

Descartes on the separateness of mind and body

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1	The method of doubt	1
2	What cannot be doubted	2
3	Why the mind cannot be identical to any body	3
4	Descartes' view of the relationship between mind and body	4
5	Varieties of dualism	5

1 The method of doubt

In the selection from the *Meditations on First Philosophy* that we read, Descartes argues that the mind is something distinct from any body. But the *Meditations* begins with a discussion of a topic seemingly far removed from the nature of the mind: the question of whether we can be certain of the truth of any of our opinions. What we have to see is how this question is related to questions about the relationship between mind and body.

Descartes begins in the First Meditation by noting that his opinions up to this point in his life have been based on his senses, but that we cannot be certain that our senses do not deceive us. This is in part because we cannot be certain that what we think of as our sensations of the world are not a dream:

‘How often have I dreamt that I was in these familiar circumstances, that I was dressed, and occupied this place by the fire, when I was lying undressed in bed? At the present moment . . . I look upon this paper with eyes wide awake; . . . but I cannot forget that, at other times I have been deceived in sleep by similar illusions; and, attentively considering those cases, I perceive so clearly that there exist no certain marks by which the state of waking can ever be distinguished from sleep, that I feel greatly astonished . . .’ (1.7)

So, Descartes argues, there seems to be some sense in which I am less than certain about the existence of the bodies I seem to be perceiving. It seems to me that there is a computer monitor in front of me right now; but, because ‘there exist no certain

marks by which the state of waking can ever be distinguished from sleep' I cannot be certain that I am not dreaming of a computer monitor rather than seeing one.

Descartes uses the figure of an 'evil demon' to make much the same point:

'I will suppose, then, not that Deity, who is sovereignly good and the fountain of truth, but that some malignant demon, who is at once exceedingly potent and deceitful, has employed all his artifice to deceive me; I will suppose that the sky, the air, the earth, colors, figures, sounds, and all external things, are nothing better than the illusions of dreams, by means of which this being has laid snares for my credulity; I will consider myself as without hands, eyes, flesh, blood, or any of the senses, and as falsely believing that I am possessed of these ...' (1.12)

The point of this, for our purposes, is not whether it is plausible or reasonable to believe that we are constantly being deceived by an evil demon; we can assume that this is not a reasonable thing to believe. Rather, the important point is that, by reflecting on scenarios like dreaming and being deceived by an evil demon, it seems possible to coherently doubt whether any of the external, physical things which we seem to perceive really do exist.

2 What cannot be doubted

At the beginning of the second Meditation, Descartes wonders whether there is anything whose existence cannot be doubted:

'I will suppose ...that everything I see is spurious. I will believe that my memory tells me lies ...I have no senses. ...So what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain.'

But he quickly finds that this is not the case; even though he can doubt the existence of any external thing, he cannot coherently doubt his own existence:

'I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me ... let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something.'

3 Why the mind cannot be identical to any body

So far, we seem to have two results: that it is possible to doubt whether any external, physical things exist, but that it is not possible to doubt that oneself, or one's own mental episodes, exist. At this point, you might ask: so what? What does this show about the relationship between the mind and the body?

To get Descartes' most explicit answer to this question, let's skip ahead to Meditation 6:

'First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to exactly correspond with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God. . . . accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.'

So see how this argument works, it helps to break it down into steps.

First, Descartes says that if he can 'clearly and distinctly' conceive some state of affairs, then God could create that state of affairs. So, if he can clearly and distinctly conceive some state of affairs, then that state of affairs is *possible*. What does 'possible' mean here?

So, if Descartes is right, we can show that it is possible that x and y are distinct things by clearly and distinctly conceiving of them as distinct. What he wants to show is that it is possible that mind and body are distinct; so what he needs to show is that he can clearly and distinctly conceive of mind and body as distinct. But, in a sense, he has already shown this. In Meditation 1, Descartes doubted the existence of material bodies; so, he was conceiving of bodies not existing. But, in Meditation 2, he found that he could not doubt his own existence. So, in this method of doubt, he was conceiving of his mind as existing, but of bodies as not existing. So he was conceiving of his mind as distinct from his body. So, if the above is correct, it follows that it is possible that his mind is distinct from his body.

