

Descartes' arguments for distinguishing mind and body

THE KNOWLEDGE ARGUMENT

In Meditation II, having argued that he knows he thinks, Descartes then asks what kind of thing he is. Discussions of identity seek to establish the essential properties of something, what makes it the thing that it is. The question 'what am I?' can be answered by considering the question of what it is for me to exist. Descartes is trying to identify his essence, those properties which, if he lost them, would mean he was no longer what he is. (An island, for instance, must be surrounded by water. If the water dried up, joining it to the mainland, it would cease to be an island.)

He remarks that he can continue to doubt whether he has a body; after all, he only believes he has a body as a result of his perceptual experiences, and so the demon could be deceiving him about this. But he cannot doubt that he has a mind, i.e. that he thinks. So he knows he exists even though he doesn't know whether or not he has a body. From this Descartes concludes that it is possible for him to exist without a body. He is essentially a mind, not a body. He would not necessarily cease to be himself if he ceased to have a body, but he would necessarily cease to be himself if he didn't have a mind.

APPEAL TO GOD'S OMNIPOTENCE

Descartes' argument so far is that minds can exist without bodies. However, on its own, it doesn't establish dualism. For this, we need to know that bodies exist and that their nature is quite different from that of the mind. Descartes argues in Meditation II that the nature of body (as extended) is different from mind (as thinking thing). He doesn't present arguments for the existence of bodies until Meditation VI, when he also argues explicitly for substance dualism, the claim that there are two distinct types of thing which can exist independently of each other.

In Meditation V, Descartes argued that he can know that clear and distinct ideas are true; and in Meditation VI, he expresses this as 'I know that all the things I conceive clearly and distinctly can be produced by God precisely as I conceive them' (156). He then reasserts that our ideas of mind and of body are clear and distinct. Furthermore, there is nothing further to the mind than thought; and nothing further to the body than extension. So the ideas of mind and body show that minds and bodies are completely distinct. So in creating minds, God would not need to create bodies; and in creating bodies, God would not need to create minds. This shows that they can exist separately, i.e. that mind and body are two distinct substances.

In this argument, Descartes doesn't mean that God can miraculously create minds and bodies existing independently. He means that it is of the nature of minds and bodies to exist independently. I.e. that they are separate substances is not miraculous, but natural. In fact, Descartes' argument doesn't really need the appeal to God's omnipotence at all. Given that he can know that his clear and distinct ideas are true, and he clearly and distinctly perceives that the essence of mind and the essence of body are fundamentally

different, he can conclude that minds and bodies – if they exist at all – exist as separate substances.

INDIVISIBILITY

Mind and body are distinct things, because they have different properties. Descartes develops this further when he argues that, unlike the body, the mind does not have any parts and cannot be divided. He argues: ‘when I consider my mind, that is to say myself insofar as I am only a thinking thing, I can distinguish no parts’ (164). It is with the whole mind that one thinks, wills, doubts, and so on. These are just different ways of thinking, not parts of the mind. By contrast, the body does have parts. You can literally lose part of your body, e.g. a hand. So mind and body are entirely distinct types of thing. Since he has also argued that both exist, he concludes that substance dualism is true.

In the seventeenth century, the issue of the relationship between mind and body was much discussed, and the view that man is part angel, part beast was advocated by so many philosophers and theologians, it was almost deemed an orthodoxy. But unlike many of his contemporaries, Descartes defended dualism not (in the first instance) on the basis of theology, but by these arguments from epistemology and metaphysics.

OBJECTIONS TO DESCARTES’ ARGUMENT

Knowledge and reality

Most philosophers believe Descartes’ argument that the mind can exist without the body, as it is given above, doesn’t work. Just because Descartes can think of his mind existing without his body, this doesn’t mean that his mind really can exist without his body. Perhaps there is some metaphysical connection between his mind and body that would make this impossible that Descartes doesn’t know about.

There are two difficulties facing Descartes’ argument. The first relates to claims about whether one thing (e.g. mind) is the same thing as another (e.g. body), or whether they are different. We can illustrate this idea with a different example. Suppose I believe (rightly) that the Masked Man has robbed the bank. I also believe that my father has not robbed the bank. I conclude that my father is not the Masked Man. Is the conclusion justified?

