

Descartes's Dualism & Elisabeth's Objection

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MIND AND BODY

In the Sixth *Meditation*, Descartes argues that his mind is “really distinct” from his body. By “really distinct”, Descartes means that they are distinct things (the word “really” comes from the Latin *res*, which means “thing”.) Since he has identified himself with his mind (i.e., the thinking thing), this means that he is distinct from his body.

The Sixth *Meditation* contains two arguments for the real distinction. The first and more famous of the two is called the Conceivability Argument:

First, I know that all the things that I clearly and distinctly understand can be made by God such as I understand them. For this reason, my ability clearly and distinctly to understand one thing without another suffices to make me certain that the one thing is different from the other, since they can be separated from each other, at least by God. [...] [B]ecause on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, insofar as I am merely a thinking thing and not an extended thing, and because on the other hand I have a distinct idea of a body, insofar as it is merely an extended thing and not a thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and could exist without it (51).

The question of how to reconstruct the Conceivability Argument, and whether it can be successful, is a matter of great scholarly controversy. Here is my proposal:

- (1) I can clearly and distinctly understand myself as a thinking thing existing without a body.
- (2) If I can clearly and distinctly understand X as being F, then God, if he exists, can make it the case that X is F.
- (3) God exists.
- ∴(4) So, God can make it the case that I, as a thinking thing, exist apart from my body.
- (5) If X can be made to exist without Y, then X and Y are different things.
- ∴(6) So, my mind and my body are different things (i.e., they are “really distinct”).

Let's go through the argument step by step.

Premise (1) is, I think, motivated by the Second *Meditation*. There, Descartes had resolved to regard as false all those things he had any reason to doubt. One of these things was that he had a body. But even while regarding this as false, he was still able to make some positive claims about what sort of thing he was; i.e., that he was a thinking thing (a thing that “doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses”). So he can clearly and distinctly understand himself as a thinking thing existing without a body.

Premise (2) is motivated by the nature of clear and distinct perception, together with the fact that God is omnipotent; i.e., that God can do anything that is possible. If I clearly and distinctly understand something, then I do not understand it as having anything incompatible with its nature (recall the explanation of “clear” and “distinct” given in Handout 4). So if I clearly and distinctly understand X to be F, then being F is compatible with X's nature. God is omnipotent. So provided that being F is compatible with X's nature, God can make it the case that X is F.

Premise (3) is proven by the arguments in the Third and Fifth *Meditations*.

Premise (4) follows from (1), (2), and (3).

Premise (5) follows from what is often called “Leibniz's Law”, or “The Principle of the Indiscernibility of Identicals”:

Leibniz's Law. If X is identical to Y, then X is F if and only if Y is F.

Leibniz's Law is plausible. If X and Y are the *very same thing*, then X and Y have all the same properties. After all, if X lacked some property that Y had, then X would be different from Y in some way – but how could something be different from itself? Now consider the property of being something that can be made to exist even if Y does not exist. Y does not have that property; Y cannot be made to exist if Y does not exist. So if X has that property, then X has some property that Y does not. Hence X and Y are not identical; they are distinct.

And premise (6) follows from (4) and (5).

The second argument that Descartes gives for the real distinction is called the Divisibility Argument (56). It goes like this:

(1) All bodies are divisible.

(2) I am not divisible.

∴(3) So, I am distinct from my body.

As above, Leibniz's Law is in the background here. If my body is divisible, but I am not, then my body has a property that I lack; hence (by Leibniz's Law) I am distinct from my body. Descartes's theory of physics commits him to premise (1). He holds that matter is infinitely divisible; there are no atoms. Here is what he says to motivate premise (2):

For when I consider the mind, that is, myself insofar as I am only a thinking thing, I cannot distinguish any parts within me; rather, I understand myself to be manifestly one complete thing. Although the entire mind seems to be united to the entire body, nevertheless, were a foot or an arm or any other bodily part to be amputated, I know that nothing has been taken away from the mind on that account. Nor can the faculties of willing, sensing, understanding, and so on be called “parts” of the mind, since it is one and the same mind that wills, senses, and understands (56).

The assumption that minds are indivisible is common to Descartes and his immediate successors. When we come to some later philosophers, this assumption will be called into question.

Even though the mind and body are not identical, Descartes holds that together they form a kind of unity and can in some sense be thought of as one thing. He is “most tightly joined and, so to speak, commingled with” his body: “so much so that I and the body constitute one single thing” (53). But given that mind and body are not only distinct, but have different primary attributes, how can they interact in this way? This question was pressed forcefully by Princess Elisabeth, whose letters to Descartes will be the focus of our next Handout.

DESCARTES’S INTERACTIONISM

Despite his dualism, Descartes acknowledges that his mind and body are so tightly connected that they are, in a sense, one thing:

Nature also teaches that I am present to my body not merely in the way a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am most tightly joined and, so to speak, commingled with it, so much so that I and the body constitute one single thing (53).

Descartes says that he (i.e., his mind) is closely aware of his body. For example, pain, hunger, and thirst are “confused sensations” which enable his mind to detect the needs of his body. His experiences of colors, sounds, and odors lead him to judge that “various other bodies exist around my body, some of which are to be pursued, while others are to be avoided” (53). The purpose of these sensations, Descartes thinks, is to enable him to take care of his body:

I can think of no better arrangement than that [the brain] produces the one sensation that, of all the ones it is (57).

