

Chapter Ten Rene Descartes: The Mind-body Dualism

Key Words: methodological doubt, solipsism, God as deceiver, cosmological argument, argument from design, substance, attributes, modes.

There are two key ideas that are presented in the Discourse and elaborated in later works. First: human beings are thinking substances. Second: matter is extension in motion. Everything in his system is to be explained in terms of this dualism of mind and matter. If we nowadays tend naturally to think of mind and matter as the two great mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive divisions of the universe we inhabit, that is because of Descartes.

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This chapter begins with an examination of some of the implications of the methodological doubt articulated by Descartes, which concluded in the identification of the *cogito*. We have seen this in detail in the previous chapter. Descartes' philosophy identifies three fundamental substances, which he affirmed constituting reality; the mind, which is the thinking substance, God, the true substance and the body or material world. Everything else can be reduced either to the first or to the third.

As the previous chapter has elucidated, according to Descartes, a confirmation about the existence of the mind or thinking substance is the beginning of all knowledge. Once the existence of the thinking substance is confirmed without doubt, it becomes the starting point of the entire human knowledge, which can be derived from this primary certainty with the application of the method of deduction. As Descartes affirms, there is nothing more easily or clearly apprehended than my own mind.

The Threat of Solipsism

Cogito ergo sum prevents the systematic doubt from leading to skepticism by providing the starting point for all human knowledge. Nevertheless, this does not rule out the threat of solipsism. The cogito has proven that I exist as a mind with my own thoughts. But this does not rule out the possibility of my mind being the only real entity and the rest being nothing more than its creation. In order to overcome such solipsistic conclusions, Descartes has to demonstrate that something else exists besides his own mind and its thoughts. The sense experience assures of such a domain of reality. But Descartes' skepticism had already called into question its validity. He

now seeks another level of certainty that assures him that the *cogito* is correct when it has ideas.

Here also Descartes insists on the idea of certainty and affirms that what makes an idea true and certain is its clarity and distinctness. He derives his model of knowledge from mathematics. In order to be certainly true, ideas must be self-evidently clear and distinct like mathematical propositions. Even in mathematics there is a possibility that an evil demon or God deceives us. The case of sensible world or bodies is even more opaque. Hence our knowledge about everything else other than the mind's existence demands an even more certain assurance, which at the moment he is unable to conceive.

Existence of Material Objects

Does this mean that the existence of the thinking substance alone is certain? The skeptical method adopted by Descartes suggests not more than this. What about the existence of the material objects we perceive and the methodological skepticism had put on hold? Don't they also exist? To answer this question, Descartes further analyses what we normally understand as perceptual knowledge. He argues that, even in perception, it is the mind and not the senses that are active.

To demonstrate his argument Descartes takes up the example of a piece of wax. The wax has certain visible qualities; it tastes of honey, it smells of flowers, it has a certain sensible colour, size and shape, it is hard and cold, and if struck it emits a sound. But all these sensible features disappear once it is placed near the fire. Nevertheless, the wax persists.

Therefore, Descartes concludes that, what appeared to the senses was not the wax itself. The wax itself is constituted by several qualities like extension, flexibility, and motion, which are understood by the mind. Therefore, the wax itself is not sensible, as it is equally involved in all the appearances of the wax to the various senses. The perception of the wax "is not a vision or touch or imagination, but an inspection of the mind. Hence Descartes concludes that, external objects are not experienced by the senses, instead, they are "known" by the mind. The knowledge of external things must be by the mind and not by the senses and to think that my ideas are like outside objects is an error. In other words, Descartes maintains that material objects or bodies themselves are not properly perceived by the senses but by the

intellect alone. Bodies are not perceived because they are seen and touched, but only because they are understood by the mind. But, just because I perceive them I cannot be sure of them, as in such cases they may be just a dream or I may be getting deceived by God.

In this context Descartes makes an interesting deviation. He says that the existence of material objects presupposes proving the existence of God on the one hand, and proving that He is not a deceiver on the other. In other words, I can be certain of them only if I can prove that there is a God who is not a deceiver.

