

Descartes - Blurp #3

by Forrest Cameranesi

In Descartes Sixth Meditation, he makes an argument that because the mind is not divisible, yet the body is, that the mind must be “completely different” from the body, presumably on the grounds that one has an attribute the other does not, namely divisibility, and thus that they must be non-identical. If his premises are correct, then it does follow logically that the body must be non-identical with the mind; though whether this lack of identity is all that Descartes means by the two being “completely different” is questionable, as the mind could perhaps be intimately connected with or dependant upon the body while not being identical with it, in such a way that they cannot exist apart from each other, and this may or may not count as ‘complete difference’ in Descartes sense. That is to say, though the two would necessarily be non-identical, there is not necessarily a ‘real distinction’ between the two. Further, it also would not necessarily follow that thinking “belongs to [one’s] essence” for the mind and body to be identical, for the simple reason that (depending on how we are to understand what a mind is) there could perhaps exist minds that are not at that moment thinking, even in Descartes’ broad sense. Also, if it were so, that the mind was somehow dependent (though not identical to) the body, then embodied-ness would be a part of one’s essence, as if the mind depends somehow upon a body, the destruction of the body (without somehow substituting another, perhaps) would destroy the mind as well. Thus, thinking may not be one’s “sole essence”, and so immortality is not necessarily possible.

Further, the entire argument can be assaulted from the start by denying that minds are indivisible. I can lose and gain memories and various modes of thought as much as the matter in my body comes and goes, and so it is conceivable to me that some of those memories and modes of thought might become separated from the others — that is, that my mind might be divided.