

What's a Sick Body Like? Or a Life-Threatening Illness?

How is your world shaped by your body? Imagine what it's like to be in someone else's body, having their experience of the world. I am my illness

February 13, 2024 By [Adam Hayden](#)

Normally we have a tacit underlying sense of bodily certainty that characterizes everyday embodied experience. But in illness this certainty breaks down and is replaced by bodily doubt. This sense of bodily doubt is the breakdown of this tacit certainty, and leads to a radically modified embodied experience.

—Havi Carel, “Invisible Suffering,” 2018

You don't need to take a philosophy class to recognize the famous quote, “I think; therefore I am.” Called the cogito, named for the first word appearing in its latin formulation, cogito ergo sum, René Descartes first published this principle in 1637, je pense, donc je suis. The latin may add gravitas, but the french enabled access to a wider audience.

As far as my philosophy goes, I'm much more a student of Carel's (the leading quote above) than I am of Descartes'. In fact, shortly after my diagnosis, I reached out to Prof. Carel and shared my love of her work on the philosophy of illness, from my perspective, as a philosophy grad student recently diagnosed with brain cancer. She requested my address, and Havi shipped to me a signed copy of one of her books. While Professor Carel, or Dr. Carel, are her earned titles, I'll call her Havi because that's how she signed her name in the book she sent to me.

It's not only Havi's kindness that draws me to her work. She writes with expertise from the collision of her lived experience with chronic illness and her professional experience as a leading scholar of phenomenology. You may recognize the word phenomenon hiding in plain sight inside phenomenology, and this is a good way to understand the field of study. What is a phenomenon? A happening, the observation of something, an occurrence, maybe? An experience? Put simply, this is phenomenology: The study of experience. Usually, one's own. We might say the study of “what it's like,” whatever “it” may be.

For Havi—and for me—that it, is life-threatening illness.

Let's get back to the quotes I'm pointing us to. What do they matter? Well I think these quotes

give us two different ideas of how we live our lives. For Descartes, the story goes like this: Monsieur René sought respite in his country home where he locked himself away and wrote his aptly titled *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Therein, Descartes documents his program of methodological doubt. Engaged in this exercise of doubt, Descartes would subject all of his beliefs to skeptical arguments. Mathematics, logic, sensation, and so on, Descartes would question every belief he thought he held until he would finally reach bedrock. The claim that he could not doubt. The very bottom of the rabbit hole.

Cogito; ergo sum.

Whatever Descartes may be, when all else was stripped away, he took as his first principle that he was a thinking thing. That he was the one thinking could not be doubted.

I think; therefore, I am.

Prof. Carel begins with the tacit certainty of the body. You, reader, have this tacit certainty. Did you just take a breath? Did you blink? Did you know that you did? Is your foot bouncing? Did you scratch your ear? Did you scroll your phone, and did you consciously direct your thumb to slide against the smooth screen or did it just sort of happen? This is the tacit certainty of the body.

For decades, I questioned little about my body. It simply worked. Sure, I was aware of my limitations. I was never much of an athlete, not a good dancer, and I can't make that weird double fold thing with my tongue. But day-to-day, say, moving effortlessly in choreography with my fellow barkeep at the cocktail bar, I'd take orders while shaking a gimlet in my left hand and stirring a sazerac with my right.

"Behind sharp!" the barback would call, I'd subconsciously shift forward. The tacit certainty of our bodies.

I'm not an observer to my illness; I am my illness. Or my illness is me, part of me, anyway. Don't confuse what I'm saying as an identity thing, or a caution against it. I'm not saying, "I am my illness" like it is defining me. No, I am saying something much deeper. The way that I hold tacit certainty in my body, my body includes a disease with deficits. I am motor impaired. My left leg is weak and not agile. It's a slug. It drags along. I don't "see this" from outside my body, I don't even know what this would mean. I live this. My body presents the world to me, so whatever my body is, is my experience of the world. I experience the world with motor deficit.

The what it's like-ness of illness is not seeing your body become ill because that would mean you are outside your body; detached from it. Like a ghost in the machine.

Stop reading.

Are you "outside" your body? Or, like piloting it? No! You're living whatever *gestures* this is. Same. Imagine 3rd person shooting your way through life! Weird. No, we are our bodies, and our bodies present our world to us.

Spend time with that. How is your world shaped by your body? How might someone else's be shaped by theirs? How could we design a world that strives toward imaging what it's like to be in someone else's body, having their experience of the world? Are we shaping worlds in which our bodies will thrive?

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