God and Certainty

With regard to the problem of knowledge, Descartes cites the principle that, only those ideas that are clearly and distinctively knowable are absolutely certain. The knowledge about the *cogito* is an example for such knowledge. The existence of the world of sensible objects still remains doubted. To proceed further, we have to now prove the existence of God; to be assured that God exists and He is not a deceiver, so that the world of objects are not unreal. Since God is the only substance in the real sense—as he alone subsists unconditionally and independently of everything else—I owe my existence as a thinking thing to Him.

Descartes thus proceeds with the proofs for God's existence with several arguments; most of them already present in the tradition, but with certain modifications. Scholastic thinkers like Saint Anselm and Saint Thomas have advanced what are known as the rational deductive arguments, which are based on reasoning from axioms which are self-evidently true. Descartes does not appropriate them unconditionally. He points out certain difficulties they lead us to and reject some of them. Certain other arguments he accepts with modifications.

Descartes disagrees with Saint Thomas' Cosmological Argument. He also distances from the argument from design, which conceives God as the first cause. This argument starts with the world and from its design and order infers the availability of a grand designer. Descartes finds this unacceptable, as doubting the existence of the world is primordial to his method.

Descartes undertakes the examination of the ideas the mind has. There are fundamentally three types of ideas. Some of them are innate to the mind, as they come from our own nature, and are known by the light of our own reason. The ideas of substance or thing, cause, existence, time, space, the basic principles of mathematics

and logic etc. are examples. Another set of ideas are factitious, which are invented by human imagination. The ideas of mermaids, unicorns, utopias, or future worlds are examples. The third type of ideas is adventitious. They are ideas which come from outside us, which nature seems to suggest to us, and which come despite our will. The hearings of a noise, seeing the sun, trees, or colors are examples.

But what are these ideas? What is their essential nature? As mentioned above, Descartes says that they are primarily present in our minds and hence we can say that they actually exist in our minds. They have actual or formal reality. One important feature of ideas is that they are always ideas of something, of objects. They represent or refer to objects and have objective reality.

Here Descartes takes up the idea of God for analysis. He argues that except for the idea of God all other ideas could be fictitious or my inventions. Following the traditional definition of substance—that which subsists independently of everything else—he affirms that God is an existent substance possessing all positive qualities in the fullest degree of reality. God is an infinitely perfect being and He possesses the positive qualities of goodness, knowledge, power, duration to their perfect degrees. With these basic formulations Descartes advances the first proof for god's existence.

First Proof for God's Existence

Descartes begins with the idea of God as a perfect being. We have a clear and distinct idea of God. He says that since something cannot proceed from nothing, there must be some cause of our idea of God. What is more perfect cannot proceed from the less perfect. There must be as much reality in the cause as in its effect. Therefore God, who is perfect, must be the cause of my idea of God as a perfect substance.

Second Proof for God's Existence

Descartes now raises the question of the cause of one's own existence. He asks what are the possible causes of his existence and argues that he himself cannot be the cause, as if he were the cause of his own existence, he would have made him perfect, since he has an Idea of perfection in his mind. And he is definitely not a perfect being; as he is unable to preserve himself, which a perfect being would be able to do. Therefore God as a perfect being exists as the only possible cause of my existence as a thinking thing.

Third Proof for God's Existence

This is the argument from the idea of perfection. Descartes argues that, all the properties he clearly and distinctly conceives to be possessed by God truly belong to Him. The clear and distinct idea of a perfect being includes the perfection of existence. To exist belongs to the nature of God as a perfect being. If God lacked existence He would be less than perfect. Perfection includes existence. Therefore, God exists.

God is not a Deceiver

In this connection he talks about the innateness of the idea of God. The idea of God is native to my mind and innate ideas are clear and distinct and are self-evident to the mind. Descartes then affirms that God is the cause of this idea. Other ideas like the ideas of cause, substance, logic, and mathematics are also imprinted on us by birth.

Descartes now explores whether physical substances exist independently of my mind. He wonders whether he can know the existence of physical substances with certainty and know what the properties of physical things are. He raises the following questions: Can I trust my senses? Is the idea of physical substance my own creation? Is God the cause of this idea?

