit’s revamping of Locke in *Reasons and Persons*)? One answer is that while Parfit reasons from the consequences for cognition and identity of split-brains and brain damage to considerations of consciousness leaving the body behind entirely, consideration of the former cases does not invite such speculation. Some thought experiments, although ultimately less exciting, are better than others.

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 146.

²⁶ Quoted in T.C. McLuhan, ed., *The Way of the Earth: Encounters with Nature in Ancient and Contemporary Thought* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 400.

²⁷ Wilhelm and Mathison, *Avatar*, 41.

²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, from *The Phenomenology of Perception*, in *The Body: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Donn Welton, ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 174.

²⁹ Take that, Thomas Nagel! See Nagel, “What is it Like to Be a Bat?” *Philosophical Review* 83 (October 1974), 435-450. In this famous paper that also addresses consciousness and identity, Nagel claims that there are some kinds of experience—bat experiences, for example—that human beings could never have. His arguments for this are complex and interesting, and can’t be done justice here.

³⁰ On the other hand, the Na’vi culture also supports beliefs that seem to affirm the distinctiveness of mind and body. So for people with knowledge of the outsiders but none of link transfer technology, they are remarkably accepting of Jake when he first arrives; they also believe at the end of the film that a total and complete transfer of Jake’s self can be achieved if he can first pass through the Eye of Eywa.

³¹ Just one excellent book carrying out this work is Evan Thompson’s *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).