No, and here’s why. It is true that if two things (in this case, people) have different properties, then they cannot be identical. Identical things must have exactly the same properties. (This is known as Leibniz’s Law of the Indiscernibility of Identicals.) If the Masked Man robbed the bank and my father didn’t, then my father is not the Masked Man. But it is not true that if I believe that two things have different properties, then they cannot be identical. I could be mistaken about the properties things have. Suppose my father is the Masked Man. Then my father did rob the bank, and my belief that he didn’t is wrong.

Descartes argues that the mind is independent of the body (and so not the body), because he can conceive of it existing without the body. Now if the mind can exist without the body, then it cannot be the same thing as the body. But from just Descartes’ thought, we cannot infer this. If the mind is the body, then obviously it cannot exist independently of the body. In this case, Descartes’ conception is wrong.

A second difficulty follows this one. Descartes is using his thought to infer what is possible. If the mind is the body, then it is impossible for the mind to exist without the body. So to know what is possible here, we first need some independent reason to think that the mind is something distinct from the body, such as the argument from indivisibility.

Even then, we need to be very cautious using what we can conceive of as a test of possibility. For example, if my father is the Masked Man, then it is impossible that the Masked Man robbed the bank, but my father didn't. Yet it is easy to imagine precisely this, that the Masked Man robbed the bank, but my father didn't. What I am imagining, though, is that the man who is the Masked Man is not my father; and it is questionable how coherent that is.

Appeal to God's omnipotence

Descartes can use his argument from God's omnipotence (really from the truth of clear and distinct ideas) to reply to this objection. Our clear and distinct ideas of mind and body are complete and exclusive. The mind is nothing but thought; the body is nothing but extension. We know this to be true, because the ideas are clear and distinct. It is therefore impossible that the mind is, or depends on, the body. If it were, then the mind would be extension as well as thought. But we know that it is not.

Descartes is no longer resting his argument on knowledge and doubt. He is resting it on the doctrine of clear and distinct ideas, and the claim that whatever can be clearly and distinctly conceived shows us how the world really is.

Indivisibility

What about Descartes' argument that the mind doesn't have parts? It does seem right to say that we will, think, imagine, with the whole of our minds, not a literal part. However, cases of mental illness, e.g. multiple personality syndrome, might be used to suggest that the mind can be divided. In such cases, it seems that some aspects of the person's mind are unable to communicate with other aspects. Freudian ideas of consciousness and the unconscious suggest something similar: people may desire one thing consciously and the opposite thing unconsciously. While this doesn't make the mind spatially divisible, it makes sense of talking about 'parts' of the mind. However, Descartes could respond that the way in which the mind is divisible is entirely different from the way in which the body is. So his argument that mind and body are different because they have different properties is still valid.

We can respond, though, that the argument assumes that minds exist. If minds do not exist as things at all, then we cannot talk about 'their' properties. A materialist will claim that there are no 'minds', only mental properties, which are properties of persons or brains.

ON THE SELF

Another objection relates to Descartes' famous 'cogito'. Descartes argues there is one thing he can be completely sure of, even if the evil demon exists: that he thinks, and from this, that he exists. He cannot doubt that he thinks, because doubting is a kind of thinking. If the demon were to make him doubt that he is thinking, that would only show that he is. Equally, he cannot doubt that he exists: if he were to doubt that he exists, that

would prove he does exist – as something that thinks. The cogito, ‘I think’, is Descartes’ first certainty, the first stepping stone to knowledge.

What does it mean to say ‘I exist’ or ‘I think’? Descartes claims that ‘I’ am a thinking thing, a substance. Many philosophers have thought he means to show that I am the same thing from one moment in time to the next. The same ‘I’ persists from one thought to another. But how can Descartes be certain of this? Philosophers have objected that, with the hypothesis of the evil demon, Descartes cannot know that there is anything that persists in time which is a unity. There is only a succession of thoughts. When this objection was presented to him, Descartes’ response, in the appendix to the *Meditations* called ‘Objections and Replies’, is to say that thoughts logically require a thinker. This claim, he thinks, is clear and distinct, so we can be certain of it.