While examining the cause of physical substances Descartes affirms that he himself cannot be their cause, as he is fundamentally a thinking substance. A thinking substance itself cannot be the cause of a substance which has extension as its essential property. The effect must be like the cause and hence the cause of the idea of an extended physical substance must be itself a physical substance. Hence they must be coming from outside of me. Moreover, God is not a deceiver. Since God exists and is infinitely good, He would not allow me to be deceived about everything that exists. Since God is good, He will not act like the deceitful demon. Therefore, God authenticates my sensory experiences. God has given me such a strong inclination to believe in bodies. If they actually do not exist, then God would be deceitful. Since that cannot be the case owing to the reasons cited above, bodies exist.

We thus come across two important aspects of Descartes' philosophy. The first aspect refers to the critical examination of our long held beliefs and assumptions and hence is thoroughly critical. He thus calls into question almost all traditional philosophical assumptions that were considered as the foundation for all philosophy, science and morality. But when he comes to advancing his own position, he seems to

be going back to the same old assumptions and beliefs he had criticized. Russell makes the following interesting observation.

The constructive part of Descartes's theory of knowledge is much less interesting than the earlier destructive part. It uses all sorts of scholastic maxims, such as that an effect can never have more perfection than its cause, which have somehow escaped the initial critical scrutiny. No reason is given for accepting these maxims, although they are certainly less self-evident than one's own existence, which is proved with a flourish of trumpets. Plato's *Theaetetus*, Saint Augustine, and Saint Thomas contain most of what is affirmative in the *Meditations*. [A History of Western Philosophy]

Substance, Attribute and Mode

Descartes' philosophy thus construes the existence of three Substances: God as the absolute substance, which so exists that it needs no other thing in order to exist and mind and body that are relative or dependent substances. This idea of substance is a very old philosophical assumption, which has its roots in the Greek tradition, and it had played a very important role in Scholastic thinking as well. Descartes subscribes to this concept and understands it in the same way in which the Scholastic philosophers conceive it.

Fundamental to the notion of substance is the idea of attributes or the essential characteristic or property of substance that which necessarily inheres in it. Substances are known through their attributes. It is the quality of a substance without which it cannot conceivably exist. For instance, according to Descartes, the mind has "thinking" as its attribute, as we cannot conceive it otherwise. That is the feature by which it distinguishes itself from other things. Similarly, the attribute of body is extension. All bodies are extended.

But the attribute of a substance can manifest itself in different ways or modes. There is an interesting correlation between the three; substances, attributes and modes. Modes cannot be conceived without substance and attributes and it is not possible for a substance to change its attributes, though it can change its modes. For example, according to Descartes, figure and motion are modes of extended substance or bodies and imagination or will are modes of thinking.

The Mind-Body Dualism

The theory of attributes and modes fundamentally justifies the separation of the entire human reality into two independent realms: the realm of the thinking mind and the realm of extended material objects. This dualism separates the mind from matter by

virtue of their different attributes. The mind has thinking as its attribute and it always thinks and is not extended. The Thinking Substance is the one that doubts, understands, conceives, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines and feels. According to Descartes, thought includes everything that we term as consciousness. It is entirely different from the physical objects and is not part of nature. Instead, it occupies an independent territory and can exist without the body.

On the other hand, what we clearly and distinctly perceive in the body is extension or the spatial continuum of three dimensions constitutive of length, breadth and thickness. Other visible qualities like colors or tastes or odors are not necessary attributes of a physical substance, as it does not need all of them in order to exist. But they must necessarily have size and shape. Owing to its unique feature, the physical world exists as an independent realm with its own laws which can be explained in terms of mechanics. Since body is a relative substance to the absolute substance of God, it owes its existence to the latter. Descartes says that God created matter with motion and rest and the source of motion in the material world is God. He is the prime mover. Descartes further argues the amount of motion in the universe is constant, as God had given the world a certain amount of motion.

This mind-body dualism has very deep and far-reaching philosophical implications. They are conceived as diametrically opposite substances. Bodies are extended and are passive but cannot think. Minds can think and hence are active, but are not extended. Both domains follow their own independent laws. Owing to such a separation, nature and its workings can be explained purely in mechanical terms. Physics proceeds with its own laws and to understand the workings of the physical world, the laws of mechanics can be applied. Consequently, the human body and the bodies of animals, is conceived as a machine which follows the laws of mechanics. Heat in the heart is the moving principle, nerves are the organs of sensation and the muscles are the organs of motion. It functions like a machine.