The brain is part of the body. So Descartes thinks that his body – in particular, his brain – is *causally connected* to his mind (“my mind is not immediately affected by all the parts of the body, but only by the brain, or perhaps even by just one small part of the brain” (56)). He also thinks that his mind is causally connected to his body (experiencing pain “as if it is occurring in the foot ... provokes the mind to do its utmost to move away from the cause of the pain” (57)). Thus Descartes appears to endorse not just *dualism*, but *interactionism*:

Interactionism. Mind and body directly causally interact with each other.¹

In a later book entitled *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes develops a more complete theory of mind-body interaction. He held that mind and body causally interact at the pineal gland, located near the center of the brain. He had a rather elaborate account of what went on in this interaction, but the important thing for our purposes is that Descartes holds that somehow, the mind and body directly causally interact at the pineal gland.

¹Most interpreters regard Descartes as an interactionist, but this is not a consensus view. Some of Descartes’s immediate followers, most notably Malebranche, endorsed an account of the mind-body relationship known as *occasionalism*, which says that bodily events only *indirectly* cause mental events (and vice versa). For the occasionalist, certain bodily events (e.g., the stubbing of your toe) serves as an “occasion” for God to directly cause you to have a certain mental event (in this case, the sensation of pain in your toe). Some interpreters regard Descartes as an occasionalist.

ELISABETH'S CHALLENGE TO DESCARTES'S INTERACTIONISM

In a letter written in May of 1643, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia posed the following challenge to his interactionism:

I beseech you tell me how the soul of man (since it is but a thinking substance) can determine the spirits of the body to produce voluntary actions. For it seems every determination of movement happens from an impulsion of the thing moved, according to the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it, or else, depends on the qualification and figure of the superficies of this latter. Contact is required for the first two conditions, and extension for the third. You entirely exclude extension from your notion of the soul, and contact seems to me incompatible with an immaterial thing.²

We can think of Elisabeth's challenge as an objection:

- (1) If X directly causes a body Y to move, then X is either extended, or makes contact with Y.
- (2) If X is an immaterial substance, it cannot make contact with a body.
- (3) If X is an immaterial substance, it is not extended.

∴(4) So, if X is a thinking substance, X cannot directly cause a body to move.

Premise (1) is directly in line with the spirit of Descartes's mechanistic physics (in fact, it is weaker than Descartes's physics requires: for Descartes, motion is explained in terms of contact *and* extension). And premises (2) and (3) are very hard for Descartes to deny. For something to make contact with a body, it would seem to need to be located in the same place as that body. But for Descartes, to be extended is simply to occupy some region of space. So if something is not extended, how can it have a location in space? And premise (3) is one of the fundamental commitments of Descartes's philosophy of mind. So it seems that Princess Elisabeth's objection requires Descartes to give up either a central claim of his physics, or of his philosophy of mind.

Descartes first responds by saying that we have a "primitive notion" of the union of mind and body (Atherton, 13). He appears to be suggesting that in addition to our conception of body-body causation, we also have a conception of mind-body causation. This kind of causation "cannot be understood except through itself" (Atherton, 13); i.e., one cannot understand or explain mind-body causation in terms of body-body causation. The two kinds of causation are fundamentally distinct, and confusion results from the failure to distinguish them.

Descartes cites our idea of weight as an example of this confusion. Scholastic physics regarded weight as an intrinsic property of a body that impelled it to move towards the center of the earth. If bodies have weight in this sense, then they can move without physical contact with another body. According to Descartes's physics, bodies do *not* have this property (elsewhere, Descartes explains the movements we attribute to weight — i.e., falling — in terms of the movements of minute, invisible particles surrounding the earth that push objects toward its surface). When we attribute weight to bodies, we are incorrectly attributing to them a kind of causal power that

²From Margaret Atherton, ed., "Selections of the Descartes-Elisabeth Correspondence," in *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period* (Hackett 1994), p. 11-12.

minds have over bodies (“we are abusing what has been given us for conceiving the manner in which the soul moves the body” (Atherton, 15)).

But Elisabeth is unmoved by Descartes’s appeal to the idea of a “primitive notion” of mind-body causation:

I admit it would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the soul, than the capacity of moving a body and of being moved, to an immaterial being (Atherton, 16).

Descartes then makes the following suggestion:

But, since Your Highness notes it is easier to attribute matter and extension to the soul than to attribute to it, when it has no matter, a capacity to move a body and be moved by one, I ask her to please freely attribute this matter and this extension to the soul; for that is nothing but to conceive it united to the body (Atherton, 19).

It is hard to know what to make of this admonition. If the soul is *not* extended, how can *conceiving of it as* extended help us to answer Elisabeth’s question? Moreover, since the soul’s being “united with the body” consists at least in part of the soul’s being causally connected with the body, it is hard to understand how one can conceive of the soul as being united with the body without already being able to conceive of the soul’s being causally connected with the body. And it’s this connection which Elisabeth claims to be incapable of conceiving.

Descartes concludes his letter by advising Elisabeth that while “it is very necessary, once in one’s life, to have well understood the principles of metaphysics [...] I also believe it would be very harmful to occupy one’s understanding in frequently meditating upon them” (Atherton, 20). But she is not dissuaded by this rather condescending advice, and replies:

I think there are unknown properties in the soul that might suffice to reverse what your metaphysical meditations, with such good reasons, persuaded me concerning her inextension. And this doubt seems founded upon the rule you lay down there in speaking of the true and the false—namely, that all our errors occur from forming judgments about what we do not sufficiently perceive (Atherton, 21)

Descartes did not reply further to this line of questioning. But many subsequent readers have thought that Elisabeth comes out of the debate with the upper hand. If the mind exerts causal power over the body, it is very hard to see how the mind could be a fundamentally different kind of thing than the body.