Now to the second part. What we want to know is not whether it is *possible* for one's mind to be distinct from one's body; what we want to know is whether minds *really are* distinct from bodies. Descartes seems to assume that we can get from the first claim to the second. That is, he seems to assume that if

It is possible that $x \neq y$

then it follows that

$x \neq y$

We can think of Descartes' argument for the distinctness of mind and body as breaking down into steps as follows:

1. If I can clearly and distinctly conceive of such and such being the case, God could make such and such the case.
 2. If God could make such and such the case, then such and such is possible.
 3. If I can clearly and distinctly conceive of such and such being the case, then such and such is possible. (1,2)
 4. I can clearly and distinctly conceive of the mind existing without the body.
 5. I can clearly and distinctly conceive of a case where the mind \neq the body. (4)
 6. It is possible that the mind \neq the body. (3,5)
 7. If it is possible that $a \neq b$, then $a \neq b$.
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- C. The mind \neq the body. (6,7)

Is this argument valid? Is it sound?

4 Descartes' view of the relationship between mind and body

What is the difference between minds and bodies? Here is what Descartes says about bodies:

'By body I understand all that can be terminated by a certain figure; that can be comprised in a certain place, and so fill a certain space as therefrom to exclude every other body.'

One of the defining aspects of bodies is that they are extended in space: that they have certain dimensions. Should we conclude from this that Descartes thinks that minds do not exist in space — that they have no dimensions? Does this make sense? Does it follow that they are not located anywhere?

Despite the fact that, on Descartes' view, minds and bodies are quite distinct, Descartes realized that minds and bodies are very closely related.

'Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, and thirst, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit. If this were not so, I, who am nothing other than a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage only by intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken.'

We can separate out a few different points here:

- First, Descartes clearly acknowledges that there are causal relationships between mind and body. Damage to a body causes pain, for example. That is a case of body-to-mind causation. He might also have added that (and says things elsewhere which should that he realized that) there are cases of mind-to-body causation, as when my desire for coffee causes me to get up and walk to the coffee pot.
- Second, Descartes says that these causal relationships between body and mind are of a very special and intimate kind; they are not like the relationship between a sailor and a vessel, even though the sailor and the vessel, like the body and the mind, stand in causal relationships.
- This second point raises a kind of puzzle for Descartes. What are these special kinds of causal relationships? He says that body and mind are ‘intermingled.’ We know what it means for two physical things to be intermingled. But what does it mean for a physical thing to be intermingled with something that lacks extension? Descartes does not say; and it is reasonable to be (as Elisabeth was) puzzled by this.

It seems, then, that we can sum up the main points of Descartes’ dualist view of the relationship between mind and body as follows:

1. The mind is not identical to any body.
2. Bodies are defined by Descartes as things which have extension. Since minds are not identical to any bodies, minds do not have extension. So minds do not exist in space.
3. Bodies sometimes cause effects in minds, and minds sometimes cause effects in bodies.
4. Bodies and minds stand in a closer relationship than other causally connected things; they are ‘intermingled’ and ‘form a unit.’ But Descartes does not say as much as one might like about what this closer relationship is.

5 Varieties of dualism

Descartes’ view is called ‘dualist’ because, according to it, minds and bodies are two things rather than one. Let’s draw two kinds of distinctions between types of dualist views.

The first kind of distinction has to do with the relationship between minds and bodies. Dualists have taken three main kinds of views about this relationship:

- Minds can cause effects among bodies, and bodies can cause effects among minds. This is Descartes’ view, and it is called *interactionist dualism*.

- Bodies can cause effects among minds, but minds cannot cause any effects among bodies. This is called *epiphenomenalism*.
- Minds and bodies never stand in causal relations of any kind. This is called *parallelism*. Usually the view is only held by people who think that God keeps the mental and physical world in sync — otherwise, the obvious correlations between the physical and the mental would seem like a pretty big coincidence.

The second distinction has to do with what the dualist in question is a dualist *about*. This distinction begins with the distinction between substances and properties; how to get a grip on this distinction via the distinction between names and predicates.

Given this distinction, we can separate out two kinds of dualism:

- The *substance dualist* says that there are mental substances — minds — which are not identical to any physical substance (i.e., body).
- The *property dualist* says that there are mental properties — like feeling a sharp pain, or seeing red — which are not identical to any physical properties — like, for example, the property of having certain neurons firing.

Descartes' main argument is for substance dualism. It seems as though anyone who is a substance dualist should also be a property dualist — it would be weird to hold that non-material substances could have physical properties.

The other direction is not so obvious; could one be a property dualist without being a substance dualist? You might think, yes; there is no reason why a material substance could not have both physical and mental properties, and that the latter are not identical to any of the former.