



## Activity 4: Summary Questions Answers

### Task

#### **1. What different theories of the body existed in early modern Europe?**

In the early modern period, many people continued to believe in the humoral theory of the body, defined by the ancient physician Galen. According to this theory, your bodily condition and personality is determined by the mixture of four 'humours' or liquids that run through your blood: phlegm, black bile, yellow bile, and (confusingly) blood. If one of the humours predominates, your personality will reflect this. We still use words such as 'melancholic', 'sanguine', and 'phlegmatic' to describe people's personalities: all of these terms originate in humoral theory. However, the early modern period also saw the rise of more mechanistic understandings of the body. These developments were aided by the rise of anatomy, which allowed people to correct the theories of ancient writers and develop new ways of thinking.

#### **2. If you had been born in the Renaissance, do you think you would have experienced your own body differently? How could historians begin to answer this question?**

It is difficult to work out how people in the past experienced their own bodies. Bodies are private things—unsurprisingly, we have many more records of people's spending habits than we do of their intimate bodily experiences. And bodily sensations are, in any case, difficult to put into words. People in the past probably found it as difficult as we do to explain bodily sensations, such as pain, to others.

Nonetheless, historians have used various methods to investigate this question. Medical textbooks help us to understand the general frameworks within which the body was understood. Although most people weren't trained as doctors, general concepts and assumptions would have filtered down through the non-specialist population and shaped the way that they thought about their own bodies. In addition, one of the best places to look is at everyday language. Just as common phrases frequently heard today (such as "Don't go out or you'll catch a cold!") can indicate deeply held beliefs about the way the body works, Renaissance people's habitual ways of talking about the body can reveal their own assumptions.



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### 3. Why were body parts important in early modern culture?

It is important to remember that the early modern period was a time of major intellectual, religious, and economic change. Many of the longstanding assumptions of medieval Europe were fragmenting, and this profoundly affected the ways that early modern people experienced their own lives. In this course we have explored one aspect of this cultural change: the rise of anatomy, empiricism, and more mechanistic understandings of the body.

Cultural historians have argued that body parts play an important role in early modern culture because they reflect ideas about the relationship between wholes and parts more generally. (A 'part' is, after all, always defined in relation to a 'whole'.) When body parts start to take on a life of their own, they trouble the stable relationship between parts and wholes: what was once an orderly structure starts to become disordered and disintegrated. This is particularly the case because medieval European culture often used the body as a metaphor or analogue for other kinds of structure, such as a political community, or the cosmos. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio have argued that the prominence of body parts in early modern culture testifies to the disintegration of the intellectual structures that medieval Europeans used to make sense of their world. Body parts, especially when they refuse to be subordinated to a whole, thus function like metaphors for a larger sense of cultural dislocation.