

Descartes on mind-body independence and the intermingling thesis

This handout follows the handout on ‘Descartes’ arguments for distinguishing mind and body’. You should read that handout first.

How is the mind related to the body? While Descartes has argued that the mind as intellect is distinct from the body, we have just seen that the existence of the imagination complicates the picture. In Meditation VI, Descartes says

nature...teaches me by these feelings of pain, hunger, thirst, etc., that I am not only lodged in my body, like a pilot in his ship, but, besides, that I am joined to it very closely and indeed so compounded and intermingled with my body, that I form, as it were, a single whole with it (159).

Because ‘one single whole’ doesn’t sound like ‘two substances’, this claim and its implications for Descartes’ dualism are puzzling.

THE ARGUMENT FROM BODILY SENSATIONS AND EMOTIONS

Reflecting on perception, sensation and feeling, we notice that we perceive we have bodies, and that our bodies – this particular physical object that we have a close and unique relationship with – can be affected in many beneficial and harmful ways. This is brought to our attention through our bodily appetites, like hunger and thirst, through emotions, such as anger, sadness, love, and through sensations, like pain, pleasure, colours, sound and so on. All these experiences have their origins in the body.

This doesn’t mean that mind and body aren’t distinct; in Meditation VI, before giving his arguments for distinguishing mind and body, Descartes carefully considers what the idea of the mind really involves. He argues that we can still conceive of ourselves existing complete without imagination or feeling. Nevertheless, our experiences of our bodies through bodily sensations and emotions show that the connection between the mind and body is very close: ‘these feelings of hunger, thirst, pain, etc., are nothing other than certain confused ways of thinking, which arise from and depend on the union and, as it were, the mingling of the mind and the body’ (159). (‘Confused’ here is not being opposed to ‘clear and distinct’, but means ‘as a result of the fusion of the mind and body’.) Descartes argues that if mind and body were not intermingled, then ‘when my body is hurt, I would not on that account feel pain, I who am only a thinking thing, but I should perceive the wound by my understanding alone’ (159). I wouldn’t feel pain, I would merely observe damage.

Furthermore, this union of mind and body is a union between the mind and the whole body. We feel pain in the various parts of our body. The soul does have privileged connection to the brain (a point of causal connection in the pineal gland), but the soul does not feel all pains to be in the brain! So Descartes argues that it is joined to all parts of the body, although it ‘exercises its functions’ at the pineal gland ‘more particularly than elsewhere’. This is really just a physiological observation.

This ‘intermingling’ doesn’t mean that the mind is divisible like the body. The mind is indivisible, and when I lose part of my body, I don’t lose part of my mind with it! This again shows, ‘if I did not already know it’, that the mind and body are distinct.

THE POINT OF ‘UNION’

Descartes himself found it difficult to understand how it is that the mind and body are distinct substances, yet form a ‘union’:

It does not seem to me that the human mind is capable of forming a very distinct conception both of the distinction between the soul and the body and of their union; for to do this it is necessary to conceive of them as a single thing and, at the same time, to conceive of them as two things; and the two conceptions are mutually opposed. (letter to Princess Elizabeth, 28 June 1643)

However, he spells out what he takes to be the point of the theory. The ‘union’ theory enables us to understand the nature and meaning of sensations and emotions: they inform us what is beneficial and harmful. In the production and experience of these, mind and body are working together to secure the good of the whole. Our emotions, if well-directed, remarks Descartes, allow us ‘to taste the greatest sweetness in this life’ (*Passions of the Soul*, article 212). If we abandon the idea of union, then the significance of bodily sensations and emotions, working for the good of the whole, is lost. An angel connected to a body, having no sensations, would not necessarily understand that certain alterations in the body were good or bad for it. If it did make such judgments, they would have to be inferred rather than immediate.

THE METAPHYSICS OF UNION

It is hard to know what to infer metaphysically – about the mind and body as substances – from Descartes’ appeal to what it is like to be a mind-body unity, experiencing bodily sensations and emotions. Descartes offers a suggestion as puzzling as it is illuminating in the same letter to Elizabeth: that the idea of the union between mind and body is a ‘third primitive notion’ – it is basic and unanalysable. Union is not essential to either mind or body, since either can exist without the other; but it is not accidental: ‘since the body has all the dispositions necessary to receive the soul, and without which it is not strictly a human body, it could not come about without a miracle, that a soul should not be joined to it’ (letter to Regius, December 1641). The comment that, unless united to a soul, a body is not a human body, suggests (but not conclusively) that the ‘human body’, body and soul together, can be considered as a unity, a thing, a substance, in its own right, a substance created from the union of body and soul. However, philosophers don’t agree on whether this is the implication we should draw from his union theory or not.

To the question, ‘What am I?’, Descartes’ first answer is ‘a thing that thinks’ (105), and he repeats in Meditation VI that we can imagine ourselves existing ‘whole’ without feeling or imagination. But we might want to question this. Is it any less true to say ‘I am a human being, a union of mind and body, an embodied mind’ than ‘I am a mind’? The mind takes on the body’s experiences as its own, i.e. we refer our sensations, emotions, etc. to our selves. We ‘own’ these states just as much as we ‘own’ our thoughts. Our experience is as of one thing. So we experience ourselves as persons – embodied minds – not just minds. Descartes accepts all this, but his argument that minds can exist without

bodies lead him to say that to lose the experiences that depend on the body would not be to lose our identities.