Mind-Body Interaction

One of the major difficulties this Cartesian dualism faced is with regard to the explanation of the interrelationship between mind and body. If the mind and body possess diametrically opposite attributes, how can we explain their interaction? Logically speaking, there cannot be any interaction. Mind cannot cause changes in the body and body cannot cause changes in the mind.

But this is contrary to our experience. We find that there exists an intimate union between the mind and the body. They often compose a substantial unity. But the ultimate separation of the two substances in terms of their opposing attributes fails to explain this. For instance, if I were a merely thinking substance and if my mind is not intimately conjoined with the body, then when I am hungry, I may know that I am hungry but may not feel hungry. The question is, how does Descartes explain this situation?

Descartes here proposes a mind-body Interaction. He argues that, though possess diametrically opposite attributes, they are combined in man, in unity of composition and not in unity of nature. Sensations and feelings are disturbances in the mind resulting from its union with the body. Yet they remain distinct. A physical state neither becomes nor produces a mental state (and vice versa), but is troubled by it. There exists a form of causal interaction. Descartes conceives mind as having its principal seat in the pineal gland of the brain.

The model of interaction suggested by Descartes has cultural and political implications as well. It provides a model where the enmity between the new science and church and between rational knowledge and divine revelation can be resolved. It suggests a dualistic model where the physical substances and their laws (of motion) are controlled by science and mental substances, which are not causally determined, come under the Church. It thus suggests a compromise and reconciliation between the Church and the world of science. This reconciliation enabled the emerging modern age to conceive the progress and developments happen in science are not necessarily antagonistic to the doctrines of the Church.

The Cartesian dualism is one of the most controversial philosophical theories in the whole history of western philosophy. Once separated, Descartes himself as well as subsequent philosophers found it difficult to explain their apparent cooperation and unity. Different thinkers have come up with different explanations, but none could provide a satisfying solution to the separation of the world into two independent domains. Descartes has been criticized for this by many thinkers. But for a thinker who appeared at a time when the new sciences were about to introduce revolutionary changes in the relationship between man and the rest of the world and between man and man, the autonomy of the physical world and its status as an independent domain in its own right was essential.

Quiz

1. According to Descartes the following are the fundamental substances.
(a) Mind alone (b) Mind and body (c) God alone (d) Mind, body and God.
2. According to Descartes, the ideas of substance or thing, cause, existence, time, space, the basic principles of mathematics and logic etc. belong to which category of ideas?
(a) Innate ideas (b) Factitious ideas (c) Adventitious ideas (d) None of the above.
3. The mind and body constitute:
(a) Unity of nature (b) Unity of composition (c) Never united (d) United occasionally according to God's will.
4. What makes an idea true and certain is?
(a) The fact that it is being perceived by the mind (b) The fact that it represents something in the world (c) The fact that it is clear and distinct (d) The fact that it is not contradicted by another idea.

Answer Key

1. (d)
2. (a)
3. (b)
4. (c)

Assignment

1. How does Descartes prove the existence of the material world?
2. Explain the mind-body relationship according to Descartes.

Books

1. Copleston, Frederick, *A History of Philosophy*, vol.4: *The Rationalists Descartes to Leibniz*, London, Continuum, 2003.
2. Durant, Will, *A Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Greater Philosophers of the Western World*, Pocket Books, 1991.
3. Rogers, Arthur Keyon, *A Student's History of Philosophy*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1935.
4. Russell, Bertrand: *History of Western Philosophy*, London, Routledge Classics, 2004.
5. Thilly, Frank: *A History of Philosophy*, New Delhi, SBE Publishers, 1983.

6. Zeller, Eduard, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, London, Longmans, green and Co., 1881.

Web Resources

1. Important Arguments from Descartes' *Meditations*, available at :
<http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/dcarg.htm>.
2. “Descartes' Life and Works”, in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-works/>
3. “Rene Descartes”, available at:
<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/philosophers/descartes.html>

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