That depends what he means by a ‘thinker’. If he means a subject that persists over time, then this is not obvious. It doesn’t seem to be contradictory to deny it. Perhaps the evil demon is simply creating a series of false thoughts, among which is the thought that a thinker, a substance, an ‘I’, exists. How could Descartes know otherwise?

But by ‘thinker’, Descartes may only mean a momentary subject of a thought: there can’t be a thought unless something thinks it. Descartes is not arguing here that this thinker persists in time. But then there is a question whether this is enough for Descartes’ later arguments. If I don’t exist over time, only at a moment, it is difficult to see how I could ever know more than the thoughts ‘I exist’ and ‘I think’. As soon as Descartes says that to be a thinker is to doubt, will, imagine, and so on, he assumes we can say these activities belong to the same subject, that he (the same thinker) does all this. But that means he is taking it for granted that thinkers persist in time. But we have argued that Descartes can’t know this. So he has not shown that he is ‘a thing that thinks’, i.e. that the same thing thinks in many different ways, rather than a sequence of such things.

To illustrate this further, consider that Descartes allows that ‘it might perhaps happen, if I ceased to think, that I would at the same time cease to be or to exist’ (105). In dreamless sleep, we certainly cease to think (at least consciously). If Descartes wishes to establish that he is the same person from one day to the next, he will again need the idea of the mind as a substance that persists even through those times when there is no thought. For example, when he comes to say he can distinguish dreaming from waking, he is presupposing that he – the same mind – has experienced both. But that means he must persist between dreaming and waking, and during some of that time, he will have no thoughts at all. However, Descartes can reply that at this point, he knows God exists, and God guarantees that Descartes’ clear and distinct memories are true. And memory logically requires being the same person from one moment to the next.

ARGUMENTS ABOUT DUALISM

Quite independently of these arguments, we may ask whether Descartes’ dualism is a good philosophical theory. It is most often rejected because it cannot give an adequate account of mental causation. The mind and the body have very different natures: the mind is essentially thinking, the body is essentially extended, i.e. it exists in and takes up space. The mind is not extended, it does not have parts. So how is it that something mental, which is not in space and has no physical force, can affect something physical, which is in space and moved by physical forces? Descartes admitted that this was a problem he never solved.

Substance dualism famously faces a number of other objections as well. Here are two. First, substance dualism seems to make me, a person with both mind and body, essentially two things, connected together. This doesn't do justice to our experience of being just one thing, which we might call an 'embodied mind'. It 'splits' our experience, which fundamentally seems unified. Descartes agreed that our experience was of the unity of mind and body, and we'll discuss this further in the next section.

Second, Descartes' claim is that the mind is not dependent on the body. That is why he can say the mind is a separate substance (substances, by definition, are not dependent on anything else to exist). But modern work on the brain suggests that the mind is very dependent on the brain to function, and in the end, to exist at all. Most importantly for Descartes' claim that the mind's essential property is thinking, damage to certain parts of the brain can make someone unable to think. So alterations in the body can affect the essential property of the mind; so the mind does not have even its essential property independently of the body. Since this property of thinking defines the mind, we can say that our minds are not independent of our bodies.

Minds without substance dualism

We can preserve Descartes' insight that we are essentially mental, and that what is mental is not the same as what is physical, without having to say that we exist as mental substances. There can be thoughts without a mental substance if thoughts are had by a physical substance. The dependence of the mind on the brain suggests this is plausible. So perhaps I am just my thoughts, or the continuity and connections between my thoughts, but my thoughts are 'had' by my body. The properties that make me me are mental properties (memories, desires, beliefs, etc.) that my body has. There is no 'me' and no 'mind' apart from these mental properties.

An objection from Locke suggests this is the right way to answer the question 'what am I?'. He argued that even if substance dualism were true, personal identity is comprised by psychological continuity, not by the continued existence of a mental substance. If all my thoughts, desires, beliefs, emotions, memories etc. were swapped with those of another thinking thing, 'I' would go with my thoughts etc. rather than remain the same thinking thing, but now with a completely different set of mental properties.