INTRODUCTION: CONSTRUCTIONS OF PHYSICAL PAIN IN EARLY MODERN CULTURE

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What is physical pain? If this seems an obvious question to pose in the introduction to a volume of essays on pain in early modern European culture, it is worth reminding ourselves that medical views of the last four decades have increasingly come to doubt whether it can be adequately answered. ‘Pure’ pain does not seem to exist, both in the sense that what we think of as the singular sensation of pain is in fact a complex of physiological events, and in the sense that the experience of pain is inextricably bound up with our mental response to it. Pain, therefore, confronts us with basic questions about the relation between body and mind, and challenges common-sense dualist assumptions about the nature of physical and mental experience. This also becomes clear from the definition drawn up by the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP), which describes pain as both a ‘sensory and emotional experience’.1

It is therefore extremely difficult to offer any meaningful definition of physical pain as an exclusively bodily event. In his 1999 study Pain: The Science of Suffering Patrick Wall, best known for his contribution to the influential ‘Gate Control’ theory of pain, writes that ‘all pain includes an affective quality that depends on the circumstances of the injury and on the character of the victim’ and that ‘pain is always accompanied by emotion and meaning’.2 Recent discussions on pain have also increasingly come to emphasize that pain is a deeply cultural phenomenon;3 the experience of pain is powerfully mediated by cultural and historical context. Studying pain, therefore, is a way of studying the intersections between the physical human body – the product of

evolutionary processes – and the cultural body, the human body as it is experienced and perceived by people in specific cultural and historical circumstances.

In proposing these new models of pain, contemporary pain medicine has frequently attacked what it sees as the misguided, modern dualist view of pain as divided into distinctly physical and mental categories. Moreover, it has often traced the origins of this view to the philosophy of René Descartes (1596–1650), whose observations on pain have been an important point of reference in recent medical writings on the subject.\(^4\) Descartes’ reputation for inaugurating a dualist conception of pain seems to rest especially on the famous drawing of the kneeling boy by the fire [Fig. 1] in the Traité de l’homme (1664) – first published in